

# Sports News in Five Arab Countries: A Comparative Study of Journalistic Role Performance Across Platforms and Sources

Communication & Sport  
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–23  
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DOI: 10.1177/21674795241231004  
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## Abstract

This study examines journalistic role performance in sports news in five Arab countries in relation to country, geographic frame, platforms, and sources. The comparative content analysis of three journalistic roles – loyal-facilitator, watchdog, and infotainment – in Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) relies on 874 sports news stories from 40 print, broadcast, and online outlets, sampled in 2020 through a constructed, two-week stratified-systematic approach. Results point to variations in all roles as a function of some predictors more than others. Specifically, the UAE tended to be the most loyal/cheerleader, whereas Qatar led in the infotainment role. Loyalty was also apparent across the region in domestic news that was more loyalist than foreign news. Sources mattered in that political sources tended to predict higher levels of loyalist content, while sports sources did not have any impact on any role. Sources' viewpoint of diversity, on the other hand, revealed multiple perspectives to be associated with more infotainment and watchdog content. The results indicate the loyalist cheerleader role that sports journalists in the West have been associated with for decades also applies to the Arab region, suggesting sports journalists behave in a similar manner irrespective of their country of origin.

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## Keywords

Arab countries, viewpoint diversity, sources, journalistic role performance, media platforms

## Introduction

Sports journalists share much in common with other types of journalists in the newsroom (Boyle, 2017). Similar to their counterparts in different newsbeats, sports journalists perform a variety of professional roles when they report the news (Humanes, 2023). Whether they cheer on their country or team (Hardin et al., 2009), act as watchdog critics to the power elites (English, 2017), or simply provide infotainment to entertain their audiences (Humanes, 2023), the roles they play reflect the journalistic culture that varies across countries (Boyle, 2017; Rowe, 2007). These cultures are embedded within media systems that theorize the relationship between the media and the various structures of power in a country, led by the political system and accompanied by country laws, economy, technology, and history (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Richter & Kozman, 2021). While the labels of “cheerleaders” and “toy department” that have plagued sports journalists for decades (Anderson, 2001; Rowe, 2004, 2007) have been recently contested to some degree (Boyle, 2017; English, 2017), whether sports journalists act as watchdog critics is related to their acceptance of ethical and professional norms (Hardin et al., 2009). These mixed findings suggest the picture is not as clear regarding the roles sports journalists play. Also unclear is whether these roles change outside the West that has dominated the field of sports journalism research, with rare instances coming from other non-Western world powers. The few times the Arab region has made its way into the field is when a country is hosting a sports mega event, with most of the work focused on the concept of soft power and nation branding as in the FIFA 2022 World Cup (e.g., Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2014).

Another type of uncertainty in research occurs outside sports. The area of journalistic cultures itself is heavily biased toward politics and public affairs, with sports rarely being represented (e.g., Humanes, 2023; Perreault & Bell, 2022). Considering the increasingly important space sports continue to occupy in modern life (Kertcher, 2021; Maguire, 1999; Rowe, 2003), it is crucial to include sports news in any analysis of the relationship between media and governing powers in a country. Beyond their entertainment value, sports have become a significant contributor to countries' image as governments continue to use sports mega events to grow their reputation internationally (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2014). Subsequently, sports can yield tremendous influence and possibly amend or perpetuate large scale relationships (Hong & Xiaozheng, 2002) between countries engulfed in political world dominance. At the home front, sports often implicitly relay notions of power dynamics in society, at times confirming existing hegemonic discourses while also challenging societal conversations about social groups (van Sterkenburg et al., 2010).

To understand journalistic sports cultures in the understudied Global South, this study zeroes into the Arab region and analyzes sports news in five countries that belong to different media systems. By and large, we wanted to find out if the conception of journalistic roles in sports news is dependent on media platforms, stories' geographic context, and the countries that house the outlets, on the one hand, and sources, on the other. To do so, this study investigates predictors of three journalistic roles – loyal-facilitator, watchdog, and infotainment – by relying on 874 news stories from 40 print, television, and online news outlets in Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). To the authors' knowledge, research on Arab sports news is yet to analyze sports journalistic cultures in any form, thus the need to provide a more comprehensive picture of what sports journalism looks like outside the West. This study, then, contributes to broadening the sports research community's scope of what constitutes sports journalism in non-Western countries, in general, and in the Arab region in particular.

## Literature Review

Forming one part of the newsroom, sports journalists are similar to yet different from other types of journalists. To understand the interplay of journalistic roles with sports cultures within the larger media system, this study relies on the theoretical frameworks of journalistic role performance and media systems, as it reviews extant research on journalistic culture in sports, Arab media systems, and journalists' sourcing habits.

