Journalists' perceptions of their audiences. A case study of local journalism in three cities in the province of Buenos Aires

Percepción de los periodistas sobre sus públicos. Estudio de caso sobre periodismo local en tres ciudades de la provincia de Buenos Aires

Percepções dos jornalistas sobre seus públicos. Um estudo de caso do jornalismo local em três cidades da província de Buenos Aires

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This paper analyzes the perceptions of journalists from local Argentine media regarding their audiences, drawing on theoretical contributions from the sociology of newsrooms. It investigates the bond of proximity and the meanings constructed around the participation of audiences in news production. It concludes that journalists face difficulties in identifying the audiences they address. The aim is to contribute to the debate on strengthening local media by identifying how much they know about the audiences that could potentially fund them.

KEYWORDS: Local journalism, audiences, citizen journalism.

El artículo analiza la percepción de periodistas de medios locales de Argentina sobre sus audiencias, desde los aportes teóricos de la sociología de las redacciones. Se indaga el vínculo de proximidad y los significados construidos sobre la participación de las mismas en la producción de las noticias. Se concluye que los periodistas tienen dificultades para identificar a los públicos a los cuales se dirigen. Se busca contribuir al debate sobre el fortalecimiento de los medios locales a partir de identificar cuánto conocen a las audiencias que podrían financiarlos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Periodismo local, públicos, periodismo ciudadano.

Este artigo analisa a percepção dos jornalistas da mídia local da Argentina sobre seus públicos, com base em contribuições teóricas da sociologia das redações. Investiga o vínculo de proximidade e os significados construídos sobre a participação dos públicos na produção de notícias. Conclui-se que os jornalistas têm dificuldades em identificar os públicos a que se dirigem. O objetivo é contribuir para o debate sobre o fortalecimento da mídia local, identificando o quanto eles sabem sobre os públicos que poderiam financiá-los.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Jornalismo local, públicos, jornalismo cidadão.

Introduction: literature and conceptual review

In recent decades, journalism, both as a profession and a social practice, has transformed in multiple dimensions, affecting those who work in news production and the audiences who consume it, particularly due to the rise of digital social media, which has become a privileged channel for expression and information consumption (Barclay et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2019). Local media outlets face, in different parts of the world, serious challenges in adapting to new modes of production, editing, distribution, exhibition, and commercialization of news, which have allowed global platforms like Meta and Google to compete for audiences, political influence, and economic benefits through advertising (Becerra, 2020; Nielsen, 2015).

Local journalism is characterized by targeting audiences that are geographically close but globally connected in terms of their consumption (Schulz, 2020); having an agenda focused on local and community issues (Hess & Waller, 2017); acting as mediators/facilitators in raising awareness of community problems (Negreira-Rey & López-García, 2021); defending the interests of local residents (Moon & Lawrence, 2021) and producing locality (Olsen, 2020) through stories that contribute to reinforcing identity, a sense of belonging, and social cohesion by presenting human interest stories, providing useful information for everyday life, and holding local governments accountable (Heiselberg & Hopmann, 2024).

The digitization of the profession posed specific challenges for local media: differentiating themselves from national-level competitors (Jenkins & Jerónimo, 2021); competing against other sources of community information (Barclay et al., 2022); and facing severe funding and sustainability crises that sometimes lead to the closure of outlets and the proliferation of news deserts (Ferrucci & Alaimo, 2020).

Local media in mid-sized cities[3] are affected by these transformations. However, they could strengthen themselves due

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[3]   In Argentina, mid-size cities are defined as urban conglomerates with populations ranging from 20 000 to 200 000 inhabitants (Randle et al., 1992). They have a strong infrastructure and a thriving economy, making them

to their proximity (geographical, community, and identity-based) and the trust they maintain with their audiences (Newman et al., 2021). According to the *Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2024), local news, alongside international news, are the most important issues for all age groups in the countries surveyed.

In the context of sustained audience loss, the question of who is the audience consuming online news, and whether their interests are aligned with those of the media, is of concern to both industry actors and journalism researchers (Mellado & Gajardo, 2024). Sophisticated user-tracking software provides valuable metrics, but sometimes these are insufficient to identify the needs of the audience (Negreira-Rey et al., 2024).

