

Audience editors: between metrics and journalistic routines

Editores de audiencias: entre las métricas y las rutinas periodísticas

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Abstract

Consumption measurement systems have become ubiquitous and disruptive in the news industry and in the work routines of its journalists. Faced with a new panorama of segmentation and content specialization, added to the appearance of a more active figure of the participative user; digital portals demand greater versatility and technological training. Based on this reality, this research focuses on the figure of audience editors, which are relatively new actors in the newsrooms of Argentine digital portals. We perform a qualitative analysis. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with audience editors from the main national digital portals, the text sets out different objectives. The first is to analyze the modifications in journalistic work routines based on the use of metrics and different measurement techniques that impact newsworthiness criteria and the decisions about the place of certain news in the media's home page. Secondly, to account for the management strategies promoted by these media, the role of Google as information gatekeeping and the role of audiences. Finally, the article proposes a reflection aimed at transcending marketing and public opinion studies to try to elucidate the ways in which the figure of the audience editor articulates the tensions between content, metrics, and journalistic practices.

Keywords

Newsrooms, metrics, audiences, news, journalists, editors, Google, contents.

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Resumen

Los sistemas de mediciones de consumos se han vuelto omnipresentes y disruptivos en la industria de las noticias y en las rutinas de trabajo de sus periodistas. Ante un nuevo panorama de segmentación y especialización de contenidos, sumado a la aparición de una figura más activa del usuario participativo, los portales digitales demandan mayor versatilidad y formación tecnológica. A través de entrevistas en profundidad semiestructuradas con editores de audiencias de los principales portales digitales nacionales, el texto se propone distintos objetivos. En primer lugar, indagar sobre las modificaciones en las rutinas de trabajo periodísticas a partir del uso de métricas. En segundo lugar, dar cuenta de las estrategias de gestión promovidas por estos medios, y el rol de Google como *gatekeeping* de la información. Por último, el artículo propone una reflexión orientada a trascender los estudios de marketing y opinión pública para intentar dilucidar los modos en que la figura del editor de audiencias articula las tensiones entre contenidos, métricas y prácticas periodísticas. Los resultados muestran que las métricas impactan en los criterios de noticiabilidad, en los contenidos y en la sinergia de las redacciones, aunque se evidencian tensiones y resistencias entre los periodistas y los editores de audiencias. Además Google es un actor crucial que promueve distintas estrategias con en el fin de lograr un lugar privilegiado en los resultados de búsquedas.

Palabras clave

Redacciones, métricas, audiencias, noticias, periodistas, editores, Google, contenidos.

Introduction¹

This article explores the new professional profiles in journalistic newsrooms from the changes promoted by the digital environment. Literature shows that systems for measuring consumption have become ubiquitous and disruptive in the news industry and in the work routines of their journalists. Faced with a new landscape of segmentation and specialization of content, coupled with the emergence of a more active figure of the participatory user, digital portals demand more versatility and technological training. Names emerge to designate these actors: analyst and web designer, *community manager*, videoweb editor, multimedia and social media editor, *programmer*

1 I appreciate the suggestions and comments of the anonymous evaluators that improved the argumentation and quality of this article.

journalist, engagement editor, digital analyst, audience editor, etc. (Assmann and Diakopoulos, 2017). With audience editors also arise other trades such as *producers*, which are those that suggest the use of certain keywords in titles guided by trends in Google and social networks (Flores-Vivar, 2014).

These professionals perform different types of tasks and news companies are adapting through digital training and training processes. In this article we will focus on audience editors. In general, the functions consist of following users' behaviors, observing their preferences (not only in terms of content, but also in their ways of reading), and promoting journalists to write new articles in relation to the trends. This work is significant within the newsrooms because, on the one hand, it interacts with journalists who generate content and, on the other hand, it processes personal data of users to gain publicity. In this context, this article addresses different dimensions related to this new actor in journalistic editions, such as their work routines, the measurement tools they use, the processes of selection and publication of news from the use of metrics and the role of Google and social networks as filters against the informative content that reaches audiences.

