Imagined Publics: Mexican Journalists' Conception of their Audiences from the Professional Roles Perspective

Públicos imaginados: la concepción de los periodistas mexicanos sobre sus audiencias desde la perspectiva de roles profesionales

Públicos imaginados: a concepção dos jornalistas mexicanos sobre seus públicos a partir da perspectiva das funções profissionais

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How do Mexican journalists conceive their audiences and how does this impact their work? This study, based on a survey of journalists in Mexico (N=486), conducted within the framework of the Worlds of Journalism project, analyzes the perceptions that journalists have about their audiences, highlighting how these perceptions influence journalistic roles. Findings indicate that the orientation ranges from educating and offering relevant content to disseminating exciting stories to increase consumption metrics, but this is conditioned by region, type of media, and journalists' age.

KEYWORDS: Audiences, Mexico, journalistic roles, surveys, journalism.

¿Cómo conciben los periodistas mexicanos a sus audiencias y cómo impacta esto en su labor? Este estudio, basado en una encuesta a periodistas en México (N = 486), realizada en el marco del proyecto Worlds of Journalism, analiza las percepciones que los periodistas tienen sobre sus audiencias, y resalta la manera en la que estas influyen en los roles periodísticos. Los hallazgos indican que la orientación oscila entre educar y ofrecer contenido relevante, y difundir historias emocionantes para aumentar métricas de consumo; pero ello está condicionado por región, tipo de medio, y edad de los periodistas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Audiencias, México, roles periodísticos, encuestas, periodismo.

Como os jornalistas mexicanos concebem o seu público e como isso impacta o seu trabalho? Este estudo, baseado num inquérito a jornalistas no México (N = 486), realizado no âmbito do projeto Worlds of Journalism*, analisa as percepções que os jornalistas têm sobre os seus públicos, destacando a forma como influenciam os papéis jornalísticos. As descobertas indicam que o direcionamento varia desde educar e oferecer conteúdo relevante até a divulgação de histórias interessantes para aumentar as métricas de consumo; mas isto está condicionado pela região, tipo de mídia e idade dos jornalistas.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Audiências, México, papéis jornalísticos, pesquisas, jornalismo.

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INTRODUCTION

In both journalistic and academic spheres, it is often assumed that a positive, virtuous, smooth, and fruitful relationship exists between the press and its audience (Banjac, 2021; Nelson & Kim, 2020). Although, in theory, the primary role of journalism is directed toward audiences as citizens (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 7), there is little exploration of how journalists conceptualize and perceive their audiences, what influence these perceptions have on their work, and how they affect journalistic roles. These roles can be understood as "microcultures" (Mellado et al., 2023) within national media systems, and most studies take them for granted.

Sociological studies of journalism show that audiences are often a vague abstraction for journalists, who prefer to write for an imagined community of people similar to themselves or their social circle, serving as a proxy for their real audiences (Gans, 1979).

While it is obvious that the *raison d'être* of journalism lies in its consumers, and that its success largely depends on creating and maintaining audiences (Nelson, 2021), the way journalism relates to them is variable. Consequently, the information produced is intended for different purposes, including educating, providing useful information for decision-making, highlighting demands, or simply entertaining.

The perception and conceptualization of audiences are dynamic, contingent on elements within the media environment, as well as the political and social context. It makes sense, therefore, to assume that in vast and diverse countries like Mexico, there might be more than one "journalistic culture", defined by regional conditions.

Currently, there is a significant gap in information regarding the relationship between journalists and their audiences, particularly in the sociology of journalism and even more so in Global South countries like Mexico. While studies have generated data on consumption patterns and the trust audiences place in specific media outlets or the media system in general, we know little about the other side of this relationship –that is, how journalists perceive their target audience–, except for a few studies that have focused primarily on the support journalists receive from society under conditions of violence

(González & Reyna, 2019; Salazar, 2022; Salazar & González, 2023). Increasing attacks on journalists' credibility reveals a deterioration in the relationship between journalism and its audiences (Nelson, 2021), especially when outrage over violence against the press does not extend to broader sectors of society.

