

Book Review

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Journalistic Role Performance: Concepts, Contexts, and Methods. Claudia Mellado, Lea Hellmueller, and Wolfgang Donsbach, eds. New York: Routledge, 2016. 264 pp. \$150.00 hbk. \$52.16 ebk.

Reviewed by: Risto Kunelius, *University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland*

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The idea of professions, as every journalism scholar knows, is a tricky terrain. It refers both to the material skills that true “professionals” master and to the social value of the restricted access to these skills. On one hand, then, journalism as a profession refers what journalists actually do. On the other hand, professional journalism denotes a varying set of public ideals that are mobilized to defend the practices and privileges of journalists.

Journalistic Role Performance: Concepts, Contexts, and Methods, edited by Claudia Mellado, Lea Hellmueller, and Wolfgang Donsbach, investigates this core question about the profession in a useful manner that is, at the same time, both diverse and coherent. The book brings the general tension between professional ideals and practices closer to empirical realities. It collects and develops elaborated vocabularies about the different (and sometimes also contradictory) roles that journalists attach themselves to. Most importantly, it helps to pose questions about how these roles are actually lived and practiced through performing them in different contexts.

In a short review, one can only offer brief highlights. In the opening section on concepts, the editors themselves offer a solid review of the achievements and problems of traditional, survey-based studies on journalistic roles. Tim Vos provides an eloquent analysis of the historical nature of professional roles outlining perspectives to investigate their variation and evolution. Roles can sometimes command performance, but sometimes a particular performance interprets a role in a new way. Specific roles enjoy different kinds of historical trajectories: they can come and go—but also come back. Some roles can define the professional field (for a while) overall, some have a more specific importance in particular areas of journalism.

This threesome—role-performance coupling, their historical arch, and their varying granularity—is a good example of the way authors in this volume open the debate into new directions. Several contributions not only point to challenges in comparing and understanding professional cultures (over time or space) but they also importantly reveal the “flexibility” of professional roles and ideals. While we can make a claim that the role of acting as “watchdog” or “investigative” force is a constant part of

journalistic role repertoire, we can also see that this means, has meant, and will mean different things—that is, it will be *performed* differently—in changing moments and locations. One could argue that such flexibility points both to a crucial strength of the professional field of journalism and to the need for a constant public reflection.

The second section shifts from theoretical elaborations toward more concrete practices and interfaces in which the role-performance tension plays out. David Ryfe offers an admirably clear take on the “practice turn” underscoring a core theme in the whole book: that rules and roles of journalism do not exist “independently” of routines and practices but that they only socially exist when they are performed (to other social actors and to other journalists). While such an analysis stops short of referring to Judith Butler’s (perhaps more radically constructionist) notion of performativity, it takes the discussion to the same terrain. We can see journalistic practice and work itself as a constant flow of (if not always conscious) professional reflection, of interpretation of what journalism can and could be. Most of role performing can be routinized repetition of basic motions but, in changing conditions, routines and rules can also support improvisation and experimentation.

David Domingo and Florence Le Cam apply the notion of performance to an interesting analysis how other actors than journalists themselves “perform journalism.” Drawing from recent work on public relations(PR), activists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), citizens, and computational software developers, they illustrate how new kinds of hybrid roles of journalism are developed, making the institutional boundaries of “the Fourth estate” interestingly fluid. The analysis shows that outsiders can very well claim to represent the professional social values of journalism. This, again, is not a new development and can be seen as a weakness of the field (from a narrow autonomy perspective)—or as a strength of its public roles and ideals.

The final part of the book offers methodological reviews on how future scholars can negotiate the shifting field of professionalism. The selection of sound advice and inspiration here covers well the basic approaches and the virtues of combining and comparing different kinds of data and evidence. The section as such would serve well as a reading list for an advanced course. Fittingly for the era in which journalists and journalism scholars live, it concludes with Michael Karlsson’s chapter on “liquid content analysis.”

Recent years have seen several readers take up the task of thinking through the crisis, shifting boundaries, reinvention, remaking, or rethinking of journalism. In this company, Mellado, Hellmeuller, and Donsbach have brought a rich set of writings with a clear contribution to a central theme in the field. The book—serving also as one more reminder of the contribution of the late Wolfgang Donsbach—will help students to situate their work and sharpen their tools for investigating the rather rapidly moving target of journalism.