

Investigating the Gap between Newspaper Journalists' Role Conceptions and Role Performance in Nine European, Asian, and Latin American Countries

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Abstract

Based on a standardized operationalization of the watchdog, civic, interventionist, loyal-facilitator, infotainment, and service roles, this study combines survey ($N = 643$) and content analysis data ($N = 19,908$) to explain gaps between newspaper journalists' role conceptions and the performance of their press organizations in nine countries from Latin America, Western Europe, and Asia. Taking an institutional approach by focusing on institutional influences on the conception–performance gap at three levels (individual, organizational, societal), our results show that these gaps

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are largest for the two roles most connected with the public functions of journalism, the civic, and the watchdog roles. Multilevel analyses offer significant evidence on that, across all six analyzed roles, the size of the gaps differed more clearly between journalists and between media organizations, than among countries. Although influences on an individual level (i.e., perceived autonomy) have some explanatory power, influences on the organizational level and, more specifically, ownership and codified editorial policies are the factors that best explain conception–performance gaps. The implications of these findings are discussed in light of the public skepticism about the performance of journalism and the media.

Keywords

journalism, media studies, professional roles, autonomy, role performance, comparative research

Journalists around the world are typically socialized into a set of professional ideals that express a conception of their roles in society. A strong research tradition has developed over the years, usually based on survey studies, examining how these ideals, as an element of “journalistic culture,” have varied across space and time (e.g., Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Patterson and Donsbach 1996; Weaver and Willnat 2012). These studies were motivated in part by the assumption that, as Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 103) explained, professional role conceptions could be expected to “determine what the communicator thinks is worth transmitting to his or her audience.”

That assumption, though, does not necessarily mean that journalistic role conceptions consistently or fully match the real-world behavior of journalists and the content of news media. There have always been questions about the extent to which role conceptions do, in fact, translate into role performance (Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Rosten 1937). In public discourse, journalists are often derided as failing to live up to their obligations to serve the public and the society, and public dissatisfaction with the performance with the news media is widespread and by many accounts increasing (Brants 2013; Edelman 2019; Waisbord 2006). Meanwhile, studies carried out during the last decade document the disconnect between journalistic ideals and practices in relation to professional roles (e.g. Mellado and van Dalen 2014; Tandoc et al. 2013; van Dalen et al. 2012; Weischenberg et al. 2006).

While some studies that have compared journalists’ role conceptions and their role performance have focused on the connection between the two—analyzing whether journalists who adhere more to a specific role are more likely to perform that role (Culbertson 1983; Starck and Soloski 1977; Tandoc et al. 2013; Van Dalen et al. 2012), others address the relation of perception and practice as a *gap*, looking at factors that may lead to *disjunction* between ideals and performance. Mellado and van Dalen (2014, 2017), for example, found significant gaps between the role conceptions and the role performance of newspaper journalists at the individual level, exploring a number of possible explanations for these gaps, including perceived political and economic influences on the news.

These and other studies have substantially helped advance our understanding of the actual significance of journalistic ideals in professionals' everyday practice. They have shown that while journalistic norms have been established in different media systems (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Weaver and Willnat 2012), the way in which journalists see themselves as professionals is not necessarily a mirror reflection of role performance, thus shedding light on the risks of relying only on journalists' self-reports when studying journalistic culture.

Nevertheless, these pioneering studies also confront important limitations, dealing with a limited range of dimensions of role conceptions and/or of content variables, a limited range of explanatory-level variables, a lack of methodological sophistication in measuring journalistic roles in the news through validated scales, and especially, methodological and theoretical challenges related to the level of analysis used to compare ideals and performance, when news is treated as an individual rather than collective outcome (e.g., Mellado and van Dalen 2014; Starck and Soloski 1977; Tandoc et al. 2013; Van Dalen et al. 2012).

The articulation of scholarship on the production of news and journalistic role performance (JRP) suggests several reasons why ideal conceptions would not consistently coincide with performance. At the same time, the analysis of both perspectives presents compelling arguments that favor the possibility of getting meaningful and valid results when comparing individual role conceptions with the average performance of the journalists' news organizations, compared with measuring the gap at the individual level only.

Mellado et al. (2017a: 6) see role conceptions as "the purposes of the profession that journalists conceive as more important at the individual level, where the locus of role evaluation is not necessarily related to social consensus," while defining role performance as "the manifestation of professional ideals in journalistic practice," an outcome of dynamic negotiations influenced by different internal and external factors (Mellado et al. 2017a: 8). JRP focuses on journalism as social practice, and on the interplay between structure, agency, and the political economy of media platforms, allowing both the observation of journalistic ideals and of its materialization within and across different institutional settings.

Under this umbrella, the news become a collective and a hybrid outcome, produced by journalists acting within complex institutionalized contexts, which may affect their ability to practice the kind of journalism they may consider ideal (Boczkowski 2011; Schudson 2011). Indeed, it is unlikely that journalists would perform their professional ideals all the time, as they write on different platforms and different news beats, facing context-based facts on an everyday basis. In the same line, and considering that roles are situational and overlap in practice (Lynch 2007), it would be unlikely that each news story would perform one and only role, or would include all elements that characterize a particular role. For example, even if journalists had a strong watchdog ideal, we should not expect that they would produce critical investigative journalism all the time, but only when some wrongdoing needed to be exposed, or when the institutional context supported the manifestation of that role.

