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BETWEEN RHETORIC AND PRACTICE

Explaining the gap between role conception and performance in journalism

Claudia Mellado and Arjen Van Dalen

A large body of research in journalism studies has analyzed which social and political roles news professionals consider they must fulfill in society. These studies are based on the assumption that role conception influences news content. However, the gap between ideals and practice is inevitable, since the constraint to which journalists are exposed limits the possibility of living up to their normative standards. While recent studies have addressed the relationship between ideals and practice by studying whether journalists with different roles report differently, we know less about the gap between the two. By comparing the role conception of journalists with the news stories they produce, we address the (dis)connection between roles and content as a gap, analyzing which roles render a larger distance and also which journalists are more likely to put their ideals into practice. The findings show a significant gap between role conception and performance, particularly for the service, civic and watchdog roles. Greater perceived autonomy leads to a smaller gap, while economic and political influences as well as belonging to a beat increase the gap. Likewise, the gap varies significantly between journalists working at the quality and the popular press.

KEYWORDS autonomy; content analysis; journalism; journalists; role conceptions; role performance; survey

Introduction

Professional role conception is one of the key concepts in the study of journalism's role in society. Researchers around the globe have conducted surveys among journalists to understand how they see their political and societal role (e.g. Donsbach 2008; Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Weaver and Willnat 2012). Dating back to the work of Cohen (1963) and Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1976), the concept has received a central position in journalism research, as can be seen from conceptual discussions (Vos 2005; Mellado 2013), standardized questionnaires (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Weaver and Willnat 2012) and scholarly debates (Mancini 2000; Graber 2003; Josephi 2005). The study of professional role conceptions has provided valuable insight into journalistic professionalization as well as the analysis of cross-national differences in the way journalists see their democratic function. However, since roles have been mainly studied in isolation from the content, several scholars have urged more attention to the connection between the way journalists see their role and the way they perform their duty in practice (Shoemaker and Reese 1996; Vos 2002; Waisbord 2013).

Whether and how role conceptions and practice are connected is a matter of debate. On the one hand, several scholars argue that role conceptions are related to

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content (Donsbach 2008; Van Dalen, de Vreese, and Albæk 2012). Their assumption is mostly based on psychological studies which have shown a solid relationship between attitudes and behavior (Kim and Hunter 1993). On the other hand, scholars have argued that a disconnect between theory and practice within the journalistic field is inevitable since news professionals are exposed to different levels of influence when reporting news stories (Shoemaker and Reese 1996; Vos 2005; Preston 2009). Empirical studies have shown inconclusive evidence, with results depending on the conceptualization of the roles, as well as the method of study. While some research has shown a significant connection between role conceptions and performance—mostly quasi-experiments (Starck and Soloski 1977; Patterson and Donsbagh 1996)—other studies, which link survey and content analysis, have shown only a weak or no relationship between both aspects (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Vos 2002; Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2012).

The different answers to the question of whether roles and content are related or not may partly be due to differences in the conceptualization of the ideal–practice connection. Some studies focus on the link as a *relation* (for example, studying whether journalists who adhere more to a watchdog model are more likely to be critical about the government). Meanwhile, others address the connection of roles and content by focusing on the *gap* (assessing to which extent do journalists live up to their ideals). Depending on which of the two conceptualizations is chosen, different conclusions may be drawn. For example, Scholl and Weischenberg (1998) found that although there was a large gap between the role conception of “explaining complex issues” and the extent to which German journalists put this ideal into practice, both aspects were significantly correlated.

Recent studies have addressed the connection of journalistic ideals and practice by studying the relation (see Vos 2005; Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2012; Van Dalen, de Vreese, and Albæk 2012). Nevertheless, we know less about the gap between role conception and performance. While the need for this type of analysis has been highlighted (Weaver and Willnat 2012), it is still not common in this area of research.

With the goal of undertaking this challenge, this paper studies the (dis)connection between roles conception and performance as a gap, focusing on how big the gap is, for which roles the gap is bigger, and which journalists are most likely to put their ideals into practice. This paper is not the first to address such questions, but while previous studies have studied the perceived gap (e.g. Scholl and Weischenberg 1998; Oi, Fukuda, and Sako 2012), this paper addresses the actual gap. The empirical analysis includes an integrated survey among 75 Chilean journalists and a content analysis of the news stories they wrote ($N = 628$), based on standardized measurements.

Studying this gap is more than a mere academic exercise. First, it connects the level of the individual journalist to the institutional level of the journalistic field (Shoemaker and Vos 2009), allowing us to move from the concept of role enactment (Coyne, 1984; Vos 2002) to the concept of *role performance* (Burke and Reitzes 1981). Role performance can be understood as a journalistic collective outcome, inevitably affected by different internal and external restrictions, as well as the journalists’ work (Mellado 2013). Second, it allows us to understand news practice through the lens of professional role conceptions, giving us a real sense of how the rhetorics of roles equates to news content. Third, the study can also shed some light on the research of journalistic freedom. While most studies have analyzed the freedom of journalists in making news decisions by measuring perceived autonomy (Mellado and Humanes 2012; Reich and Hanitzsch 2013), we think that studying the ideal–practice gap can be a new approach to examining freedom in a more concrete way.

In a broader perspective, the paper deals with the role of the news media in democracy. The study of the gap between role conception and performance gives insight into the way journalists see their political and societal role and how the media fulfill this role in practice. The potential gap between roles and practice can be seen as a limitation to journalistic autonomy, which has been described as a challenge to democracy (Roland 2009, 267).

