

# Exploring Health Journalists' Professional Role Conceptions: A Comparative Analysis of Newspaper and Other Health Journalists

JiYeon Jeong<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, School of Advertising & Public Relations, Hongik University, Korea,  
[jjyeong@hongik.ac.kr](mailto:jjyeong@hongik.ac.kr)

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**Abstract:** Health journalists play a vital role in shaping public perceptions and decisions regarding personal and public health-related issues. However, there has been limited research exploring health journalists' professional role conceptions, and the significance of these roles for sustaining the health industries remains understudied. This research aims to address this gap and enhance understanding of the profession by exploring how health journalists perceive their professional roles and their impact on the sustainability of the health industries. By utilizing secondary data from a professional research center that conducted a national survey (N=774) of health journalists, this study reveals that health journalists prioritize their role conceptions similarly to previous research, with the order being interpretive, disseminator, adversarial, and populist mobilizer. Notably, health journalists perceive the adversarial and populist mobilizer roles much more important than journalists previously surveyed. Newspaper health journalists attribute greater importance to their professional roles than health journalists working for other news delivery channels or general newspaper journalists. Overall, health journalists earnestly strive to fulfill an educator role, which is critical for translating scientific medical information. This research sheds light on the complexities of health journalists' role perceptions and contributes to a deeper understanding of the distinct professional identity of health journalism. The study's findings challenge conventional assumptions and have significant implications for advancing the field, fostering informed and impactful health journalism that serves both the audience and society at large.

**Keywords:** Health Communication, Health Journalism, Health Journalist, Newspaper Health Journalists, Professional Role Conceptions

## 1. Introduction

The field of journalism plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and influencing societal decisions. Understanding how journalists perceive their professional roles is vital for comprehending the sociology of news work and its influence on shaping the public's perception of reality. As pointed out by Weaver and Wilhoit[1], the identity of American journalists significantly influences, shapes, and biases the news, underscoring the critical need for a closer examination of this aspect. However, despite ongoing research exploring journalists' perceptions of their professional roles, a noticeable gap remains in understanding health journalists' distinct professional role conceptions.

Health journalism covers personal and public health issues and health journalism stories are among the most prevailing that run in media[2]. Health journalists play a crucial role since they influence the decisions of the readers including the general public, policymakers, physicians, and researchers.

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However, the specific perceptions and role conceptions of health journalists have not received adequate attention in the existing research literature. To bridge this crucial research gap, this study seeks to explore how health journalists view their professional roles and by comparing the responses of health newspaper journalists with those of other health journalists and general newspaper journalists, as previously captured in Cassidy's research[3]. To accomplish this, the study adopts four professional role conceptions introduced by Weaver and his colleagues[1][4], and utilized by Cassidy[3]: 1) interpretive role, 2) adversarial role, 3) disseminator role, and 4) populist mobilizer role.

In sum, the primary objective of this research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of health journalists' professional role conceptions and unveil the complexities surrounding their unique professional identity. To achieve these objectives, this study utilized secondary data from a professional research center that conducted a national survey of health journalists to capture their role perceptions accurately. By analyzing the survey data, this study aims to identify patterns and variations in how health journalists perceive their roles, which may have significant implications for the sustainability and effectiveness of health communication. This research challenges conventional wisdom about these journalists and the sociology of the news, thereby carving out a distinct professional identity for health journalists.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Professional Roles of Journalists

The Scholars have conceptualized the professional roles of journalists through theorizing and surveying professional journalists, with much current work based on that begun in the 1970s[1][3-10]. A look into what defines journalistic roles stems from an interest in understanding how journalists perceive their jobs because there are no formal "professional" criteria for entering the field or standards by which to measure and classify a journalist. Contemporary debates about whether bloggers are journalists reintroduce the contestation of how journalists and their roles should be defined. Compared with other occupations that have been professionalized including accounting, law, and medicine which require a standard educational foundation and a credentialing process, journalism mandates no such model. It may be argued that professional journalist associations, such as the Society of Professional Journalists, set the standards for the profession in lieu of credentialing. However, research shows that journalists are also less prone to belong to professional organizations than employees in other occupations and are also less likely to follow professional behaviors prescribed by professional journalistic organizations[4]. That does not mean, though, that journalists do not share a vision or set of values.

