

United Arab Emirates

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INTRODUCTION

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven emirates governed under a federal elective constitutional monarchy. Politically stable and strategically aligned with regional partners, the UAE has transitioned from an oil-dependent economy to one driven by tourism, finance, and high technology. Its society is a cosmopolitan mosaic, where rapid urban development and cutting-edge innovation coexist alongside deep-rooted cultural and religious traditions.

Historically, journalism in the UAE has operated within a state-influenced framework: national outlets and free-zone media organizations have long tailored their editorial policies to support government development agendas and bolster the country's international reputation. Press freedoms are guided by comprehensive media regulations – including the Federal Decree-Law on Publications and Publishing (2016) and updates issued by the National Media Council – which emphasize social cohesion, cultural respect, and national security.

This study's data were collected between November 2021 and March 2023, encompassing the UAE's post-pandemic economic rebound and the landmark Expo 2020 Dubai (rescheduled to October 2021–March 2022). Expo 2020 attracted unprecedented global media attention, prompting government and private outlets to experiment with immersive reporting formats (AR/VR pavilions, 24-hour livestreams) and to expand digital engagement. No major elections or natural disasters occurred during this period, offering a relatively steady backdrop against which to assess journalistic practices.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

Among the 311 respondents (n = 306 valid gender cases), 61.8% identified as male, 37.6% as female, and 0.7% as other. The mean age was 43.8 years (SD = 10.1; Median = 43; n = 261). Regarding highest education (n = 300), 3.0% completed high school, 65.0% hold a bachelor's degree, 25.7% a master's, 5.7% a doctorate, and 0.7% attended university without a degree. Formal journalism training was reported by 15.8% (n = 298), of whom 80.0% studied at universities or colleges, 53.8% via cadetship/apprenticeship, and 76.7% through short-term courses.

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

Most UAE journalists occupy non-management positions, with 62.7% reporting no management responsibilities, 29.9% in middle management, and just 6.8% in top management (n = 309). Their primary outlets are overwhelmingly national or transnational platforms (90.7%; n = 305), while only 2.3% serve local or regional media. Ownership patterns reflect a strong state presence: 67.2% work for state-run media, 24.4% for private/commercial organizations, 3.2% for public service outlets, and 1.0% in community media (n = 308).

Employment stability is high: 80.7% hold full-time permanent contracts, with smaller shares on part-time permanent (2.9%), fixed-term (6.7%), freelance (6.1%), or other arrangements (2.6%; n = 308). Nevertheless, 27.7% supplement journalism with other income sources (n = 303). Journalists in the UAE had on average 18.2 years of professional experience. Full-time journalists worked on average 46.9 hours per week (SD = 13.2; Median = 48).

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Verbal and reputational attacks are the most common threats: journalists report public discrediting of their work often or sometimes (7.2%/37.9%), hacking or blocking of their social accounts (14.2%/35.6%), legal actions (10.5%/36.3%), and questioning of personal morality (8.8%/33.9%). Less frequent are byline misuse (2.3%/19.0%) and personal-info exposure (2.9%/30.8%). While these figures highlight online and legal pressures, they should be read in light of the UAE's robust economic stability and legal frameworks that generally protect journalistic work.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Public discrediting of your work	306	2.6%	7.2%	37.9%	29.1%	23.2%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	309	6.8%	14.2%	35.6%	20.7%	22.7%
Legal actions against you because of your work	306	6.2%	10.5%	36.3%	24.8%	22.2%
Questioning of your personal morality	307	5.5%	8.8%	33.9%	25.4%	26.4%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	310	2.6%	2.3%	19.0%	15.5%	60.6%
Others disseminating your personal information	273	2.6%	2.9%	30.8%	21.6%	42.1%

Question: "In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?"

TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	309	29.1%	2.73	1.30
Concerned about physical well-being	309	32.0%	2.83	1.25
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	307	28.3%	2.62	1.30
Concerned that those who harm journalists in the UAE go unpunished	308	38.6%	2.98	1.31

Question: "Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ROLES

UAE journalists prioritize informative and constructive roles: “detached observer” (94.1% ext/very important), “educate the audience” (90.2%), and “point toward possible solutions” (87.4%) top the list. High support is also seen for “support government policy” (86.1%) and “convey a positive image of political leaders” (85.8%). In contrast, watchdog and mobilizing functions – “monitor and scrutinize those in power” (18.2%) and “motivate people to participate in politics” (15.6%) – are deemed far less essential.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	306	94.1%	4.67	0.66
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	292	18.2%	2.32	1.24
Shine a light on society’s problems	307	34.2%	2.64	1.38
Motivate people to participate in politics	307	15.6%	2.32	1.26
Provide analysis of current affairs	309	33.7%	2.59	1.33
Let people express their views	308	37.3%	2.86	1.41
Provide information people need to form political opinion	308	56.2%	3.40	1.32
Advocate for social change	306	42.2%	2.96	1.46
Influence public opinion	306	45.1%	3.01	1.43
Set the political agenda	308	50.0%	3.11	1.47
Promote peace and tolerance	302	32.1%	2.60	1.53
Educate the audience	307	90.2%	4.50	0.90
Point toward possible solutions to society’s problems	309	87.4%	4.40	0.89
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	302	77.5%	4.09	1.12
Support national development	306	53.9%	3.29	1.49
Support government policy	303	86.1%	4.35	0.96
Convey a positive image of political leaders	302	85.8%	4.35	1.06
Provide entertainment and relaxation	307	79.2%	4.14	1.16
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	309	69.9%	3.86	1.18
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	308	78.9%	4.16	1.03
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	311	73.3%	4.04	1.05
Support efforts to protect public health	306	52.0%	3.25	1.47
Counteract disinformation	308	78.2%	4.13	1.02
Discuss future implications of current events	308	54.9%	3.51	1.28