As a basis for our analysis, we combine insight from journalistic professional role research with news content studies and the hierarchy-of-influences approach to news production.

Professional Roles: From Conception to Performance

Journalistic role conceptions can be defined as the journalists' own formulation of how they ought to do their work (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Hanitzsch, 2007). The role conception forms a bridge between journalism as an institution, on the one hand, and the individual journalist, on the other hand (Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2012). The normative element in the way journalistic roles are understood becomes apparent in several studies which refer to these roles as "ideologies" or "value orientations" (for an overview, see Vos 2005), rather than a description of the journalistic role performance (i.e. actual practice).

The different roles to which journalists can adhere are manifold (see Hanitzsch 2007; Donsbach 2008; Weaver and Willnat 2012). This study focuses on six professional roles which are well suited to analyzing the link between role conceptions and performance (Rosen 1996; Eide and Knight 1999; Sparrow 1999; Waisbord 2000; Donsbach and Patterson 2004). With the objective of expanding the scope of research on professional roles by including the dimension of performance, Mellado (2013) conceptually connects characteristics of different professional role ideals that have been theoretically and empirically validated in comparative contexts, with specific journalistic styles and narrative schemas largely analyzed by the study of news content. Specifically, Mellado (2013, 7–10) operationalized six models of professional role performance—disseminator–interventionist, loyal, watchdog, civic, service and infotainment—based on the relationship journalism has with those in power, the journalists' levels of implication in a story, as well as the way journalism approaches the audience (Eide and Knight 1999; Marr et al. 2001; Hanitzsch, 2007; Donsbach 2008).

The disseminator–interventionist model takes the ideals of the disseminator role of journalism, giving importance to the distance between the journalist and the facts. In that line, the less a news story includes journalist's opinions, judgment values, interpretations, proposals, as well as the use of adjectives and first person, the closer it is to the disseminator model of journalism. In turn, the more a news item includes these characteristics, the more it can be regarded as interventionist. These two ways of narrative logic form a unidimensional structure, where a greater level of participation by the journalist entails lower levels of dissemination and vice versa (Mellado 2013).

The watchdog model takes the ideals of the watchdog role of journalism, seeking to hold the *de facto* power accountable. The performance of this journalism model includes questioning, criticism and/or accusations against those in power, conflict between the journalists and those in power, coverage of trials and processes, and the presence of investigative reporting or extensive coverage of external research on official matters.

The loyal-facilitator model takes the ideals of the propagandist, lapdog or “guard dog” roles of journalism. It materializes in two ways. In its first variant, journalism cooperates with those in power, and protects the status quo. In that way, the news stories support institutional activities, promote national policies and provide a positive image of political power. In its second variant, it moves the focus from the *de facto* powers to the nation-state unit, encouraging the sense of belonging to one’s country and strengthening national prestige. Journalists who subscribe to this model emphasize the country’s progress and/or success, compare the country/region to the rest of the world, give relevance to nationals’ triumphs, promote the country and include patriotic elements within the news story.

The service journalism model resembles the function of providing the public with information that is most interesting for them by approaching them as clients. The performance of this journalism model includes the focus given on the impact that certain facts or events have on people’s everyday life, the presence of tips and advice to manage problems, and also, the inclusion of consumer advice within a news story.

The infotainment journalism model is connected to the role of entertainment, addressing the public as spectators. When this model is present, elements of personalization, private life, scandals, sensationalism, emotions and morbidity are present in the news product.

Finally, the civic model of journalism is concerned with educating the ordinary citizen on complex and controversial topics, encouraging the public to get involved in public debate and to participate in social, political and cultural activities. The performance of this model includes the citizens’ perspective, demands and questions, background information, information on citizen activities, education on duties and rights, local impact of political decisions, as well as credibility of the public messages.

We base our selection of professional role dimensions on this analytical framework to analyze the gap between ideals and practice.

The Ideal–Practice Gap

The ideals expressed in the role conceptions of journalists are a central factor of their professional identity (Deuze 2005). By referring to their ideals and values, journalists legitimize their work and distinguish themselves from non-professionals.

Organizational studies have shown that identity and behavioral intentions are related, and that they can be seen as two sides of the same question: “‘Who am I?’ and—by implication—‘how should I act?’” (Cerulo 1997, in Alvesson Ashcraft, and Thomas 2008, 5). Since professional identities are largely formed on the job, they become a natural way of doing things.

However, professional ideals almost inevitably lead to what Preston (2009, 45) calls “tensions between holding these values in the abstract and applying them in practice”. These tensions, or discrepancies, are due to the different levels of specificity between ideals and practice. While role conceptions apply at an abstract level, role performance deals with the concrete decisions and style of the journalists. Accordingly, a theory–practice gap has been observed in other professions. Maben, Latter, and Clark (2006), for example, show how organizational factors (like time pressures and role constraints) and other factors (such as covert rules, or lack of support) “sabotage the implementation of ideals” for nurses starting their professional life.

