Comparing Journalistic Role Performance Across Thematic Beats: A 37-country study

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Abstract

Studies suggest that, at the routine level, news beats function as unique "micro-cultures." Exploring this 'particularistic' approach in a large sample of news content, we compare how the interventionist, watchdog, loyal, service, infotainment and civic roles materialize across eleven thematic news beats, and explore the moderating effect of platforms, ownership and levels of political freedom on journalistic role performance in hard and soft news. Based on a content analysis of 148,474 news items from 37 countries, results reveal the transversality of interventionism, the strong associations of some topics and roles, and the limited reach of news beat particularism in the face of moderating variables.

Keywords: journalism, news beats, soft and hard news, professional roles, role performance.

Introduction

Historically, *news beats* have structured news production around unique events, sources, routines, and thematic specialization (Fishman, 1980; Magin & Maurer, 2019). From a routine perspective, news beats are a "major venue for specialization in journalism, an organizing principle behind modern newsrooms, and as 'trading zones' for information and news materials" (Reich et al., 2021: 1199). The assumption is that news beats are – or should be – specialized fields of knowledge or particularistic "micro-cultures" (Reich, 2012; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989). This *particularism* can be at risk due to commercialism, digitalization, newsroom cutbacks and labor precarity (Martin & McCrain, 2019; Van Leuven et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the increasing challenges that newsrooms face to afford the expert division of labor that news beats entail (Robbins & Wheatley, 2021), thematic differentiation still allows for the topical organization and presentation of news content, either thematically or geographically (Magin & Maurer, 2019). Topics and sections such as politics, international affairs, economics, health, sports, crime, lifestyle, science, or celebrity help organize news output for news consumers, distinguished by their topic, focus, and style (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010).

News beats can therefore be categorized according to either the expert subject knowledge, routines, and sourcing practices of journalists and/or the *thematic content* that journalists and media outlets produce. In this paper we use the latter categorization – what we call *thematic beats* – where news topics are considered a proxy of news beats (Gans, 1979; Reich, 2012). Both approaches assume thematic differentiation in news content, although with some nuances. The *journalist-based* approach indicates that even when some practices are similar, there can be 'particular' routines, processes and journalists' perceived roles that are unique to specific beats (Reich, 2012; Robbins & Wheatley, 2021). The *content-based* approach offers mixed evidence, as different contextual, societal, economic, and organizational factors can clearly shape the coverage of political, financial, sports, or cultural affairs (Martin & McCrain, 2019; Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2017; Verboord & Janssen, 2015). Large-scale, cross-national studies of news content show the growing presence of elements of infotainment and interventionism in different thematic beats that are contingent to media platforms, ownerships, media orientations and media systems (Aalberg et al, 2013; Umbricht & Esser, 2016; de Vreese, 2017; Kavanagh et al., 2019; Mellado et al., 2021).

The literature above yields at least four areas of opportunity for scholarly development. First, while the provision of thematic news is affected, shaped, and even diffused by different social and economic contexts of news production, the extent to which thematic beats other than

politics or hard news remain particularistic across different geographical and organizational environments remains inconclusive.

Second, albeit not always explicitly, research shows that an essential ingredient of news beat particularism is their strong connection with journalistic roles. At the journalist' perception level, the role-beat relationship is corroborated by journalists who cover politics, economics, health, sports, culture, or lifestyle, who align with a variety of democratic, citizen or market roles (Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013; Albæk et al, 2014; English, 2017; Hovden & Kristensen, 2021; Hanusch, 2019). At the content and role performance level, research shows that thematic beats like politics, health, foreign, economics or sports display some forms of interventionism, infotainment, watchdog, or collaborative roles (Umbricht & Esser, 2016; Wasserman et al., 2021; Aalberg et al., 2013; English, 2022; Mellado et al., 2021). Once again, factors at play are media systems, media ownership, commercialism, and platform logics, among others. However, the relationship between thematic beats and roles is not always straightforward. Sometimes news beats can bear more influence than platforms on journalistic roles (Mellado et al., 2018) while other times platforms can be unique "manufacturing houses of news" (Reich, 2016: 14). Commercial pressures, differences in ownership, and audience orientations can also trigger the materialization of elements of infotainment and interventionism in hard-news content (Aalberg et al., 2013; Boukes and Vliegenthart, 2017). Media system factors (Esser et al., 2012; Umbricht & Esser, 2016; Albæk et al., 2014) and press freedom levels (Márquez Ramírez et al., 2020) also affect political roles like watchdog or loyalism. Therefore, there is a need to establish the type of platforms, ownerships and political conditions the exert the most influence in the unique relation of beats and roles.

A third area of opportunity is to cement more dialogue across studies that approach thematic content separately. Some studies do not even refer to role indicators like sensationalism, opinions or personalization as such but instead as narratives, angles, or news values. Others do not always brand topical news or thematic-expert journalists as "news beats." In the same line, some roles, beats and countries have received more scholarly attention than others. Finally, most studies are conducted in a single national context or compare Western democracies only. There is therefore opportunity to fill the empirical and theoretical gap in relation to non-Western newsrooms and how roles are manifest through thematic news content.

To address such issues, and based on a news content analysis of 148,474 news items in 365 news outlets from 37 countries during 2020, this study adopts a journalistic role performance framework (Mellado, 2015; 2021) and a news content approach to thematic news beats, to pursue two goals. First, to strengthen role systematization and comparison by

exploring the presence and variation of six journalistic roles – interventionist, watchdog, loyal facilitator, civic, service, and infotainment – across eleven thematic news beats: politics, economics, social affairs, court, crime, health, science and technology, sports, celebrity and entertainment, accidents and natural disasters, and lifestyle. Second, to measure and compare the influence of four different platforms (radio, TV, print and online), five media ownership orientations (private, publicly traded, public service, civic-oriented and state-run), and political freedom in the relation between hard and soft news beat clusters and journalistic role performance.

Journalistic roles across different news beats

Professional roles are one of the key topics in journalism research. Insight into which roles journalists prioritize above others can enlighten us about how they conceive their relationship with society (Donsbach, 2012; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Mellado 2021). Mellado, Hellmueller and Donsbach (2017) distinguished four different concepts within the construct of professional roles in journalism: role conception (what journalists want to do), role perception (what journalists think they ought to do), perceived role enactment (what journalists think they do), and role performance (what they do). The first three concepts – primarily explored through survey research from different countries – suggest that journalists in different cultural settings to a large extent prioritize traditional journalistic roles like watchdog or disseminator (Weaver et al., 2012; Hanitzsch et al., 2019). However, the constraints and influences to which journalists are constantly exposed (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) limit the possibility of living up to their normative standards, primarily resulting in a large gap between rhetoric and practice (Tandoc, Hellmueller & Vos, 2013; Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014). Following from this concern, Mellado (2015) has defined *role performance* as the manifestation of professional roles in both news decisions and the news outcome that reaches the public, which is typically measured through content analysis.