### *Journalistic Role Performance Across Media Systems*

Normative presumptions have dominated the study of journalism for decades. Rooted in the notion that “journalism is a benevolent force of social good, essential to citizenship, and that it... plays a ‘watchdog role’ by providing a check on excesses of state power,” such presumptions have mostly ignored regions of the world where the media play a variety of different roles (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, p. 8). While theorizations of journalistic cultures have taken different forms, one that has become increasingly relevant in global journalism studies in recent years, encompassing journalism outside advanced democracies of the West, is Mellado's (2015, 2021) journalistic role performance that postulates the existence of six roles – loyal-facilitator, watchdog, infotainment, civic, service, and interventionist – with a set of indicators that combine to form the specific role. Significant to sports are the first three roles that connote power relations and approach to audiences. In the power relations domain that theorizes the relationship between journalists and those in power, journalists could either view their role as one of a watchdog that seeks to protect the public interest by holding the powerful in check and denouncing wrongdoing, or as loyal-facilitators who portray political and other elites positively and focus on their nation by highlighting national triumphs and prestige. Forming part of the audience domain, the infotainment role highlights journalists' view of the audience as spectators. As roles are context

specific and not fixed, journalists must combine them in various ways when they produce the news (Mellado, 2021). This framework has been applied to analyze journalistic role performance in different countries and in a variety of societal, organizational, and (non)democratic environments (e.g., Hallin & Mellado, 2018; Hellmueller & Mellado, 2016; Humanes, 2023; Humanes & Roses, 2018; Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020; Stepińska et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018).

Journalistic roles, however, do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, they are sensitive to the media system to which they belong. Media systems, in turn, place media institutions within the larger country system that most often comprises the political, economic, and social systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This view of the media as part of society typically examines journalistic cultures in relation to the power structures of society, lending weight to the argument that although there are regional media systems, media still differ from one country to another, within the same region (Richter & Kozman, 2021). One case in point is the diverse landscape of the Arab region that combines some of the world's richest and poorest, and oldest and newest countries, with varying types of governance. These variations have rendered media products the result of the relationship between the media and governing powers in politics, society, and culture (Richter & Kozman, 2021). Literature on Arab media systems has labeled the media in Qatar and the UAE as loyalist (Rugh, 2004), where local journalism shows loyalty to the ruling family, regardless of state or private media ownership. Neighboring Kuwait, although it shares a similar history with the other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, has a diverse media system based on the existence of media with opposing viewpoints (Alsalem, 2021; Rugh, 2004). The only other diverse media system in the Arab world is in Lebanon whose media reflect the plurality of political parties in the country and tend to convey the political ideology of their owners (El-Richani, 2016; Rugh, 2004). As for Egypt's media, initially labeled transitional due to the many changes it underwent (Rugh, 2004), is currently characterized by low media freedom and high censorship as a reflection of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's repressive style of governance (Badr, 2021).

### *Journalistic Role Performance in Sports*

Research on the roles sports journalists perform has generally focused on the cheerleader versus critic aspects. Belonging to the "toy department" of the newsroom (Anderson, 2001; Rowe, 2004, 2007), sports journalists have often been seen as cheerleaders who boost their local or preferred teams with favorable coverage (Hardin, 2005; Hardin et al., 2009) or their countries when they play internationally through notions of nationalism (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2012), especially when sports broadcasters' familiarity with national athletes is deep (Billings et al., 2011). Only recently has evidence emerged to point to the dual roles sports journalists play: both cheerleaders and critics (English, 2017; Hardin et al., 2009). As importantly, different types of reporting emerged between traditional news organizations and sports organizations' in-house media, with the latter being less

critical of their teams, while elements of loyalty and cheerleading appeared in both samples (English, 2022). Critical reporting, however, is not always synonymous to the watchdog role, as the former often takes the shape of criticizing an athlete for underperforming (English, 2022) as opposed to the investigative type of journalism that is the bedrock of the watchdog role. In addition to the cheerleader and critic roles that are prevalent in most countries, English's (2021) typology of sports journalists in Australia found the home focus (that emphasizes national and local sports), audience centric (that pays attention to audiences), and personal reflector (that highlights personalization and journalists' subjectivity) characteristics to be additional aspects sports journalists embodied in their reporting.

In general, journalists craft their professional persona based on both professional (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) and cultural expectations (Kenix, 2015). Their understanding of their professional roles informs how they select information and convey it to the public (Hellmueller et al., 2016). Such perceptions, however, can be blurred amid various influences from political dynamics, cultural expectations, economic pressures, and other media entities (Hellmueller et al., 2016). This is especially relevant for sports journalism that functions within the global media sports complex that brings together media, culture, commercial entities, and governments, among others (Maguire, 1999). The "symbolic value" sports embody prompts individuals to invest themselves emotionally in sporting events, as well as attracts political elites to use sports for national prestige (Maguire, 1999, p. 2). As such, sports become susceptible to "political exploitation," especially when those involved can extrapolate "sociocultural significance from the action on and around the field of play" (Rowe, 2003, p. 285). Here, political economy plays a significant role where journalists are often left to choose between elevating the interests of corporate owners or serving their audiences (Lee & Hwang, 2004). And in some cases, they might also have to consider the powerful elites in their country, seeing governments tend to use their media as a public diplomacy tool (Seib, 2013), an example of which is Qatar's Al Jazeera (Samuel-Azran, 2013). As sports are conceived to be related to a country's political development (Cha, 2009), ruling elites continuously use sports and media to advance their image (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2014; Murray, 2018; Seib, 2013). In addition, sports journalists have the burden of deciding whether to keep a close or detached relationship with their sources, the loss of whom could be detrimental to their career (Lowes, 2000). Consequently, sports journalists often juggle various professional roles that are manifested in the stories they produce.

