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Journalistic Role Performance in Australia During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Events, Media Systems and Journalistic Practice

David Nolan [a], Kieran McGuinness [a], Jee Young Lee [a], Kate Holland [a] and Monique Lewis [b]

[a]News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia; [b]School of Humanities, Language and Social Science, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT

This study analyses data gathered as part of an international comparative study of journalistic role performance during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. We situate role performance at the intersection between anterior factors that shape journalistic decision-making and practice, and the contingent events and issues journalists are tasked with communicating. Based on this, we ground our analysis by considering (a) how news is shaped by media systems, and how Australia's media system may be characterised; (b) studies of journalists' work during previous health crises; and (c) analyses of media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis focuses, firstly, on whether role performance in Australia's 2020 news coverage was discernibly "consensus-based"; and, secondly, on whether there were any indicators of Australian coverage being "polarised" during this period. Our findings suggest role performance in 2020 was broadly reflective of a relative political consensus and that evidence of polarisation was limited. We find, nevertheless, that there were notable differences between different mediums and outlets, and reflect on factors that may have contributed to such differences. In light of this, we emphasise the importance of taking account of the relationship between local contexts and historical contingency in considering how role performances are produced.

Introduction

Australia had a very particular experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, with relatively low caseload numbers and fatalities. In 2020, the US, with a population of approximately 350 million, experienced 20 million cases and over 350,000 deaths, while England (population 56 million) had 2.7 million cases and 72,000 deaths. By contrast, Australia (population 25.7 million) had 28,408 cases and 909 deaths, mostly in the state of Victoria (Australian Government 2020). At the same time, the city of Melbourne experienced the world's longest

lockdown, with stay-home orders in place for a cumulative 262 days between March 2020 and October 2021 (Reuters 2021). Underpinning this experience was a combination of Australia's geographic isolation, as an island state that closed its borders relatively rapidly in March 2020, and its adoption of strong public health measures that, at least in the early stages of the pandemic, had both bipartisan political and strong public support.

In this article, we examine journalistic role performance in Australia during the pandemic's first year (2020), informed by an understanding of journalistic performance as a product of the relationship between anterior factors that contribute to influencing journalistic performance and the contingency of historical events (Schudson 2007). In Gaye Tuchman's classic definition of it as an institutional product, news can be understood as "pertinent information gathered by professionally defined methods specifying the relationship between what is known and how it is known" (1978, 82). As we discuss below, approaches to understanding journalistic practice and decision-making as "role performance" have sought to consider the relationship between: ideal and enacted roles that shape how journalists produce news; the wider institutional, sociopolitical, economic and technological relations that influence these roles in particular contexts; and the specific historical situations in which (and in relation to which) journalism is performed (Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017). To provide an account of these factors, following an initial discussion of journalistic role performance as an approach, we focus on three areas: first, work that informs a critical engagement with Australia's "media system"; second, work that focuses on journalism during previous pandemics and public health crises; and, finally, work that focused on news produced during the COVID-19 crisis in different social and political contexts, including Australia.

From this discussion, we draw on our findings to consider two questions that arise from our literature review. The first concerns whether Australia's relative political consensus surrounding the pandemic and public health measures contributed to forms of journalistic performance that reflected this. Secondly, in light of studies that have suggested Liberal media systems are becoming increasingly polarised, we consider whether there are any potential indicators of polarisation in our findings relating to Australian pandemic coverage. In addressing these questions, we focus not only on the differences in role performance between COVID-related and non-COVID-related coverage in 2020 but also on how far there was evidence coverage also differed across different mediums and news outlets in our sample.

Journalistic Role Performance and Australia's Media System

Journalistic role performance has been defined as "the collective outcome of concrete newsroom decisions and the style of journalistic reporting, considering different constraints that influence and enable journalism as a professional practice" (Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017, 5). Informed by role theory (Lynch 2007), the study of journalistic roles rests on the premise that socially held expectations of roles journalism should play in society both contribute to guiding journalists behaviours and provide frameworks through which journalists and media insitutions justify what they do (Donsbach 2012; Hanitzsch 2019). While studies of role conceptions and role perceptions have investigated the distinctions between generally shared conceptions and the particular "role

perceptions" characteristic of different cultural and institutional settings (Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Weaver 2007), studies of role *performance* seek to understand the enactment of roles in actual newswork and news coverage. Role performance theory has thus sought to consider how role conceptions and perceptions serve to influence the practice of journalism, and how role performance is mediated by other influences that contribute to shaping news production and its products (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Mellado 2019).