Drawing from earlier theoretical and empirical work on role typologies and areas in which journalism can be analyzed (Donsbach, 2012; Hanitzsch 2007), the *Journalistic Role Performance* cross-national study has advanced and validated standardized measures (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2016; Mellado, 2021) to account for six roles and their respective indicators that, along three domains – journalistic voice, power and audience – can materialize in news content. The 'journalistic voice' domain deals with the presence of the journalists' voice in the news, involving the role of the journalist as *interventionist* vis-à-vis disseminator. The 'power relations' domain concerns the relationship that journalists

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establish with societal powers, either through a *watchdog* role (holding power to account) or the *loyal-facilitator* role (cooperating with those in power and/ or emphasizing national triumphs and prestige). Finally, the 'audience approach' domain deals with the way in which journalists address the audience. Journalism can address audiences as citizens to be heard and made visible (*civic role*), consumers to be advised and counseled (*service role*), or spectators to be entertained and thrilled (*infotainment role*) (Mellado, 2015).

Roles, thematic beats and news content

Existing research offers a mixed picture of the relation between roles and thematic beats in news content. Hard news beats such as politics and to a lesser extent, economy, and social affairs, are closely bound to normative conceptions of journalism within democratic systems that place high expectations on their performance of certain roles (e.g., watchdog, civic, service) that we might expect to be prominent in political, social, and economic news. Empirical literature generally supports the normative expectation that hard news beats are intrinsically linked to the civic role. Citizen voices are more likely to be covered in political and social affairs news compared to other topics (Kleemans, Schaap & Hermans, 2017), and that the inclusion of citizen reactions and demands are likely to be found in social affairs news and to a lesser extent, politics (Mellado et al., 2017, 2021; Reich, 2016). Comparative studies have found increasing levels of interventionism (such as journalistic interpretation and opinion) in beats like politics or international affairs across established democracies, but this can depend on national and organizational factors (Esser et al. 2012; Aalberg et al., 2013; Umbricht & Esser, 2016; De Vreese et al, 2017).

In addition, there is a whole body of work devoted to debates around the influence of infotainment on hard news. Aside from the hotly contested normative implications of infotainment (e.g., Brants, 1998), empirical studies in advanced democracies have demonstrated an overall rise of this role in political reporting and in financial news, albeit with either national (Albæk et al., 2014; Umbricht & Esser, 2016) or organizational differences (Voukes & Vliegenthart, 2017). While in non-Western contexts the evidence is less conclusive (e.g., Coronel 2001; Mellado et al., 2017), countries with restricted political freedoms can overturn market incentives when covering conflict affairs (Baum & Zhukov, 2019).

While literature tends to show how infotainment values have infiltrated hard news (Esser et al. 2012; Aalberg et al., 2013), infotainment has more historical connections with news beats such as sports, lifestyle, celebrity, and crime. Typically described as *soft news*

beats (Reinemann et al., 2012), they often draw heavily on dramatic, human interest and personalization news angles; and are therefore considered as synonymous with infotainment (Patterson, 2000). Historically, these subfields of journalism have "become denigrated, relativized, and reduced in value alongside aspirations for something better" (Zelizer, 2011: 9). In relation to power, for example, sports journalists have been variously described as cheerleaders, hero worshippers, fans, and sycophants (English, 2017; Hardin, 2005). On this evidence, we might expect sports news to demonstrate high levels of loyal-facilitation, interventionism (as an expression of boosterism), and lower levels of the watchdog role, even though journalists can be critical of the performance of national teams (English, 2017).

Similarly, surveys of lifestyle journalists suggest that they see themselves as fulfilling roles such as 'service providers', 'orientation', 'life coaches', 'community advocates' and 'inspiring entertainers' (Hanusch, 2019). Other studies have emphasized the commercial and consumerist aspects of lifestyle journalism, where journalists help consumers navigate the various markets through advice, guidance, and product reviews (Fürsich, 2012). On these grounds, we would expect such news topics to be strongly associated with the service, interventionist, and infotainment roles. However, as with sports news, some studies have pointed to the inclusion of critical mindsets in lifestyle journalism (Usher, 2012), suggesting that watchdog roles are not entirely absent.

Previous literature (e.g., Van Aelst & de Swert, 2009) also link 'sensational news' with topics such as accidents, disasters, and crime coverage. While they have received less empirical attention than hard news topics, studies find that crime (Humanes & Roses, 2018; Mellado & Lagos, 2014), accidents and disasters (Wang, 2012) are typically covered through a sensationalist lens aligned with the infotainment role. Further, studies of accidents and disaster coverage suggest that journalists adopt the role of information disseminator over interventionism and may cooperate with the government to communicate during and in the immediate aftermath of a crisis rather than perform the watchdog role (Okumura, Hayashi, Igarashi & Tanaka, 2021). Most likely related to their coverage of wrongdoing, studies have also found that police, crime, and court stories often have watchdog elements (Marquez-Ramirez et al., 2020).

Two news beats that are understudied in the role performance literature but are of particular importance given the Covid-19 pandemic are health and science news. Existent research finds both beats to have a strong service ethos, connected to their role in helping citizens navigate various risks (Klemm et al, 2019). However, in the context of a pandemic, studies show how several other journalistic roles can come to the fore. For instance, the

alarmist nature of health crises can push journalists towards sensationalist discourses high in infotainment (Wasserman et al., 2021). Within the power relations domain, journalists have been found to follow both a consensual role involving the cooperation with authorities to educate the public and watchdog roles when a crisis becomes politicized (Cornia, Ghersetti, Mancini & Odén, 2016), with journalists also oscillating between these different roles as a pandemic unfolds (Klemm et al., 2019).

Towards a homogeneity of news beats?

Most of the literature discussed in the previous section would suggest that beats are at least *particularist* at the routines, newsgathering, and role perception level, and sometimes at the content-performance level. Roles can cement news beats' unique ethos, such as with sports and infotainment, lifestyle and service, or politics and the watchdog role. This approach would view beats as specific subfields of specialized journalism akin to 'subuniverses' (Marchetti, 2005) or 'micro-cultures' (Ericson et al., 1989; Reich 2012). An opposing, *homogenist* view would contend that news beats can be blurred and affected by news routines and practices that are similar and consistent across all content fields (Reich, 2012). This homogenization can result from commercialism and neoliberalization (Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn & Raeymaeckers, 2021). Likewise, trends towards infotainment or interventionism can influence all news beats and have a homogenizing effect that blurs their differences (Aalberg et al., 2013; Umbricht and Esser, 2016; De Vreese et al., 2017).

One of such reasons is the tabloidization of news, or the fact that the characteristics of popular media are increasingly integrated in news content, both in hard and soft news beats (Otto, Glogger & Boukes, 2017). Indeed, a comparative content analysis of audience-oriented roles in several news beats demonstrates that the infotainment role is performed at a relatively high level in all news topics in newspapers around the world (Mellado et al., 2021). Even though not all beats are equally impacted by infotainment, the inclusion of infotainment elements in news content seems to be transversal in most beats to connect with the audience, a trend that can be more salient in cable TV networks and in digital outlets (Kavanagh et al., 2019), and due to commercial pressures in newsrooms (Aalbeerg et al., 2013; Skövsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013).

Moreover, cost-cutting newsroom measures such as the replacement of specialist reporters with generalists are most felt in news beats which are less fundamental for everyday reporting or brand reputation, i.e., beats ranked lower in the professional hierarchy (Reich, 2012; Van Leuven et al., 2021). Another consequence is the increased outsourcing of news

production to news agencies and the use of freelancers who often produce news content for multiple news outlets, again leading to a loss of specificity and more homogeneous news content (Mathisen, 2017; Van Leuven et al., 2021).

