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News Audiences and the Challenges of Digital Citizenship

Chris Peters

Pose the question in any first-year undergraduate course – at least within Western democratic contexts – why journalism matters, and odds are a single answer will come to the fore. Democracy. The discourse around journalism's role in society as an essential pillar or 'fourth estate' of healthy democracies is a potent one, to be sure, one proffered both about and from citizens as they reach adulthood, or even before, as studies of young news audiences have repeatedly shown (e.g., Banaji and Cammanerts, 2015; Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991; Sveningsson, 2015; Peters et al. 2021). Philosophers, politicians, journalists, citizens, communities, universities, news outlets, NGOs, political parties, supranational organizations, and many other actors and institutions espouse how central journalism is to the foundation and functioning of democratic society. And, as the studies above indicate, members of the public implicitly share this view, with feelings of guilt often being expressed around not being as informed a citizen as one should be, due to lack of engagement with the news.

Given this state of affairs, it seems counterintuitive that some academics studying the news warn that the rapid changes witnessed in the media landscape over the past couple decades disrupt the journalism and democracy paradigm, rendering it "too limiting and distorting a lens through which journalism can be viewed in the 21st century" (Joseph, 2013: 445). The centrality of democracy in journalism studies scholarship blinds scholars to the far greater diversity of practices around news on the ground, Zelizer (2013) argues, which more aptly signal shifts in journalistic culture. Broersma and Peters (2017) contend that the rise of the mass press in the 19th and 20th centuries was largely attributable to journalism bringing an industrial logic to information, as opposed to fulfilling some inherent civic need for dutiful citizens to be well-informed. In this view, democracy is a limited framework for gauging the societal relevance of journalism as digital publics move on to other providers to fulfill their informational needs in everyday life. Simply put, in addition to the examples above, more figurative ink than one might expect has been spilled in journalism studies arguing that democracy alone, at least in the typical liberal Western articulation it is often conflated with (Anderson, 2021), is a poor unifying concept or 'grand narrative' to understand journalism's role in contemporary digital societies (e.g., Callison & Young, 2019; Carlson et al., 2018; Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Waisbord, 2013) – but should this necessarily be the case?

The answer, as with much academic work, is complex and dependent on what questions one asks and what 'work' one wants the concept of democracy to do to assess and understand journalism. This chapter contends that contemporary concerns around democracy's centrality in academic studies of journalism stem from a spatiotemporal unease with its ties to an evidently outdated communication perspective of the mass press and a related, at times prescriptive, liberal recognition of the spaces where people engage with information around public affairs. It stems from intellectual misgivings about elevating an institutionalist role of journalism in public life at the expense of a cultural one. And it stems from the frequency with which etic concepts are deployed to investigate what journalism means to citizens, to only then be conflated with the emic motivations for most people.

In short, this chapter asserts that confusion around journalism's role in contemporary societies results from using ahistorical, often idealized, abstracted views of citizenship as an end for journalism – and end which citizens as individuals and publics as collectives can never attain – rather than as one of many means for performing it. It may be more helpful to view journalism in terms of the processes it sets in motion, maintains, complements, and/or resists for potentially prefiguring citizenship and what has been called the 'conduct of conduct' (Rose et al., 2006),

namely the governance of society at multiple, interdependent levels through a myriad of intertwining practices. Accordingly, this chapter poses two sets of interrelated questions:

- What do we know about contemporary news audiences, how has research tried to capture their practices, and what does this reveal about their relationships with journalism?
- How might we reimagine journalism's relationship with democracy using a framework anchored in the contexts of digital citizenship – rather than the liberal ideals of good citizenship – to understand citizens' lived experiences with news?

Recent Handbook chapters give excellent overviews of the breadth of studies around news audiences (Costera Meijer, 2019), variety of mixed methodologies to approach them (Schröder, 2016), and relationship between journalism and democracy (Ryfe, 2019). This chapter does not aim to replicate these works but departs from a more straightforward aim signposted in its title: to explore how the contexts of digitally-mediated citizenship challenge scholarly understandings about the significance of news for audiences, both today and in the years to come.