Although a significant gap between ideal and performance seems to be inevitable, the extent to which ideals of individual journalists in different countries relate to the overall performance of their news organizations of different professional roles and the factors that best explain the size of these gaps still remain as significant questions. This study moves a step forward in transiting away from a strict focus on individual-level journalistic gaps that overlook the complex relationship between professional ideals, role performance, and the context in which journalists operate, in favor of a more institutional approach that focuses on the question of how the relationship between journalists and their news organizations affect conception–performance gaps at three levels: the individual level, the organizational level, and the societal level.

Based on a standardized operationalization of the interventionist, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, service, infotainment, and civic roles, the present study combines survey and content analysis data to explain the link between role conception and performance as a gap, comparing the individual role conceptions of newspaper journalists with the average performance of their newspapers across nine countries from Latin America, Western Europe, and Asia.

We are specifically interested in investigating whether professional roles closer to a public service orientation—such as the watchdog and the civic roles—present a bigger or smaller gap than public influence-oriented or consumer-oriented roles across organizations and countries, as well as testing for potential explanatory factors for role conception–media performance gaps at the individual, organizational, and societal levels.

As professional roles legitimize journalism in a particular society, this study aims to contribute to the explanation of the permanent struggle between norms and ideals, and the everyday practice of journalists and the media.

Journalistic Roles and the Struggles between Ideals and Practices

While more traditional approaches to professional roles see journalistic functions as fixed and regular norms and patterns of behavior (Zhu et al. 1977), research on JRP has shown the contextual nature of journalistic culture. Indeed, authors have also shown that although roles are often conceived as individual perceptions of journalists, they are historically constructed and socially performed (Vos 2017).

Based on previous research (e.g. Donsbach [2008] 2012; Eide and Knight 1999; Hanitzsch 2007), Mellado (2015) operationalizes and validates the presence of six independent roles in news content: the interventionist, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, service, civic, and infotainment roles (e.g., Mellado and van Dalen 2014, 2017; Mellado et al. 2017b). Following her operationalization, multiple studies have analyzed the contextual nuances of JRP in a diversity of sociopolitical and news production environments, as well as the gap between ideals and practices at the individual level (e.g., Humanes and Roses 2018; Márquez-Ramírez et al. 2020; Mellado et al. 2017a, 2017b; Stepínska et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2018).

These studies have supported the idea that professional roles are situational and sometimes conflicting sets of functions that can be combined in various ways across space and time. Several roles may be combined in a single story (Hallin and Mellado 2018; Lynch 2007; Mellado et al. 2017a), and it is not useful to divide professional roles into “good” and “bad” roles, as they can be mediated constantly depending on specific contexts (Mellado 2019).

Journalistic Conception–Media Performance Gaps

Besides the overall finding that journalistic roles are affected by significant discrepancies between what journalists would deem important from a normative perspective, and what they actually perform in the news (e.g., Weischenberg et al. 2006), studies at the individual level have found that the gap is especially large in roles more closely related to the democratic function of the press, such as the watchdog and the civic roles (Mellado and van Dalen 2014; Oi et al. 2012; Roses and Humanes 2019). Nevertheless, we know less regarding the extent to which the size of the gap varies when comparing individual role conceptions and role performance at the level of media organizations.

To address the lack of empirical evidence on this matter, we pose the following research question:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Does the size of the gap between individual journalists’ ideals and the average performance of their news media organizations significantly vary across the interventionist, watchdog, civic, loyal, service, and infotainment roles?

Research has identified a wide range of characteristics that may influence the conception–performance gap (Mellado and van Dalen 2014; Skovsgaard et al. 2012; Tandoc et al. 2013). Most studies compare journalists’ role ideals with their perceived role enactment or with the performance of a role in their individual news products. As the present study takes a more institutional approach by comparing journalists’ role conceptions with their media organizations’ role performance, we will focus on potential predictors that directly address the relationship between journalists and their news media institutions at the individual, organizational, and media system levels.

One of the potential determinants that previous studies have shown to affect journalistic practice in institutionalized contexts is the journalists’ level of perceived autonomy, often defined as the personal “latitude that a practitioner has in carrying out his or her occupational duties” (Weaver et al. 2007: 70). This might vary across media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Voltmer 2013) and from one news organization to another, depending on the nature of organizational routines, forms of ownership and organizational goals, the labor market, labor-management relations, and legal contexts, as when journalists are protected by conscience clauses from being forced to produce content that would violate their values.

Several potential determinants of the gap between ideals and professional practices refer to formalized and objective characteristics of the media, which could potentially

affect how professional roles are performed (Schudson 2011). With regard to editorial policies, for example, there is reason to expect that the implementation of journalistic ideals in their professional practice would be affected by the existence of editorial codes of conduct that guide and regulate proper journalistic behavior. Although Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) did not find quantifiable effects of codified editorial rules on perceptions of journalistic autonomy, studies taking a more qualitative approach yielded more consistent findings indicating that established guiding principles in the newsroom increase conformity in that journalists internalize the guidelines imposed by their superiors (Breed 1955; Wyss 2003). Whether this conformity translates into an overall greater correspondence between journalistic role conceptions and media role performance is yet an open question and may depend on the specific ideals that are pursued by news organizations and journalists.