Literature review

Newsrooms have undergone considerable changes in their organization, having an impact on the content they present to the public. The influence of technological factors along with the economic cuts that journalistic companies adopted converge in a new scenario. The changes include the emergence of new professional profiles, the reduction of costs by simplifying the work phases, the flexibility of the workforce and the disqualification of some trades displaced by stored information (Becerra, 2019; Retegui, 2014). At present, it is common for newsrooms to have large monitors where both journalists and editors can see in real time the clicks of audiences, and therefore know the impact of their journalistic notes.

Research has shown the distance between the preferences of journalists and users (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2013), and the need to generate traffic that prioritizes the interests of audiences (MacGregor, 2007; Van-Dalen, 2012). In fact, the literature on the field of journalism has focused in recent years on audiences, due to the visibility they acquired in the forms of consumption of the new global media ecosystem (Nelson, 2019; Fürst, 2020). Other studies dis-

cuss measurement models, while the number of views of a news story should not be translated as the number of readings, nor as the news that readers value most (Masip, 2016; Vesnić-Alujević and Murru, 2016). Also, on the ways in which metrics and specifically audience clicks affect journalistic decisions (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Welbers *et al.*, 2016). Thus, some research shows that audience measurements are conditioning to select topics and rotate news from the home (Anderson, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2014; Vu, 2014; Fürst, 2020), but there is also some resistance from publishers to understand the influence of metrics in their editorial decisions (Welbers *et al.*, 2016). On the other hand, analyzes of the political economy of communication show that journalistic companies demand multi-purpose professionals who are able to manage content systems, algorithms (Diakopoulos, 2015), audiences or big data (Tandoc, 2014).

After a review of the main discussions in the literature, the questions that will guide this article are: How do metrics affect journalistic routines? Do they affect content? What tensions are evident between audience editors and journalistic practices? What is Google's role in this framework? How do audience editors try to better position themselves in search results?

Materials and methods

Based on this panorama and in order to know more deeply these new actors, we use the interview as a qualitative technique, based on the theoretical budgets proposed by Vasilachis de Gialdino (2006) and Marradi *et al.* (2007). In that sense, and in order to achieve a complete analysis of the work of these new profiles, we conducted six interviews with audience editors working in the main digital portals of Argentina: Infobae, Clarín, La Nación, Profile and El Cronista Comercial. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted based on a guide that we developed after surveying the local and international literature on the subject. First, the training of audience editors and their professional profile within digital newsrooms were investigated. Another central topic was the use of audience measurement tools, frequency, social conversation and the ways in which they use that information in conjunction with journalists and the area of social networks and marketing of companies. In relation to the knowledge of the audiences, questions were asked about access to sociodemographic characteristics and how these data were used. The questionnaire also included questions about Google's place

in this ecosystem and its role as a *gatekeeper* of information reaching audiences. Discussions covered topics such as training, work routines, the relevance of their work in recent years, and relationships with other actors in the newsroom, such as journalists or those in charge of the advertising sector.

The interviews were conducted and recorded using the Meet platform between late 2021 and early 2022. The interviews were conducted for purposes related to the research, so the anonymity of the interviewees is maintained, although the medium for which they already work is evident, which we consider to be an important dimension in the analysis.

Results

Working routines of audience editors

The figure of the audience editor has become pivotal in the newsrooms. Their job is to track audience preferences, measure clicks, identify trends, and engage new readers. These actors are responsible for increasing overall editorial content traffic and identifying current issues likely to attract traffic, through search engine optimization (SEO). They identify search terms and topics and recommend to colleagues which ones should be included in their notes (Schlesinger and Doyle, 2015; Tandoc and Vos, 2016, Fürst, 2020).