For this reason, this paper poses a question that has been less explored in the reviewed literature, one that allows audiences to be reconstructed from the perspective of the information producers: How do journalists from four local media outlets in the central region of the Province of Buenos Aires perceive their audience in the period 2020-2023?

To answer this question, three objectives are outlined: 1) to understand the perceptions that local journalists have of their audiences; 2) to identify the relationship between local journalists and the community, considering public exposure and personal interaction; 3) to explore the meanings that journalists construct regarding audience participation in news production.

The contribution of this work lies in the central role that local media play in the vitality of democracy, as they are the ones that promote a community-based and localized agenda, which allows the nearby community, whom they target, to stay informed and make better decisions on issues relevant to their own local realities.

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centers of employment, diverse service provision, and dynamic exchanges with smaller surrounding towns (Manzano & Velázquez, 2015). At the same time, they foster a local identity tied to close-knit, neighborly, and support-ive relationships, in contrast to the imagined social interactions in larger metropolitan areas in the country's center, which are often perceived as secondary, cold, and mediated (Gravano, 2011; Silva, 2012).

Understanding the perceptions that local journalists have of their audiences is a possible way to narrow the gap between what is important to the public and what the media consider necessary to disseminate.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. Twenty-seven journalists from four local media outlets (see Table 1) in the central region of Buenos Aires Province (Argentina) were interviewed. To conduct the interviews, a coding book was developed containing 16 general variables[4] related to journalistic practices, which included several questions focusing on the specific dimension of the relationship between journalists and their audiences. Some of these questions were: What is news to you and the media outlet? Who consumes the news you produce? What role does the audience play in shaping the agenda? What role do statistics/metrics play in shaping the agenda? Do you read audience comments? Do they affect you? Do you respond to them? Do you take these comments into account in your work? What is the community's reaction to the work you do? Do you believe your work contributes to the community? Do you feel valued and respected by the community? What is your relationship with the audience?

Two sampling mechanisms were implemented when selecting the interviewees. The first was purposive and non-probabilistic, involving a prior search of journalists from the selected media outlets on news websites and social media. Secondly, initial contact was made via e-mail with the interviewees to arrange a date and time for the meeting. These journalists, who acted as gatekeepers, were then asked to recommend other professionals who could be interviewed. This technique, known in the literature on methodology as "snowball sampling",

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4   These included: practice of the profession, labor situation, media outlet structure, time management, workspaces, tasks and responsibilities, material resources, information sources, news agenda, sociability, work pressures, technology adoption, value of local journalism, gender and journalism, Covid-19 pandemic, and the future of the profession.

allowed the interviewees to be selected not directly or through a link with the researcher, but by "identifying cases of interest through someone who knew someone who could be a good candidate for participation" (Martínez-Salgado, 2012, p. 616).

The selection of the media outlets was based on their representativeness in each of the three cities (Olavarría, Azul, and Tandil) during the analyzed period, taking into account their general recognition by the community. In the cases of *El Popular*, *El Tiempo*, and *El Eco*, these were the only outlets that, at the time of the fieldwork, had a printed newspaper in circulation in each of their respective cities, meaning their reach was not limited to digital channels. In the case of *Central de Noticias*, it stands out due to the prestige and recognition its journalists have within the community, in addition to being one of the leading media outlets in terms of unique visitors to its website in Olavarría. It is important to note that *El Popular* was sold (after 134 years) in July 2023, and changed its name and brand identity; the new company and its employees are not part of this study.

Data processing was carried out using NVIVO PRO 12 software, where the interview records were entered and then coded. The work process was comparative; interviews were coded as they were conducted, and data collection was concluded once saturation in the relevant categories was achieved (Martínez-Salgado, 2012).

Development

Audiences that consume local media. Insights from journalists' perspectives

This question, which is central to designing any communicational and/or journalistic product, does not receive a clear answer from media workers. Despite the widespread adoption of web traffic analysis software,[5] in some local media outlets, this information is reserved solely for the board of directors, and in others, although they have access to these measurement tools, the audience beyond the web (radio, print, television) remains a mystery.

