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# Journalistic Role Performance

Concepts, Contexts, and Methods

Edited by

Claudia Mellado, Lea Hellmueller,  
and Wolfgang Donsbach



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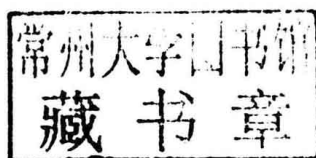
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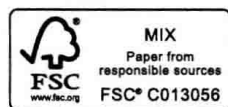
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# Journalistic Role Performance

This volume lays out the theoretical and methodological framework to introduce the concept of journalistic role performance, defined as the outcome of concrete newsroom decisions and the style of news reporting when considering different constraints that influence the news product. By connecting role conception to role performance, this book addresses how journalistic ideals manifest in practice. The authors of this book analyze the disconnection between journalists' understanding of their role and their actual professional performance in a period of high uncertainty and excitement about the future of journalism due to the changes the Internet and new technologies have brought to the profession.

**Claudia Mellado** is Professor in the School of Journalism at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile. She has been visiting professor in different universities in Latin America and Europe. She is the Principal Investigator of the Journalistic Role Performance around the Globe Project, and she has published widely in different peer-reviewed journals within the field. Her research focuses on the study of journalism cultures, journalistic performance, and comparative studies.

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**Wolfgang Donsbach** (\*1949, †2015) was Professor of Communication and founding of the Department of Communication at Dresden University of Technology, Germany. He was a visiting professor at Columbia University, Syracuse University, University of Navarra (Spain), and Harvard University. He was president of the World Association for Public Opinion Research (1995–1996) and the International Communication Association (2004–2005). He was the general editor of the *International Encyclopedia of Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell). In 2010 he was elected as an ICA Fellow. His main research interests were in journalism, political communication, public opinion, and exposure to communication.

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**To Wolfgang Donsbach, an outstanding scholar, mentor, and friend**





# Preface

*Daniel C. Hallin*

This book sets out to articulate the concept of journalistic role performance and to explore methodological approaches to studying it. The concept is important because it focuses attention on key issues related to structure and agency, culture and political economy that are central to the understanding of journalism as a social practice and institution. Role conceptions are normative understandings of what journalism is and what it should do; they have to do with how journalists understand the practice of journalism and how they justify it within the “profession” and to other actors in society. Journalistic role conceptions are in this sense central to the culture of journalism, but also part of culture more widely, since they can’t function to legitimize journalistic practices unless they are accepted to a substantial extent by other actors. How much journalistic role conceptions are shaped by other actors, and how much they develop internally, within the field of journalism, and then influence the culture of other actors is something that varies historically as well as from one system to another.

The concept of role *performance*, then, asks about the tie between these normative conceptions and the actual practice of journalism (Mellado, 2015): what is the relation between what journalists and others believe—or say they believe—about the role of journalism, and the actual practice of producing news? To what extent do journalistic role conceptions explain practice and product, impact, and function—the way journalists actually carry out their work, the news they produce, and the way they interact with other social fields and shape social and political life? Are those other actors also, at times, influenced by journalistic role conceptions, and do they have some role in shaping them? What factors impede or facilitate the translation of role conceptions into practice or shape the way in which role conceptions are performed? And how does role performance in turn reshape role conceptions?

This book explores the concept and reality of role performance from a wide range of angles. Its three parts explore the nature of journalistic roles and the concept of role performance; the varying contexts in which journalistic role performance takes place, and the way in which these contexts are affected by such factors as technological change and variation in social/political and media systems; and, finally, the variety of methodological approaches that have been proposed for studying journalistic role performance.

Inherent in the notion of role performance is the idea that the relation between role conception and role performance is not automatic, that there may be a gap between them (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014). Fox news in the United States uses the slogan, “fair and balanced,” appealing to a traditional role conception connected with the objectivity norm that became dominant in the U.S. in the mid-20th century. But its marketing strategy and appeal to its audience in practice presents a challenge to that old role conception, targeting audiences by political orientation and foregrounding the personal political views of commentators. Surveys of journalistic role conceptions typically show journalists around the world endorsing professional norms that stress impartiality and the role of media as a watchdog of those in power (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Weaver & Willnat, 2012), yet the actual practice of journalism seems to vary much more widely.

