

Audience Expectations of Journalists: Demands, Beliefs and Assessments

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Abstract

Scholarship on journalism in the digital age has often pointed to a gap between audiences' expectations of journalism and what journalists actually do in their work as one reason for the global decline in news trust and consumption. Much of this work has, however, evolved from studies of journalistic role perceptions to measure audiences' expectations of these same roles. In line with the so-called audience turn in (digital) journalism studies, this study takes an audience-centric approach to better understand what it is that audiences want, in the hope of better informing journalistic work. Through an analysis of 35 observations and in-depth interviews with audience members in Austria, we examine audiences' demands, beliefs, and assessments of journalists, and the relations among these expectation modes. Our findings demonstrate the complex nature of audiences' expectations and reveal seven dimensions. Four of these aligned partially with normative journalistic roles: expectations of (1) information; (2) interpretation; (3) accountability; and (4) activism. The remaining three extend beyond them, including expectations of (5) emotional connection; (6) interaction; and (7) societal relevance. These insights highlight what audiences value in journalism, offering a foundation for news content that caters to their needs.

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In the digital age, audiences have gained greater opportunities to engage in journalistic work (e.g., Bruns 2003; Lewis et al. 2010) and articulate their expectations of journalists in a more immediate, public, collective, and even personal manner than ever before (Craft et al. 2016; Napoli 2011). Despite the proliferation of these new opportunities, global trends of eroding trust and declining news consumption indicate that audiences and journalists may be drifting further apart (Newman et al. 2024).

The burgeoning scholarship on the relationship between journalists and audiences has tended to prioritize the perspectives of scholars and practitioners over those of audiences themselves (Carlson and Peters 2023; Swart et al. 2022). This has arguably led to three significant interconnected limitations: (1) detecting audience expectations may prove challenging when journalists and scholars rely exclusively on their preconceived images (Ang 2006; Butsch 2008); (2) information that is not provided by audiences might be more susceptible to misinterpretation (e.g., Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2018); and (3) employing predefined normative journalistic roles as the starting point may restrict the exploration of alternative forms of audience expectations. Consequently, there is a growing need for research to explore in more depth when and how audiences perceive journalism as valuable (Costera Meijer 2019).

Based on the premise that an audience-centric approach (Swart et al. 2022) is necessary to better understand audiences' expectations and pave the way for journalistic work that meets them, this study draws from a qualitative analysis of 35 observations combined with in-depth interviews. We applied role theory (Biddle 1979) and expectancy violation theory (Burgoon and Jones 1976) to explain how audiences articulate their prescriptive (demands), descriptive (beliefs), and cathectic (assessments) expectations of journalists. Findings reveal that audiences' expectations are highly complex, reinforcing the need to

examine the diverse modes in which they are expressed, as well as the connections and interactions among them. We also identify audience expectations beyond traditional journalistic roles, particularly regarding audiences' emotional connection and interaction with journalists and their awareness of their societal relevance.

Centering Audiences' Expectations

Journalism scholarship and practice widely acknowledges that foregrounding the needs of audiences is crucial for sustaining journalism's societal relevance and economic survival (Costera Meijer 2020; Swart et al, 2022). However, despite the "audience turn" in journalism studies, scholars and professionals have prioritized investigating ways in which audiences are important for journalism, rather than clarifying how journalism can be of service to audiences (Costera Meijer 2019; Witschge and Sabbah 2023). For example, much research has analyzed how journalists rely on information about their audience to make decisions, for instance regarding news construction and placement, revenue sources, and job security in the newsroom (e.g., Lee et al. 2014; Tandoc 2014; Tandoc and Vos 2016). While these studies provide valuable insight into the transformational role that increased access to such information can play in journalists' work, it does not necessarily equate to comprehending audiences' actual thoughts and feelings about what journalism is and ought to be. Relying on information about audiences instead of conducting user-centered studies can lead to findings rooted in biased assumptions and misinterpretations. This includes assuming that a lack of clicks indicates a lack of interest in the news when it can also reflect a series of cognitive (e.g., lack of personal relevance), affective (e.g., lack of visual appeal), and pragmatic (e.g., lack of fit with user's schedule) considerations (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2018).