In general, we lack systematized information about how journalists perceive their audiences, how these perceptions have evolved, and how they influence their work. For this reason, this research aims to explore how journalists in different regions of Mexico conceptualize their audiences, how they characterize them, and how these perceptions influence their work and the roles they adopt. We will distinguish between the type of media in which they work and the generation to which they belong.

Thus, the research questions guiding our work are as follows:

RQ1: How do Mexican journalists conceive of their audiences, and what do they base their perceptions on?

RQ2: How does this perception of audiences influence the roles that journalists predominantly adopt?

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JOURNALISTS AND AUDIENCES AND THE DEFINITION OF JOURNALISTIC ROLES

As Coddington et al. (2021) point out, "in the absence of a clear image of the real audience, communicators rely on mental images of an imagined audience" (p. 1028). Constructing an image of the recipients is useful for defining content, making changes or maintaining editorial lines, and choosing frames and topics, that is, for the overall news production process (Robinson, 2019; Schudson, 2003; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

In this way, different perceptions of the audience lead to different communicative outcomes. For example, if the target audience is perceived as more inclined to emotional content, more sensationalistic or clickbait content is likely to be expected. Audience perception also impacts the diversity of perspectives offered and the range of angles from which news content is presented.

Despite the advent of digital technologies in recent years, which allow for more direct knowledge of audience preferences and consumption trends, the reality is that journalists' conception of their audience continues to be a combination of both tangible and imagined elements (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Not all newsrooms have the resources to monitor and track audience metrics, and this issue is particularly pronounced in countries of the Global South, where media outlets face even greater restrictions.

In their study in the United States, Coddington et al. (2021) found that journalists' perceptions of their audiences are built from two elements: one direct, constituted precisely by audience metrics and interactions with individual members of the audience via emails, social media, and comment sections; and one indirect, stemming from their social and professional circles. These elements directly influence how journalists evaluate their audiences, for instance, whether they consider them rational or emotional, or homophilic or heterophilic (i.e., sharing similar or dissonant views with the journalists themselves).

While it is assumed that, in a democratic setting, journalists act as mediators between citizens and power groups (political, economic, religious), this does not imply that there is only one way to perform this role. On the contrary, there are different ways of practicing journalism that respond to specific contexts (De Albuquerque, 2012; Echeverría et al., 2022; Mellado et al., 2023) and, as mentioned, to how audiences are conceived (Coddington et al., 2021).

A key to understanding how journalists conceptualize their audiences lies in the concept of the "journalistic role", which represents the professional orientation adopted by news producers. This orientation determines their perception of their social function (González & Echeverría, 2022). In other words, how media personnel conceive the purpose of their work shapes the content they generate (Mellado, 2015). Therefore, a professional role is made up of ideal types, normative standards, and empirical models (Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2020; Márquez et al., 2019; Mellado, 2015; Mellado et al., 2023).

In practice, the orientation manifests in the journalist's active or passive involvement in their coverage, their relationship with sources, and how they treat their audience, whether as citizens or consumers

(Deuze, 2005; Mellado, 2015; Mellado et al., 2017, 2023). Specifically, professional orientation helps journalists perform their tasks, as it provides guidance for making sense of the information they handle. Therefore, each professional role is linked to specific routines, a specific journalist-source relationship, and a defined audience (Mellado, 2015). Additionally, González and Echeverría (2022) suggest that carrying out the journalistic task also requires a certain level of autonomy and training.

