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Navigating Ideals and Realities: On Using Reconstruction Interviews to Study Journalistic Roles

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ABSTRACT

The study of journalistic roles has become a staple in journalism research. The concrete link between role perceptions and role performance, however, remains in a “black box”. This article introduces reconstruction interviews as a holistic approach that blends perceptual and performative approaches to the study of journalistic roles. It discusses the method’s specific benefits and weaknesses, when applied to explore the relationship between role ideals and practice and demonstrates how the method can tease out different levels of influence on journalistic roles. This is done by showcasing reconstruction interviews with European journalists ($n = 15$) who routinely cover large technology corporations. Notably, the method provides tangible reference points for anchoring journalistic roles in their performance and establishes an empirical connection between ideals and practice, all while maintaining a crucial conceptual distinction between roles emerging as ideals and practices. The reconstruction of journalistic roles promotes critical reflection, and facilitates a holistic analysis of journalism practice across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.

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Introduction

The study of journalistic roles aims to provide thorough scholarly understanding of journalistic practice in relation to normative expectations within different, dynamic contexts. In times of change, uncovering how journalistic roles translate into actual journalism practice poses methodological challenges. Traditional approaches to studying journalistic roles have involved either self-reported journalistic role perceptions (Hanitzsch 2011), or the manifestation of these norms in-text and news routines as role performance (Mellado 2015). While the relationship between role ideals and practice has garnered special scholarly interest (Raemy, Beck, and Hellmueller 2019), their concrete epistemic link, and a negotiation of micro-, meso-, and macro-factors influencing their tension, often remain a “black box” (Ryfe 2023, 932).

To illuminate this elusive relationship, this article discusses the comparative reconstruction interview method (Reich and Barnoy 2016; 2020) - a distinctive integration of

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perceptual and performative approaches to the study of journalistic roles. Despite its growing prevalence in journalism practice (Brüggemann 2013; Malling 2021; Reich 2006), this method has not yet been applied to the study of journalistic roles. By reconstructing the “biography” (Brüggemann 2013) of a news story written by a journalist, this approach takes an in-depth, journalist-centered perspective on journalism practice. In doing so, this method aims to bring the negotiation of journalistic roles between ideals and practices on individual, organizational and societal level to the forefront. Firstly, the method’s benefits and challenges specific to examining journalistic role performance are discussed. Secondly, the article explores how this method can unveil various levels of influence, affecting both ideals and practices inherent to journalistic roles.

Reconstruction interviews with European journalists who routinely cover large technology corporations ($n = 15$) illustrate how journalists negotiate their roles amidst various levels of influences. In these dynamic times, large technology corporations are just one of many objects of scrutiny that challenge journalism’s traditional role and reshape the broader media landscape (Neilson and Balasingham 2022). Prior research indicates that journalists engage in diverse role practices related to these corporations, including event-driven media attention, reporting on regulatory investigations, and active criticism of their corporate behavior (Schwinges et al. 2023). Within this context, journalists grapple with the distinct influences these corporations exert over journalism’s quality, independence, and societal responsibilities (Neilson and Balasingham 2022). Addressing methodological challenges to the study of journalistic roles is vital for maintaining the relevance, accuracy, and insightfulness of journalism practice. This is especially important in an ever-changing media landscape that is plagued by rising dissatisfaction with the media’s performance and credibility, particular in relation to the performance evaluation of journalistic roles (Kalogeropoulos, Toff, and Fletcher 2022).

Introducing Reconstruction Interviews to the Study of Journalistic Roles

Reconstruction, as a specialized form of interviewing, systematically examines journalistic processes in news production and unravels the intricacies of how a journalist developed a specific news story. While the method has roots dating back a few decades (e.g., Tuchman 1978), it has gained prominence within the last two decades in particular. Reconstruction interviews have been employed to study various journalistic processes, primarily investigating journalists’ interactions with sources (Malling 2021), as well as the impact of technological affordances on news production (Anderson 2013), and news story triggers (Brüggemann 2013). Despite increasing popularity across different journalistic domains, the method has not yet been used for the study of journalistic roles.

The reconstruction method requires journalists to lead the researcher through the processes involved in crafting one or more specific news pieces (Boesman, d’Haenens, and Van Gorp 2015). To unravel the “biography” of this news story (Brüggemann 2013), journalists narrate their thinking and reasons for specific stylistic or editorial decisions, considering underlying ideals, norms, resources, and structural limitations. Typically, an opening question is posed to start the discussion of this news story: *Could you tell us how this story developed, from the beginning?* (Boesman, d’Haenens, and Van Gorp 2015). Following an ideal-typical interview process, the interview is divided into two sections (Reich and Barnoy 2016). A biographical-narrative section, central to the reconstruction, encourages

journalists to retrospectively narrate production processes in as much detail as possible. A focused-discourse section aligns with the research goals of a specific study, enabling the researcher to concentrate on particular aspects of the production process. While Reich and Barnoy (2016; 2020) provide a comprehensive overview of the method, its benefits and pitfalls specific to the study of journalistic roles has not yet been discussed.

