Interacting With Audiences: Journalistic role conceptions, reciprocity, and perceptions about participation

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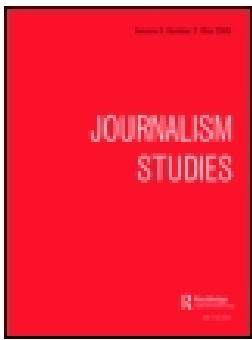
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Published online: 12 Apr 2016.

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INTERACTING WITH AUDIENCES
Journalistic role conceptions, reciprocity, and perceptions about participation

Avery E. Holton ⬤, **Seth C. Lewis** ⬤, and **Mark Coddington** ⬤

Drawing on open-ended responses to a representative survey of US journalists, this article examines how journalists' role conceptions may be associated with distinct perceptions of and practices toward audiences, whether online or offline. In particular, this research considers the potential for more reciprocal, or mutually beneficial, interactions between journalists and audiences. Using exploratory factor analysis and normalized index scores, journalists are characterized within four role conceptions. Results show that Populist Mobilizer and Entertainment roles are more associated with digital audience engagement, while Loyal Support and Public Service roles better characterize offline interactions. Findings point to a need for better explanations of how journalists' role conceptions connect with their engaging (or not) in more purposeful, persistent and reciprocal interactions with audiences.

KEYWORDS   audience; participatory journalism; reciprocal journalism; reciprocity; role conceptions

Introduction

In perhaps the most comprehensive cross-national study of audience participation in journalism, Singer et al. (2011) sum up their analysis of journalists affiliated with leading newspaper websites in 10 Western democracies by concluding: "What emerged in our study is a view of news organizations that are seeking to provide more avenues for audience involvement but simultaneously to protect the professional status of the journalist" (189). In effect, journalists recognized that people formerly known as passive readers had something to contribute as "users," whether that meant providing tips and eyewitness material on the front end of the journalistic process or in reacting via online comments on the back end. The upshot was that journalists tended to perceive the user as a potentially useful resource but nevertheless "an active recipient of the news rather than as an active participant in the news" (189)—comfortably at arm's length from journalists and their work. Since that research was conducted in 2007–2008, the potential for journalists to engage and interact with audience members, individually and collectively, has escalated dramatically. The rapid diffusion of smartphones and social media, among other technological advances in peer-to-peer networked communication across many countries (Graham and Dutton 2014; Rainie and Wellman 2012), has facilitated easy information creation and sharing among users. This contributes to media dynamics, characterized by a greater mixing of mass and interpersonal messaging, that are increasingly "hybrid" (Chadwick 2013), "affective" (Papacharissi 2014), and "spreadable" (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013) in nature.

Given such conditions, it is worth reconsidering the role(s) of the journalist in the light of such social, cultural, and technological conditions. More than ever, it would seem, journalists must confront the matter of what to do with their audiences. What kind of relationship should they negotiate with them, and with what implications for the professional purview that journalists have long maintained as gatekeepers? In 2007–2008, such questions primarily had to do with what journalists allowed users to do on their homepages (e.g., in writing blogs, uploading photos, or making comments). Today, those options have expanded to include seemingly the whole of the internet—all of the potential connections that might be forged with and among users on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and the like, setting aside the growth in messaging apps such as WhatsApp and other mobile-focused opportunities. How do journalists negotiate this proliferation of digital directions in addition to community-centric functions that may be as much about offline interactions as online ones?

Against that backdrop, and drawing on open-ended responses to a representative survey of newspaper reporters and editors in the United States, this article examines distinct approaches that journalists might take in relation to audiences, depending on their personal perceptions about their professional roles. The purpose of such research is twofold: first, to develop a richer picture of how journalists think about and act toward the audience—a key approach to updating the foundational research of Singer et al. (2011)—and, second, to frame those findings in light of conceptual heuristics that can aid in analyzing the various interpretations of audiences that emerge from journalists' self-reports. Such heuristics include the professional role conceptions approach to studying journalists, a longstanding line of research that emphasizes the importance of understanding how journalists perceive their normative role in society (e.g., see Hanitzsch 2011; Mellado 2015; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). Additionally, given the dialogical character of emerging social media, this research considers the particular potential for *reciprocal* kinds of interactions between journalists and audiences—exchanges of more mutual beneficence that are considered essential to community formation and perpetuation (Molm 2010). Because reciprocity may be evident in ways that are direct and indirect, fleeting and sustained over time, this article considers the extent to which journalists envision engagement with audiences (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014).

