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Professional roles and news construction: a media sociology conceptualization of journalists' role conception and performance

Abstract

Journalists' professional roles entail an important research area, which enhances knowledge on journalism's attempted impact on political and democratic life. Journalism scholars, however, tend not to study journalistic professional roles from its impact on news content but focus on journalists' conception of their role concluding that the way journalists conceive of their role will eventually shape the stories they produce. Hence, the link between role conception and role performance (i.e., its impact on news) has caught more attention as a justification of research interest than as loci of empirical examination. This conceptual paper revisits this assumption, arguing for an in-depth discussion of what the concept of professional role entails to understand its manifestation in news. As journalistic performance must be considered a collective outcome, this article addresses the concept of professional role from its relationship to structural characteristics of media work. Our approach suggests a media sociology conceptualization of professional roles that takes into consideration the gatekeeping context, and most importantly the organizational and societal levels, when analyzing professional roles of journalists.

Keywords

professional roles, role performance, role conception, gatekeeping theory, sociology of news

1. Introduction

Studies on professional roles have become a fundamental stream of research within journalism studies (Willnat & Weaver, 2014). Within that area of research, the conflicting stances of how journalism ought to be (i.e., journalistic role conception) and how journalism is performed (i.e., how those roles manifest in practice) have long stood in stark contrast, dating back to one of the first study on journalists' roles (Rosten, 1937). As one journalist in Rosten's study pointed out: "I'm sick of fighting my own office [...]. From now on I'm giving my paper what it wants"

(Rosten, 1937: 51). The 1930s marked a first empirical reflection on the later theorized somehow infeasible summation of a utopian role of journalists (i.e., journalist should be detached) and anti-utopian discourse of journalism practice (i.e., they have to collaborate with sources and editors as part of their job, and thus have to sacrifice some detachment). Rosten's (1937) seminal work reveals the tension between role conception and role performance. On one hand, individual journalists started having more autonomy to perform their journalistic roles on the job, as they were for example able to ask direct questions at press conferences. On the other hand, through this enhanced immediate relationship with politicians correspondents offered ample evidence that they were taken in by politicians and therefore felt that they had betrayed their objective roles, which they felt they must rigorously observe (Rosten, 1937).

Almost 30 years after Rosten's seminal study, Cohen (1963) continued his interest of studying the psychology of news producers and a snowball started to roll into the field of journalism studies. As a forerunner in conceptualizing journalistic roles, Cohen identifies the "neutral reporter" and the "reporter as participant" as the two roles defining journalism (1963, p. 31). Since that time, the concept of journalistic roles has most often been defined as journalists' perception of the social functions journalism plays in society (Weaver & al., 2007; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986). These perceived social functions are assumed to shape the stories that journalists ultimately report, because they legitimate journalism as a profession (Waisbord, 2013). Journalistic roles were thus studied from its normative stance because of their function as patterned behaviors that were supposed to create stability in organizations and in society (Zhu & al. 1997). It was hence the underlying assumption of the last sixty years of role conception research that it was somehow taken for granted that the way journalists define their jobs would affect their performance; that is, the collective outcome of concrete news decisions and the style of news reporting in content (Mellado, 2014). For example, journalists who see themselves as disseminators were expected to write very different accounts of an event than those who see themselves as interpreters/participants" (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996: 101). Likewise, journalistic role conceptions are much more operationalized than theorized because of the seeming transparency of the concept, that is, everyone seems to agree upon a common understanding of the two words, roles and conception (Vos, 2005).

Our main contribution is then to provide a more holistic analytical understanding of journalistic professional roles based on media sociology literature. Starting with a review of previous studies, we suggest that there remain empirical and theoretical challenges to the concept of role conceptions and its relationship with role performance. Two challenges considering media sociology underpinnings are at the focus of this conceptualizing paper.

