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# JOURNALISM AND ISLAMIC WORLDVIEW

## Journalistic roles in Muslim-majority countries

**Nurhaya Muchtar, Basyouni Ibrahim Hamada,  
Thomas Hanitzsch, with Ashraf Galal, Masduki, and  
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*This paper looks at the extent to which journalistic culture in Muslim-majority countries is shaped by a distinctive Islamic worldview. We identified four principles of an Islamic perspective to journalism: truth and truth-telling (siddiq and haqq), pedagogy (tabligh), seeking the best for the public interest (maslahah), and moderation (wasatiyyah). A survey of working journalists in Africa (Egypt, Sierra Leone, and Sudan), Asia (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates), and Europe (Albania and Kosovo) found manifestations of these roles in the investigated countries. The results point to the strong importance of an interventionist approach to journalism—as embodied in the maslahah principle—in most societies. Overall, however, journalists’ roles in Muslim-majority countries are not so much shaped by a distinctively Islamic worldview as they were by the political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts.*

**KEYWORDS** Islam; Islamic culture; Islamic view of journalistic roles; Muslim-majority countries; universal journalistic roles; Worlds of Journalism Study

### Introduction

In the past two decades, a variety of studies have examined the relationship between Islam, Islamic culture, and several aspects of journalism. These studies often emphasized normative issues (Azzi 2011; Hamada 2016) as well as general characteristics of journalism, such as press freedom, media laws, media policy, and media ownership (Amin 2002; Hamada 2004, 2008; Hamdy 2013; Sakr 2006), as well as self-censorship and restrictions in the newsroom (Hamayotsu 2013). Furthermore, recent years have seen a considerable stream of comparative analyses, for example by Hafez (2002), Steele (2011, 2013), and Pintak (2014; Pintak and Ginges 2008; Pintak and Setiyono 2011; Pintak and Nazir 2013).

In many Muslim-majority countries, governments tend to institutionalize journalists’ roles to their own advantage, often expressed in the form of a country’s national “philosophy,” such as Indonesia’s *Pancasila* doctrine, which tends to lead to self-censorship among journalists (Connolly-Ahern and Golan 2007; Hamayotsu 2013) or *Rukun Negara* in Malaysia, which emphasizes moral behavior and loyalty to the King (Kaur 2000).

Furthermore, religious institutions and the society they live in can also restrict journalists’ work. As a result, journalists often make an effort to meet public expectations by emphasizing news stories that have a positive value for society and humanity (Steele 2013). While this is certainly part of journalists’ job, reporting only news stories that are considered “good” stories inevitably displaces other stories that are relevant to the public’s needs.

The present study moves beyond previous studies by looking at a larger set of countries and regions, focusing on the professional roles as perceived by journalists in

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12 Muslim-majority countries. This study is an attempt to explore how journalists from Africa (Egypt, Sierra Leone, and Sudan), South and Southeast Asia (Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia), West Asia (Oman, Qatar, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates (UAE)), and Europe (Albania and Kosovo) reflect on the role journalism plays in their societies. This article, therefore, is addressing the following research questions:

**RQ1:** To what extents do journalists in the investigated countries have similar understandings of journalism's role in society?

**RQ2:** Do journalists in these countries share certain professional views that may lend themselves to the idea of an "Islamic journalism"?

For the purpose of this analysis, we selected all Muslim-majority countries that reported data for the Worlds of Journalism Study. The 12 countries differ in terms of their political system, economic development, and with regards to culture and traditional heritage. Islam and Islamic culture in these societies have historically blended with indigenous custom and tradition in often distinctive ways. This variation provides a unique opportunity to examine differences among journalists' perceptions of their roles in a predominantly Islamic environment.

### Journalistic Roles in the Literature

Following Hanitzsch and Vos (2017), we suggest studying journalistic roles from within the perspective of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2010). In the tradition of looking at journalism as discursive practice (Carlson 2015; Zelizer 1993), we understand journalistic roles as discursively constituted reality. In order to be intelligible, they exist as part of a wider framework of meaning—of a discourse. At the core of this discourse is journalism's identity and locus in society (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). The discourse sets the parameters of what is desirable in a given institutional context; it legitimizes and delegitimizes certain norms, ideas, and practices. Here, journalistic roles perform a double duty—they act as a source of institutional legitimacy relative to the broader society and, through a process of socialization, they inform the cognitive toolkit that journalists use to think about their work. In a discursive perspective, journalistic roles are never static; they are subject to discursive (re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation.

From a conceptual point of view, there are two distinct sets of roles: normative and cognitive roles. Normative roles are external to individual journalists; they encompass generalized and aggregate expectations that journalists believe are deemed desirable in society (Donsbach 2012). Being confronted with the realities on the ground, normative roles are subject to discursive reproduction and conservation, as well as to contestation and struggle. Cognitive roles, on the other hand, can be seen as the institutional values, attitudes, and beliefs individual journalists embrace as a result of their socialization. Appearing mostly as evident, natural, and self-explaining to the journalists (Schultz 2007), cognitive roles capture their individual aspirations and ambitions, and the communicative goals they want to achieve through their work.

Journalistic roles have attracted researchers' attention since the early years of communication research. Cohen (1963) was one of the first to systematically study journalists' perception of their professional roles. His classification into "neutral" and "participant" roles

was later taken further by Janowitz (1975), who identified the “gatekeeper” and the “advocate” as ideal-typical roles of American journalists. Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) popularized research on journalists’ roles by distinguishing four sets of roles: the “disseminator,” “interpreter,” “adversarial,” and “populist mobilizer.” Notably, Weaver and Wilhoit’s work has become a blueprint for a large number of studies outside the United States that largely followed their original questionnaire (see Weaver 1998; Weaver and Willnat 2012). The last two decades have seen an explosion of comparative research on journalistic roles. An early example is Donsbach and Patterson’s (2004) survey of journalists in Germany, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The largest comparative study of journalistic roles to date identified journalists’ interventionism—that is, their willingness to actively involve themselves in social development—to be a main denominator of cross-national variation (Hanitzsch et al. 2011).

