

Institutional sentinel: Journalistic role performance and the defense of media autonomy under democratic threat

Journalism
2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–27
© The Author(s) 2026



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/14648849261498625
journals.sagepub.com/home/jou



Vytautas Valentinavičius¹ 

Abstract

This article develops the concept of the institutional sentinel to explain how journalists may temporarily reconfigure professional role performance when the institutional conditions of independent reporting become objects of political contestation. Existing debates on journalism under democratic strain often frame departures from conventional objectivity as either activism or part of a moral turn. Such binaries overlook a more specific form of intervention: the public defense of governance arrangements, editorial autonomy, and organizational safeguards that enable impartial reporting. The institutional sentinel is defined as a situationally activated role-performance logic in which journalists collectively shift from monitorial observation to defending these conditions when they are publicly framed as being under procedural threat. The article is conceptual and uses the 2025–2026 conflict surrounding Lithuania’s public broadcaster, LRT, as a revelatory vignette. The vignette clarifies three elements: activation under perceived procedural threat within a context shaped by threat fusion; boundedness, expressed through temporariness, role transparency, object specificity, and reversibility; and a defensive paradox whereby institutional self-defense may protect autonomy while exposing journalism to accusations of bias, self-interest, or partisanship. The article offers a mid-range conceptual tool and develops scope conditions and propositions for comparative research on media autonomy, legitimacy, and professional boundary work.

¹Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts, Kaunas University of Technology (KTU), Kaunas, Lithuania

Corresponding author:

Vytautas Valentinavičius, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts, Kaunas University of Technology (KTU), Mickevičiaus g. 37, Kaunas 44029, Lithuania.

Email: vytautas.valentinavicius@ktu.lt

Keywords

institutional sentinel, journalistic roles, objectivity, media autonomy, public service media, democratic backsliding

Introduction

In recent years, journalism has come under growing pressure to defend not only democratic values in the abstract, but also the institutional conditions that make independent reporting possible. In environments marked by disinformation, political polarization, and democratic backsliding, journalists increasingly confront situations in which the procedural norms associated with professional objectivity appear insufficient for responding to threats aimed at weakening the autonomy of media institutions themselves (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Chadwick, 2017; Dragomir, 2019; Waisbord, 2018). Under such conditions, the traditional expectation that journalists remain detached observers may come into tension with the perceived need to protect the organizational and governance arrangements on which future impartial reporting depends (Alexander, 2006; Pickard, 2019; Ward, 2020). This tension raises an important theoretical question: what kind of journalistic role emerges when the institutional preconditions of independent journalism become the object of defense?

This question cannot be answered adequately through binary oppositions between “objective” and “activist” journalism. Scholarship on journalistic roles has shown that professional roles are neither fixed nor singular; they are historically contingent, normatively contested, and negotiated in relation to institutional constraints and changing political environments (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017, 2018; Hellmueller and Mellado, 2015; Mellado, 2015, 2020). At the same time, objectivity itself is not a simple or uniform ideal, but a layered professional norm associated with verification, fairness, balance, and procedural discipline (McQuail and Deuze, 2020; Tuchman, 1972; Ward, 2004, 2011; Westerståhl, 1983). Yet much of the debate about journalism under democratic strain still tends to treat departures from conventional objectivity as if they necessarily amount either to partisan advocacy or to a generalized moral turn in journalism (Bell, 1998; Christians et al., 2009; Waisbord, 2018). Such framing leaves insufficient conceptual space for forms of intervention that are directed neither at advancing substantive political outcomes nor at abandoning professionalism, but at defending the institutional autonomy required for professional journalism to continue at all (Ananny, 2018; Pickard, 2019; Ward, 2020).

This article develops the concept of the institutional sentinel to address that gap. I define the institutional sentinel as a situationally activated journalistic role-performance logic in which journalists collectively shift from monitorial observation to the public defense of the institutional conditions that enable future impartial reporting when those conditions are perceived to be under procedural threat. The concept captures a bounded form of role reorientation. It does not refer to journalism of attachment, a standing model of engaged journalism, or partisan activism. Rather, it describes a temporary and defensive form of intervention oriented toward protecting governance arrangements, editorial autonomy, and organizational safeguards understood as prerequisites for

independent journalism itself (Ananny, 2018; Bell, 1998; Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017; Moraes, 2023; Pickard, 2019; Ward, 2020). The term is adjacent to Norris and Odugbemi's (2010) public-sentinel framework but refers here to a reflexive defense of journalism's own institutional preconditions, a distinction developed below.

The article is motivated by the 2025–2026 conflict surrounding Lithuania's public broadcaster, LRT, where proposed legal amendments affecting governance and dismissal procedures triggered an unusually visible mobilization by journalists and media workers (BNS, 2025a, 2025b; LRT.lt, 2025c; Media Freedom Rapid Response, 2025). The LRT episode is analytically important because it illustrates a situation in which journalists did not merely report on a political controversy but mobilized publicly against reforms they framed as a procedural threat to media autonomy. Their actions included symbolic disruption of routine broadcasting, public protest, and the temporary relocation of journalistic activity into the space of civic contention (BNS, 2025a; LRT.lt, 2025c). In this sense, the case makes visible a form of professional boundary work in which the defense of the institution became part of journalistic practice. At the same time, the article does not treat the Lithuanian episode as empirical proof of a general theory. Instead, it uses the case as a revelatory vignette that helps clarify an underconceptualized role logic and specify the conditions under which it may emerge (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017; Mellado, 2015; Yin, 2018).

The Lithuanian case is also theoretically suggestive because it unfolded in a geopolitically exposed democracy, where domestic institutional disputes are interpreted against persistent external security pressures and concerns about information manipulation. In such settings, external threat and internal institutional vulnerability may be perceived as mutually reinforcing, making changes to media governance appear more consequential than routine administrative reform (Krastev and Holmes, 2019; Mälksoo, 2024). Baltic media scholarship suggests that, particularly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, media institutions in the region have increasingly operated within resilience-oriented and protective frameworks, especially in relation to information disorder and hybrid threats (Balčytienė et al., 2025; Kōuts-Klemm et al., 2022; Rožukalne et al., 2024; Vihalemm and Vunš, 2024). This broader context does not establish that journalists themselves necessarily interpreted the LRT reforms through an explicit security lens. Rather, it provides an environment in which procedural threats to media autonomy could be understood as part of a wider pattern of democratic and informational vulnerability.

However, the move from observation to institutional self-defense generates a normative dilemma. If journalism's democratic legitimacy depends in part on its capacity to function as a relatively shared reference point across political divisions, then visible institutional mobilization may protect autonomy while simultaneously undermining the appearance of impartiality that helps sustain credibility (Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Ward, 2020). The same act that raises the reputational and political costs of media capture may also furnish adversarial actors with material for claims of bias, elite collusion, or political partisanship, particularly in polarized and hybrid communication environments where hostile-media perceptions are easily activated (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Gunther and Schmitt, 2004; Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2018). The issue, then, is not whether journalism should simply "choose" between

objectivity and activism, but how to conceptualize exceptional defensive interventions that remain tied to professional self-limitation. For this reason, the article treats boundedness as central: if the institutional sentinel is to remain analytically distinct from unbounded advocacy, it must be understood as temporary, transparent, and reversible (Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Ward, 2020).

The article makes four contributions. First, it conceptualizes the institutional sentinel as a distinct response to situations in which media autonomy itself becomes the object of political contestation. Second, it situates this concept within scholarship on journalistic roles and objectivity, distinguishing it from adjacent notions such as journalism of attachment, objectively engaged journalism, and institutional advocacy more broadly (Bell, 1998; Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017; Mellado, 2020; Moraes, 2023; Ward, 2020). Third, using the LRT episode as an illustrative vignette, it situates sentinel activation within a context of threat fusion and identifies the defensive paradox whereby institutional self-defense may simultaneously protect and destabilize journalistic legitimacy (Alexander, 2006; Rosanvallon, 2008). Fourth, it develops scope conditions, normative guardrails, and propositions for future comparative research on media autonomy, legitimacy, and professional boundary work (Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Yin, 2018).

To develop this argument, the article proceeds in seven steps. The next section reviews the literature on journalistic roles and the strain placed on objectivity under conditions of democratic pressure. The third section examines why media autonomy can become an object of defense, with particular attention to public service media and to contexts marked by institutional vulnerability and geopolitical insecurity. The fourth section defines the institutional sentinel and distinguishes it from neighboring concepts. The fifth section introduces the 2025–2026 LRT protest cycle and explains the article’s analytical approach. The sixth section shows what the vignette helps clarify about role activation, boundedness, and the defensive paradox of institutional self-defense. The final section outlines scope conditions and propositions for future research before concluding with the broader implications of the concept for the study of journalism in democratically insecure environments.

