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Digital Journalism

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The Ethics of Web Analytics

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Published online: 01 May 2014.



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To cite this article: Edson C. Tandoc Jr. & Ryan J. Thomas (2015) The Ethics of Web Analytics, Digital Journalism, 3:2, 243-258, DOI: [10.1080/21670811.2014.909122](https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.909122)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.909122>

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THE ETHICS OF WEB ANALYTICS

Implications of using audience metrics in news construction

Edson C. Tandoc Jr. and Ryan J. Thomas

The collection and reporting of audience data through Web analytics is reshaping the news construction process, with journalists now aware of what their online audiences want. A more important question than understanding this process of adoption of Web analytics in the newsroom is how access to audience metrics impacts on the journalism that journalists produce. In this essay, we pose three interconnected concerns about the use of Web analytics in journalism, guided by journalism's communitarian role. First, we warn of the danger of viewing the audience as disaggregated segments based on consumer preference. Second, we argue against choice as a moral end and call for distinction between the public interest and what the public is interested in. Finally, we warn against the dangers of journalism studies romanticizing the audience and arguing too strongly against journalistic autonomy.

KEYWORDS audience; communitarianism; editorial autonomy; gatekeeping; journalism ethics; role conceptions; Web analytics

Introduction

Understanding what audiences want and what they do with news content—an important task for a journalism that is responsive to the public it serves—has gone a long way. It has evolved from the period when readership surveys were the norm—a form of audience monitoring that relied on volunteered information from a subset of the actual audience—to the accurate tracking of online audience behavior in real time. Web analytics, which refers to “the measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of Internet data for the purposes of understanding and optimizing web usage” (Digital Analytics Association 2008, 3), provides website owners with access to a wealth of information about the online audience: which headlines and links they are clicking on, how much time they are spending on each article, where in the world they are accessing the website from, and many more (Kaushik 2010; Napoli 2011; Weischedel, Matear, and Deans 2005). Web analytics initially served the needs of online marketing by keeping track of metrics that lead to conversion, usually defined as an online purchase (Beri and Singh 2013).

News organizations also saw the utility of Web analytics in understanding their online audiences. Most online newsrooms in the United States now use Web analytics (Lowrey and Woo 2010; MacGregor 2007; Usher 2013). Lists of most popular or most

viewed stories, automatically generated based on metrics (Anderson 2011b; MacGregor 2007), have also become staples of many news sites (Lee, Lewis, and Powers 2012; Thorson 2008). But while Web analytics has been useful to news organizations, its broader application to journalism is fit for reflection and debate, for while the concept of conversion—the ultimate goal of Web analytics—is clear and straightforward in the field of marketing where it simply means consumer purchase, the concept is muddy and contentious in the field of journalism, which balances its public service role with its economic function as a forum for advertising (Baker 2002).

An important consideration in the study of the journalistic application of Web analytics is how access to information about audience preferences and behavior fits into normative ideals of journalism. Web analytics appears to be particularly good at monitoring traffic accurately, superior to the guesswork and approximations of old. Through Web analytics, journalists now have access to what the audience wants, which can be used to further increase traffic, seen as a way to save an industry suffering from a shrinking news audience. But at what cost?

This essay explores the *ethics of Web analytics*. We depart from deterministic arguments that “journalism has always been shaped by technology” (Pavlik 2000, 229) and instead understand technology as abstract material that only gains meaning when put to use by people. Technologies emerge out of particular historical circumstances and as an adaptation to the prevailing conditions of the age and must be understood and evaluated not as an end but as a mechanism for the improvement and extension of journalism’s social obligations and the bolstering of democracy (Brundidge 2010). Technologies must also be balanced with prevailing norms that have guided the journalistic field (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2011; Singer 2005), for these norms play a role in how journalists conceive of and perform their social roles.

In this essay, we are guided by the assumptions of the communitarian role of journalism. Through this normative framework, we pose three interconnected concerns about the use of Web analytics in journalism. First, we warn of the danger of viewing the audience as disaggregated segments based on consumer preference—a view that is inconsistent with the communitarian function of helping pursue the common good. Second, we argue against choice as a moral end and distinguish between the public interest and what the public are interested in. If journalism is to help bring about the common good, it must provide the public with more than just what the public wants. Finally, we warn against the dangers of romanticizing the audience and arguing too strongly against journalistic autonomy, for a journalism that fulfills its communitarian role needs the autonomy to do so, especially with the multiple interests that seek to take advantage of the power of the press.

