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Cultures of Restraint and Towards an Appraisal of Non-Western News Values

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Abstract

Research on Western European and North American news media continues to dominate scholarship in the field of journalism studies. The remedies sought to rectify this imbalance notably include comparative studies across non-Western and Western countries using large-scale surveys or content analyses. At an epistemological level, such studies adopt—often inherently—an Enlightenment-inspired normative frame that makes the comparisons and transpositions possible. On the one hand, these normative frames are necessary placeholders to make sense of the global field of journalism considering existing hierarchies of knowledge production. On the other, such frames are untenable because they conveniently force Enlightenment-based assumptions upon non-Western cultures, which fundamentally exist in tension with those normative assumptions. Departing from such comparative studies and approaches, this article proposes the concept of “cultures of restraint” to understand non-Western journalism practices and news values in a more context-sensitive manner. We demonstrate the utility of this concept by applying it to the case of vernacular language migrant journalists in the Middle East. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews, we illuminate the cultural conditions that shape the journalistic task of redefining “normative” news values, in the process challenging conventional interpretations of news and journalism.

Keywords: non-Western news values, Global South, De-westernizing media studies, vernacular news cultures, cultures of restraint, postcolonial communication

Introduction

Western European and North American experiences form the basis for much of the scholarship in the field of journalism studies. This emphasis on the West is not surprising. As a profession and an academic area of inquiry, journalism is not only believed traditionally to have originated in the West, but its dominance in the twenty-first century world is sustained through Western cultural power and hegemony (Chalaby, 1998; Hanitzsch, 2019). One consequence of this hegemony is that Western notions of journalism are considered normative and non-Western journalistic practices, whenever they deviate from normative views, are treated simply as aberrations or as reminders of incomplete modernity. Journalism studies scholars have rarely scrutinized this modernity question, though. It has been salient to many in the humanities quarters including media studies or postcolonial scholars (e.g., Chakrabarty, 2000; Moyo, 2020; Spivak, 1988) who, while unpacking the dimensions of modernity, have problematized the related categories of “Western” and “non-Western” as not only constituting geo-political spaces, but also analytical tropes and pervasive imaginaries that index everyday power inequalities. And most journalism studies researchers have yet to consider this latter aspect in their scholarly thought.

As a result, within the field of journalism studies, differences between Western and non-Western news values (shared, situated philosophies that inform journalistic practices) are seldom analyzed culturally or historically. They are more often examined cross-nationally or comparatively, with a linear, Enlightenment-inspired normative frame enabling such comparisons and transpositions.¹ On the one hand, these normative frames are necessary placeholders to make sense of the global field of journalism considering existing hierarchies of knowledge production. On the other, such frames are untenable because they conveniently force

Enlightenment-based assumptions and approaches upon non-Western cultures, which fundamentally exist in tension with those normative value systems.²

Both the neglect of the Global South and studying its media from a Western epistemological standpoint have grave implications for journalism scholarship. Among other things, we believe it circumscribes our understanding of the cultural conditions within which most journalists around the world actively redefine “normative” news values to produce journalism.

Journalism scholars and practitioners in the West, for example, have understood the public service function of journalism as keeping the citizenry informed through the production of unbiased news (Beam et al., 2009). The dissemination of such news and information enables people to make informed decisions in a democracy, and thus journalism constitutes a public good. Although this conception of journalistic public service contributes to our understanding of journalism, it still presents a fragmented view of the mass media with limited treatment of alternate forms of public service that many non-Western journalists perform professionally including, as we show later in this article, helping members of the community during personal crises. Engaging with the lived experiences and role perceptions of journalists in different social and political environments is therefore indispensable to construct a more complete picture of journalism globally.

This article proposes the concept of “cultures of restraint”—a socially constructed environment of measured speech—to study non-Western news values, particularly in authoritarian contexts.³ As we will demonstrate, this concept can help researchers think through why and how non-Western journalists transform “time-honored” news values in their everyday lives. Crucially, in its study of non-Western news values, this concept enables us *not* to lose sight

of the cultural and historical conditions within which journalism is situated and which exert an overwhelming influence on journalistic work. Acknowledging these conditions mean that appellations including “Western” and “non-Western” in this article are considered to be social constructions inasmuch as geo-political spaces, as indicated in postcolonial scholarship. This article operationalizes the concept of the cultures of restraint through an investigation of non-Western journalists producing news amid shifting political landscapes, rapid technological developments, and large-scale transnational migration.⁴

Our study focuses on vernacular news media linking the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with the southern Indian state of Kerala. This state, inhabited by a majority Malayalam language-speaking population (called Malayalis), has long been a source of migrant labor for the burgeoning UAE economy, and news is one of the primary ways Malayali migrants connect with their homeland. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews, this study reveals how these actors reconcile with the cultures of restraint to redefine normative news values and meanings of journalism.