Ultimately, this study aims to clarify, at least within the American context, how different types of journalists may possess different self-conceptions about their roles, and, in turn, different perceptions of and practices toward audiences during this moment of heightened (potential) interaction through social media spaces.

Journalistic Role Conceptions

How journalists perceive their professional roles in society is a central area of journalism studies. Since Cohen (1963) distinguished between "neutral" and "participant" roles, scholars have offered various conceptualizations of journalistic roles, or the predominant self-image that journalists report regarding their social functions. Such research includes Weaver and Wilhoit's (1996) four role types—disseminator, adversary, interpreter-investigator, and populist mobilizer—as well as Hanitzsch's (2011) finding of four global "professional milieus": populist disseminator, detached watchdog, critical change agent, and opportunist facilitator. These and other studies often develop role conceptions at the

individual level of media psychology (Shoemaker and Reese 2014), using surveys of journalists to understand how individuals express certain normative goals.

Recent reviews of the role conceptions literature have noted that while roles reveal *how* journalists believe they ought to do their work, they do not entirely capture *what* they do—a gap between role conception and role performance that may be exacerbated by economic, political, and institutional circumstances (Mellado 2015; Mellado and van Dalen 2014; Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013). As Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos (2013) noted, journalistic role conceptions may be the result of what journalists expect of themselves, but those expectations may be overridden by a number of factors, including organizational influence, changes in routines, and the emergence of new technology. As such, role conceptions and their related enactments should be considered through multiple lenses that do not preclude other influences on journalistic work.

This emphasis on connecting journalistic ideals to journalistic practice points to a void addressed in this article: in the broad literature on roles, little attention is given to the particular contexts of audience interaction, engagement, and participation. How certain journalistic role perceptions translate to various types of journalist–audience relationships has yet to be explored fully (cf. Hellmueller and Mellado 2015). Thus, insofar as role conceptions outline how journalists may perceive and presumably act upon distinct political and societal functions, it matters to understand how such roles relate to different elements of journalist–audience interaction.

Reciprocity and Journalism

The relationship between journalists and their audiences has long been a source of both dependence and disdain. An audience may be required for news to work, but journalists have not been particularly interested in listening to, let alone collaborating with, audience members, in part because of the threat such interaction poses to professional autonomy (Gans 1979). While Singer et al. (2011) and others have found journalists in the twenty-first century to be far more open to interacting with and even learning from audiences (e.g., Hedman 2015; Revers 2014), there is an enduring tension between maintaining professional control of the news information environment, as a key aspect of journalists' occupational role, and developing more dialogical relationships with users via digital media (Lewis 2012).

Amid this tension, the concept of reciprocity may pose a fresh possibility for rethinking this fractured relationship. Reciprocity, the practice of exchange with others for mutual benefit, is among the most universal of social norms. In its positive form, it is considered a fundamental starting point for establishing and maintaining personal relationships (Gouldner 1960), contributing to the formation and perpetuation of trust, social capital, and community dynamics both in online (Pelaprat and Brown 2012) and offline (Putnam 2000) settings. In more fully explicating the role of reciprocity as a set of social exchanges, Molm (2010) developed a model for understanding direct forms of reciprocity (e.g., A gives to B, and B gives to A) as well as indirect ones (A gives to B who gives to C who gives to D, and so on), illustrating how both personalized and generalized exchanges contribute to strengthening social ties, when positive.

