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To cite this article: Karen McIntyre, Jesse Abdenour, Emmanuel Maduneme & Terje Skjerdal (2023) Investigating the Gap Between Journalists' Role Conceptions and Role Performance in Rwanda and Ethiopia, *Journalism Studies*, 24:12, 1497-1517, DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2023.2230302](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2230302)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2230302>



Published online: 11 Jul 2023.



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Investigating the Gap Between Journalists' Role Conceptions and Role Performance in Rwanda and Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This study reports select findings from the second wave of the Journalistic Role Performance cross-national project involving 37 countries (www.journalisticperformance.org). Specifically, this study combines survey ($N=83$) and content analysis data ($N=4,044$) to explain gaps between journalists' role conceptions and their media organizations' performance in two African countries, Rwanda and Ethiopia. In 2020–21, we analyzed news stories from 10 media houses — including TV, radio, print and online — and subsequently surveyed journalists who worked at those outlets. Among other findings, the data showed larger gaps between conception and performance for Rwandan journalists than Ethiopian journalists. Journalists in both countries revealed a large gap for the Watchdog role, suggesting journalists valued this role much more than their organizations actually performed it. Interestingly, a greater sense of autonomy predicted larger role gaps in several cases. Results extend the Hierarchical Influence Model into new territory by gauging the influence of multi-level factors in Ethiopian and Rwandan journalistic cultures.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 August 2022
Accepted 19 June 2023

KEYWORDS

Ethiopia; hierarchy of influences; journalistic role performance project; role conception; role performance; Rwanda

Journalistic role conceptions are well-established indicators of how journalists perceive their professional work. But they might not accurately reflect how journalists behave. This gap — between ideals and actual behavior — has gained increased attention in the past decade, particularly through the Journalistic Role Performance Project (Mellado 2021). However, most role studies concentrate on developed societies, while transitional media environments, especially on the African continent, have not been in focus.

This study is the first contribution to systematic analyses of the conception–performance gap among media practitioners in Sub-Saharan Africa. Ethiopia and Rwanda's media histories are both comparable and exceptional — both are marked by strong political control, in which state-operated outlets have the widest audience base and journalists are expected to support nation building and economic development through positive reporting. Rwanda's media history includes an appalling chapter in which several outlets played an active role in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi by spreading hatred and

dangerous speech (Kimani 2007). By one account, this unpleasant history has led journalists to see themselves as “villains” in local society (Moon 2021) and has served as government justification for extensive control over the media (Reyntjens 2019). By another account, journalists in the country see themselves as unifiers, dedicated to promoting peace and reconciliation (McIntyre and Sobel 2018). In Ethiopia, media have had a developmental orientation (Skjerdal 2011), whereby journalists are markedly collaborative with authorities, supporting national growth and development (Hanitzsch et al. 2019). What is less known is the extent to which journalists’ practice correlates with their normative ideals of the profession. One could suspect that a dissonance exists between ideals and practice, perhaps more pronounced in societies where media practices are habitually guarded by strict editorial policies. However, the opposite hypothesis is also possible. Journalists in these societies may find themselves in agreement with the performance of the media, particularly when it comes to less controversial roles where editorial guidelines could coincide with the practitioner’s personal value system.

The opportunity to explore these questions comes as a result of a partnership between media researchers from 37 countries in the second wave of the *Journalistic Role Performance* Project, with Africa represented for the first time. Data were collected from journalist surveys and an extensive content analysis of print, radio, television and online media outlets in Ethiopia and Rwanda. The project operates with six predetermined journalistic roles: watchdog, civic, interventionist, loyal-facilitator, infotainment and service. In this paper, we are particularly interested in two issues. First, we explore the relationship between conception and performance for each of the six roles; second, we examine how conception–performance variance relates to journalists’ perceived autonomy and outlet type (print, radio, television and online). The study compares Ethiopian and Rwandan media but also draws on global findings in the discussion. The overall intention of the study is to seek a more comprehensive understanding of mechanisms driving news production in two transitional media environments in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Literature Review

Rwanda and Ethiopia make for a rich case study in understanding journalistic dynamics and state power. Both countries share a governing structure that has been described as “developmental authoritarianism,” referring to governments that are democracies only by nomenclature and “provide significant public works and services while exerting control over nearly every facet of society” (Matfess 2015, 182). Such governments are similar to what Gagné (2019) refers to as Hybrid Political Regimes, characterized by autocratic and democratic tendencies. Both countries’ hold on the local press is immense, often justified by the need to guard against a “risk of social rupture and prolonged conflict” (Matfess 2015, 182). Rwanda and Ethiopia therefore serve as unique and important media landscapes in which to explore how journalists conceive of their roles and how those conceptions could be different from their actual role performance.

Ethiopia

Until 2018, Ethiopia’s government was led by the authoritarian Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front. The EPRDF took over after the collapse of the Soviet-backed

Derg regime in 1991, and press freedom and democratic values initially flourished as nearly 400 newspapers and magazines were licensed in the country (Stremlau 2011). However, that era of progress soon ended following the highly disputed 2005 elections, which led to attacks on and the imprisonment of journalists, suppression of free speech, and the shuttering of media outlets (Meshesha 2014).

The entry of prime minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018, who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for ending decades of conflict between Ethiopia and neighboring Eritrea, was considered a turning point. Freedom House reported an improvement in political and civil liberties as journalists were released and bans placed on media outlets were lifted (Freedom House 2019). However, a number of events, including the locally arranged election in the Tigray region of the country in 2020, served as a catalyst for the armed conflict between Ethiopian national forces and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, which lasted between 2020 and 2022.

