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Role Orientations and Audience Metrics in Newsrooms: An Examination of Journalistic Perceptions and their Drivers

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ABSTRACT

This survey of journalists, editors, and managers working for news organizations in the United States explores the perceived importance of citizen and consumer role orientations among newsworkers. It then examines how useful these professionals perceive particular audience metrics to be in fulfilling those roles orientations. This examination takes into account the contextual factors that may influence those perceptions at the individual and organizational levels. We find that newsworkers perceive some audience metrics more useful than others and generally perceive them to be more useful for helping them enact a consumer role orientation that has been historically deemed to be of lesser import. However, these perceptions vary across organizational contexts, and particularly according to the newsworker's position within an editorial hierarchy. These findings contribute to the literatures that argue that quantified audiences are an important part of role orientation formation.

KEYWORDS

Analytics; citizens; consumers; editors; journalism; metrics; roles; survey

Introduction

The conceptions, perceptions, enactments, and performances of journalistic roles have been of great interest to scholars for decades (see Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2016; Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit 2017). From source transmitters and information gatekeepers (Gieber and Johnson 1961) to public agenda setters, civic watchdogs, and purveyors of infotainment (Mellado 2015) to agents of change and public advocacy (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018), newsworkers have been cast in, and imagined in, a multitude of roles within a society. These roles, and the ways in which scholars reflect on them, change over time as the profession of journalism evolves in response to cultural shifts, new technological affordances, and changing audience expectations. Examining shifts in role conceptions helps scholars understand why newsworkers function as they do professionally and personally while anticipating the resulting impacts on news production processes (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 2018). Even when the presumed linkages between role orientations and role performance don't materialize—that is, how

newswriters think about their work is not always reflected in how they actually do their work (Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2016)—those notions give meaning to their labor and credence to their claims to legitimacy and authority within the realm of collecting and disseminating facts (Carlson 2017).

In evaluating recent evolutions of role orientations, a central discussion point is the extent to which newswriters should take audience preferences into account (Welbers et al. 2016). The growing focus on applying technologies to better understand news audiences is a long-term trend. For example, when blogs began to emerge as outlets for news content, journalists made more concerted efforts to invite audiences into the news process (Singer 2005). And when journalists started tweeting, they sought to operate with more transparency and open real-time dialogues with audiences (Hermida 2013). Such professional changes have not always been smooth, and have occasionally met blowback from newswriters resistant to change or concerned about diminishing authoritative control over the news (Sylvie 2018).

Audience metrics—quantified and aggregated measures of audience preferences and behaviors generated by passive, unobtrusive data collection, and processing systems (Zamith 2018)—offer a noteworthy example of the challenges associated with technological adaptation. The incorporation of audience metrics into news production processes, which continues to rapidly evolve as manifestations of what “counts” and the like continually change (Nelson 2018), represents a fruitful opportunity for examining the relationships between technological innovation and perceived role orientations as well as the factors that impact those relationships.

Scholars have found that newswriters hold mixed perceptions of audience metrics and use them in different ways to suit their objectives (see Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018; Zamith, Belair-Gagnon, and Lewis, forthcoming). These published findings indicate that newswriters value metrics in decision-making but remain unsure of how to balance them with journalistic intuition (Zamith 2018). However, that scholarship devotes limited attention to how those perceptions and objectives implicate role orientations (cf. Hanusch and Tandoc 2019; Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2016). These studies also offer limited examinations of the individual and organizational factors that might affect those role orientations.

This study considers those research gaps in a survey of journalists, editors, and managers working for news organizations in the United States. First, it examines the perceived importance of citizen and consumer role orientations (i.e., focusing on providing news that people *need* to know vs. producing news that people *want* to know; see Hanusch and Tandoc 2019) among newswriters and then evaluates how useful newswriters perceive audience metrics to be in fulfilling those roles. Next, it assesses the contextual factors that may influence those perceptions at the individual and organizational levels. Finally, it moves away from a singular, generalized notion of audience metrics and examines the perceived usefulness of four metrics often mentioned at the intersection of audience metrics and journalism.

This study finds that newswriters perceive some audience metrics as being more useful than others, yet metrics are generally understood to be most useful for helping newswriters enact a consumer role orientation that has been historically deemed to be of lesser import. However, such perceptions continue to vary across organizational

contexts (see also Hallin and Mellado 2018) and, crucially, by the newsworker's position within an editorial hierarchy. This leads to a broader intervention to the literature that positions constructed, quantified audiences as an important element within the formation of role orientations and underscores the need to segment metrics by type (e.g., page view vs. social sharing) and newsworkers by their position within the newsroom (i.e., managers vs. non-managers). In doing so, this article helps unpack the role of audience metrics in reshaping important aspects of journalistic identities.

Literature Review

Journalistic Role Orientations

Journalistic roles refer to “structures of meaning that are discursively created, perpetuated, and contested” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 120) to define journalism's institutional identity and position within society. This perspective is rooted in institutional theory, wherein journalism is viewed as being governed by a generally shared set of norms and informal rules that specify the appropriate and right ways of doing journalism through cultural consensus. As such, journalistic roles serve as “the discursive articulation and enactment of journalism's identity as a social institution” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 120).

Journalistic roles can be crucial antecedents to journalistic action. As Ryfe (2006) argues, journalistic decision-making often reflects beliefs about “what a journalist's role is, what her or his obligations are, [and] what values and commitments are appropriate” (p. 205). However, scholars have observed disconnects between what journalists say they do (or think they should do) and what they actually do (see Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2016; Raemy, Beck, and Hellmueller 2018; Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013). Thus, such a direct link cannot be taken for granted.

