


Detached or Interventionist? Comparing the Performance of Watchdog Journalism in Transitional, Advanced and Non-democratic Countries

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Mireya Márquez-Ramírez¹, Claudia Mellado²,
María Luisa Humanes³, Adriana Amado⁴ ,
Daniel Beck⁵, Sergey Davydov⁶, Jacques Mick⁷,
Cornelia Mothes⁸, Dasniel Olivera⁹, Nikos Panagiotu¹⁰,
Sergio Roses¹¹, Henry Silke¹², Colin Sparks¹³,
Agnieszka Stępińska¹⁴, Gabriella Szabó¹⁵,
Edson Tandoc Jr.¹⁶, and Haiyan Wang¹⁷

Abstract

This study proposes the interventionist and the detached orientations to watchdog journalism through the conceptual lens of journalistic role performance. Based on a content analysis of 33,640 news stories from sixty-four media outlets in eighteen countries, we measure and compare both orientations across different countries using three performative aspects of monitoring: intensity of scrutiny, voice of the scrutiny, and source of the event. Our findings show that the interventionist approach of watchdog journalism is more likely to be found in democracies with traditionally partisan and opinion-oriented journalistic cultures or experiencing sociopolitical crises. In turn, the detached orientation predominates in democracies with journalistic traditions associated to objectivity. Although both orientations have a lower presence in transitional democracies, the detached watchdog prevails, while in non-democratic countries the watchdog role is almost absent. Our results also reveal that structural contexts of undemocratic political regimes and restricted press freedom are key definers of watchdog role performance overall. However, the type of political regime is actually more important—and in fact the most important predictor—for *detached* than for *interventionist* reporting.

Keywords

watchdog role, journalistic performance, professional roles, journalism, comparative studies

Introduction

As a staple condition for the functioning of democracies, the watchdog role of the media is one of the most hallowed within the journalistic profession for its importance in checking on established powers and scrutinizing elite behavior (Bennett and Serrin 2005). As the backbone of journalists' professional ideology, it is now an aspiration of good practice around the world (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Weaver and Willnat 2012).

Unveiling wrongdoing and scrutinizing elites with the purpose of holding them accountable are, in theory, the core functions of watchdog journalism (Waisbord 2000). Well-known journalistic pieces comply with the functions of fostering accountability or delivering justice, causing the downfall of wrongdoers or sparking a change in legislation and policies. Iconic cases include the Watergate scandal in the United States, the Panama Papers collaborative leak investigations, the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse evidence, the coverage of the Sun Zhigang case in China, the corruption case involving building company Odebrecht and top leaders across Latin America and Africa, and recently, the *New York Times*' investigation of Donald Trump fortune and "The Trump-Russia Story."

Despite their impact, such pieces tend to be the exception rather than the norm. Just as Norris (2014) interrogates, there is a widespread concern about the extent to which journalists actually serve as watchdogs of the public interest. This paper aims to answer that question through the conceptual lens of journalistic role performance.

¹Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México, Mexico

²Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile

³Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid, Spain

⁴Universidad Argentina de la Empresa, Buenos Aires, Argentina

⁵University of Fribourg, Switzerland

⁶Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

⁷Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Brazil

⁸Dresden University of Technology, Germany

⁹Universidad de La Habana, Cuba

¹⁰Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

¹¹Universidad de Malaga, Spain

¹²University of Limerick, Ireland

¹³Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon, Hong Kong

¹⁴Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland

¹⁵Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary

¹⁶Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

¹⁷Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China

Corresponding Authors:

Mireya Márquez-Ramírez, Departamento de Comunicación, Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México, Prolongación Paseo de la Reforma 880, Lomas de Santa Fe, 01219 Mexico City, Mexico.
Email: mireya.marquez@ibero.mx

Claudia Mellado, School of Journalism, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Av. Universidad #330, Campus Curauma, Valparaíso, Chile.
Email: claudia.mellado@pucv.cl

For many decades, the study of professional roles in journalism was addressed primarily from the perspective of normative standards and journalistic ideals (Donsbach 2012; Mellado 2019). Mostly based on survey research, scholarship on role conception does corroborate that journalists around the world are, in fact, highly supportive of the watchdog role (Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Weaver and Willnat 2012).

Nevertheless, due to the problem of taking survey data as valid measurement of journalistic practice (Mellado 2019; Patterson and Donsbach 1996) and considering the multiple restrictions that journalists face to live up to their normative standards (Mellado and Dalen 2014), considerably more attention has been paid to the study of journalistic role performance, and its theorization over the past decade (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Mellado 2015; Mellado and Van Dalen 2014; Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017; Tandoc et al. 2013).

Filling the need to connect studies of journalistic roles with those on news production, the concept of journalistic role performance has been defined as the manifestation of professional roles in both news decisions and the news outcome that reaches the public (Mellado 2015; Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017; Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017; Hallin and Mellado 2018).

As a concept, journalistic role performance helps to focus on journalism as social practice and to shed light on the interplay between structure, agency, culture, and the political economy of the media (Mellado 2019). This approach enables the observation of journalistic ideals and their materialization within a larger social context and the meso-organizational level of news production.

In line with this, Mellado's (2015) work devises the practice of different journalistic roles that run along the presence of the journalistic voice in the news, the relationship between journalism and those in power, and the way journalism approaches the audience. Similar perspectives have also suggested three dimensions to be used for the analysis of journalistic roles (Donsbach 2012; Hanitzsch 2007). Based on this previous work, Mellado (2015) has proposed and then corroborated empirically (Mellado and van Dalen 2017; Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017) that instead of separate dimensions, there are three interrelated domains consisting of six independent roles: the interventionist, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, service, civic, and infotainment roles.

From this theoretical and empirical basis, multiple studies based on the cross-national Journalistic Role Performance research project have analyzed the contextual nuances of journalistic role performance in a diversity of sociopolitical and news-production environments (Hellmueller and Mellado 2016; Humanes and Roses 2018; Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017; Stepińska et al. 2016; Wang, Sparks, and Huang 2018).

