



## From Abstract News Users to Living Citizens: Assessing Audience Engagement Through a Professional Lens

Constanza Gajardo, Irene Costera Meijer & David Domingo

To cite this article: Constanza Gajardo, Irene Costera Meijer & David Domingo (2021): From Abstract News Users to Living Citizens: Assessing Audience Engagement Through a Professional Lens, *Journalism Practice*, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2021.1925949](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1925949)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1925949>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 May 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 757



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# From Abstract News Users to Living Citizens: Assessing Audience Engagement Through a Professional Lens

Constanza Gajardo <sup>a,b</sup>, Irene Costera Meijer<sup>a,c</sup> and David Domingo<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Literature, Language and Communication, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands; <sup>b</sup>Department of Social Communication, Universidad de Concepción, Concepción, Chile; <sup>c</sup>Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway; <sup>d</sup>Department of Information and Communication Sciences, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

## ABSTRACT

Journalists' increasing focus on news users is often seen as diverting the news agenda away from the core issues that are important to democracy. Hence, the practices of connecting journalists to the audience tend to be assessed as detrimental to the democratic function of journalism: informing citizens and facilitating public opinion. However, this normative link between practice and ideals has rarely been empirically addressed when studying audience engagement. In this article we use a case study (BibioChile) to provide a more precise understanding of the democratic relevance that everyday engagement with the audience—through and beyond metrics—entails for journalism. First, our analysis suggests that audiences can be integrated into journalism's democratic framework by moving beyond the dilemma of informed citizenship versus news user's metrics to include what we propose to call living citizens: empirical concrete living beings grounded in journalistic practice. Second, we distinguish three audience oriented roles—observer, listener and connector—aimed both at maximizing the attention of news users, and at making sense of their needs as living citizens. These roles cover verifiable routines and values, thereby enabling a better assessment of the fulfilment of the democratic ideals of journalism.

## KEYWORDS

Audience engagement; engaged journalism; case study; journalistic roles; normative theory; democratic role of journalism

## Introduction

Professionals seem to be accepting audience engagement metrics—clicks, likes or shares—as a characteristic of journalism that can be integrated into their everyday work, with an unprecedentedly open and positive attitude towards news users (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2021). However, the increasing warm welcome the audience receives by journalism practitioners, does not echo in its theory. Although empirical research has shown that journalists use metrics—in combination with other user feedback mechanisms—precisely for the purpose of better informing citizens—this finding has not been

**CONTACT** Constanza Gajardo  constanza.gajardo@vu.nl

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

truly integrated into journalism's normative theory. The aim of this article is to bridge the gap between normative ideals and journalistic practices by examining journalists' engagement with what we propose to call *living citizens*: concrete news users targeted by journalists on the basis of professional democratic ideals.

### **Beyond Audience Engagement Metrics**

As metrics serve to improve news websites usability and overall user experience (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2021), the embedding of real-time audience data in newsroom routines can also be aligned with journalistic purposes. For example, Cherubini and Nielsen's (2016) study on the use of analytics by newsrooms in Europe and North America found that news outlets resort to metrics such as clicks, time-spent and page views to improve the performance of their news since user data "can help newsrooms reach their target audiences and make better journalism" (7). In a similar vein, Christin and Petre's (2020) ethnographic studies on journalists' use of web analytics showed that metrics alone are not devoid of democratic worth: "when journalists emphasize the democratic aspect of audience metrics, they make the symbolic complexity of metrics explicit, disconnecting them—temporarily—from purely commercial imperatives" (143). Therefore, contrary to the scepticism that has prevailed in the normative assessment of editorial analytics (Lamot and Paulussen 2020; Lee and Tandoc 2017), the main challenge that professionals might face when integrating metrics into the news process is not the "tabloidization" of the news but their incapacity to manage and interpret audience data to better inform the audience (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016).

Moreover, research has also illustrated how the inaccuracy of metrics (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2016) can be compensated when journalists engage in offline interactions with their audiences (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019). For example, Wenzel's (2019) case study on a US based public media program, Curious City, illustrated how supplementing digital engagement with offline outreach contributed to a "shift from thinking about the public as a collection of individual ears or eyeballs, to recognizing the networks people inhabit, and how these shape interactions with, and processing of, media" (160). This relates to the notion of reciprocal journalism (Lewis, Holton, and Codrington 2014), which places journalists as community-builders who "might more readily catalyze patterns of reciprocal exchange" (229) that contribute to informing citizens as it fosters greater trust, connectedness, and social capital.

From a practical perspective, therefore, news users' metrics appear to be the tip of the iceberg of a set of practices surrounding journalists' attention to their audiences. However, at the normative level, this attention—through and beyond metrics—has seldom been addressed as conducive to journalism's democratic role. Traditionally, the normative framework of journalism has been anchored in the notion of *informed citizenship*, an abstract representation of the audience that reinforces the principle of autonomy of journalism, distancing itself not only from power but also from the public (Moe 2020).

### **The Democratic Role of Journalism**

From a normative perspective, journalists' contribution to democracy has been extensively assessed through the study of journalistic roles. This body of research has provided

a clear explanation of the “purposes and values that are supposed to guide actions [of journalists]” (McQuail 2013, 95) primarily as they situate and link journalistic expectations and performances within a democratic context (Weaver et al. 2009). The long tradition of applying Habermas’s (1989) public sphere theory to the study of journalistic roles has provided a clear and explicit explanation of the role that journalism plays in providing information that facilitates opinion formation and democratic deliberation. However, an important shortcoming of this theoretical background is that it is not equally clear on how journalists should inform potential—rather than ready-made—citizens. According to Gans (1998), journalism theory assigns journalists a central role in maximizing democracy by emphasizing the ideal of *informed citizenship* and, therefore, it falls short at prescribing “how citizens are to be informed or even what kinds of news they need to be offered” (6).