First, the implicit assumption that news is a reflection of journalistic roles guides major research projects (e.g., Hanitzsch & al., 2011). Hence the linkage between role conception and role performance has been outlined as a *pre- or post-justification* of research interest rather than as *loci of empirical investigation*. Only most recently have scholars become interested in linkage the two concepts, making the gap and relationship between role conception and role performance the loci of empirical examination (Hellmueller, Tandoc & Vos, 2012, Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013; Tandoc, Hellmueller & Vos, 2013). While previous research has conceptualized role conception as part of the socialization process, influenced by professional routines, education and its organizational context, the main interest rested on explaining role conceptions, rather than explaining role performance and understanding the relationship between what journalists think they should do and what they actually perform within the structure of a newsroom and a particular system.

Second, as professional roles are mostly conceptualized on an individual level (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; 2013; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), the attention that it has received in journalism research, we argue, comes with a lack of theoretical explanations. That is, role

conceptions as conceptualized as the most micro level examined (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Preston, 2009; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) should theoretically and conceptually be linked to other levels of influence, which may limit or change the roles journalists can perform, for example, that the high pressures of deadlines make it impossible to consistently work on investigative stories. Another example could be the performance of the watchdog role (Waisbord, 2000), which is not much practiced in countries in which the political system is characterized by a strong political parallelism in which news media, political parties and economic powers are firmly linked and media owners belong to major political parties. Therefore, journalistic professional roles should not be considered a universal standard but something that “adapts itself to its cultural contexts related to nation and press system” (Berkowitz, 2011: 1). This is crucial as Shoemaker and Reese (2013) argue that on one hand we must fully understand those journalists with respect to their individuality and creativity, but on the other hand, we must understand them within their larger institutional context, where the power of the individual expresses itself mainly through those occupational channels. Without empirically linking journalistic role conceptions to gatekeeping forces and to role performance, our studies lack explanatory power of what entails professional roles.

We suggest that differences in professional roles between countries are most visible in the actual news coverage and role performance. This is to say that these different levels of influences are related to the autonomy and the power of the individual journalists and therefore, to the gap between ideals and performance, since journalists need autonomy “to exercise independent decisions in doing their work” (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013: 6). By analyzing role conception and role performance, we can explain how routines, organizational ownership and the political system reinforce or limit a particular normative role of journalists within a particular media system.

2. Challenges for future conceptualization

The above reasoning highlights important conceptualizing questions for the future of journalism research, which we attempt to set out based on media sociology literature. From a level of influence perspective, professional roles have most often been conceptualized on an individual level, specifically, as ideals of roles of journalists. Thus, we pose a conceptualizing question on why it is, that professional roles research has been divorced from the broader literature on media sociology by not linking its explanatory power over news to other levels of influence within the hierarchical model? Why is there not enough research on the manifestation of roles in the content that is made known to the public? How do organizational influences, such as ownership, affect how journalists' will practice their job besides their conceived roles? Basically, how much do role conceptions matter within the framework of news? In relation to the first conceptualizing question, we ask how to theoretically integrate role conception research into a framework of sociology of news. In other words, how can we empirically assess how the roles journalists' conceive will eventually shape the stories they produce? We attempt to map out the second question based on role conceptions influence over professional practice. It has been documented that professional role conception as an object of study has been very Western oriented (Joseph, 2005). And maybe the reason of that bias is the way professional roles have been conceptualized (i.e. taking for granted that journalists can actually enact the role they perceive as important to carry out their duties).

Nevertheless, analyzing professional roles as a collective and negotiated process allows us to increase our knowledge about journalism around the world (Mellado, 2014). Taking into consideration more literature published in languages other than English can certainly expand our knowledge on professional roles in a transnational or global context. For

example, professional individual factors and personal attitudes are subsumed under the same analytical level in the US. This may come as a result that from a U.S. perspective, the granting of individual responsibility has proven more appealing to journalists (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013) than more liberal critiques. In a European context, Donsbach (1987) distinguished early on between the subject and the professional sphere. In the subject sphere, he locates values and norms, factors that influence the journalists as an individual. In the professional sphere he identifies professional norms and roles, news selection criteria, and social orientation. The roles journalists conceive may matter more as an organizational outcome than an individual decision over news coverage. For example, the newsroom culture and the majority of journalists within a newsroom and their preference of role conceptions seem more likely to matter for news stories than individual preferences and ideals.

