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Aspirational Metajournalism: What Nieman Journalism Lab Predictions Reveal About Platform and Audience Imaginaries

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ABSTRACT

The past few years of journalism studies scholarship have revealed that journalists and journalism stakeholders are increasingly ambivalent about social media platforms, which have grown rife with misinformation and vitriol that threaten to diminish audience trust in journalism and encourage animosity toward journalists. As social media's risks and challenges intensify while the benefits diminish, some within journalism are entering a period in which they are no longer begrudgingly depending on these platforms and instead are conceptualizing the best means for circumventing them to build and maintain news audiences. This article seeks to examine the following question: How have these changing circumstances affected journalistic perceptions of social media platforms and news audiences? Drawing on a metajournalistic analysis of over 11 years of annual predictions published by the US journalism trade press *Nieman Journalism Lab* ($n=154$), this study identifies the ways that impressions of social media platforms and news audiences have changed in order to understand what those changes reveal about the relationship between journalists and their audience. We find that although faith in social media platforms has faltered within the journalistic community, faith in the public remains unwavering.

KEYWORDS

Social media; imagined audiences; adaptation; platforms; metajournalistic discourse; qualitative methods

The disadvantages of social media platforms for news consumption and production have grown overwhelmingly obvious. The past few years of journalism studies scholarship focused on social media platforms have revealed that many within journalism are increasingly ambivalent about these platforms (Bélaïr-Gagnon et al. 2022), which have grown rife with misinformation (Saldaña and Vu 2022) and vitriol (Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020) that threaten to diminish audience trust in journalism and encourage animosity toward journalists (Johnson and Tully 2022; Perreault 2024; Quandt 2018). The result: the journalistic community sees these platforms less as opportunities for audience building and engagement and more as challenges to journalism's economic stability and its credibility among the public (Myllylahti 2023). As social media's risks and challenges intensify (e.g., the abuse, harassment, trolling, and bad faith attacks) while the benefits seemingly diminish (e.g., X doesn't send big audiences to news anymore (Fischer 2023)), the journalistic community appears to be

entering a period in which they are conceptualizing the best means for platform counterbalancing (Chua and Westlund 2022). Indeed, small signs already point toward this transition, as more news organizations invest in newsletters and other efforts to cultivate more direct connections with potential audiences.

This article seeks to examine the following question: How have social media platforms' changing circumstances affected perceptions of social media platforms and news audiences among journalism professionals? Utilizing a variation of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016) that we refer to as *aspirational metajournalism*, this article draws on 11 years of annual predictions published by the US journalism trade press *Nieman Journalism Lab* ($n = 154$). These predictions are generally written by journalism publishers, editors, funders, service providers, and others who aspire to play a role in shaping journalism's future. By drawing on this unique dataset, this study identifies how a modest but influential subset of the journalistic community's impressions of social media platforms and news audiences have changed. This allows us to explore what those changes reveal about how its members conceptualize the relationship with the audience more broadly.

We analyze these data by fusing two theoretical frameworks used to understand how people perceive of media audiences and platforms: (1) the "imagined audience" (Litt 2012), which posits that journalists "develop and maintain an image of their audience in mind because they cannot interact with each recipient personally" (Coddington, Lewis, and Belair-Gagnon 2021, p. 1028), and (2) "platform imaginaries," which similarly refers to the ways that "social actors understand and organize their activities in relation to platform algorithms, interfaces, data infrastructures, moderation procedures, business models, user practices, and audiences," (van Es and Poell 2020, p. 3). Hence, we argue that journalists' efforts to maintain strong ties with the public by circumventing social media platforms rather than depending on them reveals that journalists' imagined audiences are remarkably enduring and seemingly unaffected by the increasingly negative ways in which they are imagining social media platforms.

Journalism's Embrace of—and Challenges with—Social Media

Journalists have depended on social media platforms for almost as long as these platforms have existed. For decades, "search engines, social media, and other products offered by platform companies have become integral to the day-to-day work in newsrooms" (Nielsen and Ganter 2022, p. 16). Journalists use these platforms to cultivate sources (Perreault and Ferrucci 2020), and break news (Perreault & Hanusch, 2024). In the past, the value of these platforms was evident to journalists, who saw them as the most obvious means of cultivating a professional brand for themselves and building an audience not only for their organization, but for themselves as well (Holton and Molyneux 2018). Yet "adaptation is at the very core of the journalistic experience, with journalists balancing the need to adopt new processes and select processes that are perhaps out of date amidst the shifting sands of the journalistic field" (Perreault et al., 2025, p. 698). In this way, as journalists find themselves depending more on these platforms, however, they have come to realize just how little agency they have within this unequal relationship (Nielsen and Ganter 2022).

Journalism's lack of agency when it comes to social media platforms is nothing new. For example, in 2015, Meta/Facebook changed its algorithm to privilege video content. This change encouraged news organizations to push their journalists to produce more video posts so that they would not lose the social media platform's traffic they had come to depend upon (Moore 2017). Now that pursuit is complicated by the platform's specific logic, which privileges "personalized storytelling" over more traditional journalistic values, and—in the United States—dispute over the longevity of the platform's availability (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen 2020).