Ethiopian federal and regional governments currently run the country's major broadcast media channels. Radio is the most prominent medium, reaching nearly 80% of Ethiopians, mostly due to its affordability and accessibility (Gessesse 2020). There are about a dozen private radio stations and nearly 20 TV stations, including satellite TV stations based in the diaspora (Ethiopian Media Authority 2022). Newspaper readership is generally low and concentrated around the capital, Addis Ababa, due to poor levels of literacy and distribution challenges in the country (Skjerdal 2008; Stremlau 2011). According to the World Bank, only 24% of the population is connected to the internet, but that figure is growing rapidly (World Bank 2020).

The practice of journalism in Ethiopia is not without challenges, as journalists who work for private media are often considered anti-government, while those with state-owned media are considered pro-government (Mohammed 2021). Research also indicates that Ethiopian state-owned media are running a public relations model of journalism, in which outlets serve as representatives of the government (Mohammed 2021).

Rwanda

The defining moment in Rwanda's socio-political and media landscape was the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi carried out by the Hutu-led government with estimates of 500,000–800,000 deaths (Guichaoua 2020). Current president Paul Kagame was the commander of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which brought the war to an end by defeating the Hutu-led government forces (Dallaire 2009). The conflict also brought the media's role into focus, given the widely held belief that Rwandan radio broadcasts were catalysts for the genocide (Kellow and Steeves 1998). Most concluded that these media broadcasts were rife with hate messages that dehumanized the Tutsis and eventually led to violence against them (Mamdani 2018).

Kagame's leadership in the media and economic sectors has received mixed reviews. On one end of the spectrum, Rwanda is undergoing rapid socioeconomic and technological growth (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2017). Booth and Golooba-Mutebi (2012) noted how the "government has been strongly committed to the private sector as the engine of development" (385). The country recorded high increases in its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) index, literacy rates, and primary school enrollment (McIntyre and Sobel 2018; UNICEF 2015). Further, a 2017 United Nations

Conference on Trade and Development report noted that Rwanda's investments in "information and communications technologies (ICTs) have helped the sector grow more than tenfold since 2000" (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2017). The media landscape has also flourished as support from foreign aid led to the establishment of formal journalism training institutions, including at the University of Rwanda (Kayumba and Kimonyo 2006). There has also been a rise in the number of media outlets in the country (20 TV stations, 39 FM radio stations, 8 newspapers, and 24 registered news websites) (Rwanda Media Barometer 2021).

On the other end of the spectrum, President Paul Kagame has been accused of human rights violations and limiting press freedom. Frère (2009) notes that as a response to genocide discourses by Hutus in the diaspora, the regime adopted a hostile approach towards the press as "journalists were subject to intimidation, arrest ... and some chose to go into exile. Publications were seized or forced into bankruptcy by lack of advertising from companies with links with the state or with members of the new government" (342). Yet, the government retains the legitimacy and approval of the West, which views Rwanda as a "star pupil of the Washington Consensus" (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012, 385). Hence, Rwanda's and Ethiopia's complicated socio-political landscapes create a pertinent atmosphere for understanding and exploring the gaps in journalistic role perceptions and performance.

Journalistic Roles

Role perceptions are central to the ways in which journalists define themselves, as well as their professional values (Deuze 2005; Mellado and Van Dalen 2014). The stories a journalist decides to cover and the way those stories are constructed are to a certain extent determined by how that person perceives his or her role as a journalist, which is informed by subjective value judgments as well as newsroom socialization (Breed 1955; Shoemaker, Vos, and Reese 2009). As the Hutchins Commission argued, "no factual report ... is uncolored by the opinions of the reporter" (Hutchins Report 1947, 22). Therefore, to understand journalists' approaches to news coverage and the type of stories they are inclined to pursue, it is pertinent to understand what roles they place a premium on. One of the earliest works along this line of inquiry was by Cohen (1963), who attempted to categorize journalistic role perceptions. He delineated an orientational dyad of journalists: Neutrals (journalists inclined to detach themselves from the news audience) and Participants (who believe in interpretation and a more active role) (Cohen 1963). In a survey of 1,300 American journalists eight years later, Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1972) found that respondents generally preferred Cohen's (1963) Participant role, embracing activities such as investigating claims of government officials and analyzing complicated issues (Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman 1972). In later studies of American journalists (see Beam, Weaver, and Brownlee 2009; Weaver et al. 2009), role conceptions were calibrated and further expanded into four functions: The adversarial (journalists who pursue an adversarial approach to covering governmental and corporate stories), the disseminator (detached information purveyor), the interpretive (those who provide analysis and interpretation) and the populist mobilizer (those who pursue an activist form of reporting) (Abdenour, McIntyre, and Dahmen 2018). Recently, the contextualist was added as a fifth function (McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour 2018). Contextual journalists attempt to

provide nuance to issues through a wide lens, thus situating the story within the bigger societal picture in a manner that contributes and promotes the wellbeing of the community (Abdenour, McIntyre, and Dahmen 2018). McIntyre and colleagues (2018) found that contextualist roles were more common among younger and female American journalists. Meanwhile, journalists in nonwestern regions such as Asia and the Middle East are more inclined to express a preference for more active/interpretive roles (Weaver and Willnat 2012).

However, African journalists were absent from Weaver and Willnat's (2012) "Global Journalist" text and underrepresented in other journalistic role studies (Hanitzsch et al. 2012). Nonetheless, there are indications that African journalists are driven towards an active and participatory role in their role perceptions (Standaert, Hanitzsch, and Dedonder 2021). Kalyango et al. (2017) analyzed perceptions of journalists from five African countries (Malawi, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Botswana, Sierra Leone), along with three Asian countries, and validated the assertion that many African reporters express a preference for participatory roles such as development journalism. Specifically, the authors found that Ethiopian journalists were inclined toward "promot[ing] tolerance and cultural diversity" and "support[ing] national development" (Kalyango et al. 2017, 585). This finding is also consistent with the Worlds of Journalism Study, which found that Ugandan journalists see their roles as populist mobilizers, advocates for social change, and promoters of policies that "bring about prosperity and development" (Hanitzsch et al. 2012, 480).

