

Following the numbers or following the gut feeling?

A typology of online journalists' use of audience analytics drawing from social, organizational and technological influences

Thematic field: Media industry and society

Abstract

Audience analytics have prompted major changes in the production and distribution of news. Before their widespread use, most journalists did not pay much attention to their audiences and news selection was based on professional norms or peers. With the emergence of audience analytics and new competitors in the journalistic field as well as in advertising the attention of journalist is often directed towards metrics that are believed to reflect the interests of the audience. With their growing importance the conflict between audience analytics and journalistic selection criteria arises: More specifically, the use of audience analytics to achieve the managerial goal of addressing the largest possible audience gets in the way of journalistic ideals such as informing about public policy and fulfilling a watchdog role. Consequently, scholars accuse them of infringing the purpose of journalism giving the audience only what it wants rather than what it needs. Thus, when trying to reach the largest possible audience, editors may aim for the lowest common denominator and focus on soft news with the effect of a less informed society in terms of public policy. Other scholars consider the advent of audience analytics as an opportunity to inform editorial decisions with data.

This paper tackles the issue of the heterogenous use of audience analytics in editorial offices that may account for different outcomes with respect to journalistic quality and economic success. It analyzes how technological and economic changes in news organizations affect journalists and their coverage. To this end, technological, organizational and social influences on the use of audience analytics are extracted from existing literature and utilized to identify different usage patterns and conceptualize types of journalists. These include, for instance, different journalistic backgrounds, technological know-how, market orientation and perceptions of the audience. With the objective to establish distinguishable types of journalists while keeping them as realistic as possible, the typology reflects ideal types informed by organizational and technological influences. It distinguishes eight types ranging from audience analytics experts with a high degree of reflection and simple followers with little expertise to reluctant and ignorant journalists. Using this typology, an editorial office can be characterized by the relationship of the different types of journalists and who is in charge of editorial decisions. This sheds light on potential conflicts in editorial offices where the power of audience analytics is weighed against professional norms.

From a managerial perspective, this typology can help to account for different types and usage patterns when implementing (new) audience analytics and anticipate conflicts in the editorial office. It can also support managers in providing different types of journalists with what they need to use audience analytics for their own purpose. Furthermore, this paper informs future research by pointing to the role of the mode in which audience analytics are transmitted to journalists. It also enables a more nuanced view on the use of audience analytics concentrating on the circumstances under which they can be assigned to organizational and editorial goals.

Keywords: journalism, audience analytics, media organizations, commercialization