



News Beat Fluidity in Civic, Infotainment, and Service Role Performance Across Cultures

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ABSTRACT

Based on a content analysis of 33,640 news stories from the *Journalistic Role Performance* project, this paper analyzes how civic, service and infotainment roles connect with thematic beats and vary across media organizations and cultures. We examine differences in role performance across politics, economics, crime, social affairs, court, and miscellaneous news beats in print news from 64 media outlets in 18 countries. Our study sheds light on the multiple ways in which thematic beats define the performance of audience-oriented roles in the news across countries. We offer multiple insights into how thematic beats are shaped by national journalistic cultures and news organizations' structural characteristics, with media audience orientation and ownership strongly affecting this relationship. Considering the factors at play, we propose a typology of *news beats* regarding their relationship to audiences.

KEYWORDS

News beat; role performance; professional roles; thematic beats; journalism; news

Journalistic work has historically been structured around “beat reporting,” which refers to thematic specialization and specific routines distinguishing general assignment reporters from specialized journalists (Fishman 1980; Tuchman 1978; Magin and Maurer 2019). A more “internally homogenous” approach assumes that news beats possess a certain degree of resources and levels of professionalism, job differentiation, specialization, and brand identity (Blach-Ørsten 2016; Reich 2012a). News beats function as “sub-spaces,” “sub-universes” (Marchetti 2005, 77–78), and “micro-cultures” (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1989), that make them “particular” (Reich 2012a) and different from one another.

This level of specialization can be contingent upon organizational structures. News organizations possessing more human and economic resources might employ and assign more specialized journalists to the in-depth coverage of exclusive topics like education, health, science, transport, or crime and justice. There can exist as many specialist desks as newsrooms can afford. Their content can thus reflect a great deal of journalists' thematic expertise and specialized knowledge and the medium's target audience. In

contrast, in less-developed news organizations, where resources can be scarce, the decision-making behind the assignation of thematic coverage can be more pragmatic, and journalists can cover one or more news beats without reporting with sufficient depth. This could also depend on whether news organizations aim for a specialized or generalist audience, or are driven by commercial interests, by public service or by political interests.

Therefore, differences amongst news beats are not limited to thematic coverage, range of sources, newsgathering dynamics, or storytelling narratives. They are expected to vary across different newsroom orientations and across different countries. Moreover, they can differ in their focus on their audiences. Some beats are intrinsically bound to address citizen voices, concerns, and needs, whereas others seek to thrill and entertain audiences. Their particularities can involve approaching their audiences as citizens, as clients needing advice, or as spectators (Mellado 2015, 2020).

Newsrooms worldwide vastly differ in their reporter's level of specialized knowledge or even in the existence of comparable newsbeat desks, but journalists are assigned to covering designated themes (Reich 2012a). Hence, the topic of a news article can be a good, standardized proxy to analyze and compare the nature of beats. Mounting evidence has shown the important relationship between news topics as proxy of news beats and journalistic performance (e.g., Tandoc et al. 2020; Márquez-Ramírez et al. 2020; Humanes and Roses 2018; Mellado et al. 2017; Hellmueller et al. 2016; Wang, Sparks, and Huang 2018).

Nevertheless, more in-depth evidence is needed to ascertain how news beat systems—operationalized in this study as news topics or subject matters—cut across intra-national and cross-national levels concerning audience-oriented professional roles and across different news media structures and national cultures.

Is the performance of audience-oriented roles exclusive to specific news beats, or are these roles so pervasive that affect –and transform— all news beats equally? To what extent are the logics of news beat stability (re)defined by institutional and national contexts?

So far, these questions are insufficiently explored, especially in terms of large-scale comparisons. Previous news-making research has not explicitly typified news beat particularities in terms of their audience orientation. Hence, there is a gap in the knowledge about the particularities of variation across news beats, types of media, and journalistic cultures and how the audience is approached across different news topics.

We propose two approaches for the study of journalistic roles and news beats. “Newsbeat internal stability” would draw from the micro-cultures (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1989) assumption that news beats are unique. They remain “stable” across boundaries and behave steadily regardless of national and institutional differences. Audience-oriented roles can help assert and cement this stability: sports news, for example, goes hand in hand with infotainment in most corners of the world. “Newsbeat external fluidity”, in contrast, joins the generalistic perspective that there are specific practices and routines that are transversal to the profession (Reich 2012a, 2012b, 2016), but there are also audience-oriented roles that can alter and modify newsbeat particularities. In their interaction with these roles, newsbeats can be sensitive to and contingent on external sociopolitical and organizational influences, becoming more similar across them but less individually stable. In commercially-driven news media, for example, infotainment would affect all news beats equally, not only sports. Another example can be the

Covid-19 pandemic news reporting in many countries, where unsuspected sections like Showbiz, Sports or Economics ran health service-oriented coverage substantially, leaving aside its distinctive differences.

In sum, we pose that *newsbeat fluidity* occurs when, under specific organizational and national logics, dissimilar thematic beats behave similarly in the performance of audience-oriented roles. In contrast, *newsbeat stability* occurs when journalistic role performance shapes newsbeat uniqueness, despite –or even shaped by–institutional and national logics reinforce it.

Specifically, in this paper we ask: can civic, infotainment, and service functions cut across news beats and render them fluid, or do these journalistic roles shape news beats individually in unique ways? What is the role being played in this fluidity (or lack thereof) by intervening factors at the media system and institutional levels, such as media ownership and market orientation? In other words: how far do news beat particularities travel?

By addressing these general questions through a multilevel modeling (MLM) study based on comparative news content analysis and the role performance theoretical framework, this article examines news beat fluidity in politics, economics, police and crime, courts, economy, and miscellaneous news across 18 countries and different types of news organizations. We define news beat fluidity as the capacity of news beats to display the performance of various journalistic roles depending on structural and contextual factors. We also approach news beat stability as the capacity of news beats to remain unique with respect to specific roles regardless of national or institutional logics.

The study aims to fill various gaps in news beat research. First, there is insufficient knowledge about news beat behavior beyond single national contexts (Reich 2012a; Blach-Ørsten 2016). Second, cross-national news beat research overwhelmingly emphasizes political news, especially with regards to some elements of the infotainment role (Curran et al. 2009; Esser et al. 2012; Skövsgaard and van Dalen 2013; Jebiril, Albæk, and de Vreese 2013; Albæk et al. 2014; Umbricht and Esser 2016; Benson, Neff, and Hessérus 2018). Third, comparative news beat studies tend to engage only implicitly and not explicitly with the performance of audience-oriented roles. Finally, while individual news beats have been explored with respect to equally individual roles, no study has attempted to measure news beat fluidity by comparing various types of beats through the lens of different audience-oriented roles in multiple national and organizational contexts.

In order to address the relationship that news beats adopt towards their audience, this paper analyzes the performance of the civic, infotainment, and service roles in the news (Mellado 2020). Journalistic roles help analyze the profession in terms of norms, ideals, and practices. These approaches take different forms depending on the level of analysis used. As Mellado (2020, 30) explains, “while the evaluative level of journalistic cultures deals with the journalist’s own formulation of what is important to their work, what is important for their employer, how they think they do their work, and even how the audience perceives the work of journalism in society, the performative level deals with concrete decisions and styles of news reporting, considering different influences that affect journalism and how journalism negotiates those influences.” We thus examine how journalistic norms and ideals are collectively negotiated and result in specific professional practices across different countries and types of media.

The aim is to explore whether news beats function as “micro-cultures” that transcend national realities and explain the implementation of specific professional roles, or if organizational and societal level factors shape journalistic performance across news topics. Since most research on news beat reporting has been limited to stable, high-income democracies (Magin and Maurer 2019), we describe the multi-dimensionality of news beat work across multiple societal contexts (Reinemann et al. 2012, 223).

Audience Approaches in Journalism: The Civic, Infotainment, and Service Roles

Journalists are specialists in interacting with their sources and audiences and managing the interplay between both (Reich 2012b, 340). As Mellado and van Dalen (2017, 213) point out, “the audience’s approaches shift the focus away from the narrow focus on the role of journalism in institutional politics” and is “better suited to assess the changing functions which journalism fulfills in society and the roles it enables the public to play in social life.”

Individuals do not only engage with news and act as citizens in the traditional political sphere or organized civil society. Furthermore, their news consumption is not always geared towards relaxation and entertainment (Brants and de Haan 2010). Journalistic roles evolve across space and time, and journalists adapt their functions to address consumers and citizens as interrelated and co-occurring identities (Mellado 2020). Audience-oriented roles can thus allow journalists to follow professional norms and meet public-service and market expectations at different times or through different news beats.

We use Mellado’s operationalization of audience-oriented journalistic role performance (2015) to empirically measure and compare three journalistic roles that capture different approaches towards the public: as citizens, as clients, or as spectators.

While the *civic role* initially involved U.S. journalism partnering with citizens to strengthen communities and build citizenship (Merritt and Rosen 1995; Glasser 1999), varieties of civic-oriented role conceptions have emerged across different types of democracies (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). This function can be connected to political settings where citizens organize to improve their communities, protest state policies, or voice irregularities and wrongdoing. Initially, civic journalism was viewed as incompatible with disseminating, watchdog, and infotainment functions (Merritt and Rosen 1995). Early proponents, instead, expected the civic role to materialize in political and social stories at the community level, covering citizen concerns and sources (Voakes 1999). Over the years, aspects of the civic role became compatible with organizations that value public-service content or those who value their readers as decision-making citizens.

Thussu (2015) defines *infotainment* as a style of news production and presentation style centered on the ratings-driven commercial television news culture that aims to attract viewers/consumers with short attention spans. Its impact on the news has been one of the most hotly contested subjects in recent decades (Esser 1999; Otto, Glogger, and Boukes 2017), especially its rise in political content in developed democracies (Curran et al. 2009; Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010; Aalberg and Curran 2012; Esser et al. 2012; Umbricht and Esser 2016; Albæk et al. 2014). While the study of this topic became more widespread after Hallin and Mancini (2004, 277–279) observed increased homogenization and convergence of disparate media systems towards the

commercially driven, for-profit liberal model, there are still insufficient comparative insights into how news beats other than politics interact with this role and under which organizational and national logics this occurs.