One study hinted at the role perceptions of journalists in Rwanda, revealing how they generally employed a participatory-oriented approach when reconstructing and reporting on the Rwandan genocide (McIntyre and Sobel 2018). Studying Ethiopian journalists, Skjerdal (2011) found a general preference for development journalism, a role that is similar to the populist mobilizer and contextualist roles.

The Gap Between Perception and Practice of Journalistic Roles

Journalists generally act in accordance with their role, or identity, since self-definitions inform people's course of action (Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, and Thomas 2008). However, a body of research on the conception-performance gap has established a tension between journalists' perceptions and the actual performance of their roles (Preston 2009), often because myriad situating factors impede theoretical roles from being practicalized (Mellado and Van Dalen 2014). This gap is seen in other professions, including nursing, where factors such as lack of organizational support restrain incipient nurses' ability to act according to their perceived ideals (Maben, Latter, and Clark 2006). Similarly, journalists' conceptions of their roles do not always match the enactment of such roles and the types of stories they end up pursuing (Mellado and Mothes 2021; Preston 2009).

Hierarchy of Influences Framework

Studies have found that many different macro- and micro-level factors, including socioeconomic, political and organizational influences, contribute to such gaps between role and performance (Mellado and Mothes 2021; Shoemaker, Vos, and Reese 2009; Sigelman 1973). The Hierarchy of Influences model (Shoemaker and Reese 2014) categorizes such factors that impact journalistic function and content into five "levels" of influence:

individual, routines, organizational, institutional, and social systems. These sociological factors are conceived as concentric circles of influence spiraling up from the most micro (individual level) to the most macro (society level). Essentially this sociological model addresses the relationship between structure and agency — between “the actions people take and the conditions under which they act that are not of their own making” (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, 10–11).

Influences at the individual level include a journalist’s personal role conception, along with demographic characteristics and background (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). At the routines level, journalists become constrained by immediate newsroom dynamics and socialization customs such as pack journalism, audience appeal, story style and structure, and, importantly, news values such as objectivity (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Organizational influences entail concerns such as economic resources and editorial considerations. One such consideration is that news organizations frequently must weigh commercial and professional concerns depending on the goals of ownership (Shoemaker and Reese 2014).

Next in the “upward” spiral of influence is social institutions interacting with media entities. Social-institutional factors might include practices within media industries or common practices across media platforms such as television, radio or newspapers. This level can also include political and government intervention (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Finally, the social-systems level includes influences on content from the system as a whole, including society-wide assumptions about normative journalistic content and practice. This level is primarily concerned with ideology and culture, integrating the “symbolic mechanism that serves as a cohesive and integrating force in society” (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, 70). Recently, some scholars have argued for a remodeling of the hierarchical structure of the framework. Ferrucci and Kuhn (2022) posit that, since the hierarchy was first introduced in the late twentieth century, changes in media dynamics and digital disruptions have increased the influence of individual organizations. The authors propose that micro- and macro-level factors within the hierarchy still hold sway, but that influences such as news routines, advertising, and even governmental constraints can be moderated or even superseded by organizational priorities.

The present project concerns itself with the hierarchical model’s individual level of analysis, primarily role conceptions, and how such micro-level factors might be influenced by larger social-institutional and social-systems constraints (e.g., media platform, government intervention, cultural practices within countries).

Role Perception and Performance Divide by Role Type

The ways in which the hierarchy of influences interacts with the perception-performance gap are also dependent on role type (Mellado and Mothes 2021; Mellado and Van Dalen 2014). The gap in this sense means that these hierarchical influences impede journalists from performing certain roles they value, while other roles might go unconstrained and are easy to perform. For instance, the gap is wider for public interest and service-oriented roles like watchdog and civic roles (Mellado and Mothes 2021; Mellado and Van Dalen 2014; Oi, Fukuda, and Sako 2012). For the watchdog role, this might be because it “seeks to hold the government, business and other public institutions

accountable” (Mellado 2015, 600), putting journalists at odds with social-institutional powers, which in turn makes it difficult for journalists to live up to their perceptions of such roles.

While evidence is limited, there are indications of these gaps between role perception and performance of public interest roles in Ethiopia. Skjerdal (2011) found that although Ethiopian journalists expressed a favorable attitude towards development journalism, which is a form of public interest role, these journalists report being “challenged when they try to convert the framework into actual media practice” (Skjerdal 2011, 58). One prominent reason is related to political pressure and media ownership (Skjerdal 2011), which is also an indication of social-institutional influence (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). In Rwanda, some research has hinted at a disconnect between role conception and performance. Cruikshank (2017) found that journalists are frequently unable to effectively perform their jobs because they fear government retaliation for critical reporting and lack sufficient training and resources, and their coverage fails to reach rural populations. More recently, Moon (2019) found that journalists in Rwanda who work as foreign correspondents struggle to balance the values inherent in transnational journalism with the practical expectations in their local context.

A well-rounded understanding of journalistic role conceptions is one that does not relegate to the periphery the perceptions of African journalists. However, these perceptions are few and far between. We address this shortcoming in the literature by asking the following question regarding the gap between Ethiopian and Rwandan journalistic role and performance:

RQ1: How does conception compare to performance for the six roles among journalists in Rwanda and Ethiopia?

Journalists’ Perceived Individual Autonomy and Role Conception-Performance Gap

Previous studies have established how these levels of influence restrict journalists’ autonomy and can prevent them from fulfilling their basic functions (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011). In their *Worlds of Journalism Study*, Hanitzsch et al. (2012) posited a nexus between professional autonomy and perceived influences. They argued that professional autonomy — defined as “the latitude for journalists to do their work” — is a “fundamental requirement for professional journalistic practice” (Hanitzsch et al. 2012, 474).