As the literature presents competing hypotheses relating to the homogenization and particularist theses, we pose the following research questions:

> RQ1a: Does the performance of journalistic roles differ among thematic beats globally?
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> RQ1b: If role performance differs among thematic news beats, which beats have a stronger association with each journalistic role?

The influence of the political and organizational context

News beats can be 'particularistic' due to their strong associations with certain roles, but whether this relation is sustained at any institutional or societal context remains unclear at a global level. *News beat stability* should take place when this relation remains stable across geographical, socio-political, or organizational contexts (Mellado et al., 2021). Thus, stability would corroborate the particularistic approach to news beats. In contrast, *news beat fluidity* would occur when the relation between news beats and roles are impacted by socio-political and organizational logics.

Plenty of evidence suggests the socio-political context plays an important role in explaining news beat fluidity (Mellado, 2021; van Dalen, de Vreese & Albæk, 2012; Albæk et al., 2014; Umbritch and Esser), at least when it comes to the political beat and hard news in general. Although a particularist approach would assume that the watchdog role is performed extensively overall (or from a normative point of view 'should be performed extensively'), studies show that it can vary dramatically based on the freedom journalists enjoy in a particular societal context (e.g., van Dalen et al., 2012, Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020). Conversely, the loyal-facilitator role – though far less studied – can be expected to be prominent in political news, largely in non-democratic countries (Mellado et al., 2017). For other news beats and journalistic roles, the evidence is less conclusive. The social affairs beat tends to be more associated with the civic role than other news beats in most countries, whereas the service role tends to remain more stable regardless of the socio-political context (Mellado et al., 2021). Organizational factors may also impact news beat fluidity, as it observed a different performance of infotainment in elite versus popular newspapers in economic and hard news overall (Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2020). In hard and financial news in advanced (Boukes et al, 2020) and transitional (Mellado & Lagos, 2014) democracies, infotainment is more prominent

in popular news media who target a broad audience than in so-called elite news media or niche media.

As for the influence of platforms, there are insufficient insights into whether the reported relation between beats and journalistic roles that is typical for newspapers (Mellado et al., 2021) would remain stable across other platforms. A study by Reich (2016) comparing journalists across online, print, radio, and TV news showed that media organizations stood out as "unique manufacturing houses of news" (2016: 14), but not whether news beats would remain unique across each platform. In single democracies like the U.S., hard news in general appears more affected by elements of interventionism and infotainment in online and cable TV (Kavanagh et al., 2019). Moreover, newsrooms are transitioning from single-platform to cross-platform newsrooms characterized by cross-media content production (Reich, 2016; Singer, 2008). Resultantly, journalists are no longer expected to produce news for one platform, but be multi-skilled and provide pieces for different platforms simultaneously. This may contribute to news beat stability across platforms, but only empirical research can substantiate this.

Ownership can also impact the relationship between news beat and role performance. One key scholarly concern is that news organizations in private ownership tend to exhibit more prominent elements of the infotainment role in hard beats than news organizations in public or state ownership (Aalberg & Curran, 2012), since they are more dependent on audience and advertising revenue (Skövsgaard, 2014), and across different types of private ownership (Baum & Zhukov, 2019). Meanwhile, state-owned media in authoritarian societies perform low in the civic role (Wang et al., 2017), while publicly funded news media in advanced democracies perform high (Aalberg & Curran, 2012). Beyond these two roles (infotainment and civic), we know little about the impact of ownership on the stability of more specific news beats in other journalistic roles and in the more traditional soft beats. Considering these contrasting results and gaps in knowledge, we thus formulate the following research question:

RQ2: Does the relationship between role performance and soft and hard thematic beats vary across type of platforms, ownerships, and levels of political freedom?

Method

This study is based on large-scale manual content analysis of the news published in 365 news media outlets in 37 countries. Our research uses a most different systems-design based on a comparative study of advanced, transitional, and non-democratic countries. In order to obtain an intentionally heterogeneous sample, we selected countries representing a variety of political regimes, geographic regions, and media systems. Our study includes

countries from North America (2), Latin America (9), Western Europe (9), Eastern Europe (5), East Asia (3), Sub-Saharan Africa (2), the Middle East (6), and Oceania (1)[1].

Sampling

National teams selected between two and four news media outlets per platform (radio, TV, online and print). Given that the structure and format of media systems differ across countries in size, audience orientation, ownership, political leaning, and the presence of more than one language in a territory, researchers selected outlets to represent the diversity of each country's media system.

We used a constructed week method to select a two-week stratified-systematic sample that yielded 14 identical dates for all outlets and countries between January 2 and December 31, 2020. To account for daily and monthly variation, we divided the year into two semesters: January-June and July-December. For each semester, we created a constructed week, randomly selecting starting dates on a Monday in January and a Monday in July. Then, using three-to-four-week skip intervals, we selected each of the subsequent six days in the following months. This procedure enabled the inclusion of seven different days per semester, for a total of 14 sampled days, covering all 12 months.

Each national team determined the specific sampling unit for the selected outlets, based on the following criteria: for television: the most watched newscast within each selected channel; for radio: the news program with the greatest audience in the selected channels; for newspapers: the full issue; and for online news: the entire homepage of the selected websites (including links contained therein).

The unit of analysis was the news item. All news about the following topics were coded: politics, economy and business, police and crime, court, health, accidents and natural disasters, social affairs, sports, science and technology, lifestyle, and entertainment and celebrities. Not included in the study were editorials, opinion columns, weather forecasts, horoscopes, movie (or other cultural) reviews, puzzles, social pages, and similar content on radio and TV. We excluded supplements/magazines/special features and headlines on newspaper front pages and at the beginning of TV and radio newscasts. We also excluded content that was not produced by the staff of the respective newsrooms, for example, wire service stories and articles by non-journalists that appeared in news sites; however, content

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[1] The data was gathered by the respective national teams in Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Egypt, United Kingdom, Estonia, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mexico, Paraguay, Poland, Qatar, Russia, Rwanda, Serbia, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, United Arab Emirates, the United States, and Venezuela.

created by freelance journalists was coded. In the end, our sample consisted of 148,474 news stories (see Table A with news stories and outlets by country in the Supplementary file).

Measures

The coding was based on the operationalization proposed by Mellado (2015) and validated in previous studies (Mellado, 2021) to measure professional roles in news content. The codebook included detailed operational definitions for each indicator of the watchdog, interventionist, loyal-facilitator, service, infotainment, and civic roles. Each role is characterized by measures of professional practices, reporting styles, and narrative schemes.

The operationalization of the original indicators, which were designed for the analysis of print media (Melado, 2021), were adjusted based on the special modalities of radio, television, and online media, including the audio-visual devices of these media platforms, such as sound manipulation, non-verbal expressions, video motion, image frames, and editing (Mellado & Vos, 2017; Hallin & Mellado, 2018). Five indicators were used to measure the presence of the "interventionist" role, nine indicators measured the "watchdog" role, eight indicators measured the "loyal-facilitator" role, five indicators measured the "service" role, five indicators measured the "infotainment" role, and nine indicators measured the "civic" role. Based on the theoretical rationale of role performance literature (Lynch, 2007), measures were treated as non-mutually exclusive, meaning that multiple indicators could be found in individual news stories. Each indicator was measured on a presence or absence basis.

Prior to conducting our main analyses, we completed confirmatory factor analyses to test whether news stories reflected a latent role manifested through concurrent indicators. CFA results showed a satisfactory fit with the data. For all roles, we identified each solution as providing a better account of the data than competing solutions.

