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Introduction: Journalistic Role Performance in Times of Change

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Over the past decade, research on journalistic role performance—defined as the study of how particular journalistic norms and ideals are collectively negotiated and result in specific practices (Mellado 2015, 2021)—has gained prominence among scholars from the Global North and South. Studies on role performance provide an understanding of the processes behind journalistic practices in relation to normative expectations and offers a strong theoretical and empirical umbrella to account for the fluid, dynamic nature of the profession in different institutional settings (e.g., Abdulmajeed and El-Ibiary 2023; Blanchett et al. 2023; Hallin et al. 2023; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Humanes and Roses 2018; Márquez-Ramírez et al. 2020; McIntyre et al. 2023; Mellado et al. 2024; Mothes et al. 2024; Stępińska et al. 2016). This epistemic umbrella acknowledges that journalistic roles are not static but are continuously negotiated and redefined in response to internal and external pressures. This framework, pioneered by research initiatives such as the *Journalistic Role Performance Project*, can be distinguished from related areas of inquiry, like studies on role perceptions or expectations, in that role performance captures the real-world behavior of journalists, while role perceptions and expectations deal with the beliefs and ideals journalists and other actors hold about journalistic roles.

Since the formal introduction of the role performance framework in journalism studies in the 2010s, this research area has rapidly grown and developed significantly at the theoretical and empirical levels, driven by the need to understand how journalists navigate their roles amidst profound transformations in the media landscape, including the rise of social media and advancements in AI, labor market issues, public distrust in the media, increasing polarization, and societal crises like the global COVID-19 pandemic, all of which have further complicated the landscape of journalism.

Today, journalists face unprecedented challenges where traditional norms intersect with new pressures and opportunities, leading to an ongoing evolution in how they perceive and develop their roles. How do these circumstances impact the performance of journalism worldwide? How can different conceptual and methodological approaches contribute to the continuous advancement of role performance research within the field? This special issue on “Journalistic Role Performance in Times of Change” aims to answer these questions through a collection of studies that reflect the evolving nature of journalistic roles across different contexts and objects of study, exploring how

changes in the media ecosystem and society reshape the performance of the profession globally and offering new insights into the dynamic field of journalism.

The process of assembling this special issue began with a call for abstracts. This produced an overwhelming response, far beyond what we had expected, with over 135 submissions coming from all over the world. From this diverse set of proposals we selected a subset that seemed to us particularly outstanding and representative of a wide range of perspectives and contexts, and after the review process we are proud to present 16 articles that offer valuable insights into the current state of the profession, contributing to the further development of role performance research. A few more articles initially submitted as part of this process were still under review at the time we closed this issue, and will appear subsequently in *Journalism Practice*. This special issue was an initiative of the *Journalistic Role Performance Project*, which carried out its second wave centered around a content analysis and surveys with journalists in 37 countries. A subset of the articles presented here draw on the data from the JRP second wave. We had hoped, however, that our call for abstracts would draw in a wide range of scholars working within the broader conceptual framework of journalistic role performance, and indeed the overwhelming response to our call showed the breadth and diversity of the work that is being done from this perspective. A proof of that is that seventy-five percent of the articles presented here originated from outside the JRP project.

The papers that comprise this special issue expand the space for conceptualizing and empirically assessing journalistic role performance, bringing together innovative, thought-provoking contributions from different geographic contexts into how journalists adapt their roles in response to technological advancements, political pressures, and societal crises. They include contributions of 35 distinguished scholars from 13 countries, covering the study of role performance in about 22 news cultures. They address different contexts, both in terms of media systems and journalistic cultures and in terms of the different forces and relationships that shape journalistic practice. They focus on a wide range of different objects, which often permit innovative conceptualization of journalistic roles. Some make use of the standard typology of six roles conceptualized within the JRP framework, others adapt it in various ways, and others conceptualized distinct roles. They involve a wide range of methodologies, and in many cases propose methodological innovations that contribute to a deeper understanding of the profession.

Outline of the Issue

We have organized the contributions to this issue around four key themes.

The first six papers deal with **role performance and media systems**.

The first two focus on the watchdog role and the practice of critical journalism in China in the context of heightened political control of the media. Xiaolu Ji, Joanne Kuai and Rodrigo Zamith use a textual analysis to examine how journalists cover AI and algorithmic systems. Haiyan Wang and Angze Li use multiple methods to examine the practice of investigative journalism at *Southern Metropolitan Daily*. The two studies coincide in noting the way the watchdog and loyal-facilitator roles, often seen as opposites, are combined in Chinese journalism.

Focusing on Eastern Europe, Michał Tkaczyk conducted a longitudinal content analysis to examine how the quality press balances different journalistic roles over time, focusing

on the influence of “oligarchic” ownership on role performance in the Czech Republic. In parallel, Agnieszka Stępińska, Gabriella Szabó and Kinga Adamczewska use JRP data from two time periods to investigate how politicized media environments affect journalistic role performance in Poland and Hungary.