Studying Journalistic Role Negotiation Between Ideals and Practice

The study of journalistic roles is of key interest in journalism research, as roles serve as a principal access point to understand a journalist's identity and societal position. Roles also define journalism as a profession, while remaining responsive to major developments in society (Mellado et al. 2017). Present research identifies several distinct journalistic roles, such as the watchdog role, involving critical scrutiny of individuals or organizations in power, or the service role, aimed at meeting the audience's information needs (Mellado 2015; 2021).

Each aspect of journalistic roles presents distinct methodological obstacles. On the one hand, journalistic role perceptions encapsulate how journalists personally interpret and understand their societal roles, ethical duties, and professional responsibilities in the realm of journalism. Roles are perceived and performed against expectations of the journalist themselves, organizational interests, and perceived societal expectations (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). The methodological challenge remains that free floating interviews often disregard the social context in which journalism is practiced (Ryfe 2020). In addition, journalists may present their roles in a manner that conforms to socially desirable expectations, seeking approval or validation from the interviewer or the broader public (Ryfe 2020). Journalistic role performance, on the other hand, describes the manifestation of professional roles in-text (Mellado 2015). An examination of media content tends to prioritize individual journalists and often overemphasizes their agency, in turn neglecting organizational processes, market constraints or power dynamics between journalists and other news actors (Vliegthart and van Zoonen 2011). Studies that combine both methodological approaches, connecting standardized surveys or interviews with an examination of media content (Raemy, Beck, and Hellmueller 2019), have shown a significant gap between what journalists do and what they say they do (Raemy, Beck, and Hellmueller 2019). Therefore, it is risky to rely only on journalists' self-reports (Ryfe 2023). This leaves the concrete relationship between ideals and practices in a "black box". To tease out how the reconstruction interview method enables scholars to tap into these negotiative processes, the following research question is formulated:

Research question 1 (RQ1): What are core (a) benefits and (b) challenges associated with utilizing reconstruction interviews for the study of journalistic roles?

Journalistic roles are not situated in a vacuum; rather, they are perceived and performed within a larger context. The Hierarchy of Influences Model, proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (2014), treats news as a collective product shaped by journalists operating within these larger structures (Mellado and Van Dalen 2014). The model provides a comprehensive framework of the multifaceted micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors that shape the production of media content, and thus, journalistic role performance. Therefore, it offers a theoretical framework to systematically assess influences on journalistic roles. At the individual level stand core values and personal beliefs that shape journalistic roles. These,

however, need to be negotiated with routine practices in the form of e.g., interactions with sources (Shoemaker and Reese 2014) and public relations practitioners (Brüggemann 2013). In addition, organizational norms and structures also impact how roles are defined and executed. External influences, such as ideology and the political economy, shape the negotiation of journalistic roles within the wider societal, political, and economic contexts where journalism is practiced. For instance, the extent to which journalists can fulfill their watchdog role over individuals in positions of power has often been attributed to the societal-level differences (Hanitzsch 2011). Based on Xu and Jin (2017), journalistic roles should be considered across different, hierarchical levels of analysis.

Journalistic roles are contextual in nature. The model has previously been applied to explore different influences on role perceptions (Xu and Jin 2017), to compare role performance across different contexts (Mellado et al. 2023), and to explain gaps between role perceptions and performance (Mellado and Van Dalen 2014). These studies collectively highlight that the relationship between ideals and practices is contingent on numerous factors across different levels. As some factors influence journalistic roles more dominantly than others, journalistic roles offer key arenas of discursive tensions between perception and performance on individual, organizational, and societal levels (Raemy and Vos 2021). Also, the delineation of roles is not rigidly compartmentalized, but rather characterized by a nuanced interplay of specific role attributes and a hybridization of roles (Mellado et al. 2017). In “unsettled times” (Ryfe 2023, 933), some factors might stand in tension with each other, possibly resulting in cognitive misalignment, more heterogeneous cognitive role orientations, or moral dilemmas. To explore how the method aids to explore various level of influences, the second research question is formulated:

Research question 2 (RQ2): How can reconstruction interviews tease out different levels of influence impacting the ideals and practices within journalistic roles?

