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Catch, Engage, Retain: Audience-Oriented Journalistic Role Performance in Canada

Nicole Blanchett ^a, Colette Brin^b and Stuart Duncan^c

^aSchool of Journalism, The Creative School, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, Canada;

^bDépartement d'information et de communication, Université Laval, Quebec City, Canada; ^cSchool of Media and Design, The Creative School, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

To understand audience-oriented journalistic role performance, one must understand how journalists conceptualize and cater to their audience. Giving the audience what it wants is a complex endeavor, with varying goals and hybridized end results, in newsrooms with fewer resources serving increasingly polarized audiences. Through a triangulation of data—content analysis at the subdimension level to examine the range and hybridity of audience-oriented journalistic product presenting the civic, service and infotainment roles; a survey to identify journalists' attitudes toward the use of audience data and social media in their work; and interviews with journalists that revealed how their journalistic practice and audience perceptions were impacted by quantitative (metrics and analytics) and qualitative data (comments/social media interactions)—this research fills a gap in understanding about the connection between journalists, their audiences, and audience data when it comes to journalistic role performance. Findings show that in Canada the infotainment role is a significant part of reporting, but entertaining often comes with a goal of educating, as does service journalism. There are no “bad” journalistic roles, but there are a lot of journalists trying to figure out which ones might best catch, engage, and retain an ever-shrinking news audience.

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Introduction

Journalists are exposed to multiple audience data-points in their daily work—from analytics systems that quantitatively gauge the success of content (Blanchett 2021; Petre 2021) to reader comments or social media interactions (Mou-Danha and Crawford 2023; Post and Kepplinger 2019). These data-points have significant impact, as newsroom practices and norms are becoming more reliant on closer relationships with audiences, who might be treated as citizens or consumers (Costera Meijer 2020; Willig 2010). And these relationships are integral to economic survival (Manninen, Niemi, and Ridge-Newman 2022) in an industry facing critical resource shortages (Blanchett et al. 2023), mired in political polarization. Efforts to gain traction with algorithms, however, can impact journalists' role performance, making them more entertainers than watchdogs

(Umejei 2023). Infotainment-based journalism, formatting and promoting stories in entertaining ways that attract eyeballs, or, in other words, processes embedded in media logic (Altheide 2023; Altheide and Snow 1979), are being used to personalize user experiences. Audiences are finitely segmented and served specific types of content (Bodó 2019), in specific formats, at specific times (Hanusch 2017). Gatekeeping is no longer performed by humans alone (Nechushtai and Lewis 2019; Wu, Tandoc, and Salmon 2019) and metrics from different platforms are being blended to better understand the audience (García-Perdomo 2021). But how might these transformations in journalism aimed at maximizing engagement (Nelson 2021) and exploring new revenue sources impact journalistic roles? And how do journalists imagine and strive to understand and serve their audiences when they are frequently “reduced to a machine for swelling analytics metrics under the *holy grail* mantra of audience engagement” (Zambelli and Morganti 2022, 20)?

This study examines enactment of audience-oriented roles in Canadian newsrooms, based on a content analysis to measure the presence of such roles in journalistic products, with further contextualization provided by a survey of and interviews with journalists at the organizations being studied. Data were collected over 2020 and 2021 from seven English-language and three French-language organizations. Our study shows Canada has a strong performance in roles related to the enhancement of the relationship between journalists and the public compared to the other countries participating in this international study (Blanchett et al. 2022a). However, our analysis in this paper goes beyond the exploration of primary journalistic roles in the audience-approach domain to subdimensions of roles that allow “us to better trace and grasp the specificities of journalistic role performance” (Mellado 2021, 40) and how these roles coincide within individual stories for specific purposes.

Acting in the civic role, which focuses on highlighting citizens’ views and rights, are journalists in Canada more likely to be advocates or educators? Are journalists performing the infotainment role in Canada more frequently, by including personal and private information about the subjects in their stories, or packaging stories with sensory provoking “thrilling qualities” (Mellado 2021, 39)? In the service role, which centers on practical advice and information, are they promoting products or providing personal assistance? Information gathered from content analysis was enriched by interviews that revealed perceptions of the audience had a direct impact on practice. Journalists described how the availability of detailed data on content consumption and polarized online interactions changed audience relationships and the development and promotion of stories. No other research, to our knowledge, systematically examines the content being produced while providing deeper insight into the expression of hybridized audience-oriented journalistic roles through interviewing and surveying journalists producing the content. This mixed-methods approach reveals how efforts to give the audience what it wants and perceptions of audience relationships are directly intertwined with the performance of audience-oriented journalistic roles.

Literature Review

The performance of audience-oriented journalistic roles cannot be contextualized without understanding the environment digital journalists inhabit—and that every

journalist is a digital journalist. As the walls between the business and editorial sectors of news collapse (Duffy and Cheng 2022) alongside traditional revenue models, “extracting subscription fees from audience members or selling them supplementary goods or services is becoming more important. This requires forging strong and personal bonds between the news media and their audiences” (Manninen, Niemi, and Ridge-Newman 2022, 11). Journalistic practice has developed in a manner that allows for closer ties between the business and editorial aspects of journalism, with market research becoming “an integral—if unspoken—part of the news industry” (Duffy, Ling, and Tandoc 2018, 14). The editorial value of news is more overtly tied to its commercial value, and reporters are increasingly aware that “news must be designed to attract readers” (Ekström, Ramsälv, and Westlund 2022, 767).

In research examining the segmentation of audiences at Danish newspapers, the audience were treated in a variety of ways, as consumers, as commodities, and as citizens (Willig 2010). Mellado and Van Dalen (2017) found that journalists can approach audiences as citizens, spectators, or clients, or a combination of these depending on circumstances. Dodds et al. (2023) suggest “the audience journalists now engage with is an algorithmic construction and cannot be considered an accurate representation” (4), challenging the illusion that easily accessible data now provide an accurate portrayal of the audience. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest access to data does not equate to definitive interpretations of how past audience behavior might predict future behavior (Blanchett 2021; Duffy, Ling, and Tandoc 2018). These limitations, however, have little bearing on the sweeping changes in practice. Editors who once paid no heed to audience wants (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc 2018; Gans 2004; MacGregor 2007) now consider audience data an essential editorial tool (School of Journalism Toronto Metropolitan University 2022; Tenor 2023).

