

## Articles

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Factors influencing journalism educators' ...

## An examination of factors influencing journalism educators' perceptions on the role and future of news reporting

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## Abstract

This article explores how educational qualifications, age, gender and regional context affect journalism educators' perceptions of journalism's normative roles and the future needs of journalism students. It draws on Australian and New Zealand/Aotearoan responses to the 2021 World Journalism Education Council (WJEC) Survey *Journalistic Roles, Values and Qualifications in the 21st Century: How Journalism Educators across the Globe View the Future of a Profession in Transition*. It shows that holding a Ph.D. diminishes support for traditional observer and disseminator roles and predicts support for the mobilizer role. Age also predicts role perception; it diminishes support for the disseminator and mobilizer roles for both the current position of journalists and journalists in the next ten years. These age and education effects are independent of each other. The findings point to the need for more detailed research on the effects of further education on journalism teachers' professional conceptions and teaching strategy.

**Keywords:** journalism, journalism education, role conception, Ph.D. qualification, future of journalism

## Introduction

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Until the early 2000s, moving from newsroom to classroom had been the main pathway to journalism education in the West (see [Gasher 2005](#); [Bromley and Neal 2011](#)). As a result, critics of what [Harcup \(2011a\)](#) dubbed 'hackademia' have argued journalism educators are more concerned with professional training orientation than with transforming journalism or undertaking critical research ([Bromley 2013](#); [Folkerts et al. 2013](#); [Goodman and Steyn 2017](#); [Solkin 2022](#)). Indeed, a recent review of journalism education research ([Solkin 2022](#)) found it focuses on industry oriented 'standard' and 'reformist' models of thinking about the future of the profession, rather than investigating radical change to how journalism could be done.

Yet recent survey work by the Journalism Education & Research Association of Australia (JERRA) suggests that the majority of Australian journalism educators now have, or

are studying for, a Ph.D. ([Wake et al. 2020](#)) part of what [Bromley](#) called the ‘academization of journalism’ ([2013](#): 569). It is interesting then to reflect on whether journalism educators’ attitudes to the profession they teach are influenced by doctoral study, in particular critically reflecting on the profession and professionalism ([Nolan 2008](#); [Harcup 2011b](#); [Ahva 2013](#)), embracing ‘ambitious research’ ([Folkerts et al. 2013](#)) and contributing more to the ‘currency of the academy’ ([Lynch 2015](#)) and innovating ([Deuze 2006](#)).

This article explores whether higher educational qualifications have a clear influence on how journalism educators perceive journalism as a profession and its future. It draws on the findings of a 2021 global journalism educator study ([Drok and Duiven 2023](#)), sponsored by the World Journalism Education Council (WJEC), which examined how educational qualifications influence Australian and New Zealand journalism educators’ views on key topics including what they think the role of journalists should be and what qualifications they think future journalists need. This survey research was modelled on similar study by the European Journalism Training Association (EJTA) ([Drok 2019](#)) into educators’ vision for journalism in the twenty-first century.

Our analysis starts with an overview of key issues underpinning journalism educators’ and journalists’ views of professional roles and values, and literature on the effects of tertiary study, age and other factors on these role conceptions. We then discuss the design of the WJEC survey, our analysis and our findings. Overall, the article underscores the need for further research into how changes in educator perspectives and attitudes are linked to the evolution of their professional and academic careers.

## [Educator conceptions of journalistic roles and values](#)

Role conception is one of the most intensively studied areas in journalism scholarship, and rightly so, as investigating what professional journalists should do and what journalism should be is central to understanding what journalism is: ‘The discourse of journalistic roles is the

central arena where journalistic identity is reproduced and contested; it is the site where actors struggle over the preservation or transformation of journalism's identity' ([Hanitzsch and Vos 2017](#): 129).

[Hellmueller and Mellado](#) noted that historically, 'the concept of journalistic roles has most often been defined as journalists' perception of the social functions journalism plays in society' ([2015](#): 2) and so has centred on normative assumptions (e.g. the primacy of the watchdog role) reinforced by socialization in professional practices, organizational expectations and education. From this perspective journalism education plays a key role in helping shape new journalists' ideas of their social worth and position – even though as, [Hellmueller and Mellado \(2015\)](#) argue, reporters' later political and work contexts and role performance impinge on and reshape those earlier ideals. Certainly in a constructivist sense the normative aspects of these roles are discursively constituted: 'they exist because and as we talk about them', and are constantly being renegotiated and invented ([Hanitzsch and Vos 2017](#): 129).