The conception–performance gap might also differ depending on the audience orientation of different news organizations, with elite and popular media establishing different editorial profiles that might be reflected in their media performance (Beam 2003; Strömbäck and van Aelst 2010). For example, studies have found that at the individual level, the conception–performance gap in consumer-oriented functions such as the infotainment or the service roles (Mellado and van Dalen 2014; Skovsgaard et al. 2012) is particularly likely to be affected by market orientation.

A third broadly investigated organizational variable in media and journalism research that potentially influences conception–performance gaps is media ownership (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Although ownership types vary across countries and even media types, a widely accepted approach for the study of newspapers is to differentiate among private, corporate-owned, and state-owned newspaper companies. While private newspapers are usually less determined by economic pressures and tend to produce more substantive, issue-focused political news, newspapers publicly traded on the stock market put more emphasis on profit maximization at the expense of professional values and journalistic quality (Benson et al. 2018; Dunaway and Lawrence 2015; Hamilton 2004). Studies, however, have disagreed on the size and direction of the effect of both market orientation (Mellado and van Dalen 2014; Skovsgaard et al. 2012), and corporate/private ownership on journalistic roles across individual organizations (e.g. Benson et al. 2018; Henkel et al. 2019).

More clarity exists, although less often examined, about the effects of state ownership. Journalists working for state-owned media have been shown to perceive significantly more external political influences (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011) and less professional autonomy (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013). In this sense, political imperatives imposed by the State could most strongly relate to roles that aim at public influence such as the interventionist and the loyal-facilitator roles (Mellado 2015).

Finally, cross-national comparative research suggests that the relationship between journalists and their media organizations is—potentially most strongly—affected by societal-level differences between countries (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011; Weaver et al. 2007). Most notably, the level of press freedom in a country is discussed as a major predictor determining media independence and journalistic autonomy from political and legal through to economic conditions (e.g., Freedom of

the Press Index by Freedom House). Although some studies have found differences across countries regarding perceived level of influences in journalistic work (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011), other studies have found little to no variation at the societal level (Ahva et al. 2017; Reich and Hanitzsch 2013; Xu and Jin 2017).

In light of the nested structure of our data, we can determine whether specific individual, organizational, and societal factors influence the conception–performance gap. Considering the lack of specific evidence that allows formal hypotheses regarding the influence of these factors in the gap between individual journalistic ideals and media role performance, we pose the following three research questions:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Does individual perceived journalistic autonomy significantly influence the gap between journalists' role conceptions and the average role performance of their news media organizations across countries?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): Do codified editorial policies, ownership, and media audience orientation significantly affect the gap between journalists' role conceptions and the average role performance of their news media organizations across countries?

Research Question 4 (RQ4): Does the national level of press freedom have a significant effect on the gap between journalists' role conceptions and the average role performance of their news media organizations?

Method

The study reports findings from the JRP cross-national project (www.journalisticperformance.org).

To address our research questions, we followed a two-stage research design. In a first stage, we measured journalistic role performance. We conducted a content analysis of newspapers in nine countries from Latin America, Western Europe, and Asia, based on standardized operationalizations of the watchdog, civic, interventionist, loyal-facilitator, infotainment, and service roles in journalism. As a second step, we conducted a survey on role conceptions among the journalists who wrote the stories included in the news sample.

Content Analysis

We conducted a content analysis of the news published in the most important newspapers of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, China, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, Spain, and Switzerland. Two to five newspapers for each country were sampled, taking into account their size, scope, market orientation, ownership, political leaning, and level of influence, in a way that best represented the diversity and shape of their own national print media systems (see Table I in the Supplementary Information file). A stratified-systematic sample of two weeks from two consecutive years between 2012 and 2015 per country was selected. Within each selected sample, we considered all the news stories published in sections associated with the National Desk ($N = 19,908$).

In each country, independent coders were trained in the application of a common codebook containing operational definitions for each variable. Based on Krippendorff's alpha, final overall intercoder reliability between coders was at .78. Within-nation reliability scores ranged from .72 to .85.

The coding manual included variables that measure the performance of the six roles included in our study. The indicators were derived from the dimensions proposed and validated to measure professional roles in news content (Mellado 2015; Mellado and van Dalen 2017).

Each role was examined through the presence/absence of specific indicators in the news (see individual indicators, confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs), and global intercoder reliabilities in Table II in the Supplementary Information file).

Following CFA results, the items of each dimension were combined to form a final score for each role, ranging from 0 to 1. A higher score expressed a higher performance of a news item regarding the specific journalistic role, and vice versa. For descriptive purposes, we calculated the raw scores (sum of points divided by the total items in each role). Meanwhile, we used factor scores to run the rest of our analyses.

Survey

To capture journalistic role conceptions, we surveyed the authors of the stories represented in the news sample. The surveys were conducted as Web-based questionnaires or face-to-face interviews. We sent all journalists who wrote more than three stories in our sample an invitation to participate in the study. In the end, 643 journalists completed the survey, yielding a global response rate of 35 percent, although with important differences between countries, ranging from 10.2 percent in Germany to 90 percent in Hong Kong.

The survey measured the importance that journalists gave to the six professional roles (role conception), rating statements on a five-point scale where 1 was *not important at all* and 5 was *extremely important*.

