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Patterns of Journalistic Role Performance during Public Health Crises: Covering COVID-19 in the UK

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ABSTRACT

While journalism scholarship has long been exploring how journalistic role performance (“JRP” thereafter) varies in different scenarios, seldom have studies captured how JRP during public health crises reflects the all-around influence of such crises on journalism practice. To fill the gap, our study examined the patterns of JRP in UK news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. We draw on a content analysis of 4,184 news stories from 15 UK national news outlets across television, radio, print, and online platforms in 2020. Our results indicate that UK journalism emphasised the performance of the service role by providing news of use to the public, the civic role by (partially) inviting the public into political life, and the interventionist role by explicitly bringing to the fore journalists’ voices. UK journalism also suppressed the infotainment role. The power relations between UK journalists and the government showed a more complicated picture. UK journalists performed a watchdog role by maintaining a seemingly sceptical and distant approach to government sources, yet also showed traces of cooperation with government agendas in ensuring compliance with public health messaging. These findings are discussed in relation to ongoing debates in health and crisis news, and journalistic role performance.

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Introduction

Journalistic role performance (“JRP” thereafter) is a collective outcome of negotiations among, for example, journalists’ individual characteristics and levels of professionalism, newsroom editorial and economic constraints, and the wider social, political, and cultural contexts (Mellado 2015; Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017). JRP therefore is not a static concept but varies according to different scenarios and cultures (Mellado 2020). Previous studies have yielded rich insights into the variations of JRP in different national and/or newsroom contexts (Hellmueller and Mellado 2016; Møller Hartley and Askanius 2021), time scales (Widholm, Riegert, and Roosvall 2021), and story types (Scherr, Bachl, and de Vreese 2019).

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In this study, we address the question of how patterns of JRP vary in public health crises. In healthcare coverage, Briggs and Hallin (2010, 153) argued that journalists tend to transmit, without questioning, the information from health-related authorities because of their scientific expertise, “toward the consensual goal of health.” It is also established that during periods of societal crises, such as public health crises, journalism may suspend its watchdog role and tend towards consensus by following the agendas of elites (e.g., Papadopoulou and Maniou 2021; Saptorini, Zhao, and Jackson 2022). Scholarship also shows that during crisis events, there is tendency for news media to sensationalise, which demonstrates the infotainment role (Cottle 2009). These findings lead to the criticism levelled against the news media for being dysfunctional and failing to sufficiently inform the public to navigate the crises.

The complexities of public health crises, however, and their intricate relationship with JRP might challenge the above generalised views. Public health crisis refers to “... an event(s) that overwhelms the capacity of local systems to maintain a community’s health [...] rang[ing] from specific health issues, such as a disease outbreak in an otherwise unaffected community, to a full-scale disaster with property destruction and/or population displacement and multiple public health issues” (Bolton and Burkle, 2020, 233). Examples include the 2014 Ebola crisis (Kilgo, Yoo, and Johnson 2019), the 2016 Zika crisis (Jerit et al. 2019), and the COVID-19 pandemic emerging in 2020 (Lwin et al. 2023). As observed by Vobič (2022, 664),

... media and journalistic orientations and performance are indeed re-articulated during pandemics, but not through journalism’s simple transformation into public health advocacy since much more complex, even contradictory and conflicting communication patterns emerge in the contexts of high societal uncertainty, considerable public anxiety and the (dis)connect between trust, expertise and risk assessments.

In brief, the variations in JRP might spread across different journalistic roles during public health crises, reflecting the all-around influence of the crises on journalism practice. Yet, few studies have explored this angle. We argue that the understanding of JRP is of particular significance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its impacts go beyond health, extending into economic, social, and cultural domains, with the pandemic becoming a generalised crisis and reported on by journalists across all news beats. Therefore, examining the implications of COVID-19 pandemic on JRP allows us to investigate shifts in the performance of roles during a significant public health crisis.

JRP and Public Health Crises

We employed standardised content-based measures (Mellado 2015) of journalistic roles associated with three main domains in which the practice of journalism can be analysed (Donsbach 2012; Eide and Knight 1999; Hanitzsch 2007). The domain of the presence of the journalistic voice includes the *interventionist role* (i.e., journalist having an explicit voice in the story, and sometimes acting as an advocate for individuals or groups in society). The domain of relationship between journalists and those in power includes two roles, the *watchdog role* (i.e., journalists questioning, criticising, or denouncing institutions and individuals that form part of different elites), and the *loyal-facilitator role* (i.e., journalists cooperating with those in power or supporting their nation-state). The

audience domain includes three roles, the *civic role* (i.e., journalists approaching the audience as citizens, encouraging them to get involved in public debate, and to participate in political life), the *service role* (i.e., journalists approaching the audience as clients, providing them with helpful information, knowledge, and advice about goods and services that they can apply in their day-to-day lives), and the *infotainment role* (i.e., journalists approaching the audience as spectators, using different stylistics, narrative, and/or visual discourses to entertain and thrill them).