This is how different testimonies explain it:

I'm an Audience Editor. That means being in charge of a team that makes content for different channels, specifically to maximize the internal traffic of the *Chronicler* with its most loyal users and then the *search* traffic or social media traffic (...). In the morning I give the metrics and do a summary of what happened the previous day, a post mortem of the notes that worked, the notes that did not work so well; what our loyal reader read, what our loyal reader did not read; a study of more page views; which of all the percentage of page views came from which channel and then I do a whole survey in the morning of which notes have higher potential during the day and which channel is better to upload them. (Audience Editor, *The Commercial Chronicler*)

The testimonies show the characteristics of the work. These actors move between the metrics and the interests of journalists, while the results of these actions impact the sales or marketing area:

We have two functions, we produce specific content and in turn alert the newsroom to topics that are going around, either to do it or deepen on it. (audience editor, La Nación)

Audiences are handled in such a way as to provide real-time information, add tools for writing, and also determine the content that generates more traffic on the site. (audience editor, Infobae)

A relevant issue that emerges from the interviews is the professional path they took to fill these positions within the newsrooms. Although most of them were trained as journalists, and had previous experience from that place, these are profiles that have made a journey in their training linked to new technologies.

In my case, I worked for 15 years in Olé dedicated only to sports journalism, then I had a step for Very, which is also a daily of the group and already five years ago I am in Clarín. I was as head of sports and then the opportunity arose... it became the decision to give much more prominence to what SEO is. (Audience editor, Clarín)

I'm a paper journalist and I had to evolve with all this and learned practically alone and then the courses started, but basically these are roles that you learn from the experience of others because there is no other and you are applying it in different media, when I went through Infobae it was also because it was not done. You learn and apply and you adapt to the needs of each newsroom. (audience editor, Clarín)

An amateur professionalization is observed: a little by interest, another by incentive or need of companies, the knowledge about the metrics of these actors advanced hand in hand with changes in the media:

Since I already had a background of knowledge about digital strategy, web strategy, I applied it a lot in IT, quite successfully and then I was sort of discovered there, in quotation marks, and led to do the same in IT in the newspaper, then today I keep my original title which is the Editor in Technology in the *Chronicler* but now I am also Audience Editor, which implies being in charge of a team that makes content designed for different channels, specifically for two or three things: one, to maximize high-impact traffic in different channels. (Audience Editor, *The Commercial Chronicler*)

Interviews show that these are classic trajectories linked to journalistic training, and then, for some reason, they moved towards metrics for a personal interest. Similarly, their work teams are heterogeneous, and while there are journalists, there are also specialists in *big data*, technology and even *influencers* and *community managers*.

The people who work with me on metrics aren't journalists, they're specialists on metrics, on audiences. These people specialize in data. What I do as a journalist is to translate that information to somehow work or ask for certain information that I think can be valuable for the newsroom. (audience editor, Infobae)

I'm in charge of the SEO team, which is seven people composed of journalists and some people with some profile a little more technical, but technical in terms that they manage a lot of data, make a search, draw conclusions based on past searches. (audience editor, Clarín)

In summary, the main changes in the work organization and in the productive routines in recent years account for new professional profiles of newsrooms, among which are audience editors. The use of audience metrics is becoming an integral part of journalists' daily work. Metrics data is also reviewed regularly at meetings or sent via email to the entire newsroom. In addition to monitoring audience metrics, journalists are increasingly expected to promote their articles on social media and amass followers to increase traffic figures (Agarwal and Barthel, 2015; Chadha and Wells, 2016; Tandoc and Vos, 2016). These changes must be analyzed by the media sector, evidencing some naturalization in the multitasking journalist, which impacts both the contents and the audiences.

Measuring tools and user profiles

The new needs of the journalistic market require an in-depth knowledge of the audience and for this they use different IT tools that offer real-time user data. This model, which finds its background in ratings and minute-by-minute television, promotes clear competition among portals, and allows to know what news are more and less read, as well as the titles that attract the most attention. Studies such as those of OJD, EGM or Kantar Media now coexist with new web analytics tools that track audience behavior in real time,

providing information about page views or the average duration that users remain on the site (Cherubini and Nielsen, 2016).

The tools they use most in their daily tasks are Google Analytics, Chartbeat, which provide real-time data of website visitors, their preferences and usage behaviors. These tools are joined by those of third-party platforms that, like Facebook, are able to offer 98 indicators on the user profile that accesses their content (Dewey, 2016). There is a progressive reduction of the audience to quantitative data, which affects both the daily work of journalists and editors within newsrooms.

