

The societal context of professional practice: Examining the impact of politics and economics on journalistic role performance across 37 countries

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Abstract

The impact of socio-political variables on journalism is an ongoing concern of comparative research on media systems and professional cultures. However, they have rarely been studied systematically across diverse cases, particularly outside Western democracies, and existing studies that compare western and non-western contexts have mainly focused on journalistic role conceptions rather than actual journalistic practice. Using journalistic

role performance as a theoretical and methodological framework, this paper overcomes these shortcomings through a content analysis of 148,474 news stories from 365 print, online, TV, and radio outlets in 37 countries. We consider two fundamental system-level variables—liberal democracy and market orientation—testing a series of hypotheses concerning their influence on the interventionist, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, service, infotainment, and civic roles in the news globally. Findings confirm the widely asserted hypothesis that liberal democracy is associated with the performance of public-service oriented roles. Claims that market orientation reinforces critical and civic-oriented journalism show more mixed results and give some support to the argument that there are forms of “market authoritarianism” associated with loyalist journalism. The findings also show that the interventionist and infotainment roles are not significantly associated with the standard measures of political and economic structure, suggesting the need for more research on their varying forms across societies and the kinds of system-level factors that might explain them.

Keywords

Journalistic cultures, role performance, professional roles, media systems, comparative studies

The impact of societal-level variables on the practice of journalism is a central concern of comparative analysis in journalism studies. The idea that broad characteristics of social systems and their legitimizing ideologies were reflected in the functions of journalism was the primary argument of *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert et al., 1956). Later research cast doubt on the assumption of a one-to-one correspondence between types of social systems and the multiple roles journalism performs. Media systems and journalism cultures are complex (Hallin and Mancini, 2012; Mellado, 2021), involving diverse actors who compete to define the norms of the field (Benson and Neveu, 2005) and often combining diverse influences related to local conditions and global cultural flows (Voltmer et al., 2021).

Subsequent studies on journalistic roles have moved away from the assumption of distinct, unitary journalism cultures corresponding with competing socio-political systems toward more complex conceptualizations of the profession’s position concerning democracy, the market, and audiences, while retaining the focus on normative constructs or journalists’ perceptions of their roles (Christians et al., 2009; Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Weaver and Willnat, 2012). In this line of inquiry, country differences are explained by role expectations and media system differences. The premise that normative role *conceptions* guide actual practice has always been problematic, however (Roses and Humanes, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2013).

Accordingly, a framework based on *role performance* has been proposed as an alternative for comparative analysis of journalistic cultures (e.g., Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020; Mellado, 2021). Since news is the outcome of complex decision-making and gatekeeping processes (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014) that take place within news

organizations, the role performance approach switches the focus from individual journalists' conceptions of roles as measured in surveys to the collective practices that result from organizational processes and crystallize in news content (Mellado, 2015). The empirical evidence resulting from this framework validates the practice of journalism as subject to the influence of forces working at several micro, meso and macro levels (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). At the performance level, certain aspects of journalistic cultures are significantly shaped by the macro-structural and macro-cultural context in which they develop (Esser and Umbricht, 2014). Depending on the political and economic environments in which they operate, news media are more or less compelled to scrutinize or support established powers, restrain or actively use the journalistic voice, or approach their audiences as citizens, clients, or consumers (Mellado and Van Dalen, 2017). While the multi-level character of the context of actual news production means societal-level variables only account for limited variance in journalistic role performance, previous research shows that not all roles are equally affected by societal forces (Mellado et al., 2017; Stepińska et al., 2021). Moreover, the role performance approach produces considerable evidence for the dynamic nature of journalistic cultures, as roles are fluid, situational, and historical (Mellado, 2015, 2021).

This paper is based on the second wave of the *Journalistic Role Performance* (JRP) project and compares role performance across 365 news media outlets in 37 countries with the aim of analyzing how journalistic roles vary in professional practice across national media systems. It considerably expands the sample of news content from the first wave—increases the number of countries from 18 to 37; moves from an exclusive focus on newspapers to include news outlets across four major media platforms—newspapers, television, radio and online; and examines a full range of news topics rather than only national political coverage.

Market forces and governmental policies are routinely credited with shaping the news (Benson and Hallin, 2007: 28). We focus on two broad elements of societal context related to politics and the economy, which are often addressed in comparative research as possible influences on journalistic culture—the level of freedom of expression and political and civil rights, and the dominance of market forces within political-economic systems—testing a set of hypotheses about the impact of these variables on six dimensions of journalistic role performance.

