

# Journalistic role conceptions and performance in the global south: A comparison between Egypt and the UAE during COVID-19

the International

Communication Gazette

2023, Vol. 85(8) 646–662

© The Author(s) 2023

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/17480485231214367

[journals.sagepub.com/home/gaz](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/gaz)

## Maha Abdulmajeed

College of Mass Communication, Ajman University, Ajman,  
United Arab Emirates

## Rasha El-Ibiary

Political Mass Media, Faculty of Economics and Political Science,  
Future University, Cairo, Egypt

### Abstract

Journalists in Egypt and the UAE have been differently challenged by the COVID-19 situation at multiple levels, (1) individual (2) work/routines and (3) media/organizational while covering COVID-19. Using the hierarchy of influences model, we analyze the differentiated journalists' role conceptions, perceived performance, and challenges they faced in covering COVID-19, and how that affect their performance, as Global South-based journalists. Applying a mixed method approach, we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 journalists who reported COVID-19, representing different media platforms, as a part of the Global Risk Journalism Hub project. We also surveyed journalists (*n* 102) from both countries, as a part of the Journalistic Role Performance project. Findings revealed that media-organizational level challenges influenced journalists more than other levels. Journalists also shifted from the Civic Role Conception to performing the Loyal-Facilitator Role followed by the Interventionist Role during the pandemic.

---

### Corresponding author:

Maha Abdulmajeed, Professor, College of Mass Communication, Ajman University, Ajman, United Arab Emirates.

Email: [m.attia@ajman.ac.ae](mailto:m.attia@ajman.ac.ae)

**Keywords**

Arab journalists, COVID-19, role conception, role performance, global south, hierarchy of influences, Egypt, UAE

**Introduction**

Journalists in Egypt and the UAE were differently challenged while covering the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of those challenges are traits of Global South (GS) countries, suffering economic issues, political instability, and constraints (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020). Focusing on two different media systems, we investigate journalists' conceptions of the challenges they face in reporting COVID-19 in Egypt and the UAE, and how they affect their perceived performance. The varied experiences of journalists in Egypt and the UAE, reflecting differences in media ownership patterns, freedom, regulation, and the subsequent individual, work-related and media organizational journalistic practices, make them an interesting case study for research.

Egypt and the UAE media are government-owned/controlled, male-dominated, and rigorously regulated, reflecting GS settings and issues, and marking "a shift from a focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical relations of power" (Dados and Connell, 2012: 12–13). Examining journalism in the GS is also a way to challenge "hegemonic epistemologies and ontologies of Western-centric journalism studies" and show different genres of journalism from formerly "underrepresented" regions (Mutsvairo and Bebawi, 2022: 1143).

Prior research has shown the contradicting nature of journalists' work/role, "as journalists must tailor their practice according to organization goals and professional norms, which can be in collision" (Milojević and Krstić, 2018: 43). This encompasses media organizations' priorities, journalists' incentives, journalist cooperation/competition, and managers/owners/media organizations' encouragement/discouragement.

While the UAE had clear ownership, regulations, and direct pandemic precautions, Egypt had indirect/unclear ownership/media control, regulations, and a lack of information and precautions. The political affiliation of media organizations affects the professional experiences and values in newsrooms (Ekayanti and Xiaoming, 2018). Thus, comparing the journalistic challenges and role conceptions and performance is an important addition to the literature from the GS.

Applying the HOI model, we aim to reflect the five levels of influences on journalism ranging from micro to macro: individual, routine, media-organizational, extra-media/media-system, and ideological system (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016). In analyzing journalists' perceptions of the challenges facing them during COVID-19, we focus on three of those three levels: (1) individual level; (2) routine/work practices level; and (3) media-organizational level. The issues related to those levels are related to the GS context.

***Mass Media in Egypt and the UAE***

Egypt's media is predominantly state-regulated, with Egypt ranking 168 (out of 180), according to Reporters Without Borders in 2022, and its Cybercrime Law, issued in

August 2018, targets freedom of expression on social media (Badr, 2021). Regulation and surveillance of the digital space to curb online freedom of speech have increased (Ryan, 2019). In addition to Egypt's state-owned media, recently new private media companies have established strong ties with state security organizations (Reporters Without Borders, 2019).

The UAE's National Media Council (NMC) manages all media affairs. UAE media organizations must follow NMC's media content rules, which are publicly posted on its platform. Reporters Without Borders ranked UAE 138 out of 180 in 2022. TV, radio, print, and online media in the UAE are government-owned and a few private enterprises, both local and international, offer multilingual material.

### *Media coverage of public health crises in the GS*

Covering public health crises is challenging for journalists at the frontline of disease outbreaks along with health workers and decision-makers (Klemm, 2017). Journalists were entitled to give critical, accurate, and reliable health information concerning unforeseen outbreaks to a public needing credible information to stay safe during COVID-19 (Nielsen et al., 2020). However, assessing journalists' challenges during a global health crisis is vital to understanding how journalism has handled the epidemic and how it may affect their role performance post-COVID-19.

Klemm (2017: 1226) defines health emergencies as "a rapid, often unthinkable, development of a severe hazard, creating a sense of urgency and a need for an instant reaction; nevertheless, uncertainty and high complexity, and scientific information might not be available yet." The COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented, and extended, disrupting manufacturing procedures and stressing journalists. This has forced journalists to develop coping mechanisms to withstand health reporting limits, indicating how an emergent habit may become a professional norm (Henderson and Hilton, 2018).

