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Published in:
Journalism

DOI:
10.1177/1464884918791224

Publication date:
2018

Document version
Andet version

Citation for published version (APA):
Post-print version

The cultural journalist around the globe: A comparative study of characteristics, role perceptions, and perceived influences

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Published in Journalism, First published August 16 2018,
https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918791224

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Abstract

This article presents a global-comparative study of journalists reporting about art and culture, that is, cultural journalists. In the literature, this particular group is said to be different from other types of journalists, because their professional work is guided more by an aesthetic logic than a news logic. Until now, however, this difference has mainly been studied in national contexts. Applying a global-comparative perspective by using data from The Worlds of Journalism Study, this article shows that cultural journalists around the globe do in fact differ systematically from other types of journalists in their social and professional characteristics, and also in terms of perceptions of influences on daily work and professional role perceptions. Even though media systemic contexts play a role, cultural journalists do have distinct characteristics worldwide. This is the first study to apply such a global-comparative perspective to the role perceptions of this particular group of journalists.

Keywords

Arts journalists, comparative research, cultural journalism, cultural journalists, lifestyle journalists, The Worlds of Journalism Study

Introduction

Journalists reporting on arts and culture are said to be different from other types of journalists in their role perceptions, values, and professional practices (e.g. Forde, 2003; Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). Until now, these differences have mainly been studied in single-nation contexts (e.g. Hovden and Knapskog, 2015; Jaakkola, 2015; Riegert et al., 2015). This article aims to remedy this void by analyzing the social and professional characteristics of cultural journalists as well their perceptions of influences on daily work and professional role perceptions from a global-comparative perspective, based on The Worlds of Journalism Survey, which compares journalistic cultures across 67 countries. ‘Cultural journalist’ is difficult to define. The literature lists countless
definitions of the concept of ‘culture’, and scholarship uses a wide range of terms for the combination cultural journalists: arts journalists, cultural reporters, critics, and lifestyle journalists (for overviews, see Jaakkola, 2015; Kristensen, in press). What complicates matters further is the increasing blurring of the boundaries of the beat toward politics, entertainment, celebrity, and consumption (Kristensen and Riegert, 2017). In this article, cultural journalists are defined as those respondents around the globe who in the survey self-identify as ‘cultural journalists’, that is, have marked ‘culture’ as their particular work beat.

Studying cultural journalists’ role perceptions is important for several reasons: First, content under the broad notion of culture has become increasingly important in news production since the mid-20th century (e.g. Janssen et al., 2008). The inclination among many journalism scholars to focus on mainly news journalism and political journalism thus creates an imbalance between academic foci and newsroom priorities. Second, the professional logics of cultural journalism, that is, human interest perspectives, cultural mediation, opinionated approaches, and personal style (e.g. Chong, 2017; Hellman and Jaakkola, 2012), influence and reconfigure existing conceptions and practices of journalism. Third, topics related to art and culture provide commercial opportunities for media institutions but also push the boundaries between journalistic content and market interests. This may influence role conceptions and practices of journalists working within these areas (e.g. Hanusch et al., 2017).

The article consists of five sections. The first section expands the argument for the need for comparative research in the field, taking both media systemic/geographical aspects and beat specificities into consideration. The second part provides a theoretical framework for understanding the professional, aesthetic logic characterizing cultural journalism, which has fostered the notion of cultural journalists being different from other journalists. The third section provides a methodological outline of The Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS). The fourth section presents the findings of the analysis, pointing to cultural journalists around the globe in fact being different not only from journalists from other beats but also from journalists often grouped with cultural journalists under umbrella terms such as soft journalism or lifestyle journalism. Grouping journalists together under such professional headings may thus be too rudimentary. Furthermore, even though media systemic contexts play a role, cultural journalists still have distinct characteristics worldwide.

Research context: Role perceptions and cultural journalism

Since the 1960s, a main topic in journalism studies has been the role perceptions of especially Western journalists (for an overview, see Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017). Recently, Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) pointed to no fewer than 18 different journalistic roles in the domain of political life and additional seven ideal roles in everyday life. While much of this research has focused on how professional journalists should ideally practice their societal obligations, attention has in recent years also been devoted to how journalists do in fact practice these roles (e.g. Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017). The comparative-global turn in journalism studies since the 1990s (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2009: 6) has brought increasing attention to national diversities in role perceptions and practices across media systems in Western and non-Western settings, inspiring numerous comparative studies (for an overview, see Mellado et al., 2017). A recent large-scale study is the WJS, which compares journalistic cultures in 67 countries around the globe (Hanusch and Hanitzsch, 2017).