Taking a more integrative approach, we attempt to set out the underlying theoretical assumption of role conception research from both the functionalist and the symbolic interactionism approach. In a second step, we map new ways of theorizing professional roles from a media sociology approach in order to understand its influence over news content and answer our two conceptualizing research questions.

3. Role conception and functionalistic assumptions of journalism research

The current disconnection between the sociology of news production and the study of professional roles does not mean that both perspectives stand for different goals, rather these approaches combined potentially offer strong foundations for evaluating journalism (Mellado, 2014). In order to contribute in a more holistic way to the field, we have to look back to understand the path of the study of professional roles in journalism in order to make this area of study more significant to the practice of the profession. At the heart of this proposed approach is the interplay between structure (i.e., professional constraints and limitations journalists face on their job) and agency, the autonomy journalists have to enact and perform their values and norms. We argue that understanding the context in which the study of professional role conception emerged reveals interesting findings on how and why it was most often defined and conceptualized on an individual level. Looking back further maps out explanation of the reason role conception was mostly treated as dependent variable and studies looked at factors and variables that describe and predict which role conceptions journalists embrace.

Journalistic role conceptions have been understood by the literature as the normative and actual functions of journalism in society, a set of expectations, values, norms and standards defining how news people and organizations should and do work (Weaver & al, 2007; Hanitzsch & al, 2001; Norris & Odugbemi, 2008). Cohen (1963) as one of the pioneer in studying role conceptions has influenced much of the last decades of theorizing about role conceptions.

Cohen's (1963: 19) work entailed an examination of the "The Reporter's Conceptions of His Roles". Vos (2009: 4) bridges his analysis to theoretical foundations of role conception, arguing that Cohen's context and way of thinking was much shaped by what had emerged from sociology and social psychology as role theory linked to functionalist literature in political science. Talcott Parsons, one of the most significant and influential twentieth-century American sociologists has shaped much of those underlying assumptions with the idea that only individuals and their actions could be studied empirically (Vos, 2009). While we cannot tap into a discussion on the large variety of functionalistic approaches in sociology, political science and media studies, we tight those assumptions linked to role conception research to future theorizing about its concept and offer an explanation on how functionalistic assumptions have shaped much of what we understand about journalistic

roles. Functionalism models of the mass media were dominant in the mid-twentieth century, particularly in the United States, but also in societies that closely followed American culture (Tuchman, 2002). The main assumption is that journalists do not merely select and combine information but they produce news in the context of organizational and social frameworks (Tuchman, 2002). Media and journalists in a functionalist model were described as elements of a larger social system and mass communications as a balanced set of social structures contribute to the stability of the social system. "The underlying metaphor of communication remained that of the transmission of an information flow, which might be used selectively or even cut off, but which relayed full-fledged messages about a pre-existing reality to media audiences" (Tuchman, 2002: 79). In that sense, individual role conceptions were integral to organizational role conceptions to conform to organizational behavior. However, as more recent research shows, role conceptions are not in any case redundant with role performance and journalists survey data on role conceptions should not be taken at for granted when considering role performance.

Most importantly, functionalistic definitions of journalistic role conception stress normative expectations. According to this approach, expectations bridge the social structure and individual role behavior. Therefore, the enactment of the role is determined by social consensus and rules (e.g., Lynch, 2007). In this respect, psychological research, for example, has shown a solid relationship between attitudes and behaviors (Kim & Hunter, 1993).