Drawing on this perspective, we previously suggested that journalists and audiences alike may benefit from more reciprocally oriented exchanges (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014). "Reciprocal journalism" proposes that journalists may develop more mutually

beneficial relationships with audiences across three forms of exchange: direct (exchanges between journalists and audiences in a one-to-one fashion), indirect (exchanges that are witnessed by others and intended for community benefit, in a one-to-many fashion), and sustained (exchanges that occur repeatedly over time, pointing to future interactions and benefits). The value of reciprocal journalism is underscored by research finding that, in participatory news projects, users expected reciprocity from journalists—something in return for their contributions—and that projects succeeded or failed according to reciprocal relationship-building (Borger, van Hoof, and Sanders 2014). While certainly no cure-all by itself, reciprocity nevertheless offers a perspective for envisioning how journalists and audiences might find mutually responsive patterns of social exchange, directly, indirectly, and repeatedly over time (see also Lewis 2015).

Bringing together the above insights on role conceptions and reciprocity, this research explores the nature of journalistic perceptions of and practices toward audience interaction by studying a representative sample of US journalists: their self-conceptions in connection with self-reported activities that seek to build improved relationships with audiences, reciprocally or otherwise. How journalists characterize such relationships, and how those characterizations compare across different role types and circumstantial dimensions, is the focus of this work.

Method

This study employed a national survey of US newspaper journalists and editors (referred to hereafter as "journalists"), conducted in February 2014. The sample was drawn from Cision, a media contact service whose database contains at least 1.5 million media professionals worldwide. The authors drew a list of US newspaper journalists in that database with searches for job descriptions containing the words "writer," "reporter" "columnist," "contributor," and "editor." The search generated approximately 39,000 contacts, a similar number to the 37,983 full-time newspaper newsroom employees in the census of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (2013).

The sample was stratified according to the American Society of Newspaper Editors's 2013 ratio of editors to non-editors of 1.92:1, and then selected randomly within those two categories. Of the 5197 journalists who were e-mailed the survey, 546 completed it. Applying the American Association of Public Opinion Research's RR4 calculation, the response rate was 19.6 percent. This is similar to that of other research on journalists using Web-based surveys (Gil de Zúñiga and Hinsley 2013).

Journalists' professional role conceptions were measured through an index of 20 items drawn from the Worlds of Journalism Study,[1] each using a 10-point Likert-type scale (1 = not important, 10 = extremely important). The authors used an exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation to determine the underlying dimensions in the index, extracting dimensions with Eigenvalues greater than 1. Cronbach's alpha was then used to refine those dimensions into distinct cohesive roles. That process left four roles using a total of 16 items, after items were eliminated for their lack of fit into the structure of roles.

The first was *Public Service* (mean = 51.39, SD = 11.53), which included seven items (Cronbach's α = 0.80; monitor and scrutinize political leaders; provide information people need to make political decisions; monitor and scrutinize business; let people express their views; report things as they are; provide analysis of current affairs; be an adversary of the government). The second was *Populist Mobilization* (mean = 14.79, SD = 7.20),

which included three items ($\alpha = 0.82$; influence public opinion; set the political agenda; advocate for social change). The third was *Loyal Support* (mean = 9.01, SD = 5.51), which included three items ($\alpha = 0.81$; support government policy; convey a positive image of political leadership; support national development). The fourth was *Entertainment* (mean = 17.63, SD = 6.10), which included three items ($\alpha = 0.65$; provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience; provide entertainment and relaxation; provide advice, orientation, and direction for daily life).

To organize participants into roles for qualitative analysis, role conception scores were normalized relative to the indexes' scale and to the scores of other journalists. Each role score was split into quartiles, and each respondent was assigned to a quartile for each role. Those quartile scores were then compared across roles, and respondents were assigned to the role for which they scored in the highest quartile. Respondents who had two roles sharing their top quartile score (e.g., scoring in the top quartile in both Public Service and Entertainment) were assigned to both roles. However, respondents who had three or more roles sharing their top quartile score were assigned to a "Three or More Roles" category ($N = 82$) and excluded from this analysis. If respondents were in the bottom two quartiles (i.e., below the median) in all four roles, they were assigned a "No Roles" category ($N = 68$) and also excluded from this analysis. There were also 15 respondents outside these groups who did not answer the survey's qualitative questions, leaving a total N of 397 non-duplicated responses in the analysis. The resulting frequency of role conceptions, including overlapping assignments for those who strongly identified with more than one role, was Public Service ($N = 148$), Loyal Support ($N = 144$), Entertainment ($N = 138$), and Populist Mobilizer ($N = 132$).