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[5] We are referring to the most popular software programs, such as Google Analytics, as well as some others specific to media outlets.

				TABLE 1				
			DESCRIPTION OF THE SELECTED MEDIA OUTLETS					
Media outlet	City	Population size*	Web	Website visitors (period: August 2024)**	Number of Facebook followers***	Number of Instagram followers***	Editorial structure	Overview
El Popular	Olavarría	126 328	http://www.el-popular.com.ar/	No data	40 000	40 000	The editorial team consists of 15 journalists divided into the following areas: sports, police, politics, entertainment, general news, and web coverage. The highest authority is the media director, followed by the editor-in-chief.	A regional newspaper founded on June 24, 1899. It is part of a multimedia group that includes a radio station, a television channel, and a digital portal. In addition to covering events in Olavarría, it has a regional section that includes neighboring cities.

Media outlet	City	Population size*	Web	Website visitors (period: August 2024)**	Number of Facebook followers***	Number of Instagram followers***	Editorial structure	Overview
Central de Noticias	Olavarría	126 328	https://www. centraldenoti- cias.com.ar/	34 878	13 000	20 900	The team is composed of six journalists, four of whom are founders of the outlet. They are divided into sections: sports, politics, crime, entertainment, and general news.	It is a young media outlet, founded in 2020 by young journalists with recognized careers in the city who were laid off from a digital-native outlet created in 2006. In a short time, it established itself as a relevant news source, thanks to the prestige of its staff.

Media outlet	City	Population size*	Web	Website visitors (period: August 2024)**	Number of Facebook followers***	Number of Instagram followers***	Editorial structure	Overview
El Tiempo	Azul	75 396	https://www.diarioeltiempo.com.ar/	115 955	68 000	31 700	The team is composed of six journalists, divided into sections: sports, crime, politics, entertainment, and general news. The highest authority is the media director, followed by the editor-in-chief.	It was founded in 1933 as a morning publication and has a print edition on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays. It covers news related to the city and its district. Its director is Alfredo Ronchetti.
El Eco	Tandil	150 162	https://www.eleco.com.ar/	589 728	143 000	80 000	The team is composed of 15 journalists, distributed across the following areas: sports, crime, politics, entertainment, general news, and web coverage. The highest	The newspaper *El Eco de Tandil* was founded on July 30, 1882, by the pharmacist Juan S. Jaca. It is the fourth oldest newspaper in Argentina, after *La Nación*, *La Prensa*,

Media outlet	City	Population size*	Web	Website visitors (period: August 2024)**	Number of Facebook followers***	Number of Instagram followers***	Editorial structure	Overview
							authority is the media director, followed by the editor-in-chief and, in some cases, section editors.	and *La Capital* of Rosario, and the tenth oldest in Latin America.

*According to the 2022 census.

** Similarweb (as of September 10, 2024).

*** As of September 10, 2024.

Source: The authors.

This uncertainty regarding who reads, listens to, or watches the news leads to a series of assumptions about the readers, based on factors such as their age, social status, interests, and other dimensions. Journalists state that their audience consists of at least three age groups: older people who consume the print newspaper, young adults who read news on the website, and younger individuals who turn to social media for information. The concern lies in maintaining all these "audiences" (as they refer to them) across the different formats they produce content for: "Clearly, the digital newspaper is consumed by young people. The print newspaper actually has very few subscribers, and they are older people who struggle to adapt to new technologies" (Journalist 18, reporter, society, culture, and entertainment section, Azul).

One difficulty is that some newsrooms lack data to confirm what they believe. The absence of data is due to the fact that surveys on media consumption are no longer conducted for traditional outlets, and because the director of one of chooses not to share the web traffic data from the website:

> I believe this is a shortcoming of local newspapers; we don't really know who our ideal reader is. It's a struggle we've had, and it's a key issue. Who am I writing for? Today, with the print newspaper, it's much easier because the readers are generally 70 years old and up, and that age group has grown significantly. We also don't have it measured; it's something that, when readers pass away they're not replaced ... (Journalist 8, editor-in-chief, general news reporter, Olavarría).