Recent survey research on journalist attitudes and perceptions shows that journalists tend to believe that they perform a public service and that their two most important tasks are "investigating government claims" and "analyzing complex problems"[9]. The results are similar to the previous studies. In their 1992 national survey of 1,410 journalists, Weaver and Wilhoit[1] identified four distinct roles that identified journalists' perceptions of journalistic roles, which were also studied by Weaver and his colleagues[4] in their 2002 survey of U.S. journalists. The authors found that there was some overlap among the roles but distinguished the four roles as: interpretive, disseminator, adversarial, and populist mobilizer. In the series of Weaver and his colleagues' surveys in 1992, 2002, 2013, and 2022, a majority of the journalists surveyed identified with the interpretive role, which included "investigating government claims, analyzing and interpreting complex problems, and discussing public policies in a timely way"[1] (p. 137). This remained the largest category in Willnat and Weaver's 2013 survey[9]. The second largest category identified was the disseminator role. This role was defined as "getting information to the public quickly, and avoiding stories with unverifiable 'facts'"[1] (p. 138). Even

though there was a steep decline in the disseminator role in 2002 and 2013, “getting information to the public quickly” were deemed “extremely important” by a clear majority. Although often touted as the normative role for journalists, the adversarial role was less important than other two roles, interpretive role and disseminator role. This role was measured as “being constantly skeptical of public officials as well as business interests”[1] (p. 139). The smallest category was that of the populist mobilizer. This role included allowing the public to express its views, developing cultural interests, providing entertainment, and setting the political agenda.

Other researchers have investigated these roles. For instance, Plaisance and Skewes[11] examined how three of the roles, adversarial role, disseminator role and interpretive role, matched newspaper journalists' stated values. They similarly found that timeliness, or the need to “get information to the public quickly,” was the highest rated role responsibility identified by the journalists. Results revealed some support for the idea that journalists who took on the interpretive role tended to be associated with the values “civic-minded,” “imaginative,” and “capable” (p. 841). Cassidy[3] further explored journalists' roles by comparing the professional role conceptions of print newspaper journalists with those of online newspaper journalists. He found that print newspaper journalists perceived the interpretive role to be significantly more important than online journalists, while online newspaper journalists perceived the disseminator role, especially “getting information to the public quickly”, as more important than newspaper journalists.

The following section reviews research that has been conducted with health journalists and helps to set the context for the researcher's inquiry.

## 2.2 Studies of Health Journalists

Health journalism covers issues of personal and public health through newspapers, magazines, television and radio broadcasts, and Web sites. Like other forms of journalism, health journalism typically targets a lay audience and health journalists themselves seldom have medical training or degrees. According to Lantz & Lanier[2], health journalism stories are among the most prevalent stories that run in consumer media and can be referred to as medical science journalism, health reporting/writing, and medical/health news. Health journalism is important because of the potential effects it can have on the public and policymakers[12]. The degree of influence on health understanding is unknown[13], but several facts have been established. The general public, as well as those in medical research and practice, learn of medical developments from media[14]. The impact of this kind of reportage appears in micro settings, such as patient-physician communication[15], as well as macro settings, such as legislative proceedings[16-18]. Health journalism is considered to have benefits[17][19] and drawbacks to public health[17]. Additionally, both health journalists and their audience members are faulted for unrealistic expectations of conclusive scientific research[20]. Because health journalism influences the decisions of the public, physicians, researchers, and policymakers, this type of communication and its effects are a primary focus for medicine and media scholars.