Role performance, news and journalism

Role theory conceives social roles as “patterned and characteristic social behaviours, parts or identities, that are assumed by social participants, and scripts or expectations for behavior. . .” (Biddle 1986, p. 68). A substantial literature has developed analyzing journalistic roles as sets of normative expectations about the functions of journalism in society and its obligations toward and proper relationships with other actors. They are social in character and reflect the interaction of journalists with these other actors. They vary historically and across cultures and media systems, and are often contested. As Eide and Knight (1999) point out, “consumerist” roles of journalism like the service and infotainment role have often been stigmatized as contrary to the proper function of

journalism as an institution of public citizenship, but are also valued by audiences, have had defenders within the profession and industry—in tabloid media, for example—and have come to be increasingly seen as legitimate. Moreover, Vos (2017) argues that roles are distinct from empirical functions of journalism, in the sense of conceived social effects, for example, reinforcing social hierarchies. Thus, roles are connected to normative conceptions held by both journalists and by other actors.

Journalistic roles can be studied at different levels of analysis. Journalistic role *conceptions* are typically studied through surveys of journalists. Investigating journalistic role performance, instead, involves examining journalistic roles as they are manifested in the actual practice of journalism. In other words, role performance involves looking at the outcome of collective newsroom decisions, representing the level most likely to be observed publicly, that is, in the news story. The news story contains narrative, sourcing, and reporting elements that can manifest a wide range of roles. Hence, journalistic role performance is usually measured by content analysis.

The JRP methodology applied here employs standardized content-based measures (Mellado, 2015) of journalistic roles associated with three main domains (Donsbach, 2012; Eide and Knight, 1999; Hanitzsch, 2007). Each of these roles is connected with a widely-shared normative conception of journalistic practice, and individual indicators were developed to reflect characteristics of news content typically associated with each role. The journalistic voice domain deals with the more active or passive presence of the journalist's voice in the news and includes the opposing *interventionist* and *disseminator* roles (since these are conceived as a continuum, the latter is not measured separately). The interventionist role is characterized by an explicit journalistic voice in the story through such features as stating their point of view on a subject, offering an interpretive style of reporting (in contrast to a descriptive, fact-based style), and acting as an advocate for individuals or groups in society. Where these features are not prominent, the style of reporting is more of a dispassionate and impartial *disseminator* role.

The power relations domain deals with the relationship between journalists and those in power. Journalists might defend the idea of monitoring de facto powers and denouncing wrongdoings—the *watchdog* role—by questioning and criticizing those in power either directly or through sources, by uncovering wrongdoing, by covering external investigations or by conducting investigative journalism. In opposition, the news can serve as a loyal spokesperson for those in power, conveying a positive image of them, supporting official policies, and portraying a positive image of their country through the *loyal-facilitator* role. Finally, the audience approach domain deals with the way in which journalists address the audience. The civic role addresses the audience as citizens needing a voice and visibility with respect to their problems, concerns, demands, and actions. The service role provides guidance, tips, and orientation on the issues that affect everyday life, addressing audiences as clients in need of helpful advice. Finally, the infotainment role relies on stylistic and narrative elements such as emotionality, personalization, or sensationalism to engage a spectating audience.

Aside from the interventionist/disseminator dimension, all these roles are conceived as independent and non-mutually exclusive sets of practices that may co-occur.

Journalistic role performance and societal-level variables

The two societal level variables covered in this study—liberal democracy, and to a more limited extent market orientation—are the subject of considerable discussion in the literature on the societal context of journalism, but their impact on news content has not been tested systematically across a relatively large sample of countries covering different regime types and media systems. In this section we present a set of hypotheses, tying the literature on the impact of these variables on journalism to the specific measures developed within the role performance framework.

Political structure

Previous studies have found an explanatory power of political factors on the practice of journalism (Donsbach and Patterson, 2004; Esser and Umbricht, 2014; Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Nygren and Dobek-Ostrowska, 2016). The greatest volume of theorizing and research deals with press freedom, or more broadly on democratic and civil rights in society. It is here that the literature is clearest in terms of predicted relationships. It is reasonable to assume that political structure would have the greatest impact on the performance of more political roles—such as the watchdog and loyal-facilitator roles—as well as on the civic role, which includes measures of the representation of citizen voices and collective political participation. Previous research on role performance suggests that higher levels of democratic and civil rights—we will refer to this variable as liberal democracy—are positively associated with the watchdog and civic roles and negatively associated with the loyal-facilitator role (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2021). Political structure could be assumed to have less impact on more consumer-oriented roles, since commercial pressures and incentives to maintain audience engagement may be present across a wide range of political environments (Stepińska et al., 2021).