As of today, no research on sports journalism in the Arab region exists, making it impossible to predict the roles sports journalists would play. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests social-national identity, in the form of pride in national triumphs, might prompt journalists to behave in the loyalist role more than the watchdog one. Undoubtedly, the sports hosting prowess that Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE exert is unmatched in the region, evidenced by the numerous continental and international tournaments they have and will be hosting, including the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, FIBA Basketball World Cup 2027, Formula 1 Grand Prix races, the ATP Qatar Open,

and Dakar Rally, among others (Reiche & Brannagan, 2022). It follows that national sports media might also reflect their country's prowess, allocating more attention, resources, and perhaps, nationalistic coverage to these events on home soil, at times "fuel[ing] nationalist sentiment" in contentious geopolitical issues (Dorsey, 2022, p. 93).

*Media Platforms.* Scholars have argued that platforms matter, in that journalists adjust their style according to the type of journalism in which they are engaged, and that the functionality of the internet differentiates online journalism from other forms (Deuze, 2003). Regarding professional roles, research so far points to both similarities and differences among media platforms in how the roles are performed (Mellado et al., 2021) and their relationship with sources (Mellado & Scherman, 2021). In sports, audiences watch live competitions through multiple channels without being restricted to one, relying on social television applications as a second screen that allows them to interact with others through conversations about the specific sporting event (Cunningham & Eastin, 2017). For what concerns journalism, the differences between traditional and digital media lie in the extent to which journalists can influence public opinion playing the role of agenda setters in raising the salience of an issue to the public (Oh et al., 2021). Journalists hold more power to frame stories through traditional forms of media than on social networks where users can expand conversations and reframe stories without any influence from traditional media (Oh et al., 2021). The public, thus, becomes more involved in sports stories through social media compared to traditional media. Regarding journalistic cultures in relation to media platforms, one research study in sports has suggested there are no differences among media platforms in how and how much they present female athletes, who are mostly underrepresented and framed in stereotypically negative manners (Romney & Johnson, 2020). One of the few existing journalistic role performance studies on sports has found that the sports journalism model in Spain combines opinion creation with infotainment, with digital native news media providing a more critical approach (Humanes, 2023). Another study of sports journalists' role conception in the United States found a mix of the watchdog critic and loyal mouthpiece role (Perreault & Bell, 2022). Contrary to Humanes' (2023) study, however, the US findings revealed the prevalence of the loyal mouthpiece role in digital sports journalism due to the rise of esports, alongside the role of detached observer.

*Geographic Frames.* International sports form a major part of local newscasts in many countries around the world (Horky & Nieland, 2013). Due to "the social power of televised sport," evident in the popularity of male sport stars (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2010), American and European sports leagues have become among the leading industries worldwide, signaling their massive appeal outside their borders. Forbes' recent list of most valuable teams worldwide revealed the latter belong to four European football leagues alongside the NBA, NFL, and MLB in the United States (Ozanian & Teitelbaum, 2022). Although the countries in the Arab region have their own sports

competitions, attention to international tournaments is high. Accordingly, it is plausible that professional roles change in relation to where the sports story originated. For instance, Egyptian journalists reporting on the local football league might have to juggle various roles in producing the story than if they were to cover an international tournament with no locals involved. To account for the importance of media platforms and geographic locations of sports stories in relation to journalistic roles, we pose the following research question:

**RQ1.** What are the main differences in the performance of journalistic roles in Arab countries when comparing across countries, media types, and geographic frames?

### *Sourcing*

Who gets to speak in the news can yield tremendous power (Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019). Type of sources, their position in the hierarchy, and/or their credibility are among the many factors that impact audiences when they consume the news. For decades, research on sourcing in the news has consistently pointed to the dominance of officials, with more visibility to those with more authoritative, typically people occupying a higher level in the hierarchy (Cook, 1989). As importantly, source diversity and diversity of viewpoints have been deemed fundamental to journalism (Mellado & Scherman, 2021), as research has revealed audiences tend to perceive the news as more credible when it includes diversity (Cozma, 2006). While scholars have linked source diversity to democratic contexts (e.g., Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019), other forms of societies can profit as well, as a large and diverse number of sources would ensure the journalistic process of newswriting is more thorough and balanced than stories with fewer sources in all types of news (Mathisen, 2023), including sports (e.g., Horky & Nieland, 2013).

