

Does the audience welcome an audience-oriented journalism?

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Introduction

Digitalization has transformed the audience into a disruptive force in journalism (Edgerly et al., 2018). Most newsrooms experienced a steep increase in editorial metrics (Cherubini and Nielsen 2017) and shifted their focus to subscriber revenues to

counter the decline in advertising revenues (Newman et al., 2021). This trend nurtures an image of an industry that places the audience at the center of its daily operations. However, the idea of users being the focal point of journalism is not new. As phrased by journalism theorist Carey (2007, p. 12), “the audience is the god-term of journalism”, serving as the core element around which the entire profession and industry revolves. This idea is not a simple one and has not always been accepted or understood in its implications (Ryfe 2016). Journalism usually kept the audience at arm’s length, although its importance has never been questioned (Dvir-Gvirsman and Tsurriel 2022). In recent decades, a more participatory journalism has emerged, accelerated by the audience (Costera Meijer, 2020) and digital turn (Ohme et al., 2022) in journalism. “A more audience-oriented, connection-strengthening audience logic may have developed” (Blassnig and Esser 2021, p. 3).

It suffices to look at the variety of journalistic roles that journalism scholars identified throughout the years to demonstrate how journalism practice has evolved (e.g., Hanusch and Tandoc, 2017; Weaver et al., 2014; Tandoc et al., 2012). As we argue in this paper, the audience was far from the only idea inspiring journalism practice. Structural changes, such as digitalization, have transformed journalism, even altering normative roles, for instance, the shift from “objectivity” to “participatory transparency” (Hellmueller et al. 2013). With the advent of digitalization, competition for attention increased. The relationship between journalists and audiences undoubtedly shifted. Consequently, audiences gained a more prominent role (Heise et al., 2014).

The possibility of audiences to interact with journalists made journalists more aware of their needs and desires, influencing decisions about which content should be produced (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc Jr 2018: p. 437). Journalists – and journalism scholars – agree that “journalism must improve its relationship with audiences” (Nelson and Lewis 2022: p. 1). In light of these evolutions, Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) propose to approach journalism as a discursive institution: an institution shaped by how the audience speaks of and interacts with it (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017: p. 121). This offers an interesting perspective to assess the centrality of the audience in journalism. We can compare the way in which journalists conceive of audience-oriented journalistic roles with the way in which audiences conceive these roles. We do this based on their expectations and needs towards news professionals. A substantial amount of research has been done on journalistic roles from a production perspective (e.g., Hanusch 2019). Despite their prominent role, audience’s views on journalistic roles have remained underexplored (Riedl and Eberl, 2020, p. 1).

In this paper, we explore the literature about journalistic roles, and the subdivision of audience-oriented roles, as well as the role of the audience in shaping journalism. We question which audience-oriented journalistic roles the Flemish audience deems important based on the results of a regionally representative survey. We use regression modeling to explore whether socio-demographic characteristics, news attitudes, and news use could predict differences in views on these journalistic roles. We conclude by reflecting on how this bottom-up approach can shed light on the relationship between journalists and their audiences. We improve our understanding of what the audience sees and thinks journalists do, and what it expects from journalism. Although news media rekindled their attention for their audiences and audiences are vocal about what they

expect from journalists, we cannot speak about a truly reinforced connection. Across the board, audience trust is at an all-time low and news avoidance is peaking (Newman et al., 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to assess whether audiences are expecting journalists to orient towards their audience and if they are welcoming this audience orientation. We also assess whether performing certain roles can improve the audience-journalism relationship.

Audience-oriented journalistic roles

In their conceptual paper on the understanding of journalistic roles, Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) categorized journalistic role orientations into four groups: normative, cognitive, practiced, and narrated. Each group has its own conceptually divergent angle, respectively: what journalists ought to do, what they want to do, what they do in practice, and what they think or say they do (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). These four groups have an interplay: practices can form narratives around these roles, developing into cognitive and/or normative roles. Hanitzsch and Vos described role orientations as “discursive constructions of the institutional values, attitudes, and beliefs with regards to the position of journalism in society and, consequently, to the communicative ideals journalists are embracing in their work” (2017, p. 116). We follow this approach of journalism as a discursive institutionalism, analyzing journalism’s identity from a macro-perspective, as opposed to, for example, socialization theory from a meso-perspective (Raemy 2020: p. 1). Previous studies have approached journalism as a discursive construct (e.g., Husband 2005; Carpentier 2005; Matsaganis and Katz 2014). These studies view journalistic roles not as established, but more as “socio-culturally contested” (Budarick 2020: p. 189). Journalists, therefore, obtain their professional identities, values, and practices from their cultural environment (Tameling and Broersma 2013). Some authors argue that their environment gives meaning to their roles and practices (Waheed and Hellmueller 2021). Others claim that journalism only “exists because the audience talks about it” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017: p. 129).