Communication and the Cultures of Restraint

Press censorship forms the undercurrent of journalism practiced in much of the non-Western world. To understand the relationship between censorship and journalism, it is essential to explore how the two are embedded in and shaped by regional histories and cultures as well as postcolonial developmentalism and difference (Chatterjee, 1993; Kumar and Parameswaran, 2018). Press censorship, we suggest, needs to be seen as a constituent of a larger phenomenon, what we provisionally call cultures of restraint—a concept that emerged from our extensive fieldwork and immersion in theoretical literature and whose major dimensions will be illustrated in the current and the upcoming sections.⁵ By cultures of constraint, we refer to the general

environment of reservations that a society, community, or even a supranational space can impose against the marketplace of ideas. Cultures of restraint include direct and indirect limitations on freedom of expression. It is a regime in which social actors seriously consider, to the point of internalization, whether a particular object of expression, such as journalism, can be put out in an open space for public attention and consumption. Often such introspection results in an actor not participating in the ongoing process of the production of ideas or, in self-censorship. At other times, the limits outside of which an idea is deemed threatening would be learned through osmosis, or through a process of reprimands. The latter can range from an official notification from the government-instituted censorship department to the silencing of social actors generating the ideas.

Cultures of restraint form the antithesis of the liberal democratic tradition, which assumes that there is an inherent good in the diversity of ideas and opinions, even though their utility may not be realized fully at the current moment. As media theorist John Peters (2012; 2008) suggested, liberalism discounts for the fact that we do not always know what ideas mean to other people, to our neighbors, for instance. Because thoughts and ideas, some of which are produced and propagated through the institution of journalism, may differ drastically from the indigenous point of view, cultures of restraint cannot categorically support the production of opposing ideas.

To be sure, the liberal democratic tradition is widely seen to constitute the foundation of modern media technologies. However, an uncritical embrace of this tradition and of resistance against censorship borders on being naive for two main reasons. First, if freedom of expression is given *carte blanche*, then it will also include in its purview malicious forms of speech (such as rumor) and expressions of hatred. Indeed, there are instances in the world when an idea itself is toxic: one that results in societal unrest and disharmony and in some cases conflict and violence.

Yet, the journey of an idea from its inception and transmission to eventual conflict and violence is rarely straightforward. It requires the mobilization of, as George (2019) noted, political orchestrators, grassroots instigators, and corrupt law enforcement—ingredients that could be readily made available in the digital age. Second, freedom of expression, integral though it is to the history of the ideas of media and communications, is not a politically neutral category. It has acquired new connotations within the political history of the long Cold War, serving as a tool for American propaganda (Rajagopal, 2019). The political character of “freedom of expression” is rarely acknowledged by communication scholars who treat this concept narrowly, as an objective, core priority. This largely monochromatic stance ignores the broader sociological concerns including the Western (ab)use of the freedom of expression argument to usurp upon or enable imperialist domination over the Global South on political and economic fronts, making the need for new concepts more urgent in critical scholarship on the media.⁶

In practice, cultures of restraint privilege the adverse effects of an idea over the benefits that it may generate. This notion turns the Enlightenment view on its head, in a move redolent of the English philosopher John Stuart Mill’s selective invocation of the principles of liberty. In his liberalist essays “On Representative Government” and “On Liberty,” Mill (2015) proclaimed self-rule as the highest form of government and yet argued against giving Africans or Indians self-rule on historicist grounds, on grounds that they “were *not yet* civilized enough to rule themselves” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 8). Likewise, the British rulers in the Indian subcontinent retarded the capacity of vernacular languages to represent reality by imposing the colonial language, English. They claimed that the languages of the colonized lacked authenticity, lacked “technical” or “scientific” vocabulary (Asif, 2020). Today, authoritarian rulers, rightwing governments, and nationalist elites in much of the postcolonial world have expropriated these

historical arguments to convince themselves that political modernity can be attained only through an incongruous relationship to Western liberalist thoughts—or through embracing the cultures of restraint.⁷

Cultures of restraint, then, are certainly not limited to the world of journalism, but pervade every sphere of public life, including artistic performances and public talks. In the specific contexts of authoritarian regimes that curb free speech in the non-Western world, the responsible exercise of journalistic “restraint” in reporting news overlaps with the self-protective self-censorship, with both being enveloped in the cultures of restraint. The concept thus represents a dialogic relationship between the context, which is public and social life, and those who function within it, engaged in expressive traditions such as journalism. There is, furthermore, a deep connection between the cultures of restraint and the notions of respect for those in power or for the elders enshrined in Eastern religious philosophies including Hinduism and Islam. The cultures of restraint are frequently produced, among other things, by the appropriation of religious language.

Attentiveness to religious philosophies makes the cultures of restraint stand in contrast with analogous concepts, such as Gilles Deleuze’s “societies of control,” which are characterized by the Enlightenment-inspired sidelining, if not rejection, of religion. This oversight to religious themes occurs in concert with the marginalization of the Global South as a site of academic inquiry. For example, in Deleuze’s (1995) influential essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” the notion of control societies—indicative of a border-less, capitalistic, technologically-driven repressive culture—mentions the Global South only in passing, or as Rajagopal (2019) articulated, as a “postscript to the Postscript” (p. 415). The idea of cultures of restraint, in comparison, decenters technological modernity without eschewing it completely.

And that is the utility of this concept: it brings back into focus the everyday, the religious, the vernacular, challenging assumptions, foregrounding contradictions, and unsettling conventional “news values” (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O’Neill, 2017).