Even though the *informed citizenship* model has been criticized for being “too far removed from empirical reality and too demanding for the citizen” (Moe 2020, 210), the journalistic goal of—precisely—informing citizens, has persistently rested on this theoretical construct. More precisely, normative journalistic roles such as the disseminator, adversary, interpreter-investigator, and populist mobilizer (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996) and, more recently, the populist disseminator, detached watchdog, critical change agent and opportunist facilitator (Hanitzsch 2011, 2017) have emphasized the responsibility that journalism holds in providing the public—understood as a generic group of citizens rather than as people who use the news for various purposes—with factual and reliable information. From this perspective, journalists’ approach to their audiences has been mainly addressed as a subsidiary point of reference or as an “indicator of the condition of a communication system” (Donsbach 1983, 19).

Consequently, while journalistic roles have been useful in explaining how journalists must deal with external powers for journalism to fulfil its democratic function, there is a need to further our understanding of how paying attention to their audiences enriches journalism’s ability to actually inform citizens. As the journalistic consideration of the audience seems to have a secondary place in the normative framework of journalism—while in practice news users are a growing protagonist—the linkage of the fundamental ideals of the profession to its everyday practices will enable a better assessment and an enrichment of journalism’s normative framework. The research question that this article poses is: how does journalists’ attention to the public, through and beyond audience metrics, serves journalism’s normative democratic role of informing citizens and fostering public opinion?

A useful entry point for grounding the assessment of the democratic role of journalism can be found in Michael Schudson’s list of seven functions that the profession can do for democracy. According to Schudson (2008), journalism should provide (1) information, (2) investigation, (3) analysis, (4) social empathy, (5) public forum, (6) mobilization and (7) explain how democracy “works”. We argue that examining how journalists’ attention to audiences is related to these functions could illuminate the ways in which journalism can work with their audiences for the fulfilment of its democratic role. Moreover, as role conception refers to “what journalists think is important to do” and role performance refers to “what they actually do” (Hellmueller and Mellado 2015, 5), a focus on journalists’ performance will allow us to “think outside of the limited space that the normative world gives us in order to analyze a more detailed layer of journalistic practices and routines” (Mellado 2020, 173).

In the following sections of this paper, we present a case study which looks at the practical ways in which journalists integrate the audience in their everyday work. Then, we explain how going beyond the abstract notion of *informed citizenship* towards what we propose to call *living citizens*—concrete news users targeted by journalists on the basis of professional democratic ideals—enabled the identification of journalistic roles that contribute to a better assessment of journalism's fulfilment of its democratic ideals.

## The Case-Study

BioBioChile has three particular characteristics that make it suitable for our investigation. First, it is a mainstream legacy news organization that has overcome the critical challenge of adapting to the digital environment. It was created in 2009 as the online news website of a Chilean hard news broadcasting radio network, Radio Bío-Bío (founded in 1966). Originally, BioBioChile had a single newsroom staffed by only four journalists and currently it is composed of 40 professionals located in three different newsrooms across the country. Secondly, reports on its performance have identified it as the most trusted news brands among Chileans (Reuters 2020) while also being consistently ranked as the most popular news site in the country (Reuters 2020; 2019). This suggests that they meet two features which, from a normative perspective, have traditionally been conceived as mutually exclusive: quality and popularity. Thirdly, BioBioChile is positioned within a media holding that does not have a political or religious affiliation, something that is highlighted in its slogan, which claims that they are “at the service of the people”. The latter justifies the selection of this news organization for the case study as it indicates that journalists should not only take the audience into account but consider them as the main focus of their work.

Taken together, these characteristics account for a news organization that has faced similar challenges to many other media outlets both in the Global South and around the world. In the Chilean media system, news outlets operate in a highly commercial environment (Orchard 2018) and the high penetration of the Internet has prompted journalists to resort to different audience engagement strategies to keep news organizations economically sustainable and socially relevant. It should be noted, however, that this case study is not aimed at producing generalizable conclusions. Rather, it is intended to investigate how journalists' actual relationship with the audience can inform and enrich the normative framework of journalism.

## Methodological Approach

The case study consisted of in-depth interviews with journalists working at BioBioChile. The selection criteria for interviewees followed constructive-theoretical sampling (Lindlof and Taylor 1995) which “uses the properties of the construct under study to guide the selection of cases” (128). Consequently, since this research focuses on the relationship between journalists and their audiences, we selected journalists who had different levels of responsibility for the relationship with news users in the newsroom. Interviewees included: three founding directors of the news organization who also serve as editor-in-chief, editor-in-chief and trends editor; the incumbent and former editor of the social media team; three area editors; and two reporters. Although we

could have conducted more rounds of interviews, by the tenth interview we reached the point of analytic saturation as no new properties of the data emerged (Charmaz 2006). Fieldwork was carried out between the months of July and August 2018 by videocall.

