

# Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication

## **Journalists' Professional Roles and Role Performance**



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Subject: Journalism Studies Online Publication Date: Feb 2019

DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.832

### **Summary and Keywords**

Professional roles are a key topic in journalism research along with the fundamental elements in defining journalism as a profession. For many decades, scholars have devoted their efforts to analyzing normative standards and journalistic ideals, while their analysis through the lens of professional performance has remained in the background. Nevertheless, considerably more attention has been paid over the past decade to the theorization of the different concepts in play when analyzing professional roles in journalism, especially the study of journalistic role performance (i.e., the manifestation of professional roles in both news decisions and the news outcome that reaches the public). Studies on journalistic role performance are able to tell us how or to what extent news professionals have enough autonomy for their role conceptions or perceptions to be manifested in journalistic practices, as well as in the news product made available to the public.

So far, research on journalistic role performance has systematically found patterns of multilayered hybridization in journalistic cultures across and within advanced, transitional, and non-democratic countries. Several studies have also shown significant discrepancies depending on societal, organizational, and individual factors, as well as a wide gap between journalistic ideals and professional practices. Some of these studies have also found significant discrepancies between journalists' role conceptions and their perceived role enactments.

Future studies need to address the intrinsic capacity of social media platforms to deinstitutionalize communication through parallel channels, which may turn out to be a crucial element when it comes to performing both traditional and new journalistic roles.

**Keywords:** journalism, professional roles, journalistic role performance, journalistic cultures, role conception, role perception, perceived role enactment, comparative journalistic research, professionalism, journalism studies

# Introduction

As an object of study, professional roles are one of the key topics in journalism research (Mellado, Hellmueller, & Donsbach, 2017A, p. 3). They are also the fundamental elements when it comes to defining journalism as a profession. In this respect, journalistic roles become essential components of journalistic cultures.

Journalistic cultures represent the cultural capital that, as “interpretive communities,” journalists share. They may manifest themselves in values and ideals as well as in journalistic practices (Mellado et al., 2017A; Schudson, 2003; Zelizer, 1993).

For many decades, the study of professional roles in journalism was addressed mostly from the perspective of normative standards and journalistic ideals, while their analysis through the lens of professional performance remained in the background.

Through surveys of and interviews with journalists, an extensive array of studies around the globe have analyzed both the different roles that they should normatively fulfill in society (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009) as well as the roles that journalists consider important for their profession (Hanitzsch, 2011; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996; Weaver & Willnat, 2012; Weinacht & Spiller, 2014; Willnat, Weaver, & Choi, 2013). Among the classic empirical typologies of roles are the “neutral” and “participant” roles found by Cohen (1963); the “neutral,” “watchdog,” and “analytical” roles found by Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1976); the “disseminator,” the “interpreter,” the “watchdog,” and the “populist mobilizer” roles found by Weaver and his team at Indiana University (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996; Weaver et al., 2007), or the “bloodhound” and “missionary” functions proposed by Köcher (1986).

Studies on professional role conceptions have been Western-oriented (Josephi, 2005; Hallin & Mellado, 2018; Mellado, 2015). Most early studies on role conceptions were designed and conducted in advanced democracies (especially the United States).<sup>1</sup> Later, researchers from other regions such as Latin America, Asia, and Africa became interested in applying these surveys to their own journalists to establish which professional roles were most important to them (e.g., Deuze, 2002; Herscovitz, 2004; Muchtar, Hamada, Hanitzsch, Masduki, & Ullah, 2017; Pasti, 2005; Ramaprasad, 2001; Wilke, 1998; Zhu, Weaver, Lo, Chen, & Wu, 1997). However, most of them relied on measurements or conceptual approaches developed in the West, basically because they were already available.

Over the past six decades, most of these studies have typically shown that journalists worldwide endorse professional roles and values that emphasize neutrality, objectivity, and the scrutiny of official behavior, holding those in power accountable (e.g., Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Weaver, 1998; Weaver & Willnat, 2012).