Journalism scholarship has explored variations of the above roles when covering public health crises, although some roles are more studied than others, roles are not always the explicit focus of analysis; they have never been combined in a single study. Studies are consistent in identifying the prevalence of the service role when covering public health crises, as news coverage tends to highlight the impact that public health crises have on people's everyday personal lives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Edwards (2022) found that Spanish newspapers emphasised the reported symptoms of contracting the virus, while both Zhang and Cheung (2022) and Wirz et al. (2022) discovered that the U.S. press emphasised the pandemic's influence on various aspects of people's daily lives, for example, the lack of paid sick leave for employees with confirmed cases, the impact of the pandemic on people's wellness, travel plans, and groceries. Patterns are consistent in reporting other public health crises. For example, Dutch media (Vasterman and Ruigrok 2013) and Australian media (Fogarty et al. 2011) alarmed the public about the risks of the virus during the 2009 A/H1N1 pandemic outbreak, and Canadian media on the risks of diseases such as SARS (Berry, Wharf-Higgins, and Naylor 2007).

Moreover, news stories also provide tips and advice to audiences to cope with crises. For example, Spanish newspapers provided information about preventive measures (e.g., isolation, hygiene, and sanitation) for COVID-19 (Edwards 2022); Australian media used quotations to offer advice and recommended actions for viewers to manage H1N1 risks (Fogarty et al. 2011); and U.S. newspapers covered practical information on H1N1 preventions, diagnose, and cure (Oh et al. 2012).

Based on the above review of existing research, this study proposes:

H1: The performance of the service role is positively related to covering COVID-19 related news stories in the UK.

Contradictory patterns have been found in the infotainment role, watchdog role, and loyal-facilitator role, in relation to public health crises. As to the infotainment role, sensationalised coverage was found in covering the COVID-19 pandemic using dramatic tone and metaphors (Milutinović 2021; Wasserman et al. 2021); covering the Zika virus using emotionally charged language (Jerit et al. 2019); covering the Avian Influenza using expressions of worst-case scenarios and emotionally-loaded words (Dudo, Dahlstrom, and Brossard 2007); and covering SARS using metaphors, exaggeration, and dramatic superlative adjectives (Berry, Wharf-Higgins, and Naylor 2007; Washer 2004). In the case of UK, Hilton and Hunt (2011) found that the vast majority of UK newspapers' coverage of A/H1N1 used bland, instead of sensationalised, language in headlines. Nevertheless, UK journalism is not immune to a sensationalised way of reporting (e.g., Conboy 2006; Humprecht 2019; Jensen 2012), which is also evidenced in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic with journalists using fear-inducing language (Hase and Engelke 2022).

Studies have also found the news media is partly responsible for the politicisation of health issues and epidemics and their public responses. In the U.S., studies show how both the Zika and Ebola viruses were politicised in the news coverage (Singer, Willison, and Greer 2020). Alongside the commercially-grounded conflict frame that drives such coverage, politicisation can also be rooted in other professional logics of journalism including the watchdog role and norms of political balance and impartiality. In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tshabangu and Salawu (2021) found that in performing the watchdog role, Zimbabwean journalists exposed acts of power abuse and corruption among businesses and public officers, while Vobič (2022) found that Slovenian journalists scrutinised the irregularities of state's pandemic mitigation measures. On the contrary, both Saptorini, Zhao, and Jackson (2022) and Papadopoulou and Maniou (2021) found that some governments used the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to restrict press freedom, control the information agenda, throttle access to ministers and officials, and therefore impede the watchdog function of the media.

The flipside of the watchdog role is the loyal-facilitator role, where journalists cooperate with those in power in upholding existing power relations. Evidence of this role was found in Milutinović (2021) which uncovered the promotion of political strategies in COVID-19 pandemic mitigation in Serbian media, and Buchmeier (2022) which found that Japan's public broadcaster NHK cut the COVID-19 risk in Tokyo from the news agenda, coinciding with the official agenda towards the Olympic Games which is considered to be a boost to the nation's global image. However, Hooker, King, and Leask (2012) found that journalists in major Australian print, radio, and television media organisations who reported on avian influenza and pandemic planning were cautious about being mere conduits of governmental agendas and less critical towards the government in their coverage.