Over time, journalism scholars have proposed various classifications of these roles. For example, Siebert et al. (1956/2000) distinguished four models of journalism: authoritarian, liberal, social responsibility, and Soviet. Similarly, Hallin and Mancini (2004) established three models of media systems: polarized pluralist, democratic corporatist, and liberal, each associated with a particular journalistic practice. Likewise, Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) defined the relationship between politicians and journalists as either adversarial or collaborative. More recently, Mellado (2015) identified six types of professional roles: interventionist, watchdog, loyal facilitator, service-oriented, infotainment, and civic. It is important to define each of these types:

- *Interventionist*: This role involves a more interpretive form of journalism, where the reporter openly takes a stance on the issue at hand, often writing in the first person and using adjectives to describe events. The journalist may also present solutions to problems or publicly demand that the relevant authorities do so.
- *Watchdog*: This is the epitome of critical, investigative journalism that promotes transparency and accountability among the powerful through long-term investigative reports.
- *Loyal facilitator*: This role is characterized by presenting a positive image of government authorities and economic elites, supporting their initiatives, and publicizing their activities. Rather than pointing out mistakes, it seeks to highlight the achievements of those in power.
- *Service-oriented*: Journalists in this role focus on stories that impact their audience's daily lives, providing suggestions and useful advice for decision-making in both political and commercial spheres.

- *Infotainment*: This role is oriented toward disseminating more emotional than informational stories. Sensationalist news about public figures' scandals is used to entertain audiences and, as a result, generate profits.
- *Civic*: In this role, audience members are seen as citizens, and the journalist echoes their demands and interests. As the center of their attention, news content focuses on educating audiences about fundamental aspects such as their rights and social responsibilities (Mellado, 2015).

This typology will guide the analysis of the data presented in the following pages. The reason for using Mellado's (2015) framework as the basis for this article lies in the fact that, unlike other academic works on the subject, her proposal offers a more granular view of the concept of professional roles. It provides a clear operationalization in which one of its three dimensions is precisely the journalists' perception of their audience. Moreover, it allows for the verification of this orientation in journalistic content.

METHODOLOGY

Most studies on journalists' perceptions of their audiences were developed in a pre-digital environment (Coddington et al., 2021), and much of the journalism literature focuses on media systems in Western democracies. Thus, there is a significant gap to fill in understanding how journalists in Global South media systems, including the digital environment, conceptualize their audiences.

To explore journalists' perceptions of their audiences and the importance they place on them in shaping their work, this research uses data from a statistically representative survey applied to 486 Mexican journalists from six regions of the country between 2021 and 2022. The survey was conducted within the framework of the global Worlds of Journalism project, an international research consortium with national teams of researchers in over 100 countries.

The survey regions were created based on geographical contiguity and indicators of criminal insecurity. These regions are: Mexico

City and the metropolitan area, the Center, the West, the Northeast, the Northwest, and the Southeast.

Given the lack of a national registry of journalists and to ensure that the interviews were conducted with active journalists, we built a National Directory of News Media. We first tracked journalistic activity or media organizations through their social media accounts on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram, identifying those that classified themselves as such. Once these accounts were located, they were verified based on three criteria: that they published original news (not just external information), that they posted recent and updated news (ensuring the accounts were active), and that they had their own website and/or constant activity on platforms such as Facebook, X and/or Instagram.

To ensure the reliability and internal validity of the survey results, the sample was complemented with information from other sources, such as the National Print Media Registry of the Ministry of the Interior, the directory of digital entrepreneurship compiled by Sembramedia.org, the national media registry of the National Electoral Institute (INE) issued during the 2021 federal elections, and the registry of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC).

