

1 Revisiting Journalists' Role Conceptions Research

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Journalistic role conception has been a key concept in studies of journalistic cultures that assess the roles journalists prioritize when informing society. No doubt, any occupational group develops certain belief systems that give meaning to their work in its attempt to claim professional status (Waisbord, 2013). Professional roles as ideals of journalistic practice are important for the profession of journalism because as Mellado (2015, p. 596) suggests, “ideals and values serve to legitimize and define journalism. Evaluative ideals are the tools and skill sets that set journalism apart from other fields [...]” Hanitzsch (2007) also argues that professional role conceptions help to form an identity of journalism.

Every journalist holds role conceptions, ideas of proper behavior that are internalized. These conceptions are the result of the perceived expectations of both the normative and empirical functions of journalism in society (Donsbach, 2008; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver et al., 2007) that others expect of the profession, and that the journalist sees as legitimate or not. Relevant reference groups that journalists see as legitimate are, for instance, newsroom colleagues, senior journalists, management and proprietors, political groups, the specific audience of the news medium, or society as a whole through constitutional law, press law, court decisions, and widely held (although not always) democratic principles. Each of these reference groups can have different expectations toward the journalistic profession and any journalist might perceive these expectations as differently relevant and/or legitimate. The actual and concrete role conception is thus a negotiation between these different expectations with some expectations influencing roles more dominantly than others. As a consequence, professional roles may not only differ among journalists in a country or across countries, but also among generations of journalists, due to career changes, the workplace, or social, political, and technological changes in society (Hellmueller & Keel, 2013).

For Zelizer (1993) journalistic cultures represent the cultural capital shared by the journalists as “interpretative communities” that can materialize in values and ideals, or in journalistic practices. Indeed, different authors (Hanitzsch, 2007; Hellmueller, 2014) have already clarified that journalistic culture is a complex construct that includes not only journalistic ideals, but also manifests at two other levels: the cognitive and the performative.

In this chapter, we revisit six decades of research on journalists' conception of their roles and how they have evolved over time and across different cultures (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver & Willnat, 2012). Additionally, this chapter addresses conceptual and methodological limitations of the study of professional role conceptions worldwide. We further argue that studying journalists' role conceptions alone is not enough to understand the professional culture of journalism.

Journalistic Role Conceptions: A Review of Previous Studies

Normative theories (see Eide chapter) describe the values and attitudes that the press should have from the beginning of the studies on professional attitudes and roles (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Later, since many of journalism's practical problems could not be solved under a merely "ideal" norm (Canel & Sabada, 1999), journalism studies also began to examine how reporters really understand their roles.

Systematic research on journalists' ideas about which roles they should play in society dates back at least to Cohen's (1963) description of a "neutral" versus a "participant" press. As journalists in Western countries (mostly in the U.S.) developed high levels of journalistic professionalism to mainly to defend their autonomy as a profession as well as to increase accuracy and truthfulness in their reporting, their own understandings of their roles began to matter in a system in which each individual journalist could be assumed to have enough influence over the production of news that their personal role conceptions were of consequence. Nevertheless, as early as the 1930s, Rosten's (1937) seminal work already revealed the tension between ideals of professionalism and practical constraints.

Most early studies on role conceptions have been conducted in the U.S. and then later adapted to other cultural and linguistic settings. In general, studies on journalistic role conceptions have examined journalists functioning in a particular social system such as a country unit (e.g., Keel, 2011; Marr, Wyss, Blum, & Bonfadelli, 2001; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes & Wilhoit, 2007; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996; Weischenberg, Malik, & Scholl, 2006) or have focused on a comparison of different journalism cultures based on geographical borders (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Mellado, Lagos, Moreira, & Hernández, 2012; Weaver & Willnat, 2012).

In order to produce more meaningful discussions on journalistic professional roles, we analyze studies that have been published about journalism around the world, so as to understand different approaches to the study of professional roles as ideals in journalism as they emerged and developed over time. While some studies on journalistic roles were translated into English (e.g., Donsbach, 2008), one concern is with the misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the results embedded in the journalistic cultural contexts, but also within the academic paradigms in which these studies were conducted. Therefore, we pay close attention to the definition and conceptualization of role conception research in the original languages as well as the explanations of the results thereafter.