Different authors have made a case for future studies to translate abstract statements on role conceptions into specific and operationalized practices that may be easier to understand for journalists across cultures when they rate the importance of professional roles (Mellado et al. 2017a; Weischenberg et al. 2006). Following that call, the members of the project collaboratively designed most of the statements used to measure role conceptions by translating the indicators included in our content analysis into reporting practices that journalists were asked to rate in terms of their individual importance (see individual indicators, CFA analyses, and Cronbach's α s per role in Table II in the Supplementary Information file). We also included some specific normative items that have shown consistency across time and cultures from previous cross-national surveys among journalists (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Weaver et al. 2007).

Predictors on the Conception–Performance Gap

To examine effects on conception–performance gaps, we included variables connected to the professional autonomy of the journalists on three levels. At the individual level,

we measured perceived autonomy by asking journalists to indicate their agreement (five-point scale, from *never* to *always*) with three statements associated with their professional autonomy: “When I have a good idea about a topic that I consider important, I always get it covered,” “I have quite or a lot of freedom to select news stories on which I will work,” and “I have quite or a lot of freedom to decide which aspects of a news story I should emphasize.” These items were averaged to form an index of perceived individual autonomy ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.79$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$).

Three organizational-level factors were measured, each pertaining to characteristics of the specific newspapers that journalists worked for. The presence of *editorial codes of ethics* was measured by indicating whether the given newsroom implemented editorial codes of conduct that specified legitimate/illegitimate behavior (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). *Media audience orientation* indicated whether media specifically address a politically interested audience (*elite press*) or a general mass audience (*popular press*). Finally, *media ownership* measured whether the journalists worked for newspapers owned and controlled by private group chains, single owners, or families (*private ownership*), by publicly traded corporations (*corporate ownership*), or by the State (*State ownership*).

At the media system level, the widely used *Freedom of the Press Index* published by Freedom House captured the political and economic freedom of the media systems included in this study. This *press freedom* index was included as the average rank that each country achieved during the fieldwork time (between 2012 and 2015). The index correlated highly with similar measures of press freedom, such as the Democracy Index, published by the Economist Intelligence Unit ($r = -.94$, $p < .001$).

Analytical Strategy

To analyze the size and direction of the gaps between journalists’ role conception and media role performance, we compared each journalist’s individual role conception with the average role performance of their respective organization. To this end, we first calculated the average score of each journalist based on their answers to the survey questions representing each role. Then, we calculated the average score of role performance for each media outlet with regard to each role, considering all the news stories from each specific outlet. Considering that the scales used to measure role performance were different from the scales measuring role conception, we recoded the average scores for role conception (ranging from 1 to 5) into ranges from 0 to 1. Finally, we calculated the absolute differences between the two, subtracting the average role performance score of each media outlet from the average role conception score of each journalist belonging to that outlet.¹ It should be noted that the absolute values of the “gap” scores have no substantive interpretation, as we have no way to know what level of presence of a particular role in news content would correspond to the journalists assignment of levels of importance. The focus of our analysis is on the relative sizes and directions of these gaps, and the factors that increase or decrease the gaps between journalists’ ideals and the average performance of their news organizations.

Likewise, as our dependent variable, the “gap,” is defined as the difference between two variables, factors that reduce the gap could do so either by increasing the performance of that role or by decreasing the priority assigned to it by journalists.

Table 1. Average Gap between Journalists' Role Conceptions and Their Media Organizations' Role Performance.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>	<i>r</i> _{yi} Effect Size Correlation
Watchdog	0.716	0.168	107.49	633	.001	5.61	.941
Civic	0.740	0.156	119.08	631	.001	6.35	.953
Interventionist	0.306	0.171	45.08	635	.001	2.35	.761
Loyal-facilitator	0.503	0.193	65.71	632	.001	3.62	.875
Infotainment	0.500	0.187	67.79	638	.001	3.65	.877
Service	0.663	0.178	94.16	635	.001	5.18	.933

Results

Journalistic Conception–Media Performance Gaps across Roles and Countries

According to our data, the roles that showed the largest gaps between individual journalists' ideals and the average role performance of their news media organizations (RQ1) were the more public service–oriented roles, such as the civic role, $t(631) = 119.08$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 6.35$, and the watchdog role, $t(633) = 107.49$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 5.61$, as can be seen in Table 1. Journalists across countries give significantly more importance to public service–oriented roles than what their news media organizations actually perform in the news. The interventionist role showed the smallest gap, $t(635) = 45.08$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 2.35$, followed by the infotainment $t(638) = 67.79$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 3.65$, and the loyal-facilitator role, $t(632) = 65.71$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 3.62$.

Multilevel Effects on Journalistic Conception–Media Performance Gaps

To investigate institutional influences that may affect the gaps between journalists' role conception and media role performance on an individual, organizational, and societal level, multilevel models were conducted for each journalistic role. Each model contained three levels, with journalists being nested in their media organizations that, in turn, are nested in their respective countries. To account for individual, organizational, and societal differences in the size of the gaps, the random intercepts of the two higher levels were included in all models. Predictors were hierarchically included as fixed effects on the first (i.e., individual autonomy), second (i.e., editorial codes of ethics, media audience orientation, and media ownership), and third levels (i.e., press freedom). Each analysis started with an intercept-only model to account for the fact that institutional characteristics on the three levels are unequally distributed across the countries included in the present study. Hence, the intercept-only models help detect whether individual, organizational, and country differences occur before additional predictors are considered.

The intercept-only models revealed that, across all six roles, the sizes of the gaps differed more clearly between journalists and between media organizations than between countries—reflecting a robust finding that does not considerably change after the inclusion of additional predictors (see *Covariance Parameters* in Tables 2–4).