Due to the use of data and the recommender systems that house them, “how news is prioritized remains a normative question, but such gatekeeping no longer belongs to journalists or humans exclusively” (Nechushtai and Lewis 2019, 299). Even smaller newsrooms are impacted by a variety of platform algorithms identifying audience preferences. News “users, as well as the algorithms that minutely track and shape online activity, have gained a fundamental and virtually unassailable role” (Singer 2023, 14) in the gatekeeping process (see also Walters 2021). Umejei (2023) found that “economic logic” impacts gatekeeping processes as journalists move away from watchdog roles to develop more entertaining stories that match interpretations of what algorithms and audiences want.

Although research into the use of audience data and their influence on editorial decision-making has grown rapidly in recent years (Napoli 2011; Zamith, Belair-Gagnon, and Lewis 2020), much of it ethnographic (Blanchett Neheli 2018; Christin 2020; Dodds et al. 2023; Lamot 2022; Petre 2021; Tandoc 2019), from a journalistic role performance framework, less is known about how such influences might impact the creation of audience-oriented journalism, and ethnographic tools such as observation and interviews are notably absent from much journalistic role research (Hanitzsch 2018). Recent cross-national examinations of journalistic roles show that there are limited differences in how organizations in different countries treat the audience as both citizens and consumers, suggesting shared platforms of practice and the use of audience data may be limiting differences in role performance based on media type or system (Mellado et al. 2023a). However, the journalistic role performance framework of analysis allows for a

deeper examination of roles encompassing the audience-approach domain with an analysis of subdimensions, in the civic, education, and infotainment roles, which when combined with the critical contextualization of the use of audience data from journalists who are producing the content being studied, provides a much clearer picture of the evolving relationship between journalists and their audiences. As noted by Singer (2008), using a mixed-methods approach, or triangulation of data, “not only helps guard against seeing what’s not there, a potential bias of any single-method approach, but also facilitates seeing what *is* there” (10).

Methodology

Data for this research were gathered as part of the second wave¹ of the Journalistic Role Performance project (JRP), a cross-national effort of 37 countries, where researchers aimed to better understand the factors that impact different models of journalism based on standardized operationalization of the watchdog, civic, interventionist, loyal-facilitator, infotainment, and service roles (Mellado 2021). Fieldwork for the study occurred between 2020 and 2021. The global sample for content analysis consists of a total of 148,474 news stories from 365 news outlets. The Canadian sample includes 3,727 news stories: 1676 online; 976 newspaper; 834 television; 241 radio. The full sample of stories in the content analysis were weighted in order to ensure equal representation by platform. For the purpose of this paper, analysis was centered on stories that presented audience-focused roles: civic, service, and infotainment.

For the second component of this study, the survey, in Canada, we were able to achieve 133 valid responses, representing every organization studied, from just over a thousand invitations for survey participation.² This paper focuses on data from three practice-based questions relating to journalists’ perceptions of the importance of audience data and social media in the development of content, in order to give more context into the factors that shape editorial decision-making in audience-oriented role performance in the newsrooms being studied.

The Canadian branch of the study was unique, however, as it also included a third, ethnographic/qualitative component involving both participant observation and interviews, providing further contextualization of findings. Ethnographic work was hampered by a COVID lockdown early in data collection. However, five journalists were informally interviewed during the course of participant observation at HuffPost Canada. Semi-structured formal interviews were held with an additional eight English-speaking journalists.³ Together these eight journalists identified having work experience at all but one English organization being studied.

As seen with all the participating countries, the media selected as sites of study had to be of national significance; however, regional and local outlets were included where they were considered important to the media landscape. Covering 10 million square kilometers and 6½ time zones, the Canadian media landscape is highly concentrated, both geographically (with national hubs in Toronto and Montreal for French-language media) and in terms of ownership (Winseck 2021). In recent years, hundreds of local news outlets, mostly community newspapers, have closed (Lindgren and Corbett 2023). In the first half of 2023, broadcasting networks CTV and TVA, and the Postmedia newspaper chain, laid off hundreds of workers, including journalists. The Canadian government

has introduced several policy measures to support newsrooms, most recently compelling the largest digital platforms to compensate publishers for links to news stories. In response, Meta blocked access to news content and Google threatened the same course of action before striking an agreement with the government.

There were 12 sites of study in Canada:

Television

CTV National News

CBC: The National

Global National

TVA Nouvelles (Evening Network edition)

Newspapers

Toronto Star

National Post

Globe and Mail

Radio

CBC Radio: World at Six

ICI Radio-Canada Première: L'heure du monde

Online media

La Presse

CBC.ca

Huffington Post Canada⁴

Content Analysis

As specified in an earlier article (Blanchett et al. 2022a), content analysis was based on a systematic stratified sample from January 2 to December 31, 2020. The year was divided into two 6-month periods: January–June and July–December. For each 6-month period, a constructed week was created, allowing us to include 7 days in each 6-month period for a total sample of 14 days during the year.

Only stories that were created by the organization itself (in whole or in part) were included in the analysis. For example, stories from a wire service or those taken from another media outlet were not coded⁵; however, stories “with files” from a wire service or another agency but with a reporter byline from the outlet of study were coded. Content created by freelance journalists was also coded. In the case of online media, embedded video or audio clips specific to the story were coded along with the text. All types of news stories were included in the sample, from politics to sports to lifestyle to business; however, no opinion pieces or editorials were included in the sample.

Measurement and Coding

We relied on the operationalization proposed by Mellado and validated in previous studies (Mellado 2021; Mellado and Van Dalen 2014; Mellado et al. 2017) to measure professional roles in news content. Canada ranks high in audience-oriented performance—second of 37 countries for civic, fifth for service, and eighth for infotainment (Blanchett

et al. 2022a)—making it a suitable backdrop for examination of these roles on a deeper level.