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One of the basic assumptions of role conception research is that the way in which journalists understand their roles shapes the news content they produce. This assumption is mostly based on psychological studies that have shown a significant relationship between attitudes and behavior in specific working and personal environments (Kim & Hunter, 1993).

Indeed, earlier studies on role conceptions argued that there was a significant relationship between role conceptions and journalistic decisions (Kepplinger, Brosius, & Staab, 1991; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Starck & Soloski, 1977). However, those studies did not compare the rhetoric on roles with actual journalistic performance but only journalists' perceptions of different professional roles, as well as what they thought they actually did. However, as we know, surveys will never measure actual behavior.

Moreover, the extent to which journalistic ideals can manifest themselves in practice in the journalistic field depends on myriad factors that frequently yield differences and sometimes contradictions between what professionals would like to do and what they actually do in their work (Mellado et al., 2017A; Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013; Van Dalen, de Vreese, & Albæk, 2012).

As far back as the 1930s, Rosten (1937) had already warned of the tension between professional ideals and practical constraints. Since then, gatekeeping theory and the hierarchy-of-influences approach have analyzed a variety of constraints that might influence how journalists perform their roles, suggesting that explanations of journalistic cultures based solely on role conception research should be questioned rather than assumed (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Due to the problem of taking survey data as valid measurements of journalistic practice (Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Schudson, 2003; Vos, 2002) and the lack of theorization of professional roles within the journalistic field (Mellado et al., 2017A), considerably more attention has been paid over the past decade to the study of journalistic role performance, that is, the manifestation of professional roles in both news decisions and the news outcome that reaches the public (Hallin & Mellado, 2018; Humanes & Roses, 2018; Mellado, 2015; Mellado, Humanes, Scherman, & Ovando, 2018; Mellado et al., 2017A 2017B; Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Stępińska, Jurga-Wosik, Adamczewska, Selcer, & Narożna, 2016; Vos, 2002; Tandoc, Hellmueller, & Vos, 2013; Wang, Sparks, Lü, & Huang, 2017).

Indeed, the concept of role performance focuses on the connection between journalists' beliefs about the role of journalism and the actual practice of producing the news (Mellado, 2015). It connects studies on the professionalism of roles with those on news production and the sociology of news.

In accordance with gatekeeping and hierarchy-of-influences studies, more recent research measuring both role conceptions and actual role performance has systematically shown a wide gap between professional ideals and professional practices at different

levels (Brüggemann & Engesser, 2014; Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Tandoc et al., 2013; Vos, 2002).

Different studies assert that although journalistic role conception research is an important component for the study of professionalism, where “ideals and values are the tools and skill sets that set journalism apart from other fields and guarantee its autonomy from heteronomous forces, and serve to legitimize and define journalism” (Mellado, 2015, p. 596), the constraints to which they are exposed within the profession limit the possibility of living up to their normative standards (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014), even though journalists may have clear ideas about which professional roles are most important to them.

Research on journalistic role performance has also shown that the practice of the profession seems to vary much more widely than the current findings on journalistic ideals would suggest. The most recent empirical studies have found patterns of multilayered hybridization in professional role performance worldwide, with journalistic cultures displaying multiple “types of journalism” that do not fully resemble ideal typologies of roles or media systems (Humanes & Roses, 2018; Mellado et al., 2017B; Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, Mick, Oller Alonso, & Olivera, 2017E; Stępińska et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2017). In other words, these studies have found that when considering the performance of essential roles of journalism in society, ideal or conventional assumptions about journalistic role conceptions in different societal settings fail to work.

Such results reported by the international literature on journalistic role performance in recent years have undeniably re-opened the opportunity to discuss the extent to which professional roles are contingent upon different levels of influence (Mellado et al., 2017A). In this context, the concept of journalistic role performance becomes quite valuable since it focuses attention on issues relating to structure, agency, culture, and political economy. These issues are key to the understanding of journalism as a social practice (Esser, 2008). Journalistic role performance also raises the problem of the connection between journalism's normative ideals and practice (Schudson, 2003), and encourages us to think about how ideals arise and function within a larger social context and how they relate to journalistic performance.

