

Educating attitude

The potential of professional roles and role perceptions
in journalism education

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Introduction

In several institutes for higher professional education¹ in the Netherlands competence based learning has been the standard for the past several years. Students who attend one of the four journalism schools at the Universities of Applied Science in the Netherlands can expect a curriculum that aims at increasing their competencies: the whole of relevant knowledge, skills and professional attitudes that is considered essential for the functioning of professional journalists. Knowledge and skills have obviously always been part of the educational programme, but teaching and assessing professional attitudes seems less straightforward.

In this paper, I explore how the use of *professional roles* and *professional role perceptions* can be useful when it comes to teaching journalistic attitudes. The use of professional roles as a standard in education is no novelty in the Netherlands. Dutch students who attend nursing school for instance, are completely familiar with their most important professional roles as *caregiver*, *director*, *designer*, *coach* and *professional*.² These roles give nurses-to-be a sense of what will be expected from them in their professional careers, while at the same time allowing them to create a personal interpretation of these roles and to lay emphasis on the roles that suit them best.

Students who attend journalism schools have to cope without such equivalents. This seems surprising to say the least, since the first studies that focused on journalists and their professional role perceptions date from the seventies, establishing a long tradition of role

¹ Although the term Universities of Applied Sciences is used by professionals in international settings, most Dutch refer to these institutions with the term HBO.

² All teaching members of the staff at Fontys University of Applied Sciences fulfil six professional roles: professional mentor, study career mentor, assessor, constructor of learning environments, researcher and team leader.

research (e.g. Janowitz, 1975; Johnstone, Slawski & Bowman, 1976; Köcher, 1985, 1986; Donsbach, 1982, 1983, 2008, 2010; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee & Voakes, 2007; Deuze, 2002, 2002a).

The question I address in this paper is if and in which way professional roles could function as valuable instruments in schools of journalism. In the conceptual framework, I elaborate on the concept and on two notions of professional roles that could both serve journalism education: a strongly normative and fixed conception on the one hand, and a more interpretive and flexible conception on the other. I discuss the potential of professional roles for students, for whom they might function as a framework that enables them to understand how they could shape their professional identities, as well as the potential for educators, who can use them as comprehensible and practical references to a professional attitude they expect from their students. In order to illustrate my ideas, I refer to the study of Dutch Journalist's roles and role perceptions in the context of the public debate, which I conducted as part of my PhD-project.

Conceptual framework

Roles are described as “those behaviors characteristic of one or more persons in a context” (Biddle, 1979: 58), and journalists' professional roles can be defined as the roles that are characteristic for them in a professional context. Hermans (2000) states that two notions of professional roles can occur. First there is a strongly normative aspect, which lies in the fact that roles are construed to enable people to function in a certain social context. In that context people share values and ideas about what constitutes normal or desirable behavior.

Fulfilling a certain social role is a way to live up to the expectations in a social setting (Coutu, 1951: 180), a way to maintain social structure (Hermans, 2000: 31).

Second, roles have an interpretive aspect, which allows people to deal with their roles in a more flexible way. From this point of view, roles are no longer more or less fixed prescriptions of normal behavior, but structures that guide people in deciding what options they have to react to the expectations of their social context. Turner (1962: 22) describes the interpretive role as “a sort of ideal conception which constrains people to render any action situation into more or less explicit collections of interacting roles.” Such a conception of roles comes in handy in situations in which different roles could be adopted, especially when these roles cannot be fulfilled at the same time, and a role conflict arises (Biddle, 1979: 394), or when journalists feel that the roles they usually take do not suffice.

Journalism studies enjoys a long tradition of research of professional roles and role perceptions, that originated decades ago (e.g. Janowitz, 1975; Johnstone, Slawski & Bowman, 1976; Köcher, 1985, 1986; Donsbach, 1982, 1983, 2008, 2010; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee & Voakes, 2007; Deuze, 2002, 2002a). In this tradition I have noticed a tendency to consider roles as rather normative concepts that frequently led to the distinction between several types of journalists. In such studies, ‘gatekeepers’ exist next to ‘advocates’, and ‘bloodhounds’ next to ‘missionaries’. In such *typifications* of professional roles, there is not much room for flexibility or contextual role-interpretation. Role perceptions are presented as relatively fixed categories. A gatekeeper is a gatekeeper, an advocate is an advocate, and a bloodhound is not easily compatible with a missionary.