The *service* role is, comparatively speaking, one of the least theorized and operationalized journalistic roles in the literature. It has emerged more emphatically in conjunction with the rise of consumerism and the fragmentation of audiences into niches with different lifestyles and interests. According to Eide and Graham Knight (1999, 525), the service role is linked to the global idea of audience members as clients who need advice and guidance about their individual needs but is not necessarily linked to consumerism. Stories from various beats are meant to provide help and advice about everyday life (Mellado and van Dalen 2017).

Moreover, while some of these roles—especially the civic and infotainment roles—have been theorized as intrinsically antagonistic towards each other (Rosen 1996; Aalberg and Curran 2012), role performance research has challenged these normative assumptions by showing how professional roles are situational and overlap in practice (Mellado and van Dalen 2017; Mellado 2020; Hallin and Mellado 2018). For example, in any given news article, journalists might perform a civic role by covering citizen voices and empowering them; a service role by providing news that is useful to reader's daily lives; an infotainment role aimed at eliciting emotional responses from the public (Brants and de Haan 2010). This can then vary depending on the media's orientation, type of ownership, and national journalistic cultures.

Different News Beats, Different Roles? Expected Differences Across Political Regimes

As stated in earlier sections of this article, journalists are expected to perform similar journalistic practices from the generalist perspective of news beat research (Reich 2012a), as boundaries between news beats are blurring (Nørgaard Kristensen and From 2012). From the "particularistic" approach, reporters who cover specific topics would develop unique practices that cut across media organizations or country-differences (Reich 2012a; Hovden and Kristensen 2018). Reich's extensive work (2012a, 2016) offers evidence to support both approaches, suggesting that, with the moderating effect of institutional and international logics, news beats are likely to remain relatively stable in certain circumstances and generally more fluid in others in their relation to audience-oriented roles.

Comparative scholarship on journalistic role performance and reporting styles has shown that country-level differences such as journalistic traditions and systemic-level factors account for a great deal of variation in journalistic practices (e.g., Mellado 2020; Esser et al. 2012; van Dalen, de Vreese, and Albæk 2012). Therefore, taking macro and meso-level dimensions together, we argue that more news beat fluidity than stability can be expected.

Thus, we hypothesize that:

H1. The performance of the civic, service, and infotainment roles is explained to a great extent by thematic beats, presenting differences across organizations and societal contexts.

Specifically, research has identified different relationships between thematic beats and audience-oriented journalistic roles across countries.

There is a relative consensus that social affairs beats are intrinsically linked to the civic role, as journalists cover citizens concerned about health, education, human rights, and issues that directly affect them beyond partisan politics. Existing research tends to corroborate this relationship. Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans (2017, 477) found a higher presence of citizen sources in political and social news than in other thematic beats in the Dutch media. Most studies conducted in Europe (Skövsgaard and van Dalen 2013; De Swert and Kuypers 2020; Reich 2012a, 2012b, 2016) and the U.S. (Hellmueller et al. 2016) also reveal that the inclusion of citizen concerns and reactions is more closely linked to contemporary social affairs than to political news.

In Latin America (Mellado et al. 2017), political news includes slightly higher civic role levels than other beats except for social affairs news. In a non-democracy like Cuba, the civic role in the official press ranked above Chile or Brazil, (Mellado et al. 2017), although it was unclear whether one specific news beat boosted these results. By contrast, research conducted in China showed that the civic role was widely absent from the mainland press, regardless of news beats (Wang et al. 2017). Based on these previous findings, we pose that:

H1.1. The performance of the civic role will be more likely to appear in political and especially social affairs news than in other thematic beats across established and transitional democracies.

While research in advanced democracies has shown an overall rise of infotainment in political reporting, studies have also found that its presence varies widely amongst nations. The longitudinal study of political print content from six Western countries by Umbricht and Esser (2016) identified a significant increase in infotainment, although each press system displayed different indicators of infotainment. Scholars in transitional democracies have also explored the impact of infotainment in political news coverage, though their findings are less conclusive (e.g., Coronel 2001; Mellado et al. 2017).

The court beat has received less attention. Research conducted in established democracies links court news to the infotainment role, as media are said to cover court news through a more sensationalistic lens (Johnston and Bartels 2010) or by perpetuating “myths” through personalization of judges (Solberg and Waltenburg 2014). Concerning crime news, the portrayal of violence has also been associated with the infotainment role across Spain and Latin America (Hallin 2000; Humanes and Roses 2018; Mellado and Lagos 2014). Therefore, we expect that:

H1.2. The performance of the infotainment role will be more likely to emerge in political news in established democracies, and in court and crime news globally.

Concerning the service role, studies have shown that news beats like health are more likely to have patients’ concerns in mind when offering concrete information and advice meant to help them to face risks and address grievances (Holland 2018) and that lifestyle journalists review products and advise consumers on the latest trends (Fürsich 2012). For their part, financial journalists in both transitional and advanced democracies strive to offer coverage that can inform investors’ decision-making processes (Tambini 2008), or to provide personal and micro-finance advice for ordinary people (Doyle 2006; Mellado and Lagos 2014), or both (Timmermans 2019). News practices in the economics beat tend to be consistent “no matter what country or language it is published in” (Timmermans 2019, 1).

Previous journalistic role performance studies on Latin America (Mellado et al. 2017) also found that the service role is not as closely linked to political news as it is to other beats. In non-democracies like China, Wang et al. (2017) found the service role –like the civic role– to be highly marginal in most news beats. Thus, we expect that:

H1.3. The performance of the service role will be more likely to appear in economic, social affairs, and miscellaneous news in both established and transitional democracies.

The Broader Organizational Context of Journalistic Roles and News Beats

News beats are part of a broader organizational context. On the one hand, the structural characteristics of the media, such as audience orientation or media ownership, can shape different approaches to audiences (Dunaway 2008), which translate into the performance of specific journalistic roles. On the other hand, the organizational context may moderate the effects of news beats on role performance and render news beats more fluid.

The impact of commercialism, market pressures, and news organizations' business principles restricts journalists' independence through economic imperatives (Mothes, Schielicke, and Raemy 2020). As a result, the performance of infotainment, civic, and service roles might trigger different levels of news beat fluidity in commercial and elite newspapers. Thus, we pose that:

H2. Media audience orientation will significantly influence the relationship between thematic beats and the performance of the civic, infotainment, and service roles across countries.

Elite newspapers can be assumed to have more resources. Due to their niche, often politicized and educated readerships, they may be more motivated to cover a broad range of citizen sources and their concerns, while mass-audience popular media may be more tempted to instill infotainment narratives in their content to increase sales. Of course, this might vary across news beats. For example, political journalists in some countries can be more shielded from commercial pressures than colleagues from other less-resourced news beats like social affairs (Skövsgaard and van Dalen 2013; Albæk et al. 2014; Blach-Ørsten 2016). Moreover, "tabloid" journalists can have a "shared ideology" (Deuze 2005), viewing their duty as a commercially driven "service to the public" (877), and transversally experiencing more commercial and organizational pressures (Skövsgaard 2014). Commercialism can thus render news beats less static and more fluid since all journalists are expected to cater to commercial imperatives.

Studies comparing elite and tabloid newspapers in advanced democracies suggest that the popular press tends to show significantly higher infotainment than elite newspapers (Curran et al. 2010) in crime and political news coverage. Doyle (2006) found differences between UK economic journalists who worked for specialist papers and those who worked for the popular press, which leaned more towards infotainment. In Latin America, the infotainment role is more significant in the Chilean popular press across news beats (Mellado and Lagos 2014). Concerning crime news, Hallin (2000) found that this genre has historically been associated with the popular press in Mexico.

Based on this framework, we formulate the following sub-hypotheses:

H2.1. Elite-oriented newspapers will be more likely to display the civic role in political news across countries.

H2.2. Popular-oriented newspapers will be more likely to display the infotainment role in most news beats across countries.

Media ownership can also affect the relationship between news beats and journalistic performance (Dunaway 2008). Scholars generally distinguish between privately held newspapers, those owned by large corporations, and state-run titles (Benson, Neff, and Hessérus 2018; Picard and Van Weezel 2008; Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010). While state-owned newspapers can be primarily influenced by political factors, private and mainly corporate-owned media are often dominated by commercial interests involving differences in journalistic outcomes (Mothes, Schielicke, and Raemy 2020), which again can impact news beats transversally and make them more fluid. Thus, we expect that:

H3. Media ownership will significantly influence the relationship between thematic beats and the performance of the civic, infotainment, and service roles across countries.

State-owned newspapers tend to dominate societies with authoritarian political systems, but journalistic performance can sometimes differ across these societies. The official press in Cuba has shown considerably low levels of infotainment (Mellado et al. 2017), while China's state press sometimes performs significant levels of infotainment to cover political and business elites (Wang et al. 2017).

More agreement exists regarding the lack of performance of the civic role in State-media in non-democratic countries (Wang et al. 2017) in contrast to publicly funded media in advanced democracies (Aalberg and Curran 2012; Esser et al. 2012). Thus, undemocratic political regimes and their government-handled media might impact news beats transversally in the lower performance of civic roles.

For the service role, while the state-owned Cuban press has shown moderate levels of service-oriented news (Mellado et al. 2017), the performance of this role is marginal in most of the Chinese state press and has a weak presence in commercial newspapers (Wang et al. 2017, 2018).

Given that our study only includes state-owned newspapers from non-democratic countries, we hypothesize that:

H3.1. State-owned newspapers will be less likely to display the civic and service role across most news beats.

Most studies have shown that private and corporate-owned print media tend to display more infotainment in established democracies than other types of media ownership (Benson, Neff, and Hessérus 2018; Dunaway 2008; Ferrucci 2015; Aalberg and Curran 2012). In Eastern Europe, the profit-seeking orientation of most international media investors manifests in the rapid spread of commercialization and tabloidization of the news media (Stetka 2012).