Thus, we pose that:

H1. *The greater the degree of liberal democracy in a national system, the greater the performance of the watchdog and civic roles in the news*

H2. *The greater the degree of liberal democracy in a national system, the less the performance of the loyal-facilitator role in the news*

Studies are less clear regarding expectations about the impact of liberal democracy on the performance of the interventionist role. In established, Western democracies, we might assume that greater political freedom would be reflected in greater autonomy, enabling a more active journalistic voice, but the use of journalistic voice in such systems would also be affected by journalistic traditions such as objectivity and factuality (Esser and Umbricht, 2014). At the same time, in Western democracies interventionism has been theoretically associated with lower levels of professionalism and higher levels of political instrumentalization and partisanship (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). In transitional democracies, the active voice of journalists may reflect partisan stances in politically polarized environments, a close relation between news organizations and political actors,

or a more paternalistic view of journalists as guides and educators of public opinion (De Albuquerque, 2019).

Hence a high degree of journalistic voice doesn't necessarily reflect either the free agency and autonomy of individual journalists or a democratic role of the media. Indeed, previous role performance evidence does not show a clear linear relationship between the interventionist role and measures of press freedom or liberal democracy, suggesting that this role takes various forms in different political contexts (Stępińska et al., 2021).

Thus, we formulate the following research question:

RQ1. *Is liberal democracy significantly associated with the performance of the interventionist role?*

Economic structure

Historically, the comparative literature has offered less focus on the impact of the economic structure on professional roles. There is, however, an important traditional perspective in media studies which sees the development of the market and the rooting of the media in the market as a key factor promoting their independence. Curran and Seaton (1997) refer to this as the “Whig interpretation” which, they argue in a critical account, was dominant in conventional understandings of British media history (e.g., Asquith, 1975). This perspective is commonly associated with conservative thinkers like Friedman (1962), who argue for a natural harmony between economic and political freedom. But it became a widespread argument in media studies in the 1990s and early 2000s, when economic liberalization in many parts of the world was seen as encouraging media opening and journalistic professionalization. “Market forces,” as Lee (2001) summarized this stance, “provide an enabling mechanism for other voices than those of the government or state to gain a hearing” (see also Lawson 2002). From this position, we could hypothesize that journalistic cultures immersed in societies with strong economic rights and market economies should have a high degree of independence from political actors and that market orientation, or economic freedom, should have parallel influences to political freedom on the watchdog, loyal-facilitator, and civic roles. It is also possible, however, that market-oriented systems would have more unconstrained commercialization of media resulting in lower performance of public-interest-oriented roles, and there may be forms of “market authoritarianism” (Hallin and Mancini, 2012: 296; Winfield and Peng, 2005) in which commercial media collude with authorities and/or avoid active political coverage.

Journalism in market-oriented societies might also be expected to show a higher performance of more consumer-oriented roles. Comparative studies in Western democracies have typically used commercialism to account for country-level variation in infotainment in the news (Esser and Strömbäck, 2012; Umbricht and Esser, 2016). Since commercialization is a global trend (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), we might expect to find this tendency across a wide range of systems. Similarly, it is reasonable to assume that in more consumer-oriented systems the performance of the service role would be higher.

To test the influence of economic structure, we propose two hypotheses:

H3. *The greater the degree of market orientation in a national system, the greater the performance of the watchdog and civic roles, and the less the performance of the loyal-facilitator role in the news*

H4. *The greater the degree of market orientation in a national system, the greater the performance of the service and infotainment roles in the news*

Method

Based on standardized operationalization of the watchdog, civic, interventionist, loyal-facilitator, infotainment, and service roles, we conducted a content analysis of the news published in four platforms—newspapers, television, radio and online—in 37 countries.

We recruited teams in countries that represented a variety of political regimes, geographic regions, and media system classifications across North America, Latin America, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Oceania.

Sampling

Researchers in each country selected two to four news outlets per platform. Since the structure and format of media systems differ across countries, including size, audience orientation, ownership, political leaning, and language, researchers were asked to ensure that the selected outlets represented as much as possible the diversity of each system. Accordingly, the number of media outlets included varied across countries, with greater heterogeneity in a media system associated with the inclusion of more outlets. The number of outlets and news items per country appears in the Supplementary Information file in [Table A-1](#) and [A-2](#).

Using the constructed week method, a stratified-systematic sample of 2 weeks was selected from January 2 to December 31, 2020. The sampling unit was the *most watched* newscast within each selected television channel, the *most listened-to* news program within each selected radio channel, *the full issue* of the selected newspapers for print media, and the *entire homepage* of the selected news websites (including the respective links) for online media. The unit of observation was the news item. All news content in the sampled outlets was coded on those days, excluding op-ed pieces, reviews, and stories not produced by the journalists at the respective news outlet—e.g., (labelled) wire service stories. Our final sample consisted of 148,474 news stories from 365 news outlets.