Nevertheless, journalistic roles—even when they manifest solely at a discursive level—matter because their construction implicates the resources granted to journalists and the notion of journalism. For example, journalistic roles can serve as a basis for articulating and legitimating claims of professional authority (Carlson 2017). Those same roles can serve as constraints to journalists as they anchor journalistic norms—or what journalists can and should do—and thereby set the parameters for what is considered acceptable practice within particular domains (Zamith, Belair-Gagnon, and Lewis, forthcoming).

Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) make an important intervention in providing a process model of journalists' institutional roles that makes an analytic distinction between *role orientations* and *role performance*. Role orientations refer to the discursive constructions of the institutional values, attitudes, and beliefs about the position of journalism within a society and ultimately the communicative ideals that journalists consciously and unconsciously reference (see also Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). Within role orientations, Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) further distinguish between *normative roles* and *cognitive roles*. Normative role orientations encompass the generalized expectations journalists believe to be desirable within a society, such as being a watchdog to hold elected officials accountable, and how those expectations should be realized by journalists (e.g., reviewing government expense filings). Those norms are then internalized

into cognitive role orientations, which refer to the institutional values, attitudes, and beliefs that particular journalists adopt through socialization processes (e.g., education and on-the-job experience). This role internalization process is selective as journalists adopt cognitive scripts that blend their understanding of normative roles with their individual objectives and their perceptions of organizational constraints. Put differently, normative roles suggest what is generally desirable to think or do in a given context, which is then filtered into the cognitive notions that offer recipes and maps for concrete action (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017).

Professional role orientations tend to be stable enough to be analyzed, described, understood, and accepted, but also dynamic and somewhat contextual as a result of their socially negotiated nature (Christians et al. 2009). It is therefore unsurprising that scholars have proposed a range of different journalistic roles. For example, Cohen (1963) distinguished between neutral and participant roles while Janowitz (1975) highlighted gatekeeper and advocate roles for newswriters. More recently, Hanitzsch (2007) conceptualized journalism culture by describing three key aspects: institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies. Hanitzsch's conceptualization has proven to be influential, with a number of studies examining journalistic culture by adopting the conceptual definitions offered in that work and using (and occasionally tweaking) operationalizations offered in subsequent work (e.g., Hanitzsch et al. 2011).

In Hanitzsch and Vos's (2017) process model, these role orientations are then translated into role performance, which reflects the behavioral translation of role orientations through *practiced roles* and *narrated roles*. Practiced role performance captures the conductible expression of role orientations through the enactment of cognitive roles via journalistic practice (i.e., doing journalism). Narrated role performance refers to the integration of the antecedent steps, which emerges from a reflection of how the journalists' role orientations are carried out in practice. That is, narrated role performance reflects the logics of role orientations, practiced roles, and the evaluations of their intersection. Those narrations are important as they feed back into the discursive construction of norms and the negotiation of personal values (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017).

Hanitzsch and Vos's (2017) model helps conceptualize different aspects of journalistic roles and how those aspects feed to and from one another. The model also affirms that while role orientations are often presumed to impact role performance (while simultaneously being shaped by it), what journalists do and what they say they do are not always in agreement (see Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2016; Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013). Indeed, journalism is influenced by an array of factors that are external to the journalist (Shoemaker and Reese 2013), and may thus constrain journalists in their attempts to translate role orientations into performance. Ultimately, Hanitzsch and Vos' (2017) theorizing highlights the importance of studying journalistic roles by underscoring their impact on both conceptions and practices.

This study focuses on narrated roles with a primary objective of gaining insights into role orientations by drawing on surveys about how newsroom managers, editors, and journalists think about institutional values and the ways in which they might be impacted by the emergence and proliferation of objects designed to give real-time, quantified information about news audiences.

Audience Metrics and Role Orientations

Role orientations and performances are subject to (re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation—sometimes as a result of major controversies (Carlson and Lewis 2015) or in response to longer socio-technical changes (Zelizer 1993). Researchers have argued that the confluence of deteriorating economic conditions and the availability of new technologies have the potential to impact journalistic roles by amplifying or modifying certain role orientations (see Ferrucci 2018b; Hermida 2013; Schapals 2018). Of particular importance to this study are the social, economic, and technological developments surrounding the emergence of audience metrics as a key element within the present audience information ecosystem (Zamith 2018).

In recent decades, as the news industry in the US has faced increasing consolidation—developments mirrored elsewhere in the world—scholars have applied market theory to the study of journalism and news more broadly. Market theory posits that news organizations should “compete with each other to offer the least expensive mix of content that protects the interests of sponsors and investors while garnering the largest audience that advertisers will pay to reach” (McManus 1994, 85; see also Ferrucci 2018a). As noted by Daniels (2008), news organizations driven by the principles of market theory place more emphasis on news as a commodity and less on news as a public service (see also Ferrucci 2018b). Such an approach, driven in part by news organizations’ increasing reliance on advertising at the close of the twenty-first century, does not necessarily align with the democratic function of journalism (Ferrucci and Painter 2016; McChesney 2004). As the news industry became more market oriented (Beam 2003; Weaver et al. 2007), and as audience metrics have become a central component of the news business (Tandoc 2014), scholars have expressed concerns that web metrics could foster an environment where journalism would become more market-driven and be drawn away from its civic objectives (Ferrucci 2018a; Tandoc and Thomas 2015). Indeed, as one respondent told Whipple and Shermak (2018, 80), “we are still worried about clicks and page views (aka, #s) when we should really be pouring resources into producing journalism that is actual journalism.”