The Reconstruction Method Applied: Journalistic Role Performance in the age of Big Tech

To demonstrate how reconstruction interviews can be used to study the negotiation of journalistic ideals and practice, reconstruction interviews with European journalists who routinely cover large technology corporations are discussed. Interviews illustrated here were part of a larger study that sought to examine the professional roles of journalists and lobbyists in constructing Big Tech’s accountability in society. The basis for the reconstruction was a recent article authored by the journalist, selected from the corpus of their last five news stories. For a thorough examination of role manifestations, exploring how journalists manage these roles in response to influences on various levels, and offering a contextualized comprehension of their source interactions, the news story had to be of considerable length. Typically, this meant an article of around or exceeding five hundred words. The news story was then selected in collaboration with the participant when they deemed the news story as a typical example of their journalistic work. In our sample, no instances were encountered where journalists considered an article of this length atypical of their work.

The interview was divided into three sections (see an abbreviated interview guide in the Appendix A). To create rapport, interviewees were invited to introduce themselves and describe their daily work. In a biographical-narrative section, the reconstruction

encouraged professionals to provide a chronological and detailed account of the development of the news story. This included their own involvement and influences of others, motivations for certain editorial and stylistic decisions, the use of and interactions with sources, and other circumstances that shaped the final news story. Further, journalists were asked to elaborate on their perceptions on the ways the importance, style, or way of reporting on large technology corporations had potentially changed over the years, and to connect their perceptions to concrete instances from the news story. Thereby, it was possible to probe detailed influences and processes of the manifestation of normative practices in-text. The journalist retained agency in narrating the story's genealogy, yet the interviewer intervened to clarify certain processes left ambiguous.

Further, two focused-discourse sections (Reich and Barnoy 2016) specifically explored journalists' perceptions of their professional roles and their relationship to corporate sources. Here, the news story continued to serve as a guide, and enabled journalists to exemplify their role perceptions and corporate source interactions by the means of concrete examples. Journalists were asked about their perceived societal contributions and purposes, normative expectations, and responsibilities. Additionally, they were asked regarding their perceived relationship with sources. In concrete terms, this meant that the journalist narrated their relationship with sources and could point to specific instances in-text. This sectional division was not strict but allowed for going back and forth to establish clear links between the reconstruction of concrete journalistic practices, role perceptions, and interactions with sources. The semi-structured format also allowed participants to introduce additional topics.

Sampling and Interview Procedure

Qualitative in-depth reconstruction interviews with a purposive sample of European journalists ($n = 15$) who routinely cover Big Tech corporations served to answer the research questions. To identify potential interviewees, a wide range of news coverage related to technology, technology policy, and corporations was examined. Participants willing to participate in this study later often facilitated contacts with further potential interviewees. In total, 15 journalists consented to partake in an interview. These journalists were located in different European countries (see Table 1) that can be situated within the democratic corporatist and liberal model (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

Using a qualitative reconstruction approach, the country selection served two purposes. Firstly, the sampled diverse set of countries suited the project's purpose to study journalistic roles towards Big Tech, and countries were selected based on their economic and political significance in the European debate surrounding Big Tech corporations. Germany, for instance, is a major economic and political power in Europe, and Ireland hosts numerous international tech companies' European headquarters. Belgium, being a central European nation and hosting several European Union institutions in Brussels, also holds political significance in the regulation of Big Tech. Secondly, these countries presented a suitable sample to illustrate reconstruction interviews for the study of journalistic roles, as they capture different macro-level factors that influence role performance. Journalists from different media outlets, spanning print and online journalism, national and international circulation, specialized and general readership, and covering various beats such as technology, economy, and policy, were included in the sample. The participants also varied in socio-demographic characteristics, including

Table 1. Sampling overview.

ID	Role	Working location of the journalist	News media outlet
JO01	Technology Correspondent	Germany	European specialist media
JO02	Investigative Journalist	Austria	Digital European investigative outlet
JO03	Technology Journalist	Brussels	Digital investigative news outlet
JO04	Technology Correspondent	Germany	Specialist news website
JO05	Editor of Digital Beat	Germany	Daily online newspaper
JO06	Data Journalist	United Kingdom	Specialist news website
JO07	US Technology Correspondent	Germany	Business newspaper
JO08	EU Digital Policy Correspondent	Brussels	European specialist media
JO09	Journalist focused on Digital and AI	Germany	Daily newspaper (broadsheet)
JO10	European Policy Correspondent	Brussels	Daily business newspaper
JO11	National Economy Correspondent	Germany	Daily newspaper
JO12	Technology Journalist	Switzerland	International news agency
JO13	Technology Journalist	Ireland	Daily newspaper
JO14	Technology/ Data Privacy Journalist	Brussels	European specialist media
JO15	Technology Journalist	The Netherlands	Daily newspaper

age, gender, and position. To honor a heavy methodological focus on textual analysis and ensure clarity of results, broadcast journalists were not the sample.