For example, news values such as objectivity or monitoring government power may be only partially applicable within the cultures of restraint. As we will show later in the analysis sections, journalists operating within the cultures of restraint prioritize working *with* the government rather than *standing apart* from the government. In this way, the news media can be understood as collaborators with the state in the management of society, which speaks to the collectivist, “survival of all” ideal rather than the libertarian philosophies of the “survival of the fittest” and “man as an end in itself” (Freeman, 2000; Yin, 2007). Building on these ideas, this article poses the following research question for inquiry: How are the cultures of restraint manifested in the news values and practices of Malayali migrant journalists in Middle Eastern contexts?

Background: Malayali Migrants and Media in the Middle East

Although circuits of civilization and trade across the Indian Ocean existed for centuries, the large-scale migration of Malayalis to the Middle East, or the “Gulf,” started only in the 1970s with the oil boom⁸ (Vora, 2013; Washbrook, 2013). The region attracted migrant workers from South Asia, including Kerala, who readily assimilated into the scarce local labor force. The reasons for migration were primarily economic: a high unemployment rate in Kerala and tax-free monetary rewards in the Gulf. Currently, 90 percent of the global Malayali diaspora of 2.4 million live in the Gulf, mainly in the UAE, where migrants constitute 90 percent of the population (Zachariah and Rajan, 2018). Most migrants continue to belong to the lower-class and

are employed in unskilled or semi-skilled work. Nearly half of the Malayali migrants in the UAE are Muslims followed by Hindus and Christians who constitute about 25 percent each.

In the UAE, Malayali migrants work in a range of occupations from construction to business, from domestic work to journalism, but they are all governed under the Kafala system, which restricts the migrants' period of stay, requires them to have local sponsors, and excludes the possibility of citizenship (Syed, 2016). The abuse of low-income migrant workers by sponsors is an issue that is frequently raised in international news media, although without adequately acknowledging that the Kafala system is perpetuated through capitalism, class inequality, globalization, and the legacies of British colonialism, among other factors (Azimi, 2016; Chakravartty and Dhillon, 2016). Many migrant workers also go missing for months and years, sometimes voluntarily, to escape harsh work conditions. Given the large migrant population in the UAE and limited staff at the Indian Embassy in the country, Malayali migrant journalists have stepped up to provide social support to the migrant population.

With regard to media, the turn of the 21st century has seen the establishment of Malayalam-language dailies and broadcast media in the Middle East for the Malayali migrant population, with *Gulf Madhyamam* being the first newspaper to be published, in 1999 from Bahrain. Asianet Radio was launched in 2000 in the UAE and Asianet television operations in 2003. Although the largest Malayalam-language newspaper *Malayala Manorama* (hereafter, *MM*) was shipped daily from Kerala to the Middle East since the 1970s and thus made available (two to three days late) to readers, it was not until 2005 that the newspaper established a news bureau in Dubai and started five Middle Eastern editions. Between 2006 and 2016, more than five Malayalam satellite television channels developed exclusive Middle East operations to “cater to the imagination of the homeland and the search for one’s roots by recreating the life in

India for diasporic consumption” (Mini, 2016, p. 181). Malayalam-language news portals such as *Marunadan Malayali* are becoming increasingly popular, particularly with the younger generation. In the past years, however, four Malayalam-language radio stations, such as *MM* company’s Radio Mango 96.2 FM, have also closed in the UAE because of “drop in advertisement revenue” and “high licence fee” (Kader, 2019). In all, the Middle East, and the UAE in particular, presents both challenges and opportunities to the exchange of media as much as of people and ideas. We next explain how this socio-cultural context shaped the methodology of our research study.

Methodology

Part of a larger research project, this article examines the ways in which Malayali migrant journalists negotiate the cultures of restraint in the UAE to re-interpret or translate normative news values. To accomplish this, the first author conducted in-depth interviews by telephone with migrant journalists in July-August 2021 and fieldwork in Kerala from November 2017 to February 2018. The decision to use Kerala as a base was informed by fieldwork in the Middle East in June-July 2016 during which many Malayali journalists censored themselves: a few declined interview requests; and some of those who agreed only answered part of the interview questions. It became clear that this group could be productively engaged only in Kerala. Notably, even for Malayalam-language news media in the Middle East, much of the news is generated from Kerala because of the close ties that Malayali migrants have maintained and developed with the homeland. In Kerala, migrant and local journalists were comfortable speaking about their work experiences in the UAE. They openly participated in interviews that each lasted from 45 minutes to three hours.