Beyond public health crisis contexts, studies on the performance of watchdog and loyal-facilitator roles in the UK specifically also yielded mixed findings. On the one hand, although historically scholarship has placed UK journalism within the liberal media tradition, they also noted the strong partisan tendencies of the UK press (Hallin and Mancini 2004), particularly when reporting on politics and elections, that can push parts of the press towards supporting the government's agenda (Cammaerts et al. 2016). On the other hand, earlier research on the role conceptions of UK journalists emphasised their role as impartial disseminators of information (e.g., Donsbach 1983), particularly in the broadcast sector, which has also been identified in recent studies. For example, a survey of UK journalists highlighted the significance that is placed on holding power to account (Thurman, Cornia, and Kunert 2016). Further, a comparative study between British and German journalism cultures showed that UK journalists perceive their role to be more adversarial than their German counterparts to those in power (Henkel, Thurman, and Deffner 2019). The pattern seems to be reflected in covering public health crises. For example, Cornia et al. (2016) found that when covering the 2009 swine flu pandemic, UK newspaper journalists performed a watchdog role by questioning the government's pandemic management and that this role performance was independent of the newspapers' political affiliation.

The performance of the interventionist and civic roles has received less attention in the literature that examines the coverage of public health crises. A few exceptions emerged in studying the roles performed during the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit using indicators only

moderately analogous to JRP. In terms of the interventionist role, Blom et al. (2021) found that Danish journalists acted as a mobiliser, i.e., mobilising the audience in ways of thinking and behaving, or as an interpreter, i.e., providing interpretations of reported issues, when covering the pandemic in televised news interviews and press meetings. Moreover, Edwards (2022) found that Spanish newspapers called for the public to take action in quarantine, social distancing, disinfection, and wearing masks, and framed them as “everyone’s responsibility.” While previous studies found that UK journalists, generally, are more favourable to factual, instead of intervening, reporting (Henkel, Thurman, and Deffner 2019; Thurman, Cornia, and Kunert 2016). As to the civic role, Holland and Lewis (2021) identified that in the pandemic news reporting in Australia, citizens were one of the main sources quoted or referenced, and approaching the audience as “political astute citizens” was the dominant pattern of reporting through covering, for example, how citizens responded to the public health measures (e.g., border closures and testing) and the actions of the political leaders and public health authorities. Nevertheless, both Matthews et al. (2023) and Mulupi and Zirugo (2022) found that the voices of ordinary citizens were not prominent in the news coverage of the pandemic in the case of UK and African press respectively.

Given the above inconsistent findings, this study also asks:

RQ1: How is the performance of the infotainment, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, intervention, and civic role, respectively, related to covering COVID-19 related news stories in the UK?

On account of the comparative, cross-national orientation of most JRP studies, their focus invariably remains at the level of the role. But journalistic roles are containers that hold several indicators, and it is likely that at any one time, some of them are driving the performance of a particular role over others. In this paper, we draw attention to these indicators, or sub-roles, in order to bring further nuance to our understanding of the six roles in covering the COVID-19 pandemic:

RQ2: How do the specific indicators within each role contribute to the meaningful differences, if there are any, in its performance when covering COVID-19 related news stories in the UK?

Method

Sampling

This study was based on a content analysis of news published in four platforms—news-papers, television, radio, and online—across 15 news outlets in the UK (see [Table 1](#)). The criteria used to select the media outlets were audience size, reach, and level of agenda setting influence. We also ensured that the selected outlets represented the diversity of the UK’s media system as much as possible considering audience orientation, political leaning, and ownership.

Using the constructed week method, a stratified-systematic sample of two weeks was selected for each media outlet from 2 January to 31 December, 2020. The sampling unit for the respective platforms was the most watched newscast within each selected channel (TV), the news programme with the greatest audience (radio), the full issue (press), and the entire homepage of the selected websites (online). All current news content in the sampled outlets was sampled on those days, excluding editorials, opinion columns,

Table 1. Sampled news outlets and numbers of sampled news stories per outlet.

Media type	News outlet	Audience orientation	Political leaning	Ownership	<i>N</i>
Television	BBC News	Popular	None	Public	271
	Channel 4 News	Elite	None	Public	244
	Sky News	Popular	None	Private	283
	ITV News	Popular	None	Private	248
Radio	BBC Radio 4	Elite	None	Public	321
	BBC Radio 2	Popular	None	Public	242
	TalkSport	Popular	None	Private	270
	Classic FM	Popular	None	Private	212
Newspapers	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	Elite	Right	Private	315
	<i>The Guardian</i>	Elite	Left	Private/Trust	263
	<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	Popular	Left	Private	255
	<i>The Sun</i>	Popular	Right	Private	213
Online Media	BBC News Online	Popular	None	Public	337
	Mail Online	Popular	Right	Private	449
	Huffpost	Popular	Left	Private	261
Total					4184

weather forecasts, horoscopes, movie (or other cultural) reviews, puzzles, social pages, and similar content on radio and TV was not included in our study. We excluded supplements/magazines/special features programs and headlines on newspaper front pages and at the beginning of TV and radio newscasts. We also excluded content that was not produced by the staff of the respective newsrooms; wire service stories, for example, or articles by non-journalists included on news sites. In the case of online media, we only coded news items that appeared on the extended home page by clicking on, and thereby opening, each of the relevant items. Items that included embedded video or audio clips were also coded. We sampled 4,184 news stories in total (see Table 1). The unit of analysis was individual news items, defined as a set of contiguous verbal and, if applicable, audio and/or visual elements that refer to the same event/issue/person.