However, Mellado and Mothes (2021) noted that in a typical news process, a journalist’s individual autonomy is inevitably constrained because the “news content is not necessarily produced by only one journalist. Rather, it is created with other colleagues within highly complex institutions and political contexts and is therefore a collective outcome” (151). Simply put, journalists interested in watchdog functions might meet a wall if they are only assigned stories that are unrelated to such roles (Mellado and Mothes 2021). Moreover, the watchdog piece might also be unable to be performed if it runs contrary to the philosophical, economic and political peculiarities of the media organization (Mellado and Mothes 2021), as research has demonstrated that these social systems and “organizational influences tend to lead to a larger gap” (Mellado and Van Dalen 2014, 872). In this sense, journalists’ perceptions of individual autonomy

becomes an essential factor in understanding the gap between their role conceptions and actual performance.

The political and economic climates of African countries make it logical to assume that the gap between role conceptions and performance would differ by the level of perceived autonomy. Mancini (2000) found that journalists in countries with increased external interference in their jobs are likely to experience a larger gap. However, the literature examining the role conception and performance gap in many African countries is scarce, if not nonexistent. Compared to other countries, Ethiopia ranks low on media independence due to government pressure on journalists, as well as legal and economic constraints (Freedom House 2021; Gessesse 2020). Moges (2021) found that Ethiopian “journalists self-censor in selecting sources to report, particularly, internal conflicts and other sensitive issues of the country” by giving preference to governmental sources (1). Thus, evidence indicates a lack of journalistic autonomy, and hence, a gap between role perception and enactment in Ethiopia. Media independence is also low in Rwanda (Freedom House 2022), where the government has exerted a tight grip on the press, limiting free speech and civil liberties (Frère 2009; McIntyre and Sobel 2018; Sobel Cohen and McIntyre 2021). This could mean journalists lack the autonomy to enact the watchdog or other public interest roles. Hence, it is within reason to hypothesize that:

H1: Perceptions of individual autonomy will be a predictor for the gap between journalistic role conceptions and performance.

Differences in Media Platforms and Role Conceptions-Performance Gap

Differences in media platforms have been found to influence journalistic content and process (Hallin and Mellado 2018; Maier 2010). However, most research on roles and performance focuses on print journalism, with little attention given to TV, radio, and online news (Mellado et al. 2021). Platforms possess unique features, often referred to as affordances, “and they are the physical and structural possibilities of media technologies, which may shape the conditions and potentiality of their uses” (Mellado et al. 2021, 361). The affordances of different platforms impact the structure of news content (Benson et al. 2012), how the content reaches people, as well as the speed with which it gets to them (Mellado 2015).

Such affordances could impact the way journalists think about and navigate their roles (Hutchby 2001). For instance, Mellado et al. (2021) found that online outlets were likelier to play the role of watchdog, while print media played more loyal-facilitator roles. However, there are a dearth of studies on the relationships between differences in media platforms and the gap in role conception-performances among journalists in Rwanda and Ethiopia. To address this relationship, we propose the following question:

RQ2: How does news media type (newspaper, TV, radio, online) relate to journalists’ role conceptions and performance?

Method

This study reports select findings from the second wave of the Journalistic Role Performance cross-national project, which includes data from 365 news media outlets in 37

countries (www.journalisticperformance.org). To address our hypothesis and research questions, we followed a two-stage research design. The first stage measured journalistic role performance through a content analysis of news outlets in the two African countries that participated in the project — Rwanda and Ethiopia — based on standardized operationalizations of the watchdog, civic, interventionist, loyal-facilitator, infotainment, and service roles in journalism. The second stage included a survey on role conceptions among the journalists who wrote the stories included in the content analysis. This allowed us to compare journalists' evaluations with the performance of their organizations across countries. All data collection occurred in 2020 and 2021.

Content Analysis

Sampling. To measure journalistic role performance, we analyzed news stories from a variety of news outlets in each country. News outlets were selected based on popularity (the most read, watched, or listened to) and media type (TV, radio, print and online), with preference given to national outlets. We further attempted to represent each country's media system by considering size, audience orientation, ownership, political leaning, and language. The seven Rwandan news outlets included two television stations (Rwanda TV and TV1), one radio station (Radio Rwanda), two newspapers (New Times and Imvaho Nshya) and two online outlets (Igihe.com and Umuseke.com). The ten Ethiopian news outlets included three television stations (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, Amhara Media Corporation and Ethiopian Satellite Television), two radio stations (Ethiopian Radio and Sheger FM), three newspapers (*The Ethiopian Herald*, *Addis Admass* and *The Reporter*) and two news sites (Waltainfo.com and Addisstandard.com). The Ethiopian sample includes a regional television station and a diaspora-run outlet in order to capture the role that such channels play in the overall media landscape in the country. Using the constructed week method (Riffe, Aust, and Lacy 1993), a stratified, systematic sample representing two weeks was selected for media outlets in each country from January 2 to December 31, 2020. Selected sampling units included the most watched newscast at each television station (for example, Rwanda TV's most-watched daily newscast was News in Kinyarwanda at 8 pm), the most listened-to news program at each radio station, and the entire issue or homepage for newspapers and online news media. The unit of analysis was each news story. All standard news topics were included, with the exception of editorials, opinion columns, weather forecasts, horoscopes, movie (or other cultural) reviews, puzzles, and social pages in newspapers and news sites, and similar content on radio and TV. We also excluded content that was not produced by staff in the respective newsrooms. The final content analysis sample included 4,044 stories from 17 news outlets in Rwanda and Ethiopia.