Journalism’s Communitarian Role

A major function of journalism within a democracy is the building of community. John Dewey (1927) recognized that democracy is difficult, particularly in a complex social system that disperses, stratifies, and segregates its members. For Dewey (1927, 168), individuals are incomplete without community, for “no man and no mind was ever emancipated merely by being left alone.” Thus, democracy “forces a recognition that there are common interests” transcending mere individual preferences (Dewey

1927, 207). There can be no equivocation between, on the one hand, a citizen's public duties as part of a community and, on the other, a consumer's exercising of choice as an actor within a market system.

Communitarian philosophers, drawing in part on the work of Dewey, have argued that community is central to self-realization, where people recognize that life is about more than the pursuit of individual interests and understand the relational bonds that bind us together (Etzioni 1995; Glendon 1991; MacIntyre 1984; May 2001; Mulhall and Swift 1992). The "excessive individualism" of politics and culture in the United States, communitarians argue, has stymied discussions of the common good and recognition of communal interest (Etzioni 1995, 21). This reflects the ascendancy and subsequent hegemony of the individual-centric ideals of John Locke over the arguments of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who recognized the interdependence rather than disaggregation of humanity (Glendon 1991). Communitarians understand the individual and community as intertwined rather than distinct, where one cannot be understood as separate to the other. Therefore, it is not a case of the primacy of the community over the individual but recognition that humans can neither be understood as free-floating atoms without connection to the society around them, nor as part of a monolithic bloc.

Democracy mandates a culture that encourages dialogue on the pressing concerns of the day, which in turn necessitates an informed and engaged polity. Dewey (1927, 184) believed that journalism could play a key role in offering "a subtle, delicate vivid, and responsive art of communication." In other words, journalism should facilitate public discourse, nurture the public's intellectual curiosity, and provide a space for dialogue on the common good. In so doing, journalism brings the public into existence, for it is through communication that a disaggregated mass of individuals becomes a community. It is for this reason that Christians (1997, 25) envisions a "journalism of conversation" where disparate people are drawn into a community of shared interest.

The kind of press needed by a democracy, then, is one that helps to "cultivate social spaces for public dialogue" (Croteau and Hoynes 2001, 20). Journalism draws disparate groups into a community. Baker (1998, 344) summarizes this role: "First, the press should be discursive, supporting reflection and value or policy choice. Second, this discursive press must be inclusive. The democratic pursuit of, and hopefully agreement on, a real common good requires an inclusive public discourse." The goal of a journalism informed by communitarianism is "not merely readers and audiences provided with data, but morally literate persons" (Christians, Ferre, and Fackler 1993, 89).

However, the vogue of audience/consumer choice, allied to technologies that allow for greater customization and personalization of news than ever before, threatens these ideals. McQuail (1997, 516) prophetically foretold of "the probable trend of modern society and of mass media" toward "a loosening of collective social bonds and a weakening of mutual obligations of a moral kind, including public duties." We stand on the precipice of a society where we are inoculated from one another and from news that draws disparate individuals together into a public, threatening the notion of a public itself. In providing journalists a wealth of information about the actual online audience, Web analytics can contribute to this threat in three related ways.

Classifying Audiences

The audience is a major force influencing the news construction process (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). The audience has evolved to the point where audience members can choose, promote, and even disseminate information beyond the control of the newsroom and thus potentially set the news agenda (Bruns 2003; Napoli 2011). Web analytics has also provided more immediate and accurate ways for journalists to monitor audience preferences, and this has arguably further increased the influence of the audience on news construction. This is part of the gradual flattening of the power structure between journalists and their audiences (Deuze 2003).

Tracking the audience is not new for journalists. Traditional media—newspapers, radio, and television—have relied on readership surveys, circulation figures, and rating systems to track audience preferences (Beam 1995; Gans 1979; Schlesinger 1978). Feedback from a small segment from the audience also came in the form of letters to the editor and phone calls to newsrooms (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011). However, journalists ignored, if not rejected, audience feedback and dismissed audience research as inaccurate and not useful; this was indicative of journalistic views of audiences as uninformed and lacking the skills and knowledge necessary for evaluation of journalistic performance (Burns 1977; Gans 1979; Schlesinger 1978).

