

THE AMERICAN JOURNALIST IN THE DIGITAL AGE

How journalists and the public think about journalism in the United States

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This paper reports findings from a 2013 survey of 1080 US journalists and a 2014 survey of 1230 US citizens, focusing on their views of traditional journalism roles and the performance of journalism in the United States. The study finds significant differences in how journalists and the public evaluate news media performance and journalistic roles. It also finds that news consumption and social media use predict stronger support for traditional journalistic roles among journalists and citizens.

KEYWORDS journalistic roles; public perceptions; survey; US journalists

Introduction

In no institution is the corrosion of credibility more critical than among mainstream media and journalism, which many still regard as essential to democracy. Gallup data suggest that only about a third (32 percent) of American adults had either “a great deal” or “a fair amount of trust” in the media in 2016. That compares to a high of 55 percent in 1999. As Martin Baron, a prominent editor at *The Washington Post*, notes, “No question: trust is our greatest challenge.” Monetization and adapting to social media, he says, “pale in comparison” (Huang 2016).

While public trust in the media may be low, large-scale surveys done in 2016 during the US presidential election found that news produced by mainstream journalists “remains an important part of public life” (Gottfried et al. 2016). Three-quarters of US adults agreed that “news organizations keep political leaders in check—preventing them from doing things they shouldn’t be doing.” In a climate of what is generally regarded as a crisis in lack of trust in American news media, the Pew survey finding is surprising. Equally important is the finding that more than 70 percent of US adults follow local and national news “somewhat” or “very” closely.

Thus, while the work of American journalists is consumed by millions of people each day, there is little evidence on the extent to which journalists and the public agree on the roles that journalists should be performing. It might well be that the somewhat idealistic and altruistic image US journalists hold of themselves as democracy’s “watchdog” (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986, 1996; Weaver et al. 2007) is out of touch with the public’s actual view of them.

This study provides additional evidence on this question, as it probes the views of both journalists and the public about these roles, drawing on a representative survey of US journalists conducted in late 2013 and a representative survey of the American public

conducted in early 2014. The data from these two surveys not only provide a representative look at how journalists and the public see each other, but also allow a more detailed analysis of the demographic and organizational factors that might influence these perceptions.

Diverging Views on Journalism

US journalists have been systematically studied for more than 40 years now, beginning with the seminal 1971 survey by Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1976) and continuing with four national surveys conducted in 1982, 1992, 2002, and 2013 by scholars at Indiana University (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986, 1996; Weaver et al. 2007; Willnat and Weaver 2014; Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit 2017).

But despite the relatively frequent analyses of US journalists and their work, only a few studies to date have compared journalists' and public's perspectives on journalism. Martin, O'Keefe, and Nayman (1972) were the first to compare how journalists and the public see each other. Based on interviews with 65 newspaper editors and 1015 respondents from Wisconsin that focused on race-related student protests at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1969, the authors found that the editors judged their readers' positions with respect to the protests fairly accurately. However, there was very little accuracy on the part of the readers in perceiving the editors' positions regarding the student protests. In addition, most readers perceived the newspapers as biased against their own opinions.

Similarly, surveys conducted in 1993–94 among 60 newspaper journalists and 376 respondents from the Midwest revealed very different perceptions of journalistic ethics (Voakes 1997). Members of the public tended to believe that journalists' ethics are guided primarily by legal, competitive, and occupational influences, while the journalists cited organizational policies, the law, and their own moral reasoning as main influences on their ethical decision making.

About a decade later, Tsfaty, Meyers, and Peri (2006) compared Israeli public and journalist perceptions as to what constitutes good and bad journalism using data from two surveys conducted in 2002 among 209 journalists and 1119 members of the Israeli public. They found that the public was much more likely than the journalists to rate neutrality and taking public interest into account as very important, but journalists were more likely to emphasize verification of facts and interpreting the news. They also found that journalists were more likely than the public to believe that the Israeli media were patriotic to a degree that compromised their professionalism, while members of the public were more likely to state that journalists do not sufficiently cover positive developments and that there is too much competition and too little ethical consideration in the Israeli news media. In addition, the authors found evidence that the greater the discrepancy between individual members of the public and the average journalism answers, the less the trust in the news media.

The most recent study of 927 US newspaper journalists and 312 US adults surveyed online in 2010 by Gil de Zuniga and Hinsley (2013) found that the journalists were much more likely than the public to rate highly their performance of all the roles listed in the survey, especially covering stories that should be covered, being objective, and getting information to the public quickly. The public, on the other hand, rated most highly getting information quickly, covering stories that should be covered, and verifying facts, with being objective ranked last. The authors noted that the public's low ranking of the

journalists' objectivity is consistent with previous studies that found public disapproval of perceived media bias (Rouner, Slater, and Buddenbaum 1999; Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010).

Hypotheses and Research Question

Based on the findings of these comparative studies, which all found significant differences in how journalists and the public see and understand each other, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: There will be significant differences in how important the public and journalists consider various professional roles to be.

As suggested by the findings of Tsfaty, Meyers, and Peri (2006) and Gil de Zuniga and Hinsley (2013), journalists will be most likely to value traditional journalistic roles such as investigating government claims (the "watchdog" role) or providing analysis of complex problems (the "interpreter" role). The public, on the other hand, should be most supportive of journalistic roles that relate to the "disseminator" function of journalists, such as getting information out quickly and concentrating on the widest audience. We therefore propose the following two sub-hypotheses related to H1:

H1a: Journalists will be most likely to consider very important the roles of investigating government claims, providing analysis of problems, and discussing national and international policy.

H1b: The public will be most likely to consider very important the roles of getting information out quickly, avoiding unverified content, and concentrating on the widest audience.

