The metrics of the audience: The new journalistic gut feeling

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the way in which journalists measure the interest of their audiences by using three concepts associated with media production: 1. The metaphor of journalistic gut feeling. 2. The news values. 3. The audience metrics. The reflection is based on the findings established through academic literature review, which already shows noticeable changes such as the use of quantitative data within the journalistic routine, derived from the analysis and the metrics of audiences. The rise of audience metrics as a result of a new journalistic gut feeling is still in discussion, and its influence is present in the selection, production and circulation of journalistic content affecting the entire media hierarchy. It concludes vindicating the necessity to continue doing research on the links among media, content production and audiences, which are relevant to understand the configuration of journalism today.

Keywords: media; audience; news values; journalistic gut feeling; digital metrics.

Introduction

JOURNALISM studies are a fertile field of knowledge, which has already reached its first century. Classic authors like Lippmann (1922), White (1950), Breed (1955), Galtung & Ruge (1965), Tuchman (1973) or Gans (1979) laid the foundations of

News making (Schudson, 1989), whose main point of interest was the selection and production of news, including journalistic routines (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

In parallel, academic research addressed the effects of media on the audience, such as fear, the restriction of social interaction, the distortion of legal control and the lack of context in stories (Sacco,1982; Chiricos, Eschholz & Gertz, 1997; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004; Haney & Greene, 2004 y Hjalmarsson, 2009). Media effects studies derived theoretical models such as Cultivation (Gerbner, 1969), Agenda Setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), Framing (Entman, 1991), Theory of social learning (Bandura, 2002) and Fear of crime (Bryant & Zillmann; 2002), among others.

Then, with the digital transformation, started new studies not only about journalism on the web, but also regarding social networks such as YouTube (Khan, 2017), Twitter (Moon & Hadley, 2014), Facebook (Al-Rawi, 2017) or Instagram (Larsson, 2018), channels through which media content circulates nowadays.

However, despite the progress made and the passing of time, the question about what captivates audience interest, motivates not only the generation of new knowledge, but debate. Therefore, within the academic area of media selection and production, there is a branch called News values, whose origin occurred when only the analog media existed, but is still valid in social media times (Molina-Jácome, Camargo, Guerrero & Magallanes, 2018), allowing the understanding of newsworthiness or the interest of audience in media contents.

Furthermore, the News Values concept is an alternative to the metaphor of journalistic gut feeling, which is one of the first attempts, to understand newsworthiness, in times where academic training did not exist and professional learning occurred within the newsrooms. This metaphor compares the reporter with a hound dog with a large nose, who identifies stories and brings them to his master (the editor), who after discussing and passing them through the filters of Gatekeeping (Clayman & Reisner, 1998), or the media hierarchy (editors, chief editors and middle directors), decides to transform them into media products such as news, chronicles or reports; however, not before using the strategic ritual of "the shield" of objectivity (Tuchman, 1972) to counter the risks of the profession.

Both concepts–the News values and Journalistic gut feeling–are subjective and interpretive, as long as they depend on the journalist's judgment and coexist with the audience's metrics, which are a quantitative tool, built with data from the consumption of websites, social networks or applications. However, while news values keep a theoretical and empirical vitality (Martínez & Zuluaga, 2016; Wendelin, Engelmann & Neubarth, 2017), the journalistic instinct does not.

Considering the mentioned context, this article intends to argue the thesis that "Journalistic gut feeling is insufficient to measure the interest of the audience, due to the ascending use of metrics, in the production of media content, although the metaphor of the hound journalist still persists in the collective memory." It will do

this using the findings of the academic literature in two key concepts: one called news values, which has been in force for more than five decades and another emerging concept, called audience metrics, which will determine not only the evolution of current journalism, but also the workers of this industry.

1. The metaphor of journalistic gut feeling and the news values

The first thing to say regarding the metaphor of journalistic gut feeling is that it arises from the practice of the journalist's job, whose purpose is to determine the interest, which will provoke a story to be marketed, within a particular community. Then, one question appears: Why does the journalist consider some events as newsworthy in contrast to other which are not? That question is addressed specifically by Schultz (2007), when referring to the instinct that the reporter develops to determine the interest, that the story will have in the audience and argues that there are two types of journalistic values: orthodox and heterodox values. The first are present in the new content and the second is associated with the journalistic exercise inside the newsrooms, which is where the media content is produced or elaborated. That is, they originate in the experience and through permanent contact with the stories.