One of the central critiques leveled at health journalism is that it does not give complex medical issues the contextual treatment they deserve in order for people to understand and assess risk[21]. Levi[14] outlines several pitfalls in how medicine is covered, most importantly that journalistic simplicity and clarity causes complicated issues to morph into a “few digestible pieces” (p. 16). Similarly, Shuchman [19] believes there are four main problem areas with medical reporting: sensationalism, biases and conflicts of interest, lack of follow-up, and stories that are not covered. Adding to that list is the perception that journalists do not consider story effects to be paramount. “Journalists' primary concern is accuracy, clear reporting, with secondary concern for a story's consequences. Journalists consider themselves primarily reporters rather than educators, but the public expects reporting to contain an education element”[2] (p. 1310). Continued research on health journalists will help clarify whether there

is merit to these charges and whether health journalists operate using different ideas of professional roles than general news journalists.

In a survey of newspaper and magazine health journalists (N = 396), Hinnant and Len-Ríos[22] found the health journalists face challenges in maintaining scientific credibility while communicating complicated medical science information to a lay audience. Specifically, in the interview results from this research, it emerged that health journalists avoid “bogging down” their stories with too much technical information, and they spurn “dumbing it down” by including some of the technical information. A majority of the newspaper and magazine health journalists (71%) in the study reported that the ability of their readers to understand medical information is important to consider when they are working on a health story. The idea that health journalists do not think about effects of their work is worth more exploration.

A study by Chew, Mandelbaum-Schmid, and Gao[23] explores how health journalists cover controversial science, specifically mammography guidelines. The authors found that journalists understand the scientific controversy about mammography, but “their stories are subordinate to the editorial pressures of reader interest, advocacy groups, and advertising demands, as well as the economic goals of media organizations” (p. 347). This journalistic perspective could be associated with Weaver and his colleagues’[1][4][9] adversarial role, but is perhaps suppressed by health journalism conventions and the need to provide audiences with clear answers and recommendations. The layers of editorial control might work to confound professional traits of health journalists in that organizational—and extramedia—level factors also shape the published product, as they do in many journalism work environments. The Chew and her colleagues’ study[23], however, illuminates how controversy, which is an important news value in other journalistic contexts, becomes suppressed in health journalistic news contexts.

Ultimately, health journalism work differs in important ways from other types of journalism work in light of its potential impact on public health spheres and private health decisions. Eggner[24] states: “As long as a discrepancy exists between medical wisdom and the health of the population, there will be a valued role for the medical journalist” (p. 1400). This research explores the question of how journalists prioritize their “valued role.”

### **3. Research Questions**

This research aims to enhance understanding of the profession by exploring health journalists’ perceived professional role conceptions for sustainability. Based on the review of the literature, the researcher offers the following research questions.

The first question focuses on understanding how health journalists overall rank the importance of their role conceptions. Therefore, the researcher asks:

RQ 1: What are the professional role conceptions of health journalists?

Next, this research explores how newspaper health journalists differ from other health journalists and general newspaper journalists by comparing how they rate the importance of their role conceptions. The researcher is interested in knowing:

RQ 2: How do the professional role conceptions of newspaper health journalists compare with those of other health journalists, and general newspaper journalists, as previously identified by Cassidy [3]?

The following section discusses the methods used to answer above research questions in this study.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design**

To test the proposed research questions, this study utilized secondary data from a professional research center that conducted a national survey of health journalists. The survey measured the practices, opinions, and perceptions of health journalists. The Association of Health Care Journalists provided help in developing the sampling frame and used names identified from Bacon's Media directory online.

## 4.2 Respondents of the Study

To conduct the survey, health journalists were recruited nationally using Bacon's Media Directory. The survey response rate was 61.9%. There were a total of 774 completed surveys from health journalists across various media channels, including 309 survey responses from newspaper health journalists.

## 4.3 Research Instrument

### 4.3.1 Health journalists' professional roles

A series of questions was used to determine health journalists' professional role conceptions. Questions were taken from Weaver and his colleagues[3][6] and Cassidy[5], and adapted for the populist mobilizer role for the sample being surveyed. The interpretive role included "Journalists should provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems." The disseminator role included "journalists should get information to the public quickly." The adversarial role (Cronbach's alpha = .86,  $r = .76$ ) included "Journalists should be constantly skeptical of business" and "Journalists should be constantly skeptical of public officials." The populist mobilizer role included "Journalists should concentrate on news that's of interest to the widest possible audience." The response scale ranged from 7 (extremely important) to 1 (not at all important).