Much of the discussion in the pages that follow focuses on the nature of these gaps. Understanding them is often particularly fruitful for analyzing the forces that affect the production of news, including differences among media systems and processes of historical change in journalism, and I would like to add some reflections of my own here on how to think about gaps between role conception and role performance.

One reason such gaps exist is that journalistic role conceptions are multiple, not mutually exclusive and sometimes conflicting (Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015; Mellado, 2015); and journalists have to choose among, balance, and combine them in various ways. Journalists make choices about which routines of news production to follow in particular cases; their practice is guided not by fixed roles but by “repertoires” they may apply in varying ways. The existence of multiple role conceptions in part reflects the complex institutional context within which journalists work. News organizations are often simultaneously businesses and institutions of the public sphere, for example, and role expectations derived from commercial pressures and public service orientations are often in tension. Journalists also interact with many different types of actors who have different expectations and interests.

I have been doing research recently on health and medical reporting (Briggs & Hallin, 2016). Health journalism is distinct in many ways, but journalistic role performance, as Mellado (2015) suggests, is always context-specific, and special cases like this often yield interesting insights into journalistic practice. Health journalists we interviewed had varying views of their roles, but what was most striking to us was the extent to which the same journalist would often shift within the interview between role conceptions. One *New York Times* reporter, for example, when we asked about the common view that health reporters had an obligation to “educate” the lay public about biomedical science, said clearly, “Well this is not my job. I’m not an educator. I’m an entertainer,” and went on to explain that she wrote stories that she thought were interesting and would provoke conversation. “I don’t care if [people] improve their health. That’s their problem, not my problem. It’s their doctor’s problem.” Later in our

interview, though, talking about stories she was particularly proud of, she said something very different:

We heard from so many people who said, “I ripped your story out and put it in front of my husband’s nose this morning, and I can’t believe he’s doing everything that this guy was doing.” ... I’ve had medical groups say, “... we’ve been trying for twenty-five years to get people to call 911 and finally people are reading your story and doing it.” So it’s really gratifying to hear that people feel their lives were changed.

Health journalists embrace complex and shifting sets of role conceptions rooted in the different social fields they bridge. They embrace the culture of biomedical science and public health to a large extent, and it shapes and helps to authorize their role; at the same time they are keen to assert the distinctiveness of journalism as a knowledge production practice, and their reporting is closely aligned with standard journalistic roles—multiple roles, some related to service journalism, some to political reporting, some to human interest or business reporting. They also write for many different audiences simultaneously—journalistic role conceptions are often rooted in conceptions of the audience—and this requires merging roles in writing a single story, in many cases. A story on a new research publication may simultaneously be written for biomedical insiders interested in the significance of the science, for investors or potential investors in the company that carried out the research, for potential patients, and for citizens and policy-makers, concerned, for example, about how the cost of a new drug might affect health system budgets.

Gaps may also appear because not all journalistic roles are equally articulated or explicit. I have argued, for example (Hallin, 1986), that while the explicit ideology of journalism centers on reporting within the “sphere of legitimate controversy,” where norms of impartiality prevail, there are many kinds of stories in which journalists play a very different kind of role, celebrating consensus values or denouncing actors seen deviating from those values. This role is not taught in journalism schools and rarely stated by journalists as a part of their self-understanding. Role conceptions tend to be articulated in situations where journalists need to legitimize their practices in the face of criticism from the outside, and it is the nature of “sphere of consensus” reporting that it involves stances that are taken for granted and not thematized as controversial. When controversies do arise, because journalists are seen as deviating from the norm, taking a “distanced” stance when a committed one is called for, references to the norm are generally framed narrowly: news should be impartial, of course, just not in *this* particular context. But these “exceptions” are common and fit clear patterns, and this role of reaffirming consensus values can certainly be said to be among the basic roles of journalism in many systems.