Once the sample framework was completed, we selected media outlets in the regions through stratified random sampling. The stratification was based on the type of media and the level of importance of the outlet in the region. The sample size for each region was set at 75 cases, enough to perform inferential statistics within each region. Additionally, we oversampled in Mexico City to later create a proportionally national database. Thus, the number of surveys per region was defined as follows:

As with any survey-based study, reliability depends on having a representative sample of the population of interest, free from biases in selecting respondents and conducting the survey (Babbie, 2008). When collecting opinions, perceptions, and experiences from informants, there is always a latent risk that the responses may not necessarily reflect their true views, as there is no absolute guarantee that they always say what they think or do what they say (Berger, 2000). For this reason, we constructed a sample as representative as possible of the universe

TABLE 1

INTERVIEWED JOURNALISTS BY REGION

Region*	Journalists surveyed
Mexico City	108
Southeast	75
Center	73
West	83
Northeast	70
Northwest	77
Total	486

Regions are integrated as follows: Mexico City: Mexico City, 59 municipalities of the State of Mexico, and one from Hidalgo. Central: State of Mexico, Hidalgo, Tlaxcala, Morelos, Puebla, and Guerrero. West: Jalisco, Michoacán, Nayarit, Colima, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Querétaro, and Zacatecas. Northeast: Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, Durango, and San Luis Potosí. Northwest: Sinaloa, Sonora, Chihuahua, Baja California, and Baja California Sur. Southeast: Veracruz, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Campeche, Yucatán, Quintana Roo, and Chiapas.
Source: The authors.

of analysis, including various types and sizes of media, informants with different characteristics and rankings, and randomly selecting survey participants from the media directory we built. This ensured both the internal and external validity of our findings (Lameck, 2013).

For the specific objectives of this research, we used five questions, three of which relate to an indirect approach to how journalists perceive audiences –namely, a subjective construction of their needs and demands–, and two that refer to a direct approach through audience metrics and communication channels with them (Welbers et al., 2016). These questions also consider the two axes identified by Coddington et al. (2021) regarding the conception of audiences: whether oriented toward the rational or the emotional.

The questions we posed are as follows:

On a scale from "Not at all important" to "Extremely important", please indicate how important the following aspects of your work are:
- Educate audiences
- Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience
- Tell stories that emotionally move the audience

On a scale from "Not at all influential" to "Extremely influential", please indicate how influential the following elements are in your work as a journalist:
- Audience research and data (ratings, circulation, web metrics)
- Feedback from the audience

We explored these elements by region, type of media, and journalists' ages to better understand the variations in audience perception and its possible influence on journalistic work according to these characteristics. Additionally, we related the last elements to different types of roles established in the literature under the assumption that journalists' perceptions of their audiences affect how they perform their work.

RESULTS

The importance of educating audiences

To begin with the questions regarding the assumed preferences of audiences, we found that the educational function remains highly relevant among Mexican journalists. Seventy percent of the respondents stated that educating audiences is a very important or extremely important aspect of their work. This response takes on particular nuances when broken down by region. In the Northwest, this type of relationship with the audience is the most valued, with nearly 83 % of surveyed journalists indicating that this element is very or extremely important. At the other end of the spectrum is Mexico City, where, although this response is also the majority, only 62 % of journalists assign a value of very or extremely important.

These differences may be attributed to the characteristics of each region's audience, such as education level or the political sophistication assumed by journalists, which may influence their answers. A chi-square test was conducted to evaluate the association between these variables. The test statistic was 24.02, with a p-value of 0.007, indicating a significant association (see Figure 1a).