This initial and almost institutional rejection of audience feedback is consistent with the fact that journalists did not really know who their actual audiences were. Since early forms of audience research took substantial time to put together and were based on arguably non-representative samples, journalists rarely paid attention to the information they provided. Instead, journalists relied on abstract conceptions of an audience constructed based on what they knew about their peers, superiors, and relatives (Beam 1995; Gans 1979; Heinonen 2011; Lowrey and Latta 2008; Sumpter 2000). The audience is an institutional construction, constructed by institutions with vested interest in providing a particular profile of the audience, such as advertisers and media companies (Etema and Whitney 1994; Turov 2005). But an implication of treating the audience as such is the depersonalization of the audience, defining the audience as a passive mass, as merely products to be sold (Ang 1991). The audience, however, has changed dramatically and describing them as passive is no longer accurate (Gillmor 2004; Napoli 2011; Sullivan 2013).

Web analytics has made audience feedback more visible in the newsroom so that ignoring the audience is becoming more and more difficult. As audience feedback is now reported in real time, journalists are no longer able to rely exclusively on imagined constructions of audiences. The imagined audience is now based on accurate, comprehensive, albeit still incomplete, information about the actual audience. The pieces of information that Web analytics provide can allow journalists to accurately segment their audiences.

The practice of audience segmentation is not new and many news organizations have survived economic shocks to the traditional media by targeting a specific subset of the audience. Some niche publications target specific demographics appealing to a particular group of advertisers. The size of a target market is no longer the sole arbiter of preference. Other market-related factors, such as purchasing power, have played important roles in audience segmentation. These typologies of the audience have

clearly affected content decisions in these specific outlets as well as the general diversity of ideas in the journalistic field.

Web analytics is a tool that lends itself well for audience segmentation. The current practice is prioritizing audiences based on their sheer number. This is consistent with the goal of increasing traffic. Stories that are popular are prioritized in terms of story placement. For example, a time-lagged comparison of most viewed stories and the stories currently displayed on the homepage found that the former influenced the latter, so that editors are displaying more popular stories more prominently on the site (Lee, Lewis, and Powers 2012). It seems like editorial judgment of a story's relevance is no longer enough to guide decision-making. However, when subjected to the totalizing logic of the market, the use of Web analytics has the potential to lock journalism into a race toward the lowest common denominator, ghettoizing citizens into bundles based on narrow preferences and predilections rather than drawing them into a community. As new media organizations emerge, this logic may be naturalized into an unassailable hegemony. "As this media segmentation advances, people will not develop any common fund of knowledge. They will become unable to engage in civic talk; they will have nothing to say to each other. Any common public sphere will wither and die" (Baker 1998, 365).

The pragmatic use of Web analytics in online marketing seeks the optimum number of conversions, and producers attain this marketing ideal by providing what most of the consumers want based on what they actually want and not based on imaginations of the producer. But as we have argued, conversion in the online journalism setting is very different. For if we follow this marketing logic, then journalists will have to provide the same types of stories that get the most number of clicks, serving the majority of the audience who manifest their preferences through clicks. The minority who click on public affairs stories, for example, become marginalized and less valued because of their small number. The more journalists succumb into this click-based logic, the more the minority becomes marginalized, and the cycle continues to gnaw away at the notion of community. This is inconsistent with the pursuit of the common good. A click-based segmentation of the online audience disregards other considerations, and also falls into the trap of giving what the audience wants at the expense of what the public needs.

Romanticizing Audience Choice

Scholarship indicates that journalists are becoming more aware than before of the needs and interests of their audiences because of Web analytics, turning away from the distance (or even skepticism) that characterized its relationship with audiences in the non-digital era (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Walter 2011; Lowrey 2009; MacGregor 2007; Napoli 2011). Web analytics has allowed newsrooms to measure online traffic, and newsrooms also use audience metrics to drive more traffic. For example, listing the most viewed stories on the website functions as a shortcut for other readers to select which stories to read, keeping them on the site for some time (Tenore 2011; Thorson 2008). These metrics also influence placement of news stories on websites (Lee, Lewis, and Powers 2012). Thus, it seems that many journalists now compare their own beliefs

about what the audience wants with actual tracking data. Journalists “no longer implicitly trust themselves” (MacGregor 2007, 296).