One question raised in this book is whether roles not articulated and explicitly justified could have normative force. I think they can, in the sense

that actors learn them by example. Wittgenstein is invoked in relation to news routines, and if we follow Wittgenstein, people can learn the “rules” of a social game—and its roles—by practicing that game, without articulating those rules. This might also apply to non-normative roles of journalism. In many parts of the world journalists sell their services to politicians or business elites, promoting their economic and political interests (McCargo, 2012; Roudakova in press). This is usually not recognized publically as a journalistic role (since this would undermine the value of the publicity that is being sold), though it may be that the normativity of this role is expressed privately, if for example a reluctant journalist is told by co-workers, bosses, or patrons, “who do you think you are to refuse to provide a service to a paying customer?” To a large extent, though, these role conceptions are no doubt reproduced as part of a particular journalistic culture simply by journalists playing the game and seeing others play it.

Gaps also reflect the heterogeneity of journalism. Not all journalists, and not all news organizations embrace the same journalistic role conceptions, and indeed there are often struggles within the field of journalism over which role conceptions will prevail. This is probably particularly true during periods when the institutional structure of journalism and its relation to other social institutions are changing. In many Latin American countries, for example, since the shift to competitive political systems in the 1980s and 1990s, many different kinds of media have coexisted and competed in shifting constellations in different countries, including big media conglomerates with both market power and politically powerful owners; economically marginal newspapers owned by elites with political connections; relatively professionalized commercial newspapers; small-scale independent news media, today often online, run by journalists; state-run news media often sponsored by populist governments; and community media of various forms. This kind of heterogeneity is probably the norm in much of the world today, in part because the ways in which digital technology has decreased barriers to entry, creating a proliferation of new forms of journalism—like the partisan news of Fox in the U.S.—and “para-journalism” (Schudson, 2011), blurring the boundaries of journalism as a profession. One thing this means for research methodology is that the temptation in comparative research to try to represent each “case” (a case usually meaning a national media system) by a single number—the percent of journalists who endorse this or that role, or the percent of content that has this or that characteristic—is likely to be misleading. It represents a misunderstanding of the nature of a system: a system is characterized by a pattern of *variation*, not by a set of fixed characteristics (Hallin, 2016).

Competition among journalists embracing different role conceptions, often working within different niches in the media ecology, is one of the main mechanisms of change in journalistic role conceptions. Journalistic role conceptions rise and fall as journalists and news institutions compete and adapt to changing social conditions. Here it is useful to remember multiple meanings of the term *performance*. Most of the time, role performance is taken to mean the *fulfillment* of a role conception. The performance is seen

as a carrying-out of the role, which precedes it. If, however, we focus on the question of how role conceptions are established, displaced, and modified, we might want to think of the notion of journalistic practice as performative in the sense of J. L. Austin (1962)—that is, we might think of journalists as *constituting* journalistic roles by performing journalism in particular ways.

Gaps between role conception and role performance also result from contradictions between role conceptions and the material conditions of journalistic work. Journalists may see it as their role to provide information citizens need to be active in political life, but be unable to fulfill that role because political stories don't sell. They may see it as their role to play the "watchdog" to those in power, but be unable to perform that role because owners veto it or they are threatened with violence. The extent of these kinds of contradictions obviously varies by situation, by historical period, and by systemic context, with the result that journalistic role conceptions can be more loosely or more tightly coupled with role performance in different contexts. This is one of the most important advantages of the concept of role performance over the concept of role conception, that it focuses our attention on the sources of this variation. This is particularly important at a moment when the field is concerned with moving beyond Western-centered paradigms for research on journalism and theorizing a wider range of media systems. The long-standing practice of studying journalism around the world by doing surveys of journalists' role conceptions, for example, rests implicitly on a model of the media derived from Western systems with high levels of journalistic professionalism: it makes the most sense if we assume that journalists are the key actors in the production of news, that they have enough autonomy that their individual role conceptions matter, and that the system is egalitarian enough that it makes sense to count each individual equally. In many systems, all of those assumptions may be quite far from reality, and it will be particularly important in analyzing these systems to think systematically about what forces might disrupt or modify the linkage between role conception and role performance.