For example, our study of nineteen countries measuring journalistic role performance found that out of these six journalistic roles, the watchdog role was the second most performed function at the global level, although with significant differences across countries. It was found to be higher in many transitional than in advanced democracies, despite the common expectation that news from established democracies would exhibit it more strongly (Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017). Journalists from countries that experienced economic or political turmoil, or wherein the press is not

normally associated with the watchdog role, have been found to perform it at a much higher level than in other countries normatively associated to this role. What factors explain such results? This previous study did not explore the extent to which the performance of the watchdog role was actually related to contextual, organizational, or news-based characteristics, nor the specific role indicators that boosted the results per country.

To fill this gap, this paper sets a step forward to more specifically explore the performance of the watchdog role and its individual indicators. Mellado's (2015) methodological design and theoretical development is sufficiently comprehensive as to enable a broad comparative analysis of role performance across countries (Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017) and to zoom-in in the performance of individual roles to observe their fluidity, dynamism, and complexity.

We propose and compare two emerging sub-dimensions of the watchdog role based on the operationalization and theorization of earlier work. We then analyze their variation across eighteen countries from Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Americas based on content analysis of 33,640 news articles from sixty-four newspapers. These countries represent a diversity of journalistic traditions, media systems, and sociopolitical contexts.

Our rationale is that news that contain elements of questioning, criticism, and denunciation (Mellado 2015) account to incremental levels of watchdog journalism as they comply with a monitorial function and potentially lead to accountability (Mellado 2015). However, the source channeling this monitoring function is key: either journalists themselves or third parties can voice the scrutiny and prompt different levels of accountability (Jacobs and Schillemans 2016). Journalists, hence, can choose "between actively seeking to influence the political process and trying to function as impartial conduits for political reporting" (Donsbach 2012: 2; see also Esser and Umbricht 2013; van Dalen et al. 2012).

For this reason, at the reporting level, journalistic traditions such as neutrality, detachment, interventionism, or partisanship are crucial forces behind watchdog role performance (Mellado 2015; van Dalen et al. 2012). Some studies on watchdog journalism and its muck-racking variation have illustrated the centrality of individual journalists and news media in exposing corruption (Feldstein 2006), compared journalists acting as impartial mediators or as critical watchdogs in political issues (Trenz et al. 2009), or observed the rise of *adversarialism* via the aggressive and critical questioning of politicians (Clayman et al. 2007; Entman 2003).

However, research has so far not explicitly measured or compared the performance of scrutiny in terms of its level of intensity, journalists' interventionism, or journalists' detachment in reporting. Interventionism, understood as the strong presence of the journalists' individual voice in reporting, is transversal to—and interacts with—all journalistic roles. Hence, if interventionism is coupled with the watchdog role, it can acquire a more adversarial nature (Mellado 2015; Mellado and Vos 2017).

Moreover, just as all roles, the performance of the watchdog and its detached and interventionist variations are contingent upon the nature of multi-level factors. At the structural level, important definers include the type of political regime and level of

press freedom (Kellam and Stein 2015). Economic influences and media's links to political powers also play an important part (Li and Sparks 2018; Pinto 2008; Waisbord 2000). Likewise, the strength of media markets, availability of newsrooms resources, and levels of autonomy are crucial (Pinto 2008).

Depending on the sociopolitical context or the journalistic tradition, the watchdog role could be connected to a professional ideology of objectivity, or, in contexts with high levels of political parallelism, to partisan-motivated scrutiny, or in denunciation on behalf of political or economic interests (Puglisi and Snyder 2011; Stetka and Örnebring 2013).

Based on this previous literature, we propose an analytical framework consisting of two sub-dimensions of the watchdog role: a *detached watchdog*—closer to a more passive voice of the journalist when scrutinizing those in power “by reflecting reality”—and an *interventionist watchdog*, in which the journalist “shapes reality in the journalistic account” by openly questioning, criticizing, and making the allegations to scrutinize those in power (Donsbach 2012; Skovsgaard et al. 2013: 27).

Our first aim is to explore the predominant type of watchdog journalism in news around the globe and their variation across countries. Our second aim is to integrate different systemic variables associated to structural and sociopolitical conditions, as well as to organizational and story-level variables to explore the factors predicting the materialization of both sub-dimensions.

Analytical Dimensions of Watchdog Journalism

The watchdog role of the press has been one of the cornerstone functions of the democratic order. It can be characterized as “stories [that] *implicitly* demand the response of public officials” (Ettema and Glasser 1998: 3, emphasis added). In functioning as a *Fourth Estate*, “by publicizing corruption, scandal in high places, or the government’s simple inattention to the needs of the people, the press could ensure that a nominally democratic government met its obligations to its constituents” (Hampton 2009: 10). But in which ways are corruption and scandals publicized as such? We identify three dimensions in the watchdog role operationalization originally developed by Mellado (2015): *the intensity of scrutiny*, *the journalistic voice*, and *the source of the news event* through which the watchdog role can be performed.

Intensity of scrutiny refers to incremental levels to watchdog reporting: the least intense level involves simply questioning and interrogating those in power without necessarily denouncing wrongdoing (Bennett and Serrin 2005: 170). A more intense level of scrutiny becomes more overtly critical, sometimes even adopting a confrontational or “aggressive” questioning tone (Clayman et al. 2007; Eriksson and Östman 2013). Finally, the highest level of intensity—denunciation—involves deployment of interrogatives designed to express outrage or to voice actual accusations and provide extensive evidence of wrongdoing (Waisbord 2000).

With respect to the voice addressing the scrutiny, this can be achieved either through journalists’ own voice or through a third party or source. A more detached type of monitoring consists of third parties or sources voicing the questioning, criticism or

denunciation, whereas an interventionist orientation involves journalists voicing the scrutiny themselves.