Before the interviews, participants signed an informed consent form. Most of the interviews were conducted via videotelephony platforms between September and November 2022 and were held in English or German. One interview was held in-person. The interview length varied from 35 to 99 min, with an average of 55 min. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. To uphold anonymity given the rather small, specialized target group, the concrete media organizations cannot be disclosed. Quotes used to exemplify the application of the reconstruction method have been submitted to the respective interviewee for approval.

Both agent-based empirical evidence, i.e., journalistic role perceptions emerging through the interview and item-based material, i.e., journalistic role performance emerging in the discussed news story, were analyzed to provide a holistic view on their intricate relationship. The systematic analysis of the reconstruction interviews was guided by the research questions. The focus was not only on how role performance was reflected in the text, but also on how role perceptions, journalistic practices, sourcing strategies, and other micro- or macro-level influences impacted journalistic role performance.

Empirical Illustration of Reconstructing Journalistic Roles

This section demonstrates the data collection process using reconstruction interviews and highlights findings that illustrate both the advantages and obstacles that are particular to the method's application to journalistic roles. Specifically, it showcases how the method can effectively uncover varying levels of influence in a holistic approach.

RQ1a: The Benefits of Reconstructing Journalistic Roles

The negotiation between ideals and practice revealed potential tensions or alignments. Achieving a contextual understanding of journalistic roles involves considering specific circumstances and influences that may have impacted the news story within its unique context. In context of news coverage about large technology corporations, journalists explained a tailored role perception:

To penetrate and explain a complicated reality, to be a critical corrective in such a way that hidden power mechanisms, certain manipulative economic practices and others are uncovered. First, to explain, to make reality understandable, and second, to critically question the scattered narratives. (JO07)

Here, the journalist emphasized various contextual aspects of their role in covering large technology corporations. They referenced inherent power structures in the complex relationship between journalism and these corporations (Neilson and Balasingham 2022). Emphasizing a critical evaluation of information provided by corporate sources during technological and regulatory opacity, they highlighted their role in explaining these complexities to the reader.

An iterative investigation of role ideals and practices acknowledged the ongoing, cyclical nature of role negotiation processes. Journalists continually adapted their role ideals based on practical experiences, changing contexts, societal shifts, and evolving media landscapes. The use of the reconstruction method allowed for mapping adaptations of role perceptions rooted in both narrated and practiced performances (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). The interviews demonstrated that journalists are navigating a dynamic digital era, shaped by fast-moving technology and transnational corporate power structures. For example, limitations in performing a professional role seemed to inform an appropriation of professional ideals. While all interviewed journalists generally supported the ideal of monitoring those in power, they acknowledged practical constraints of the “means [they] have” (JO14) to practice this role. In the case of an interview with a prominent CEO figure, the performance was “limited to ten questions” (JO13). Some even expressed apprehension, admitting that holding a tech giant like Google accountable “seemed a bit daring” (JO11) to them. Looking at a news story on a new iPhone model, another journalist even expressed the belief that discussing certain news topics may not significantly impact their audience (JO05). Analyzing the final product against the initial objectives revealed instances where journalistic practices reflected on journalists’ role perceptions, highlighting the nuanced interplay between ideals and real-world challenges in the newsroom.

Reconstruction interviews effectively made the previously invisible aspects of journalistic practices visible, which formed important components of their role. Similar to findings by Malling (2021), our reconstruction showed that many source interactions remained invisible in media content. Journalists described how most interactions with corporate sources took place off-the-record, pushing this type of reporting “off stage” (JO03). The reconstruction demonstrated which interactions with corporate representatives had proven to be “very good for background” (JO01) or “quite useless” (JO01). Usually hidden from the reader’s eye, journalists demonstrated how the typical inclusion of just a few sources in the final product was the result of their seasoned but hidden work of interacting with sources, going to events, and talking to people, who would tell them things (JO06). Despite remaining hidden role work, those practices formed strong components of their role to provide information “interesting to a broad group of readers” (JO02), or present “arguments of both sides” (JO01).