There is some literature on the effects of journalism education on professional views, but little consensus about the extent of that influence. Some studies have found it to be significant and life-lasting ([Becker et al. 1987](#); [Mensing 2010](#); [Parsons 1989](#)) but others have suggested societal factors are more important ([Shoemaker and Reese 1996](#); [Fröhlich and Holtz-Bacha 2003](#)). Yet as researchers and public intellectuals, journalism educators play a broader role in projecting what journalism can be and do, proposing new models of journalism (e.g. constructive or solutions-oriented) that can bridge what [Drok \(2019\)](#) characterizes as the gap between an elitist professionalism and a suspicious public. At a time when the public is questioning both journalism's ability to help people in their lives and whether they can trust the news ([Nielsen and Selva 2019](#)), journalism education has a unique opportunity to fortify both the public and young practitioners' understanding of journalism's value to society and to

critically shape the future of the profession and public communications more broadly ([Allan et al. 2020](#)). As Drok noted the 2019 ETJA study into journalism educator's role conceptions was the first large-scale investigation of its kind, and our study of the Australian and New Zealand cohort from the subsequent WJEC survey is part of understanding possible regional trends within that global sample.

Seven decades of scholarship has produced a sometimes-bewildering array of labels and categories and dimensions to invoke in any analysis. Weaver and Wilhoit's series of classic studies of US journalists showed their role perceptions could be split into five main types: investigator, disseminator, populist mobilizer, adversarial and observer ([Weaver et al. 2007, 2018](#); [Weaver and Wilhoit 1991](#); [Weaver and Willnat 2012](#)). *Investigators* see the primacy of their role as inquiry, holding power to account, acting as a watchdog. *Disseminators* have a consumer-oriented role conception, providing information and entertainment. *Populist mobilizers* adopt an interventionist role, to effect social change. In our interpretation this role can also embrace the *adversarial* function that [Weaver et al. \(2018\)](#) note, where the journalist acts as a critical adversary to government and business. Observers simply aim to report things as they are, or to mirror reality without necessarily investigating or having a change agenda ([Weaver et al. 2007](#); [Weaver and Wilhoit 1991](#)).

Journalists' professional norms and values, such as autonomy, objectivity, public service and accountability guide their role conceptions ([Shoemaker and Reese 1996](#); [Harlow and Brown 2022](#)). Thus, a journalist who believes in objectivity is likely to see themselves as a neutral observer or disseminator of information, as opposed to one who believes in inquiry and accountability, who will see themselves as an investigator or, if they value agency/intervention, as a mobilizer.

In the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS), [Hanitzsch et al. \(2019\)](#) build on Weaver's taxonomy to suggest more nuanced role conceptions that also speak to non-western practitioners:

*monitorial* (similar to the investigator role), *collaborative* (those who see their role as being to support authority, particularly in developing countries and the global south) *interventionist* (similar to popular mobilizers – those who see their role as being to work for social change) and *accommodative* (consumer-oriented, similar to the disseminator role). These roles are not mutually exclusive either, for example, being ‘monitorial’ can also often align with a consumer-oriented approach, if that is what audiences want (e.g. in parts of the US media). In [Standaert et al. \(2021\)](#) later research from the WJS study, they identify ‘a global repertoire’ of 41 role conceptions but note that more than half the responses correlate with six key roles in order of frequency: informer, watchdog, educator, reporter, investigator and monitor. Conceptions vary according to media system and national context, being significantly different in the global North and South ([Standaert et al. 2021](#)).

In the 2017 WJS findings the Australia and New Zealand journalists grouped with Anglo-US and northern European countries in tending towards the monitorial and accommodative poles ([Hanitzsch et al. 2019](#): 182). Australia and New Zealand, although often lumped together in the ‘Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC)’ tradition as fellow travellers in empire, war and peace, nonetheless have important political and cultural differences. Journalists in both countries were broadly oriented towards the observer role, but New Zealand journalists valued monitorial and interventionist factors more highly than Australians, who in turn valued accommodative or disseminator factors ([Hanitzsch et al. 2019](#): 179–81, [2016](#); [Hanitzsch and Vos 2017](#)).

## The relevance of educational attainment and other factors

Recent studies have sought to explore a range of factors, including attainment of higher education that influence how journalism educators form and develop their own perceptions of these roles. [Mellado and Subervi \(2013\)](#) examined individual and contextual factors affecting Chilean journalism educators’ orientations and found that teachers’ education level

significantly influenced their perception of their own role. Respondents with Ph.D.s were more scholarly oriented and leaned more towards ‘developing a self-reflective and critical thought process among future journalists’ than those without tertiary qualifications ([Mellado and Subervi 2013](#): 352).