Regarding institutional influences perceived at the individual level (RQ2), our analyses show that perceived autonomy had a positive effect on the gap between journalists' role conceptions and media role performance regarding the watchdog and the civic role across countries (see Table 2). In other words, journalists with higher levels of perceived journalistic autonomy showed a larger gap between role conception and role performance for both the watchdog role ($b = .017, p = .036, \beta = .08$) and the civic role ($b = .017, p = .031, \beta = .08$). As an increase or decrease of the gap can be due to differences in role conceptions, differences in media's role performance, or both (see Figure 1, 2, and Table III in the Supplementary Information file), post hoc variance analyses were conducted to further explore the effects of individual perceived journalistic autonomy on the watchdog and the civic gap. These additional analyses showed that journalists' perceived autonomy² did not affect role performance, $F_{\text{Watchdog}}(2, 627) = 0.03, p = .971; F_{\text{Civic}}(2, 627) = 1.62, p = .199$, but that journalists with lower levels of perceived autonomy indicated a significantly lower importance of the watchdog and the civic roles, $F_{\text{Watchdog}}(2, 625) = 14.69, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .045; F_{\text{Civic}}(2, 622) = 16.63, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .051$, which resulted in smaller gaps between conception and performance. Journalists who felt more autonomous in their professional work, in contrast, also perceived the watchdog and the civic role as more important, while the role performance of their news organizations remained unaffected, leading to larger gaps for these roles among journalists with higher perceived autonomy, $F_{\text{Watchdog}}(2, 625) = 13.73, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .042; F_{\text{Civic}}(2, 622) = 15.87, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .049$.

At the organizational level, addressing RQ3, our data show that the existence of binding editorial policies in the newsroom affected the interventionist and the infotainment gaps.

For the interventionist role, the conception–performance gap was smaller if binding editorial policies on journalistic ethics existed ($b = -.114, p = .006, \beta = .26$), indicating greater accordance between individual journalists role ideals and the overall performance of their media organizations in the presence of established editorial standards (see Table 3).

More specifically, post hoc analyses revealed that the existence of ethical codes in the newsroom significantly increased role performance toward a more neutral reporting style, $F(1, 628) = 31.54, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .048$, while they did not have a significant impact on journalists' role conceptions, $F(1, 627) = 0.01, p = .941$. In other words, effects of binding editorial policies in the newsroom on the size of the gap between interventionist conception and performance, $F(1, 627) = 4.60, p = .032, \eta_p^2 = .007$, can mainly be attributed to differences in role performance, with newspapers with established editorial codes of ethics leaning significantly more toward the detached observer role, while newspapers without codified editorial rules tended more toward interventionism (see Figure 1, 2, and Table III in the Supplementary Information file).

Table 2. Multilevel Models of Individual, Organizational, and Media System Effects on Public Service-Oriented Gaps (Unstandardized Coefficients).

	Wachdog				Civic			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
<i>Fixed Effects</i>								
Intercept	.731***	.667***	.721***	.727***	.742***	.680***	.702***	.698***
Individual Autonomy		.017 ($p = .034$, $\beta = .08$)	.017 ($p = .036$, $\beta = .08$)	.017 ($p = .037$, $\beta = .08$)		.017 ($p = .027$, $\beta = .08$)	.017 ($p = .031$, $\beta = .08$)	.017 ($p = .032$, $\beta = .08$)
Editorial Codes of Ethics (0 = No)			.012	.011			-.007	-.007
Elite Press (0 = Popular Press)			-.054 [†]	-.054 [†]			-.027	-.027
Private Ownership (0 = Corporate Ownership)			-.011	-.011			.020	.020
State Ownership(0 = Corporate Ownership)			-.105 [†]	-.096			-.044	-.056
Press Freedom Rank				-.001				.001
<i>Covariance Parameters (ID)</i>								
Residual	.019***	.019***	.019***	.019***	.016***	.016***	.016***	.016***
Intercept Newspaper	.005**	.004**	.004**	.004**	.004**	.004**	.004*	.004*
Intercept Country	.003	.003	.001	.001	.002	.002	.001	.001
<i>Estimated Grand Mean (based on model with best model fit)</i>		$M = .729$; $SE = .02$; $95\% CI [.679; .779]$					$M = .740$; $SE = .02$; $95\% CI [.696; .785]$	
-2LL	-663.91	-666.43	-671.96	-671.99	-749.03	-751.24	-753.34	-753.37
AIC	-655.91	-656.43	-653.96	-651.99	-741.03	-741.24	-735.34	-733.37

Note. CI = confidence interval; ID = the covariance type used in the MLMs (one random effect was estimated at each of the higher levels); LL = log likelihood; AIC = Akaike information criterion. Bold values signify where the predictors had an effect of $p < .05$. [†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Multilevel Models of Individual, Organizational, and Media System Effects on Public Influence-Oriented Gaps (Unstandardized Coefficients, β Values in Parentheses).