As the concept of cultures of restraint requires us to actively examine how language-based identities can potentially create power hierarchies in postcolonial societies, the first author also interviewed Malayali migrant journalists who worked with English-language news outlets in the Middle East. Interview data was gathered from 62 journalists in total, of which 38 worked for the Malayalam-language *MM* newspaper. All the interviews conducted were for the larger research project on the Malayalam-language press in the Middle East and not solely for this article. Due to word limit considerations, only a small proportion of representative interviewee narratives are analyzed in this article. The interview data was supplemented with a focus group discussion at a popular tea stall in Kozhikode city in Kerala where journalists frequented to munch evening snacks and sip tea. The focus group conversation stemmed from an interview that the first author was conducting with a former migrant journalist at that tea stall, before they were joined by five Malayalam-language journalists from various news organizations who had journalistic experience in the Middle East. The first author's Malayali background as well as prior fieldwork experience in Kerala ensured that these cultural ways of initiating and moderating an "impromptu" group conversation were part of the researcher's methodological toolkit (Briggs, 1984). Detailed notes taken during the focus group and interviews contained descriptions of the setting and key points from the conversations. Names of all informants were substituted with a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

During the field research in Kerala, the first author also analyzed Malayalam news to provide context to the interviews and ask specific questions to journalists. The methodological design for the study, however, did not include a formal content analysis of news stories; rather the goal was to move beyond text-based analysis of media to unravel the cultural and political contexts in which news is produced. In doing so, the analysis takes its inspiration from Udupa

(2015) who encouraged researchers to overcome the dominant message-centric analysis of media that privileges the sender-receiver dyad, to instead unravel the political and semiotic contexts in which news actors practice journalism. Similarly, drawing on area studies scholarship, Rajagopal (2001) suggested a more open, intertextual reading and analysis of news media materials, one in which text and context enriched each other. Following these recommendations, we present our analysis in the remainder of the article.

Advocacy as a News Value

The cultures of restraint in the UAE present challenges to journalism's celebrated critical adversarial function of monitoring government power, and consequently Malayalam media devote considerable space to news from Kerala. For Malayalam-language news about the UAE, migrant journalists have reoriented their focus from political journalism—which is otherwise dominant in Malayalam-language journalism in Kerala—to advocacy-based journalism. The latter functions within the bounds of the cultures of restraint, which demand that journalists respect government authorities and the “law of the land,” yet serves the migrant population in innovative ways. From the fieldwork, we discovered that Malayali journalists from various news organizations were engaged in social justice work such as locating and repatriating missing migrant workers in the Middle East. Journalists achieved this task through a grassroots network of freelance reporters, social workers, members of the Malayali migrant community as well as through a host of technologies such as mobile devices, WhatsApp, the Internet, and a reality television show called *Pravasalokam* (“The World of Expatriates”). The mobilization of people in the search process was largely successful with more than 900 missing migrant workers traced in the last decade. There was a consensus among our interviewees that “human-interest” stories

on the Malayali migrant community formed the bedrock of Malayalam-language reporting in the UAE.

In early 2018, the first author spent several weeks in Kozhikode to interview migrant journalists visiting Kerala. The district of Kozhikode emerged as an important research site given that many former migrant journalists had settled there and even many of the current migrant journalists came to visit their families in Kozhikode. As a busy port-city in the history of the Indian Ocean World, Kozhikode had served as a chief link between Kerala and the Middle East, and some of that reputation was carried forward to the realm of journalism in the digital age. Everywhere in Kozhikode, one could see the marked influence of the Middle East: from the names of business organizations touting their Gulf connections to that of the cuisines served in restaurants. The city provided a perfect environment to a Gulf returnee, as many of the former migrant journalists confirmed during a focus group discussion at a teashop. The focus group conversation stemmed from an interview with Shaju, a former migrant journalist. In his forties, Shaju had worked for the Kozhikode edition of *MM* before being assigned to its Dubai branch. He was visiting Kozhikode to meet his family. Over tea, coffee, and Sharjah shake (milk-based smoothie made from dates and fruits), as we discussed news reporting in the UAE, advocacy emerged as the supreme news value for Malayalam-language migrant journalism. Practicing advocacy journalism resonated with the image of the “model minority” that migrant journalists such as Shaju wished to project of themselves. “Malayalam newspapers in the UAE cannot be critical about the political system and leaders. Malayalam newspapers are careful about this,” explained Shaju, adding that, “As our Prime Minister says that the goodness of a country is reflected through its overseas migrants, Malayalis have always been careful in keeping up the reputation of their country in a foreign land.”

Shaju's words indicated the way he took the advice of a political leader (the Prime Minister) at face value, considering his own positionality as a Malayali migrant—a submissiveness that we observed in a few migrant journalists who otherwise remained more critical of political developments in India. In the context of migrant journalism, advocacy then served as a news value that would maintain the relevance of Malayalam-language journalism in the UAE. "Newspapers in the UAE go beyond their political ideologies. Migrant journalists concentrate on charity and human-interest news stories. When they return to Kerala, they again go back to their original behavior," noted Shaju, suggesting that embrace of advocacy as a news value was only temporary and it ceased to matter after they completed their stint as a migrant journalist in the UAE and moved back to Kerala. A sample of news headlines that Shaju wrote recently for the UAE edition of *MM* supported the advocacy-focus of migrant journalists:

Pakistani Quran teacher rescues Indians stranded in the UAE, Indian Consulate steps in

Woman from Kollam district makes history in the UAE with licence for bus driving

Yusuff Ali becomes the UAE's first permanent expat resident

Kerala woman wins over USD 3 million in the UAE raffle, says would use it for charity

News stories on charity contributed directly to the Malayali migrant community, which was mainly composed of low-income workers, many of whom needed financial support during medical emergencies and loss of employment at some point. These stories sometimes also fit the category of financial and business journalism, which remains a staple of most newspapers, including the English-language press in the UAE, and more broadly in the Middle East. Migrant journalists including Shaju justified the focus on charity news partly due to the active work done by charity organizations in the UAE and the ease of accessibility of relevant news sources. "We give news regarding charity activities of Malayalis. There are more than 50 Malayali

organizations registered in Dubai. They do lot of charity activities in the UAE and Kerala,” stated Shaju, adding that, “The majority of Malayalis in the UAE are from Malabar [northern Kerala]. The charity contributions of migrant Malayalis are very significant in Kerala. The charity organizations mainly provide medical assistance to the Malayali population.”