Similarly, journalists are also exposed to different constraints when reporting the news. The match between roles and content is subject to economic and organizational pressures, and the social and political system in which journalists operate (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). Different theoretical models have been developed to structure and link the different levels of influence on journalism, of which the individual journalist and his or her role perceptions are only one factor (Shoemaker and Reese 1996; Preston 2009). From within the news organization, commercial pressures may limit the time for journalists to do their work (Sigelman 1973). From outside the news organization, reference groups, sources, advertisers, politicians and cultural values may limit the freedom of journalists to live up to their roles (Mellado and Humanes 2012). At the individual level of the journalist, psychological factors (Donsbach 2004) can also influence news decisions. Combined, these factors are likely to create a gap between journalistic ideals and practice.

Several scholars have argued that the gap between journalistic roles and content is particularly strong in countries where the social and political structures do not allow the “Western” model of professional journalism to work (Mancini 2000, 276; Josephi 2005; Oi, Fukuda, and Sako 2012). At the same time, empirical studies have shown a gap between ideals and practice (Scholl and Weischenberg 1998; Pihl-Tingvad 2012; Skovsgaard et al. 2012; Strömbäck, Karlsson, and Hopmann 2012), in particular due to commercial pressures (Preston 2009, 45). Although we have to take into account that these studies have only examined the perceived gap between roles and practice, we can also expect to find a significant gap when comparing role conceptions and real practice. Therefore our first hypothesis is:

H1: There is a significant gap between journalistic role conceptions and performance.

Explanations for the Conception–Performance Gap

Previous research looking into the difference between ideals and practice showed that some role conceptions are easier to put into practice than others. Oi, Fukuda, and Sako (2012) found that Japanese journalists perceive a small gap between role conceptions and performance for the disseminator role, but at the same time perceive a wider gap between the ideal of being watchdog and the perceived possibility of putting this role into practice. Likewise, Danish journalists perceive a large gap for acting as a watchdog (Pihl-Tingvad 2012).

A larger gap for the watchdog role than for other roles can be explained by the external factors putting pressure on the journalist. While owners or advertisers might not have any problem with journalists putting their loyalty ideal into practice, they will object when the intentions of the individual journalists go against their interests and become too critical.

This might not only be the case for the watchdog, but also for the civic-oriented role. In a study comparing ideal news selection criteria and perceived real selection criteria, Strömbäck, Karlsson, and Hopmann (2012) found that the normative importance attached to events that increase people’s awareness of problems in society largely exceeds the actual importance. Our second hypothesis is therefore stated as follows:

H2: The role conception–performance gap is larger for the watchdog and civic-oriented roles than for the loyal, service, infotainment and disseminator roles.

We expect that the gap between saying and doing does not only depend on the type of role, but also on the individual journalist, particularly on their level of perceived autonomy. Autonomy has been defined as “the latitude for journalists to do their work” (Weaver et al. 2007, 70). Previous research has shown that different factors at the level of the news organization and the individual journalist influence the journalist’s perceived autonomy (Weaver et al. 2007; Mellado and Humanes 2012; Reich and Hanitzsch 2013). We expect that these factors will be related to the conception–performance gap, since professional journalists need this autonomy to exercise independent decisions in doing their work.

Starting at the level of the news organization, we expect that the gap varies between journalists working at quality and those at the popular press due to the different journalistic styles of the two types of news media (Stromback and Van Aelst 2010). The match between the views of the individual journalists and the organization where they work is an important factor influencing the level of autonomy. By asking journalists about the possibility of putting their ideals into practice, Preston (2009, 47) concluded that “it appears that professional values are applied selectively according to particular media contexts or type of medium.” The editorial profiles of the popular press have historically been linked to some professional views, such as the infotainment role, while the editorial profile of the quality press would be more in line with role conceptions closer to the “public interest” (Beam 2003). Therefore, tabloid journalists can be expected to have a smaller gap between ideals and practice than the quality press for some roles, but a larger gap for others.

Skovsgaard et al. (2012) found differences in perceived gap between ideals and practice in news selection for tabloid and broadsheet journalists, but no consistent pattern. Instead of posing a directional hypothesis, we only test for a relation between media orientation and the conception–performance gap.

H3: Media orientation (quality versus popular press) has a significant effect on the gap between role conception and performance.

Based on previous studies about perceived autonomy, we expect that journalists belonging to a beat will have a smaller ideal–practice gap than journalists who do not. Due to cost-effectiveness and an elite status within the profession (Reich 2012), beat journalists experience more freedom to frame stories and less pressure than other journalists. Studies among American (Weaver et al. 2007) and Chilean journalists (Mellado and Humanes 2012) showed that journalists covering a particular beat perceived more autonomy.

H4: The gap between role conception and performance is smaller for journalists covering a beat than for journalists who do not cover a beat.

Several studies have shown that perceived influences from external and internal restrictions impose limits to the independence of journalists, and thus the possibility of putting their ideals into practice. Preston (2009, 45) concludes that “even though most journalists regard these professional values as important, many acknowledge that external factors (such as ownership, commercial or competitive pressures) made them difficult to apply in every day practice.” Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos (2012) found a negative influence of routines on the enactment of the mobilizer and adversarial role, but a positive relation with the disseminator role. Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) found a positive relation between professional influence and autonomy and argue that professional influences such as newsroom conventions might protect the journalists from unwanted influences from

outside the newsroom. Meanwhile, Mellado and Humanes (2012) found a negative relationship between pressure from superiors, owners, politicians, government officials, business and public relations in general and perceived autonomy. Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) identify six dimensions of influences on the work of journalists: political, economic, organizational, professional, procedural influences and influences from reference groups. Based on research which linked these factors to perceived autonomy, we expect that the gap between role conception and performance is related to different dimensions of influences, as well as to perceived autonomy itself.