FIGURE 1

IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATING AUDIENCES

a) By region
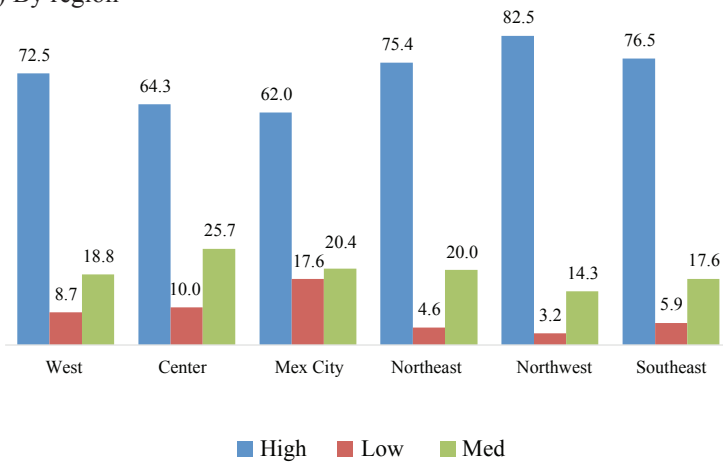
b) By type of media
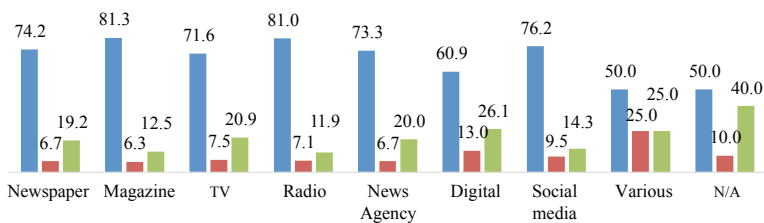
Source: The authors.

When distinguishing by type of media, the importance of educating audiences is particularly emphasized by those working in magazines, where 81 % responded that this role is very or extremely important. At the opposite end, only 50 % of those working across multiple media outlets gave this response. This trend may be linked to the fact that many magazines focus on scientific dissemination, where educating audiences is a fundamental element. The association between these variables is also statistically significant, with a test statistic of 73.98 and a p-value of 0.0009 (see Figure 1b).

Finally, when relating the importance of educating audiences with the age of the journalists surveyed, we found, interestingly, that younger journalists place more importance on this response. For all journalists aged 24 to 28, educating audiences is very or extremely important, while only 50 % of those around 47 years old gave these responses.

Tell stories that emotionally move the audience

This type of relationship also plays a significant role in the journalist-audience interaction, as it reflects a conception of audiences driven more by immediacy, impulse, and emotion.

There is not as much regional variation in these responses as in the previous element. For all regions, except the Central, more than 69 % of surveyed journalists place importance on emotions, showing that this seems to be a transversal element across all local journalistic cultures, transcending regional diversities in almost every case. It is therefore not surprising that the association between region and the importance of exciting audiences was not statistically significant in the chi-square test (see Figure 2a).

Regarding the variation of this response by type of media, it can be observed that emotion is a priority particularly for those working in newspapers and television (81.5 % and 79.1 %, respectively), and less important for those working in social media (52.4 %). This relationship is statistically significant, with a test statistic of 63.3 and a p-value of 0.00001 (see Figure 2b).

Concerning how the importance of generating emotional responses is distributed by age, it seems to be an element that declines among younger generations. While it is a frequent response among those aged 50 and above, younger journalists give it less importance, although the trend is not entirely clear.

FIGURE 2

IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONALLY MOVE THE AUDIENCE

a) By region
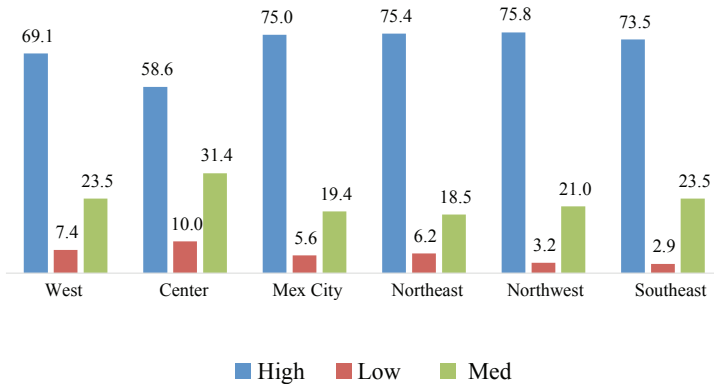
b) By type of media
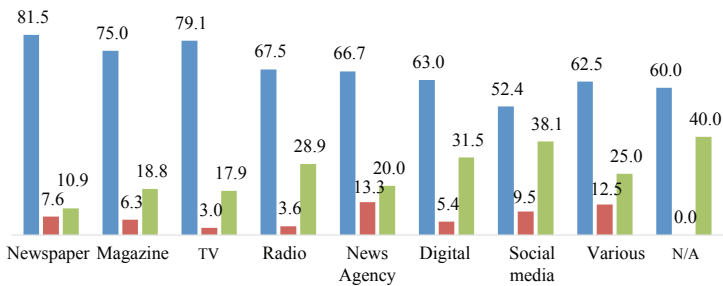
Source: The authors.

### Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience

Another way to engage with audiences is by providing content that aligns with what is assumed to be the majority's preferences. Journalists in the Northwest are the most likely to say that this element is very or extremely important (76%), while it is less common in the Western region (57%). The relationship is statistically significant, with a test statistic of 19.9 and a p-value of 0.029 (see Figure 3a).

FIGURE 3

PROVIDE THE KIND OF NEWS THAT ATTRACTS THE LARGEST AUDIENCE

a) By region
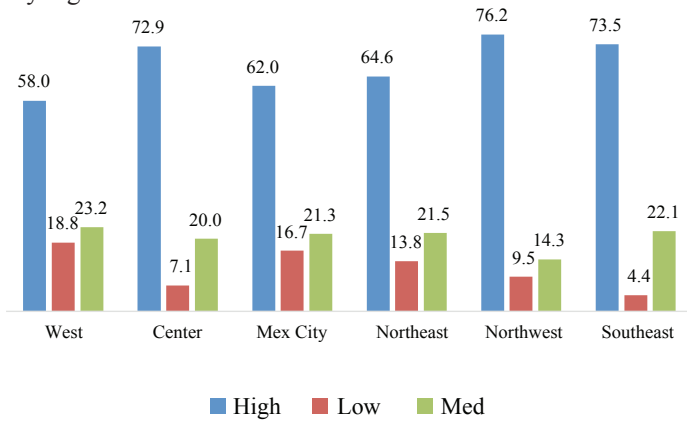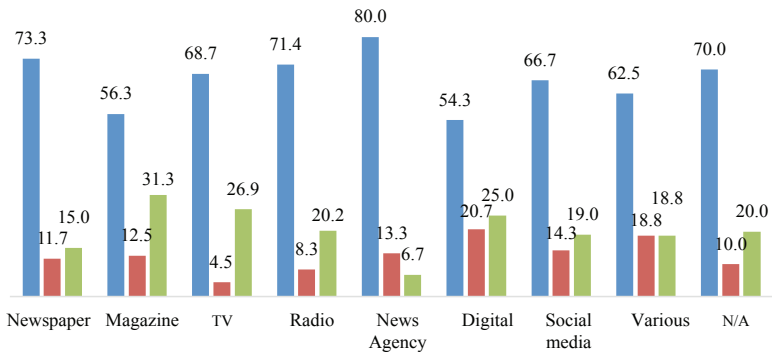
b) By type of media

Source: The authors.

By type of media, this response stands out among those working in news agencies, where 80 % of respondents consider this aspect very or extremely important. Only 54.3 % of journalists working in digital-native media gave this response. This relationship is also statistically

significant, with a test statistic of 43.4 and a p-value of 0.0002 (see Figure 3b).

Regarding how this element is distributed by age, there is no clear trend. While it is a common response among journalists aged 49 and above, it is also frequent among those 28 or younger.

INFLUENCE OF METRICS AND FEEDBACK FROM THE AUDIENCE

In terms of the formal elements that reveal how journalists perceive their audiences, we explored the influence of metrics (i.e., "hard" data such as ratings or circulation) and the feedback that audiences provide through the channels made available by the media. The importance journalists place on audience metrics by region ranges from 44.1% (Southeast) to 61.5% (Northeast). The relationship between regions and the importance of metrics is statistically significant, with a chi-square test statistic of 23.06 and a p-value of 0.01 (see Figure 4a).