Another aspect of watchdog journalism that distinguishes between detached and interventionist approaches to watchdog reportings is the type of *event that prompts the questioning, criticism or denunciation*. Drawing from Mellado's (2015) operationalization, a detached orientation to monitoring would involve covering judiciary processes or external investigations or dossiers from third parties or monitoring bodies (Ettema and Glasser 1998; Jacobs and Schillemans 2016). A more interventionist type of watchdog reporting would involve the journalist actively seeking and unveiling exposes or journalists explicitly manifesting conflict by overtly confronting established powers or acknowledging existing antagonism between the media house or individual journalist and any given political actors (Bishop 2015; Kellam and Stein 2015).

The Interplay between Watchdog Reporting, Sociopolitical Contexts, and Different Journalistic Traditions

Literature suggests that journalists from advanced democracies, with more solid media markets and higher levels of professionalization, would perform the watchdog role in significantly higher levels than journalism in transitional democracies or non-democratic countries, because journalists in established democracies tend to adhere to this role more prominently (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Weaver and Willnat 2012). Specifically, journalists within liberal media systems could be more likely to perform the detached variation of watchdog based on its tradition of factuality and objectivity (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Schudson and Tiff 2005).

In European countries with a democratic-corporatist tradition, the watchdog role also plays an important part in the news coverage of politics and politicians (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Journalism in these contexts mixes a "legacy of commentary-oriented journalism" with "neutral professionalism and information-oriented journalism" (Esser and Umbricht 2013: 992).

Meanwhile, journalism in the Polarized Pluralist media systems of southern Europe (Hallin and Mancini 2004) would tend to display an interventionist and interpretative approach to journalistic role performance, in line with its political instrumentalization tradition and high political parallelism (Benson and Hallin 2007; Esser and Umbricht 2013; Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017). Partisanship can also trigger a higher level of interventionism in covering scandals and displaying the watchdog role (Balán 2011; Puglisi and Snyder 2011).

Contextual events can also activate different intensities and orientations to scrutiny. For example, critical, skeptical, and even aggressive questioning may increase in traditionally "objective" traditions like the United States (Clayman et al. 2007), especially during political polarization, such as the Trump's administration (Bishop 2015). In contexts experiencing sociopolitical turmoil, watchdog journalism may depart from traditions of neutrality and detachment to acquire a more adversarial,

interventionist, and even antagonist approach (Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017). Journalists might be eager to more openly question, criticize, and denounce wrongdoing in contexts of widespread corruption and uncertainty.

Other factors can potentially hinder watchdog journalism or only allow for lukewarm levels of scrutiny. In transitional democracies and non-democratic countries with varying levels of democratization, commercialism, and economic development (Peruško et al. 2013), challenging sociopolitical conditions could prevent the performance of the watchdog role, especially the interventionist type. Constrained contexts of press freedom and access to information or unduly intrusion of powerful rulers (Kellam and Stein 2015) coupled with media and political cronyism might discourage an active monitoring function at all (Waisbord 2000: 5–6). Journalists in most transitional democracies are therefore likely to adopt a more cautious or detached approach to scrutiny (Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017).

However, Eastern European democracies could be an exception. They present high levels of clientelism, state intervention, political parallelism, market-driven partisanship, and political instrumentalization (Örnebring 2012). Post-socialist Europe has “provided a venue for ‘a battle of the models,’ where American and Western European concepts of media system organization fought for dominance” (Jakubowicz and Sükösd 2008: 28), but changing property patterns of news organizations and their changing political alliances also play a role. In Poland, one newspaper’s political orientation and another’s negative attitude toward the government influenced a more interventionist approach to watchdog role performance (Stepińska et al. 2016), suggesting that certain organizational factors could trigger a dual approach to scrutiny.

In contrast, in countries with predominantly one-party or state-party rule, like Cuba, the lack of press freedom arguably prevents the practice of watchdog journalism altogether (Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, et al. 2017). In China, the Communist Party still interferes and shapes news agendas on top of the growing pressures of commercialism, hampering the performance of the watchdog role (Li and Sparks 2018).

Based on this previous evidence, we pose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The performance of a detached watchdog role is significantly higher in democracies with a journalistic culture characterized by editorial detachment and objectivity.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The performance of an interventionist watchdog role is significantly higher in democracies with partisan and opinion-oriented journalistic traditions.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The performance of an interventionist type of the watchdog role is significantly higher in democratic countries undergoing sociopolitical crises and political turmoil.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The performance of both the detached and the interventionist orientations to the watchdog role is significantly lower in transitional democracies, although the detached watchdog tends to prevail in these countries.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): In non-democratic countries with restricted press freedom, both orientations of the watchdog role are almost absent.

Predictors of Watchdog Role Performance

Studies on factors predicting journalistic role performance (Humanes and Roses 2018; Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, et al. 2017; Wang et al. 2017) found that social, organizational, and story-level variables—besides country differences—account for variation in the performance of journalistic roles. We draw from these findings to explore the factors more likely to affect the type of watchdog performance in the news.

Watchdog journalism is said to predominate in established, stable democracies with high levels of *press freedom*, journalistic autonomy, level of democratization, and low levels of censorship, governmental control, instrumentalization of journalists, or state intervention (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Weaver and Willnat 2012).

Another factor significantly associated to the performance of different roles is *media audience orientation*. The distinction between popular and elite press significantly explains the presence of different reporting styles (Esser 1999; Skovsgaard et al. 2013). In China, for example, market newspapers scored a higher presence of the watchdog role than official newspapers (Wang et al. 2018).

Media political leaning is also an important element associated to the performance of different roles. In five Latin American countries, Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, and colleagues (2017) found the medium's political orientation significantly predicted watchdog journalism, with right and center-leaning newspapers being less likely to display this role than the more pro-watchdog leftist media. In the United States, Puglisi and Snyder (2011) found a strong correlation between the partisan leaning of newspapers and the partisan bias of their coverage of political scandals.