Examining those mechanisms helps foresee how to support journalists amid risk crises.

The pandemic reporting condition, such as working remotely, in isolation, increased workload, longer working hours, and difficulties in finding and reaching out to sources, has endangered journalists' physical and mental well-being (Bernadas and Ilagan, 2020; Macleod, 2021, Nielsen et al., 2020). With the psychological effects of stories, and the fear of job loss/wage reduction (Arab Trade Union Confederation, 2020; Hoak, 2021) journalists had to apply uncommon work practices, especially during quarantine as fieldwork was either prohibited or impossible. Journalists felt differently about covering COVID-19, as there was no end in sight to the pandemic (Bernadas and Ilagan, 2020), which put more stress on journalists.

Journalists, thus, had to alter their work routines, particularly concerning using new digital technologies with no or limited training (Finneman and Thomas, 2021). While applying new practices in using online resources reinforces journalists' ability to overcome coverage challenges and earn new skills, it increases the possibility of disseminating inaccurate information. Hence, earning advanced fact-checking skills became mandatory and a stressor, and the increasing need for health reporting led journalists

“to rely heavily on experts’ opinion, without verifying their assumptions” (Bernadas and Ilagan, 2020: 135). This shows how journalistic practices, technological changes, and contextual limits can affect health crisis reporting (Henderson and Hilton, 2018).

Moreover, information access and press freedom challenged GS-based journalists, during COVID-19, reinforcing existing freedom of speech repression issues (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Many authoritarian governments used “informational autocracy,” “an approach to authoritarian governance based primarily on the manipulation of information” (Cosentino, 2021: 10). Authorities in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Jordan practiced political interference in communicating scientific information to the public (AlAshry, 2021) and access to official information was a major obstacle to journalists in Egypt (Khamis and El-Ibiary, 2022).

The shutdown and/or suspension of media organizations during the pandemic was an added challenge to journalists along with information access and news dissemination (McIntosh, 2020; Macleod, 2021), in several GS countries like Egypt, Kenya, Mexico, Philippines (Bernadas and Ilagan, 2020). Covering the situation in hospitals risked journalists’ personal safety in some countries, while it was strictly forbidden in others (Camus, 2020; Hivos, 2020). In Egypt and Iraq, some international media organizations’ offices were closed, and foreign journalists were deported due to unfavorable coverage (Arab Trade Union Confederation, 2020). Egyptian journalists expressing their personal views on social media were severely endangered (AlAshry, 2021; Amnesty International Public Statement, 2020; El-Ibiary and Calfano, 2022).

Journalists covering health crises faced “role conflicts between remaining independent and feeling responsible for supporting public interest” (Klemm, 2017: 1236). Health crisis reporting has shifted from a watchdog to a more “cooperative” as a public mobilizer role, according to research. Professional characteristics affect journalists’ understanding and performance of risk reporting. General reporters covered the health issue with a wider focus, a more neutral role, and a focus on official information and “how to act.” Specialized reporters were less worried and had more in-depth perspectives (Klemm, 2017).

Journalists’ role conception refers to “journalists’” formulation of the journalistic roles most important for them, while their role performance is “the collective outcome of concrete newsroom decisions and the style of journalistic reporting” (Mellado (2019: 7). Journalists’ role conceptions may change due to the situational context and the factors changing their role prioritization (Holland et al., 2014). Even the same journalistic role may have varied orientations from a country to another due to structural contexts (e.g., the sociopolitical contexts, media systems, and economic circumstances) of news production (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020).

All COVID-19 challenges have a “seismic impact” on journalism, allowing journalists to assess their practices (Finneman and Thomas, 2021). Journalists “transform the practice and business of journalism” to overcome those obstacles (Bernadas and Ilagan, 2020: 136). Given the sociopolitical obstacles in GS authoritarian media ecosystems, journalists’ conceptions of their role may have a greater impact on pandemic coverage. News organizations and decision-makers must examine GS journalists’ role conception and performance during COVID-19, their challenges, and coping techniques.

### *The hierarchy of influences model and COVID-19 reporting*

Shoemaker and Reese proposed the Hierarchy of Influences (HOI) levels of analysis to disentangle and categorize the dynamics impacting media content production. The HOI analyzes how different structural and contextual circumstances lead to differentiations in media coverage of events and explain which factors have an impact on media content. The model considers the varied factors interacting across five levels of a hierarchy to construct media content, which influences our perception of reality (Reese and Shoemaker, 2014, 2016).

The *Media Organizational level* considers the economic-journalistic goals and policies of the media organization as well as internal dynamics and their impact on content production, such as supervisors, coworkers, editorial policy, and organization ownership.

The *Media Routines level* includes patterns of behavior that form the structures of media work, the process, and techniques journalists use to effectively access information and produce and provide the audience with media content they expect and need (news values, deadlines, reliance on official sources, etc.).

Then comes the *individual level* which includes personal traits of journalists that could affect their practices, like job attitudes and values, life experience, friends and family, gender, race, etc. (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016).

Understanding what factors affect media content production is crucial when reporting COVID-19. Informing large audiences with precise and complete information points to the need to analyze how varied yet overlapping elements affect Arab journalists' COVID-19 coverage. Most studies that used the HOI model focused on Western media environments, even if their media practices and ecosystems are different from non-Western countries (Collins et al., 2022).

