The Influence of Local Culture on the Ideology of Samoan Journalism

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Abstract—**Much research implicitly suggests that journalism values arise from culturally removed organizational structures and shared occupational training. Further, few studies examine the perspective of journalism from both audiences and journalists. These omissions are important given the essentiality of mutually constructed and culturally embedded normative behaviors within journalism. This research examines audiences and journalists in Samoa, a country purposefully selected as a recently independent, post-colonial, country that relies upon a very traditional, shared national identity for it's relatively nascent identificatory cohesion. This study aims to gain a better understanding of how local culture can set parameters and expectations for journalism; how journalists negotiate culture into their own professional ideology; and how audiences understand journalism within a cultural context.**

Index Terms—**Culture, journalism, audience, journalist, hierarchy of influences theory.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Journalism, as a social institution, is perpetually constructed and concomitantly deconstructed in concert with local communities who support and engage journalists within a larger collective narrative detailing what journalism means. Journalists construct their own professional identity in large part as a response to audience conceptions of journalism through a process of "collective journalist sense making" [1]. This process is inherently culturally dependant and relies upon shared symbolic narratives in creating an ideology of journalism as an interpretive social institution. Given this inherent communal interconnection, it is surprising that relatively few research studies have explored both audience and journalist perceptions of journalism, rather than the much more common approach of research in this area, which has been to report findings from one group or the other. Further, scant research has explored the ideology of journalism within a specific cultural context, and fewer still have fully considered how culture is interwoven throughout audience and journalist perceptions of journalism and journalistic practice. Indeed, culture has been largely removed from theoretical discussions exploring the hierarchy of influences on journalism. These omissions are important oversights given the essentiality of mutually constructed and culturally embedded normative behaviors within journalism as asocial institution. This research provides analysis of interviews and focus groups with audiences and journalists in Samoa, a country

purposefully selected as a recently independent, post-colonial, country that relies upon a very traditional, shared national identity for it's relatively nascent identificatory cohesion. Samoa has had historical tensions in press freedoms and is still very much in the midst of formally and informally creating a shared understanding of what journalism is and should be within its borders. This study aims to gain a better understanding of how local culture can set parameters and expectations for journalism; how journalists negotiate culture into their own professional ideology; and how audiences understand journalism within a cultural context.

II. LOCAL CULTURE AND JOURNALISM

Journalists are situated within communities that co-create a shared communicative narrative about what journalism is within a specific society [2]. However, that shared communicative narrative does not always provide an obvious consensus as to what it is that makes a journalist. This lack of agreement has been attributed to the long-held tension between academic and professional examinations of journalism and to the chasms within academia itself as it grapples, from countless methodological approaches, to understand an expansively adaptive and culturally responsive institution [3]. The lack of consensus is magnified at an international level, which then incorporates perspectives that are unique to a particular geographic region [4], [5], but often appropriates conclusions to a generalized understanding of journalism–or to a geographically combined west/east divide–without much recognition of differences at the local level. There is a somewhat globalized endowment of journalism as a near universal ideology that continues to maintaina relative "inability to consider journalism in the context of other fields of cultural production" [6]. These other fields concurrently participate within a broader cultural narrative that shapes journalism as a unique ideology within a particular cultural context. However, local culture has largely been removed from discussions of journalism in place of market indicators and audience measurement within professional circles, whereas academic inquiry has remained focused on shared definitional characteristics across a globalized profession. This focus has led to a continued shift away from "the basic yet overlooked fact that journalists use news to achieve pragmatic aims of community" [7].

Research has largely avoided the complexities of examining local culture in journalism and, instead, has maintained a "universal stock of professional beliefs" [5] that work to shape journalism. These professional values

and beliefs may "shift subtly over time; yet always serve to maintain the dominant sense of what is (and what should be) journalism" [3]. This universal stock of beliefs has been called the professional ideology of journalism [8], which translates to an ecumenical set of everyday expectations and normative behaviours that define what it means to be a journalist [9]. With the development of public journalism throughout the 1990s, researchers have suggested that global journalism, as a social institution, increasingly empowers audiences as engaged and active citizens of the world [10]. A journalist's own self perceptions of their societal role are integrated within a larger set of universal journalism traits, which include public service, but also objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics [11]. These traits might be applied with different levels of emphasis around the globe, but they are said to be integrated into an international ideology of journalism and journalistic practice [12] that maintains institutional core values, such as relevance, truth, public loyalty, autonomy, and engagement. Some research argues that professional autonomy [13] or "professional latitude" [14] remains at the axiomatic source of that collective practice. Yet, culture remains largely absent from widely-cited journalism theory, such as journalism's hierarchy of influences [15]. These normative behaviours in journalism are largely seen in academic research to be the result of the values embedded in journalism practice and training. Such an approach to understanding journalism misses much of the nuance in journalistic practice and reception that derives from a shared understanding of local culture, which then shapes journalism as a cultural institution.