We have different measurement tools that all newspapers in general use and that most portals in Argentina use to compete with each other, even to generate actions of advertising guidelines and so on. We use Google Analytics, we use Chartbeat, ComScore, My Metrics which are different tools to measure behaviors and also to measure the type of reader we have, so, for the audience it is very important, it is the essence of what it does. (Audience Editor, The Commercial Chronicler)

The length of time spent on the content and the number of followers is the pillars of online loyalty. The new *engagement* equation involves multiplying the reading time, viewing, or listening of content by the return frequency and divided among all distribution platforms (mobile, web, etc.) (Rodríguez-Vázquez et al., 2018).

Audience editors consulted distinguish between two types of audiences: “faithful” and “swallows.” The so-called “faithful” are those that follow the brand of the medium and that directly enter the portal when they want to inform themselves, while the “swallows” are those that interested in some subject, problem or news enter a search engine that eventually takes them to the news portal. The challenge for media companies is to transform these occasional audiences into loyal ones. This is how Clarín’s audience editor explains it:

Now, there is a huge universe. In the past there were 80 million, where most of the people come, the guy who goes through Google... that person is another type of consumer because it can be more swallow that goes looking for something particular and finds in Clarín the answer, but you don’t have... there already changes the composition a little and it is more difficult also to have it then forces you to offer a content for the whole spectrum.

Finally, another challenge for some portals is to add subscribers. In Argentina, some media such as Clarín and La Nación also maintain paid walls,

so the portal only allows the free viewing of up to five news items and if a user wants to see more, they must subscribe to the medium. As summarized by the hearing editor of *El Cronista Comercial*:

Today you have to think about the fan... there are all types of people: those who visit you two or three times a month and then the subscriber, but you have to think about everything. Because the one who moves the needle of the numbers would be like the anonymous one, and the one who moves the numbers in terms of money, which is what you need, is the one who subscribes, but you need everything...

In short, audience editors are faced with different types of users, and they apply different strategies for each group. On the one hand, loyal readers or subscribers are offered the “usual” content, and a reading contract is maintained that guarantees synergy between the journalistic company and the audiences. On the other hand, for swallows, different tactics are implemented in order to make them become faithful or subscribers. Tracking the preferences of news topics is key in the proposal made by the metrics which aim that users enter directly to the portal site the next time they want to inform themselves.

Who defines the agendas today?

Linked to the work processes of journalists is the selection and hierarchization of information, as well as the application of the news criteria. Wolf (1991) defines newsworthiness as “the set of elements through which the information apparatus controls and manages the number and type of events from which it selects the news” (p. 222). The author asks himself the following question: “What events are considered sufficiently interesting, significant, relevant, to be transformed into news?” (p. 222). The first studies in the field coined the concept of *gatekeeping* (care of the door or access) to account for the irregular way in which information circulates and is subject to instances that delay or “block” them at some point in the communication chain. Hence, *gatekeeping* works between the content published in newspapers or news and the process of filtering information.

In any selection process, general criteria about what is news are involved, but also, the ability of journalists and editors to install topics in the media agenda comes into play. In that sense, as early as 1979 Golding and Elliott

evidenced the importance of what they defined as values/news, i.e., those “criteria for selecting the elements worthy of being included in the final product from the material available in the drafting” (p. 114). Values/news work in the newsrooms as reference guides that allow emphasizing in some events, mitigating others and highlighting those that interest the public to read in a first order of priorities (Arrueta, 2010).

Thus, Reese and Shoemaker (2016) distinguish five levels that affect, both from the micro and the macro, the selection of information. One of the levels focuses on the individual factors of the journalist such as their beliefs, experiences and training. Another relates to journalistic routines and organizations within newsrooms that also influence decisions about what events to cover and what not, for example. The third level is the most macro linked to the pressures of organizations, the ownership structure of the medium and its policies. The extra media factors represent the fourth level (sources, advertising, competition, etc.). The fifth level concerns the political ideology of the medium.

This proposed hierarchy of influences was intended for the traditional media model, with journalists who had a marked distance from their audiences. Nowadays, technological advances allow journalists to easily know who their audiences are, what news they prefer, and even what topics of the media agenda they comment on on social networks. Many portals also receive traffic reports of audiences on the web every day. Thus, audiences have become important actors that, as shown by different works, have an impact on editorial decisions and therefore also act as gatekeepers of information.