Of the various factors that have influenced the professional values of US journalists, including the perceived importance of various journalistic roles, in our past studies, the newsroom environment has been the most important. The day-to-day interaction with editors and colleagues has been perceived by journalists as the most powerful force over their conceptions of values and professional practice. This conclusion from analyses of the predictors of journalistic role importance is supported by the significant differences by type of news medium we have found in the percentage of journalists considering various roles to be very important in 1982, 1992, and 2002 (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986, 1996; Weaver et al. 2007).

Some of these differences include a tendency for journalists embracing the interpretive role ("investigating official claims," "analyzing complex problems," and "discussing national/international policy") to be working for larger news organizations, especially news magazines, wire services, and daily newspapers. Those working for radio and weekly newspapers were much less likely to consider this role to be very important. The same was true for the adversarial role ("being an adversary of government and business").

Considering these findings from previous survey studies of US journalists, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: There will be significant differences by type of journalist (newspaper, television, etc.) in how important the various professional roles are thought to be.

Finally, we are interested in exploring whether demographic background factors such as sex, age, education, political leaning, and media consumption might correlate with more or less support for specific journalistic roles. Older and more conservative respondents, for example, might be more likely to mistrust the media and thus be less supportive of traditional journalistic functions such as the “watchdog” or “interpreter” role. The same might be true for respondents with less education.

We are also interested in testing whether exposure to traditional news media might be related to more support for traditional journalistic roles, while exposure to news on social media could possibly undermine such support. Gil de Zuniga and Hinsley (2013), for example, found that respondents who were more positive about journalists’ performance were more likely to be regular consumers of traditional news media sources, but not sources of citizen journalism.

Because of the tentative nature of these potential relationships among the public and the journalists, we propose the following research question:

RQ1: Which factors best predict journalistic roles among journalists and the public?

Methods

Data for this study come from two representative surveys of US journalists and the US public. In the fall of 2013 we conducted a national online survey with 1080 full-time US journalists, similar to the ones done in 1971, 1982, 1992, and 2002. The survey asked many of the same questions included in the previous studies (such as journalists’ job satisfaction and journalistic role perceptions) so that trends could be tracked over time. However, it also included a series of new questions about the use and impact of social media in the practice of modern journalism that were partially adopted from studies by Gulyas (2013) and Hedman and Djerf-Pierre (2013).

The 2013 journalist study employs the same basic sampling methods used in the previous studies that include journalists from all the print and broadcast news media. The sample of traditional US journalists is based on a multi-stage sampling procedure, which first draws a representative sample of media organizations in the United States and then, in a second step, samples of journalists from within each of the selected organizations. The additional sample of online journalists was created by identifying online journalists within a representative selection of traditional media organizations and by obtaining lists of journalists from online-only media organizations and news websites. The response rate was 32.6 percent.¹

The survey of the general US public was conducted in early 2014, with a representative sample of 1230 adult Americans. Respondents were recruited by a professional survey organization that provides access to representative online panels. While the overall sample compares favorably to 2010 US Census data, the final set of respondents was slightly older, more educated, and racially less diverse than the overall US population. However, a comparison with a national telephone poll conducted by Pew in 2013 reveals only small differences in the basic demographic characteristics of the two samples. We are therefore fairly confident that our online sample is representative of the overall US population. The response rate was 55 percent.²

The citizen survey incorporated many of the questions that were used in the 2013 journalist survey, including questions about journalistic roles and media performance in

general, which allowed us to compare how journalists and citizens thought about the journalistic profession.

Dependent Variables

Journalistic roles. To gain a better understanding of how journalists and citizens think about journalistic roles, both sets of respondents were asked to state how “important” they considered 15 journalistic roles that have been identified in prior research (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986, 1996; Weaver et al. 2007). Respondents were asked, for example, how important they thought it was to “get information to the public quickly,” “provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems,” or to “investigate claims and statements made by the government.” Response categories for both samples ranged from “not really important” (coded 1) to “extremely important” (coded 4).³

Independent Variables

Traditional news media exposure. Exposure to mainstream news media was assessed by asking citizens about how much time they spent yesterday “watching national or local TV news,” “reading a printed newspaper,” and “reading or watching online news” (coded “none” = 1 to “more than 90 minutes” = 6). Similarly, journalists’ exposure to news on mainstream media was measured by asking them how many days a week they usually “watch local TV news,” “evening network TV news,” “the cable TV news,” or “news on public television” (coded “none” = 1 to “7 days” = 8).

Social media news usage. A second set of questions measured more specifically how journalists and citizens use social media for work and for browsing the news. In order to measure how often journalists use social media in their work, a set of questions assessed how regularly journalists use “blogs authored by journalists or other professionals,” “blogs authored by regular citizens,” “microblogging sites, such as Twitter,” “professional social networking sites, such as LinkedIn,” “audio-visual sharing sites, such as YouTube,” and “crowd-sourcing sites, such as Wikipedia.” Response categories ranged from “never” (coded 1) to “regularly” (coded 4). The six measures were subsequently combined into a *social media news usage* index ranging from 1 (“low usage”) to 4 (“high usage”) ($\alpha = 0.76$, mean = 2.57, SD = 0.67).

Social media news usage among citizens was measured by asking respondents how often they use social networking sites to “see headlines about the latest stories in the news,” “click on links to news stories,” “post or share links to news stories,” “like or comment on news stories,” and “discuss issues in the news with other people on social networking sites.” Response categories ranged from “never” (coded 1) to “frequently” (coded 4). As was done for the journalists, the five measures were combined into a *social media news usage* index ranging from 1 (“low usage”) to 4 (“high usage”) ($\alpha = 0.83$, mean = 2.94, SD = 0.65).