Similarly, research has often employed questionnaires presenting a list of institutional journalistic roles as a starting point to examine audience expectations, often to measure the

level of (in)congruency between audiences and journalists (e.g., Loosen et al. 2020; Vos et al. 2019; Willnat et al. 2019). These studies' results tend to show high levels of incongruency (but see Loosen et al. 2020), with journalists prioritizing roles related to investigative journalism (e.g., impartiality or neutrality), while audiences prioritize roles related to information dissemination (e.g., getting information out quickly, providing entertainment). While such studies are important to explore the derived consequences, for instance in terms of trust and willingness to pay for news (Kalogeropoulos and Fletcher 2019), they may not fully capture whether audiences hold expectations beyond journalists' role orientations. This may leave various audience expectations unexplored, highlighting an urgent need to move toward inquiries into how journalism can best serve its audiences (Carlson and Peters 2023; Costera Meijer 2019; 2020; Swart et al. 2022; Witschge and Sabbah 2023).

Furthermore, with digital technologies lowering barriers to news production and distribution, journalism continues to be disrupted by new formats and actors who effectively engage audiences (Eldridge 2014; 2018). Combined with the growing emphasis on audience-centered approaches (Swart et al. 2022), these shifts have spurred a rich stream of qualitative research into audiences' notions of journalism. Studies have explored how audiences expect journalists to uphold traditional normative values while viewing content creators on social media through a different lens, namely valuing qualities such as authenticity and slower content (Banjac and Hanusch 2022). Research has also examined audiences' perceptions of emerging storytelling technologies like immersive journalism, which they understood but found somewhat unsettling, ultimately not recognizing it as fully journalistic (Greber et al. 2024). Similarly, data and automated journalism have raised new questions about journalistic boundaries, with audiences valuing human intervention, in-depth analysis, and personal angles (Stalph et al. 2024).

Thus, understanding audiences' evolving expectations of journalists is key to interpreting shifts in digital journalism, rethinking its fundamental definitions (Carlson and Lewis 2015), and ensuring its continued relevance. However, despite growing scholarship on audiences' perspectives on journalism, more research is needed to disentangle what audiences demand, observe, and prefer in journalistic work given that discrepancies between expectations and observed practice can be key factors in the erosion of trust in news (Fawzi and Mothes 2020).

We address these questions through the concept of expectations (Biddle 1979; Burgoon and Jones 1976), as it allows us to undertake a fine-grained examination of their prescriptive, descriptive or predictive, and cathectic modes. Investigating how audiences experience journalism as meaningful – i.e. relevant, valuable, enjoyable, and worthwhile – allows us to prioritize their understandings (Costera Meijer 2013, Swart et al. 2017). This approach helps preserve nuance in advancing scholarly understandings of audiences' complex expectations of digital journalism (Banjac 2022; Costera Meijer 2019; Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2018).

Theoretical framework

In role theory, expectations are conceptualized as reactions to roles, namely behaviors perceived to be typical of a person in a particular position (Biddle 1979). For instance, an expectation by audiences that “journalists report critically” is a reaction to a behavior perceived to be characteristic of journalists, associated with the watchdog role (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Similarly, expectancy violation theory (EVT) conceptualizes expectations as consistent patterns of behavior shaped by both social norms and personal experiences (Burgoon and Jones 1976). Building on EVT, Burgoon and Hubbard (2005) define interaction position as the combination of needed, anticipated, and desired behaviors. When

this interaction position contrasts with observed behavior, it can lead to demands for greater alignment between the two.

Applying the concept of expectations to the relationship between journalists and their audiences suggests that audience expectations are shaped by their interactions with journalists and their work (Banjac et al. 2024). At the same time, journalists draw upon their ideas about their societal role to guide their work, shaping collective understandings of journalism (Cohen 1963; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Zelizer 1993). According to Hanitzsch and Vos (2017), journalistic roles are discursively constructed through exchanges among journalists and with external social actors, informing subsequent role performance (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Journalists must navigate expectations from these diverse actors, including audiences, who in digital journalism have greater opportunities to communicate with them directly, publicly, and personally (Banjac et al. 2024; Craft et al. 2016; van der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014). Thus, audience expectations have the potential to influence journalists' role orientations, while journalists' role performance can, in turn, generate new expectations among audiences.