Measures. The codebook included operational definitions of the performance of the watchdog, interventionist, loyal-facilitator, service, infotainment, and civic journalism roles, all of which have been validated by previous studies (see e.g., Mellado 2015; Mellado et al. 2020). Five items measured the presence of the "interventionist" role, nine items measured the "watchdog" role, eight items measured the "loyal-facilitator" role, five items measured the "service" role, five items measured the "infotainment" role, and nine items measured the "civic" role. Each item was coded as present or absent from the news story. In addition to the roles, the codebook included measures

related to general information on each news item, such as platform, the specific news outlet, date of publication, story type, and story placement; the characteristics of the story, such as topic and location; and the sources cited, including number of sources, source type, diversity of source types, and diversity of points of view.

Data Collection. The general project coordinator trained principal investigators in each country how to apply the codebook, and PIs, in turn, trained investigators within their country of study. Eight investigators coded the data from Ethiopia and Rwanda and entered data into an online interface designed for this project. Intercoder reliability was tested in three ways: First in a pre-test among principal investigators across countries, then in pre-tests among national teams, and finally in a post-test within each country. The average Krippendorff's alpha reliability score across all role variables was .79 for Ethiopian stories and .81 for Rwandan stories.

Survey

To capture journalistic role conceptions, we surveyed journalists who worked at the media outlets included in the content analysis. This research received ethics approval by the Virginia Commonwealth University Institutional Review Board (Ref. HM20018703), the Rwanda Governance Board (Ref. 349/RGB/CEO/RD/2021) and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (Ref. 310185).

Sampling and Data Collection. Journalists were contacted through their personal/work emails, social media accounts, or via editors in their respective newsrooms, and invited to participate in the survey, which was administered online and offered in English and Kinyarwanda in Rwanda, and in English in Ethiopia. After cleaning the data and eliminating individuals who did not answer a sufficient number of questions, the respondents used in the analysis included 32 journalists from five Rwandan news outlets and 51 journalists from four Ethiopian news outlets. The number of outlets included in the survey is lower than the number of outlets included in the content analysis since sometimes we could not recruit the minimum number of survey respondents from each outlet (as determined through quota sampling) to include that outlet in the survey.

Measures. After consent was obtained, the survey included questions measuring journalists' conceptions of their professional roles, perceived enactment of those roles, perceived levels of professional autonomy, use of different social media tools, and work and personal characteristics.

Relevant to this study, country of origin, media type, and perceived autonomy were used as predictor variables in regression analyses. We measured media type by asking journalists which platform they use to deliver their content: television (41%), radio (28.9%), print (24.1%) or online (6%). Media type was converted into three dummy variables (0 = non-print, 1 = print; 0 = non-TV, 1 = TV, 0 = non-online, 1 = online). Radio was held as a constant. We measured perceived autonomy by asking journalists to indicate their agreement (five-point scale, from never to always) with three statements associated with their professional autonomy: "When I have an idea about a topic that I consider important, I am able to develop/cover the story," "I have freedom to select the news/stories I work on," and "I have freedom to decide which aspects of a news story I should emphasize." These items were averaged to form an index of perceived individual autonomy ($M = 3.76$, $SD = .77$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$).

Our criterion variables were the gaps between journalists' conceptions and their news organizations' performance regarding the six journalistic roles. Journalists' conceptions were measured by asking respondents to rate the importance of 40 reporting practices in the survey designed by the central project to represent the indicators included in the content analysis. Response options included a five-point scale where 1 was "not important at all," 2 was "not very important," 3 was "somewhat important," 4 was "quite important," and 5 was "extremely important." Cronbach's alpha reliability for the roles ranged from .71 to .83. Confirmatory factor analyses were used to test whether journalists' responses reflected a latent role manifested through concurrent concrete indicators. Consequently, 33 of 40 statements continued to be part of the scales, indicating a good fit with the data. To analyze the size and direction of the gaps between journalists' conceptions and role performance, we compared each journalist's individual responses to the average role performance of their respective organization. We first calculated the average score of each journalist based on their answers to the survey questions representing each role. We then calculated the average score of role performance for each media outlet with regard to each role, considering all of the news stories from each specific outlet. Given that the scale range used to measure role performance (0–1) was different from the scale range for measuring role conception (1–5), we recoded the average scores for role conception (ranging from 1 to 5) into ranges of 0–1. Finally, we calculated the absolute differences between the two by subtracting the average role performance score of each media outlet from the average role conception score of each journalist belonging to that outlet. It should be noted that the absolute values of the "gap" scores have no substantive interpretation. The focus of the analysis is the relative sizes and directions of these gaps and the factors that increase or decrease the gaps between journalists' conceptions and the average performance of their news organizations (Mellado et al. 2020; Mellado and Mothes 2021).

Findings

RQ1 asked how the gaps between conception and performance compared between journalists in Rwanda and Ethiopia. For all roles, journalists' conceptions were generally greater than the average performance of their organizations. As Table 1 shows, the largest gap between conception and performance for the Rwandan journalists in the study was for the Watchdog role ($M = -.84$, $SD = .11$). Rwandan journalists, on average, indicated they valued this role much more than their organizations actually performed it. The second largest gap between conception and performance was for the Service role ($M = -.80$, $SD = .13$), followed by the Civic ($M = -.79$, $SD = .17$) and Loyal-Facilitator ($M = -.61$, $SD = .15$) roles. The smallest gaps were for the Interventionist ($M = -.52$, $SD = .23$) and Infotainment ($M = -.47$, $SD = .15$) roles.