However, not only national specificities are important to journalistic role perceptions and performances but also the specificities of particular journalistic beats. Most research has been devoted to the norms and practices of news journalists and political journalists, as they are often viewed as the cornerstone of the news institution (e.g. Neveu, 2002). However, more recently, research has emerged, especially in a Northern-European context, engaging with journalism on specialized, overlapping topics such as art, culture, entertainment, celebrity, lifestyle, and everyday life. They are often merged under umbrella terms such as ‘soft news’ (e.g. Sjøvaag, 2015) or
‘lifestyle journalism’ (Hanusch, 2012, 2017), but more specific terms are also used. Although some label it ‘arts journalism’ (e.g. Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Janssen et al., 2008; Szántó et al., 2004), ‘cultural journalism’ has become a common designation in recent years (e.g. Golin and Cardoso, 2009; Heikkilä et al., 2017; Jaakkola, 2015; Kersten and Janssen, 2017; Kristensen, in press), signaling a broader interpretation of the beat’s focus areas. The diverse terminology makes it difficult to gain a clear picture of the research field.

In existing research, there is a shared focus on cultural content in newspapers in specific national contexts, for example, in Brazil (Golin and Cardoso, 2009), Denmark (Kristensen, 2010), Finland (Jaakkola, 2015), the Netherlands (Janssen, 1999), Norway (Larsen, 2008), or the United States (Szántó et al., 2004). Another shared focus is the role perceptions and professional norms of cultural editors and journalists, but again mainly in national settings, for example, in Britain (Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007), Norway (Hovden and Knapskog, 2015), and Sweden (Riegert et al., 2015). A few studies have applied a comparative approach but mainly from a Western perspective. Janssen et al. compared the cultural coverage in Dutch, French, German, and US newspapers from 1955 to 2005 (Janssen et al., 2008; Kersten and Janssen, 2017; Verboord and Janssen, 2015), while Purhonen et al. compared the coverage in British, Finnish, French, Spanish, and Swedish newspapers from 1960 to 2010 (e.g. Heikkilä et al., 2017; Purhonen et al., 2017). These studies, among other things, show that newspapers bring more stories about culture and cover an increasingly broad range of cultural topics.

A common absence, however, is a global-comparative approach to professional characteristics and role perceptions of cultural journalists. By means of survey data from the WJS, this article aims to remedy this by fleshing out cultural journalists’ similarities to and differences from other types of journalists and around the globe.

**Theoretical framework: The aesthetic logic of cultural journalism**

Scholars use terms such as ‘journalists with a difference’ (Forde, 2003), ‘arts exceptionalism’ (Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007), and ‘aesthetic paradigm’ (Hellman and Jaakkola, 2012) to designate the particularity of cultural journalists in terms of professional role perceptions and practices of societal obligations. As a backdrop for the empirical analysis, the following outlines the background for and contours of this particularity, based on existing single-country studies.

A first focus area is cultural journalists’ academic background, because their training is more often in the arts and humanities than in journalism (e.g. Hovden and Knapskog, 2015; Jaakkola, 2015). Expert knowledge of art, literature, music, and so on is considered a precondition for having the authority and ability to write about, analyze, and evaluate cultural expressions and phenomena. This suggests that norms and approaches from the aesthetic fields are more important in cultural journalism than traditional news values. This has led to the self-perception among cultural journalists of being better educated than their peers from other beats (Forde, 2003; Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007).

The particularity of cultural journalists is also explained by the predominance of personal style or even subjectivity over neutral reporting: Opinionated, critical, and literary genres have a prominent place – especially the review is key (Heikkilä et al., 2017; Kersten and Janssen, 2017; Kristensen, 2010). Furthermore, personal curiosity and engagement are seen as more important than the objectivity norm, which also gives cultural journalists considerable freedom in choosing which topics to cover and how (Chong, 2017; Hovden and Knapskog, 2015).

