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Review

Beyond Journalistic Norms: Role Performance and News in Comparative Perspective

Claudia Mellado (Ed.)

Published by Routledge, London, 2021, 299 pp.

In the early noughties, when I was still active as a journalist, I attended a meeting with colleagues from Latin America and Africa. Any external observer to that meeting would have concluded that journalism was the same everywhere: according to the conversations, our job consisted predominantly of monitoring the government and those in positions of power; being objective and always showing the ‘two sides’ of each story; and informing, educating and entertaining the readers. Many attendees agreed that everything else was a deviation from ‘real’ journalism. A few years later, once I shifted to academia, I discovered that not only were we unknowingly paraphrasing the founding principles of the BBC, but there were different journalistic traditions around the world, some of them detached from the supposed ‘universal’ ideals of objectivity and neutrality, with alternative understandings of the social duties and civic engagement that journalists should have (for an overview, see Esser & Umbricht, 2013).

At a time in which journalism is under greater technological, financial and political pressures, Claudia Mellado’s edited book *Beyond Journalistic Norms: Role Performance and News in Comparative Perspective* is a welcome contribution to current debates not only about the function that journalism should play in society, but more crucially about what journalists actually do in different contexts, beyond personal and professional ideals. The book is the outcome of the *Journalistic Role Performance Project*, a global research initiative that surveyed hundreds of journalists around the world and analysed 64 newspapers from 18 countries between 2013 and 2018. The focus of the study has been on ‘how particular journalistic norms and ideals are collectively negotiated and result in specific practices’ (p. 12), thus offering an empirically grounded critique to often repeated assumptions –particularly in popular discourse– that journalism is bounded by a clear set of principles and practices.

Mellado’s book paints a much richer, more complex picture. Journalists may effectively act as watchdogs of the powerful –as they often claim to do–, but can occasionally adopt a more loyalist approach, seeking to cooperate with authorities or express support for the nation; they may also provide entertainment, civic information or advice to audiences; and may seek to disseminate facts or adopt a more interventionist role (pp. 34-40). These different roles are neither hierarchical nor exclusive. None of them are ‘good’ or ‘harmful’ per se. They can reinforce each other and may also be employed by journalists at different times, even within the same news story. Moreover, the roles are not the outcome of particular media systems –as in the classic typology of polarised pluralist, democratic corporatist or liberal (Hallin & Mancini, 2004)–, therefore challenging assumptions that specific geographical, economic or political contexts necessarily produce a typical set of journalistic practices. Data from the United States, for instance, shows that journalism in that country has significant levels of opinion and interpretation (Chapters 5 and 6),

contradicting expectations that the ‘American model’ is dominated by facts and neutrality. Journalism therefore emerges as dynamic and fluid, with shifting roles that interact and co-exist, shaped not only by the actions of specific individuals, but also by the profile of news organisations and the overall legal, economic and political context.

Rather than following a geographical or country-by-country structure, the different chapters are arranged thematically into three sections: an introductory one outlining the conceptual framework and methodologies of the study; a second one focussed on the manifestation of journalistic role performance in the news, and a final one detailing journalistic role performance. Each chapter is underpinned by a wealth of quantitative data, illustrated by tables and bar charts. Although that level of detail substantiates the findings, it may ward off undergraduate students and other lay readers. Perhaps, more examples, such as those mentioned in Chapters 1, 6 and 12, could have helped to communicate the findings to a broader set of readers.

Despite its obvious strengths, the book has a few minor limitations. Some are acknowledged by the authors, such as the exclusive focus on newspapers as well as on national news only. I will add two more. Firstly, although the book carefully avoids stating that journalistic practices can be categorised according to specific regions or nations, there is still a kind of methodological nationalism across the chapters, with the study lacking a deeper problematisation of the nation-state. It would be relevant to look at role performance not only on an international level, but also on a transnational and sub-national one, as it is in fact touched upon in Chapter 9. In a context of increasing authoritarianism and misinformation around the world, and with structural crises creating ‘news deserts’ due to the closure of local newspapers (Abernathy, 2018; Pickard, 2020), role performance should be examined beyond big urban centres, in order to learn more about what journalists do in rural areas, lower socio-economic neighbourhoods as well as those populated with racial minorities or migrants.

Secondly, on a more theoretical level, the book is contained within the boundaries of the academic field of journalism, even though, in my view, there is potential to engage with broader debates on media and communications. Acknowledging that professional journalistic roles are fluid and shaped by their social, political and economic context may have relevant insights for debates on mediation or mediatisation, which have examined ‘the integration and impact of communication devices and practices within and on the social fabric’ (Scolari & Rodriguez-Amat, 2018, p. 134). For instance, it would be interesting to reflect more on the implications of acknowledging the shifting, dynamic nature of journalistic practices, and how these practices adapt, interact and respond to broader conditions, can have on arguments of ‘media logics’ structuring social life.

Despite these minor shortcomings, *Beyond Journalistic Norms* is a robust empirical and theoretical contribution to the literature in journalism, whose findings emerge from Western and non-Western settings. Arguments and data demonstrating that there is no universal model of journalism will be of interest not only to scholars, researchers and postgraduate students in this particular field, but also to academics focussing on broader media and communication studies.

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