In the review of these studies we focus on (1) the definition of professional roles as ideals, (2) the justification of why we should study them, as well as (3) the inclusion of meta-theories such as the gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) to contextualize the study of role conceptions, and (4) the differences and gaps that exist when applying the same instrument (usually survey questionnaires developed in the West) to study role conceptions of journalists in non-Western countries. For example, in a Western context, professional roles are mostly conceptualized on an individual level (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). However, the attention this perspective has received in journalism research comes with a lack of theoretical explanations. Since journalists need autonomy to exercise independent decisions in their work (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014), role conceptions may not be realized in practice,

and need to be linked to other levels of influence that may limit the exercising of independent decisions in the newsrooms. This is particularly the case in countries characterized by strong political parallelism in which news media, political parties, and economic powers are firmly linked and media owners belong to major political parties (Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015).

With an approach over time and across different contexts, we also address role conceptions on the level of the organization (as in the media organizational role), and on a societal level (as in the media's role in society). We believe that thinking about the concept of role conceptions from various times, contexts, and languages may help to enrich a field that has been historically organized around analytical concepts, epistemologies, and evidence developed mostly in the U.S. and Western Europe (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014).

The U.S. Perspective on Journalistic Role Conceptions

Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1976) wrote an influential book that laid the groundwork for a tradition of studies on journalistic role conceptions in the U.S. They found in their 1971 large-scale national survey of U.S. journalists that there was more widespread support among journalists for the participant than for the neutral role, including a watchdog role in investigating governmental activities and an analytical role in interpreting complex problems. They pointed out that the interviewing for their study was done just a few weeks following the publication of the Pentagon Papers, so answers to questions about investigative reporting were most likely influenced by that series of events. Johnstone and colleagues found that fewer than one in five journalists could be classified as advocates of a single role, however. Most subscribed to both a neutral and a participant role, although participant values were more prevalent among journalists in large cities and those who socialized extensively with other journalists. By the time that Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) conducted their first national survey of U.S. journalists the Watergate scandal had toppled the Nixon presidency and investigative reporting seemed to have increased journalism's respectability. But by the end of the 1970s, the glamour of such reporting began to fade. More participant roles such as investigating government claims, analyzing complex problems, discussing national policy, and developing intellectual interests were less likely to be ranked as very important than in Johnstone et al.'s 1971 study, even though Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) relied on Johnstone et al.'s (1976) measures of roles.

In their 1982 study, Weaver and Wilhoit (1986, p. 115) argued that the more general labels for participant and neutral roles of journalists were not quite accurate. As they put it:

Investigating government claims is, of course, an active, rather than passive, role, just as is discussing national policy. But neither necessarily means sharing of policy making. Getting information to the public quickly may be, in fact, just as participatory, and it certainly is not always neutral.

Because of this concern, Weaver and Wilhoit added two questions about the adversary role (of government and business) to the eight questions that Johnstone et al. (1976) used to measure journalistic roles. Whereas Johnstone's factor analysis of the eight questions produced two factors that were interpreted as a general orientation toward participant and libertarian

(neutral) journalism, Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) found three distinct general roles when they factor analyzed their set of 10 items: adversarial, interpretive, and neutral disseminator. In keeping with Johnstone et al.'s findings, Weaver and Wilhoit found the interpretive/investigative role was dominant, endorsed by nearly two thirds of all journalists, followed by the information dissemination role and last by the adversary role. They also found that these roles were not mutually exclusive, but rather were correlated. About one third of the U.S. journalists fully embraced both the interpretive and disseminator roles, and only a fraction (about 2%) were exclusively one-role oriented. And less than one fifth fully endorsed the adversarial role, suggesting that this role was different in the minds of journalists from an investigative or interpretive approach. In other words, at the end of the 1980s, Weaver and his team already suggested that professional roles could overlap in practice. This absolutely makes sense if we think about roles in society in a more general way. People embrace different roles and they use them in different contexts and circumstances, as journalists also do.

In the early 1990s, in light of changes in journalism and politics during the 1980s in the U.S., Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) added two more questions about the perceived importance of possible roles of journalists—setting the political agenda and letting ordinary people express their views on public affairs. When all 12 questions were factor analyzed, four broader roles or functions emerged, three of them the same as in the early 1980s—adversarial, interpretive, and information disseminator—and an additional one they labeled “populist mobilizer” consisting of the two new items and two measures of developing cultural interests and providing entertainment. As in the earlier studies, most journalists strongly endorsed a combination of two, and sometimes three, of these four broad roles. And as in the 1982 study, this 1992 study suggested that, for most journalists, the interpretive stance—what the Johnstone group in 1971 called the participant role—did not extend to a full acceptance of an adversary role.