Finally, the particularity is a result of cultural journalists being cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984) or cultural mediators (e.g. Janssen and Verboord, 2015) between cultural producers and cultural consumers. Cultural journalists serve not only as cultural gatekeepers but also share the cultural field’s passion for arts and culture, and are, according to Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen (2007), engaged in ‘the project of improving “public appreciation of the arts”’(p. 619). These close intertwinements with the cultural industries have been intensified by professionalized communication efforts (e.g. Davis, 2013) and made information subsidies potentially very
influential, or even ‘structurally embedded’ (Strahan, 2011: 128), in cultural journalism. This contrasts the normative role conceptions most often associated with (Western) journalism in terms of monitoring elites and informing citizens to make political decisions (e.g. Hanitzsch, 2011: 486).

Recent studies suggest that media institutional and professional changes have led to an increasing ‘newsification’ or ‘journalistification’ of cultural journalism (Hellman and Jaakkola, 2012; Sarrimo, 2017), referring to cultural journalism becoming more like news journalism. This is explained by, for example, cultural journalists becoming gradually more trained in journalism, media, and communication than in arts and letters (Hovden and Knapskog, 2015) and by the cultural department’s loss of autonomy in regard to the news desks (Sarrimo, 2017). As a consequence, news logics are seen to increasingly drive their professional work. Longitudinal studies have, for example, found that news genres have become more important in cultural journalism (e.g. Jaakkola, 2015; Szántó et al., 2004; Verboord and Janssen, 2015), although they have not replaced the key review genre. For these reasons, some speak of a marginalization of the aesthetic logic and a crisis in cultural journalism (Jaakkola, 2015; Sarrimo, 2017). Even though others have (con)tested this crisis discourse (e.g. Heikkilä et al., 2017; Kersten and Janssen, 2017), these more recent changes would suggest that cultural journalism has an increasingly hybrid or dualistic nature, mixing logics from the cultural or aesthetic field with news logics (e.g. Hovden and Knapskog, 2015; Jaakkola, 2015; Kristensen and From, 2015).

Based on this existing research about cultural journalism, but also based on the fact that this research has mainly been conducted in single-country contexts, this article poses the following research questions:

**RQ1.** Are cultural journalists in fact (still) ‘journalists with a difference?’ In other words, do cultural journalists around the globe systematically differ from other journalists in their countries in terms of social and professional characteristics, perceived influences, and role perceptions?

**RQ2.** Are ‘the journalists with a difference’ also ‘different from within?’ That is, do such differences vary by region (geographical, political, media system)?

**Method: The WJS survey**

The survey data used are from the second wave (2012–2015) of the WJS, a collaborative project describing the professional backgrounds and perceptions of over 27,500 journalists in 67 countries (WJS, 2016). Of these, 953 classified themselves as having culture as their main beat. Comparing a large number of countries can sensitize us to the large variation in the recruitment, work situations, and attitudes of cultural journalists across the globe. As noted by Sartori (1970), however, this also increases the problem of conceptual stretching, that is, that our categories will be applied much more heterogeneously than in a traditional single-country study. We need to consider some of the biases which might reside in the statistical categories, most importantly, that of a ‘cultural journalist’.

In the WJS survey, a journalist was defined as ‘a person who earns at least 50 percent of his or her income from paid labor for news media and is involved in producing and editing journalistic content as well as in editorial supervision and coordination’. This restriction likely favors cultural journalists working (mostly) daily over part-time contributors. Furthermore, choosing the category ‘cultural journalist’ involves two judgements, where respondents have to (1) decide that they work mainly in one specific beat (the alternative is being a ‘generalist’), and if yes, (2) decide that ‘Culture’, one of 11 categories, was the most appropriate. The first criterion likely favors cultural journalists in large news organizations, where there is more room for specialization. Here, however, the large national variations in specialization (e.g. for the European countries, between 15% and 66%) suggest the importance of other, complex factors. The second judgment is also troublesome, as the borders of ‘cultural journalism’ are, as noted, quite unclear, and worse, like specialization likely varies systematically with country-level factors. These kinds of methodological challenges –
the heterogeneity in the statistical category of a cultural journalist and the large differences in the national contexts they work, if being largely unavoidable in large-number comparisons of countries – poses serious problems for individual-level comparisons between cultural journalists and those in other beats. Multilevel analysis techniques are here required.