### 4.3.2 Journalist by medium type

This variable was measured by asking journalists "What type of organization do you work for?" Categories included in these analyses are: newspaper, radio, television, magazine, wire service, freelance, online, trade publication, and newsletter. Newspaper health journalists were defined as health journalists who work for newspaper organization. Other health journalists work for other organizations in these categories.

## 4.4 Statistical Tools for Analysis

For statistical analysis, one-sample t-tests and an independent t-test were used. All statistical tests were conducted using SPSS 21.0 for Windows. A significance level of .05 was employed for all statistical analyses.

## 5. Findings

RQ1 asked what the professional role conceptions of health journalists are (see Table 1). The top rated professional role of health journalists was the interpretive role ( $M = 6.27$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) followed by disseminator role ( $M = 6.06$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), adversarial role ( $M = 5.60$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ), and then populist mobilizer role ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ). The proportions of health journalists who rated each role as extremely important were in same order as above: interpretive role (61.88%), disseminator role (47.57%), adversarial role (34.99%), and populist mobilizer role (12.7%).

[Table 1] Comparison of Means of Dimensions of the Professional Role Conceptions

Professional Role Conceptions	Journalist Type			<i>t</i> -value				
	All Health Journalists		Newspaper Journalists (c)					
	Newspaper Health Journalists (a)	Other Health Journalists (b)		n, M (S.D)	n, M (S.D)	n, M (S.D)	<i>a</i> - <i>b</i>	<i>a</i> - <i>c</i>
Interpretive	766, 6.27 (1.23)		306, 6.34 (1.18)	460, 6.22 (1.27)	654, 6.29 (1.01)	1.335	.787	-1.157
Disseminator	761, 6.06 (1.13)		305, 6.31 (.92)	456, 5.89 (1.23)	654, 6.03 (.97)	5.501***	5.422***	-2.501*
Adversarial	766, 5.60 (1.31)		306, 5.80 (1.21)	460, 5.46 (1.36)	654, 4.62 (1.60)	3.543***	17.165***	13.250***
Populist Mobilizer	764, 4.42 (1.66)		307, 4.85 (1.49)	457 4.13 (1.71)	654, 4.82 (1.42)	6.183***	.355	-8.657***

Note: \**p*< .05, \*\*\**p*< .001

To address RQ2, health journalists were divided into two groups: newspaper health journalists and health journalists who work for other media organization types. The other organizations included radio, television, magazine, wire services, freelance, online, trade publications, and health newsletters. Differences in professional role conceptions between newspaper health journalists and other health journalists were compared with data on the role conceptions of general newspaper journalists previously studied by Cassidy[5]. For comparison, only the mean scores of the same questions in Cassidy’s research were matched to the questions in this study.

To assess any statistical differences among these three groups, one-sample *t*-tests were used. In addition, an independent *t*-test was run to determine the statistical difference in professional role conceptions between newspaper health journalists and other health journalists.

As shown in Table 1, the results were similar to the interpretive role conception. When comparing newspaper health journalists (*M* = 6.34, *SD* = 1.18) to other health journalists (*M* = 6.22, *SD* = 1.27), *t* (764) = 1.34, *p* = .182, the difference was non-significant. When comparing the newspaper health journalists (*t* (305) = .79, *p* = .432) as well as the other health journalists (*t* (459) = -1.16, *p* = .248) to general newspaper journalists (*M* = 6.29, *SD* = 1.01), again, there were no significant differences among the groups in their perceptions of the interpretive role conception.