Journalistic roles and the strain on objectivity

Journalistic roles are best understood not as fixed professional identities, but as historically contingent and socially negotiated orientations that define what journalists believe they ought to do in public life. Role scholarship has shown that journalism is constituted through ongoing struggles over its institutional identity, normative boundaries, and public purpose rather than through a stable consensus on a single professional model (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017, 2018). In this sense, roles operate as interpretive frameworks through which journalists make sense of their responsibilities toward audiences, political actors, and democratic institutions. They are shaped not only by professional norms, but also by organizational routines, institutional constraints, and broader political contexts (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017; Mellado, 2015, 2020). This perspective is especially important in periods of democratic strain, when inherited professional expectations may no longer align easily with the conditions under which journalism is practiced.

A central distinction in this literature is the one between role conception and role performance. Role conceptions refer to the normative ideas journalists hold about what their work should be, whereas role performance concerns how these orientations are enacted, translated, or modified in actual news practice (Hellmueller and Mellado, 2015; Mellado, 2015, 2020). The two do not always coincide. Journalists may endorse one role normatively while performing another under the pressure of organizational routines, political constraints, market incentives, or crisis conditions. This distinction matters for the present article because the phenomenon examined here is not simply an attitudinal shift in what journalists say they value, nor merely a permanent redefinition of professional identity. Rather, it concerns a situational reorientation in collective role performance under conditions in which the institutional autonomy of journalism itself is perceived to be under threat. In other words, the issue is not whether journalists cease to believe in professionalism, but how professionalism may be enacted differently when its enabling conditions appear politically vulnerable.

Within the broader field of journalism studies, one of the most enduring and contested components of professional role orientation is objectivity. Objectivity has historically functioned as both a normative ideal and a professional strategy. Classic work treats it not simply as truthfulness, but as a procedural discipline grounded in verification, balance, factuality, and forms of restraint that help journalism claim legitimacy in pluralistic societies (McQuail and Deuze, 2020; Tuchman, 1972; Ward, 2004, 2011; Westerståhl, 1983). Tuchman's well-known formulation of objectivity as a "strategic ritual" captured its protective function: objectivity offered journalists a repertoire of professional practices that could shield them from accusations of bias while maintaining authority under conditions of contestation (Tuchman, 1972:678). Yet later scholarship has also shown that objectivity is internally differentiated rather than singular. It can refer to factual accuracy, balanced representation, detachment of tone, procedural fairness, or institutionalized routines of verification, and these dimensions do not always move together (McQuail and Deuze, 2020; Westerståhl, 1983). Treating objectivity as a unitary norm therefore obscures important tensions in how journalists interpret and perform it. In the argument developed here, the dimensions of objectivity most clearly placed under strain are detachment and ritualized balance, whereas verification, factual discipline, and accountability to shared standards of evidence remain central to the professional legitimacy that sentinel action claims to defend (McQuail and Deuze, 2020; Ward, 2004, 2011, 2020; Westerståhl, 1983).

This multidimensionality is crucial because contemporary criticism of objectivity often targets different aspects of the norm at once. In some accounts, the problem is excessive detachment in the face of falsehood; in others, it is ritualized balance that gives undue legitimacy to anti-democratic or disinforming actors; in still others, it is the idea that journalists can or should occupy a value-free standpoint in the first place (Bell, 1998; Rosen, 2010; Waisbord, 2018; Ward, 2020). The debate is therefore not simply about whether objectivity remains desirable, but about which version of objectivity is being defended, revised, or rejected. Ward (2004, 2011, 2020), for example, argues that objectivity remains a democratic necessity, but not because it entails neutrality in any absolute sense. Rather, it remains valuable as an ethical discipline that constrains journalism's tendency to collapse into tribalism, propaganda, or moral unanimity. By

contrast, critics of conventional “both-sides” reporting argue that procedural balance may be exploited by actors committed less to democratic contestation than to manipulation, delegitimation, and epistemic disruption (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). These tensions suggest that objectivity is increasingly being reinterpreted under new political and communicative conditions rather than simply abandoned.

One important implication of role scholarship is that such reinterpretation does not necessarily amount to a complete break with professional norms. Roles may be renegotiated within the profession rather than discarded altogether. Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) show that journalism’s institutional identity is discursively constituted through contestation over the meaning of its core values, while Mellado (2020) emphasizes that role theory must account for how norms are adapted and performed differently across contexts. This is especially relevant in environments where journalists perceive that conventional professional routines no longer adequately protect the public role of journalism. Under such conditions, a shift may occur not from professionalism to anti-professionalism, but from one mode of professionalism to another. The key analytical task is therefore to specify what kind of shift is taking place, at what level, and toward what object.

Existing scholarship already identifies several ways in which journalistic roles can move beyond conventional detachment. One influential formulation is Bell’s (1998) “journalism of attachment,” which argues that, in situations of moral crisis, journalists cannot remain bystanders without risking complicity. A different line of argument appears in work on engaged or objectively engaged journalism, which maintains that journalism can remain committed to evidence, verification, and fairness while also acknowledging its normative investment in democratic life (Ward, 2020). More recent work similarly suggests that journalists may adopt differentiated models of intervention depending on the type of issue, the structure of the media system, and the relationship between professional norms and social justice claims (Moraes, 2023; Verhoeven, 2025). What these approaches share is the recognition that detached neutrality is neither the only possible nor always the most normatively defensible form of journalistic professionalism. At the same time, they do not fully capture situations in which the target of intervention is not primarily public policy, moral witnessing, or civic values in general, but the institutional autonomy of journalism itself.

This limitation becomes especially visible when journalism operates in settings marked by democratic erosion, political polarization, and attacks on media legitimacy. In such settings, objectivity may come under pressure from at least two directions at once. On the one hand, journalists may face criticism that detached reporting normalizes falsehood, creates false equivalence, or fails to respond adequately to anti-democratic threats (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2023; Waisbord, 2018). On the other hand, any visible departure from neutrality may itself be used to reinforce accusations of bias, elitism, or partisan collusion, particularly in polarized communication environments shaped by hostile-media perceptions and identity-based trust segmentation (Gunther and Schmitt, 2004; Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Mason, 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2020). The result is that objectivity becomes strained not only as an epistemic norm but also as a professional settlement: it remains necessary for credibility,

yet increasingly difficult to perform in a way that is socially recognized as legitimate across political divides.

For this reason, the present article does not start from the assumption that journalism is moving wholesale beyond objectivity. Nor does it assume that visible departures from conventional neutrality should automatically be interpreted as activism. Instead, it asks whether there are situations in which journalists may temporarily reconfigure their role performance in order to defend the institutional conditions under which objectivity itself can remain meaningful. This requires attention not only to the ethical content of journalistic roles, but also to their institutional object. Journalists do not act only in relation to events, actors, and audiences; they also act within organizations and under governance arrangements that structure what kinds of journalism are possible. When those arrangements are perceived to be under threat, the defense of media autonomy may become a salient object of professional action.

The argument developed in this article builds on this insight. It proposes that, under specific conditions, journalists may adopt a distinct role-performance logic oriented toward defending the institutional infrastructure that makes future impartial reporting possible. This is not equivalent to replacing objectivity with activism, nor to treating journalism as a standing vehicle of democratic advocacy. Rather, it points to a bounded form of professional reorientation that emerges when the institutional conditions of journalistic independence are themselves drawn into political contestation. Before defining this concept in detail, however, it is necessary to examine why media autonomy in some settings becomes an object of defense in the first place. That question is especially pressing in relation to public service media and to democracies marked by institutional vulnerability, geopolitical insecurity, and pressures associated with media capture.

When media autonomy becomes the object of defense

Journalism is usually theorized as an institution that monitors power, informs citizens, and facilitates public scrutiny of political life. Yet journalism can perform these functions only under institutional conditions that protect a meaningful degree of editorial autonomy, organizational stability, and public legitimacy. For this reason, media autonomy should be understood not merely as a professional privilege, but as a constitutive condition of journalism's democratic role (Ananny, 2018; Pickard, 2019; Ward, 2020). When those enabling conditions are perceived to be under threat, journalism may confront a more reflexive problem: before it can continue to observe and evaluate political power, it may be compelled to defend the institutional arrangements that make such observation possible in the first place. This shifts attention from journalism as watchdog over external political processes to journalism as an actor responding to threats directed at its own conditions of independence.

This issue becomes especially visible in relation to public service media. Unlike purely commercial media, public service broadcasters occupy a hybrid position. They are expected to serve the public interest, provide widely accessible and relatively trusted information, and sustain pluralistic communication, while simultaneously remaining insulated from direct political control despite operating through publicly constituted governance arrangements (Ananny, 2018; Pickard, 2019). Their democratic significance

does not lie only in the content they produce, but also in the institutional architecture through which they operate: governance rules, appointment procedures, dismissal protections, accountability mechanisms, and safeguards against partisan interference (Hanretty, 2010; Puppis, 2010). In this sense, public service media are not simply journalistic organizations among others; they are part of the institutional infrastructure of the public sphere. As with courts, universities, or electoral commissions, their democratic value depends partly on the integrity of the rules that protect them from capture (Ananny, 2018; Pickard, 2019).