Based on the CFA results, the individual dichotomic indicators comprising each dimension were combined into a continuous scale ranging from 0 (representing the absence of all indicators) to 1 (representing the presence of all indicators comprising a role). For descriptive purposes, we calculated raw scores, based on the total points divided by the number of indicators in each role. A higher score expressed a higher presence of each journalistic role in the news, and vice versa. Meanwhile, we used factor scores to test for differences in the performance of the roles analyzed. Since each role represents a latent variable, the factor score is technically considered a better measurement due to the weighting of its constituent indicators according to each item's contribution to that latent variable

(DiStefano, Zhu, & Mindrila, 2009).[2]

To account for the influence of organizational and societal-level factors in the relationship between professional roles and news beats we included three measures: (1) For political freedom we used Freedom House Global Freedom Score: A comparative assessment of political rights and civil liberties across the globe. A country/territory is awarded 0 to 4 points for each of 25 indicators, for a maximum of 100 points. (2) Platforms were categorized into television, print, online and radio. (3) Ownership structure was classified into five variables: publicly traded corporation, private ownership, state ownership, public service media, and civic society.

Data collection

Native speakers in each country conducted the news monitoring and extraction on the selected dates, and the coding processes of news stories. The corpus of news items in each country was randomly divided among coders to reduce bias and avoid a situation in which one coder would code an entire outlet. The fieldwork for the content analysis, and the compilation of organizational and societal-level data was carried out between 2020 and 2021.

Since several concepts are inevitably culturally bound, we followed a three-step strategy to test for intercoder reliability between and within countries. First, we conducted a pre-test among principal investigators across countries to ensure that they had a shared understanding of the codebook. Second, national teams ran pilot tests based on news items not included in the actual sample. As many training sessions were conducted as necessary until coders attained acceptable intercoder reliability coefficients. Coders were also monitored at monthly intervals during the coding process.

Once the coding was completed, a post-test was conducted in each country, based on 100 items, to measure intercoder reliability. Based on Krippendorff's alpha (Ka), the final global overall intercoder reliability was .79. The variation in intercoder reliability across roles ranged from .76 to .86, while the variation across countries ranged from .72 to .91.[3]

Results

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[2] Factor scores are linear combinations of the observed variables and include what is shared between the item and the factor. This way of building overall scores helps to address several problems. First, it assigns more weight to some items than to others. It also avoids the problem of distortion in raw scores when variables have a very low or a very high mean (ceiling and floor problems), equalizes the relative difficulties of different indicators to a specific dimension, fosters comparisons across factors when the numbers of items per factor varies, and generates standardized scores.

[3] No noticeable differences were found for countries with the lowest ICR scores, from the overall findings.

General findings

Overall, our data show that the performance of journalistic roles significantly differs among news beats (*RQ1a*). The results first indicate that, comparatively speaking, the performance of public influence-oriented roles (interventionist and loyal-facilitator) tends to be more similar across beats than the performance of audience-oriented (service and infotainment) and public service-oriented roles (watchdog and civic). Indeed, while the effect size of news beats is substantial for the watchdog (η^2= .090) and civic (η^2= .096), and also for the service (η^2= .113) and infotainment (η^2= .105), it is only modest for the loyal-facilitator (η^2= .027) and especially for the interventionist (η^2= .014) roles.

Specifically, the data reveal that while the performance of the interventionist role is transversal – with most of the beats scoring higher on that role – political news tends to be higher in the performance of both the watchdog (t= 157.294; df= 57400, p < .001; Cohen's d= .134) and infotainment role (t= 116.433; df= 57400, p < .001; Cohen's d= .158), while news on economy (t= 91.714; df= 24487, p < .001; Cohen's d= .172), and science and technology news (t= 51.049; df= 5386, p < .001; Cohen's d= .206) are significantly higher in the service role. Along with the service role, health (t= 100.956; df= 41818, p < .001; Cohen's d= .170) and lifestyle news (t= 67.501; df= 8947, p < .001; Cohen's d= .218) tends to be higher on infotainment, while social affairs news coverage tends to score higher in both infotainment (t= 108.089; df= 41528, p < .001; Cohen's d= .184) and civic roles (t= 136.000; df= 41528, p < .001; Cohen's d= .161). Finally, police and crime (t= 96.934; df= 18003, p < .001; Cohen's d= .246), accidents (t= 54.083; df= 6506, p < .001; Cohen's d= .220), as well as news on entertainment (t= 109.828; df= 10160, p < .001; Cohen's d= .246) and sports (t= 94.840; df= 15865, p < .001; Cohen´s d= .206) tend to include more elements of infotainment (see Table 1).

Table 1. Mean and SD of roles per thematic news beat

News beat/Roles	Interventionist	Watchdog	Loyal-facilitator	Service	Infotainment	Civic
Politics	.175 (.213)	.089 (.134)	.032 (.101)	.048 (.119)	.078 (.158)	.069 (.128)
Health	.169 (.213)	.042 (.094)	.027 (.086)	.097 (.169)	.090 (.176)	.061 (.117)
Economy	.176 (.209)	.057 (.113)	.038 (.108)	.100 (.170)	.055 (.132)	.054 (.113)
ScienceTech	.197 (.222)	.031 (.088)	.052 (.125)	.151 (.205)	.057 (.128)	.029 (.081)
Court	.171 (.213)	.154 (.173)	.010 (.051)	.015 (.068)	.137 (.218)	.050 (.119)
Police & Crime	.171 (.215)	.088 (.149)	.011 (.056)	.026 (.094)	.178 (.246)	.059 (.131)

Accidents/Disasters	.157 (.202)	.029 (.082)	.011 (.053)	.036 (.101)	.156 (.225)	.036 (.093)
Lifestyle	.256 (.247)	.019 (.059)	.026 (.080)	.163 (.209)	.167 (.222)	.043 (.099)
Entert./Celebrity	.211 (.221)	.028 (.077)	.031 (.082)	.044 (.112)	.282 (.249)	.015 (.059)
Sports	.204 (.220)	.025 (.075)	.034 (.089)	.015 (.068)	.167 (.210)	.015 (.059)
Social Affairs	.183 (.218)	.063 (.116)	.032 (.097)	.077 (.151)	.101 (.186)	.103 (.159)
Global	.181 (.220)	.054 (.110)	.030 (.093)	.063 (.140)	.107 (.189)	.055 (.118)

News beats as predictors of journalistic roles

In order to address *RQ1b*, we conducted multilevel analyses, one per journalistic role. Each model contained three levels, with 148,474 news stories nested in 365 news media organizations that, in turn, are nested in 37 countries. Each analysis began with an intercept-only model to account for the fact that role performance characteristics are unequally distributed across the three levels. Hence, the intercept-only models help to detect whether individual, organizational, and country differences occur before additional predictors are considered. Subsequently, our story-level predictors - the thematic news beats - were hierarchically included as fixed effects. Final models for news beat predictors – after controlling for different story, organizational and societal-level predictors – are reported in Table 2.[4]

The data reveal that the news beats most associated with the performance of the interventionist role are lifestyle (b = .182, p = .001, β = .08), followed by sports (b = .088, p = .001, β = .05), and entertainment and celebrities (b = .082, p = .001, β = .04). In turn, the economic beat (b = .003, p = .358), as well as news on accidents and disasters (b = - .003, p = .652) do not show a significant association with the performance of this role.