One problem with social consensus and rules is that they cannot fully explain action, especially in the context of the journalistic field. Different to other professions, like Medicine or Law (or as the behavior of a normal human being who is relatively independent in life and can take its own decisions), journalism as a profession is a more heteronomous field (Bourdieu, 2005) where journalists are more exposed to different internal and external constraints that limit in different levels their autonomy to do what they would like to do (Hanitzsch & Reich, 2013; Mellado & Humanes, 2012). Because of structural components that have been always part of the profession, journalists have clear limitations to the freedom they have to take decision, and to behave according to their own ideals.

Nevertheless, research on journalistic role conception is particularly interested in action, i.e., the underlying assumption is the idea that journalists' conception of their professional role likely influences how they report or write news. This idea of journalistic roles influencing news content is a functionalistic argument in itself. Nevertheless, the way role conceptions play out in journalistic practice in the equation of journalism remains unclear. One thing is what journalists think is important to do (role conception or perception), what they think they do (perceived enactment), and another thing is what they actually do (role performance). Therefore, if we want to analyze journalistic role conceptions, we have to situate the journalists and to study ways in which they embody aspects of the social world.

If professional role conceptions of journalists are subject to limits set by the level of routines of the workplace, the organizational structure, or the political system in which reporters operate, among others (Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011), there are empirical findings to believe that those influences also affect performance. More precisely, rules may not apply to everyone, because normative ideals can clash with expectations from various references groups (such as sources, audiences, personal expectations) and may result in a role conflict (Coser, 1975). For example, editors in a news organization may expect their reporters to be detached observers (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). However, by dealing with political sources, reporters may experience a boundary to that particular role expectation when they have evidence that their sources are wrong. There is a limit to impartiality or disseminating the story, when it comes to reporting stories or claims by one side that is obviously wrong. For example, we cannot report party A says, the earth is flat, party B says, the earth is a bowl, we will do a story and the audience decides. A disseminator role clashes with an adversarial

role (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996) or with a citizen-oriented role (Rosen, 1996) if the audience's expectations assumed by the journalists are discussing public policies in a timely way. Such situations cannot be always explained by a functionalistic logic.

Such functionalistic assumptions have also difficulty accounting for the variability and flexibility demanded by role multiplicity, understanding individual level negotiations that may allow journalists to switch or combine roles (Lynch, 2007). Multiple role performance involves both doing and thinking. Both mechanisms point to the distinction between expectation, negotiation and change. Roles are in other words not only reproduced (as a rather functionalist argument) but also produced as an outcome of dynamic negotiations (a rather symbolic interactionism argument). Indeed, we suggest that to analytically understand how journalistic roles influence journalism or journalists performance, we require a theoretical and conceptual framework that combines and attitudinal approach with a hierarchy of influence approach follow (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013; Tandoc & al., 2013). Furthermore, and based on such a conceptual framework, we require multiple methodologies to assess journalists' role performance (e.g., content analysis), journalists' role conception (e.g., surveys or qualitative interviews), and organizational and social-system data (e.g., objective indexes) to analyze the complexities of professional roles and to analytically and empirically connect the components of professional roles.

4. Professional roles as a collective and relational process

In contrast to the functionalist approach, the symbolic interactionism definition of role accepts role performances as a collective-relational process. A role is something that is constantly negotiated by individuals in a tentative, creative way (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). Role taking permits journalists to anticipate the consequences of their own and others' plans of action. Role conflicts can be resolved by aligning actions to others and to the social context and to act in a manner to be appropriate to the situation (Blumer, 1969). In other words, journalists do not actually enact a role, but they perform a role as a collective outcome, as several authors have suggested (Mellado, 2014; Vos, 2005). Roles are relational by negotiating identification with different roles in relation to reference groups. For journalists, roles are relational in a sense that they anticipate the consequences of their own reporting to others and the social context. This is done in an interactive way for a journalist to cooperate and compete with others. "Others" can be various references groups or individuals such as sources, people in the same news organization, or their audience.