Research on sources is rooted in “questions about bias, power, and influence,” since the relationship between journalists and their sources impacts society as both sides engage in shaping “ongoing meanings in a culture” (Berkowitz, 2009, p. 102). In the political domain, both politicians and journalists find value in each other (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006). Similarly in science reporting, journalists rely on a set of different actors, such as politicians and experts, to make sense of a complicated issue (Lück et al., 2018). And in sports, the symbiosis between journalists and their sources (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2007) means sources are valuable for their quotes that reflect key perspectives from the main actors on a team (Reinardy & Wanta, 2007) and add credibility to the news story (Andrews, 2005). The few studies that have examined sourcing practices in sports have revealed sports journalism to differ, albeit slightly, from politics and public affairs. Expectedly, athletes and coaches were found to be the most prominent type of source in sports news in various investigations across several countries, sports, and media types, although with heavier representation for the United States (Garrison & Sabljak, 1985; Kozman, 2017a, 2017b; Whiteside et al., 2012) and

print media in Northern Europe (Horky & Nieland, 2013). In line with research in the United States, descriptive figures in the 2011 International Sports Press Survey (Horky & Nieland, 2013), the largest worldwide analysis of sports newspaper coverage from 22 countries, and its predecessor in 2005 (Schultz-Jorgensen, 2005), found athletes, coaches, and club personnel to feature the most, with the overwhelming majority of stories drawing their sources from the sports world in both studies (Horky & Nieland, 2013), including athlete and team accounts on social media (Nölleke et al., 2017). More recent versions of the same survey focusing on social media revealed congruent results in various countries, such as Germany (Seeger et al., 2023) and South Africa (Chari et al., 2022), particularly how sports officials and athletes continue to dominate in sports news. The various ISPS country studies also found the prevalence of single-source stories, in addition to a significant number of unsourced news [for example, 24% in Chari et al. (2022); 26% in Horky and Nieland (2013); 17% in Seeger et al. (2023); and 22% in Schultz-Jorgensen (2005)]. Although we expect sports figures to feature prominently in sports news, we have no information about the impact of sources on journalistic roles. In other words, what type of impact, if any, do sports sources have on the sports story? And are other sources as powerful in sports journalism? To investigate this relationship, we pose the following research question:

**RQ2.** Is there an effect for type and frequency of sources and their diversity of viewpoints on the performance of journalistic roles?

## Method

This study is a content analysis of newspaper, television, and online news from five Arab countries: Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Principal investigators in each of the 37 countries that formed the Second-Wave Journalistic Role Performance project led a team that collected data simultaneously in 2020, following a constructed week approach. Principal investigators in each country chose their national media outlets, reflecting the variations in the country media systems in terms of language, newsroom size, ownership, political leanings, and audience orientation. The stratified systemic 2-week sampling strategy took place between January 2, 2020, and December 31, 2020, yielding 13,299 Arab news stories. From these, 874 were identified as sports stories from 40 outlets (Table 1).

### *Sample Unit and Unit of Analysis*

The sampling unit was the full issue of each newspaper, the most watched newscast of each television channel, and the entire homepage of each news Web site (including links). The unit of analysis was the single news story, defined as a set of contiguous verbal and, if applicable, audio and/or visual elements that refer to the same event/issue/person. Excluded were reviews, op-eds, wire stories, and any content not produced by the outlet, such as wire service stories and articles by non-journalists.



**Table 1.** Media Outlets in the Sample Across Five Countries.

Outlet	Frequency	Percent
Egypt	203	23.3
El oula	3	.3
CBC News Egypt	26	3.0
Al Ahram	43	4.9
Al masry Elyoum	24	2.8
Alyoum Alsabee	41	4.6
Alwafd	17	1.9
Mada Masr	4	.5
Masrawy	42	4.8
Daily News Egypt	4	.5
Kuwait	109	12.5
Kuwait TV	19	2.1
Alrai TV	24	2.8
Al Qabas	19	2.2
Al Anba	12	1.3
Kuwait Times	4	.4
Alaan	2	.2
alraimedia.com	29	3.3
Kuwait Arab Times	2	.2
Lebanon	168	19.2
Al Manar TV	9	1.0
LBCI	3	.4
MTV Lebanon	16	1.8
OTV	3	.3
An-Nahar	58	6.6
Al Akhbar	66	7.6
Lebanon Files	1	.1
El Nashra	10	1.1
LBC Online	2	.3
Qatar	245	28.1
Aljazeera English	70	8.0
Aljazeera Arabic	47	5.4
The Gulf Times	59	6.7
Al-Sharq	39	4.4
ILoveQatar	21	2.4
Qatarliving	10	1.1
United Arab Emirates	148	16.9
Dubai TV	8	1.0
Abu Dhabi TV	35	4.0

*(continued)*

**Table I.** (continued)

Outlet	Frequency	Percent
Al Bayan	12	1.4
Al Itihad	15	1.8
Al Khalij	22	2.5
Barq Alemarat	32	3.6
Wam	5	.6
Al Ain	18	2.1
Total	874	100

### Coding Protocol

*Intercoder Reliability.* Native speakers of Arabic and fluent speakers of English in each of the five Arab countries coded the content. The project followed a three-step strategy to test for intercoder reliability among and within the 37 countries. First, principal investigators in all countries participated in training sessions followed by a pre-test to ensure they understood the common codebook. Second, national principal investigators trained their team of coders in several sessions and ran pre-tests on their teams featuring articles not included in the study sample. When coders were deemed ready to proceed, they coded a sample of the study for intercoder reliability. When the results, which were checked within each country and with the rest of the countries in the project, achieved reliability, the coders proceeded with coding the respective national sample. Third, each country conducted a post-test on its team to confirm the reliability of the coders in the actual coding process. The global intercoder reliability of the project using Krippendorff's alpha was .79, and ranged from .76 to .86 for journalistic roles, and from .72 to .91 across countries. The reliability coefficients of the Arab countries for all types of stories ( $N = 13,299$ ) are reported in [Table 2](#).