> The neighbors who consume media, especially through traditional TV, are people 50 or 60 years old and up. Some younger people might know you, but it's because they watch at their parents' house, not because they consume TV themselves. To me, this is also another way of recognizing that there are people who don't consume television … That's why there's a trend to create content aimed at capturing that other audience, those who don't turn on the TV, don't listen to the radio, don't read the newspaper, and don't visit the website (Journalist 21, web content writer, Tandil).

The journalists' feeling is one of fumbling in the dark, relying on conjectures and assumptions that are not always accurate. What they state is that those who buy the paper edition of the newspaper do so out of habit or tradition, and younger people are not interested in purchasing it. To reach this audience, it's not only necessary to communicate in a different format –such as adapting to digital social media and generating new topics of interest. At the same time, halting the decline in print newspaper sales involves making a series of editorial decisions that require resources they don't have and taking on responsibilities for which they aren't recognized. These responsibilities typically fall to media leadership or specific roles, such as an audience editor or community manager.

> [Referring to the print newspaper] I believe it should be journalism of higher quality, with investigative or in-depth pieces. Or, if you're going to cover the same topic as on the digital platforms, and if the portal has two sources, you should have six. The reality is that we can't do that … to produce quality journalism, you need quality journalists. There's no magic to it, so to speak (Journalist 8, news editor, general news writer, Olavarría).

The journalist in charge of technological innovation at the Tandil multimedia company explains that they implemented various communication channels: blogs, newsletters, podcasts, WhatsApp news updates, and content production. They not only modified formats and languages but also brought in young people who suggested new topics, such as urban music. The company's effort, which has over 100 years of history in the city, is to compete for the younger audience and retain it. However, the journalist acknowledges that this is a challenge for multiple reasons:

> Yes, there is a big change, there is interaction, but I can't say if the younger audience is truly 100% attracted to it. It's still a traditional media outlet trying to tell young people what they should listen to or watch. In that sense, the hardest part of our task is reaching a new audience … We try in every

possible way to find young voices, fresh voices to interview, but in the end, we also end up creating content that is still targeted at the older audience. It's complicated (Journalist 19, head of innovation strategies, political and general news reporter, Tandil).

The journalist's reflection is crucial for understanding the challenge faced by traditional media companies, deeply rooted in the city's history, in connecting with younger generations. The real difficulty lies in balancing the need to retain traditional readers while also appealing to a younger audience with different consumption habits, interests, and ways of accessing information.

Regarding perceptions of the audiences' information and consumption practices, the first issue that emerges from the interviews with journalists is that people are more likely to get their news through digital social media platforms than through websites. In other words, their news consumption tends to occur on Instagram, Facebook, or X, unless something specific piques their interest and motivates them to visit a website.

I don't think people sit at their computers and type in the media's website link; instead, they get their information through social media. It's through social media that they click on links and then go to the website. I feel that my generation is all about Twitter, Instagram, and browsing there. For example, I get my news from Twitter, I have all the media outlets there, and when a story catches my eye, I click the link and go to the page. So, yes, digital is the way to go now (Journalist 2, writer, entertainment section, Olavarría).

The second issue journalists consider is that people don't visit the same article twice; instead, they prefer to click on a new story about the same topic. This has direct consequences on the way content is produced: journalists create shorter articles that provide continuity on a given topic, rather than writing updates or adding more information to an already-published story.

The third issue on which the journalists agree is that people are reading less. According to the interviewees, there is no interest in

reading long and/or in-depth articles; instead, they prefer to get their information from just an image, a headline, and a caption on social media: "People read less and less, which is a major problem we have, and it's not just related to journalism, but also to our education" (Journalist 13, reporter, police section, Azul).

The fourth reflection that emerges from the interviews is that journalists believe not all the topics they cover are of interest to the public. They particularly highlight political issues, in general, and what is known in Argentina as *rosca política*,[6] in particular.

> Sometimes the topic of the day is the agreement between the municipal workers and the local government, you know? And we're there, doing the interview with one union leader, then with another one, we're in the microclimate, that's the topic we have to cover. Then the feedback you get says, "Why aren't the garbage collectors passing by?" And you realize that the public wasn't interested (Journalist 24, sports section, Tandil).