Culture is a powerful moderator (Zelizer 1993). While journalism has long been a commercial enterprise—this is certainly the case in the United States (McManus 1994)—it was sufficiently profitable to comprises adherents to civic objectives and adherents to commercial objectives (see Zamith 2018). However, the rapid economic deterioration of the industry has challenged those conventions and structures. As but one example, Coddington (2015) has argued that the metaphorical “wall” separating the editorial and business parts of news organizations has become more of a “curtain.” Moreover, journalism jobs are now becoming more precarious than ever (Örnebring 2018)—meaning the tangible risk in resisting new role demands is more acute than ever before.

However, a simple theoretical binary between resistance and assimilation is limiting. Role orientations are not just outward expressions of identity but also an internal mechanism for making labor meaningful (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). As such, an important question is how the developments making the key considerations of market theory particularly acute in the present moment may be driving a reorientation of role

orientations to help newswriters make sense of the “new normal” (Örnebring 2018, 109) and the attending social transformations in the industry.

Under that theoretical prism, it can be expected that market pressures and new affordances for targeting audiences would promote stronger consumer orientations. Indeed, scholars have observed that for-profit news organizations used audience metrics far more than non-profit ones (Hanusch 2017; Lee, Lewis, and Powers 2014; Usher, 2013). For example, Ferrucci (2018a) found that the journalists they interviewed believed audience metrics could be used to advance positive and normative journalistic ideals, and that newsrooms with a stronger market orientation were more likely to “simply giv[e] the public what it wants” (p. 14). However, there has been little quantification of this phenomenon and exploration across broader swaths of the industry.

Although citizen and consumer role orientations may be viewed as oppositional (see Hanitzsch and Vos 2017), Ferrucci (2018b) notes that the implicated markets of audiences, advertising, and stock often overlap and may have weak to strong orientations. Moreover, some scholars consider the two role orientations to be complementary (Hindman 2017). While multiple studies have looked at how newsrooms utilize audience metrics (Usher 2013), they rarely examine the nuances in how organizations use audience metrics differently depending on their role orientations. Such a pathway would suggest that different working logics may be shaped by role orientations that have an eye toward similar journalistic objectives.

In a key example, Hanusch and Tandoc (2019) found that, over the past decade, journalists generally believed a consumer role orientation (“producing news that people *want* to know,” such as entertainment stories and general life advice; p. 696) increased in importance within journalism at a faster pace than a citizen role orientation (“providing news that people *need* to know,” such as stories that hold the powerful to account and help citizens engage with political processes; p. 696). However, they also found that the frequency of use of three audience feedback mechanisms (audience metrics, reader comments, and tweets) was distinct from their perceived effectiveness in informing newswriters about their audiences. Put differently, even as journalistic role orientations were changing among that group, a technology often associated with a particular orientation (consumer) was frequently used but not often found to be useful. However, it is important to be mindful of Ferrucci’s (2018a) finding that “an organization’s market orientation will affect technology usage significantly more than an individual’s market orientation” (p. 13). As such, scholars must be mindful of the different contextual factors that might implicate perceptions of audience metrics and how they are put to use.

Contextual Factors and Audience Metrics

Many elite news organizations now have audience metrics programs tailored to their goals and priorities, which may vary depending on their financial or public imperatives (Belair-Gagnon 2018; Cherubini and Nielsen 2016; Usher 2013). While scholars have identified a number of factors that could influence attitudes toward and uses of audience metrics by news organizations and newswriters, the evidence supporting the

impact of those factors remains mixed (Zamith 2018). As Welbers et al. (2016), Lee, Lewis, and Powers (2014), and Vu (2014) argue, market pressures—which are particularly high in an American media system (McManus 1994)—are likely to impact the extent of metrics use in newswork, but the evidence for how they might impact the logics governing journalism, and the particular factors that moderate or mediate those impacts, is quite limited. However, the research on the broader stream of literature on metrics use suggests that important factors exist at both the individual level and the organizational level (see Shoemaker and Reese 2013).

At the individual level, scholars have found that preexisting attitudes toward the use of audience feedback, perceptions of organizational policies guiding their use and of one's own knowledge about audience metrics, the amount of training received on how to use audience metrics, the amount of one's journalism education and experience, and one's position within an editorial hierarchy can influence the use of audience metrics within newswork. Tandoc and Ferrucci (2017) argued that individual newswriters appear more likely to use audience metrics when organizational norms or policies lead them to conform (cf. Hanusch 2019; Usher 2013) and that newswriters who are skeptical of such tools will be much less likely to adopt them (cf. Welbers et al. 2016). Tandoc and Ferrucci (2017) and Giomelakis et al. (2018) noted that newswriters who have the tools and knowledge to engage with audience feedback are more likely to incorporate them into their editorial decision-making. Vu (2014) observed that higher amounts of journalism training tend to produce lower use of audience metrics. Finally, newswriters further up in an editorial hierarchy tend to have different attitudes toward audience metrics, with those further up tending to be stronger proponents and users of journalistic metrics (Bunce 2019; Hanusch and Tandoc 2019; Zamith, Belair-Gagnon, and Lewis, forthcoming).