*Variables.* The dependent variables for this study were three journalistic roles – loyal-facilitator, watchdog, and infotainment – that were conceptualized and operationalized following the framework of Mellado and colleagues ([Mellado, 2015, 2021](#); [Mellado & van Dalen, 2017](#)). For each role, several indicators were used and coded for their absence/presence in each story. These included eight indicators for the loyal-facilitator role (show patriotism, promote the country, highlight national triumphs, defend/support activities, defend/support policies, present a positive image of the elite, show progress/success, and compare to other countries), nine indicators for the watchdog role (information on judicial/administrative processes, questioning by journalist, questioning by others, criticism by journalist, criticism by others, uncovering by journalist, uncovering by others, reporting on external investigation, and investigative reporting), and five indicators for the infotainment role (personalization, sensationalism, emotions, private life, and morbidity) (for details, see the JRP homepage). Confirmatory factor

**Table 2.** Global Intercoder Reliability Across Roles in Arab Countries.

Country/Role	Loyal-facilitator	Watchdog	Infotainment	Mean
Egypt	.79	.70	.71	.73
Kuwait	.78	.73	.69	.73
Lebanon	.89	.90	.91	.90
Qatar	.81	.74	.70	.75
UAE	.77	.75	.74	.75

analyses (CFAs) were then used to measure the scale consistency of each role. Keeping only the indicators that showed a sufficient fit in the CFA, each role was computed by averaging its indicators, resulting in a range of zero–1, where higher values meant more of that role. For descriptive purposes, we calculated raw scores (total points divided by the total items for each role), meanwhile, we used factor scores to test for differences in the performance of the roles. As for the independent variables, they were measured as follows: country was Egypt (23.3%), Kuwait (12.5%), Lebanon (19.2%), Qatar (28.1%), and UAE (16.9%); media type was newspaper (49.3%), television (30.2%), and online (20.5%); geographic frame was domestic (37.6%), foreign (44.5%), domestic with foreign participation (10.1%), foreign with domestic participation (5%), and not clear (2.8%); source type was sports (54.3%), state/political party (9.1%), business/company (3%), police/security (0.1%), legal/court (1.1%), military/defense (0.1%), health (2.2%), education (0.6%), civil society (0.7%), religion (0%), citizen (1.5%), media (9%), celebrity (0.7%), anonymous (2.4%), and other (0.3%); and source diversity point of view was multiple viewpoints (8.7%), unilateral (59.2%), and absence of sources (32.1%).

## Results

Prior to testing the research questions, we conducted an ANOVA on the three roles to first measure whether there are differences among the countries in these roles (Table 3). We then proceeded with multiple regressions on each of the three roles separately (Table 4), entering the variables in two blocks: block one was for our control variables, country and dummy coded media type, while block two included dummy coded geographic frames, frequency of sources, dummy coded sources' diversity points of view, and the six most prominent sources as predictors of each role.

The results of the three ANOVAs revealed significant differences among the countries in the loyalist and infotainment roles only (Table 3). Welch's  $F$  test values are reported instead of the common ANOVA  $F$ , since the data violated the assumptions of equal variances. The UAE topped the list in loyalist content ( $M = .16$ ,  $SD = .18$ ), followed by Egypt ( $M = .19$ ,  $SD = .18$ ), and further away by Kuwait  $M = .02$ ,  $SD = .08$ ), while Qatar ( $M = .16$ ,  $SD = .19$ ) led the group in infotainment ahead of the UAE ( $M = .12$ ,  $SD = .20$ ), with Lebanon sitting last ( $M = .03$ ,  $SD = .07$ ).

**Table 3.** Means of Journalistic Roles Performances Across Countries (Standard Deviations in Parenthesis).

Country/Role	Loyal-facilitator	Watchdog	Infotainment
Egypt	.1066 (.1867)	.0055 (.0406)	.0818 (.1701)
Kuwait	.0278 (.0857)	.0162 (.0599)	.1231 (.1785)
Lebanon	.0160 (.0450)	.0128 (.0411)	.0300 (.0762)
Qatar	.0360 (.1057)	.0222 (.0881)	.1613 (.1919)
UAE	.1688 (.1827)	.0104 (.0632)	.1247 (.2046)
Total	.0700 (.2456)	.0138 (.0635)	.1066 (.1770)
<i>F</i>	33.975***	2.199	30.557***
<i>Eta</i> <sup>2</sup>	.145	.010	.070

Note. *df* = 4, 364.302, \*\*\**p* < .001.