For that reason, threats to media autonomy do not always take the form of overt censorship or direct suppression. A growing literature on media capture shows that contemporary threats often proceed through procedural, legal, and organizational reforms that appear formally legitimate while gradually weakening editorial independence in practice (Dragomir, 2019; Surowiec et al., 2020). Such interventions may involve changes to oversight structures, appointment procedures, dismissal thresholds, reporting obligations, or funding mechanisms (Dragomir, 2019; Hanretty, 2010; Surowiec et al., 2020). Their significance lies precisely in the fact that they operate through the language of governance rather than through explicit attacks on press freedom (Puppis, 2010). This makes them especially difficult to contest publicly: what appears to one side as a technical reform may be interpreted by the other as a strategic attempt to lower the institutional barriers protecting editorial autonomy. In such cases, the object of struggle is not content alone, but the procedural architecture through which future content will be shaped (Ananny, 2018; Pickard, 2019).

This dynamic is particularly important in public service media because governance design is inseparable from editorial independence (Hanretty, 2010; Puppis, 2010). Changes in voting rules, dismissal procedures, or reporting obligations can alter the balance between professional autonomy and political leverage without any immediate interference in newsroom output (Dragomir, 2019; Hanretty, 2010; Surowiec et al., 2020). From a democratic perspective, this means that procedural reforms may function as latent instruments of control: they create the conditions under which future intervention becomes easier, cheaper, and less publicly visible. For journalists, such reforms may therefore be experienced not as routine administration, but as threats to the institutional preconditions of their profession (Ananny, 2018; Pickard, 2019; Ward, 2020). The issue is not simply whether a specific editorial decision is being constrained, but whether the organizational capacity for independent journalism is being made structurally more vulnerable. Under such conditions, media autonomy itself may become an object of defense.

The problem is sharpened further in political environments marked by democratic strain, populist contestation, and declining trust in mediating institutions. In such contexts, journalism is often exposed simultaneously to external delegitimation and internal institutional vulnerability. Political actors may portray independent media as partisan, elitist, or unaccountable, while also advancing reforms framed as transparency, efficiency, or accountability that in practice expand opportunities for political influence (Dragomir, 2019; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Surowiec et al., 2020). The resulting tension is important for role theory because it means that journalists may no longer experience threats to media autonomy as exceptional anomalies outside professional practice.

Rather, institutional defense can become entangled with the routine conditions under which journalism is carried out. What changes in such contexts is not only the risk environment of journalism, but also the professional meaning of restraint, neutrality, and non-intervention.

These dynamics may become particularly salient in geopolitically exposed democratic settings, where domestic institutional vulnerability coexists with sustained external security pressure. In such contexts, democratic institutions may be experienced as historically contingent and vulnerable to both internal erosion and external destabilization rather than as fully settled or self-reinforcing (Krastev and Holmes, 2019; Mälksoo, 2024). The Baltic region is relevant in this respect because its media systems have developed under the combined pressures of post-socialist transformation, geopolitical exposure, disinformation campaigns, and renewed security anxieties following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Balčytienė et al., 2025; Kõuts-Klemm et al., 2022; Vihalemm and Vunš, 2024). In this environment, journalistic autonomy may be understood not only as a professional norm but also as part of a broader infrastructure of democratic resilience. This does not imply that journalism merges with state security agendas. It suggests more narrowly that threats to independent media may be interpreted against a wider background of democratic vulnerability and informational insecurity.

Baltic scholarship increasingly suggests that journalists and public service media in the region have been operating under such pressures for some time. Studies point to heightened sensitivity to information disorder, concerns about self-censorship and professional threat, and growing emphasis on resilience, democratic continuity, and protection of the information environment (Jastramskis et al., 2023, 2025; Kõuts-Klemm et al., 2022; Rožukalne et al., 2024; Valentinavičius, 2022). These conditions do not automatically produce a single journalistic response, nor do they imply a uniform rejection of objectivity. What they do suggest is that the institutional context in which objectivity is enacted has become more fragile and more politically charged. Where public communication is viewed as exposed to manipulation, hybrid threat, or capture, journalists may come to see the defense of editorial autonomy not as an external political choice but as part of preserving the possibility of professional journalism itself.

To capture how these contextual pressures may converge, this article uses the term threat fusion. Threat fusion refers to the coupling of external geopolitical insecurity with internal procedural challenges to media autonomy, such that institutional reforms may be interpreted as more consequential within a wider environment of democratic and informational vulnerability. The concept does not imply that every governance dispute is explicitly securitized by journalists or that the LRT mobilization was publicly framed in direct geopolitical terms. In the present vignette, threat fusion is treated primarily as a contextual condition that helps explain why changes to broadcaster governance could acquire heightened institutional significance, while the publicly documented claims of LRT employees remained focused principally on editorial autonomy and safeguards against political influence (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Buzan et al., 1998; Dragomir, 2019; Maliukevičius, 2024).

At the same time, the possibility that media autonomy becomes an object of defense does not by itself resolve the normative problem. Journalists who publicly defend their institution may strengthen resistance to capture, but they may also expose themselves to

accusations that they have abandoned impartiality and entered political struggle as interested actors. This is especially likely in polarized environments where visible institutional self-defense can be reframed as elite self-protection or partisan mobilization. The analytical challenge, then, is not simply to note that public service media may be threatened, but to explain what kind of professional role orientation may emerge when journalists respond to such threats and how that role can be distinguished from more familiar forms of activism, advocacy, or engaged journalism. It is to that question that the next section turns.

The institutional sentinel: Concept, level of analysis, and boundaries

The concept developed in this article seeks to capture a type of journalistic response that is not well described by binaries between objectivity and activism. When journalists perceive that the institutional conditions enabling independent reporting are themselves under procedural threat, they may temporarily reorient professional practice from routine monitorial observation toward the public defense of those conditions. This article conceptualizes that response as the institutional sentinel (Ananny, 2018; Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017; Pickard, 2019; Ward, 2020).

More precisely, the institutional sentinel may be defined as a situationally activated journalistic role-performance logic in which journalists collectively shift from monitorial observation to the public defense of the institutional conditions that enable future impartial reporting, when those conditions are perceived to be under procedural threat. Three elements of this definition are central. First, the concept is situational rather than permanent: it refers to exceptional episodes rather than the everyday normative baseline of journalism. Second, it concerns role performance rather than exclusively internal role conception: the analytical focus is on publicly enacted professional behavior and justificatory logic rather than on individual psychological attitudes alone (Hellmueller and Mellado, 2015; Mellado, 2015, 2020). Third, the target of action is institutional rather than substantive: what journalists defend in sentinel mode is not a policy platform or ideological program, but the governance, autonomy, and organizational safeguards without which professional journalism becomes harder to sustain.

The term also requires differentiation from Norris's broader account of the news media as a public sentinel. In that framework, the democratic performance of media systems rests principally on their capacity to act as watchdogs, agenda setters, and gatekeepers: scrutinizing powerful actors, directing public attention, and facilitating inclusive communication within the public sphere (Norris and Odugbemi, 2010). The institutional sentinel is adjacent to this tradition but identifies a different object and mode of action. Whereas the public-sentinel framework concerns the routine external contribution of news media to accountability and governance, the institutional sentinel describes an episodic and reflexive form of collective role performance directed at protecting the governance arrangements and autonomy safeguards of journalism itself. The relationship between the two is therefore one of institutional precondition: sentinel action, as conceptualized here, may arise when journalists perceive that the conditions required to perform their ordinary watchdog, agenda-setting, and gatekeeping functions are being procedurally weakened.

Clarifying the level of analysis is therefore essential. The institutional sentinel is not best understood as a purely individual role conception, because the empirical manifestations that motivate the concept are often collective, organizationally visible, and publicly coordinated. At the same time, it is not reducible to organizational strategy alone, since what is at stake is not simply institutional behavior in a managerial sense but a professional logic articulated and enacted by journalists themselves. The concept is therefore located at the level of collective journalistic role performance: it names a mode of professional boundary work through which journalists temporarily redefine what responsible journalism requires when the institutional infrastructure of journalism is perceived to be under threat (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017; Reese and Shoemaker, 2016). This formulation avoids overclaiming, since it does not assume direct access to journalists' inner beliefs in the absence of interview data, while still allowing analysis of publicly enacted role shifts and their justificatory language.