Mellado (2015) has developed a model for assessing the presence or absence of six dimensions of role performance based on three domains. The first focuses on the presence or absence of *journalistic voice*, signalling the performance of the journalist as either disseminator or *Interventionist.* As disseminator, the journalist focuses on neutrally relaying facts, while Interventionist performance involves the active communication of a position or explanation, signalled by interpretation, a point of view, the use of clarifying adjectives, and/or reports in the first person. Because these stand as opposites, Mellado treats these as alternative manifestations within a single dimension of role performance. The second domain of *power relations* relates to journalism's relationship to other sites of institutional power. Journalists may perform as *Watchdogs*, holding authorities' positions and actions up to scrutiny, or presenting reports that provide grounds for moral denunciation. They can also act as *Loyal Facilitators,* presenting authorities in a positive light, amplifying their perspectives and positions, or providing explicit or implicit support for their policies. The third domain relates to *audience approach*, where audiences are variously addressed as citizens, clients or spectators. This may be manifest in three dimensions of role performance: the *Civic* role, addressing and/or representing the audience as citizens affected by matters of public debate; the *Service* role, which addresses audiences as potential consumers of services and products in their everyday life; and the *Infotainment* role, embodied in performances that promote aesthetic and narrative engagement with media, through personalised and sensational stories, the promotion of scandals, and a focus on private lives. With the exception of the disseminator-interventionist role, which is treated as a single dimension, each of these roles is treated as independent, meaning they may co-exist in a single story.

While some roles (most obviously the "watchdog") align with celebrated professional ideals of journalism, others (such as "infotainment" and "service") do not. This highlights the disparity between journalism's high ideals and actual performance, as well as the range of socially and historically constituted variables that shape the performance of journalistic roles (Vos 2017). As Hallin and Mellado note, these include "factors such as the political culture of particular media systems, the pattern of relations between journalists and other social actors, the market structure of media industries, and patterns of socialization of journalists" (2018, p.28). Other factors include topic areas or "beats" in which journalists report (Mellado and Lagos 2014) and media platforms on which reporting takes place. While studies have questioned whether the affordances and requirements of particular platforms (e.g., print, television, radio, online) play a role in shaping journalistic performance, findings produced by comparisons across media platforms have been mixed (Mellado, Humanes et al., 2021; Mellado et al, 2023). The character and demands of media platforms may play a role, but scholars also emphasise that outlets that share platforms vary, while different platforms share many of the same demands, expectations and pressures (Hallin and Mellado 2018, 28).

While influences on journalistic role performance are thus multiple and complex, economic, regulatory, cultural and political settings clearly play a major role. Here, the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004) offers a model for understanding factors that shape journalistic performance in particular settings. Taking a comparative approach, they focused on four key variables across European and North American media systems: the development of media markets, the degree and forms of "political parallelism" (how far media outlets align with political party and interest group positions), levels of journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Through detailed analysis of these factors, the authors developed three models: the Liberal model (North Atlantic), the Democratic Corporatist model (North-Central European), and the Polarised Pluralist model (Mediterranean).

Australia's media system has been broadly defined as belonging to the Liberal model, characterised by the dominance of commercial media, limited involvement of the state, low levels of political parallelism, and relatively high journalistic professionalism (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Jones and Pusey (2010), however, argued that rather than belonging squarely to the "Anglo-American" Liberal model, Australia is more of a "Liberal outrider", noting several traits more in keeping with Polarised Pluralist systems defined by political parallelism and lower levels of journalistic professionalism. They list several factors, including the country's historically late professionalisation of journalism, Australia's poor regulation of accuracy and impartiality in commercial broadcast journalism in contrast to the UK, and "the slow development of relevant bourgeois liberal institutional conventions and rational-legal authority, e.g., formal recognition of freedom of the press" (Jones and Pusey 2010, 456). Clientelism, they argue, puts Australia in line with a more polarised model, where public media appointments may be a result of political loyalty rather than professional criteria. Examples offered include party-political public appointments to the ABC Board, media intervention in politics, and the "cash for comment" talkback radio scandal of 1999/2000 which "achieved levels of commercial/media parallelism only exceeded by Berlusconi's Italy" (Jones and Pusey 2010, 457).

If Australia's media system might be viewed as a "liberal outrider", this may partly be due to its high concentration of media ownership (Gaber and Tiffen 2018). The substantial oligopoly of News Corp Australia, Seven West Media, and Nine Entertainment Group can be realised by contrasting the market figures with those from the United Kingdom and the United States: Rupert Murdoch's News Corp has 57.5% of the market share in Australia, compared with 32.5% in the UK, whilst the largest market share in the US is just 9.6%, owned by Gannett. The revenue controlled by top media companies is 95% among daily newspapers, 75% in free-to-air television, and around 70% of radio revenue (Park in Newman et al. 2022, 130). Gaber and Tiffen point out that the newspapers that monopolise the smaller state capitals "almost invariably support the conservative side of politics" (Gaber and Tiffen 2018, 33). The powerful influence of News Corp, which has long engaged in "conservative advocacy" (Fielding 2023), can be read as contributing to a particular climate of political parallelism in Australia. While, historically, other media have adopted a more traditional, centrist position that seeks to balance political perspectives, new players have entered the Australian online market, such as *The Daily Mail* and *Guardian Australia*, that are characterised by more marked (conservative/liberal) editorial identities. International studies suggest the shift to online news is creating increased polarisation in liberal media systems. Nechushtai (2018), for example, has presented

evidence that the US has shifted to a "polarised liberal" news environment. Fletcher, Cornia, and Nielsen (2020) have documented similar trends in the UK and Australia, but note that in both countries this trend is less pronounced, largely because of the persistent popularity of public service media.