At the organizational level, market orientation, perceived competition, organizational size, amount of coupling between editorial and business sides, and primary media vehicle have all been found to exert some degree of influence. In general, publicly traded and market oriented organizations (i.e., those that rely on advertising revenue and aim to maximize profit) make greater use of metrics (Ferrer-Conill 2017; Ferrucci 2018a; Lowrey and Woo 2010; Vu 2014). Similarly, those that perceive greater competition or employ tight coupling are more likely to monitor audience metrics (Hanusch and Tandoc 2019; Lowrey and Woo 2010; Tandoc 2015). Cherubini and Nielsen (2016), Hanusch (2017), and Whipple and Shermak (2018) highlighted that an organization's primary media vehicle (e.g., television or print) plays a role in shaping metrics use, though there is little quantitative work modeling the extent of the impact or identifying the platforms most susceptible to metrics use (cf. Zamith, Belair-Gagnon, and Lewis, forthcoming).

The vast majority of the literature on metrics in journalism evaluates them as a general construct. However, scholars are increasingly finding that there is “no ‘God’ metric for journalism” (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016, 34; see also Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019; Nelson 2018). Different metrics may be better suited for informing certain editorial activities. Based on a survey of 270 news publishers, the Web analytics company Parse.ly (2017) found that, generally speaking, the four most useful metrics for publishers—including news organizations—were time-on-page, page views, social

sharing, and new/returning visitors. However, such work leaves unclear which metrics are perceived as most useful for particular editorial acts. Zamith (2018) thus contends that scholars should disaggregate the construct of metrics and examine their different forms in order to advance the understanding of how they impact particular journalistic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. This would include an examination of which audience metrics are perceived as being most useful for helping editorial newswriters enact citizen and consumer role orientations in order to nuance the scholarly understanding of how journalistic roles are being implicated by the transformations reshaping the news industry.

Research Questions

This article draws on theorizing about journalistic roles (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017) and market considerations (Ferrucci 2018a; McManus 1994) to examine the reorientation of journalistic role orientations as reflected upon by different classes of newswriters, with an eye toward how audience metrics—generally and specifically—are impacting two particular orientations: toward citizens and toward consumers. Work by Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit (2017) and the Worlds of Journalism team (see Hanitzsch et al. 2019) help chronicle changes in role orientations but shed limited light on how audience metrics implicate those orientations. Hanusch and Tandoc's (2019) contribution helps conceptualize citizen and consumer role orientations but examines a limited range of contextual factors that may structure reorientations of and toward those two role orientations. Finally, scholars in this stream have not distinguished between different types of metrics, which may have distinct impacts on role-associated attitudes and beliefs. As such, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1(a): How important are citizen and consumer role orientations to newswriters?

RQ1(b): To what extent do post-secondary education, experience in journalism, managerial responsibility, perceived importance of reader-derived revenue, perceived market competition, organization size, and primary media vehicle impact the perceived importance of citizen and consumer role orientations?

RQ2(a): How useful are audience metrics perceived to be for enacting citizen and consumer role orientations?

RQ2(b): To what extent do post-secondary education, experience in journalism, managerial responsibility, perceived importance of reader-derived revenue, perceived market competition, organization size, and primary media vehicle impact one's perceived usefulness of audience metrics for helping enact citizen and consumer role orientations?

RQ3: Which audience metrics are perceived as being most useful for helping enact citizen and consumer role orientations?

Method

Sample

We surveyed editorial newswriters (i.e., journalists, editors, and news directors) in the United States to address the research questions. First, we drew a sampling frame from

Cision, a media listings database, in November 2017. That frame was restricted to newswriters working at magazines, newspapers, and online outlets based in the US. Second, we computationally and then manually cleaned the sampling frame to remove accounts not clearly tied to the intended individual. For example, if an individual had any of 62 generic terms in the username of their associated email address (e.g., “mediarequests”), they were automatically removed. Similarly, those who did not have a first or last name listed or had a name that suggested a non-human (e.g., “Department”) were also removed.

We then created two strata to promote an even distribution between individuals in supervisory and non-supervisory roles. Those in supervisory roles needed to have job titles, as listed by Cision, that implied some form of management (e.g., Editor, Producer, News Director). Those in non-supervisory roles had listed titles such as a Reporter, Writer, and Columnist. We then removed individuals affiliated with magazines or newspapers with print circulations below 10,000, as well as those affiliated with online outlets with an equally limited monthly reach. While the validity of available metrics are contested—for example, online traffic can be gamed—this was followed by a close examination by the authors in order to exclude outlets that either lacked general appeal or were likely run by a single person, and the final sampling frame was subsequently manually reviewed. This approach was utilized to yield a broad sample capturing a range of newswriters operating within distinct media organizations. We then drew a random sample yielding 10,449 eligible individuals, with the aim of arriving at a sample that, based on contemporary response rates, would be sufficiently large for statistical analysis but not overpowered. Those individuals were contacted by email, with three reminder emails sent to nonrespondents. An incentive of participation in a random drawing for either a \$500 or one of ten \$50 Amazon gift cards was also offered. Because Cision offered over-inclusive listings, the survey instructed potential participants to only advance if they were active, full-time newswriters. There were 520 completed surveys and 480 partially completed surveys, yielding an RR4 response rate of 9.6% (AAPOR 2016). The response rate reflects a downward trend in response rates among surveys of journalists and is consistent with rates in recent, comparable scholarship. Many studies (see Lee and Coleman 2018; Örnebring and Mellado 2016) have reported similar or lower response rates due to factors ranging from survey fatigue to job pressures placed on potential respondents. However, the demographic profile of respondents in this study, described in the results, is consistent with those in comparable, high-standard work by Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit (2019) and Vos (2016), which increases confidence in the representativeness of this sample.