The concept is rooted in the idea that journalism depends not only on professional norms but also on institutional conditions of possibility. Public service media, in particular, operate through governance arrangements that help secure editorial independence, accountability, and insulation from partisan control. When those arrangements are perceived to be weakened, objectivity can no longer be treated purely as an internal professional discipline. It also appears as institutionally contingent: a norm whose meaningful exercise depends on whether journalists retain the autonomy required to enact it. In such moments, defending the institutional infrastructure of journalism may be framed as a precondition for maintaining the possibility of future impartial reporting (Ananny, 2018; Pickard, 2019; Ward, 2020).

The institutional sentinel therefore does not imply a wholesale replacement of objectivity. Rather, sentinel action is justified by appeal to the future possibility of impartial journalism, not by the claim that impartiality has ceased to matter. What is most clearly strained under such conditions is the expectation of detached non-intervention, while verification, factual discipline, and accountability to shared standards of evidence remain central to the legitimacy journalists seek to preserve (McQuail and Deuze, 2020; Ward, 2004, 2011, 2020; Westerstahl, 1983). Sentinel activation thus involves not the abandonment of objectivity, but its conditional reinterpretation under institutional stress.

To clarify the concept further, it is important to distinguish it from several neighboring models of journalistic intervention. First, the institutional sentinel is not equivalent to journalism of attachment. Bell's (1998) formulation of attachment is rooted in the moral problem of witnessing suffering and rejecting the bystander stance in situations of violence or atrocity (see also Ruigrok, 2008). By contrast, the institutional sentinel is not centered on witnessing or moral proximity to suffering, but on defending institutional autonomy when the conditions enabling independent journalism are perceived to be under threat.

Second, the concept is not identical to engaged or objectively engaged journalism (Moraes, 2023; Verhoeven, 2025; Ward, 2020). Ward's (2020) model allows journalism to acknowledge democratic values while remaining committed to evidence, fairness, and ethical discipline as an enduring professional orientation. Related scholarship similarly examines how journalists reconcile professional objectivity with commitments to social justice, inclusion, or other substantive normative goals (Moraes, 2023; Verhoeven, 2025).

The institutional sentinel, by contrast, is episodic and object-specific: it is activated under particular threat conditions and directed toward protecting the institutional conditions that make journalism possible.

Third, the institutional sentinel is not simply partisan or cause-oriented journalistic activism. In journalism scholarship, such activism refers to intentional forms of political intervention or alignment through which journalists support particular political actors, campaigns, movements, causes, or substantive social outcomes; it may range from overtly championing a perspective to participating directly in political or movement activities (Fisher, 2016; Shultziner, 2026; Shultziner and Shoshan, 2018). Sentinel action may also have political consequences, but it differs in both target and legitimation. Its target is not the triumph of a preferred political project, actor, or policy outcome but the preservation of institutional safeguards such as governance integrity, dismissal protections, and editorial independence. Its justification is correspondingly narrower: it presents intervention as necessary to defend the institutional conditions under which pluralistic and professionally independent journalism remains possible (Ananny, 2018; Pickard, 2019; Ward, 2020).

Fourth, the institutional sentinel is narrower than institutional advocacy in a broad sense. Journalists, professional associations, and media organizations may defend media freedom and professional interests through litigation, public advocacy, organizational statements, or collective mobilization (Höglund and Schaffer, 2021; VonDoepp, 2017). Not all such actions, however, amount to sentinel activation. What distinguishes the sentinel is the conjunction of a perceived procedural threat, a clearly specified institutional object of defense, and a claim that the resulting role shift is exceptional, limited, and reversible. In this sense, sentinel action is a bounded subtype of institutional defense rather than a synonym for all forms of media-freedom advocacy or professional collective action.

These distinctions help identify the concept's core dimensions. The first is trigger: sentinel activation is initiated by the perception of an institutional threat, typically procedural rather than purely rhetorical. The second is object of defense: the target is the governance and autonomy infrastructure of journalism, not a substantive public policy or ideological platform. The third is temporality: sentinel action is episodic rather than permanent and may be suspended, reactivated, or terminated as the mobilization cycle changes, even when the underlying institutional dispute remains unresolved. The fourth is professional justification: intervention is framed as preserving the conditions for future impartial reporting rather than replacing professionalism with advocacy. The fifth is public visibility: sentinel activation is enacted in ways that make the defense of the institution publicly legible, whether through symbolic disruption, collective statements, protest, or other visible forms of boundary work.

The concept also carries an internal normative tension. Because sentinel action is public and visible, it may raise the political and reputational costs of capture while simultaneously exposing journalism to counter-frames of bias, self-interest, and elite collusion. A journalistic institution that steps forward to defend its own autonomy risks appearing as an interested actor rather than as a neutral observer. For that reason, sentinel action can remain analytically and normatively distinct from unbounded advocacy only if it is constrained by clear criteria of boundedness: temporariness, transparency about role

shift, continued openness to legitimate disagreement, and a demonstrable capacity to suspend or end exceptional practices rather than normalize them as a permanent professional mandate. The institutional sentinel is thus best understood as a bounded form of collective journalistic role performance that emerges when the institutional infrastructure of independent reporting is perceived to be under procedural threat. The next section explains how the article approaches this phenomenon analytically and how the 2025–2026 LRT protest cycle is used as an illustrative vignette to clarify its mechanism and limits.

The 2025–2026 LRT vignette and analytical approach

This article uses the 2025–2026 LRT protest cycle as an illustrative revelatory vignette within a conceptual theory-building design. Drawing on legislative materials and publicly available employee statements, news reports, and documented broadcast and protest practices produced during the conflict (LRT.lt, 2025b, 2025c, 2026a, 2026b; BNS, 2025a, 2025b, 2026; Murauskaitė et al., 2026), it reconstructs how the procedural threat and institutional object of defense were publicly framed, how a collective role shift became visible, and how exceptional practices were suspended, reactivated, and ended. These materials support analysis of publicly enacted role performance and justificatory language, but not inference about unanimous newsroom motivations, audience effects, or the protest's causal impact on legislation. The vignette therefore serves to identify and refine a possible role-performance logic rather than to test a causal model or establish its prevalence (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017; Mellado, 2015, 2020; Yin, 2018).

The immediate dispute concerned proposed changes to the rules governing the dismissal of LRT's director general. At the first parliamentary reading in late November 2025, the proposal would have replaced the existing requirement of eight votes among the twelve members of the LRT Council with a simple majority. The version subsequently advanced under an accelerated procedure required at least seven votes, introduced a secret ballot, and allowed dismissal if the Council concluded that the director general had improperly performed statutory duties or if the Council declined to approve LRT's annual activity report. Under the existing law, dismissal required eight votes in an open ballot and had to be justified on public-interest grounds (BNS, 2025b). These procedural differences formed the concrete institutional object around which the conflict developed.

Supporters of the amendments argued that the existing qualified-majority requirement made the director general exceptionally difficult to dismiss, that a simple-majority threshold was closer to the practice of most European public broadcasters, and that secret voting would allow Council members to decide without external pressure (Skėrytė, 2025; Stankevičius et al., 2025). LRT employees and media-freedom organizations, by contrast, framed the lower threshold, secret ballot, and broadened dismissal grounds as weakening safeguards against political influence (LRT.lt, 2025c; Media Freedom Rapid Response, 2025).

LRT employees publicly framed their response as a defense of institutional safeguards rather than of a particular officeholder. In announcing the campaign on 1 December, staff called for the dismissal proposal to be withdrawn and for a broader discussion on depoliticizing the LRT Council, while stressing that their objection concerned the weakening of protections for the broadcaster's independence rather than any specific individual (LRT.lt, 2025c). The

campaign initially operated through broadcast practices: journalists, presenters, producers, camera operators, and technical staff inserted brief moments of silence into ordinary programming and used them to explain the democratic importance of independent media (BNS, 2025a; LRT.lt, 2025c). During the three-day protest beginning on 16 December, LRT Radio relocated its programming to Independence Square outside parliament, placing ordinary journalistic production within the space of public mobilization (BNS, 2025a). These publicly documented practices make visible a collective shift in performed professional role – from reporting on an institutional dispute to openly defending the conditions under which reporting was conducted – without establishing that every participating employee understood or justified the intervention in identical terms.