It is important, here, to clarify what we mean by "polarisation". Discussions of polarisation have suggested it is a product of a trend toward politics becoming increasingly "sectarian", with not only an increased distance between different positions, but an increased tendency to distrust, dismiss, disengage with opponents who are positioned as an "other" (Finkel et al. 2020). While often viewed as a problem associated with political parties, movements and citizens, a focus on media polarization centres on the idea that, in a high-choice media environment, news outlets follow and fuel this process to promote brand loyalty among audiences, through alignment with exclusive ideological perspectives that inform their agendas and the promotion of distrust and dismissal of alternatives. While polarization has attracted widespread attention as a concept diagnosing a disturbing trend, however, Kreiss and McGregor have raised concerns that such blanket diagnosis problematically "treats polarization as ends neutral" in a way that "frames pro—and anti-democratic performances of political identities, deployment of moral language, and unwillingness to seek compromise as equally bad, as if we should equate Black Lives Matter and Stop the Steal" (2023, 9). While Kreiss and McGregor suggest moving away from "polarization" altogether, Esau et al. (2023) instead propose a concept of "destructive political polarization" to specify what forms of polarization may be democratically problematic. Examples include where relevant information, such as scientific research, is "discredited or dismissed for not fitting the way a certain group sees the world, or for belonging to the opposite ideological or partisan reality" (Esau et al. 2023, 12). Such destructive polarization was clearly evidence during the COVID-19 pandemic in some political contexts, where public support for and adherence to health measures including lockdowns, mask-wearing and social distancing became dependent on political identity, contributing to the scale and severity of its impacts (Allcott et al. 2020; Recuero et al. 2022).

Media Systems, Public Health Events and COVID-19

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19), which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020, has had wide-ranging impacts on all sectors of society and constitutes "the most profoundly communicated and mediatised health event ever witnessed in human history" (Lewis, Holland, and Govender 2021, 1). The mediatisation of pandemics is shaped by factors such as disease characteristics, media attention-cycles, journalism culture and political context (Fox 2021; Morani et al. 2022; Singer, Willison, and Greer 2020). Reporting on the pandemic varies between countries with different political and media systems, the political context in which the pandemic has played out and the response measures adopted (Mellado et al., 2021). The intersections between these factors may influence the roles that journalists performed during the pandemic.

Research on previous pandemics and public health crises indicates such events place demands on journalists and other public health communicators that differ from more routine health news reporting contexts (Klemm, Das, and Hartmann 2019; Nolan et al. 2021). The outbreak of a new disease is often characterised by high levels of uncertainty and governments and health authorities devoting considerable attention to managing

the news (Ungar 2008). Journalists are tasked with accurately reporting their statements about the nature of the threat and what they are doing to mitigate it, balancing the seriousness of the threat with not creating undue panic and alarm. Previous research on pandemic news reporting has identified an emphasis on consequences, actions and attributions of responsibility and blame, with the focus on each changing as a pandemic evolves (Fox 2021; Shi, Wijaya, and Brossard 2008).

There is evidence to suggest journalists see themselves as adopting new and different roles when reporting on health crises. Klemm et al.'s (2019) study of German and Finnish journalists who reported on health crises found they embraced a range of general professional roles, including information disseminator, interpreter, watchdog and translator. Notably, their study also found journalists say they adopt a cooperative relationship with authorities during health crises. Additional roles include that of public mobiliser, which relates to mobilising self-protective behaviours and socially responsible treatment of others. While such "how-to-act" messages are not unique to health crises, Klemm et al suggest their importance and nature shifts at such times. Examples of such performance, which might constitute a form of Civic role performance, were found in a study of Australian coverage in 2020, such as one newspaper which advocated that "every Australian can be doing their bit to slow down the spread of COVID-19" and relayed government health advice (Nolan et al. 2021, 33).

Research suggests news media are heavily reliant on health authorities and governments as sources of information in the early stages of infectious disease outbreaks. As key sources, journalists follow the lead of public health authorities in "sounding the alarm" about an emerging health crisis (Mellado, Hallin et al., 2021). While Mellado, Hallin et al. note that such practices exemplify a "biomedical authority" model of health communication, as described by Briggs and Hallin (2016), they identify several features of COVID-19 that complicate an assumption these were the operating norm. For example, journalists and public health officials had to represent the disease in the absence of fully developed scientific knowledge about it. As such, "journalists are often compelled to report in a context where the science of public health does not speak with one voice" (Mellado, Hallin et al., 2021, p. 1266). Philo and Berry (2023) likewise argue that expert divisions and unsettled scientific understanding of the virus made it difficult for biomedical sources to control the public narrative.

A key factor affecting journalistic performance in liberal media systems appears to be whether a crisis is positioned, following Hallin (1986), as falling into the "sphere of consensus" or the "sphere of legitimate controversy". One example of controversy was the UK's contentious adoption of a "herd immunity" strategy early in the pandemic that, as Philo and Berry (2023) note, forced journalists to navigate claims and counter-claims grounded in different and specialised forms of expertise. The most prominent example of the politicisation of the crisis was in the US, where Hart, Chinn, and Soroka (2020) found that newspaper and television news coverage during the first phase of the pandemic was highly politicised and polarised, intersecting as it did with the US election and the Black Lives Matter movement. President Trump's undermining of public health officials and their advice also disturbingly echoed the weaponisation of the pandemic in some Eastern European states, where it "acted as a disruptive, unpredictable, and exhausting media event with a high potential for divisiveness, especially in political contexts

marked by low levels of media freedom, declining democratic standards, and politicization of the pandemic" (Mihelj, Kondor, and Štětka 2022, 583).