News beats can also predict the journalistic role performance. Van Dalen et al. (2012) analyzed how professional roles might manifest themselves differently depending on journalistic specialization. Reich (2012) found that Israeli journalists who cover political issues act as watchdogs to a greater extent than business journalists. In the Chilean press, the prevailing topic of a news item more strongly predicted the watchdog, service, civic, and loyal-facilitator roles with relation to any other variable (Mellado and Lagos 2014). For their part, in China Wang et al. (2017) and in Spain, Humanes and Roses (2018) found a higher presence of the watchdog role in political news than in economy/business, and miscellaneous news but lower than stories on court, police, and crime topics.

Procedural aspects of objectivity and epistemology are also important to understand journalism's role as a social institution (Örnebring 2017: 77). Pioneer work by Donsbach and Klett (1993) and later by Skovsgaard et al. (2013) revealed a significant relationship between different reporting methods and professional roles.

Following the literature but considering the lack of specific evidence that allows us to have formal hypotheses regarding the influence of these factors in the two orientations to watchdog reporting analyzed in this study, we pose the following research question:

Research Question 1: Which variables at the systemic, organizational, and content-based level more strongly explain the performance of the detached and interventionist dimensions of the watchdog role?

Methods

The study reports findings from the Journalistic Role Performance cross-national project, based on a content analysis of national news from eighteen countries of Western Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia, and the United States. Following Hallin and Mancini's (2004) heuristic media systems and The Economist' Democracy Index (2012–2015),¹ we sampled newspapers from established democracies such as the United States and Ireland for the Liberal model, Germany and Switzerland for the Democratic Corporatist model, and Spain and Greece for the Polarized Pluralist model. Transitional democracies include Poland, Hungary, and Russia from Eastern Europe; Chile, Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina from Latin America; and the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Malaysia from Asia. We also included two non-democratic countries: China and Cuba.

The sampled articles were published in each country's most important newspapers, as defined in the sampling protocol. Selected papers are representative of their print media system based on criteria such as circulation, newspaper size, reach, audience orientation, ownership, political leaning, and level of agenda-setting influence. The list of selected newspapers and the number of analyzed items per country and their characteristics can be found in the supplementary information.

Using the constructed week method, we selected a stratified-systematic sample per country from two consecutive years between 2013 and 2015. The unit of analysis was the news article associated to the National Desk—politics, economy and business, police, crime and court, social affairs, and general national news. In total, our sample consisted of 33,640 news stories from sixty-four news outlets.

Measurements

The coding manual included different indicators related to the performance of the watchdog role, according to the previous operationalization of Mellado (2015), which was validated across different countries around the world (Mellado and van Dalen 2017; Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017). Each indicator was examined through their explicit presence/absence in the news (see operationalization in Table 1). The items resulted in a final score for each news story (range = 0–1). For descriptive purposes, we calculated the raw scores (sum of points divided by the total items in each role). Meanwhile, we used factor scores to test for differences in the presence of the two types of watchdog roles among the countries analyzed. A higher score expressed a higher performance of the watchdog role in any of its forms, and vice versa. For this paper, we used nine out of ten indicators proposed by Mellado (2015) to measure the watchdog role²: five of them are analytically closer to the detached orientation, and four indicators are analytically closer to the interventionist orientation to watchdog reporting.

Based on Krippendorff's formula ($K\alpha$), final global intercoder reliability was .74. The variation of intercoder reliability per indicator within each country ranged from .71 to .82³ (see intercoder reliability per indicator in Table 1).

Table 1. Operationalization of the Detached and Interventionist Orientations of the Watchdog Role.

Indicator of detached orientation	Operationalization
Information on judicial/administrative processes	The news story includes information on trials, judicial or administrative processes against individuals, or groups of power ($K\alpha = .74$).
Questioning by sources	Questioning of individuals or groups of power through quotes, statements, and/or opinions given by someone other than the journalist ($K\alpha = .73$).
Criticism by sources	Criticism is given of individuals or groups of power in the form of quotes, statements, and/or negative opinions given by someone other than the journalist ($K\alpha = .75$).
Denunciation by sources	Quotes and/or testimonies are provided from people other than the journalist, that account for, accuse or evidence something hidden, not only illegal but also irregular or inconvenient, concerning individuals or groups of power ($K\alpha = .82$).
External investigation	The news story includes investigations that were not carried out by the journalist—such as judicial, administrative, and specialized/academic research, among others—but that he or she covers extensively ($K\alpha = .74$).
Questioning by the journalist	By means of statements and/or opinions, the journalist questions the validity or truthfulness of what individuals or groups in power say or do ($K\alpha = .75$).
Criticism by the journalist	The journalist makes an assertion or reference in which he or she negatively judges or condemns what the individuals or groups in power say or do ($K\alpha = .72$).
Denunciation by the journalist	The journalist makes an assertion or reference in which he or she accuses or makes evident something hidden, not only illegal but also irregular or inconvenient concerning individuals or groups of power ($K\alpha = .73$).
Reporting of conflict	The journalist invokes a source, an institution, or an individual from a sphere of power as an opponent ($K\alpha = .71$).

The Pearson bivariate correlation tests confirmed a high association among the indicators belonging to the detached watchdog and among the indicators belonging to the interventionist watchdog role (see supplementary appendix).

Through regression analysis, we controlled for news-story factors: news topics, story type, reporting methods, and the journalist's point of view in the story; as well as organizational factors such as media political leaning—a five-point scale including left, center-left, center, center-right, right—and media audience orientation such as elite-popular as independent variables to predict both orientations to the

watchdog role. Finally, at the societal level, we controlled for the political regime—advanced democracies, transitional democracies, and non-democratic countries—according to The Economist Democracy Index (2012–2015), Press Freedom Index (Freedom House 2017), and the Economic Freedom Index (Heritage Foundation) for the years in which the sample was taken. The later was finally excluded from the final analyses because of multicollinearity.