H5: The gap between role conception and performance is positively related to perceived organizational, political, economic, group references and procedural influences on journalists' work and negatively related to perceived autonomy and professional influences.

Finally, we test whether personal background characteristics of the journalists (gender, education, age, experience and political leaning) have an influence on the gap between ideals and practice. Since most of the research has looked into these factors as possible determinants of role conception rather than journalistic autonomy (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013, 138), we pose an open research question rather than a hypothesis.

RQ1: Do personal and background characteristics have a significant effect on the gap between role conception and performance?

Method

To address our hypotheses and research question, we followed a two-stage research design.

First, we measured role performance. We conducted a content analysis of news stories written by Chilean journalists in 2010 and 2011, based on standardized operationalizations of the disseminator, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, civic-oriented and consumer-oriented journalism models introduced in previous sections. In a second step, we measured role conceptions. Specifically, we surveyed the journalists who had written at least five stories from our news sample, through a Web-based survey.

Chile is an interesting case to study the gap and its conditionalities due to the different political, economic and social changes that have influenced both the country and journalism since the beginning of the 1990s. Following 17 years of dictatorship, the country has been transforming from a somewhat strict political control to a more liberal model affected by growing commercialization and competition. On the other hand, the country presents high levels of political parallelism—where media, political parties and economic powers are closely linked—as well as the highest concentration rates in media ownership in the Latin American region (Mellado 2012). These two factors have been strongly associated with low levels of pluralism in the news, and the journalists' loss of power as independent professionals (Leon-Dermota 2003). Therefore, the political and commercial pressures, which are present in Chilean journalism, can lead to a gap between ideals and practice (Mancini 2000; Preston 2009).

In the following, we explain the sampling procedures, measures and data collection for the content analysis and the survey, as well as the way in which we link role conception to performance at the individual level.

Content Analysis

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of the Chilean national press from 2010 and 2011. All five general-interest Chilean printed media outlets with national circulation were content-analyzed: *El Mercurio*, *La Tercera*, *Las Últimas Noticias*, *La Cuarta* and *La Nación*.¹

Through the constructed-week method, a stratified-systematic sample of each newspaper was selected. Specifically, two constructed news weeks were sampled per newspaper, per year.

The unit of analysis was the news item. A news item was understood as the group of continuous verbal and visual elements that refer to the same topic. All signed news items associated with the national desk were coded ($N = 1736$).

Four independent coders were trained in the application of a common codebook containing operational definitions for each variable (see Appendix A). The coding was done manually between January and June 2012. Based on Krippendorff's alpha formula, overall inter-coder reliability between coders was 0.79. Reliability scores ranged from 0.72 (for background information) to 0.92 (for sensationalism), with the exception of interpretation ($K\alpha = 0.68$).

The coding manual included several indicators that were meant to measure each of the six role performance models included in this study (see Appendix A). Each indicator was coded on a presence (1)–absence (0) basis. For each one of these indicators, we coded for manifest rather than latent meaning content. We used five items to measure the disseminator model ($\alpha = 0.76$), eight items for the watchdog model ($\alpha = 0.81$), nine items for the loyal model ($\alpha = 0.70$), three items for the service model ($\alpha = 0.73$), five items for the infotainment model ($\alpha = 0.86$) and six items for the civic-oriented model ($\alpha = 0.76$). The Kuder-Richarson 20 method for dichotomous data shows acceptable internal reliability in each case. Also, previous exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses provided strong support for the selection of the items (Mellado and Van Dalen 2013).

Survey

An online survey was conducted between August and October of 2012 with journalists ($N = 187$) who had at least five articles represented in the news sample. The survey measured the perception that these journalists had about their professional roles, as well as their levels of autonomy, perceived level of influence, as well as some personal, work-related and organizational characteristics of the media to which they belong.

We emailed the journalists an invitation to participate in the study as well as the link to access the survey. After three weeks we sent a first follow-up e-mail to those who had not completed the questionnaire. After four follow-up reminders, 75 journalists completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 40.1 percent.² From the 75 journalists in our sample, we analyzed a total of 628 news articles.

With the objective of controlling non-response error, gender and the type of newspaper to which the journalist who answered the survey belong, were checked against those who did not reply. According to the analysis, respondents and non-respondents were homogeneous, with no significant differences among the groups in any of the two cases.

The set of scales used to measure role conceptions was drawn following past journalists' surveys conducted in Chile (Mellado 2012). Specifically, the questionnaire included 22 statements regarding the importance of different media functions for them.

Respondents were asked to rate each of them, on a five-point scale, where 1 corresponded to “not important at all” and 5 corresponded to “extremely important” (see Appendix A).