Perceived performance of news media. Journalists’ and citizens’ overall perception of how the journalistic profession is doing was measured by asking them whether they thought that journalism in the United States is going either in the “right” or “wrong” direction. In addition, journalists were asked to rate “how good a job of informing the public their organization is doing,” while citizens were asked to rate “how good a job of informing the public the news media are doing.” Response categories for both questions ranged from “poor” (coded 1) to “outstanding” (coded 5).

Journalist-specific Variables

Organizational context. In order to measure how the organizational context influences perception of journalistic roles, the journalist survey included a series of questions that assessed the journalists' relative job position and perceived freedom in their professional work. Journalists were asked to state whether they work for the print media, whether they are reporters, whether they are supervisors (all coded as dummy variables), whether they think their story ideas usually get covered (coded "occasionally only" = 1 to "almost always" = 3), how much freedom they think they have in selecting their stories, and how much freedom they think they have in deciding which aspects of a story to emphasize (both coded "none at all" = 1 to "almost complete freedom" = 4).

Attitudes toward journalistic work. Journalists' attitudes toward their work were assessed by asking them to rate the importance of five factors: "the chance to influence public affairs," "the chance to help people," "the chance to develop a specialty," "the importance of their organization's editorial policy," and "the importance of their job security." Response categories ranged from "not too important" (coded 1) to "very important" (coded 3). In addition, journalists were asked how much "influence" they thought the media "should have on public opinion" (coded "no influence" = 0 to "great influence" = 10).

Control Variables

Demographics. Both surveys included an identical set of demographic control variables that assessed respondents' sex, age, education, race, political leaning, income, and importance of religion.⁴

Findings

While the focus of this analysis is on journalistic role perceptions, we also included a series of questions in our two surveys that measured journalists' and citizens' general attitudes toward the journalistic profession. As expected, journalists tend to have a somewhat more positive perception of their occupation, but both citizens and journalists hold rather pessimistic views regarding the future of this profession. A majority (59.7 percent) of journalists, for example, believe that journalism in the United States is going in the wrong direction—a perception that is shared by almost half (49 percent) of the citizens in our survey. While a majority of journalists think that their organizations are either doing an "outstanding" or at least "very good" (58 percent) job of informing the public, only slightly more than a quarter (27.4 percent) of the public believes the same to be true for the news media overall. A majority of citizens also see "a fair amount" of political bias in the news coverage (67.7 percent) and think that the media are influenced by "powerful people and organizations" (72.4 percent).

Journalistic Roles in the Digital Age

In order to analyze how journalists and citizens think about journalistic roles, both sets of respondents were asked how important several journalistic roles were to them. Each of them responded to 15 questions such as this one: "How important do you think it is for journalists to provide analysis and interpretation of national developments?"

Responses included “extremely important,” “quite important,” “somewhat important,” and “not really important.”

H1 states that there will be significant differences in how important the public and journalists consider various professional roles to be. We also speculate that journalists will be more likely than the public to consider very important the roles of investigating government claims, providing analysis of problems, and discussing national and international policy, while the public will be more likely than journalists to consider very important the roles of getting information out quickly, avoiding unverified content, and concentrating on the widest audience.

As indicated in Figure 1, this is indeed the case. While about three-quarters (78.2 percent) of journalists consider investigating government claims to be an “extremely important” role of the media, less than half (49.7 percent) of the citizens consider this classic watchdog role as “extremely important.” Similarly, journalists are much more likely than the public to think that “providing analysis of complex problems” (68.8 versus 25.1 percent) and “discussing international policy” (50.5 versus 31 percent) or “national policy” (39.1 versus 25.6 percent) are “extremely important” functions of the press.

Citizens, on the other hand, are somewhat more likely than journalists to think that “getting information to the public quickly” (52.7 versus 46.5 percent), “avoiding stories with unverified content” (50.6 versus 45.3 percent), “letting people express their views” (34.2 versus 30.8 percent), and “concentrating on the widest audience possible” (27.5 versus 12.1 percent) are “extremely important” journalistic roles.

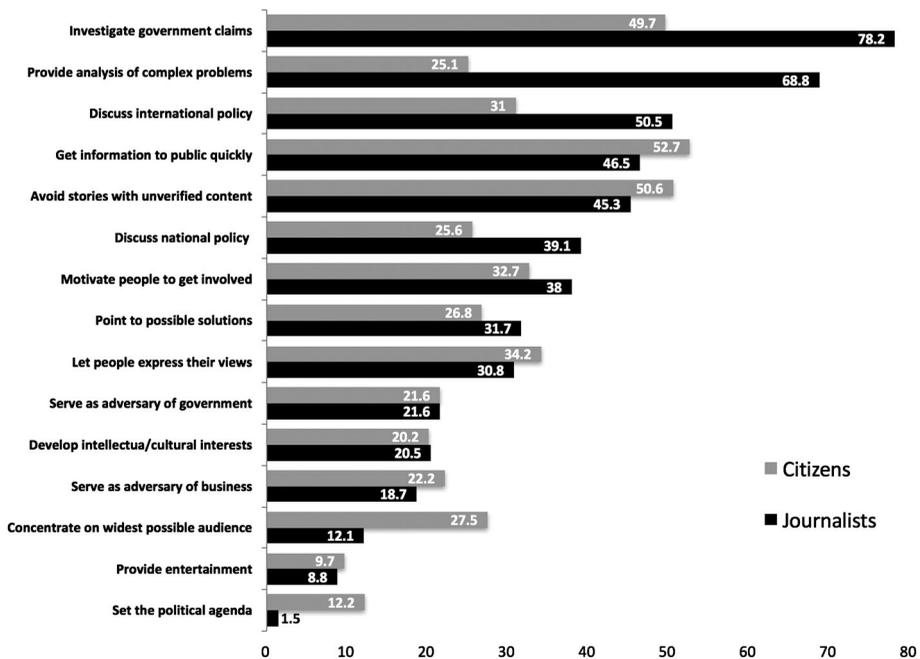


FIGURE 1
 Perception of journalistic roles among journalists and citizens (percentage of all journalists and citizens saying roles are “extremely important”)

Overall, these findings show that US journalists and citizens have somewhat divergent views on the proper roles for the news media. While a majority of journalists believe that investigating government claims and discussing national and international political affairs are important functions of the press, citizens seem to regard getting news quickly, avoiding unverified stories, and concentrating on the widest audience possible as more important. Thus, the first set of hypotheses is supported by the findings of our two surveys.