Measurements

To measure the performance of the watchdog, interventionist, loyal-facilitator, service, infotainment, and civic roles in the news, we relied on the operationalization proposed by [Mellado \(2015\)](#) and validated in subsequent studies ([Mellado, 2021](#); [Mellado and Van Dalen, 2017](#)). The original indicators, designed during the first wave of the project for the analysis of print media, were adjusted based on the special modalities of radio, television, and online media, including the audio-visual resources of these media platforms, such as

sound manipulation, non-verbal expressions, and editing. Specific indicators for each role appear in the Supplementary Information file in [Table A-3](#). Each indicator was measured on a presence/absence basis.

Following the coding, confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs)¹ were conducted per each role domain. Indicators not showing sufficient consistency were excluded from the indices (see CFA fit indices for role performance in the Supplementary Information file in [Table A-4](#)).² Based on the CFA results, the individual indicators comprising each role were combined into a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 1. For descriptive purposes, we calculated raw scores (total points divided by the total items for each role). A higher score expressed a higher presence of each journalistic role in the news. Meanwhile, we used factor scores to test for differences in the performance of the roles analyzed.

To analyze the impact of societal-level factors we used two measures. For political structure we used the V-Dem Liberal Democracy index, which includes 69 indicators measuring electoral democracy, rights of free expression and political participation, rule of law and political checks and balances. The Reporters Without Borders index of press freedom is included in many comparative analyses of journalism cultures. Since our analysis is focused on the impact of societal variables at the broadest level, however, we used the more inclusive V-Dem index. The two are highly correlated, and produce similar results; the same is also true of the Freedom House Global Freedom Index.

In the case of economic structure, the two main indices available are the Heritage Foundation Economic Freedom Index and the Fraser Institute Economic Freedom Index. Both organizations have strong ideological agendas, supporting free-market policies. Given that the purpose of this part of the analysis is to test hypotheses associated with this point of view, however, these measures are appropriate. Specifically, we decided to use the Heritage Foundation index, which has four sub-indices: Rule of Law, Government Size, Regulatory Efficiency and Open Markets. The first of these sub-indices overlaps conceptually with the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index and is relatively highly correlated with it. Thus, to avoid the overlap and to focus more specifically on the extent to which *markets* are unconstrained, we chose to use the latter three elements of the Economic Freedom Index, which more narrowly measure the economic policy. We will refer to this measure as “market orientation.”

We also included several control variables. At the story level, we measured if the news was related to the pandemic, the length/size of the item, the news topic, and the location of the event/story (domestic/foreign). At the organizational level, we controlled for platform, media ownership, and for the outlet’s political orientation.

Data collection

The sampling process and the coding were conducted by native speakers in each country. National teams received extensive training during 2019 and 2020 to ensure a good understanding of the codebook containing operational definitions and examples for each variable. The fieldwork was carried out during 2020-2021.

Using Krippendorff’s alpha (Ka), the final global intercoder reliability was 0.79. The variation in intercoder reliability across roles ranged from 0.76 to 0.86, while the variation

across countries ranged from 0.72 to 0.91 (see [Table A-5](#) in the Supplementary Information file).

Analytical strategy

To investigate structural influences on role performance, and due to the nested structure of our data, multilevel regressions were conducted for each journalistic role. Each model contained three levels, with 148,474 news stories being nested in 365 news media organizations that, in turn, are nested in 37 countries. Because journalistic role performance is conceived as highly variable across specific contexts across and within each national media system, we analyze the influence of country-level factors, and we control for other elements at the story and media outlet level that vary within systems.

To report societal differences on role performance, the random intercepts of the two higher levels were included in all models. Each analysis began with an intercept-only model to account for the fact that role performance characteristics are unequally distributed across the three levels. Hence, the intercept-only models help to detect whether individual, organizational, and country differences occur before additional predictors are considered.

Subsequently, predictors were hierarchically included as fixed effects at the societal level. Null (1) and final models (2) for societal level predictors—after controlling for story-routine and organizational level predictors—are reported.

Results

While findings on all roles analyzed vary significantly across societal contexts (see [Table A-6](#) in the Supplementary Information file), we found sharp differences among roles in terms of the amount of variation explained at the country level. Indeed, the intercept-only multilevel models revealed that variation in the performance of the loyal-facilitator role is better explained at the country level than all other roles. This result resonates with findings from our previous wave ([Mellado, 2021](#)), as well as with other findings at the role-perception level regarding the importance given to the “collaborative role” ([Hanitzsch et al., 2019](#)), suggesting that journalism’s support for elites decidedly varies at the macro level.