To set the foundation for this discussion, the chapter first outlines how audience research has attempted to understand the relationships people have with journalism by measuring public preferences and behaviours through quantification, and how qualitative approaches are deployed to gauge sensemaking practices and feelings associated with news use. It then considers what this means for journalism's relationship with democracy, and how the contexts of digital citizenship potentially disrupt previous discourses about news as well as audience engagement with informational flows. Taken together, these sections demonstrate that journalism is only ever one part of the social world, and not necessarily a privileged one in terms of civic engagement around public affairs.

Quantified News Audiences – Journalism and the measurable public

The past couple decades have seen several publicly available, regularly administered surveys attempt to capture public sentiment around the news industry and compare longitudinal tendencies. Among the most prominent is the multi-country 'Reuters Digital News Report', which first appeared in 2012 with comparative data on five countries, increasing to 46 over the course of a decade, including a growing number of insights from the non-Western world. Its emergence follows earlier efforts of the annual US-focused 'State of the News Media', first appearing in 2004, and the EU-administered 'Eurobarometer' survey, which has been asking a varying number of questions about media use since 1970.

Although focus diverges from survey-to-survey, year-to-year, certain questions are typically posed to news audiences in these sorts of treatments. One of the more prominent themes is trust – trust in journalism as an institution, trust in different types of media, trust in particular outlets, and so forth. The prominence and prevalence of such questions reflects the common sentiment that “trust in media is seen as the lifeblood of journalism's role in and contribution to people's sense making” (Brants, 2012: 17), given the need for the public to have a seemingly independent institution to do knowledge work we are simply unable to do, in order to reliably, credibly, and responsibly unravel the complexities of politics and society. Large scale surveys, like those mentioned above, have as a central mandate trying to gauge to how citizens (usually of a given nation) think journalism is doing in this respect, with attitudinal questions around trust being asked to operationalize and aggregate the particular sentiments of individuals into broader public opinion.

As Coleman and Ross (2010) note, the development of opinion polling attempts to make the public measurable rather than autonomous, definitive rather than amorphous. Surveys of public attitudes toward news and journalism can thus be seen as an extension of the longstanding sociopolitical project of rendering diverse and potentially unmanageable citizens as countable –

and thus hopefully governable – publics within the nation state. We commonly refer to this as statistics, the ‘science of the state’ (Foucault, 1991), which results in an ‘avalanche of numbers’ that supports a ‘moral science’ central to technologies of power in modern governance (Hacking, 1991). There is a whiff of this in statistics about news audiences too; what is being counted is not just how much journalism people consume and what they believe but the degree to which many citizens are prone to informational ignorance and institutional distrust – most recently exemplified in surveys and digital tracking studies of news avoidance (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020), filter bubbles and echo chambers (Fletcher et al., 2021), and fake news (Tandoc Jr et al., 2020). While figures vary extensively, what much quantitative research seems to indicate about measured news audiences is that trust in journalism as an institution has been slowly waning over the years, although large discrepancies exist between nations, and the recent COVID pandemic seems to have partially reversed this trend (Newman et al., 2021).

Other survey-based research tries to solidify other behaviours and preferences of news audiences – often termed as ‘exposure’ and ‘effects’ – such as device use and frequency, outlet and topical preference, levels of civic engagement and political affiliation, and spatiotemporal considerations, generally applying statistical analysis to uncover patterns and correlations between etc (researcher-determined) variables, often across different categories. Edgerly et al. (2018), for example, surveyed youth in the US and found four different news repertoires (i.e., cross-media patterns of consumption) amongst respondents (News avoiders; Curated news; Traditional news; and News omnivores), with increased civic participation being closely correlated with more intense engagement with journalism. In a similar study, Wolf and Schnauber (2015) focused on the question of device preference, stability of use, and sociodemographics, finding a general move amongst Germans towards mobile devices, especially amongst youth (see also Molyneaux, 2018; Westlund & Färdigh, 2015).