The publicly visible mobilization is better understood as a two-wave protest cycle than as a single event followed by definitive deactivation. The first public protest was announced on 28 November 2025, and the LRT employee campaign began on 1 December (BNS, 2025b; LRT.lt, 2025c). The first major rally took place outside parliament on 9 December (LRT.lt, 2025f), followed by three consecutive bonfire protests on 16, 17, and 18 December (LRT.lt, 2025a; 2025d; 2025e). The 17 December rally formed the central event of this three-day sequence, while the temporary suspension of the on-air silence pauses on 22 December marked partial de-escalation rather than the termination of the wider campaign (LRT.lt, 2025b). Mobilization was renewed on 25 March 2026, when LRT journalists resumed the protest campaign, followed by public rallies on 8 and 25 April (BNS, 2026; LRT.lt, 2026b; Murauskaitė et al., 2026). The LRT protest initiative group formally ended the campaign on 2 June after parliament adopted a revised version of the legislation (LRT.lt, 2026a). The formal end of the campaign did not mean that all

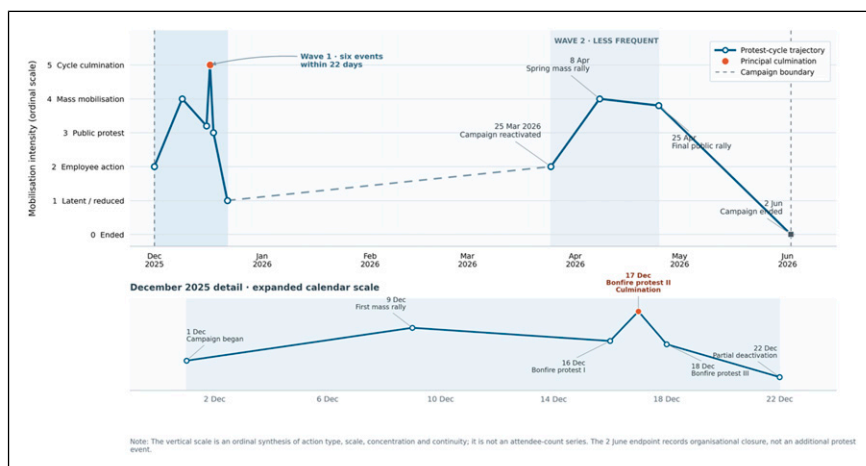


Figure 1. LRT protest-cycle mobilization, 28 November 2025–2 June 2026.

Note. Mobilization level is an analytical ordinal classification, not a direct participant count. The bonfire protests of 16, 17, and 18 December are treated as separate events. The three protest-cycle events recorded in 2026 are the employee campaign reactivation on 25 March and the public rallies on 8 and 25 April. The 2 June point marks the formal termination of the campaign and is not counted as a fourth protest event. Source: author's reconstruction from public statements, news reports, protest documentation, and media-freedom monitoring materials.

concerns had been resolved: the Venice Commission had continued to recommend further refinement of the draft in May, and media-freedom organizations still objected to remaining provisions when parliament adopted the amendments on 2 June 2026 (Gerdžiūnas, 2026; Venckūnas, 2026). Figure 1 visualizes this temporal pattern: a dense initial wave concentrated in December 2025, followed by three discrete mobilization events in 2026 rather than continuous protest activity of comparable frequency.

The chronology reveals an episodic pattern of mobilization. The most concentrated wave occurred in December 2025, followed by a period of lower protest frequency and renewed mobilization in spring 2026. Although the later rallies remained substantial, exceptional journalistic interventions were not maintained continuously. Instead, they were suspended, reactivated in response to renewed procedural pressure, and subsequently brought to a formal close. This pattern suggests that reversibility does not require the complete resolution of the underlying institutional dispute. Rather, it refers to the capacity of journalists to enter and leave an exceptional mode of collective role performance while the broader political conflict remains unsettled. Boundedness therefore concerns the temporal and organizational limits of sentinel action, not the disappearance of the threat that initially activated it. Taken together, the episode functions as a concept-generating case by making visible a temporary, collective, and publicly justified defense of the institutional conditions required for future impartial reporting.

What the vignette helps specify: Activation, boundedness, and the defensive paradox

The LRT vignette helps clarify three elements of the institutional sentinel: how it is activated, what makes it bounded, and why it generates a defensive paradox. These dimensions distinguish the concept from broader theories of engaged journalism and more diffuse claims about journalism's moral turn under democratic strain. The publicly available statements and protest practices indicate that the publicly enacted role shift was justified not by political disagreement alone, but by concern that the proposed governance changes would weaken future editorial autonomy. The publicly stated object of defense was therefore the institutional and organizational conditions of reporting rather than the substance of previous LRT coverage. This evidence makes a collective role-performance logic publicly visible, but it does not establish that all participating employees shared the same motivations or internal role conceptions.

The publicly available LRT materials primarily document an institutional-autonomy frame: employee statements focused on dismissal procedures, the politicization of the LRT Council, and safeguards for the broadcaster's independence. Threat fusion should therefore not be treated as a security frame demonstrably articulated by all participants. In the present argument, it functions primarily as a contextual condition: in a geopolitically exposed and informationally vulnerable environment, domestic governance changes may acquire heightened significance because institutional weakening is understood against broader concerns about democratic resilience. The LRT vignette is compatible with this contextual interpretation, but direct evidence of security-inflected role conceptions would require interviews or explicit actor statements. The vignette also indicates that activation is publicly performative. Sentinel action becomes visible through symbolic and

organizational practices that depart from routine monitorial forms. In this respect, activation involves both interpretation and performance: a threat is publicly identified, and that identification is enacted in ways that reposition journalists from observers of a conflict to defenders of the conditions of observation. The vignette also clarifies the importance of boundedness. Without limits on the duration, object, and form of intervention, the concept would collapse into a broader category of engaged or activist journalism. Boundedness is therefore not an accessory to the argument but one of its core analytical and normative conditions. Sentinel action remains distinct only if it is tied to a specific institutional object and if exceptional practices can be suspended, reactivated, or terminated rather than normalized as a permanent professional mandate (Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Ward, 2020).

The LRT episode makes the four dimensions of boundedness visible in different ways. Temporal boundedness appears in the concentration of mobilization in December 2025 and its episodic reactivation in spring 2026 rather than in continuous protest activity (LRT.lt, 2025b; 2026a; 2026b). Object boundedness is reflected in the publicly stated focus on dismissal procedures, Council governance, and safeguards for editorial independence (LRT.lt, 2025c). Role transparency is visible in the public campaign, the on-air silence pauses, and the relocation of broadcasting to the protest space (BNS, 2025a; LRT.lt, 2025c). Reversibility refers to the suspension, later reactivation, and eventual formal termination of these exceptional practices; it does not imply that the broader institutional dispute had been resolved (LRT.lt, 2025b; 2026a; 2026b). Taken together, these dimensions distinguish sentinel action from a permanent activist orientation. Without temporariness, object specificity, transparency, and reversibility, the institutional sentinel would lose the features that distinguish it from adjacent interventionist models.

The defensive paradox: Protecting autonomy while risking legitimacy

The third and perhaps most important contribution of the vignette is to clarify the defensive paradox at the center of the concept. Sentinel action is normatively motivated by the defense of journalistic autonomy, yet the public defense of autonomy can itself create new vulnerabilities for journalistic legitimacy. The same visible intervention that raises the political and reputational costs of institutional capture may also provide adversarial actors with material for reframing journalism as biased, self-interested, or politically aligned (Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Ward, 2020). This paradox can be specified as two interacting dynamics. The first is a protective dynamic: public mobilization may increase the reputational, political, and international costs of procedural intervention in media governance, rendering otherwise technical reforms visible as matters of democratic concern (Alexander, 2006; Rosanvallon, 2008). The second is a delegitimizing dynamic: visible institutional self-defense can be appropriated into narratives of bias, elite closure, and partisan self-protection, especially in hybrid and polarized communication environments shaped by hostile-media perceptions and identity-linked distrust (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Gunther and Schmitt, 2004; Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2018).

The analytical value of the vignette lies in illustrating that these two dynamics are not sequential alternatives but simultaneous possibilities. Sentinel action may help resist capture while also intensifying the very legitimacy struggles that make institutional defense necessary in the first place. For that reason, the institutional sentinel should be understood neither as a straightforward democratic corrective nor as simple activism, but as a risky and constrained form of professional boundary work. The vignette instead helps clarify the conditions under which such a role-performance logic becomes plausible: a procedural threat to institutional autonomy, an institutional setting in which autonomy matters directly for future journalism, a political environment in which such threats are interpreted as especially consequential, and sufficient residual institutional capacity for journalists to make collective resistance publicly visible.

Scope conditions and propositions for future research

The concept of the institutional sentinel is not intended as a universal model of journalism under democratic strain. The scope conditions developed here do not derive from the LRT vignette alone. They are theoretically derived through the article's synthesis of scholarship on journalistic role performance, institutional autonomy, procedural media capture, collective resistance capacity, and bounded professional intervention (Ananny, 2018; Dragomir, 2019; Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017; Mellado, 2015, 2020; Pickard, 2019; Ward, 2020). The LRT episode serves a more limited function: it makes these dimensions visible in a concrete setting and helps sharpen their formulation, but it cannot establish their prevalence, causal weight, or applicability across media systems. The purpose of this section is therefore not to generalize empirically from a single case, but to translate the conceptual framework into a set of theoretically derived conditions and propositions that can be examined in future comparative research.