We use role orientations as a guiding concept, and within that framework, we focus on cognitive roles. Cognitive roles derive from how journalists themselves see their roles, based on their own views, norms, and convictions. These roles tend to appear as evident, natural, and self-explaining. Cognitive roles are still contested and therefore more easily changed compared to normative roles (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Normative roles are long-established roles within professional journalism (Deuze 2005). These roles, such as acting as a watchdog and objectivity, seem indisputable. They act as markers of professional identity (Aldridge and Evetts 2004; Schultz, 2007 in Hanitzsch et al., 2019: p. 189). Adherence to journalistic roles has other purposes as well. For example, journalists put forward professional roles to demarcate their profession from other content-creators not abiding to these roles (Carlson et al., 2018).

Cognitive roles are subdivided into four role orientations: monitorial, collaborative, interventionist, and accommodative. The accommodative role is the dimension with the strongest audience orientation. “Journalists embracing an accommodative role emphasize the needs and desires of the audience” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017: p. 123). Journalists

adhering to this role try to promote understanding, meaning, and connection with their audience (Bartsch and Schneider 2014), for instance, offering tips, creating entertaining content, and help to form viewpoints (Mellado and Hermida 2021). It closely relates to the understanding of ‘journalism as a service’ (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007). Journalists in the North/Central European model of media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004) consider accommodative roles, or audience-oriented roles, which we use for the sake of clarity, among the most important to pursue as opposed to other regions (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Belgium (Flanders), which forms the object of this study, belongs to this Central European model (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

Journalistic roles have never been uncontested, but recent evolutions – even revolutions – in society and the media have questioned the roles of journalists explicitly (Koljonen 2013). Our “high-choice media environment” (Van Aelst et al., 2017: p. 4) questions the societal role of journalism, challenging established norms and roles, due to the volatile choices of the audience, and intrusion of competitors (Lichtenstein et al. 2021). Digitalization and the emergence of social media changed the audience-journalism relationship: “a more audience-oriented, connection-strengthening audience logic may have developed” (Blassnig and Esser 2021, p. 3). An instance of this trend is demonstrated by the growing significance of audience metrics (Lee and Tandoc 2017). Additionally, journalistic roles are becoming more focused on catering to the audience (Hanusch and Tandoc 2017). Costera Meijer concludes, in her extensive research, summarized in a paper in 2020, that journalism made an ‘audience turn’. Journalists’ attitude towards audiences changed from keeping them at a distance to constantly monitoring their movements (Costera Meijer, 2020, p. 2326). A similar evolution took place in Belgian journalism: audience research, feedback, metrics, and involvement clearly influence journalists’ work (Mertens and Standaert 2017). The Belgian journalist increasingly focused on their audience over the past decade.

There is a paradox in audience-oriented journalistic roles. Journalistic roles have, as previously mentioned, different purposes. One is to demarcate the profession, including from ‘intruders’. The audience is seen as such an intruder, e.g., in its more content-generating, distributing, and participatory activities enabled by digital technologies. The more journalists, however, orient their roles towards the audience, the more they might invite in these intruders. This could explain reluctance to adopt audience metrics in newsrooms (Gajardo et al., 2021). Or the continuous articulation between holding on to demarcating roles like offering well-produced, well-sourced, and accurate stories about the politics governing our society, and catering to audience expectations. Journalists constantly balance between citizen and civic demands (van der Wurff and Schoenbach, 2014). Therefore, it is important to know if and to what extent the audience expects something different, more specifically which roles journalists should adhere to. It’s uncertain whether the audience welcomes an (increasingly) audience-oriented journalism.

Audience’s views on journalistic roles

The influence of the audience on journalism is becoming more prevalent. However, studies on audience expectations of journalistic roles are rare (Tandoc and Duffy 2016,

p. 3339), despite long-standing evidence of audience expectations shaping role conceptions (Biddle 1986). The audience challenges journalism to adapt to their needs and desires, which translate into expectations towards journalists. The main audience expectations of journalism described in the literature are providing unbiased, balanced, independent, and accurate information (Heider et al., 2005; Loosen et al., 2020; Riedl and Eberl, 2020; Willnat et al., 2019). When examining the audience's views on journalism, studies focus on normative roles. For example, Heider et al. (2005, p. 952) concluded that the audience did not strongly support normative roles, such as acting as a watchdog and keeping them up to date. Vos, Eicholz, and Karaliova also surveyed American journalists and audiences on normative roles, and found significant differences in assessments of roles between the two groups (2019, p. 1009). Audiences thus even question these established roles.