Gradually a little more attention has been paid to more flexible interpretation of professional journalistic roles. According to Deuze (2004), as professionalization of the

profession took shape in the twentieth century, role perceptions that seemed clearly distinctive earlier seemed to merge. “In 2002, we see an extremely pluralistic profession, in which people cherish different (and sometimes conflicting) role perceptions at the same time” (Deuze, 2004: 160). This increasingly pluralistic view on role perceptions is endorsed by several other authors, such as Johnstone, Slawski & Bowman (1976), Weaver & Wilhoit (1996) and (Donsbach (2008).

For this reason most studies of the roles and role perceptions in journalism can give educators and students only a hint of an idea about the role perceptions among journalists. Such a typology of orientations in journalism could give a sense of what kind of attitude the profession expects of journalists-to-be, but it does neither give them a grip on the complex combination of (seemingly) conflicting roles, nor does it help them to construe an individual set of role perceptions that enables them to define a personal professional identity.

The combination of a normative role conception that define the kind of behavior that journalists in general reckon professional, and an interpretive role conception that consist of role elements journalists can could provide them with certainty, boundaries and a sense of how to be part of a collective, while at the same time giving them the freedom to be flexible and shape an individual professional identity.

Example: journalists and their roles in public debates

In the remainder of this paper, I give an example of what normative and interpretive roles could look like. I concentrate on journalists and their roles and role perceptions regarding a

distinctive aspect of their work: their activities in public debates³. I have been focussing on this context of their work during my PhD project⁴ about their democratic roles in public debates.

Obviously, the idea that journalists have a role in public debate can in itself be seen as a normative role description – one that could be used to distinguish their roles in public debates from their roles as, for instance, providers of news and context, researchers, or entrepreneurs. A similar exploration could be done for those roles, but here I concentrate only on the roles in het context of public debates.

Methodology

In my PhD project, I examined a combination of journalistic output and views of journalists. I took a set of four public debates⁵ as a starting point, and investigated all stories⁶ of Dutch journalists in seven media. The sample consisted of 1046 stories from newspapers (*de Volkskrant*; *AD*) free papers (*Sp!ts*; *De Pers*), current affairs shows (*Netwerk*; *Nova*), and a journalistic platform on the internet (*Joop.nl*).

These stories had several functions. Their first function was that they could be analysed to explore the characteristics of the constructed debate in the media (genres, presentation,

³ I define public debates as confrontations of different opinions about political and social matters that are either actively or passively accessible to a broad group of people (Pröpper & Van Kersbergen, 1995: 6).

⁴ Willemars, M. (expected 2014), *Journalisten, publiek debat en democratie: Meer dan een podium bieden?*

⁵ These debates were about the liberalization of the policy on embryo screening in the case of several hereditary types of colon, breast and ovarian cancer; about the arrest of the Dutch cartoonist Gregorius Nekschot because of some supposedly discriminatory cartoons; about the supposed censoring of the work of Dutch-Iranian photographer Sooreh Hera, whose work was banned from an exposition in Gemeentemuseum Den Haag; and about the indictment and prosecution of the Dutch right wing politician Geert Wilders, because of hate speech and discrimination.

⁶ With 'stories' I mean all the kinds of genres that ran in newspapers, in current affairs show and on the web.

prominence and temporal distribution); characteristics of the contributors (types, recurrence and variety); and of contributions (style and tone, standpoints, perspectives and arguments).

Their second function was that they provided a basis for the interviews I conducted. The data set provided me with the names of journalists that were involved in the production of the four discussions. I conducted in-depth interviews with 28 journalists, whom I selected according to the criteria of maximal variation considering their gender, age, level of education and experience. I selected journalists in both managing as executive functions, and journalists employed by media organizations as well as freelance professionals. I made sure that I did not only spoke to journalists with a prominent or distinctive performance in the discussion, and made sure to include journalists who stayed behind the scenes as well.