In East Asian countries, corporate media sometimes use infotainment to address politically or economically beneficial topics to media owners (Coronel 2001). Hallin and Mellado (2018) found that to be true for the Chilean case, with private TV channels displaying more infotainment than public service TV, although both rated nearly equal in the performance of the civic role.

Indeed, results on the performance of the civic role across institutional ownership logics have not been conclusive. While some studies found fewer civic-oriented stories in commercially driven media (Benson, Neff, and Hessérus 2018; Ferrucci 2015), others

identified a different scenario, as private networks can sometimes feature more ordinary citizens than public networks (De Swert and Kuypers 2020). Thus, we pose the following hypothesis:

H3.2. Private and corporate-owned newspapers will be more likely to display the infotainment role across most news beats –especially in politics– than state-owned newspapers across countries.

The service role relates to consumer needs and advice (Nørgaard Kristensen and From 2012). Commercial, for-profit media operating within market economies and post-industrial societies are more prone to exhibit the service role, the economic beat being an example (Timmermans 2019). However, the service role not only addresses individual needs but also “lends itself to collective, political action as it shares common ground—the problematization of the everyday life-world—with the social movements, advocacy, and activist groups that are the driving force in sub-politics” (Eide 2017, 198). We can expect political and social affairs news to display the service role in private and corporate-owned newspapers. Thus:

H3.3. Private and corporate-owned newspapers will be more likely than State-owned newspapers to display the service role across economics, politics, and social affairs news beats across countries.

Overall, our hypotheses suggest that concerning audience-oriented role performance, news beats are more likely than not to open to external forces, becoming fluid due to the influence of commercialism, ownership, and specific political regimes.

Method

The study reports findings from the *Journalistic Role Performance* project based on a content analysis of national news from 64 newspapers in the United States, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and Greece from North America and Western Europe; Poland, Hungary, and Russia from Eastern Europe; Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and Cuba from Latin America; and the Philippines, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and China from Asia. Given that our objective was to obtain an intentionally heterogeneous sample, we selected countries to account for various political regimes, geographic regions, and media systems classifications, when available. While we made every effort to select countries according to a most different systems design by including a great variety of geographical and political cases, it is essential to acknowledge that our sample is far from representative of the diversity of media systems worldwide (Mellado 2020).

The sampled newspapers in each country represent these countries' print media systems based on circulation, newspaper size, reach, audience orientation, ownership, political leaning, and level of influence on the public agenda.¹ Using the constructed week method, we selected a stratified-systematic sample per newspaper per country from two consecutive years between 2013 and 2015, consisting of two constructed news weeks per newspaper per year. Specifically, one newspaper edition for each of the seven days of the week was selected for each semester of each year, ensuring that every month was represented by at least one day to avoid overrepresentation of one specific period or event.

The unit of analysis was the news article. Our sample consisted of 33,640 news stories from 64 news outlets. These are the articles published in the newspaper's national desk

section: politics, economy and business, police and crime, the courts, social affairs, and miscellaneous news. From a research-design perspective, these are topics commonly found across various newspapers worldwide and permit cross-comparison. Moreover, we left soft news sections aside because the traditional professional roles, as we understand them, grew out of macro politics and mainstream national news. We only included news stories, briefs, articles, and long features but excluded columns or editorial pieces.

Measurements

Based on Mellado's operationalization of journalistic roles in the news, the coding manual included indicators designed to measure the performance of the civic, service, and infotainment roles, which were then validated across different countries. Each indicator was coded so that researchers could account for their explicit presence/absence in the news (see operationalization in Mellado 2020).

Four indicators measured the presence of the service role: *impact on everyday life*, *tips and advice [grievances]*, *tips and advice [individual risks]*, and *information and consumer advice*. Six indicators measured the performance of the infotainment role: *personalization*, *private life*, *sensationalism*, *scandal*, *emotions*, and *morbidity*. Finally, nine indicators measured the performance of the civic role: *citizen reactions*, *citizen demand*, *credibility of citizens*, *education on duties and rights*, *contextual background information*, *local impact*, *citizen questions*, *information on citizen activities*, and *support of citizen movements*.

Local teams in each country were trained on the application of a codebook that was translated and back-translated from English into the various local languages.

Based on Krippendorff's formula (K_a), we obtained a final global intercoder reliability of .75. The variation of intercoder reliability per indicator within each country ranged from .71 to .84.

Prior to our main analyses, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the audience-oriented approach using Mplus 7.0. Based on the CFA results, the individual role items were combined to build each role (range: 0–1), yielding a final score for each role for each news item. A higher score signaled higher performance of each journalistic role and a lower score signaled lower performance of each role. For descriptive purposes, we calculated the sum of the points divided by the total number of items in each role. We used factor scores to test for differences in the presence of each role across thematic beats, news organizations, and countries.

At the individual level, we coded the story's main topic as a proxy for news beats. From the perspective of content analysis, it is the best way to standardize comparison and account for prevalence and characteristics of thematic beats across dissimilar newsrooms, beat structures and journalistic traditions.

The instrument originally covered 17 different news topics: government/legislature; campaigns/political parties; police and crime; court; defense/national security; economy; education; energy, environment and climate change; transportation; housing, infrastructure and public works; accidents and natural disasters; health; religion; human rights; demonstrations and protests; social problems; and miscellaneous. These categories were then recoded as six values that rendered the following sample distribution: politics (35.2% of the stories); police (12%) court (3.5%); economy (16.5%); social affairs (21.5%); and miscellaneous (11.3%).

Regarding organizational-level predictors, we measured newspapers' audience orientation, which indicated whether a given newspaper mainly addresses a politically interested niche audience (elite press) or a broader, diverse readership (popular press). About 75.2% of the news items in the sample came from elite newspapers and 25% came from popular newspapers. This results from popular titles, including fewer news articles per issue, and the absence of popular press titles in Cuba, Spain, Brazil, and Greece.

Our second organizational predictor was media ownership. We determined whether the newspapers in the sample were controlled by private groups (private ownership), publicly traded corporations (corporate ownership), or the government (state ownership). For our sample, 16.5% of the news was published by state-owned media, 66% by private entities, and 17.5% by large corporations without major private shareholders. As preliminary analyses did not yield important significant differences in the performance of the civic, infotainment, and service roles with respect to the latter two groups, we grouped them together under the label of private-corporate owned media.

Analytical Strategy

Three sets of multilevel analyses were carried out to investigate the effect of thematic beats, as well as the organizational and country levels on the performance of the civic, infotainment, and service journalistic roles, one for each model. Each multilevel model consisted of three levels, with news stories nested in news organizations and countries.

Given that the main aim of this paper was to examine the influence of news beats on journalistic performance rather than testing competing story-level predictors, we included news topics as dummy predictors at Level-1 (with social affairs as the baseline category). We also included media ownership and media audience orientation as potential predictors at Level-2. To account for the nested structure of the data, the random intercepts of Level-2 and Level-3 (media outlet and country) were included in all models, while news-story and organizational level predictors were included as fixed effects. We also measured potential cross-level interactions between news topic and media audience orientation, and between news topic and media ownership. We used analyses of variance to provide descriptive results from our models.

Results

The Relationship between News Beat Fluidity and Role Performance Across Countries

Overall, our analyses suggest that accounting for differences at the organizational and country levels, the individual-level variables (thematic beats) are still significant factors for explaining the performance of the three audience-oriented roles analyzed in this study, thus supporting *H1*. While role performance mostly varied at the news beat level, a significant proportion of variance is still explained at the country level, especially for the civic role, suggesting essential differences across societal contexts. News beats might be static if studied in their own context, but decidedly become more fluid once they are cross-nationally compared (see [Table 1](#) *covariance parameters: intercept country*).

Specifically, the results reveal that all news topics turned out to be significant predictors of the performance of the civic role, meaning that, to some extent, this role has the potential to “open” all news beats when addressing citizen concerns, partially supporting hypothesis H1.1. Still, news on social affairs were more likely to display the civic role than news on police and crime ($b = -.030, p = .001, \beta = -.17$), court ($b = -.042, p = .001, \beta = -.09$), miscellaneous ($b = -.033, p = .011, \beta = -.17$), economic ($b = -.038, p = .001, \beta = -.20$), and politics ($b = -.032, p = .001, \beta = -.34$). This means that even when controlling for other variables and affecting other beats, social affairs is still the more intertwined with the civic role. In other words, it is more stable across different societies. However, the trend is not necessarily universal. Germany and Malaysia, do not follow this pattern, showing a greater presence of the civic role in the court and financial news beats, respectively. Another highlight is the polyvalence of the civic role in the U.S., Greece, Spain, and Latin America, where the civic role is not that higher in political news than in the police, the courts, miscellaneous or financial beats (Table 2), revealing that the civic role it is decidedly not solely a political function.

H1.2 and H1.3 are also partially supported by the data, as infotainment makes newsbeats more fluid across various political regimes. It also tends to have a significant presence across all thematic beats –even more than the civic and the service roles do. Court and miscellaneous news are excluded, though, as they are not significant predictors of infotainment, unlike the other newsbeats.

Regarding political news, the performance of the infotainment role is not only higher in established democracies as expected. Transitional democracies from Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe exhibit similar infotainment in political content (see Table 3). Moreover, except for the press in the U.S., Germany, Switzerland, and Brazil ($b = -.025, p = .001, \beta = -.05$) political news includes fewer infotainment elements than social affairs news (Tables 1 and 3). These findings mean that there can be more infotainment in social than in political news, reflecting the need of this newsbeat to rely on dramatic, human-interest narratives about citizen concerns to connect with audiences.

By contrast, crime news ($b = .075, p = .001, \beta = .10$) exhibit the infotainment role even more than social affairs and all other beats in most of the countries (Table 1). Hence news beat fluidity is multidimensional regarding this role. While infotainment affects most news topics, generating external fluidity, it is also external in the sense that the relationship affects various types of political regimes.