Findings

The Detached and Interventionist Approaches to Watchdog Journalism

Overall, the performance of a detached form of the watchdog role is significantly higher than an interventionist watchdog role around the world ($M_{\text{detached watchdog}} = 0.093$, $SD = 0.176$; $M_{\text{interventionist watchdog}} = 0.044$, $SD = 0.154$), suggesting that in global terms, sources and external actors are the voices questioning, criticizing, and denouncing when the watchdog role is performed (see Table 2).⁴

In the detached approach, the least intense levels of scrutiny prevail: sources' criticism (in 14.4% of the sampled news articles), followed by sources' questioning (9.6%). The coverage of trials and judiciary processes followed suit (9.0%), while denunciations from third parties and the publication of external investigation scored significant lower levels globally (6.6% and 6.5% of articles containing them, respectively).

In the interventionist approach, the indicators featuring most frequently were also the least intensive forms of monitoring: journalists' questioning (5.9%) and journalists' criticism (5.2%). Journalists' denunciation had a minor presence (2.1%), and the reporting of conflict between news media and actors was considerably low (1.0%).

In spite of these general tendencies, we found statistically significant differences across countries in both approaches ($F_{\text{detached}} = 137.427$; $df = 18$; $p = .000$; $F_{\text{interventionist}} = 174.460$; $df = 18$; $p = .000$).

Journalism in the United States and in Poland are at the forefront of the detached approach ($M_{\text{US}} = 0.158$, $SD = 0.189$; $M_{\text{Poland}} = 0.163$, $SD = 0.221$). In the case of the Polish press, the top indicator is the questioning by sources (26.5% of news articles), the highest percentage of the sample for this indicator. In the case of U.S. journalism, two different indicators dominate and stand out globally: the coverage of external investigations (22.3%) and the reporting of sources' criticism (31%).

To a lower degree, Germany, Spain, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Greece, and Hungary show an important presence of the detached watchdog role in news. Germany peaks in the coverage of trials at the same percentage than news in Hungary (16.7%). The Spanish press showed the highest presence of source denunciation (16.9%), an indicator that is also predominant in Mexico (15.9%), Argentina (12.4%), and Brazil (10.4%).

In the Philippines ($M = 0.077$, $SD = 0.172$), Ireland ($M = 0.076$, $SD = 0.177$), Russia ($M = 0.088$, $SD = 0.136$), and Malaysia ($M = 0.064$, $SD = 0.138$), the performance of the detached watchdog shows a moderate presence, while the press in Switzerland ($M = 0.044$, $SD = 0.099$) and Chile ($M = 0.026$, $SD = 0.083$) presents

Table 2. Indicators of the Detached and Interventionist Orientations of the Watchdog Role per Country (% of Stories).

	The United States	Russia	Greece	Spain	Hungary	Switzerland	Poland	Germany	Mexico	Cuba	Argentina	Brazil	Chile	Malaysia	Philippines	China	Ireland	Hong Kong	Global
Conflict ($\chi^2 = 938.365; p \leq .000$)	0.20	0.30	3.70	1.70	0.20	0.10	0.70	0.10	0.00	0.00	0.90	2.00	0.10	8.90	0.00	0.20	0.00	0.50	1.00
Questioning by journalist ($\chi^2 = 2795.869; p \leq .000$)	1.90	9.70	13.30	21.90	10.60	0.90	18.50	4.20	3.60	2.40	7.00	7.30	1.10	2.00	0.20	0.90	3.30	0.20	5.90
Criticism by journalist ($\chi^2 = 3296.363; p \leq .000$)	2.50	5.90	26.10	14.40	8.70	1.00	14.70	3.80	3.10	1.60	7.30	3.00	0.30	0.90	0.30	0.70	4.70	0.30	5.20
Denunciation by journalist ($\chi^2 = 874.947; p \leq .000$)	1.50	2.60	6.30	4.80	4.80	0.30	6.40	0.90	3.30	0.30	2.90	3.70	0.20	0.20	0.10	0.10	0.40	0.10	2.10
Interventionist watchdog (M/SD) ($F = 201.907; p \leq .000$)	0.02 (0.07)	0.05 (0.13)	0.15 (0.32)	0.14 (0.36)	0.07 (0.18)	0.007 (0.06)	0.13 (0.32)	0.03 (0.13)	0.03 (0.12)	0.014 (0.09)	0.06 (0.17)	0.05 (0.16)	0.005 (0.05)	0.03 (0.14)	0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.14)	0.03 (0.04)	0.04 (0.17)
Information on trials ($\chi^2 = 1316.310; p \leq .000$)	15.27	6.23	8.02	15.85	16.74	3.87	8.94	16.68	10.40	0.00	14.68	15.90	2.44	8.79	9.28	1.16	10.48	1.12	9.05
External investigation ($\chi^2 = 1454.978; p \leq .000$)	22.31	7.3	4.6	7.7	2.4	6.0	12.7	9.5	9.2	0.30	4.8	12.7	1.00	3.00	8.9	1.20	4.40	0.30	6.50
Questioning by sources ($\chi^2 = 1872.200; p \leq .000$)	6.10	16.20	14.20	8.10	13.00	1.30	26.50	12.10	15.20	2.40	11.70	12.70	3.00	13.70	9.10	2.80	7.80	1.60	9.30
Criticism by sources ($\chi^2 = 3082.545; p \leq .000$)	31.00	12.50	25.90	24.60	21.80	8.80	28.10	27.80	18.50	2.60	20.50	15.20	5.30	5.30	6.30	2.10	14.10	3.00	14.40
Denunciation by sources ($\chi^2 = 2139.605; p \leq .000$)	4.40	2.00	9.60	16.90	8.20	2.20	5.00	7.50	15.90	2.40	12.40	10.40	1.20	1.20	5.10	0.50	1.30	0.70	6.60
Detached watchdog ($F = 190.419; p \leq .000$)	0.16 (0.19)	0.09 (0.14)	0.12 (0.18)	0.146 (0.20)	0.12 (0.21)	0.04 (0.10)	0.16 (0.22)	0.15 (0.23)	0.14 (0.21)	0.01 (0.07)	0.13 (0.19)	0.13 (0.22)	0.03 (0.08)	0.06 (0.14)	0.08 (0.17)	0.01 (0.07)	0.01 (0.18)	0.01 (0.06)	0.11 (0.24)

Note. Mean and standard deviation are in parentheses.

low levels. Expectedly, in newspapers in Cuba, China, and Hong Kong, the detached orientation and in fact the watchdog role overall is practically null (Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017).