Two items were asked to match the service role ($\alpha = 0.64$), four items for the watchdog role ($\alpha = 0.85$), six items for the loyal role ($\alpha = 0.86$), two items for the infotainment (spectator-oriented) role ($\alpha = 0.62$) and six items for the citizen-oriented role ($\alpha = 0.79$). In the case of the disseminator role, two items were asked to the journalists: “to be a detached observer” and “to be a passive and indifferent observer”. Nevertheless, Cronbach’s alpha (0.21) and bivariate correlations ($r = 0.15$) for these two questions were below acceptable levels. In addition, “to be a passive and indifferent observer” does not show significant variation across several relevant independent variables used in this study. Therefore, we decided to only use the first item to measure the disseminator role, since that item shows more variations across independent variables.³

To access perceived levels of influence on news work, we asked journalists to indicate how important they felt that 29 different influences were in their work, on a five-point scale. According to the six-dimensional scale used by Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011), the scores for each item were then averaged and converted into six indexes of perceived influences: political influences ($\alpha = 0.84$, mean = 2.47, SD = 0.915); economic influences ($\alpha = 0.90$, mean = 2.64, SD = 1.10); organizational influences ($\alpha = 0.81$, mean = 3.40, SD = 0.900); professional influences ($\alpha = 0.67$, mean = 2.49, SD = 0.654); procedural influences ($\alpha = 0.69$, mean = 3.76, SD = 0.786) and reference group influences ($\alpha = 0.61$, mean = 2.76, SD = 0.786).

To measure perceived professional autonomy, the questionnaire included four items related to level of freedom in making news decisions on a five-point scale, where 1 is never and 5 is always. The four items were later converted into an index of perceived professional autonomy ($\alpha = 0.73$).

Journalists were also asked if they have a specific news beat (59.5 percent), as well as their years of professional experience (mean = 9.89, SD = 7.7). The journalists’ education level was measured by estimates of completed years of schooling (mean = 16.2, SD = 0.842). With regard to political orientation, respondents were asked to place their political leaning on a seven-point scale where 1 was left, 7 was right and 4 was center (mean = 2.94, SD = 1.05). In addition, sex (57.3 percent men) and age (mean = 33, SD = 7.3) were also considered in the analysis.

We also collected some organizational variables related to the five newspapers to which the journalists belong. Media orientation was measured as quality (65 percent) and popular press (35 percent). Media size was measured in terms of the number of journalists who work in each news organization (mean = 170, SD = 143.5). Reliance on advertising indicates the news organization’s percentage of revenue that is derived from advertising (mean = 62.5, SD = 31.1). Ownership was measured on a categorical scale with “chain-owned” (84 percent) and state-owned (16 percent). Finally, readership was calculated averaging the number of readers of each newspaper Monday through Sunday (mean = 349,062.7, SD = 154,939.6). These organizational-level variables were included as controls in our regression analysis.

Analytical Strategy

In order to analyze the match between the journalist’s role conceptions and his/her role performance, we first calculated the average score of each journalist from his/her articles for each journalism model. For instance, a journalist who showed presence of three of the six

indicators of the civic model on each of his/her news articles got a role performance score equal to 0.50. Likewise, a journalist who showed presence of all indicators of the infotainment model in each of his/her news articles got a role performance score equal to 1.0, and so on. In case of the disseminator–interventionist dimension, the items were recoded so that higher values expressed more presence of the disseminator model.

Second, we calculated the average score of each journalist from his/her answers to the survey questions representing each role. Considering that the scale we used to measure role performance was different from the scale we used to measure role conception, we decided to transform our data. Using a simple proportional transformation procedure, the average scores for role conception ranging from 1 to 5 were recoded to range from 0 to 1. For descriptive purposes, we report absolute differences, subtracting the role performance average scores from the role conception average scores from each role for each journalist. To test our hypotheses, and since all journalism model variables were highly skewed, we used standardized z-scores of the role conception and role performance dimensions separately when calculating the gap between both.

Results

How Big is the Gap Between Ideals and Practice?

In order to test if there is a significant gap between journalistic role conceptions and performance (H1), as well as the size of the gap for different roles (H2), we used a paired samples *t*-test. Specifically, we predicted that the ideal–practice gap would be larger for watchdog and civic-oriented than for the loyal, service, infotainment and disseminator roles.

The results mostly support our expectations. [Table 1](#) shows a significant gap between the journalists' conceptions and how they put them into practice for each of the six roles analyzed.

With the exception of the disseminator role, all roles are overall performed less than journalists would like. In addition, preliminary analysis only showed a significant relation between conception and performance in the case of the infotainment model, although the correlation failed to be substantial (Spearman's $Rho = 0.26, p < 0.05$).

In line with H2, the gap between role conception and performance is significantly larger for the watchdog than for the loyal ($t = 8.593, df = 72, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.106$), the infotainment ($t = 3.325, df = 72, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.044$) and the disseminator roles ($t = 4.536, df = 72, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.059$), and also significantly larger for the civic than for the loyal ($t = 10.259, df = 70, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.127$), the infotainment ($t = 3.918, df = 70, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.053$) and the disseminator roles ($t = 5.864, df = 70, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.087$). Nevertheless, H2 is only partly supported. Contrary to what was expected, the gap turned out to be larger for the service role than for the citizen ($t = 4.442, df = 70, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.059$) and the watchdog roles ($t = 3.509, df = 72, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.046$).

Overall, the size of the effect was large for the gap between the civic and the watchdog and the loyal role, moderate for the gap between the civic and the disseminator role, and only small for the rest of the role differences.

Explaining the Gap

To test which factors explain the gap between role conceptions and performance, we used multiple linear regression analysis, testing the influence of 15 independent

TABLE 1

Role conception, role performance and the gap between ideals and practice

	Watchdog	Service	Infotainment	Civic-oriented	Loyal	Disseminator
Role conception	0.549 (0.276)	0.710 (0.205)	0.517 (0.244)	0.600 (0.176)	0.200 (0.185)	0.587 (0.262)
Role performance	0.036 (0.42)	0.053 (0.078)	0.146 (0.148)	0.075 (0.078)	0.020 (0.025)	0.723 (0.164)
Difference between role performance and conception	0.5131*** (0.277)	0.6571*** (0.203)	0.3705*** (0.253)	0.5248*** (0.185)	0.1797*** (0.186)	-0.1360*** (0.326)
<i>N</i> (minimum)	73	75	73	71	75	75

Values are mean scores with standard deviations in parentheses. Role conception scores are based on a simple proportional transformation procedure.

