

Role theory and the changing relationship between journalists and audiences: Towards (re-)conceptualising roles and expectations

THEMENSTELLUNG UND RELEVANZ DER ARBEIT

This thesis project focuses on the *changing relationship between journalism and society*, which has raised practical issues for how journalism nowadays is produced and consumed. Technological innovation over the past 30 years has enabled interaction and communication between journalists and audiences that was previously not possible (Karlsson et al. 2018). Feedback mechanisms such as web analytics and reader comments reveal to journalists what audiences expect of them (Hanusch and Tandoc 2019). Journalism also finds itself within an information-rich news media landscape, confronted with greater competition to attract audiences, compounding its ongoing economic insecurity. As such, journalists are arguably more beholden to audiences' needs and wants, and there is perceived pressure to adjust their work and the way they think about their work. One avenue of research where this changing relationship has been explored is in the levels of (in)congruence between journalistic role conceptions (how journalists understand their work) and audience expectations (what audience want/need from journalists), finding both parallels and divergences (Loosen et al. 2020).

However, in reviewing this scholarship, several shortcomings emerge, which this study addresses. **First**, journalists' roles and audiences' expectations have primarily been studied separately, neglecting to examine how they simultaneously shape one another (Vos et al. 2019). **Second**, roles and expectations scholarship has had limited theoretical engagement, with the exception of a few studies (e.g. Loosen and Schmidt 2012). **Third**, roles research has overwhelmingly focused on political journalists which has reinforced a value hierarchy that subordinates popular form of journalism, such as lifestyle journalism, as having a lesser or 'softer' contribution to society – claims often rooted in gendered narratives (Hanusch 2019; Costera Meijer 2001). **Fourth**, research has rarely accounted for the impact of social identity, such as class, gender, and race, on roles and expectations, focusing instead on determinants such as political orientation, and age (Gil de Zuniga and Hinsley 2013). **Lastly**, roles and expectations have been studied primarily through quantitative methods, specifically surveys (e.g. Ramaprasad 2001). As such, these studies have inadvertently limited the possibility for roles and expectations to emerge freely, without the normative constraints of pre-determined role conceptions captured in standardized surveys (Joseph 2005). Together, these shortcomings form the foundation for this study's theoretical framework and research questions.

THEORETISCHE HERANGEHENSWEISE

Role Theory: Consensus and Conformity in the Journalist-Audience Relationship

To explore the complexity of the changing journalist-audience relationship, this project's theoretical framework is informed primarily by role theory, rich in concepts that allow us to explore the reciprocal 'health' of this relationship. Role theory's central argument is that roles and expectations shape one another. It proposes that within society, people occupy positions (e.g. occupations) that are populated by diverse *roles* – "behaviours characteristic of one or more persons in a context" commonly referred to as a *role-incumbent* (e.g. journalist) (Biddle 1979: 56). An *expectation*, on the other hand, is "a statement that expresses a reaction about a characteristic of one or more persons" (Biddle 1979: 119) and can be enforced onto a role-incumbent by a *role-sender* (e.g. audiences) (Snoek 1966). Of key importance to this study are the concepts of *role-consensus*, *role-conformity*, and *role-taking* (adapted for this study to also include '*expectation-taking*') (Biddle 1979). 'Role consensus' refers to the agreement among role-incumbents (journalists) and role-senders (audiences) about the roles and expectations each holds. However, audiences are increasingly in a position to challenge the stability of journalists' role conceptions, inviting them to engage in varying forms and levels of 'role conformity'. Here, a role-incumbent is pressured to conform their behaviour to new expectations. The extent to which these dynamics might be occurring becomes evident in levels of 'role/expectation-taking', that is, the

ability of audiences to accurately imagine journalists' roles, and vice versa. To examine these concepts, one of this study's key contributions is its triangulation of: journalists' role conceptions (how journalists think about their roles); journalists' imaginations of audiences' expectations (what journalists think audiences expect); audiences' actual expectations (what audiences say they expect from journalists).