Charity organizations in the Middle East follow Islamic principles, or the ideal of religious charity: the *zakat* (“almsgiving”). The *zakat* is the third commandment in Islam that asks believers to care for the needy. By deferring to the core value of charity, noted Kochuyt (2009), believers “ineluctably bring in themselves a standard prescribing how people should relate to one another and to God by means of gift-giving” (p. 99). Thus, Malayali migrant journalists, sometimes even those who did not identify with the Islamic faith, saw news reporting on charity-related events concerning the migrant population as one possible way in which they could partake in the *zakat*.

According to many migrant journalists we interviewed, a focus on charity- and advocacy-related journalism was also important as it provided a much-needed corrective to the journalism practiced in Kerala, which they regarded as highly “negative.” A few migrant journalists remarked that Malayali journalists in Kerala “abused freedom of expression” and wrote stories that emphasized the “sensational” side of news stories rather than developmental angles, as one journalist named James mentioned during the focus group discussion:

These days, Malayalam-language media is full of negative news, and this can eventually affect the mentality of the society as a whole. There is negative news about masses, police, and government. If a minister organizes a press meet and he announces some development projects, that is not reported. Journalists instead ask him questions about some controversial issues, and if he gives a sensational

answer, that is highlighted. Malayalam media is going after controversy.

Recently, *Mathrubhumi* newspaper started a column called *sadvartha* (“good news”). This signifies that the rest of the news is negative news, and they had to start a separate column for good or positive news and search for news to fill this column. Matters have gone to such an extent in Kerala. This is unfortunate.

The homeland in this way served as a barometer to analyze and compare the journalism that migrant reporters in the UAE pursued. Migrant journalists often perceived themselves as a corrective or balancing agent to the journalism practiced at home in Kerala. While for most migrant journalists, their stint in the UAE provided them with a chance to look at journalism from an alternative or “positive” angle, some considered their work in a more critical manner. In either case, journalists remained firmly rooted in their idea that they were doing journalism as opposed to public relations.

A Case of “PR Journalism?”

If one were to gauge Malayalam-language journalism in the UAE through Western journalistic standards and norms, the former will find itself in a dubious position because of its avoidance of critical political reporting. But leveling such critiques also reproduces the very Western value system and episteme whose priorities have long occluded a holistic understanding of the cultural conditions of vernacular news production in the Global South. It is, therefore, vital to unpack the ways “unorthodox” journalism practices are implicated in the larger socio-political context—something that a concept such as the cultures of restraint allows us to do.

Migrant journalists were aware that the lack of critical political reporting was attributed to the UAE’s cultures of restraint and the interviewee narratives helped sketch some of the characteristics within the field of journalism. “There is no scope to ‘make’ news in the Gulf,”

Nair said, referring to critical political reportage, as we sat for conversation at twilight in his well-ventilated drawing room. Nair served as the deputy editor of *MM* newspaper in Dubai for several years in the early 2000s and now lived with his family in Ernakulam, Kerala. He spoke candidly, like a veteran intellectual who had a lot to share. “When I was the editor, a photographer from Dubai saw a fire and reported, as in Kerala. He was arrested. We had to rescue him. Even when we are an eyewitness to an event, we can’t report that,” he narrated, adding that, “So there are differences between journalism in Kerala and the UAE. We always have to ‘boost’ the people there. They won’t allow any critical reporting, not even cartoons. It’s not something that’s negative; it’s just the way it is there.” Nair had thus internalized and reconciled with the altered set of news characteristics (avoidance of adversarial reporting), treating it as a natural state of journalism in the UAE. He never sought to challenge these norms, ingrained as they were in the cultures of restraint.

Reporting news stories from the field in the UAE needs extensive time and cultural resources, and through the interviews, we discovered that many migrant journalists did not go to the field every day to report on news stories. As compared to their counterparts in Kerala, journalists in the UAE spent more time on the desk. Legwork involved dangers, such as the possibility of getting a story “wrong” from the perspective of censors, besides adding up expenses. Furthermore, the identity of migrant journalists mattered in the journalistic field. “I did not go to field much. Since I am a non-Muslim and a non-Emirati, my presence in the field was not very helpful,” explained Nair, suggesting the difficulties that certain Malayali migrant journalists faced during field reporting in the UAE and that led to them preferring to write stories from the desk.

