

How audience data is shaping Canadian journalism

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With media conglomerates [slashing jobs, programs](#) and [publications](#) and growing [news avoidance and perceived issues of trust](#) in journalism, finding ways to catch, engage and retain an audience has become a

matter of survival for those in the news business.

There's been a big shift in how journalists consider their audiences in newsrooms. That shift is largely due to [audience data](#)—lots of audience data.

Journalists experience almost constant feedback about the content they create. It doesn't matter if they're working online, in television, radio or traditional print. They're delivering to multiple platforms and every day they're exposed to [quantitative data](#)—metrics that measure audience behavior on websites and social media—and qualitative data—such as audience comments on social media.

As one television journalist told us: "You know exactly how far someone scrolls down a page, how many seconds they're spending on a page, what device you're using, we know so much about our audience, just like Google knows about our audience."

But what impact does all of this data have on how journalists perceive their audiences and the content they publish? That's what Colette Brin of Laval University, Stuart Duncan from Toronto Metropolitan University and I explore in a [newly published paper](#) examining audience-oriented journalism.

Audience-oriented journalism

In basic terms, audience-oriented journalism involves three specific roles:

- Infotainment—journalism that uses narrative strategies and style that align with more entertainment-based media;
- Civic—journalism that focuses on educating citizens on their rights or advocating for their demands; and

- Service—news reports that promote products or help you solve everyday problems.

We [analyzed more than 3,700 stories](#) from 2020, surveyed 133 journalists in 2020 and 2021 and interviewed 13 journalists during the same time period. The [news organizations](#) we studied were the Toronto Star, Globe and Mail, National Post, CTV, Global News, La Presse, HuffPost Canada, TVA and CBC/Radio-Canada. Having worked in newsrooms ourselves, we were able to contextualize our results through our own experiences.

We found audience data has a big impact on practice in Canadian newsrooms. At the now defunct HuffPost Canada, for example, the audience was segmented into specific "types" of readers based on audience data. As one editor described, "We do X, Y and Z for this type of story for this type of person." In essence, how a story was written depended on who it was being written for.

Reporters were also aware of the importance of audience data from a business perspective. As noted by one newspaper reporter:

"This is all algorithm stuff that I don't entirely understand, but it does help the eggheads figure out how to customize your user experience when you go to the website. So it's showing you stuff you're interested in much the same way of Facebook and Twitter, which keeps people engaged with your website, which means more subscribers, which means I get to stay gainfully employed."

Responses to our survey supported the importance of audience data in the selection, development and promotion of stories and in measuring their value. Based on [other studies](#), we also know that journalists can lowball [the importance of data](#) in making editorial decisions, so there could be even greater impact than we measured.

Infotainment and sensationalism

There is frequent critique that the ubiquity of data in newsrooms has resulted in a push for clickbait or more sensationalized stories that boost traffic at the expense of more newsworthy reportage—and [sometimes that happens](#).

Sensationalism is part of infotainment. However, our content analysis revealed that a lot of what qualifies as infotainment in Canadian journalism involves descriptive language and sharing relevant, personal details about the subject being written about. Done appropriately this can give greater nuance and context to a story.

As well, infotainment in Canada is often combined with the "educator" part of the civic role. For example, one editor told us how they look to find the "more fun" (infotainment) aspect of a story that can give a "point of entry" to inform the public about things like rules of Parliament.

The civic and service roles are also often performed together, with news you can use that might impact someone's understanding of political processes or stories about their rights as citizens.

Nearly 80 percent of the stories we sampled had at least one audience-oriented role present, and almost 40 percent had more than one. This provides strong evidence that audiences are top of mind in newsrooms.

Our conversations also revealed that even if newsrooms aren't always able to [accurately interpret](#) what the audience wants, they're spending a lot of time and resources trying to do so.

Importance of social media

Most reporters we talked to used social media—whether they wanted to or not—because they recognized it as an important tool to reach audiences, find sources and promote their work. More than 78 percent of the journalists surveyed agreed it was an important tool to connect with audiences.

However, reporters also noted the downsides of [social media](#), particularly related to political polarization. One newspaper reporter said,

"While it provides a venue to find an audience, which is what we absolutely need to do, it has also created a forum with which to attack journalists and attack the free press."

That hostile environment resulted in another reporter being careful about her choice of words so she could reach a wider audience:

"I deliberately go out of my way to try to reach the people who are trying to ignore me. Like, that's the target audience as you write. So you're avoiding unnecessary use of terms that get spun into shit, not because we don't deserve to use those terms ... but because what you're actually attempting to do is to reach those people."

Even if people might not trust news, or a certain media organization, there is evidence to show they can still recognize and appreciate [quality journalism](#).

Canadian journalists have to find ways to understand and reach an audience that may not always want to listen. They're trying hard to do so. Whether it works, and the lasting impact of their efforts on journalistic standards, remains to be seen.

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