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**Between proximity and distance: Including the audience
in journalism (research)**



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Between proximity and distance: Including the audience in journalism (research)¹

1 Introduction

Discussions about what journalism provides and what the audience selects have a long tradition in communications research, and are routinely part of public debate on journalism's (in)ability to meet the demands and needs of its audience. Most would agree that journalism's purpose cannot be reduced to "giving the people what they want", while at the same time warning journalism's practitioners not to ignore its audience's preferences. In essence, these debates are about the appropriate or functional degree of proximity and distance between journalism and its audience (Görke 2014). But what does "appropriate relation" mean, and who is going to decide on that and to what end? More generally, how do we define proximity and distance between journalism and audience, and how can we measure and assess it? And from a fundamentally theoretical perspective: What kind of relationship is it overall?

These questions are becoming even more pressing as media practices in the age of the internet blur the boundaries between news producers and consumers as well as between production and consumption. In particular, the integration of social media into the media repertoires of individuals and media organizations urges us to rethink these categories, which are so fundamental, even constitutive, for journalism and audience research alike. The fluidity and processual nature of these developments has also been captured in hybrid terms: "mass self-communication" (Castells 2009: 58-70), "produsage" (Bruns 2008), "personal media" (Lüders 2008) or "personal publics" (Schmidt 2014) are new concepts that try to address the shifting relationship between professional journalism and active audiences and the "de-boundarizing" of spheres that used to be regarded as separate (Loosen 2015).

Given these developments, this chapter aims to provide an overview of current approaches to conceptualising and researching the journalism/audience-relationship. After a brief glance at historical perspectives (section 2), we will address some theoretical issues in more detail (section 3), and discuss some of the different ways the journalism/audience-relationship has been conceptualised in empirical studies (section 4). The chapter concludes with some reflections on the proximity and distance between journalism and audience, and the role of journalism research in this respect (section 5).

¹ The final, definitive version of this paper will be published in: Franklin, B. and Eldridge II, Scott (eds.) (2016): *The Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism Studies*, Routledge.

2 Historical perspective

Paradoxically, the study of the relationships between journalism and its audience is both classical and emerging in the field of journalism research.

It is a classical in the sense that the audience is (and has always been) a constitutive part of journalism, and is therefore inherently interwoven within every conception or theory of journalism, its performance, and its function in society. This is markedly visible in the case of journalism theories that are informed by social theories (Scholl 2013; Löffelholz 2008): Critical theories, for example, draw a picture of the audience as a mass that is manipulated by media (industries). Cultural studies, on the other hand, ascribes the power over meaning and sense making to users, who are subsequently modulating journalism and its products to their own ends (Abercrombie/Longhurst 1998).

At the same time, the journalism/audience relationship is an emerging topic as networked digital media have amplified the communicative forms which structure and reproduce it. In other words, it makes a difference whether this relationship operates mainly under the conditions of mass media or whether networked digital media provide additional and more varied channels of communication with different communicative modes. Print and broadcast media technologies have supported a “communicative figuration” (Hepp/Hasebrink 2014) that has been prominently described via theories of mass communication, of “gate-keeping” and of a “two-step-flow of communication” (McQuail 2010): Within the mass media paradigm journalists act as “senders” in the sense that they filter, aggregate and broadcast information for a dispersed and anonymous mass of people. Audience members act as “receivers” of information who engage in interpersonal follow-up-communication on the news within smaller networks of families, friends, networks of shared interests, etc. These conversations, while important for the formation of opinion and social cohesion, do not gain the same visibility as journalistic content. Neither journalists nor most audience members would take much notice of them, unless they are deliberately addressed in letters to the editor (as the most prominent, but by far not only example of forms of audience participation; Engesser 2013) and subsequently chosen for publication, i.e. for distribution to the mass audience, by journalists (Gans 1977; Wahl-Jorgensen 2007; Nielsen 2010; da Silva 2012; Reader 2015).

Digital media technologies have added new communicative options to this constellation, one of the most notable being the steady growth of user comments.

This feature, now common on many news websites (Jönsson/Örnebring 2011; Bachmann/Harlow 2012; Netzer et al. 2014), supplements traditional reporting and makes follow-up-communication to news stories - at least parts of it - visible to journalists and other users alike. Readers or viewers might comment on the story by giving their own opinions, asking questions, calling the journalist’s perspective into doubt or thanking them for their efforts, etc. (Witschge 2011). Furthermore, they are not restricted to addressing journalists, but can also engage in conversations with other audience members, eventually forming loose connections or even tight-knit communities of people who gather regularly at a certain comment section to discuss the news (Mitchelstein 2011).