Measures

We adapted survey questions and response options from existing studies, including those by Tandoc and Ferrucci (2017), Tandoc (2015), Hanusch and Tandoc (2019), and the Worlds of Journalism study (see Hanitzsch 2007). The following variables were used to address the research questions:

Importance of Citizen Role Orientation

Respondents were asked to rate, on a seven-point scale ranging from “not at all important” (1) to “very important” (7), how important each of the following four journalistic functions were to the respondent’s work: (a) monitor and scrutinize political leaders; (b) motivate people to participate in political discussion; (c) provide information people need to make political decisions; and (d) monitor and scrutinize business. This scale exhibited strong internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.847$).

Importance of Consumer Role Orientation

Respondents were asked to rate, on a seven-point scale ranging from “not at all important” (1) to “very important” (7), how important each of the following four journalistic functions were to the respondent’s work: (a) provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience; (b) provide entertainment and relaxation; (c) provide content that makes audiences feel good; and (d) provide advice, orientation, and direction for daily life. This scale exhibited acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.696$).

Usefulness of Metrics

We measured the perceived usefulness of metrics to the fulfillment of the two different roles by asking the following question: “How useful are audience metrics to your ability to do the following things?” All eight items from both consumer and citizen role orientations were listed and each item was rated on a seven-point scale ranging from “not at all useful” (1) to “extremely useful” (7). Respondents were then asked about the usefulness of the four metrics highlighted in the Parse.ly (2017) report (new/returning visitors, page views, social sharing, and time-on-page) for fulfilling each of the eight role orientations, using the same scale options.

Contextual Factors

To assess the impact of theoretically meaningful contextual factors, two sets of questions were developed. Individual-level factors, described below, included: journalism education, experience in journalism, and managerial capacity. Organization-level factors included: importance of reader-derived revenue, market competition, organization size, and primary media vehicle.

Journalism education was measured by asking respondents if they received at least a bachelor’s degree and, if so, if one of those degrees was in journalism. Experience in journalism was measured by asking respondents about the number of years they worked as a professional journalist. Managerial capacity was measured by asking respondents if they worked in a supervisory or managerial role at their organization.

Importance of reader-derived revenue was measured by asking respondents to rate, from 1 (“not at all important”) to 7 (“very important”), how important subscription revenue or donations were to their organization’s revenue stream. Market competition was measured on a scale ($\alpha = 0.760$) that asked respondents to rate, from 1 (“not at all competitive”) to 7 (“very competitive”), the degree of competition among different news organizations in their organization’s primary market for (a) advertising, (b) quality reporting, and (c) readership. Organization size was measured by asking respondents to provide their best estimate of how many full-time news and editorial workers were

employed at their organization, with options for Small ranging from 1 to 10 newsworkers, Medium ranging from 11 to 50 newsworkers, and Large exceeding 50 newsworkers. Primary media vehicle was measured by having respondents select from the following options: magazine, newspaper, and online.

Control Variables

Respondents were also asked about their gender, political orientation, and income level. Multiple options were available for gender identification, but only Male and Female responses were kept due to low representation of other categories. Political orientation was measured by asking respondents to self-identify on a scale from 1 (“strong liberal”) to 7 (“strong conservative”). Income level was measured by asking respondents to select their annual household income from options ranging from \$0 to more than \$200,000, spread in \$20,000 increments. While age was measured in the survey, it was omitted from the models due to its strong correlation with the experience in journalism variable.

Results

Respondents ranged in age from 21 to 79 ($M = 46$, $SD = 12.9$), with 55.6% identifying as male. Most were white (91.9%) and non-Hispanic (93.5%). Respondents were generally well-educated, with 70.5% having a bachelor’s degree and 25.4% having a master’s or doctorate degree. Among those with a college degree, 62.2% received at least one degree in journalism. The median household income ranged between \$80,000 and \$100,000 per year, with fairly even distribution in most categories above and below that. The majority worked for an organization for which the newspaper was the primary vehicle (64.1%), followed by online media (24.7%) and magazines (11.2%). Additionally, 20 respondents were excluded from the analysis as they indicated a different primary media vehicle. These demographics are broadly consistent with surveys by Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit (2019) and Vos (2016), with a marginally wealthier and more gender-balanced sample. There was a roughly even distribution for small outlets (1–10 full-time editorial workers; 35.9%), medium outlets (11–50; 33.2%), and large outlets (more than 50; 30.9%). Lastly, 53.8% of the remaining respondents self-reported being in a supervisory or managerial role at their organization.

Importance of Role Orientations

The first research question focused on how important newsworkers perceived citizen and consumer role orientations to be. Altogether, newsworkers perceived citizen-oriented role items ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.80$) to be more important than consumer-oriented items ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.41$). Individually, three of the citizen-oriented role items were among the four most important items. Among the citizen-oriented items, newsworkers deemed most important providing information people need to make political decisions ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 2.20$), followed by monitoring and scrutinizing political leaders ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 2.28$), monitoring and scrutinizing businesses ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 2.06$), and motivating people to participate in political discussion

Table 1. Summary of multiple regression analysis for variables predicting the perceived importance of citizen and consumer orientations.