The performance of the interventionist role is second in terms of the amount of variation across countries, showing that the active use of journalists’ voices does tend to be a prominent characteristic in certain national journalistic cultures. While the performance of all other roles is also significantly affected by country differences, the amount of variation explained tends to be lower in comparative terms (see Covariance Parameters in [Tables 1–4](#)).³

In the following, we report the specific impact of macro political and economic factors on role performance.

Power relations: Loyal-facilitator and watchdog roles

Our findings show that when taking a stance in relation to power institutions, journalistic cultures tend to be more critical ($M = .054$; $SD = 0.110$) than loyal overall ($M = 0.030$; $SD = 0.093$). Nevertheless, this is not the case for all societies, and the patterns of difference are consistent with the common hypothesis that political structure shapes journalistic practice in this domain. The data show that liberal democracy is positively associated with the watchdog role ($b = 0.041$, $p = .01$; $\beta = 0.09$), thus supporting *H1* (see Fixed Effects and Covariance Parameters in Table 1). Countries that rank at the top of this role are mostly represented by established democracies (UK, Israel, Spain, Switzerland) and Eastern European post-communist democracies (Estonia, Poland, and Hungary), while authoritarian societies (Egypt, Cuba, UAE) show the lowest level of the watchdog role. Supporting *H2*, our findings also show that liberal democracy has a significant negative effect on the loyal-facilitator role ($b = -0.179$, $p = .001$; $\beta = -0.16$). Journalists in authoritarian societies such as UAE, Egypt, Ethiopia, Cuba, Qatar, and Kuwait are the top performers of the loyal-facilitator role, while ranking significantly lower in the performance of the watchdog role. In turn, as expected, journalistic cultures from full democracies and especially liberal media systems, such as Australia, Ireland, and the United States, present significantly lower levels of loyalism in their news (Table A-6 in the Supplementary Information file).

In contrast, market orientation does not show a significant association with the performance of either the watchdog or the loyal-facilitator role (Table 1). Thus, *H3*,

Table 1. Multilevel regressions of societal-level effects on performance of interventionist and politics-oriented roles (all news topics).

	Interventionist		Watchdog		Loyal-facilitator	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
Fixed effects						
Intercept	.054*	-.177***	.078***	-.085***	.133***	.028 (.034)
	(.025)	(.049)	(.017)	(.026)	(.031)	
V-dem liberal democracy		-.023 (.032)		.041** (.016) (B = .09)		-.079*** (.018) (B = -.16)
Market orientation		-.002 (.030)		.029 (.015)		-.031 (.017)
Covariance Parameters (ID)						
Residual	.233***	.223***	.165***	.143***	.175***	.166***
Intercept news outlet	.034***	.028***	.015***	.008***	.023***	.015***
Intercept country	.019***	.018***	.009***	.004**	.033***	.005**
-2LL	235531.38	200227.51	176141.33	133648.43	186801.97	155709.92

Note. ID = the covariance type used in the Multilevel Regressions (one random effect was estimated at each of the higher levels); LL = log likelihood. Significant predictors and standardized coefficients (B) of significant predictors in bold.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Table 2. Multilevel regressions of societal-level effects on performance of audience-oriented roles (all news topics).

	Service		Infotainment		Civic	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
Fixed effects						
Intercept	.088*** (.011)	.020 (.022)	.058** (.019)	-.140*** (.035)	.188*** (.021)	-.101** (.038)
V-dem liberal democracy		-.023** (.011) (B = -.07)		.036 (.021)		.052* (.023) (B = .08)
Market orientation		.017* (.010) (B = .05)		-.005 (.020)		-.010 (.021)
Covariance Parameters (ID)						
Residual	.105***	.092***	.209***	.192***	.303***	.278***
Intercept news outlet	.009***	.007***	.024***	.014***	.026***	.017***
Intercept country	.003***	.002**	.010***	.008**	.014***	.009***
-2LL	98971.91	68927.08	215542.30	177329.76	278553.43	232724.18

Note. ID = the covariance type used in the Multilevel Regressions (one random effect was estimated at each of the higher levels); LL = log likelihood. Significant predictors and standardized coefficients (B) of significant predictors in bold.

****p* < .001; ***p* < .01; **p* < .05.

Table 3. Multilevel regressions of societal-level effects on performance of interventionist and politics-oriented roles (news on macro politics).