It is relevant to consider that although this entry is squarely positioned in the quantitative research tradition—as it is the tradition of most role performance, role conception, and role perception studies—there is a lot of newsroom and ethnography research that actually addresses these specific issues using a different conceptual framework. Indeed, reading authors from media sociology like Goffman (1959) or Tuchman (1972) clearly shows us that the notion of role performance has been quite close to qualitative and ethnographic research that has dealt with how journalists actually “operationalize” their own ideals in their daily practice.

# Professional Roles as Object of Study

One of the main challenges of quantitative studies on journalistic professional roles over time has been the lack of theorization and empirical focus on analyzing the link between role conception and journalistic practice. Basically, journalistic roles have mostly been used as an empirical concept to study the functions on which journalists place more importance in society, while the definitions given to the construct “professional role” have varied quite widely (Mellado, Hellmueller, & Weaver, 2017C).

Overall, role theory defines a role as the expected behavior of people who occupy a particular social status and position in society (Biddle, 1979; Montgomery, 1998). In other words, a role has been conceptualized as the function undertaken by an individual in accordance with the normative demands placed upon that individual in his or her position (Goffman, 1961, p. 85). It should be noted, however, that roles might take different forms depending on the level of analysis applied to them.

Mellado et al. (2017A) distinguished four different concepts within the construct of professional roles in journalism: role conception, role perception, (perceived) role enactment, and role performance (see Table 1), taking into account the dual empirical and evaluative aspect thereof. The differences between these concepts are not only about how they are defined but also about how they can be empirically measured (Blumer, 1969; Lynch, 2007; Turner, 2006).

- 1. Role conception:** The purposes of the profession that a journalist conceives as most important at the individual level, and where the journalists' evaluation of a specific role is not necessarily related to social consensus.
- 2. Role perception:** Perceived role expectations in society. Role perceptions do not form a mental picture of a role for a particular journalist and do not necessarily have a location in the conceiver. They may instead follow a script that has been internalized and is located in a larger social structure. For example, journalists who perceive a watchdog role as important may have internalized the way of thinking expected by the media outlet where they work.
- 3. Role enactment:** The implementation of a journalistic role focusing on the individual journalist only. Here, of course, there is a need for consistency between the journalist's role conception/perception and his or her behavior. Within journalism studies, role enactment has been addressed mostly at the evaluative level of analysis, referring to what journalists think they do (Culbertson, 1983; Oi, Fukuda, & Sako, 2012; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Skovsgaard, Albæk, Bro, & de Vreese, 2013; Weischenberg, Malik, & Scholl, 2006). Some studies have used the term “role enactment” to analyze the manifestation of journalistic roles in news content (Carpenter, Boehmer, & Fico, 2015; Tandoc et al., 2013; Vos, 2002). Nevertheless, given the internal and external constraints that impact journalism, the concept of role enactment may never be fully applied within the journalistic profession. In this respect, role enactment differs from role performance in that it is more difficult to accomplish in journalism, since it implies that journalists have autonomy and

freedom over their work, thereby being able to individually put into practice what they think are the most important roles of their profession.

**4. Role performance:** The collective outcome of concrete newsroom decisions and the style of journalistic reporting, taking into consideration the different factors that influence journalism as a professional practice (Mellado et al., 2017A, p. 5). Role performance deals with behaviors (Biddle, 1979; Burke & Reitzes, 1981), and it can be seen as an outcome of dynamic negotiations influenced by different internal and external constraints that potentially inhibit, but may also enable, the practice of journalism (Mellado, 2015; Vos, 2005). Within this context, role performance can explain the extent to which journalists' news decisions and reporting styles are influenced by a journalist's specific role conception, perception, or perceived enactment, or by other variables that are not in the mix of expectations perceived as legitimate.