Journalists' willingness to accommodate social media platforms' algorithmic changes stems from an important, implicit assumption: If journalists try to present their work in a way that will (1) be privileged by social media platform algorithms and (2) appeal to social media users, they will cut through the increasingly crowded digital media environment and find an audience for their work. Yet, the past several years have called even that assumption into question. Since Elon Musk took over Twitter and renamed the platform X, it appears his changes to the platform's algorithm have resulted in far less traffic to online news publishers (Fisher, 2023). Meta's leaders seem to be similarly deemphasizing news within both Facebook and Instagram (Guaglione 2023; Isaac, Robertson, and Grant 2023), particularly considering the 2025 announcement to end fact-checking partnerships.

Journalism's Challenges with—and Embrace of—the Public

Even when journalists do encounter audiences on these platforms, their interactions are increasingly hostile. A growing body of journalism studies research has revealed the emergence and impact of what Thorsten Quandt (2018) refers to as "dark participation," which he defines as the "negative, selfish or even deeply sinister contributions" that include trolling and the spread of disinformation (p. 40). These studies suggest that journalists who engage with audiences *via* social media platforms risk encountering highly personal, vicious harassment and even threats of physical violence (Bossio et al. 2024; Holton et al. 2021; Miller 2023; Perreault 2024; Perreault and Miller 2022). This is especially true for journalists of color and women journalists (Miller and Nelson 2022; Nelson 2023).

Although social media platforms have long been perceived as the most obvious means by which journalists can build, maintain, and engage with audiences (Nielsen and Ganter 2022), journalists' relationship with these platforms has always been dangerously unequal (Hase, Boczek, and Scharrow 2023; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2021). Journalism studies scholars have observed that journalists' efforts to find ways to use these platforms to better reach and engage with audiences may diminish people's trust in news media. In their 2022 study, Ross Arguedas et al. found that "trust erosions were often associated with changing journalistic practices on platforms that strained norms considered foundational for trust, such as impartiality, objectivity, and accuracy" (2022, p. 1836). In other words, journalists' dependence on social media platforms to reach news audiences has not only resulted in journalists facing more harassment from those audiences, but has also had the ironic effect of making those audiences more suspicious of the news.

These circumstances raise the question: How have journalists' experiences attempting to build and engage with audiences *via* social media platforms affected

their perceptions of those audiences? The answer to this question takes as a given that the journalistic community has an overarching perception of the “audience” in the first place. We next turn to a theoretical framework for how that perception unfolds.

Imagined Audiences and Platforms

Because journalists cannot identify every person who interacts with their content, they create an “imagined audience” that comprises the people with whom they believe they are communicating (Litt 2012). The notion of journalism’s imagined audience stems from political scientist Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities,” which refer to the way in which citizens cultivate an abstract sense of fraternity within their own nations (Anderson 2016). Even as audience analytics grow more sophisticated (Christin 2020; Nelson & Tandoc, Jr., 2019; Petre 2021; Zamith, Belair-Gagnon, and Lewis 2020), it remains impossible for journalists to truly comprehend who their audience comprises. In the absence of empirical knowledge, they draw upon their intuition and assumptions to “imagine” what their audiences want and expect from news.

Journalism studies scholars have used the imagined audience framework both to understand how journalists think about their audiences and how those perceptions shape the way they ultimately approach those audiences. As Coddington et al. write, “The case of journalists and their perceptions about audiences offers an entry point for exploring how audiences are imagined and with what effect,” (2021, 1029). Journalists’ imagined audiences shape their approaches to news production (Matthews 2008) and their approaches to audience engagement (Nelson 2021). The impact of journalists’ perceptions of their audiences on the steps they take to ultimately reach those audiences is hard to overstate. Journalists who view their audiences as interested in—and capable of—contributing to news production also seek to cultivate opportunities to bring members of the public into their reporting *via* audience engagement (Schmidt, Nelson, and Lawrence 2022), while journalists who perceive the audience as inherently uninterested in civically-minded journalism may attempt to balance that coverage with what they see as “softer,” more entertaining content, while those who perceive the audience as inherently invested in civic matters may be likelier to invest more resources into experimenting with different approaches to that sort of coverage (Nelson & Tandoc, Jr., 2019).

Although there is a growing body of literature dedicated to identifying journalism’s imagined audience, we know little about what causes these imagined audiences to change. This is even more relevant at a time when there appears to be so much evidence facing the journalistic community that suggests the audience comprises many people who have only a passing interest in journalism and an increasingly skeptical—if not outright hostile—attitude toward journalists. Furthermore, we know little about the way journalists’ imagined audiences are shaped by the ways in which they imagine other aspects of news production and audience engagement, including social media platforms. Indeed, journalists’ use of social media platforms are similarly affected by their perceptions of those platforms. van Es and Poell refer to this phenomenon as *platform imaginaries* (2020), which they define as

the ways in which social actors understand and organize their activities in relation to platform algorithms, interfaces, data infrastructures, moderation procedures, business models, user practices, and audiences (2020, p. 3).