One of the topics of debate in the literature is the ways in which audiences affect the definition of a note. Thus, some research shows that the increase of metrics on an article affects the thematic preferences of journalistic work (Anderson, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2014; Vu, 2014). For example, Welbers *et al.* (2016), note that stories from news articles at the top of the portal that were “most viewed” were more likely to receive attention in subsequent newspaper stories. The study, which combined content analysis with interviews, showed that page views influenced the journalistic selection of topics, but that editors predominantly denied such influence.

I think reactions are taking up more and more space. Not only what the journalist thinks is important, the famous agenda, but also what we can see that the reader thinks is important. So, without turning our backs on who we are, without turning our backs on traditional agenda journalism, we are increasingly

trying to make content that suits the tastes and consumption of our audiences, which is not one, but several. (Audience Editor, The Commercial Chricler)

The journalistic team knows and looks at the metrics all the time. I do a deeper analysis of some cases, so that I can download some more complex information that people are not looking at in realtime. I see what it measures and based on what it measures I can make another note, because it is the moment when people look for more information. Your work is to look at numbers in realtime, that's how the whole newsroom works. We have another work dynamic. (audience editor, Infobae)

The role of *gatekeeping* has always been assigned to journalists, but with technological changes, audiences play an increasingly important role in editorial decision-making.

The routines changed undoubtedly. It changed what you know about the hearing today. You have to manage emotions much more as a professional, this monitoring of the audience also takes to a kind of minute-by-minute. While the media did not lose the power of the agenda setting, there's now a fact that is much more conversational, and while the scoop still plays a vital role, because it's the basic input of a journalist's ego, the scoop today basically serves you to get ahead of the conversation. (audience editor, La Nación)

Another thing that changed for me are three basic concepts. I call it: audiences-timing-platform. What's happening now is that you're aware all the time that you write for an audience, that you write with a timing. (audience editor, La Nación)

The testimonies show that metrics today have a considerable impact on the criteria of newsworthiness and the preferences of audiences are considered in the process of constructing the news. However, the editors consulted, while recognizing this scenario, warn that there are limits and that the incidence is often lower.

You also don't have to do everything that audiences ask you to do, otherwise you become a minute-by-minute rating. You're Tinelli. (Audience Editor, The Commercial Chricler)

I don't tell journalists what to write about, instead I give them some tools for a real-time update of content that could be made. I used to do it manually, now it's automated. I emailed them earlier in the day with recommendations,

and then we were able to automate that. But I don't say 'write this note', but I say 'this is yielding'. Then everyone does what he/she wants, but I warn them what is yielding. (audience editor, Infobae)

Clearly, there is some tension in newsrooms when it comes to considering audience preferences in news construction. While classic newswire criteria persist, audience preferences are now added as one more issue to consider in the selection process. In the next section we will focus on the role of search engines as information leakers.

The role of Google

In recent years the Internet giant has grown and dominated the market altogether. Today, Google has an impact on the ranking and visibility of news by rewarding, according to interviews, "quality" information. At the same time, it now offers its own news round-up, which for some newspaper companies represents unfair competition. The testimonies show another relevant actor in the tasks of selecting the information that reaches the "swallows" audiences: search engines in general and Google in particular. For example, an audience editor from La Nación website explains:

Google was crucial in the transformation. I poetically call it the kiosk of our era of work. If you're not on Google, you're not at the newspaper stop. Then there's another debate about whether or not it's the algorithm that has to set your agenda, that's another debate. But there are certain rules. In the past, the rule was that news ended at 19:30 because the note had to enter a printing plant. That conditioning seemed natural to us. The thing is that we had to adapt to optimization. (audience editor, La Nación).