Underlying many these studies is the idea of comparing use with other variables, often through self-reported survey data, an idea that some scholars with a similar urge toward quantification and ‘hard data’ on audience behaviour are uneasy with. A related strand of research, with a different epistemological basis grounded more fundamentally in behavioural science, uncovers usage patterns through regression analysis of observable actions (Taneja et al., 2012) or network analysis to actions like clicking, liking, sharing, page views, and similar datafied behaviours to identify clusters of users, patterns of consumption, and overlap (Flaxman et al., 2016; Mukerjee et al., 2018). While methodological preferences differ, what survey, behavioural, and information retrieval approaches hold in common is an indication that from the ensemble of media available at a given point of time in a particular culture, people (in conjunction with their social groups) gradually combine devices, genres, and platforms into media repertoires which they routinely and habitually draw upon in different contexts. Moreover, while news users tend to cluster in groups with some shared sociodemographic characteristics, and news audiences as a whole tend to be moving to mobile devices, the sheer complexity of intensities, practices, and preferences that define digital news audiences – or perhaps more accurately, elude definition – make it clear that news use is likely far less predictable than it was in the past.

Qualified News Audiences – Journalism and the sensemaking public

The complement to the quantitative approach – often unhelpfully posited as its counterpoint – is the qualitative tradition, which focuses not on measuring the public but on trying to understand its myriad experiences. Such research tends to respond to concern and confusion about what news audiences want and find civically and personally relevant, positing that such relationships cannot be reduced to statistical analysis alone. The results make for illuminating but potentially more complex and ambiguous insights. For instance, reviewing a decade’s worth of studies of Dutch news audiences, Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink (2015) found that expressions of different ways of relating to the news spanned terms familiar from the mass media era, such as read, listen,

watch, and discuss, to newer phrases that resonate in the digital age, such as surf, scan, share, and participate.

Such diverse practices speak to the evident materiality and temporality of contemporary digital news use, although we should not assume that such considerations were absent in the analogue era – far from it, in fact, as the spatiotemporal and social significance of news use in daily life, both within the private sphere of the family home (Morley, 1986) and public sphere of mass transit and newsstands (Sheller, 2015), has long been recognized. Nonetheless, the current environment is one in which constant, mobile connectivity and social media streams (interweaving personal and news updates) afford novel opportunities for incidental exposure to public affairs through diverse media habits, which are often not centred around news (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Put another way, contemporary news consumption and the sensemaking practices around it often have less to do with journalism itself than the social relations that prefigure different forms of engagement with it (Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015), which are often untethered from any sense of civic duty and frequently anchored in sociotechnical networks and digital platforms.

Whether one should refer to this as news use, reception, or consumption is questionable in the traditional academic articulation of these terms, and is principally a matter of analytical focus, similar to that around whether we refer to people as news users, audiences, consumers, communities, publics, or citizens (Livingstone, 2005). Rather, it indicates a key scholarly point of departure: as people navigate the media ecology they live in, they regularly combine a variety of media – including but not limited to journalism – in different repertoires order to meaningfully fulfil their needs for information and diversion (Peters & Schøder, 2018). A banal but crucial understanding, then, is that people can be engaged with news even if they do not actively and regularly participate, interact, or consume it (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018). Engagement is articulated diversely between different human-to-self, human-to-human, human-to-content, human-to-machine, and machine-to-machine configurations in the digital landscape, some of which are easy to capture, but many of which are invisible, not only to news organization but even to people themselves (Steensen et al., 2020).

When audiences do engage directly with journalism, it is typically in ‘small acts of [digital] engagement’ (i.e., liking, sharing), which require relatively little investment and become democratically significant only in the aggregate (Picone et al., 2018). In addition, research recurrently reveals the importance of face-to-face communication in different everyday social settings for shaping news engagement (Couldry et al., 2007; Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015; Moe, 2020; Swart et al., 2017). In this sense, qualitative studies of news use are often defined by revealing ambiguities: news audiences tend to state they are more critical towards journalism in interviews than they are in practice (Madianou, 2009); people often use news sources they don’t prefer and prefer what they don’t use (Swart et al., 2017); and news use is often more about structuring the day or filling the ‘down times’ between activities than any particular content-based consideration (Dimmick et al., 2011). In short, news performs a host of functions in shaping people’s social fabric that have a tangential, only chaos theory-like relationship with grand visions of journalism’s democratic mandate.