Each interview was between one and a half to two hours in length. The first section of the topic list focused on getting to know the background of journalists, their role in the organization and their work routines. Then, in the second section, we used Schudson's (2008) list of 7 functions journalism plays in a democracy as a basis to elicit participants to talk openly about their work from a democratic point of view. We asked the journalists to classify the functions according to their own criteria, in relation to the work they do at BioBioChile. In order to gain more clarity on their experiences, we also requested them to give illustrative examples of how their responses related to their interaction with the audience. It is important to point out that the use of Schudson's list responded to the need to have a grounded and concrete reference of the normative ideals of journalism. For this reason, it was used only as an interview guide and was not intended to be used to determine the fulfillment of the list of functions or the importance of some functions over others.

In the analysis of the interviews, we employed the slogan of the organization "at the service of the people" as a sensitizing concept. Sensitizing concepts, according to Bowen (2006), "give the researcher an idea of how the observed instances of a phenomenon may fit into conceptual categories". In contrast to definitive concepts that provide prescriptions about what to look at, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions in which to look. Our analysis, therefore, centred on the professional practices encompassed by this slogan and the meaning journalists give to it. Having coded the interviews through this approach, we identified three groups of specific practices, skills, and forms of audience evaluation. These groups of practices are treated as journalistic roles, since they are intended to serve a specific professional purpose. In the next section of this article, we describe how these roles emerged in relation to the notion of *living citizens* and explain their relevance to the normative framework of journalism.

### **Journalistic Roles in Relationship to *Living Citizens***

A first finding of the case study is that professionals did not use the words *democracy* or *citizenship* when they described how their work serves a democratic function. For instance, the editor in chief of BioBioChile expressed a shared reticence to explicitly assume their role of fostering democracy as, for him, "influencing democracy would turn us into activists, and as journalists, our only role is to inform people as well as possible". This can be explained both by Chilean journalism's professional culture characterized by protective of the status quo (Mellado and Van Dalen 2017), and by professional journalists' ambivalence towards their role in democracy (Schudson 2013).

Interestingly, the interviews revealed several practices, routines, values, and skills linked to the fulfilment of a democratic and social role for journalism. From a theoretical point of view, professionals' daily interaction with their audiences, both through and beyond metrics, outlined a unique understanding of them. This approach constitutes what we call "living citizens", a notion that emerged from observing that practitioners approached news users as living beings for whom journalism must be useful and meaningful. That is, the abstraction of representing news users through metrics—what we call

*abstract news users*—becomes tangible and can be translated into specific practices and actions (living) when journalists address them on the basis of their democratic ideals (citizens). Consequently, the *living citizen* is a descriptive empirical concept that connects the normative and theoretical construct of informed citizenship to journalistic practice.

The first and most broadly practiced role that emerged in relation to living citizens is *observing the audience*. As we will explain further below, this role deals with the observation of metrics with the goal of capturing the interest of users to the news that journalists find relevant. It is composed of three particular practices: *publication appropriate to the situation*, *storytelling adapted to the device*, and *distribution in line with the platforms where users are*. The second role extends beyond metrics to *listening to the audience*, consisting of actively paying attention to people's thoughts or needs through the different communicative channels that the news organization has available. It is composed by the practices of *recognizing their users*, *reaching an understanding or agreement*, and *ignoring the audience who is considered improper*. In this role, editors and journalists aim to "make the audience feel close to the news organization, by making them feel heard and considered" (social media editor). The third role we identified is *connecting with the audience*, which consists of relating to news users as members of a community. Here, the ability of professionals to practice a two-way exchange with their audience is seen as a journalistic demonstration of a social commitment. The practices grouped here are *understanding when audiences feel served and accompanied*, *making audiences feel represented through local news*, *ensuring that audiences feel reflected through "special" representativeness*. Justifying these three roles, the interviewed professionals insisted that their ultimate goal is to "keep people informed so they can decide about their lives" (journalist).

Altogether, these roles are interwoven as they constantly feed each other illustrating the plenty of nuances on how journalists thought of their news users and engaged with them. In the following subsections, we analyse the skills and tasks that journalists we interviewed described in connection to these three roles, and we explain how these practices are aligned with the democratic ideals of journalism.

### **Observing the Audience**

Observing the audience is geared toward real-time evaluation of news through experimentation with different news forms and genres that can enhance their attention. The use of metrics as a mediated representation of news users is a driving element within this function, helping professionals to better ensure that they will be able to inform them about the news they consider relevant. As one of the journalists stated.

If I don't get to cause interest or captivate the person's interest, I can't do anything else ... none of the other things I do will work because if I don't get those first comments, first likes, the story won't circulate and won't reach the audience that I want it to reach.

An important element of this role is to make the news suitable both for the platforms and for users, specially by understanding that clicks, shares or likes are mediated by the algorithms and conventions of different platforms in which the news is distributed and used (Picone 2017). Such layered understanding of news users implies an observation of them as *living citizens* since the focus is on identifying how best to reach them and, more importantly, how to make them informed of the significant issues that have a

bearing on their lives. A crucial practice for this purpose is the A/B testing of headlines and news stories. From a journalistic point of view, A/B testing serves to improve the experience of news use, in order to boost the number of visits to the news site and to make specific news more appealing to the audience (Hagar and Diakopoulos 2019). As the social media editor explains:

When a story on a very important topic doesn't do well [on visits], we have to work on it because we know it's a story that people should be reading. So, we assess how we can enhance it, whether it is a second release in which we change the text that goes on Facebook or we add a graphic piece that accompanies it.