> Personally, I sometimes face the dilemma of whether the topics that interest us as journalists also interest the general public. Sometimes yes, they align, and other times they don't. Especially with political topics … for us it's a matter of political maneuvering, it's interesting for us, but then we see that the public doesn't really care. So we have to define topics with broader appeal for the majority of people: like a group of school kids sitting in to demand heating, well, those kinds of topics really move people. We try to focus on topics that affect us every day (Journalist 21, web content writer, Tandil).

For local media outlets, covering the municipal agenda, city council, and political parties is not optional, given the economic difficulties they face. Through official and private advertising, politics buys and

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6   In Argentina, the term "rosca política" refers to the negotiations, deals, and strategies that politicians use to gain consensus, alliances, or support in the political arena. This expression typically refers to the behind-the-scenes political maneuvers aimed at influencing decisions and securing backing for specific actions or candidacies.

demands a prominent place in the public media spotlight. For this reason, journalists must fulfill commercial obligations but also rethink content to make it engaging for their audiences. According to the journalists, different types of audiences coexist, each with their own interests and expectations in local media.

> I believe there are two types of audiences. However, I think the more mass-oriented one is still the one that consumes fast, immediate, and very superficial news. That happens, but I also think it's false to say that people don't read or aren't interested in other things: there are people who are paying to access certain content that has depth and development (Journalist 26, multiplatform content producer, politics, society, and gender sections, Tandil).

The subscription model implemented in Tandil involves more in-depth and analytical articles, confirming that there is an audience interested in journalism that offers more than just daily current events.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JOURNALISTS AND THEIR AUDIENCES

In this section, we aim to explore a distinctive feature of local journalism: the close relationship that journalists have with their audiences. This connection is especially strong in mid-sized cities, where journalists and their audiences not only share the same geographic space but also common social networks and identities. These bonds are evident in daily interactions in places such as clubs, schools, parks, institutions, gyms, and other community spaces.

Furthermore, locating a local journalist is easy, as is obtaining their phone number or even running into them on the streets, at events, or in other spaces that are part of daily life in the city. Journalists in mid-sized cities are more exposed to interactions with their audiences than those working in larger urban centers, both physically and digitally. This closeness presents a dual challenge: accepting everyday recognition while also dealing with the pressures and demands of their neighbors. The following example, shared by a sports journalist from Tandil, illustrates this proximity:

> People call my personal phone all the time. A lot of people have my
> number and say, "Hey, you're the sports guy, how did Santa Marina do?"
> I might have just come back from vacation and have no idea. It happens
> to me, I'll be at home, you know, sitting, watching TV, and they pull back
> the curtain from outside, like they're coming to my house. They'll also
> send me WhatsApp messages asking, "Hey, do you have the number
> for such-and-such pharmacy?" But well, it's part of the job, you can't
> complain about it (Journalist 24, sports writer, Tandil).

The idea that journalism is a service to the community, one that
operates without set hours, leads most journalists to accept that others
will contact them on their personal phones rather than through the
media outlet they work for. This condition adds pressure to their work
and can sometimes become exhausting. Although each journalist
adopts different strategies for managing their exposure and may limit
their contact with the public to varying degrees, there remains a sense
of inevitability about this kind of relationship with the audience, which
also becomes demanding:

> The pressure is constant. But it's the same whether you approach this
> profession with passion or not. What sometimes amuses me is reading
> how the community demands certain things from you, like the names
> of those involved in criminal incidents, for example. They demand this
> from a place that's often hard to understand, and this is cultural, what
> I'm saying. People like us, who are workers generating news, also need
> economic compensation because it's part of what we do. Sometimes, when
> you read the comments, you see that people sit in a position where they
> demand things without understanding that we are also working and expect
> to be paid for our efforts, yet they want everything for free (Journalist 13,
> reporter, criminal section, Azul).

In the interaction between local media and their audiences,
citizens point out mistakes, question approaches, and suggest
improvements, ranging from headline choices to different ways of
handling news stories. The public knows that behind the screen, there is
a person who will read their comments and take a stance on what they

are saying. Ultimately, even when journalists decide not to respond, there remains an implicit dialogue and an ongoing commitment to improving the quality of the journalistic product.