*** $p < 0.001$ comparing role conception and performance (paired samples *t*-test).

variables—personal, work and organizational characteristics—on each dependent variable separately. Table 2 shows the reanalysis after non-significant predictors for each dependent variable were eliminated from each model.

H3 predicted that working for quality or popular newspapers has a significant effect on the conception–performance gap. The results supported our expectations for the gap between two of the six roles. The analysis showed that journalists who work in the quality press tend to have a larger gap for both the disseminator role (mean = 0.05, SD = –0.222 for popular press; mean = 0.23, SD = 0.332 for quality press) and for the service role (mean = 0.63, SD = 0.20 for popular press; mean = 0.67, SD = 0.169 for quality press). Specifically, journalists working in the quality press perform the disseminator role more than they want to, while they perform the service role much less than they would like to. In the case of the disseminator role gap, media orientation alone accounted for 15.6 percent of the variance. For the other four conception–performance gaps, media orientation does not have a significant effect.

In the fourth hypothesis, we predicted the gap between role conception and performance to be smaller for beat journalists than for those who work in different types of news. The results did not support our expectations. Differently from what we expected, beat journalists are more likely to have a bigger conception–performance gap in the case of the watchdog (mean = 0.59, SD = 0.217 for beat journalists; mean = 0.47, SD = 0.298 for no beat journalists) and the loyal role (mean = 0.21, SD = 0.150 for beat journalists; mean = 0.15, SD = 0.205 for no beat journalists), performing both roles less than they would like to. In the other four roles, belonging to a beat did not have a significant effect.

Because beat journalists cover the *de facto* powers (politics, economy, beats) they are really committed to being critical. Nevertheless, they might feel more pressure from the political and economic power, as well as from their own news organization, leading to self-censorship and, therefore, a bigger gap. Regarding the loyal role, even though the gap between roles and content differs for beat and non-beat journalists, both conception as well as performance are (considerably) less present as compared to the rest of the models.

The fifth and last hypothesis assumed that the ideal–practice gap would be negatively related to perceived autonomy and professional influences, while positively related to the other influences on journalists' work. The results support our expectations in three of the six models. Nevertheless, group references and procedural influences do not explain the gap in any of the six roles.

Journalists who perceived a higher level of autonomy tend to show a smaller gap for the infotainment and civic role. Also, a smaller gap in the case of the service role is most likely to be found among journalists who feel more professional influences. In turn, journalists who perceived higher economic influences are more likely to show a bigger gap for the watchdog, civic and infotainment roles—performing the watchdog and the civic roles less than they want to, and the infotainment role more than they would like to. Likewise, journalists who feel more political and organizational influences tend to have a bigger gap in the watchdog role, performing that role less than they would like to (see Table 2).

Finally, we wanted to know if age, gender, years of education and political leaning influence the ideal–performance gap of Chilean newspapers journalists. The analysis revealed that, in general, the impact of personal characteristics is not too relevant, and that only gender and years of education have a significant effect on the role–performance gap. In the case of the civic-oriented role, men (mean = 0.48, SD = 0.174) tend to have a smaller gap than women (mean = 0.58, SD = 0.187). In the case of the loyal role, journalists with more years of education tend to have a bigger gap, performing that role less than they want to.

TABLE 2

Factors explaining the gap between ideals and practice (standardized regression coefficients)

Predictors	Watchdog	Service	Infotainment	Civic-oriented	Loyal	Disseminator
Personal characteristics						
Gender (male)				-0.246*		
Education level					0.326**	
Work-related characteristics						
Beat (yes)	0.221*				0.270**	
Perceived economic influences	0.421**		0.254**	0.293***		
Perceived political influences	0.232*					
Perceived organizational influences	0.271*					
Perceived professional influences		-0.255*				
Level of autonomy			-0.225**	-0.389***		
Media outlet characteristics						
Media orientation (quality press)		0.161*				0.464***
Adjusted R^2	0.135	0.095	0.114	0.128	0.174	0.157

The variable reliance on advertising, group references, procedural influences, media size, age and political leaning were excluded from the final analysis since they were not significant for any of the models.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, for one tail.

Discussion

Based on standardized measures of role conception and role performance, this paper addressed the (dis)connection between rhetoric and practice as a gap, studying which roles showed the largest disconnection and which journalists were most likely to put their ideals into practice.

These findings showed that there is a significant gap between journalistic role conceptions and role performance. This gap is particularly large for the watchdog and civic-oriented roles, which are the two roles more closely related to the professional ideal of the press as an autonomous fourth estate. The finding that Chilean journalists are not the democratic watchdogs they would like to be is in line with research in other Latin American countries (Waisbord 2000) and in the Western world. Although the fourth estate watchdog role of the press has been a defining feature of journalistic ideology worldwide since the 1970s, in practice the press often reflects rather than challenges power structures (Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien 1995). In that line, the gap between rhetoric and practice found in this paper is a warning against using normative ideals of journalism as a way of understanding its reality.