The Analysis of Roles and Subdimensions

Although there are six journalistic role performance dimensions, this paper concentrates only on the three determined to be audience-oriented: the civic, service, and infotainment roles (Mellado 2021). Within the JRP codebook⁶ detailed parameters of these audience-oriented roles are described. The service role “provides helpful information, knowledge and advice about goods and services that audiences can apply in their day-to-day lives ... tips, guidance and information about the management of day-to-day life and individual problems (news you can use)” (25). In the civic role, journalists focus

not only on educating citizens for participating in electoral processes, civil protests, as well as participation, affiliation and support of political parties, but also on helping them to make sense of their own communities, and on how they can be affected by different political decisions. (31)

The infotainment role “borrows from the conventions of entertainment genres (e.g., action movies, TV dramas, suspense novels) by using story-telling devices and establishing characters and setting” (27). Journalistic roles have been scrutinized in a growing corpus of research (Mellado 2021). In terms of audience-oriented roles, analysis shows they can be present individually or hybridized and that there are no roles that are fundamentally tied to *good* or *bad* journalism (Humanes and Roses 2021; Mellado and Van Dalen 2017).

Digging Deeper into Journalistic Roles

Subdimensions are groupings of indicators within each of the journalistic roles. Analysis at this level gives greater insight into the specific ways roles are practiced (Mellado 2021). The civic role has two subdimensions: “advocate,” where a journalist helps elucidate citizen demands and “lends support to social movements” (Humanes and Roses 2021, 127), and “educator,” where journalists act as a guide to help inform the audience. In the “promotion” subdimension of the service role, journalists provide information about consumer trends or advances in products or services and/or information that rates the quality of products and services. In the “personal assistance” subdimension the goal is to help make sense of or offer tips and advice to deal with “everyday” problems. Although both might involve news you can use, there is a distinct difference in these service roles. For example, a story recommending the use of hand sanitizer to prevent the transmission of COVID would only fall into the personal assistance category, whereas one that recommended/rated specific brands would be more promotional, and both subdimensions could be present in the same story. In the infotainment role, the audience is considered a spectator (Mellado 2021) and journalists share personal information about their subjects as a narrative technique to build interest in the “content” subdimension. Narrative elements such as the use of emotions or sensationalism that heighten the “entertainment” value of a story are seen in the “packaging” subdimension. An important factor in the coding of sensationalism within the journalistic role performance framework is that it must be deemed by the coder as “exaggerated,” “out of the ordinary,” or “unusual.” For example, if a television reporter is talking quickly or loudly

due to trying to communicate in a difficult environment, such as a protest, it would not be considered sensationalism. If there was no apparent reason for an “exaggerated” performance, it would.

Indicators for the subdimensions being explored in this study are identified in [Table 1](#).

Sampling of Journalists

We surveyed journalists who worked at the media outlets included in our study at the time of the data collection (2020). Similar to other comparative international studies (see, for example, Lauerer and Hanitzsch 2019), the team in Canada used a non-probability sample with harvested e-mail lists compiled from the websites and social media feeds of those organizations selected for content analysis, and included journalists whose work was part of the data in the content analysis. Canadian journalists were contacted through publicly accessible e-mail addresses and telephone numbers. The surveys were largely conducted as web-based questionnaires, with some completed by telephone. Journalists were informed of the purpose of the study and all participants expressly consented to participate and were given information about data use, sharing, and publishing (Blanchett et al. 2022a). Data used for this paper represent completed surveys from all sites of study, across all platforms. The tally by organization is as follows: CTV 10, CBC 26, Global 11, TVA 6, Radio Canada 7, Globe and Mail 21, Toronto Star 32, National Post 6, LaPresse 8, HuffPost Canada 6, totaling 133 responses. Singer (2008), among others, has noted quantitative methods such as surveys complement qualitative methods in order to best understand fluid digital environments.

Interviews and Thematic Analysis

Open-ended interviews that focus on “everyday experience” (Bauman and Adair 1992, 13) best garner a participant’s point of view and can “mimic the larger ethnographic

Table 1. Subdimension indicators.

Audience-oriented subdimensions	
Service	Indicators
Promotion	Consumer information
	Consumer advice
Personal assistance	Impact on everyday life
	Tips and advice (grievances)
	Tips and advice (individual risks)
Civic	Indicators
Advocate	Citizen reactions
	Citizen demand
	Credibility of citizens
	Citizen questions
	Information on citizen activities
	Support of citizen movements
Educator	Education on duties and rights
	Local impact
	Social community impact
Infotainment	Indicators
Content	Personalization
	Private life
Packaging	Sensationalism
	Emotions
	Morbidity

experience of actually *being*” in a particular environment. This strategy was utilized in both formal interviews (done via Zoom or phone) and informal interviews (done in the process of participant observation in the newsroom). All interviews were treated with equal weight in analysis. As noted by Rinaldo and Guhin (2022), “... ethnography and interviews should be thought of as being on a spectrum rather than as dichotomous categories.” When interviews are performed from a place of “local knowledge”—all authors of this paper have worked in newsrooms—it also allows for understanding of “everything from shared mottos and aphorisms to the Bourdiesian doxa only visible to a critical hermeneutics” (Rinaldo and Guhin 2022). Thematic analysis was performed on interview data with this same ethnographic sensibility, manually identifying trends across sets of interviews (Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas 2013) with the “selection of vivid, compelling extract samples” (402) reflective of and relating back to the research questions.

Comprehensive Analysis

The combination of content analysis, survey results, and contextualization of findings with participant interviews allow for a richer understanding of the complex factors that influence subdimensions and newsroom processes related to audience-oriented journalism, explored through the following research questions:

RQ1: How are audience-oriented journalistic roles performed in Canadian media?

RQ2: How do the ways in which journalists imagine and develop their relationships with the audience affect their practice?