Recent studies have investigated the changes and continuities in how journalists and audiences perceive, use, and manage user feedback via online comments (Boczkow-

ski/Mitchelstein 2011; Reich 2011; McElroy 2013; Nielsen 2014; Springer et al. 2015). In sum, they paint the picture of a transformed communicative environment which is no longer structured by a mass media paradigm alone. User comments provide a “meeting point” (Bergström/Wadbring 2015: 140) for journalists and their audience with its own dynamics, emerging rules and hierarchies (Rosenberry 2011; Weber 2013). They introduce an interface between the formerly separated modalities of interpersonal and mass communication contributing to an overall paradigm shift from “information supply and demand” to “dialogue and participation” in public communications. Such notions have also become a source of journalistic self-reflection: The Guardian, for instance, discusses “the mutualisation of news” and observes “that the web has led to a news community where ideas and news are shared rather than delivered” (The Guardian, 2009). To manage these changes journalistic organizations also set up guidelines and create specific professional roles such as community managers or social media editors (Bakker 2014). There is a considerable amount of empirical evidence that suggests a changing journalism-audience relationship but how can we theorize these transformations of journalism and its audience?

3 Journalism and (its) audience: Theorizing a complicated relationship

Journalism cannot be considered in absence of its audiences. Journalistic performance, its practices, routines, and products inherently address an audience. In short: journalism provides a service for which it needs an audience and not only on economic terms. This seemingly trivial statement makes it possible to inquire into the specific type(s) of relationship(s) that connect(s) journalism to its audience. Answers to this question, in turn, also depend on how we theorise “journalism” and “audience”.

To this end, following Scholl (2004), we can identify theories of journalism and/or audiences that operate on different levels: From the macro theoretical level of social theories (theories of action, systems theories, integrative social theories, structuration theories etc.; see Löffelholz 2008 for an overview) “the audience is a societal size of reference constituting the public” (Scholl 2004: 524, own translation) - irrespective of how differently theories might model the relationship between journalism/(news) media and audiences/the public in detail (as already illustrated with the examples on critical theories and cultural studies above). From a micro analytical perspective, the audience is seen as the accumulation of individual recipients or users of media and journalistic coverage. This is also the level on which the various theories within media effects research operate.

In addition, audience research encourages us to look at the various paradigms or analytical statuses of “the audience” (Nightingale 2011): We can roughly distinguish between three basic concepts of audiences (Loosen/Schmidt 2012: 869 pp.): Firstly, the *audience as recipients-perspective* which conceptualises the audience as the sum of receivers of media content. Secondly, the *audience as product-perspective*, originating from critical theory, asserts that the audience itself is constructed by a media industry which, in order to sell its media products, is “desperately seeking the audience” (Ang 1991). The *audience as product-perspective* places an emphasis on the ways that media systems include and rely on regimes of audience measurement that *manufacture* audiences (Bermejo 2009; Anderson 2011b). A third perspective, in contrast, sees *audiences as empowered networks* - not a disperse mass of people engaging in the appropriation of media content or being appropriated by the media industry, but rather, actively and collaboratively producing and disseminating information using networked digital media. In various theoretical models these

empowered networks are seen as a decisive factor leading to a new public communicative environment (Bruns 2008; Benkler 2006; Jenkins 2008).

These approaches (can) acknowledge that, from the perspective of journalism, information about and images of audiences “help construct the news” (DeWerth-Pallmeyer 1997: xi) and are “flowing back” into newsrooms (and more or less to individual journalists) so that the relationship between journalism and audience is reflexive in a very practical sense: Journalism has to take information about its audience into account in order to produce news that will be, or has a chance to be, noticed.

This reflexivity needs to be considered theoretically as well. Meusel (2014) argues that this is not accomplished if the journalism-audience relationship is only understood as an “imaginary conversation” (Cooley 1983) between (individual) journalists and their audiences. She shows that a more appropriate conception of the journalism-audience relationship can be achieved with reference to Max Weber’s concept of a “social relationship”, defined in “Basic Sociological Concepts” as

“behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms. [...] Thus, as a defining criterion, it is essential that there should be at least a minimum of mutual orientation of the action of each to that of the others“ (Weber 1978: 26/27).