The performative level of professional roles is the level most likely to be observed by the public and different reference groups through the outcome of newsroom decisions (e.g., the news story). Nevertheless, the study of role performance also enables an analysis that captures the so-called backstage of news production, that is, the negotiations with different reference groups, the search for sources, styles of data gathering, and the verification process.

It should be borne in mind that although its relevant components are inevitably determined by normative criteria, the concept of role performance is not a normative one (Mellado, 2015; Mellado et al., 2017A).

Indeed, roles are not good or bad per se, since they are not universal. They are historical, are situational, and can be mediated constantly depending on the specific contexts. Journalists in advanced democracies, for example, may perform a more detached watchdog role or a more adversarial watchdog role, as happens in the cases of the United States and Spain. Likewise, journalists from transitional democracies may perform a more civic role or stick to performing a disseminator role if, for example, they are still fearful of a dictatorship regime. At the same time, journalists working for a very commercialized media outlet or in specific news beats may use the infotainment role in a much more prominent way, while in non-democratic countries the adversarial role or the loyal-facilitator role (depending on what type of dictatorship it is, of course) would be more appropriate.

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Table 1. Role Conception, Perception, Enactment, and Performance in Journalism

<b><i>Role concept</i></b>	<b>Role conception</b>	<b>Role perception</b>	<b>Role enactment</b>	<b>Role performance</b>
<i>Definition</i>	Journalists' own formulation of the journalistic roles that are most important to them	Journalists' or media's role expectations in society	Individual behavior materialized in news decisions and journalistic reporting	Collective outcome of concrete newsroom decisions and the style of journalistic reporting
<i>Level of Analysis</i>	Individual level (the locus of role evaluation is not necessarily related to social consensus)	Individual/organizational level (does not necessarily have a location in the conceiver, it is related to social consensus and can also be related to the role journalists think is important to the media where they work)	Individual level (needs autonomy and consistency between role conception and behavior)	Result of dynamic negotiations of different reference groups
<i>Method of Study</i>	Mostly surveys and qualitative interviews	Mostly surveys and qualitative interviews	Mostly surveys, interviews, and experimental designs	Mostly content analysis, textual analysis, critical discourse

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				analysis, and ethnography
Source: Mellado et al. (2017A, p. 7).				



The differences in the way roles are conceptualized are limited by the applied perspective. The functionalist approach—the one used for most studies on professional role conceptions—sees a role as the set of expectations that a society places on an individual, creating regular rules and patterns of behavior. This definition stresses normative expectations and social consensus, where the performance of a role tends to be taken for granted.<sup>2</sup>

This excess of normativism has meant that most research is still limited to “hard” news, giving the impression that journalistic professional roles are more relevant to specific groups of the profession that interact with the power elites, while ignoring those that report on other issues or topics. Indeed, the emphasis that the field has put on the link between politics and journalism has diminished other areas and elements of journalism that do not belong to this relationship (Zelizer, 2011). This has certainly affected the configuration of professional roles that are now addressed from both the normative and the empirical levels, and the way in which they have been studied. For example, social media raises important questions about journalists' roles and their identity in a shared media space (Duggan, 2015; Hermida, 2014).

Meanwhile, the interactionism perspective—the one used by studies on role performance—does not see roles as being fixed but instead as negotiated and changeable within a particular social context (Blumer, 1969; Lynch, 2007; Mellado, 2015; Vos, 2005, 2017). As it has been already mentioned, role performance studies conceptualize professional roles as flexible, situational, and independent sets of functions that can be combined in various ways across space and time, often subject to adaptation and combination (Hallin & Mellado, 2018, p. 28). This approach is closer to the one used by earlier research that tackled some of these issues using a different methodology, e.g., newsroom ethnography studies.