In 2002, Weaver and colleagues from Indiana University conducted another large national survey of U.S. journalists (Weaver et al., 2007) and added three more questions about the importance of possible roles for journalists to the 12 existing role questions—motivating people to get involved in public discussions of important issues, pointing people toward possible solutions to society's problems, and analyzing international policy. A factor analysis of these 15 questions resulted in the same four broad roles or functions of news media as were found in the 1992 study—adversarial, interpretive, information disseminator, and populist mobilizer. The interpretive role remained the strongest, but the disseminator role declined sharply in perceived importance and was broader in scope, including providing news of interest to the widest audience and also providing entertainment and relaxation. This new disseminator role included not only news but also entertainment content for a mass audience (Weaver et al., 2007, p. 142).

Based on these studies, we may think that journalistic autonomy was probably highest in the U.S.—and many other Western countries—in the 1970s and 1980s, and some of this diversification of roles may actually be linked to increased commercialization of media, and thus to diminished journalistic autonomy.

The U.S. Impact on the Study of Journalistic Role Conceptions in European Scholarship

In a German context, Weischenberg (1992) was influential in establishing a program of studying the “self-understanding” of journalists. While there is no translation into English, the German meaning of “journalistic role conception” (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986) refers to the “berufliches Selbstverstaendnis” which translates into *professional self-understanding*. The conceptualizations of journalists’ professional self-understanding are more de-coupled from the individual level than in the U.S. case. While professional individual factors and personal attitudes are subsumed under the same analytical level in the U.S. tradition, in the European context Donsbach (1987) distinguished between the subject and professional sphere. In the subject sphere, Donsbach locates values and norms, all factors that influence the journalist as an individual (Kunczik & Zipfel, 2001). Associated with the professional sphere are social factors such as ethical principles, professional norms, news selection criteria, research methods, and social orientation—all factors that influence the professional role of journalists as they reflect societal expectations.

In most of the German studies on journalistic role conceptions (Weischenberg et al., 2006, for example), the authors argue that expectations of journalistic roles that develop in a particular society are only translated into the actual news content if journalists themselves identify with those expectations; that is, journalists need to feel responsible for a particular role. Therefore, the scholars argue that surveys are crucial and important to identify whether journalists prioritize a specific role. As shown in this example, public opinion and the expectation of society toward journalism are crucial in the definition of the professional self-understanding of journalists in a German context. Researchers further argue that this type of self-image that journalists have of their role will most likely overlap with external expectations of journalists. Furthermore, the actual influence that those self-understandings have on the actual journalistic work is contested. One criticism that the scholars highlight is that surveys reflect a socialized and generalized understanding of journalists’ roles, which was learned by journalists in a particular learning situation and might be irrelevant for their actual work later on. Hence, the authors conclude that it is much more effective to actually ask about roles of their work that are relevant for journalistic practice.

Weischenberg, Malik, and Scholl (2006) argue that the study of role conceptions is not of relevance as long as it does not have an actual practical consequence for news coverage. Particularly for political coverage and political opinion, the relevance of studying role perception declines, as the journalists’ role and impact on politics cannot be concluded based on the survey responses alone.

While there is clearly an influence of the U.S. tradition of research on role conceptions in a German context, the German approach is conceptually different as it locates role conception more within the organizational and societal structure of the German media system. In other words, professional role ideals are seen as mediating the expectations of the media system and the public.

What stands out in the German context is the idea of the professional sphere as regulating the expectations that are put on journalists and shaping the actual news coverage. Professional roles in such a conceptual framework are more de-coupled from journalists’ own beliefs about their roles. This is manifest in the survey items that appear in surveys in Germany asking journalists about their role ideals: journalists are first asked to tell how important those items

are for themselves personally *as part of their profession* and they are further asked (only for the items that they agreed on mostly) how successful they are in realizing these goals in their actual reporting (perceived enactment). In such a way, researchers can identify idealized roles as well as journalistic roles with practical relevance (Weischenberg et al., 2006, p. 100). As outlined above, scholars already conceptually thought of the “gap” between role conception and role performance, but had analyzed this on the level of the perception of the journalists, rather than comparing it to the actual coverage, or to the expectations of the audience, assuming that journalists are indeed aware of the gap between idealized roles and role conceptions that matter for their reporting.

The study of journalistic role conceptions has been popular in Western Europe. Patterson and Donsbach (1996), and Donsbach and Patterson (2004), studied political journalism in the U.S., Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and Sweden, and suggested a theoretical model that organizes professional roles into two dimensions. The passive-active dimension refers to the degree to which the journalists act independently from those who are interested in what will be published (the news), and the advocate-neutral dimension reflects the extent to which the press takes sides on certain issues or disputes. From these dimensions, four roles emerge: “passive neutral,” “passive advocate,” “active neutral,” and “active advocate.” The four roles support the role diversity previously found in surveys in the U.S.