	Interventionist				Loyal-Facilitator			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
<i>Fixed Effects</i>								
Intercept	.278***	.241***	.313***	.358***	.463***	.443***	.439***	.409***
Individual Autonomy		.010	.013	.012		.005	.006	.007
Editorial Codes of Ethics (0 = No)			-.114 ($p = .006, \beta = .26$)	-.114 ($p = .006, \beta = .26$)			-.054	-.056
Elite Press (0 = Popular Press)			.026	.025			.018	.017
Private Ownership (0 = Corporate Ownership)			-.043	-.045			-.003	-.003
State Ownership (0 = Corporate Ownership)			.142 ($p = .016, \beta = .38$)	.162 ($p = .010, \beta = .43$)			.216 ($p = .001, \beta = .51$)	.172 ($p = .009, \beta = .41$)
Press Freedom Rank				-.006				.005
<i>Covariance Parameters (ID)</i>								
Residual	.020***	.020***	.020***	.020***	.025***	.025***	.025***	.025***
Intercept Newspaper	.003*	.002*	.001	.001	.004*	.004*	.003*	.003*
Intercept Country	.007	.007	.009	.009	.006	.007	.001	.001
<i>Estimated Grand Mean</i> (based on model with best model fit)		$M = .305; SE = .03; 95\% CI [.227; .384]$					$M = .494; SE = .02; 95\% CI [.451; .538]$	
-2LL	-619.02	-617.30	-631.52	-632.20	-474.50	-476.70	-491.98	-493.14
AIC	-611.02	-607.30	-613.52	-612.20	-466.50	-466.70	-473.98	-473.14

Note. CI = confidence interval; ID = the covariance type used in the MLMs (one random effect was estimated at each of the higher levels); LL = log likelihood; AIC = Akaike information criterion. Bold values signify where the predictors had an effect of $p < .05$. $^{\dagger}p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Multilevel Models of Individual, Organizational, and Media System Effects on Consumer-Oriented Gaps (Unstandardized Coefficients).

	Infotainment				Service			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
<i>Fixed Effects</i>								
Intercept	.477***	.452***	.321***	.303***	.657***	.611***	.567***	.545***
Individual Autonomy		.007	.006	.006		.012	.015	.016
Editorial Codes of Ethics (0 = No)			.077 (<i>p</i> = .045, <i>β</i> = .16)	.077 (<i>p</i> = .042, <i>β</i> = .16)			.061	.062
Elite Press (0 = Popular Press)			.032	.031			-.084 (<i>p</i> = .003, <i>β</i> = .19)	-.083 (<i>p</i> = .004, <i>β</i> = .19)
Private Ownership (0 = Corporate Ownership)			.056	.053			.057	.058
State Ownership (0 = Corporate Ownership)			.095†	.066			.051	.030
Press Freedom Rank				.003				.003
<i>Covariance Parameters (ID)</i>								
Residual	.029***	.029***	.029***	.029***	.026***	.026***	.026***	.026***
Intercept Newspaper	.004*	.005**	.004**	.004**	.004*	.004*	.002*	.002*
Intercept Country	.002	.002	.000	.000	.001	.001	.002	.002
<i>Estimated Grand Mean</i> (based on model with best model fit)		<i>M</i> = .477; <i>SE</i> = .02; 95% <i>CI</i> [.433; .522]					<i>M</i> = .657; <i>SE</i> = .02; 95% <i>CI</i> [.615; .699]	
-2LL	-410.87	-405.76	-412.25	-412.82	-468.93	-467.65	-478.78	-479.09
AIC	-402.87	-395.76	-394.25	-392.82	-460.93	-457.65	-460.78	-459.09

Note. CI = confidence interval; ID = the covariance type used in the MLMs (one random effect was estimated at each of the higher levels); LL = log likelihood; AIC = Akaike information criterion. Bold values signify where the predictors had an effect of *p* < .05.

†*p* < .10. * *p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Codified editorial policies also had a significant impact on the infotainment role, but in a different direction (see Table 4), indicating that the existence of binding ethical codes increased rather than decreased the gap between role conception and role performance ($b = .077, p = .045, \beta = .16$). This increasing effect on the gap was mainly due to ethical codes decreasing media's role performance on infotainment, $F(1, 628) = 34.77, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .052$, while not affecting journalists' role conceptions, $F(1, 625) = 3.36, p = .067$. Hence, infotainment was less pronounced in media organizations with codified editorial rules, although their journalists attach similar relevance to infotainment as their colleagues from outlets without editorial codes, $F(1, 625) = 9.38, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .015$.

Regarding media audience orientation (RQ3), the likewise consumer-oriented service role showed a significant effect of market orientation on the conception–performance gap, with a smaller gap emerging in elite newspapers compared with popular newspapers ($b = -.084, p = .003, \beta = .19$). In elite newspapers, the service role was not only less pronounced in actual news coverage compared with popular newspapers, $F(1, 628) = 31.26, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .047$, but journalists working for elite newspapers also perceived the service role as significantly less important, $F(1, 627) = 14.69, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .023$, thereby showing a smaller infotainment gap than journalists working for popular newspapers, $F(1, 627) = 11.41, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .018$. The infotainment role, instead, did not show any significant effect of this organizational factor.

