

# Journalistic Epistemologies

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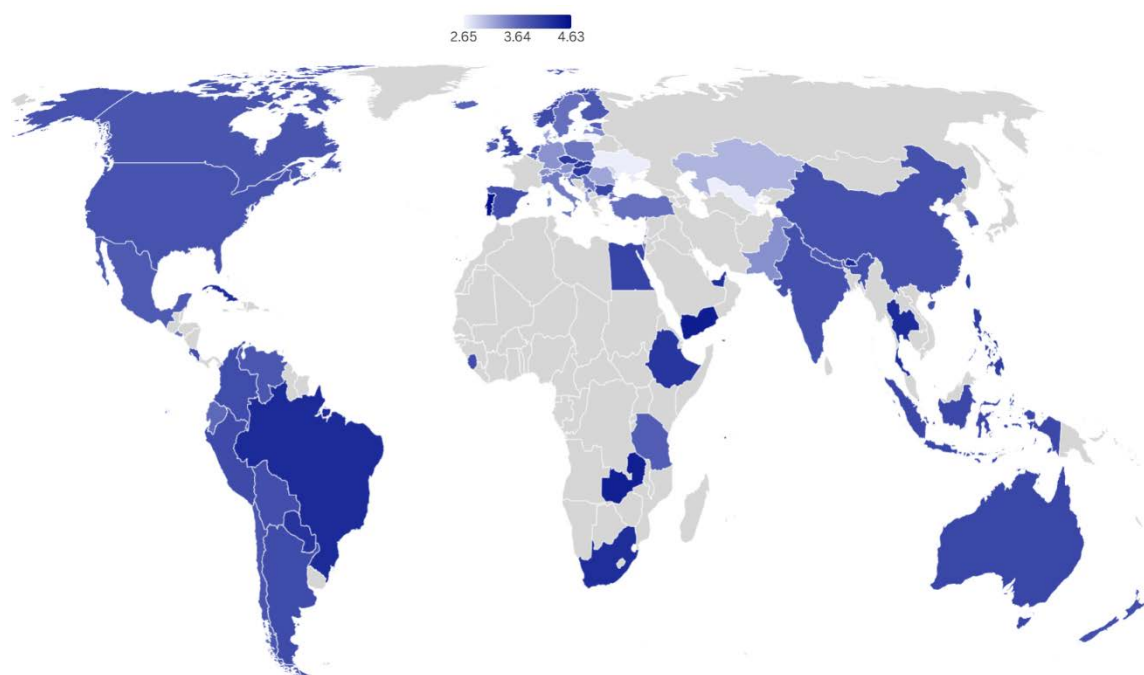
The Worlds of Journalism Study 3 (WJS3) provides unprecedented insight into how journalists across the globe conceptualize the truth-seeking and truth-sharing facets of their profession. Drawing on cross-national survey data from 75 countries, this chapter examines the epistemological assumptions that underpin journalistic practice worldwide.

By epistemologies, we mean the ways journalists think about what they are able to know about the world and how what is known is communicated to their audiences. Objectivity, rooted in a realist perspective, has long been the epistemological heart of Western journalism (Maras, 2013). This approach assumes that the world is knowable, that fact and opinion can be distinguished, and that knowledge can be imparted to others impartially and fairly (Thomas, 2019). Yet objectivity is only one approach. Other perspectives, such as subjectivity as a journalistic ideal (Steensen, 2017) or more activist forms of journalism (Ginosar & Reich, 2022), illustrate the pluralistic epistemologies that exist globally. Hence, we use the plural epistemologies to recognize the diverse approaches to seeking and sharing truth across contexts.

What’s more, journalists have been contending with challenges to traditional approaches. Transparency has gained traction, with journalists increasingly acknowledging the need to be open about their motives and professional positioning (Karlsson, 2022). A fact-checking movement has taken hold around the world, where journalists have wrestled with the ambiguities of facts and

interpretations (Graves & Lauer, 2020). The notion of a “balanced presentation” of the news has drawn critics, leading to new outlooks (Hiles & Hinnant, 2014), and seemingly all media systems now feature more partisan and advocacy outlets (Waisbord, 2009). Finally, in light of the challenges of misinformation and fragile public trust in the media that journalism faces in many countries (Newman et al., 2025), the question of its epistemic foundations becomes increasingly pressing. This underscores the need for a deeper understanding of journalistic epistemologies.