So the social relationship between journalism and audiences is based on a mutual orientation informed by reflexive and generalised expectations, i.e. on what journalism should provide to its audience, or on what the audience might expect from journalism (Scholl 2004; Lewis et al. 2014; Borger et al. 2014). These expectations can be addressed on a macro level by treating “journalism” and “audience” as social spheres which are interconnected to “a communicative unit called the public” (Görke/Scholl 2006: 651).

On the micro level, in contrast, we might look at the interdependencies between “journalists” and “audience members” (viewers, readers, listeners, users), conceiving of them either as social roles which are constituted through a set of mutual expectations, or focusing on individual actors who hold certain identifiable norms and beliefs. On all levels, though, reflexive generalised expectations should be treated as both a prerequisite to and a result of communication, i.e. they are (re-)produced in mutual observation and interaction, and at the same time they frame these communicative processes.

So we can rephrase and specify the historical shift from mass media to digital networked media already mentioned in the previous section as a shift in the modes of mutual observation and interaction which also affect the generalised expectations journalists and audiences have of each other. Under the conditions of mass media, journalism relied mainly on the observation modes of audience research and punctual feedback e. g. via letters to the editors. Audience members, in turn, observed journalistic performance by selecting and consuming their products, with only little opportunity to engage in direct interaction and observe the ‘other-audience’.

Online media have introduced new modes of observation to journalists, including monitoring and aggregating digital traces of audience members which reveal information about news preferences, appreciation, engagement or recall (Bermejo 2009; Napoli 2010; Anderson 2011a). But they have also broadened the scope for audience members’ observational

practices towards journalism, as well as with respect to observing each other (Hautzer et al. 2012; Schulz and Roessler 2012; Wendelin 2014). Online, media users can easily compare different takes on news events by checking different news outlets as well as by comparing perspectives shared via user comments, or they might gain insights into editorial decisions by following individual journalists on Twitter or reading editorial blogs offering a sense of transparency to the newsroom and its practices. Perhaps most important of all, digital media have introduced a conversational mode into the journalism-audience relationship, by providing communication channels and spaces that afford direct interaction, whether dialogue- or conflict-oriented. Thus, with social media, journalism and audiences meet on uncommon ground.

Based on these theoretical considerations, we can ask empirical questions: Does the shift in modes of mutual observation and communication lead to changing generalised expectations between journalism and audiences, or are they rather stable? Which values and norms do they include? Are these expectations, values, and norms congruent or is there a (growing) disparity between journalists and their audience?

4 Including the audience in journalism (studies): Current contributions and research

Although the scholarly division between “journalism studies” and “audience studies” might suggest otherwise, journalism research is not restricted to journalists alone. It usually departs from treating “the journalist” as the basic unit of empirical investigation, but contains many - more or less explicated - “traces of the audience”. This section will present a selection of approaches used to investigate audiences from within the field of journalism studies. They are structured by three main strategies to include the audience, or more specifically: strategies to give attention to generalised expectations about audiences, in the design of empirical studies on journalism.

The first strategy is to not only rely on concepts or research objects typical in journalism research, but to also probe them for the *implicit information about the audience* they reveal. One of the classics of journalism studies, for example, is the research on journalistic role conceptions (Weaver/Wilhoit 1986; Cassidy 2005; Mellado 2011; Mellado/van Dalen 2013; van Dalen et al. 2012). Even when not discussed explicitly, this research helps us understand whether journalists consider themselves as mainly independent from audience influence (i.e. as a “gatekeeper” who provides a mass audience with objective information), as partners in a conversation with audiences, or if they aim to “stand up for the disadvantaged population” (Weischenberg et al. 2012: 214) etc.

A second strategy is to include instruments in the empirical design directed at extracting *explicit perspectives on the audience*. This refers to studies that include dimensions, categories and/or constructs which relate directly to the audience, like asking journalists about their “newsmen’s fantasies” (Pool/Shulman 1959) or “image of the audience” (Weischenberg et al. 2012: 215), on their perceived degree of the audience’s influence on their work (Weischenberg et al. 2012: 231), or on their general assessment of audience participation via social media (Robinson 2010). A different approach, coming from the field of newsroom studies, is to observe daily work routines and focus on the instances when direct interaction with audience members takes place, e.g. by reacting to readers’ comments, monitoring Twitter, or answering phone calls from viewers (Domingo 2011).