Variable	Citizen orientation					Consumer orientation				
	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Control variables										
Gender (Male)	0.22	0.18	0.06	1.24	0.218	-0.12	0.14	-0.04	-0.84	0.402
Income	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.48	0.630	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.25	0.801
Political orientation	-0.07	0.07	-0.05	-1.07	0.286	0.02	0.05	0.02	0.45	0.654
Individual level										
Journ. Education (Y)	0.34	0.18	0.09	1.90	0.059	0.17	0.14	0.06	1.22	0.224
Experience in Journ.	0.00	0.01	-0.02	-0.35	0.730	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.39	0.695
Managerial Cap. (Y)	0.11	0.20	0.03	0.56	0.579	0.69	0.15	0.24	4.58	0.001
Organizational level										
Reader revenue	0.11	0.04	0.13	2.52	0.012	0.07	0.03	0.11	2.14	0.033
Market competition	0.15	0.06	0.11	2.27	0.024	0.14	0.05	0.14	2.88	0.004
Organization size	-0.10	0.13	-0.05	-0.83	0.406	-0.14	0.10	-0.08	-1.50	0.135
Vehicle (Newspaper)	1.48	0.30	0.39	4.94	0.001	-0.49	0.23	-0.17	-2.16	0.031
Vehicle (Online)	1.25	0.31	0.30	3.99	0.001	-0.52	0.24	-0.16	-2.17	0.031
Observations										
	426					426				
R^2 /Adj. R^2	0.110/0.087					0.139/0.116				
<i>F</i>	4.661					6.057				

Note: Y = Yes. The reference group for Vehicle is Magazine.

($M = 4.02$, $SD = 2.18$). Among the consumer-oriented items, respondents identified providing the kind of news that attracts the largest audience ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.90$) to be most important, followed by providing advice, orientation, and direction for daily life ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.97$), providing entertainment and relaxation ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.96$), and providing content that makes audiences feel good ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.93$).

Multiple regression models were used to assess the impact of contextual factors on the extent to which respondents believed citizen ($F(11, 414) = 4.66$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.11$) and consumer ($F(11, 414) = 6.06$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.14$) orientations were important. As shown in Table 1, organizational factors were generally more important. The higher the importance of reader-derived revenue, the higher the importance accorded to both citizen and consumer orientations. Such respondents demonstrated greater perceived import both for functions like monitoring political leaders and providing entertainment. A similar relationship was found for market competition. In contrast, the media vehicle had differing effects for each orientation: newspapers and online media were more likely to perceive citizen orientation to be important than magazines, and they were less likely to perceive consumer orientation to be important. Notably, however, the highest standardized beta was offered by an individual-level factor: whether the respondent had managerial responsibilities. Newswriters with managerial responsibilities perceived consumer orientation to be more important than those without such responsibilities, though the relationship with citizen orientation was not statistically significant. More variance was explained by the consumer orientation model than by the citizen orientation model.

General Usefulness of Metrics

The second research question focused on the extent to which newswriters perceived metrics as useful in helping enact citizen and consumer role orientations. In general, newswriters perceived metrics to be more useful for enacting consumer-oriented

Table 2. Summary of multiple regression analysis for variables predicting the perceived usefulness of metrics in advancing citizen and consumer orientations.

Variable	Citizen orientation					Consumer orientation				
	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Control variables										
Gender (Male)	0.17	0.17	0.05	1.03	0.304	-0.08	0.17	-0.02	-0.46	0.649
Income	0.00	0.03	0.01	0.12	0.908	-0.01	0.03	-0.02	-0.39	0.697
Political orientation	0.02	0.06	0.01	0.31	0.760	0.01	0.06	0.00	0.09	0.929
Individual level										
Journ. Education (Y)	0.35	0.16	0.10	2.10	0.036	0.16	0.17	0.05	0.96	0.335
Experience in Journ.	-0.01	0.01	-0.05	-0.90	0.370	-0.02	0.01	-0.14	-2.68	0.008
Managerial Cap. (Y)	0.35	0.18	0.10	1.92	0.055	0.53	0.18	0.16	2.88	0.004
Organizational level										
Reader revenue	0.09	0.04	0.11	2.25	0.025	0.11	0.04	0.15	2.90	0.004
Market competition	0.21	0.06	0.18	3.54	0.001	0.22	0.06	0.18	3.60	0.001
Organization size	-0.09	0.12	-0.04	-0.75	0.454	0.00	0.12	0.00	0.00	0.997
Vehicle (Newspaper)	0.98	0.28	0.28	3.52	0.001	-0.43	0.28	-0.12	-1.54	0.125
Vehicle (Online)	0.80	0.29	0.21	2.77	0.006	-0.24	0.29	-0.06	-0.83	0.408
Observations	425					426				
R^2 /Adj. R^2	0.101/0.077					0.104/0.080				
<i>F</i>	4.235					4.360				

Note: Y = Yes. The reference group for Vehicle is Magazine.

roles ($M=3.88$, $SD=1.70$) than citizen-oriented roles ($M=3.12$, $SD=1.68$). Notably, and in contrast to the previous research question, three of the consumer-oriented items were among the four most important items. Among the consumer-oriented items, newswriters saw metrics as being most useful in helping them enact the objectives of attracting the largest audience ($M=4.74$, $SD=2.13$), followed by providing content that makes audiences feel good ($M=3.76$, $SD=2.10$), providing entertainment and relaxation ($M=3.74$, $SD=2.04$), and providing advice, orientation, and direction for daily life ($M=3.29$, $SD=1.95$). With the citizen-oriented items, newswriters perceived metrics to be most useful for enacting the objectives of providing information people need to make political decisions ($M=3.34$, $SD=2.02$), followed by motivating people to participate in political discussion ($M=3.25$, $SD=2.05$), monitoring and scrutinizing businesses ($M=3.02$, $SD=1.95$), and monitoring and scrutinizing political leaders ($M=2.86$, $SD=1.87$). However, the low means suggest that newswriters generally perceived metrics not to be very useful in enacting a citizen orientation. In short, while RQ1(a) showed that newswriters perceived citizen orientation as more important, RQ2(a) shows that they perceive metrics, writ large, as less useful for helping enact that role than they are for the less-important consumer orientation.