## The Gap Between Professional Ideals and Journalistic Performance

The gap between ideals of roles or normative values and role performance is measured as the degree of congruence or discrepancy between an individual's role conception, role perception, or perceived role enactment and that individual's professional performance (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014).

Understanding the gap and the relationship between what journalists want to do (or think they ought to do) and what they actually perform is crucial to the analysis of forces affecting news production.

Journalists may see their main role as that of providing information that citizens need in order to be active in political life, yet they may be unable to perform that role because political stories do not necessarily attract large audiences. They may also see their main role as that of acting as a “watchdog” over those in power, yet they may be unable to

perform that role in most countries due to obstacles such as government control, corporate control over the media (e.g., owners have veiled corporate interests that might become compromised by watchdog stories), among others constraints. For journalists, this situation is the rule rather than the exception. Moreover, the threats and harassment that these professionals face are a global challenge, even for advanced democracies (Löfgren & Örnebring, 2016).

In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that when the performance of individual journalists differs from the characteristics of their role conception or perception, it is not necessarily an indicator of a malfunctioning news organization. Indeed, such journalists may perform roles that conflict with those they think they do or like or ought to do with those their colleagues perform, those expected by the media outlet where they work, and even those embedded within the macro-organizational structure in which the media is located.

While systematic studies dedicated to measuring the gap are relatively recent and evidence of the forces explaining such a gap is still insufficient, I discuss here several reasons that may explain the distance between professional ideals and journalistic practice.

Professional roles are not mutually exclusive (Mellado, 2015); they are historically constructed and sometimes conflicting (Vos, 2017), so journalists have to combine them in various ways when they produce a news story. They may praise specific ideals of the profession, but their practices are guided by roles that are context specific and not fixed, which can be applied in different ways, as already exemplified in the section “PROFESSIONAL ROLES AS OBJECT OF STUDY” (Mellado, 2015).

Traditional approaches assume that professional roles are fully contracted by behavior and categorized by norms, values, and beliefs (Ashforth, 2001). Nevertheless, previous studies have suggested that journalistic roles cannot be considered discrete categories (Mellado, 2015; Vos, 2005). Indeed, while at the normative level it is possible to talk about ideal types of roles in journalism, in practice this becomes impossible, since professional roles at all stages (conception, perception, perceived enactment, and performance) may overlap in practice (Lynch, 2007). In this respect, unlike ideals and values that are easier to transfer, and unlike media system characteristics that have shown more discernible patterns in comparative studies, such as legal frameworks, the size and scope of their media markets, the nature of state intervention, or the extent to which political instrumentalization and parallelism are present, the actual manifestation of journalistic roles is more difficult to fit into existing ideal typologies, since they are constantly changing, being mediated not only by social, organizational, and individual factors, but also by the local context of the news (Mellado et al., 2017B).

The existence of multiple roles partly reflects the institutional context within which journalists work. Also, since news professionals write for many different audiences

simultaneously, journalistic role ideals are often rooted in conceptions of the audience, which often means that several roles overlap when writing a single story.

The gap may also be partly due to differences in the conceptualization of the ideal-practice connection. While some research focuses on the ideal-practice connection as a relationship (Scholl & Weischenberg, 1998) (e.g., studying whether journalists who place more importance on the infotainment role of journalism are more likely to perform that role), other studies address the connection between ideals and practice as a gap, by focusing on the distance between the two. Of course, different conclusions may be drawn depending on which of the two approaches are used (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014).

Another possibility is that the gap is, in part, a methodological artifact that may be due to the fact that previous research has not measured role conceptions correctly. For example, in the surveys typically used to measure role conception, the wording of the questions might be too abstract, meaning that journalists do not actually have a common basis on which to reply, thus resulting in non-comparable responses. Another flaw of survey-based research is that journalists might give socially desirable responses that fit normative expectations. Their responses therefore might be about what they would like or are expected to do instead of what they actually do. It is also common for journalists from different contexts to understand concepts differently or give different meanings to concepts such as neutrality or partisanship. For example, the translation of Western ideals such as truth and freedom does not really capture the ways in which those norms are articulated within other contexts. Thus, the fact that they are implemented and understood according to local realities suggests that there are no straightforward universal journalistic practices with unanimous and stable meanings.