There are few studies that examine cognitive roles, particularly audience-oriented roles. Therefore, it is unclear whether the recent uptake of audience-oriented roles is welcomed by the audience. Riedl and Eberl, 2020 investigated the Austrian audience's views on journalistic roles. They compared journalists' and audience's ratings on a set of role orientations, including audience-oriented roles like 'Entertainer' and 'Marketer'. The authors concluded that the Austrian audience expects less adherence to the marketer-role and the same adherence to the entertainer-role compared to journalists' views. Most research, however, focuses on journalistic roles from the perspective of journalists (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 2013; Hanitzsch and Vos 2018; Hanusch 2019).

Concretely, we need to study journalistic roles through audience research. Firstly, the audience acquired a central role in journalism, even in Belgium. The audience became 'intruders' who may alter roles and/or lead to prioritizing other roles, such as the entertainer-role. Secondly, journalism oriented itself more towards this audience, as evidenced by the omnipresence of audience metrics (Molina et al., 2021). Metrics give an indication of audience behavior. It instructs journalists on how to respond to its wants and needs. Thirdly, it remains uncertain whether the audience expects an increasingly audience-oriented journalism. Therefore, it is essential to identify which audience-oriented journalistic roles the audience deems important and which ones not. Based on these insights, we formulate our first research question:

RQ1. – What are the views of the Flemish audience on audience-oriented journalistic roles?

We depicted the audience as a monolith. However, it is possible that different sub-groups of the audience may have distinct expectations from journalists (Riedl and Eberl, 2020, p. 6). Research on audience expectations examines the effect of various identity strands on expectations, including age, political preference, education level, media trust, and media use (Banjac 2021). For instance, age strongly influences the perception of the watchdog role. Older generations expect journalists to adhere to their watchdog role more rigorously (Vos et al., 2019). The higher the education level, the greater the expectations an individual has of political journalistic roles (Loosen et al., 2020). Political preference indicates one's views on normative roles. Individuals who vote more right-wing expect

journalists to inform them about current affairs less (Riedl and Eberl, 2020). Media trust also affects one's perception of normative roles. The higher the trust, the more individuals value the role of watchdog (Nah and Chung 2011). Lastly, media use is highly correlated with one's expectations of journalism. The more news an individual consumes, the higher their expectations (Riedl and Eberl, 2020, p. 6). We also use these characteristics to divide our respondents into subsets. News avoidance is included because it has been increasing steadily in recent years, also in Flanders (Newman et al., 2021). This news attitude is a drastic turning away from journalism, highlighting the complex audience-journalism relationship even more. We also included news interest as an intriguing news attitude to investigate views on journalistic roles.

Our second research question is:

RQ2. – How do views on audience-oriented journalistic roles vary according to socio-demographic characteristics; according to news attitudes; according to news use?

We investigate audience-oriented journalistic roles within the Belgian context, specifically in Flanders. Belgium is comprised of three linguistic communities: French-speaking (Wallonia), German-speaking (East-Cantons), and Dutch-speaking (Flanders). As a result of several state reforms, community authorities were granted additional powers to regulate radio and television broadcasting markets, which led to each community having its own media law and regulators. Distinct media markets also exist from an economic standpoint, with media companies focusing on serving one community. Five legacy media companies dominate the Flemish media landscape: four commercial companies and one public service media company. It's challenging for new players to enter this media landscape and be both relevant and profitable (Hendrickx et al., 2021: p. 2). In 2020, 2537 professional journalists were member of the Flemish Union of Journalists (VvJ 2020). Most of them (73%) work at legacy media companies. When we refer to journalists in this paper, we are referring to these professional journalists working at the Flemish legacy media companies.

The Flemish audience became more critical towards domestic news media. Approximately 57% of the Flemish people trust news most of the time, which has been declining in recent years. News avoidance rose recently, with the total number of avoiders now at 63%. Paying intent for news is relatively low in Flanders, making it difficult even for legacy media to remain sustainable (Newman et al., 2021). The fall in trust, rise in avoidance, and low willingness to pay indicate that Flemish journalism is struggling to reinforce a sustainable relationship with audiences.