Beyond classifying them into two different groups, what does Schultz (2007) mean when referring to the term values? To understand it, we must return to the pioneering work of Galtung & Ruge (1965), which appears frequently on revisions of the academic literature of journalism studies, since they were forerunners by proposing a different way of response to the question about the newsworthiness of events, identifying 12 attributes, whose presence or absence determine, according to them, whether a story is more likely to be selected for media coverage:

1. Frequency: An event that takes place at the same time or with a similar frequency in media, such as a murder, is more likely to be selected as news, as it is a social trend that lasts for a long period of time.

2. Threshold: Events must cross a threshold to be recorded in the mind. If that happens, they will develop a huge impact. Therefore, homicides or accidents will have greater impact on the perception of those responsible for the news selection.

3. Unambiguity: An event can be selected as news the better it is clearly interpreted by those who select news.

4. Meaningfulness: Everything with cultural similarity is more likely to be selected as news, as it becomes a reference framework.

5. Consonance: If the incident fits the mental image of those who select news, it is more likely to become one.

6. Unexpectedness: the weirdest and most unexpected thing that can happen in a culture will have the greatest possibility to become news.

7. Continuity: Occurs when an event remains in the headlines of media and justifies the journalistic coverage for a while.

8. Composition: News included in the selection because they help balance information. For example, a report on the alleged institutional racism within the police next to initiatives to struggle it.

9. Reference to elite nations: Actions that occur in elite countries are more likely to become news than those which takes place on countries considered as less relevant.

10. Reference to elite people: Actions of those who belong to the elites of fame or power are more likely to become news in contrast to those regarding regular people.

11. Reference to persons: News tends to present events as actions of one person, rather than the result of social forces.

12. Reference to something negative: The negative is seen as unexpected event, which occur in a short period of time with respect to the positive.

Each one of these attributes is present in both texts and images, whether photographic or audiovisual (Bednarek & Caple, 2012) and contribute to build media discourse. From then on, according to Caple & Bednarek (2013), In the last 50 years there are multiple studies that criticize or reinforce this line of research, that not only remains in force, but has transcended the analog formats and now explains the reality of the digital media environment as evidenced by authors such as Corrigan (1990), Beaudoin & Thorson (2001), Harcup y O'neill (2001), Moon & Hadley (2014); Wendelin, Engelmann & Neubarth (2017) y Molina-Jácome & Martínez Monterrosa (2018), among others.

These authors added novel news values, which the pioneering study of Galtung & Ruge (1965) did not consider. Or they show critical approaches like Niblock & Machin (2007), who pointed out that the selection of the news is no longer controlled by journalists, as long as advertisers and consumers also affect it. These two stakeholders, both that of the advertisers and consumers, were not included by the pioneers in their initial approach oriented towards the attributes of the content consumed by the audience.

However, Lee (2009), recognizes that the news values do influence the attention of the audience, although indirectly and mediated by media coverage. It should be noted that news values today have migrated from journalistic information to entertainment, as supported by contemporary researchers such as Lee & Chyi, (2014); Lee, Lee, Moon & Sung (2015); Al-Rawi (2017), Trilling, Tolochko & Burscher (2017) y Molina-Jácome & Martínez Monterrosa (2018).

Also, according to Bednarek (2016), News values allow us to understand how events are transformed into consumable products, through media discourse, which is

built by journalists. Nevertheless, how does the coexistence of the journalistic instinct with digital metrics occur in practice? This article reflects on this point below.

2. The journalistic gut feeling and the audience metrics

In the previous chapter, the concept of the News values was addressed as one of the busiest paths in academic literature, to understand the selection and production of content and how it has transcended from the analog to the digital within the media ecosystem; however, it should be noted again that both news values and the metaphor of the journalistic gut feeling depend on who produces the content: the reporters.

Therefore, it is logical that Tuchman (1972) has used qualitative techniques of the social sciences to study journalistic routines and the production of the news such as: observation, field diary and interview, as these aim to obtain data from reporters, whose job is to reconstruct the events that occur in every day, elaborate contents, and capture the interest of consumers. Today, audience metrics are also trying to solve the question about what captivates audience interest the most? Focusing not on the selection or production of the content, but on the measurement of the interaction and so on analyzing the data that a software such as Google analytics collects.

It should be noted that research of the audiences as an object of study is associated with three questions: 1. What media are consumed? 2. How do media affect people? (effects) and 3. What do people do with media? (Berganza & Ruíz, 2005). Inquiring into the methodological techniques applied to this object of study, it will be found the use of surveys, quantitative in nature, as it "allows obtaining a large amount of information referring to very large populations of enormous geographical areas" (Vilches, del Río, Simelio, Soler y Velázquez, 2011, p. 174), which is the main interest of mass media, for the possibility to spread their contents to thousands and even millions of people.