Within the power relations domain, while all news beats have a significant association with the performance of the watchdog role, this function is especially relevant for the political (b = .229, p < .001, β = .26) and court news beats (b = .369, p < .001, β = .20). The loyal role is also significantly associated with the police and crime (b = -.100, p < .001, β = - .07), and court news (b = -.139, p < .001, β = -.07), but in a negative way, while it is positively associated with science and technology (b = .109, p < .001, β = .05) and sports

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[4] At the story level, we controlled for the length/size of the item, and the location of the event/story (domestic/foreign). At the organizational level, we controlled for platform, media ownership, and for the outlet's political orientation. At the country level, we controlled for the level of global freedom.

beats (b = .063, p < .001, β = .05), with news from both fields showing more levels of loyalism.

Meanwhile, lifestyle (b = .234, p < .001, β = .16) and economy (b = .115, p < .001, β = .13) show a bigger and positive association with the performance of the service role; entertainment/celebrity (b = .393, p < .001, β = .20) and police and crime (b = .176, p < .001, β = .12) show a positive association with the performance of the infotainment role; while the civic role shows a strong and significant association with social affairs news (b = .352, p < .001, β = .27).

Table 2. The influence of thematic news beats on role performance

News beats/Roles	Interventionist	Watchdog	Loyal-Facilitator	Service	Infotainment	Civic
Fixed Effects						
Intercept	.020 (.025)	-.057** (.016)	.156*** (.031)	.054*** (.009)	.030 (.018)	.005 (.020)
Politics	.024*** (.003) (ß = .03)	.229*** (.002) (ß = .26)	-.037*** (.002) (ß = -.03)	-.045*** (.002) (ß = -.06)	-.032*** (.002) (ß = -.03)	.101*** (.003) (ß = .09)
Health	-.025*** (.003) (ß = -.02)	-.014*** (.002) (ß = -.02)	-.022*** (.003) (ß = -.02)	.087*** (.002) (ß = .12)	-.032*** (.003) (ß = -.03)	.105*** (.003) (ß = .08)
Economy	.003 (.003)	.029*** (.003) (ß = .03)	.026*** (.003) (ß = .02)	.115*** (.002) (ß = .13)	-.117*** (.003) (ß = -.09)	.038*** (.004) (ß = .03)
Sport	.088*** (.004) (ß = .05)	-.010** (.003) (ß = -.01)	.063*** (.004) (ß = .05)	-.114*** (.003) (ß = -.10)	.117*** (.004) (ß = .07)	-.059*** (.005) (ß = -.03)
Police & Crime	-.016*** (.004) (ß = -.01)	.124*** (.003) (ß = .09)	-.100*** (.003) (ß = -.07)	-.080*** (.003) (ß = -.08)	.176*** (.004) (ß = .12)	.060*** (.004) (ß = .03)
Court	-.020*** (.005) (ß = -.02)	.369*** (.004) (ß = .20)	-.139*** (.005) (ß = -.07)	-.066*** (.003) (ß = -.04)	.033*** (.005) (ß = .02)	-.021*** (.006) (ß = -.01)
Social Affairs	.034*** (.003) (ß = .03)	.059*** (.002) (ß = .06)	-.005 (.002)	.064*** (.002) (ß = .09)	.026*** (.003) (ß = .03)	.352*** (.003) (ß = .27)
Science & Technology	.051*** (.007) (ß = .02)	-.039*** (.005) (ß = -.02)	.109*** (.006) (ß = .05)	.163*** (.004) (ß = .09)	-.138*** (.006) (ß = -.05)	-.068*** (.007) (ß = -.02)
Accidents and disasters	-.003 (.006)	-.020*** (.005) (ß = -.01)	-.055*** (.005) (ß = -.02)	-.042*** (.004) (ß = -.03)	.097*** (.006) (ß = .04)	-.011 (.007)
Lifestyle	.182*** (.005) (ß = .08)	-.061*** (.004) (ß = -.03)	.037*** (.005) (ß = .02)	.234*** (.003) (ß = .16)	.083*** (.005) (ß = .04)	.128*** (.006) (ß = .05)
Entertainment & Celebrity	.082*** (.005) (ß = .04)	-.021*** (.004) (ß = -.01)	.074*** (.004) (ß = .04)	-.070*** (.003) (ß = -.05)	.393*** (.005) (ß = .20)	-.007 (.006)

Covariance Parameters (ID)						
Residual	.230***	.142***	.170***	.092***	.187***	.275***
Intercept News Outlet	.034***	.012***	.023***	.007***	.020***	.021***
Intercept Country	.018***	.008***	.032***	.002***	.009**	.012***
-2LL	229129.61	148375.98	178726.11	76629.94	194809.03	258477.05
BIC	229309.95	148556.32	178906.45	76810.28	194989.37	258657.39

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

Role performance and thematic beats across platforms, ownerships, and levels of political freedom

In order to answer *RQ2* and account for the influence of platforms, ownership orientations and political freedom in the relationship between thematic beats and role performance, we compressed all eleven news beats into two general clusters, in line with Reinemann et al.'s (2012) conceptualization: *hard news* – where we included politics, social affairs (e.g., protests, education, human rights, housing, migration, labor issues), economics, health, and court news beats – and *soft news,* which comprises news on sports, lifestyle, celebrity, entertainment, and crime. We left accidents and natural disasters and science and technology aside, as they fall less clearly into either hard or soft news clusters according to previous literature. We then created a dichotomic variable of soft (0) and hard (1) news beats.

Thereafter we analyzed the influence of each variable – four platforms, five types of ownerships and levels of political freedom – comparing every group against each other. To do that we recalculated our MLM model per each group (TV, radio, online, print, publicly traded, private, and so on) whose coefficients are shown and compared in Table 3. Each cell presents comparable coefficients of fixed effects and levels of significance of each group in relation to each role against hard/soft news beat clusters. For the case of political freedom – a metric variable – we calculated direct cross-level interaction terms for each role.[5] In Table 3, each column represents the relation between a role and our moderating variables in hard news with respect to soft news. For example, in the first column concerning the interventionist role, the

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[5] For the case of platforms and ownership types, this solution was taken instead of running cross-level interactions, since a meaningful category would have to be defined as a baseline group for each categorical variables, against which all other categories are compared. However, our research question needed to compare each platform and ownership orientation against each other, so we opted for filtering cases and running each model separately.

coefficients of fixed effects of hard news across all platforms have a negative sign, suggesting the presence of interventionism is lower in hard news than in soft news beats, but the impact is bigger in online platforms, meaning that in online platforms, both soft and hard news differ the most in relation to that role. We also ran descriptive mean differences of the relationship between roles and thematic beats across the three organizational and societal factors included in this study, resulting in graphic visualizations of their interactions.

In using this type of analysis in addition to the visualization of mean differences (Fig. 1-18), we can illustrate three types of information: how similar or not are hard and soft news in the performance of a role in each platform, ownership type and political freedom level; what platform or ownership type scored the highest and lowest performance of a single role in each cluster; and which of the two clusters – soft or hard – is more likely to be "stable" in the performance of a role across platforms, ownership and levels of freedom. If the relationship between a role and a thematic beat barely varies across all categories, it can be considered more stable, thus supporting the particularistic thesis. In contrast, if the relationship between roles and beats is dissimilar across groups, it can be considered more fluid, indicating that platform affordances, organizational logics or socio-political factors disrupt the unique ethos of news beats in relation to roles.