Multiple regression models were again employed to assess the impact of contextual factors on the extent to which newswriters perceive metrics to be useful for helping enact citizen ($F(11, 413)=4.24$, $p<0.001$, $R^2=0.10$) and consumer ($F(11, 414)=4.36$, $p<0.001$, $R^2=0.10$) orientations. As shown in Table 2, both individual and organizational factors proved to be important, though organizational factors were more important for citizen orientation. With regard to citizen orientation, newswriters who received a journalism education were more likely to perceive metrics as being useful for enacting that orientation. Similar effects were found for the importance of reader-derived revenue and degree of market competition—as they increased, so did the perceived usefulness of metrics for enacting citizen-oriented roles. Moreover, those whose

organizations focused on newspapers and online media were more likely to see metrics as being useful for enacting citizen-oriented roles.

In contrast, journalism education was not a statistically significant predictor for the perceived usefulness of metrics for enacting consumer-oriented roles. Instead, experience in journalism (more experience resulted in lower perceived usefulness) and managerial capacity (having such responsibilities resulted in higher perceived usefulness) were statistically significant individual-level factors. At the organizational level, the primary media vehicle did not exert statistically significant effects but, as with the citizen orientation, there were positive effects exerted by the importance of reader-derived revenue and degree of market competition.

Usefulness of Specific Metrics

The third research question focused on the particular metrics newswriters perceived as being most useful for helping enact citizen and consumer orientations. As expected, given the results for RQ2(b), newswriters perceived all four metrics to be more useful for enacting consumer orientation ($M=3.88$, $SD=1.70$) than citizen orientation ($M=3.32$, $SD=1.67$). The most useful metric for enacting consumer orientation was page views ($M=4.28$, $SD=1.82$), followed closely by social sharing ($M=4.24$, $SD=1.82$), and then new/returning visitors ($M=3.78$, $SD=1.83$) as well as time spent on page ($M=3.57$, $SD=1.83$). A similar pattern—and again, with lesser perceived usefulness—was found for the citizen orientation; the most useful metric was social sharing ($M=3.52$, $SD=1.78$), followed closely by page views ($M=3.50$, $SD=1.84$) and then time on page ($M=3.16$, $SD=1.77$) and new/returning visitors ($M=3.09$, $SD=1.74$). In short, newswriters considered a couple of metrics (page views and social sharing) to be particularly useful for helping enact both consumer and citizen orientations, with the former role better assisted than the latter.

Discussion

Studying journalistic roles involves an analysis of orientative and performative elements of journalism, including cognitive and narrative role orientations (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). This study examined the ways newswriters reflect on two important cognitive role orientations and narrate the utility of audience metrics in relation to enacting those roles. We first found that newswriters perceived a citizen role orientation to be more important than a consumer one. Second, we found that audience metrics were most useful in advancing a consumer role orientation—and only somewhat useful in advancing the more-important citizen role orientation. Third, newswriters perceived particular metrics to be more useful than others, with the page views and social sharing metrics deemed most useful for advancing both the citizen and consumer role orientations. And finally, we found that organizational contextual factors were generally more influential than individual ones in shaping newswriters' beliefs about role orientations and attitudes toward the perceived utility of audience metrics, with the notable exception of one's position within an editorial hierarchy which played a major role in most models.

These findings have important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, we find that a citizen role orientation remains central to editorial newswriters' cognitive scripts (see also Weaver et al. 2007) and that they thus continue to promote a discourse that makes journalism a centerpiece of a democratic society—a position that carries certain responsibilities, like keeping watch on elected officials (see Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit 2017). However, while journalistic roles must be sufficiently stable to be shared, they are also dynamic as a consequence of their socially negotiated nature (Christians et al. 2009). To that end, we see some evidence of change. Indeed, a consumer role orientation appears to be becoming increasingly important to newswriters (see also Hanusch and Tandoc 2019). This finding may be viewed as consistent with McManus' (1994) articulation of market theory, which suggests that news organizations should seek to optimize resources for audience and advertising markets—especially as economic conditions worsen (see also Ferrucci 2018a). However, the pace of change—that a citizen role orientation remains central—reiterates the powerful moderating force of professional culture (Zelizer 1993), even as organizational structures are reshaped (Coddington 2015) and professional livelihoods are put at risk (Örnebring 2018).

The findings may also be viewed as indicative of a broader cultural change within journalism that is more audience-centric (Zamith 2018)—a change that manifests most clearly through survey items associated with a consumer role orientation—and views the use of audience metrics as helpful in realizing a better vision of journalism (Hindman 2017). Through that prism, we see a story that is perhaps not about the binary of acceptance and resistance but of reorientation—of adapting values, norms, and practices to fit new circumstances and leverage new tools (see also Zamith, Belair-Gagnon, and Lewis, forthcoming). The present findings illustrate that audience metrics are perceived as being useful for advancing a consumer role orientation, which is growing in importance, and at least somewhat useful for advancing a citizen role orientation. This parallels recent evidence pointing to growing uses of audience metrics in newswriting (Ferrer-Conill 2017; Whipple and Shermak 2018; Zamith 2018) and their impact in reshaping norms within organizations (Petre 2018; Zamith, Belair-Gagnon, and Lewis, forthcoming), and leads to a broader theoretical intervention that positions constructed, quantified audiences as an increasingly important element within the formation of role orientations. Under Hanitzsch and Vos' (2017) process model, these new normative ideas may be factored into newswriters' cognitive orientations and, in turn, their practices—though a clear, direct link should not be assumed (see Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2016; Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013) and there are clear limits to the utility newswriters find in these tools (see Hanusch and Tandoc 2019). More broadly, such a view questions implicit assumptions that citizen and consumer role orientations are antithetical to one another.