Thus, applying the HOI on GS media across multiple levels will help to provide an in-depth and contextual explanation of challenges Arab journalists perceive to affect their coverage, shaping their role perceptions during the pandemic. As Reese and Shoemaker (2016) pointed out their model could be manipulated to examine diverse media content, we apply the HOI in investigating challenges and role perceptions of Arab journalists when reporting COVID-19, across different media beats, platforms, and content.

Media content is mainly influenced by media routines and media organization level (Collins et al., 2022). As in many GS authoritarian media systems, the situation deteriorated during COVID-19 in the Arab context (Bentzen and Smith, 2020). According to the World Press Freedom index (2020–2022), most Arab countries are in either the “difficult” or “very serious” category.

Accordingly, we focus on how different media in Egypt and the UAE have dealt with COVID-19, regarding media agendas, reliance on certain types of news sources, the dominant journalistic role performance, during the pandemic (Abdulmajeed and Fahmy, 2022), bearing in mind the difference between Egypt and the UAE in economic growth, technical and communication infrastructures and the media organizations structures of in each country (Global Knowledge Index, 2022; Human Development Index, 2023).

We apply the HOI model to (a) identify the challenges journalists in Egypt and the UAE faced while covering COVID-19, (b) analyze the forces/dynamics that triggered those challenges through three different levels of hierarchy; media/organizational, routines and individuals, and (c) to explain how they prioritized certain journalistic roles while covering COVID-19, according to the three levels of challenges they had to deal with. We examine the challenges and role conceptions of journalists in Egypt and the UAE during COVID-19, to understand how the individual, routines and media-organizational levels of the HOI influenced their perceived performance.

### Research questions

**RQ1:** What are the Egyptian and UAE journalists' perceived role conceptions and performance during the COVID-19 and how they were challenged by the pandemic?

**RQ2:** How were journalists in Egypt and the UAE challenged at (1) the individual/personal, (2) work routines, and (3) media-organizational levels of the HOI during the Covid-19?

### Method

Applying a mixed-method approach in collecting data from samples of journalists in Egypt and the UAE, we used a survey of ( $n = 102$ ) journalists from both countries and depth-interviews with 20 journalists. To answer RQ1 about journalists' conceptions of their roles amid those challenges, we conducted an online survey through Google Form on a sample of 73 journalists in Egypt (representing 10 media outlets), and 29 in the UAE (representing 6 media outlets), as a part of the Journalistic Role Performance project. All respondents have reported COVID-19 in both countries. Journalists were contacted through their personal/work emails, telephone, social media, or via editors in their media organizations, and invited to participate in the study (Table 1). The survey data was collected from September to November 2021. This nonprobability sample presents some bias due to the lack of official, updated, and accurate records of journalists in both countries.

To go into more depth and answer RQ2 about the multilevel challenges journalists face and how those challenges affect journalists' performance during the pandemic, we conducted interviews from June to December 2021 with a purposive sample of 13 journalists in Egypt and 7 in the UAE, who reported Covid-19, as a part of the Global Risk Journalism Hub project. All interviewees requested to be anonymized for security purposes. Their demographic and professional information are included in (Table 2).

### Measures

For RQ1, we used the Arabic version of the JRP survey. Journalists were asked to assess the conception and performance of the six professional journalistic roles using a five-point scale. Work and personal characteristics were also measured in the survey. We

**Table 1.** Demographic and professional characteristics of surveyed journalists in Egypt and the UAE.

<b>Gender</b>	Male	60%
	Female	40%
<b>Type of medium</b>	Print	47%
	TV	25%
	Radio	5%
	Online	25%
<b>Education</b>	Bachelor degree/college diploma	75%
	Master's degree	19%
	PhD	7%
<b>Current position</b>	Editor in chief/news director	4%
	Editor	52%
	Producer	6%
	Reporter	25%
	Anchor/host/presenter	5%
	Writer	5%
<b>Years of experience</b>	$M = 16.30$ $SD = 8.253$	

Total  $N = 102$

used Mellado (2019) six journalistic roles—Interventionist, Watchdog, Loyal-facilitator, Service, Civic, and Infotainment—to assess Arab journalists' role conceptions and performance during the pandemic. Based on the distinction between the journalistic role "conception" and "performance," discussed earlier by Mellado (2019), bearing in mind that most of the role conceptions studies emerged in Western media contexts (Hallin and Mellado, 2018).

We conducted a snapshot survey via Qualtrics on a sample of Arab journalists in both countries to determine the main and subthemes of the in-depth interviews (RQ2). We divided them into six themes: personal, professional, and procedural challenges faced when covering COVID-19, using digital tools in media coverage, news sources availability, training, work environment, and differentiated work practices during the pandemic. We analyze how individuals, routines, and media organizations affect COVID-19 reporting by comparing what Arab journalists want to do and what they do.

### Findings and analysis

RQ1: Perceived Journalistic Role Conceptions and Performance of Egyptian and UAE journalists during COVID-19.

To answer RQ1, we explored the perceived role performance and conceptions by journalists in Egypt and the UAE during COVID-19. Then, we analyzed how Egypt and the UAE differed in the highest perceived role performance and conception of journalists during COVID-19, and how those roles differed according to the medium (TV, radio, print, and online) and the journalists' characteristics.