In Austria, for example, Karmasin (2008) studied the role images of political journalists. The author also pointed out the distinction between role conception and role performance, basing the study on Weischenberg et al. (2006). Karmasin (2008) wrote that measuring role conceptions is empirically complicated because it would be naïve to make assumptions about behavior based on idealistic roles. The author argues that because professional role ideals always imply some form of social pressure or social desirability, roles at the same time reflect some form of social consensus. It is therefore common sense to the author that individual attitudes of journalists do not alone determine role conceptions but that social structures and cultural contexts also define the way journalists see their roles. In that sense, it seems logical that German scholars (Donsbach, 2008) prefer the term “role perception” over “role conception” (translated into English) when talking about professional role ideals. As the introduction of this book states, by articulating the concept as a form of perception, the locus of the role seems to be within “social consensus” rather than being conceived by journalists solely on the individual level.

As for Switzerland, until the late 1990s no data were available on Swiss journalists. A team of researchers started in 1998 to conduct surveys with journalists, similar to the ones conducted in Germany earlier (such as Weischenberg, Loeffelholz, & Scholl, 1993) and also in the U.S. (Johnstone, Slawski, & Bowman, 1976; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986). The same survey was repeated in 2008 to understand how journalists in Switzerland had changed over 10 years (Bonfadelli, Keel, Marr, & Wyss, 2011; Keel, 2011). More than 95% of Swiss journalists in 2008 thought that the most important journalistic role was to describe reality as objectively as possible, and those results were similar to the ones from 1998. Also, some of the roles associated with serving the audience had grown over time. Swiss journalists in that sense share many characteristics with their colleagues in Western European and North American countries (Bonfadelli, Keel, Marr, & Wyss, 2014).

Meanwhile, Spanish studies on professional roles have been heavily influenced by the U.S. approach, since basically all available studies are based on Weaver's items included in surveys of U.S. journalists. In the earliest studies, most Spanish journalists identify mainly with the disseminator role followed by the interpreter, advocate, and adversarial roles (Canel & Piqué, 1998; Canel, Rodríguez, & Sanchez-Aranda, 1999). The consolidation of the democratic system as well as the increasing commercialization of the media system seemed to have introduced changes in the ideals of journalists in Spain. Indeed, several later studies indicate that the disseminator role has lost some importance over time, giving room to other roles. In their survey of 201 broadcast journalists, Sabarís and Vélez (2003) found that the functions the journalists give more importance to were reporting quickly (93%), entertaining the public (84%), and providing information to make everyday life easier (61%).

In the study of Hanitzsch et al. (2011), the Spanish journalists are found to adopt the Western journalistic culture characterized by journalists' "detachment, non-involvement, providing political information and monitoring the government, as well as providing interesting political news to motivate people to participate in political discussion" (2011, p. 281). In another study, Roses and Farias (2013) found that Spanish journalists identify with the "interpreter/investigative" role more than with the "mobilizer" role. Humanes, Martínez Nicolás, and Saperas (2013) also found that political journalists give high importance to the disseminator role, although combined with other journalistic functions such as interpreting the events and enabling citizens to have informed opinions.

Nevertheless, one similarity between Spanish and other European studies on professional roles is that several of them state the importance of moving to the measurement of the materialization of role ideals in journalistic practice. For example, Humanes, Martínez Nicolás, and Saperas (2013) ask for future studies to measure and understand the gap that exists between role conceptions and role performance, considering the high level of partisanship of the media. In other words, they referred to studying role performance as a necessary step to move forward within journalism studies research.

In Denmark, Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese (2013) conducted a survey among journalists and found that journalists' role ideals have substantial explanatory power in regard to how journalists implement the objectivity norm, at least at the attitudinal level, but that it was relevant to know to what extent that translates into practice.

As Donsbach (2008) notes, journalists' ideals of their roles depend on many factors, including the professional culture of a given country and the individual influences of other journalists. The professional culture is influenced by historical developments in each country, including those in government as well as the economy. For example, Donsbach argues that journalism in the United Kingdom and the U.S. showed similar patterns of historical development because of early press freedom and commercial motivation to reach the widest possible audience, thus resulting in less openly partisan news media and a preference for facts over opinion, whereas in Germany and other European countries the absence of press freedom until the 20th century led to more perceived importance of opinion and an adversarial stance.