According to both role theory and EVT, expectations can respond to different modes: prescriptive, descriptive or predictive, and cathectic. *Prescriptive expectations* convey the intention to demand that others engage in specific normative behavior (Biddle 1979; Burgoon and Jones 1976). Consequently, demands expressing prescriptive expectations often include linguistic markers such as “should” or “must” and may pressure others into compliance (Bank et al. 1977).

Descriptive or predictive expectations (Biddle 1979; Burgoon and Jones 1976) respond to observations of a specific behavior. They are expressed as objective statements or beliefs informed by a past, enunciating a present, or anticipating a future behavior. They tend to use linguistic markers such as “was,” “is,” or “will be.” Unlike prescriptive expectations,

descriptive ones do not have a normative nature, although their matter-of-fact enunciation may nonetheless prompt compliant behavior. Furthermore, audiences' expressed beliefs about how journalists typically behave can shape journalists' intentions to conform, adapt, or challenge those beliefs (Fishbein and Ajzen 2010).

Cathectic expectations have an emotional dimension (Biddle 1979) and convey positive or negative emotional reactions to, or assessments of behavior (Biddle 1979). Therefore, assessments based on cathectic expectations can include language such as "like" or "dislike." Similar to descriptive expectations, cathectic expectations are not normative in nature; however, expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a particular behavior can encourage rewarded actions or promote compliance. In other words, cathectic expectations also shape behavior through positive reinforcement (Skinner 1958).

A framework informed by the concept of expectations can help us understand audiences' perspectives with nuance (Banjac et al. 2024). Research on folk theories of journalism shows that news audiences can articulate descriptive expectations, such as the belief that journalists are fundamentally biased in their work. Examples include "all media is skewed" (Nelson and Lewis 2021, 11) or "the lack of objectivity has always been there" (Juarez Miro 2023, 9). Perceived bias can lead audiences to demand specific behavior. For instance, in response to a story about a bank attempting to regain public trust after a financial scandal, audiences may argue that journalists: "ought to be taking them apart. They ought to be going after them like Deep Throat in Watergate" (Wilner et al. 2021, 1939). Similarly, audiences can express diverse cathectic expectations, such as positive emotional reactions in relation to bias: "I do love MSNBC, I just love it. I think they got my message" (Juarez Miro 2023, 9).

Recognizing diverse expectation modes can enhance our comprehension of their nature, demonstrating the importance of exploring how various expectation modes coexist

and interact to understand expectation conflict, such as when audiences' expectations do not match their experiences with journalistic work. This can help clarify whether and how audiences' complex expectations and potential conflicts might underlie behaviors such as news distrust or avoidance (Fawzi and Mothes 2020; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). Furthermore, it is important to consider descriptive and cathectic expectations because they capture key aspects of audience experiences and preferences in journalism. However, since these expectations are not explicitly normative, journalists may be more likely to dismiss them (Raemy and Vos 2020), which could, in turn, exacerbate audience dissatisfaction.

To address these concerns, this study takes an inductive approach to answer two research questions:

RQ1: What are audiences' prescriptive, descriptive, and cathectic expectations of journalists?

RQ2: How do the diverse modes relate to one another in audiences' expectations of journalists?

Method

To answer the research questions, we focus on the Austrian context. This relatively small media market shares defining trends with many other Western democracies, especially those aligned with a Democratic Corporatist model (Hallin and Mancini 2004), characterized by high newspaper circulation, external pluralism, historically strong party press (which has recently experienced a resurgence in Austria), robust journalistic professionalization, and strong state intervention with protection for press freedom. In Austria, the role of the state is reflected in the prominence of public broadcaster ORF as well as in press subsidies to support quality journalism (Sparviero et al. 2023; