

## Book Review

### Journalistic Role Performance. Concepts, Contexts, and Methods

*Claudia Mellado, Lea Hellmueller, & Wolfgang Donsbach (Eds.)*

New York: Routledge, 2017, pp. 263

This great book tackles a big challenge. Unlike existing volumes on role performance that are based mainly on empirical research, this book takes a more conceptual and theoretical route, even if documentary and verification materials are missing. Despite this absence, the book is essential reading to approach empirical work. The topic is clearly introduced in the title: journalistic role performance. The book is divided in three parts: the first one deals with definitions, the second investigates role performance in various environments, and the last one discusses methodological problems.

As in any collection, the quality of the chapters is uneven. I found the introductory chapters by Mellado and colleagues and the chapter by Waisbord to be extremely interesting. Other chapters in the first part of the book are rich in reference to various literatures not limited to media scholarship, as they include other scientific fields such as philosophy (the chapter by Ornebring) and normativism (the chapter by Eide). The section on methodology is essential reading for research about journalistic role performance. If I had the authority, I would make this book mandatory reading.

As it is very focused around a main topic, the book contains some repetitions as to the authors and studies that are referred to, but this indicates that there exists a good level of consensus as to the important works on the topic.

The book points out three major questions related to the specific topic that represent a major challenge for the field of media scholarship. One general question has to do with the possible gap between the theory and practice of journalism and, in particular, the gap between professional role ideals and actual practice. Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach address these issues in their opening chapter, especially the differences among role conception, role perception, role enactment, and role performance. The question remains: why there is a large gap between role conception and role performance?

In my view, a possible answer beyond the argument offered by Waisbord is connected to the second major question of the book: how should we observe and interpret journalism beyond the Western world? In most cases, communication scholars look at journalism models in these countries as “peripheral models,” using the analytical categories that were developed to analyze journalism in Europe and the United States. As [Curran and Park \(2000\)](#) wrote in their book *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, these categories derived from the study of a “tiny handful of countries” and were applied to very different social and political

contexts. The fact is that there exists a sort of hegemonic view of what journalism is, or at least ought to be. This hegemonic view is grounded in a long tradition of journalism schools, research centers, textbooks, and manuals, as well as studies and research almost exclusively based on the experience of the United States and Western Europe. It has become the common wisdom of the profession around the world. This hegemonic and universal view of the profession does not take into account what Waisbord, one of the authors of the book, defines as “socially situated practice.” This statement echoes what [Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm \(1956, p. 1\)](#) wrote many years ago: “the press always takes on the form and the coloration of the social and political structures within which they operate.” Oftentimes we forget this essential statement. A universal, professional role struggles with the pressures, the habits, and the traditions of surrounding social and political contexts. The social desirability in journalists’ answers to scholarly surveys is mainly defined by the hegemonic view of journalism both within and beyond the Western world, but it sharply contrasts with the actual surrounding situation. This condition becomes even more dramatic when we apply interpretative categories deeply rooted in the history of liberal democracies to journalism worldwide. Most authors in the book recognize this dramatic gap. [Van Dalen, de Vreese, and Albaek \(2017, p. 189\)](#) write, “journalists from Hong Kong to the United Arab Emirates pay lip service to the Anglo-American ideals of professional journalism and say that they see themselves as objectively reporting watchdogs of

government ... Do journalists’ ideals inform their practice or is there a gap between what they say they want to do and what they actually do?” In conclusion, we have to learn that a gap exists between the hegemonic ideal theory of journalism and its practice, and that this gap is even larger when we go beyond the borders of the world where this theory was developed.

The last section discusses how to investigate role performance. This, too, remains an open problem. My impression is that role performance can be studied in a satisfactory way by using a “mixed methods” research, including field observations, personal interviews, content analyses, and survey research. Let me add that Western methodologies may be problematic, too. Analytical categories are generally grounded in the Western academic world, and may not be directly applied to different journalistic procedures and formats. Undoubtedly, this is another shortcoming in the study of role performance that needs to be considered.

I do not have answers to these questions, but the book offers valuable help in its solid argument about the need for a relativistic approach to the study of journalism that takes into account actual conditions of practice, a point clearly made by Dan Hallin in his preface.

## References

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- Siebert, F., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1956). *Four theories of the press*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

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