Measures

This study measured two sets of variables. First, we measured stories' COVID-19-relatedness. We considered a story related to COVID-19 when they were focused on and presented in the explicit context of the COVID-19 pandemic or were related to the impact of the pandemic on any topic. Second, we measured the presence of six professional roles in news content, using the operationalisation proposed by Mellado (2015) and validated in subsequent studies (e.g., Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez et al. 2017; Mellado and Van Dalen 2017) (see the above literature review for the operationalised definitions of the six roles). Five indicators were used to measure the presence of the interventionist role, ten indicators for the watchdog role, eight indicators for the loyal-facilitator role, five indicators for the service role, five indicators for the infotainment role, and nine indicators for the civic role (see Appendix 1). Each indicator was measured on a presence (1) or absence (0) basis.

Coding

Five coders were involved in the coding process, with the corpus of news items divided randomly among coders to reduce bias. Intercoder reliability tests showed an overall score of .80, and .73 for the interventionist role, .81 for the watchdog role, .96 for the

loyal-facilitator role, .79 for the service role, .70 for the infotainment role, and .80 for the civic role, respectively. Coders were also closely monitored during the coding process to improve intercoder agreement.

Following the coding, confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted for each role to assess the consistency of the scales for the different roles. Based on the CFA results, the individual indicators comprising each dimension were combined to generate a final role score. For descriptive purposes, we calculated raw scores (total points divided by the total items for each role). The individual indicators comprising each role were thus combined into a scale of 0–1. A higher score expressed a higher prevalence of each journalistic role in the news, and vice versa. Meanwhile, we used factor scores to test for differences in the performance of the roles analysed.

Findings

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test H1 and to answer RQ1. As shown in Table 2, compared with non-COVID-19 news stories (.04442), COVID-19 stories were considerably more service-oriented (.11219), with the performance of the service role showing the largest increase in mean difference compared to other roles. Table 2 also suggests that the difference between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 stories in the performance of the service role is statistically significant ($F(1, 4182) = 313.567, p < .001$) with a moderate effect size ($\eta^2 = .070$). Therefore, H1 was supported.

Looking at the differences between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 stories for the remaining five roles (RQ1), Table 2 shows that COVID-19 stories showed greater performance of the civic and interventionist roles, but less evidence of the infotainment, loyal-facilitator, and watchdog roles. As suggested in Table 2, there was a statistically significant difference between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 stories in the performance of interventionist ($F(1, 4182) = 16.278, p < .001$), loyal-facilitator ($F(1, 4182) = 3.925, p = .048$), infotainment ($F(1, 4182) = 140.405, p < .001$), and civic roles ($F(1, 4182) = 79.055, p < .001$), but not in the watchdog role ($F(1, 4182) = 2.722, p = .099$). However, not all these differences are meaningful. Meaningful differences appeared in three audience-oriented roles: the aforementioned service role and infotainment role ($\eta^2 = .032$) showed moderate differences, with the civic role ($\eta^2 = .019$) showing a small difference. The interventionist and loyal-facilitator roles—while recording statistically significant differences—only display negligible effect sizes.

Having identified the audience domain to contain the only meaningful differences in role performance between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 stories, RQ2 asks which specific

Table 2. Differences of JRP between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 stories.

Roles	Mean	Non-COVID-19 story mean	COVID-19 story mean	df	F	Sig.	η^2
Interventionist	.17509	.16143	.19351	1	16.278	<.001	.004
Watchdog	.09495	.10017	.08791	1	2.722	.099	.001
Loyal-Facilitator	.01613	.01796	.01367	1	3.925	.048	.001
Service	.07328	.04442	.11219	1	313.567	<.001	.070
Infotainment	.14041	.17282	.09671	1	140.405	<.001	.032
Civic	.11764	.09880	.14304	1	79.055	<.001	.019

Note: The fifth-seventh columns report the outcome of ANOVA, and the last report those of Eta Squared (η^2), a measure of effect size for use in ANOVA.

indicators within these roles were driving these differences. We conducted an independent-samples t-test to examine whether there is a statistically significant difference in the specific indicators in the three audience-oriented roles between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 stories. The results in Table 3 shows that all but two indicators (consumer advice and citizen demands) show significant differences between covering COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 stories.