As for the service role, differences at the news beat level turned out to be more relevant than country differences, suggesting this role tends to be more stable across countries than across news beats. In other words, regardless of context, the service role makes some news beats unique and decidedly different from others.

More specifically, and strongly supporting H1.3, news on social affairs tends to include more elements of the service role than news on politics ($b = -.036, p = .001, \beta = -.18$), police ($b = -.045, p = .001, \beta = -.14$) and the courts ($b = -.036, p = .001, \beta = -.07$), while stories on the economy ($b = .016, p = .05, \beta = .01$) rank the highest in the performance of the service journalistic function overall (see Tables 1 and 4). Miscellaneous stories also include more elements of service journalism than news on politics, the courts, and the police. They also tend to include fewer service elements than news on social affairs ($b = -.032, p = .001, \beta = -.34$). The service role therefore is more likely to insulate news beats and make them internally stable rather than externally fluid.

Table 1. Individual, organizational, and country-level effects on the performance of the civic, infotainment, and service roles.

	Civic				Infotainment				Service			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Fixed Effects												
Intercept	.052***	.098***	.093***	.071***	.061***	.059***	.085***	.088***	.035***	.061***	.072***	.064***
Thematic Beat (0= Social Affairs)												
Politics		-.058***	-.058***	-.032***	-.012***	-.012***	-.025***		-.040***	-.040***	-.036***	
Police and Crime		$\beta = -.23$	$\beta = -.23$	$\beta = -.24$	$\beta = -.04$	$\beta = -.04$	$\beta = -.05$		$\beta = -.17$	$\beta = -.17$	$\beta = -.18$	
Court		-.060***	-.060***	-.030***	.048***	.048***	.075***		-.050***	-.050***	-.045***	
Miscellaneous		$\beta = -.17$	$\beta = -.17$	$\beta = -.17$	$\beta = .12$	$\beta = .12$	$\beta = .10$		$\beta = -.15$	$\beta = -.15$	$\beta = -.14$	
Economy		-.059***	-.059***	-.042***	.006	.006	-.015		-.048***	-.048***	-.036***	
Elite Press		$\beta = -.09$	$\beta = -.09$	$\beta = -.09$					$\beta = -.08$	$\beta = -.08$	$\beta = -.07$	
State Ownership		-.061***	-.061***	-.033***	.027***	.027***	.007		-.034***	-.034***	-.001	
Politics*Elite Press		$\beta = -.16$	$\beta = -.16$	$\beta = -.17$	$\beta = .07$	$\beta = .07$			$\beta = -.10$	$\beta = -.10$		
Police* Elite Press		-.064***	-.064***	-.038***	-.028***	-.028***	-.044***		-.003	-.003	.016**	
Court *Elite Press		$\beta = -.20$	$\beta = -.20$	$\beta = -.20$	$\beta = -.08$	$\beta = -.08$	$\beta = -.08$				$\beta = .01$	
Miscellaneous * Elite Media			.013*	.037***		-.044***	-.042***			-.005	.008	
Economy*Elite Media			-.040*	-.070**		-.013	-.021				-.029*	-.040*
Politics*State Ownership			$\beta = -.13$	$\beta = -.13$							$\beta = -.10$	$\beta = -.09$
Police* State Ownership				-.032***				.015***				-.015***
Court *State Ownership				$\beta = -.06$				$\beta = .02$				$\beta = -.03$
Miscellaneous * State Ownership				-.032***				-.047***				.001
				$\beta = -.04$				$\beta = -.05$				
				-.019*				.004				.006
				$\beta = -.01$								
				-.032***				.001				-.029***
				$\beta = -.04$								$\beta = -.04$
				-.031***				.014**				-.046***
				$\beta = -.04$				$\beta = .02$				$\beta = -.07$
				.036***				.002				.027***
				$\beta = .05$								$\beta = .04$
				.033***				-.029**				.017*
				$\beta = .03$				$\beta = -.03$				$\beta = .02$
				.050**				.010				.031*
				$\beta = .03$								$\beta = .02$
												.002

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

	Civic				Infotainment				Service				
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	
Economy*State Ownership				.034*** $\beta = .03$.048*** $\beta = .06$.032*** $\beta = .03$.017* $\beta = .02$.005
Covariance Parameters (ID)													
Residual	.11083***	.10810***	.10810***	.10760***	.11803***	.11591***	.11591***	.11552***	.10884***	.10704***	.10704***	.10664***	
Intercept Organization	.02812***	.02755***	.02740***	.02729***	.04699***	.04421***	.03975***	.03923***	.02213***	.02128***	.02168***	.02105***	
Intercept Country	.03162**	.03108**	.02962*	.02995*	.02242**	.02271*	.02111	.02076	.01499*	.01612*	.01523	.01573	
-2LL	-52289.5	-53970.4	-53974.0	-54256.2	-48018.6	-49245.0	-49262.1	-49492.0	-53548.1	-54675.0	-54679.1	-54947.7	
AIC	-52273.7	-53891.7	-53854.6	-53998.1	-48002.8	-49166.9	-49141.7	-49229.3	-53531.2	-54595.1	-54569.8	-54662.7	
BIC	-52240.0	-53815.9	-53745.1	-53762.2	-47969.1	-49091.0	-49032.2	-48993.5	-53497.5	-54519.3	-54444.3	-54426.8	

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

Table 2. Civic role performance by thematic beats per country.

Civic Role	Politics	Police	Court	Social Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy
United States	.094 (.126)	.118 (.146)	.114 (.119)	.149 (.172)	.128 (.149)	.081 (.115)
Russia	.080 (.104)	.070 (.102)	.096 (.103)	.143 (.138)	.055 (.089)	.088 (.097)
Greece	.073 (.124)	.094 (.152)	.141 (.173)	.219 (.243)	.096 (.147)	.092 (.175)
Spain	.020 (.081)	.029 (.091)	.031 (.095)	.125 (.198)	.039 (.098)	.010 (.051)
Hungary	.026 (.098)	.001 (.040)	.020 (.081)	.054 (.126)	.016 (.067)	.001 (.001)
Switzerland	.022 (.058)	.005 (.026)	.008 (.037)	.026 (.082)	.002 (.015)	.005 (.031)
Poland	.055 (.115)	.014 (.056)	.055 (.134)	.116 (.174)	.042 (.111)	.051 (.091)
Germany	.055 (.099)	.035 (.081)	.084 (.088)	.077 (.128)	.034 (.084)	.039 (.078)
Mexico	.048 (.107)	.049 (.114)	.068 (.173)	.149 (.218)	.063 (.135)	.057 (.132)
Cuba	.014 (.060)	.111 (.157)	--	.139 (.228)	.063 (.138)	.068 (.131)
Argentina	.039 (.112)	.053 (.133)	.049 (.128)	.175 (.226)	.044 (.112)	.029 (.102)
Brazil	.040 (.082)	.035 (.078)	.063 (.130)	.130 (.208)	.018 (.061)	.024 (.063)
Chile	.044 (.076)	.008 (.038)	.010 (.034)	.051 (.094)	.012 (.046)	.013 (.045)
Malaysia	.073 (.126)	.076 (.153)	.027 (.048)	.103 (.176)	.054 (.115)	.132 (.187)
Philippines	.053 (.101)	.010 (.043)	.015 (.055)	.046 (.091)	.011 (.041)	.025 (.061)
China	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)
Ireland	.016 (.064)	.006 (.042)	.001 (.001)	.071 (.157)	.005 (.034)	.019 (.083)
Hong Kong	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.002 (.020)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)

Means and standard deviations (in parentheses)

Table 3. Infotainment role performance by thematic beats per country.

Infotainment	Politics	Police	Court	Social Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy
United States	.065 (.122)	.094 (.141)	.070 (.151)	.066 (.123)	.112 (.169)	.048 (.110)
Russia	.034 (.076)	.152 (.171)	.102 (.153)	.066 (.149)	.101 (.133)	.013 (.056)
Greece	.050 (.084)	.072 (.120)	.124 (.128)	.075 (.115)	.072 (.110)	.019 (.055)
Spain	.006 (.036)	.032 (.112)	.010 (.051)	.033 (.097)	.042 (.109)	.002 (.019)
Hungary	.026 (.103)	.123 (.199)	.076 (.229)	.056 (.128)	.096 (.164)	.055 (.136)
Switzerland	.031 (.084)	.067 (.148)	.019 (.064)	.037 (.101)	.071 (.117)	.022 (.071)
Poland	.056 (.120)	.252 (.291)	.109 (.186)	.101 (.187)	.115 (.184)	.030 (.088)
Germany	.087 (.149)	.168 (.217)	.080 (.122)	.058 (.120)	.170 (.215)	.050 (.113)
Mexico	.020 (.074)	.090 (.176)	.031 (.080)	.044 (.119)	.051 (.118)	.016 (.056)
Cuba	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	--	.001 (.001)	.003 (.021)	.001 (.001)
Argentina	.060 (.130)	.221 (.237)	.060 (.120)	.102 (.171)	.083 (.156)	.026 (.082)
Brazil	.050 (.112)	.076 (.121)	.080 (.129)	.032 (.102)	.093 (.151)	.014 (.061)
Chile	.067 (.139)	.134 (.195)	.063 (.139)	.080 (.149)	.217 (.206)	.046 (.111)
Malaysia	.071 (.140)	.092 (.162)	.071 (.124)	.094 (.149)	.086 (.139)	.024 (.069)
Philippines	.026 (.066)	.067 (.111)	.085 (.112)	.027 (.055)	.038 (.080)	.007 (.035)
China	.028 (.081)	.039 (.102)	.016 (.050)	.045 (.112)	.094 (.150)	.028 (.081)
Ireland	.015 (.063)	.069 (.168)	.001 (.001)	.025 (.094)	.068 (.188)	.014 (.063)
Hong Kong	.048 (.102)	.083 (.159)	.024 (.063)	.059 (.115)	.101 (.150)	.029 (.086)

Means and standard deviations (in parentheses)

The Influence of Organizational-level Factors on News Beat Fluidity

The next intercept models incorporated organizational-level factors. Across all three roles, a significant proportion of variance explaining the role-newsbeats relation lies at the media outlet level (see [Table 1](#) *covariance parameters: intercept organization*). In other words, news beats can either retain their internal logics or be more fluid depending on institutional-meso characteristics, providing significant support for *H2* and *H3*.