Also based on the JRP data, Susanna Pagiotti, Anna Stanziano, Marco Mazzoni and Roberto Mincigrucci compare the Interventionist role of journalism across nine Western European countries, discussing style and content-driven interventionism, as well as factors of media systems that might explain differences in journalistic practices. Finally, David Nolan, Kieran McGuinness, Jee Young Lee, Kate Holland and Monique Lewis, also using data from the JRP second wave, investigates how Australian journalists adapted their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the way media system factors and the distinct context of a health crisis affect their performance.

The second set of articles deal with **specific journalistic practices and challenges** and includes a focus on some unusual objects of study for journalistic role performance, and on journalists’ interactions with different actors.

In her contribution, Nadia Haq discusses the professional dilemmas confronted by journalists reporting on sensitive topics. Based on qualitative interviews with British press journalists, and drawing on Stuart Hall’s writings about hegemony, the article examines the dilemmas they face in their professional roles when it comes to negotiating objectivity in the reporting of stories involving Muslims, revealing the tensions between norms of objectivity and journalistic agency and ethics.

Cecilia Arregui Olivera discusses the interaction between local and foreign journalists in Nairobi, centering on the interplay between these groups and how their relationships impact their professional role conceptions and performance. Using in depth interviews the study highlights the role negotiations that occur between foreign correspondents—aware of criticism toward stereotypical representations of Africa—and national journalists—often motivated by counter-narratives.

Sara Ödmark and Jonas Nicolai focus on an unusual but important context at the boundaries of journalistic practice. They conducted a content analysis of 150 satirical segments on television to explore the role of satire in news and its impact on journalistic performance in US, Sweden, Netherlands. The authors show how satirical news blends entertainment and information, affecting the traditional boundaries of journalistic roles.

Milda Malling discusses the interaction of journalists with their sources, using in-depth interviews and reconstructed journalist-source interactions in Lithuania and Sweden. She introduces the distinction between professional roles and social roles in journalistic practice, and investigates the way journalists negotiate the professional and social aspects of their relations with sources.

A third set of articles follows the “audience turn” in journalism studies, looking at **the relationship between journalism and the audience**.

Nicole Blanchett, Colette Brin and Stuart Duncan focuses on audience engagement strategies and their impact on journalistic roles in Canada. Through a triangulation of JRP data that includes content analysis, surveys and in-depth interviews, their paper examines how journalists adapt their roles to meet audience expectations and retain readership in a competitive media landscape.

Morten Skovsgaard, Lene Heiselberg and Kim Andersen highlight the dynamic nature of the Danish public’s demand for watchdog journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic

through three representative surveys and a panel component. Traditionally viewed as a static concept, their study compellingly argues that the demand for watchdog journalism, as well as ideas on the type of watchdog journalism that should be performed fluctuates based on broader contextual changes and audience characteristics.

Annon Kedem and Motti Neiger examines the integration of professional and personal identities of news professionals on social media, based on in-depth interviews and quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 10 prominent Israeli journalists' Twitter profiles and political tweets. They introduce the concept of ideological branding, and reveal how personal branding functions as a distinct context of journalistic role performance in the digital age.

Finally, a fourth set of contributions deals with **methodological and theoretical innovations in the study of journalistic roles**.

Mette Bengtsson and Sabina Schousboe analyzes the tensions between the objectivist role perception and role performances of fact-checkers and propose rhetorical argumentation theory as resource to advance epistemological discussions among both scholars and practitioners on the role of fact-checkers and the credibility of news.

Alexandra Schwinges makes the case for reconstruction interviews as a method to study the link between role perceptions and performance. Drawing on research on 15 European journalists who cover tech issues, she argues for the utility of this method (also used in Malling's work on journalist-source interactions) for capturing the complexities of journalistic practice in a holistic and "journalist-centered" way across micro, meso, and macro-levels.

Finally, David Ryfe offers a theoretical intervention into the conceptualization of role performance, centered around recent developments in cultural and cognitive theory and connecting these with field theory. He argues that we should think of journalistic roles as schematic associations rather than as "scripts," internalized through two cognitive processes—declarative and nondeclarative—from distinct field positions. He also argues for reinterpreting the "gaps" between ideal and practice in these terms, explaining how and why role-taking may be situational and dynamic and at the same time organized and patterned.

All in all, the contributions that give life to this special issue underscore the importance of examining journalistic roles in a dynamic and context-specific manner. This special issue serves as an illustration of the complexity of journalism in the face of a changing and challenging media landscape. It also offers a roadmap for future research, encouraging scholars to delve deeper into the fluidity of journalistic role performance and to develop innovative methods and theories that reflect the ever-changing nature of the field.

We are deeply grateful to our contributors for their outstanding work, and we hope that readers will find it stimulating and intellectually rewarding.

Disclosure Statement

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

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