The gaps between conception and performance were generally smaller for the surveyed Ethiopian journalists (Table 1). The largest gap was for the Civic ($M = -.65$, $SD = .17$) role, followed by the Loyal-Facilitator ($M = -.63$, $SD = .16$) and Watchdog ($M = -.62$, $SD = .23$) roles. The gaps were smaller for the Service ($M = -.55$, $SD = .16$) and Infotainment ($M = -.52$, $SD = .15$) roles, and the smallest gap was for the Interventionist ($M = -.42$, $SD = .18$) role. Similar to Rwandan journalists, Ethiopian respondents indicated a general under-performance of roles compared to conceptions. However, gaps were

Table 1. Average gaps between journalists' conceptions and media organizations' performance for each role ($N = 83$).

Role	Rwanda <i>M (SD)</i>	Ethiopia <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Watchdog***	-.84 (.11)	-.62 (.23)	5.29	1.19
Civic***	-.79 (.17)	-.65 (.17)	3.77	.85
Interventionist*	-.52 (.23)	-.42 (.18)	2.18	.50
Loyal-Facilitator	-.61 (.15)	-.63 (.16)	-.62	-.14
Infotainment	-.47 (.15)	-.52 (.15)	-1.41	-.32
Service***	-.80 (.13)	-.55 (.16)	7.31	1.65

Note: Negative sign (–) for role gap indicates that conception was higher than performance (i.e., journalists valued the role more than news outlets actually performed it).

*Role gap between countries significantly different at $p < .05$.

***Role gap between countries significantly different at $p < .001$.

smaller on average, suggesting that Ethiopian journalistic content might be more tightly coupled with the values of the journalists who create it.

To further answer RQ1, along with H1 and RQ2, parametric tests of significance (t-tests and regressions) were used. Parametric analysis assumes that variables are normally distributed. However, the project's small sample size ($N = 83$) dictated that variables should be tested for normality, given that smaller sample sizes present a higher chance for abnormality (Tabachnick and Fidell 2007). Scalar variables used in the analysis were tested for univariate normality and the presence of outliers. Distribution charts and tests for skew and kurtosis indicated that most variables were distributed normally. However, data suggested that the Watchdog and Infotainment role gap distributions were abnormal, and several significant outliers were detected (see Tabachnick and Fidell 2007, 96). These outlying cases were determined to be part of the target population, so transformation was deemed an appropriate method for improving normality and reducing the influence of outliers in these two variable distributions (see Tabachnick and Fidell 2007, 86–88). After transformation, skew and kurtosis were reduced, and only one possibly significant outlier (in the Infotainment Gap variable distribution) remained. Tests further indicated that the transformed variables were similar enough to the original variables that they would still represent the phenomena in question.¹

Regarding the issue of multivariate normality for the regressions, Mahalanobis and Cook's Distance tests of the models indicated no presence of multivariate outliers.² Additionally, diagnostics revealed no suspected multicollinearity for any predictors in the final models.³ Thus, the variables were deemed suitable for this particular analysis. For all parametric tests below (t-tests and regressions), the two transformed variables were used in place of the original Watchdog and Infotainment gap variables.

Addressing RQ1, independent-samples t-tests compared the means of the six role-gap variables for each country (Table 1). Four gaps were significantly different between countries, and in all of these cases, the gaps were greater for Rwandan journalists. The largest effect size when comparing Rwandan and Ethiopian journalists was for the Service gap variable, $t(80) = 7.31$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.65$, followed by the Watchdog gap, $t(81) = 5.29$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.19$. The third-largest effect size was for the Civic gap variable, $t(80) = 3.77$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .85$, and fourth-largest was for the Interventionism gap variable, $t(79) = 2.18$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = .50$. Mean differences

between countries for the Infotainment and Loyal-Facilitator gap variables were not significant.

To answer H1 and RQ2, separate regressions tested the extent to which country of origin, journalistic autonomy, and media type interacted with six role conception-performance gaps (see Table 2). Predictor variables accounted for nearly half (48.1%) of the variance (R^2) in the Service Gap model. Predictors also explained a large amount of variance in the Watchdog (41.5%) and Civic (34.8%) models. Regarding the Country of Origin dummy predictor variable, being an Ethiopian journalist significantly predicted a smaller gap for the Watchdog ($\beta = -.376, p < .001$), Service ($\beta = -.534, p < .001$) and Civic ($\beta = -.227, p < .05$) criterion variables. Country of Origin was not significantly related to the Interventionism and Loyal-Facilitator gap variables.

H1 predicted that individuals with greater journalistic autonomy would be associated with smaller gaps between conception and performance. This hypothesis was not supported. In fact, data showed evidence of the inverse: a greater sense of autonomy predicted larger role gaps in several cases (Table 2). The Autonomy Index predictor was positively associated with the Loyal-Facilitator ($\beta = .281, p < .05$), Civic ($\beta = .250, p < .05$) and Watchdog ($\beta = .240, p < .05$) gap criterion variables. Autonomy was not significantly related to the Interventionism, Service, or Infotainment gap variables.

RQ2 asked how news media type related to role gaps. Both the Print Outlet and Online Outlet dummy variables had a significant impact on the criterion variables (Table 2). Print journalists in both countries were more likely to have larger Watchdog ($\beta = .296, p < .01$) and Civic ($\beta = .316, p < .01$) role gaps at their outlets. The same was true for online journalists in Rwanda (Watchdog: $\beta = .204, p < .05$; Civic: $\beta = .230, p < .05$). Additionally, the Online Outlet predictor was negatively associated with the Interventionism gap criterion variable ($\beta = -.296, p < .05$). The TV Outlet dummy variable was not significantly related to any of the criterion variables.

Discussion

This study examined the gaps between how journalists in Ethiopia and Rwanda perceive their roles and how much their news outlets actually perform those roles, taking into consideration journalists' perceived levels of autonomy and their media outlet type.