Despite this, the data did not support our expectations concerning *H2.1*. While media audience orientation significantly influences the performance of the civic role and the elite media exhibits this role to a greater extent than the popular media overall ($b = .037, p = .001, \beta = .10$), this result varies across countries. For example, the popular press in Russia and Malaysia showed higher levels of civic journalism than the elite

Table 4. Service role performance by thematic beats per country.

Service	Politics	Police	Court	Social Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy
United States	.007 (.045)	.003 (.037)	.003 (.026)	.029 (.098)	.007 (.050)	.046 (.127)
Russia	.046 (.123)	.007 (.040)	.063 (.144)	.099 (.161)	.037 (.120)	.082 (.146)
Greece	.022 (.103)	.016 (.062)	.008 (.043)	.070 (.135)	.016 (.068)	.103 (.223)
Spain	.015 (.071)	.011 (.061)	.002 (.025)	.093 (.187)	.029 (.107)	.011 (.073)
Hungary	.041 (.138)	.008 (.073)	.023 (.131)	.120 (.236)	.062 (.169)	.145 (.251)
Switzerland	.015 (.060)	.001 (.013)	.001 (.001)	.023 (.089)	.027 (.097)	.033 (.091)
Poland	.027 (.095)	.043 (.128)	.086 (.208)	.098 (.183)	.065 (.191)	.200 (.232)
Germany	.019 (.066)	.014 (.058)	.033 (.086)	.061 (.118)	.054 (.148)	.033 (.090)
Mexico	.015 (.077)	.010 (.064)	.042 (.126)	.052 (.133)	.050 (.181)	.052 (.141)
Cuba	.005 (.047)	.001 (.001)	--	.073 (.168)	.014 (.073)	.022 (.087)
Argentina	.016 (.073)	.011 (.066)	.001 (.001)	.086 (.183)	.084 (.177)	.057 (.148)
Brazil	.015 (.078)	.007 (.058)	.023 (.106)	.067 (.166)	.024 (.092)	.069 (.173)
Chile	.010 (.040)	.005 (.040)	.001 (.001)	.056 (.136)	.040 (.122)	.084 (.157)
Malaysia	.027 (.089)	.056 (.141)	.001 (.001)	.048 (.120)	.027 (.084)	.042 (.107)
Philippines	.022 (.085)	.015 (.086)	.006 (.039)	.098 (.173)	.010 (.052)	.094 (.155)
China	.001 (.016)	.001 (.018)	.001 (.001)	.005 (.036)	.007 (.043)	.005 (.039)
Ireland	.011 (.068)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.071 (.187)	.028 (.188)	.070 (.188)
Hong Kong	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.005 (.046)	.006 (.050)	.004 (.030)

Means and standard deviations (in parentheses)

press in most news beats. Also, in advanced democracies like the U.S., Ireland, and Switzerland (and in Poland), the civic role in political news is significantly higher in the popular press than in elite publications. Thus, *H2.1* is mainly rejected.

These findings show that in specific journalistic cultures, the popular press is more effective at voicing voice citizen concerns through different news beats than the elite press. It appears that in some countries, societal level dimensions are less connected to the civic role than the actual orientation of the popular press, which appears to lend a human-interest angle to complex issues like politics and economics. Still, in key established democracies like the U.S. or Germany, the civic role tends to be more stable across news beats, rather than being the byproduct of a given beat (such as social affairs) or a specific media orientation (such as the popular press) (see [Table 5](#)). In these two countries, high levels of professionalism (Hallin and Mancini 2004) and mass-readership not tied to political elites alone might have prompted journalists from all news beats to incorporate coverage of citizen voices into their standard reporting, making news beat externally particularistic. High levels of professionalism can thus make the civic role less news beat-driven and more transversal across journalistic cultures.

Although *H2* was not supported by the data, our models reveal a significant cross-level interaction between media audience orientation and news beat for the civic role (see [Tables 1](#) and [3](#)). In other words, social affair news present the greatest opportunity for citizen voices to be heard in the elite press, while this is not the case to the same extent in news on politics ($b = -.032$, $p = .001$, $\beta = -.06$), police ($b = -.032$, $p = .001$, $\beta = -.04$), court ($b = -.019$, $p = .001$, $\beta = -.01$), miscellaneous ($b = -.032$, $p = .001$, $\beta = -.04$) or economy ($b = -.031$, $p = .001$, $\beta = -.04$).

Media audience orientation ($b = -.042$, $p = .001$, $\beta = -.14$) also presented a significant relationship with the performance of the infotainment role. Globally, this role tends to be higher across all thematic beats in the popular media, corroborating infotainment's overall connection to popular genres (see [Tables 1](#) and [6](#)). Our expectation in this regard (*H2.2*) was supported overall, but the moderating power of media audience

Table 5. Civic role performance by thematic beats and media audience orientation per country.

	Civic											
	Elite						Popular					
	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy
Argentina	.035 (.104)	.045 (.113)	.047 (.125)	.192 (.238)	.056 (.121)	.031 (.112)	.043 (.123)	.062 (.153)	.052 (.135)	.151 (.208)	.037 (.107)	.026 (.088)
Brazil	.040 (.082)	.035 (.078)	.063 (.130)	.130 (.208)	.018 (.061)	.024 (.063)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Chile	.044 (.077)	.012 (.045)	.010 (.035)	.054 (.092)	.015 (.058)	.015 (.048)	.046 (.063)	.003 (.023)	.007 (.029)	.041 (.099)	.010 (.039)	.004 (.022)
China	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Germany	.057 (.102)	.038 (.085)	.042 (.089)	.081 (.130)	.040 (.090)	.040 (.079)	.038 (.074)	.016 (.053)	.111 (.000)	.039 (.098)	.000 (.000)	.024 (.070)
Hong Kong	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.002 (.019)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	—	.002 (.022)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Ireland	.009 (.037)	.005 (.041)	.001 (.012)	.079 (.170)	.008 (.043)	.122 (.051)	.048 (.129)	.008 (.043)	.000 (.000)	.052 (.130)	.000 (.000)	.058 (.175)
Mexico	.060 (.122)	.054 (.117)	.076 (.182)	.171 (.232)	.081 (.148)	.064 (.142)	.019 (.049)	.029 (.099)	.000 (.000)	.086 (.153)	.029 (.099)	.024 (.067)
Spain	.020 (.080)	.029 (.091)	.031 (.095)	.125 (.198)	.038 (.098)	.010 (.051)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Switzerland	.020 (.052)	.003 (.017)	.006 (.036)	.027 (.079)	.002 (.016)	.004 (.027)	.030 (.072)	.006 (.032)	.019 (.045)	.026 (.086)	.002 (.014)	.010 (.045)
US	.086 (.116)	.124 (.150)	.124 (.118)	.165 (.177)	.118 (.147)	.069 (.109)	.124 (.156)	.112 (.142)	.059 (.118)	.121 (.160)	.152 (.155)	.125 (.128)
The Philippines	.074 (.110)	.019 (.059)	.016 (.057)	.063 (.092)	.017 (.051)	.025 (.061)	.016 (.069)	.003 (.022)	.010 (.034)	.028 (.086)	.000 (.008)	.016 (.053)
Malaysia	.063 (.125)	.085 (.169)	.026 (.049)	.105 (.177)	.040 (.093)	.111 (.166)	.098 (.123)	.062 (.126)	.028 (.056)	.098 (.174)	.099 (.164)	.144 (.200)
Greece	.073 (.124)	.094 (.152)	.141 (.173)	.219 (.243)	.096 (.147)	.092 (.175)	—	—	—	—	—	—

(Continued)

Table 5. Continued.

	Civic											
	Elite						Popular					
	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy
Poland	.070 (.063)	.024 (.063)	.064 (.143)	.130 (.180)	.055 (.127)	.056 (.096)	.110 (.049)	.006 (.049)	.000 (.000)	.063 (.136)	.020 (.046)	.020 (.044)
Hungary	.027 (.097)	.001 (.012)	.023 (.093)	.084 (.149)	.017 (.078)	.000 (.000)	.022 (.100)	.006 (.051)	.012 (.037)	.018 (.081)	.016 (.060)	.000 (.000)
Russia	.067 (.083)	.056 (.091)	.090 (.087)	.117 (.117)	.043 (.083)	.093 (.096)	.101 (.130)	.099 (.118)	.111 (.142)	.089 (.174)	.123 (.071)	.079 (.100)
Cuba	.014 (.060)	.111 (.157)	—	.139 (.228)	.063 (.138)	.068 (.131)	—	—	—	—	—	—

Means and standard deviations (in parentheses)

orientation between thematic beats and role performance makes some news topics more homogeneous than others within specific types of papers in certain countries. For example, in Hong Kong media, the infotainment role mostly appears in the popular press' coverage of crime and miscellaneous stories. Hungarian journalism presents a significant contrast between its elite press culture – which has deficient levels of infotainment overall – and its tabloid journalism culture, with popular papers featuring higher levels of infotainment in almost every news beat. Similar results were observed in Chile and Poland, where popular papers are decidedly more homogeneous in infotainment performance across thematic beats (see [Table 6](#)). These results reveal that infotainment is a more malleable role and that it offers stylistic devices that can be useful to various types of news beats.

In terms of the relationship between infotainment in political news and media audience orientation, our results also revealed that some patterns do not operate equally in all countries. For example, the performance of the infotainment role in Malaysia is significantly higher in the elite press than in the popular press. At the same time, no significant differences were found in the performance of the infotainment role in political news between elite and popular U.S. papers. These results corroborate the context-specific nature of journalistic work. Political infotainment can be closely linked to audience approaches and market structures, or to specific journalistic cultures at the national level.