Journalistic Functions in the Digital Age

Using factor analysis, we aggregated the individual responses to the 15 questions into the following four clusters of functions to assess other, possibly broader, changes in the core philosophies of journalists and citizens: interpretive, disseminator, adversarial, and populist mobilizer. These four core journalistic functions have been identified in previous survey studies of journalists (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Weaver et al. 2007) and therefore were adopted in the present study as well.

As was done in previous studies, we conceptualize the *interpretive function* with four sub-components: “investigate government claims,” “discuss national policy,” “discuss international policy,” and “provide analysis of complex problems.” The *populist mobilizer function* also is composed of four sub-components: “develop intellectual and cultural interests,” “let people express their views,” “motivate people to get involved,” and “point to possible solutions.” The *adversarial function* has three sub-components: “serve as adversary of government,” “serve as adversary of business,” and “set the political agenda.” Finally, the *disseminator function* consists of four sub-components: “get information to public quickly,” “avoid stories with unverified content,” “concentrate on widest audience,” and “provide entertainment.”

As the factor analysis displayed in Table 1 shows, the 15 journalist role perceptions cluster fairly well across the four predicted groups—but more so for journalists than for citizens. For both journalists and citizens, for example, the four components of the interpretive function correlate as predicted and seem to form one coherent function. The same is true for two of the three components of the adversarial function (“serve as adversary of government and business”), despite the fact that “set the political agenda” does not seem to be part of this cluster anymore—either for journalists or citizens.

Similarly, fewer components than predicted seem to form the populist and the disseminator functions. While “developing intellectual and cultural interests” does not correlate well with the other three components of the populist function for both journalists and citizens, “pointing to possible solutions” also does not seem to be part of this cluster for citizens. Finally, “avoiding stories with unverified content” is not part of the disseminator function for journalists, while “getting information to the public quickly” and “avoiding stories with unverified content” do not seem to correlate with this function among citizens.

Overall then, our two datasets indicate that journalists and citizens share similar conceptualizations of what the functions of press are, but they clearly differ in how important they consider each of these functions to be. While a majority of journalists consider the interpretive function an extremely important part of their jobs, citizens tend to value the disseminator function somewhat more highly than journalists. However, the way these functions are conceptualized by journalists and citizens tends to be fairly similar.

TABLE 1
Factor analysis of journalistic role perceptions among journalists and citizens

	Factors, journalists				Factors, citizens			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Interpretive function								
Investigate government claims	0.686	0.072	0.170	0.025	-0.135	0.643	0.489	0.173
Discuss national policy	0.686	0.084	0.209	0.027	0.343	0.549	0.101	0.258
Provide analysis of complex problems	0.713	0.156	-0.024	0.125	0.421	0.691	0.074	0.188
Discuss international policy	0.862	0.019	0.057	-0.051	0.202	0.799	0.170	0.146
Populist function								
Develop intellectual/cultural interests	0.163	0.476	0.246	0.069	0.667	0.289	0.216	0.182
Let people express their views	-0.035	0.744	0.068	0.168	0.450	0.071	0.681	0.209
Motivate people to get involved	0.040	0.844	0.044	-0.034	0.375	0.144	0.738	0.196
Point to possible solutions	0.183	0.705	0.041	0.005	0.633	0.187	0.425	0.131
Adversarial function								
Serve as adversary of government	0.172	0.045	0.927	-0.013	0.158	0.171	0.155	0.895
Serve as adversary of business	0.175	0.051	0.927	-0.051	0.186	0.210	0.138	0.882
Set the political agenda	0.027	0.294	0.494	0.091	0.647	0.062	-0.038	0.485
Disseminator function								
Get information to public quickly	0.084	0.000	-0.021	0.683	0.288	0.442	0.381	-0.072
Avoid stories with unverified content	0.157	0.003	0.022	0.335	-0.153	0.228	0.622	0.019
Concentrate on widest audience	-0.206	0.213	-0.010	0.651	0.611	0.251	0.198	0.008
Provide entertainment	-0.017	0.020	0.031	0.676	0.754	0.122	-0.083	0.149
Eigenvalues	8.19				9.71			
Total variance (%)	54.6				64.76			

Extraction: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Primary loading of a variable on a factor is indicated in bold. *N* = 1080 for US journalist survey and *N* = 1230 for US citizen survey.

Journalistic Functions by Media Type

H2 states that different types of journalist (print, broadcast, online, etc.) will have different perceptions of how important the various professional roles are. As shown in Tables 2–5, role perceptions among journalists working for the various types of media do indeed differ, but less than expected. Journalists working for television and weekly newspapers, for example, tend to have the lowest mean scores across the four dimensions of the interpretive function—and thus seem to be closer to citizens who also see this

function as less important (see Table 2). The opposite is true for three of the four dimensions of the disseminator function, which television and weekly newspaper journalists actually tend to consider the most important roles of journalists (see Table 3). However, these perceptions correlate fairly well with the perceptions of the general public, which indicates that television and weekly newspaper journalists tend to be closer to the public in their role perceptions than their colleagues working for other media.