The third function of the stories was that they served as input for the interviews: the stories gave me material to confront journalists with, and a way to reconstruct how they acted in the production process (compare with Reich's reconstructive interviews (2009). This was the basis of a conversation about their perception of their own roles, and about their professions functions in public debates. I analysed journalists role perceptions based on their view on the function, form and development of debates; their ideas about their goals and positions in debates; and their thoughts about the selection of contributors and contributions in public debates.

The combined analysis of their views and their work resulted in an image of the various roles and role perceptions present among the population, in terms of both broad, normative orientational frameworks that all journalists agree upon, and in terms of more complex interpretational processes that represent a variety of professional choices journalists can make.

Roles as a relatively fixed normative framework

When we look at what journalists say and do in the context of public discussions, there are several roles they agree upon, and that can function as the broad orientational framework that describe what behavior journalists themselves consider part of their job.

A first thing they acknowledge, is that they function as *informants* who enlighten their audience about public debates. Providing information is journalism's core business, and most journalists describe this role as their most important role. Yet in spite of the fact that they emphasize the importance of this role in general, they disagree on what constitutes as useful information, and they have very diverse ideas about their audience.

Second, they agree that they should provide a platform for discussion – they are the *accommodators* of public discussion. Journalists cannot imagine that they would not make room for discussion in their papers, their sites and their shows, and they feel that their outlets would not be complete without these mediated discussions. But when they accommodate the debate, they make different choices and have many incompatible views of which contributors and contributions they should provide a platform for.

A third role that they consent with, is that they operate as *contributors* to public debate. Not only because they publish editorials, and share their comments on debates, but also because they influence the discussion by the way they inform their audience about it, and the way they accommodate it. But yet again, they have various ideas about how and to what extent they can and should do this.

As I stated earlier, these normative roles have the potential to be useful in educational settings, in the sense that they can serve as frameworks that define what journalists see as common denominators of their profession. They can give students an idea of what they should do to fit in a professional setting, and they can be used in journalism schools to give teaching staff a grip on what aspects of journalists behavior they should focus upon. The problem with these general roles is that there are so many ways to fulfil them, and so many reasons to, that they remain too vague for students to translate them to an individual professional attitude. Interpretive roles are more adequate for that purpose.

Roles as a set of flexible, interpretive choices

The fact that journalists agree upon some general notions of their roles in public debates, does not alter the great differences between individual journalists. I will discuss the variety of ways journalists interpret the roles they agree upon, by elaborating on the extreme positions they can take. These extreme positions give an idea of the freedom of choice that journalists have when they make an individual interpretation of the aforementioned roles.

Informing roles

If we look at the informing roles, the journalists in this study have various ideas about what kind of information they should share with what kind of audience. They all have their own audience, with its own characteristics and needs. Journalists at for instance *Netwerk* and *Splits* aim at an audience of ordinary, people, with an average interest in current affairs, but not necessarily much knowledge of the issues that public debates are about. These

journalists can interpret their informing roles as a role as *educators*, helping their audience understand what discussions. They sometimes function as *translators*, who clarify matters in understandable language. Useful information can be about the development of the public discussion, but it can also give basic background information about the issues that under discussion or about the way the political process is organized. Their goals vary, but journalists can feel the urge to *activate* or *empower* their audience. The general idea is that readers and viewers are no political animals – they are only moderately interested in the political process or political debates.

Journalists who work for *Nova* aim at an audience of highly educated, politically interested people, among whom are politicians and decision-makers. Journalists who work for such a group of viewers don't educate. They provide information about the discussion, give complex background information, and try to give all information necessary to make wise decisions. In doing so, they function as *informants or experts* in the process of decision making. Although they strive for a clear presentation of this information, translating matters into easily understandable stories is not necessary and they experience this as dumbing down.