We will proceed with a descriptive analysis of where in the world cultural journalists appear to be most and least common. This is followed by a series of multilevel regression analyses (generalized least squares (GLS), random effects) of how their characteristics tend to differ from generalists and those in other beats, using predicted (fitted) values with country as the grouping variable. In practice, this means that we look for the differences between cultural journalists and other beats while controlling for country-level effects. With 25 countries suggested as the minimum number of countries to derive reliable estimates for such linear models (Bryan and Jenkins, 2016), the WJS dataset, with 67 countries, appear well suited.

We will, first, focus on differences in cultural journalists’ backgrounds, place of work, and position in the newsroom and second on how they differ in terms of what they see as relevant journalistic roles and important influences on their work. To see if these differences also appear across various regions and media systems, the same analyses are repeated separately for seven regions, although limiting the comparison of cultural journalists to generalists.

‘Journalists with a difference?’

This first part aims to answer if cultural journalists around the globe are in fact still ‘journalists with a difference’. Do they have distinctly different characteristics and perceptions of roles and influences compared to other types of journalists, and thus does the aesthetic logic of the beat still have precedence?

Overview

In the 67 countries that took part in the WJS survey, a national average of 41 percent of the journalists consider themselves to have a specific beat, and 7 percent of those classify themselves as cultural journalists. On average, 3 percent appear in the statistics as cultural journalists,² ranging from 18 percent in Austria to almost none in the United States, Turkey, Tanzania, and several other countries (Figure 1).³ When the known size of the journalistic populations has been adjusted, cultural journalists account for approximately 2.7 percent of all journalists in the 67 countries. Although the share is fairly low, it is evidence of the existence of a global community of cultural journalists.

The highest proportions can be found in the European and American countries (approximately 4%), and the figure is generally lower in the Asian (2%) and African countries (1.4%). There are large national variations, however, even in countries with quite similar societies and journalistic systems (e.g. 11% in Austria vs 5% in Germany). The few comparative studies of newspaper coverage of art and culture in the United States and selected European countries (Janssen et al., 2008; Verboord and Janssen, 2015) show that coverage has increased in all countries. Variations in the number of cultural journalists can therefore not be explained by different trends in the priority given to art and culture. The differences are more likely a result of the methodological challenges of national terminologies, newsroom organizations, and conditions of employment. The general pattern, however, is that both cultural journalists and specialized journalists are more common in countries commonly classified as democratic, affluent, highly developed with a well-educated population, a low level of corruption but a high level of press freedom and journalistic professionalism. This suggests that cultural journalists may also be ‘different from within’.
Social and professional characteristics
Existing research has provided little data on the social and professional characteristics of cultural journalists across countries. It has, however, pointed to a gendered split, hard news coverage being dominated by male journalists and soft news coverage by female journalists (North, 2016). This would suggest a female domination in domains such as arts and culture. Research has also found that cultural journalists are more often trained within arts and letters than in journalism (Forde, 2003; Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Hovden and Knapskog, 2015).

These patterns are substantiated by the analysis of the WJS data. Compared to other journalists in their country, cultural journalists around the globe are generally more likely to be female but also older and have more journalistic experience (Table 1). They are more likely to hold a master’s degree, but not more likely to hold a degree in journalism, indicating that many cultural journalists are still educated within other fields (such as arts and letters). In that sense, the norms and standards from aesthetic fields, or aesthetic rather than journalistic logics, are still predominantly their professional point of departure.

Cultural journalists are also more likely than others to work in magazines and radio, which shows that these media types are still important to cultural journalism. There is a small proportion of cultural journalists in stand-alone online media, which would contradict the more cyber-optimistic view that the Internet has set free cultural journalism from institutionalized media. Instead the data point to the continued importance of established news media as platforms for cultural information and debate. This finding may also be a result of the methodological design, giving precedence to news media and professional journalists. Cultural journalists are less likely than other journalists to work in local publications, and more likely to work in public service or state-owned media, which typically devotes more attention to art and culture than commercial broadcasters (Kristensen and Riegert, 2017; Riegert et al., 2015).