In examining the *service role*, two indicators—impact on everyday life, and tips and advice on managing personal issues—showed notable increases when covering COVID-19 stories. This shift in emphasis in pandemic reporting was particularly noteworthy in the case of impact on everyday life (where the consequences or meanings of events are related to peoples' everyday lives, rather than their macro consequences), with its manifestation 21.9% higher in stories related to COVID-19, echoing findings by, for example, Edwards (2022), Vasterman and Ruigrok (2013), and Zhang and Cheung

Table 3. Differences of manifestations of indicators in service, infotainment, and civic roles between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 stories.

Role	Indicators	COVID-19 Story		df	t	p
		No	Yes			
Service role	Impact on everyday life	251	576	2876.089	-17.199	<.001
		10.4%	32.3%			
	Tips and advice on managing issues with others	23	76	2384.095	-6.422	<.001
		1.0%	4.3%			
	Tips and advice on managing personal issues	51	158	2458.903	-9.186	<.001
2.1%		8.9%				
Consumer information	153	152	3530.061	-2.613	.009	
Consumer advice	55	37	4182	.544	.587	
	2.3%	2.1%				
Infotainment role	Personalisation	594	213	4181.518	10.942	<.001
		24.7%	12.0%			
	Private life	193	88	4159.457	4.059	<.001
		8.0%	4.9%			
	Sensationalism	273	135	4124.558	4.182	<.001
11.4%		7.6%				
Emotions	745	379	4055.250	7.220	<.001	
	31.0%	21.3%				
Morbidity	271	47	3742.467	11.569	<.001	
	11.3%	2.6%				
Civic role	Citizen reactions	504	450	3693.936	-3.232	.001
		21.0%	25.3%			
	Citizen demands	285	182	3965.668	1.717	.086
		11.9%	10.2%			
	Credibility of citizens	214	239	3421.276	-4.544	<.001
		8.9%	13.4%			
	Local impact	304	398	3311.655	-8.107	<.001
		12.7%	22.3%			
	Social community impact	403	580	3310.643	-11.709	<.001
		16.8%	32.5%			
Educating on duties and rights	66	241	2381.439	-12.327	<.001	
	2.7%	13.5%				
Citizen questions	54	78	3092.616	-3.714	<.001	
	2.2%	4.4%				
Information on citizen activities	239	96	4181.074	5.613	<.001	
	9.9%	5.4%				
Support for citizen movements	68	30	4176.317	2.577	.010	
	2.8%	1.7%				

(2022). This finding also resonates with a role perception study by Klemm, Das, and Hartmann (2019, 1230) who found that journalists prioritise providing “how-to-act” information during public health crises, such as where to get treatment and who to call. This was illustrated by news articles that reported on, for example, advice about COVID-19 testing (Plush 2020), the implications of lockdown restrictions (Frainier and Smith 2020), and steps people can take to reduce the risks of infection and onward transmission (Kaye 2020).

All five indicators in the *infotainment role*, i.e., personalisation, private life, sensationalism, emotions, and morbidity, were less prominent in COVID-19 stories compared with non-COVID-19 stories. As suggested in Table 2, although the mean difference of the infotainment role between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 stories is large, the total mean for the infotainment role ranks second (.14041), and its mean in COVID-19 stories ranks fourth (.09671), among all six roles. As a matter of fact, as seen from Table 3, while the presence of emotions in pandemic reporting was 9.7% less than other news topics, it was still quite consistently present (21.3%), and audience research has shown that exposure to COVID-19 news prompted high levels of emotional responses, both positive and negative (Jackson, Nguyen, and Hoang 2022). The relatively low levels of personalisation in COVID-19 news (12.7% lower than for non-COVID-19 news) imply that journalists found it difficult to develop this news angle, yet paradoxically, one of the most resonant and feel-good news stories throughout the first wave of the pandemic in the UK was personalised around Sir Captain Tom Moore (the 99-year-old World War II veteran, who walked laps of his garden to raise funds for the National Health Service in England) (ibid). The low levels of morbidity in pandemic reporting (2.6%) may seem a surprising finding given the relentless coverage of death rates (e.g., Basch, Kecojevic, and Wagner 2020; Quandt et al. 2020), but may be explained by our definition of this code, which asked “Does the news story exacerbate the audience’s attention through textual, sound and/or image elements, describing or portraying acts of violence, death, crime, extreme poverty or sex scenes/scandal in the news, or of the subjects in concrete detail?”. Thus, while death was a constant theme of news coverage, it was rarely presented in morbid detail, but rather as an update on the ongoing development of the pandemic in the UK.