Findings

Examining audience-oriented journalistic role performance to the subdimension level through content analysis allowed for deeper insight into how reporting is enacted in newsrooms in Canada. RQ1 will be explored using this data. Survey data and interview data shed light on how journalists who contributed to the content being studied developed an understanding of and worked to connect with the audience. These two sets of data will form the basis of results for RQ2, which contextualizes the findings of RQ1.

RQ1: How are audience-oriented journalistic roles performed in Canadian media?

Table 2. Mean subdimension values by platform.

Subdimensions	Overall mean (standard error)	Print (standard error)	Television (standard error)	Radio (standard error)	Online (standard error)
Personal assistance service	0.106 (0.003)	0.071 (0.005)	0.111 (0.006)	0.073 (0.005)	0.167 (0.008)
Promotional service	0.089 (0.003)	0.143 (0.009)	0.032 (0.004)	0.033 (0.005)	0.148 (0.010)
Content infotainment	0.175 (0.005)	0.152 (0.010)	0.170 (0.010)	0.160 (0.010)	0.217 (0.012)
Package infotainment	0.111 (0.003)	0.086 (0.005)	0.149 (0.007)	0.090 (0.005)	0.123 (0.006)
Advocate civic	0.074 (0.003)	0.050 (0.005)	0.092 (0.006)	0.082 (0.006)	0.073 (0.006)
Educator civic	0.148 (0.003)	0.113 (0.006)	0.179 (0.007)	0.126 (0.007)	0.174 (0.007)

In our analysis of the entire dataset of stories, notable disparities in the prominence of audience-oriented subdimensions become apparent. As seen in Table 2, the content infotainment—subdimension (as seen, for example, in personalization of subjects, such as a newspaper article that identified a woman as a single mother of three and then shared what would normally be private information about her personal life, the fact she had experienced food insecurity) displays greater prevalence across our story dataset (mean = 0.175) in contrast to the package infotainment-subdimension (mean = 0.111), which could be seen, for example, in a sensationalized TV story on COVID 19 that had exaggerated, quick cuts and a script that described the “rapidly spreading” virus; or another story that used emotions, describing “private sorrows” related to the anniversary of Hiroshima; or in terms of morbidity, details of a violent crime in a newspaper article.

In the civic role, related to coverage of citizens’ issues and knowledge mobilization surrounding duties and rights, there are two subdimensions: educator and advocate. The educator civic-subdimension has double the prominence (mean = 0.148) of the advocate civic-subdimension (mean = 0.074) in Canada. All three indicators for the educator subdimension (local impact, social community impact, educating on duties and rights) were seen in an online story identifying citizens’ rights related to refusing work during the pandemic. An example of the advocate subdimension was seen in a television story about a person who started an online petition signed by more than half-a-million people demanding an end to rent and mortgage payments during COVID lockdowns. The disparities in prominence between the personal assistance service-subdimension (mean = 0.106) and the promotional service-subdimension (mean = 0.089) are less pronounced. Personal assistance is seen in stories that impact everyday life, such as an online story that outlined changes in personal taxation rules, and others that offered tips and advice, such as avoiding bank scams or limiting risk to coronavirus. Promotional service stories offer consumer information and advice, for example, several that covered a potential ban on Huawei 5G products suggesting alternative products.

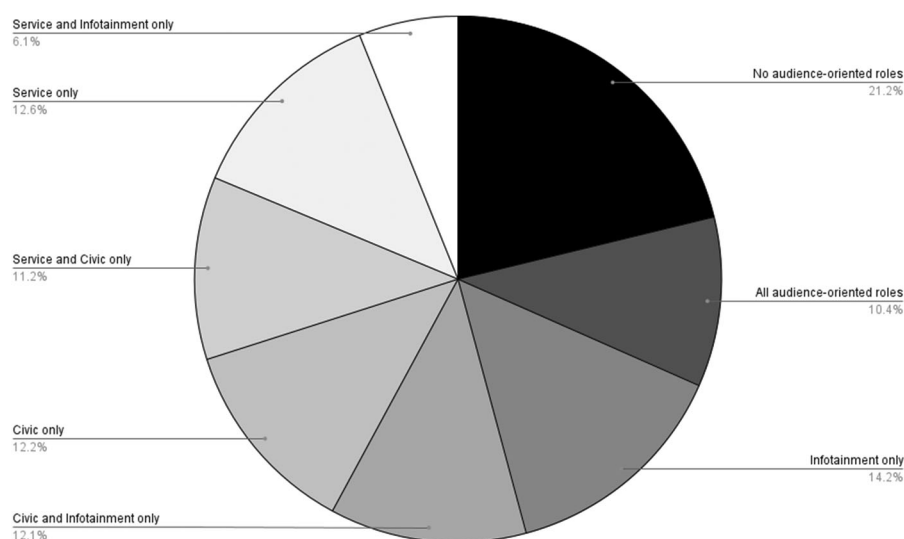


Figure 1. Distribution of audience-oriented roles in content sample.

There is also clear evidence of the prevalence of audience-oriented roles and hybridization of roles in Canadian journalism. As seen in [Figure 1](#), nearly 80% of stories in our sample had one or more audience-oriented roles present. All three were present in 10% of stories and there is a near equal presence of civic stories and civic stories that also utilize infotainment; although, infotainment is less evident in service reporting. The civic and service roles were also present together in a significant number of stories.

As seen in [Table 2](#), although limited, there are some significant differences in the performance of subdimensions between print, television, radio, and online platforms. Notably, while examining all articles regardless of platform, the personal assistance service-subdimension is more prominent than the promotional service-subdimension (0.106 vs 0.089); however, the opposite is true in print (0.071 vs 0.143). While the level of the promotional subdimension is near equal to print in online content, online content is unique in that there is more equal distribution between promotion and personal assistance. Examining the infotainment subdimensions, the difference in prominence between the content and packaging subdimensions is most pronounced online (0.217 vs 0.123), and the content subdimension is notably more pronounced in online journalism. Television has the highest mean for packaging, overall. However, both television and online show significantly more of the packaging subdimension than radio or print.