While Hanitzsch and Vos' (2017) theoretical work builds on an institutionalist perspective that prioritizes higher-order influences, this study also calls attention to the importance of the individual-level influence of one's position within an editorial hierarchy when it comes to adhering to certain role orientations and in their beliefs about the role metrics can play in helping enact those roles (see also Zamith, Belair-Gagnon, and Lewis, forthcoming). That is, this study's findings are consistent with the view that

organizational-level contextual factors are salient as they exerted some of the largest effect sizes (McManus 1994; Usher 2013). However, the position of the individual within an editorial hierarchy was statistically and practically significant. Thus, although audience metrics are now features of many newsrooms, newswriters with managerial responsibilities appear to have different ideas about how useful they are and to what ends they should be put—an observation that demands further theorizing by bridging economic and editorial perspectives in the service of better understanding how roles are conceived, communicated, and enacted (see Ferrucci 2018a, 2018b).

The study also offers valuable practical insights. Most notably, we find evidence that newswriters did not perceive different audience metrics as being equally useful for enacting the citizen and consumer role orientations. This offers quantitative evidence supporting qualitative observations discounting the existence of a “God” metric (see Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019; Cherubini and Nielsen 2016; Nelson 2018). Newswriters viewed the much-maligned page views and social sharing metrics to be the most useful for advancing the two role orientations studied in this article. In contrast, respondents found the new/returning visitors metric and the increasingly valorized time-on-page metric to be considerably less useful. This suggests that newsrooms should perhaps not so quickly do away with traditional measures since editorial newswriters find value in them. The conversation, perhaps, should instead be guided toward how to align those traditional metrics and organizational objectives. More broadly, this finding indicates that future scholarly work should differentiate between metrics and seek to explore the apparent disconnect between how the pageviews metric is talked and thought about. The findings also present clear evidence for more closely examining social sharing metrics.

This research has its limitations. First, these data reflect conscious cognitive role orientations and some elements of narrated role performance (see Hanitzsch and Vos 2016). The findings do not reflect actual journalistic practice—which can be significantly different from the measured concepts (Mellado, Hellmueller and Donsbach 2017; Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013). Second, the response rate was lower than ideal. While the demographic profile of the respondents is congruent with the standard-bearing surveys of US journalists and thus gives us confidence in our results, it is nevertheless plausible that some attitudinal biases exist within the sample. Third, the sampling criteria used two measures, circulation size for print media and unique visitors for online media, as proxies for selecting similarly sized organizations and excluding niche outlets after qualitatively determining appropriate cut-off points. Those measures, and particularly online industry metrics for reach, have shortcomings—indeed the latter is not among the most-used online metric, according to Parse.ly (2017) and some organizations may have inflated figures due to illegitimate traffic—that may have led to the incorrect exclusion of certain organizations. For this study, the authors, however, then manually reviewed the sample to exclude outlets that lacked general appeal or were ran by one person. Fourth, it is possible that some of the respondents—especially those who infrequently used metrics—misunderstood what particular metrics meant (see Zamith 2018). While such misunderstandings may have impacted specific results about the extent to which a particular metric was deemed to be useful for enacting a particular role orientation, the broader point stands that while there is

no “God” metric, some metrics stand out in their perceived utility to advance certain role orientations. While this study focused on just four metrics previously identified as being particularly useful, we encourage scholars to incorporate additional metrics that, while perhaps not perceived as being generally useful, could be perceived as being useful for the particular task of enacting a certain role orientation.

Finally, this study also used a less nuanced measure of market orientation—a key variable for helping predict metrics-related attitudes and beliefs—than Ferrucci (2018a) has recommended. Indeed, scholars who have approached “consumer role” and “citizen role” have often done so in binary terms (see Hanusch and Tandoc 2019). Although a market-oriented approach to news became more prevalent in the late part of the 20th century and has consequently impacted how news organizations produce and distribute news (Beam 2003; see also Pompilio 2009; Shoemaker and Vos 2009), Ferrucci (2018b) has suggested it is most prudent to evaluate market orientation as a continuum. Indeed, one may see the consumer role item “providing the kind of news that attracts the largest audience” as simply catering to the lowest common denominator at the expense of “actual journalism” (Whipple and Shermak 2018, 80) but it may also be seen as a way of tailoring the “actual journalism” to make it more appealing (Hindman 2017). Put differently, the implicated notion of “reach” in that role item can be important for both the business and public service aspects of journalism. These role item measures may thus not be as straightforward and mutually exclusive as they seem, and more conceptual development is thus needed within this stream of the literature.

Looking forward, the spread and influence of a constructed, quantified audience in newswork is likely to only increase and become more complex as automation and artificial intelligence are deployed alongside metrics. As perceptions of audience metrics continue to affect journalistic role orientations, and potentially promote the enactment of a consumer role orientation that has been historically less salient, it will remain critical for digital journalism scholars and practitioners to understand newsworkers’ usages and perceptions across organizational contexts, and particularly with regard to an actor’s position within an editorial hierarchy. In a time of increasing market pressures and technological experimentation in media work, understanding the nuances of role orientations, technology, and the contextual factors that moderate and mediate change remains important for advancing digital journalism scholarship. In order to develop stronger theoretical and conceptual approaches to the study of contemporary newswork, digital journalism scholars need to further unpack quantified audience as an important element of role orientations.

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