Methodology

Probing the flemish people on news use and news attitudes

Professional market research firm WHY5Research distributed our survey via e-mail to their panel in December 2019.¹ The sample consisted of a representative group of

1577 Flemish respondents between 16 and 75 years old. It was regionally representative on gender, age, and education level (STATBEL 2019).² The sample was questioned about their news use and news attitudes.³ The respondents gave their views on audience-oriented journalistic roles through nine statements. These statements were adapted from previous audience research studies, including the Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2020), the report ‘How young people consume news’ (Galan 2019), and a study by Vos et al. (2019). To test whether these roles were audience-oriented, the statements were refined through discussions with three Flemish journalists. These statements were included: Offering useful, actionable information; Offering thorough, in-depth news; Helping gain insight into complex issues; Helping form a view of what is happening in society; Taking strong stances; Confirming my view of society; Going against generally accepted ideas; Having a positive view of society; and Pleasure while consuming.

Analyzing a representative flemish sample

To analyze Flemish audience’s views regarding audience-oriented journalistic roles, we used a three-step approach. First, we reduced the nine statements by means of principal component analysis (PCA) to three components. Then, we calculated the average ratings of the roles. Lastly, we used linear regression modeling to predict the importance of journalistic roles according to socio-demographic characteristics, news use, and news attitudes.

Principal component analysis

We conducted a PCA with orthogonal rotation (varimax) on eight statements. All statements except ‘pleasure while consuming’ were entered in the PCA. We excluded ‘pleasure while consuming’ from this analysis, because the initial round of PCA showed weak correlations between this statement and the others. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure verified the sampling adequacy of the analysis with a value of 0.889, which is considered ‘superb’ according to Hutcheson (1999), and individual KMO values for each item were higher than 0.84, which is well above the acceptable limit of 0.5 (Kaiser 1974). Bartlett’s test of sphericity ($28) = 5172.638, p < 0.001$, demonstrated sufficiently large correlations between the items for PCA. We obtained eigenvalues for each component after the initial analysis. Two components had eigenvalues greater than Kaiser’s criterion of one and in combination explained 66.45% of the variance. The scree plot showed inflexions that justify retention of two components. Given the large sample size, the convergence of the scree plot, and Kaiser’s criterion on two components, we retained two components in our final analysis (Table 1).

The statements ‘offering useful, actionable information’, ‘offering thorough, in-depth news’, ‘helping me gain insight into complex issues’, and ‘helping me form a view of what is happening in society’ question a common underlying principle, which we refer to as ‘Journalists as explainers’. The statements ‘taking strong stances’, ‘confirming my view of society’, ‘going against generally accepted ideas’, and ‘having a positive view of society’ also question a common underlying principle, which we refer to as ‘Journalists as

Table 1. Summary of exploratory factor analysis results for eight journalistic roles (N = 1577).

Rotated structure matrix for PCA with varimax rotation of a two component questionnaire

| Items | Rotated component coefficients | | Communalities |
|---|--|--|---------------|
| | Component 1 – Journalists as explainers | Component 2 – Journalists as opinion facilitators | |
| Offering useful, actionable information | 0.877 | 0.206 | 0.811 |
| Offering thorough, in-depth news | 0.848 | 0.265 | 0.790 |
| Helping me gain insight into complex issues | 0.834 | 0.264 | 0.766 |
| Helping form a view of what is happening in society | 0.585 | 0.504 | 0.596 |
| Taking strong stances | 0.085 | 0.813 | 0.669 |
| Confirming my view of society | 0.319 | 0.726 | 0.628 |
| Going again generally accepted ideas | 0.270 | 0.672 | 0.524 |
| Having a positive view of society | 0.313 | 0.659 | 0.532 |
| Eigenvalues | 2.806 | 2.510 | |
| % of variance | 35.077 | 31.374 | |
| N of items | 4 | 4 | |
| α (reliability) | 0.866 | 0.760 | |
| Cases excluded | 92 | 124 | |

Note: Major loadings (>0.40) for each item are **bolded**.

opinion facilitators’. We translated the final statement, ‘pleasure while consuming’, into the role of ‘Journalists as infotainers’.

Average scores on audience-oriented journalistic roles

The ratings’ means of audience-oriented roles were calculated for each individual statement and their corresponding umbrella-terms (Table 2).

Linear regression modeling of potential predictors

Linear regression modeling was used to explore potential predictors of the importance of the audience-oriented journalistic roles. The aim was to determine how much of the variation in the dependent variable is explained by the independent variable. This approach is more commonly used in theory building, as the independent variable can help explain some of the variation of the dependent variable (Kutner 2005). With linear regression, not only were the independent variables that predict the roles explored, but

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of journalistic roles (Representative sample N = 1577).