It is important, however, to point out that journalistic roles can fluctuate significantly based on other factors. This includes story topics (Mellado et al. 2023b; Tandoc et al. 2021), as demonstrated in the service subdimensions in lifestyle stories compared to government stories ([Table 3](#)). The mean for personal assistance was 0.209 in lifestyle stories, 0.129 in government stories; the promotional service mean was 0.338 for lifestyle stories, compared to 0.042 for coverage of government stories, supporting Humanes and Roses (2021) prediction that the service role may be more present when widening the sample of content outside of harder news.

RQ2: How do the ways in which journalists imagine and develop their relationships with the audience affect their practice?

We can see in the content analysis how the subdimensions of audience-oriented role performance play out in Canadian media. However, survey data provide insight into how journalists build relationships with their audience and their perceptions of the impact audience data have on editorial practice. Our descriptive survey data, representing every site of study, shows journalists placed significant importance on using social media to connect with the audience, more than 78% rating it from somewhat to very important (see [Figure 2](#)). Of those surveyed, 65.5% felt it was important to use audience data in editorial decision-making (see [Figure 3](#)), and almost 67% felt it was important to use ratings/traffic data to measure the relevance of a story (see [Figure 4](#)). These results

Table 3. Story topics and mean value changes between subdimensions.

Subdimensions	Personal assistance service (standard error)	Promotional service (standard error)
Lifestyle stories	0.209 (0.011)	0.338 (0.016)
Government stories	0.129 (0.006)	0.042 (0.004)

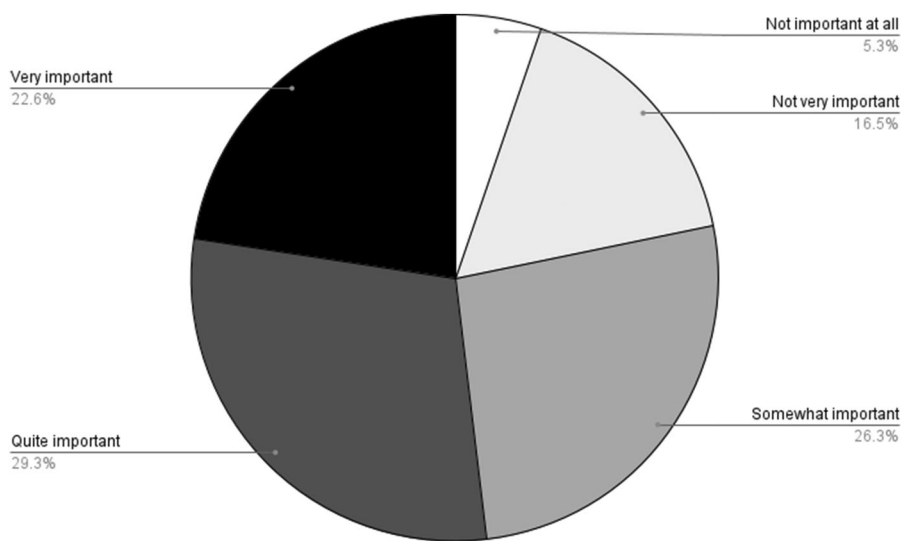


Figure 2. Q138: Using social media to connect with an audience.

must also be considered in light of previous research that found journalists can undervalue the influence of audience data on practice (Vu 2014; Welbers et al. 2016).

Our interviews with newsworkers supported the importance of audience engagement/online interactions and the impact of audience data on editorial decision-making as seen in the survey results. These editorial decisions are directly related to journalistic output and the presence of audience-oriented roles in the journalism being analyzed in the content analysis. In open-ended discussions that centered on how journalistic roles had

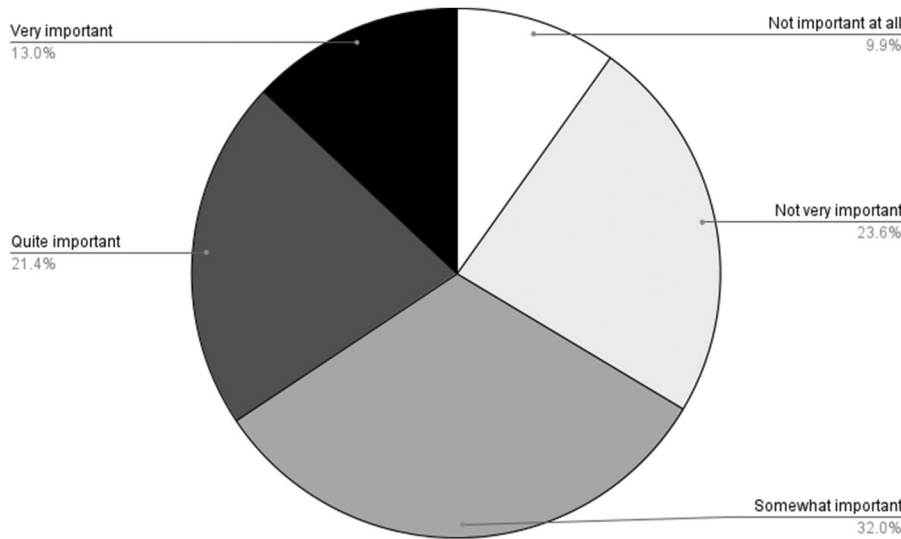


Figure 3. Q139: Using metrics and analytics, such as pageviews and time spent, to inform the selection, development, and promotion of stories.