Table 3. The relationship between hard vs.soft news beat clusters and role performance across platforms, ownership types, and levels of political freedom

|		Interventionist	Watchdog	Loyal-facilitator	Service	Infotainment	Civic
Platform – news beat interaction (0= soft news)							
	TV	-.024*** (ß = -.02)	.206*** (ß = .21)	-.106*** (ß = -.10)	.142*** (ß = .20)	-.215*** (ß = -.19)	.327*** (ß = .21)
	Print	-.106** (ß = -.10)	.204*** (ß = .23)	-.091*** (ß = -.10)	.105*** (ß = .15)	-.285*** (ß = -.27)	.236*** (ß = .22)
	Online	-.137*** (ß = -.13)	.190*** (ß = .22)	-.089*** (ß = -.08)	.110*** (ß = .16)	-.344** (ß = -.31)	.213*** (ß = .20)
	Radio	-.037*** (ß = -.03)	.190*** (ß = .18)	-.090*** (ß = -.08)	.078*** (ß = .09)	-.165** (ß = -.17)	.247*** (ß = .17)
Ownership – news beat interaction (0= soft news)							
	Publicly Traded Corporation	-.099*** (ß = -.08)	.206*** (ß = .23)	-.097*** (ß = -.10)	.111** (ß = .16)	-.296** (ß = -.27)	.237*** (ß = .21)
	Private	-.108*** (ß = -.09)	.196*** (ß = .22)	-.091*** (ß = -.10)	.110*** (ß = .16)	-.291*** (ß = -.27)	.233*** (ß = .21)
	State-Owned	-.051*** (ß = -.04)	.109*** (ß = .13)	-.017	.094*** (ß = .11)	-.145*** (ß = -.14)	.212*** (ß = .17)
	Public Service	-.019	.229*** (ß = .21)	-.149*** (ß = -.14)	.118*** (ß = .16)	-.200*** (ß = -.18)	.359*** (ß = .21)
	Civic Society	-.192*** (ß = -.15)	.151*** (ß = .17)	-.036	.078*** (ß = .10)	-.230*** (ß = -.23)	.314*** (ß = .22)
Political Freedom – news beat interaction (0= soft news)		-.008	.062*** (ß = .07)	-.065*** (ß = -.06)	-.007	-.029*** (ß = -.02)	.036*** (ß = .03)
*** = .001; **= .01; *= .05							

Taking the top-level results first, fixed effect coefficients reveal a significantly greater presence of the interventionist, loyal-facilitator, and infotainment roles in soft news; and significantly higher levels of watchdog, service, and civic roles in hard news, in consonance with results reported in RQ1. But as Figures 1-18 show, these vary once external variables are introduced, with hard and soft news tending to be more fluid than stable overall. While stability is only found across smaller groups of organizations or platforms, in comparative terms soft news presents a higher stability than hard news, which appears more vulnerable to organizational and contextual influences. Nevertheless, the impact of external variables is nuanced, and is unpacked below.

Platforms

The differences between hard and soft in the performance of the six journalistic roles are statistically significant for all platforms, although the relationship plays out differently depending on the role (see Table 3). For interventionism, the biggest differences between the two clusters manifested in online and print platforms. Descriptive visualization suggests that soft news can be more stable than hard news due to more similar levels of high interventionism in TV, online and print platforms, whereas the hard news cluster is more fluid. However, in both clusters, the highest interventionism is found on TV and the lowest in radio (Fig. 1). Concerning the watchdog role, differences between both clusters are nearly similar in TV and print outlets, and in online and radio news, although print media score the most watchdog performance overall (Fig. 2). In contrast, in the loyal-facilitator role, soft news tends to be more stable, presenting similar loyalism in print and TV, whereas hard news is more fluid across platforms. Still, in both clusters, loyalism is higher in TV outlets (Fig. 3). The service role presents the strongest differences between clusters in TV. Hard news is more stable in the service role across all platforms except online, which score comparatively higher. Soft news, instead, is more fluid across platforms, with radio displaying the most service news overall (Fig. 4). For infotainment the biggest differences between both clusters is in online news. The soft news beat cluster is stable across print and TV, while displaying the most and the least infotainment in online and radio outlets, respectively. The hard cluster tends to be more fluid across platforms, presenting more infotainment in TV outlets (Fig. 5). Finally, for the civic role, while TV outlets display the highest levels in both clusters, the role stands out more in

hard news. Still, both clusters can be relatively stable in the performance of this role across all other platforms (Fig. 6).

Figures 1-6. Media platform and journalistic role performance in hard and soft news beat clusters
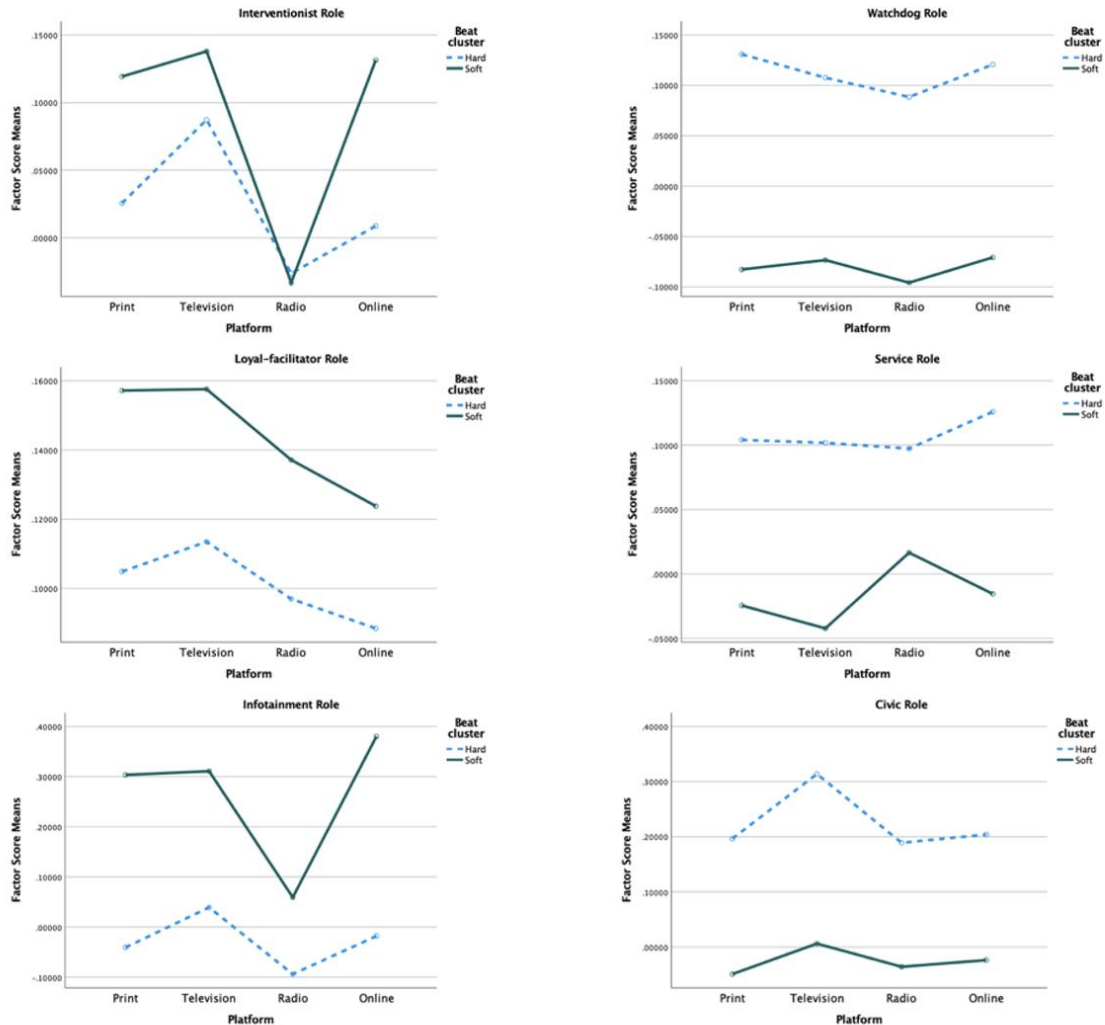
Media ownership