**Table 2.** Demographic and professional characteristics of interviewed journalists in Egypt and the UAE.

No #	Affiliation	Media type/ country	Gender	Years of experience	Interview method	Interview date
1	Deputy chief editor	Print/Egypt	Female	20+	Zoom	05/11/2021
2	Journalist, multimedia editor	Online/ Egypt	Male	10+	Zoom	05/11/2021
3	journalist, economic editor	Online/ Egypt	Male	10+	Zoom	06/11/2021
4	Chief Editor/ founder of media website	Online/ Egypt	Male	20+	Zoom	27/11/2021
5	Journalist	Print/online Egypt	Female	15+	Zoom	05/12/2021
6	Journalist/video producer	TV/Egypt	Male	10+	Zoom	27/11/2021
7	Journalist/media producer	Online/ Egypt	Male	10+	Zoom	09/12/2021
8	Investigative journalist, trainer	Online/ Egypt	Male	20+	Zoom	29/06/2021
9	Deputy chief editor	Newspaper/ Egypt	Female	20+	Zoom	04/12/2021
10	Journalist, trainer	TV/Egypt	Female	20+	Zoom	16/06/2021
11	Journalist, trainer	Foreign Egypt	Female	15+	Zoom	17/06/2021
12	Journalist, former deputy chief	Online/TV Egypt	Female	30+	WhatsApp	09/06/2021
13	Media trainer/TV journalist	TV/Egypt	Female	20+	Zoom	26/06/2021
14	Reporter	TV/online UAE	Female	+5	Phone interview	14/09/2021
15	News producer, editor	TV/online UAE	Male	+25	Phone interview	12/12/2021
16	News producer, editor	TV/online UAE	Male	+30	Face-to-face	15/08/2021
17	Editor	Newspaper/ online. UAE	Female	+25	Face-to-face	20/08/2021
18	Reporter, presenter	Radio/UAE	Male	+8	Phone interview	27/08/2021
19	Reporter	TV/UAE	Male	+5	Face-to-face	16/09/2021
20	Senior-investigator reporter	TV/UAE	Female	+20	Face-to-face	04/12/2021



### Changed priorities when covering COVID-19

This analysis emphasized the distinction between what surveyed journalists in both countries want to do and their actual media performance. The loyal-facilitator role (LFR) performance scored the highest mean among the respondents in both countries ( $M=0.16$ ,  $SD=0.062$ ), followed by the Interventionist role ( $M=0.124186$ ,  $SD=0.068$ ), then the service role ( $M=0.124135$ ,  $SD=0.083$ ). Then comes the watchdog role ( $M=0.014$ ,  $SD=0.062$ ), the infotainment role ( $M=0.081$ ,  $SD=0.05$ ), and finally, the civic role ( $M=0.034$ ,  $SD=0.02$ ).

Conversely, when it comes to respondents' role conceptions the civic role conception scored the highest mean among respondents in both countries ( $M=0.68$ ,  $SD=0.21$ ), followed by the service role conception ( $M=0.67$ ,  $SD=0.2$ ), then the watchdog role conception ( $M=0.65$ ,  $SD=0.2$ ), then the LFR conception ( $M=0.57$ ,  $SD=0.24$ ), the Interventionist role conception ( $M=0.53$ ,  $SD=0.2$ ), then finally, the infotainment role conception ( $M=0.48$ ,  $SD=0.21$ ).

The shift from prioritizing the audience approach-based role "civic" in journalists' role conception to the "Loyal-facilitator" perceived role performance based on the power relations dimension (Mellado, 2019) highlights the impacts of *the routines, media-organizational, and media system* forces on shaping COVID-19 coverage in both countries.

This aligns with previous research on how journalists' role perceptions could change according to crisis (Holland et al., 2014). As the relationship between media organizations and the political regime in the Arab media context has increasingly influenced journalists' coverage of COVID-19 (AlAashry, 2021; Cosentino, 2021), the distinction between the respondents' role conceptions priorities and their perceived role performance indicates the risks that have challenged Arab journalists during the COVID-19.

The analysis reveals statistically significant differences in the LFR conception between both countries  $t(100)=-5.339$ ,  $p=.001$ . The mean score for the respondents from the UAE ( $M=0.762$ ,  $SD=0.232$ ) was higher than Egyptian journalists ( $M=0.506$ ,  $SD=0.211$ ). Another significant difference was found in the LFR performance between the two countries,  $t(100)=-4.714$ ,  $p=.001$ . The mean score for the respondents from the UAE ( $M=0.208$ ,  $SD=0.0271$ ) was higher than Egyptian journalists ( $M=0.149$ ,  $SD=0.064$ ).

Likewise, there is a significant difference in the Interventionist role conception between both countries,  $t(100)=-2.413$ ,  $p=.018$ . The mean score for the UAE respondents ( $M=0.61$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ) is higher than Egyptian respondents ( $M=0.50$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ). Additionally, a significant difference was found in the interventionist role performance between both countries  $t(100)=-3.372$ ,  $p=.001$ . The mean score for the UAE journalists ( $M=0.15$ ,  $SD=0.03$ ) is higher than Egyptian journalists ( $M=0.11$ ,  $SD=0.07$ ).

Although the LFR performance scored the highest among journalists in both countries, different media routines and contexts can explain why it is significantly higher in the UAE than in Egypt. UAE interviewees had to rely on official news sources, who were available when needed, and there was a government set, clear, and unified media agenda since the outset of the pandemic, with media practices oriented to focus on the positive management of the crisis, raising the public awareness while avoiding inflating fear. Implementing strict

policies and preventive measures prioritized the healthy working environment for journalists, leading to significant conception and performance of the LFR in the UAE. The diverse journalists' nationalities in the UAE may be another reason urging them to avoid risking their work permits. This emphasizes the impact of the *media routines and media organization's policies* on journalistic role conception and performance, even when there are similarities in the sociopolitical contexts and media systems.