It may also be the case that journalists interviewed for studies measuring role conceptions do or did not have great influence over the most important decisions on news content. Finally, the lack of validation of some of the scales used to measure professional roles at the evaluative level (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2011) may have contributed to such a methodological artifact too.

There is no doubt that the gap also reflects the heterogeneity of the profession. Not all journalists, media organizations, or news beats embrace the same journalistic role conceptions and/or perceptions, and often there are struggles within the field over which role conceptions should prevail. Advising the consumer, for instance, is a paramount role in soft news and sections such as lifestyle or travel, as much as infotainment is a paramount role for sports or gossip. But even the so-called hard news sections are subject to forces of commercialization, and the inclusion of elements of roles like the infotainment one is becoming more and more common (Mellado, López-Rabadán, & Elórtogui, 2017D; Uribe & Gunter, 2007).

The size of the gap obviously varies by situation, historical period, and social context, resulting in journalistic role conceptions being more or less coupled with role performance in different contexts (Vos, 2017). This is undeniably one of the most

important advantages of the concept of role performance over the concept of role conception, since it focuses attention on the sources of such variation.

### Studying Professional Roles

An important issue when studying not only every stage of professional roles but also the gap between ideals and practice is the way in which these concepts are empirically measured.

The very first studies to measure professional roles by content analysis were important efforts that laid the foundations for the study of journalistic role performance. Nevertheless, most of those studies were not clear about the operationalization of their measurements and were dependent on subjective interpretations rather than an investigation into specific practices that could potentially reveal professional roles in news content. For example, Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) and Vos (2002) studied role conceptions and separately evaluated news stories written by the surveyed reporters. However, the operational definition of roles in news content comprises several statements that are the same as the questions put to those journalists (Mellado, 2015).

Other studies on reporting styles that indirectly address different functions of the media tended to focus on isolated indicators (Benson & Hallin, 2007; Esser, 2008; Van Dalen, de Vreese, & Albæk, 2012), making it difficult to establish the reliability and validity of scales.

In order to overcome these serious limitations, initiatives like the international Journalistic Role Performance Around the Globe (JRP) Project have generated a common methodology, with valid scales to measure journalistic role performance in news content. Using these scales, scholars are able to analyze different dimensions of journalistic performance in different contextual settings to enable cross-national comparative research.

The performative level of journalistic cultures represents the level most likely to be observed by the public and different reference groups through the analysis of the outcome of newsroom decisions (e.g., the news story). Journalistic role performance as a product, then, is normally measured by content analysis.

Nevertheless, the performance of roles can also take the form of actions performed prior to the output, the so-called backstage of news production (Goffman, 1959), where the negotiations with different reference groups, the search for sources, and the verification process are crucial. Journalistic role performance as a process, then, should be measured by techniques such as ethnography and/or in-depth interviews.

The JRP Project focuses on the final output, analyzing how different dimensions of professional roles manifest themselves in news content across different countries and cultures. This project has been the starting point for other related studies, which have also addressed the disconnect between journalists' norms and professional performance

(e.g., Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014), as well as comparisons of role performance among media platforms (e.g., Hallin & Mellado, 2018).

Based on standardized content-based measures (Mellado, 2015), studies conducted as part of the JRP Project have looked at three main domains in which the practice of journalism can be analyzed: the “journalistic voice” domain; the “power relations” domain; and the “audience approach” domain. The measures used by this project have been inspired by both content analysis on journalistic practices mentioned throughout the text and important qualitative studies of newsroom practices (Bantz, McCorkle, & Baade, 1980; Bogaerts, 2011; Tuchman, 1972; Usher, 2014).