Cultural journalists are also more likely to work in non-permanent and part-time positions, confirming not only that this beat has less job security and stability than many other journalistic jobs but also that it employs a heterogeneous group of contributors with broad tasks and types of employment (Kristensen and From, 2015). This is corroborated by the fact that cultural journalists are more inclined to do other work besides journalism compared to other types of journalists.
Table 1. Selected properties of culture journalists compared to other beats: Predicted values, multilevel regression.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Generalist</th>
<th>News/current affaires</th>
<th>Politics</th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>Crime and law</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Sports</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Entertainment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in journalism</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism education</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Political scale             | 4.6        | 4.7                    | 4.6      | 4.9     | 4.6           | 4.1     | 4.8    | 4.5    | 4.3           |

| Workplace                   |            |                        |          |         |               |         |        |        |               |
| Daily newspaper             | 31%        | 39%                    | 41%      | 44%     | 53%           | 38%     | 45%    | 30%    | 30%           |
| Television                  | 24%        | 25%                    | 24%      | 16%     | 24%           | 18%     | 21%    | 21%    | 23%           |
| Radio                       | 19%        | 18%                    | 13%      | 8%      | 9%            | 23%     | 17%    | 13%    | 16%           |
| Magazine                    | 6%         | 4%                     | 5%       | 8%      | 3%            | 9%      | 2%     | 19%    | 14%           |
| Online (of offline outlet)  | 9%         | 7%                     | 8%       | 9%      | 8%            | 6%      | 9%     | 7%     | 9%            |
| Online (stand-alone)        | 8%         | 6%                     | 7%       | 7%      | 6%            | 7%      | 6%     | 9%     | 9%            |
| Public or state-owned       | 28%        | 27%                    | 25%      | 18%     | 20%           | 31%     | 24%    | 26%    | 19%           |
| National reach              | 47%        | 48%                    | 58%      | 64%     | 48%           | 54%     | 54%    | 58%    | 58%           |
| Regional reach              | 24%        | 25%                    | 19%      | 15%     | 29%           | 22%     | 21%    | 23%    | 19%           |
| Local reach                 | 21%        | 19%                    | 14%      | 12%     | 17%           | 15%     | 16%    | 11%    | 12%           |
| Manager                     | 43%        | 37%                    | 38%      | 37%     | 21%           | 40%     | 41%    | 36%    | 45%           |
| Full-time                   | 80%        | 84%                    | 84%      | 86%     | 87%           | 70%     | 82%    | 79%    | 78%           |
| Permanent position          | 49%        | 52%                    | 51%      | 53%     | 52%           | 43%     | 50%    | 48%    | 46%           |
| Freelancer                  | 9%         | 6%                     | 7%       | 5%      | 6%            | 15%     | 8%     | 10%    | 7%            |
| Do other work beside journalism | 24%    | 19%                    | 21%      | 19%     | 18%           | 33%     | 21%    | 22%    | 27%           |
| News items per week         | 27.2       | 28.9                   | 19.9     | 17.9    | 14.1          | 11.8    | 25.2   | 12.8   | 17.5          |
Most importantly, their social and professional characteristics are different not only from those of hard news journalists (following the general patterns sketched above) but also from those of journalists in other beats, often grouped under the soft news umbrella term. This gives further grounds for suggesting cultural journalists as ‘journalists with a difference’. They are typically much more experienced and more highly educated than entertainment journalists, and work less often in TV, magazines, and private media. These differences in media outlets and ownership are also true compared to health journalists, albeit to a lesser degree, but the two groups do share important similarities, for instance, the low share of male journalists and a relatively high educational level. Sports journalism, in contrast, is much more male-dominated (as argued by North, 2016) and the least educated among these ‘soft’ specializations.

Perceived influences
When journalists in the questionnaire report on their editorial freedom and to what degree various factors influence their work, we are dealing with perceived influences, which might not necessarily objectively influence the way they produce journalism (Hanitzsch et al., 2010). In the WJS survey, journalists were asked to rate various influences as important in their job from 1 (not influential) to 5 (extremely influential). These were later grouped in five indexes (for details, see Hanitzsch et al., 2010): Political influences comprise all influence from the political context including politicians, government officials, and censorship. Organizational influences are those that govern decision-making processes and routines in the media organization. Procedural influences include operational constraints in everyday work, like time pressure and shortage of resources. Economic influences include, for example, profit expectations and market research, and Personal influences involve expectations and pressures from colleagues, friends, family, and so forth. For details, see Hanitzsch et al. (2010). In addition, we will look at two questions regarding their feelings of autonomy: ‘Thinking of your work overall, how much freedom do you personally have in selecting news stories you work on?’ and ‘How much freedom do you personally have in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized?’ from 1 (no freedom at all) to 5 (complete freedom). The results from the comparisons of cultural journalists to those in other beats are given in Figure 2.