Their findings—that journalists’ approach to social media platforms are shaped by the ways in which they *imagine* those platforms—eerily echo similar studies of the relationship between how journalists imagine and approach their audiences. The question these studies raise is, do the journalistic community’s platform imaginaries impact their imagined audiences?

This project attempts to answer this question by drawing on a novel dataset that allows us to compare how the imagined audience of a small but influential subset of the journalistic community compares with its platform imaginaries. In doing so, our hope is to explore how perceptions of audiences matter for the way relations between journalism and platforms develop. These data also allow us to understand the opposite—how perceptions of platforms matter for the way that relations between journalists and their audiences develop. Though each of these relationships loom large in today’s digital media environment, research tends to focus on aspects of one or the other. With these circumstances in mind, our research question is as follows:

RQ: How have journalists’ perceptions of social media platforms and news audiences changed over time?

Method

To address the research questions, we performed an analysis of a unique sort of metajournalistic discourse: articles published through *Nieman Journalism Lab’s* annual “Predictions for Journalism” series. Carlson (2016) defines “metajournalistic discourse” as “public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception,” (p. 350). *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions offer a distinctly valuable source of metajournalistic materials given that they represent what we refer to as *aspirational metajournalism*, which we define as a type of metajournalism that ascribes boundaries and value judgments surrounding journalism’s legitimacy (Carlson 2016) through its examination of what journalism can—and should—be. To be sure, anyone who has read these predictions knows their value does not stem from their predictive accuracy—indeed, though they are called “predictions,” they typically come across more like a description of hopes offered by a variety of journalistic actors. However, these hopes are valuable in that they reveal the implicit assumptions of people within the journalistic community who, by virtue of funding newsrooms or shaping newsroom strategy, play powerful roles in determining what journalism ultimately looks like.

These predictions are typically produced by contributors from across the globe, as well as people who work both within and outside of journalism, including journalism practitioners, publishers, funders, and tools and service providers. We considered excising the academics’ predictions from the sample due to the fact that their perspectives were not explicitly embedded in the world of journalistic practice; however, we ultimately chose to keep their predictions in our sample because of the fact that academics do participate in the overall co-creation of journalism and its future not just through the metadiscourse (as reflected in this study) but also through journalistic

socialization (e.g., the training of aspiring journalists *via* journalism education). In short, the journalistic community is a big tent that involves many voices that shape the practicalities of journalism. In this way, perspectives from journalism studies scholars and other academics offer an important lens into ongoing discussion surrounding how journalism should change and what those aspirational changes suggest about how journalism practitioners and stakeholders think about the profession and its relationship with the public. These predictions then offer a uniquely valuable lens by which we can identify the aspirations of those who play pivotal roles in shaping the journalistic field (Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022). By drawing from this *aspirational* metajournalistic discourse found within these *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions, we have attempted to better understand how the journalistic community leverages past experiences to argue for what journalism should look like going forward (see Jackson, Thorsen, and Reardon 2020).

In doing so, *Nieman Journalism Lab* Predictions allow scholars to explore a site of *epistemic contests* “in which actors, advocating competing understandings of reality and the nature of knowledge, struggle in various realms to achieve validation for their epistemological systems” (Carlson 2025, p. 4). These predictions (see Table A1) come from a range of actors including journalists, non-profit leaders, technologists, and academics. A commonality among the writers is that they tend to have elite standing. The elite standing is reflective of much of metajournalism—indeed, often elite standing is what enables actors to partake in *epistemic contests* (see Creech and Buozis 2025)—but given the focus of this study on predictions, the elite standing is essential given that elites exert disciplinary pressure and have the capacity to pressure the field toward their aspirations (Creech and Buozis 2025).

In line with rigorous qualitative research, our methodology began with “a long preliminary soak” (Hall 1975, p. 15) in the predictions through an open exploration of the website, using a range of terms in order to “‘hear’ the same underlying appeals, the same ‘notes,’ being sounded again and again” (p. 15; see also Kananovich 2025). During this process a range of terms were explored including “platforms” as well as the specific names of the specific platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram). What the authors quickly discovered was that many terms were used so commonly in the predictions that they offered little filtering (e.g. the concept of platforms, as one would expect, was written into almost all predictions). Hence, our data collection involved filtering *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions to those that included the term “audience.” More specifically, we compiled all of the predictions that referred to audiences in the title or the description, resulting in an 11-year period (2012–2023) of predictions ($n=154$) reflecting on the audience. “Audience” was selected as the term to use given its central conceptual hub within the journalistic lexicon for reflecting on audience engagement (Nelson 2021)¹ and, given the broader mission of the predictions, social media platforms were naturally included within those. In this way, “audience” was not just a meaningful term to use, but the ideal term to best address the research question (Creswell 2007).