Question: “Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work.” (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

UAE journalists display nuanced beliefs about how they “know” what they know. They overwhelmingly agree that interpretation is necessary (85.2%, M = 4.27, SD = 0.77) and that they should make their standpoint transparent (87.9%, M = 4.31, SD = 0.79). High consensus also exists for letting facts speak (72.9%, M = 3.92, SD = 0.91) and for representing objective reality (69.3%, M = 3.83, SD = 0.82). In contrast, fewer endorse the inevitability of power shaping truth (46.0%, M = 3.41, SD = 0.99) or the impossibility of withholding personal beliefs (35.3%, M = 3.09, SD = 1.01).

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	304	85.2%	4.27	0.77
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	300	46.0%	3.41	0.99
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	300	35.3%	3.09	1.01
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	302	42.7%	3.37	1.06
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	303	69.3%	3.83	0.82
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what’s true and what’s not	303	56.4%	3.53	1.04
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	302	57.0%	3.57	1.03
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	303	72.9%	3.92	0.91
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	304	81.3%	4.13	0.84
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	298	87.9%	4.31	0.79
Journalists should alert audiences when a source’s claim is untruthful	300	78.3%	4.12	0.82

Questions: “The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree.” / “Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs.” (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

UAE journalists strongly endorse formal ethical standards: 72.9% agree ethics should always follow professional norms (N = 306; M = 4.02, SD = 0.97), 66.3% say they apply unless extraordinary circumstances (N = 309; M = 3.79, SD = 1.05), 52.6% believe ethics depend on each situation (N = 310; M = 3.46, SD = 1.12), and 34.5% view ethics as personal judgment (N = 307; M = 2.96, SD = 1.14).

Controversial methods are rarely justified: only 2.6% say claiming another identity is always justified (N = 311; 25.7% on occasion), 1.9% for hidden recordings (N = 309; 24.3% on occasion), and just 0.6% accept money from sources (N = 309; 7.4% on occasion). Even promotional mimicry (1.6%/38.4%) and unverified reporting (1.3%/6.1%) are seldom approved.

TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	306	72.9%	4.02	0.97
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	309	66.3%	3.79	1.05
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	310	52.6%	3.46	1.12
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	307	34.5%	2.96	1.14

Question: "The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	311	2.6%	25.7%
Using hidden recording devices	309	1.9%	24.3%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	309	1.6%	12.9%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	307	1.6%	14.0%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	309	1.0%	9.1%
Paying people for confidential information	311	1.3%	20.9%
Accepting money from sources	309	0.6%	7.4%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	310	2.3%	33.9%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	310	1.6%	38.4%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	309	1.3%	6.1%

Question: "Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Journalists report moderate day-to-day (the question about media freedom was omitted). Overall, 51.2% say they have a great deal or complete freedom to select which stories to cover (N = 291; M = 3.47, SD = 0.93), and 50.2% feel similarly about deciding which aspects of a story to emphasize (N = 301; M = 3.40, SD = 1.01).

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	291	51.2%	3.47	0.93
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	301	50.2%	3.40	1.01

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

UAE journalists report that decision-making is shaped first by internal norms – especially self-censorship (77.0%), journalistic ethics (75.7%), and formal editorial policy (74.2%) – and by senior editors (73.7%). Close ties to sources (70.5%), robust news-gathering resources (67.1%), and ownership (67.3%) also matter. Externally, access to information (76.8%), media laws (72.8%), and government officials (72.3%) are highly influential, whereas friends (26.7%), issue advocacy groups (24.5%), and advertising (36.9%) have much less sway.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	295	50.5%	3.33	1.21
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	297	73.7%	3.91	1.12
The business managers of the news organization	292	63.7%	3.69	1.24
The owners of the news organization	284	67.3%	3.72	1.33
Editorial policy	291	74.2%	3.92	1.20
Advertising considerations	282	36.9%	2.87	1.48
Profit expectations	269	36.8%	2.85	1.46
Audience research and data	280	41.8%	3.14	1.31
Availability of news-gathering resources	289	67.1%	3.82	1.11
Time limits	290	65.2%	3.66	1.23
Journalism ethics	288	75.7%	3.95	1.13
Self-censorship	287	77.0%	4.01	1.09
Personal values and beliefs	284	68.7%	3.78	1.20
Colleagues in other media	291	35.1%	3.02	1.24
Friends, acquaintances and family	285	26.7%	2.63	1.27
Feedback from the audience	299	59.2%	3.55	1.10
Competing news organizations	300	64.0%	3.64	1.16
Media laws and regulation	298	72.8%	3.91	1.08
Access to information	298	76.8%	3.98	1.04
Government officials	285	72.3%	3.86	1.08
Business people	265	27.5%	2.78	1.24
Public relations	290	53.8%	3.40	1.23
Relationships with news sources	292	70.5%	3.83	1.13
Issue advocacy groups	229	24.5%	2.65	1.21
Religious groups and institutions	217	26.3%	2.59	1.29

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)