| Audience-oriented journalistic role | N | Mean |
|---|------|------|
| Offers thorough, in-depth news | 1520 | 4.29 |
| Offers useful, actionable information | 1522 | 4.33 |
| Helps me gain insight into complex issues | 1512 | 4.21 |
| Helps me form my own view of what is happening in society | 1513 | 4.03 |
| Journalists as explainers | | 4.22 |
| Takes strong stances | 1502 | 3.79 |
| Confirms my view of society | 1506 | 3.86 |
| Goes against generally accepted ideas | 1503 | 3.81 |
| Has a positive view of society | 1512 | 3.84 |
| Journalists as opinion facilitators | | 3.83 |
| Pleasure while consuming | 1521 | 4.16 |
| Journalists as infotainers | | 4.16 |

also their strength and direction. Linearity was evaluated through visual inspection of a scatterplot. Homoscedasticity was assessed by visual inspection of a plot of standardized residuals versus standardized predicted values. Residuals were normally distributed as evaluated by visual inspection of a normal probability. Independence of residuals was checked by Durbin–Watson statistics (Weisberg 2014).

Dependent variables. Views on audience-oriented roles: Journalists as explainers; Journalists as opinion facilitators; and Journalists as infotainers. Respondents rated all nine statements corresponding to these umbrella-terms on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (5) Strongly agree.⁴

Independent variables. Socio-demographic characteristics: age is measured on a linear scale from 16 to 75 years old; education level on an ordinal scale (10) from low to highly educated; income on an ordinal scale (8) from low to high income; and political preference on an ordinal scale (7) ranging from very left-wing to very right-wing.

Attitudes towards news: interest in news is measured on an ordinal scale (5) from high to low interest; news avoidance on an ordinal scale (4) from high to low avoidance; general trust in news on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree (low trust) to (5) Strongly agree (high trust).

News use: news use was probed by asking about the use of five different news sources: news via print; news via television; news via radio; online news; and news via social media. Respondents indicated their use of these sources on a scale ranging from high use to no use.

Results

Flemish news users consider most audience-oriented roles important

To address our first research question, we analyzed the ratings given by 1577 Flemish respondents to the nine audience-oriented roles using a scale that ranges from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5).⁴ On average, all statements received at least a 3.7 out of 5, with the four statements related to ‘Journalists as explainers’ receiving scores well above 4. The statement ‘Pleasure while consuming’, which is linked to ‘Journalists as infotainers’, received an average score of 4.22. Although still highly rated, the statements related to ‘Journalists as opinion facilitators’ obtained an average score of 3.83 (Table 2).

Predictors of audience-oriented journalistic roles

Linear regression modeling reveals the independent variables that predict our audience-oriented journalistic roles. The coefficients (B) demonstrate both the strength of the predictor and its direction.

Journalists as explainers

The first main audience-oriented journalistic role we study is ‘journalists as explainers’. According to the linear regression models, socio-demographics age, education level, and income significantly ($p < 0.001$) predict ‘journalists as explainers’. This indicates that older, more educated, and more affluent respondents have a slightly higher chance of appreciating ‘journalists as explainers’. For instance, they expect journalists to provide more insight into complex issues compared to younger, less educated, and less affluent respondents. Additionally, political orientation also significantly ($p < 0,05$) predicts ‘journalists as explainers’. The coefficient (B) is -0.034 , which indicates that very left-wing voters consider this role more important than very right-wing voters (Table 3).

News attitudes are relatively strong predictors. Especially general trust in news ($B = 0.181$) and interest in news ($B = -0.251$) predict ‘journalists as explainers’. The more someone trusts news, the more they view the role of ‘explainers’ as important. The same applies to respondents who are more interested in news. Other significant predictors include consuming news via television ($B = -0.046$) and radio ($B = -0.039$). The more frequently someone consumes news via these sources, the more important they deem this role. Remarkably, print is less predictive. News users may associate audiovisual stories with more clear, actionable, and insightful news than printed stories.

Journalists as opinion facilitators

Age is the only socio-demographic characteristic predicting ‘journalists as opinion facilitators’ ($B = 0.005$). This suggests a generational divide in the appreciation of journalists taking stronger positions. The older the respondent, the more important, they deem journalists confirming their view of society. News attitudes significantly predict this role,

Table 3. Linear regression modelling of Journalists as explainers.