The first author collected the full text for each prediction and gathered them into a database for analysis. The authors conducted the coding of the predictions in three stages, following Creswell’s (2007) structure for a constant comparative design: open coding, where the research team read all content, noting broad trends; axial coding,

where these data trends were categorized and conceptualized; and selective coding, where themes were identified to find participant quotes that best represented the volume of categories and concepts within the data. In the findings section that follows, we refer to the predictions by prediction number given that (1) the predictions operate as a discursive corpus and in conversation relative to the social reality of journalism, but also more practically (2) to enhance the readability of the findings section. Prediction numbers are matched with the title, year, author and the positionality of the author (e.g. professional title) in the [Appendix](#).

While constant comparative research designs often use a grounded theory framework, Fram (2013) notes that such designs are also suitable for an etic coding method—like this one—driven by theory and literature. This coding process occurred over several meetings (March 2024-June 2024) in which the research team members shared relevant data, and emerging themes were discussed.

Findings

Our analysis revealed increasing ambivalence within the journalistic community when it comes to social media platforms. This ambivalence seemed to stem largely from financial concerns. More specifically, there appeared to be a consistent thread within these predictions surrounding journalism's failure to uncover a means of generating revenue *via* social media platforms. Over time, this concern became compounded by the journalistic community's growing awareness that social media platforms appeared to be playing a central role in increasing distrust in news and harassment of journalists.

Interestingly, there was no parallel shift that unfolded when it came to perceptions of news audiences. Considering the fact that journalists' challenges with social media platforms stem not only from the platforms themselves but from their increasingly hostile and threatening interactions with members of the public that unfold on them, we wondered if the journalistic community would begin to grow more pessimistic not only about the value of these platforms, but also the role of the public in journalism well. Yet, our findings do not reveal this sort of shift unfolding when it comes to perceptions of news audiences. Instead, if anything, the journalistic community's increasing focus on the audience suggests an emboldened sense that audiences continue to comprise people who bring value to journalism.

We have organized our findings into the following sections. We begin by examining how perceptions of social media have changed over time. From there, we move onto how perceptions of news audiences have changed (or, more accurately, remained constant).

The Promise of Social Media for Journalism

Our data reveal that the journalistic community's perspective on social media has indeed changed over time. At first, these *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions appeared to place a great deal of faith in social media platforms to aid journalists in their mission to monetize and engage with audiences. However, over time that faith was shaken. The most recent *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions reveal that the journalistic community seems much less confident that these platforms can support their work.

Instead, the community appears much more concerned about the potential of these platforms to harm journalists, the public, and the relationship between the two.

Indeed, early predictions reflect that the journalistic community saw great promise in social media. For example, in a 2012 prediction, the author describes their early optimism for YouTube and Twitter even amidst early doubts:

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of YouTube videos were being uploaded and Twitter was a frenzy of micro-updates on the situation. Obviously, not all of this content was reliable, but *these reports create a vibrant, real-time environment of news that mattered to people in a way that even a collection of large organizations could not accomplish.* (Prediction 153, [2012] emphasis ours).

In this way, early predictions foregrounded social media platforms as venues that could offer the opportunity for a “more qualitative understanding of audiences” (Prediction 149 [2013]). In 2015, one prediction argued that 2016 would be the year that “we begin to treat every platform like a publishing platform, with its unique audience, its own publishing schedule and formats, and its unique metrics of success” (Prediction 139 [2015]). By extension, 2017 would be the year that “[user-generated content] is something I predict we’ll see a lot more of ... We won’t just get audiences’ or commenters’ opinions on topics and whip up a quick list. Brands will rely more on “trending” stories, or stories that the public themselves deem newsworthy, when weighing what to cover” (Prediction 128 [2016]). And by 2018, “in the future,” another prediction read, “social’ will mean the audiences we interact with,” (Prediction 87 [2018]). For example,

WhatsApp groups [allow audiences to] connect 1:1 with content creators. But these relationships won’t be (and shouldn’t be) limited to online interactions: in 2019, we’ll see a growing desire for IRL conversations that build stronger relationships between audiences and producers (Prediction 103 [2018]).

Consistently through the predictions, the journalistic community reflected that their use of social media platforms could be a means by which they might improve upon existing newsroom routines and practices, rather than create new ones. After all, “the idea of user-generated content is nothing new” (Prediction 128 [2016]) and neither is the desire to “authentically engag[e] new audiences” (Prediction 141 [2015]). These predictions reveal an excitement about social media platforms that stems from the journalistic community’s broader goals of maintaining meaningful engagement with the people they seek to reach with their news. In other words, it appears that, early on in the predictions, the journalistic community’s embrace of social media platforms stemmed not just from the new opportunity these platforms offered, but also the ways in which these platforms could be more or less seamlessly blended into existing newsroom routines.

It is worth noting that, even early on, the journalistic community expressed some ambivalence about social media. Indeed, writers suggested in these earlier predictions that audiences could not be effectively served by social media alone. In 2015, predictions acknowledged that social media reporting “takes as many different forms as there are different audiences on different platforms” (Prediction 140 [2015]) and hence, a successful relationship with audiences will need to go beyond social media. Similarly,

the predictions reflect a growing realization that social media would be unable to meet the promise of a digital space addressing the “clear need for news sources that readers across the political spectrum can trust, in order to facilitate a constructive exchange of ideas” (Prediction 129 [2016]). Yet, these reservations suggested an ambivalence not about whether or not journalists should use social media (the consensus appeared to be yes, they should) but about the extent to which these platforms should shape how journalists attempt to report the news and build and maintain connections with the public.