The interventionist and the loyal-facilitator roles were found to be mainly affected by media ownership (see Table 3). Regarding both the interventionist role ($b = .142, p = .016, \beta = .38$) and the loyal role ($b = .216, p = .001, \beta = .52$), the gaps were larger if newspapers were owned by the State than by corporations, while private ownership did not show any significant effects on the size of the gaps, if compared with corporate ownership (RQ3). Journalists in State-owned news organizations attached significantly more importance to both roles, $F_{\text{Interventionist}}(2, 627) = 30.74, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .089$; $F_{\text{Loyal}}(2, 624) = 14.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .044$, while their media organizations differed significantly, but at a lower level from other ownership types in terms of the performance of these roles, $F_{\text{Interventionist}}(2, 628) = 61.82, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .164$; $F_{\text{Loyal}}(2, 628) = 41.16, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .116$, thereby leading to larger conception–performance gaps in State-owned media, $F_{\text{Interventionist}}(2, 627) = 8.59, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .027$; $F_{\text{Loyal}}(2, 624) = 15.77, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .048$.

At the media system level, although role conception and performance vary significantly across countries, and the level of press freedom had an influence on both, it did not affect the gap between individual journalists' ideals and the average performance of their news media organizations for any of the six analyzed roles, $p > .25$ (RQ4).

Discussion and Conclusion

The main goal of our study was to investigate the gap between individual role conceptions and the average role performance of journalists' newspapers in nine countries from Europe, Asia, and Latin America, examining the size of the gap for the

interventionist, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, civic, infotainment, and service roles, and testing for potential explanatory factors at the individual, organizational, and societal level.

The credibility and social responsibility of journalism is a major subject of debate today, both in the public realm and in academia. As Waisbord (2013) points out, these debates are driven by changes in media industries that have undermined the conditions for traditional models of professionalism, by patterns of globalization that have created hybrid journalism cultures, and by blurred boundaries of the profession in an era of change in the media ecology. Investigating the relationship between journalistic ideals and role performance at the institutional level, and the factors that increase or decrease discrepancies between ideals and performance, is one way to provide empirical evidence that bears on these debates about the journalistic professionalism in the contemporary world.

First, our results revealed that the extent to which journalists' role conceptions match actual media performance across countries significantly differs depending on the role under examination. The greatest discrepancies between professional ideals and media role performance occur in the roles that are most important for defining the relationship between the media system, the political system, and the citizenry. Hence, the civic and the watchdog roles showed the largest gaps.

Our results also offer significant evidence that, across all six analyzed roles, the size of the gaps differed more clearly between journalists and between media organizations, than among countries, with the gap between journalistic ideals and media performance manifesting in different ways depending on different factors. Among the institutional predictors analyzed for this study, ownership, codified editorial policies, and media audience orientation are the ones that best explained the gap between individual role conceptions and media role performance.

Regarding the existence of binding editorial policies, the direction of the effect was contingent on the specific role predicted: While the infotainment gap was larger in newsrooms with established editorial policies, the interventionist gap was smaller in the same newsrooms. Regarding the interventionist role, our findings hold particular implications for journalists as neutral disseminators of political information: As the interventionist role is one side of the "journalistic voice" unidimensional structure, the negative effect of binding editorial rules on this gap does not only apply to interventionism but also to its opposing face, that is, the ideal to report in a neutral and impartial fashion. As editorial policies more likely address ideals of neutrality than of active subjectivity in news coverage (Wyss 2003), our finding reflects a persistent prevalence of the disseminator role as a traditional journalistic standard codified in today's media organizations through editorial policies, thereby normalizing an essential journalistic ideal. Similarly, the greater influences of codified editorial policies on the infotainment gap may also be taken as a sign of a still-prevalent orientation of newspapers to more classic hard news coverage compared with the focus on sensationalistic soft news portrayals that have become increasingly pronounced in other media platforms (see, for example, Pew Research Center 2000; Reinemann et al. 2012).

In terms of media ownership, our analyses showed strong gaps for State-owned newspapers with regard to both the interventionist and the loyal-facilitator roles, with journalists' ideals being less reflected in news coverage. This finding corroborates earlier research showing that State-owned media exert more external control over journalists in favor of a more State- or government-aligned coverage (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011; Reich and Hanitzsch 2013). With regard to differences between private and corporate ownership, our analyses are in line with earlier notions of greater variety "within" than "between" ownership types (Benson et al. 2018).

The gap between journalists' ideals and the performance of their media organizations also depends on whether newspapers address wide, diverse audiences or more politically interested audiences. According to our analyses, elite newspapers and their journalists appear less inclined to pursue a primarily consumer-oriented service role, thereby showing smaller conception–performance gaps. The infotainment gap, in turn, was not affected by the media's audience orientation—most likely because both elite and popular newspapers are nowadays equally affected by increasing commercial orientations that are conceived of as main drivers of changes in reporting styles (e.g. Dunaway and Lawrence 2015).

Although with less explanatory power, influences at the individual level of the journalist play a role when explaining the conception–performance gap in more public service-oriented roles. For example, our analyses reveal positive effects of journalists' perceived autonomy on the gap for the watchdog and for the civic role, with individual autonomy increasing both gaps. This may appear paradoxical, but our findings indicate that journalists who perceive more journalistic autonomy simultaneously assign more relevance to both roles, without their ideals necessarily being better reflected in their organizations' actual news coverage. The causal direction of the relationship between perceived autonomy and role conceptions cannot be addressed by our study, but considering that the relation of journalistic autonomy to the performance of professional roles may be more complex than it appears on the surface (Schudson 2005), it would be interesting for future research to investigate whether journalists pursuing watchdog and civic roles—as the most important public service-oriented journalistic standards—are in fact more autonomous (rather than only perceiving more autonomy) or whether more autonomy gives an impetus for journalists to reflect more on the importance of these standards. Indeed, professional autonomy in journalism is not always conceived at a purely individual level, and concepts of professionalism often involve systems of "control and discipline" (Nygren 2012: 81) intended, in part, to preserve the collective autonomy of journalists in relation to other actors within the news organization (owners, lawyers, marketers) as well as to stay independent of outside control (Singer 2007).