The multiple regression (Table 4) on the loyalist role saw significant differences across countries, geographic frame, and the presence of political sources, with the model explaining 24% of the variance ( $p < .001$ ). When considering all variables, the four countries were less likely to include loyalist content compared to UAE, with the closest one being Egypt and the farthest, Kuwait. Although foreign news was less likely than domestic news to be loyalist (unstandardized  $B = -.068$ ,  $p < .001$ ), domestic news with foreign participation was more likely than purely domestic news to include loyalism ( $B = .047$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The only other significant variable was the use of political sources that predicted more loyalist content ( $B = .067$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

For the watchdog role, only geographic frames and viewpoint diversity were significant (Adjusted  $R^2 = .038$ ,  $F = 2.83$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Purely foreign stories ( $B = .011$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and foreign stories with domestic participation ( $B = .03$ ,  $p < .01$ ) had higher likelihood to include this role compared to domestic news, respectively, and multiple viewpoints ( $B = .047$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the presence of sources with a unilateral viewpoint ( $B = .018$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were more likely to influence watchdog content than when no sources were included.

Lastly, the infotainment role was significantly different across four countries, media type, and some sources (Adjusted  $R^2 = .132$ ,  $F = 7.964$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not geographic frames or source frequency. All but Kuwait were significantly different from UAE in infotainment. Whereas Qatar was the most prone for infotainment ( $B = .039$ ,  $p < .05$ ), Lebanon was the least ( $B = -.104$ ,  $p < .001$ ), compared to UAE. In platforms, online news was significantly more likely than TV to include infotainment ( $B = .074$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similar to the watchdog role, the presence of multiple sources' viewpoints was associated with more infotainment ( $B = .079$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while the number of sources did not matter. Regarding source types, the strongest and only positive predictor was celebrities ( $B = .153$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while both political ( $B = -.109$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and health sources ( $B = -.100$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were negatively related to infotainment.

**Table 4.** Multiple Linear Regressions Predicting the Three Roles Separately.

Role	Variables	Model 1B (SE)	Model 2B (SE)
Loyal-Facilitator	Country		
	Egypt	-.062 (.015)***	-.056 (.014)***
	Kuwait	-.136 (.017)***	-.124 (.016)***
	Lebanon	-.146 (.016)***	-.104 (.016)***
	Qatar	-.122 (.014)***	-.103 (.014)***
	Medium		
	Online	.050 (.013)***	.021 (.013)
	Print	.021 (.011)	-.008 (.011)
	Geographic frame		
	Domestic/Foreign participation		.047 (.015)**
	Foreign/Domestic participation		.022 (.021)
	Foreign		-.068 (.011)***
	Unclear		-.069 (.011)*
	Number of sources		.000 (.005)
	Diversity POV		
	Diversity POV: Unilateral		-.002 (.017)
	Diversity POV: Multiple		-.026 (.025)
	Sports source		.009 (.016)
	Political/State source		.067 (.017)***
	Business/Company source		.039 (.029)
	Health source		.006 (.031)
	Celebrity source		.043 (.055)
Media source		.019 (.018)	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.153	.240	
F	27.248***	15.517***	
Watchdog	Country		
	Egypt	-.006 (.007)	-.008 (.007)
	Kuwait	.006 (.008)	.004 (.008)
	Lebanon	.002 (.007)	-.007 (.008)
	Qatar	.012 (.007)	.008 (.007)
	Medium		
	Online	.003 (.006)	.000 (.007)
	Print	.004 (.005)	.005 (.006)
	Geographic frame		
	Domestic/Foreign participation		-.002 (.008)
	Foreign/Domestic participation		.030 (.010)**
	Foreign		.011 (.006)*
	Unclear		-.003 (.013)
	Number of sources		.002 (.003)

(continued)

**Table 4.** (continued)

Role	Variables	Model 1B (SE)	Model 2B (SE)
	Diversity POV		
	Diversity POV: Unilateral		.018 (.008)*
	Diversity POV: Multiple		.047 (.012)***
	Sports source		-.011 (.008)
	Political/State source		-.004 (.008)
	Business/Company source		-.025 (.014)
	Health source		-.004 (.015)
	Celebrity source		-.005 (.027)
	Media source		-.003 (.009)
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.003	.038
	F	1.494	2.830**
Infotainment	Country		
	Egypt	-.035 (.019)	-.045 (.018)*
	Kuwait	.006 (.021)	-.014 (.021)
	Lebanon	-.074 (.020)***	-.104 (.021)***
	Qatar	.056 (.018)**	.039 (.018)*
	Medium		
	Online	.081 (.017)***	.074 (.018)***
	Print	.008 (.014)	.008 (.015)
	Geographic frame		
	Domestic/Foreign participation		.022 (.020)
	Foreign/Domestic participation		.002 (.027)
	Foreign		.019 (.015)
	Unclear		.036 (.035)
	Number of sources		.010 (.007)
	Diversity POV		
	Diversity POV: Unilateral		.030 (.022)
	Diversity POV: Multiple		.079 (.032)*
	Sports source		-.017 (.021)
	Political/State source		-.109 (.022)***
	Business/Company source		-.056 (.037)
	Health source		-.100 (.040)*
	Celebrity source		.153 (.071)*
	Media source		.005 (.024)
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.092	.132
	F	15.803***	7.964***