Regarding variation by type of media, this perspective is most common among those working in magazines, where 75% of respondents consider this aspect very or extremely important. Only 25% of journalists working in multiple media outlets gave this response. For news agencies, this element is also not highly relevant, as only 33.3% of these journalists consider metrics extremely or very important. The diversity in the levels of importance given to metrics can be statistically attributed to the type of media, as the chi-square test resulted in a statistic of 154.5 and a p-value of 0.0002 (see Figure 4b).

In terms of age, older journalists tend to place less importance on audience metrics. The response "no importance" is more common among those aged 43 and older.

INFLUENCE OF AUDIENCE FEEDBACK

The other formal aspect we explored regarding journalists' perceptions of their audiences is the feedback that these audiences provide to the media. Once again, the Southeast is the region where audience feedback has the least influence –50% of surveyed journalists rate audience feedback as very or extremely important–, which aligns with

FIGURE 4

INFLUENCE OF METRICS

a) By region
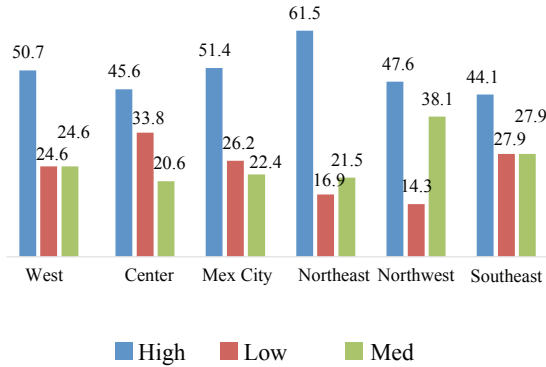
b) By type of media
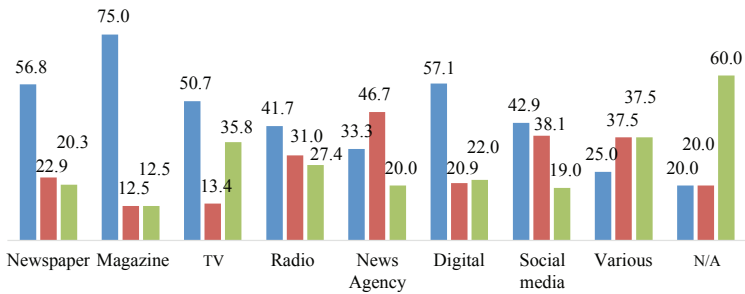
Source: The authors.

the findings on audience metrics. The relationship between variables is statistically significant, with a test statistic of 17.6 and a p-value of 0.06 (see Figure 5a).
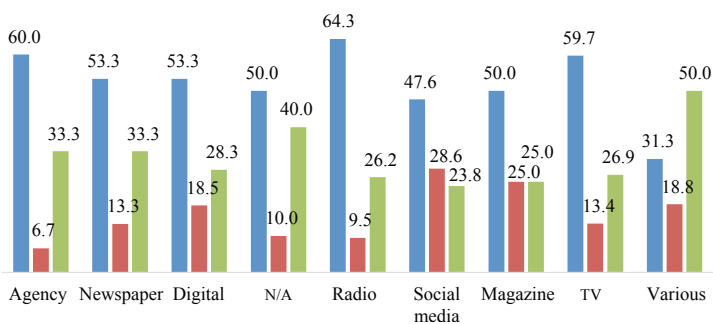
Regarding the variation of this response by type of media, this perspective stands out among radio journalists (64% of those surveyed). This is not surprising, considering that radio stations have traditionally been pioneers in maintaining open communication channels with their