How do audiences participate in the production of news?

Journalists acknowledge that certain topics generate a large volume of messages and opinions because they resonate with people, allowing them to express their dissatisfaction and give it public visibility. This is one of the ways in which audiences participate, according to the subjects analyzed: they provide information that is later constructed into news, trust journalists, and thus legitimize one of the most important roles of the profession.

> In recent times, supported by new technologies, there is an agenda set by the local residents. The residents themselves become sources, seeking a response to their issues in the media they trust. This also represents a sort of comparative advantage, if you will (Journalist 15, reporter, general news section, Tandil).

According to the interviewees, the local community plays an active role in shaping part of the daily news agenda. Unlike larger media outlets with national reach, local media do not limit themselves to sections dedicated to "people's" stories or videos. Instead, an issue raised by a local resident can quickly become the lead story the following day. In this way, public contributions not only provide insight into the interests and concerns of the audience but also offer journalists an opportunity to spotlight important, often overlooked, local issues.

> I receive an overwhelming number of messages from people who have issues in their neighborhood, from individuals with complaints about something that happened at the hospital, and from people who reach out to us for help or to ask about situations because they can't find answers through formal channels (Journalist 15, general news reporter, Tandil).

The fieldwork results suggest that there are three key ways in which the public participates in news production in local media:

Publics as sources/co-producers: The community makes inquiries and provides information about events they believe should be reported. Generally, these involve complaints, neighborhood issues, government absenteeism, abuses by companies that fail to provide services, situations of need, as well as schedules for sports, social, cultural, and charitable activities. Citizens also approach journalists or send them information regarding road accidents, open-air dumps, police operations, and traffic checks, among other topics. The interviewed journalists state:

> Community as content producers hasn't been developed yet in our outlet, which is something I see happening with other media … On social media, people tell you: "In this neighborhood, they don't mow the grass", "This happened over here, something else happened over there". I see this happening more frequently in sources (Journalist 5, reporter, police section, Olavarría).

> Through WhatsApp, we centralize everything the audience wants to say, tell, or express, and from there, we often get useful information. People tell you they've been robbed, so right there, you have a great source of information (Journalist 17, web content writer, Tandil).

Audiences as co-editors on social media: Once the news is published, audiences suggest edits (on websites and social media) that correct certain details and/or expand on what journalists have written, using their own knowledge, data, or direct access to the people or events involved. This is a particularly interesting phenomenon, one that is becoming more pronounced in mid-sized cities, and it turns news content into a transmedia experience. It is the audiences who engage with the news and contribute to expanding, correcting, and/or questioning it.

> We do address specific complaints, whether it's due to a concern or something the readers didn't like. Our interaction with the audience is quite personalized when there is an issue … We approach it with a lot of

caution, so to speak. We carefully gather data, double-check the news, and thoroughly verify any messages or opinions that come in (Journalist 14, editor-in-chief, general news writer, Tandil).

Audiences as co-commentators of reality (comments on traditional and digital media): In the various media through which a news story is communicated, the community shares its positions and opinions, creating a collective dialogue on specific topics that raises new questions about what is happening and its implications.

We're always checking comments on certain articles that deal with very sensitive topics. For example, when they started vaccinating children [during the Covid-19 pandemic], there were many violent comments, so in those articles … we try to make sure that those comments don't misinform what we are saying (Journalist 2, reporter, entertainment section, Olavarría).

Understanding the complexity of the relationship with the public allows us to grasp the importance of local journalism. As demonstrated by unfortunate historical events (such as a pandemic, for example), it is local journalists who play a central role in overseeing the functioning of institutions. The interviewees report that they are constantly consulted by local residents who, when they do not receive answers from the government or when they find themselves in situations of stark inequality with private entities, turn to local journalism to make their issues visible and collective.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, the aim was to answer the question: How do journalists from four local media outlets in the central region of the province of Buenos Aires perceive their audience in the period 2020-2023? To address this, we set three specific objectives: 1) to understand the perceptions that local journalists have about their audiences; 2) to identify the relationship between local journalists and the community, considering public exposure and personal interaction; and 3) to explore the meanings journalists construct regarding how the audience participates in news production.