Given that cultural journalists have often been accused of running the errands of especially the cultural industries (Kristensen, in press), and are often characterized by low job stability, it is interesting to note that cultural journalists generally appear to feel many of the pressures in their work less strongly than other journalists do. This particularly applies to influences from the political context and procedural influences. Cultural journalists are also less likely to feel pressure from economic interests and organizational influences. The latter is confirmed by their feeling of having freedom to choose stories and what aspects of these stories to emphasize, thus confirming existing national studies (Hovden and Knapskog, 2015). Entertainment journalists are similarly autonomous in feeling low influences from politics and procedural influences but they are, in contrast, feeling very strong organizational and economic influences, making an important distinction between these two groups. The only form of influence that cultural journalists appear to feel as strongly as other journalists is personal influences from peers, friends, and family. This suggests that the individual journalist’s expertise, interests, and social relations, that is, aspects typically associated with the aesthetic logic, are still driving forces. Day-to-day events, traditional news values, competition with other news media, or pressures from power elites are seemingly less influential.

Cultural journalists also appear to feel less production pressure. Even full-time cultural journalists produce an average of only 12 items per week compared to other journalists who produce 25. Although some scholars speak of a ‘newsification’ or ‘journalistification’ of cultural journalism due to professional and institutional changes (Jaakkola, 2015; Sarrimo, 2017), production pressure is still less pronounced in this beat compared to others. This may be ascribable to the types of genres used in cultural journalism, characterized by longer analytical, critical, or commentary pieces. Not even the intense push of information subsidies from the cultural industries,
for example, publishers, movie distributors, and music agencies (e.g. Davis, 2013), seems to influence their perception of production pressures.

Roles perceived as important in their job
The aesthetic logic suggests that traditional roles associated with (political) journalism are less important to cultural journalists. This is partly supported by the WJS data. In the survey, journalists were asked to rate various roles as important in their job from 1 (not important) to 5 (extremely important). These were later grouped in four role indexes – monitorial, interventionist, collaborative, and accomodative (for details, see Hanitzsch, 2011). In addition, four specific roles (educate audience, provide advice for daily life, attract large audiences, and promote tolerance) were included in the analysis. The results are presented in Figure 3.

Like the other ‘soft beats’ (Sports, Health, Entertainment), cultural journalists find the monitorial role, which involves setting the political agenda, informing people politically, and monitoring political readers, less important than generalists and those in the ‘hard beats’ (News, Politics, Economy, and Crime).

They do not appear to be very different from other journalists, however, in regard to the interventionist role (advocating social change and setting the political agenda) or the collaborative role (supporting those in power). This seems somewhat surprising, given that content analyses have shown that institutionalized politics, for example, culture politics, is not high on the cultural news agenda, even in welfare states with considerable public funding for arts and culture (Kristensen and Riegert, 2017). This does not mean that ‘the political’ is not related to cultural journalism. Cultural journalism often touches upon politically saturated topics such as race, ethnicity, and religion but applies a ‘sociocultural’ more than an ‘institutionalized politics’ perspective (Riegert et al., 2015). This could explain the findings from the WJS survey on the perceived role of advocating social change and political agenda setting.

In regard to the accommodative role (providing entertainment and advice, reach large audiences), cultural journalists are placed in a middle position between those working with politics and economy, who consider this a less important part of their job, and journalists working with sport, health, and entertainment, who more often find this important. It is somewhat surprising that cultural journalists are not more likely than other journalists to believe that providing advice on daily life is important. Hanusch (2017), for example, shows that (Australian) lifestyle journalists see themselves as service providers and life coaches. This finding does perhaps reflect that cultural journalists, according to the definition used here, gravitate more toward traditional cultural journalism than lifestyle journalism, supporting the argument that grouping quite heterogeneous types of journalists under the lifestyle or soft journalism umbrella terms may be problematic. For entertainment and health journalists in the WJS data, this image of lifestyle journalists appears more fitting. The fact that cultural journalists are not more likely than other journalists to aim for the largest audience may partly be because they think of themselves as catering for distinct audiences. No cultural desk can cover all cultural subfields but may (need to) choose specific ones as a trademark (Kristensen, 2010).