Ironically, television and weekly newspaper journalists also consider the entertainment role to be of least importance, which correlates with the relatively low importance this role receives among the general public (see Table 3). While this seems counterintuitive, it might reflect the fact that these journalistic roles are based on normative ideas and values, so both the journalists and the public might say that they do not value this role highly despite the fact that it is an important part of what the media do and many citizens prefer.

Smaller differences were found between journalists and citizens in how they perceive the various roles that are part of the populist mobilizer function (see Table 4). While the public generally sees this function as less important than journalists, these differences tend to be small and less systematic than those observed for the interpretive and disseminator function. The role of “developing intellectual and cultural interests,” for example, was considered least important by journalists working for television, wire, and online media—and therefore correlated most with public perceptions of these journalistic roles. “Letting people express their views” and “motivating people to get involved” was least valued by journalists from magazines and online media organizations.

The smallest differences between journalists and citizens were found in how they evaluate the importance of the adversarial function (see Table 5). While “serving as the adversary of the government and business” seems to be valued fairly evenly by the journalists and the public, the role of “setting the political agenda” receives somewhat more support from the public. It is interesting to note, though, that television and weekly newspaper journalists again report the lowest levels of support for the adversarial function when

TABLE 2
Journalistic role by media type: interpretive function

	Investigate government claims	Provide analysis of complex problems	Discuss national policy	Discuss international policy
Daily	3.79 (0.45)	3.68 (0.56)	3.09 (0.84)	3.36 (0.74)
Magazine	3.77 (0.50)	3.71 (0.49)	3.43 (0.68)	3.65 (0.58)
Online	3.78 (0.47)	3.66 (0.56)	3.20 (0.82)	3.40 (0.73)
Radio	3.71 (0.54)	3.65 (0.68)	3.22 (0.81)	3.46 (0.71)
Television	3.68 (0.57)	3.54 (0.68)	2.97 (0.84)	3.11 (0.85)
Weekly	3.64 (0.61)	3.51 (0.67)	2.92 (0.93)	3.10 (0.91)
Wire	3.92 (0.36)	3.72 (0.48)	3.53 (0.64)	3.70 (0.48)
All journalists	3.75 (0.52)	3.63 (0.60)	3.12 (0.85)	3.33 (0.79)
Citizens	3.33 (0.77)	2.77 (0.94)	2.74 (0.95)	2.93 (0.91)
Levene's test	317.20***	236.30***	35.44***	4.61*

Cell entries represent mean scores: 1 indicates “not really important” and 4 indicates “extremely important” (SD in parentheses).

* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 3
Journalistic role by media type: disseminator function

	Get information to public quickly	Avoid stories with unverified content	Concentrate on widest audience	Provide entertainment and relaxation
Daily	3.33 (0.66)	3.18 (0.81)	2.39 (0.87)	2.39 (0.84)
Magazine	3.28 (0.80)	2.87 (0.92)	1.90 (0.64)	2.55 (0.95)
Online	3.32 (0.68)	3.00 (0.87)	2.33 (0.73)	2.23 (0.86)
Radio	3.25 (0.68)	3.22 (0.83)	2.30 (0.88)	3.00 (0.88)
Television	3.42 (0.69)	3.19 (0.91)	2.77 (0.86)	2.05 (0.87)
Weekly	3.30 (0.73)	3.33 (0.74)	2.45 (0.95)	2.17 (0.88)
Wire	3.30 (0.55)	3.55 (0.77)	2.12 (0.77)	2.09 (0.84)
All Journalists	3.59 (0.69)	3.22 (0.83)	2.38 (0.88)	2.23 (0.88)
Citizens	3.40 (0.72)	3.26 (0.88)	2.76 (0.98)	1.99 (0.97)
Levene's test	4.56*	5.56*	19.44***	90.15***

Cell entries represent mean scores: 1 indicates "not really important" and 4 indicates "extremely important" (SD in parentheses).

* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

compared to their colleagues working for other media. These attitudes, of course, correlate with their low support of the interpretive function and their somewhat higher support of the disseminator function.

Overall, though, it is clear that journalists tend to value the interpretive function of journalism more than the public—independently of which type of news medium they work for. Citizens, on the other hand, tend to value the disseminator function of the media more than journalists, especially as it relates to "getting information to the public quickly," "avoiding stories with unverified content," and "concentrating on the widest audience."

TABLE 4
Journalistic role by media type: populist mobilizer function

	Develop intellectual/cultural interests	Let people express their views	Motivate people to get involved	Point to possible solutions
Daily	2.67 (0.89)	3.02 (0.83)	3.09 (0.88)	3.03 (0.87)
Magazine	2.86 (0.88)	2.28 (0.92)	2.48 (0.89)	2.75 (0.91)
Online	2.57 (0.85)	2.87 (0.82)	3.04 (0.92)	3.16 (0.78)
Radio	2.76 (0.97)	3.04 (0.89)	2.93 (1.03)	2.81 (1.05)
Television	2.52 (0.91)	2.90 (0.96)	2.96 (0.92)	2.91 (0.99)
Weekly	2.80 (0.93)	3.07 (0.88)	3.26 (0.87)	2.82 (0.93)
Wire	2.66 (0.89)	2.66 (0.91)	2.71 (1.01)	2.81 (0.94)
All Journalists	2.69 (0.91)	2.93 (0.90)	3.02 (0.93)	2.92 (0.92)
Citizens	2.59 (0.96)	2.92 (0.96)	2.92 (0.95)	2.71 (1.01)
Levene's test	9.84***	11.15***	0.87	37.35***

Cell entries represent mean scores: 1 indicates "not really important" and 4 indicates "extremely important" (SD in parentheses).

*** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 5
Journalistic role by media type: adversarial function

	Serve as adversary of government	Serve as adversary of business	Set the political agenda
Daily	2.62 (1.06)	2.52 (1.02)	1.61 (0.78)
Magazine	2.75 (1.01)	2.74 (1.03)	1.74 (0.66)
Online	2.49 (0.96)	2.34 (0.98)	1.36 (0.61)
Radio	2.61 (1.02)	2.62 (1.04)	1.43 (0.65)
Television	2.45 (1.03)	2.34 (1.00)	1.25 (0.53)
Weekly	2.40 (0.98)	2.29 (0.99)	1.42 (0.68)
Wire	2.86 (0.93)	2.85 (0.89)	1.53 (0.68)
All journalists	2.57 (1.02)	2.48 (1.01)	1.49 (0.70)
Citizens	2.53 (1.03)	2.53 (1.04)	1.95 (1.06)
Levene's test	0.65	1.98	169.13***

Cell entries represent mean scores: 1 indicates "not really important" and 4 indicates "extremely important" (SD in parentheses).

*** $p < 0.001$.

Predictors of Journalistic Functions

The final step of our analysis investigates which factors might best predict the way journalists and citizens think about journalistic functions. To do so, we developed two separate hierarchical regression models for journalists and citizens that predict each of the four journalistic functions mentioned above—interpretive, disseminator, adversarial, and populist mobilizer. Both regression models include a set of standard demographic variables, measures of traditional news media exposure (combined print, television, and online exposure), and use of social media to either follow news (for citizens) or produce news (for journalists).

The regression models for the journalists also include a set of variables that tests possible correlations between organizational context and perceived journalistic functions. The variables included in this block are: type of journalist (print or other), type of job (reporter or supervisor), perceptions that their story ideas usually get covered, and perceptions of how much freedom they have in selecting their stories and in emphasizing parts of their stories.

A final block of variables in the regressions represents journalistic attitudes in general. Included here are variables that measure the perceived importance of factors such as: the chance to influence public affairs, the chance to help people, the chance to develop a specialty, the importance of an organization's editorial policy, the importance of job security, and the idea that media should influence public opinion.

As shown in Table 6, the findings suggest that a number of demographic factors—such as education, political leaning, and race—are significantly related with how important journalists and citizens consider traditional journalistic functions. Among journalists, general attitudes toward the profession also seem to be associated with the perceived importance of journalistic functions. The various measures that represent the organizational context of journalists' work, on the other hand, are not significant predictors of how important journalistic functions are thought to be.

TABLE 6

Ordinary least-squares regression models predicting journalistic role perceptions among journalists and citizens

	Interpretive values		Disseminator values		Adversarial values		Populist mobilizer values	
	Journalists	Citizens	Journalists	Citizens	Journalists	Citizens	Journalists	Citizens
Individual background								
Being female	0.11	-0.04	-0.14	0.12	-0.33**	-0.29**	0.01	0.10
Age	-0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01**	-0.01	-0.01	0.03**	-0.01
Education	0.17*	-0.17**	-0.10	-0.19***	0.06	-0.14***	0.07	-0.16***
Being conservative	-0.18**	-0.13*	0.19**	-0.04	-0.15**	0.01	-0.26***	-0.01
Minority	0.04	0.55**	0.01	0.40***	0.20	0.40**	0.67*	0.34*
Importance of religion	-0.05	0.13	0.08	0.29***	-0.09	0.01	-0.01	0.19***
Income	0.06***	0.01	-0.01	-0.01	0.03*	-0.01	-0.07***	-0.01
Traditional news media use	0.02	0.11***	0.05***	0.05***	0.03*	0.06***	0.04*	0.05***
Social media use for work/news	0.29***	0.38***	0.06	0.25***	0.24***	0.19***	0.28**	0.26***
Incremental R^2 change (%)	9.6***	-	8.5***	-	6.1***	-	6.0***	-
Organizational context								
Print	0.20	-	0.19	-	0.16	-	0.23	-
Reporter	0.28	-	-0.06	-	0.07	-	-0.33	-
Supervisor	-0.37*	-	-0.24	-	-0.20	-	-0.11	-
My story ideas get covered	0.13	-	0.07	-	0.02	-	0.05	-
Freedom to select stories	-0.01	-	0.05	-	0.04	-	0.21	-
Freedom in what to emphasize	0.01	-	-0.04	-	-0.03	-	-0.10	-
Incremental R^2 change (%)	2.3*	-	1.1	-	0.6	-	0.7	-
Journalistic attitudes								
Chance to influence public affairs	0.48***	-	-0.01	-	0.27***	-	0.85***	-
Chance to help people	0.18	-	0.18	-	-0.14	-	0.76***	-
Chance to develop a specialty	0.17	-	0.05	-	0.04	-	0.23*	-
Importance of organization's editorial policy	0.12	-	-0.29***	-	0.05	-	-0.14	-
Importance of job security	-0.07	-	0.47***	-	0.01	-	0.51***	-
Media should influence public opinion	0.18***	-	-0.02	-	0.12***	-	0.21***	-
Incremental R^2 change (%)	8.7***	-	4.0***	-	2.8***	-	21.1***	-
Total R^2	20.6***	8.1***	13.6***	14.8***	9.5***	6.5***	27.8***	9.4***
Total N	849	1162	849	1162	849	1162	849	1162

Cell entries for both samples of US journalists and US citizens are unstandardized regression coefficients (*b*).