The journalistic voice domain deals with the presence of the journalists' voice in the news. The passive stance of journalists in their reporting has been associated with the neutral and disseminator roles (Cohen, 1963; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986), while the active stance has been linked to the participant (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Johnstone et al., 1976), advocate (Janowitz, 1975), and missionary roles (Köcher, 1986).

The power relations domain deals with the relationship between journalists and those in power. Journalists might defend the idea of monitoring *de facto* powers and denouncing wrongdoings (Waisbord, 2000), but, at the same time, they may see their role as acting as loyal spokespersons for those in power, conveying a positive image of them, supporting official policies, and portraying a positive image of one's country, thereby encouraging the sense of belonging (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995; Donsbach, 1995; Pasti, 2005; Mellado, 2015).

The audience approach domain deals with the way in which journalists address the audience. Based on this different understanding of the audience, they can be addressed as citizens, clients, or spectators (Eide & Knight, 1999; Rosen, 1996; Weaver et al., 2007).

Within each of these domains, professional roles can be measured in the news by specific indicators that resemble specific reporting styles. The journalistic voice domain involves the role of the journalist as *interventionist* vis-à-vis *disseminator*. The power relations domain involves the *watchdog* and the *loyal-facilitator* roles. Finally, the different understanding of the audience can be associated with three independent dimensions of professional roles: the civic, the infotainment, and the service roles.

All these roles—with the exception of the interventionist and the disseminator roles, which are part of a one-dimensional structure (Mellado, 2015)—are independent but relate to each other to some extent. They cannot, therefore, be considered poles of a continuum but rather independent dimensions in their own right.<sup>3</sup>

Each of the six dimensions of role performance is operationalized in terms of its practical manifestations in news content, allowing researchers to measure the position of a journalistic practice, closer or distant from different professional roles.



Figure 1. Dimensions of journalistic role performance.

Source: Mellado (2015, pp. 596-614).

As a template for empirical studies, roles are seen as empirical constructs to study role performance in news content within different cultural contexts. However, these are not the only perspectives from which role performance can be analyzed in the news, nor are they the only dimensions of journalistic performance that can be found in news content,

particularly in the new media landscape. Moreover, taking into account that several concepts are inevitably culturally bound, it is likely that not all the indicators emerging from the literature will work in the same way in all societies, especially when considering that professional roles can be seen as reflective measurement models, in which the dimensions exist independently from the measures used, and where adding or removing an item does not change the conceptual domain of the dimension (Wirth & Kolb, 2012).

## Professional Role Conception, Perception, and Perceived Enactment

While it may be true that measuring professional role performance by content analysis or ethnographic work is far more complex than measuring professional roles by surveys of journalists, the challenge of measuring role conceptions/perceptions or perceived role enactment properly is also very big.

Looking at the studies on role conception, role perception, and perceived enactment carried out over the past decades, the operational definition of roles mostly takes the form of abstract statements—such as being a detached observer—that journalists are asked to rate by indicating the extent to which such statements are important to them or to their media outlets, or the extent to which they believe they accomplish those functions. However, they do not take the form of specific practices—such as taking sides in a news story—that journalists may find easier to understand. Of course, what it means “to be a detached observer” for an Indian journalist, for example, is not necessarily the same for an American journalist. In contrast, the terms “opinion” or “interpretation” are globally shared. The same may happen among colleagues from different, or even the same newsroom or news beat. Indeed, the preliminary results of the JRP Project have shown, first, that there is more consistency in journalists’ responses to the questions addressing specific practices than those on abstract aspects of the profession, and second, that abstract and empirical indicators of role conceptions do not belong to the

same role dimensions, that is, they do not measure the same thing (Mellado & Helmueller, 2015). I mentioned this issue in the section "THE GAP BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL IDEALS AND JOURNALISTIC PERFORMANCE," when remarking that the gap was a possible methodological artifact.