| Journalists as explainers | | | | | | |
|--|-------|----------|---------|----------|--------------|---------------|
| Independent variables | R | R Square | F | Sig. | Coefficients | |
| | | | | | Constant | Predictor (B) |
| Socio-demographic characteristics | | | | | | |
| Age | 0.125 | 0.016 | 24.423 | <0.001** | 3960 | 0.005 |
| Education level | 0.147 | 0.021 | 33.388 | <0.001** | 3932 | 0.055 |
| Income level | 0.143 | 0.020 | 23.569 | <0.001** | 4019 | 0.059 |
| Political preference | 0.077 | 0.006 | 6.912 | 0.009* | 4418 | -0.034 |
| Attitudes towards news | | | | | | |
| Interest in news | 0.276 | 0.076 | 126.455 | <0.001** | 4711 | -0.251 |
| News avoidance | 0.200 | 0.040 | 63.781 | <0.001** | 3751 | 0.164 |
| General trust in news | 0.264 | 0.070 | 113.335 | <0.001** | 3578 | 0.181 |
| Consume news via ... | | | | | | |
| Print | 0.050 | 0.002 | 3808 | 0.051 | 4.304 | -0.018 |
| Online | 0.009 | 0.000 | 0.122 | 0.727 | 4.227 | -0.018 |
| Social media | 0.027 | 0.001 | 1104 | 0.293 | 4.176 | 0.007 |
| Television | 0.112 | 0.013 | 19.561 | <0.001** | 4.337 | -0.046 |
| Radio | 0.124 | 0.015 | 24.065 | <0.001** | 4.339 | -0.039 |

Note: *sign. level < 0.05; **sign. level < 0.001.

with general trust in news ($B = 0.122$) and interest in news ($B = -0.197$) being moderate predictors of the importance of 'journalists as opinion facilitators'. This is more important for respondents who have high trust in news and who have high interest in news, indicating that trust in news is necessary before appreciating journalists taking a stance. Most sources for news consumption are predictors for this role. Although significant, print ($B = -0.049$), online ($B = -0.041$), social media ($B = -0.015$), television (-0.070) and radio (-0.041) are not strong predictors. The negative coefficients indicate that the more frequently someone consumes news via these sources, the more they deem this role important. For instance, the more often people follow the news through television, the more they expect journalists to challenge generally accepted ideas (Table 4).

Journalists as infotainers

The final audience-oriented role is 'journalists as infotainers'. The level of education ($B = 0.041$) predicts this role. Remarkably, highly educated respondents consider this role to be slightly more important than those with lower levels of education. They thus expect that journalists bring the news in a more pleasurable, entertaining manner. The degree of interest in news ($B = -0.211$), news avoidance ($B = 0.137$), and general trust in news ($B = 0.177$) moderately predicts the perception of 'journalists as infotainers'. Those who have less interest in news, expect journalists to be less *infotaining*. On the other hand, those who frequently avoid the news, expect journalists to act less as *infotainers*. Avoiders

Table 4. Linear regression modelling of journalists as opinion facilitators.

| Journalists as opinion facilitators | | | | | | |
|--|-------|----------|--------|----------|--------------|---------------|
| Independent variables | R | R Square | F | Sig. | Coefficients | |
| | | | | | Constant | Predictor (B) |
| Socio-demographic characteristics | | | | | | |
| Age | 0.119 | 0.014 | 21.794 | <0.001** | 3595 | 0.005 |
| Education level | 0.008 | 0000 | 0.102 | 0749 | 3811 | 0.003 |
| Income level | 0.032 | 0001 | 1173 | 0.279 | 3815 | 0.013 |
| Political preference | 0.005 | 0000 | 0.029 | 0866 | 3856 | 0.002 |
| Attitudes towards news | | | | | | |
| Interest in news | 0.220 | 0.049 | 77.981 | <0.001** | 4219 | -0.197 |
| News avoidance | 0.090 | 0.008 | 12.594 | <0.001** | 3623 | 0.073 |
| General trust in news | 0.180 | 0.032 | 50.758 | <0.001** | 3397 | 0.122 |
| Consume news via ... | | | | | | |
| Print | 0.140 | 0.020 | 30.770 | <0.001** | 4088 | -0.049 |
| Online | 0.106 | 0.011 | 17.267 | <0.001** | 4035 | -0.041 |
| Social media | 0.056 | 0003 | 4746 | 0.030* | 3895 | -0.015 |
| Television | 0.176 | 0.031 | 49.015 | <0.001** | 4022 | -0.070 |
| Radio | 0.131 | 0.017 | 26.758 | <0.001** | 3960 | -0.041 |

Note: *sign. level < 0.05; **sign. level < 0.001.

may think that journalists are too focused on infotainment. News enthusiasts appreciate journalists who are more *infotaining*. Print ($B = -0.022$), social media ($B = -0.021$), television ($B = -0.049$), and radio ($B = -0.046$) significantly predict 'journalists as infotainers'. The more someone uses news, regardless of the source, the more important they consider this role (Table 5).