No doubt, the professionalization of journalism and the training and socialization of journalists in each country also influenced professional roles, so that even in countries with similar political and media structures, roles can differ considerably. Thus it becomes important

in studying journalists' roles to not only compare these beliefs across countries, but also over time, taking into account historical developments in each country, as well as different media platforms (see Vós, and Mellado & Vós chapters).

The U.S. Impact on the Study of Journalistic Role Conceptions in Non-Western Scholarship

Although most of the studies on role conceptions were produced in the U.S. and Europe, researchers in other regions such as Latin America, Asia, and Africa have started to include journalistic role conceptions in their research agenda.

However, most of them have relied on measurements or conceptual approaches developed in the West because they were already accessible; that is, non-Western studies developed later and thus were evaluated based on what was already known about professional roles research developed in the West.

In other words, journalism studies in non-Western countries, in general, use “foreign” conceptual and methodological models to study professional roles mostly because of the lack of development in the field, and also because of the lack of practical effect of these kinds of studies in countries with media systems characterized by low autonomy, low press freedom, and so on. Most scholars acknowledge the limitations of the Western concepts in their discussions, but a major de-Westernizing change in the conceptualizing and theorizing of professional roles has yet to take place. In fact, studies that compare single country studies (Weaver, 1998; Weaver & Willnat, 2012), or comparative research projects that use the same methodology to compare countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2011) have reinforced the development of a more Western stream of research in other regions of the world.

For example, Herscovitz and Cardoso (1998) found important similarities between Brazilian and American journalists regarding the importance that they both give to the press' interpretive role. Furthermore, Herscovitz (2004) compared Brazilian journalists to American and French journalists as these two journalistic cultures have influenced Brazilian journalism at different points in time. She discusses a “global journalism led by the American model” (p. 71). For the survey instrument, the same items developed in the U.S. were employed (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). However, Herscovitz asked journalists about the importance of their “media roles.” The factor analysis revealed different factors from those in the Weaver studies. Herscovitz (2004, p. 85) argues that the mere replication of survey instruments in cross-national studies faces cultural and technical constraints that prevent generalizations, and that in the view of Brazilian journalists, “the process of absorption of professional norms and values from the United States has taken the form of a caricature.” In other words, while Brazilian journalists perceive themselves as “disseminators and interpreters of information, as prescribed by the American model, survey respondents and journalists who participated in the qualitative part of the study suggested they frequently deliver to their audiences information that lacks verification, accuracy and independence” (Herscovitz, 2004, p. 84).

In a comparative study among journalists of Mexico, Brazil, and Chile, Mellado et al. (2012)—based on the first stage of the Worlds of Journalism Project—tested two competing explanations for the presence of different professional roles in these countries: the dominance

of political structures, levels of press freedom, and the size and concentration of media ownership versus the predominance of political cultures and political parallelism. The results provide some support for the second explanation, although neither of the two fully accounted for the differences between the countries. Specifically, Mellado et al. found that the professional functions of detachment, being a watchdog of the government and business elite, as well as the citizen and the consumer-oriented approach, were considered the most important journalistic ideals among Mexican, Chilean, and Brazilian journalists; however, there were significant differences in the levels of importance given to each function depending on the country.

Ramaprasad (2005) studied Nepalese journalists based on the tradition of the American Journalists series (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). In this study, the questions were framed in a way that they addressed the organizational level: what journalistic roles and traits do Nepalese journalists ascribe to private and government media? In the conclusion, Ramaprasad writes about the limitations of studying journalistic role conceptions (p. 104), asserting that “Nepalese journalists tempered their idealism with realism,” and that “they recognized that their profession and its practice were not free from personal and particular institutional pressures.”

Ramaprasad and Hamdy (2006) surveyed Egyptian journalists and found four main functions among this professional group: “supporting Arab values,” “sustaining democracy,” “supporting the government,” and “providing entertainment.” Similar roles were found by Ramaprasad (2001) and Ramaprasad and Kelly (2003) in previous studies in Tanzania and Nepal.

Pasti, Chernysh, and Svitich (2012) assess modern Russian journalism that has transformed from being a state job during the Soviet era to a market freelance position in the post-Soviet era. Russian media today are directly or indirectly in the hands of the government or government-controlled entities, which negatively affects both the development of the market and the quality of its journalism (p. 267). Pasti et al. present data from a national survey of 800 Russian journalists in 2008. While Pasti et al. (2012, p. 277) did not explicitly refer to role conceptions, the authors assess the perceptions of role performance and reporting methods, finding that Russian journalists are in the midst of a social and political transition, and their values seem to emphasize the need to survive in a highly competitive environment (p. 278).