	Interventionist		Watchdog		Loyal-facilitator	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
Fixed effects						
Intercept	.061** (.024)	-.177*** (.053)	.194*** (.022)	-.024*** (.038)	.110** (.035)	.008 (.040)
V-dem liberal democracy		-.033 (.030)		.067** (.021) (B = .12)		-.118*** (.022) (B = -.22)
Market orientation		-.024 (.029)		.041* (.020) (B = .07)		.036* (.020) (B = .05)
Covariance Parameters (ID)						
Residual	231***	.225***	.209***	.193***	.181***	.173***
Intercept news outlet	.040***	.034***	.023***	.017***	.031***	.020***
Intercept country	.018***	.016**	.016***	.007**	.042***	.007**
-2LL	105908.43	91193.90	98210.14	80923.08	87261.81	73406.69

Note. ID = the covariance type used in the Multilevel Regressions (one random effect was estimated at each of the higher levels); LL = log likelihood. Significant predictors and standardized coefficients (B) of significant predictors in bold.

****p* < .001; ***p* < .01; **p* < .05.

Table 4. Multilevel regressions of societal-level effects on performance of audience-oriented roles (news on macro politics).

	Service		Infotainment		Civic	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
Fixed effects						
Intercept	.072*** (.009)	-.054** (.020)	.035* (.019)	.029 (.037)	.306*** (.027)	.142*** (.047)
V-dem liberal democracy		-.021* (.011) (B = -.06)		.039 (.029)		.060 (.029)
Market orientation		.006 (.010)		.003 (.032)		-.022 (.028)
Covariance Parameters (ID)						
Residual	.078***	.072***	.175***	.164***	.410***	.374
Intercept news outlet	.006***	.005***	.022***	.016***	.035***	.023***
Intercept country	.003***	.002**	.010***	.008**	.023***	.016***
-2LL	22793.35	14313.10	84084.52	69791.04	149391.33	125146.97

Note. ID = the covariance type used in the Multilevel Regressions (one random effect was estimated at each of the higher levels); LL = log likelihood. Significant predictors and standardized coefficients (B) of significant predictors in bold.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

predicting that market orientation, like liberal democracy, would be associated with critical journalism is not supported by our study when testing it in the full dataset.

Audience approach: Service, infotainment, and civic roles

Overall, our findings show that journalism around the world mostly addresses the audience as spectator, with 30 of 37 countries performing the infotainment role ($M = 0.107$; $SD = 0.189$) significantly more prominently than the service role ($M = 0.063$; $SD = 0.140$), and especially the civic role ($M = 0.055$; $SD = 0.118$), revealing that audiences are being entertained more than advised or empowered (Table A-6 in the Supplementary Information file).

Similar to the results from the first wave of our project when studying print journalism, we found that consolidated and transitional democracies, such as Germany, Argentina, Poland, and Chile, rank at the top of the performance of the infotainment role—along with Serbia and Estonia that joined the second wave—while journalistic cultures from authoritarian countries show middle and low levels of performance of this role. Nevertheless, the data show that neither liberal democracy ($p = .102$), nor market orientation ($p = .778$)—as predicted by $H4$ —are significantly associated with the performance of infotainment (Table 2).

In the case of the civic role, our models show that liberal democracy does influence the performance of civic journalism, as predicted (*H1*), with democratic countries displaying the role significantly more ($b = 0.052, p = .028; \beta = 0.08$) than those with less political freedom, where individual rights like freedom of assembly are not protected and citizen voices, protests and demands tend to be censored. Once again, however, contrary to *H3*, market orientation does not influence the performance of the civic role. Full democracies like the UK, Canada, Israel, France and Germany, rank highest in the performance of civic journalism while most authoritarian countries show the lowest presence of this role. Still, nations with varying levels of democracy show important levels of the civic role in the news, suggesting that coverage of citizens protests and demands in “hybrid systems” can be triggered by weak rule of law, corruption or human rights abuses. It is also possible that in some cases expressions of citizen voices reflected in the civic role are promoted by, or supportive of, political authorities.

While the infotainment role is unaffected by the societal factors analyzed in this study, and the civic role is associated with liberal democracy only, the service role, where journalists provide tips and advice on everyday life or consumer information, is positively influenced by market orientation ($b = 0.017, p = .040; \beta = 0.05$), as predicted (*H4*). The service role is also negatively associated with liberal democracy ($b = -0.023, p = .029; \beta = -0.07$), with countries that are more market-oriented and at the same time have less political freedom often performing this role significantly more (Table 2). Because liberal democracy and strong market orientation do not necessarily go hand-in-hand, an interesting finding is that most authoritarian contexts analyzed in our study that display high levels of market orientation tend to score very high in the performance of the service role, including the UAE, Egypt, and Qatar. While there is insufficient previous evidence that explicitly links the service role with political variables, the higher levels of service role in authoritarian societies could relate to the more didactic approach of the media in authoritarian contexts, where being a “guide” is part of the journalistic culture, but only further research can confirm this.