A few of the younger Malayali journalists whom we interviewed, however, saw the lack of field reporting and critical political reportage as a “shortcoming.” These younger journalists were exposed to Western journalistic norms during their formal training in Indian journalism schools, some of which—such as the Indian Institute of Mass Communication—were established with the help of overseas funding or in collaboration with US universities. One of these migrant journalists, Santosh, reported from the UAE for a year before returning to Ernakulam. Field reporting had been integral to his journalistic work and being unable to do investigative and critical political stories in the UAE took the sheen off journalism for him, as he explained during the interview at his house in Aluva, Ernakulam.

Even during peak winter months, tropical Kerala was warm and humid enough to cause sweating. The ceiling fan of Santosh’s drawing room operated at its highest speed, as he explained the differences between journalism in the UAE and Kerala. After returning to Kerala, he had become more critical of the work he and other migrant journalists performed in the UAE. “They [migrant journalists] are not working hard. They are just doing PR work. They go for press conferences and cover events if someone calls them. Apart from that, they are not doing any work,” lamented Santosh, adding that, “They are going for such events and meetings and get advertisements for the newspaper. That is the only journalism they are doing. They can do a lot of things.” Santosh’s comment reveals an important difference in the newsgathering process between Kerala and the UAE. Whereas in Kerala, journalists actively traveled to remote places to find news, Malayalam-language journalists in the UAE typically waited for news to come to them. Another interviewee, a UK-educated Malayali journalist with the Qatar-based English-language newspaper *The Peninsula*, labelled this as “PR journalism,” highlighting the process in which news and information were pushed to the journalists rather than that in which reporters

proactively gathered news materials in the raw. Thus, because migrant journalists could not produce critical news stories in the UAE, migrant journalists partook in work that bordered on being “public relations.” As community journalists, migrant reporters attended events and functions organized by members of the Malayali community to cultivate formal and personal relationships, as Santosh reflected below:

They [migrant journalists] are getting nothing but monetary benefits. They are also getting a lot of contacts. When politicians and celebrities visit the Gulf, they get invitation. They are enjoying these contacts, free pass, and the affluence.

That’s why they are interested to work in the Gulf. Lulu mall was organizing a food fest. When they invited me, I refused. What should I do in the food fest? The entire journalist community goes, and they enjoy the expensive gifts. What journalism is this? So, these journalists do not like me.

In addition to personal benefits, migrant journalists were able to garner advertisements and public reputation by participating in these events. It was therefore unsurprising that Malayalam-language newspapers in the UAE gave ample news space to Malayali businessmen. The coverage of businesspeople and the pervading “envelope culture”—the practice in which journalists receive money or gifts from business organizations in return for news publicity—went hand in hand in the UAE (Lodamo and Skjerdal, 2009). Santosh was critical of this practice and claimed part of the reason behind the envelope culture was that many migrant journalists in the UAE, particularly at Malayalam-language broadcast media outlets, were part-time journalists and did not adhere to journalistic ethics to the same extent as did full-time, professional journalists. Consequently, it was common for migrant journalists to regularly receive “rewards” in exchange of news stories. “Businessmen give gifts to the journalists and hearing this all the channels will

go for the press meetings of businessmen. During my early days in Dubai, there was a program in Lulu Market, and we were going to cover that,” claimed Santosh, adding that, “On our way, an executive from Lulu called and asked us ‘why are you late we have gifts for you.’ Hearing this, I returned and did not go to cover their expo. I don’t like such an approach of business people.” Envelope culture was not limited to Malayalam-language journalism, but it was also prevalent in Arabic- and English-language journalism in the Middle East (Onyebadi and Alajmi, 2016).

From Timeliness to Tardiness, From Competition to Collaboration

The UAE’s cultures of restraint altered “normative” news values such as timeliness, particularly for news stories that had the potential for negative political ramifications. As a news value, timeliness suggests that information has greatest public value if it is reported quickly and accurately. In the breaking news era, speed has been prioritized over accuracy in most parts of the world. In the case of Malayalam-language journalism in the UAE, however, timeliness is not considered to be a principal news value because of the inherent risks involved in the form of possible political backlash from the Emirati government authorities, as Santosh explained below.

In Kerala, if we miss an important or sensational news, it will cost us a lot since the field is very competitive. In the UAE, it is not like that. There, we purposely miss or avoid news, since it’s risky to report such news. So, missing a sensational news is actually considered good. If you came to know about an incident today, may be after four days you would read about it in the newspaper because newspapers will only report about it after getting the official report.

The idea of timeliness is thus dismantled in the UAE for stories with a potential political connection. Furthermore, in the absence of timeliness, the very meaning of what is news becomes a subject of reflection among journalists habituated to performing critical journalistic

work in Kerala. Because Malayalam-language news media mainly remains a migrant community media in the UAE, news stories often focus on the individual or human-interest stories. Marking a departure from conventional news angles such as conflicts or anomalies, news stories mainly focus on community events and individuals and showcase them in a public light, giving readers a glimpse into the everyday life of Malayali migrants. Through short-lived publicity, such stories have the potential of making an individual in the Malayali community famous for a day, to paraphrase the American artist Andy Warhol. As someone opposed to this form of journalism, Santosh questioned the public good that emanated from this line of journalistic work. “For example, if I publish a critical news story no one calls me. But if I publish someone’s photo and story about his/her dance performance, a lot of people call and tell me that they really liked it,” explained Santosh, adding that, “Although nothing of that is ‘news.’ If I write about how an insurance company is looting people, no one is interested.”