The ETJA survey of European journalism educators and their views and practices ([Drok 2019](#)) found that educational degree ‘did not have a huge or univocal impact’ on attitudes to journalistic tasks or position in society ([Drok 2019](#): 52), but those with Ph.D.s did have the highest scores for, ‘provide in-depth information’, ‘provide analysis and interpretation of current affairs’, ‘stay away from stories that cannot be verified’ and ‘provide information people need to make political decisions’ and the two monitorial roles of scrutinizing business and government ([Drok 2019](#): 53). This weighting indicates that Ph.D.-qualified educators are more likely to support the monitorial role but does not provide confirmation. Unlike the younger teachers in that study, they also show an above average level of support for slow journalism and a below average level of support for commerce-oriented tasks. Ph.D.-respondents were more supportive of tasks that are related to a ‘mover’ type of journalism, promoting social change, influencing public opinion and setting the political agenda, while those with a Bachelor degree were more supportive of tasks that are related to the more conservative ‘mirror’ type of journalism, mirroring reality, being a detached observer and letting facts speak for themselves. Drok concluded that the influence of such background characteristics on the view on tasks and position of journalists is ‘modest and seldom statistically significant’ ([Drok 2019](#): 66–67).

Other studies suggest journalistic role preference can also correlate with age and work experience; as an older practitioner cohort favours traditional observer roles while a younger one favours agenda-setting roles ([Vos et al. 2019](#)). However, there is no hard evidence that gender exerts an influence one way or another ([Hanitzsch and Hanusch 2012](#)). While culture

still exerts a strong pull on role preference, a lack of national variance suggests other causes for differences in perceptions such as organizational factors (e.g. newsroom type) ([Zeng 2018](#)).

Thus, while a great deal is known about how journalists around the globe see their roles and how fundamental this role perception is to how they do their work, less is known about the views of journalism educators and more broadly about the impact of tertiary education, particularly doctoral training, in shaping these views and perceptions of role of journalism in society. This is an important gap in journalism studies literature due to the increasing reliance on universities to produce journalists, and their preference for Ph.D.-qualified educators.

The above discussion establishes the need to understand the influence of educational attainment on educator views about journalism and its future. This research seeks to enhance the understanding of the effect of the age, education and location of journalism educators on: (1) what they consider to be the important tasks of journalists in the next ten years and (2) their perception about the current roles of journalists. We investigated the following two research questions:

**RQ1: What relative impact do age, education and location have on the role preferences of journalism educators in terms of the important task for journalists in the next ten years?**

**RQ2: What relative impact do age, education and location have on journalism educators' perceptions of the current position of journalists?**

The next section provides an overview of the sample population, questionnaire and data collection method used to collect data from the journalism educators in Australia and New Zealand.

## Method

Regional data from the 2021 WJEC survey, run in 46 countries ([Drok and Duiven 2023](#)) across the world, was used in this study. The WJEC survey was conducted from January to February

2021. We used the e-mail contact lists for the Australian and New Zealand journalism educator associations: the JERRA, with approximately one hundred members, and the Journalism Educators Association of New Zealand (JEANZ) which represents between fifteen and twenty people teaching journalism at tertiary level (both permanent and contract staff). These groups were appropriate because they contain a large proportion of respondents with Ph.D.s.

Respondents were contacted by e-mail and provided an e-mail link to an online questionnaire, which included the standard WJS batteries of questions relating to role perception. It asked respondents to rate on a scale 1–5 whether they agreed with a series of standard statements about what the role of journalism should be and their position on a standard set of aggressive reporting practices, drawn largely from the WJS questionnaire and Drok's study of European journalism educators. There were 38 respondents from Australia (around 70 per cent of the possible cohort) and sixteen from New Zealand (around 30 per cent of the possible cohort), which were combined into one dataset ( $n = 54$ ). We note that journalism educator numbers have likely dropped since earlier surveys with the rationalization of journalism education programmes in these countries.

The survey participants were highly educated, very experienced in journalism practice, and mostly female. The median age of educators was 55.25 years with Australian educators tending to be younger, with a median age of 52 vs. 58 in New Zealand. 64% of the respondents were female, while 36% of the respondents were male. 56% of the respondents had Ph.D.s, while 44% had either a bachelor's, master's or other qualification. A similar proportion in Australia and New Zealand (56–58%) had over sixteen years journalism experience. 67% of the respondents worked full-time and 33% worked part-time.