Journalistic voice: The interventionist role

Looking at the extent to which journalists are detached reporters or the active agents that the interventionist role ($M = 0.181; SD = 0.220$) entails, our findings show that while inter-country variation is substantial, the standard system-level variables of liberal democracy ($RQ1, p = .470$), and market orientation ($p = .935$) fail to explain the performance of this role. Societies with higher levels of political freedom or those that have a higher market orientation do not necessarily allow for a more pronounced use of journalists’ personal voice in the final news product (Table 1). Countries that have contrasting levels of democracy score significantly higher than the average in the performance of the interventionist role, including full democracies (Israel, Canada, Germany, and Taiwan), hybrid/transitional democracies (Hungary, Poland, and Argentina), and authoritarian countries (Cuba). At the other extreme, journalism cultures that score significantly lower than the average present a more consistent pattern—mostly in Middle East countries with

strong political influence on the news such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Kuwait (Table A-6 in the Supplementary Information file).

This result echoes previous findings from the first wave of our study that question the linear relationship between freedom and autonomy and a higher presence of the journalistic voice in the news.

Is politics different?

While the models reported above did control for both organizational and story-level factors—including the news topic—a question might be raised as to whether the impact of societal-level factors is obscured by the diversity of the content covered in this study. Most of the theory we draw on in conceptualizing relations between societal-level variables and news content is focused on macro politics; therefore, it is possible that the diversity of our content sample, which includes sports, entertainment, lifestyle features and the like, conceals some of the relationships between macro-level variables and role performance. We therefore replicated the analysis, excluding various forms of “soft news” and focusing only on “hard news” coming from topics related to government and legislatures, elections and political parties, defense and national security, social problems, and protests and demonstrations ($n = 63,202$).

The results show that the impact of liberal democracy on the performance of the political-oriented watchdog and loyal-facilitator roles—positive in the first case and negative in the second—is more strongly evident when we focus only on political news (Table 3). In the case of market orientation, a significant, though relatively small positive relationship with the watchdog role emerges. This is consistent with H3, and suggests that in some cases market orientation may contribute to a context for critical journalism. At the same time, a significant positive association of market orientation with the loyal role also emerges. This is clearly worthy of further study. In regimes that are politically authoritarian but also market-oriented, corporate and political powers are often intertwined, and the presence of prosperous national businesses and industries could thus be a source of either national pride or elite support in the media.

The performance of the service role in macro political news is only associated (negatively) with liberal democracy, indicating that market orientation does affect the performance of the service role but in “softer” news beats. Finally, the performance of the civic role in political news is not impacted by liberal democracy (Table 4), as it was when analyzing the overall performance of journalistic roles across all news topics. It is possible, of course, that closer analyses of particular countries would show qualitative differences in the civic role related to forms of citizen participation.

Discussion

In this paper we examined the impact of two key elements of the societal-level context on journalistic role performance across a wide range of media systems: markets and political milieus. Consistent with the standard liberal theory, our findings show that in democratic environments where there is more political freedom there is more monitoring of those in

positions of power (watchdog role), though the evidence is more mixed on this point for articulating citizen concerns and demands (civic role). As expected, in less democratic political settings with more restrictive freedoms, not only do these two roles tend to fade, but journalism is more likely to cater to elites through the loyal-facilitator role. While *Four Theories* advanced this argument more than six decades ago, our study provides strong support to this key hypothesis in journalism and media studies based on a large sample of news from multiple platforms and with a diverse lens, beyond the Western hemisphere.

At the same time, we found additional evidence of the complexity of interventionism, a finding introduced in the first wave of the JRP project (Mellado, 2021). The active use of journalists' voice, opinions, adjectives, or calls to action in the news as opposed to detached and factual dissemination is a practice that appears to be deeply ingrained in the professional ethos of many journalists across different cultures, inviting more focalized research on the specific nature of interventionism. High levels of interventionism can be found in authoritarian, democratic or hybrid systems, and in highly market-oriented as well as in state-controlled economies. This suggests that the role probably has different forms, functions and roots in different systems. A high level of interventionism might reflect a propagandistic role of the media in an authoritarian system, or a partisan function in a highly pluralistic regime or highly polarized political environment (Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez, 2014). It might also be associated with a high level of professional autonomy, reflecting a shift toward "critical professionalism" in both Western (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 271-3) and non-Western societies, or with a current discourse within the journalism profession that questions the value and practice of journalistic objectivity calling on journalists to make judgment-statements based on evidence (Schudson and Duyen Tran, 2021). It might also be related to commercial pressures and audience fragmentation pushing toward more subjective relations between the journalist and the audience (Esser and Umbricht, 2014).