Next, the researcher turns to examining the disseminator role. All three groups also placed high importance on the disseminator role conception. The mean scores for disseminator role conceptions were as follows: for the (a) newspaper health journalists, (*M* = 6.31, *SD* = .92); for (b) other health journalists, (*M* = 5.89, *SD* = 1.23); and for (c) general newspaper journalists, (*M* = 6.03, *SD* = .97). One-sample *t*-tests and an independent *t*-test show that the differences in professional role conceptions among all these groups were significant (a-b: *t* (750.03) = 5.50, *p* < .001; a-c: *t* (304) = 5.44, *p* < .001; b-c: *t* (455) = -2.50, *p* < .05). The newspaper health journalists perceived the disseminator role as significantly more important than did other health journalists and than did newspaper journalists. Also, other health journalists perceived this role to be significantly less important than did general newspaper journalists.

Significant differences among the groups in the perceptions of adversarial role conception were also found through an independent *t*-test for (a) the newspaper health journalists (*M* = 5.80, *SD* = 1.21) and (b) other health journalists (*M* = 5.46, *SD* = 1.36), and the one-sample *t*-test for (c) the general newspaper journalists (*M* = 4.62, *SD* = 1.60) and the newspaper health journalists as well as the other health journalists (a-b: *t* (764) = 3.54, *p* < .001; a-c: *t* (305) = 17.17, *p* < .001; b-c: *t* (459) = 13.25, *p* < .001).

Both newspaper health journalists and other health journalists perceived this role conception as significantly more important than general newspaper journalists. Newspaper health journalists placed the highest importance on this role among the groups.

The results showed that the mean scores for the populist mobilizer role conception of all three groups were comparatively lower than the three other role conceptions. The mean scores for populist mobilizer role conceptions were as follows: for the (a) newspaper health journalists, ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ); for (b) other health journalists, ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ); and for (c) general newspaper journalists ( $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ). The independent  $t$ -test found that the difference was significant between newspaper health journalists and other health journalists ( $t(711.92) = 6.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This indicates that newspaper health journalists perceive this role to be significantly more important than other health journalists. The one-sample  $t$ -test also showed that there was a significant difference between other health journalists and general newspaper journalists ( $t(456) = -8.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with general newspaper journalists perceiving this role conception as significantly more important than other health journalists. However, when comparing newspaper health journalists to general newspaper journalists, the difference was non-significant.

## 6. Discussion

In terms of professional role conceptions, health journalists identified with the four roles in the same order as Cassidy[5] examined, with the order being interpretive, disseminator, adversarial, and, finally, populist mobilizer. However, it is noticeable that the proportion of health journalists who rated the adversarial role and the populist mobilizer role as extremely important (34.99%; 12.7%, respectively) were nearly double that of those journalists (17.6%; 6.2%, respectively) previously found by Weaver and Wilhoit[6]. On the other hand, the proportions of health journalists who rated interpretive role or disseminator role as extremely important (61.88%; 47.57%, respectively) were about the same (62.9%; 51.1%, respectively). The finding that the importance of the populist mobilizer and adversarial roles was nearly doubled for both is noteworthy because these two roles represent a more emotional investment in protecting and serving the reader. Perhaps there is something specific about the topic of health that elicits this kind of reaction from journalists. The varying degrees of intensity toward professional roles between health journalists who work in newspapers as opposed to those who work in other media and to general newspaper journalists is also a noteworthy finding of this research. More specifically, newspaper health journalists more strongly identified with three of the professional roles (disseminator, adversarial, and populist mobilizer) than did other health journalists. One argument to explain the level of intensity among newspaper health journalists could be that these professional roles were developed based on the work of newspaper journalists, so it would make sense that newspaper health journalists would more closely align with them than health journalists working in other media. It could also be that newspaper health journalists, because of the nature of the medium, have more latitude in providing in-depth coverage than other media including radio, television, and online, except magazine, that the researcher finds these differences. Furthermore, since health coverage in newspapers often appears alongside political news coverage, the health journalists might feel pressure for their material to be as serious and socially impactful as political news. They may believe that their work has more of an impact than do other health journalists. These questions are worthy of further exploration.