Political versus Lifestyle Journalism: The Discursive Boundaries of Societal Authority

Journalism research has tended to prioritize political journalism as playing a key function in democracy, at the expense of considering the societal contribution of 'softer' forms of journalism (Zelizer 2013), such as lifestyle journalism. Lifestyle journalism scholars have stressed that journalism studies has treated this genre as "unworthy of the term journalism" (Hanusch 2012: 3), "relegated to the backburner of journalism studies" (Fürsich 2012: 12), and occupying "a marginal space" (Vodanovic 2019: 1) even though it has become an important component of audiences' daily media repertoires. By separating journalism's relationship with political life from that with everyday life, scholarship has perpetuated a hierarchical boundary between public-political life and private-personal life (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). To examine these binaries and dichotomies, this study draws on Gieryn's (1983), concept of boundary work, and Weintraub's (1997) concept of the public-private 'grand dichotomy' – a social construct that separates reason and power from emotion and intuition (Pateman 1983). Boundary work has been conceptualized in journalism as a process occurring in three forms: expulsion of those who challenge established journalistic practices and values; expansion to accept other actors into the field; and protection of autonomy from external influences, including commercial and market pressures (Carlson 2015). Thus, this study investigated which boundary markers political and lifestyle journalists discursively employ to distinguish themselves and accept/reject one another from the journalistic field.

How Social Identity Shapes Roles and Expectations: An Intersectional Approach

This study also takes into account arguments that journalism as an occupation and ideology is rooted in 'majority cultures' that promote elite (middle-class), masculine, and White worldviews (Hovden 2008; Steiner 2020). Following this argument, journalists with 'stigmatized cultural identities' might struggle to reconcile this with their journalistic identity (Slay and Smith 2011), while audiences with marginalized social identities are invisible to journalism's dominant professional ideology (Lindell 2020). Therefore, this study took an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989), focusing on race, class, gender, to examine how journalists' and audiences' lived experiences of privilege/marginalization shape their role conceptions and expectations? To conceptualize class, the study relied on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital, evaluating journalists' and audiences' levels of access to economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital to locate them within the classed social space.

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Based on the above theoretical framework, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: *What do political and lifestyle journalists understand to be their roles?*

RQ2: *How do political and lifestyle journalists imagine their audiences and their expectations?*

RQ3: *What do audiences expect of political and lifestyle journalists, and through which modes do they express their expectations?*

RQ4: *How do class, race, and gender shape journalists' role conceptions and audience expectations?*

RQ5: *To what extent do journalists' role conceptions, their imaginations of audiences' expectations, and audiences' actual expectations reflect one another?*

RQ6: *How are boundaries between political and lifestyle journalists implicitly and explicitly reinforced or challenged by journalists and audiences?*

METHODISCHES VORGEHEN

This study employs qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 26 political journalists working for quality mainstream and tabloid news media, 22 lifestyle journalists working for magazines or lifestyle sections of mainstream newspapers, and 8 audience focus groups with a total of 57 participants, in South Africa, July-October 2018. Journalists and audiences were administered a survey to capture their demographic information, including racial and gender identity, and social class. **Interviews:** Journalists were selected based on purposeful and maximum variation sampling strategies to represent both specific criteria (being journalists) and varied “qualities, attributes and situations” (publication, genre, beat, gender), ensuring a diverse sample (Lindlof and Taylor 2002: 123). All 48 journalists work across mainstream agenda-setting media outlets (different formats and target audiences) and genres (political and lifestyle, including food, health, technology, fashion and beauty). Among the 22 lifestyle journalists, 12 are female, 12 hold senior editorial positions and 10 are reporters, age ranging from 23 to 64 years. Among the 26 political journalists, 11 are female, 6 hold senior editorial positions and 20 are reporters, age ranging from 23 to 56 years. Interviews were semi-structured, and explored journalists’ motivations to become a journalist, their role conceptions, and perceptions of their audiences. **Focus Groups:** Focus groups allow for patterns of consensus and dissent offering an alternative understanding of a subject to emerge (Kitzinger 1994). Participants were approached through maximum variation sampling strategies to insure intersectional diversity (Lindlof and Taylor 2002). Focus groups were both homogenous and heterogenous along class, race, and gender, and reflected the diversity of the broader population. Themes explored included audiences’ perceptions of journalism’s functions, and their expectations of journalists’ roles. **Analysis:** All transcripts were analysed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, relying on principles of ‘informed grounded theory’ (Thornberg 2012). Importantly, in an effort to de-centralize and de-Westernize knowledge production (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2020), this study approaches South Africa not as a case study but as a core of knowledge production relevant to journalism cultures and societies globally.