This last point raises the issue of methodology, which is the subject of the final section of the book. In fact, another possible explanation for gaps between role conception and role performance is methodological.

We could find such gaps, for example, because we are not measuring role conceptions correctly (maybe journalists are giving socially desirable responses on surveys or interviews) or because we are measuring the role conceptions of the wrong people, rank-and-file journalists, for example, who may not influence the most important decisions about news content. This book considers the advantages and limitations of multiple methods—survey research, content analysis, newsroom ethnography, discourse analysis, and more—and one of the most important conclusions it suggests is that multiple methods are extremely useful in the study of journalistic role performance. The nature of the concept of role performance itself, in an important way, pushes us toward multimethod research, since it deals with two phenomena and the relation between them, and a single method used in isolation



is likely to leave many unanswered questions. This is especially true in an environment in which, as many of the chapters in this book point out, the practice of journalism is increasingly fluid, with many actors and forms of practice involved in shifting combinations. Multimethod research is becoming increasingly common in journalism studies, as for example in the recent work of Aelbaek et al. (2014), and the chapters of this book make a particularly good case for the advantages of such an approach.

The concept of journalistic role performance is valuable because it poses the connection between normative ideals or cultural models and the practice of journalism as a problem, and encourages us to think through how those ideals arise and function within a larger social context and how that context affects shapes their relationship with journalistic practice. To do this well requires careful analysis of the very different social contexts within which journalists work—different national contexts as well as different niches and sectors within journalism. The essays of this book give us a rich and nuanced set of conceptual frameworks and methodological tools to approach these questions.

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# Acknowledgment and the Story of This Book

The chapters that constitute *Journalistic Role Performance: Concepts, Contexts, and Methods* are original to this book. We are extremely grateful to all authors for the quality of their work, support, and commitment to this volume. As the original time frame proved to be more optimistic than realistic, our project took longer than we expected for several reasons.

The idea of the book emerged after a fruitful conversation about the future of the study of professional roles in journalism studies at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association in London in 2013. At the same time, we had just launched our Journalistic Role Performance around the Globe comparative project. The idea of developing the concept of journalistic role performance in an entire book sounded like a wonderful opportunity to provide a solid theoretical and empirical framework for a new research agenda. Selected the best authors for each chapter, and submitted our project, we signed the contract with Routledge at the end of that year.

From then on, we started to work with all coauthors side by side. During the long journey of editing this book we experienced an extremely difficult event that affected all of us working on this project. In July 2015, and without any warning, we learned that we had lost one of the major thinkers in journalism studies: Wolfgang Donsbach passed away unexpectedly. His contribution to this volume remains visible as he edited several of the chapters that compose this volume. Wolf was extremely passionate about this project, and he pushed us hard to publish this book in a way that it would make an important and unique contribution to the study of professional roles. He was never too tired to edit chapters that we would share with him and his extremely critical mind shaped the book at every stage.

Because of that and for his contribution to journalism studies, we would like to dedicate this edited volume to Wolfgang Donsbach. He will be greatly missed by all of us.

McChesney once quoted Wolfgang Donsbach who complained that there's "too much petty number-crunching" in the field, too many research projects of "little relevance and significance." We think that we can honor him with this book as it moves scholarly thinking forward in re-conceptualizing



professional roles of journalists, something that captured his mind during the last years. Indeed, he was one of the most active members of the collaborative international project that put this concept under empirical investigation in our field.

Many people have worked with us on the long road to take this book to its finishing line and a good number of people supported us to give life to this project although their names do not necessarily appear in the book. First, we would like to give special thanks to our families and friends. In professional terms, and as we already expressed, we would like to thank all of our collaborators who made an excellent contribution to this book. We also want to thank all of the scholars who read parts of this book and sent us their feedback, like Silvio Waisbord, Daniel C. Hallin, Henrik Örnebring, Arjen Van Dalen, David H. Weaver, and Jay Blumler. We would also like to give special thanks to Tim P. Vos, who accompanied us during the entire adventure, sending feedback, ideas, and pushing us to think out of the box. Thank you all.