A growing number of studies specifically look at journalists’ roles beyond the western world. In a series of surveys, Pintak (2014; Pintak and Nazir 2013), for instance, found journalists in the Arab and Islamic world to serve their audiences in the capacity of an agent of change. Other studies identified journalistic traits that correspond to the idea of “development journalism” in parts of Asia and Africa (Edeani 1993; Ramaprasad and Kelly 2003; Ramaprasad and Rahman 2006; Romano 2003). Steele (2013, 355), therefore, concluded that “although the principles and (roles) of journalism may indeed be universal, they are understood and expressed within particular political and cultural contexts.” In many African contexts, for example, journalistic role models fall into three major domains: journalism for social change, communal journalism, and journalism based on oral discourse (Skjerdal 2012).

The need for alternative concepts that are better suited to the realities in the non-western world has long been recognized (e.g., Hachten 1981). Asian scholarship, for instance, has linked the media’s role to the preservation of social harmony and respect for leadership, which urges journalists to restrain from coverage that could potentially disrupt social order (Masterton 2005; Xu 2005). The discomfort that many scholars in the global South felt with the uncritical adoption of western normative ideas was perhaps best articulated by Mehra (1989, 3), who argued that “unlike the individualistic, democratic, egalitarian and liberal tradition of Western political theory, some societies value their consensual and communal traditions with their emphasis on duties and obligations to the collective and social harmony.”

### **Journalistic Roles in Muslim-majority Countries**

The way journalists enact and articulate their roles in Muslim-majority countries is influenced by a variety of factors. Malaysia is known for revoking media licenses and imprisonment of critical journalists (Tapsell 2013). Turkey is a recent example for massive government intervention into the media system, in addition to the media exercising a substantive degree of political parallelism (Kaya and Çakmur 2010). In Sudan, the political regime utilizes the press as a tool for political mobilization of popular support, while implementing censorship and tight control over the media (Rugh 2014). In Qatar, freedom of expression is guaranteed by the country’s constitution, but the government has reportedly paid for Al-Jazeera’s operating costs since its inception (Valeriani 2010). Kosovo is a post-conflict society and still in a stage of transition toward democracy (Taylor 2015).

Throughout the Arab world, journalistic roles are strongly shaped by a public sense of patriotism, which has led to further restrictions of media practices. Governments

introduced codes of ethics that require the news media to adhere to patriotic and particular moral values (Hafez 2002). Journalists, publishers, and other media practitioners in many of these countries continue to be victims of harassment and political pressures, including dismissal, censorship, restraints on travel, physical assault, threats, arrest, detention, torture, abduction, passport withdrawals, and exile (Amin 2002; Ayish 2010).

The conditions under which journalists work in these countries clearly influence the way they reflect on journalism's contribution to society. Pintak (2014; Pintak and Nazir 2013) found journalists in the Muslim world act as "agents of change" in their respective communities. Such a perception may be driven by the particular political situation in these countries as well as by socio-cultural values. In Indonesia, for instance, journalists are expected to act as promoters for socio-economic development and as protectors of "authentic" cultural values, such as an appreciation of spirituality and family values (Romano 2003). In Malaysia, the government enforces the media to promote national ideology and national unity (Kaur 2000). Similarly, a majority of journalists in Qatar perceived themselves as supporters of national unity and national development (Kirat 2016). The "collaborative role" identified in Egypt calls on journalists to actively provide discursive support and legitimacy to the political regime by publicizing governmental policies (El Issawi and Cammaerts 2015).

### Journalism Principles and Islamic Perspective

The influence of Islamic culture and heritage, however, has received surprisingly little scholarly attention, with a few exceptions (e.g., Ayish 2003; Ferjani 2010). The search for what one could call "Islamic journalism" somewhat fell through the cracks, which has most likely resulted from a dominance of western journalism textbooks and training. One question that drove the present analysis, therefore, was whether there is any such thing as a distinctively "Islamic journalism"—one that has traits and properties different from other journalistic cultures. Such a view may be less compelling to readers who may feel that religious belief may be of little relevance to the practice of journalism. Mowlana (1993), however, argues that while religion in the West is divorced from public life and social action is left to the conscience of the individual, this separation did not necessarily materialize in Islam, and if attempts were made by the late modernizers to do this, the process was never completed. Hence, in order to trace the potential foundation of a distinctive Islamic paradigm of journalistic roles, we need to extract some of the principles that may serve as its foundation.

An Islamic perspective on journalism can be meaningfully derived from the main sources of Islamic worldview, which include: the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, the Muslims' heritage, the human heritage, and reason and experience (Hamada 2016). *Sunnah* encompasses Islamic custom, the religious practices established by Prophet Muhammad among his companions, the textual forms of which are contained in the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* (narrations of the Prophet's companions). Both the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* encourage using reason and rationality as a basic means to protect us from untruth, inaccuracy, and evil doing. The following discourse between Prophet Muhammad and Muadh ibn Jabal emphasizes the importance of reasoning as one of the main sources of the Islamic worldview:

The Prophet: how will you decide on a problem?

Ibn Jabal: I will decide according to the *Qur'an*.

The Prophet: If it is not in the *Qur'an*?

Ibn Jabal: according to the *Sunnah*.

Prophet: if it is not in that either?

Ibn Jabal: then I will use my own reasoning. (Ahmed 1992, 118)

Ramli (2005) introduced the idea of Prophetic Journalism, which is based on four positive attitudes from Prophet Muhammad, which include: always telling the truth (*siddiq*), having the ability to keep anonymity of their sources (*amanah*), and spreading truth and good deeds to the public (*tabligh*). In addition, journalists are expected to be smart and think critically based on an understanding that the journalists' job is to influence public opinion; hence, these roles need to be exercised carefully for the sake of developing society rather than simply reporting negative news. Furthermore, he emphasized two important dimensions in relation to Islam and journalism: building a better image of Islam, and making a positive contribution to the community. Pintak (2014) identified six additional concepts in his study of journalism in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan, which include the concepts of justice (*'adl*), telling the truth (*haqq*), independence (*nasihah*),<sup>1</sup> balance (*l'tidal*), prevention of evil attitude (*hisbah*), and respecting and valuing moderation (*wasatiyyah*).