Additionally, significant differences were found in journalists' loyal-facilitator perceived role performance and Interventionist perceived role performance as well, due to the medium type. Print was higher than TV and radio in both. The mean score for respondents working in Print  $t(100) = -5.136, p < .001$ . ( $M = 0.196, SD = 0.034$ ) was higher than TV  $t(100) = 1.974, p < .05$  ( $M = 0.145, SD = 0.050$ ), and radio  $t(100) = 5.812, p < .001$ . ( $M = 0.028, SD = 0.01$ ) for the loyal-facilitator perceived performance among journalists.

Similarly, mean score for respondents working in Print  $t(100) = 4.519, p < .001$  ( $M = 0.149, SD = 0.059$ ) was higher than TV  $t(100) = 4.004, p < .001$  ( $M = 0.080, SD = 0.069$ ) and radio  $t(100) = 4.519, p < .001$  ( $M = .001, SD = .01$ ) for the Interventionist perceived role performance among journalists.

The above results supported Fisher et al. (2022) findings about varied role perceptions among reporters due to the medium type. Besides, it highlights the impact of the *media-organizational level on the journalistic perceived role performance*. The significant difference could be explained in the light of interviewees' responses on the nature of print platforms as journalists said they were able to publish different types of content when covering the pandemic (e.g., news reports, interviews, opinion articles, etc.) while in TV and radio the priority went to breaking news. No significant difference in both perceived roles of Loyal-facilitator and Interventionist was found with online media,  $p < .05$ . In the UAE, this could be because most UAE online media either focuses on news coverage or republishing content from other platforms, while opinion content was written by external writers not among the surveyed sample.

Additionally, no significant differences were found between respondents neither in their Loyal facilitator or Interventionist perceived role performance nor in the two role conceptions due to: gender, education, and professional position as variables at the individual level,  $p < .05$ . This highlights the impact of routines and media-organizational levels over the individual level, aligning with Hanitzsch et al. (2019) who found that journalists acknowledged the higher influence of the media-organizational and the routines levels than other levels and that the highest media-organizational influence was in Africa, Russia, Latin America, and most of Asia.

RQ2: Challenges journalists in Egypt and the UAE faced during COVID-19 as per the Hierarchy of Influences Model

### (1) Personal–individual challenges:

Individual/personal level challenges faced by journalists in Egypt and the UAE are related to gender, professional characteristics, skills in using new technology, and being a general versus specialist reporter. Journalists in Egypt and the UAE were challenged by job loss, salary cuts, freelance work, and job insecurity.

UAE Women journalists were more worried than their male coworkers, stating they were “stressed to feel that they are more likely to lose their jobs in comparison to

*their men coworkers, as selecting who will be fired, mainly depended on personal not professional considerations,”* according to a journalist at Al-Khaleej newspaper. Likewise, an Egyptian journalist and trainer put it, *“women were the hardest to hire and easiest to fire, based on false discriminatory statements.”*

Most journalists from both countries were challenged by using new technologies, with older journalists less able to adapt compared to younger ones. Most UAE interviewees said it was their first time to use new technologies for interviewing sources remotely, but they easily adapted. Egyptian women journalists complained that most training opportunities go to their male colleagues, due to scarcity of resources, limited professional opportunities, and social constraints, pointing to a clear “gender digital gap” (Khamis and El-Ibiary, 2022). This correlates to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) survey results of women from 77 countries suffering greater stress, job loss, and lack of equipment during the pandemic than their male peers (IFJ, 2020), as a GS trait.

Both UAE and Egyptian journalists lacked experience in covering public health crises, intensifying COVID-19 risks to their health, psychological state, and professional challenges. Due to the lack of safety precautions in Egypt, as per a journalist at a private paper, *“many journalists contracted Covid-19, and some lost their lives while reporting in hospitals without enough safety measures.”* This reflects Klemm et al. (2017) portrayal of the risks facing health crisis journalists, as a sudden threat necessitating immediate response without having enough scientific information.

Moreover, UAE journalists were challenged by the type of journalistic beats, being a specialized reporter, when they had to cover specialized beats (e.g., Arts, Sports, etc.) where all on-site activities were suspended for several months. However, Egyptian journalists’ personal safety was endangered when they oppose the regime rhetoric (Amnesty International, 2020). *“Journalists are detained for reporting information other than the regime’s daily report,”* says the editor of a blocked website.

## **(2) Work-routine challenges:**

Work-routine challenges include information access, reliance on official sources, geographic scope of COVID-19 coverage (Joyce et al., 2022), technology-related challenges, such as Zoom meetings, open-source tools, working remotely (Hoak, 2021) and work values associated with new technology (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016).

While Egypt’s journalists worked in unsafe conditions, UAE journalists were clearly notified they must strictly follow preventative procedures while they were provided with all facilities to keep themselves safe since the beginning of the pandemic (e.g., working remotely, social distancing, regular free PCR tests, quarantine for positive cases and their contacts). An executive producer at Dubai Media Incorporated said:

*We continued to perform our duties during the curfew, providing extensive coverage from different areas in the country, while following the preventative procedures was a must.*

Prioritizing COVID-19 cases was also evident, *“Reporting about a positive case in the UAE or being in contact with it, was an obligation by law,”* assured an editor in Al Khaleej Newspaper. In contrast, a deputy chief editor of Egypt’s state-owned

*Al-Ahram*, said journalists during Covid-19 stayed at home for two weeks only, then they were obliged to resume work from the office while it could be done remotely “*There is no need to risk the health and safety of journalists amid a pandemic,*” she said.