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Among citizens, higher levels of education were found to be negatively associated with the perceived importance of all four journalistic functions (possibly because of greater skepticism of those with higher levels of education), while being part of a racial or ethnic minority was positively correlated with how important they considered these functions. More religious citizens also perceived the disseminator and populist mobilizer function as more important.

Among journalists, on the other hand, higher levels of income correlate positively with the interpretive and adversarial function, but negatively with the populist mobilizer function. In addition, for journalists, being conservative was negatively related with the perceived importance of all journalistic roles (except the disseminator function among journalists). Finally, female journalists and citizens thought the adversarial role to be less important as well.

As expected, more use of traditional media, such as newspapers and television news, correlates positively with all four journalistic functions among both journalists and citizens. This makes sense given the fact that those who use more traditional media should also be more likely to believe in the importance of traditional journalistic functions.

Interestingly, though, the same positive correlations were found for those who spend more time with news consumption and news production via social media. As mentioned above, the social media use variable as defined here represents slightly different concepts for journalists and citizens. Among citizens, the measure denotes the use of social media for *obtaining* news and information about current affairs. Thus, according to our findings, citizens who are more likely to use social media to check the latest headlines or share news links with their friends are also more likely to think traditional journalistic functions are more important. This is somewhat surprising given the prevailing wisdom that social media users might be less inclined to believe in the value of traditional news media and those who work for them.

Among journalists, the measure represents the use of social media for the *production* of news. This would include, for example, using Twitter to publish comments and links to news stories, or using blogs authored by other journalists to get ideas for new stories. Thus, as our findings indicate, journalists who rely more on social media in their work are also more likely to endorse traditional journalistic functions. As a consequence, it seems that journalists who rely on social media in their work might actually be more supportive of traditional journalistic functions than their colleagues who do not.

While demographic variables and media use are associated with how journalists and citizens see traditional journalistic functions, specific attitudes toward journalism also showed significant correlations with the perceived importance of journalistic functions. Journalists who believe that the “chance to influence public affairs” is important, for example, tend to think that the interpretive, the adversarial, and the populist mobilizer function are important. Similarly, journalists who think that the “media should have more influence on public opinion” than they currently do, accord more importance to the interpretive, the populist mobilizer, and the adversarial functions.

Overall then, all three of these attitudes reflect a certain desire to influence public affairs which, in turn, might bolster support for more traditional journalistic functions. Thus, at least some of the journalistic attitudes tested here turned out to be important predictors of how journalists think about their various functions in society.

Conclusions

This in-depth analysis of how journalists and the public think about journalism in the United States finds significant differences in how each group perceives the role of journalists in society and the performance of the media overall. Journalists were more likely to consider as very important the roles of investigating government claims, providing analysis of problems, and discussing national and international policy. Citizens, on the other hand, were more likely than journalists to think that getting information to the public quickly, avoiding stories with unverified content, letting people express their views, and concentrating on the widest audience possible were extremely important journalistic roles. Overall, this indicates that journalists rated the interpretation of news as more important than neutral reporting, whereas the public preferred neutrality to interpretation.

These findings not only support our initial hypotheses, but also the results obtained in Tsftati, Meyers, and Peri's (2006) comparison of attitudes among Israeli journalists and the public, which also found that journalists valued an interpretive role more highly than citizens. Direct comparisons with Gil de Zuniga and Hinsley's (2013) study of US journalists and the public are more difficult because the authors asked both sets of respondents "how well" journalists are performing in various roles that constitute "good" journalism. Our study, on the other hand, measured "how important" respondents judged each of these professional roles. Unsurprisingly, journalists in the earlier study were much more likely than the public to rate highly their performance of all the roles listed in the survey.

It is noteworthy, though, that Gil de Zuniga and Hinsley's study found that journalists and the public disagreed most on how "objective" the work of US journalists is, which not only might be a reflection of perceived media bias but also one of perceived importance of this particular journalistic function among the American public. Overall then, there are indications that the public has been and still is clamoring for more neutral journalism in the United States.

While the journalists and the public differed significantly in how they perceived journalistic roles, we did not find many differences in perceptions *between* the various types of journalists (as predicted in H2). However, our findings do indicate that journalists working for television and weekly newspapers value the disseminator function more highly than their colleagues working for other media and thus tend to be closer to the public in their role perceptions. Overall, though, role perceptions among journalists working for the various types of media differed less than expected.

Our analysis also found a number of interesting differences in the demographic predictors of journalistic roles between journalists and the public. Members of the public with higher levels of education, for example, were *less* likely to value the importance of traditional journalistic roles, while the opposite was true for journalists. Further analysis revealed that more-educated and conservative citizens also are less likely to believe that the media are doing "a good job informing the public."⁵

These surprising findings regarding the negative relationship between education and perceived media performance indicate that journalists have to do a better job explaining their work to an educated audience that might have become skeptical of traditional journalism. Journalists need to redouble their efforts to be transparent about reporting practices, making sure they are clear about when and how they are evaluating evidence to reach an interpretive conclusion.

We also found that the use of social media was a positive predictor of traditional journalistic functions for both citizens and journalists, which is consistent with a recent study of 1000 German internet users that found that they mostly preferred professional journalism in evaluating internet-based formats and services (Neuberger 2014). Thus, the growing use of social media for getting news and information among the American public (Mitchell et al. 2016) might actually have a positive effect on how news consumers perceive traditional journalistic roles. In fact, people who mostly get their news from social media (which often present news in a less-organized way than traditional media sources) might be more likely to value traditional journalistic roles such as being objective and avoiding stories with unverified content because they might think these roles are under-served online.