In short, these initial predictions by and large shared a sense of optimism about social media platforms, as well as an implicit—often enthusiastic—acceptance that these platforms would play an integral role in the relationship between journalism and the public in a digital era. However, as the later predictions reflect, this optimism was never fully realized. By 2023, the predictions had shifted tone to reflect far more pessimism (e.g. more like “will Twitter go bankrupt?”; (Prediction 36 [2022]). We turn to this more pessimistic turn in the predictions next.

Early Promise Gives Way to Later Concerns

On balance, early *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions maintained a perception of social media platforms as being a more positive than negative contribution to the news industry and its approach to and interactions with the public. These predictions tended to take as a given that social media platforms were here to stay. Consequently, they often focused on ways that journalists might consider using these platforms to improve the quality and impact of their work. Over time, however, that dynamic flipped.

Indeed, predictions for 2023 did the opposite. Rather than begin with the implicit acceptance that journalists must depend on social media platforms to build and maintain their audiences, some of the predictions that ran in this year explicitly suggested that journalists might consider moving beyond social media platforms altogether. This is unsurprising considering these followed the Elon Musk acquisition of Twitter the prior year. His ownership of Twitter (now X) has been marked by the platform’s well-publicized embrace of extremist, right wing figures, and a diminishment of its user experience.

In light of these drastic changes to a platform journalists had until then widely embraced, predictions for 2023 were the first to describe how journalists might consider “jumping ship” from social media platforms altogether (Prediction 40 [2022]). One prediction, for example, noted that “the news industry will have to confront the realities of building an audience in a post-social media world” (Prediction 30 [2023]). Prediction 30 [2023] further noted that traffic from social media platforms had sharply declined. In 2018, a prediction acknowledged that

The “social media” position went from not being a position at all, to an automated task, to something relegated to interns because they understood “how the internet works” to, at some point, a role that editors finally understood the importance of. Entire social teams were created, led by brilliant journalists no less. But in true media form, times are changing—again (Prediction 88 [2018]).

Taken together these predictions suggest that the journalistic community's enthusiasm for social media platforms began to wane over time, and then very recently has taken a deep dive into dissatisfaction. *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions revealed that, very early on, writers understood the potential value of social media platforms and were excited about the opportunities to cultivate richer, more rewarding relationships between journalists and the public. And while they also understood the risks that accompanied their increasing dependence on these volatile and powerful actors, that ambivalence has only increased over time. Most recently, the *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions suggest that the journalistic community has deep, perhaps unresolvable concerns about these platforms, which explains why the journalistic community is—for the first time—explicitly considering news production in a “post-social media” era.

Audiences Are Valuable and Good

While the journalistic community's perceptions of these platforms have changed over time, there has been no such change in the perceptions of the people actually using these platforms—the audience. On the contrary, these same *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions reflect much more consistency when it comes to the perceptions of the public. Our analysis reveals an interesting consistency over time when it comes to the community's implicit and explicit thoughts and perceptions about the people they hope to reach. Despite the journalistic community's concerns about digital platforms, they continue to overwhelmingly believe in the value and promise of digital audiences. Predictions viewed audiences as valuable and good.

The significance of the audience from the perspective of the journalistic community was expressed through a number of arguments within these predictions that tended to be framed around the larger normative goals of journalism. For example, some of the predictions argued that more audience involvement in journalism would allow journalists to reach “those with the least amount of power and who are represented or affected by what the reporting is ‘About’ are always part of ‘For’ or ‘With?’” (Prediction 98 [2018]). At times, predictions discussed this relationship in a reciprocal manner—as in “when audiences feel we are reflecting and serving them, or providing value to their lives, they're more likely to support our journalism *via* memberships, subscriptions, or donations” (Prediction 107 [2018])—but other predictions reflect that many times journalists *do not* receive memberships, subscriptions or donations yet persist in their work. The journalistic community in this way expressed an almost missional commitment to their audience, concerned that “each piece of reporting should be contemplated in terms of power and representation” (Prediction 98 [2018]).

In this way, the predictions reveal that audiences were an essential focus of journalistic work and were effectively served by “lone journalists,” but that if news organizations “knew how to institutionally answer these questions, we could broaden how...[we] seek to strengthen communities” (Prediction 69 [2020]). Similarly, Prediction 153 [2012] argued that news organizations often seemed to be “sneering” at the needs of the audience, even as individual journalists took the time to “Put [themselves] in the shoes of the audience.” The journalistic community argued that this needed

to change, that your “your audience ‘why’ and your newsroom ‘why’ have to be the same (Prediction 19 [2023]). After all, “the audiences of individual journalists represent one of the biggest chunks of unrealized value on the internet” (Prediction 52 [2021]). Valuing the audience and engaging them on a human level “are part of the value proposition of a digital publisher” and hence, journalists should engage with readers as fellow “people, not brands” (Prediction 56 [2020]).