A main difference between journalists in the UAE and Egypt was the (un)availability of information sources about the pandemic. Journalists in the UAE were updated with timely information from official sources about the COVID-19 situation in the UAE, while they were challenged in obtaining sufficient and accurate information from sources outside the UAE. A news producer at Al Arabiya says:

*We did not face any problem to get information about Covid-19 inside the UAE, the media briefing and the official sources were available, but we suffered to get accurate information about other regional countries.*

Journalists in Egypt, however, suffered a scarcity of information other than a daily official report that only showed numbers, without access to official sources to explain them. This has exposed differences among journalists in their vision and approach towards news verification according to their workplace. While many journalists indicated having to take a leave from work and start freelancing to avoid restrictions, others indicated they are doing their job by just running the news they receive. As a news manager at CBC channel says:

*Our role is to report the news we get from government sources to avoid misinformation. We have no time to verify information, we report what we get, especially the news related to numbers and to governmental procedures.*

This reflects a trend of “news-receiving,” as opposed to the “newsgathering” concept (Miles, 2006), in mainstream media.

Investigative journalists resisted the lack of information, saying “*journalists must dig in the news, compare local to international, compare death rates between last year and this year, to find the truth.*” According to a blocked website editor, “*We search through international news and try to find anything about Egypt because we have no idea what is going on and how many people are in danger.*” This reflects the different “patterns of behavior that form the structures of media work” (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016, p: 11).

Journalists in the UAE were challenged with the need to manipulate new perspectives/practices, and use storytelling to attract the audience, while keeping a balanced tone, during the pandemic. They needed to spread awareness, and urge people to follow preventative procedures, without inflating fear. “*The tone of reassurance was highly required in media messages along with the need to raise awareness about the virus,*” says a reporter/presenter at RAK Radio.

Additionally, UAE interviewees relied on global official news sources more than specialists or non-governmental sources, while Egyptian journalists depended on the WHO website, international news sources, and research articles, to find information about Egypt.

Common routine challenges in both countries include journalists' need to cope with extensive use of new technologies in a relatively short time, financial threats, and increased workload, affecting their performance (Milojević and Krstić, 2018). Several private media organizations had to either cut down journalists and/or salaries during the pandemic. That was the most serious challenge for both countries' journalists. This points to Reese and Shoemaker (2016) unstated rules and implied policies, encompassing factors like (low) wages, in addition to the (insecure) labor contracts, which strongly affect journalists' performance (Milojević and Krstić, 2018).

Senior UAE journalists emphasized the importance of supporting coworkers, dealing with psychological challenges, working in isolation, and feeling that the pandemic is endless. This echoes Hoak's (2021) study on the lack of support from managers and peers as the first stressor for U.S. journalists during the pandemic, followed by layoffs and furloughs. Peer and manager support, care, and approval were intangible benefits for journalists, even more important than logistical support.

As for professional training, most UAE interviewees did not receive training either on using new technologies or dealing with the pandemic pressures. Many had to multitask and produce multimedia for newspaper websites. Egyptian journalists too did not get any training from their media organizations. Yet, many earned free online training through several international media organizations on news verification and multimedia production.

### **(3) Media-organizational challenges:**

Media-organizational challenges include relations with supervisors, coworkers, editorial policy in covering COVID-19 (e.g., priorities, how clear is the media agenda for journalists covering the pandemic), incentives offered to journalists, cooperation and/or competition among journalists, the intangible encouragement (care and approval) and logistic support offered by media organizations (Hoak, 2021). Challenges at this level come from within a media organization, such as supervisors, coworkers, media company owners, and editorial policy (Collins et al., 2022).

In the UAE, there was a clear agenda that all media organizations followed strictly, including (1) topics to focus on, such as the government's efforts in dealing with the pandemic, (2) news sources to get information, (3) and what aspects should be highlighted in reporting. The same themes were used through mainstream media in the UAE. UAE interviewees emphasized there was no room for any misbehavior. Dissemination of false or inaccurate information amounts to accountability and legal punishment.

While all UAE interviewees acknowledged their media organizations provided logistical support, such as PCR tests, vaccination, gloves, masks, etc., they mostly did not receive any intangible support from their supervisors, instead, they had to make the same work duties or even more (as some coworkers got infected by the virus) without compensations. This shows how media organizations' priorities could be challenging to journalists, despite providing a clear media agenda through the pandemic (Abdulmajeed and Fahmy, 2022).

Self-censorship is a prevalent practice among journalists from both nations. UAE journalists practice self-censorship even on social media. Egyptian journalists distinguished between "self-censorship" and "self-regulation," the former coming from fear of governmental processes and the latter from attempts to improve journalistic professionalism.

They agreed that “self-censorship” surpasses “self-regulation” (Khamis and El-Ibiary, 2022).