Furthermore, the general lack of hunger for “breaking news” in the UAE has made migrant journalists value collaboration, something that would be difficult in Kerala. Migrant journalists from Malayalam- and English-language media shared their political news stories with each other because the idea of a political, “exclusive news story” simply did not exist in the UAE because of the associated risks, as Santosh explained in the following passage.

Since there is no competition in the UAE, there is a lot of collaboration. But not so here in Kerala. People here will switch off their mobile phone after 8 pm if they get a scoop. That way, his journalist friends won’t be able to reach him and get that exclusive story. Because if his friends publish the same story, it will affect his own performance. There, everyone gets the news at the same time. It’s similar to the medical profession. Doctors there don’t get enough patients and so they

don't get a good practice—the same is the case with journalism. So, doctors want to come back, especially those who are attached to the profession because there is not much to do there. Similarly, journalists also come back to Kerala to do better work. It's [the UAE] not a place for more enterprising journalists. They get a good salary, but there is not much work to do, since you can't create a story.

In this way, if a newspaper did publish an “exclusive” story, it would invariably be a human-interest story. The collaborative nature of newswork in the UAE enhanced cohesion among migrant journalists from different news outlets who often socialized at multiple venues including community events, press clubs, and social gatherings. These interactions provided further incentive to collaboration as a journalistic and cultural value, in turn strengthening the idea of a community of migrant journalists, at least for the duration of their limited time in the UAE.

Boundaries of Adversarial Reporting

Although most Malayali migrant journalists in the UAE “correctly” re-interpreted news values according to the cultures of restraint, there were also outliers who defied this act. One such journalist was Simon who currently works as a freelancer in Kerala. Simon had the experience of working for several English- and Malayalam-language news outlets in the Middle East before he was deported to Kerala for writing critical migrant-related news stories. Today, he contributes news stories on Gulf migration for English-language digital news outlets in India such as *The Wire*, *The Scroll*, and *The Lede*. Through a series of interviews in restaurants, roadside tobacco stalls, and coffee houses in the city of Thiruvananthapuram, Simon discussed the status of Malayalam-language journalism in the UAE.

Simon opined that the migrant journalists could do more to address the issues of the Malayali population in the UAE. “Malayalam-language media has a space in the UAE. If they remain in touch with the Embassy and also the migrant community, they will get enough news. There are a lot of problems Indians face, mainly the exploitation of labor,” adding that, “Indians are at the forefront of cheating other Indians.” Although Emiratis owned most construction and manufacturing companies, in practice a tiny section of Indians managed the day-to-day operations. These upper-class and caste Indians fell into the realm of business expatriates and acted as *kafeels* (Arabic word for “sponsors”) in the Kafala system of labor. In most cases of labor abuse, having a common national identity marker worsened rather than improved the plight of a migrant worker. Through news coverage, Malayalam-language media could provide a check on labor exploitation by shedding light on malpractice. Yet, because the acting *kafeels* would have the necessary social contacts to push back against the media, migrant journalists prevented themselves from venturing far into critical reporting. For migrant journalists such as Simon who did report on the issues of migrant laborers, the consequences were dire, as he explained in the following account.

Once I got information that some women have been illegally trafficked into the UAE as part of a sex racket. A group of women gave me this information and I followed them. I understood that a rich businessman ran this racket. Then I reported this. I had to face pressure from many people to withdraw the case. Finally, I had to exit the UAE. The businessman threatened me, my family and warned that he will not allow me to enter the UAE in my lifetime. But I did not yield. Many people liked me because they were seeing this kind of journalism in the UAE for the first time. But they also asked me to withdraw the news and

apologize to him. Other newspapers were not ready to report this news, since they were not ready to arouse the enmity of the businessman (these newspapers are dependent on advertisements placed by the businessman). I was asked to leave the UAE at night in order to escape the action of immigration officers....So basically, it is not possible to do critical journalism in the UAE. Businessmen have their own interests and media obeys them, since they provide advertisements.

The businessman leveraging the influence of political and administrative offices to intimidate the journalist indicates how the connections between class and capital in the UAE are mobilized to obstruct the work of migrant journalists, and by extension, critical investigative journalism. To be sure, the critical function of journalism can be realized only in so far as its practitioners are permitted to operate. The story illuminates how even wealthy migrants can participate in the UAE's cultures of restraint to influence the flow of information.

Adversarial reporting was thus uncommon in the Middle East, and English-language journalists were more likely than Malayalam-language journalists to put that to test. According to Simon, English-language journalism provided relatively greater freedom to do reporting as it was easier to raise any issues with the highest authorities or organizations such as Reporters without Borders and the International Center for Journalists. English-language journalists had greater awareness and access to these channels, which Malayalam-language journalists rarely had. Due to these reasons and because of his facility in English-language newswriting, Simon moved his work to English-language newspapers in the Middle East. But, as his case illustrates, even that was not sufficient to support critical migrant reporting and he had to eventually return to his homeland. Adversarial reporting thus remained largely incompatible with the cultures of restraint.