The main conceptual contours in journalistic epistemologies are often anchored in realism (also identified as naturalism and positivism), interpretivism (also known as constructivism), or intuition (Potter, 2017). Realism – in line with objectivity, sees the world as knowable and knowledge as readily transferable. Interpretivism, by contrast, views knowledge as inseparable from human and social experience, conveyed only through the perspectives of those whose experiences are relied upon. In this context, objectivity can also be interpreted as a strategic ritual within journalism rather than a direct mirror of reality (Tuchman, 1972). More recently, constructivist perspectives have also become visible in journalism as an epistemological orientation that places greater emphasis on the media’s specific principles of selection and construction and abandons the belief that reality can be represented independently of the (journalistic) observer (Pörksen, 2013), which may be the result of new journalistic actors taking a leading role in the field. Meanwhile, intuition is a matter of



**FIGURE 7: RELEVANCE OF INTERPRETATION IN NEWS MAKING**

Average ratings of “Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts” (Scale: 5 = strongly agree ... 1 = strongly disagree)

believing in one's instincts or gut feelings, often referred to as a "journalistic instinct" that journalists develop through newsroom experience, allowing them to "know" what is true (Schultz, 2007).

This theoretical overview provides a conceptual foundation to better understand the diverse epistemological assumptions underpinning journalistic practice identified through the analysis of data gathered from journalists in 75 countries. To assess journalists' epistemological views, we posed a series of questions, asking them to rate their agreement with a series of statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

#### INTERPRETATION, OBJECTIVITY, AND THE NATURE OF TRUTH

While the data on journalistic epistemologies reveal considerable variation shaped by national and regional contexts, they also highlight convergences in how journalists approach knowledge production, evidence, and social responsibility in the digital age. For example, there is broad international agreement that facts do not speak for themselves. In nearly all countries, the average level of agreement with the statement, "Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts," exceeds the midpoint of the 5-point scale, often substantially (see Table 13). Countries such as Portugal, Yemen, Zambia, Brazil, and Cuba stand out, yet the general pattern indicates that many journalists believe facts are not self-explanatory but require context to be understandable, departing from a pure realist perspective.

This understanding coexists with a persistent, though more moderate belief that "It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting." In many countries, journalists express agreement with this idea, with values above 3.5 in places such as Albania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Zambia, and Lithuania. However, endorsement of the notion that journalists can completely withhold their personal beliefs is less consistent. Only a few countries—Yemen, Taiwan, Ukraine, Hong Kong, and Cuba—show average agreement above 3.4; in most cases, agreement hovers around or below the scale midpoint.

Support for a binary view of truth is similarly limited. Countries including Australia, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany show low agreement with the statement, "Things are either true or false, there is no in-between." These responses suggest that journalists globally prefer more nuanced, context-sensitive understandings of truth over rigid, absolute interpretations.

#### POWER, BIAS, AND STRUCTURAL AWARENESS

Beyond questions of objectivity and interpretation, many journalists also recognize the structural forces that shape what is considered true. In countries such as Yemen, Ukraine, Thailand, Bhutan, and Hong Kong, agreement with the statement "Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power" is particularly high. This perspective reflects an acute awareness of the political and institutional contexts that influence journalism, especially in societies where trust in authority is contested. However, on a global average, this viewpoint receives the lowest support among all surveyed items (global mean = 2.77).

Similarly, journalists across regions demonstrate awareness of the limits of neutrality. Agreement with the notion that it is impossible to fully separate personal beliefs from reporting is often moderate to high, indicating a widely shared acknowledgment of subjectivity in news work (global mean = 2.88).

#### PROFESSIONAL NORMS AND SOCIAL COMMITMENTS

Amid epistemological complexity, certain professional principles emerge with remarkable clarity. Across nearly all countries, there is strong support for the statement, "Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful." Slovakia, Moldova, Austria, and Canada exhibit particularly high averages, though support is robust globally (global mean = 4.07). This indicates that verification remains not merely an ideal but a core communicative practice, moving beyond simple stenography ("he said, she said") toward adjudication—a practice that underpins journalism's relationship with audiences in an era of growing uncertainty (see Table 14).