Ownership orientation also impacts the relationship between hard news and soft news in role performance, in most, but not all categories. Hard news beats show the strongest differences of interventionism in civic society-owned media (Table 3). In comparative terms, soft news is more fluid than hard news for this relationship, and civic society-owned media display the most interventionism in both clusters. Public service and state-owned media, in turn, show the lowest differences in the performance of interventionism between soft and hard news beats, scoring the lowest overall. The watchdog role shows more pronounced differences in public service and publicly-traded media, the latter displaying the highest watchdog

journalism in both clusters. For this role, hard news tends to be more fluid, though, across ownership types (Fig 8). The loyal-facilitator role is overall lower in hard news than in soft news, but only statistically significant in both for-profit types of ownership and in public service media, where the differences are bigger between both clusters. In hard news, loyalism peaks in state-owned media and shows some stability in private and public service media; whereas in soft news, the loyal role is higher in civic society media, but can be stable across both for-profit ownership types (Fig. 9). Both hard and soft news can remain relatively stable in the performance of the service role across most types of ownership, except in civic society-owned media where the role scored the highest in both clusters (Fig.10). Infotainment is lower in hard news than in soft news, with the biggest differences in private-oriented and publicly-traded media. Figure 11 also suggests that for-profit media bears the most influence in the materialization of infotainment, especially in soft news, which tends to be more fluid across ownership orientations. Finally, for the civic role the biggest differences between both clusters are in public-service media. Hard news can be more fluid across ownership orientations (Fig. 12), whereas soft news remains more stable in its low levels of civic orientation. Additionally, public service media leads in the performance of this role in hard news, whereas civic society-society is comparatively higher in civic journalism in soft news.

Figures 7-12. Media ownership and journalistic role performance in hard and soft news beat clusters
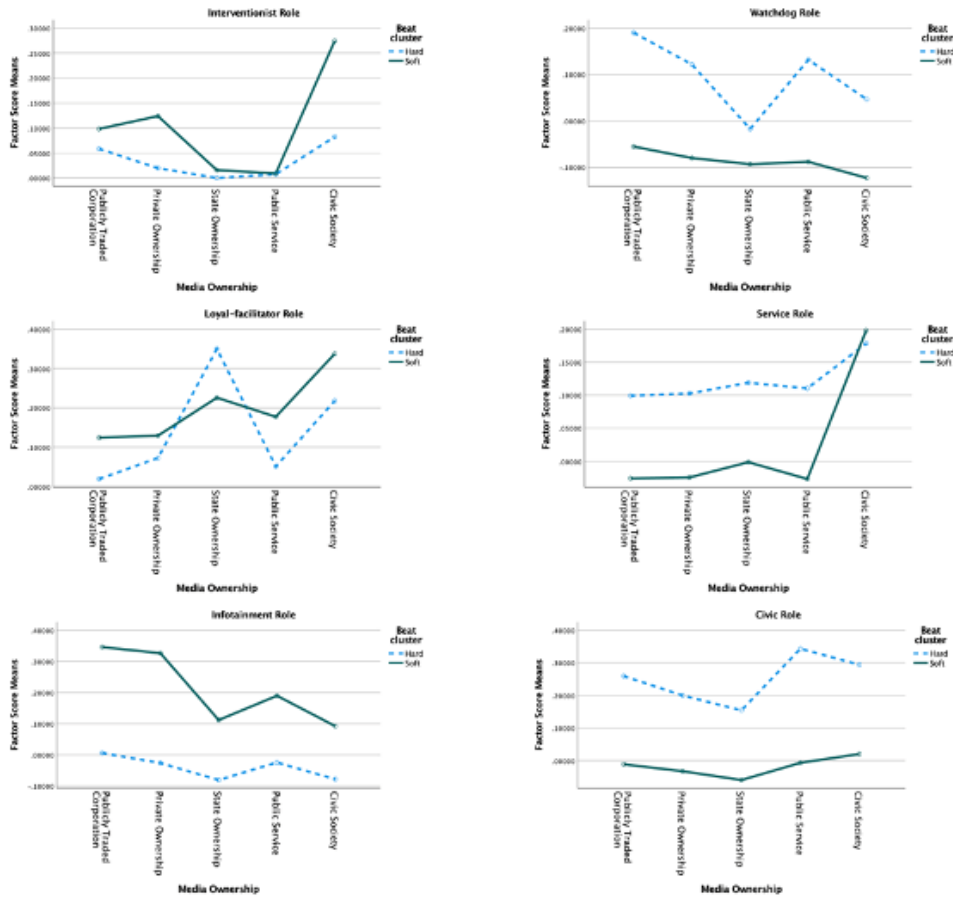

Political freedom

Finally, political freedom yielded statistically significant differences between hard and soft news in the watchdog, loyal, infotainment and civic roles, bearing no significant influence for the case of interventionism or service. For both hard and soft news, the watchdog role increases in countries with more political freedom, while it diminishes with restricted liberties. Infotainment increases in politically free countries in both clusters, while the civic role is higher in hard news than in soft news, especially in free countries. For all these three roles, hard news beats tend to be much more fluid across levels of political freedom than soft news clusters (Fig. 14, 17, 18).

The loyal role, instead, presents more heterogeneous results: it is higher in hard news than in soft news in autocratic contexts, and it is higher in soft news than in hard news in free countries (Fig. 15). For this role, the levels of fluidity are similar in both clusters across levels of political freedom.