The number of respondents assigned to each role conception was generally even across roles because they were normalized by overall professional scores; that is, they were categorized by role based on their scores relative to other journalists. For the Loyal Support role, then, though the overall scores for this role were much lower than those for other roles, respondents were assigned to this role if they scored particularly high in this role *relative to other journalists*. This method of categorization allowed for direct comparison across the varying numbers of items in the indices for the four roles and helped to isolate differences among journalists regarding their identification with roles that tended to be largely revered (Public Service) or reviled (Loyal Support).

In order to understand how these role conceptions might be associated with journalists' participatory beliefs and behaviors, especially those that have been linked to a richer, more reciprocal form of engagement, the journalists were asked two open-ended questions aimed at examining direct, indirect, and sustained reciprocal interaction: "Can you describe how you typically interact with readers/followers directly (one-on-one) and indirectly (one-to-many)?" and "Thinking about your interactions over time, how do you ensure a good relationship with your readers?" Through close readings, responses were categorized into patterns as suggested by scholars (Birks and Mills 2011; Strauss and Corbin 1998), with attention given to recurrent and dominant responses within each of the four role conceptions.

Results

The journalists participating in the study were 54 percent male and 46 percent female and had a mean age of 49 (SD = 13.16), with a mean of 23 years working in the news

business (SD = 12.84). Nearly half (45.6 percent) had leadership positions as editors or publishers, not including copy editors. They worked in newsrooms with an average of 62 employees (SD = 134.40), but a median of just 15; that is, most of them worked in small newsrooms, but a few worked in very large ones. Close to half of the respondents (46.3 percent) described their newspapers as being in urban settings, with 22.2 percent in suburban settings and 31.5 percent in rural areas.

While the journalists broadly noted the routinization of social media into their professional lives as a vehicle for creating and conveying news, a clear break emerged in the way social media was approached as a participatory tool. In their open-ended responses, Populist Mobilizers and Entertainers favored social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, not only as tools for sharing news and information but also as pathways to improved reporting, personal branding, responsive engagement, and reciprocal exchanges at direct and indirect levels. Populist Mobilizers said they used sharing news across digital devices and social media channels, and in some cases promoted their individual or organizational work, to open or extend conversations with their audience —all part of being perceived as being "more available as listeners." Those in the Entertainment role assumed a slightly more deliberate attitude, saying they often took on fewer or shorter stories in lieu of increasing social media interactions. They were receptive to audiences as sources of information, as critics of their work (e.g., in critiquing their opinion columns and reviews), and as "always-on respondents." Entertainers reported elevated levels of debate and banter with audiences on digital platforms, ranging from one journalist who said, "Sometimes I ask questions that are reflected back on blog items for the many, like where can people watch the US Olympic hockey team at 7:30 a.m. and get breakfast?" to another who said he engaged readers who sought advice and purposely tried to open larger debates with other social media users both directly and indirectly.