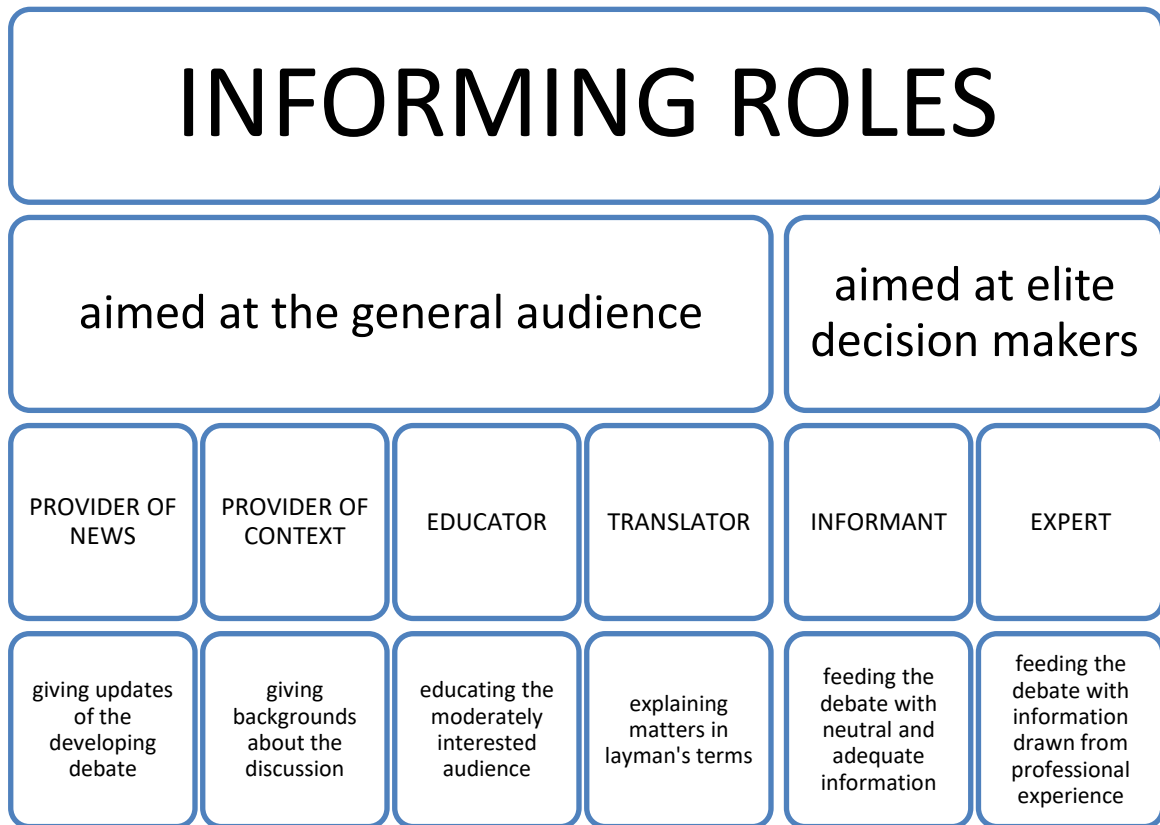


Figure 1 – Interpretive (aspects of) informing roles

Accommodating roles

To continue with the role as accommodators, some journalists prefer to facilitate contributions from politicians, experts and interest groups that fit within a somewhat elitist and institutionalized debate, while others accommodate public discussions around the contributions of citizens and ‘experts-by-experience’. Their choices in this respect correlate with the way they see their audience. Journalists give different reasons when it comes to the reasons why they select these contributors as well. Sometimes their role is to select people whose involvement in a discussion is clear, and they present the debate as a matter between the people who are suffering a wrong, and the people who are responsible for it (role: involvement) At other times, their role is to select the people who can best deliver their arguments. Than they select experienced debaters, such as politicians, spokespersons of

interest groups and opinion makers (role: presentation). They can strive for contributors that represent the opinions of larger groups, and focus on politicians and interest groups (role: representation), or they can aim at contributors that give authentic statements, like experts-by-opinion do (role: authenticity).

In giving space to different contributions and contributors, some journalist strive for a balanced debate , that pays attention to the most important positions, perspectives and groups in the discussion. Others try to emphasize extreme positions, in order to keep the discussion alive, and to focus on the opinions of overlooked groups.