The evidence for the claim of classical liberal theory that political and economic freedoms go hand in hand to promote independent journalism is more equivocal. Market orientation did have a significant positive influence on the watchdog role in political coverage, albeit smaller than the effect of liberal democracy. At the same time, in contrast to the effect of liberal democracy, market orientation predicts loyalism in political news, suggesting that when capitalism and authoritarianism join forces, they can prompt a more propagandist tone that supports both business and political elites. This interconnection between economic forces and journalism, and the subsequent impact on journalistic autonomy, has been studied in democratic (e.g., Ornebring and Karlsson, 2022), authoritarian (e.g., Dessie et al., 2022) and hybrid/transitional environments (Milojević and Krstić, 2018), but not at the specific level of role performance as outlined in this research. Based on findings from this study, further explorations are required into how news processes are tied to economic gain by powerful media entities that might support the loyal-facilitator role and amplify hegemonic narratives in diverse cultural environments.

Second, while the infotainment role in media is historically linked to the global processes of deregulation and media competition (Umbricht and Esser, 2016), our analysis shows that market orientation does not influence the presence of infotainment. It

may be that the general level of societal market orientation is not always reflected in media markets specifically. It is also possible that practices like personalization and representation of emotion reflect an evolution of professional norms toward subjectivity not reducible to the level of commercialization in a media system (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Still, market orientation at the societal level does appear to have significant impact on the performance of the service role, supporting its close ties to consumer culture.

While our study contributes to the understanding of journalistic cultures globally, several limitations should be addressed. Although illuminating societal-level differences in role performance across countries, the analysis aggregates from diverse contexts and utilizes variations of broadly-conceived forms of journalistic roles. As Powers and Vera Zambrano (2018) point out, however, this form of analysis necessarily leaves much unexplored about the performance of the six roles measured here in different contexts. The watchdog role, for example, is performed at different levels across all media systems. Its development, however, is probably different in authoritarian systems, or in highly polarized polities, than it is in more stable or consensual ones. The meaning of infotainment is probably also different between elite traditional newspapers and new digital media (our data show that national systems vary considerably in the extent to which they are homogeneous or heterogeneous in the roles performed by different outlets). Clearly there is room for a finer-grained analysis of specific roles in specific national contexts, including qualitative analysis, which would also be important to assessing the validity of measures across systems.

A second limitation is that our current analysis does not consider the interrelationships and possible interactions among the different levels of analysis covered in the study. We focus here on the direct influence of system-level variables on role performance, controlling for story-level and organizational variables. But it would also be possible to look at the indirect impact of societal variables, mediated through variables at other levels of analysis—for example, the impact of story topics in the relationship between market orientation and role performance.

Finally, this paper deals with two key societal-level factors. Still, there are many other societal-level variables that could be taken into account in future research. These include factors related to the political party system, patterns of ethnic and linguistic diversity and cultural variables as well as characteristics specific to media policy and media systems, many of which have not been conceptualized or measured at the global level. Important criticism has been raised about the reliance of scholars on standardized measures rooted in liberal theory, which take Western liberal democracies as the principal point of comparison (e.g., Becker et al., 2007; Burgess, 2010; Bush, 2017). These variables are widely used in part because few measures are available which cover nearly all countries in the world. The analysis presented here certainly confirms that liberal democracy, in particular, has important effects on journalistic practice across a wide range of media systems, and is an important variable to include in comparative analysis. It also shows, however, that even for political roles of journalism which are significantly predicted by liberal democracy, the amount of variance it accounts for is limited, and it does not have significant effect on key variables like journalistic voice and the infotainment role. It is clear, therefore, that there is a need both to develop measures covering a wider range of societal and media system

characteristics, and to carry out more context-specific comparative analysis that would be sensitive to factors that shape journalism across diverse media systems.








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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Confirmatory factor analysis is a statistical procedure used to test the factor structure of a set of observed variables, allowing to demonstrate the relationship between observed variables and their underlying latent constructs (in our case, between each indicator and the roles to which they belong).
2. We also tested for measurement invariance for categorical outcomes, conducting multi-group analyses of measurement invariance. The data show partial measurement invariance across countries.

3. While the focus of our analysis is cross-country international comparison, it is important to note that role performance, while patterned, is not homogenous within countries. Indeed, there are significant intra-country variations in the performance of the six roles analyzed by this study across outlets (see Table A-7 in the Supplementary Information File). The most striking occur in countries where there is pronounced political-polarization and/or internal conflict, or countries absent of well-established journalistic cultures.

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