The increase in the performance of *civic role* when covering COVID-19 stories was accounted for by an increased emphasis on citizen reactions, credibility of citizens, local impact, social community impact, educating on duties and rights, and citizen questions. There are two notable findings beneath these headlines. First, social community impact (15.7%) and local impact (9.6%) are among the indicators that showed the biggest differences between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 stories. These codes only applied to stories that focused on the impact of *political decisions* (not events generally) on geographically and socially (e.g., sexuality, ethnicity, disability, but also occupations such as nurses) defined communities. Here, the pandemic provided plenty of potential stories when, for example, the UK government introduced a tiered system of restrictions based on locations and their related infection rates. At various times there were also policy changes that impacted healthcare workers, educators, pupils, and elderly people, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Little surprise, then, that we also witness a significant rise in educating on citizens’ rights and duties, that was barely present in general news (2.7%), yet was seen in 13.5% of COVID-19 stories. Second, when it comes to specific indicators of citizens’ voice in the news, citizen reactions were present in almost a quarter of

all COVID-19 stories (25.3%), with citizen demands (10.2%), citizen questions (4.4%), information on citizen activities (5.4%), and support for citizen movements (1.7%) less prominent. This presents a somewhat familiar model of including citizen voices in the news, where they are largely given voice in reacting to the events of the day, rather than how they are trying to change the world (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005).

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study examined the patterns of JRP in six journalistic roles—the interventionist, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, service, infotainment, and civic—when covering the COVID-19 pandemic compared with covering other news stories in the UK. We found all but one role (the watchdog) to be significantly different for COVID-19 news, but meaningful differences were only found in the audience domain, that includes the service, civic, and infotainment roles. Several important reflections emerge from these findings, that connect to ongoing debates in crisis news and journalistic roles.

First, as H1 predicted, the service role was considerably higher in COVID-19 news, with a particular focus placed on explaining the everyday personal impacts of the pandemic, and on giving tips and advice on how to act. This echoes not only findings of existing research in the context of public health crises (e.g., Edwards 2022; Vasterman and Ruigrok 2013; Zhang and Cheung 2022), but also links to audience research suggesting that such reporting was fulfilling a drive amongst news audiences for “personalised surveillance—i.e., the overwhelming lockdown-induced need to monitor the pandemic in relation to how it affected their own daily routines and concerns” (Nguyen, Glück, and Jackson 2022, 7).

Second, far less previous research has examined the civic role in relation to public health crisis news. Here, we found that it was a prominent feature in pandemic news coverage, and significantly higher than general non-COVID-19 news. The civic role focuses on the connection between journalism, the citizenry, and public life, and has two main dimensions. The first is to educate citizens for participating in electoral processes, civil protests alongside helping them to make sense of their own communities, and how they can be affected by different political decisions. The second is to encourage the public to get involved in public debate, and to participate in social, political, and cultural life (Mellado et al. 2021). Both dimensions are therefore empowering citizens, but in different ways. Alongside our findings for the service role, we would characterise UK pandemic news as conforming more to the first dimension: empowering in how it gave advice on navigating the pandemic, and how it explained to citizens the consequences of the government’s latest restrictions. However, it did little to disrupt the established norms of presenting citizens as largely passive spectators of the news agenda, which is set by politicians and other elites (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005; Matthews et al. 2023). Here, citizens are still largely portrayed as powerless observers of the world, who have fears, impressions, and desires, but have little to say about the big issues on the political agenda (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). According to Brookes, Lewis, and Wahl-Jorgensen (2004, 78), this discursive construction of citizens “works ideologically to legitimize a situation in which media and political elites are the key players, while citizens are incapable of making meaningful contributions to the debate.”

Third, we found that the infotainment role was significantly diminished in COVID-19 news in comparison to other news topics. These findings stand in contrast with existing arguments that crisis reporting, including the coverage of public health crises, tends to sensationalise coverage (e.g., Milutinović 2021; Wasserman et al. 2021). Instead, they seem to echo the findings of Hilton and Hunt (2011) that UK newspapers did not sensationalise the coverage of A/H1N1 in their headlines. This might be due to the location of the crisis. Ihekweazu (2017) found more sensationalised news coverage about the Ebola crisis in unaffected media markets than in markets with Ebola cases in the U.S. In our case, in comparison to prior public health crises, COVID-19 was an immediate risk to the UK public. This contrasts with other significant disease outbreaks, notably Ebola and SARS, that represented a limited and distant threat. A greater presence of the infotainment role was not apparent, suggesting an avoidance of the type of reporting that may cause alarm and panic amongst the public, in line with the central role of news media during a health crisis to provide factual coverage to news audiences. Some elements of this role were still evident, however. Reporting captured the emotions (e.g., fear and anxiety) experienced by the public during the pandemic and also presented personalised portrayals of key characters (e.g., the fundraising of Sir Captain Tom Moore).