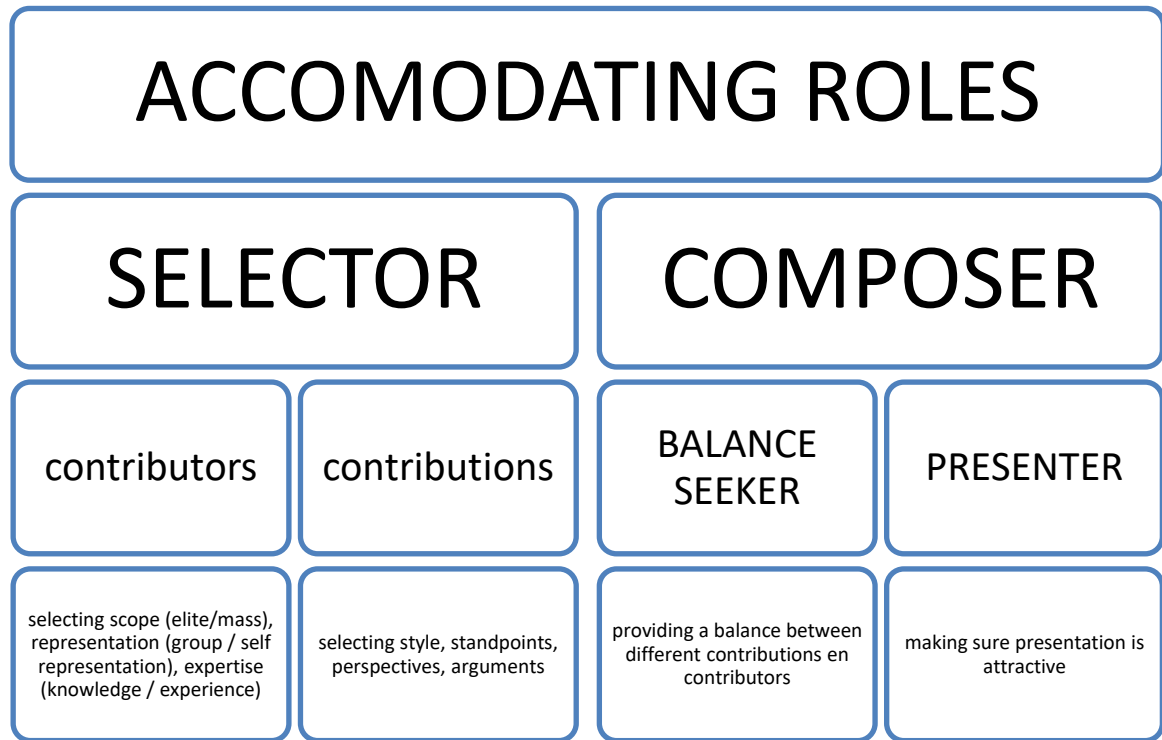


Figure 2 – Interpretive (aspects of) accommodating roles

Contributing roles

To finish with journalists' role as contributors to the discussion. Although all journalists in the study agreed that they had a role as contributors to public debates, they disagreed about the extent to which they should have active and visible positions in discussions.

There are journalists who maintain that they only contribute to debates because the platform they work for ventilates a certain view on the matters that are discussed, in editorials or, less explicitly, in the standpoints emphasized in the selection. Such an institutionalized view on their contributions indicates a role that requires journalists to position themselves as part of a collective, while the opposite role, of journalists who say they contribute to debates on an individual and personal level, exists as well.

Again, the reasons journalists give to prefer either a collective or an individual interpretation of their contributing roles, can vary, however there is a high degree of consensus among journalists who only see a collective contributing role. Their rationale is either that they have an unintentional contributing role, not because they want to proclaim a certain view, but because of the fact that they have to select, and that this process of selection automatically puts forward a certain view of the discussion. Others think of their role as a collective contributor in terms of a choice to advocate a certain philosophy.

Journalists who see themselves in an individually contributing role have more varying rationales. Some see themselves as advocates, not because of the ideas shared by their colleagues, but because they develop an urge to share their personal beliefs. Others see themselves as personal guides, who believe they cannot do more than share their interpretation of a debate with their audience. They believe an objective stance is impossible, because they cannot separate their being a journalist from being a citizen, with

his own ideas about the matters under debate. They believe they should try to be as transparent as possible about the limitations of the way they present events. Another rationale for an individual, personalized position in debates, is that such a position can increase the visibility of a journalist and raise the awareness of his work and his personal brand.