Web analytics must be understood as a signifier of the broader trend in media toward customization and choice, which is in turn a reflection of a market-driven discourse dominant in western society, where modernity is understood through the prism of the market as part of an overall shift away from a production-based to a consumption-based society (Bauman 1998). The neoliberal ideological project constructs a particular view of choice, theorizing choice as an intrinsic good and capitalizing upon longstanding notions of the consumer as a rational agent exercising discretion and good judgment in a market economy. The role of the producer, therefore, is to serve the consumer, who, to appropriate an old maxim, “knows best.” This discourse embeds the notion of “self-possessing and self-directing individuals” capable of “exercising choice in pursuit of self-realizing life projects” (Clarke 2007, 160–161) into the popular vernacular, centering choice as essential to one’s wellbeing and sense of self. The ability to exercise choice transforms the consumer from a passive recipient into an active agent empowered to shape his or her own destiny. In a journalistic context, choice enables audience members to cultivate their own information diet rather than accept what is spoon-fed to them by elites, who presume to know what is in their best interests.

Stuart Hall (2011, 722) satirized this romantic conception of emancipation-through-consumerism, which promotes the ideal that “exercising ‘consumer choice’ is the next best thing to freedom itself.” By combining discourses of consumer choice with discourses of human freedom and dignity, neoliberalism falsely equates market logic with democracy, and consumer preference with democratic engagement. This is dangerous ground, for “consumers are not citizens” (Sunstein 2007, 136). Should journalists serve consumers, who sustain journalism through their purchasing power? Or should journalists serve citizens who occupy a central role in the conception of journalism as a form of public service? The use of Web analytics must be conditioned by fealty to journalism’s communitarian mission. With the wealth of audience information journalists get routinely exposed to through Web analytics, this is not an easy task, but simply catering to shifting public tastes and interests is not an appropriate model for any journalism that purports to be a *steward* of the public interest. Indeed, such a journalism would need to abandon the term altogether and reconceptualize itself as a *butler* to provide what the public is interested in.

We must take great caution in the use of technology that places choice as a moral end. When scholars write of “replacing the old model of the media imposing the content on users whose only option is to consume or not to consume the news” (Karlsson and Strömbäck 2010, 4) or of a “revolutionary shift in the balance of power between news provider and news consumer” (Lasica 2001, 5), heed must be paid to the combination of technological determinism, audience romanticism, and market logic implicit in such arguments. From these perspectives, audiences are emancipated from a top-down media structure by their capacity to exercise greater choice over their information diet. We argue that choice must instead be viewed as a *means* rather than an *end*; in other words, acknowledging the public’s greater capacity for choice should be the start of the conversation rather than the end of it. That conversation must revolve around how new technologies can be used to advance the communitarian mission of journalism. Put simply, *choice for its own sake is no worthy end*.

As audiences fragment and choices proliferate, journalistic standards are driven down due to the ease of delivering low-cost, softer news (Hamilton 2004). The market drastically under-produces content that is in the public interest, such as investigative journalism, because of the risk and expense involved, and also because it has difficulty finding (and sustaining) large audiences (Baker 2002). Thus, journalism in the public interest may be curtailed because it fails to be commercially attractive. A lowest-common-denominator strategy takes hold, where, instead of offering information with the aim of civic uplift and enlightenment, “financial incentives strongly favor sensational, lurid, and formulaic offerings” (Frank and Cook 1995, 243) as this is the content that finds a mass audience. Choice may dress in the garb of empowerment but it is of no utility to democracy whatsoever if the net result is a more uninformed (or misinformed) and unengaged polity and a fragmented community.