In a study of Japanese journalists, Oi, Fukuda, and Sako (2012) found that two roles were considered most important: “providing accurate information” and “serving as watchdog of the government,” while seeking social justice was a distant role for them, comparatively. In their study they also recognize that journalistic roles considered important were not necessarily put into practice. For example, although they give high importance to the watchdog role, they do not believe they are successful at “investigating the activities of the government” (p. 57).

In their study of journalists from Egypt and Uganda, Hanitzsch et al. (2011, pp. 281–282) found that “the political appeal of journalism’s watchdog role does not always correlate highly with a skeptical attitude towards the business world,” with results that are similar to the ones they found in other non-Western contexts such as in the case of Chile, Brazil, China, Turkey, Indonesia, and Israel, and even in some Western media systems. These results also reveal that the journalists in Egypt are overall different from the other countries included in the study, which could indicate a “distinctive journalism culture in the Arab world.”

In the latest version of *The Global Journalist* book, Weaver and Willnat (2012) found that the average ranking of the roles that journalists give more importance to around the world differ substantially from that of U.S. journalists who were, for example, more likely to consider the watchdog role as the most important (p. 536). Other important differences were found concerning the disseminator role, the citizen-oriented role, and the entertainment role, especially between Western and non-Western countries, but also within these regions (pp. 536–538).

Meanwhile, in the first wave of the Worlds of Journalism Project, Hanitzsch et al. (2011) interviewed journalists from 18 countries and found that detachment, non-involvement, providing political information, and monitoring the government were the essential journalistic ideals around the globe. Specifically, they found that the importance given to interventionism was not a common characteristic of Western journalism (p. 280).

Such a conclusion hints at the interpretation that roles (e.g., the watchdog role) might be inherently different based on the journalistic culture in which they are practiced. For example, in Chile or in China, the watchdog or the adversarial roles are not the main roles chiefly performed when compared to the U.S. In other words, contextualizing these roles within a media system in which they are practiced can help to understand how the same concepts (e.g., watchdog) can have different implications for actual practices of journalists.

Conceptual and Methodological Limitations in the Study of Journalistic Role Conceptions

There have been both conceptual and methodological limitations in the study of journalistic role conceptions. At the conceptual level, the main problem that such studies have faced overall is a lack of theorization of professional roles as object of study within the journalistic field. Specifically, journalistic role conception has been mostly used as an empirical concept to analyze the functions that journalists give more importance to in society. For example, the different conceptual and operational definitions that the authors give to the word “professional role” varies quite widely, and it is not very clear how they theoretically support them (see introduction).

Some authors suggest that role conceptions in journalism research are much more operationalized than theorized because of the seeming transparency of the concept (Vos, 2005); a tautological term in which everyone agrees upon a common understanding, although without actually theorizing about it (Vos, 2005; Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015). Similarly, roles in journalism have been mostly studied from a normative stance since roles function as patterned behaviors and fixed components that should create stability in organizations and in society in general (Zhu et al., 1997).

The introduction of this book highlights that as the functionalistic definition of role conceptions stresses normative expectations and social consensus, the performance of such a role is mostly taken for granted. One problem with social consensus is that it cannot fully explain action, especially in the context of the journalistic field, where journalists are exposed to different internal and external influences that limit their levels of autonomy (Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011) much more than in other professions (Bourdieu, 2005). Meanwhile, the

interactionism approach suggests that the manifestation of roles is exposed to several internal and external constraints, which could make it difficult to accomplish some roles in specific situations, although “it is through roles that tasks in society are allocated and arrangements made to enforce their performance” (Goffman, 1961, p. 87).

The rationale developed by the interactionism approach actually matches the hierarchy of influences and gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015), which indicate that the organizational and societal level variables overall have much more power than the individual level of the journalist in shaping journalistic practice. One of the explanations for the disconnection between professional roles studies and studies on media production is that although journalists fulfill a role within a larger system, role conceptions have been usually operationalized only at an individual level of analysis (Vos, 2005; Weaver, 2015).

But as interesting as the differences in role conceptions are across countries (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2011), national studies (Hanusch, 2015; Ramaprasad & Kelly, 2003; Pasti, 2005), and across time (Weaver et al., 2007; Weaver & Willnat, 2012), it is unclear whether they make much difference in actual reporting. As pointed out by Blumler and Cushion (2014, p. 259), what is needed is to avoid the problem of “increasing attention to the inner workings of journalistic institutions at the expense of their external ties, impact and significance, including their normative ones.”