The WJEC questionnaire split the role conception statements into two separate question batteries. The first asked educators about *journalism futures* and what they perceived would be the significance of various journalistic tasks in the decade ahead. The second explored

educators' attitudes to the position of journalists in society *currently*, asking how strongly they agreed that journalists should play certain normative roles (detached observer, promoter of social change, etc.) These two batteries were used to test normative views along different dimensions (interventionist or non-interventionist and mirroring or constructing reality). We used [Drok's \(2019\)](#) role terminology of *investigator* (incorporating the monitor/watchdog/analyst roles), *disseminator* (incorporating the informer/entertainer roles), *mobilizer* (incorporating the interventionist/participant roles) and *observer* (incorporating the neutral/observer roles) so as to compare our findings with those from an aligned European survey.

To test RQ1 and RQ2, we conducted factor analysis on each battery separately, because it measured different things across different timeframes and used different scales with different anchor points. Educators' views about the importance of key journalistic tasks in the next decade (*journalism futures*) were assessed using the question: 'Compared to today, in the next ten years the importance of the following tasks for professional journalists *should* be much higher, higher, same as now, lower or much lower?'. They were asked to rank each of eighteen items on a 5-point scale with 5 = much higher and 1 = much lower. Respondents could also choose 9 = don't know, although these responses were not used in the analysis (see [Appendix 1](#) for individual items). A principal components analysis of these eighteen items resulted in three distinct factors and were labelled based on the items that loaded onto them. These responses mapped reasonably neatly onto the *Investigator*, *Disseminator* and *Mobilizer* roles, as per [Drok \(2019: 163\)](#). The number of items that loaded onto each factor were: *Investigator* (seven items), *Disseminator* (six items) and *Mobilizer* (four items). The details of the individual items loading on to each factor are shown in [Appendix 4](#). The statistically significant factor loadings for all the variables (>0.55) and communalities (>0.47) suggested that the individual items were reliable measures of the extracted factors. High Cronbach's alpha values (>0.7) –

*Investigator* ( $\alpha = 0.898$ ), *Disseminator* ( $\alpha = 0.852$ ) and *Mobilizer* ( $\alpha = 0.770$ ) indicated that the items that loaded on to the factors were both reliable and internally consistent. The mean scores of each item loading onto a factor were summated to compute a composite variable for each of the three factors identified from factor analysis. These factors were posited as the dependent variables (DVs) in the study.

Logistic regression analyses were then conducted on each composite variable to determine the predictive effect of gender, journalism experience, age, country and education. All the predictors are categorical variables and hence dummy variables were created for each. The dummy variables were then used as the independent variables in logistic regression analysis as proposed by [Darlington and Hayes \(2017\)](#). Four groups of age were used in the analysis – those who are less than 39 years old, those who are in the 40- to 49-year age group, those who are between 50 and 59 years old and those who are above 60 years old. The group with those who were less than 39 years old was used as the reference group while forming the dummy variable. For education, respondents were grouped into two groups – those with a Ph.D. and those with Bachelor's, Master's and other qualifications. The latter group was used as the referent group in the dummy variable ([Darlington and Hayes 2017](#)). In terms of location, of the two groups living in New Zealand and Australia, those living in New Zealand were used as the referent group.

In the second question, educators were asked to evaluate the *current* 'position of journalists in society ("neutrality") and with regard to reality/truth ("objectivity")'. Responding to the phrase 'Journalists should...' they had to use a 5-point Likert scale to rank their agreement with twelve normative roles, where 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree. Again respondents could also choose 9 = don't know, although these responses were not used in the analysis (see [Appendix 3](#) for individual items). A principal components analysis of these twelve items resulted in three distinct factors and were labelled based on the items that loaded

onto them. These responses mapped reasonably neatly onto the Observer Neutral, Mobilizer Interventionist and Observer RO (Reality Orientation) roles, as per [Drok \(2019: 163\)](#). The numbers of items that loaded onto each factor were: *Observer Neutral* (five items), *Mobilizer Interventionist* (three items) and *Observer RO* (four items). The details of the individual items loading on to each factor are shown in [Appendix 4](#). The statistically significant factor loadings for all the variables (>0.59) and communalities (>0.45) suggested that the individual items were reliable measures of the extracted factors. High Cronbach's alpha values (>0.7) for – *Observer Neutral* ( $\alpha = 0.763$ ), *Mobilizer Interventionist* ( $\alpha = 0.792$ ) and *Observer RO* ( $\alpha = 0.717$ ) also indicated that the items that loaded on to the factors were internally consistent. The mean scores of each item loading onto a factor were summated to compute a composite variable for each of the three factors identified from factor analysis. These factors were used as the DVs in the study.