While all of those values are important to look at, this paper focuses on four basic principles of journalism as perceived by Islamic worldview. The first principle is the concept of *haqq* (truth). The *Qur'an* clearly instructs: "Do not mix *haqq* (truth) with *batil* (falsehood) and hide the *haqq* (truth) knowledgably" (92:42). In his research, Hamada (2016) counts at least 138 references to the root word *naba*—meaning "news" that must be based on truth unmixed with willful falsehood—in the *Qur'an*. The principle is essential, as indicated in the *Qur'an*: "O Believers ... verify it, lest you adversely impact some people unknowingly and then become embarrassed over what you did" (49:6). Furthermore, Hamada (2001) argues that the news must carry a strong sense of responsibility and accountability on the part of journalists and their organizations.

The second principle is based on set of concepts that cluster around a pedagogic function of journalists as public communicators, mostly known as *tabligh*, which broadly means to spread truth and good deeds to the public. In the context of this principle, journalists are expected to play the role of an educator, or teacher, who promotes a positive attitude to the members of the audience and encourages them to do good deeds. This principle is embodied in the concept of *al-amr bil-ma'ruf wa-n-nahy 'an il-munkar*, usually translated as "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong." This key principle obliges Muslims to invite good and "forbid, whether in words, acts, or silent denunciation, any evil which they see being committed" (Kamali 1998, 28). This understanding can constitute a dilemma to journalists when it invites them to avoid telling the truth for a concern over *fitnah* (defamation). Thus, many journalists tend to disseminate only news stories that are good for society and humanity in order to avoid *fitnah* (Steele 2013). Such expectations and restrictions often resulted in increasing rates of self-censorship and further restriction in the newsroom (Hamayotsu 2013).

The third principle is called *maslahah*, which means to seek the best for the public interest. The idea behind this is perhaps best illustrated by one of Prophet Muhammad's sayings: "Whosoever of you sees an evil action, he must change it with his hand. If he is not able to do so, then with his tongue. If he is not able to do so then with his heart and this is the weakest of faith" (Muslim; *Hadith* 34). What this principle essentially calls

for is a profoundly interventionist attitude and participant stance. Journalists are not seen as detached observers, as bystanders and uninvolved witnesses. To the contrary, journalists are expected to involve themselves in public discourse and to take a stance in order to promote social change in society. Journalists serve their audience in the role of an “agent of change” who contributes to the betterment of society (Pintak 2014).

The final principle is called *wasatiyyah*, which means “moderation,” a concept emphasized in both the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah* (Ushama 2014). Moderation in this context implies impartiality and fairness; journalists may not endorse a particular political cause or support one side of the conflict over the other (Hamada 2016). The core meaning of moderation is justice (*‘adl*). This notion carries a wide array of connotations, including straightness, straightforwardness, impartiality, fairness, equitableness, probity, honesty, uprightness, equitable composition or just composition. There are obvious tensions between the moderation principle and *maslahah*, if the latter is primarily understood in terms of an interventionist attitude.

If the above principles contribute to journalistic culture in Muslim-majority countries in substantive ways, then it makes sense to expect a certain degree of commonality between the 12 investigated countries. At the same time, however, the countries differ in many important respects (see Table 1). Muslims constitute the majority of the population in all 12 countries, but to a different degree. The share of Muslims of the overall population ranges between about 100 percent in Turkey and around 60 percent in Albania, Malaysia, and Sierra Leone. Within the Muslim majority in those countries, differences also exist with regards to the various denominations in Islam. Muslim populations are predominantly Sunni in all countries with the exception of Oman, which is dominated by orthodox Ibadhism. Furthermore, journalists are operating in different political systems. Indonesia and Malaysia are democratic countries, while Oman, Qatar, Sudan, and the UAE are classified as authoritarian regimes. Political and media freedom ranges between “partly free” and “not free” according to the Freedom House classification. Economic and human development is relatively high in the oil-exporting Gulf region, while it is low in Sierra Leone.

Finally, Islam also differs with regards to its connection to the state and social life. Albania, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Kosovo, Malaysia, Sierra Leone, and Turkey are predominantly secular societies in which Islam often blends with ancient custom and tradition. Sudan and the three Gulf states, on the other hand, practice a much more orthodox version of Islam, where Islamic law (*Shari’a*) applies to most or all domains of public life.

## Method

This comparative study is based on a cross-sectional survey of professional journalists in Albania, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Kosovo, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Sierra Leone, Sudan, UAE, and Turkey. The data for this study were collected between 2012 and 2015, based on a collaborative effort of researchers from 66 countries who participated in the Worlds of Journalism Study. To recruit respondents, collaborators typically employed stratified (by rank) proportional random sampling. The data were obtained through face-to-face, telephone, email, online and paper-and-pencil surveys, or a combination thereof. Response rates were generally very high, ranging between 68 percent in Qatar and 95 percent in Egypt and Malaysia.<sup>2</sup>

The questionnaire was initially created in English and was then translated into local languages where necessary. In order to answer our research questions, we presented to the

**TABLE 1**  
Countries included in the study

	<b>Albania</b>	<b>Bangladesh</b>	<b>Egypt</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Kosovo</b>	<b>Malaysia</b>	<b>Oman</b>	<b>Qatar</b>	<b>Sierra Leone</b>	<b>Sudan</b>	<b>Turkey</b>	<b>UAE</b>
Reference year <sup>a</sup>	2012	2013	2012	2015	2015	2014	2015	2013	2013	2014	2014	2014
Political regime <sup>b</sup>	Hybrid regime	Hybrid regime	Hybrid regime	Flawed democracy	–	Flawed democracy	Authoritarian	Authoritarian	Hybrid regime	Authoritarian	Hybrid regime	Authoritarian
Political freedom <sup>c</sup>	Partly free	Partly free	Partly free	Partly free	Partly free	Partly free	Not free	Not free	Partly free	Not free	Partly free	Not free
Press Freedom <sup>c</sup>	Partly free	Partly free	Not free	Partly free	Partly free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Partly free	Not free	Not free	Not free
Economic												

<sup>a</sup>The year when the survey was conducted (Worlds of Journalism Study).

