

The Journalism-Audience Relationship through the Prism of Norms and Roles.

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The current journalism-audience relationship is complex and clouded. On the one hand, audience trust in journalism has waned, with an increasing number of people opting to avoid news, particularly on pressing issues like politics. Furthermore, the majority of audiences remain unwilling to pay for (online) news. Moreover, these attitudes towards journalism are particularly pronounced among younger audiences (Newman et al., 2016 – 2023). On the other hand, journalism has faced significant challenges to recover financial losses incurred during the transition to the contemporary digital media landscape (Nielsen, 2019). In today's high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017), where information is abundant and often free, convincing audiences of the value of news and persuading them to pay for it has become a formidable task (Edgerly, 2021). These trends present a grim forecast for the future of journalism.

The 21st century has ushered in profound economic, technological, and organizational changes that have complicated the relationship between journalism and its audiences (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). There has also been a shift in the dynamics of this relationship. Historically, journalists operated predominantly on a 'we write, you read' basis, considering audiences' needs and wishes only to a limited extent (Deuze, 2008). However, contemporary journalism's economic model has evolved to rely more heavily on audience support through subscriptions and other financial contributions (Nielsen, 2019). Technological advancements, such as the rise of social media platforms, have introduced major intermediaries into the equation, complicating the direct connection between journalists and their audiences (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). These changes have pushed journalism into a precarious position, both financially as well as in terms of societal relevance (Olsen et al., 2020). Journalism's survival in the digital age has been one of the central questions both in the field and in academic research in recent years.

In recognizing its complex and clouded relationship with its audiences, journalism has initiated an 'Audience Turn', striving to improve this relationship (Costera Meijer, 2020). To date, this turn has mainly focused on technological innovations aimed at enhancing journalism's understanding of its audience through metrics and improving user experience with tools like news recommendation systems (Steensen and Westlund, 2020).

This Audience Turn has not yet brought grist to the mill for journalism. To break free from its crisis spiral and improve journalism's relationship with its audiences, several scholars have in the past decades issued calls for "rebuilding," "reconsidering," "reconstructing," and "remaking" journalism (Alexander et al., 2016; Downie and Schudson, 2009; Waisbord, 2013; Anderson, 2013; Boczkowski and Anderson, 2017), and even for "rethinking again" (Peters and Broersma, 2016). Hence, the current crises are observed also as opportunities to reevaluate and reinvent journalism (Perrault and Nölleke, 2022). In their 'Journalism Manifesto' (2022), Zelizer, Boczkowski, and Anderson make a strong case that journalism needs to reinvent itself regarding journalism's institutionalized norms, fixation on elite sources, and its relationship with its audiences. They posit

that journalism is at a crossroad, having to choose between a reformist or revolutionary path. The first keeps journalism's stance towards norms, elite sources, and the journalism-audience relationship broadly the same. The latter revolutionizes these core dimensions within journalism.

This thesis primarily investigates the clouded and complex journalism-audience relationship, exploring how it can be better understood and possibly improved. In pursuit of contributing – for a small part – to this revolutionary path. The revolutionary aspect of the research within this thesis is first and foremost looking for and finding ways to give audiences a seat at the table to discuss journalistic norms and roles, emphasizing why this is crucial in improving the journalism-audience relationship, and adding urgency to this field of research. In a way, audiences are given a say on the core features of journalism, potentially shaking the field to its very foundations. Therefore, the first main research question (**RQ1**) is posed: **How can the complex journalism-audience relationship be explored?** This requires painting a detailed portrait of the current state of the journalism-audience relationship and seeking ways to delve deeper into this connection. Theoretical frameworks from both Audience Studies and Journalism Studies will be employed, particularly the 'Beyond Journalism perspective' (Deuze and Witschge, 2018) and the 'Radical audience turn in journalism studies' (Swart et al., 2022). The goal is to heed the call to take audiences' perspectives seriously in journalism and to examine journalism's role(s) in society from an audience-centric viewpoint, and as broadly as possible. In other words, 'journalism' and 'news' will be approached in the broadest sense, steered by audiences' interpretations of these concepts. Moreover, different ways, or methods, will be used to further integrate this audience viewpoint, explicitly as well as implicitly. Subsequently, two subquestions (**SQs**) are addressed: (**SQa**) **How do audiences perceive the role(s) of journalists?** and (**SQb**) **How do journalists perceive the role(s) of their audiences?.**

Utilizing Bruce Biddle's Role Theory (1979; 1986), this thesis conceptualizes role-playing as relational with journalists and audiences mutually constructing roles. It proposes that audiences, through their expectations, partially determine the roles journalists can and should fulfill. The concept of 'imagined audiences' is also explored, considering how journalists' perceptions of their audiences influence the roles they play (Litt, 2012; Nelson, 2021).

This thorough exploration of the journalism-audience relationship through the prism of roles both from audiences' as well as journalists' perspectives will be used to reflect on possible improvements of this complex and clouded relationship. Moreover, the gained insights are utilized to tackle a recurring question in Journalism Studies: Is the Audience Turn in journalism (Costera Meijer, 2020) welcomed by the audience, or more specific by all subsets of the audience? Or is this definitive turn towards audiences not deemed (equally) Valuable (Costera Meijer, 2021) by all audiences? In this way, audience-oriented journalism and valuable journalism are brought into conversation.

In this way, this thesis will not merely do its bit in exploring avenues to examine the complex journalism-audience relationship. It also endeavors to find ways to reconnect disengaged audiences. Journalism provides

audiences with the necessary – and a common – framework on current affairs and important societal debates (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). The COVID-19 health crisis was exemplary for what happens if people are not aware of important issues, for instance, news avoiders were less informed on health measures in place, and consequently were a potential threat to societal well-being (Boekee, Hoekstra, and van der Veer, 2020). Therefore, it adds urgency to studying the current journalism-audience relationship and finding ways to (re)connect disengaged audiences with a journalism in crisis.