The reconstruction interview triggered a reflective role narration. The identification of sources and their framing when reconstructing journalistic role performance aided in examining source diversity and potential over-reliance on particular sources that could bias the story. For example, a journalist emphasizing their role as a watchdog might

lean towards exposing wrongdoing or holding powerful entities accountable. An example is provided by a journalist describing an exposé on corporate lobbying activities in the European Parliament. Despite positioning themselves as a journalistic watchdog, they emphasized not wanting “to paint them [Big Tech corporations] as evil” (JO14). To defend their journalistic objectivity, the journalist always offered corporations a right to reply to say “look, I wrote this story because this is a story” (JO14). An analysis of concrete sourcing motivations revealed that corporate sourcing patterns served as both a reflection of journalistic balance and detachment, and a deliberate tactic to demonstrate objectivity. Comparing this narration with the actual news story could reveal ethical considerations they grappled with in the process. For instance, one journalist described the delicate balance “between do I want people to understand, or do I want it to be precise?” (JO01). They illustrated this balance through the news story, showcasing moments where they aimed to provide more information, incorporate different perspectives, or rely on readers’ knowledge to contextualize information.

Ultimately, these reflections on their concrete practices revealed self-critical attitudes, minimizing self-glorification, and enhanced self-reports (Ryfe 2020). Instead, exploring the story’s development helped identify instances in which role ideals were not translated into performance. For example, while a journalist described their role in generating new information for the reader, they critically called the news story at hand an exemplary showcase of a “cookie cutter factory making type of story in that I do not generate the information” (JO10). Critically reflecting on their professional relationship to technology companies, journalists admitted to a “client patron relationship between journalism and big tech that is necessary” (JO06).

A qualitative and inductive approach to the reconstruction method acknowledges dynamic and evolving roles which is particularly relevant in times of change. Conceptual flexibilities of journalistic roles helped to nuance journalistic roles in times of hybridization (Mellado et al., 2017). The watchdog role was not introduced by the interviewer proactively, but phrased as follows, for example: “In academia we conceptualize different journalistic roles. One of them is the so-called watchdog journalism. What is your take on this role? Would you consider yourself as a watchdog of these big tech corporations?” This approach allowed the journalist to interpret the concept flexibly. For instance, one journalist reasoned that they indeed perceived performing a watchdog role “because by informing and exposing how they’re [Big Tech] acting and how they are trying to influence legislation, we’re making sure that the debate is fair and not being hijacked” (JO14). The open-ended questions led journalists to inductively associate specific role labels with practices they considered essential to those roles. The reconstruction further uncovered other role practices, including actively and repeatedly reaching out to sources, and incorporating updates to the published news story online if necessary.

When specifically asked about the journalistic watchdog role, journalists linked traditional role aspects with a strong audience orientation. In this context, the journalist saw themselves “as a bit of an advocate for the consumer” (JO04) by “classify[ing]” and “evaluat[ing]” (JO04) provided information for informed consumer decisions (JO05). While consumer advice had previously been conceptualized as part of a service role that is traditionally associated with a strong audience approach (Mellado 2015), journalists in our sample perceived themselves as a watchdog for the consumer. They demonstrated

this through news stories that critically engaged with new smartphone models (JO04) or other technological affordances (JO05).

Ultimately, the reconstruction of journalistic roles entailed examining how journalists negotiate between their ideal professional roles and the practical realities of their work. The combination of input and output-based analyses made these negotiations concrete, tangible, and empirically grounded, rather than relying solely on theoretical links. This utility is particularly relevant in assessing contextual and reflexive journalistic roles that are challenging to methodologically assess directly (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017).

RQ1b: Methodological Challenges When Reconstructing Journalistic Roles

The reconstruction approach also highlighted specific methodological considerations to ensure scientific quality, rigor, and transferability, particularly in the field of journalistic roles. It was important to keep a conceptual distinction between role perception and role performance. Our experiences underscored the significance of not assuming a direct, linear link between the two concepts, and not extrapolating one from the other. Instead, both were found to be related but distinct aspects of a journalist's role. For example, it was revealed that a journalist actively undertook critical monitorial role practices, exemplified by their persistent requests for a draft policy file. Despite this, they rejected the characterization of their role as "investigative" (JO01) and refrained from adopting the label of a watchdog. Similarly, a journalist expressed that their persistence, while necessary, was not something they took pride in; rather, it was considered as part of the routine journalistic work (JO07). Therefore, the reconstruction approach enabled the empirical tracing of how specific role practices may indicate role perceptions, while also revealing instances where there were disparities between perceptions and actual practices.