Some journalists believe that part of their contribution to debates lies in activating their audience. Some speak about the wish to involve their audience in the political process, others aim at enabling the audience to participate in public debate, while there is also a group that speaks of their roles in terms of giving the audience something to talk about at parties or when they meet colleagues at the coffee machine.

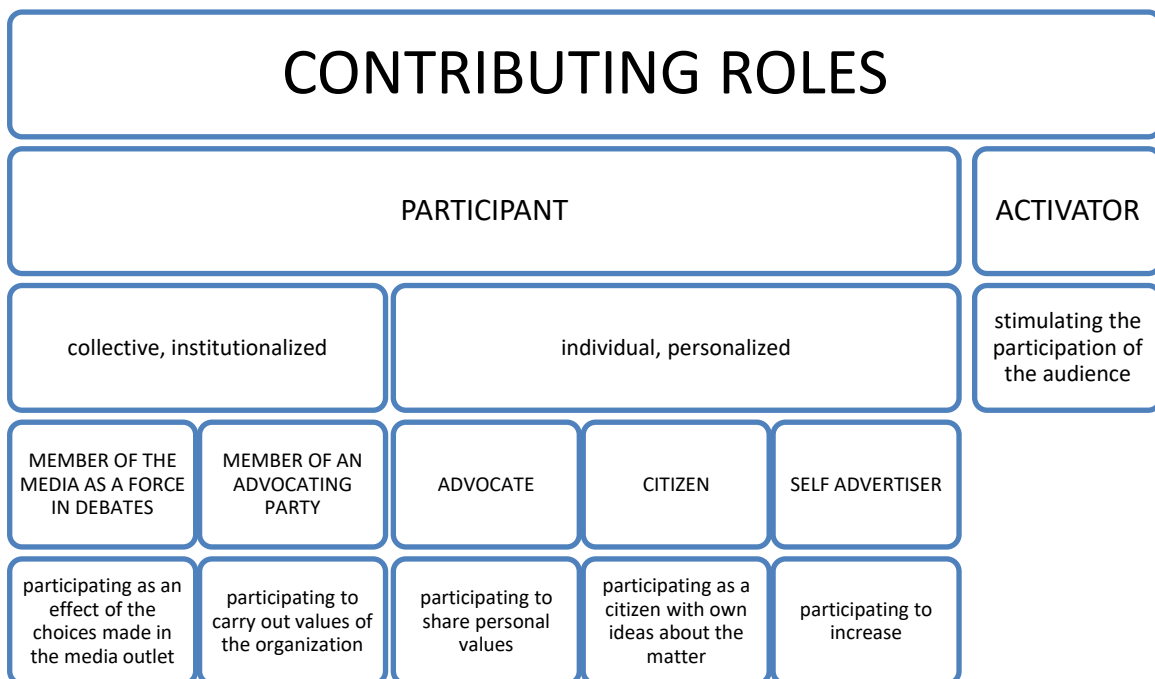


Figure 3 – Interpretive (aspects of) contributing roles

Conclusion and discussion

In this paper, I've suggested the use of a combination of normative, general role perceptions and interpretive, contextual role perceptions in order to establish a useful framework to teach journalism students what professional roles they can fulfil.

When we speak of roles as general, normative and relatively fixed notions that define what all journalists agree they should do in order to function as journalist, we speak about the common conceptions of professional behaviour, and describe roles should be part of every student's competency. Yet when we look closer, journalists aim at very different things when they say they fulfil the same role and they give very different reasons when they do the same things. This is where a more interpretive view on roles is useful, because such a view allows students to pick elements.

I've elaborated on what such notions of role conceptions could look like, by means of a qualitative study of journalists' work in public debates. This led to a structure in which general roles that could be seen as mandatory study material are supported by optional elements. Figure 4 shows how such a structure looks.