The journalistic community reflected that audience data tended to be a poor way to understand the audience. In this way, survey data proved to be an unreliable manner to understand news users given that

The line between politics and news media is becoming blurred to a point of little distinction in the eyes of some, perhaps many, Americans. When we think we’re asking survey respondents about their consumption of news, they might as well be telling us about their consumption of politics (Prediction 53 [2021]).

When the journalistic community referred to the audience, they more specifically were referring to an “unaudience” (Prediction 97 [2018]) given that news is “not a consistent presence in many Americans’ lives” (Prediction 30 [2023]). In this way “understanding the un-audience requires going beyond demographics” (Prediction 97 [2018]).

The journalistic community similarly reflected that data from audience metrics were insufficient given that to understand audiences “we will go beyond page views and engaged time—which was very popular in 2015!—and we’ll...[need to] be very curious about what audiences do—and what that behavior tells us about them” (Prediction 140 [2015]).

All the individual data points—each page view, each share, each engagement—often fail to capture the broader (and harder) topic of how the editorial proposition is consumed and viewed as a whole, and how this is shifting in real-time (Prediction 70 [2020]).

In this way metrics “obscures the real opportunity for news organizations: using analytics to better understand their core audiences, no matter how large or small, and to develop meaningful relationships with them” (Prediction 150 [2013]). The term audience, according to predictions, “is most often attached to numbers, data, and this silent question of what can we get out of one another to meet our personal needs” (Prediction 47 [2021]).

An essential assumption throughout the predictions is that audiences ought to be able to be monetized. Audiences after all “will not engage with (much less pay)” (Prediction 141 [2015]) if treated as an object to be obtained as opposed to a reflection of a relationship. Here predictions shifted over time, with earlier predictions viewing social media as largely synonymous with the audience. Predictions acknowledged that news organizations need “shift some of their attention away from pageviews and toward building an engaged and loyal audience” (Prediction 155 [2012]). Hence, the journalistic community offered numerous predictions aimed at considering how to “fund these outlets by literally meeting audiences where they are” (Prediction 21 [2023]). The journalistic community acknowledged that “over the past decade, ‘audience development’ has gone from a little-known marketing term to a familiar newsroom role” (Prediction 49 [2021]).

Discussion

The subset of the journalistic community that writes *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions clearly feels a growing ambivalence regarding social media, yet continues to hold news audiences that depend on social media platforms in high regard. These findings have both theoretical and practical implications when it comes to understanding how people who produce, fund, and study journalism think about and approach their relationships with news audiences and social media platforms. First, when it comes to this subset of the journalistic community's imagined audiences and platform imaginaries, these findings suggest a durability when it comes to the former, but not the latter. These predictions show that journalistic actors' platform imaginaries are increasingly negative, leading these actors to participate in this aspirational metajournalistic discourse by advocating for improvements to these platforms or for news organizations to move beyond them entirely. However, despite the implicitly unflattering perception these actors reveal when it comes to social media platforms, their perceptions of the people they use these platforms to reach remains positive.

In other words, our analysis reveals that the excitement and enthusiasm this subset of the journalistic community shared at the advent of the social media era has begun to curdle into uncertainty if not outright skepticism about social media platforms (Ross Arguedas et al. 2022). Yet, despite actors' disdain for these platforms stems in no small part from the harassment inflicted upon them within these platforms by the audiences they use these platforms to reach, the journalistic community's perceptions of these audiences remain positive. *Nieman Journalism Lab* prediction writers began to lose confidence in social media platforms due to the harassment and misinformation that increasingly proliferated on them (Miller 2023). However, when it comes to the public—which comprises the very people who engage in online abuse and misinformation sharing—journalists' faith is unshaken.

Considering how much less hospitable social media has become for journalists (Miller 2023), it is no surprise to see journalists becoming less enamored with social media. These platforms were once seen primarily through the lens of opportunity—the opportunity to build and engage with audiences, the opportunity to find a richer and wider array of sources, and the opportunity to work with the public to improve the quality and variety of the news. Over time, however, that promise has been complicated by the challenges and obstacles these platforms present. Now that journalists are keenly aware that social media platforms are uninterested in privileging the news (Nielsen and Ganter 2022), and that the people who use these platforms often seek to harass those who report and share the news (Holton et al. 2021), there is a growing sense that perhaps these platforms have outlived their utility when it comes to journalism.

Yet, as important as what these predictions focused on is what they overlooked. More specifically, over time predictions grew more explicitly pessimistic about social media as those writing predictions described the limitations, obstacles, and shortcomings of these platforms when it comes to news production and dissemination. These predictions reveal that journalism is increasingly grappling with a painfully unequal relationship with social media platforms that hold a tremendous amount of power over the size of the news industry's audience and perhaps even the extent to

which the public trusts the news they encounter within these platforms. As a result, an examination of these predictions over time reveals this subset of the journalistic community grappling with their mounting discomfort with these platforms, and, most recently—and for the first time—beginning to consider what it would be like for the profession to move beyond them.