Accordingly, qualitative studies alert us to something obvious but not always reflected in how we research news audiences, which is that the clearer the picture we wish to paint about people as news users, the more the results often end up, under scrutiny, lacking focus. Conversely, embracing the messiness of news audiences from the outset tends to reveal unexpected patterns the longer we look. News itself is has transformed due to new organizational forms of capital (i.e., global media platform infrastructures, van Dijck et al., 2018), new subjective possibilities for co-production (i.e., citizen witnessing, Allan, 2013), and new accelerated temporalities of communication (i.e., the ‘shrinking of the present’, Rosa, 2013) – so untangling it from these processual dynamics is challenging conceptually, to say nothing of empirically, when embracing the emic perspective of the individual news audience member. This is not to say research insights derived from emic approaches to the audience are relative or anecdotal; a common misconception

of qualitative research is that it isn't generalizable, when a more accurate scientific understanding is that qualitative research offers a systematic production of critical reflexivity necessary for knowledge development through the 'force of examples' and processes of falsification, which demonstrate the limits and contradictions of a given theoretical proposition (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

In terms of researching news audiences in the current era, this means considering the everyday practices in which news is potentially encountered, and how these build up, stabilize, and are disrupted over time (Vulpius et al., in press). Digital news flows can be envisioned "less like water running smoothly down a channel, and more like an entire terrain forming in the manner of lava spreading unevenly, bubbling up and overflowing, and melting some structures even as it hardens into other structural forms" (Sheller, 2015: 19). In such an environment – simultaneously ambient and immersive, pervasive and localized – particular types of news audience formations overlap within larger, entangled processes. Notwithstanding the entirely reasonable lure of analytics in newsrooms for reasons of profitability (for private organizations), or justification of funding mandates (for public broadcasters), and the similar widespread support for positivistic methods in academic research, qualitative research repeatedly reveals that such instruments will inevitably struggle to capture the complex interrelation between informational institutions, spatiotemporal contexts, normative assessments of news use, and emotional orientations of audiences to the news. The types of engagement that metrics capture tend to be less profound in terms of revealing how news-related practices affect people, perhaps change views and behaviours, and therefore potentially have democratic impact.

Democratic News Audiences – Journalism and digital citizenship

If we consider journalism in pre-digital era, viewed solely in terms of its potential democratic functions – as opposed to quotidian uses like weather reports, job and housing advertisements, entertainment listings, and so forth – two main roles spring to mind. The first is that, in many countries, journalistic preferences historically bore close affinity to political affiliation – journalism as a matter of solidarity (Schudson, 1999). The subscription to a particular news outlet was part of professing one's political allegiance, a practice that still exists to some extent around newspaper, television, and online brands today. A second ideal, also built upon liberal political philosophy, was the thought that being updated on the news was a fundament of informed citizenship – journalism as a matter of duty. This historical sentiment also resonates strongly today when one discusses journalism with audiences (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018; Sveningsson, 2015; Swart et al., 2017), indicating some degree of discursive continuity over time. In terms of the former, journalism as solidarity, the conduct of citizens that the institution traditionally prefigured is one aligned with processes of ritualized citizenship – demonstrating group affinity and performing political identity. In terms of the latter, journalism as duty, the conduct it prescribes is more closely aligned with liberal technologies of governance "that can address the recurrent complaint that authorities are governing too much" (Rose et al., 2006: 85) – being informed is not an institutional responsibility of government, but a self-governed expectation of citizens, which they frequently outsource to journalism. In this respect, there are parallels with the insurance industry – a largely commercial enterprise that offers numerous services for citizens to self-manage a profusion of risks, rather than expecting government will do it for them.

So what then of the digital era? Has anything changed? The first point to note is that those who say democracy is a poor unifying paradigm to analyse contemporary journalism (Broersma & Peters, 2017; Carlson et al., 2018; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Zelizer, 2013) are clearly not claiming democracy is irrelevant, as some have suggested (Ryfe, 2019). Rather, they are pointing to limitations that underlie this commonplace conceptualization, which valorizes only a small sliver of journalism – to say nothing of the broader media ecology in which citizens engage with information – that aligns with overt, capital 'P' Politics, and tends to position the news audience as a collective of rational, information-seeking individuals. Often conflating news consumption