The nuanced approach to audience metrics in *observing the audience as living citizens* further contributes to mitigating some of the assumptions associated with the supposed negative implications of metrics regarding the democratic value of journalism (Carlson 2018). From a normative perspective, pursuing economic goals (popularity) undermines democratic goals (quality) (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013; Hermida and Thurman 2008). However, our analysis shows how the audience is considered in accordance and not in opposition to the democratic role of informing the citizenry. Editors and journalists recalled how news stories on politics or economy which “do not perform very good in metrics” have to be improved because “the audience should pay more attention to them” as the information “would affect people in their lives”. This approach to metrics not only suggests an intention to make the news more popular, but also, and more importantly, demonstrates an interest in enhancing the attention to the news that journalists deem relevant for the citizenry. As BiobioChile's managing editor pointed out: “Deep down our journalists want to keep people informed so they can decide about their own lives”.

The discourses about professional autonomy are especially relevant in this respect as journalists used this concept to discuss the connection between their own professional identity and their personal motivation in terms of making a contribution to society. Interviewees claimed to have a professional concern regarding the reception of their news: “I've been very proud to see the newsroom's journalists angry when people don't read a story about something that directly affects them, when there's no one seeing it, there's no one expressing an opinion, there's no one debating” (editor in chief). The awareness that some topics generate little interest among the audience led journalists to resort to the concept of autonomy to argue that the news organization provided them with the “necessary freedom” to be able to fine-tune stories so they could “empower” the *living citizens*. Such approach differs from common associations of journalists' autonomy, traditionally linking the concept only to the idea of distancing oneself from the audience (Tandoc 2014; Singer et al. 2011).

As professionals understand the distribution of news stories as a journalistic responsibility, metrics are seen as a tool to enhance the sustainability of their journalism as they allow to fine-tune their work at a technical and at an editorial level. At a technical level, professionals interpret users' navigation data to evaluate the functioning of the interface or the attractiveness of the storytelling. But journalists do not only pay attention to the most clicked or liked stories, but rather they apply an assessment of the metrics that is based on the editorial objectives pursued by the news organization. Thus, at an editorial level, a shared definition of what counts as a “successful news story” helps professionals to



have a clear idea about the specific goals that ought to be achieved individually or collectively. Three relevant practices that are part of journalists' daily routine of observing the audience were identified in this role.

- (a) *Publication appropriate to the situation*: Journalists emphasized the importance of strategically knowing the audience in order to determine how and when to publish the news. As one of the editors recalled: "I know that we are read by young people, people who are traveling by bus or in the subway, who do not want to read something very long and who want to be informed about something with concise facts".
- (b) *Storytelling adapted to the device*: Editors and journalists talked about their news having to be simple, with attractive headlines and smart use of photography and video to make it suitable for the screen size and connection speed of people's devices. A critical challenge identified by professionals is having to constantly learn to use new tools to adapt stories to video or to infographics.
- (c) *Distribution in line with the platforms where users are*: Journalists stated that they follow their online audience to the platforms they use, and this influences the format of the news stories. Recently they have been using Instagram because "the audience is moving there" and they perceive that the interaction developing in that platform is "more positive than in Facebook". However, they claimed that as the core audience is still on Facebook, the news has to be strongly shaped to what this platform demands.

Overall, the case of BiobioChile shows that journalists' practices to *observe the audience* contradict normative orientations through which the consideration of audience metrics has been described as a threat to the profession. Scholars often follow the assumption that metrics are a representation of people's actual behaviour or interests (cf. Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2016), and professional attention to them is often perceived as a threat to the autonomy of journalists. Our interviewees showed that when abstract news users are seen as living citizens, the quantified reports have very practical use. This means that journalists use what Hindman (2018) calls an "ethical metrics approach" as journalists do not attempt to maximize revenue or "produce important stories on topics of civic import. Rather, their aim is to maximize audience for civically valuable content". With this, "the goal of informing the public is unchanged, but the journalism practices adopted can be significantly different" (189). Technology, therefore, provides journalists with the opportunity to gather data about how news users navigate the news (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2021), and professionals get an understanding of how they can inform their audiences better by critically addressing people's needs and desires. Such approach echoes Zamith's (2018) claim for disaggregating the construct of metrics "and examine their different forms in order to advance the understanding of how they impact particular journalistic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours" (354).

### **Listening to the Audience**

Listening to the audience is a tangible way of integrating into the daily tasks of journalists the responsibility to inform them better by knowing what their needs are. This role

consists, first, in being open to considering people's needs and, second, acknowledging their legitimate desire to feel seen and heard. By listening to the audience as *living citizens*, journalists take on the responsibility to better inform them of those issues that are important in people's lives, the definition of the tone or angle from which to treat the stories, or to simply serve as a companion to them. In doing so, professionals expect to foster a sense of companionship, thereby improving how audiences receive information and enhancing a preference for this news outlet over others.

Even though listening is interwoven in practices of observing the audience, as a role it can be distinguished by the importance that journalists give to "satisfy people's desire to *speak up*" (Dreher 2010). Listening implies, first, being organized and consistent in actively paying attention to what audiences are saying, and second, making conscious decisions on whether to take their voice into consideration. The relevance of listening for journalists, thus, lies in their capacity to engage in "the act of recognizing what others have to say, recognizing that they have something to say" (Couldry 2009, 579).