One aspect related to the lack of theorization of professional roles is the absence of clarity of the dimensions and elements that comprise this construct. If we review what scholars from other fields such as social psychology or sociology have theorized and empirically found on this matter (Blumer, 1969; Lynch, 2007; Turner, 2006), we can at least distinguish four different concepts in the study of professional roles, which together give a more detailed picture of this object of study: role conception, role perception, perceived role enactment, and role performance (see introduction).

Another limitation is the lack of clarity of the meaning of professional roles at the normative level. While some scholars talk about media roles, others refer to institutional roles, and still others refer to individual role conceptions. Although these three examples are clearly approached at different levels of measurement and analysis, the terms tend to be used interchangeably. For example, Hanitzsch and his collaborators (2011) asked journalists about their roles, and in their questionnaire included the question: “The following list describes some of the things the news media do or try to do. Please tell me on a scale of 1 to 5, how important is each of these things in your work.” Surveyed journalists can answer this question either on an individual level (a thing is very important for me as part of my professional ideology/identity) or on an organizational level (a thing is important because my news media encourage me to accomplish this role) (Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015).

In the same line of thought, most research on role conceptions remains limited to “hard” news, leaving the impression that journalistic professional roles are better adjusted to specific groups of the profession that interact with the power elites, and leaving aside those that inform about other issues or topics (Humanes et al., 2013). The emphasis that the field has put on the linkage between politics and journalism has diminished other areas and elements of journalism that do not belong in this relationship (Zelizer, 2011). Certainly, this has affected the

configuration of professional roles that today are raised at both normative and empirical levels and the way in which they have been studied.

Another limitation of previous studies on journalistic role conceptions deals with global connectivity. The conceptual boundaries of journalism have shifted, suggesting more network space in which journalism occurs (Reese, 2016). This applies above all to a Western context, but may extend beyond that context as some research has shown (Reese, 2016). Based on that rationale, it seems important to think about the digital and global network spaces as this might impact on how journalists conceive their roles and the ways in which those roles are practiced. For many years, journalists have been studied under the umbrella of news organizations. Hierarchy of influences and gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) see individual journalists as embedded within organizational levels of influence over their work and professional attitudes as shown in this chapter. Following this idea, on the social institutional level and the social system level then, journalistic culture is conceptualized as being shaped by the economic, political, and legal system in which journalists operate (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

However, Reese (2016) suggests that emerging networked spaces in which news content is distributed make concepts of fields, spheres, and networks as relevant as concepts of hierarchy of influences. Different configurations of global journalism, for example, make networks outside the organizational structure of the media much more relevant than in the pre-digital age. Hence, while we propose to shift the focus from an evaluative level (what the journalists think about their roles) to the overall concept of professional roles (which as we have seen involves ideals but also practices and behavior), studying professional roles between different cultures also requires taking into account the shifting media environment that has made new concepts, such as networks, important forces that impact professional roles and their practice.

Finally, and as it is evident from the studies outlined above, most that has been written on journalistic roles during the last decades has been about the Western world, which has been an important limitation of this stream of research (Josephi, 2005; Mellado, 2015). As Waisbord (2013) emphasizes, professionalism should not be narrowly linked with normative ideals as they have been historically developed in the West.

In methodological terms, one important issue to address as a limitation is the parallels between “ideal types” of roles and the way in which journalists perform their ideal roles. Although at the normative level it is possible to talk about ideal types of roles in journalism, in practice this becomes different, since professional roles at all stages (conception, perception, perceived enactment, and performance) are not mutually exclusive and can overlap in practice.

Another important methodological problem that research on role conceptions faces has to do with the quality of measurements. First, from a quantitative point of view, not all studies on role conceptions have actually tested their scales to measure dimensions of journalistic roles through appropriate statistical procedures. For example—and just to mention some of the major comparative available studies—while Weaver and Donsbach studies did use Exploratory Factor Analysis in their studies, Hanitzsch studies did not use it. The use of Confirmatory Factor Analysis, and specially the testing of Factorial Invariance to know to what extent comparisons are possible among countries has been almost absent, so the watchdog role might have other dimensions in the case of Chile than it has in the case of

Denmark. This aspect should be urgently taken into consideration for future studies. For example, in some countries the dimension of investigative reporting as part of the watchdog function is more important when journalists have access to documents, whereas in countries in which this is harder to achieve, the watchdog function's main defining characteristic might be the fact that journalists question business and political elites. In other words, not all dimensions that make up a particular role can be considered as the same (dimensional structure) in all organizational, political, and cultural contexts.