Meanwhile, in the interventionist type of watchdog reporting, Greece ($M = 0.153$, $SD = 0.316$), Spain ($M = 0.137$, $SD = 0.358$), and Poland ($M = 0.132$, $SD = 0.323$) lead the list. In the Greek press, two specific indicators boost the result: journalists openly questioning (13.3% of news articles) and criticizing elites (twice as much, with 26.1%). This last indicator indeed presents the highest recorded percentage of journalists' criticism of the sample.

Spanish and Polish journalism followed suit as second and third in the performance of the interventionist type, although Spanish journalists are more overtly questioning (21.9%) than their Polish counterparts (18.5%), and indeed scored much higher than any other country of the sample in this indicator. In Poland, journalists put into practice the interventionist approach mainly questioning (18.5%) and criticizing (14.7%).

Four transitional democracies—Hungary ($M = 0.07$, $SD = 0.180$), Brazil ($M = 0.047$, $SD = 0.157$), Argentina ($M = 0.057$, $SD = 0.171$), and Russia ($M = 0.051$, $SD = 0.126$)—show a medium level of the interventionist watchdog. These countries share the questioning by journalist indicator as the most important, although Argentina also stands out for criticism by journalists.

Meanwhile, a more heterogeneous group consisting of Mexico ($M = 0.033$, $SD = 0.12$), Malaysia ($M = 0.034$, $SD = 0.141$), the United States ($M = 0.020$, $SD = 0.065$), Ireland ($M = 0.028$, $SD = 0.142$), and Germany ($M = 0.030$, $SD = 0.127$) shows, comparatively, a low level of the interventionist watchdog. The press in the United States and Ireland performs the interventionist watchdog through journalists' criticism (2.5% and 4.7%). In Germany, newspapers tend to contain journalists' questioning (4.2%), whereas in Malaysia there is an important presence of declared conflict (8.9%). In Mexico, questioning by journalists was the highest indicator within this approach (3.6% of the articles).

Finally, an almost null presence of the interventionist watchdog role is found in China ($M = 0.008$, $SD = 0.045$), Cuba ($M = 0.018$, $SD = 0.016$), Philippines ($M = 0.002$, $SD = 0.033$), Hong Kong ($M = 0.002$, $SD = 0.038$), Chile ($M = 0.005$, $SD = 0.054$), and Switzerland ($M = 0.007$, $SD = 0.063$), resembling the result found by Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. (2017), measuring the performance of the overall watchdog role.

Predicting the Detached and Interventionist Orientations to Watchdog Journalism

We ran linear regressions to ascertain the extent to which systemic, organizational, or content-related variables (see “Methods” section) played a part in defining the detached and interventionist types of the watchdog role. We ran separate regression models for two dependent variables: the performance of the detached and the interventionist watchdog role. The following findings only report the final regression models with the most explanatory power, standardized regression coefficients, and the variables that

resulted statistically significant. These results account for country-fixed effects via country dummy variables (see Table IV in the Supplementary Information file).

The regression model for the detached watchdog role explains 15.5 percent of the variance (see Table 3). The results show the stronger influence of systemic variables, such as political regime (-.268) and press freedom rank (.198). Higher level of democracy and press freedom predict higher levels of detached watchdog. In hierarchical terms, the topic of the news is the second strongest predictor of detached watchdog reporting, as police and crime (.192), and court news (.182) display it to a higher extent than political news (.162). Variables related to reporting methods have resulted weak predictors of the detached orientation except for source balance (.167), proving that detached watchdog journalism heavily relies on the account of sources for its monitoring functions. Organizational variables were also weak predictors, despite coefficients being statistically significant.

The regression model for the interventionist orientation of the watchdog role explains 20.3 percent of the variance (see Table 3), with results changing slightly in comparison with the model for the detached watchdog. Systemic variables strongly predict this approach as well. Higher levels of democracy (-.189) and press freedom (.161) are significantly related to a higher presence of interventionist watchdog reporting. However, news topic has a much lower importance in predicting it.

In contrast, two important indicators of story narrative such as journalist's point of view (.265) and journalist's argumentation (.182) are crucial for interventionist watchdog. Finally, organizational variables such as political or audience orientation—although showing weak statistically significant coefficients that suggest a higher presence of this interventionist orientation in conservative and elite newspapers—are not as important or decisive as the other macro- and micro-level variables.

All these results strongly support our hypotheses. Consistent with H1, we found that news in advanced democracies and journalistic cultures characterized by editorial detachment and objectivity display higher levels of detached watchdog reporting than news in transitional and non-democratic countries ($F = 451,290$, $df = 2$, $p \leq .000$). The exceptions are the Irish and Swiss media where the detached type of watchdog journalism prevails, but to a much lower level (see Table 2).

Our results also give strong support to H2, according to which the interventionist watchdog is higher in democracies characterized by partisan and opinion-oriented journalistic traditions ($F = 201,907$, $df = 17$, $p \leq .000$). Spain and Greece scored the highest performance of the interventionist watchdog role overall (see Table 2). When conducted, scrutiny in these countries likely stems from a tradition of overall interventionism but might also be related to their specific sociopolitical contexts, as H3 predicted. Indeed, the interventionist watchdog role is significantly higher in democratic countries undergoing sociopolitical crises and political turmoil, as it was the case of Spain and Greece at the time of the study (see Table 2).