In Australia, by contrast, the Government's closure of international borders in March 2020 meant it did not experience the high caseloads and mortality rates of other countries. There was also widespread political and public consensus that the pandemic represented a genuine threat, and bipartisan support for strong public health measures. A large-scale, topic-based content analysis of 2.5 million news items across 2020 found that the majority of coverage, particularly from March to June 2020, was dominated by "informational" coverage: case numbers, employment figures and tracking the spread of infections (Nolan et al. 2021). In this early phase Prime Minister Scott Morrison initiated a "national cabinet" comprised of himself and all State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers. This show of bipartisanship was symbolically important, particularly given that in Australia's federal political system health policy is divided between the Commonwealth (national) government and the states and territories, with much of the responsibility lying with the states. During this initial phase of political consensus, official sources were dominant, which suggests the majority of journalists would likely have acted as disseminators, Loyal Facilitators and performed a Civic role of advising citizens. However, as the year wore on, schisms between political leaders began to emerge, largely along party lines. The national government, led by conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison, increasingly expressed a desire to lift restrictions on citizens and businesses and frustration at (centre-left) Labor State Premiers, particularly in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia, for their refusal to do so. For these state leaders, however, maintaining strong health measures during the height of the crisis – particularly prior to the delivery of vaccines – saw them gain popularity. The aforementioned analysis of news items showed an increase in stories that focused on conflict, blame and controversy during this period (Nolan et al. 2021). However, that analysis did not explicitly measure journalistic role performance, nor provide any comparison of how far it differed across outlets. It is to this task that we now turn.

Building on our above review of previous research, this study asks the following questions:

> RQ1: Does a focus on role performance suggest that reporting of COVID-19 reflected a "consensus-based" approach to reporting the pandemic in Australia?

> RQ2: Are differences in reporting between outlets evident, in line with suggestions Australia's media system is becoming more polarised?

Methodology

To address these questions, this study draws primarily on Australia's country-level findings from the second wave of the Journalistic Role Performance (JRP) project (www.journalisticperformance.org), which gathered data from 365 news media outlets in 37 countries. Our analysis focuses on content analysis data that measured actual role performance. Based on a standardized operationalization of the Watchdog, Civic, Interventionist, Loyal Facilitator, Infotainment, and Service roles in journalism, this measured role performance through the presence of indicators of each of these roles in the news. The Australian sample is comprised of two outlets selected from TV, radio, online and print news across a constructed fortnight throughout 2020.

The unit of analysis was the news item, defined as a set of contiguous verbal, written, audio and/or visual elements that refer to the same event/issue/person. An event, issue, or statement may be reported by a media outlet in more than one news item on a given day. When the same event, statement, or issue was covered in more than one item, these were considered to be individual stories and were coded separately. Various items that did not meet the criteria of news, such as editorials, opinion columns, weather forecasts and similar content on radio and TV were excluded from our study. The Australian data for this study derives from a content analysis of 1,965 news items from eight television, radio, online and print news outlets.

Coding

Multiple coders coded each news story directly into an online interface designed for that purpose or entered the data manually into SPSS. The corpus of news items was divided randomly among coders to reduce bias and avoid the risk that each coder could code an entire outlet by herself/himself. Coders were retrained as many times as necessary to ensure that acceptable intercoder reliability coefficients were achieved. Coders were also closely monitored during the coding process to improve intercoder agreement. Once the coding process was finalized, a post-test was conducted to ensure the reliability of the coders in the actual coding process. Based on Krippendorff's alpha (Ka), the final Australian intercoder reliability was .76.

In the Australian data, the sampling procedure generated a total of 1965 relevant stories distributed across the year and we categorised them into two groups – COVID-19 related story (1) and non-COVID story (2). Out of the 1,965 stories, 558 were related to COVID-19, while the remaining 1,407 were not related to COVID-19.

Variables

We relied on the operationalization proposed by Mellado (2015) and validated in previous studies (Mellado and Van Dalen 2017; Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017) to measure professional roles in news content. Five indicators were used to measure the presence of the "interventionist" role, nine indicators measured the "Watchdog" role, eight indicators measured the "Loyal Facilitator" role, five indicators measured the

Table 1. Role performance indicators.

Role	Indicators
Interventionist	Journalist's point of view Interpretation Call to action Qualifying adjectives First person
Watchdog	Information on judicial/administrative processes Questioning by the journalist Questioning by others Criticism offered by the journalist Criticism offered by others Uncovering performed by the journalist Uncovering performed by others Reporting on external investigation Investigative reporting
Loyal-Facilitator	Defense/support activities Defense/support policies Positive image of the elite Progress/success Comparison to other countries National triumphs Promotion of the country Patriotism
Service	Impact on everyday life Tips and advice (grievances) Tips and advice (individual risks) Consumer information Consumer advice
Infotainment	Personalization Private life Sensationalism Emotions Morbidity
Civic	Citizen reactions Citizen demand Credibility of citizens Education on duties and rights Local impact Social community impact Citizen questions Information on citizen activities Support of citizen movements

"Service" role, five indicators measured the "infotainment" role, and nine indicators measured the "Civic" role (see Table 1). Each indicator was measured on a presence (1) or absence (0) basis. We transformed those indicators into dichotomous variables to calculate the main roles and place all of our measures on the same scale.