The fact that both newspaper health journalists and other health journalists rated the adversarial role as more important than did general newspaper journalists may lie in the fact that health stories have to do with concern for the audience's well-being. While some health stories might appear benign, e.g., choosing the right walking shoe to protect or support your feet, other health stories convey information that can lead to life-altering decisions—to undergo chemotherapy, to enroll in a clinical trial, or to forego certain controversial cancer screenings (e.g., mammography and PSA screenings). Additionally, health

journalists might feel a particular affinity for the watchdog role if they view it as protecting consumers from organizations that profit from citizens' poor health.

Newspaper health journalists were found to align themselves more closely to the populist mobilizer role than were other health journalists. That finding may be due to the fact that newspapers are more local than some of the other media journalists work for (e.g., freelancers, health newsletter journalists and magazine journalists). A look at descriptive statistics shows that the number of newspaper health journalists who work for community media was 120 (15.56% out of overall health journalists), while the number of non-newspaper health journalists working for community media was 25 (0.70%). This reinforces Weaver and his colleagues' [3][6][10] point that journalists working for smaller media outlets, such as local newspapers, who see audience members as contributors to the journalistic process, tend to associate with the populist mobilizer role.

This research offers important lessons for the field of health journalism. One important question is: Why is not the populist mobilizer role ranked higher than fourth on the list of professional roles? As evidenced by the Lantz and Lanier [4] quote, "Journalists consider themselves primarily reporters rather than educators, but the public expects reporting to contain an education element" (p. 1310) and apparent in other critiques of health journalism, the public expects health journalists to take an advocacy role; health journalists are not expected to be like other journalists. On the other hand, the interpretive role could most closely represent the educator role that Lantz and Lanier refer to. Perhaps the finding that the interpretive role is ranked so highly by health journalists indicates they embrace the role of educator. In any case, health journalists would benefit from questioning which roles they are expected to perform. Additionally, with regard to newspaper health journalists in particular, rethinking the importance of the disseminator role could be a helpful exercise. With so many outlets now carrying medical science information, newspapers could consider scaling back on the dissemination role in order to respond to the needs being fulfilled by other media. This would allow them to amplify other roles that are not being fulfilled by other media.

## 7. Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to explore how health journalists perceive their professional roles. This study delves into the professional role conceptions of health journalists and aims to provide a deeper understanding of their unique identity within the field of journalism. By analyzing secondary data from a national survey of health journalists, this study uncovers valuable insights that shed light on their role priorities and potential differences between newspaper health journalists and other health journalists. The study's findings reveal that health journalists primarily identify with four professional roles: interpretive, disseminator, adversarial, and populist mobilizer. Notably, the adversarial and populist mobilizer roles hold greater importance for health journalists compared to previous studies. Additionally, Newspaper health journalists attribute greater importance to their professional roles than health journalists working for other news delivery channels or general newspaper journalists. Overall, the prominence of the educator role highlights the critical task of translating complex medical information for the audience.

This exploratory study offers some first-cut findings from which to build health journalists' professional role conceptions, differentiating them from general newspaper journalists. Moreover, this research is important because it provides a macro-level approach to the functionality of health journalism, offering new ways to critically assess how it serves or does not serve audience members and, more broadly, society. Although the results of this study provide valuable knowledge to the field of health journalism, it is worth noting a few limitations that should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, there is no guarantee that Cassidy's data do not include newspaper health journalists because Cassidy defines a general newspaper journalist as "a journalist and whose job primarily entails

working on the print edition of a daily newspaper”[5] (p. 269). This leaves open the possibility that the results of the comparison between health journalists and general newspaper journalists are not as clear cut. This study is also limited by the measurement tools for role conceptions. Future research may use more items and more elaborate measurement tools, especially in terms of measuring the public journalism concept of the populist mobilizer, to determine health journalists' professional role conceptions.

In conclusion, this study lays the groundwork for further exploration and critical assessment of health journalism's functionality and impact on society. By addressing these implications and limitations, future research can continue to advance the field of health journalism and foster informed and impactful health communication.

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