Considering this conceptual distinction, an inductive approach was necessary to capture underlying ideals. It proved beneficial to avoid priming journalists on the watchdog role concept. Despite rejecting a watchdog role label, one journalist considered themselves as part of the media's Fourth Estate function and described both role ideals and practices traditionally associated with the watchdog role:

Well, to be honest, I do not see myself on the chain in front of the doghouse. But of course, it's the job of the media as the fourth estate in the state [...] to take a critical look at it and to question it [...] Yeah sure, I'm part of journalism, but I'm not a watchdog [...] But if you see journalism as a corrective and my work as a corrective, then sure. Of course, it is part of it. (JO07)

Another example refers to the abstract concept of "power", which journalists inductively filled with meaning. Journalists narrated situations in which power imbalances with large technology corporations had influenced the news story. These instances included organizational ownership (JO06, JO09), [lack of] financial support of journalism, and an unprecedented influence of corporate public affairs practices (JO07).

Considerations regarding comparability versus flexibility needed to be made to yield meaningful insights. While a biographical-narrative section involved reconstructing a specific news story, the subsequent focused-discourse section typically addressed questions related to the research objective (Boesman, d'Haenens, and Van Gorp 2015). In this case, those sections related to watchdog role perceptions and source interactions

with lobbyists. When reconstructing journalistic roles, it proved beneficial to relax the strict separation of these sections. The semi-structured interview guide outlined overarching research goals, key themes, and a general sequence of questions. Core questions and probing techniques were applied uniformly, but the semi-structure also allowed for a sequential flow of topics. For instance, discussions on sourcing patterns often organically extended from reconstructed news stories, prompting a shift to the second focused-discourse section and a broader conversation about general source interactions and their relation to journalistic role perceptions. Even when exploring normative journalistic expectations or perceived responsibilities, it was necessary to revisit the reconstructed news story, asking journalists to identify instances in the text that exemplified these abstract ideals. While reconstructing a news story on delivery services with a journalist (JO15), they expressed the belief that journalists need to critically reflect on how they monitor technology corporations, noting a perceived shift towards a more tech-dystopian news coverage. This statement by the journalist prompted the interview to add a follow-up question regarding their role perceptions. In elaborating on their role, the journalist emphasized the importance of writing about the impact of tech companies on society, including aspects such as privacy, employment, and children. They further clarified their role as “an intermediate between the company and the consumer”, to “help them make better informed decisions” (JO15) by means of the news story at hand. Hence, discussing abstract concepts while maintaining a connection to the specific news story at hand proved to be advantageous.

Another challenge, relevant to the broader method, but particularly salient in the context of reconstructing journalistic roles, involves the avoidance of relying solely on instantaneous empirical evidence (Reich and Barnoy 2020). Considering the complexity of journalistic roles (Mellado 2021), ensuring robust insights into roles necessitated a careful examination of the applicability of individual-level accounts to a broader framework. At the case selection stage, it became important to check for the representativeness of the news story for the work of the journalist. For example, a recent news story complied with the listed selection criteria. However, the journalist did not think that it was

an article that combines a great deal of deep thought, time, and research. In this respect, it is also not an article that [they] stand by. Yes, [their] name is above it. Everything is wonderful. But it is not an article that can be used to represent [their] work in a particularly representative way. (JO07)

Further, evidence from a single news story could often be only fully understood in the context of others. In their reconstructions, journalists made sure to stress particularities. Occasionally, factors influencing news stories were immediate and less tied to structural or systematic influences, such as editors or colleagues being on leave (JO05, JO14). It proved beneficial to ask journalists continuously whether the journalistic performance they demonstrated in the reconstructed text was exemplary of their role at large.

Reconstruction interviews remain heavily dependent on the interviewee. Professional routines might be naturalized and engrained in practices, leaving them not readily available to be identified by the journalist. In one specific instance, a journalist characterized a selected news story as “a really easy one” (JO10) and several follow-up questions were necessary to unpack seemingly self-evident factors that had influenced the news production process. In other instances, journalists had often followed a corporation they

covered in their news story for a longer time (JO07), and the discussed news article was part of a larger series of articles reflecting a “long process” (JO01). This suggested naturalized news routines.

The navigation of the non-routine interview setting posed a challenge to a meaningful reconstruction of journalistic roles. While the journalists in our sample frequently conducted interviews for their own work or had occasionally been interviewed about their profession before, none of them had prior experience participating in reconstruction interviews. This made it necessary to introduce this interviewing technique to participants. At the beginning of each reconstruction, journalists were encouraged to share some information about themselves to build rapport. Journalists acknowledged the complexity of their roles and this non-routine setting at times led to discomfort, and desire to express themselves more effectively (JO09).