Figures 13-18. Political freedoms and journalistic role performance in hard and soft news beat clusters
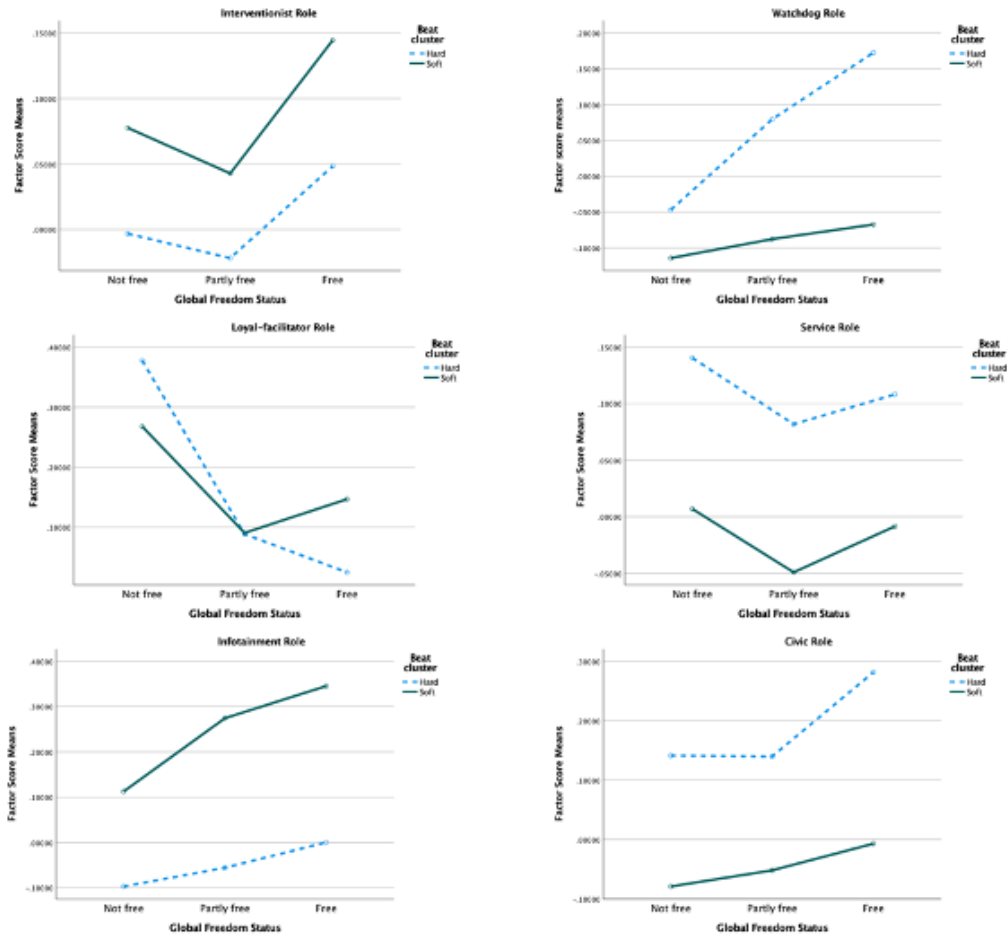
Discussion

The primary aim of this paper was to shed light on the ongoing debates about news beat particularism in relation to journalistic roles, as manifested in thematic content, across multiple settings. Our results add nuance to these debates firstly by bringing attention to the performance of journalistic roles in relation to a range of thematic beats and second, by interrogating to what extent the unique (or particular) relation between news beats and roles performance is impacted by contextual factors, specifically political freedoms, platforms and ownership structures.

Addressing the variation of six roles across 11 thematic beats (RQ1), we found some support to the particularistic thesis, as there are significant differences where almost all news beats behave as micro-cultures to some extent. We corroborate the literature that suggest some elements of interventionism is highly associated with soft beats (Hanusch, 2019; Kristensen & Riegert, 2021), whereas court and political news with the watchdog role (Marquez-Ramirez et al., 2020). The service role is more associated with economic and

lifestyle news, the infotainment role is more present in celebrity and sport stories, while social affairs news is deeply connected to the civic role. Additionally, according to these first set of results, the performance of the interventionist and loyal facilitator roles explained less variation across thematic beats than the rest of the roles. Low levels of loyalism across beats may indicate that this a role not so much engrained in news beat ethos, but in organization and political milieus. Meanwhile, the transversality of interventionism may represent a different tendency associated with neoliberalization, i.e., a shift from fact-centered/neutral journalism towards more opinionated journalism which has been documented in several countries including the U.S. (see for example Esser & Umbricht, 2014). Still, these findings would partially support the particularist, micro-cultures thesis (Ericson et al., 1989), offering reassurance to those who are concerned about the rise and homogenizing consequences of neoliberal pressures in news production (Van Leuven et al., 2021).

However, this is not the end of the story. When we introduce organizational and political factors to the equation, focusing on the differences between soft and hard news, we find more limited reach of the particularistic thesis, as particularism is only possible in smaller enclaves of platforms or organizations. We found interventionism, infotainment, and loyalism more associated to soft news, whereas watchdog, service and loyal roles more associated to hard news. Still, in comparative terms, soft news can be more stable than hard news, which are more vulnerable to media logic and political systems. Nevertheless, some key enclaves strongly moderate the differences between hard and soft news in relation to role performance. An important finding, in line with some previous literature (Aalberg et al., 2013) is that two variables still shield the democratic functions of journalism (watchdog, service, and civic) in hard news: television and public service ownership of the media. Both exert the strongest moderating power for their materialization, while at the same time inhibit loyalism. Civic society ownership moderates the presence of interventionism in hard news and is also the type of media to display more service news in general. We can also corroborate (Kavanagh et al., 2019) the power of online platforms to trigger more interventionism and infotainment in soft news, and the for-profit logics of both private and publicly-traded corporations to prompt more infotainment (Baum & Zhukov, 2019) in the same group of beats. With respect to infotainment, our study can offer some reassurance that, at least at a global level, soft and hard news are still not blurring, and infotainment is still more present in soft news. However, interventionism can be a homogenizing force in all news content. Finally, as expected, political liberties systematically protect the watchdog and civic functions in hard news, whereas they also

decrease the presence of loyalism and infotainment, which globally, is still a role mostly present in soft news.

These findings have several implications for journalism studies research. Our study underlines the importance of a comprehensive, comparative approach when studying the particularities or similarities of hard and soft news beats across organizational and sociopolitical contexts beyond established democracies. In addition, the implications for news beats research lie in comparing and including a wider number of news beats that are normally studied in isolation, both individually and along the soft and hard news divide. Moreover, we explicitly corroborate the strong link between roles and thematic news beats, but *only as long as they are insulated from other external influences* such as platform, ownership and political freedom, and therein the limits of the micro-culture argument. Thematic news beats can retain their unique ethos in some contexts with respect to certain roles, but completely vary in the wake of others.

While this work significantly contributes to the study of news beat cultures in comparative perspective, our findings should be considered alongside their limitations. A strength but at the same time a limitation of this study is that we took the content approach to thematic beats. Thus, we take the end-product as presented to the audience as our point of departure in understanding journalistic practices and routines. While beats can be particularistic with respect to journalistic functions at the news-content level, this particularism cannot be considered as fixed or categorical, as roles are fluid and contextual (Mellado et al., 2021). A diversity of local news events at stake might trigger role performance: pandemics, elections, scandals, sports mega-events, etc., hence more longitudinal analyses is needed. Likewise, we build on a rather traditional view of journalism where journalists are assigned to one beat whereas today, newsrooms are increasingly inhabited by generalists, and news is more often outsourced to news agencies or freelancers who produce this content (Mathisen, 2017; Van Leuven et al., 2021). In that sense, we need more ethnographic research to study how the performance of roles in the news is impacted by different journalistic and non-journalistic actors. Still, the focus on news topics in media content helps illuminate the limitation of the particularism approach because topical content is produced by generalist journalists and results from several gatekeeping processes, so more comprehensively reflects the complex processes of collective news making.

Moreover, more fine-grained research could address why in certain platforms, ownership structures, and countries with similar levels of political freedoms, the relation between beats and role performance is similarly low, high, or medium. Comparative analysis

of beat reporting through newsgathering routines, storytelling and sourcing patterns across different platforms and societies should also shed more light on the matter.

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