Alternatively, journalists who align more with the roles of Loyal Support and Public Service were less receptive to social media as instruments for participatory engagement, noting that while they did incorporate such media into their reporting and frequently experimented with ways to enhance their journalistic approaches, traditional forms of communication remained most important for them. In some cases, journalists within these roles indicated that they rarely if ever initiated contact with their readers through digital or social media channels, instead choosing to engage only when users engaged them first. They argued that direct participation with their audiences, including direct reciprocation, fell more along the lines of face-to-face contact, e-mails, and telephone exchanges. These journalists, a large number of whom worked for suburban or rural newspapers, said they made a point of positioning themselves in busy coffee shops, restaurants, town hall meetings, and other forms of public presence to remind the community they were available and to enhance the potential for direct levels of participation through means of conversation. These journalists viewed social media as more of an outlet to push news and far less a place to build community or engage in meaningful conversations. These exchanges helped journalists avoid online conversations that were "ugly, hateful, and engage personal insults," as one Loyal Support journalist put it, and instead have "actual conversations with people [that produce] much more constructive discussion than trying to engage people online." In other words, face-to-face dialogue was viewed at a premium in terms of participating and reciprocating with audiences.

Finding an online/offline balance for engagement was nearly impossible according to some Public Service journalists, including one who noted that comment boards, Facebook,

and Twitter indeed provided "room for interaction," but that face-to-face interactions remained the primary mode for opening direct dialogue. This approach frequently resulted in journalists listening at length to readers' arguments, disagreements, complaints, and opinions, according to several respondents. Such listening was largely cast as a positive form of direct reciprocation with potentially powerful indirect results. By taking the time to listen to their readers one-on-one, and at times to seek solutions for them, journalists said they were ensuring more sustained audiences. Further, because such actions occurred in public forums (i.e., coffee shops, town hall meetings, etc.) where intentions could not be veiled behind digital screens and emotional responses were readily ascertained, other potential and current readers were likely to develop and share positive perceptions of the journalists and their organizations.

Notably, this sentiment emerged digitally among Public Service journalists, many of whom reported taking on the role of arbiter in social media exchanges among their readers. By liking others' posts and providing information when requested, they said they helped keep online conversations civil. If the dialogue between readers turned sour, they worked to resolve the issue. In cases where hostility escalated, they attempted to cool the situation before taking extreme measures such as blocking readers from comment sections, blog forums, or Twitter discussions. Yet they remained distinctly cautious in terms of routine engagement with social media users, suggesting much like the Loyal Support journalists that participation and reciprocation with audiences was best practiced offline.

Many of these journalists saw themselves as indirectly engaged with audiences in other ways, such as "creating hashtags that might catch on" or "retweeting thoughtful responses." They saw their journalistic content as a means of indirectly engaging audiences without investing too much online time. As one Loyal Support journalist put it, "I communicate with my readers through my stories and columns published in our three editions a week and with breaking news stories posted on our website and email blasted to online subscribers." Those in the Public Service role seemed to agree, saying that indirect communication occurred most beneficially through content such as editorials or columns, which provided insights into their personal opinions and allowed readers to respond either through e-mail, telephone conversations, comment boards, or Twitter in rare cases. Many of these journalists argued for the virtue of content as a means of kick-starting reciprocation more broadly, offering audiences a service that has increasingly become free or inexpensive to access.

Relatively few journalists surveyed here spoke in temporal terms when discussing how they sustained participation or reciprocation with audiences. Instead, a sweeping majority said they relied on a combination of traditional tenets of good journalism (i.e., balance, objectivity, truthfulness, transparency, etc.) and what could be described as a certain level of "politeness" toward their audiences. Across all roles, journalists used phrases such as "being friendly," "being nice," "highlighting the good," "being approachable," and "being polite," to describe how they sustained audience. Such descriptors, despite their breadth, are indicative of sustained forms of reciprocity that many respondents said were necessary to build, strengthen, and maintain audiences.

Such "politeness" emerged in varying forms across roles. Loyal Support journalists, who again emphasized face-to-face interactions over time, said they frequently relied on the legacy or brand of their media and used positive engagements with readers to uphold that brand as well as the loyalty of their readers. Such engagements were described as participation with audiences less in terms of inviting engagement in the news process

and more in terms of being "fair and polite" at all costs. Public Service journalists extended that thought, saying that their audiences deserved a level of courtesy that included owning up to mistakes. Populist Mobilizers saw such civility as responsiveness, including a "willingness to immediately do what I can to provide information that [my readers] may seek." Others said simply allowing for limited forms of engagement was sufficient reciprocation to create lasting audiences: "I don't really think about having a relationship with readers. I think about providing good journalism and doing what it takes to make our newspaper more relevant, which involves allowing readers to have some input or getting input from the general public."