<sup>b</sup>Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit).

<sup>c</sup>Freedom House.

<sup>d</sup>Economies by gross national income per capita (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs).

<sup>d</sup>United Nations Development Programme.

<sup>f</sup>Central Intelligence Agency *World Factbook*.



journalists a number of statements related to different aspects of journalistic roles (see Table 3). The statements were preceded by following question: "Please tell me how important each of these things is in your work." Respondents were given five response options, ranging from "extremely important" (5) to "unimportant" (1).

Overall, more than 3500 journalists responded to the survey in the 12 countries. Table 2 presents some background information on the sample and basic characteristics of the interviewed journalists. Sample size varied between 662 respondents in Indonesia and 94 in Turkey. The maximum sampling error was smaller than 5 percent in all countries but Turkey. The percentage of women journalists varied considerably across the 12 countries; it was lowest in Bangladesh (10.9 percent) and highest in Malaysia (52.4 percent), Albania (51.7 percent), and the UAE (50.2 percent). Journalists were, on average, between 31 and 38 years old. Numbers did not differ greatly between the countries; journalists were youngest in Kosovo (31 years) and oldest in Oman (38 years). Likewise, journalists were on average least experienced in Sierra Leone (6 years) and Kosovo and Indonesia (8 years); they were most experienced in Oman (13 years). With the exception of Sierra Leone, the majority of journalists in all studied countries had a university degree; the percentage of those who specialized in journalism varied between 32 percent in Turkey and 73 percent in the UAE.

## Results

Table 3 provides an overview of the journalists' responses in the investigated 12 countries. The table reports mean scores for the various aspects of journalistic roles along with their standard deviations and the percentages of respondents who found these roles to be "extremely" or "very important." We also conducted a set of one-way ANOVAs in order to get a sense of how different the journalists in the 12 countries were with regards to their role perceptions. The various roles in the table are ordered according to their relative importance, using the average mean across countries. The average standard deviations indicate the extent of disagreement within the countries (larger standard deviations point to higher disagreement).  $\eta^2$  values represent the amount of variation that is due to country differences; the higher the values the more countries differ on this role. It is worth noting that the measures used for the present article were based on the Worlds of Journalism Survey questionnaire, which was not specifically tailored to tap into a distinctively Islamic understanding of journalistic roles and culture.

In most of the studied Muslim-majority countries, journalists highly emphasized the ideas of reporting things "as they are" and acting as a detached observer (see Table 4). The representational role was almost unanimously supported across the sample, while the detached observer role was most appreciated in Albania and Kosovo, Egypt and Sudan, Oman and Qatar, and Turkey. Bangladesh somewhat escaped from this trend. Average standard deviations were relatively small, while country differences account for 15.3 and 19.5 percent of the variation in the journalists' responses. This suggests that journalists agreed on the importance of these roles with their colleagues in the same country, but there was some notable variation between different societies. Overall, however, this variation was a matter of degree rather than pointing to a qualitative difference. Seen from an Islamic perspective, the above two aspects of journalistic roles very much represent the principles of truth and truth-telling (*siddiq* and *haqq*) as well as moderation (*wasatiyyah*), the latter of which implying impartiality and fairness. Can we take such commonality for a distinctive feature of Islamic journalism?

**TABLE 2**  
Backgrounds of journalists

	Albania	Bangladesh	Egypt	Indonesia	Kosovo	Malaysia	Oman	Qatar	Sierra Leone	Sudan	Turkey	UAE
<i>N</i>	292	339	400	662	202	349	257	383	220	236	236	237
Female (%)	51.7	10.9	36.5	21.5	45.5	52.4	39.7	27.7	29.1	34.9	44.9	50.2
Age (mean)	32.54	36.7	36.7	34.4	30.83	35.5	37.9	–	31.6	37.3	32.4	33.7
Experience (mean)	9.36	11.6	12.0	8.5	7.51	9.6	12.6	–	5.8	11.4	9.3	–
University degree (%)	98.0	86.8	97.3	87.0	86.2	82.8	78.7	72.7	40.4	95.2	91.1	91.8
Specialized in journalism (%)	72.4	43.7	71.8	33.9	67.0	55.9	61.4	71.1	48.3	65.2	31.9	72.6

**TABLE 3**  
Journalistic roles (across the sample)

	Mean (SD) <sup>a</sup>	Country differences	
		F <sup>b</sup>	Eta <sup>2</sup>
Report things as they are	4.31 (0.83)	60.16	0.153
Promote cultural diversity	4.27 (0.89)	9.45	0.028
Educate the audience	4.14 (0.94)	26.67	0.073
Be a detached observer	4.08 (0.95)	78.25	0.195
Provide analysis of current affairs	4.07 (0.89)	50.46	0.132
Motivate people to participate in politics	4.05 (0.97)	68.63	0.173
Advocate for social change	4.03 (1.00)	39.42	0.107
Support national development	4.03 (1.04)	32.18	0.089
Provide news that attracts largest audience	3.95 (1.06)	22.01	0.062
Influence public opinion	3.89 (1.09)	36.37	0.100
Provide information people need to make political decisions	3.73 (1.11)	54.65	0.144
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	3.70 (1.04)	36.57	0.100
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	3.65 (1.06)	70.90	0.178
Monitor and scrutinize business	3.37 (1.13)	50.11	0.133
Provide entertainment and relaxation	3.35 (1.18)	12.50	0.037
Let people express their views	3.21 (1.24)	72.78	0.184
Set the political agenda	3.10 (1.23)	32.42	0.092
Convey positive image of political leadership	2.95 (1.24)	43.94	0.119
Support government policy	2.94 (1.17)	75.24	0.188
Be an adversary to the government	2.90 (1.27)	79.48	0.202

<sup>a</sup>Average means and standard deviations (all countries have equal weight).

<sup>b</sup>F values; all significant at  $p < 0.001$ ; one-way ANOVA;  $df = 11$  (except for "Educate the audience" and "Promote cultural diversity":  $df = 7$ ).

Tempting as such an interpretation might be, a comparison with other multinational studies suggests that journalists in the 12 Muslim-majority countries are not quite different from their colleagues in other parts of the world when it comes to the importance of detachment and objectivity (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Weaver and Willnat 2012). Obviously, the valuation of impartiality, detachment, and truth-telling or objectivity does not set them apart from their peers in other countries, and it is hard if not impossible to say to what extent their preference for these values emanates from religious beliefs. The professional norms of objectivity, impartiality, and detachment have traveled across borders and seem to belong to the normative core of journalism worldwide. Through a transfer of occupational ideology from the West to the global South, they are taught in journalism schools around the world and are found in almost every journalism textbook. Furthermore, the objectivity, impartiality, and detachment norms may not always be fully enacted in practice as they may clash with other professional norms or the realities on the ground.

This is also evidenced by another commonality that we found among the journalists from most of the 12 Muslim-majority countries: a tendency toward social interventionism. Journalists in Muslim-majority countries find it important to support national development, and to advocate for social change. This tendency was particularly pronounced among journalists in Bangladesh and Indonesia, Oman and Qatar, as well as in Sierra Leone and Sudan. Turkey was interesting insofar as journalists were keen to advocate for social change but were less enthusiastic in their support of national development. Journalists in many

**TABLE 4**  
Journalistic roles

	Albania		Bangladesh		Egypt		Indonesia		Kosovo		Malaysia	
	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)
Report things as they are	98.0	4.57 (0.57)	76.8	4.13 (1.09)	85.4	4.36 (0.80)	94.1	4.51 (0.68)	98.5	4.83 (0.47)	79.3	4.13 (0.83)
Promote cultural diversity	79.5	4.07 (0.96)	87.0	4.41 (0.89)	–	–	91.9	4.30 (0.65)	87.5	4.51 (0.81)	78.9	4.16 (0.86)
Educate the audience	73.4	3.98 (1.00)	77.4	4.19 (1.03)	–	–	94.1	4.36 (0.65)	74.9	4.15 (1.02)	81.8	4.20 (0.83)
Be a detached observer	90.8	4.31 (0.80)	47.9	3.31 (1.40)	92.2	4.65 (0.67)	64.0	3.70 (1.05)	94.9	4.67 (0.68)	71.5	3.89 (0.89)
Provide analysis of current affairs	77.1	3.94 (0.72)	78.4	4.14 (0.89)	79.4	4.17 (0.86)	72.8	3.93 (0.88)	92.5	4.50 (0.74)	69.8	3.93 (0.83)
Motivate people to participate in politics	13.0	2.14 (1.12)	42.7	3.09 (1.36)	79.9	4.21 (0.92)	60.3	3.59 (0.96)	34.0	2.88 (1.45)	38.8	3.17 (1.08)
Advocate for social change	72.3	3.88 (1.02)	79.6	4.16 (1.11)	76.3	4.17 (0.97)	81.0	4.03 (0.78)	72.3	4.05 (1.23)	61.7	3.67 (0.95)
Support national development	73.4	3.85 (1.13)	76.3	4.19 (1.08)	69.6	4.04 (1.10)	75.1	3.96 (0.82)	70.4	4.01 (1.10)	66.8	3.84 (0.97)
Provide news that attracts largest audience	81.6	4.14 (0.89)	75.9	4.16 (1.03)	62.7	3.84 (1.14)	76.2	3.96 (0.73)	62.1	3.80 (1.18)	67.6	3.88 (0.93)
Influence public opinion	77.1	4.02 (1.00)	59.3	3.69 (1.25)	78.9	4.19 (0.95)	49.5	3.30 (1.13)	74.5	4.04 (1.19)	57.5	3.57 (1.00)
Provide information people need to make political decisions	51.7	3.33 (1.31)	60.5	3.74 (1.16)	82.7	4.27 (0.91)	70.9	3.81 (0.80)	50.5	3.46 (1.36)	64.8	3.75 (0.97)
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	55.3	3.50 (1.07)	51.0	3.45 (1.16)	66.6	3.90 (0.96)	52.3	3.48 (0.91)	62.8	3.76 (1.16)	63.7	3.74 (0.88)
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	36.5	3.02 (1.19)	63.2	3.84 (1.02)	74.6	4.05 (1.00)	56.0	3.60 (0.91)	63.5	3.75 (1.19)	50.3	3.55 (0.93)
Monitor and scrutinize business	27.9	2.74 (1.13)	51.3	3.52 (1.20)	53.8	3.56 (1.13)	44.3	3.40 (0.89)	46.4	3.36 (1.23)	48.7	3.46 (0.91)
Provide entertainment and relaxation	46.0	3.24 (1.19)	38.3	3.16 (1.23)	35.2	3.11 (1.24)	54.2	3.59 (0.82)	48.2	3.26 (1.33)	50.3	3.47 (1.00)
Let people express their views	80.1	4.06 (0.83)	78.8	4.21 (0.98)	82.2	4.29 (0.89)	85.6	4.12 (0.66)	75.9	4.15 (1.14)	71.8	3.95 (0.88)
Set the political agenda	19.7	2.28 (1.20)	40.2	3.04 (1.28)	56.0	3.60 (1.10)	28.3	2.84 (1.11)	38.2	2.92 (1.40)	33.2	2.99 (1.04)
Convey positive image of political leadership	18.6	2.21 (1.25)	37.3	2.94 (1.37)	21.4	2.60 (1.27)	36.3	3.15 (1.06)	25.3	2.71 (1.32)	4.3	3.25 (1.15)
Support government policy	9.7	2.06 (1.07)	28.7	2.76 (1.30)	22.1	2.61 (1.30)	30.4	3.26 (0.75)	13.0	2.20 (1.17)	51.7	3.47 (1.07)
Be an adversary to the government	64.9	3.67 (1.19)	28.9	2.54 (1.52)	52.3	3.57 (1.14)	10.5	2.67 (0.94)	74.5	4.09 (1.08)	45.6	3.27 (1.14)