H4 assumed that the performance of both types of the watchdog role is lower in transitional democracies, with the detached type being slightly higher than the interventionist, whereas according to H5, both approaches would be nearly absent in non-democratic countries. The results tend to give support to our expectations, although

Table 3. Predictors of the Detached and Interventionist of Watchdog Role Performance.

Predictors	Detached watchdog			Interventionist watchdog		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Political regime	-.076	.003	-.268	-.047	.002	-.189
Press freedom rank	.008	.000	.198	.006	.000	.161
Media political orientation	-.006	.001	-.027	.004	.001	.020
Media audience orientation	.023	.002	.057	.010	.002	.028
Politics topic	.059	.003	.162	.031	.003	.095
Economy and business topic	—	—	—	.010	.003	.024
Police and crime topic	.104	.004	.192	.033	.003	.069
Courts topic	.169	.005	.182	.030	.004	.036
Social affairs topic	.042	.003	.100	.012	.003	.033
Story type	.020	.001	.088	—	—	—
Balance	.043	.001	.167	.000	.001	-.002
Verifiable evidence	.023	.002	.061	.013	.002	.040
Conditional use	.015	.002	.033	-.005	.002	-.013
Argumentation	.036	.002	.083	.069	.002	.182
Journalist's point of view	.017	.003	.035	.125	.002	.265
Country fixed effects	Yes			Yes		
Constant	-.118	.005	—	-.053	.004	
Adjusted R ²		15.5			20.3	
N		33,639			33,639	

with some discrepancies ($F_{\text{detached}} = 451,290, df = 2; p \leq .000; F_{\text{interventionist}} = 274,994, df = 2; p \leq .000$).

While the performance of the detached watchdog role and especially the interventionist type of watchdog journalism is comparatively lower in most transitional democracies, some countries do not follow that pattern. In Hungarian, Mexican, Argentinian, and Brazilian news, the presence of the detached watchdog role is significantly higher than its interventionist form, which is consistent with H4. Nevertheless, the detached watchdog reporting in these countries is higher than in several established democracies and also higher than the overall sample mean (see Table 2).

Likewise, while Russian journalism shows moderate to medium levels of both approaches, Polish journalism shows high levels of the interventionist type of watchdog role performance, which is consistent with H2. Nevertheless, they also scored high levels of the detached watchdog, even higher than the levels recorded in most of the established democracies included in the study. This result can likely be attributed to the differences between the popular and the elite press in Poland with respect to audience approach and political orientation (Stepińska et al. 2016).

Finally, news in non-democratic countries did not rank highly in any of the two approaches. Indeed, China and Cuba show similar patterns, as our H5 predicted. Restricted conditions for the scrutiny and monitoring of political elites in both countries liexplain the results.

Discussion and Conclusion

The first goal of this paper was to discern the interplay between the performance of two forms of watchdog journalism—detached and interventionist—and its variation across established, transitional, and non-democracies. We found that when journalists and the media perform their monitoring function, it is more often through the detached rather than the interventionist approach, as journalists normally rely on the voice of third parties and informants, rather than their own voice.

Moreover, in terms of intensity, the watchdog role is performed through the least intensive forms of scrutiny such as questioning and criticism. Actual denunciation of wrongdoing is rare in both orientations as this might not be as feasible as questioning or criticism in newsgathering daily routines. Denunciation by third parties would require the institutionalization of effective monitoring and counterbalancing bodies from which to gather information and incentives on the part of political insiders to denounce and leak the official wrongdoing to the press (Balán 2011), something more likely to exist in partisan and politically polarized journalistic cultures. Denunciation by journalists, via investigative reporting, would require not only bravery and professional autonomy but a vast range of reporting skills, networks of sources, human and financial resources, time and access to information, and crucially an institutionalized context of accountability and press freedom (Waisbord 2000). Few newsrooms can afford to hire and sustain investigative teams in the long term, especially in digital and 24/7 news environments. In most transitional countries, journalists not only lack the training to conduct investigative journalism but also face precarious working conditions and might even work in considerably risky environments (Hughes et al. 2017).

Further analyses using paired-sample *t* tests ($t = 87,211$, $df = 17$, $p \leq .000$) were conducted to identify the biggest differences in the presence of the interventionist and detached watchdog orientations within each country. Results show the biggest differences between the presence of the two forms of watchdogs existing in the United States, Germany, Brazil, and Mexico, countries tending to be more homogeneous in their watchdog role performance, as this role is mainly performed through a detached orientation. Theoretical expectations in relation to the U.S. and established democracies, and to the detached nature of Latin American journalism, are supported.

On the contrary, the smallest differences in watchdog role performance and its two approaches are found in a heterogeneous group of countries—Chile, Cuba, China, Spain, Greece, Poland, and Russia, with different reasons behind this result. In Cuba and China, there are restricted conditions to perform any type of vigilance on the established powers. In the case of Hong Kong, the low performance of both forms of watchdog could be explained by the influence of economic interests from Mainland China, as well as a limited press freedom. In Chilean media, the absence of both types of watchdog reporting results from a historical lack of tradition for investigative journalism and media political collusion likely constraining the monitoring function of the press (Mellado and Lagos 2014).

Finally, in Spain, Greece, Poland, and Russia, the interplay between a partisan tradition, a growing influence of liberal norms, and a challenging sociopolitical environment

characterized by economic crisis—in the case of Spain and Greece—might blur the differences between the interventionist and detached performance of the watchdog role.

As for the factors underlying the performance of both sub-dimensions of the watchdog role, we support the previous findings about the overall multilayered nature of hybrid journalistic cultures (Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017). Structural contexts of undemocratic political regimes and restricted press freedom are key definers of watchdog role performance overall. However, the type of political regime is actually more important—and in fact the most important predictor—for *detached* than for adversarial or interventionist reporting, which is more reliant on journalists' initiative and voice.