Fourth, although, traditionally, UK journalism has tended to demonstrate a more factual, instead of interventionist, role (Henkel, Thurman, and Deffner 2019; Thurman, Cornia, and Kunert 2016), our study found that in COVID-19 stories UK journalists became more explicit in presenting their own voices. This is consistent with existing research that found that journalists prioritised their public mobiliser role in their professional mindset when covering public health crises (Klemm, Das, and Hartmann 2019). When covering COVID-19 this was characterised by reporting that encouraged the public to adopt preventative behaviours to reduce the spread of the virus, follow public health guidelines, and later to volunteer and support the UK's vaccine rollout. Looking broader, journalists' engagement in their subject matter and the tendency to shift to a more advocacy role is common to crisis and disaster contexts. Across the life-cycle of disruptive crisis and disaster events, journalists will provide information that supports preparedness, response, and recovery (e.g., Houston et al. 2019). When journalists cover traumatic events, such as a disaster or a significant public health crisis, they may be impacted by the events, either personally or in their professional capacity (Berrington and Jemphrey 2003; Usher 2009). In the UK's experience of COVID-19, this was witnessing the pressures that hospitals, healthcare, and other essential workers faced. A consequence of this may be to express support for public health measures, even when seeking to maintain a critical distance when covering health policy and decision-making. As a significant public health emergency, which reached into both public and private domains, we therefore see a more involved form of reporting, with journalists demonstrating both a mobilising and advocacy role. At the peak of the UK's first wave of COVID-19, examples of this mode of journalism were evident in using qualifying adjectives to describe, for example, the harrowing accounts from intensive care units about the impacts of COVID-19 on staff and patients, interpreting the causes and meanings of the pandemic, as well as policy responses and interventions to mitigate its impacts, and bringing in their first-person perspectives into the news reports, especially in television news.

Fifth, the interplay between journalists and the government showed a complicated picture. Our results showed a consistent performance of the watchdog role by UK

journalists during coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, that might be explained by the journalism culture in the UK. Our study verifies the strong watchdog tradition of UK journalism (e.g., Cornia et al. 2016; Thurman, Cornia, and Kunert 2016), indicating that this dynamic was not altered significantly in the context of this health emergency. Following other disruptive events, such as acts of terrorism, war, and financial crisis, which require societies to adjust, respond, and reappraise core values (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2017), there may follow changes in the types of actors/sources given access to the media. This can on one hand result in a narrowing of perspectives, facilitated by the acceptance of government/elite framing of responses to a crisis for example (Groeling and Baum 2008; Mourão and Sturm 2018). Yet, on the other hand, UK journalists maintained their watchdog role, suggesting no significant changes in these practices. Moreover, our finding also resonates with polling conducted during the first wave of the pandemic that showed 43% of Britons think journalists at the government's coronavirus daily briefings were doing a good job of holding the government to account (Skinner, Pedley, and Garrett 2020).

Evaluating from the perspective of health news coverage, our finding responds to the observations by Hallin, Brandt, and Briggs (2013) that health news, in general, instead of merely transmitting medical experts knowledge as loyal facilitators, had demonstrated a trend in increasingly bringing in health controversies, which creates a public sphere of health communications and exhibits the watchdog role performance. This thesis might well explain our finding contextualised in the COVID-19 pandemic when governmental policies are entwined with the uncertainties and complexities of the virus, such as its origin, treatment, societal impact, and mitigation and recovery measures. Rather than channelling the voices from those in power to the public, journalists might instead question or critique the decisions made by those in power in an attempt to achieve social good.

We nevertheless hesitate to put the watchdog role and loyal-facilitator role on two ends of the continuum of the power-relations between journalists and the government. Instead, we would argue for the dual appearance of the two roles in the news reports. A closer look at the performance of other roles lend support to our argument. As explained in our findings on the emphasis of the service role, the "how-to-act" information is mainly instructions from the government. While the indicators in the civic role that shifted up during the pandemic were mostly those where journalists were disseminating pro-health messages from the government, for example, explaining the impact of governmental pandemic mitigation policies on local or social communities, and educating on duties and rights during the pandemic. Both cases indicated that journalists "extended" government policies, i.e., explaining how to use the policies and their feasibility, rather than focusing on the policies themselves. Thus, while the news stories were not celebrating or promoting government policies, the above findings on the service and civic roles suggested traces of journalists' cooperation with the governmental agendas. It echoed the observation by Quandt et al. (2020) on the case of Germany during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These findings could also be perhaps explained by journalistic role perception studies. When covering public health crises, existing studies found that journalists can entwine their perceptions of a monitorial role with facilitative and collaborative roles (Vobič 2022), or shift their role perceptions from a watchdog to a more co-operative role

(Klemm, Das, and Hartmann 2019), through, for example, collaborating with the government in disseminating pandemic-related information to the public, aligning with health authorities, and rationalising self-censorship. As a matter of fact, a study on the sourcing practices of UK news outlets when covering the COVID-19 pandemic found the prominence of political sources in UK news: first, the most frequently named sources were representatives of the UK government; and second, when stories involved political actors, they were more likely to be given a voice as a source (Matthews et al. 2023). Therefore, the intertwining of the watchdog role and the loyal-facilitator role as indicated in our findings adds more nuance to the thesis of consensual reporting in public health crises (Briggs and Hallin 2010). This further indicates the importance of examining journalistic performance across all roles during coverage of public health crises whose impact spread across all, rather than individual, areas of the society, which has implications on all news desks instead of the health desk alone.