	Oman		Qatar		Sierra Leone		Sudan		Turkey		UAE	
	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)
Report things as they are	63.4	3.75 (1.22)	54.5	3.51 (1.23)	94.9	4.59 (0.67)	90.4	4.57 (0.76)	97.9	4.79 (0.57)	71.2	4.04 (1.05)
Promote cultural diversity	–	–	–	–	88.4	4.39 (0.78)	–	–	77.4	3.98 (1.22)	83.3	4.37 (0.95)
Educate the audience	–	–	–	–	95.9	4.61 (0.63)	–	–	52.1	3.30 (1.38)	85.4	4.33 (1.02)
Be a detached observer	89.5	4.23 (0.83)	53.2	3.48 (1.22)	68.5	3.89 (1.15)	94.5	4.72 (0.62)	91.5	4.66 (0.80)	49.3	3.45 (1.28)
Provide analysis of current affairs	71.6	3.90 (1.04)	40.4	3.19 (1.23)	91.6	4.43 (0.76)	90.4	4.56 (0.76)	88.3	4.31 (0.83)	65.0	3.82 (1.14)
Motivate people to participate in politics	40.5	3.16 (1.20)	34.7	2.78 (1.41)	59.6	3.59 (1.28)	70.5	4.07 (1.26)	34.4	2.91 (1.32)	64.7	3.76 (1.19)
Advocate for social change	76.7	4.03 (1.01)	57.1	3.64 (1.19)	90.3	4.52 (0.76)	93.1	4.72 (0.65)	81.7	4.19 (0.94)	47.6	3.23 (1.47)
Support national development	76.7	4.04 (1.14)	56.6	3.58 (1.19)	91.3	4.56 (0.77)	95.6	4.79 (0.61)	56.7	3.41 (1.45)	76.4	4.08 (1.11)
Provide news that attracts largest audience	69.3	3.93 (1.11)	48.2	3.38 (1.23)	72.4	4.01 (1.29)	89.1	4.52 (0.85)	63.8	3.65 (1.33)	76.6	4.11 (1.07)
Influence public opinion	66.1	3.75 (1.09)	57.9	3.66 (1.24)	68.1	3.87 (1.13)	91.4	4.64 (0.72)	77.7	4.74 (1.12)	70.4	3.85 (1.23)
Provide information people need to make political decisions	53.7	3.59 (0.93)	34.3	2.78 (1.40)	79.8	4.14 (1.04)	87.3	4.49 (0.91)	78.7	3.96 (1.09)	42.3	3.42 (1.45)
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	63.8	3.76 (0.95)	44.0	3.23 (1.27)	76.0	4.07 (0.88)	87.5	4.51 (0.86)	41.9	3.02 (1.25)	68.4	3.92 (1.12)
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	33.5	3.30 (0.88)	29.7	2.58 (1.35)	79.8	4.17 (1.05)	83.7	4.39 (0.97)	86.0	4.14 (0.92)	49.3	3.37 (1.36)
Monitor and scrutinize business	54.5	3.43 (1.17)	29.0	2.61 (1.34)	55.5	3.50 (1.13)	81.7	4.37 (1.00)	63.4	3.61 (1.09)	30.5	2.87 (1.36)
Provide entertainment and relaxation	54.1	3.58 (1.02)	47.2	3.33 (1.27)	59.0	3.60 (1.22)	60.4	3.71 (1.36)	32.3	2.68 (1.30)	50.9	3.48 (1.22)
Let people express their views	63.4	3.67 (1.11)	36.3	2.90 (1.40)	95.4	4.58 (0.65)	90.9	4.59 (0.88)	87.2	4.30 (1.05)	38.9	2.97 (1.46)
Set the political agenda	44.4	3.19 (1.08)	36.4	2.93 (1.37)	55.5	3.49 (1.22)	53.5	3.58 (1.41)	69.6	3.74 (1.15)	29.1	2.63 (1.45)
Convey positive image of political leadership	40.1	3.35 (0.96)	48.8	3.34 (1.28)	35.4	2.77 (1.38)	34.2	2.83 (1.55)	11.8	2.09 (1.20)	75.4	4.14 (1.08)
Support government policy	47.9	3.32 (1.23)	49.1	3.35 (1.29)	46.2	3.25 (1.22)	34.6	2.92 (1.54)	6.5	1.85 (1.07)	78.2	4.24 (1.03)
Be an adversary to the government	20.2	2.54 (1.23)	16.5	1.96 (1.29)	32.5	2.64 (1.35)	43.2	3.12 (1.62)	35.9	3.00 (1.47)	15.6	1.73 (1.28)

“%” indicates the percentage saying “extremely” or “very important.”

Muslim-majority countries obviously see themselves as acting in the role of an “agent of change,” who drives public conversation and contributes to the improvement of society. This result corresponds to similar findings of other surveys in Muslim-dominated societies (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Pintak 2014; Romano 2003). Nonetheless, the interventionist attitude of journalists in our sample is not distinctive to the Muslim world either. Understood in the context of “development journalism,” it denominates a journalistic approach supportive of efforts to bring about economic and socio-cultural development. This has been established as a common feature of many journalistic cultures in developing and transitional countries (Edeani 1993; Ramaprasad and Kelly 2003; Ramaprasad and Rahman 2006; Romano 2003).

The journalists’ interventionist attitude and participant stance clearly resonates with the idea of *maslahah*, which broadly means to work for the public interest. The willingness of journalists to nurture public conversation and contribute to a better society is often but not necessarily related to providing support for government policy. The emphasis on government support differs from country to country; cross-national differences explain 18.8 percent of the overall variation in the data. Supporting government policy is most pronounced in the UAE, Malaysia, Qatar, Oman, and Sierra Leone, where 78.2, 51.7, 49.1, 47.9, and 46.2 percent, respectively, of the journalists found it “extremely” or “very important” in their work. Likewise, the idea that journalists should convey a positive image of political leadership was generally little appreciated by the journalists and found some support only among journalists in the UAE and in Qatar. Overall, such a collaborative, or facilitative, understanding of journalists’ roles was least pronounced in Albania, Egypt, Kosovo, Sudan, and Turkey. Hence, an interventionist attitude among journalists coincides with supporting state authorities in some contexts, while it does not do so in others.