Conclusion

This study proposes that the journalistic work performed by Malayali reporters in the UAE must be situated in the corresponding context—within a pervasive environment of measured speech that we have conceptualized as cultures of restraint—and similarly Malayalam-language journalism in the UAE must be evaluated and critiqued within this broader milieu, which accords a marginal status to migrant populations. Under these conditions, migrant journalists re-interpret “traditional” news values such as timeliness and competitiveness to remain relevant. In addition, by fulfilling the public service function of news media to advocate for community members, rather than monitoring government power, Malayalam-language journalists become important social actors within the Malayali community, although they remain relatively marginal in the larger UAE society owing to their language, class, and citizenship status.

This article thus challenges some of the key assumptions that undergird the normative practice of journalism, most notably concerning the meaning of public service function of news media. Rooted in the experiences of Western developed nations, traditional scholarly interpretations suggest that journalism’s public service role is to serve democracy by monitoring government power (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). We show that, rather than following a top-down approach whose locus of attention is the political system and its myriad intermediaries, the public service function can also be fulfilled on a more horizontal plane. Journalists can take an advocacy-based approach as they actively help, in conjunction with social justice and charity-based organizations, underprivileged community members to resolve personal crises such as employment loss or medical emergency by writing about them and marshalling public support and funds. This horizontal approach, which often becomes a more bottom-up approach, is also a

way through which journalists thrive in the cultures of restraint, where vernacular journalism has taken the task of providing social vigilance, predominantly at the community level.

Malayalam-language journalism in the UAE may appear incomplete, or less journalism and more public relations. We argue that such perceptions are the product of abstraction of the normative, universalistic journalism—which is anchored in Western ideas of journalism—from the cultural and historical conditions that have shaped newswork in much of the world, particularly in non-Western societies. This abstraction is inadequately problematized within the field of journalism studies, even in scholarship on non-Western news media. For journalism studies scholars, media theories developed in and for the Global North, or “Western media theories,” often become prisms to make sense of news media in the Global South (Author, YYYY). Consequently, as Hanitzsch (2019) noted, despite an increasing quantity of publication output on the Global South, its qualitative and theoretical impact on the field of journalism studies continues to be minor.

To be clear, we are not proposing that journalism research on the Global South be conducted in a vacuum nor are we against the idea of universalistic thinking as such. We are, on the contrary, suggesting that the normative and universalistic notions of news media currently employed in journalism research are problematic because they defy, to paraphrase Chakrabarty (2000), “pluralizing reason.” Western media theories arguably lack the potential to generate field-defining knowledge on the Global South. It is because they eventually tend to place postcolonial difference on the scale of modernity, while expecting that difference to speak to values and concepts, such as democracy, that are considered core to Western, in particular American, journalism.

News media scholarship produced in other disciplines such as sociology and media anthropology have advanced important critiques of adopting Western media perspectives to study the Global South (e.g., Rajagopal, 2001; Rao, 2010). However, journalism studies scholars have largely overlooked those insights. One contribution this article makes to the sociology of news scholarship is to incorporate postcolonial power and difference more directly into media analysis within the field of journalism studies. Toward that end, the proposed concept of the cultures of restraint will present, we hope, one among the many conceptual resources in future for charting new pathways to study non-Western journalism.

Endnotes

¹ There is a growing body of literature using cross-national comparisons to study news. See, for example, the reports produced by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the Worlds of Journalism study (Hanitzsch et al., 2019).

² This is especially true for vernacular media cultures, which despite being the dominant form of media culture in the Global South, are typically excluded from cross-national studies at the expense of the English-language press.

³ Following George's (2020) argument, we consider "authoritarian" as existing on a continuum rather than as a binary (democratic/authoritarian).

⁴ "Culture" carries a freight of meanings in different fields such as anthropology, cultural studies, and sociology (e.g., Geertz, 1973; Parsons, 1972). In this article, we mainly draw from cultural studies and "area studies" to define culture ("sanskāram" in the Malayalam language) broadly as a way of life (Narayan, 2017; Williams, 1976).

⁵ This fieldwork was for a larger project on the Malayalam-language press in the Middle East, of which this article is a subset.

⁶ The freedom of expression frame also glosses over the extensive regime of secrecy that grew in the United States in the nuclear age (Masco, 2013). And yet, as Rajagopal (2019) highlighted, for communication scholars it could become a "banal description, a given aspect of 'information' to be puzzled over" (p. 414).

⁷ Importantly, a rejection of American liberalist ideas does not prohibit non-Western nations from participating in global trade and capitalism. To the contrary, countries ranging from China to the UAE are at the forefront of global capitalism having developed their own homegrown versions of "capitalism," which co-exist with communist or authoritarian values.

⁸ In the remainder of this article, we use the term the "Middle East" and the six countries constituting the Gulf Cooperation Council (including the UAE) somewhat interchangeably. This is not to reduce any cross-national differences; instead, it is mainly a result of Malayali migrants imagining the Middle East more as a "borderless" geo-political region—the "Gulf"—than a collection of individual nation-states.

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