A first scope condition concerns the institutional object of threat. Sentinel action is most plausible in settings where journalism depends visibly on governance arrangements that can be procedurally altered in ways that affect editorial autonomy. This is why the concept is especially relevant to public service media, publicly constituted broadcasters, and other institutions whose autonomy relies on formal safeguards such as appointment rules, dismissal thresholds, oversight procedures, or legal protections. Where journalism is dispersed across highly fragmented or weakly institutionalized environments, comparable threats may exist, but they may not generate the same publicly legible object of defense. In such cases, journalists may perceive vulnerability without being able to mobilize around a clearly identifiable institutional target (Ananny, 2018; Dragomir, 2019; Pickard, 2019).

A second scope condition is procedural threat intensity. Not every political criticism of media institutions, nor every regulatory adjustment, is likely to activate sentinel behavior. The argument advanced here applies most strongly when journalists perceive a procedural intervention as consequential for future institutional autonomy rather than as a routine policy disagreement. Threat intensity is therefore not defined solely by objective severity, but by professional interpretation: journalists must perceive that the change lowers the barriers to capture, increases opportunities for political leverage, or weakens the institutional integrity of the organization in ways that matter for future reporting. This

is one reason why the concept should not be generalized to all conflicts involving media regulation. Sentinel activation requires a threshold at which institutional reform becomes professionally legible as a threat to journalism's enabling conditions rather than as ordinary governance dispute.

A third scope condition concerns institutional capacity for visible resistance. Sentinel action requires not only threat, but also the residual capacity to act collectively and publicly. If institutional vulnerability is too extreme, journalists may lack the autonomy, resources, legitimacy, or organizational coordination needed to mount visible resistance. In such cases, capture may proceed without meaningful public mobilization. Conversely, where institutions remain relatively robust and threat intensity is lower, contestation may stay within routine professional or legal channels and never activate sentinel performance. The concept is therefore most applicable in intermediate situations: where perceived threat is high enough to trigger exceptional concern, but institutional capacity remains sufficient to make collective defense feasible and publicly visible (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017; Reese and Shoemaker, 2016).

A fourth scope condition is the presence of an interpretive environment shaped by threat fusion. Sentinel action becomes more plausible where internal procedural interventions are read against a wider background of democratic fragility, geopolitical insecurity, or informational threat. This does not mean that sentinel action is limited to geopolitically exposed democracies. It suggests, however, that sustained external pressure and concerns about democratic vulnerability may make institutional weakening appear especially consequential and exceptional professional responses more thinkable. In relatively stable liberal-democratic settings, the same governance dispute may be interpreted primarily as a technical controversy; in more vulnerable political and informational environments, it may be understood as part of a broader pattern of institutional erosion or potential capture (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Buzan et al., 1998; Krastev and Holmes, 2019; Mälksoo, 2024).

A fifth scope condition involves the possibility of bounded exceptionalism. The concept only applies where journalists can plausibly present their intervention as temporary, object-specific, and reversible. If institutional self-defense becomes normalized as a permanent professional mandate, the phenomenon is better understood as a different model of engaged journalism or institutional advocacy. The institutional sentinel therefore presupposes not only intervention but also a claim to self-limitation. This makes boundedness a scope condition as well as a normative criterion: without a demonstrable capacity to suspend or terminate exceptional practices rather than normalize them as a permanent professional mandate, the distinctiveness of sentinel action dissolves.

These conditions can be summarized heuristically in a simple typological form. Sentinel emergence is most likely where procedural threat intensity is high and institutional capacity for resistance remains present, especially in contexts where media autonomy is publicly salient and threats are interpreted through a broader frame of democratic insecurity. Where threat intensity is low, journalists are more likely to remain within routine monitorial roles. Where vulnerability is high but resistance capacity is weak, institutional weakening may proceed without visible collective defense. Where mobilization occurs without boundedness, the phenomenon moves closer to institutional advocacy or durable activist role orientations.

On the basis of this conceptual synthesis, rather than through empirical generalization from the LRT episode, the argument yields several propositions for future comparative and empirical examination. Sentinel activation is most likely when journalists perceive procedural interventions in media governance as threatening the future autonomy of reporting rather than merely altering current administrative arrangements. This proposition follows from the concept's emphasis on institutional object and procedural trigger. Future work could examine whether journalists are more likely to engage in visible institutional self-defense when reforms concern appointment rules, dismissal procedures, funding safeguards, or oversight structures than when conflicts concern content regulation or episodic political criticism alone. Comparative case studies could test whether similar governance disputes are interpreted differently depending on the degree to which journalists perceive them as opening pathways to capture (Dragomir, 2019; Surowiec et al., 2020).

Furthermore, sentinel activation is more likely in contexts where internal procedural threats are interpreted through wider frames of democratic insecurity, informational threat, or geopolitical exposure. This proposition concerns threat fusion. It suggests that the same formal institutional intervention may generate different professional responses depending on whether the wider environment encourages journalists to interpret institutional weakening as an isolated reform or as part of a broader pattern of democratic vulnerability. This could be investigated through cross-national comparison between media systems exposed to different levels of polarization, democratic erosion, or external insecurity. Geopolitically exposed democracies may be especially relevant sites for such research, but they should not be presumed to be the only ones.

The public legitimacy of sentinel action is likely to vary across audience segments rather than producing a uniform directional shift in overall media trust. Because sentinel action makes institutional self-defense publicly visible, it is unlikely to have a single effect on legitimacy. Some audiences may interpret it as democratic repair or principled defense of independence, while others may see it as proof of bias, elite self-protection, or partisan collusion. Future research should therefore avoid relying solely on aggregate trust measures and instead examine segmented responses across different political, ideological, or identity-based publics (Gunther and Schmitt, 2004; Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020). This proposition is especially important because it follows directly from the defensive paradox: the same intervention may protect autonomy while simultaneously intensifying distrust among certain groups.

Sentinel action is more likely to be interpreted as legitimate when its boundedness is made publicly visible through temporal limitation, role transparency, object specificity, and reversibility. This proposition follows from the argument that boundedness is central to the concept's normative defensibility. Audiences and observers are more likely to distinguish sentinel action from unbounded advocacy when journalists openly signal that the intervention is exceptional, tied to a specific institutional threat, and subject to suspension or termination when the specific mobilization phase closes, even where the underlying institutional controversy remains unresolved. Future empirical work could examine whether these guardrails moderate audience interpretation, elite framing, or professional self-understanding in comparable cases (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Ward, 2020).

Where institutional vulnerability is extreme and collective resistance capacity is weak, procedural capture may advance without sentinel activation even under high threat

conditions. This proposition highlights that sentinel behavior should not be expected wherever threat is severe. On the contrary, the ability to mount visible collective defense presupposes some remaining autonomy, legitimacy, and organizational coordination. This suggests a nonlinear relationship between vulnerability and mobilization: sentinel action may be most likely not at the highest levels of institutional collapse, but where threat is acute and resistance remains just feasible enough to be performed publicly. This proposition could be explored through comparison between cases of attempted capture that generated visible resistance and those that did not.

These propositions should be understood as analytically derived expectations rather than findings established by the vignette. A revelatory case selected because it makes sentinel action especially visible cannot show how frequently the role emerges, under what conditions it fails to activate, or when institutional mobilization becomes unbounded advocacy. Those questions require comparison with negative and boundary cases, including situations in which procedural threats exist but journalists do not mobilize, collective resistance is institutionally impossible, or exceptional intervention becomes a durable professional orientation.

Implications for comparative research

Taken together, these propositions suggest that the institutional sentinel should be studied not as a stable journalistic type but as an episodic and relational phenomenon. Its emergence depends on the interaction of institutional design, political threat, professional interpretation, and public visibility. Future research could develop this agenda in at least three directions. First, comparative case studies could examine whether similar governance disputes in different countries generate sentinel activation or remain within routine professional politics. Second, interview-based research could investigate how journalists themselves understand the boundary between institutional self-defense and advocacy, thereby addressing questions of role conception that the present conceptual article cannot resolve directly. Third, audience research could assess whether visible boundedness moderates the legitimacy costs associated with public institutional defense.

The point of these propositions is not to convert the concept prematurely into a closed explanatory model. Rather, they are intended to make the concept usable: to show where it is likely to apply, what kinds of variation matter, and how future work might distinguish sentinel action from adjacent forms of intervention. In that sense, the institutional sentinel is offered as a mid-range conceptual tool for studying how journalism responds when the defense of its own autonomy enters journalism itself as an object of professional action. The conclusion returns to the broader significance and limits of that claim.