Another fairly consistent finding across the investigated Muslim-majority countries is that journalists in these societies are less keen to position themselves as adversaries of the government. This role was highly rated only in Albania and Kosovo, while it is less appreciated by journalists in all other countries, most notably in Indonesia and the Gulf states. These results come as no surprise. Adversarial journalism is based on the separation of the media from the state, which allows journalists to act as a countervailing force that proactively challenges power elites if needed. This assumption may not hold for many of the investigated countries. The journalists’ interventionist attitude reported above suggests that rather than acting as an adversary of the government, thus creating hostility between the media and political powers, journalists see themselves as part of the political process and therefore act as a constructive force. Journalists’ terms of employment also matter in the equation. In many Gulf states, journalists are—to a large extent—considered governmental employees. In these contexts, national interest or *maslahah* is often defined in terms that prohibit reporting that could potentially harm the national political and economic interest or national security—definitions that are far too broad to allow for critical and robust journalism (Duffy 2014). Again, Albania and Kosovo mark an important contrast here. The geographic location of these countries, in addition to differences in political systems and cultural heritage, may have propelled journalistic cultures much closer to the European mainstream.

In a similar vein, monitoring and scrutinizing political leaders and businesses were not high on the journalists’ agenda compared to other roles. This marks another important difference between journalists in the studied Muslim-majority societies and their colleagues in western countries, who tend to hold the watchdog role of journalism in very high esteem (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Weaver and Willnat 2012). However, there was quite a bit of variation

in the extent to which this role was endorsed by journalists in the investigated countries. In fact, country differences accounted for 17.8 percent of the variance in the journalists' assessments of the importance of a monitoring politics, which is quite substantive by any standard. Monitoring and scrutinizing political leaders was found to be "extremely" or "very important" by at least three out of four journalists in Egypt, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Turkey, while it was considerably less supported in Albania and the Gulf states.

Overall, it seems that roles that journalists carry out in the political domain are particularly vulnerable to cross-cultural variation, at least in our sample of countries. National differences accounted for large parts of the variance for the political information role ("provide information people need to make political decisions"; 14.4 percent), the political expression role ("let people express their views"; 18.4 percent), and the political mobilization role ("motivate people to participate in political activity"; 17.3 percent). Political expression was found to be particularly important by journalists in all countries but the Gulf states; political motivation—and all other political roles—were strongly embraced by journalists in Egypt.

These differences may well be related to different interpretations of the *maslahah* principle in the context of a given political environment and situation. *Maslahah* means to seek the best for the public interest, but "public interest" could refer to a variety of different things and goals. Another question is who has the authority to define the public interest. In the current political situation in Egypt, for instance, many journalists felt an urge to give a voice to the people and motivate them to actively contribute to the country's political transition. In Qatar, Oman, and the UAE, by way of contrast, there is simply no space for political contestation due to an authoritarian regime. These conditions are not likely to breed a significant "public" demand for political mobilization.

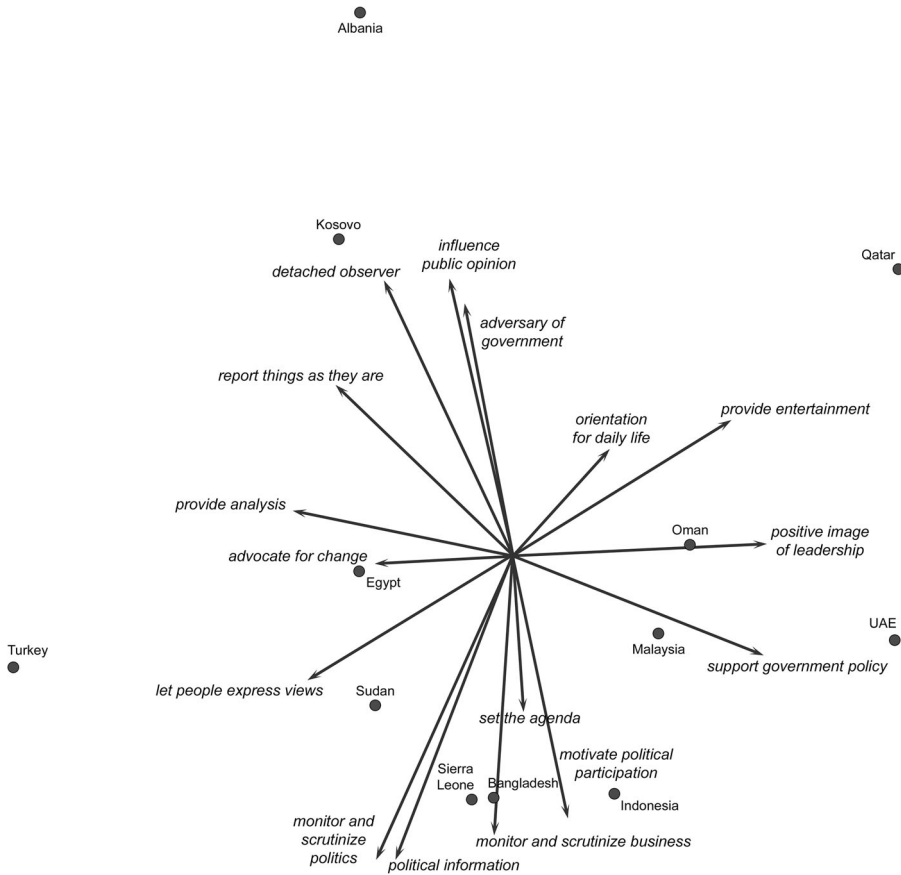
Finally, the present study found some considerable support among journalists from Muslim-majority countries concerning the importance of journalistic roles that broadly relate to the *tabligh* principle mentioned above. This principle embodies the pedagogic functions of journalists, through acting as educators and teachers who provide knowledge and promote a positive attitude to the community and encourage people to do good deeds. This educator role is clearly visible in our results. In all countries, with the exception of Qatar, journalists found it very important to provide analysis of current affairs. The role of educating the audience was highly rated in seven of the eight countries, where the question was asked (i.e., in Albania, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kosovo, Malaysia, Sierra Leone, and the UAE). Here, Turkey was the exception. Comparatively less importance was attributed to the pedagogic role that relates to everyday matters ("providing advice, orientation, and direction for daily life").