## Results and discussion

A summary of the results of eight logistic regression analyses is presented in [Table 1](#). The predictors used in the logistic regression are identified in the left-hand column; they include age, education and country. The DVs in the logistic regression include the Disseminator, Mobilizer, Mobilizer Interventionist, Observer Neutral and Observer RO and Investigator roles. The investigator role, gender and journalism experience are not reported in [Table 1](#), as no significant findings were found.

**Table 1 Predictors of the most important tasks for journalists in the next ten years and current position of journalists.**

	Important tasks for journalists in the next ten years		Current position of journalist		
Dependent variables	Disseminator	Mobilizer	Mobilizer Interventionist	Observer Neutral <sup>2</sup>	Observer RO

Predictors	Beta coefficients		Beta coefficients		
Age					
40–49	–0.456 <sup>1</sup>	–0.442 <sup>3</sup>	–0.503 <sup>4</sup>		
50–59	–0.731	–0.468	–0.425		
>60	–0.733	–0.450			
Education					
Ph.D.	–.233 <sup>2</sup>		0.293 <sup>5</sup>	–0.247 <sup>6</sup>	–0.238 <sup>7</sup>
Country					
Australia					0.290 <sup>8</sup>

Note:

1.  $r^2 = 0.253$ ,  $F(3, 46) = 5.20$ ,  $p < 0.005$ .

2.  $r^2 = 0.054$ ,  $F(1, 48) = 2.757$ ,  $p = 0.10$ .

3.  $r^2 = 0.110$ ,  $F(3, 46) = 1.887$ ,  $p < 0.10$ .

4.  $r^2 = 0.126$ ,  $F(3, 46) = 2.21$ ,  $p = 0.10$ .

5.  $r^2 = 0.067$ ,  $F(1, 48) = 4.495$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

6.  $r^2 = 0.061$ ,  $F(1, 48) = 3.131$ ,  $p < 0.10$ .

7.  $r^2 = 0.057$ ,  $F(1, 48) = 2.884$ ,  $p < 0.10$ .

8.  $r^2 = 0.084$ ,  $F(1, 51) = 2.160$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

In some cases, the  $p$  value was greater than 0.05. We have chosen to report results with  $p$  values up to 0.1 in [Table 1](#). According to [Hair et al. \(2018\)](#), the significance level, indicates the chance the researcher is willing to take of being correct and the estimated coefficient is different from zero. Conventionally, a  $p$  value of 0.01 or 0.05 has been used. However, [Simundic \(2008\)](#) has pointed out that confidence intervals of 90% ( $p = 0.1$ ), 95% ( $p = 0.05$ )

and 99% ( $p = 0.01$ ) are commonly used in literature. [Hazelrigg \(2009\)](#) states that, there is nothing sacred or sacrosanct and they are conventional choices. The researcher is free to choose a different number. A confidence interval of 90% is appropriate for smaller samples ([Hair et al. 2018](#)). The sample size in this study is small with 54 respondents participating in the study. Hence, we have chosen to report results with  $p$  values up to 0.1.

### The effect of age on role preference

As can be seen in [Table 1](#), the age of our respondents predicts whether they will favour the disseminator, mobilizer and mobilizer interventionist roles. The older they are, the less likely they will favour these roles. This effect is strongest when respondents were asked about the important tasks for journalists in the next ten years; for the disseminator role, its  $r^2 = 0.253$  shows that approximately 25 per cent of the variability in the disseminator role is influenced by the three older age groups used in this analysis. *Age* is also a significant predictor of the mobilizer role; 11 per cent of the variability in this role is influenced by three of the four age groups used in this analysis, as shown by the  $r^2 = 0.11$ .

When asked about the current position of journalists, age also predicted whether our respondents would favour the mobilizer interventionist role. Those in the middle-aged groups of 40–49 and 50–59 years did not favour this role. Again, there was a moderately strong effect noted, with 12.6 per cent of the variability due to these age groups. As might be inferred from the beta coefficients, the mean scores for the disseminator and mobilizer role mostly drops with age; older people have much less interest in these roles (see [Table 2](#)).

### The effect of education on role preference

The level of education of our respondents predicted how likely they were to favour certain journalistic roles. When respondents considered the important tasks for journalists in the next ten years, the more educated they were, the less they favoured the disseminator role.