Lastly, the study does have limitations, which are intrinsic to the specific research design. While exemplary for the complex contemporary journalistic landscape, conclusions may not readily extrapolate to more traditional journalistic settings. Given a small response rate, comparability between respondents and non-respondents cannot be assured. Furthermore, the sample lacked representation from journalists in polarized pluralist models (Hallin and Mancini 2004) and exhibited a bias toward German-speaking and Western European journalists, and this over-representation needed to be accounted for.

Ultimately, to navigate contextual challenges and role dynamics, it was necessary to avoid instant empirical evidence, address contextual and representational challenges, and to keep a strict distinction between role performance and perceptions.

RQ2: A Multi-level Examination of Journalistic Roles

The reconstruction involved analyzing the interplay between idealized roles and actual practices on a micro-, meso-, and macro-level. By studying journalists’ role perceptions and linking them directly with a reconstruction of their practices, it was possible to link individual-level examinations (Raemy and Vos 2021) of journalistic roles with other, routine levels of influences that may alter these (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Consequently, this approach traced the negotiation between different identities and associated expectations, ultimately elucidating the prioritization of certain expectations over others (Mellado 2021).

The individual level examinations, conducted through the focused discourse section of the interview, revealed the journalists’ self-perceptions of their role. The news story in turn revealed how this professional identity influenced their choices during the news story creation and ultimately manifested in-text. One journalist acknowledged the media’s overarching role as a “Fourth Estate” (JO07) within journalism but resisted applying the specific watchdog role label to their own performance. This revealed a negotiation between the journalist’s personal professional identity and the societal role of journalism: “So I guess the answer to your question is yes and no. They might perform a similar function in society, but then my role is not that much like a watchdog” (JO06). This underscores the importance of distinguishing between individual and societal role perceptions, as they appear to differ in this context. By contrasting their role on a personal and societal level, the news piece at hand could demonstrate which aspects of it

pertained to more individual level influences, and which were part of a broader, societal role performance.

Discussing the level of autonomy journalists had in shaping the story helped in comprehending the influence of editorial policies, editorial teams, or external pressures on their role execution. To demonstrate their editorial autonomy, one journalist (JO14) described in detail concrete circumstances under which the story had been triggered, filed, and eventually approved and published. The news story had been picked up late on a workday, had interrupted personal plans that needed canceling, and the publication of the news story had been delayed allowing corporations to reply to accusations made against them. To navigate a heated political environment, the journalist recounted how the eventual news piece was a result of a collaboration between the reporter and editor: "I remember that one of my tech editors went into it [the news story] actually at like 11[PM] or 12[AM], because I think we had gone for something a bit stronger" (JO14). This role orientation was evident in the actual role performance. In another instance, a journalist demonstrated how they made sure to minimize editorial influence on their role performance:

So I am only partly responsible for the final outcome of the story because I then file this to an editor and sometimes things get cut. But in essence, if I know that things are going to get cut, I usually put them at the end and then people start cutting from the ground up of the piece. (JO10)

They had demonstrated this tactic in the reconstructed news story, resulting in the inclusion of the predicted two sources.

Organizational influences on journalistic role performance showcased how the news organization's policies, editorial guidelines and organizational expectations impacted the alignment or deviation from idealized roles. Although news selection processes were frequently deliberated within the editorial team, one journalist asserted autonomy in choosing topics for news stories related to German legislation, emphasizing that there was "no big question about whether they should cover this [topic]." The journalist further justified their choice by noting that, at their media organization, there was a consistent focus on "the same few things" (JO01). Some news stories had been triggered by personal interest and role understanding (JO12), or by perceived public demand (JO05), or had ultimately been pursued because the story aligned with the interests of other colleagues (JO12), or with "short and long-term editorial ideas" (JO06) of the news outlet. One journalist articulated this influence by stating, "from me, because I represent the [news outlet], the audience expects high quality journalism, which means well-written, but also accurate, particularly at a time when we are riddled with misinformation and disinformation online" (JO10) and then demonstrated these using the news story at hand. Moreover, the way journalists narrated their role performance offered insights into the influence of their organizational identity on their actions. Some journalists consistently used "we" instead of "I" (JO06) when discussing how they wrote a news story, emphasizing the collective effort, teamwork, or institutional support involved in news production rather than individual authorship.