Regarding the first objective, local journalists struggle to clearly define their audience due to the opacity in the management of metrics systems and the limited audience measurements promoted by local media companies. This poses a problem for adapting to the dynamic transformations in news consumption habits, which not only involve the use of new communication platforms but also new informational needs that journalists only partially understand (such as shorter reading times, the need for front-page updates, and interest in specific topics). Since there is no formal decision to tailor news for different audiences (based on factors like age, class, education, or interest in being informed), generic news stories continue to be produced and reproduced without significant changes across the various platforms available to the media outlet (the same story is published in the print edition, uploaded to the website, and then shared on social media). This leads to a missed opportunity to leverage the unique communicative potential of each platform and to implement effective audience segmentation. This perspective is echoed by Cantalapiedra (2016), who argues that there is a concern for the reader, but it does not translate into more engaging content, but rather into a more impersonal one.

Thus, the simpler, less elaborate genres that require less involvement from the journalist and the media outlet in telling the story dominate local journalism. Paradoxically, this aspect works against the possibilities for the growth and sustainability of news organizations. In line with Negreira-Rey et al. (2024), the specificity of content in relation to its communities is key to the survival of local journalism in a context of automated and homogenized news.

Regarding the second objective, the fieldwork results allow us to affirm that local journalists have a close relationship with their audiences, with whom they share spaces in community life. This proximity results in a series of demands and expectations that are directed at the journalists themselves, not just the media companies. This increases the pressure on their tasks, given the level of public exposure to which local journalists are subjected. On the other hand, credibility and trust, as well as the service-oriented role they perform, are key pillars for understanding the relationship between local journalism and its audiences. However, this proximity does not translate into greater sustainability for local projects or alternative sources of funding.

This last idea connects to the third objective, which allowed us to investigate the modes of citizen participation in news production. The results of this study highlight three modes of participation: co-producers, as sources that generate new stories and topics to be covered; co-editors, by adding information and correcting possible errors in already published articles; and co-commentators, given the dialogue facilitated by different channels that allow citizens to express their opinions, exchange viewpoints with journalists, and publicly frame events that affect them.

The contribution of this study lies in a) highlighting local journalism as a central pillar of access to information and the ability to bring local issues to light for millions of people who receive and help produce news with a close agenda that is not covered by national media; b) addressing the challenge faced by local journalists in identifying the particularities and demands of their audiences, which affects the gap between the interests of the media and those of the public; and c) identifying the transformation that local journalism undergoes concerning the opportunities for audience expression within the context of digital communication platforms, which allow them to be sources, actors, and editors of news content.

At the same time, this study makes a significant contribution to local journalism research by expanding the understanding of the dynamics between journalists and audiences in local settings. The identification of these three modes of interaction (co-producers, co-editors, and co-commentators) reveals a significant shift in the perception of audiences toward a more participatory communication process.

Regarding the limitations of this study, it is important to highlight the absence of interviews with people in managerial positions within the selected journalistic organizations. This omission represents a limitation in the research, as these roles typically offer a broader and more strategic perspective on the audience they serve, due to their privileged access to a full range of data and audience analysis. These individuals, being involved in organizational decision-making, not only have a detailed understanding of the internal and external dynamics that influence content production but are also able to interpret how these dynamics translate into strategies aimed at meeting the needs and expectations of their audiences.

We believe that incorporating these actors in future research could provide a more holistic perspective, enabling a comparison between the perceptions of journalists at the operational level and the strategic viewpoints shaped within the upper echelons of media organizations. Expanding the range of interviews in this manner would undoubtedly enrich the results, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic between media outlets and their audiences.

Moreover, for future studies, we consider it essential to conduct a deeper exploration of the role of social media in the processes examined, particularly how these platforms influence journalists' perceptions of their audiences. As social media has become a primary channel for the distribution and consumption of information, it is important to investigate how these tools impact journalists' understanding of audience preferences, expectations, and behaviors. This analysis could shed light on how social media interactions, audience data, and real-time feedback are transforming the relationship between journalists and their audiences, as well as how these shifting perceptions influence everyday journalistic practices.

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