As we know, corruption scandals are triggered by competing government actors who leak damaging information about their rivals (Balán 2011). However, this might not always be possible in countries with low levels of press freedom—the second strongest predictor of detached watchdog—where “powerful presidents” use a “wide range of tactics to silence their critics,” or where executive powers face little opposition or lack mechanisms of counterbalances or oversight (Kellam and Stein 2015: 66).

In “insecure democracies,” prevalent in transitional countries with high levels of anti-press violence (Hughes et al. 2017); or in non-democracies, with high levels of state intervention, detachment and less-intensive scrutiny are likely to be a precaution mechanism or function as journalists' safeguard against risk or hostile reactions from elites (Li and Sparks 2018).

In contrast to the detached approach, journalistic traditions are, in fact, slightly more important factors to trigger the interventionist type of watchdog role performance than structural factors like levels of democracy or press freedom. In partisan-polarized countries, partisanship could be a probable cause of “targeted” scrutiny toward governing elites. However, our results show that newspapers' political leaning or partisanship, per se, do not trigger the interventionist approach. The journalist's voice is the strongest factor to activate this approach, corroborating the high levels of interventionism and opinion-oriented journalism existing in these countries (Hallin and Mancini 2004), possibly exacerbated by conflicting sociopolitical environments. However, this is not the rule worldwide, as most journalists around the world cannot afford to have a public voice in their reporting or to exert scrutiny openly.

Studying the performance of the watchdog role more in depth shows that although journalistic cultures have some similarities at the global level, they are still national and primarily driven by their narrative tradition, by their media system, by sociopolitical contexts, and even by the nature of the news topic at question. Still, when looking at the factors all together, the watchdog role of the media is more prominently tied to the quality of democracy at the role performance level. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that all-critical journalism is beneficial for democracy. In some transitional democracies, for example, mainstream media systematically use critical journalism to attack democratically elected, popular rulers that threaten the interests of media proprietors and their political allies (Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez 2014). In established democracies, intensive scrutiny of political figures aimed at attracting an audience often contributes to political disinformation

and cynicism (Patterson 2012), as short-term personal scandals prevail over more relevant issues (Stayner 2013).

In this sense, our study sheds light into the fluidity of the watchdog role when analyzing a diverse set of countries not normally included in the literature. In practice, monitoring is not a rigid, intangible ideal to which journalists aspire, but a dynamic set of practices incorporated in the daily reporting of news—not only front-page investigative pieces—confirming the contextual nature of journalistic roles, and the importance of addressing and exploring the actual performance of roles in the news (Mellado 2015).

Routinized practices like criticism or questioning manage to transcend unattainable normative aspirations and show that journalists worldwide have assimilated, at least partially, their monitoring function. Given the political, societal, and economic circumstances of news production, scrutiny not always elicits actual accountability, but partial, timid, or partisan-driven watchdog is still better than no watchdog at all. Future research should be able to test our hypotheses in other media platforms (TV, radio, online news), including regions like Africa, the Middle East, and Oceania, that were not part of the study.

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ORCID iD

Adriana Amado  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7275-7991>

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The index classifies countries as full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes. For the purpose of this paper, flawed and hybrid democracies were considered as “transitional” according to their position between 2012 and 2015.
2. In the original operationalization of Mellado (2015), the indicator “investigative reporting” was included as part of the overall watchdog role model. However, for the analytical purpose of this paper, this item was left out on the grounds that investigative journalism can be practiced through an interventionist or a detached orientation.
3. Local teams in each country were trained in the application of a common codebook translated and back-translated from English into Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, Russian, Polish, Malay, German, French, Italian, Hungarian, Filipino, and Greek. Two to six coders per country were trained by their respective local researcher for forty hours in total in the application of a common codebook. The actual coding did not begin until intercoder reliability tests among coders were satisfactory.
4. The correlation coefficient between the two orientations to watchdog reporting was $r = .248$ ($p \leq .000$).

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Author Biographies

Mireya Márquez-Ramírez is associate professor of Journalism Studies and Media Theory, Department of Communications, Universidad Iberoamericana Mexico City.

Claudia Mellado is professor of Journalism at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile. She is the principal investigator of the Journalistic Role Performance cross-national study, as well as the leading editor of the book *Journalistic Role Performance: Concepts, Contexts and Methods* (NY: Routledge, 2017).

María Luisa Humanes is associate professor of Research Methods in Communication Studies, Department of Communication Sciences and Sociology, University Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid, Spain

Adriana Amado is a political analysis, activist and professor of Communication at the Institute of Social Sciences and Project Disciplines of Universidad Argentina de la Empresa

Daniel Beck is a lecturer in the Department of Communication and Media Research at University of Fribourg, Switzerland.

Sergey Davydov is associate professor in the Faculty of Communications, Media and Design at the Higher School of Economics, in Moscow, Russia.

Jacques Mick is associate professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology and Political Science, Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil.

Cornelia Mothes is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Media and Communication, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany.

Dasniel Olivera is assistant professor in the Faculty of Communications at University of Havana, Cuba, and a doctoral candidate in Social and Political Sciences at Universidad Iberoamericana Mexico City.

Nikos Panagiotou is assistant professor at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

Sergio Roses is assistant professor at the Department of Journalism, University of Malaga, Spain.

Henry Silke is lecturer in Journalism at the School of English, Irish and Communications, University of Limerick, Ireland.

Colin Sparks is professor of Media Studies, Department of Journalism, Hong Kong Baptist University.

Agnieszka Stępińska is professor at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland.

Gabriella Szabó is senior research fellow at the Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Hedson Tandoc Jr. is an associate professor and Director of the PhD and Masters by Research Programmes at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

Haiyan Wang is associate professor of journalism studies in the School of Communication and Design in Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, China.