Culture could feasibly be encapsulated somewhat peripherally into the overarching ideological level of influence put forth in the hierarchy of influences theory–although at a definitional level this is problematic given that several ideologies can exist within any particular culture. Further problem atizing the integration of culture and ideology in the hierarchy of influences is the assumed 'top-down' transmission, which is rooted in Marxist critical/cultural theories of capitalism and hegemony [16]. This approach views ideology as deriving from "higher power centers in society" [15] and, as such, misses much of the contextual cultural influences from the communally oriented 'bottom-up.' If, on the one hand, "it is impossible to separate news from community" [17], then local community and culture needs to be integrated into understanding journalism as a socially embedded institution of meaning with an enveloping level of influence on journalism praxis. Culture, as manifested through learned behaviour patterns, is evidenced in language, traditions, and beliefs of a specific society and it informs all social institutions, including journalism. Yet, this fundamental essentiality of local culture within journalism praxis remains largely overlooked. This research asks audience members and journalists in Samoa what is–and also what should be–journalism in their country as well as their own perceptions of the role that Samoan culture has on journalism. Given the importance of journalism as "a site where a community's sense of self is represented and negotiated" [18], this study posits these points of interrogation as guiding research questions for analysis.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research involved interviews and focus groups with news audience members in Samoa and Samoan journalists. Most participants contributed through focus groups involving more than one individual present, although at times that was not possible and data was collected through individual interviews. Focus groups and interviews followed a loose structure that was often dictated by the direction of discussion. In all meetings, it was ensured that each participant was asked two central questions, in varying order and degrees of emphasis: What is–and also what should be–journalism in Samoa? Is there a relationship between culture and journalism in Samoa? These questions were purposefully broad to allow participants to articulate their own perceptions. They became part of a larger set of general questions that evolved through discussion, but were fundamentally central to every interview and focus group. In all cases, this researcher aimed to be as removed from discussions as possible, which allows one to observe the local co-construction of meaning of concepts during an ongoing discussion by individuals but under the interactive influence of group" [19].

Interviews largely took place at coffee shops, public meeting areas and restaurants throughout Apia, the capital of Samoa. Journalists and audience members were found through a 'snowball' methodology–mainly through word of mouth, but also via email and Facebook. In a small country, repeated requests to chat over a cup of coffee (the 'compensation' offered for those who had a few moments to 'talk about journalism in Samoa and Samoan culture') were warmly received. Audience members were included in this study if they read a Samoan newspaper at least three times a week. Journalists were included if they were presently employed as a journalist in Samoa or had worked as a journalist in Samoa at some point in their life. After each interview and focus group, participants were asked if they knew of anyone further that would be qualified and willing to participate in this research. Using theoretical saturation as a goal, focus group meetings were added until little new information was obtained [20]. In total, focus groups and interviews were conducted with 21 journalists and 47 audience members in Samoa.

IV. RESULTS

A. Journalism as a Site of Cultural Struggle

Culture can be defined as the intersection of belief and practice [21]. Journalists drew upon a revered history of shared cultural symbols and iconography to describe and validate their role as investigators for Samoan society. They relied upon culture cultural symbols as a form of validation for their journalistic practice and they cited specific cultural connections to the normative orientations of their work. In contrast, audiences repeatedly retreated to a cultural/traditional context when critiquing journalism and viewed the "problem" of journalism as being disconnect between the polarizing extremes of tradition and modernism. Audiences' Weberian perspective saw the rise of journalism come at the cost of cultural tradition. Audiences viewed journalism as a colonial institution that existed largely

outside of their Samoan culture and therefore held it largely in disdain. Audience members largely disregarded any suggestion that journalism could be integrated into fa'a Samoa. Due to this cultural disconnect, audience and journalist estimations of journalism in regards to interventionism, market orientation, power distance and the autonomy/heteronomy divide were philosophically inverted.