Discussion

Based on our findings, the Flemish audience in general welcomes journalists orientation towards the audience (RQ1). The audience-oriented roles brought under the umbrella term 'journalists as explainers' are particularly highly regarded. The Flemish audience expects journalists to bring them useful, actionable information, and thorough, in-depth news. Hence, journalists must not solely bring the facts, they must also contextualize, and make news applicable to the daily lives of the audience. This approach aligns with the principles of constructive journalism, which emphasizes personal relevance and problem-solving in news reporting (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020).

Respondents also view the role of 'journalists as infotainers' as highly important. They expect journalists to deliver news in an entertaining manner, which is somewhat contradictory to the trend of increasingly negative news (Boyer 2021). Riedl and Eberl, 2020 also found high expectations of the entertainer-role of journalists.

Table 5. Linear regression modelling of Journalists as infotainers.

| Journalists as infotainers | | | | | | |
|--|-------|----------|--------|----------|--------------|---------------|
| Independent variables | R | R Square | F | Sig. | Coefficients | |
| | | | | | Constant | Predictor (B) |
| Socio-demographic characteristics | | | | | | |
| Age | 0.035 | 0001 | 1836 | 0.176 | 4074 | 0.002 |
| Education level | 0.092 | 0.009 | 12.975 | <0.001** | 3952 | 0.041 |
| Income level | 0.077 | 0006 | 6648 | 0.010* | 4018 | 0.038 |
| Political preference | 0.022 | 0001 | 0.587 | 0444 | 4243 | -0.012 |
| Attitudes towards news | | | | | | |
| Interest in news | 0.196 | 0.038 | 60.557 | <0.001** | 4575 | -0.211 |
| News avoidance | 0.143 | 0.020 | 31.566 | <0.001** | 3770 | 0.137 |
| General trust in news | 0.217 | 0.047 | 74.243 | <0.001** | 3531 | 0.177 |
| Consume news via ... | | | | | | |
| Print | 0.053 | 0003 | 4314 | 0.038* | 4274 | -0.022 |
| Online | 0.002 | 0000 | 0.009 | 0924 | 4150 | 0.001 |
| Social media | 0.064 | 0003 | 6311 | 0.012* | 4251 | -0.021 |
| Television | 0.102 | 0.010 | 15.885 | <0.001** | 4291 | -0.049 |
| Radio | 0.122 | 0.015 | 23.103 | <0.001** | 4306 | -0.046 |

Note: *sign. level < 0.05; **sign. level < 0.001.

The third set of roles, ‘journalists as opinion facilitators’, is viewed as the least important, although still high. Respondents give going against generally accepted ideas and taking strong stances the lowest scores. The lower importance given to these roles correlates with the findings of [Taber and Lodge \(2006\)](#), indicating audiences having difficulties with news that challenges their opinions.

Overall, the Flemish audience considers the audience-oriented journalistic roles important. This contradicts with studies concluding that normative journalistic roles are considered less important. Therefore, the audience potentially does not only welcome an increasingly audience-oriented journalism but could even question the established normative roles, embracing a shift in journalistic roles. By taking “a more user-oriented, connection-strengthening audience logic” ([Blassnig and Esser 2021](#), p. 3) journalism may have invited the audience to change established roles by other roles. Concurring with [Blassnig and Esser](#), “audiences have become to have a power of their own, influencing the logic of journalistic action” (2021, p. 2).

Do certain subsets of the audience consider these audience-oriented roles more important (RQ2)? We have categorized the audience based on three main characteristics: socio-demographic characteristics, news attitudes, and news use. Older, higher-educated, and affluent respondents consider journalists as explainers to be more important. This suggests, for example, that these privileged audiences get more useful, actionable information from news consumption. It also indicates that journalists may not treat all audiences equally ([Eldridge et al., 2019](#)). Some audiences may be considered more

valuable, and as a result, journalists may produce content catering to their needs and desires. Older generations also view journalists as facilitators as more important, which could indicate a generational fault line in the importance of journalists helping to form opinions. Younger audiences, on the other hand, prefer to take stances on current issues without the assistance of journalists. This younger generation may demand a less opinionated form of journalism. Remarkably, higher-educated audiences appreciate journalists as infotainers more. This reinforces the idea that privileged audiences get more out of news consumption, and consequently find it more enjoyable. Political preference solely predicts journalists as explainers. The more left-wing someone votes, the more important they view this role, highlighting the critical stance of right-wing voters towards journalism. (Riedl and Eberl, 2020) also found that political preference plays an important role in shaping role expectations.