Apart from the watchdog and civic-oriented roles, service journalism also showed a large gap, which might also have to do with its public-interest function. According to Eide and Knight (1999), service journalism also fulfills important democratic tasks, such as providing practical help to social movements and activism groups (Eide and Knight 1999), which have played an important role in recent Chilean history.

Although no factors could account for the gap between ideals and practice across all roles, the study showed that the gap between roles and content was related to personal, work-related and media outlet characteristics. The factors explaining which journalists are more or less likely to put their ideals into practice are largely in line with previous international research on journalistic autonomy. Economic, political and organizational influences tend to lead to a larger gap, in particular for the watchdog role, which in the case of Chile can be largely explained by the high levels of political parallelism. Apart from perceived autonomy, perceived professional influence led to a smaller gap. This is in line with Reich and Hanitzsch (2013, 149–150) who see a professional influence as an aspect, or indication, of greater professional autonomy. Previous studies have shown that professionalism combined with autonomy can be a valuable management tool for journalists: rather than managing by explicit rules and guidelines, (news) organizations can trust that people will work in line with their professional roles (Soloski 1989). On the other hand, a gap between ideals and practice can decrease levels of work commitment (Pihl-Tingvad 2012). Research in organizational psychology has shown that professionals who strive for ideals often feel frustration when the gap between theory and reality becomes too large (Sigelman 1973).

This paper is one of the first to combine a survey of journalists with a content analysis of the published news articles these journalists write, improving on previous research in two ways. First, the operationalization of role performance is based on standardized measures of specific reporting styles and narrative schemes of journalists. Second, while previous work has addressed the perceived gap between roles and content (Scholl and Weischenberg 1998; Oi, Fukuda, and Sako 2012), this paper addresses the actual gap.

Although the method is groundbreaking, the study also comes with limitations. First, the number of journalists is somewhat limited. Since the study sampled news and not journalists, we depended on the number of journalists that signed the news articles and not the other way around. Besides, we decided to only consider the journalists who have five or more news articles in the sample, in order to provide more reliable analyses. Second, we limited our analysis

to just one media type; in this case, the five national newspapers. Future studies should test whether the gap is equally large in broadcast and online news. Likewise, to better understand how different journalistic beats differ in terms of the gap between rhetoric and practice, future research could incorporate news sections outside the national desk. Third, only one statement is used to measure the disseminator role conception in the survey.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study confirm the view of scholars who argue that a disconnect between roles and content is inevitable, since journalists lack sufficient autonomy to live up to their ideals. As Mancini (2000) has argued, non-Western countries are the most likely cases to find such a gap. Nevertheless, we believe our study also has broader relevance for the understanding of journalism in other contexts. We expect that the different factors which explain the role conception–performance gap, like professional, economic and political perceived influences, are also relevant in other journalistic cultures and might even explain part of the cross-national differences in the gap. Nevertheless, the size and direction of the gap may depend on the societal context. Future studies in other contexts should then replicate the analysis to see whether these factors influence the gap in the same way in countries with other economic systems and democratic traditions. Moreover, future cross-national studies need to be done to test whether actual economic, political, organizational and professional influences explain differences in the gap between theory and practice in journalism.⁴

Our findings suggest that assessing reporters' attitudes as collected through surveys only captures the "tip of the iceberg" when studying journalism. Nevertheless, this does not take away the value of survey research into journalistic perceptions and views. Such studies offer valuable insight into the journalistic profession, for example in the particularity of journalistic cultures, both nationally and internationally, as well as newsroom socialization, to name just two examples. What we want to warn against though is taking role conceptions at face value as indicators of journalistic performance. As our study has demonstrated, this would be a flawed approach which misses the complex relation between the roles of individual journalists, and the organizational and societal context in which they work. Understanding how roles influence journalistic performance requires a theoretical framework which combines an attitudinal approach with a hierarchy of influences approach.

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NOTES

1. *La Nación* is only considered for 2010, which is when the printed newspaper was halted by decision of the current government.
2. Twenty-one journalists were from *El Mercurio*, 14 were from *La Nación*, 15 from *La Tercera*, 19 from *Las Últimas Noticias* and 6 from *La Cuarta*.
3. These two items are based on the questions asked to a representative sample of Chilean journalists in a previous study of professional roles (Mellado 2012). Nevertheless, we think that a slightly different wording for "to be a passive observer" is a possible explanation for low reliability and correlation, as is the fact that in this study we only included newspaper journalists.
4. Such a goal is currently undertaken by the international project Journalistic Role Performance around the Globe (<http://www.journalisticperformance.org>, @Jourperformance).

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Appendix A

Summarized Questionnaire Statements and Coding Instrument of Journalistic Role Performance Indicators