It is clear that audience-tracking technologies have become more sophisticated, enabling news media outlets to eschew guesswork and gain a more accurate picture of what their audience members ostensibly want. However, what audiences *want* and what they *need* are qualitatively different things. The former is driven by individual market impulses, the latter by acknowledgement of the needs of a thriving democracy. Put another way, “the market requires giving the public what it wants; democracy requires giving the public what it needs” (Barger and Barney 2004, 199). Research indicates that, given the choice, audiences will gravitate toward “soft” news over “hard” news (Boczkowski 2010; Boczkowski and Peer 2011; Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Walter 2011). Similarly, we know that audiences now have much greater capacity to customize the news they receive toward their ideological and taste preferences (Thurman 2011). When we add Web analytics into the mix, and consider the economic framework within which contemporary journalism operates, we run the risk of a media ecosystem that panders to, rather than enlightens and challenges, its audience, and thus poses a barrier to the formation of community around shared ideals and collective subscription to the success of democracy.

Using Web analytics to segment audiences based on their market value and to understand and supply what the preferred audience wants, which we argue are both inconsistent with the communitarian role of journalism, are both rooted in the increasing influence of market forces on the journalistic field. The autonomy of the field, at the macro level, is therefore threatened, and fulfilling the communitarian function, we argue, requires journalistic autonomy. For journalists to be able to serve this purpose of building a community by serving the public, they have to be free to do so. However, even at the micro level, editorial autonomy, and therefore even the higher goals it pursues, is constantly under threat.

Editorial Autonomy and Professionalism

The institutional abstraction of the audience in the past was parallel to the celebrated role of the press as the fourth estate. The individual audience did not matter in news construction, for the role of the press is to serve the general public by providing information that serves public interest. Journalists were also protective of their editorial autonomy, arguing that accommodating audience feedback, when they came in the form of phone calls, letters, and readership surveys from a subset of the actual audience,

would compromise their news judgment (Beam 1995; Gans 1979; Schlesinger 1978). Thus, the norm of editorial autonomy had worked as an excuse for journalists to shield themselves from audience feedback, arguing that considering audience preferences in their editorial judgment will compromise their independence. They have historically relied instead on their own gut instincts and preferences, determined and reinforced by newsroom socialization (Lowrey 2009; Soloski 1989; Tuchman 1978; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). Lacking definitional fixity, such subjective assessments led to journalists being “notorious for knowing what news is but not being able to explain it to others” (Zelizer 2005, 67).

The gut-level instincts journalists profess are born out of the view that the professional journalist has greater expertise and authority to determine what information is in the public interest than the public can themselves (Anderson 2011b). Journalists have demonstrated hostility to audiences encroaching on their journalistic autonomy and questioning their judgment (Singer and Ashman 2009). This is due, in part, to the fact that they question “one of the most fundamental ‘truths’ in journalism, namely: the *professional* journalist is the one who determines what publics see, hear and read about the world” (Deuze 2005, 451, our emphasis). What does it mean to be “professional”?

To belong to a profession is to possess a measure of power and prestige (Larson 1977). Though journalism lacks many of the criteria by which a profession is traditionally defined, such as a formalized education and a membership (commonly) regulated by licensure (Meyers et al. 2012), journalists have asserted their professionalism throughout the twentieth century, establishing codes of ethics and standards of practice that were designed to bolster journalism’s standing in the minds of the public (Plaisance 2005). In so doing, journalists demarcated the boundaries of the field, signaling who did (and did not) belong to journalism’s “interpretive community” (Zelizer 1993). In particular, journalists have invoked their professional autonomy as a means of warding off criticism and maintaining a monopoly over news construction, emphasizing their centrality to democracy (Deuze 2005). Through autonomy, journalists were able to present themselves as *the* stewards of the public good; were their autonomy ever called into question, so too would the integrity of democracy itself. For Deuze (2003), this legitimizes a top-down status quo where journalists exercise monopoly over news and spoon feed information to passive audiences.

It is clear, however, that the changing media landscape is increasingly challenging journalism’s monopoly over news dissemination. In so doing, it is attacking (and eroding) the boundaries of the interpretive community (O’Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Singer 2006; Zelizer 2004). The digital age is characterized by a transformation of power relations, where power shifts “away from the professional and towards the layperson” (Singer 2003, 147). Underpinning these transformations is a romanticized view of a flattening of the journalist–audience relationship. For example, Lasica (2001, 8) pointed out: “The user, after all, is in the best position to know what he or she finds most interesting, valuable, useful, or newsworthy,” while Singer (2007, 82) refers to the “bottom-up power” engendered by new technologies.