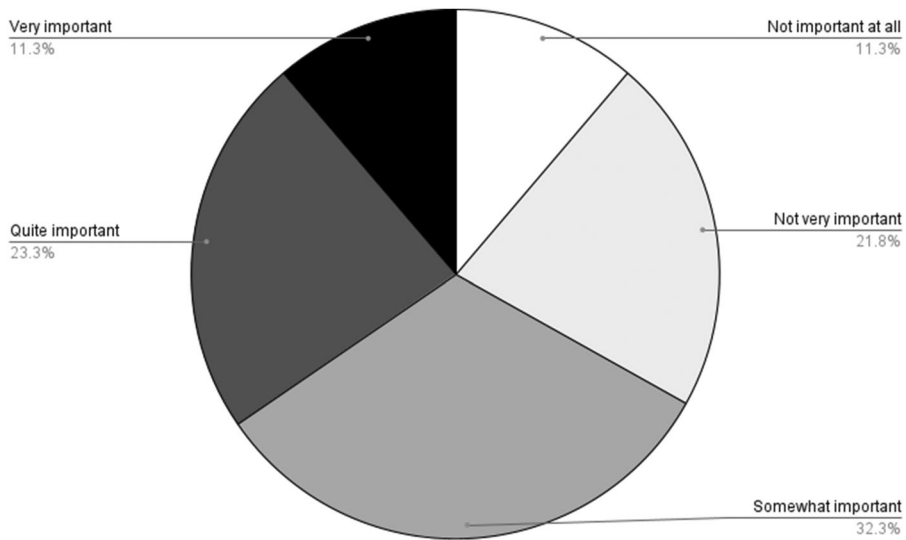


Figure 4. Q140: Using ratings, circulation numbers, or traffic metrics to measure the relevance/value of a story.

changed, there was general consensus that mainstays of journalism, such as good research, fairness, and accuracy, were of prime importance. However, participants acknowledged that drastically cut resources and disappearing news outlets were limiting the watchdog role (Blanchett et al. 2022a). As one journalist noted in an interview, “So many publications I wrote for don’t exist anymore” (Reporter 3, 23 October 2020, personal communication). Meanwhile, requirements to deliver on multiple platforms, efforts to secure revenue in new ways, and the need to create content that catered to an audience that was harder to find and more easily took offense were changing practice. All of the journalists interviewed both formally and informally noted that building relationships with and understanding their audience was an integral part of journalistic work, and that the impact of audience data had changed their practice to varying degrees.

A Focus on Audience

The performance of audience-oriented journalistic roles cannot be understood outside of the use of audience data because they help determine the promotion of stories and the focus of stories yet to be developed. Contemporary journalism is hinged to perceptions of what the audience wants. One journalist said they were told to write more content with a Canadian focus as it helped to boost subscriptions (Reporter 3, 23 October 2020). This freelancer, who had worked for multiple sites of study, also noted the demand for listicles and that for so many articles “it’s gotta be 10 things.” HuffPost reporters were required to pick the “best audience” (Editor 1, personal communication, 20 February 2020) for their stories. Using collected data, the organization developed audience profiles (Blanchett, McKelvey, and Brin 2022b) that included details such as one imagined audience member named Adam being a “middle millennial” who had a partner named Taylor, and a “young millennial” named Adela who they knew was “on Insta at 10pm.” It was part of an “audience funnel” where journalists imagined who they were writing for *before* starting to write a story:

People say that all the time, know your audience, but it's interesting to say even within your audience there's segments. And we do X, Y and Z for this type of story for this type of person. (Editor 2, personal communication, 20 March 2020)

During participant observation, Editor 3 described his job as “just trying to catch people” (personal communication, 20 February 2020). A journalist who worked as a freelancer for multiple organizations being studied also referred to being able to “catch people” when discussing waning interest in COVID stories: “If you keep reading the same story everyday people shut down and they're not going to read it” (Reporter 1, personal communication, 15 October 2020). He said journalists had to find a different angle or way of covering the pandemic in order to hold the audience, particularly as information was accessible on so many different platforms/locations.

A television journalist noted that “we all have to sort of make a claim on an audience's time in order to justify the eyeball ... other organizations cover sports better than we do. We make a substantial investment to cover politics” (Reporter 4, personal communication, 28 September 2020). He said that audience data provided detailed information: “You know exactly how far someone scrolls down a page, how many seconds they're spending on a page, what device you're using, we know so much about our audience, just like Google knows about our audience.” Referring to social media he also said, “I absolutely fundamentally believe you have to go meet your audience where the heck they are.”

Educating and Entertaining the Audience

Editor 5 (personal communication, 20 February 2020) explained during participant observation that he worked to develop stories that people were talking about, using an example of Canada's prime minister Justin Trudeau eating in the House of Commons; however, he saw these stories as an opportunity to inform people (civic role), in the case of this story, about protocols in Canadian Parliament. He described this as adding “some vegetables” to the mix. The “more fun” (infotainment) aspect of the story gave them a “point of entry” to educate the public. During a formal interview, Reporter 3 also noted “the most important role” is to “educate the public” (23 October 2020, personal communication).

Engaging or entertaining the audience was seen as a key way to keep an audience. Although there were ranges in understanding of the use of audience data, the perception of its importance was more consistent:

This is all algorithm stuff that I don't entirely understand, but it does help the eggheads figure out how to customize your user experience when you go to the website. So, it's showing you stuff you're interested in much the same way of Facebook and Twitter, which keeps people engaged with your website, which means more subscribers, which means I get to stay gainfully employed. (Reporter 2, personal communication, 17 June 2020)

Managing Audience as Consumers and Critics

Discussions in formal interviews included changing ethical norms and documented issues of audience trust and political polarization in Canadian media (Brin and Charlton 2023). One participant said although most content was paywalled on his organization's website, stories promoting products or services that included “affiliate links” (which

generate revenue) were not. In these stories, when a reader clicked on a link and purchased a product or service the news organization made money. Putting these stories behind the paywall would impede traffic and, therefore, potential income.