Egyptian journalists reported that media control involved “*feeding all mainstream media with false/unverifiable information,*” says the editor of a blocked website pointing to the daily governmental report that all media had to run, and no one is allowed to challenge. As an independent journalist describes:

*The ‘Supreme Council for Media Regulation’ (SCMR) banned unauthorized sources from pandemic reporting and imposed media blackouts. To prevent government retaliation, I had to report about the pandemic anonymously, which was devastating and frustrating.*

State control of Egypt’s media, subsequent editorial policies, and the absence of transparency in relation to COVID-19 figures were major challenges. According to a CBC journalist, “*in-depth comparisons and analyses of announced figures are absolutely impossible because no one can criticize government officials or say that this or that policy is wrong.*” He adds, “*The problem stems from the absence of dependable correct/transparent figures. The other side is the editorial policies that direct journalists to avoid negativities.*” This shows the contradicting nature of journalists’ work/role, where organizational goals contrast professional norms (Milojević and Krstić, 2018: 43).

Economically, “*conventional media organizations suffered from the lack of advertisements, as advertisers were economically suffering, so they cut advertising money from the media,*” says an Egyptian economic journalist in Forbes during COVID-19.

## Conclusion

Journalists in the GS “aim to facilitate change and achieve impact and set a base for building possibilities,” (Mutsvairo and Bebawi, 2022: 1148), yet they do not necessarily succeed in achieving this due to multilevel challenges they face while gathering and disseminating COVID-19 information.

At the *individual level*, journalists from Egypt and the UAE from both genders were challenged by job loss, salary cuts, working on a freelance basis and lack of job security. Women journalists, however, felt more insecure due to male favoritism, a major GS country trait. Journalists were also challenged by adapting to new technology, despite increased workload, amid their lack of experience in covering crises, which led many of them, especially in Egypt, to contract the virus. Finally, journalists in both countries, at varied degrees, were stressed, working in isolation, lacking support amid an endless pandemic, threatening their lives and families.

At the *work routines level*, journalists in Egypt were challenged by the lack of information, logistical support, and access to officials and training, while officials and information were available to UAE journalists, as well as logistical support. Yet, UAE journalists found it difficult to get information on other regional countries and resorted to international news sources and the WHO, which were used by Egyptian journalists to find information about Egypt. Journalists in both countries, however, were challenged

by the lack of media organizations training while having to adapt to new technologies quickly, amid a stressful work environment, after cutting down journalists, lack of coworkers and managers support, working in isolation, and facing an endless pandemic.

At the *media-organizational level*, as in most GS countries, UAE journalists had a clear agenda to follow in COVID-19 reporting, while in Egypt, the SCMR imposed restrictions, and warned journalists against quoting any unofficial sources when reporting the pandemic. Journalists in both countries practiced self-censorship. While UAE journalists refrained from writing on social media to avoid misinterpretation, Egyptian journalists practiced self-censorship to avoid government retaliation.

The impacts of *the routines and media-organizational* forces on shaping COVID-19 coverage in both countries are evident in the distinction between what surveyed journalists in both countries want to do and their actual media performance. Findings reveal shifts in journalistic role prioritization among respondents between the respondents' role conceptions priorities and their perceived role performance, which is consistent with Klemm (2017) findings.

As the power relations role approach is prominent in journalists' perceived role performance, while the audience approach is higher in their role conceptions, this emphasizes the changing roles during the pandemic. It also reflects the impact of the lack of information access, and the tight grip on press freedom that threatened Arab journalists during the pandemic.

With the LFR performance scoring the highest among journalists in both countries, different media routines and contexts can explain why it is significantly higher in the UAE than in Egypt. UAE journalists had to rely on official news sources, using a clear and unified government-set media agenda focusing on positive crisis management, leading to significant conception and performance of the LFR in the UAE. In Egypt, the unclear rules left journalists prohibited from reporting outside government information, amid a lack of pandemic information. Meanwhile, media organizations did not provide logistic or coworkers support, endangering journalists' safety. Egyptian journalists, thus, differed in their role conceptions and performance.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

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

### **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **References**

Abdulmajeed M and Fahmy N (2022) Living with the pandemic: A comparative analysis between Egypt and the UAE. In: *Presented at the 72nd ICA Conference 'One World, One Network?'*, Paris.