Journalists felt that their level of interventionism and market orientation were inappropriate given their perceived role of importance as an informed tusitala (storyteller) in Samoan society. They felt they needed to have more ability to intervene, perform their role as investigator and also rely less on market forces, so that they could properly tell the story of Samoa. Journalists validated their roles as tusitalas so that they could do investigative work-rather than doing the investigative work as a means of validating their tusitala status. One journalist said, "nobody can tell the story of Samoa but us. We are tusitalas." Another said, "as tusitalas we need to dig deeper." Freedom from government oversight was needed, however, if these tusitalas could tell their stories. As one journalist said, "they (the government) are always watching us. What can we do? This is no way for Samoa." Here, the journalist figuratively unites the perceived proper level of interventionism with the identity of the entire country. Samoan journalists viewed the perceived governmental restraint as antagonistic to Samoan culture. In referencing a traditional history of Samoan journalism, one reporter said, "they (early colonialists) might have reported rubbish, but even they didn't have to deal with this. It's not right." By using the discursive phrase, "even they," the journalist connects his own plight with those seen as anathema to fa'a Samoa (Samoan culture) – the colonialists that withheld Samoan culture from locals for decades. Here, even the noncultured, abusive colonialists escaped government scrutiny, which is an affront for those who view themselves as tuisitalas.

In contrast, audiences saw the level of intervention in journalism to be far too high and journalism itself operating at a level that was too autonomous within Samoan society, thereby removing the institution of journalism further away from Samoan culture. Audiences reported seeing journalists as behaving outside of normative Samoan cultural restrictions, whereas the government represented fa'a Samoa on a global scale. One audience participant said, "what is the world thinking of us? About Samoa? Journalists need to understand that when they report." When asked to consider what journalism perhaps should be in Samoan society, the overwhelming majority said some variation of the response that journalism should "tell us what is going on." By this, it was meant that they wanted to know what church dances, concerts, and cultural events were happening in their village or the main centre of Apia. In 77.6 percent of responses, audience members felt that journalism should be some variation of a timetable of cultural events. This role is similar to previous research finding that journalism can serve as a disseminator of information [22]. However, newsworthiness of potential topics was not judged by news values, such as unexpectedness, negativity, or proximity [23]. Rather, it was the cultural relevance of that topic that suggested its news value. The events that audience members wanted to know more about were unique to Samoa and not found in other countries. Participants valued these events as distinctly Samoan events and spoke of them with a deep reverence.

B. Cultural Knowledge as Journalism Training

None of the journalists at the *Samoa Observer* had training in journalism. When asked about their qualifications to be journalists, audience members generally eschewed what they viewed as minimal professional knowledge but equated that knowledge to cultural authority. They cited a lack of training in journalists as a problem but then spoke at length as to the cultural failings demonstrated through weak reporting. For example, in one particular focus group exchange among audience members - Respondent A: "Where do these people come from anyway? Where have they been trained?"Respondent B: "I don't think they have no training."Respondent A: "I know. It's not Samoan. You don't act like that. It's not right."The logistical connection here is between a lack of demonstrable Samoan cultural norms to what is described as poor journalism skills. Another audience member said, "They (journalists) need to be taught a bit more, sometimes. A bit more about what to say. How to say it–in Samoa. Here" The lack of education is again not in journalism training but in fundamental Samoan ways, which will then improve the quality of journalism in Samoa. This research lack of regard could be due to perceived behaviors operating outside of accepted cultural normative limits and not to shortcomings in journalism training.

In contrast, when asked what their qualifications were to be a journalist, almost all of the journalists interviewed maintained that their qualifications resided in their Samoan nationality. One respondent said plainly, "You can't be a journalist in Samoa and not be Samoan. You just can't." This near universality in response signals a widespread connection with a shared culture that represents a unifying force in their journalism work. While a lack of formal journalism training was generally seen to be negative for journalists by audiences (although conceptually equated to a lack of cultural education), that training was also not uniformly viewed as necessary by journalists. In one interview, an editor stated, "I just interview people and see if they are willing to ask tough questions and dig up stories. Do they know Samoa? Do they know the right questions?" In his response, the editor directly equates the ability to ask questions with the cultural specificity of Samoan ethnicity. Journalists spoke of needing cultural sensitivities and the implications that reporting might have on their small, collectivist island - even though these considerations on the part of journalists were not widely recognized by audiences. Journalists understood that simply asking direct questions could be perceived as disrespectful in Samoan society. [24] In a statement that summarizes that tension, one journalist in this study said, "you definitely got to know how to pose the question so that people don't get upset. But, you still got to ask the question. You have to know how to ask it though." Such a perspective suggests implicitly the paramount importance of local cultural authority in journalism.