This critical aspect suggests that (a) possibly, role conceptions have not been measured correctly, and (b) the lack of clarity on the meaning of professional roles at the normative level leads to confusion between role conception, role perception, and perceived role enactment in studies on journalistic professional roles.

Finally, measuring the gap between role ideals and professional practices requires a combination of methods (e.g., surveys or interviews for role ideals and content analysis and/or newsroom observation or ethnography for role performance). The impact of other variables on news decisions and reporting styles can also be assessed through the interviews or data collected at the organizational and/or societal level.

Studying journalistic professional roles through the lens of not only evaluations of journalists' work but also the way in which they perform their professional roles is far from being a mere academic exercise, since the way in which journalists cover news has a profound impact on shaping public and private spheres, on citizens, on governance, and on the democratic construction of a specific national system.

Studies on journalistic role performance move things a step forward because they are able to tell us how or to what extent news professionals have enough autonomy for their role conceptions to be manifested in journalistic practices as well as in the news product made available to the public. Indeed, one of the advantages of studying the performative level of journalistic roles is that it can help to measure journalistic autonomy in a more indirect yet objective way, by analyzing the extent to which journalists are able to put their professional roles and ideals into practice (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014).

In this respect, unlike studies on professional role conceptions alone, journalistic role performance studies appear to offer different perspectives on the practice of journalism around the world, particularly in countries where evaluative elements are less articulated in practice (Mellado et al., 2017A).

So far, while international studies on professional role conception/perception support the idea that journalists from different media systems conceptualize their roles as expected (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver & Willnat, 2012), research on journalistic role performance has systematically found patterns of multilayered hybridization in journalistic cultures across and within advanced, transitional, and non-democratic countries (Mellado et al., 2017B). Several studies have also shown a significant gap between journalistic ideals and professional practices, particularly in roles more closely related to the professional ideal of the Fourth Estate; in countries with less press freedom; among journalists who cover "hard" news topics and those who feel more economic and political pressures. Also, some of these studies have found discrepancies

between journalists' role conceptions and their perceived role enactments (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Roses & Humanes, 2019).

Likewise, studies on role performance have found significant differences in the performance of a variety of professional roles depending on the media platform (Hallin & Mellado, 2018), although the latest research suggests that the thematic beat and media audience orientation are more crucial variables in explaining differences in role performance (Humanes & Roses, 2018; Márquez- Ramírez et al., 2018; Mellado et al., 2018). Similar studies have also revealed a significant correlation between the prevalence of different sources and journalistic roles in news (Márquez- Ramírez et al., 2018).

One of the main challenges of studying journalistic roles, and, specifically, the performance of such roles today, is that the conceptual boundaries of journalism have become increasingly blurred in the current digital ecosystem. Social media's intrinsic capacity to deinstitutionalize communication through parallel channels may turn out to be a crucial element when it comes to performing both traditional and new journalistic roles. Professional roles can certainly evolve and be redefined—in both discourse and practice—since their emergence and development not only have historical and contextual components but also a strong grounding in the logic that journalists use to communicate with the audience, and in the expectations of various reference groups. Future studies need to address all these elements.

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### Notes:

(1.) As Western journalists developed high levels of professionalism, their understanding of their roles began to take shape within a context in which individual journalists were believed to have a considerable influence over the news stories they produced.

(2.) The reliance on normative beliefs is not surprising considering that the journalistic field has been predominantly normative in nature (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Mellado et al., 2017a; Waisbord, 2013; Zelizer, 1993, 2017), thus dictating whether journalism can be considered “good” or “bad” journalism.

(3.) Unlike studies on role conceptions that have looked at similar areas (Hanitzsch et al., 2011), studies on role performance consider that professional role dimensions are independent in their own right and are not extreme poles of one dimension. Indeed, a news story may include, for example, elements from the watchdog role and from the loyal

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role, which would not be possible by the means in which role conceptions have been measured by several studies.

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