FIGURE 5

INFLUENCE OF AUDIENCE FEEDBACK

a) By region

■ High   ■ Low   ■ Med
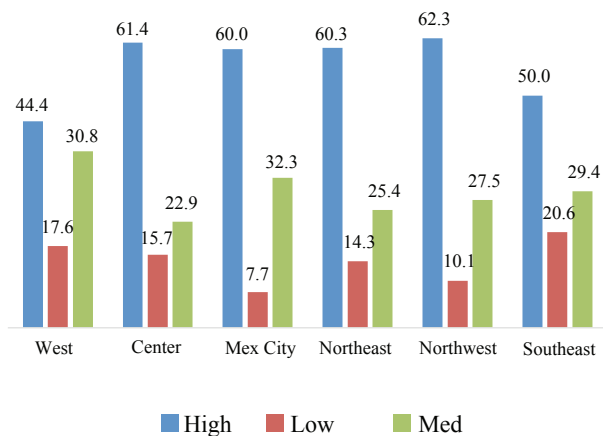
b) By type of media

Source: The authors.

publics, such as through audience ombudsmen (Castillo-Díaz, 2022; Sosa Plata, 2016). At the other end of the spectrum are journalists working in digital networks, where only 47% consider audience feedback to be highly or extremely important in their work.

It is also a rarely mentioned element among journalists who work across multiple media outlets, which is expected. The association between the influence of audience feedback and the type of media is also statistically significant, with a test statistic of 59.3 and a p-value of 0.0006 (see Figure 5b).

Finally, regarding age, audience feedback is recognized as an important influence, particularly among journalists aged 49 and older, although there is no significant decline in its importance among younger generations.

Discussion and conclusions

Concerning indirect perceptions of audiences, the data obtained from the survey suggest that journalists' opinions are divided between viewing audiences as rational or emotional subjects, with variations based on media type, age, and the region in which they work. Among the six possible journalistic roles, perceptions of audiences align Mexican journalists more closely with the civic and infotainment roles. That is, based on their perception of the target audience, journalists believe their main function is to educate and emotionally move their audiences.

While educating audiences and providing information of interest to the majority is highly valued in the Northwest, exciting audiences is a priority in all regions. In terms of media type, the function of educating audiences is emphasized more in magazines, but moving is more prominent in newspapers and television. Regarding age, the educational role is important across all age groups, while the emotional role is more pronounced among journalists aged 50 and older.

Regarding direct approaches, metrics are particularly influential for journalists working in the Northeast, younger journalists, and those working in magazines. The influence of audience feedback is related to these elements but does not show identical patterns. It is most influential among those working in radio, in the Western region, and among older journalists. Notably, the growing trend of working for multiple media outlets dilutes the influence that audience feedback might have.

In line with the literature on journalism in Mexico (see, for example, Del Palacio, 2023; González & Echeverría, 2018; González de

Bustamante & Relly, 2021; Márquez et al., 2019; Salazar, 2022; Salazar & González, 2023), these diverse audience conceptions demonstrate that journalism in Mexico is far from homogeneous. In other words, journalists working in different media and regions do not necessarily share the same notion of their audiences and, therefore, adopt different journalistic roles.

Based on the above, the main contribution of this article is the assertion that studying audiences can also include examining the journalist's perception of them. In other words, to obtain a more complete picture of news consumers, it is necessary to understand them through their relationship with news production. It is expected that there will be a relationship between these two actors, but as the literature suggests, this relationship is not always smooth and close; rather, it tends to be diffuse and circumstantial (Banjac, 2021; Riedl & Eberl, 2020; Salazar & González, 2023; Strömbäck et al., 2020). The reason for this is that there is a marked divergence between the expectations and roles assigned to each actor, which is why –as proposed here– it is important to look at one from the perspective of the other. In this case, the audience from the viewpoint of the journalist.

However, it is important to clarify that the fact that journalists' responses lean toward the civic and infotainment roles, in terms of their relationship with audiences, does not necessarily mean that they actually carry out these roles in practice. In other words, while it is expected that the professional orientation adopted by journalists will determine their performance, the data presented here do not indicate that the content they produce effectively contains elements that educate and/or emotionally move news consumers. For that, a study analyzing the content itself is required (see, for example, Márquez et al., 2019; Mellado et al., 2023).

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