Google is the main source of traffic, both in *search* and in SEO, because as you better profile in SEO, you better appear in Google searches. And then on the trends, you have to be aware of that, but you also don't have to be the order of the day because this is migrating, let's say. That's when the newsroom also has to be looking at what's being talked about, not just being tied to what's going on at Google (...) Google may be a mentor, but I don't consider it vital. It's useful if you're looking for a little more guidance, about where to go. I don't think a newsroom has to be 100 percent behind Google's trends. (audience editor, Infobae)

In the international literature, research shows the debate that exists in academia about the place of Google and Google News in the digital news environment. One of the discussions is that, by offering personalized content geared toward individual users' interests, platforms like Google are supposed to reduce news diversity and thus lead to partial information blindness (i.e., filter bubbles). Based on this hypothesis, Haim *et al.* (2017) conducted two exploratory studies to test the effect of implicit and explicit personalization on the content and diversity of Google News sources. The conclusions point out that "except for the small effects of implicit personalization on content diversity, we found no support for the filter bubble hypothesis" (p. 334). However, the authors note a general bias as Google News overrepresents certain media and underrepresents others.

On the other hand, there is growing concern about the extent to which algorithmic personalization limits people's exposure to various viewpoints, thereby creating "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers." Research on the personalization of web searches accounts for ranking based on the location of results. In a recent paper, Huyen *et al.* (2019), investigated whether web search results are customized based on the user's browsing history, which can be deduced by search engines. Specifically, they developed a "sock puppet" auditing system in which a couple of new browser profiles first visit websites that reflect divergent political discourses, and second, run identical politically-oriented searches on Google News. When comparing the search results returned by Google News for the different browser profiles trained, they observed on the platform a statistically significant personalization that tends to reinforce polarization.

Finally, an interesting debate is whether redactions should adapt to Google's parameters in order to be prioritized in searches or not. The editors interviewed agreed that the rules are unclear and that while Google rewards quality content at the same time, it also appears as a competitor generating its own news:

Google's formula ends up being like Coke's: nobody tells you. But there are certain parameters that should be met, obviously as long as it does not alter what journalism is, i.e., if you go against that does not serve you, but there are certain issues that we were getting used to and that we try to work to capture traffic by Google, but Google has a particularity: it is half contradictory because it ends up being the very competence of the media, i.e., there is a lot of information in Google that you Google and you get the answer in the first search result, then there is also a whole job. (audience editor, Clarín).

Google gets you a lot more out of what it gives you, but you need it to be able to compete, so there are some media that in their strategy care about Google and care about social networks but are increasingly focused on expanding their product offering to their most loyal reader or making an analysis of what sporadic readers consume and what they consider to be valuable on their page. (Audience Editor, *The Commercial Chronicler*)

For their part, Fischer *et al.* (2020), show that unless consumers specifically search for topics of local interest, national media dominate the search results. Characteristics related to local supply and demand, such as the number of local media outlets and the demographics associated with their consumption, are not related to the likelihood of finding a local news outlet. The findings imply that the platforms may be diverting web traffic away from local news.

Discussion and conclusions

This article presents an overview of the ways in which new professional profiles in newsrooms are adapted to the digital environment. From the side of journalistic companies, versatile professionals are required who are able to manage content systems, metrics, audiences or big data. These changes must be analyzed in the light of the precarious work experienced by the media sector, evidencing some naturalization in the multitasking journalist, which impacts both the contents and the audiences.

Some of the debates presented in this article are centered on the tensions established between journalists and audience editors in relation to the impact that metrics have on news construction. Metrics and algorithms play a key role and mediate between editorial decisions and journalists' tasks. The paper shows that metrics affect both content definition and journalistic routines and that there are tensions and limits in the constant negotiations between audience editors and journalists.

Another point to consider is that audience editors face a multiplicity of audiences (faithful, swallows, etc.) and they apply different strategies for each group. The monitoring of the preferences of news topics is key in the proposals of journalistic content and also in the reception of audiences. These practices affect the configuration of the agenda promoting changes in information professionals (Anderson, 2011). The challenge is focused on striking a balance between journalists' proposals, media agenda and audience clicks.

Finally, we question the relevant role of Google as a news leaker. Audience editors maintain different tactics to try to win in the search engine hierarchy, although as they state “they don’t know for sure what the formula is.” This actor represents a concern in journalistic companies and its role is increasingly important as a guide in the consumption of information. In short, it is a scenario in constant transformation where artificial intelligence has a key role in the generation of journalistic content.

Future work will have to investigate how Google influences the preferences of audiences and how they negotiate with metrics in their informative diets.

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