The third and final strategy is to *take both sides into account*. In a way, this is the most demanding strategy, as it calls for the design of empirical instruments that address the

practices and expectations of journalists and audience members in a similar, comparable way. It can be realised with different methodological approaches, e.g. different forms of qualitative or quantitative interviews, via content analysis or observation (see also Loosen/Schmidt 2016 on these three basic classes of scientific methods to access social reality). In addition, there are different possibilities available to relate findings for journalists and for audience members, e.g. comparing them or developing a synthesis of the different partial aspects. Various studies have chosen this strategy, and they will be presented in more detail below.

An early example is a study by Martin, O’Keefe and Nayman (1972) on the “opinion agreement and accuracy between editors and their readers”. For a specific, selected news event and a set of newspapers, they conducted interviews with editors and with readers, combining them with a content analysis of the news stories on the event. Thus, this approach departed from a simple “supply/demand-gap” and worked with assumptions of the co-orientation model by McLeod and Chaffee (1972). What the authors found is that “editors perceive the views of their readers fairly closely, [...] [whereas] readers perceive newspapers as biased, and generally opposed to their views (Martin 1972 et al.: 460); later on, such biased perceptions have been described by Vallone et al. (1985) as the “hostile media phenomenon”.

Reader (2012) employs a different methodology to study online comments by comparing results from a textual analysis (with reference to Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model) of six journalistic essays about anonymous online comments with 927 audience-member responses to these essays (that were partly quantitatively analysed). The study concluded that “journalists and audiences have very different conceptualisations about ‘civility’ and the role of anonymity in civil discourse” (p. 495): Whereas journalists seem to prefer quality over quantity, active commentators seem “willing to tolerate substandard writing and vitriol if it encourages broader public participation” (p. 505).

A recent example investigating mutual co-orientation online is the “News Gap” study by Mitchelstein & Boczkowski (2013). They operationalised this news gap as the difference between the “most newsworthy” and the “most read” / “most emailed” / “most commented” stories on three news sites. Instead of relying on self-reports gathered from interviewing journalists or users they took data collected automatically and interpreted it as an outcome of aggregated selection decisions on the side of journalism and audiences respectively. Similar approaches will probably become increasingly important, as journalists - and journalism research - increasingly deal with “transparent audiences” that leave digital traces during their news practices (An et al. 2013).

The most common approach to assess the journalism/audience-relation in an integrated research design relies, however, on survey data. Tsftati, Meyers and Petri (2006), for example, compared Israeli journalists’ and the public’s perceptions on “what constitutes good and bad journalism” (p. 152) with the help of a “comparative survey strategy” (p. 154): Using similarly-worded questions and response options, they asked samples of both groups questions on core journalistic goals, values, and practices as well as on a more general evaluation of the performance of Israeli media. Here, one of the striking findings is that the public is slightly more positive in its general evaluation of Israeli media in comparison to journalists. One explanation given is that journalists are more familiar with the inner workings of the media and, therefore, may be more sceptical and critical of it (p. 163). Furthermore, the authors also highlight how perceptions of professional norms such as “neutrality”, “verifying facts” etc. that were addressed in the survey, most likely mean different things to journalists and audiences (p. 168).

In a similar way, Bergström and Wadbring (2015) investigate the attitudes towards reader comments among the public and among journalists in Sweden. They conducted two surveys which included a set of statements (e.g. “Reader comments make news reporting

more interesting”) to be assessed by the respondents. Their findings show that journalists are less positive about reader comments and more critical of their quality than audience members (ibid.: 147). They also found that significant shares of audience members (between 23 and 38 percent) stated “no opinion” on certain items, indicating a noteworthy aspect of the journalism-audience relationship: Both methodologically and theoretically, we have to account for the fact that not every audience member is knowledgeable, capable, or willing to express attitudes towards professional journalistic practices to the same degree.

In our own research on four news outlets in Germany, we encountered similar challenges: Based on a theoretical model of audience inclusion we set up a multi-method research design that focused on the mutual co-orientation of practices and expectations (Loosen/Schmidt 2012; Schmidt/Loosen 2015). In particular, we operationalised constructs such as “journalistic self-image / external image” or “(assumed) motivations for audience participation” as parallel item sets which were included in standardised surveys among journalists and audience members. Among the latter, we found shares of “Don’t know / no opinion” answers similar to Bergström and Wadbring (2015), pointing to the general methodological problem of comparing data from groups with different degrees of knowledge or interest in journalism as well as with different perspectives on journalism.