No such ambivalence appears to exist for this subset of the journalistic community's imagined audience. Journalists have found themselves increasingly facing “dark participation” in the form of online harassment and abuse on social media platforms (Quandt 2018). They also understand that people are increasingly distrustful of the news and susceptible to misinformation (Johnson and Tully 2022). Despite this knowledge, these predictions suggest that regard for the public remains undiminished. The perception of the public as a valuable part of news production has remained constant (Nelson 2021), even as the journalistic community's perception of social media platforms as a central means of improving the public's role in news production has grown much darker.

In short, our findings suggest that journalism practitioners, scholars, funders, and stakeholders are malleable when it comes to their perceptions of technology they have come to depend on for news production, but rather stubborn when it comes to their perceptions of the people that have come to depend on this technology for news consumption. Even as journalistic actors undergo changes in their platform imaginaries caused in no small part by audience behavior, their imagined audiences remain the same. In some ways, these findings are unsurprising. Scholars have long observed that journalists often use themselves as stand-ins when determining their imagined audience (Coddington, Lewis, and Belair-Gagnon 2021), so it makes sense that their perceptions of the public would remain stable even as their perceptions of social media platforms change. Furthermore, journalists depend on an audience for their work to carry any sort of impact. So maintaining a faith in people despite evidence that challenges said faith is perhaps a prerequisite for those who choose to pursue—and persist in—a journalism career.

Limitations

This analysis stems from a unique dataset, which has its own distinct limitations. *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions represent a small—highly U.S.-focused slice of existing metajournalism (see Creech and Buozis 2025). While *Nieman Journalism Lab* works to reflect the broad scope of the journalistic community, as this sample reflects, much of the prediction making does fall to U.S. voices. In some cases, metajournalism in the U.S. bears meaningful similarities to metajournalism elsewhere (Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022), but there's strong reason to also consider that meaningful differences persist. For example, Moon's scholarship on Rwanda (see Moon 2021; 2023) reflects a frayed social contract between journalists and their audience; hence, corresponding circumstances might not always result in a resilient connection to audiences. That said, these *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions are perhaps the best example of *aspirational metajournalistic discourse*, meaning they offer perhaps the clearest portrayal of the hopes held by highly influential actors within journalism.

Another limitation of these data is the self-serving nature of these predictions on the *aspirational metajournalistic discourse* this study seeks to explore. These predictions are valuable not necessarily because they represent the majority opinion of the industry, and not necessarily because they speak to a majority of the news industry. Instead, they're valuable because they represent a select group of elite actors within the industry talking to and amongst each other about how they would like to see the industry change. So, they reveal how those in positions to make serious changes to the news industry intend to shift the field in one way or another. Equally important, they reveal why they believe those shifts are the right ones at this particular moment.

It is for these reasons we feel that the elite nature of these predictions, both in the sense of their authors and their likely audience, is both a limitation as well as a unique benefit of these data. On the one hand, it is hard to argue that these predictions mirror the perceptions of most practicing journalists. On the other hand, they do likely capture the perceptions among the minority of those within journalism with the agency to meaningfully impact how—and within what platforms—journalism gets produced and disseminated. In that way, we believe these sorts of analyses are truly valuable, and hope more scholars use these predictions to examine related questions surrounding how those with the means and resources to change journalism would like those changes to unfold.

In short, *Nieman Journalism Lab* predictions show us what those who hold real sway within the news industry would like the industry to become. With that in mind, we hope others will use these data in their own studies of the journalistic community's perceptions. Journalists, nonprofit leaders, academics, technologists all have different priorities—yet it is perhaps profound the degree to which such a divergent group, gathered together to “predict journalism” for the following year—operated with lockstep sentiment. This speaks to the shared co-creation of journalism of which so many parties play a role and here, as we see in this study, *aspirational metajournalism* plays a vital role in offering a form of stability through norming values (Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022); in this case that their audience was of high value, even if their existing means of reaching them were not. While predictions offer little in actually *predicting* the future of journalism, they offer a powerful lens in understanding journalism's present; by nature, our aspirations are based on present circumstances.

Conclusion

As this particular analysis reveals, what we're seeing is a shift away from social media platforms, yet not a similar shift away from news audience idealism. That means that, even if journalists themselves might be growing disenchanted with the public as a result of the significant threats and harassment they increasingly experience, that disenchantment is not shared by their superiors, who might feel more critical of social media platforms than ever before yet continue to feel optimistic about the potential of news audiences to improve the quality of the news by making good faith contributions to news production and dissemination. Of course, there's a good chance this optimism is not wholly pure, since presumably some of the authors of these predictions who hold higher-level management positions within news organizations have financial incentives to approach news audiences with a more positive mindset than

journalists themselves who might be more eager to return to the more traditional journalist/audience approach of “we produce the news, you consume it, end of story.” Regardless of the underlying motivations, these predictions show how the attitudes of those with varying degrees of power within journalism are shifting in one key way—with regards to social media platforms—while remaining remarkably consistent in another—with regards to positive perceptions of news audiences. These findings are not only valuable for demonstrating the durability of perceptions among journalistic elites, but also for demonstrating the value of those perspectives more generally.