Regarding institutional factors at the societal level potentially affecting the conception–performance gap, our study found no significant differences between countries and no effects of the countries' level of press freedom. Given that our analyses looked at differences between journalists and their media organizations—instead of only looking at differences in role conceptions between journalists of different countries, or at differences in role performances between newspapers of different countries—this

finding implies that countries may vary greatly in terms of their press coverage and normative journalistic standards when measured separately, but significantly less in terms of the level of discrepancy between individual role conception and media performance which seems to be a general trend across nations, regardless of the type of political regime, geographical location, or media system models.

In fact, although countries showed discernible differences in the size of the gaps when comparing them without controlling for error variance (see Table 2–4), such differences become less pronounced when controlling for the nested structure of the data through multilevel models.

As far as we know, this is the first study that analyzes the gap between individual journalists' role conceptions and media role performance, comparing discrepancies between journalists' ideals and actual performance across countries. Nevertheless, important limitations should be acknowledged. This study covers several geographic regions and regime types, but with a wider range of cases, it is possible that other patterns would emerge. This study is also limited to newspapers. A second wave of this study is currently under way, and includes a much wider range of national cases, as well as television, radio, and online media, making it possible to consider whether relations between role conceptions and role performance vary by medium as well as national context.

Likewise, for some countries, the survey sample presented a very low response rate, partly because of the difficulties in getting responses from journalists who belonged to the analyzed news organizations. For example, many journalists did not work in those newsrooms anymore, probably because they changed jobs. At the same time, some journalists claimed to have political and editorial conflicts, or said they were overwhelmed by the number of surveys they were asked to reply to every month by different organizations and studies, or claimed that their news organization had banned them from answering surveys of any kind.

Consequently, some countries are more strongly represented in our analyses than others, which, of course, can have affected our results. Future research should pay more attention to this problem by targeting stratified samples from the outset, and by contacting the journalists in parallel to the news data collection process.

This study relies on standardized measures, consistent with the call of Esser et al. (2012: 141) for “increased standardization in how key concepts are conceptualized, . . . operationalized and investigated empirically.” The measures have been designed and tested across a team of researchers familiar with diverse contexts of journalism practice, and were designed to be comprehensible to journalists across a wide range of journalism cultures. In part, this is possible because journalism is sufficiently globalized that most journalists around the world are familiar with a common set of discourses about the different social functions of journalism. Clearly, however, journalists work in widely varying cultural and structural contexts, and there is much about the meaning of the patterns produced by standardized measures that cannot be known without moving to more context-sensitive qualitative methods. Journalists working within different cultural contexts or regime types, for example, may have different ideas of what it means concretely to perform the role of “watchdog” or of facilitating civic participation, which

could be revealed through more intensive research on particular cases. Small-*N* follow-up research is also important to clarifying the *mechanisms* that produce patterns shown here, whether, for example, those patterns result from different cultural understandings journalists may have of particular roles, or from particular patterns of division of labor, or from particular kinds of power relations within and outside the newsroom.

In addition, by focusing on institutional influences on diverse levels, the measures used here are parsimonious in that they exclude additional factors that may also affect conception–performance gaps, such as purely individual characteristics (e.g., age, gender). Hence, due to our focus on the institutional context in which roles are performed, our analyses do not equally take into account all elements that may somehow affect the gaps. At the media system level, we only included a single variable, the standard measure of press freedom, and this may miss important system-level influences, although these may be highly correlated with the measure used here. At the same time, considering the contextual and historical nature of journalistic performance, longitudinal studies are very much needed. For example, future studies on professional roles between different cultures should take into account the shifting media environment and its important forces that impact professional roles and their practice.

In spite of these limitations, the findings of this study have important implications for the study of normative ideals and role performance in journalism and media studies. Taken together, our results shed compelling evidence on how journalistic cultures—regardless of the different ways of socialization into journalism across countries—potentially translate into similar gaps between journalists’ ideals and their media organizations’ performance, with all countries revealing similarly evident gaps.

Also, our study reveals that while ownership type and codified editorial rules have greater explanatory power on the conception–performance gap for the interventionist, loyal-facilitator, service, and infotainment roles, the perceived autonomy of the journalist is best able to predict the gap on the two roles related to the idea of journalists as social and political actors who provide a public service function by holding “de facto” powers accountable, and by facilitating public understanding, opinion formation, and political participation among citizens. Here, a possible tradeoff between “internal” and “external” autonomy, and between the interests of the profession as a whole, and the autonomy of the individual journalist must be further explored.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Previous to our main analyses, we conducted different confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) for each analyzed role, based on the original domains proposed by Mellado (2015). Within each domain, roles showed a satisfactory fit with the data at both the role performance and the role conception level. The standardized factor loadings for each model were high, and indicator reliabilities (squared multiple correlations) were satisfactory for each individual dimension at both levels. More information on these calculations can be found in Mellado et al. (2017b).
2. For the post hoc analyses, perceived autonomy was recoded based on percentiles as low, medium, and high.

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Author Biographies

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