- AlAshry M (2021) A Comparative analysis of the reportage of COVID-19 during the first and second wave: A case of the Egyptian and Jordanian newspapers. *International Journal of Media and Information Literacy* 6(1): 17–33.
- Arab Trade Union Confederation (2020). *Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Journalists and the Media Sector in the Arab World and the Middle East*. [https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/effects\\_of\\_Covid-19\\_pandemic\\_on\\_journos\\_eng.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/effects_of_Covid-19_pandemic_on_journos_eng.pdf)
- Badr H (2021) Egypt: A divided and restricted media landscape after the transformation. In: Richter C and Kozman C (eds) *Arab Media Systems*. London, UK: Open Book, 215–231.
- Bentzen N and Smith T (2020) The impact of coronavirus on media freedom. *European Parliament*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/651905/EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)651905\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/651905/EPRS_BRI(2020)651905_EN.pdf)
- Bernadas JMAC and Ilagan K (2020) Journalism, public health, and COVID-19: Some preliminary insights from the Philippines. *Media International Australia* 177(1): 132–138.
- Camus MR (2020) Journalism in times of COVID-19. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 22 March. Available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1246259/journalism-in-times-of-Covid-19>
- Collins SJ, Kinnally W and Sandoval JA (2023). The hierarchy of influences model, national culture, human development, and journalism influences. *Electronic News* 17(2): 93–112.
- Cosentino G (2021) You can't arrest a virus': The freedom of expression crisis within Egypt's response to COVID-19. *Journal of African Media Studies* 13: 207–220. Issue Media and the Coronavirus Pandemic in Africa (Part One), DOI.
- Dados N and Connell R (2012) The global south. *Contexts* 11(1): 12–13.
- Ekayanti M and Xiaoming H (2018) Journalism and political affiliation of the media: Influence of ownership on Indonesian newspapers. *Journalism* 19(9-10): 1326–1343.
- El-Ibiary R and Calfano B (2022) Job satisfaction and social media use: Cognitive reflection and journalists' utilization in Egypt and the United States. *International Journal of Communication* 16: 4844–4865. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/18760/3922>
- Finneman T and Thomas R (2021) "You had to be reporting constantly" COVID-19's impact on U.S. weekly newspapers' journalistic routines. *Newspaper Research Journal* 2021, 42(3): 330–345.
- Fisher C, Nolan D, McGuinness K, et al. (2022) Australian regional journalists' role perceptions at a time of upheaval. *Media International Australia* 184(1): 92–105.
- Global Knowledge Index (2022) <https://www.knowledge4all.com/>
- Hallin DC and Mellado C (2018) Serving consumers, citizens, or elites: Democratic roles of journalism in Chilean newspapers and television news. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23(1): 24–43.
- Hanitzsch T, Ramaprasad J, Arroyave J, et al. (2019) Perceived influences; journalists' awareness of pressures on their work. In: Hanitzsch T, Hanusch F, Ramaprasad J, et al. (eds) *Worlds of Journalism: Journalistic Cultures Around the Globe*. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 103–159. DOI: 10.7312/hani18642-006
- Henderson L and Hilton S (2018) The media and public health: Where next for critical analysis? *Critical Public Health* 28(4): 373–376.
- Hivos (2020) *Press under pressure: The view from investigative journalists*. <https://shortest.link/jAWo>
- Hoak G (2021) Covering COVID: Journalists' stress and perceived organizational support while reporting on the pandemic. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 98(3): 854–874.
- Holland K, Sweet M and Blood RW (2014) A legacy of the swine flu global pandemic: Journalists, expert sources, and conflicts of interest. *Journalism* 15(1): 53–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884913480460>



- Human Development Index (2023) <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/hdi-by-country>
- Human Rights Watch (2021) *COVID 19 Triggers Wave of Free Speech Abuse*. <https://shortest.link/iGG->
- International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) (2020) Journalists and media staff killed 1990>2020: 30 years of contribution towards safer journalism
- Joyce HV de M, Harlow S, Schmitz Weiss A, et al. (2023) Spatial dimensions within hierarchy of influences: How re-conceived notions of space in networked societies impact Latin American journalists. *International Communication Gazette* 85(6): 498–519.
- Khamis S and El-Ibiary R (2022) Egyptian women journalists' feminist voices in a shifting digitalized journalistic field. *Digital Journalism* 10(7): 1238–1256.
- Klemm C (2017) Changed priorities ahead: Journalists' shifting role perceptions when covering public health crises. *Journalism* 20(9): 1223–1241.
- Macleod H (2021). COVID-19 and the media: A pandemic of paradoxes. *IMS book series –Defending journalism*. [https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2990-Covid-19\\_and\\_the\\_media\\_FINAL\\_singlepages.pdf](https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2990-Covid-19_and_the_media_FINAL_singlepages.pdf)
- Márquez-Ramírez M, Mellado C, Humanes ML, et al. (2020) Detached or interventionist? Comparing the performance of watchdog journalism in transitional, advanced and non-democratic countries. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 25(1): 53–75.
- McIntosh T (2020) Governments delay access to information due to COVID-19. *Global Investigative Journalism Network*. <https://gijn.org/2020/03/31/governments-delay-access-toinformation-due-to-Covid-19/>
- Mellado C (2019) Journalists' professional roles and role performance. *Oxford Research Encyclopedias. Communication*. <https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-832>.
- Miles H (2006) *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World*. London, UK: Abacus; New Ed edition.
- Milojević A and Krstić A (2018) Hierarchy of influences on transitional journalism—corrupting relationships between political, economic and media elites. *European Journal of Communication* 33(1): 37–56.
- Mutsvauro B and Bebawi S (2022) Journalism and the global south: Shaping journalistic practices and identity post “arab spring”. *Digital Journalism* 10(7): 1141–1155,
- Nielsen RK, Fletcher R, Newman N, et al. (2020) Navigating the ‘infodemic’: How people in six countries access and rate news and information about coronavirus. *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford*. <https://18.nu/qhP9>
- Reese SD and Shoemaker PJ (2016) A media sociology for the networked public sphere: The hierarchy of influences model. *Mass Communication and Society* 19(4): 389–410.
- Reporters Without Borders (2019) *Media ownership monitor: Egypt*. Retrieved from <https://egypt.momrsf.org/en/owners/companies/>
- Ryan V (2019) Google is deepening its involvement with Egypt's repressive government. Retrieved from <https://theintercept.com/2019/08/18/google-egypt-office-sisi/>
- Shoemaker PJ and Reese SD (2014) *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century*. Third edition published 2014 by Routledge. Online at: <https://18.nu/qhP8>
- The Amnesty International Public Statement. (2020). *Egypt: Prisons are Now Journalists Newsrooms*. [https://www.amnesty.be/IMG/pdf/20200503\\_public\\_statement\\_egypt.pdf](https://www.amnesty.be/IMG/pdf/20200503_public_statement_egypt.pdf)
- World Press Freedom Index (2022) <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-s-2022-world-press-freedom-index-new-era-polarisation-0>