WICHTIGSTE ERGEBNISSE

This study offer three key findings and contributions to journalism and journalism studies:

Role theory and the complexity of the role-expectation relationship: By triangulating different perspectives in the journalist-audience relationship, different levels of role consensus and conformity across political and lifestyle journalists and their audiences emerged, exposing a lack of role-expectation consensus or ‘bad health’, especially within political journalism. Within lifestyle journalism we see role-expectation consensus across journalists’ role conceptions, their imaginations of audience expectations, and audiences’ actual expectations. In other words, what journalists think is their role, what they believe their audiences expect, and what their audiences actually expect is in alignment, suggesting high levels of role-expectation consensus. Specifically, we see lifestyle journalists and audiences expressed shared roles and expectations of providing escapism, entertainment, inspiration and aspiration, etc. However, in looking at political journalism, the study finds an almost complete disconnect or absence of consensus. Political journalists’ role conceptions appear to be idealized notions that are almost entirely detached and different from their audiences’ expectations (actual or imagined). Political journalists saw themselves as watchdogs and disseminators, while audiences perceived them as market-oriented and sensationalist, captured by political power, and too negative – expectations that journalists were very much aware of and imagined accurately. What this begins to suggest is a construction of idealized journalistic roles so deeply rooted, political journalists cannot or do not want to conform to the evidently contradictory expectations audiences have of them. Alternatively, the political journalists in this study experience other organisational or institution/society-level influences that disrupt their roles and prevent them from conforming to the observed audience expectations, something requiring further research. *For journalism this raises*

practical questions and implications: If journalists are unable or unwilling to meet their audiences' expectations, are audiences more likely to avoid news or lack trust in journalism?

An intersectional approach to studying roles and expectations: The intersectional approach used in this study shows journalists' and audiences' roles and expectations are far more nuanced than previously revealed, and those with marginalized intersectional identities find themselves on the periphery of journalism's core occupational ideology. This study further exposed journalism's institutional elitism in the way that journalists with 'culturally stigmatized identities' are pressed to question established journalistic ideology, norms and values, and in the way that journalists are socialized to exclude audiences they may (or may not) share an intersectional identity with. For example, Black journalists in this study negotiated their wish to engage in the emotional labour of empathy with the normative demands of reporting in a detached way. At the same time, marginalized audiences felt excluded from journalism's dominant ideology and also subordinated by audiences who share in that privilege. For example, Black-working-class audiences expected journalists to be empathetic which points to a role-expectation consensus between them and Black political journalists that remains unfulfilled. White-middle-upper-class audiences' expectations, however, reflected the dominant and normative journalistic role conceptions, showing role-expectation consensus among those with greater intersectional power and privilege. *For journalism this raises further questions and implications:* How can journalists with marginalized or 'culturally stigmatized' identities fulfil their occupational roles effectively when confronted with normative journalistic ideals that are at odds? How does the exclusion of marginalized audiences' expectations from journalism, silence the voices that journalism claims to serve? Suppressing such roles and expectations arguably restrains journalism from fulfilling its core function and enduring claim to informing *the* public, in all its intersectional diversity.

Political-lifestyle journalism boundaries: Drawing on the boundary-making concept, this study showed both boundary blurring across shared role conceptions, and reinforcement of boundaries firmly rooted in gendered narratives and claims to autonomy. Pointing to some implicit *blurring of role-boundaries*, lifestyle journalists expressed the same roles traditionally associated with political journalists, such as being an advocate, change agent, mediator, and educator, thus challenging claims that lifestyle journalism offers less societal value than political journalism. At the same time, political and lifestyle journalists also explicitly reinforced boundaries, whereby political journalists evoked autonomy claims and gendered discourses to 'other' and subordinate lifestyle journalism's societal function and worth. They claimed lifestyle journalists held less societal authority because of they were dependent on commercial influences (e.g. advertising, public relations), and the content they provide was "frivolous" and "fluffy." Conversely, having internalized these gendered and autonomy markers lifestyle journalists engaged in self-deprecation, claiming their work was indeed less worthy, but they also engaged in self-affirmation, by pointing out ways in which their work fulfilled functions that political journalism were failing to fulfil, such as by being a counter to the negativity of political journalism, providing solutions, and by engaging news-avoiding audiences in an accessible way. Similar patterns of distinction were found among audiences' expectations of political and lifestyle journalism, which they saw as addressing dichotomous spheres of life, but importantly, also emphasising that both fulfil different but equally important functions. *For journalism and journalism studies this raises further implications:* Considering audiences increasing levels of distrust in news media, decreasing news consumption and even complete news avoidance, this study suggests there is a growing need for journalism to acknowledge the value and function of various forms of journalism that make up audiences' news media repertoires and fulfil diverse news needs.

In summary, this study highlights that a disconnect between political journalists' role conceptions and audiences' expectations potentially breeds growing distrust in media. This is exacerbated by perceptions of journalism as an elite institution that neglects the expectations of marginalized audiences, and is dismissive of the value of lifestyle journalism in audiences' everyday life.

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