In practice, journalists listen to the audience through the online and offline communication channels that allow people to directly carry a conversation with journalists. The interviewees highlighted three offline channels: (i) *Geographical*: The newsroom is located in the centre of the city of Concepción, the second biggest city in Chile with nearly one million inhabitants. According to the editor-in-chief, this strategical location gives people a sense of personal closeness to the news organization. (ii) *Physical*: journalists keep the newsroom doors open with minimal security measures as it "enables authorities to complain about the treatment of a story" or "people involved in a crime to come forward to provide their side of the story". (iii) *Through a free telephone hotline*: the phone in the newsroom can be answered by any of the journalists or editors in the newsroom. "Most of the time people call to make a complaint or to denounce something and we must listen". Professionals recognize this among their functions and understand it as part of the job. As one of the editors recalled: it is an "opportunity to receive and answer people's questions". This willingness in giving time to listen to the audience can also be explained by the fact that journalists seek "contact with the street". Since BioBioChile is responsible for adapting all of the material that reporters of the radio network produce, most of the daily routine of the journalists is carried out behind their desks. Listening to the audience, thus, is also seen as an opportunity to come up with a new angle on a story or to simply bring in changes to their routine.

Two more digital channels completed the spaces for listening to news users: (iv) *Platforms*: On every platform, the newsroom has a specific strategy to communicate with the audience. Although all journalists are allowed to interact, it is often the social media editor who pays attention to what the general audience is "saying" online. And (v) *Website*: Journalists and editors highlighted the utility of receiving email corrections from the audience through the website. This feature consists in a button that says: "Correct if you found an error" which deploys a contact form where users can write and send their message. The correction is automatically directed to the author of the story and the editor's email inbox. Journalists indicated that part of their daily work is to write back to the users with the outcome of the correction "so that readers do not feel that they are talking to a door". According to them, corrections enhance the news content and provide them with "insight into people's thoughts".

Being close, receptive and open to dialogue, are not only journalistic concerns but organizational values that encourage professionals to develop skills such as being receptive, respectful, patient and open to criticism. As listening does not only consist of hearing or reading what people say, but also of responding to them in order to “make them feel heard” (Dreher 2010), journalists are aware that it is important to show an attitude of openness that conceives the relationship as symmetrical (Loosen and Schmidt 2016). This needs to be reflected both in the production of news and in the interaction with the news users. Moreover, listening to the audience as *living citizens* does not imply that professionals actually pay attention to every single user. The journalistic considerations for listening to the audience are mainly based on the sense of opportunity or worthiness that this activity entails from a professional perspective. We identified three particular practices for *listening to the audience*:

- (a) *Recognizing their users*: By picking up the phone and welcoming them to the newsroom, journalists perceived that most of the time people only wanted to feel that they were being listened to. Although these situations could be seen as superficial, journalists expressed a genuine intention in taking their time to listen to people even when it served the symbolic purpose of “making the audience feel close” said the editor-in-chief. An illustrative example of this is the relationship they build with Mireya, “a homeless woman that is popular in the city, who often comes to the office, walks inside the newsroom, chats with the editor (...) We are a service radio station that accommodates this within our agenda because it has a value, perhaps not so much in visits [to the website] but in people taking us into account”. Such approach to their audience illustrates that listening is not a passive bottom-up practice, but a horizontal active activity in which journalists worry about making audiences feel considered.
- (b) *Reaching an understanding or agreement*: “Having the chance to talk to people on the phone or in the newsroom is an opportunity”, said the social media editor. According to him, giving time and energy to listen to people is linked to having an actual conversation and “reaching an agreement”. Both the general editor and the social media editor explained that they have more than once talked on the phone with users who request to be removed from the Facebook page blocked users list, in which they have ended up due to their offensive language or the insults they have given to journalists. The agreement usually implies that users understand their mistake and agree not to do it again.
- (c) *Ignoring the audience who is considered improper*: Journalists suggested having implicit rules for deciding to give time and interest to the audience. They expressed that people had to be polite and show good intentions, otherwise, they would not give their time to them. Journalists said that they “would go crazy” if they worried about what people comment on Facebook and some of them admitted to avoid reading comments because of the emotional stress that insults could cause them. This particular consideration shows that listening is a conscious and selective decision of journalists, and as a role, it is practiced only when professionals see a purpose in doing it. However, it is not so clear under what specific criteria journalists make these decisions, or how fast are they able to verify the correctness of both the informant and the information. On several occasions, BioBioChile has been accused of not

applying enough filters to the information delivered by its audience, leading to conflicting cases of misinformation.

Despite the fact that their practices try to foster a horizontal communication with their audience, journalists feel comfortable seeing the audience as users of the news rather than as professional equals (cf. Singer et al. 2011). Professionals even distanced themselves from the audience with arguments that are strongly linked to conventional journalistic roles, such as feeling “responsible only of supplying the news” or “having to respond to the audience only through the news I publish”, as two editors stated. However, it is not completely clear under what criteria journalists define the boundaries of their listening practices, especially in terms of the opinions they were willing to consider or not.

### **Connecting with the Audience**

*Connecting* with the audience as living citizens is an ongoing practice that journalists carry out in parallel with *observing* and *listening*. Specifically, it deals with the capacity of the practitioners to go beyond listening and engage in a two-way exchange with the audience, so they can feel news is representing them and thus engage in it as a community: a group of living citizens who feel part of the news organization. As the editor-in-chief explained:

It is very important to develop a connection with the community, to understand the community, to understand the audience (...) We believe that if you create a link with them and understand what the community wants, the rest comes naturally.