Likewise, when considering the current position of journalists, the more educated they were,

the less they favoured the observer (both observer-neutral and observer reality orientation) role (although they still rate these highly – see [Table 2](#)). Having a Ph.D. also predicted respondents would favour the mobilizer interventionist role. The size of the education effect is much smaller here though; between approximately 5 per cent and –8 per cent of the variability in these roles is due to having a Ph.D..

The mean for those with either a bachelor’s, master’s or other qualification is 2.82 and for those with a Ph.D. the mean is 2.48. This suggests those who have a Ph.D. tend to attribute less importance to the disseminator role (in the next ten years) than those without a Ph.D.

As might be expected, those with a Ph.D. rate the disseminator and observer roles less highly than those without Ph.D.s but also rate the mobilizer interventionist role more highly (see [Table 2](#)).

**Table 2: Means of the predictors of the most important tasks for journalists in the next ten years and current position of journalists.**

	Important tasks for journalists in the next ten years <sup>†</sup>		Current position of journalist <sup>**</sup>		
	Disseminator	Mobilizer	Mobilizer Interventionist	Observer Neutral	Observer RO
Predictors	<i>Mean Values (<math>\bar{X}</math>)</i>		<i>Mean Values (<math>\bar{X}</math>)</i>		
Age					
<39	3.58	4.25	3.72	3.67	4.42
40–49	2.73	3.45	2.70	3.74	4.15
50–59	2.47	3.56	3.02	3.64	4.15
>60	2.37	3.52	3.19	3.49	3.34
Education					

Bachelor's, master's and other	2.82	3.58	2.81	3.83	4.24
Ph.D.	2.48	3.63	3.30	3.46	3.97
Country					
Australia	2.69	3.66	3.12	3.64	4.20
New Zealand	2.48	3.43	3.03	3.52	3.85

Note:

☐ Assessed using 5-point scale with 5 = much higher and 1 = much lower.

☐\*\* Assessed using a 5-point Likert scale with 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree.

### To what extent is the education effect a function of age?

As can be seen from [Table 3](#), 56 per cent of the respondents have a Ph.D. and 75 per cent of these are 50 years and above. To check whether the education effect is simply a function of age, because those with Ph.D.s tend to be older, we conducted a chi-square test on age vs. educational level. To ensure cell counts are above the minimum of five required for chi-square tests, we collapsed the two lower and two higher age groups. This test was not significant, showing that there is no relationship between age and educational level. The results are shown in [Table 3](#).

**Table 3: Education qualifications across different age groups.**

	Education qualifications across different age groups		
	Those without a Ph.D.*	Those with Ph.D.	Total in each age group
Age			

<49	9	7	16
50 and above	13	21	34
Total in each group of educational qualifications	22 (44%)	28 (56%)	50 (100%)

\*Those with a bachelor's, master's or other qualifications.

### The effect of location on role preference

Location did have a significant effect on role preference. Being Australian predicted a more favourable attitude towards the observer (reality orientation) role, when respondents were asked about the current position of journalists in society. Again, this was a moderate effect, with only 8 per cent of the variability in this role predicted by being Australian. An examination of the means for each group shows that respondents living in Australia have a higher mean of  $\bar{x} = 4.20$  while those living in New Zealand have a lower mean of  $\bar{x} = 3.85$ .

### The effect of other predictors on role preference

Age was not a significant predictor of the investigator role. Nor were gender and journalism experience significant predictors of either the current position of journalists, nor any of the roles that are seen to be important in the next ten years, i.e. investigator, disseminator or mobilizer.

Thus, in response to our research questions:

*RQ1: Does age, and education, have an effect on the role preferences of journalism educators in terms of the important tasks for journalists in the next ten years?*

*Yes.*

*RQ2: Does age, education and location have an effect on journalism educators' perceptions of the current position of journalists? Yes.*

There are interesting and subtle differences in Antipodean educators' role orientations and values, depending on location, age and, importantly level of education. Australians tend to be younger and in some things, more observer-oriented than their older New Zealand counterparts. As educators get older and more educated they tend to change their ideas of what the role of journalism and journalism education should be; they are less concerned about meeting daily deadlines or pleasing an audience.

The only significant regional difference in journalism educator perception of roles – that those in Australia favour the observer role more than those in New Zealand – is interesting, aligning with a view that New Zealand is generally seen as having the more radical utopian politics than Australia ([Sargent 2000](#)).