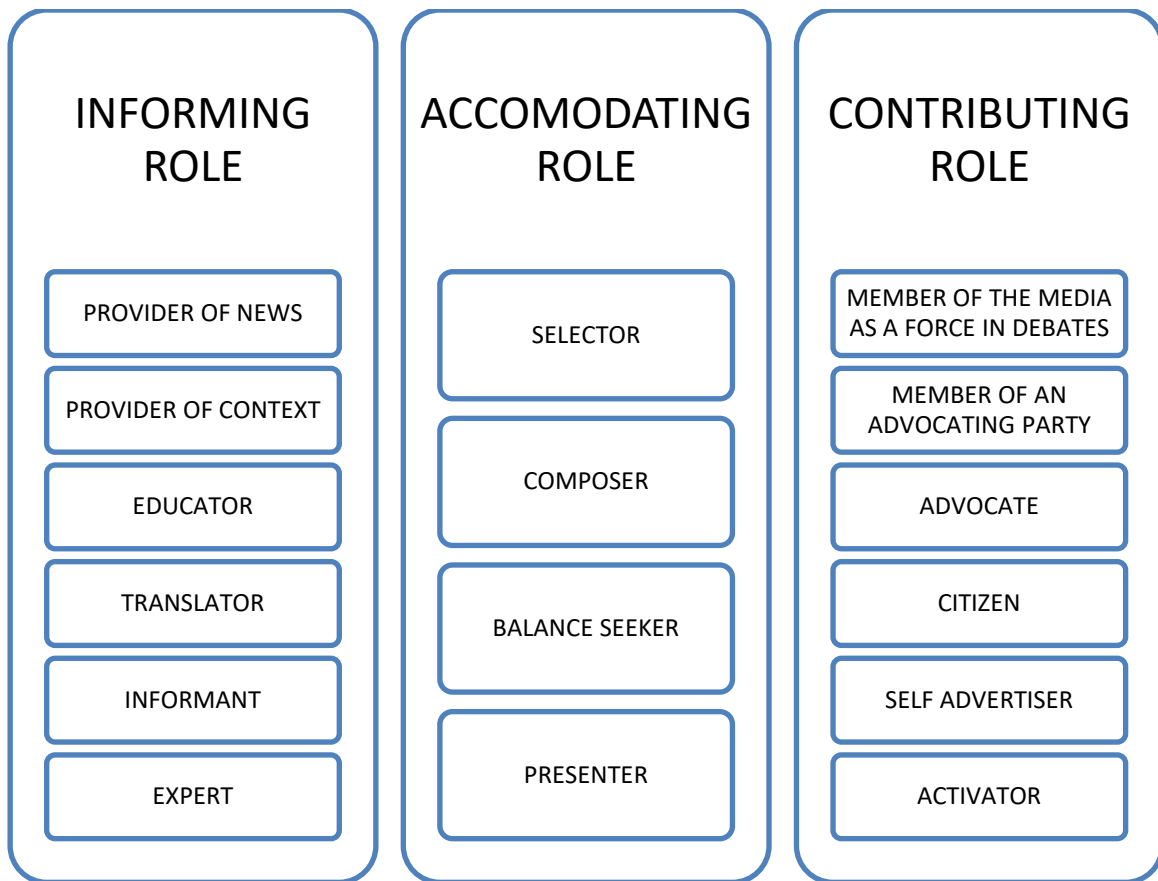


Figure 4 – Roles and supporting role elements

A normative role concept can provide a certain amount of certainty, while an interpretive can give future journalists the freedom to construct their own set of ideas about the profession drawing from a set of very different building blocks. Such a use enables teachers like myself to prepare young people for the reality of one and the same profession, while taking into account that these young people have different talents and ideas. Stimulating them to develop these talents en be true to their ideas may enable starting journalists to better position themselves in a field that asks for individual quality and self-confidence.

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the use of roles and role perceptions in journalism education. I propose a combination of two rather different role concepts: a set normative ideas that journalists agree upon, that describes the most characteristic features of the profession, and can be used as a framework of expected behaviour in curricula; and a set of interpretive ideas, that function as the variable role elements that individual students can use to construe roles that correspond with their personal ideas about the job.