In collecting and reporting quantifiable, accurate, and immediate feedback from the audience—the audience communicating, in a way, what it wants—Web analytics presents journalists the possibility of audience-centered decision-making. What is particularly noteworthy, foreshadowed by earlier discourse on the need for a consumer-driven narrative for news, is how Web analytics can automatically generate decisions

based on metrics. Put simply, the influence of the audience need no longer be mediated by a journalist. Lists of most read or most popular stories are usually automatically generated based on metrics. The age of big data is leading to “algorithmic journalism” (Anderson 2011a). A Web analytics software, Visual Revenue, generates its own suggestions of which particular stories to display on which part of the homepage to achieve the optimum number of Web traffic for the site (Sonderman 2011). These changes are consistent with giving the audience some control over news construction.

But despite the somewhat sunny optimism of many journalism scholars, we contend that this narrative portends a drift away from journalism ethics, toward an audience-centered free-for-all governed by market logic. If we re-center journalism and its democratic obligations at the heart of the debate, the optimism about the reversal of top-down power structures can instead be read as a deep pessimism about the promise of journalism itself and of journalists’ capability to execute their role-related responsibilities. Such a viewpoint castigates journalists as failures in serving the public need; the solution, seemingly, is not to advocate for a better, richer, more ethical journalism, nor to consider reform of the broader socioeconomic structures that shape and fundamentally constrain journalistic practice (Baker 2002; McChesney 2003; McChesney and Nichols 2010), but to remove journalists from the narrative altogether and place agency in the hands of the public-as-consumer. This sidesteps altogether the vexing issue of how a better journalism can be constructed out of the embers of what technological innovation and economic disruption have wrought and stymies efforts at articulating how journalism can better professionalize and adapt to the digital age in a manner that does not sacrifice its public service mission. It is an admission of failure on the part of the model of journalist-as-gatekeeper, resolving the problem by removing the journalist from journalism. This is an untenable solution and does little to advance journalism’s communitarian possibilities. This drift toward neoliberal atavism, where the expertise and judgment of the producer are disregarded in favor of the transient needs of the consumer, must be resisted.

Recommendations and Conclusion

While the news media are often vaunted (not least by their own members) for the watchdog role they play, perhaps a yet more critical role played by journalism is the manner in which it bridges difference—critical in a pluralistic, complex social system—and connects the individual to society. In a pluralistic, complex society, the press can play a critical role in accommodating difference, yet the danger of the growing trend toward news personalization and customization is that it may allow the civic spirit to atrophy, as citizens tailor their information according to preexisting ideological and taste preferences and consequently make decisions with ramifications for civic health based on faulty, incomplete, or subjective data.

Journalism must “give citizens a sense of belonging” (May 2001, 204) and a stake in collective interests. Thus, it must, first, be inclusive. It must reject the tendency toward disaggregation of individuals into ever-smaller clusters based on consumer-driven understandings of the self. Second, it must also address and prioritize what the public needs, rather than consider provision of choice largely based on what most of the audience wants as the culmination of journalism. The false, flat “empowerment” of

audiences in the digital age embeds an atavistic, consumerist discourse into journalism that balkanizes the public into individual information-seekers, transacting with journalism on a purely individual basis. Recognition of communal needs is set aside in the name of an unreflexive celebration of choice. The public, under such a model, is little more than a constellation of individuals seeking out the information they want on the platform of their preference from a provider of their choosing—and news organizations, exposed to the quantified preferences of the audience, submit to this audience-centric logic. Finally, journalists must continue preserving their editorial autonomy if they are to meet these functions that come with the communitarian role of journalism. Journalism must be understood as a precondition for the formation of community. In an age of increasing fragmentation, scholars need to develop a path forward that theorizes audience empowerment distinct from the choice-driven market formulation to which it has hitherto been tethered.