Regarding coverage of crime-related issues, a relatively homogeneous, static news beat culture is associated with infotainment in Argentina regardless of the outlet's orientation. In popular papers, the connection between infotainment and crime news coverage is standard in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Germany. Surprisingly, crime stories in the elite media from Ireland and the U.S include more infotainment than material published in the popular press. The audience approach and editorial stakes certainly moderate the presence of infotainment in crime news.

While media audience orientation did not show a significant and direct effect on the performance of the service role ($ps > .10$), our data did reveal a significant cross-level interaction between media audience orientation and thematic beats, with elite media diminishing the effect of political ($b = -.015, p = .05, \beta = -.03$), economic ($b = -.046, p = .05, \beta = -.07$), and miscellaneous news beats ($b = -.029, p = .05, \beta = -.04$) on its performance (see [Tables 1](#) and [7](#)). While we did not pose a formal hypothesis about this relationship, these results show that providing tips and advice to the public seems less important in the elite media than in the popular media, especially in economics, miscellaneous, and political news. Instead, this is more prominent in popular media coverage of economic news, and especially in transitional democracies such as Eastern European countries.

The impact of media ownership on the relationship between role performance and thematic beats also turned out to be significant globally (see [Table 1](#)). The data strongly support *H3.1*, with state-owned newspapers –which in our study only hail from non-democratic countries – exhibiting the civic role at a lower level than private and corporate-owned media outlets ($b = -.070, p = .011, \beta = -.13$).

Further analyses show that media ownership significantly moderates the effect of the thematic beats on civic role performance, with state-owned media increasing the effect of all news topics. In other words, state-owned media include fewer civic-role elements in news stories on social affairs than in the rest of the beats (see [Tables 1](#) and [8](#)). This provides greater nuance than the analysis based on previous findings, which suggested that

Table 6. Infotainment role performance by thematic beats and media audience orientation per country.

	Infotainment											
	Elite						Popular					
	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy
Argentina	.058 (.124)	.210 (.231)	.067 (.121)	.106 (.174)	.107 (.180)	.026 (.076)	.062 (.137)	.235 (.243)	.048 (.118)	.096 (.167)	.071 (.140)	.027 (.088)
Brazil	.050 (.112)	.076 (.121)	.079 (.129)	.032 (.102)	.093 (.151)	.014 (.061)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Chile	.038 (.095)	.071 (.141)	.046 (.111)	.035 (.092)	.088 (.149)	.022 (.071)	.248 (.214)	.231 (.227)	.222 (.249)	.192 (.197)	.281 (.201)	.150 (.174)
China	.033 (.087)	.015 (.048)	.020 (.055)	.055 (.125)	.103 (.156)	.035 (.091)	.020 (.069)	.048 (.116)	.014 (.047)	.032 (.092)	.082 (.138)	.011 (.046)
Germany	.080 (.143)	.136 (.190)	.071 (.113)	.051 (.112)	.167 (.213)	.047 (.113)	.156 (.185)	.333 (.268)	.167 (.236)	.123 (.168)	.190 (.244)	.077 (.106)
Hong Kong	.041 (.093)	.063 (.154)	.024 (.063)	.049 (.102)	.093 (.143)	.026 (.081)	.094 (.141)	.117 (.162)	—	.083 (.138)	.112 (.158)	.047 (.106)
Ireland	.018 (.069)	.109 (.201)	.000 (.000)	.034 (.110)	.068 (.181)	.014 (.061)	.000 (.000)	.034 (.123)	.000 (.000)	.003 (.021)	.069 (.205)	.018 (.076)
Mexico	.019 (.067)	.037 (.102)	.024 (.069)	.036 (.110)	.066 (.135)	.111 (.050)	.022 (.090)	.283 (.246)	.083 (.139)	.069 (.139)	.022 (.069)	.040 (.084)
Spain	.006 (.036)	.032 (.111)	.010 (.051)	.033 (.097)	.042 (.109)	.002 (.019)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Switzerland	.026 (.077)	.042 (.110)	.022 (.069)	.022 (.081)	.050 (.109)	.016 (.059)	.045 (.101)	.089 (.173)	.000 (.000)	.054 (.117)	.086 (.121)	.047 (.102)
US	.066 (.120)	.101 (.152)	.075 (.157)	.063 (.119)	.111 (.168)	.048 (.110)	.061 (.130)	.086 (.128)	.044 (.117)	.072 (.129)	.114 (.173)	.049 (.115)
The Philippines	.021 (.061)	.031 (.084)	.092 (.112)	.007 (.039)	.038 (.086)	.008 (.036)	.034 (.073)	.092 (.121)	.045 (.108)	.026 (.066)	.037 (.071)	.000 (.000)
Malaysia	.085 (.152)	.059 (.119)	.069 (.119)	.088 (.148)	.080 (.135)	.028 (.064)	.032 (.089)	.142 (.202)	.083 (.167)	.109 (.151)	.107 (.152)	.022 (.072)
Greece	.050 (.084)	.072 (.120)	.124 (.128)	.075 (.115)	.072 (.110)	.019 (.055)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Poland	.036 (.095)	.133 (.191)	.091 (.172)	.062 (.148)	.062 (.057)	.020 (.067)	.113 (.161)	.347 (.321)	.222 (.240)	.251 (.241)	.238 (.233)	.098 (.145)
Hungary	.007 (.042)	.045 (.110)	.000 (.000)	.014 (.070)	.035 (.097)	.000 (.000)	.088 (.188)	.180 (.228)	.278 (.382)	.104 (.160)	.147 (.190)	.121 (.183)
Russia	.029 (.067)	.115 (.144)	.078 (.153)	.042 (.109)	.085 (.122)	.005 (.030)	.042 (.087)	.231 (.198)	.167 (.142)	.094 (.181)	.121 (.144)	.024 (.080)
Cuba	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	—	.000 (.000)	.003 (.021)	.000 (.000)	—	—	—	—	—	—

Table 7. Service role performance by thematic beats and media audience orientation per country.

	Service											
	Elite						Popular					
	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy
Argentina	.017 (.074)	.016 (.082)	.000 (.000)	.076 (.173)	.063 (.149)	.047 (.142)	.016 (.073)	.004 (.041)	.000 (.000)	.099 (.196)	.095 (.189)	.070 (.154)
Brazil	.015 (.078)	.007 (.058)	.023 (.106)	.067 (.166)	.024 (.092)	.069 (.173)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Chile	.005 (.041)	.004 (.041)	.000 (.000)	.048 (.129)	.019 (.067)	.051 (.127)	.041 (.136)	.006 (.039)	.000 (.000)	.074 (.152)	.051 (.140)	.226 (.193)
China	.001 (.012)	.005 (.034)	.000 (.000)	.005 (.040)	.005 (.034)	.005 (.040)	.002 (.021)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.004 (.031)	.010 (.055)	.005 (.036)
Germany	.017 (.063)	.014 (.058)	.024 (.075)	.057 (.117)	.051 (.154)	.032 (.086)	.032 (.084)	.012 (.055)	.125 (.177)	.098 (.125)	.071 (.122)	.045 (.119)
Hong Kong	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.003 (.034)	.000 (.000)	.001 (.019)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	—	.009 (.068)	.014 (.077)	.016 (.061)
Ireland	.014 (.074)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.087 (.202)	.046 (.156)	.083 (.201)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.031 (.137)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Mexico	.016 (.068)	.013 (.071)	.042 (.130)	.061 (.143)	.065 (.213)	.045 (.120)	.012 (.096)	.000 (.000)	.042 (.102)	.027 (.096)	.020 (.090)	.083 (.213)
Spain	.015 (.071)	.011 (.061)	.002 (.024)	.093 (.187)	.029 (.107)	.011 (.072)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Switzerland	.016 (.061)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.019 (.073)	.021 (.071)	.025 (.081)	.012 (.058)	.001 (.018)	.000 (.000)	.027 (.104)	.030 (.112)	.065 (.120)
US	.006 (.042)	.005 (.051)	.003 (.029)	.031 (.104)	.005 (.034)	.058 (.140)	.012 (.054)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.025 (.086)	.012 (.078)	.000 (.000)
The Philippines	.028 (.098)	.028 (.122)	.007 (.042)	.169 (.207)	.016 (.065)	.094 (.155)	.010 (.050)	.005 (.043)	.000 (.000)	.021 (.070)	.001 (.018)	.095 (.147)
Malaysia	.020 (.076)	.069 (.166)	.000 (.000)	.044 (.114)	.019 (.066)	.042 (.129)	.047 (.114)	.037 (.090)	.000 (.000)	.057 (.134)	.054 (.125)	.042 (.095)
Greece	.022 (.103)	.016 (.062)	.008 (.043)	.070 (.135)	.016 (.068)	.103 (.222)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Poland	.026 (.096)	.069 (.154)	.100 (.221)	.112 (.196)	.054 (.185)	.202 (.231)	.027 (.093)	.023 (.098)	.000 (.000)	.046 (.107)	.089 (.207)	.191 (.243)
Hungary	.028 (.107)	.016 (.109)	.000 (.000)	.053 (.166)	.014 (.058)	.079 (.217)	.086 (.205)	.002 (.022)	.083 (.250)	.197 (.279)	.102 (.215)	.224 (.270)
Russia	.044 (.125)	.009 (.048)	.086 (.163)	.115 (.170)	.049 (.124)	.040 (.114)	.049 (.120)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.079 (.148)	.050 (.153)	.143 (.169)
Cuba	.005 (.047)	.000 (.000)	—	.073 (.168)	.014 (.073)	.022 (.087)	—	—	—	—	—	—

Cuban journalism showed relatively high levels of civic journalism compared to other countries (Mellado et al. 2017). It appears that when the civic role manifests itself in state-run media in non-democratic countries, it does so only in coverage of unproblematic and uncontroversial news topics.