The content analysis also included measures related to (1) general information on each news item, such as the type of medium in which it was published, the news outlet, the date of publication, story type, and story placement; (2) the characteristics of the story, such as the topic of the news item and the location where the news story takes place; and (3) the sources cited, including number of sources, source type, the diversity of type of sources, and the diversity of points of view.

Data Analysis

We conducted a descriptive analysis. Frequency and crosstab were used to see the frequency distribution of news coverage. One-way ANOVA and T-test were performed to identify the differences in role performance in COVID and non-COVID-related news items, as well as differences in role performance based on outlet and medium, and an alpha level of .05 was set to determine statistical significance. Through our presentation of findings, we discuss possible links between different aspects of role performance measurements and concepts of "consensus-based reporting" and "polarisation" that we seek to explore.

Findings

Was Australia's COVID-19 Reporting "Consensus-Based"?

To consider whether reporting of the pandemic was "consensus-based", we analysed roles performed in reporting on COVID-19 and compared these to non-COVID related news items. As discussed above, previous studies have suggested that, during health crises, journalists have tended toward more cooperative relations with health authorities, and emphasised information dissemination as a significant role they perform – a finding supported by our study of Australian news coverage of the pandemic in 2020 (Authors, YY). In addition, at least in the initial phase of Australia's response to the crisis, a high degree of political consensus surrounded key health and economic measures taken in response to the crisis. This might lead one to expect a strong presence of the Loyal Facilitator role (supporting authorities' public health responses) and Civic role.

Table 2. Role performance comparison (T-test).

	Interventionist Role	Watchdog Role	Loyal Role	Service Role	Infotainment Role	Civic Role
News items related to COVID	0.116	0.034	0.005	0.041	0.050	0.036
Non-COVID based news items	0.096	0.043	0.008	0.029	0.092	0.017
Total	0.102	0.040	0.007	0.032	0.080	0.023
t	5.592*	4.023*	2.691	8.443**	31.104***	39.743***

*p < .05, ** < .01, *** < .001.

Table 2 shows our overall findings relating to role performance in both COVID and non-COVID-based news items. As anticipated, the Civic role is much more prominent in COVID-19 focused reporting. This is largely accounted for by significant increases in the indicators focused on "citizen reactions", "education on duties and rights" and "local impact", all of which were more present in COVID-based news items. Similar findings were produced by Mellado et al. (2023) in their parallel analysis of COVID-19 coverage in the UK. The Civic role is not, however, *more* prominent than items that perform a Service or Infotainment role, indicating that, notwithstanding the crisis, news audiences were more frequently addressed as consumers than citizens – or more accurately, perhaps, as consumer-citizens. When compared to non-COVID-items, the Service role is significantly more prominent, although Infotainment items are notably less so, a pattern that is also reproduced globally (Hallin et al. 2023). Increased elements of the Service role were based on "Impact on everyday life" (the consequences of facts or events for people's everyday lives) and "tips and advice (grievances)" and "advice on how to act", a category that advises how to manage problems in everyday life by making use of relevant services. Again, Zhao et al. (2023) produced similar findings in the UK, which they read as responsive to audience concerns as to how the pandemic affected their lives and could be navigated. It could also, however, be read as aligning with a broader, neo-liberal positioning of healthcare as a matter of individual responsibility and consumer choice (Dent 2006). The Watchdog role is reduced in reporting on COVID-19 coverage overall, as might be expected based on suggestions journalists adopt a more co-operative relationship with authorities during health crises. However, the Interventionist role is more prominent in COVID-19 coverage, a finding we discuss further below. There was no statistical difference in reporting of the Loyal Facilitator role across COVID and non-COVID reporting, indicating that, while news outlets may have relayed the pandemic messaging of government and other authorities in 2020, they did not do so in a way that projected them in a significantly more positive light.

In order to drill down further, we also examined whether there were discrepancies in reporting across different outlets. Tables 3 and 4 provide summaries of these findings by outlet with, from top to bottom, two outlets displayed for television, radio, newspaper and online outlets. What is immediately apparent is that the two online-only outlets, *News.com.au* and *Guardian Australia* respectively, are much more interventionist than other media, across COVID and non-COVID items alike. Television outlets are much less

Table 3. Role performance by news outlet (ANOVA): COVID-19 related news items.