C. Endurance as a Cultural Measure of Journalistic Value

Both audiences and journalists spoke of journalism as a

continuum of shared information. Audience members did not think that immediacy was important to journalism nor did journalists. Whereas audience members eschewed its presence as a fundamental flaw to what they saw as the failings of contemporary journalism, journalists stated that the value of their profession was largely its historical significance -serving as a permanent record for Samoa. One audience member said quite plainly, "what you (from outside Samoa) do is rush, rush, rush. Why? Why is it important? Where are you going? We (from inside Samoa) will get there when it is important to be there." This slow pace of change intrinsic to Samoan culture, measures cultural movement in generations, not decades. As one audience member said, "if it is important, we'll know about it. Maybe not today, but someday."

The value of journalism is generally more in the "here-and-now than the there-and-then" [25]. This emphasis on expedience is interwoven into journalism's normative framework in many cultural contexts. However, as Zelizer [25] rightfully asserts, the "treatment of the present often includes a treatment of the past" [25]. Journalists in Samoa could not address what they do in the present without interjecting their shared culture, created through a long history of traditions. One journalist said, "there is no journalism without fa'a Samoa. There is no nothing without that. Fa'a Samoa is who…is who.. we are. Journalism is just a small part of that. I'm not a journalist first. I'm a Samoan first."This primacy of Samoanness places her, as a journalist, on a continuum of cultural significance, and not in the tradition of journalistic pursuits.

V. Conclusion

As was stated earlier, there was no shared professional training for almost all of the journalists interviewed in this study. This shared lack of universal training rules out the possibility that any agreements found in regards to their perspectives on the journalistic profession were due to a common educational background. This suggests that these commonalities, at least in part, could be attributed to a shared culture, which helped to direct the norms of Samoan journalists and perceptions of Samoan audiences.

The reverence of tradition in the Pacific Islands has already been seen in the widespread integration of cultural convention into what could be categorized as 'modern' societal institutions, such as parliament, land ownership. This research would suggest that journalism needs to be included as a social institution that has attempted to intertwine fa'a Samoa throughout its colonial and capitalistic framework, whether seen as fully successful by audiences or not. Samoan culture was found to be centrally important to the perception of journalism from both journalists and audiences – for journalists, fa'a Samoa dictated what form of journalistic training was necessary; the fundamental value of journalism to society; and the importance of a journalist's work to Samoa; for audiences, fa'a Samoa created the framework for assessing journalism's relative stature in Samoan society and the importance of journalism over time. This fluidity of fa'a Samoa into the norms and values of what is generally viewed as a 'western' institution of journalism, contradicts accepted modernistic markers of progress that are largely dismissive of culture and also challenges the conceptualization of journalism as evolving from strict occupationally defined norms and routines. This finding suggests that further research, which includes culture in the creation and perception of journalism norms, values and routines, must be considered. The concept of liquid modernity [26], which suggests that culture can evolve and integrate tradition as it progresses, is applicable here as theory moves into a more contextual understanding of how journalism thinks of itself and how audiences interact with journalism.

This research suggests that an examination of journalism influences should include culture if it is to fully embrace the complexity of what journalism actually means within a particular society. If journalism is indeed, a shared narrative, created concomitantly between audiences and journalists, then culture must be considered as enveloping and constitutive to the meaning of journalism. Culture is not the same as ideology. Theory exploring the hierarchies of influence must consider the centrality of culture as *the* enveloping influence, rather than the generally accepted encompassing level of ideology. One culture has multiple ideologies, while culture is shared across disparate groups united in a common set of attitudes, beliefs and values. This research is only the beginning of a larger discussion as to the role of culture within the hierarchy of influence theory. The importance of culture, in this research, superseded any organizational norm or professional orientation and played a large role in dictating how journalism was conceived by both audiences and journalists. In this research, culture manifestly interfered with, and influenced the daily praxis of journalism in Samoa. Research needs to continue developing this stream of inquiry through comparative studies that examine contrasting cultures and their own unique conceptualizations of journalism in specific relation to the hierarchy of influences theory. The mono-cultural approach of this research limits any conclusions to Samoa alone, so much more expansive research is needed. Future comparative studies should also consider the benefits of a larger sample that may be accessed through survey questionnaires.

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