Consistent with this emphasis on verification, transparency now enjoys substantial endorsement across many media systems. In Thailand, the UAE, Slovakia, Moldova, Zambia, and Paraguay, journalists express support for making their own standpoint visible in their work (global mean = 3.33). While historically resisted in some cultures, transparency is increasingly recognized as a marker of professional responsibility rather than bias.

The data also reflect support for relational or proximity-based approaches to reporting. Journalists in Thailand, North Cyprus, the UAE, Zambia, and Iceland show strong agreement with the notion that they should be embedded in the communities they cover to represent them accurately (global mean = 3.06). These responses suggest that community engagement and local connectedness are viewed as important strengths of contemporary journalistic practice.

#### INTUITION, EVIDENCE, AND THE ROLE OF JUDGMENT

More intuitive or instinctive approaches to truth-finding elicit greater ambivalence among journalists. While some countries, including India and the UAE, show relatively high agreement with the statement "Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not," many other countries report scores near or below the scale midpoint (global mean = 2.80).

Conversely, the principle that "journalists should let the facts speak for themselves" receives broad endorsement. Journalists in Iceland, Slovakia, Hong Kong, and South Africa report the highest levels of agreement. Even in countries where interpretation is highly valued, respondents maintain strong support for evidence-based reporting (global mean = 3.83). This suggests an epistemological balance: journalists acknowledge the role of interpretation and subjectivity while upholding factual rigor. Journalists seemingly recognize that instinct as a way of knowing has the vulnerability of reproducing bias and stereotypes.

#### CONCLUSION

The findings of this chapter suggest that journalistic epistemologies are marked by a dynamic interplay between traditional professional norms and evolving interpretive commitments. This addresses the question of what journalism itself means in a global and multicultural context. While foundational ideals such as factual verification and the responsibility to convey truth to audiences remain widely upheld, journalists increasingly recognize that truth is not merely discovered but actively constructed through interpretation and situated practice. The near-universal agreement that journalists should alert audiences when

sources are untruthful shows that commitment to factual accuracy continues to anchor professional identity. This co-existence of verification imperatives and interpretive awareness highlights a pluralistic epistemological landscape rather than a departure from tradition.

A more expansive view of knowledge production also emerges through the strong endorsement of transparency, reflexivity, and community embeddedness across many countries. Journalists increasingly support the idea that they should disclose their perspectives and be connected to the communities they cover in order to portray them accurately, highlighting the role of subjectivity in newsgathering. This signals a shift away from a model of detached, neutral observers toward a more embedded and contextually aware professional role. Crucially, this evolution does not suggest the abandonment of objectivity; rather, it represents a reconfiguration of what

objectivity means in practice—one that combines evidentiary rigor with interpretive honesty and, in certain contexts, advocacy on behalf of marginalized groups.

Contemporary journalism thus appears to be negotiating an epistemological middle ground: upholding core values of truth-telling and verification while simultaneously adapting to the complexities of a fragmented and contested information environment. Rather than signaling crisis or incoherence, this pluralism reflects an effort to sustain journalism's democratic function through a more reflective and context-sensitive approach to knowledge. By integrating verification with transparency, and facts with interpretation, journalists are cultivating an epistemic posture that could be better suited to addressing the challenges of misinformation, declining trust, and shifting audience expectations.