Conclusion

This article has argued that journalism in democratically insecure environments may, under specific conditions, confront a reflexive professional dilemma: before it can continue to observe power, it may need to defend the institutional arrangements that make independent observation possible. To conceptualize this situation, the article introduced the institutional sentinel as a bounded and situationally activated journalistic role-

performance logic in which journalists collectively shift from routine monitorial observation to the public defense of the institutional conditions that enable future impartial reporting. The concept does not describe a wholesale abandonment of objectivity, nor a generalized turn to activism. Rather, it identifies a more specific and limited phenomenon: exceptional institutional self-defense undertaken in the name of preserving the autonomy on which professional journalism depends.

Using the 2025–2026 conflict surrounding Lithuania’s public broadcaster, LRT, as a revelatory vignette, the article illustrates how this role-performance logic may become publicly visible when procedural reforms are framed as threats to media autonomy rather than merely as administrative adjustments. The vignette helped clarify three core elements of the concept: first, sentinel action becomes publicly visible when journalists frame the institutional infrastructure of reporting as being under procedural threat; second, it remains analytically distinct from broader advocacy only insofar as it is bounded by temporariness, object specificity, role transparency, and reversibility; and third, it is marked by a defensive paradox, since visible institutional self-defense may simultaneously protect autonomy and expose journalism to renewed accusations of bias, elitism, or partisan collusion. In this sense, sentinel action is neither a straightforward democratic corrective nor a simple breach of professionalism. It is a risky, constrained, and context-dependent form of professional boundary work.

The broader implication is that journalistic objectivity should not be treated only as a normative ideal internal to professional culture. Under conditions of institutional vulnerability, objectivity also depends on organizational and governance arrangements that secure the practical possibility of independent reporting. This is especially visible in public service media and in settings where democratic fragility, procedural contestation, and wider informational or geopolitical threat become mutually reinforcing. In such contexts, the defense of media autonomy may itself enter journalism as an object of professional action. Yet precisely because such action risks eroding the appearance of impartiality on which journalism’s broader legitimacy rests, the article has argued that boundedness must remain central to any normative defense of sentinel behavior. Without clear limits, the institutional sentinel would collapse into either permanent institutional advocacy or a generalized model of engaged journalism.

The institutional sentinel is therefore offered as a contingent and bounded conceptual category rather than as a universal professional norm. Its contribution is to provide a vocabulary for identifying a form of role performance that may emerge when the defense of media autonomy becomes inseparable from journalistic practice itself. Future research can examine its comparative reach across media systems, investigate how journalists distinguish institutional self-defense from advocacy, and assess how audiences interpret visible efforts to defend media autonomy under conditions of polarization and democratic strain.

ORCID iD

Vytautas Valentinavičius  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2110-3917>

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Alexander JC (2006) *The Civil Sphere*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195162509.001.0001>
- Ananny M (2018) *Networked Press Freedom: Creating Infrastructures for a Public Right to Hear*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9516.001.0001>
- Balčytienė A, Bocullo D and Juraitė K (2025) Baltic democracies beyond the EU accession: media as a bearer of democratic culture and means of resilience in navigating uncertainties. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 33(2): 375–390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2024.2360030>
- Bell M (1998) The truth is our currency. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 3(1): 102–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X98003001008>
- Bennett WL and Livingston S (2018) The disinformation order: disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication* 33(2): 122–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317>
- BNS (2025a) Journalists begin 3-day protest over LRT law changes. *LRT*, 16 December. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2777121/journalists-begin-3-day-protest-over-lrt-law-changes>
- BNS (2025b) Lithuanian journalists plan protest over proposed changes to LRT law. *LRT*, 28 November. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2759399/lithuanian-journalists-plan-protest-over-proposed-changes-to-lrt-law>
- BNS (2026) Over 10,000 people protest in Vilnius against politicisation of LRT. *LRT*, 8 April. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2892394/over-10-000-people-protest-in-vilnius-against-politicisation-of-lrt>
- Buzan B, Wæver O and de Wilde J (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Chadwick A (2017) *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. 2nd edition. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190696726.001.0001>
- Christians CG, Glasser TL, McQuail D, et al. (2009) *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies*. University of Illinois Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctt1xcjws>
- Dragomir M (2019) *Media capture in Europe*. Media development investment fund. Available at: <https://www.mdif.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/MDIF-Report-Media-Capture-in-Europe.pdf>
- Egelhofer JL, Aaldering L and Lecheler S (2021) Delegitimizing the media? Analyzing politicians' media criticism on social media. *Journal of Language and Politics* 20(5): 653–675. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.20081.ege>

- Fisher C (2016) The advocacy continuum: towards a theory of advocacy in journalism. *Journalism* 17(6): 711–726. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884915582311>
- Gerdžiūnas B (2026) Lithuanian parliament adopts softened LRT changes following Protests—Explainer. *LRT*, 2 June. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2948278/lithuanian-parliament-adopts-softened-lrt-changes-following-protests-explainer>
- Gunther AC and Schmitt K (2004) Mapping boundaries of the hostile media effect. *Journal of Communication* 54(1): 55–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02613.x>
- Hanitzsch T and Vos TP (2017) Journalistic roles and the struggle over institutional identity: the discursive constitution of journalism. *Communication Theory* 27(2): 115–135. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12112>
- Hanitzsch T and Vos TP (2018) Journalism beyond democracy: a new look into journalistic roles in political and everyday life. *Journalism* 19(2): 146–164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916673386>
- Hanretty C (2010) Explaining the de facto independence of public broadcasters. *British Journal of Political Science* 40(1): 75–89. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000712340999024X>
- Hellmueller L and Mellado C (2015) Professional roles and news construction: a media sociology conceptualization of journalists' role conception and performance. *Communications Society* 28(3): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.28.35948>
- Höglund C-M and Schaffer JK (2021) Defending journalism against state repression: legal mobilization for media freedom in Uganda. *Journalism Studies* 22(4): 516–534. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1882879>
- Iyengar S, Lelkes Y, Levendusky M, et al. (2019) The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science* 22: 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>
- Jastramskis D, Plepytė-Davidavičienė G and Gečienė-Janulionė I (2023) Professional threats and self-censorship in Lithuanian journalism. *Filosofija. Sociologija* 34(4): 422–431. <https://doi.org/10.6001/fil-soc.2023.34.4.8>
- Jastramskis D, Plepytė-Davidavičienė G and Kupetytė R (2025) The role of organisational factors and working conditions for the autonomy of journalists in an unstable economy. *Journalism Studies* 26(2): 258–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2024.2420204>
- Kohring M and Matthes J (2007) Trust in news media: development and validation of a multi-dimensional scale. *Communication Research* 34(2): 231–252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650206298071>
- Kōuts-Klemm R, Rožukalne A and Jastramskis D (2022) Resilience of national media systems: baltic media in the global network environment. *Journal of Baltic Studies* 53(4): 543–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2022.2103162>
- Krastev I and Holmes S (2019) *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*. Allen Lane.
- Lewandowsky S, Ecker UKH, Cook J, et al. (2023) Misinformation and the epistemic integrity of democracy. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 54: 101711. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101711>
- LRT.lt (2025a) Laužų protestų startas: tūkstantinė minia ir žinutė plakate – “tanku per laisvą žodį?” [Bonfire protests begin]: a crowd of thousands and the message A tank over free speech? Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2777283/lauzu-protestu-startas-tukstantine-minia-ir-zinute-plakate-tanku-per-laisva-zodi>