By contrast, media ownership does not have a significant and direct influence on the performance of the infotainment role –especially when it comes to political news – suggesting the existence of a rather transversal commercial approach of journalism and the media today (see Tables 1 and 9). Despite this, our results did reveal that media ownership moderates the effect of news topics in the performance of the infotainment role, with state-owned media diminishing the effect of infotainment for news on police ($b = -.029$, $p = .01$, $\beta = -.03$), likely because these stories are easier to enrich with infotainment elements such as suspense, sensationalism, and emotion. By contrast, state-run newspapers like those in non-democratic countries were more likely to perform the infotainment role in economic ($b = .017$, $p = .05$, $\beta = .02$) and miscellaneous stories ($b = .032$, $p = .001$, $\beta = .03$) than in social affairs news, perhaps to focus the attention on business-related sensationalized scandals rather than on social affairs news as potential causes of social dissatisfaction. Thus, H3.2 is rejected.

Finally, the data support H3.3, as we found that media ownership is linked to the performance of the service role ($b = -.040$, $p = .05$, $\beta = -.09$). According to our models, state-owned media outlets tend to include significantly fewer elements of the service role in their news than private/corporate-owned media in social affairs and political stories (see Tables 1 and 10).

Discussion

This paper analyzed how the civic, service, and infotainment role performance are related to different news beats. The aim was to testing whether the latter work as internally stable “micro-cultures” across organizational conditions and countries or whether these conditions boost their external fluidity in relation to the performance of infotainment, service, and civic functions. One general conclusion is that news beats strongly and significantly affect the performance of audience-oriented roles, which means they are tightly interrelated. Still, given that roles co-occur, the stability of news beats is subjected to contextual change, with the impact of country-level and organizational differences driving these results in several directions.

Our first set of hypotheses explored the performance of audience-oriented roles in specific news beats across different types of countries. Due to the emergence of the civic role in the U.S., we had expected political and social affairs news beats to exhibit this role in developing and established democracies. We found that, globally, social affairs topics and the civic role tend to go hand in hand, and it is safe to contend that the beat is stable thanks to the performance of this role.

However, this is not exclusive to this thematic beat or political news. Through the lens of country variation, we can argue that all beats can, at some point, become fluid when addressing citizen voices and concerns. It is not one type of political regime alone but rather specific circumstances that can trigger the civic coverage in any news beat. The civic role holds the potential to de-stabilize news beats to make them more fluid.

Table 8. Civic role performance by thematic beats and media ownership per country.

	Civic											
	State Owned						Private/Corporate Owned					
	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy
Argentina							.039 (.112)	.053 (.133)	.049 (.128)	.175 (.226)	.044 (.112)	.029 (.102)
Brazil							.040 (.082)	.035 (.078)	.063 (.130)	.130 (.208)	.018 (.061)	.024 (.063)
Chile							.044 (.076)	.008 (.038)	.010 (.034)	.051 (.094)	.012 (.046)	.013 (.045)
China	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Germany							.055 (.100)	.035 (.081)	.048 (.088)	.077 (.128)	.034 (.084)	.039 (.078)
Hong Kong	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.003 (.027)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)
Ireland							.016 (.064)	.006 (.042)	.001 (.010)	.071 (.157)	.005 (.034)	.019 (.083)
Mexico							.048 (.107)	.048 (.114)	.068 (.173)	.149 (.218)	.063 (.135)	.056 (.132)
Spain							.020 (.080)	.029 (.091)	.031 (.095)	.125 (.198)	.038 (.098)	.010 (.051)
Switzerland							.022 (.058)	.005 (.026)	.008 (.037)	.026 (.082)	.002 (.015)	.005 (.031)
US							.094 (.126)	.118 (.146)	.113 (.119)	.149 (.172)	.128 (.149)	.080 (.115)
The Philippines							.053 (.101)	.010 (.043)	.015 (.055)	.046 (.091)	.011 (.041)	.025 (.061)
Malaysia							.073 (.126)	.076 (.153)	.026 (.048)	.103 (.176)	.054 (.115)	.132 (.187)
Greece							.073 (.124)	.094 (.152)	.141 (.173)	.219 (.243)	.096 (.147)	.091 (.175)
Poland							.055 (.115)	.014 (.056)	.055 (.134)	.116 (.174)	.042 (.111)	.051 (.091)
Hungary							.026 (.098)	.004 (.040)	.020 (.081)	.054 (.126)	.016 (.067)	.000 (.000)
Russia	.067 (.083)	.056 (.090)	.090 (.087)	.117 (.117)	.043 (.083)	.093 (.096)	.101 (.130)	.100 (.118)	.111 (.142)	.174 (.155)	.071 (.094)	.079 (.100)
Cuba	.014 (.060)	.111 (.157)	—	.139 (.228)	.063 (.138)	.068 (.131)	—	—	—	—	—	—

Table 9. Infotainment role performance by thematic beats and media ownership per country.

	Infotainment											
	State Owned						Private/Corporate Owned					
	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy
Argentina							.059 (.130)	.221 (.237)	.060 (.120)	.102 (.171)	.083 (.156)	.026 (.082)
Brazil							.050 (.112)	.076 (.121)	.079 (.129)	.032 (.102)	.093 (.151)	.014 (.061)
Chile							.067 (.138)	.134 (.195)	.063 (.139)	.080 (.149)	.217 (.206)	.046 (.110)
China	.028 (.081)	.039 (.102)	.016 (.050)	.045 (.112)	.094 (.150)	.027 (.080)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Germany							.087 (.149)	.168 (.217)	.080 (.122)	.058 (.120)	.170 (.215)	.050 (.113)
Hong Kong	.036 (.090)	.037 (.101)	.001 (.001)	.041 (.089)	.085 (.148)	.028 (.084)	.070 (.119)	.106 (.176)	.042 (.083)	.074 (.131)	.109 (.150)	.035 (.092)
Ireland							.015 (.063)	.069 (.168)	.001 (.001)	.025 (.094)	.068 (.188)	.014 (.063)
Mexico							.020 (.074)	.090 (.176)	.031 (.080)	.044 (.119)	.051 (.118)	.016 (.056)
Spain							.006 (.036)	.032 (.112)	.010 (.051)	.033 (.097)	.042 (.109)	.002 (.019)
Switzerland							.030 (.084)	.067 (.148)	.019 (.064)	.037 (.101)	.071 (.117)	.022 (.071)
US							.065 (.122)	.094 (.141)	.070 (.151)	.066 (.123)	.111 (.169)	.048 (.110)
The Philippines							.026 (.066)	.067 (.111)	.085 (.112)	.017 (.055)	.038 (.080)	.007 (.036)
Malaysia							.071 (.140)	.092 (.162)	.071 (.124)	.094 (.149)	.086 (.139)	.024 (.069)
Greece							.050 (.084)	.072 (.120)	.124 (.128)	.075 (.115)	.072 (.110)	.019 (.055)
Poland							.056 (.120)	.252 (.291)	.109 (.186)	.101 (.187)	.115 (.184)	.030 (.088)
Hungary							.026 (.103)	.123 (.199)	.076 (.229)	.056 (.128)	.096 (.164)	.055 (.136)
Russia	.029 (.067)	.115 (.144)	.078 (.152)	.042 (.109)	.084 (.122)	.005 (.030)	.042 (.087)	.231 (.198)	.167 (.142)	.094 (.181)	.120 (.144)	.024 (.080)
Cuba	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	—	.001 (.001)	.003 (.021)	.001 (.001)	—	—	—	—	—	—

Table 10. Service role performance by thematic beats and media ownership per country.

	Service											
	State Owned						Private-Corporate Owned					
	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy	Politics	Police	Court	S. Affairs	Miscellaneous	Economy
Argentina							.016 (.073)	.011 (.066)	.001 (.001)	.086 (.183)	.084 (.177)	.057 (.148)
Brazil							.015 (.078)	.007 (.058)	.023 (.106)	.067 (.166)	.024 (.092)	.069 (.173)
Chile							.010 (.064)	.005 (.040)	.001 (.001)	.056 (.136)	.040 (.122)	.084 (.157)
China	.001 (.016)	.001 (.018)	.001 (.001)	.004 (.036)	.007 (.043)	.005 (.039)	—	—	—	—	—	—
---							.018 (.066)	.014 (.057)	.033 (.086)	.061 (.118)	.054 (.148)	.033 (.090)
Hong Kong	.001 (.001)	.000 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.002 (.020)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.009 (.063)	.009 (.060)	.011 (.051)
Ireland							.011 (.068)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.071 (.187)	.028 (.123)	.070 (.188)
Mexico							.015 (.076)	.010 (.064)	.042 (.126)	.042 (.133)	.050 (.181)	.052 (.141)
Spain							.015 (.070)	.011 (.061)	.002 (.025)	.093 (.187)	.029 (.107)	.011 (.073)
Switzerland							.015 (.060)	.001 (.013)	.001 (.001)	.022 (.089)	.027 (.097)	.033 (.091)
US							.007 (.045)	.003 (.037)	.003 (.026)	.029 (.098)	.007 (.050)	.046 (.127)
The Philippines							.022 (.085)	.015 (.086)	.006 (.039)	.098 (.173)	.010 (.052)	.094 (.155)
Malaysia							.027 (.089)	.056 (.141)	.001 (.001)	.048 (.120)	.027 (.084)	.042 (.107)
Greece							.022 (.103)	.016 (.062)	.008 (.043)	.070 (.135)	.016 (.068)	.103 (.223)
Poland							.026 (.095)	.043 (.128)	.086 (.208)	.098 (.183)	.065 (.191)	.200 (.231)
Hungary							.041 (.138)	.008 (.073)	.023 (.131)	.120 (.236)	.062 (.169)	.145 (.251)
Russia	.044 (.125)	.009 (.048)	.086 (.163)	.116 (.170)	.026 (.084)	.040 (.114)	.049 (.120)	.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.079 (.148)	.050 (.153)	.143 (.169)
Cuba	.005 (.047)	.001 (.001)	—	.073 (.168)	.014 (.073)	.022 (.108)	—	—	—	—	—	—

As for the links between infotainment and politics at the global level, our study corroborates this scholarly concern. Since most news beats predict the presence of infotainment globally and out of the three, is the most visible role in the news, we can assert that this is a rather transversal, global role in the coverage of most topics beyond politics. Also, as the literature suggests, political infotainment is not exclusive to established democracies but is observed in developing democracies as well. However, the transversal nature of this role means that politics is not necessarily the news beat most impacted by infotainment. Social affairs and sometimes crime news tend to display a higher presence of infotainment than politics in most countries.