**TABLE 13: JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES (MANDATORY QUESTIONS)**

Country	Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting
Albania	3.21	2.52	2.32	3.23	4.37
Argentina	3.94	2.16	3.26	2.51	3.15
Australia	4.00	2.95	2.69	2.37	3.75
Austria	3.35	2.43	2.62	1.61	3.56
Belgium	3.70	2.83	2.76	2.09	3.66
Bhutan	4.31	3.71	3.28	3.43	3.88
Bolivia	3.90	2.15	2.96	3.60	3.87
Brazil	4.32	3.05	3.23	3.00	3.74
Bulgaria	4.01	1.98	2.82	2.92	4.27
Canada	3.82	2.67	2.83	2.17	3.51
Chile	3.82	1.98	2.95	2.86	3.60
China	3.87	3.37	3.08	2.60	3.87
Colombia	3.93	2.21	3.07	2.89	3.69
Costa Rica	3.91	2.33	3.31	3.07	3.72
Croatia	3.69	1.95	2.67	2.52	3.71
Cuba	4.30	2.52	3.45	2.50	3.61
Czech Republic	4.15	2.01	2.32	2.42	3.64
Denmark	3.20	2.79	2.66	2.05	3.39
Ecuador	3.62	2.77	3.09	3.52	3.67
Egypt	4.03	3.14	3.26	3.12	4.01
El Salvador	3.56	2.07	2.96	2.94	3.39
Estonia	3.72	3.54	3.03	2.12	3.68
Ethiopia	4.19	3.33	3.04	3.13	3.70
Finland	3.80	3.58	2.67	2.13	3.15
Germany	3.33	1.95	2.35	1.41	3.55
Hong Kong	4.38	3.66	3.56	2.53	3.82
Hungary	4.16	3.40	2.85	3.01	3.70
Iceland	3.65	2.56	2.12	2.69	3.78
India	3.88	3.30	3.19	3.26	3.74
Indonesia	3.98	2.38	2.52	2.93	4.18
Ireland	3.75	2.93	2.42	2.39	3.79
Israel	3.56	3.04	3.11	2.81	3.60
Italy	3.49	3.06	2.84	2.70	3.60
Kazakhstan	3.10	2.80	3.04	3.17	3.04
Kosovo	3.82	1.86	2.17	3.00	3.35
Latvia	3.38	2.29	3.16	3.28	3.82
Lithuania	2.65	1.65	2.40	2.44	4.02
Mexico	3.77	2.08	3.07	2.98	3.58
Moldova	2.87	2.97	2.71	3.34	4.30
Nepal	3.76	3.36	2.92	3.58	3.55
Netherlands	3.82	2.16	2.61	2.28	3.18
New Zealand	3.91	3.06	2.84	2.46	3.68
North Cyprus	3.29	2.69	3.02	3.19	4.13
Norway	3.94	2.73	3.17	2.06	3.37
Pakistan	3.35	3.33	3.07	3.25	3.42
Paraguay	4.21	2.50	3.20	3.50	3.75
Peru	3.95	2.14	2.88	3.90	3.98
Philippines	4.11	3.28	3.10	3.41	3.90
Poland	3.53	2.96	2.83	3.01	3.58
Portugal	4.63	2.69	2.53	2.35	3.90
Romania	3.20	2.97	2.71	3.13	4.13
Serbia	3.51	2.54	2.81	3.22	3.96
Seychelles	3.69	2.92	2.57	3.18	3.61
Sierra Leone	3.93	3.28	3.29	3.67	3.95
Singapore	4.01	3.57	2.93	2.35	3.59
Slovakia	4.20	2.18	2.44	3.43	3.87
Slovenia	3.16	1.86	2.50	3.06	3.12
South Africa	4.29	3.00	2.99	2.90	3.71
South Korea	3.84	2.56	2.54	2.59	3.19
Spain	3.89	3.30	2.55	2.15	3.46
Sweden	3.57	2.49	2.42	2.33	3.40
Switzerland	3.35	2.59	2.70	1.71	3.52
Taiwan	4.13	2.41	3.64	2.17	3.43
Tanzania	3.74	2.64	3.15	3.34	3.42
Thailand	4.30	3.76	2.36	3.38	4.16
Turkey	3.57	2.50	3.14	3.44	3.97
UAE	4.27	3.41	3.09	3.37	3.83
UK	4.01	3.27	2.69	2.49	3.68
Ukraine	2.71	4.03	3.58	2.54	2.15
USA	3.86	2.92	2.63	2.55	3.82
Uzbekistan	2.71	2.67	2.71	2.82	2.83
Venezuela	3.81	2.17	3.04	3.15	3.62
Yemen	4.47	4.12	3.87	4.00	4.07
Zambia	4.45	2.87	2.97	3.83	4.22
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.77</b>	<b>2.77</b>	<b>2.88</b>	<b>2.85</b>	<b>3.67</b>

Mean scores. 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.)