That difference aside, the level of self-reflection and critical awareness these educators apply to their role preferences, is reflected in similar comments from respondents in both countries: 'Journalism is pragmatic and has to balance so many elements, so I wouldn't want to push some of these priorities hard, because it would be at the expense of others', said one respondent. Another argued: 'Neutrality is not the same as objectivity; false equivalency is a disservice to everyone in a post-truth "alternative facts" world', while yet another said: 'We know that our role is not neutral and that we all, as journalists, carry some degree of bias in our work. We should aim to be critically reflective of our bias'.

The economic and ideological pressures on journalists affected the role preference of some. One proposed that 'there should be much higher emphasis on treating readers as consumers not as an ideal but as something the profession needs to do to remain in business!', while another said:

I agree we need to scrutinise other media but would note that as media organisations become – or seem to the public to become – more partisan, holding media to account will make you appear partisan to the public. This is why we must stop pretending to be [objective].

Nonetheless, many affirmed that professional values should trump commercial

concerns: one said journalism should ‘maintain traditional western liberal journalistic values assiduously’ and another ‘I think journalists can’t mirror reality but do I agree they should set out to knowingly misrepresent reality? No!’

To more closely explore the impact of education and other factors on journalism educators outlooks, further mixed-methods research should focus on exploring differences in pedagogical approach, knowledge of industry expectations, and preferences for innovation between journalism teachers with different levels of tertiary education: bachelor’s, master’s and Ph.D. degrees.

## Conclusion

These results suggest that gaining a Ph.D. does change how journalists think. It makes journalists more likely to favour an interventionist mobilizer approach to journalism, and less inclined to support the traditional observer role. This effect is independent of age. Being older also predicts decreasing support for the disseminator role and less support for the mobilizer role.

The results confirm and add to previous studies of journalism educators such as [Drok’s \(2019\)](#) by showing that the preference in Ph.D.-level educators for a slower, ‘mover’ journalism that promotes social change, is measurable, significant and predictive. However, rather than showing Australian and New Zealand educators support a monitorial role, as Drok suggested, their preference, somewhat surprisingly, veers towards an interventionist role as they gain higher education. Contrary to [Drok \(2019\)](#), who thought the effect of such background characteristics as education likely to be modest and seldom significant, these findings suggest that the Ph.D. effect is noticeable and statistically significant. Further confirmation of the ‘Ph.D. effect’ comes from the fact that these findings contradict earlier studies of journalists that show older journalists favour the observer roles ([Vos et al. 2019](#)).

Why should a Ph.D. have this effect on journalists? Perhaps it is closer to their original reason for getting into journalism in the first place; to change the world. The time spent on a Ph.D., free from the churn of daily disseminator-led journalism, has given them space to craft something longer and closer to their ideals and values. It may have increased their skills and thus their confidence in their ability to effect change through research, thus reaffirming their youthful optimism for what journalism can do. If we take this view, then the interventionist role could be seen as the default, dominant role for journalists, rather than the observer role presumed by normative views of mostly Western journalism. These educators are less interested in simply observing society or taking a client-support role; they are confident in their analysis and their ability to see where change is needed and to enact it.

These findings, while based on a relatively small sample, suggest that role perception is not just culturally and organizationally dependent, but also dependent on education; that if role orientation is a matter of 'how journalists think about their social purpose' then that social purpose is shifted by education. Age has a significant, and often stronger effect than education on role perception. For educators considering future tasks for journalists, age predicts lessening support for the mobilizer and disseminator roles. Both of these roles might be categorized as being agents of others' agendas, whether social change or consumer needs. The implication is that educators, as they get older, are less interested in serving other agendas and perhaps more interested in analysis and monitoring; they become more sceptical of any agenda, whether social/ mobilizer or commercial.

Yet for educators considering the roles of current journalists, age has a somewhat surprising non-linear effect. Younger educators strongly support the mobilizer role, but this drops sharply in middle years, before picking up again in later years. This age effect is harder to explain. Why should they see the future with more clarity than they see the present? Perhaps an explanation lies in these educators' strong connection to industry. Many of those in their

middle years will have recently come out of industry roles; perhaps their view of the present roles for journalists is coloured by their perception of current reality in the workplace, as opposed to how they might like it to be in ten years' time. Another explanation lies in the Ph.D. effect – these people like the mobilizer role; the Ph.D. has the effect of reversing what would otherwise be a significantly less favourable attitude towards the mobilizer role due to ageing.