The digitalization of journalism does not automatically imply that journalists should limit themselves to online engagement. Interviews illustrated that being digital also meant acknowledging that there are people behind each device and therefore the audience needs to be approached taking their context into consideration. As such, *living citizens* are not only “living” entities because they are alive, but also because they are moving targets to be traced (Domingo, Masip, and Costera Meijer 2015). Consequently, building communities around the news is an extension of *observing* and *listening* that encompasses offline and online practices of reciprocal relationship between journalists and audiences that can contribute to “greater trust, connectedness and social capital” (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014).

This reciprocal relationship between journalists and the audience, however, goes beyond the understanding of reciprocity as a form of interaction (Borger, Van Hoof, and Sanders 2016; Lewis 2015). In the role of *connecting* with the audience, journalists focus primarily on trusting and being trusted by news users. This approach suggested that a *connection* could be achieved by, first, trusting that the intentions of news users were genuine and honest, and second, responding to them in a way that would make them feel trusted. For example, professionals evaluated positively each time that people shared documented information for free (offline or online), gave feedback through the various forms of interaction channels they offer, or reached out to journalists for help. These acts of the audience were perceived as a validation of their role as journalists: “people usually trust us also because they feel that in our interaction with them, they feel listened to and they feel served”, said one journalist.

Interestingly, the assessment of this role is sometimes equalled to evaluating BioBio-Chile journalists' professional success. According to the managing-editor, journalists are being systematically evaluated for how deeply they care about the audience. Stories that contributed to improving people's lives, as living citizens, satisfied them the most professionally and personally because they felt they contributed to give them a voice and opening ways to solve their problems. As one of the journalists explained:

People see that if they hadn't raised their voices and spoken to Biobio to tell us their problem, change would not have been possible. We took them, gave them a voice, amplified their voices and, between the two of us, generated that change.

In concrete terms, the practices of journalists connecting to their audience that we distinguished are:

- (a) *Understanding when audiences feel served and accompanied:* Journalists were highly conscious about the importance of being up to the expectations of the audience in terms of the "service" they provided to them. They expressed satisfaction when they considered themselves "to be a vehicle for finding answers to problems" or when they realize that their audience sees them as a connection to the authorities. Several journalists mentioned how important was for them to see people's reaction to the efforts of both the radio and the website during the 2010 earthquake in Chile. The expressions of gratitude from a group of residents "who spontaneously came to applaud us for all the work we did in that time" meant for the editor-in-chief that their work was extremely important for the people and made him "feel that we are in connection with them".
- (b) *Making audiences feel represented through local news:* Journalists often emphasized that a good way of connecting with its audience was to make them feel represented in the news coverage. For example, one of the journalists claimed that "people really enjoyed local news" because "they feel reflected in the site in a way that the important political news never does". Since BiobioChile operates as the online platform within a national news network it is possible for them to provide both local and national content in a balanced way.
- (c) *Ensuring that audiences feel reflected through "special" representativeness:* Journalists also talked about connecting with the audience with "special" content that is produced by the social media team only to commemorate specific events that are emotionally relevant for people. For the anniversary of the death of the Chilean folklorist Violeta Parra, for example, the social media editor recalled asking the audience to "record themselves singing for at least three seconds one of her famous songs at some characteristic spot in their city. They sent the material through WhatsApp and the participation of the people was impressive (...) It was clear to us that our relationship with the people was unique and they wanted to appear".

Understanding, representing and recognizing their audience are practices that journalists can enact in order to build a cohesive community: a "positive source that people can draw on for telling and sharing stories" (Costerá Meijer 2010, 332). This process of building plural communities around BioBioChile, thus, derives from an understanding by the journalists of what audiences find valuable in their journalism and how the professionals are

able to perceive it and enhance it. Although journalists seldom mention it explicitly, their articulation of this role is strongly linked to the journalistic democratic function of mobilization (Schudson 2008). The practices they describe are driven by the motivation of making an impact on people's lives and in society by shifting the emphasis "from watchdog to good neighbour" (Costerá Meijer 2010, 332), not by depoliticizing the news but by "wrapping it up in a more open, curious, compassionate and good-humoured professional attitude and tone of voice" (332).

## Conclusions

This article sought to bridge the gap between normative ideals and journalistic practices by examining how journalists' attention to and interest in the audience contributes to the fulfilment of journalism's democratic ideals. Using the slogan of the organization "at the service of the people" as a sensitizing concept, we identified engagement practices that enabled us to inspire and inform the normative theory of journalism in two ways. Firstly, by outlining the conceptualization of the audience as *abstract news users* and *living citizens*. And second, by the identification of three journalistic roles in relation to the audience that contribute to a better assessment of journalism's fulfilment of its democratic ideals. The roles of *observer*, *listener*, and *connector* enriches journalism's normative framework by grounding the long-standing theoretical construct of "informed citizenship" to verifiable routines and values that are both visible and measurable in professionals' everyday practice.

The practices of attention to the audience of BioBioChile suggest that journalists conceive their audiences as *living citizens*: a complex and heterogeneous group of people who are expected to have agency on their lives through journalists' work (cf. Schudson 2008). Although professionals did distance themselves from a democratic discourse, they were not ambivalent towards their role in democracy as they did not "fall short of their ideals or fail to accept the responsibilities of stewardship" (Schudson 2013, 172). Rather, interviewees manifested a great interest in contributing to people's quality of life both at a personal and social level. Such professional consideration of their audience seems to stem from BioBioChile's long tradition of maintaining a close relationship with the people, influencing journalists' ability to give a detailed explanation of how they relate to readers and listeners. The foregoing, combined with the open and personal approach of the interviews, enabled the identification of the constitutive features of a democratic vocabulary of journalism that are shown in this article. A key finding in this regard is that the basis of journalistic work lies not only in providing accurate and relevant information, but also in the expression of human values such as compassion, empathy and inclusion.