In this regard, we also need more qualitative studies to understand how these dimensions are qualitatively different in media systems in countries as diverse as the Philippines or Nigeria. In addition, we need more ethnographic research to close the gap between conception and performance to study the transitional process between conceiving and perceiving a role, and the actual task and relevance that is given to a role in a particular context. By studying the context, we can understand the structures and the system in which these journalists work, as well as how power over content is negotiated within these structures. We believe that mixed-methods designs can also be beneficial in understanding the differences between countries. As dealing with known and unknown variables remains a challenge for every empirical inquiry, combining qualitative tools of causal inference with quantitative data analysis (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012) could be useful, for example, in knowing which characteristics are more important for a watchdog role.

In addition, in most studies on role conceptions, the operational definition of statements that represent role conceptions are in the form of abstract statements that journalists should rate by indicating the extent to which these are important for them, more than specific practices that may be easier to understand for journalists when they think about their functions in society. Of course, what it means, for example, "to be a detached observer" for an Indian journalist, does not necessarily mean the same for a U.S. one. The same may happen among colleagues from the same newsroom. This problem should be addressed by studies that analyze the gap between role ideals and role performance.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we revisited the study of journalistic role conceptions over time and across cultures. What we found most relevant is the heterogeneity of concepts and definitions that exists not only between non-Western and Western countries and journalism scholars, but also within Western contexts, such as the differences we found between Germany, Spain, and the U.S. and the ways in which the study of professional roles is approached.

For example, while in the U.S., role conceptions studies focus on the individual conceptions of journalists rather than asking journalists about the roles of the media organizations they work for, in Germany role ideals mediate the expectations of the media system and the audience.

Because scholarship in journalism pays much attention to the importance of the evaluative component at the expense of other levels of journalistic culture, in this chapter we documented some of the criticism of such approaches, especially the lack of theorization on the construct of role performance, the lack of clarity of the meaning of professional roles at the normative

level, the Western focus of role conception studies as an object of study, and methodological issues (which are mainly related to the quality of measurements), as well as the implications of scholarly research based on these issues.

Indeed, one important aspect that needs to be taken into account is that journalism researchers have often focused on Western countries at the expense of other regions, most notably Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. But that statement of the problem remains on the surface. What may stand behind it is the lack of journalism scholars or low numbers of journalism scholars that conduct research in those countries on journalistic role conceptions, as it is not as developed as a form of scholarly activity as it is, for example, in the U.S. or Germany.

Furthermore, while comparative research has clearly gained currency in the field of journalism studies (Hanitzsch et al., 2012, p. 473) caution is necessary to understand whether that means the field is truly becoming more global, or, whether Western concepts are exported to non-Western research inquiries that cannot fully grasp the complexity of non-Western media systems. In other words, it may well be that even though we see more studies conducted in non-Western contexts, without considering the local journalistic contexts the field is not necessarily becoming more globalized but rather more attuned to the Western concept of studying journalistic roles.

Along this line, one important aspect that future studies on journalistic role conceptions will need to address is how to compare cultures using the same dimensions. This discussion has to do with quality of measurements discussed in a previous section of this chapter.

As we have highlighted, one important consequence of a digital and global media environment is the fact that the conceptual boundaries of journalism have shifted, suggesting more of a network space or network spaces in which journalism occurs (Reese, 2016). So studies that move from the study of journalistic role conception alone to an overall conceptualization of professional roles in journalism—as different chapters of this book discuss—will enhance research approaches to grasp the diversity and heterogeneity of the culture of journalism in a digital environment.

No doubt there is a need to move forward in the study of journalistic culture in a more holistic way. That assertion is not intended to exclude the study of professional roles from an evaluative perspective; however, what we believe is that although journalistic role conception research has been a crucial piece for the study of professionalism within the journalistic field, across different kinds of news media and different societies, this gap between rhetoric and practice documented by media studies as well as recent studies on journalistic role performance, is a warning against studying only normative ideals of journalism as a way of understanding journalistic reality.

Therefore, we argue that there is an urgent need to develop original methodological approaches (e.g., combining different methodologies or different techniques within the same methodological approach), and to identify differences and similarities through collaborative and social system comparisons able to overcome many of the shortcomings discussed here.

It is also important to keep in mind that journalism is highly dependent on specific cultural and societal contexts, and that in some places, specific roles may be much more relevant and

coherent than others. Because of that, professional roles in journalism should not be seen as universal standards but rather as beliefs that journalists may hold or not about their work, depending on different network spaces, as well as societal and cultural settings.

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