On the other hand, it must also be said that journalistic companies have always had participation channels, which encourage interaction between those who make editorial decisions and their audiences. An example of this are the letters to the director, which shows not only the need for exchanges between media and audiences, but also the participation of citizenship on issues of public debate (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001; Nielsen, 2010; Córdova, 2012; Barrios, 2017).

Hence, both the journalistic gut feeling, and the News values share that they are interpretative constructions, originated in the permanent necessity to measure the magnitude of the interest of audiences on the contents that circulate daily. An alternative way are metrics, which are increasingly being used in media and that could be configured as a new version of the journalistic smell, no longer on a subjective basis, but a quantitative one. According to Anderson (2011) it is notorious when, for example, website traffic is measured in each of the published stories and these consumptions end up influencing the decisions made in the newsrooms.

Thus, the previous situation leads us to the question: Is the journalistic gut feeling still used in the production of digital content? For Callejo (2019, p. 172), the emergence of digital media transformation has meant that even the practice of measuring audience with a survey, as was the case at another time, has lagged today. It makes no sense to look for the sociodemographic profiles of consumers, when users themselves provide their interests or what attracts their attention while browsing, "and perhaps most importantly, direct access to them is possible, every time they turn on certain screens."

In other words, in the contemporary world people reveal the data of their own free will, which some time before could only be obtained through expensive research and representative samples of the population. However, it is necessary to state that in social networks, consumers have instant possibilities to express their opinion with options such as like, dislike, share or comments (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell & Logan, 2012) and even contents have emoticons or icons as in the social network Facebook, to express sadness, surprise or joy. Consequently, media does not have to invest money to know the type of emotion, which generated the story produced by the journalistic team.

Despite the above, Pantti (2010), found that, although journalists are aware that emotion generates newsworthiness, they should be careful with the stories that imply it, since they could distort the "good journalism", which is mainly informative, relating it to aspects closer to sensationalism (bad journalism) and entertainment. Also, within the context of social networks, characterized by immediate interaction and audience participation, what is being shared, what one likes or dislikes, does not differentiate the boundaries between information or entertainment making those boundaries blurred.

Therefore, the researchers Lampe, Wash, Velásquez & Ozkaya (2010) and Khan (2017) point out that entertainment is a predictor of user participation in a website. Although Khan (2017) warns that the Pareto law, where 80% of the participation is made only by 20% of the individuals cannot be ignored; so, the audience metrics are again relevant, because they make visible what is not registered with comments or likes which occurs with the amount of seconds or minutes that a user dedicates to consume an audiovisual content.

In a social network like Instagram, according to Larsson (2018), the behavior is different, to YouTube or Facebook, since it is not oriented to redistribute or share the contents as it happens with others, but towards a private personal interaction. In that sense, it is unlikely that mass and instantaneous consumption of content will occur and especially that it reaches millions as it happens with viral videos, which represents a challenge for professionals within the media industry, who seek to disseminate their content beyond the original receiver.

3. The quantitative ascent: analysis and audience metrics

Before continuing with arguments about the insufficiency of the journalistic gut feeling, compared to the metrics of the audience, it is convenient to analyze the approach based on the gradual rise of the digital quantitative paradigm, which, although it is true, does not yet completely replace the instinct and the decision making of journalist regarding content, has become a practice that came to stay in the newsrooms.

This is supported by the researcher Vu (2014), who concludes that, to some extent, publishers are willing to adjust their decisions using metrics, as they perceive the increase in economic benefits by obtaining more readers and a greater advertising guideline. Also, Tandoc Jr (2015) explains it, indicating that the application of metrics is noted in aspects of media production such as: the selection and location of the story and even the writing of the headlines. On a different paper, Tandoc Jr & Thomas (2015) argue that journalism must achieve a balance between the demand of the audiences and the most relevant topics that they must be informed about. The aim of journalism should focus on promoting the proper functioning of the democratic process, transcending the desire of the audience, otherwise it should not be worthy of being called journalism.

This argument is related to the ideas of Belair-Gagnon, Zamith & Holton (2020), who claim that journalism has a citizen service-oriented role, that controls power, defends the audiences and that has been stronger throughout history of media itself. But there is also a second role oriented to satisfy the audiences with demanded contents, or the needs of the market. This second role is the one that gives metrics explosive potential, despites journalists perceiving that citizen-service is more crucial, instead of the growth of audience metrics in the newsroom. These are not above the historical paradigm that media has a social responsibility and should be focused there.

Meanwhile Fürst (2020) criticizes the fact that audience metrics have a negative impact on the quality of news, caused by the selection, presentation and follow-up of the topics influenced by the numbers of the audience over the journalistic relevance or newsworthiness. In addition, there is a tendency of paying more importance to quick clicks, sensationalism and a strong focus on visual content.