Note. DV: country, media type, geographic frame, frequency of sources, diversity point of view, and six source types (baseline variables: UAE, domestic frame, and absence of sources for diversity POV, respectively)

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

This comparative study of sports news coverage in five Arab countries sought to examine predictors of journalistic role performance. In particular, the analysis focused on variations across countries, media platforms, geographic contexts, and sources in how journalists perform the loyal-facilitator, watchdog, and infotainment roles. Meaningful results emerged in the power relations domain of loyalism, whereas the watchdog and infotainment roles saw less variations.

The most substantial difference in all three roles across the countries was in their loyalism. Countries and geographic frames, alongside political sources, accounted for a quarter of the variation in the role. This suggests media loyalty in the Arab region is not to be taken as a uniform occurrence across countries. Whether Arab sports news exercises loyalty to the powerful elites in a country, be it from the political, cultural, or business domains, is a result of the intersection of country, story frame, and political sources. The UAE showed the highest tendency to play the role of loyal-facilitator in sports news, followed by Egypt, while Kuwait and Lebanon were the least to do so, respectively. While there were no differences across media platforms, the geographic context of the news story mattered. Perhaps expectedly, domestic news was more likely than foreign news to include loyalist content, especially when there was foreign participation, indicating journalists' propensity to show their loyalty to the nation when foreigners are involved. This would include flaunting local wins and celebrating national triumphs when the competition is regional or international. This finding is anticipated as scholars consider sports an arena that "represent[s] a collective national experience" through the use of the nation's symbols (Kertcher, 2021, p. 67), and is consistent with research on the connection between sports and nationalism in the West where media coverage of sports is considered "instrumental in representing national identities and international relations" (Rowe, 2009, p. 543). Empirical research has continuously revealed national media's heavy focus on national teams in various international competitions – including the Olympics (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings et al., 2014), the European Football Championship (Bishop & Jaworski, 2003), and the FIFA World Cup – as they promote nationalistic themes in their coverage (Scott et al., 2012). Scholars contend that broadcast commentators' use of nationalistic discourse is meant to appeal to audiences culturally, implicitly prompting them to continue to watch the events (Scott et al., 2012). Oftentimes, nationalistic themes are associated with more nationalistic attitudes in heavy consumers of sports content (Billings et al., 2013), although it is yet unclear whether these attitudes existed before or after consumption (Devlin & Billings, 2016). Importantly, sports journalists' focus on the national and local is evident not only in the content they produce, but also in their self-reports that highlight the value they place on home teams (English, 2021). Sports sociologists argue that such media coverage can "reproduce and maintain hegemonic social relations, and in- and outgroup distinctions on both inter- and intranational lines" (Bishop & Jaworski, 2003, p. 243).

Beyond country and geographic differences, loyalist content is a result of who is quoted in a story. Even in sports, politicians act as powerful disseminators of information. This is most likely due to the fact that some of the stories included other topics

as well, mainly politics, economy, health, education, and entertainment. Thus, the sports-politics connection that various sports scholars have theorized is present in this study as well. This aligns well with research on sports in the American context, where politicians were featured prominently in sports stories, especially when the issue intersected with politics (Kozman, 2017a; 2017b). Beyond political sources, there was no effect for source frequency or viewpoints diversity. Put simply, journalists' inclination to be loyal facilitators is not affected by their sources' diversity of viewpoints; rather, sources are quoted in numbers most likely to support the loyalist content. In general, source diversity has been viewed in a positive light, and considered to be fundamental to journalism (Mellado & Scherman, 2021), based on the premise that diversity in sources and their viewpoints suggests a more thorough journalistic work (Mathisen, 2023) of high quality (Horky & Nieland, 2013). Although this study neither tested source diversity on audiences' perception nor explored the connection between diversity and the quality of journalism, it nevertheless hints that sources' diverse viewpoints did not change journalists' inclination to present news that aligns with their national elites.

In contrast, the watchdog role was the least to differ across Arab states. National media tended to be homogenous in the watchdog function, only including this role when covering foreign stories with and without domestic participation. This means even in sports stories that some might view as pure entertainment, Arab sports news tends to shy away from criticizing local elites. Instead, journalists prioritize their nations and try to show their positive image in sports while playing the role of critics when foreigners are involved. When sources were used, neither their number nor their type mattered in how much of a watchdog role the media played, but their diverse opinions did. Specifically, multiple viewpoints signaled more watchdog content that pushed the news toward accountability. Arab sports news' hesitation to be watchdog oriented mirrors sports journalism in the West, where the critic-watchdog role, although present, seems to be less prominent than the loyal-cheerleader roles (see English, 2017, 2021, 2022; Hardin et al., 2009).