- LRT.lt (2025b) LRT trumpai. Protestas tęsiamas, laikinai atsisakoma tylos pauzių. [*LRT in brief: Protest continues, silence pauses temporarily suspended*]. 22 December. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2783410/lrt-trumpai-protestas-tesiamas-laikintai-atsisakoma-tylos-pauziu>
- LRT.lt (2025c) LRT žurnalistai ir kiti darbuotojai skelbia protestą: mus bando užvaldyti, negalime tylėti [LRT journalists and other employees declare a protest: they are trying to take Us over, we cannot remain silent]. 1 December. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2761111/lrt-zurnalistai-ir-kiti-darbuotojai-skelbia-protesta-mus-bando-uzvaldyti-negalime-tyleti>
- LRT.lt (2025d) Prie Seimo – 10 tūkst. minia, Meilutytės daina ir skambi Malinausko kalba apie Žemaitaitį [A crowd of 10,000 outside parliament, Meilutytė's song and Malinauskas's striking speech about Žemaitaitis]. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2778223/prie-seimo-10-tukst-minia-meilutytes-daina-ir-skambi-malinausko-kalba-apie-zemaitaiti>
- LRT.lt (2025e) Protesto laužai prie seimo: trečioji diena. [Protest bonfires outside parliament: The third day]. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/fotogalerijos/685/2779454/protesto-lauzai-prie-seimo-trecioji-diena>
- LRT.lt (2025f) Thousands rally in Vilnius against threat to media freedom. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2770183/thousands-rally-in-vilnius-against-threat-to-media-freedom>
- LRT.lt (2026a) LRT protesto iniciatyvinė grupė: ačiū visiems, padėjusiems šioje kovoje už žodžio laisvę [LRT protest initiative group: thank you to everyone who helped in this struggle for freedom of expression]. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/tavo-lrt/15/2948375/lrt-protesto-iniciatyvine-grupe-aci-u-visiems-padejusiems-sioje-kovoje-uz-zodzio-laisve>
- LRT.lt (2026b) LRT restarts protest against political takeover attempts. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2878174/lrt-restarts-protest-against-political-takeover-attempts>
- Maliukevičius N (2024) *Fortifying Democracies: Lithuania's Comprehensive Approach to Counter Disinformation*. Eastern Europe Studies Centre. Available at: https://www.gssc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/v05_Maliukevicius_Fortifying-Democracies_EN_A4.pdf
- Mälksoo M (2024) NATO's new front: deterrence moves eastward. *International Affairs* 100(2): 531–547. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae008>
- Mason L (2018) *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became our Identity*. University of Chicago Press.
- McQuail D and Deuze M (2020) *Mcquail's Media and Mass Communication Theory*. 7th edition. Sage.
- Media Freedom Rapid Response (2025) Lithuania: media freedom groups raise alarm as political pressure campaign on LRT widens. Available at: <https://www.mfrr.eu/lithuania-media-freedom-groups-raise-alarm-as-political-pressure-campaign-on-lrt-widens/>
- Mellado C (2015) Professional roles in news content. *Journalism Studies* 16(4): 596–614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.922276>
- Mellado C (2020) Theorizing journalistic roles. In: Mellado C (ed) *Beyond Journalistic Norms: Role Performance and News in Comparative Perspective*. Routledge, pp. 22–45. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429425509-3>

- Moraes F (2023) Who are the activist and engaged we are talking about? A look at the Brazilian commercial press and political positioning as a journalistic strategy. *Brazilian Journalism Research* 19(3): e1609. <https://doi.org/10.25200/BJR.v19n3.2023.1609>
- Murauskaitė A, Platūkytė D, Stankevičius A, et al. (2026) ‘we will not give up’: 30,000 pack Vilnius square in defence of public broadcaster. *LRT*, 25 April, Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2909100/we-will-not-give-up-30-000-pack-vilnius-square-in-defence-of-public-broadcaster>
- Norris P and Odugbemi S (2010) Evaluating media performance. In: Norris P (ed) *Public Sentinel: News Media and Governance Reform*. World Bank, pp. 3–29. <https://hdl.handle.net/10986/2687>
- Pickard V (2019) *Democracy Without Journalism? Confronting the Misinformation Society*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190946753.001.0001>
- Puppis M (2010) Media governance: a new concept for the analysis of media policy and regulation. *Communication, Culture & Critique* 3(2): 134–149. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2010.01063.x>
- Reese SD and Shoemaker PJ (2016) A media sociology for the networked public sphere: the hierarchy of influences model. *Mass Communication & Society* 19(4): 389–410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2016.1174268>
- Rosanvallon P (2008) *Counter-democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*. Goldhammer A (Trans.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511755835>
- Rosen J (2010) The view from nowhere: questions and answers. *Press*. Available at: <https://pressthink.org/2010/11/the-view-from-nowhere-questions-and-answers/>
- Rožukalne A, Kažoka A and Siliņa L (2024) ‘Are journalists traitors of the state, really?’—Self-censorship development during the Russian–Ukrainian war: the case of Latvian PSM. *Social Sciences* 13(7): 350. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13070350>
- Ruigrok N (2008) Journalism of attachment and objectivity: dutch journalists and the Bosnian war. *Media, War & Conflict* 1(3): 293–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635208097048>
- Shultziner D (2026) Journalistic interventionism: types, professional, and normative conceptions. *Mass Communication & Society* 29(4): 531–549. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2025.2478892>
- Shultziner D and Shoshan A (2018) A journalists’ protest? Personal identification and journalistic activism in the Israel social justice protest movement. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23(1): 44–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161217736889>
- Skėrytė J (2025) Seimo pirmininkas: bus parengtas naujas projektas dėl LRT vadovo atleidimo tvarkos [speaker of the seimas: a new proposal on the procedure for dismissing the head of LRT will be prepared]. *LRT*, 9 December. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2770133/seimo-pirmininkas-bus-parengtas-naujas-projektas-del-lrt-vadovo-atleidimo-tvarkos>
- Stankevičius A, Petrakova L and Perminas P (2025) Ruginienė sako esanti atvira diskusijoms apie LRT tarybos depolitizavimą [Ruginienė says she is open to discussions about depoliticizing the LRT Council]. *LRT* 12 December. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2773049/ruginiene-sako-esanti-atvira-diskusijoms-apie-lrt-tarybos-depolitizavima>
- Strömbäck J, Tsfati Y, Boomgaarden H, et al. (2020) News media trust and its impact on media use: toward a framework for future research. *Annals of the International Communication Association* 44(2): 139–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2020.1755338>

- Surowiec P, Kania-Lundholm M and Winiarska-Brodowska M (2020) Towards illiberal conditioning? New politics of media regulations in Poland (2015–2018). *East European Politics* 36(1): 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2019.1608826>
- Tuchman G (1972) Objectivity as strategic ritual: an examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology* 77(4): 660–679. <https://doi.org/10.1086/225193>
- Valentinavičius V (2022) The role of focusing events on agenda-setting: changes in the Lithuanian security policy agenda after the annexation of Crimea. *Eastern Journal of European Studies* 13(1): 309–329. <https://doi.org/10.47743/ejes-2022-0115>
- Venckūnas V (2026) Venice commission says LRT law needs further refinement, moderates criticism. *LRT*. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2921233/venice-commission-says-lrt-law-needs-further-refinement-moderates-criticism>
- Verhoeven E (2025) How journalists deal with inclusion and objectivity: three models of social justice coverage. *Journalism Studies* 26(6): 661–677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2025.2456497>
- Vihalemm T and Vunš M (2024) Media engagement during Russia's war against Ukraine: reflections of young Russian-speaking estonians and media professionals. *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research* 40(77): 75–100. <https://doi.org/10.7146/mk.v40i77.141601>
- Vondoepp P (2017) The promise, challenge, and foundations of media collective action: illustrations from Sub-Saharan Africa. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 22(4): 510–526. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161217723151>
- Waisbord S (2018) Truth is what happens to news: on journalism, fake news, and post-truth. *Journalism Studies* 19(13): 1866–1878. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2018.1492881>
- Ward SJA (2004) The invention of journalism ethics: the path to objectivity and beyond. In: *Montreal and Kingston*. McGill-Queen's University Press. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt81578>
- Ward SJA (2011) *Ethics and the Media: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977800>
- Ward SJA (2020) *Objectively Engaged Journalism: An Ethic*. Montreal and Kingston. McGill-Queen's University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv10kmf5j>
- Westerståhl J (1983) Objectivity in news reporting: general premises. *Communication Research* 10(3): 403–424. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365083010003007>
- Yin RK (2018) *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. 6th edition. Sage.

Author biography

Dr. **Vytautas Valentinavičius** serves as an Assistant Professor and Researcher at the Kaunas University of Technology, where he also acts as the Executive Editor of the scientific journal *Public Policy and Administration*, published jointly with Mykolas Romeris University. A visiting scholar at the University of Central Florida in 2022, Dr. Valentinavičius combines rigorous academic inquiry with extensive practical experience in governance and public service. Since 14 July 2026, he has served as an Intelligence Ombudsperson of the Republic of Lithuania, following his appointment by the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania (Parliament) in June 2026. In this capacity, his professional work focuses on the independent oversight of intelligence activities, with particular

attention to legality, accountability, national security, and the protection of human rights. He is also a member of the State Progress Council, having joined the Council in February 2026 during the tenure of the XX Government of the Republic of Lithuania. His public service record also includes a distinguished tenure at the Seimas Ombudsman's Office (the National Human Rights Institution of the Republic of Lithuania), where he served as Head of the Human Rights Department (2019–2024) and previously as a Senior Advisor (2014–2019). With over two decades of experience in human rights protection, he has played a pivotal role in the National Coalition for Human Rights and served on the boards of various non-governmental organizations. Dr. Valentinavičius holds a PhD in Political Science from Kaunas University of Technology, awarded through a joint doctoral consortium including the General Jonas Žemaitis Lithuanian Military Academy, Klaipėda University, and Vytautas Magnus University. He also holds a master's degree in journalism from Vytautas Magnus University and graduated *cum laude* with a master's degree in political science from the Institute of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University. His primary research and professional interests encompass national security and human rights, Eastern European affairs, public policy and agenda-setting, political communication, democratic governance, and democratization.