What is it, then, that constitutes the role of cultural journalists, apart from its distance from the world of politics? Even though the WJS questionnaire aims to map broad national variations in the majority of journalists rather than examine beat peculiarities, there are some responses that place cultural journalists in a different category. They typically score higher in educating the audience, telling stories, and promoting tolerance. This emphasizes the potential societal importance of cultural journalism in a broader context, because the data identify enlightenment and providing alternative perspectives on the world, or ‘a cultural filter’ on pertinent issue of society, as key to cultural journalists’ role perceptions, making them distinctly different from political and lifestyle journalists.
Figure 2. Perceived influences and editorial freedom by beat: Coefficients, multilevel regression (GLS, random effects).
Figure 3. Role perception by beat: Coefficients, multilevel regression (GLS, random effects).
A more difficult question is whether the differences observed are effects of the distinctiveness of the beat or other statistical peculiarities of the group, for example, the female dominance within the field and the fact that cultural journalists are more highly educated. To examine such possibilities, we estimated a multilevel model (GLS, random effects) where the previous indexes for role adherence and perceived influences are regressed on the Democracy index Economy Intelligence Unit (EIU) and the Human Development index (United Nations) (UNDP), types of ownership, outlet, years of journalistic experience, gender, educational level, type of position and contract, and beat. The analysis supports the hypothesis that the beat of cultural journalism is important. Moreover, when controlled for the above factors, cultural journalists are significantly less likely than most other journalists to perceive political, organizational, procedural, and economic factors as important influences on their work. Controlled on the same factors, they are also significantly less likely to see the monitorial role as important than generalists and journalists working in current affairs and politics.

‘Different from within?’

The analysis so far suggests that cultural journalists are indeed often different from other journalists. There are many national exceptions to this sketch of an ideal type (Weber, 1949 [1917]), however, both in terms of background, work situation, and journalistic values. Cultural journalists in Sudan, for example, are much less likely to be female than male, and less likely to have a higher education than other journalists in their country. Belgian cultural journalists are more likely than other journalists to state that political and interventionist roles are important in their jobs. Such negative cases should of course, as Lakatos (2014 [1974]) insisted, be used progressively to expand our understanding of the phenomena investigated: Are the professional peculiarities suggested for cultural journalists a global phenomenon, or are they less marked in some media systems and political systems than others? In other words, are cultural journalists also ‘different from within?’

To analyze such variations, the countries in the WJS survey are grouped into seven regions. Three follow Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) classification: (1) Liberal/North-Atlantic, (2) Democratic corporatist/North European, and (3) Political pluralist/South European. The rest follow major geographical divisions: (4) Latin America, (5) Africa and Middle East, (6) Eastern Europe (including Russia), and (7) Asia. Table 2 and Figures 4 and 5 present some of the predicted differences in the background, perceived roles, and influences between cultural journalists and other journalists in different regions. To increase comparability, a series of control variables were used in the regressions.

Two general observations can be made. The first concerns the strength of the national context: cultural journalists are generally more similar in their backgrounds, role adherence and perceived influences to other journalists in their own country than to cultural journalists in other countries. Second, the general differences we have identified so far between cultural journalists and other journalists tend to be more or less a global phenomenon, and repeated in most regions to a smaller and lesser degree. This is true, for example, for the over-representation of females, journalists with a master’s degrees, journalists in a temporary position (Table 2), and journalists with a lower perceived importance of the monitorial role, and the lower feeling of outside influences (Figures 4 and 5).

When it comes to differences between regions, a first finding is that cultural journalists in liberal (and also African/Middle Eastern) countries appear to see their accommodative role – to cater for a mass market – as more important than other journalists in their country. The reverse is true for cultural journalists in democratic corporatist countries. This supports the idea that this model provides particularly favorable conditions for producing cultural journalism, at least when it comes to being independent from the various types of commercial pressures often said to be particularly influential in cultural journalism. This may be linked to the public service ethos at the
heart of this model to which coverage and debate of art and culture are key (e.g. Kristensen and Riegert, 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Characteristics of cultural journalists and generalists in seven world regions (N = 953).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (1 = yes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master degree (1 = yes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism education (1 = yes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online (off-line outlet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online (stand-alone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public or state-owned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National reach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional reach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Reach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freelancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do other work beside journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News items per week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p <0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001*
A second finding is that cultural journalists in Europe and the Americas appear to feel greater freedom from political and economic influences than other journalists, while this is less the case in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia. The journalists in the latter regions also differ from Western cultural journalists by being less, not more, likely to work in media with a national reach and have shorter journalistic experience than other journalists in their countries. Overall, this suggests that cultural journalism holds a less prestigious and less important role in these countries. This might be related to different degrees of specialization but needs to be researched further.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have demonstrated the importance of taking beat-specific aspects and geographical/media systemic aspects into consideration when studying cultural journalists’ characteristics, role perceptions, and perceived influences.