**TABLE 14: JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES (OPTIONAL QUESTIONS)**

Country	Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful
Albania	2.19	2.58	4.25	2.70	4.11	4.36
Argentina	2.48	2.37	3.49	2.99	3.75	4.12
Australia	2.94	2.54	4.01	3.47	3.03	4.28
Austria	1.97	2.40	4.01	1.91	2.85	4.54
Belgium	2.06	2.77	3.60	2.32	2.60	4.30
Bolivia	2.68		3.98		3.51	3.96
Brazil	2.61	2.37	3.62	2.82	3.29	4.11
Bulgaria	3.28	3.24	4.05	2.57	4.04	4.53
Canada	2.44	2.01	3.88	2.77	2.73	4.53
Chile	2.51		3.86		3.37	4.14
Colombia	2.60	2.53	3.74	2.67	3.76	4.07
Costa Rica	2.68	2.56	3.80	2.75	3.51	3.97
Croatia	2.95	3.15	3.45	2.75	3.62	4.20
Cuba	2.87	2.68	3.79	2.85	3.85	4.18
Czech Republic	2.95	3.06	3.82	2.50	2.91	4.16
Ecuador	2.77	2.70	3.67	3.18	3.82	3.90
El Salvador	2.31	2.36	3.85	2.58	3.67	4.04
Finland	2.22	2.75	3.92	1.98	2.76	4.25
Germany	1.94	2.23	3.84	1.82	2.93	4.40
Hong Kong	2.67	2.92	4.40	3.30	2.63	4.21
Hungary	3.32	2.84	3.76	2.38	2.31	4.14
Iceland	2.92	3.04	4.54	4.03	1.88	4.29
India	3.65	3.64	3.86	3.44	3.82	3.83
Indonesia	3.07	4.05	3.78	3.23	2.92	3.41
Ireland	2.74		3.96	2.98	2.95	4.33
Kazakhstan	3.35	3.39	3.45	3.45	3.55	3.67
Kosovo	2.53	2.27	3.61	2.30	2.46	2.56
Latvia	2.71	3.25	3.78	3.03	2.56	4.18
Lithuania	2.17	2.12	4.19	2.90	1.96	4.33
Mexico	2.83	2.84	4.04	3.08	3.66	4.03
Moldova	2.94	3.57	4.08	2.97	3.86	4.58
Nepal	2.63	2.69	3.58	3.49	3.61	3.93
New Zealand	2.98	2.53	3.94	3.25	2.95	4.40
North Cyprus	3.22	3.54	3.58	4.19	3.65	4.28
Pakistan	3.13	3.24	3.58	3.44	3.69	3.63
Paraguay	3.06	2.88	3.88	3.56	4.17	4.24
Peru	3.07	3.09	3.83	2.72	4.04	4.14
Poland	3.09	2.85	3.74	3.49	3.73	4.09
Portugal	2.91	2.69	3.31	2.55	3.37	3.93
Romania	2.87	3.46	3.91	2.56	3.75	4.42
Serbia	2.81	3.21	3.90	3.17	2.48	4.21
Sierra Leone	3.26	3.44	4.14	4.00	4.16	4.04
Slovakia	2.78	3.33	4.49	3.24	4.27	4.59
Slovenia	2.88	2.27	3.36	2.74	2.08	4.35
South Africa	2.91	2.74	4.30	3.23	2.86	4.30
South Korea	2.83	3.28	3.94	2.55	3.79	3.74
Taiwan	2.56	2.63	4.28	2.37	2.54	4.18
Tanzania	2.83	3.47	3.51	3.90	3.48	3.40
Thailand	3.27	3.14	4.12	4.53	4.60	4.42
Turkey	2.71	2.50	2.82	3.73	3.60	4.41
UAE	3.53	3.57	3.92	4.13	4.31	4.12
Ukraine	2.63	2.77	3.92	3.06	3.46	4.29
USA	2.74	2.35	4.05	3.55	2.75	4.39
Uzbekistan	2.30	2.34	2.47	2.79	2.66	2.74
Venezuela	2.71	2.73	3.89	2.69	3.46	3.84
Yemen	3.13	3.26	3.32	3.36	3.26	3.33
Zambia	3.28	3.57	4.50	4.08	4.22	3.94
<b>Average</b>	<b>2.80</b>	<b>2.89</b>	<b>3.83</b>	<b>3.06</b>	<b>3.33</b>	<b>4.09</b>

Mean scores. 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.)