When considering conception-performance gaps among Rwandan journalists, data revealed that the biggest gap was for the Watchdog role, in that journalists valued this role much more than their organizations actually performed it. This is not surprising given that journalists in the country are censored, both overtly and through self-

Table 2. Linear regression models predicting conception-performance gaps for each role ($N = 83$).

	Interventionism	Watchdog	Loyal-Facilitator	Service	Infotainment	Civic
Country (1=Ethiopia)	-.132	-.376***	.120	-.534***	.157	-.227*
Autonomy	.158	.240*	.281*	.173	.077	.250*
Print Outlet	-.164	.296**	-.212	.182	-.112	.316**
TV Outlet	-.059	.177	.113	.061	.010	.004
Online Outlet	-.296*	.204*	.142	.176	.054	.230*
Total R^2	19.1%	41.5%	16.1%	48.1%	3.9%	34.8%

Note: Except for R^2 indicators of explained variance, values are standardized partial regression coefficients (betas). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

ensorship. President Paul Kagame and his party have been used as an example of “developmental authoritarianism,” which, as previously mentioned, describes governments that provide public service but also exert tight control over society (Matfess 2015). In Rwanda’s case, the government justifies such control by saying it is necessary to prevent another genocide (Frère 2009; Reporters Without Borders 2021). Because content is state-controlled, it is likely that Rwandan reporters are not able to perform their watchdog duties, which typically include exposing government corruption and malfeasance. Ethiopian journalists also displayed relatively high gaps for the Watchdog role, though less than their Rwandan counterparts. This makes sense given that most Ethiopian journalists in the sample came from two media organizations which are close to the state — Ethiopian Radio, a federal state media organization, and Amhara Media Corporation, a regional state media organization. Journalists at these outlets are generally educated with at least a BA degree, but they may not be able to fully enact professionally acknowledged standards since they are expected to be loyal to the media owner (Mohammed 2021).

The inability of journalists in Rwanda and Ethiopia to perform watchdog reporting despite believing philosophically in this approach aligns with findings from the larger JRP Project. Among the 37 countries in the study, Rwanda and Ethiopia ranked lower in watchdog role performance. Countries that ranked highest in watchdog role performance included the United Kingdom, Israel and Estonia. The fact that journalists who are least able to perform the watchdog role live in authoritarian societies, while those most able to perform the role live in established or transitional democracies, is consistent with Mellado et al.’s (2023) findings that global freedom positively predicts watchdog role performance. Rwanda and Ethiopia both guarantee a free press in their respective constitutions, but these findings support other data that show that such a guarantee does not play out in reality (Reporters Without Borders 2021; 2023).

What is more surprising than the conception-performance gaps for the watchdog role in this study is that the Ethiopian journalists had similarly high gaps on the loyal-facilitator dimension. This role is especially cherished in state-run media (Skjerdal 2017). Our findings indicate that, despite its importance, Ethiopian news workers do not perform the role to its fullest extent in actual practice. One possible explanation for this gap is that support for the loyal-facilitator role might be so strong that even if performance of the role is objectively high, it still does not match the lofty expectations for this type of journalism in Ethiopia. Accordingly, data from the Worlds of Journalism Study showed that Ethiopia was an outlier on the collaborative dimension, which resembles the loyal-facilitator role (Hanitzsch et al. 2019).

Findings revealed that greater journalistic autonomy did not predict smaller gaps between conception and performance. The connection of this finding to previous research is mixed. On the one hand, it runs contrary to existing research showing that journalists with more external constraints, and therefore lower levels of perceived autonomy, saw bigger gaps between role conception and performance (Mancini 2000; Mellado and Van Dalen 2014). On the other hand, it aligns with results from the previous wave of the JRP Project, which showed that “journalists with higher levels of perceived journalistic autonomy showed a larger gap between role conception and role performance” (Mellado et al. 2020, 562). Similarly, the current study also found that gaps were larger for Watchdog roles.

In Ethiopia and Rwanda, where legal and political mechanisms constrain journalists, we expected low levels of autonomy to predict high gaps. Surprisingly, we found the opposite. Greater autonomy resulted in larger gaps among three roles: the Loyal-Facilitator, Civic and Watchdog. Mellado et al. (2020) similarly found that greater autonomy led to greater gaps for the Watchdog and Civic roles. The authors discovered autonomy was associated with greater esteem for those roles, but was not associated with performance, leading to larger gaps. Indeed, in the present study, post-hoc tests revealed positive correlations between autonomy and both the Watchdog ($r = .39, p = <.001$) and Civic ($r = .38, p = <.001$) role conceptions. Also in line with the previous study, there were no significant correlations between autonomy and performance of those two roles. Thus, autonomous journalists in Ethiopia, Rwanda, and other countries apparently place higher value in public-service roles, but that autonomy does not translate into greater Civic or Watchdog performance. It should be noted that, in the current study, the opposite was true for the Loyal-Facilitator role. Autonomy was not related to esteem for this role, but was negatively correlated with Loyal-Facilitator performance ($r = -.26, p = <.05$), leading to the aforementioned gap. Therefore, the data indicate that Ethiopian and Rwandan journalists with autonomy do not value this role, yet perform it at a higher level than journalists with less autonomy. This is possibly because, in both countries, loyalty to official agendas such as economic growth and national cohesion are expected among journalists and lead them to perform this role, even though they do not necessarily agree with it on a personal level. In Ethiopia, for example, journalists in state media commonly perform pro-government reporting despite their opposition to such an approach (Skjerdal 2013). Perhaps this is because journalists working in such controlled environments as Rwanda and Ethiopia don't think of such restrictions as limiting them. In in-depth interviews, Sobel and McIntyre (2019) found that journalists in Rwanda said they feel as if they are free because they know how to report sensitive stories in ways that do not cross boundaries. Knowing how to navigate within their restricted environment made them feel as if they were not restricted. Therefore, perhaps journalists in this study felt an inflated sense of autonomy, which could explain how greater autonomy resulted in larger gaps between role conception and performance.