Of course, we should also consider the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic when interpreting the findings. While journalists maintained a watchdog role and were critical of the government response to the pandemic, the polling research showed that there is significant trust and goodwill towards the National Health Service in the UK (Gershlick, Charlesworth, and Taylor 2015) which was, not surprisingly, at the heart of the government policies towards the pandemic mitigation. This might also explain the traces of loyal-facilitator role in UK news coverage of the pandemic.

In summary, our findings have several implications for the role of media in covering public health crises. Given the vital importance of journalism in crisis mitigation, our analysis demonstrates nuances in the performance of journalistic roles that may occur during significant disruptive events whose impacts extend into all areas of society.

The tendency to sensationalise for example, which is well documented in other crisis contexts (e.g., Cottle 2009), was not apparent in reporting on COVID-19. Instead, a greater emphasis was placed on service, interventionist, and civic role elements, illustrating how journalism can both inform and empower citizens during a public health crisis. Then rather than acting as uncritical transmitters of government agendas (e.g., Briggs and Hallin 2010; Saptorini, Zhao, and Jackson 2022), our analysis showed that UK journalists on the whole maintained its watchdog role. While government sources may have been prominent in news coverage of COVID-19 (e.g., Matthews et al. 2023), as other research has shown (e.g., Tshabangu and Salawu 2021; Vobič 2022), journalists continued to perform the watchdog role by providing insights, critique, and external investigations into its pandemic policies and response. This is important since it demonstrates no significant shifts from this central tenet of journalism practice, despite the breadth and extent of the impacts of COVID-19 on the UK. However, this does not resolve the (essentially political and normative) question of whether the UK news media *should* have performed a more muscular and assertive form of watchdog journalism, especially in light of the widely acknowledged government mishandling of the pandemic. Here, readers might interpret our findings as a failure of the UK news media to sufficiently hold the government to account over the first year of the pandemic. As we write, the official public inquiry into the government handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is now underway. Yet parallel post mortems into news media performance have not gathered similar momentum. It is our hope that the evidence presented here will contribute to such conversations.

Looking forward, we also hope that our study opens up discussions on the nuances of JRP during public health crises; for example, whether there are any meaningful differences between reports written by specialist medical/health/science journalists compared to those by general reporters, between public service broadcasters and commercial-oriented counterparts, and between outlets with different political orientations. Reflecting on these discussions could have important empirical implications for journalistic training, the development of public service media, and media literacy. Moreover, as further research on JRP during COVID-19 emerges from other national contexts and considers its implications for public health crises, it would be valuable to consider to what extent the findings reported in this study may reflect international patterns in JRP.

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Appendix

Journalistic role performance indicators.

Role	Interventionist	Watchdog	Loyal-Facilitator	Service	Infotainment	Civic
Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Journalist's point of view - Interpretation - Call to action - Qualifying adjectives - First person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information on judicial/administrative processes - Questioning performed by the journalist - Questioning performed by others - Criticism performed by the journalist - Criticism performed by others - Uncovering performed by the journalist - Uncovering performed by others - Reporting on external investigation - Investigative reporting - Conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Defense/support activities - Defense/support policies - Positive image of the elite - Progress/success of journalist's own country - Comparison to other countries - National triumphs - Promotion of the country's image - Patriotism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impact on everyday life - Tips and advice on managing issues with others - Tips and advice on managing personal issues - Consumer information - Consumer advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personalisation - Private life - Sensationalism - Emotions - Morbidity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Citizen reactions - Citizen demands - Credibility of citizens - Education on duties and rights - Local impact - Social community impact - Citizen questions - Information on citizen activities - Support of citizen movements
Example	<p>A journalist saying "I don't think this is legal ..." is coded as "journalist's point of view."</p>	<p>The report on "Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu charged with corruption for accepting gifts" mentioning "Mr. Netanyahu is facing charges of fraud, bribery and breach of trust" is coded as "Information on judicial/administrative processes."</p>	<p>The quote "At 82, she's the oldest Supreme Court justice on the bench, a feminist icon, and a liberal. Right now, she's having a moment" is coded as "positive image of the elite."</p>	<p>The report on "General election 2019: What the Conservatives' win means for your money" is coded as "impact on everyday life."</p>	<p>The quote "The 'West Philadelphia-born and -raised' rapper and movie star attended Overbrook High School, known in Philly as the 'Castle on the Hill'" is coded as "personalisation."</p>	<p>The quote "The Brexit word and its aftermath, which saw an increase in reports of hate crime, caused many Eastern Europeans living and working in the UK to question whether they wanted to remain here" is coded as "social community impact."</p>