	Interventionist Role	Watch-dog Role	Loyal Role	Service Role	Infotainment Role	Civic Role
Nine News (TV)	0.087	0.024	0.014	0.026	0.035	0.046
ABC (TV) News Melbourne	0.077	0.031	0.012	0.037	0.034	0.058
ABC Radio Newcastle	0.036	0.010	0.009	0.062	0.000	0.014
Radio 3AW	0.023	0.032	0.002	0.046	0.004	0.034
The Herald Sun	0.040	0.047	0.001	0.032	0.032	0.031
The Sydney Morning Herald	0.054	0.045	0.002	0.034	0.037	0.047
News.com.au	0.258	0.032	0.000	0.044	0.156	0.030
The Guardian Australia	0.293	0.046	0.006	0.047	0.071	0.035
F	35.310***	2.320*	2.547*	0.888	18.221***	2.332*

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

Table 4. Role performance by news outlet (ANOVA): non-COVID-19 related news items.

	Interventionist Role	Watch-dog Role	Loyal Role	Service Role	Infotainment Role	Civic Role
Nine News (TV)	0.051	0.017	0.007	0.043	0.063	0.020
ABC (TV) News Melbourne	0.072	0.031	0.015	0.012	0.064	0.020
ABC Radio Newcastle	0.027	0.042	0.003	0.029	0.015	0.016
Radio 3AW	0.020	0.020	0.004	0.018	0.048	0.018
The Herald Sun	0.029	0.025	0.001	0.039	0.091	0.008
The Sydney Morning Herald	0.049	0.092	0.004	0.019	0.061	0.025
News.com.au	0.270	0.045	0.013	0.036	0.282	0.006
The Guardian Australia	0.280	0.063	0.020	0.024	0.145	0.024
F	117.827***	16.012***	6.772***	3.016**	57.342***	2.782**

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

so but are somewhat more interventionist in their reporting than newspapers, and radio news is the least likely to perform Interventionism. All media, however, was *more* likely to be Interventionist in COVID than non-COVID focused reporting, with the exception of the (highly interventionist) *News.com.au*.

It is important to note here that an increased interventionism does not necessarily undermine a suggestion that Australian reporting of COVID-19 was "consensus-based". As discussed by Stępińska et al. (2020), in terms of content, different forms of interventionism may be distinguished by how far they express an interpretation or explanation of facts, on one hand, or how far journalists express a point of view on the other. This aligns with the distinction Benson and Hallin (2007, 32) draw between "interpretation" and "giving opinions". While there were no statistical differences between COVID and non-COVID based news items in the presence of the "journalist's point of view", "calls for action" or "use of qualifying adjectives", COVID-based news items featured significantly more "interpretation" and use of the "first person", indicating it is these elements that account for the overall finding of increased interventionism in COVID-19 reporting. Returning to Hallin's (1984) framework, a notable aspect of the "sphere of consensus" is that, because facts and their interpretation are largely not in dispute, this frees journalists to provide explanation and translation of information that informs their audience, and by doing so support an effective public health response (Klemm, Das, and Hartmann 2019). It is also notable that, while the Interventionist role was more prevalent in the reporting of COVID-19, it remains very significantly below the global mean for the Interventionist role in 2020 (0.181), and among the 37 countries studied Australia ranked a notably low 32nd in this role. These findings align with our previous study which found information dissemination was particularly prevalent in Australia's pandemic reporting in 2020 (Nolan et al. 2021).

Newspapers were most likely to perform the Watchdog role, with the partial exception of *Guardian Australia* (an Australia-focused, online-only version of UK newspaper *The Guardian*). However, in the case of *The Sydney Morning Herald,* traditionally a broadsheet newspaper, it is notable that the Watchdog role is performed substantially less in COVID-19 than non-COVID coverage. With the exception of *Guardian Australia.* which was more likely to perform the Loyal Facilitator role in non-COVID stories, there were no significant differences between COVID and non-COVID stories in this role. It is notable, however, that

television news was the strongest performer of the Loyal role in COVID coverage through the direct relaying of the positions and policies of authorities.

Weighing up these findings, it is clear that reporting is different across COVID and non-COVID news items, and there is some evidence that suggests the former was more "consensus-based". An increased overall presence of the Civic role suggests media did perform a role in supporting a public health response that, in the early phase of the pandemic, reflected an elite consensus surrounding the need for substantial health measures to keep the population safe. The overall lower presence of the Watchdog role also aligns with previous scholarship suggesting cooperation during public health crises. While Interventionist journalism was higher in COVID by comparison to non-COVID coverage, it is notable that in global terms it remained rather low, and increases in Interventionism appear predominantly interpretive and explanatory rather than opinion-based.

R2: Were There Clear Differences in Role Performance Across Outlets, and Evidence of Polarisation?

In addressing the question of role performance and differences between outlets, it is worth considering outliers in patterns of outlet-based role performance. The strongest examples of this are in the particular weight given to the Loyal Facilitator role in the coverage of Nine News (Mean = 0.014) and ABC News Melbourne (Mean = 0.012) compared to other news outlets [F = 2.547, $p < 0.05$]. When it comes to the Civic role, ABC News Melbourne (Mean = 0.058) scored significantly higher compared to other news outlets [F = 2.332, $p < 0.05$]. The Interventionist role was significantly more prominent in COVID-19 related stories published by *News.com.au* (Mean = 0.258) and *Guardian Australia* (Mean = 0.293) compared to other news outlets [F = 35.310, $p < 0.001$] (Table 3). *The Herald-Sun, The Sydney Morning Herald* and *Guardian Australia* were the most prominent in performing the Watchdog role.