Reporter 5 said they weren't too concerned about affiliate content as these were mostly "lifestyle" stories, as opposed to news, and were generally written by freelancers, not staff reporters. However, this reporter did have concerns about how such content, and strategies to build revenue that pushed the limits of journalistic autonomy, might damage the reputation of the paper with readers, or potential readers, who may not be exposed to more impactful stories sitting behind the paywall:

I think it presents huge challenges, because [redacted] has journalistic standards that it publishes and tells the public, this is, you know, what we stand for, and this is how we do it, and ... when you have all this huge injection of third-party content, I have questions around who's editing it ... We have to make sure we're doing everything we can to not damage the relationship [with the audience]. (Personal communication, 21 May 2021)

One journalist, referring to the impact of online interactions with the audience and the impact of polarization, noted that they "have to be very careful because any mistake we make gets amplified a thousand fold and used as further evidence that we're part of some scheme to destroy the world in some fashion or another" (Reporter 2, personal communication, 17 June 2021). He added, "While it [social media] provides a venue to find an audience, which is what we absolutely need to do, it has also created a forum with which to attack journalists and attack the free press." Another journalist noted their careful use of language to avoid alienating potential segments of an audience:

I deliberately go out of my way to try to reach the people who are trying to ignore me. Like, that's the target audience as you write, you know. So, you're avoiding unnecessary use of terms that get spun into shit, not because we don't deserve to use those terms ... but because what you're actually attempting to do is to reach those people. (Reporter 6, personal communication, 17 November 2021)

Discussion

A significant and growing body of work has documented changes in newsroom practice due to the implementation of audience data as an editorial tool, and the growing importance placed on identifying what the audience wants and building relationships with the audience. However, it is the combination of qualitative and quantitative data that provides the best chance of understanding practice (Singer 2008). The triangulation of content analysis data that determines the presence of audience-oriented journalistic roles and interview and survey data gathered from journalists working in newsrooms at the time of data collection, gives critical insight into how ideas of audience are formed in the news organizations being studied and how such perceptions might impact the creation of content.

Civic Subdimensions

In Canada, there is significant evidence that when performing the civic role journalists spend much more time educating than advocating, a more distinct separation of

subdimensions than seen in previous research (Humanes and Roses 2021). However, based on content analysis and interviews with journalists, there is also evidence that reporters are combining the civic and infotainment roles to draw audiences into and amplify stories that contain important information by making them “fun.” Audience-oriented roles are sometimes performed independently, but often concurrently (see also Mellado 2021). In a third of civic stories coded, the civic and infotainment roles are both present. This reflects a similar finding in analysis of US newspaper content that found a strong tie between the civic and infotainment roles that was not seen in the majority of countries from a range of media systems in the first wave of the JRP project (Humanes and Roses 2021), suggesting this could be something more prevalent in the North American news environment, but requires further exploration.

Infotainment Subdimensions

Data show that journalists in Canada are practicing infotainment broadly, but there are distinctions at the subdimension level. Describing personal information of subjects, or the content subdimension, is more prevalent in Canadian reporting. However, sometimes the use of personalization is wholly appropriate to a story, for example, the challenges faced by a single mom facing food insecurity referred to earlier. The fact she is a single mom with limited income is central to the story, and helps the audience connect to her circumstances. As noted with previous research (Mellado and Van Dalen 2017), not all infotainment is *bad* journalism, and using narrative techniques to support engaging story-telling was a goal of interviewed journalists. Further qualitative analysis of stories presenting infotainment roles could shed light on the most impactful use of this audience-oriented role in terms of broadening reach and understanding as opposed to sensationalizing for the sake of entertaining.

Service Subdimensions

The service role, overall, is more likely to be seen in stories offering personal assistance than promotion of products in Canada, reflecting previous findings on an international scale (Humanes and Roses 2021). Sharing information with the audience that might help them in their daily lives was also noted as a priority by most journalists interviewed and in participant observation. However, there are differences in performance when examining subdimensions at the platform level. Print was the only platform to have a higher level of promotion of consumer information than personal assistance; although, the mean for the promotional subdimension in print was near-identical to that of online outlets. Offering another example of hybridization, the service and civic roles are also performed together in Canada. This could be seen, for example, in stories as COVID erupted, where Canadian citizens were trying to get back to the country and journalists shared citizens’ concerns but also offered practical advice on where to get information. An area requiring further examination, particularly in relation to the service role, is how ownership structures might impact role performance on all platforms, building on analysis of newspapers in the first wave of the JRP project (see, Mothes, Schielicke, and Raemy 2021). For example, the privately owned outlets in our study, both newspapers and both with deep investments in audience data, drove the higher mean for the service-

subdimension involving promotion of products when looking at results based on platform of delivery. Our one civic-society site, a French digital news organization, drove the high mean for promotion of products in online news, perhaps because it relies primarily on ads, as well as donations. Examining more fully how the ideated goals and values of particular organizations impact the use of audience data and audience relationships is a rich area of future study.

Revenue Mechanisms and Subdimensions

Discussion surrounding new revenue mechanisms such as affiliate links exemplify what Petre (2021) described as the “clean/dirty boundaries” (116) of news production that are “collectively upheld within a given newsroom.” Although journalistic doxa is being challenged, there are still boundaries—selling products and services in a lifestyle story might be acceptable, but different rules apply to harder news stories. “The implementation of new technology evokes different judgment and choices” (Lamot 2022, 532), and this varies not just at the level of the journalist producing or promoting the story, but in the management of different types of stories from an economic purview. For example, participants in our study shared that important stories are often paywalled, but not if they’re considered crucial to public safety and that some stories would be covered regardless of expectations of popularity. As noted by Ekström, Ramsälv, and Westlund (2022), more research is needed “into how publisher’s (sic) prioritize reader revenue and develop proprietary analytics infrastructures” (770) and how such decisions might impact role performance.

The Impact of Audience Interactions

Ideas of the audience can be clouded by algorithmic tools that might not accurately reflect a potential audience’s breadth (see also Dodds et al. 2023; Moyo, Mare, and Matsilele 2019), or interpretations of data that aren’t inclusive. However, never before have journalists thought more or been given more information about who their audience might be/is and social media helps inform that understanding. Although Coddington, Lewis, and Belair-Gagnon (2021) rightly suggest that “journalists’ audience interactions on social media varies too widely—from persistent harassment and abuse to lively exchanges of information and ideas—to establish a widely shared influence on their image of the audience” (1041), these interactions do influence journalists’ perceptions of their audience, and as seen in previous research, can influence their practice (Mou-Danha and Crawford 2023; Post and Kepplinger 2019). This is evident in the importance placed on connecting with the audience through social media by surveyed and interviewed journalists and industry practices such as the use of “relevant keywords in headlines—to increase their chances of being amplified” (Matamoros-Fernandez et al. 2021, 245) by social media recommendation systems.