According to Cherubini & Nielsen (2016), some of the audience metrics most used in journalistic routines are the following:

Bounce rate: Number of users who land on a page and leave immediately.

Engaged time: Amount of time users spend actively interacting with a page or site: reading, writing, scrolling, or looking.

Pageviews per visit: Average number of page views on each visit, during a certain period.

Reach: Number of people who, in theory, have been exposed to a certain content.

Recirculation: Percentage of the audience that has committed to a content (article, video, etc.) and proceeds to interact with other content.

Scroll depth: How far users scroll down on a page.

Time spent: Time (in minutes or seconds) that visitors have spent on a site or on a web page.

These audience metrics are just a sample, as Cherubini & Nielsen (2016) mention about 15 in total, and at first look they give the impression of being a transparent or neutral technology, however, for authors such as Welbers, Van Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, Ruigrok & Schaper (2016) the influence of metrics on the journalistic routine has reached such a point that when stories appear as the most viewed, they are more likely to receive attention, in subsequent follow-up by reporters. In addition, they criticize the fact that metrics are being used to obtain economic benefits, falling into a dangerous paradox, since the rise of the metrics could go against society, when the important news become less relevant, based on a low record of user's clicks.

This is also recognized by Blanchett Neheli (2018), for whom it is unquestionable that these metrics are having a significant impact on media environment but could limit the exchange of information between media and the public. If used only for commercial purposes though, its highest purpose is to build and inform the audience. This position on the influence and impact of metrics is also defended by Zamith (2018), for whom they not only have the potential to alter the editorial decisions of journalists, since they offer real-time data on individual actions and patterns of behavior, but they challenge the existence and gradual replacement of the journalistic instinct.

In this regard, Carlson (2018), argues that the scrutiny of academics should focus on how algorithmic judgment alters the production of news, the institutional arrangements that govern algorithmic processes, results, and their discursive legitimization, assuming the increase in its use.

This rise in metrics is also no stranger to companies that develop software, as in Google Analytics' case, which are aware that they are a disruptive phenomenon and do not want to be seen as unwanted intruders in newsrooms and figure themselves as allies, who help to improve the finances of journalistic companies. But as Belair-Gagnon & Holton (2018) assures, audience metrics create tensions in the journalistic team, who are not experts in their use, and also must allow their entry into their work, sacrificing autonomy and independence in the content making decision that will receive media coverage beyond what the audience data indicates. Or as stated by Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc Jr (2018), when metrics join the journalistic routine, convert the selection of the contents into a concerted process that oscillates between the data of the audience (quantitative) and journalistic intuition (qualitative), without forgetting the obvious frictions this causes.

Finally, the findings of Giomelakis, Sidiropoulos, Gilou & Veglis (2019), who, like Carlson (2018), Zamith (2018) and Blanchett Neheli (2018), consider metrics to have a significant impact on the way journalists select or produce content and that Wang (2018) expands this explanation in the dimensional field theory; which considers audience metrics as a trend and identifies three axes of the journalistic field - the techno-economic environment, the subject of journalism, and the object of journalism - and examines how these axes negotiate with influences outside and inside the journalistic field to determine how the field acts and reacts. Lamot & Paulussen (2019) associate this with at least six routine processes in media: 1. Location of the content. 2. Packaging, presentation, or promotion of stories. 3. Media coverage planning. 4. Imitation (Selection of a story highly successful on the digital platforms of the competition). 5. Evaluation of journalistic performance and 6. Conception of the audience.

The metric is a quantitative indicator and humanity has always used numbers as a control tool. Therefore, the debate both in the academy and in the newsrooms is far from over. In the same way, what is undoubtable is the existence of a new journalistic gut feeling, whose materiality includes now not only the warm and intangible intuition of the reporter as in the past, but the rational and cold precision of the quantifiable.

Conclusion

This reflection ends with an exhortation to deepen the relationship between media and their audiences. Although similar formats such as printed ones have not stopped being used, the digital ones clearly entered competition within an ecosystem, which far from assisting the extinction of a species, caused an unprecedented convergence in the same environment, without the oldest formats displacing those who have a nascent presence on the web. In fact, even new ones are surging which are accessed only through social networks.

This relationship must include not only the selection or production of the contents, but also the journalistic routines, which are essential to understand them in their complexity. Being aware that audiences are increasingly better heard and analyzed–no longer instinctively–but with quantitative data, which specialized software can collect and make available to publishers and media directors.

Future studies in journalism should not only investigate the effects of metrics, but how this new paradigm contributes to a greater or lesser quality of the products proposed to the audience. This is an aspect that remains as an ideal for the journalistic company and that should not be left aside in the construction of good journalism, if not also a better society.

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