Consequently, the journalistic understanding of the audience as *living citizens* offers journalism studies an analytical perspective that enables a better comprehension of how engagement can be normatively evaluated as conducive to the democratic role of journalism. Our findings contradict the popular assumption that the journalistic consideration of the audience—both through and beyond metrics—is a challenge or a threat to the democratic function of the profession. Journalists *observing users' traces*, *listening* to people's voice, or *connecting* with the community still defend their professional know-how and editorial criteria. When journalists conceive audiences as *living citizens*, they

see themselves as professionals whose value is strongly linked to their capacity of performing the watchdog role, not only in the interest of seeking to hold the de facto power accountable, but also by being the people's watchdog, by taking people's problems seriously. Although market pressures influence the extent to which metrics are used in the newsroom, they do not automatically determine the civic quality or value of the news (Hindman 2018). As we have shown in this article, taking the audience into serious consideration encourages journalists to see themselves as accountable both for their role of informing the citizenry and creating a space for public opinion on two different levels. First, by taking responsibility for making their journalism relevant and appealing to the audience, and second, by being aware of the influence that their journalism may have in people's lives.

Moreover, we found that taking advantage of technology was aligned towards providing information in such a way that people are inclined to pay attention and, ultimately, to become actively involved both in the news media and in society (Belair-Gagnon, Zamith, and Holton 2020). As we have illustrated in this article, to inform the citizenry also implies carrying out other practices that foster closeness with, and trust of, audiences. This approach to journalism's democratic role goes in line with Kovach and Rosenstiel's (2014) idea that the profession "has always been more of a service—a means for providing social connection and knowledge—than a fixed product—an outlet's stories or advertising" (17). Thus, the identification of these new journalistic roles in relation to the audience provides with a more concrete understanding of how journalism's democratic functions (Schudson 2008) can be fulfilled by professionals. Ultimately, this can serve to more accurately identify the opportunities and challenges the profession faces, which, in turn, leads to a refined understanding of the ways in which journalism can play a better democratic role.

These findings, however, bring new challenges for journalists. From a technical point of view, professionals must know how the technology works not only to produce news in different formats, but also to accurately interpret metrics reports. From a professional point of view, journalists need to prioritize how they communicate with the audience, particularly in terms of developing empathy, compassion and receptiveness. From a normative angle, journalists are challenged not only to be faster in verifying the information shared by their audience, but also to be stricter in defining which viewpoints or opinions of users can be considered appropriate. Given that one of the central concerns of journalists is to represent the different voices of society, determining what differentiates a proper opinion from one that encourages misinformation appears as a critical issue when it comes to making editorial decisions regarding audience engagement.

This article does not intend to draw generalizable conclusions, but to investigate how the actual relationship of journalists with the audience can inform and enrich the normative framework of journalism. Future studies could address other newsrooms in different contexts to nuance the analysis. Likewise, more research on audience perceptions is needed to better understand what type of engagement would contribute most to fulfilling the democratic role of the profession. In addition, investigations could help to better understand how to measure the success of journalism in fulfilling its goal of informing the audience so that they feel empowered to act as citizens. As this paper focuses primarily on the democratic relevance of journalism and not on democracy per se, future studies could also address how current democratic challenges can be better addressed by journalism.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This study has been supported and financed by the Becas Chile Scholarship Program under Grant 72180532 (ANID, Chile).

## ORCID

Constanza Gajardo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9329-8728>

## References

- Belair-Gagnon, V., J. L. Nelson, and S. C. Lewis. 2019. "Audience Engagement, Reciprocity, and the Pursuit of Community Connectedness in Public Media Journalism." *Journalism Practice* 13 (5): 558–575.
- Belair-Gagnon, V., R. Zamith, and A. Holton. 2020. "Role Orientations and Audience Metrics in Newsrooms: An Examination of Journalistic Perceptions and Their Drivers." *Digital Journalism* 8 (3): 347–366.
- Boczkowski, P. J., and E. Mitchelstein. 2013. *The News Gap: When the Information Preferences of the Media and the Public Diverge*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Borger, M., A. Van Hoof, and J. Sanders. 2016. "Expecting Reciprocity: Towards a Model of the Participants' Perspective on Participatory Journalism." *New Media & Society* 18 (5): 708–725.
- Bowen, G. A. 2006. "Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5 (3): 12–23.
- Carlson, M. 2018. "Automating Judgment? Algorithmic Judgment, News Knowledge, and Journalistic Professionalism." *New Media & Society* 20 (5): 1755–1772.
- Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Cherubini, F., and R. K. Nielsen. 2016. *Editorial Analytics: How News Media are Developing and Using Audience Data and Metrics*. SSRN 2739328.
- Christin, A., and C. Petre. 2020. "Making Peace with Metrics: Relational Work in Online News Production." *Sociologica* 14 (2): 133–156.
- Costera Meijer, I. 2010. "Democratizing Journalism? Realizing the Citizen's Agenda for Local News Media." *Journalism Studies* 11 (3): 327–342.
- Costera Meijer, I., and T. Groot Kormelink. 2016. "How a User-Based Approach Changes the Meaning of Clicks, Transparency, and Citizen Participation." *The Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism Studies* 345.
- Costera Meijer, I., and T. Groot Kormelink. 2021. *Changing News Use: Unchanged News Experiences?*. New York: Routledge.
- Couldry, N. 2009. "Rethinking the Politics of Voice: Commentary." *Continuum* 23 (4): 579–582.
- Domingo, D., P. Masip, and I. Costera Meijer. 2015. "Tracing Digital News Networks: Towards an Integrated Framework of the Dynamics of News Production, Circulation and Use." *Digital Journalism* 3 (1): 53–67.
- Donsbach, W. 1983. "Comparative Indicators for the Way British and German Journalists Define Their Relations to the Public." *International Communication Gazette* 32: 19–36. doi:10.1177/001654928303200102.
- Dreher, T. 2010. "Speaking Up or Being Heard? Community Media Interventions and the Politics of Listening." *Media, Culture & Society* 32 (1): 85–103.
- Gans, H. J. 1998. "What Can Journalists Actually do for American Democracy?" *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 3 (4): 6–12.