We were, however, able to assess the differences between attitudes and expectations between journalists and their audiences (in our terminology: inclusion distance) by looking at the disparity in the meaning of each item for each group (see Heise et al. 2014; Schmidt et al. 2013 for detailed findings). Overall, we identified many areas of congruence between journalists’ and users’ expectations. However, disagreement (or, in theoretical terms, inclusion distance), was mostly found in two respects: Firstly, while journalists were more likely to assume ego-centered motivations for user participation such as “blowing off steam” or “for self-expression and self-display”, they underestimated the degree to which audience members (stated that they) wanted to expand their own knowledge or aim to introduce topics that are important to them into public debate. Secondly, while journalists and audience members by and large agreed on the importance of traditional journalistic values of objective, fast and reliable information on complex issues, they disagreed on the importance of new participatory practices for journalism. For example, in all cases journalists rejected notions such as “to provide opportunities for user-generated content to be published” or “to present own opinions on issues to the public” stronger than audience members did.

5 Conclusion and Outlook: Between proximity and distance

Among the three strategies outlined above, there is no inherently “better” perspective, because all of the cited approaches help us to better understand the journalism-audience relationship - and all have their particular limitations. If we do, however, follow the theoretical consideration that this relationship consists of reflexive generalised expectations that frame actual practice (and are in turn reproduced by it), then we need to employ empirical designs and adequate theories that are able to assess and explain this social relation. This is not only important in its own right, but will also contribute to our understanding of the fundamental changes to the public sphere and, ultimately, the changes democratic societies face with the rise of networked digital media.

Communicative options, opportunities for mutual observation, and channels for different modes of exchange have greatly increased over the last few years, but this development seems to be neither a linear nor a simultaneous process for all segments of journalism, for all journalists or for all audience members. Instead, we witness how journalistic organisations as well as individual journalists differ in the enthusiasm or reluctance with which

they embrace these developments, and in the resources they can employ to manage them. We can also see a differentiation of audience segments in at least two respects: First, with respect to audience preferences and increasingly narrow interests which can be served better in the seemingly endless digital world; here, the highly personalised “filter bubble” (Pariser 2011) of algorithmically curated newsfeeds is regarded simultaneously as a promise and as a threat. Second, we see great differences with respect to the audience’s interest in and capacity for participation: Not every user wants to have his or her say on current events, and not everyone is able to contribute to such debates, for different yet poorly understood, reasons of (self-) exclusion. Some early evidence from our own research suggests that newsrooms do increasingly confront this differentiation when serving different communicative channels, i.e. their print product reaches different audience segments than their online platform and their social media accounts do. Thus, it seems to be the case that journalists don’t work with the operative fiction of “a single audience”, but increasingly acknowledge that they serve “multiple audiences” (Hasebrink 2008, own translation) via different channels - not only in the sense of an academic modulation, but in a practical sense during their daily work routines.

Thus, we are led back to the fundamental questions posed in the introduction: Is there a “right and functional relationship” between journalism and audience, and who is going to decide on what it should look like? If we accept the normative idea that journalism should represent principles such as diversity and controversy, then a more intensive contact between journalists and audience members does not necessarily result in “better” journalism, (Görke 2014) especially if the opportunities for contact are skewed towards certain groups or interests. Journalists who only follow aggregated click data, or who only follow the needs of those social groups that are articulating their demands and concerns online, might eventually neglect certain topics. But they could also reflect on the inherent bias built into these modes of observation and decide to report on events even though - or just because - they will not get many clicks, likes, and retweets.

So one major challenge for journalists is to reconcile the (assumed) demands of the disperse and heterogeneous, yet often silent mass media audience with the (verbalised) demands of the connected audiences they face in comment sections and social media. Journalism research which takes both sides into account can support journalism in this respect: Not because it will solve this challenge once and for all, but because it expands our knowledge of mutually oriented practices and expectations towards public communication without being directly involved on either side. This way, journalism research can inform both sides about their values and expectations, helping journalists with their core task: To engage their audience with meaningful information about the world we share.

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7. Further Reading

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The handbook chapter discusses the “core structural components of audience theory” such as active/passive and shows how they are challenged by participatory media practices.

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Against the background of the sociology of professions this article explores the tension between professional control and open participation in the news process.

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The paper outlines key aspects of the sociological theory of inclusion and explicates them in a comprehensive heuristic model of audience inclusion in journalism.