Discussing audience engagement, feedback, or anticipated reactions during the story's creation emphasized how journalists perceived their role in meeting the informational needs and expectations of a particular audience:

We have to deal with two factions in the tech sector. You always have the faction, the fans, so to speak, who want more positive accompanying coverage [...]. And on the other hand, they have a very critical audience, which in turn also goes a little bit into the opposing camp [...]. And between these two interests, you always have to find a balance [...]. (JO04)

Noteworthy differences in journalistic roles emerged on a more macro level. In stark contrast to the expansive transnational operations of Big Tech corporations, journalists perceived it as a formidable challenge to cover such vast topics with a “small team” (JO01) or with national collaborative partners only (JO02). Journalists reporting to a national audience often aligned their focus on a topic with the national policy agenda (JO01) or covered corporations relevant to the local economy (JO15). Within a highly specialized “Brussels bubble” (JO14), journalists indicated a sense of camaraderie and close interaction among journalists and background sources (JO01, JO05, JO11). Acknowledging a global trend towards stricter regulation of Big Tech, journalists sought to contextualize these developments by contemplating their implications within their respective national contexts (JO01, JO06).

Ultimately, the reconstructed news story disentangled the complexities of idealized roles and practical realities at various levels at once. Reflecting on the news story in front of them, one journalist mentioned factors on multiple levels, ranging from “the ability, [...] the staffing, the time” (JO14). Journalists admitted struggling “to juggle with all these things” (JO14), but the text revealed how journalists prioritize, structure, and frame information based on their perception of their role in serving their news organization, the audience, and society.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article introduced reconstruction interviews as a method to study journalistic roles between their ideals and practice in a blended approach. Its utility to tease out various levels of influences on journalistic roles was illustrated with an exemplary study of journalistic roles towards large technology organizations. I argue that using qualitative reconstruction interviews bears several benefits to the study of journalistic roles. The interview process can elicit reflective reasoning behind journalistic role performances and specific perceptions, norms, and factors behind journalistic practices. In doing so, the method makes informal and formerly invisible processes underlying news production visible.

The method enriches the methodological toolkit for studying journalistic roles by revealing the multifaceted role negotiations across various levels of influence. While the reconstruction method was initially developed as an alternative to content analysis (Reich 2006), the combination of a performative and perceptual lens proved particularly relevant for studying journalistic roles across different levels of influence. This blended approach shed light on the complex interplay of influences on the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels that journalists grapple with, such as organizational policies, audience expectations, and societal shifts (Mellado et al. 2017; Shoemaker and Reese 2014). In this application, the reconstruction method shifts focus to the level of the individual news story. By “recording actions, not evaluating behavior, on specific stories rather than on general estimations” (Reich 2006, 501), roles could be anchored within concrete, epistemic practices. The iterative relationship between role ideals and practices

showcased the dynamic nature of journalism, where journalists seemed to negotiate their ideals based on evolving contexts. While promising for a nuanced comprehension of journalistic roles, the method's application demanded careful consideration of aspects specific to the study of journalistic roles that go beyond pitfalls discussed by Reich and Barnoy (2016; 2020). It remained imperative to avoid instantaneous empirical evidence to capture fluid and hybrid roles systematically (Mellado et al. 2017) and to keep a clear conceptual distinction between journalistic role perceptions and journalistic role performance.

The method proved to tap into negotiations that were symptomatic of broader discussions of the changing role of journalism in the digital age. Sensitive to these contextual particularities, reconstructing journalistic perceptions and experiences considered journalistic realities and left room for elements that had not yet been captured by previously established journalistic roles (Mellado 2021). Delving deeper into how journalists navigate evolving circumstances, contend with increasing challenges stemming from shifting norms, rapid technological advancements, and political polarization, demanding adept juggling and daily adjustments to multiple roles, remains a crucial avenue for research. Further integrating content analysis elements into the reconstruction of news stories can advance a blended approach to journalistic roles, extending frameworks for studying journalistic roles amidst these dynamic changes in the media landscape. These methodological properties allow for granular and rich insights into journalistic roles in flux, and comparative testing of new theories (Raemy and Vos 2021). Thereby, reconstruction can serve both scientific explorations, i.e., and be applied to new and under-researched fields, and scientific explanation, i.e., explain previous quantitative insights into journalistic role performance.

In conclusion, this article advocates for a journalist-centered account on journalistic roles that covers various levels of influences. This blended approach sheds light on the epistemic link between a perceived and performed role instead of a consecutive investigation of both role elements separate from one another. Demarcating the reconstruction method from other available methods to study role perceptions and performance, this method enables insights to be grounded in concrete illustrations and tangible reference points. Methodologically, the contextual approach to the reconstruction of journalistic roles holds the potential to uncover the processes behind journalistic practices across diverse global contexts. This advancement enhances our comprehension of the global identity and aspirations of journalists, offering insights into the roles they presently undertake and those they aspire to fulfill in the digital age, particularly towards transnationally operating organizations, like Big Tech corporations.

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