A third explanation could be rooted in the theoretical framework employed in the current study. It is possible that these journalists based their perceived levels of autonomy at the organizational levels of the Hierarchy of Influence (Shoemaker and Reese 2014), hence, they had fewer restraints from the particular media platforms they worked for. However, at the institutional level of the Hierarchy of Influence — where government interference is classified — perceptions of individual autonomy might mean something entirely different. Simply put, journalists could perceive higher professional autonomy in relation to their immediate organization but not in relation to the political climate of the country. This would fit with Ferrucci and Kuhn's (2022) organization-centric view of media influence, in which a particular news outlet's values might play an outsized role in how journalists approach their jobs. Future research should seek to clarify if professional autonomy is viewed differently depending on its connection to the levels of influence.

Finally, data revealed that working at print news outlets predicted larger conception-performance gaps when it came to the Watchdog and Civic roles in Rwanda and Ethiopia, and the same was true for online journalists in Rwanda. Perhaps print and online news

workers were more likely to study journalism, and thus place more importance on traditional journalistic roles like the Watchdog and Civic roles, compared to broadcast journalists, who are sometimes hired for their on-air skills rather than strictly for their writing and reporting. Therefore, print and online journalists tend to set a higher bar for those roles. That said, we hesitate to place much emphasis on this finding due to the survey's small sample size.

Study results add to existing communication literature, primarily through the theoretical prism of Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) Hierarchy of Influences model. Findings help extend this theory substantively into the field of African journalism and, more specifically, East African journalism. Within these particular journalistic cultures, lack of cohesion between idealized conception and performance of the Watchdog role suggests that, like many studies in Western contexts, institutional and social-systems factors can outweigh individual predispositions. Even when Rwandan and Ethiopian journalists perceived themselves as more autonomous, data indicated that "larger" constraints, such as cultural, organizational and institutional norms, possibly prevented reporters from fulfilling functions they believed were important to their field. Future research could further examine the interplay between levels, and specifically whether "larger" constraints supersede individual-level influences, or whether our findings are unique to this region or to countries with lower levels of press freedom. Finally, the conception-performance gaps seen only among print/online reporters in the present study indicate that institutional socialization within one particular medium can weigh heavily, whether in Ethiopia, Rwanda, or other socio-geographic contexts. The findings somewhat support Ferrucci and Kuhn's (2022) contention that organizational structures moderate the influences of other levels. However, the large gaps between journalists' conceptions and actual enactment of the watchdog role suggest that organizations in Rwanda and Ethiopia have limited power to combat the censorial institutional and social-systems forces in such authoritarian countries. Ferrucci and Kuhn (2022) concede that their revisioning of the hierarchy is not necessarily appropriate for areas outside the United States, and the results found here might support their model's geographic limitations.

Conclusion

This study is limited in that the survey sample size was relatively small, especially concerning Rwandan journalists, and online news workers were not included in the final Ethiopian sample. The researchers faced significant challenges recruiting respondents, despite multiple attempts, due to the length of the survey, the lack of financial incentive and a general culture in the region of being unfamiliar with and skeptical of participating in surveys — all of which speak to the difficulty of conducting survey research in developing countries (Lupu and Michelitch 2018). The study is further limited in that levels of perceived autonomy are similar in Rwanda and Ethiopia, two countries with similarly low levels of press freedom. Future studies could compare these countries to those with higher expected levels of autonomy, such as the U.S. or some European countries, to look for differences between countries based on this variable. In addition, while including these two African countries in the larger JRP Project is a strength of this study and gives scholars the ability to make cross-country comparisons, relying on a predetermined theoretical framework and methodological design that can apply to countries around the world is also limiting

in that some measures may not capture the nuances specific to journalistic roles in the African context. For example, some roles not included in this project may be more applicable to non-Western countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia. Roles like the change agent, the educator and the mediator, for example, are particularly relevant and make up the developmental-educative role function proposed by Hanitzsch and Vos (2018). Also, the quantitative research design may not be the most appropriate to detect additional influences that might increase the conception–performance gap among journalists in non-Western societies, such as the impact of family socialization (Dirbaba and O'Donnell 2016). Finally, coder reliability scores were low for some role variables, perhaps reflecting some of these limitations.

Despite these limitations, the larger Journalistic Role Performance Project should be commended for its theoretical and methodological complexity and scope. Further, this study is only the second large-scale cross-country survey to include journalists from African countries (see Hanitzsch et al. 2012) and the first to include journalists from Rwanda and Ethiopia. The lack of data from African countries is a shortcoming of previous important journalistic role studies, including the first wave of the JRP Project and Weaver and colleagues' American Journalist surveys. This research shines a much-needed light on an understudied region.

Notes

1. Bivariate correlations indicated that the original and transformed variables were nearly identical (both were at $r = .98$ or above). Further, results of regressions using the original variables were similar to results using the transformed variables.
2. The greatest Mahalanobis distance in the six regression models was 16.242 and the greatest Cook's distance was .254, both of which were well under the recommended threshold for multivariate outliers (Tabachnick and Fidell 2007, 75, 99).
3. The minimum tolerance score for any predictor in the models was .588, and the maximum variance inflation factor score was 1.701. Thus, no multicollinearity was suspected (Tabachnick and Fidell 2007, 88–91).

Acknowledgements

This study is part of the larger Journalistic Role Performance Project, a global research project to systematically analyze the state of journalistic cultures across the world, led by Dr. Claudia Mellado at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso in Chile.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

While the host institution for the study is the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso in Chile, each national team funded their own fieldwork. This work was supported by a Virginia Commonwealth University SEED Award.

Data Availability Statement

Contact the lead author for access to the data.

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