A *first main finding* is that cultural journalists around the globe tend to systematically differ from other types of journalists. First, cultural journalists are more often female, more educated, and have less job stability compared to other journalists. Second, several of these characteristics differ not only from those of hard news journalists but also from those of journalists from other beats, often grouped with cultural journalists under the soft news term. This suggests that such inclusive terms should be used with caution, if we wish to understand the specific role perceptions of particular types of journalists: cultural journalists, entertainment journalists, health journalists, and lifestyle journalists.
Third, cultural journalists in most countries appear to feel many of the pressures in their work less strongly than other journalists do, such as production pressures or editorial interference in story selection and framing (i.e. pressures from within the news organization) and pressures from advertisers and sources (i.e. pressures from outside the news organization). Within the news organization, the cultural newsroom thus still seems to represent a privileged space, driven less by immediacy and audience demands, and more by the expertise and predilections of individual journalists. The logics which have for long been associated with the aesthetic paradigm in cultural journalism are thus still key, at least to cultural journalists’ self-perceptions. This also suggests that cultural journalists do not experience their intertwining with culture industry agents or sources (advertisers, PR professionals, artists, distributors) as more influential in their daily work than other journalists, although this has often been a critical claim (e.g. Davis, 2013; Strahan, 2011). While the data support Hanusch et al.’s (2017) finding that lifestyle journalists feel great pressure from brands and PR professionals, such pressure is felt less by cultural journalists. Fourth, roles associated with political agenda setting and scrutinizing are, perhaps not surprisingly, of less importance to cultural journalists. Instead providing entertainment, telling stories, and promoting tolerance are key. These findings point to the cultural intermediary role of the beat having both publicist and commercial dimensions and thus to the societal potential of cultural journalism in a broader context (e.g. Kristensen, in press; Riegert et al., 2015).

A second main finding is that, even if cultural journalists are ‘journalists with a difference around the globe’ they are also ‘different from within’. While cultural journalists worldwide tend to occupy homologous positions vis-à-vis other journalists in their countries and regions (e.g. experiencing less pressure on their work than other journalists), they also tend to be more similar in their backgrounds and attitudes to journalists in their own country and region than to cultural journalists in other countries and regions. The media systemic contexts and the particularities of the beat interact. This point should be extended to most other beats, which seem to follow a similar logic of ‘similarity with a difference’, supporting arguments that beats are a fundamentally
important factor in forming the journalism being done in them. Although not surprising, the finding also reaffirms the challenge of speaking of ‘journalists’ as a universal professional group. This study would, at least, suggest that we should look at the specific beats within which roles are performed to fully understand journalism’s professional diversity.

**Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Independent Research Fund Denmark, grant: DFF – 4180-00082.

**Notes**

1. See the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS) Field Manual and WJS questionnaire for details.
2. Other specializations: News 6.5 percent, Economy 4.4 percent, Sports 4.4 percent, Politics 3.6 percent, Crime 2.2 percent, Domestic Politics 2.2 percent, Entertainment 1.8 percent, Foreign politics 1.6 percent, and Health 1.5 percent.
3. Additional tables and figures are available in an online supplement, see the journal homepage.
4. Coefficients: Generalists .004, News .03, Politics -.03, Economy .02, Crime and law .02, Sports .08**, Health .11**, and Entertainment .15***.
5. Coefficients: News -.06, Politics -.18***, Economy -.44***, Crime and law -.13**, Culture .30***, Sports -.24***, Health -.20***, and Entertainment .10.
6. The following control variables were used: Human Development Index (HDI) (1 = high, 0 = low), EIU Democracy Index (1 = high, 0 = low), Ownership (private/commercial or state/public), type of outlet (daily newspaper, weekly newspaper, magazine, radio, tv, news agency, stand-alone online), years of journalistic experience, full-time (1 = yes, 0 = no), and gender.

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