Role conception indicators	Role performance indicators
Disseminator–interventionist	
Be a detached observer	<i>Taking sides or a position:</i> The news item shows the opinion or judgment of the journalist, who takes a stand on the story.
Be a passive and indifferent observer	<i>Interpretation:</i> The journalist explains the causes, meaning and/or suggests possible consequences of certain facts/actions. <i>Proposal/demand:</i> The journalist manifests the need for change in relation to any event or issue. <i>Adjectives:</i> Use of adjectives by the journalist within the news story. <i>First person:</i> Use of first person (I, we, me, my, our) by the journalist within the news story.
Watchdog	
Act as watchdog of the government	<i>Information on judgments:</i> The news story includes information on judicial or administrative processes against individuals or groups of power.
Act as watchdog of business elites	<i>Questioning de facto powers (the journalist):</i> By means of statements and/or opinions, the journalist questions the validity or truthfulness of what individuals or groups in power say or do.
Act as watchdog of political parties	<i>Questioning de facto powers (the source):</i> Questioning of individuals or groups of power through quotes, statements and/or opinions given by someone other than the journalist.
Act as a watchdog of civic society	<i>Criticizing and judging de facto powers (the journalist):</i> Assertion or reference from the journalist, in which he/she negatively judges or condemns what the individuals or groups in power say or do. <i>Criticizing and judging de facto powers (the source):</i> Criticism of individuals or groups of power in the form of quotes, statements and/or negative opinions given by someone other than the journalist. <i>Denouncing de facto powers (the journalist):</i> Assertion or reference from the journalist, in which he/she accuses or makes evident something hidden, not only illegal, but also irregular or inconvenient concerning individuals or groups of power. <i>Denouncing de facto powers (the source):</i> Quotes and/or testimonies from people other than the journalist, that account for, accuse or evidence something hidden, not only illegal, but also irregular or inconvenient, concerning individuals or groups of power. <i>External investigation:</i> The news story includes investigations that were not carried out by the journalist—such as judicial, administrative, specialized/academic research, among others—but that he/she covers extensively.
Loyal-facilitator	
Actively support government policy on national development	<i>Supporting institutional activities:</i> The journalist praises, promotes and/or defends specific official activities carried out by the political or economic powers.
Highlight the benefits of the current economic model	<i>Supporting national policies:</i> The journalist praises, promotes and/or defends national or regional government policies in general, or any one in particular.
Convey a positive image of political leadership	<i>Positive image of the political elite:</i> The journalist favorably stresses and highlights leadership or management skills, as well as personal characteristics of political leaders.
Convey a positive image of business leadership	<i>Positive image of the economic elite:</i> The journalist favorably stresses and highlights leadership or management skills, as well as personal characteristics of economic leaders.
Give relevance to the country's advances and triumphs	<i>Progress/success of the country:</i> The journalist emphasizes that <i>his/her own country</i> is progressing and doing better than before in any relevant dimension.

Appendix A (Continued)

Role conception indicators	Role performance indicators
Cultivate nationalism/ patriotism	<p><i>Comparison to the rest of the world:</i> The journalist emphasizes the country's advances and triumphs in comparison to other countries in the world.</p> <p><i>Nationals' triumphs:</i> Individuals or groups who have triumphed in the country or abroad are highlighted within the news story.</p> <p><i>Promotion of the country's image:</i> The news story refers to activities organized with the objective of promoting the country's image.</p> <p><i>Patriotism:</i> The news story includes statements made by the journalist that positively value being from a specific nation.</p>
Service Give the audience concrete help to manage their everyday problems	<p><i>Tips and advice (grievances):</i> The news story gives <i>tips</i> or practical advice to manage everyday problems that audiences have with their environment (i.e. how to face noisy neighbors, how to handle wrongful charges).</p>
Provide the audience with the information that is most interesting	<p><i>Tips and advice (individual risks):</i> The news story provides <i>tips</i> or practical advice to solve personal problems that the audience could potentially face (i.e. how to be a smart buyer and save money, how to invest or ensure savings and a safe retirement).</p> <p><i>Consumer advice:</i> The news story informs about the latest trends in products and services in the market, or helps them distinguish between products of different qualities.</p>
Infotainment Concentrate on news that is of interest to the widest possible audience Provide entertainment and relaxation	<p><i>Personalization:</i> The news item centers on one or more persons and their different intellectual, physical, mental or social characteristics or personal background.</p> <p><i>Private life:</i> The news story focuses on aspects of a person's life that do not correspond to areas of public and/or collective interest, and that people normally prefer to maintain in their personal sphere.</p> <p><i>Sensationalism:</i> Use of style elements or descriptions in the story (exaggeration, emphasis of the incredible, the use of dramatic superlative adjectives and metaphors) that highlight the <i>unusual, spectacular or unexpected</i></p> <p><i>Emotion:</i> Explicit references to feelings or descriptions of the different emotions within the news story.</p> <p><i>Morbid:</i> Exacerbation of the reader's attention through the text, describing acts of violence, crime or sex scences/scandle within the news story in concrete detail.</p>
Civic-oriented Motivate people to participate in civic activity and political discussion	<p><i>Citizen perspective:</i> The news story includes the vision of regular or organized citizens, showing how they perceive or are affected by different political decisions.</p>
Promote democracy	<p><i>Citizen demand:</i> The news story includes regular or organized citizens' demands or proposals on how different political measures/decisions should be handled.</p>
Advocate for social change	<p><i>Credibility on citizens:</i> The journalist gives credibility to what the citizens perceive, denounce or demand within the news story.</p>
Provide citizens with the information they need to make political decisions	<p><i>Local impact:</i> The news story mentions the impact of certain political decisions on specific communities.</p>
Educate people about controversial and complex topics	<p><i>Background information:</i> The news story provides the citizens with background information in order to make political decisions (i.e. electoral processes, protests, citizen groups, participation/support of political parties).</p>
Develop the intellectual and cultural interest of the public	<p><i>Information on citizen activities:</i> The new story gives information about citizen acts such as campaigns, collective actions, protests, commemorations, demonstrations and protests.</p>