- Habermas, J. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hagar, N., and N. Diakopoulos. 2019. "Optimizing Content with a/b Headline Testing: Changing Newsroom Practices." *Media and Communication* 7 (1): 117–127. .
- Hanitzsch, T. 2011. "Populist Disseminators, Detached Watchdogs, Critical Change Agents and Opportunist Facilitators: Professional Milieus, the Journalistic Field and Autonomy in 18 Countries." *International Communication Gazette* 73 (6): 477–494.
- Hanitzsch, T. 2017. "Professional Identity and Roles of Journalists." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*.
- Hellmueller, L., and C. Mellado. 2015. "Professional Roles and News Construction: A Media Sociology Conceptualization of Journalists' Role Conception and Performance." *Communication and Society* 28 (3): 1–11.
- Hermida, A., and N. Thurman. 2008. "A Clash of Cultures: The Integration of User-Generated Content Within Professional Journalistic Frameworks at British Newspaper Websites." *Journalism Practice* 2 (3): 343–356.
- Hindman, M. 2018. *The Internet Trap: How the Digital Economy Builds Monopolies and Undermines Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kovach, B., and T. Rosenstiel. 2014. *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Lamot, K., and S. Paulussen. 2020. "Six Uses of Analytics: Digital Editors' Perceptions of Audience Analytics in the Newsroom." *Journalism Practice* 14 (3): 358–373.
- Lee, E. J., and E. C. Tandoc. 2017. "When News Meets the Audience: How Audience Feedback Online Affects News Production and Consumption." *Human Communication Research* 43 (4): 436–449.
- Lewis, S. C. 2015. "Reciprocity as a Key Concept for Social Media and Society." *Social Media + Society* 1 (2): 1–2.
- Lewis, S. C., A. E. Holton, and M. Coddington. 2014. "Reciprocal Journalism: A Concept of Mutual Exchange Between Journalists and Audiences." *Journalism Practice* 8 (2): 229–241.
- Lindlof, T. R., and B. Taylor. 1995. *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Loosen, W., and J. H. Schmidt. 2016. "Between Proximity and Distance: Including the Audience in Journalism." In *The Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism Studies*. edited by Bob Franklin and Scott Eldridge II, 354–363. New York: Routledge.
- McQuail, D. 2013. *Journalism and Society*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Mellado, C. 2020. *Beyond Journalistic Norms: Role Performance and News in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Routledge.
- Mellado, C., and A. Van Dalen. 2017. "Challenging the Citizen–Consumer Journalistic Dichotomy: A News Content Analysis of Audience Approaches in Chile." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 94 (1): 213–237.
- Moe, H. 2020. "Distributed Readiness Citizenship: A Realistic, Normative Concept for Citizens' Public Connection." *Communication Theory* 30 (2): 205–225.
- Orchard, X. 2018. "Precarious Balance: How Journalists Negotiate Notions of Autonomy in the Trade-Off with Political Actors." *Journalism Practice* 12 (4): 422–439.
- Picone, I. 2017. "Conceptualizing Media Users Across Media: The Case for 'Media User/Use as Analytical Concepts.'" *Convergence* 23 (4): 378–390.
- Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. 2019. "Digital News Report 2019." [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR\\_2019\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf).
- Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. 2020. "Digital News Report 2020." [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR\\_2020\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf).
- Schudson, M. 2008. *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Schudson, M. 2013. "Reluctant Stewards: Journalism in a Democratic Society." *Daedalus* 142 (2): 159–176.
- Singer, J. B., D. Domingo, A. Heinonen, A. Hermida, S. Paulussen, T. Quandt, and M. Vujnovic. 2011. *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

- Tandoc, E. C. 2014. "Journalism is Twerking? How Web Analytics is Changing the Process of Gatekeeping." *New Media & Society* 16 (4): 559–575.
- Weaver, D. H., R. A. Beam, B. J. Brownlee, P. S. Voakes, and G. C. Wilhoit. 2009. *The American Journalist in the 21st Century: US News People at the Dawn of a New Millennium*. New York: Routledge.
- Weaver, D., and C. Wilhoit. 1996. *The American Journalists in the 1990s: U.S. News People at the End of an Era*. Mahwah: Erlbaum.
- Wenzel, A. 2019. "Public Media and Marginalized Publics: Online and Offline Engagement Strategies and Local Storytelling Networks." *Digital Journalism* 7 (1): 146–163.
- Zamith, R. 2018. "Quantified Audiences in News Production: A Synthesis and Research Agenda." *Digital Journalism* 6 (4): 418–435.