It is notable that these outlying results not only reflected different outlets but also different media platforms. If we shift momentarily from a focus on outlets to media platforms (see Tables 5 and 6), it is apparent these distinctions largely also reflect platform differences – television coverage was most prominent in performing Loyal Facilitator and Civic roles, while online outlets were by far the most Interventionist.

It is interesting to reflect here on whether it is the medium or the outlet that is the driver of these differences. In the case of the Loyal Facilitator role, for example, it is notable that more than other media, television was the medium that reproduced the daily press conferences of authorities, allowing them a platform for putting forward (and reproducing) their perspectives. Print performs most strongly as Watchdog in

Table 5. Role performance by medium (COVID-19 related news items).

	Interventionist Role	Watchdog Role	Loyal Role	Service Role	Infotainment Role	Civic Role
Print	0.045	0.046	0.001	0.033	0.034	0.037
Television	0.081	0.028	0.012	0.032	0.034	0.053
Radio	0.030	0.021	0.006	0.054	0.002	0.024
Online	0.276	0.039	0.003	0.045	0.113	0.032
F	81.684***	3.733*	4.619**	1.645	31.425***	3.739*

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

Table 6. Role performance by medium (non-COVID-19 related news items).

	Interventionist Role	Watchdog Role	Loyal Role	Service Role	Infotainment Role	Civic Role
Print	0.041	0.064	0.003	0.027	0.073	0.018
Television	0.058	0.021	0.009	0.032	0.064	0.020
Radio	0.024	0.034	0.004	0.025	0.028	0.017
Online	0.275	0.054	0.016	0.030	0.214	0.015
F	273.336***	16.497***	12.772***	0.527	101.254***	0.548

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

both COVID and non-COVID stories, suggesting that it may be the medium, and its particular historical tradition of performing the role of watchdog, that is at play. Regarding online media, their dominance of an "interventionist" style of performance may reflect the differences in both the style of that medium and also its economy, given online outlets' particular exposure to an attention economy (which would also align with their dominance in performing the Infotainment role). Indeed, the key sub-indicators of interventionism in our sample of online outlets, which differed markedly from legacy media, was the much higher presence of "journalist's point of view" and "qualifying adjectives" in news items in *News.com.au* and *Guardian Australia* (see Table 7). These sub-indicators provide the strongest indication of interventionism that is not merely interpretative but *opinion-based*, suggesting a form of news that, in both content and style, differs markedly from legacy media.

A medium-based explanation of role performance also appears fairly convincing in the case of the television outlets, which both rely strongly upon visual spectacles for their performances and (at least in Australia, where cable news channels serving politically distinct audiences are far less popular than some other international markets) probably also remains the strongest medium in terms of its performance of a ritual role that seeks to unite the audience-community it interpellates. However, it is also worth noting that, as shown in Table 2, it is ABC (TV) News that performs the Civic role most strongly of all outlets, which may also reflect its statutorily prescribed public service remit. For print outlets, there are other potential explanations. As previously noted, *The Sydney Morning Herald* is historically a broadsheet newspaper, and thus particularly disposed toward the performance of a Watchdog role, which may be shaped as much, if not more, by the market demographic it seeks to target as the nature of the medium. Notably, too, one of the biggest early scandals of the pandemic – the spread of infections

Table 7. "Journalist point of view" and "Qualifying adjectives" by news outlet.

	Journalist point of view				Qualifying adjectives			
	Absence		Presence		Absence		Presence	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Nine News (TV)	50	91	5	9	54	100	-	-
ABC (TV) News Melbourne	71	92	6	8	76	99	1	1
ABC Radio Newcastle	63	100	-	-	63	100	-	-
Radio 3AW	59	98	1	2	59	98	1	2
The Herald Sun	91	97	3	3	84	90	9	10
The Sydney Morning Herald	49	98	1	2	50	100	-	-
News.com.au	56	72	22	28	26	33	52	67
The Guardian Australia	58	71	24	29	37	45	45	55
Total	497	89	62	11	449	81	108	19

into the community from the *Ruby Princess* cruise ship because authorities had allowed passengers to disembark without entering quarantine – occurred in Sydney and was ultimately found to be the responsibility of the NSW government (the state in which Sydney lies). In Victoria, likewise, some key events provoked government scrutiny, particularly Victoria's mishandling of hotel quarantine and the controversial sudden lockdown of tower blocks that caused substantial suffering to vulnerable populations. Thus, while Australian newspapers tend to adopt stronger editorial agendas than radio and television outlets, it is also likely the case that localised events contribute to provoking particular role performances.

In the case of the *Herald-Sun*, however, it was also notable that its performance as "watchdog" may have reflected its strongly partisan criticisms of Victoria's Premier, Daniel Andrews, whom it labelled "Dictator Dan" and accused of incompetence and mismanagement, a theme also reproduced at other News Corporation papers, such as Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* which labelled Andrews handling of the pandemic a "Dan-Made Disaster" on its front page (17 July 2020). (The *Herald Sun* would continue its campaign against Andrews, including his handling of the pandemic until the November 2022 Victorian election, in which Andrews won a second landslide majority.) Notably, however, while the *Herald Sun's* reporting was more Interventionist in its COVID than non-COVID reporting in 2020, it was considerably less so than the two online outlets.