with civic duty, improved understanding, and tolerance, such assumptions seem misguided in terms of prescribing an ahistorical, benevolent, emancipatory view of how news knowledge shapes worldviews and practices (Carlson & Peters, forthcoming). It may actually be more reasonable to assume that digital citizens enjoying a subject position aligned with certain socioeconomic or sociocultural privileges may be more inclined to participate and engage with news, sometimes in ways that are demonstrably harmful to others, than the fictive ‘average citizen’ assumed by deliberative democratic theory (Quandt, 2018). As Anderson (2021: 1925) notes, a normative vision of journalism attuned to this situation would not view journalism’s primary purpose as providing factual information to citizens, but would “seek to expose cruelty, take the side of the weak versus the strong,” and thus promote political solidarity when pain is being inflicted on marginalized groups.

In other words, understanding digital citizenship necessitates first acknowledging people as socially-situated rather than atomistic actors (Achen & Bartels, 2016), enmeshed in informational infrastructures that have commercial logics and affordances that tend to order the world in ways that subjectify users based on collective categorization (Bucher, 2018), and which tend to favour the powerful. In terms of journalism, these patterns are further reinforced discursively by longstanding sociopolitical and cultural communicative strategies deployed by news and news-like organizations (i.e., media in a broader sense) which utilize identity politics to laud users for choosing the ‘right’ outlet for news. Alongside this, many news organizations employ forms of public pedagogy and metajournalistic discourse to instruct publics on competing information providers that should, at best, be dismissed and, at worst, despised (Peters, 2009) – leading to the situation noted above, where the journalism industry as a whole comes to experience growing levels of distrust, even if preferred news and informational outlets thrive. Cultural orientations fueled by digital media systems make for a heady mix of media abundance, which has positive potential affordances in terms of rights-based democratic politics (Hintz et al., 2018) but also “facilitates staggering opportunities for dis/misinformation. Powerful actors, especially governments, intelligence services, and the military, are uniquely positioned to take advantage of networked communication to pump falsehoods into the public sphere” (Tumber & Waisbord, 2019: 16). Established and emergent media organizations are a key (also powerful) part of this new digital information ecology. It is thus interesting to reflect whether this moves us, in conceptual terms, in reverse; back towards an era of (news) media consumption epitomized over a century ago, where journalism could be seen as a practice of political solidarity, rather than the mass press ideal of the 20th century, centred around dutiful and informed citizenship.

Conclusion – News audiences, journalism, and the performance of digital citizenship

A key caveat hinted at in some of the studies of news audiences above – as well as related work into engagement on message boards, social media groups, and other fora where digital information flows and coalesces (Pilkington, 2021; Rieger et al., 2021) – is that etic notions of trust correlated with media use tend to isolate journalism from essential mediated and non-mediated processes. Alternatives to traditional professional journalism may offer greater explanatory purchase on the emic meaning making practices around digital citizenship and citizens’ engagement with public affairs. In this regard, the turn by citizenship scholars away from considering the idealized status of citizenship to its diverse manifestations and practices proves instructive for understanding news audiences as digital citizens – citizenship is performed as opposed to received (Hintz et al., 2021), meaning news use is merely one of many means for performing citizenship.

Further complexifying this picture is the rise of ambient news streams anchored in algorithmic systems that rely on big data, indicating that the ways information is encountered by different publics, its source, and associated meaning-making potentials are increasingly hard to trace. Somewhat paradoxically, in a media ecology that becomes ever-more complex, citizens as individuals and collectives feel empowered to navigate public affairs in ways that complicate

assessments of the value of autonomy versus expertise. Sensemaking practices around public affairs are not necessarily outsourced to journalism as an institution to the degree they once were, meaning its institutional status to shape the conduct of citizens may become less significant. Concurrently, the cultural status of reporting and investigating as a valuable epistemological practice remains, despite being more widely dispersed (as illustrated in discourses of digital empowerment by citizens who have ‘done their own research’). News use abuts and runs up against other digital informational flows and hybrid online/offline communicative practices, which leaves only one clear, though somewhat unsettling takeaway from this chapter for future research: understanding digital news audiences in terms of their relation to democratic citizenship means recognizing journalism is only ever one part of the social world, and not necessarily a privileged one in terms of civic engagement and understanding public affairs.

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