The way sources, news organizations, societal structures as well as the audience affect the journalists' negotiation and adoption of various social roles has been widely approached by the level of influence, gatekeeping theory and news production stream of research. To elaborate on those theoretical perspectives, let us look at the traditional process of a news story that may be theoretically similar to today in a digital news environment. The news story does not start in the newsroom. Westley and MacLean (1957) conceptualized events as perceived by sources as the starting point. News becomes news through the interaction with sources. The delivery process of information is maintained through the relationship between journalist and source. Sources are a crucial part of the media because they deliver the narrative of the event. Sources frame the event because in order to understand what has happened, sources give meaning to an event. An event catches someone's attention through a delivered story by a source. Westley and MacLean (1957) combined the source with the media outcome and argued that the gatekeepers survive to the extent that they satisfy needs for "B's" (i.e., their audience or their public depending on the news organizations' conceptualization of their role). Westley and MacLean argue that sources reinforce power over journalists to legitimate power with acceptance of journalists and audience. Influence in such a sense is negotiated over role performance.

Contextual factors constrain the multiplicity of roles and may lead to role conflict. For example, credible sources may require less investigative reporting and journalists do not necessarily verify their statements. Such a role behavior when dealing with credible sources may lead to a role conflict with news organizations' expectations. Nevertheless, the most cited role conceptions studies such as Weaver et al. (2007) and Weaver & Wilhoit (1986, 1996) as well as Johnstone, Slawski & Bowman (1972) study journalists' role conceptions on a media-centric level. For example, journalists are asked to respond how important it is for journalists to provide analysis and interpretation of international developments. That is problematic insofar as roles are not measured as relational to sources, audiences or media organizations (own media organization as well as competitors), but by the internalized expectations of the media. In other words, this has made treating role perception and role conception as the same concept, which could be quite problematic, because the perception of a role does not necessarily have to translate into a journalist's conception of a role that matters for the actual reporting. Role conception in that sense is a concept that is internalized as a role within a context and culture. Journalists form an understanding of what is required from their organization and what is possible within their work. Thus, role perception is not related to role performance, only if it becomes conceptualized as a potential behavior within an organizational context. For example, journalists perceiving a disseminator role performed by colleagues do not necessarily internalize that as an individual role conception only if its feasible within a specific organizational and cultural context (Biddle, 1979).

This distinction is not without consequences for interpreting research results: For example, in one of the largest comparative journalism research to date, Hanitzsch and his collaborators in 18 countries (Hanitzsch & al., 2011), asked journalists about their roles. In their questionnaire, they included the following question to measure institutional roles of journalists: "The following list describes some of the things the news media do or try to do. Please tell me on a scale of 1 to 5 how important is each of these things in your work" (see Worlds of Journalism Project). Here, an ambiguity occurs because surveyed journalists can either answer this question on a conception level (i.e., this thing is very important in my work as part of my professional ideology, but newsroom constraints neglect the importance of such roles) or on a more perception level (e.g., this thing is important because my newsroom encourages this role) and we do not know how much journalists personally agree with such a particular role. Eventually, we do not know how those roles eventually translate into their news product.

For scholars interested in whether roles will translate into news output categories, such distinctions are not of small scale. How do journalists manage to conceptualize different action frames, but which are not necessarily invoked in every situation? The distinction between thinking and doing is essential: Having internalized a role conception frame does not evoke that frame in every doing situation, because roles are situational. In this view, roles become important in two ways: as determinants of how information is perceived and processed, and as internal representations used to guide behavior and to align conduct with others" (Morgan & Schwalbe, 1990, p. 158). Both are important aspects in the field of journalism studies to conceptualize journalistic professional roles that consists of journalistic role conceptions and journalistic role performance.

5. Understanding influences on the collective role performance of journalism

This article revisited the theoretical underpinning of the link between role conception and role performance, arguing for an in-depth discussion of how this link can be explained from a media sociology approach. Specifically, this paper provides evidence to the inexistence of a clear theoretical and empirical conceptualization of professional roles as a complex process

of negotiations between the journalists and the different forces that influence their work. Studies on professional roles have mostly not considered to explain how journalism works, mainly because the divorce of role conception and role performance within media sociology research.

According to our review of previous literature, journalists think and do, but every decision represents a distinct way in which journalists meet the demands of the system and maintain personal integration in it. Journalists are also citizens of their own societies, which subjects them to other kinds of external and internal pressures. And they have their personal attitudes derived from various sources linked to various reference groups. These play themselves out in their writing or reporting. The result of the tension to meet various role expectations and different ideals is visible in the news product.

In comparing each part of the process of professional roles elaboration – from the perception to the performance, we can then conclude how journalists meet the demand of the organization, and a specific society, and how they integrate those into their individual understanding of professional roles.

Bourdieu (1998) argues that in order to try and grasp the explanatory mechanism of journalistic practice one has to understand that journalism has very little autonomy, subject as it is to a whole series of pressures arising from the characteristic social relations between journalists. Such pressures can be adopted in the production process – for example audience ratings can lead to a “keep it short and simple” formula that neglects an investigative journalistic role. A similar argument that was pointed out by Westley and MacLean (1957) that gatekeepers survive to the extent that they satisfy needs for their receivers. Such pressure then creates uniformity rather than originality (Bourdieu, 1977). Based on that, organizational structures need to be considered as essential to our understanding of the way journalists perceive of and interact with the social environment; that is, organizational and societal-level roles must be integrated into the analysis. Journalists' perceptions then become an organizational perception (i.e., media perception), and their role conception is a negotiated organizational role conception. Even though, organization cannot perform role conceptions themselves, institutional structures are influenced by other fields such as other institutions, government, PR agencies, interest groups that influence media to allow expression from different sources. Such power structures are most often unconscious. In fact, there seems support for a certain amount of necessity to unconscious power structures; otherwise people would try to deliberate themselves.

This paper bears theoretical and practical relevance. First, the analysis can help to understand the bridge between given role and a role that has been taken within a news organization by a journalist. Second, it can help to understand why individual differences are not evident in news content by arguing that in cases of multiple roles or role conflicts, i.e., situations of uncertainty, an action frame is chosen aligned with the organizational role, that is aligned with their institutional structure to be “on the safe side”, and finally, the analysis can further our knowledge on *spiral of silence* mechanisms within a newsroom, a regulative mechanism that is applied to control journalists' choices and to control their opinion.

Considering the profound changes that media and journalism are going through, it becomes interesting for future studies comparing different media cultures and different media outlets (particularly online news and niche media) where organizational structures might be influenced by different constraints or where organizational structures leave more flexibility for a negotiation of journalistic roles and where institutional structures allow more deliberative thinking and doing.

Despite the growing importance of global perspectives, normative assumptions about how journalism should work in society are very often heavily influenced by the West (Wahl-

Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). We argue that only with overcoming this bias, it will be possible to recognize the diversity of journalism that exist in society as well as the way roles, norms and practice are configured in different societies. Such an approach requires a multi method and global approach. An attempt to shed light on an analytical model of professional roles is currently undertaken by the Journalistic Role Performance project (www.journalisticperformance.org). In a first step, 27 countries analyze role performance and link those stories to the journalists who produced to news. After that, organizational level variables and social-system variables are collected from independent sources to identify and explain the gap between role conceptions and role performance. Such projects are increasingly important in journalism studies. From a global perspective and comparative approach, most of our measures were developed in the Western world. To understand journalism as an institution, valid measures developed in Western and non-Western countries are needed to understand the context in which those journalists work and how role conceptions impact their stories and their role performance. With no doubt, such research will provide a much-needed analytical understanding of professional journalistic roles and media performance around the globe.

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