At the same time, the role of promoting cultural diversity was supported in all countries where this question had been asked. The idea of acting as a mediator between different social groups is particularly relevant to countries that are inhabited by different ethnic and religious communities, such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kosovo, Malaysia, and Sierra Leone. Three of these countries—Indonesia, Kosovo, and Sierra Leone—have experienced serious inter-ethnic and inter-religious violence in the past, and calls for the news media to restrain from inflammatory coverage that had been publicly voiced by various social groups.

In order to visualize the similarities and differences between the 12 countries, we produced a map using the specialized software tool Visual CoPlot,<sup>3</sup> which is based on an adaptation of multidimensional scaling. We used centered mean scores for this analysis in order

to remove potential acquiescence bias from the data. This procedure, however, tends to emphasize differences over similarities, which we need to bear in mind when interpreting the map. On the map, commonalities and differences between countries across all included indicators are represented as spatial distances. The vectors (or arrows) represent the variables used in the analysis. Vectors for positively correlated variables point in similar directions;<sup>4</sup> the proximity of a country to a vector indicates the extent to which journalists in this country embrace this role in their work. Overall, the mathematical properties point to a reasonable solution; the Coefficient of Alienation is smaller than 0.15 and the Average of Correlations is higher than 0.70 (Bravata et al. 2008).

Figure 1 points nicely to some meaningful country groupings. The three Gulf countries, together with Malaysia, form a cluster of countries, in which journalistic culture emphasizes a collaborative and facilitative role more than in the other countries. Oman, Qatar, and the UAE are authoritarian societies; as mentioned above, governments expect journalists to be supportive of their efforts to bring about development and stability. Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Sierra Leone form another cluster of countries in which journalists seem to be much more motivated by a monitorial approach and by their political



**FIGURE 1**  
Co-plot based on centered mean scores; observations: Coefficient of Alienation = 0.109; variables: Average of Correlations = 0.758.



function in society. In Egypt, Sudan, and Turkey, not far away from the former three countries, we found the most interventionist journalistic cultures. Journalists in these countries highly emphasize their role as an “agent of change” (Pintak 2014), with strong affinity to a monitorial role.

Together, the countries mentioned so far seem to cover a universe of differential understandings of the development journalism philosophy (Romano 2005, 4–8). Journalists conceive of themselves as “agents of empowerment” and as watchdogs in the countries located at the bottom and on the left side of the map. Journalists as “government partners,” which can be seen as a hybrid of authoritarian and social responsibility theories, is most appreciated in the Gulf countries. Albania and Kosovo again mark an interesting contrast here. Journalistic culture in these two countries seems most “westernized” for these journalists most highly value an adversarial and detached observer approach.

## Conclusion

The present analysis is the first large-scale comparative attempt to systematically study the roles of journalists in Muslim-majority countries. Based on interviews with working journalists in 12 countries, this article tries to contribute to our understanding of journalism’s position in the Islamic world. We were interested in the extent to which journalists in Muslim-majority countries have similar understandings of their role in society, which could bring us closer to the identification of a distinctively “Islamic journalism.” Such journalism would lead to commonalities between the investigated countries, created by unifying forces stemming from an Islamic perspective to the news media.

Based on a literature review, we identified four principles of an Islamic perspective to journalism: truth and truth-telling (*siddiq* and *haqq*), pedagogy (*tabligh*), seeking the best for the public interest (*maslahah*), and moderation (*wasatiyyah*). These four principles are associated with distinctive journalistic roles. For most of these roles, we found evidence in our analysis of journalists’ responses from the 12 Muslim-majority countries. All above principles have their manifestations in the investigated journalistic cultures.

Moreover, we found that differences between the countries were more pronounced than similarities. One commonality was the relative importance of an interventionist approach to journalism in the investigated societies as it is embodied in the *maslahah* principle. Much more than in other societies, journalists conceived of themselves as change agents who steer public conversation and socio-cultural development. Notably, Albania and Kosovo escaped from this overall trend. At the same time, this interventionist attitude does not seem to resonate with the idea of adversarial and watchdog journalism. Journalists want to make an intervention in society, but they do so in a constructive fashion rather than in a confrontational and adversarial manner. In a similar vein, the *tabligh* principle is also pronounced among journalists in the studied countries: journalists are keen to act as pedagogues, educators, and teachers, in addition to promoting cultural diversity.

Overall, however, our analysis shows that journalists’ roles in Muslim-majority countries are not so much shaped by a distinctively Islamic worldview as they were by the political, economic, and socio-cultural context in which the journalists operate. At the same time, the rather all-encompassing nature of Islamic principles, and the way these principles are differentially appropriated in the various national contexts, might well complicate such a conclusion. In the end, it may be hard to say to what extent

journalistic culture is indirectly influenced by the appropriation of Islamic culture within a given political context, or directly by the political system itself. Furthermore, the above-mentioned principles of an Islamic worldview are often differently understood and enacted across the Islamic world, within and between countries. While a basic feature of Islamic culture is the very rigid universal understanding of worship rules, a modern interpretation of Islam calls for and encourages flexible understanding an application of the above principles to make them more sensitive to real-world conditions in space and time. Future studies should bring more clarity to the professional roles of journalists across a wider range of Muslim-majority countries using a research strategy specifically tailored to the analysis of Islamic countries.

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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## NOTES

1. It should be noted that the correct translation of *nasihah* is “advice” and not “independence” (*istiqlal* in Arabic).
2. More detailed methodological information can be obtained from the project website at <http://worldsofjournalism.org/52/>.
3. See <http://davidtalby.com/vcplot/>.
4. Two indicators had to be excluded due to low correlations: “support national development” and “attract largest audience.”

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