Less noticeable is the finding that news attitudes have an impact on views of audience-oriented roles. Other studies have concluded that a high level of trust in journalism strongly influences how people view journalism (Nah and Chung 2011). Willnat et al. (2019) also found that low trust in news may result from a disparity between audience expectations and what journalists deliver. A more interested audience and a more trusting audience, believes that adhering to audience-oriented roles is important for journalists. People who avoid the news less are more likely to appreciate journalists orienting towards the audience. It is unclear whether attitudes towards news affect expectations of journalistic roles or the other way around. We do know that these attitudes are the most significant predictors of role importance. Including audience-oriented roles in news reporting could further increase trust in and interest in the news and reduce news avoidance. Similar findings emerge regarding news use. In general, the more someone consumes news, regardless of the source, the more they value an audience-oriented journalism. This is logical because the audience constructs their opinion of journalists, and therefore also their opinion of journalistic roles, on what they see them doing (Obermaier et al., 2021). As people consume more journalism, their expectations of journalists to adhere to these roles increase. Therefore, journalists are expected to adhere more to audience-oriented roles, providing them with more valuable journalism.

Our research indicates that, overall, the Flemish audience welcomes an audience-oriented journalism. Therefore, journalism can improve their relationship with the audience by further implementing audience-oriented roles. However, subsets of the audience differ in their views on audience-oriented roles. Particularly, the more 'valued' audiences consider these roles more important. This suggests a journalism that caters more to an older, higher-educated, more affluent audience.

Conclusion

In this study, we approached journalism as a discursive institution. As such, we envision it as an institution that stands or falls by the shaping of the audience (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Zelizer 1993). The audience is conceptualized as the most crucial player in challenging journalism to change. This includes shifting to a subscription-based strategy as an economic factor, quantitatively translating

audience's needs and desires by incorporating more audience metrics into newsrooms, and introducing more audience-oriented editors. Newsrooms worldwide are moving towards an "audience-oriented reconfiguration" (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc Jr 2018: p. 449) and incorporate an "audience logic" (Blassnig and Esser 2021, p. 1). Journalism has taken a drastic turn towards the audience in the past decade (Costera Meijer, 2020), making it increasingly challenging to balance between citizen and civic demands (van der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014), and sparking debate about the societal role of journalism.

Journalism claimed its role in society by adhering to established roles. If these roles are contested, journalism could lose its societal relevance. Furthermore, if audiences increasingly turn away from journalism, the economic viability of quality, societal relevant journalism could significantly decrease. To address this disconnection, we must explore ways to (re)connect the audience with journalism and gain insights into which roles that journalists currently perform and which journalistic roles the audience deems important. It is uncertain whether audiences welcome this audience-oriented journalism, making the study of the audience's views on journalistic roles crucial. With our study, we supplemented the studies examining audience views on journalistic roles. In general, Flemish audiences appreciate an audience-oriented journalism. However, not all audiences equally embrace this audience orientation and are not treated equally by journalism.

This study is not without limitations. First, we did not ask Flemish journalists to rate the audience-oriented journalistic roles. However, our statements, particularly the underlying principles, align with the accommodative roles identified in the Worlds of Journalism-study (Hanitzsch et al., 2019: p. 195), which are among the most important roles according to Belgian journalists (Mertens and Standaert 2017). Second, we examined only a limited set of journalistic roles, focusing on three audience-oriented roles. Third, we used a limited set of characteristics that could predict the importance of journalistic roles. We tested the characteristics also operationalized by Vos et al. (2019), and examined additional characteristics. We also explored news use with different sources. A better approach would be to construct media repertoires, to grasp a news consumer's entire media practices, not just their preferred sources (Vandenplas and Picone, 2021). Lastly, our quantitative methods examined which journalistic roles the audience deems important, but not the reasoning behind their choices. It was evident from the Discussion that it was impossible to state if, for example, news attitudes shape the importance of journalistic roles or the other way around. A qualitative approach could delve into the reasoning behind the importance of roles and potentially uncover new, yet unidentified roles. More comparative research is also necessary to examine differences between media and political systems. Even within the Belgian media landscape, it may be relevant to examine differences between the linguistic communities.

In conclusion, it is important to further explore mismatches in journalistic roles between audiences and professional journalists. This may explain why audiences are turning away from traditional journalism. Our bottom-up approach aspires to reconnect the audience with journalism by examining which journalistic roles need to be retained, and which ones should be modified.

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Notes

1. Data-collection was finalized before COVID-19 hit Flanders, and before a period of (semi-) lockdowns made changes to normal life.
2. Our sample didn't significantly differ from official regional socio-demographic characteristics (STATBEL 2019). The average age of the respondents was 47. 49% were female. 31% is highly educated, 20% is lowly educated.
3. The survey was carried out as part of the Roularta Chair on *Personalisation, Trust and Sustainable media*.
4. A small share (on average 3.5%) indicated 'no opinion'. They were excluded.

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