It should also be noted that "Interventionist" does not necessarily directly equate to *partisan.* Nevertheless, given News Corp's established reputation for "conservative advocacy" (Fielding 2023), it is possible that its interventionism was at least partially shaped by the character of that organisation (which also owns *News.com.au*). *Guardian Australia,* meanwhile, has sought to position its journalism as "unashamedly progressive but never partisan", and its editors have openly discussed how they sought to "create something different" in Australia's media market (Taylor 2023) in an editorial approach that was distinct from both the conservatism of the New Corp stable and the more traditional, non-aligned editorial stances of other media outlets.

Conclusion

Through this study, we have sought to reflect on the performance of journalism in both the context of Australia's media system and the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, we considered how both those circumstances might themselves have influenced journalistic performance and, reciprocally, how changes affecting Liberal media systems, including Australia's, may have influenced pandemic reporting. To this end, in light of Australia's relatively consensus-based response to the pandemic, the strong alignment between Australian political leaders and health authorities, and previous findings related to the performance of journalism during pandemics, we considered whether there was any evidence of role performance during the pandemic was also "consensus-based". Our findings suggest this may have been the case. An increased presence of the Civic role in COVID reporting is consistent with previous findings that, during health crises, journalists will tend to cooperate with and serve as a relay of the public health messaging of government and health authorities, particularly in situations of relative political and scientific consensus. The lower frequency of the Watchdog role for most news outlets in COVID stories also reinforces that journalists were, at least in the first year of the

pandemic, somewhat less inclined to question, critique, or investigate in their reportage. While journalists were somewhat more Interventionist in COVID reporting, the relatively low presence of Interventionism in global terms suggests they more predominantly performed a disseminator role of relaying information, and where Interventionism was performed it tended to be interpretive and explanatory rather than opinion-based. At the same time, audiences were frequently addressed as consumers, needing information and advice for services, with stories concerned about impacts on their everyday lives.

Secondly, we considered whether there was evidence of polarisation between outlets, in light of suggestions that Liberal media systems are becoming more polarised. While we have acknowledged that categories of role performance do not directly measure polarisation, when we examined sub-indicators of roles that might potentially indicate polarisation in coverage, there was no strong evidence supporting this. Instead, we found that platform-based differences appeared to be a stronger factor in shaping differences in reporting. Television played a far stronger Civic role in COVID stories along with a Loyal Facilitator role. Radio performed a Service role more frequently, and newspapers were more inclined towards a Watchdog role in COVID reports than other outlets. We did find that online outlets were substantially more Interventionist than other outlets, and both this and their much stronger focus on Infotainment suggest these are markedly different in both content and style from legacy outlets. This was also indicated by their stronger focus on opinion-based rather than interpretive modes of Interventionism. While this suggests that if there is an Australian shift toward "polarised Liberalism" online media may be leading the way, we are cautious about drawing strong conclusions here, as we are about blanket diagnoses on "polarization" as *always* being a democratic ill (Kreiss and McGregor 2023). As we have noted, Interventionism does not necessarily equate to partisanship and is at best a partial indicator of polarisation. Secondly, polarisation may be indicated by other factors, such as framing, that are not measured by indicators of role performance. Indeed, as we have discussed, some of the most notorious examples of partisan, advocacy-based reporting occurred in News Corp tabloid newspapers (including *The Herald Sun*), but this was not strongly reflected in our findings. It would be of interest, in future work, to examine where indicators of "destructive polarisation" are present in news items, and to what extent these correlate to different indicators of journalistic role performance (Esau et al. 2023). Furthermore, although our findings generally support the view that medium appeared the strongest factor associated with differences in coverage, we also noted the presence of other significant factors, such as institutional context (whether outlets were guided by a public service remit, a broadsheet tradition, or adopted a characteristic political standpoint) and the influence of specific events on coverage produced in particular locales. In this respect, our findings emphasise a need to not only consider how role performance is shaped by the relationship between events and media systems but also to pay detailed attention to the contexts in which journalistic practice is performed.

While this study provides some useful insights into journalistic role performance in Australia's reporting of the pandemic, it inevitably also has some limitations. We would have liked to provide a longitudinal analysis of role performance over the course of 2020. This, however, proved difficult, as we were unable to trace patterns in coverage over time. This, we concluded, was most likely a product of methodology, as the use of a constructed fortnight of coverage meant that findings were shaped as much, if not

more, by particular events on given sample days as they were by broader influences over time. Although we have emphasised how journalistic role performance emerges at the intersection of events, media systems and routine journalistic practices, pandemics do not constitute singular, uniform events. While all sampling procedures present limitations this, alongside our consideration of the "mega-event" of COVID-19, raises questions about both how to measure longitudinal trends in role performance and take account of the influence of contingent events that merit further theoretical and empirical exploration.

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ORCID

David Nolan http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5445-5543
Kieran McGuinness http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5270-8591
Jee Young Lee http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6985-1730
Kate Holland http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3873-5769
Monique Lewis http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7089-7306

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