The infotainment role appears to be relevant for various news beats due to its potential to connect with audiences through various elements, like emotions, private life or personalization. It is also a very strong driver of fluidity because all news beats are susceptible to its impact. Unsurprisingly, this has primarily been the case for crime storytelling, which is mainly static in many parts of the world. By contrast, covering social affairs through a human angle typically engages audiences and can help journalists place pressing societal issues at the core of the political debate.

Given that the impact of infotainment in political and social affairs news is often seen as—and proved to be—bad news for democracy (Aalberg and Curran 2012), our results support the claim that there is a need to more thoroughly discuss how infotainment is measured and operationalized in the literature. Critical scholarship addressing the definitions and distinctions associated with infotainment (Otto, Glogger, and Boukes 2017; Reinemann et al. 2012) points at the overall lack of consistency and clarity in the operationalization and conceptualization of the different elements of infotainment. While some studies focus on sensationalism or privatization alone, our study measured and compared infotainment in terms of the several elements of narrative and style that comprise it, namely: personalization, private life, sensationalism, emotions, and morbidity (Mellado 2020). This means that infotainment is a much more complex role than its bad reputation leads us to believe, drawing on many elements useful for storytelling. Taking these various facets of infotainment into account elucidates why the role in general, and some infotainment elements, can be compelling for journalists. Infotainment triggers news beat fluidity as it helps journalists from different news beats connect to their audiences.

Contrary to the civic and infotainment roles, which are more contingent on macro and meso variables, we found that news beats are more likely to remain stable concerning the performance of the service role. This means that no geographical, organizational, or media-system variables necessarily explain why some news provides tips, advice, and guidance on navigating grievance procedures. Service-oriented news is contingent on topical conjunctures that need advice-giving, and in that sense, social affairs and economics news are the ones to channel the function. While not all national-desk news provides opportunities to disseminate information that is always useful for the audience's ordinary lives, the service role goes beyond the realm of consumerism or typically "soft" beats such as lifestyle or travel. Audiences need more than advice on cheap trips and trendy restaurants. They often look to the news for crucial information about health care, housing, or micro-finance, and only specific news beats are bound to do so.

Our results also show different beat behavior across countries, suggesting that no single beat remains completely insulated or stable across similar media systems. We

also conclusively show that the moderating power of audience orientation and media ownership intensify or decrease these effects. As such, our second and third group of hypotheses explored whether audience orientation or media ownership increased or diminished the relation between news beats and roles.

With respect to the civic role, our findings provide a great deal of nuance to the often dichotomic approach that outlines the differences between the “serious” or elite media and the often-vilified popular press. For example, it is generally believed that the elite press can better advance civic missions than its tabloid counterparts. This study shows that this depends on the specific thematic beats at play and the nature of journalistic cultures. Based on our results, we can assert that elite media are, in fact, better connected to the civic role in general, but mainly through social affairs news. If we add media ownership to the equation, this is also true for private media, where the civic role tends to materialize only in social affairs.

Instead, in countries with authoritarian legacies, the popular press bears the civic flag. The link between the popular press and the civic role is also valid for political news in the most well-established democracies like Switzerland or the U.S. Unlike elite media, which is better at insulating the performance of the civic role to only social affairs news, the tabloid press provides a platform for nurturing civic functions in political affairs and other beats more generally.

The proponents of the early civic movement (Voakes 1999) envisioned a new civic approach to journalism that was closer to people than to elites, placing itself at the core of communities. Our results also prove that in contexts in which professional standards are high, mainstream journalists from all newsbeats can routinely address that call in their reporting at least to some extent or through some elements of the civic role.

We also learned that when introducing the moderating power of media ownership, state-owned newspapers in authoritarian societies whose journalists are known for their high levels of political instrumentalization also display the civic role. However, this holds only for unproblematic topics that do not involve politics and social affairs. In other words, state-owned media from authoritarian regimes do not give citizens a voice regarding political and social issues. The introduction of moderating variables at the organizational level can thus refine earlier research findings on the relationship between role performance and news beats in certain countries.

Regarding infotainment, our study confirms that this role does reign supreme in the popular press as a global trend and that the moderating effect of media orientation is not always conclusive concerning news beats. Indeed, the popular press does not necessarily trigger political infotainment in countries as emblematic as the U.S., but it does boost crime infotainment in regions as far from each other as Latin America and Eastern Europe, making it more stable.

Similarly, the elite press restricts the appearance of the service role in key thematic beats like politics or economics, which means that tabloid papers once again do better in meeting the audience’s needs in these matters. The often less-resourced popular press appears to be a much more hospitable environment for audience-oriented roles to materialize in a broader range of news beats, hence, the popular press boosts news beat fluidity.

Unlike media orientation, media ownership, surprisingly, does not seem to have a significant and direct influence on the performance of the infotainment role, especially when

it comes to political news. The politics-infotainment link is not necessarily intrinsic to private-owned newspapers. We only know for sure that state-run media also exhibit infotainment, although only in economics and miscellaneous stories.

Overall, we found that news beats are more fluid in popular media, where multiple beats are strongly oriented towards catering to the audience through one of the three roles. Irrespective of news beats' unique traits, their behavior is similar when connecting with audiences, as the popular orientation is more transversal and cuts across disparate countries. Thus, when boosted by malleable, flexible roles such as infotainment and to a certain extent the civic, and service roles, news beats can become more fluid and less bound to their unique characteristics.

By contrast, some media characteristics can insulate specific news beats to make them more static. For example, due to their often-politicized nature, the elite media can operate more context-specifically and vastly differ across countries. This can tether news beats like politics or social affairs more closely to the civic role than other beats. This approach can also disengage the service role in politics or economics in elite media. Hence, the internal particularities in news beats involve both unique reporting practices and a unique (dis)connection to their audience in different ways than other news beats. Economic news can be internally particularistic in staying away from the civic role and instead endorsing more service functions, if only in specific media types: economic news serves an elite niche rather than ordinary citizens and gives them advice rather than a voice. Also, the court beat does not appear to engage with a specific role or type of medium, and there is no evidence to suggest that this news beat is stable or fluid in terms of journalistic role performance. Rather, it can be internally particularistic in its distinctive routines, sources and procedures.

Finally, the political beat is much harder to categorize with respect to audience orientation. Given that it is one of the most fluid beats overall in terms of audience engagement and one of the most contingent on sociopolitical context and media system conditions, there is room to argue that it can sometimes be fluid with respect to infotainment and service roles but more static when it comes to civic affairs in certain countries.

Taking the news story, the organizational structure, and the societal levels together, we can conclude that news beats are firmly and significantly defined by their approach to the audience and are stable and unique if looked at individually. However, role performance significantly alters their dynamics as it varies across news beats. Organizational –and, to a lesser extent, national contexts— can “open” many newsbeats and make them fluid, but the three variables are all significant only regarding the civic role. This means that the civic role can reinforce and alter news beat stability when introducing organizational and national-level differences. Societal contexts significantly matter for civic functions rather than organizational expectations or news beat characteristics alone.

For the infotainment role, news beats are also significantly different, as some can strongly display this role. However, rather than national differences, organizational logics yielded more significant effects sizes, meaning that commercial incentives – rather than national differences—significantly spark fluidity across most beats.

Finally, the service role renders more news beat stability as news topics yield the largest effect sizes, confirming that some news beats are static in that they are intrinsically bound to serve audiences. To a much lesser extent, organizational logics can sometimes reinforce this stability, while it is decisively not a role influenced by national differences.

Although we offer essential evidence on the dynamic relationship between audience-oriented roles and thematic beats across news media organizations and countries, future research should address several limitations of this study.

Since our analysis only included newspapers, it is crucial to explore whether other media platforms provide further explanations of role performance across news beats (Reich 2016). Also, given the historical nature of journalistic role performance, the literature could benefit from longitudinal approaches that analyze how roles change over more extended periods concerning news beats (Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010; Umbricht and Esser 2016).

Also, while we found substantial variation across countries, we did not include societal-level predictors considering the small N (18 countries) we have at Level-3 and the number of predictors included at Level-1 and Level-2. Therefore, future studies should test our hypotheses in a broader sample of countries, including Africa, the Middle East, and Oceania. They should also test the influence of societal-level factors that could explain these variations in greater detail.

Despite these limitations, our findings have important implications. For the scholarship on news beats, our panoramic, multi-variable study shows that the arguments of “micro-cultures”, specialist beats can only hold typically at the role perception, sourcing, or news-gathering phase. While those phases tend to involve individual journalists’ decision-making, news content is the outcome of collective decisions that are informed by organizational policies and by socio-political contexts. For this reason, at the role performance level, few news beats remain unique. Organizational and societal influences have the potential to significantly trigger their fluidity and similar orientation towards the audiences.

Our results also contribute to debates about the redefinition of the profession and journalistic labor due to technological changes. Despite the validity crisis that news beat systems have faced during recent years, when looking at the journalistic outcome published by print media worldwide, our study shows that news beats still matter, explaining a great deal about how journalists perform different roles. Nevertheless, news beats that do not exhibit clear connections to their audience through specific role performances could be more exposed to “de-skilling” (Bro, Hansen, and Andersson 2016), becoming obsolete and redundant (Usher 2017; Anderson, Bell, and Shirky 2015). By contrast, news beats that can adopt and address audience-oriented functions in news coverage are more likely to constitute specialized clusters able to survive the long-term transformation, specialization, and upskilling.

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