The influence of social media is also evident in choices related to the use or avoidance of certain words in order to reach, or at least not offend, particular segments of an audience; although, this motive is a concern for some in terms of limiting journalism’s core tenet to build common truths (Mallick 2023). The demand for the creation of more types of stories such as listicles that are widely amplified on social media is another

concern if their creation comes at the expense of more consequential stories. In a worst-case scenario, such “entertaining and evocative formats may get our attention but does little for our understanding” (Altheide 2023, 85), and usurp more complex stories more conducive to the watchdog role (Umejei 2023). However, news organizations need to find ways to educate, or share information well in new environments, particularly for the younger demographic that is increasingly accessing information through social platforms (Newman 2023). Less brand recognition when content is accessed through social media, growing conflict with digital platforms, and growing comfort with attacking journalists (Fenlon 2022), means this is an environment that likely will only get more challenging, and requires further research, particularly in countries like Canada where the educator subdimension of the civic role has such prominence and is viewed with such importance by journalists, as seen in our interviews and participant observation.

Increasing Similarities in Practice

As increasingly noted in the examination of journalistic practice, similarities are growing across mechanisms of delivery and media systems (Mellado et al. 2023a), and can be seen in the use of the same language and practice related to audience data across diverse environments (Björkman and Franco 2017; Nelson and Tandoc 2019; Umejei 2023). This homogenization is attributed, at least in part, to shared use of technological tools and external platforms (Bisiani et al. 2023; Blanchett 2021), and newsroom convergence (see Blanchett Neheli 2019; Maier 2010). In the case of print, for example, “newspaper” articles might be published word-for-word online or appear online first. According to all of the journalists we interviewed, decisions on what to cover and how to cover it were impacted by website and social media data. Differences in attitude between, for example, print and online journalists in terms of use of and appreciation of data seem to be waning compared to previous studies (for example, see Hendrickx et al. 2021).

This is not to say differences in content produced don’t exist. For example, television and online stories were much more similar in terms of their performance of infotainment subdimensions, which makes sense given the particular affordances of these media in terms of packaging stories with visual/auditory components where use of emotions and sensational video attracts more eyeballs (Altheide 2023; García-Perdomo 2021). However, as processes become more intertwined, there is decreasing value in, for example, studying “newspaper” journalists separate from “online” journalists or only looking at “broadcast” content but excluding website content for a particular site of study.

Limitations

As the goal of this study was to analyze Canadian audience-oriented journalism at a granular level, and such analysis requires deep knowledge of local markets, we have not done a comparison of subdimensions internationally. But this is an area for future exploration that could build on the work of other scholars who have examined audience-oriented roles in print environments (Humanes and Roses 2021; Mellado 2021). This would be particularly beneficial in partnerships where teams of researchers have the resources to do ethnographic work or at minimum interviews with journalists. Comparison of impact of ownership also has limited transferability given the limited number and diversity of

organizations studied within Canada, and is something that might be better explored in the type of research partnership identified above that could broaden the scope of analysis. We also acknowledge that although our interview data provide context, they cannot be tied directly to particular decisions made in the performance of roles in the content we analyzed. Regardless, such data provides crucial insight into the expression of journalistic roles in Canada.

Conclusion

Our research fills a gap in understanding about the connection between journalists, their audiences, audience data, and journalistic output. Content analysis on its own gives no insight into how or why decisions might have been made; surveys of or interviews with journalists without an examination of the products they produce provide little room for analysis of idealized narratives versus actual practice. Using the JRP framework and a mixed-methods approach, we gain a better understanding of how journalists' perceptions of and relationships with the audience might impact journalistic product, and evidence of how deepening audience-influence is shaping practice, and, therefore, the performance of audience-oriented roles.

Interviews with journalists show intent in their efforts to both entertain and inform, or, in other words, perform both the infotainment and civic roles, or the civic and service roles, in an individual story. However, we also see how the audience can be treated more clearly as clients/consumers with the development of revenue mechanisms more directly tied to the promotion and sale of products. Our findings support that there are no audience-oriented journalistic roles that are inherently good or bad (Mellado 2021). In combination, they can help promote the amplification of information with a goal to educate and empower the news audience—or they can push products and prioritize profits.

Regardless, the depth of available data in today's newsrooms is shaping practice. When performing journalistic roles in the audience-oriented domain, journalists are no longer imagining who their audiences are. Instead, they're being given detailed data and participating in online feedback loops that build their own perceptions of the audience and what that audience wants, accurate or not. Despite this influx of data and the prevalence of audience-oriented journalism, though, "many publishers are struggling to convince people that their news is worth paying attention to, let alone paying for" (Newman 2023, 29). This is a particular issue with the younger demographic that is more likely to get information from an influencer than a journalist—with consequences that can go far beyond lack of traffic to lack of understanding about critical civic issues (Altheide 2023). Increasingly, the question in newsrooms is not who is the audience, but where did they go? And perhaps in more polarized political environments, how do you avoid offending them? Answers to those questions might be a matter of survival.

Notes

1. Canadian data were not included in the first wave of the JRP project.
2. One hundred and thirteen of these surveys met the requirements to be included in the international data set for gap analysis, which had specific requirements based on a minimum

number of surveys per newsroom, results of which have been previously published (Blanchett et al. 2022a).

3. Participants are not always linked to organization(s) in order to adhere to deidentification agreements. REB# 2019-479 Toronto Metropolitan University.
4. Huffington Post closed its newsrooms in Canada on March 9, 2021.
5. Acknowledging some broadcast or other stories may not have been labelled as wire service content.
6. The codebook can be accessed at <https://www.journalisticperformance.org/appendices>. There were 11 coders in total, two professors and nine students. Based on Krippendorff's alpha (K_a), the final intercoder reliability score in Canada was 0.73, indicating substantial agreement (Krippendorff 2004).

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ORCID

Nicole Blanchett  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9444-2018>

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