The purpose of this discussion has been to re-center the communitarian role of journalism at the heart of what we regard as a largely techno-centric debate. We concede that the arguments presented here may view the audience in an unflattering manner. Perhaps it could be read as emblematic of a paternalistic model of journalism, where journalists determine the public interest on the public's behalf, constructing themselves as the institution best placed to determine its audiences' needs. Deuze (2003, 220), for example, argues that journalistic suspicions of audiences legitimize and entrench a status quo governed by elite power, advocating a transformation of the journalist–audience relationship away from the “we write, you read” dogma of modern journalism.” The normative assumptions guiding such arguments are that paternalism is an undesirable moral trait (though it is not) and that audiences are capable of *consistently* and *precisely* determining what is in their interests (though they are not). We reject outright the application of a market language akin to “customer is always right” to journalism; its totalizing logic is a moral dead end. Instead of discussing ways journalism can improve, the solution appears to be to burn down the gates and grant agency to the audience.

News construction occurs within a social setting (Reese and Ballinger 2001) and journalists exist within a field with its own logic and context (Benson 2006). The larger context where journalists find themselves is not rosy, for traditional media are seeing a shrinking audience for news. They are feeling the pressure of the bottom line in a media ecology increasingly characterized by greater competition for ever-dwindling audiences (Hamilton 2004; McManus 2009; McChesney and Nichols 2010). In an age where news media outlets are increasingly being asked to do more with less, it is not too difficult to imagine a journalistic environment where media outlets harness Web analytics to pursue issues that satisfy the bottom line and deliver low-cost, low-risk, low-need “information” to a restless public rather than the more expensive, time-consuming public affairs journalism that may (at least, at first) struggle to find a commercial audience. But journalism serves a purpose *above and beyond* its immediate commercial audience.

It is equally important to consider the occupational setting where journalists operate. Online news is far different from traditional news. It no longer makes sense to speak of a deadline, for every minute is an expiration date online. Swamped with work and burgeoning responsibilities—for news work is no longer confined within the space of one's news website but now also includes social media sites such as Facebook and

Twitter—journalists are further pulled away from opportunities to pause, think twice, and re-examine their day-to-day (or even minute-by-minute) actions. We do not, and cannot, expect them to do so. But one decision after another to highlight an article about the prominent celebrity of the day to drive traffic embeds this practice—slowly but surely—into a routine, and thus becomes part of the journalistic common sense.

At a pivotal juncture for journalism, it is important to re-assert the value of community and resist the commercial imperative. Web analytics is a powerful tool, but how it is used is what determines the kind of power it can wield and to what end. Stopping with understanding audience preferences, and then catering to those, is treating choice as an end rather than a means. But choosing to reflect and act on *both* what the audience wants and does not want, understanding why and assessing whether the latter is something the audience needs, is considering choice as means to a more worthy end. We know why stories about celebrities get a lot of clicks. But why do other stories we editorially consider as more important not attract traffic? The market cannot be trusted to provide what the audience needs (Baker 2002), but nor can the audience be trusted to always know what it needs. This is especially so in a period of information overload.

It also cannot pass without comment—though it requires a much broader discussion than we are able to offer here—that the public has a role to play in this, too. Our discussion has focused on Web analytics and its use by journalists, and warned against the use of the technology for ends that do not support journalism’s public service obligations. However, to chide journalists for following, rather than challenging, a passive public is to evade discussion of public passivity itself. The arguments presented here extend to the public; we contend that the logic of choice also shuns any discussion of the public’s obligations to “carry their share of the democratic burden” (Barger and Barney 2004, 191). Under a market framework, the survival of excellent journalism depends largely on the desire for excellent journalism. In short, “we get the journalism we help create, which is nothing more or less than the journalism we deserve” (Wyatt 2010, 294).

The evolution of the audience has understandably jolted traditional and familiar journalistic roles. The role, however, should not swing mindlessly into providing what the audience wants. The role should be about understanding what the audience wants and how journalists can take that information and balance this against what the audience needs. It is an unusual responsibility, but journalism is an unusual public good. Journalists need to be responsive to the public they serve, but they also should serve the higher goal of public interest. Journalists should turn the public’s attention to information that audiences can easily relate to and that seems related to their experiences, for these are the types of information that are easier to digest. Stories that are easier to understand, such as celebrity news and humorous pieces, tend to get a lot of clicks. A journalist conscious of what journalism ought to be will use access to this information about audience preferences in constructing important realities into versions that the audience can appreciate. The goal of journalism, ultimately, is to “promote a well-functioning democratic process” (Sunstein 1993, 81). If journalism simply views itself as the conduit through which transient audience preferences are satisfied, then it is no journalism worth bearing the name.

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