Our findings suggest we should explore further qualitative and quantitative research into the influence of a Ph.D. on educators' views about both the function of journalism in society and the normative tasks that journalists perform. In particular, a fruitful area of research might be what are the most aspirational roles for journalists; what do they really want to do, rather than think they should? The generalizability of these results is certainly limited by the sample size and the fact that our WJEC sample relates only to educators from Oceania, but the authors are not claiming this study is in any way representative of journalism globally, as it must be examined in light of other WJEC survey responses yet to be published. It also raises useful questions about the diversity of journalism educators and the common sociocultural factors that might influence their approaches to teaching journalism and their visions for its future. The WJS has shown that journalism in Australia and New Zealand is not too far from the midpoint of the Western journalistic norm ([WJS 2017](#)). Furthermore, the rapidly globalizing nature of journalism, the increasing preference for universities to employ those with Ph.D.s and the likely impact of that preference on higher journalism education suggests that the education effects noted here will likely only get stronger.

## **Appendix 1: Question on journalism futures**

Compared to today, in the next ten years the importance of the following task for professional journalists *should* become:

5 = mch higher; 4 = higher; 3 = same as now; 2 = lower; 1 = much lower; 9 = do not know

Get information to the public quickly	5	4	3	2	1	9
Stay away from stories that cannot be verified	5	4	3	2	1	9
Monitor and scrutinize government	5	4	3	2	1	9
Stand up for the disadvantaged	5	4	3	2	1	9
Provide entertainment and relaxation	5	4	3	2	1	9
Expose social abuses	5	4	3	2	1	9
Make each day as many stories as possible	5	4	3	2	1	9
Provide analysis and interpretation of current affairs	5	4	3	2	1	9
Monitor and scrutinize business organizations	5	4	3	2	1	9
Give ordinary people a chance to express their views	5	4	3	2	1	9
Concentrate on news that will sell	5	4	3	2	1	9
Provide information that people need to make political decisions	5	4	3	2	1	9
Concentrate on bringing the latest news	5	4	3	2	1	9
Provide in-depth background information	5	4	3	2	1	9
Monitor and scrutinize civil society organizations	5	4	3	2	1	9
Motivate people to get socially involved	5	4	3	2	1	9
Treat the public as consumers rather than citizens	5	4	3	2	1	9
Point people towards possible solutions for societal problems	5	4	3	2	1	9

## Appendix 2: Items loading onto each role

	Investigator	Disseminator	Mobilizer
Expose social abuses	0.840		
Monitor and scrutinize government	0.825		
Provide information that people need to make political decisions	0.789		

Monitor and scrutinize civil society organizations	0.762		
Monitor and scrutinize business organizations	0.659		
Provide in-depth background information	0.656		
Stand up for the disadvantaged	0.652		
Make as many stories as possible each day		0.848	
Treat the public as consumers rather than citizens		0.834	
Concentrate on bringing the latest news		0.779	
Concentrate on news that will sell		0.732	
Provide entertainment and relaxation		0.692	
Get information to the public quickly		0.683	
Stay away from stories that cannot be verified			
Motivate people to get socially involved			0.804
Give ordinary people a chance to express their views			0.768
Point people towards possible solutions for societal problems			0.708
Provide analysis and interpretation of current affairs			0.559

### Appendix 3: Question about journalists' current role

The following question is about the position of journalists in society ('neutrality') and with regard to reality/truth ('objectivity'). Answering categories are:

5 = strongly agree; 4 = agree; 3 = neutral; 2 = disagree; 1 = strongly disagree; 9 = do not know

A journalist should...

be a detached observer	5	4	3	2	1	9
promote social change	5	4	3	2	1	9
remain strictly impartial	5	4	3	2	1	9
influence public opinion	5	4	3	2	1	9
be a neutral disseminator of information	5	4	3	2	1	9
set the sociopolitical agenda	5	4	3	2	1	9

mirror reality as it is	5	4	3	2	1	9
report about positive developments in society	5	4	3	2	1	9
not let personal beliefs and convictions influence reporting	5	4	3	2	1	9
be transparent about the working process	5	4	3		1	9
let facts speak for themselves	5	4	3		1	9
monitor and scrutinize the reporting of other news media	5	4	3		1	9

#### Appendix 4: Perceptions of current role of journalists

	Observer Neutral	Mobilizer Interventionist	Observer RO
Be a neutral disseminator of information	0.747		
Be a detached observer	0.718		
Not let personal beliefs and convictions influence reporting	0.670		
Mirror reality as it is	0.641		
Remain strictly impartial	0.596		
Influence public opinion		0.822	
Set the sociopolitical agenda		0.822	
Promote social change		0.817	
Be transparent about the working process			0.739
Monitor and scrutinize the reporting of other news media			0.644
Report about positive developments in society			0.633
Let facts speak for themselves			0.593

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