In doing so, these findings raise an important question: How accurately is this small but influential subset of the journalistic community understanding the situation in which it finds itself? Perhaps they are right to cast the majority of the blame for the hostility, harassment, and diminished trust they face from the public on the social media platforms that the public increasingly uses to consume and engage with news. And perhaps maintaining an imagined audience that errs more on the side of idealism about what people want from journalism is necessary for journalists to maintain a meaningful connection to their work. Alternatively, it may be possible that the public is as much to blame for the challenges journalists currently face as the social media platforms that both members of the public and journalists rely on. If this is the case, then it might be time for the journalistic community to question the implicit assumptions that have kept journalism’s imagined audience so consistent.

Journalists’ growing skepticism of social media platforms has not been accompanied by a similar skepticism toward the millions of people who use these platforms for news consumption. On the contrary, journalists seem to have no problem distinguishing between platforms and the public. These findings suggest that journalists’ faith in the people they seek to reach with their news is profoundly powerful, which makes sense considering that those who go into journalism aspire to serve the public good. In light of these findings, it is reasonable to assume that, should journalists eventually abandon social media platforms, they will not also abandon their desire to maintain strong, engaged relationships with the people they seek to reach.

Note

1. We in particular focus this paper’s findings on predictions reflecting the relationship between audiences and social media, but all predictions related to the “audience” were gathered. To ensure that we’d cast the widest net for data collection, we also conducted a search for the term “public” but found few additional predictions relevant to the study that had not already been identified (e.g. many results reflected on “public officials,” “public relations”).

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Appendix

Table A1. NiemanLab predictions.

Prediction #	Title	Author	Role	Year Published
Prediction 19	User-centric editorial models embrace empathy and scale	Dmitry Shishkin	Independent digital media consultant	2023
Prediction 21	The year we see the future of local news won't look like its past	Tracy Powell	CEO of The Pivot Fund	2023
Prediction 30	News confronts reaching audiences in a post-social world	Sam Cholke	Manager of distribution & audience growth at the Institute for Nonprofit News.	2023
Prediction 36	Talk to Gen Z	Martina Efeyini	Science News Civic Science fellow	2022
Prediction 40	Journalism in a time of permacrisis	An Xiao Mina	Technologist, author, consultant, and coach who works with media entrepreneurs and leaders	2022
Prediction 47	Audience engagement ≠ community engagement	Ariel Zirulnick	Senior editor for community engagement at Southern California Public Radio	2021
Prediction 49	Audience development roles broaden further	Sarah Marshall	Global senior director of audience development, social, and analytics for Vogue	2021
Prediction 52	Media 3.0: The news creator economy arrives	Matt Karolian	General manager of Boston.com	2021
Prediction 53	Tomorrow's news audience: Smaller, but more obsessed	Jesse Holcomb	Assistant professor of journalism and communication at Calvin University	2021
Prediction 56	Be essential	Cory Haik	Chief digital officer at Vice Media Group	2020
Prediction 69	What have we done for you lately?	Jennifer Choi	Managing director of the News Integrity Initiative	2020
Prediction 70	Declining trust forces publishers to claim (or disclaim) values	Tanya Cordrey	Former chief digital officer of Guardian News & Media	2020
Prediction 87	Community becomes a core newsroom value	Lauren Katz	Senior engagement manager at Vox.	2018
Prediction 88	Putting the social back in social media	Mandy Velez	Social media editor at The Daily Beast	2018
Prediction 97	It's time to understand the un-audience	Stephanie Edgerly	Associate professor at Northwestern University	2018
Prediction 98	Participation gets personal	Airle Zirulnick	Leads the Membership in News Fund	2018
Prediction 103	Spanish-language audio blows up	Carolina Guerrero	CEO and co-founder of Radio Ambulante	2018
Prediction 107	The gap between journalism and research is too wide	Seth C Lewis	Professor of Journalism at the University of Oregon	2018
Prediction 128	The audience is the source and the story	Mandy Velez	Editorial director of Revelist	2016
Prediction 129	Public trust for private realities	Alexis Lloyd	Chief design officer at Axios	2016
Prediction 139	The year of the splinter site	Katie Zhu	Product manager and engineer at Medium	2015
Prediction 140	Secrets of a successful relationship	Renee Kaplan	Head of audience engagement at the Financial Times	2015
Prediction 141	Engaging audiences for better civic discourse	Jennifer R Choi	Program officer for the McCormick Foundation's Democracy Program	2015
Prediction 149	Mobile, social, video	Ed O'Keefe	Editor-in-chief of NowThis News	2013
Prediction 150	Think audiences, not just metrics	James G Robinson	director of news analytics at The New York Times	2013
Prediction 153	Think like the audience	Mindy McAdams	Professor at the University of Florida	2012
Prediction 155	Journalistic skills are still marketable	Carrie Brown	Assistant professor of journalism at the University of Memphis	2012