As Tsfati, Meyers, and Peri (2006) point out, disagreements between journalists and the public with regard to the importance of journalistic roles could be considered natural if one views journalism as a profession similar to other professions, such as medicine and law, where the professionals are assumed to have more knowledge than the general public. In that case, the public would rely on journalists to tell them what they need to know, not necessarily what they are interested in or want to know.

However, our study found that a majority of US journalists and almost half of the US public thought that journalism is headed in the wrong direction, and only slightly more than one-fourth of the public thought that news organizations were doing a good job of informing the public. More than two-thirds of the people also saw a fair amount of political bias in news coverage and thought that the media are influenced by powerful people and organizations.

These are not encouraging signs for the credibility of US news media and journalists. Coupled with disagreements about the roles that journalists should perform that we found, these findings should give US journalists pause for concern over their preference for interpretation and investigation over reporting in a neutral manner. The differences in how journalists and the public perceived journalistic roles that we find here, especially in the neutral disseminator function, may be contributing to declines in journalistic credibility and use of traditional news media.

The credibility issue is a serious one, but it must be seen within the context of generalized institutional decline in America. Consequently, future studies that probe the attitudinal intersection between the journalistic profession and the public should focus more on analyzing people's expectations of the media overall—how do they see the role of the mainstream media in a current political environment that is characterized by extreme partisanship and a general disregard for facts and truth among the political elite? Do they believe that journalists play an important role in this emerging "post-fact world" (Fukuyama 2017), and if so, what role might that be? Do they believe that journalists can repair the image of their dysfunction, and if so, how could they win back the people's trust and confidence? In the end, such a focus would offer an important step forward in the analysis of the obvious gap between the people and the media.

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NOTES

1. *Journalist sample:* The findings we report come from online interviews with 1080 US journalists working for a wide variety of media organizations throughout the United States. These interviews were conducted from August 7 to December 20, 2013. The journalists were chosen randomly from news organizations that were also selected at random from listings in various directories. We compared our final main sample percentages with the overall workforce percentages from these estimates and found a relatively close match for all seven media types. The final sample of 1080 US journalists included 358 daily newspaper journalists, 238 from weekly newspapers, 132 from television stations and networks, 97 from radio, 92 from online news organizations, 103 from the wire services, and 60 from news magazines. The response rate was 32.6 percent (American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Response Rate 1 (RR1)).
2. *Public sample:* The sample of online respondents for this survey of the general US public was provided by Qualtrics, which relies on census-representative, 100 percent research-only panels managed by ClearVoiceSurveys.com. The response rate was 55 percent (AAPOR RR1).
3. *Journalistic roles:* For each of the following statements, please indicate how important or unimportant you think they are: (1) Get information to the public quickly; (2) Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems; (3) Provide entertainment and relaxation; (4) Investigate claims and statements made by the government; (5) Provide analysis and interpretation of international developments; (6) Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified; (7) Concentrate on news that's of interest to the widest possible audience; (8) Discuss national policy while it is still being developed; (9) Develop intellectual and cultural interests of the public; (10) Be an adversary of public officials by being constantly skeptical of their actions; (11) Be an adversary of businesses by being constantly skeptical of their actions; (12) Set the political agenda; (13) Give ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs; (14) Motivate ordinary people to get involved in public discussions of important issues; (15) Point people toward possible solutions to society's problems.
4. *Sex:* Male/female. *Age:* In what year were you born? *Education:* What is the last grade or class that you completed in school? Grade 1–8; High school incomplete; High school graduate; Technical, trade, or vocational school; Some college; College graduate; Post-graduate training. *Race:* Are you Spanish, Hispanic or Latino? (yes; no). In which one of the following racial groups would you place yourself? White; Black or African-American; Asian or Asian-American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Pacific Islander; Other. *Importance of religion:* How important is religion or religious beliefs to you? Not at all important; not very important; somewhat important; very important. *Political leaning:* In general, would you describe your political views as: very conservative; conservative; moderate; liberal; very liberal. *Income:* Finally, we'd like to ask you some financial information. Would you please tell us what your total personal income was, before taxes, from your work in journalism during 2012? Less than \$15,000; \$15,000 to less than \$20,000; \$20,000 to less than \$25,000 ... \$150,000 and over.

Final demographics in journalist survey: sex (male = 62.5 percent, female = 37.5 percent), age (mean = 46, SD = 12.3), education (mean = 6.4, SD = 0.98, median = "college degree"), race (White = 89.2 percent, Minority = 10.8 percent), political leaning (mean = 2.3, SD = 1.2, median = "liberal"), income (mean = 10.8, SD = 7.6, median = "\$50,028"), importance of religion (mean = 2.5, SD = 1.1, median = "somewhat important"). *Final demographics citizen survey:* sex (male = 49.3 percent, female = 50.7 percent), age (mean = 47.1, SD = 13.7), education (mean = 4.8, SD = 1.4, median = "some college"), race (White = 84.6 percent, Minority = 15.4 percent), political leaning (mean = 3.8, SD = 1.3, median = "liberal"), income (mean = 9.1, SD = 6.8, median = "\$45,000 to <\$50,000"), importance of religion (mean = 3.0, SD = 1.1, median = "somewhat important").

5. We checked this finding by regressing citizens' demographics on "perceived media bias" and perceptions of whether the media are doing "a good job informing the public." The findings indicate that more-educated ($\beta = -0.08, p < 0.01$) and conservative respondents ($\beta = -0.11, p < 0.001$) are less likely to believe that the media are doing a good job informing the public. Consuming more traditional media ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.001$), on the other hand, correlates with more positive perceptions of how well the media are informing the public. We also found that perceived media bias is associated with being male ($\beta = 0.10, p < 0.001$) and being conservative ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.001$), but not with education.

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