Besides being involved in power relations, sometimes journalists see themselves playing a role in infotainment, particularly because the nature of sports lends itself to such a role. Literature reveals the audience approach is evident in other countries, such as Australia, where sports journalists believed a focus on their audiences is an important aspect of their job (English, 2021). The results of our study indicate journalists play this role the most in Qatar and the least in Lebanon, with the UAE and Egypt falling in between. Even in infotainment, sports sources had no impact on the type of content. Rather, it was celebrity sources that were the strongest predictor of infotainment, while political and health sources were negatively associated with it. Although the number of sources did not matter, multiple viewpoints predicted more infotainment than news with no sources. Interestingly, the only platform to differ in any role was online news that was more prone for infotainment compared to TV, standing in stark contrast to earlier theorizations about television playing the role of infotainer (Thussu, 2010). This finding also diverges from existing research on sports journalistic cultures that found



digital news to play both the role of watchdog critic (Humanes, 2023) and loyal mouthpiece (Perreault & Bell, 2022). A plausible explanation could attribute the differences partially to media systems in that both the American and Spanish systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) differ significantly from those in the Arab region, even when the region comprises various systems. Specifically, we contend that the low mean level of the watchdog role in our dataset ( $M = .0138$ ,  $SD = .0638$ ), compared to the much higher tendency to display loyalism ( $M = .7$ ,  $SD = .2456$ ), suggests that restricted media freedom in the Arab region (Richter & Kozman, 2021), although varied across countries, impedes journalists from holding the powerful accountable. Consequently, it can be argued that the current classifications of Arab media systems could be useful in differentiating the region from other parts of the world but have little value in explaining differences among the countries that purportedly belong to the same media system. This was the case of UAE and Qatar that are dubbed loyalist (Rugh, 2004) but displayed differing attitudes in loyalism and infotainment, and Lebanon and Kuwait that belong to the group of diverse media systems but behaved quite differently in their infotainment role.

The above analysis indicates sports news in five Arab countries fulfills the role of loyal cheerleader for the power elites with varying levels across countries more so than the role of watchdog. With positive news that highlights national triumphs and flaunts patriotism outweighing critical stories of local powers, we found sports stories in the sample to favor presenting a positive image of their respective country, in general, and do more so in comparison to stories about international sports. This was especially true when political sources were quoted in the story, indicating the close-knit relationship between politics and sports (Kozman, 2017a), and regardless of whether multiple viewpoints existed. In contrast, news that held the powerful accountable was rare across all five countries – similar to Western sports journalism (see English, 2017, 2021, 2022; Hardin et al., 2009) – but was affected by source viewpoints where multiple perspectives were associated with more critical journalism, supporting research on the importance of source diversity (Mathisen, 2023). As for the infotainment role, an expected one given sport's entertaining function, the countries differed, even when they belonged to similar media systems, suggesting a more nuanced conceptualization of Arab media systems is needed. Or the results could simply mean sports news in the Arab region is different and needs to be accounted for when discussing Arab media as an entity. Perhaps the most unexpected result is the absence of any impact for sports sources. Whether this was due to the year of the pandemic or sports sources take a back seat to other elites and do not influence the news in the region needs further exploration.

In conclusion, this study found the loyalist cheerleader role with which sports journalists in the West have been associated for decades also applies to the Arab region, suggesting sports journalists behave in a similar manner irrespective of their country of origin. At the same time, sports journalism in the Arab countries diverges from more recent evidence from other regions of the world that revealed sports journalists have started to embrace the watchdog role more than previous times (e.g., English, 2017, 2021, 2022). From a media systems perspective, the study showed Arab sports news is

as heterogeneous as it is homogeneous. Although normative media theorizations tend to view the Arab world as a monolith, the current study contests this designation, arguing that both differences and similarities characterize sports news in the Arab countries.

The most significant limitation in this study was the year of sampling. With the coronavirus disrupting life across the globe, sports took a back step to more important news, affecting the usual flow of international events. Still, major sports news broke around the world in 2020, including the sudden death of NBA superstar Kobe Bryant in a plane crash in January, Liverpool winning the English Premier League title after 30 years in June, and Swedish football star Zlatan Ibrahimovic announcing his return to Italy's AC Milan in August, among others. Another limitation was the focus of the stories that intersected with other topics. It is, therefore, impossible to claim the above analysis is about purely sports news. Some of the results are arguably the effect of other topics as well, as such it is advisable to take these factors into consideration when making generalizations about Arab sports news. A third limitation is our focus on three roles out of six possible ones. To make a meaningful contribution to literature, we included the two roles in the power relations domain based on their significance in Arab journalism, and infotainment as the role that conveys the focus of sports on entertaining the masses and sports news on relaying information and entertainment. Future research should consider analyzing all roles to better understand how each fares in relation to the other roles. Finally, this study makes no claim that five countries represent the entire Arab region. Rather, it relies on the sample as a first step to understand sports news in the region.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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