Of all responses collected that engaged the question of sustained participation and reciprocation with audiences, none explicitly indicated that certain actions repeated over periods of time were a cornerstone of building more engaged or meaningful relationships with their audiences.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has examined how journalists possessing different role conceptions may perceive their relationship with audiences, focusing on their self-reported attitudes and interactions regarding participation and reciprocation with such audiences. The results reveal that while some journalists are indeed using digital and social media to connect with audiences, others remain steadfastly traditional in their approaches. Much like Singer and her colleagues found (Singer et al. 2011), some journalists—especially those identifying with the Loyal Support and Public Service roles—continue to protect the more traditional tenets of their profession by limiting interactions with audiences and relying on more established forms of communication, such as face-to-face and email interactions. With regard to reciprocation, these journalists appear to put higher value on engagement and reciprocity in offline settings, and continue to see more benefit in customary interactions rather than those that may occur—directly or indirectly—through digital and social media channels. Additionally, whereas we previously hypothesized that journalists would seek to develop reciprocally oriented relationships over time (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014), there was little evidence of "sustained reciprocity." On the whole, journalists were open to building relationships with audiences, but mostly on their own terms and not necessarily for the long term.

The primary differences appear to emerge between Populist Mobilizers and Entertainers, on the one hand, and Loyal Support and Public Service journalists, on the other. Broadly speaking, the former appear more willing to embrace digital platforms not only as routinized parts of their work but also as emergent spaces for interactions with audiences—in essence, welcoming the generative possibilities that might exist in connecting with and even responding to readers and followers online. More skeptical of digital forms of engagement were Loyal Support and Public Service journalists, who on balance preferred traditional channels, face-to-face encounters, and limited uses of social media for exchange with audiences. For these latter journalists, it seemed, simply doing "good journalism" was its own expression of courtesy and goodwill to audiences; to ask for more personal, ongoing, dialogical, and digitally oriented forms on top of that fell outside the scope of their role.

These differences appear to fit these role conceptions. Populist Mobilizers and Entertainers, by definition, have a greater audience orientation toward motivating and amusing

readers and followers while also covering issues that drive engagement. Loyal Support and Public Service—which may seem contradictory with regard to how they would monitor public officials, for example—both conjure up a certain paternalistic function of journalism, one concerned with looking after communities as journalists see fit, in accordance with their professional purpose. Loyal Support, in particular, is often associated with community journalism in rural settings, where face-to-face encounters are more likely to occur and be valued by journalists and audiences alike. Indeed, a limitation of this study is that it does not differentiate among journalists at metropolitan, suburban, and rural newspaper settings—a factor that may explain some of the differences that exist both within and across the roles identified here. Future research should examine how structural factors, such as community setting, may be connected with particular role conceptions and, in turn, distinct attitudes toward audience, participation, and reciprocation. Additionally, given the comparative aspect of studying role conceptions (Hanitzsch 2011), researchers should consider how roles relate to different forms of audience interaction across countries and media systems (Hellmueller and Mellado 2015).

Over time, the role conceptions literature has suggested that, among other factors that influence content, certain roles are associated with certain broadly shared approaches to *producing for* audiences, as in the case of an infotainment orientation being associated with market-driven tabloidization (Mellado 2015). However, the literature has yet to fully address the matter of how certain roles are connected with *interacting with* audiences, particularly at this moment of social, mobile, digital media. Going forward, better explanations are needed for how and why particular self-images are associated with journalists engaging (or not) in more purposeful and persistent interactions with audiences—and the results of such interactions for reciprocity in communities that journalists serve.

NOTE

1. The Worlds of Journalism Study, begun in 2007, is a cross-national effort to assess the state of journalism in dozens of countries (see http://www.worldsofjournalism.org/ for details and a list of publications resulting from previous surveys).

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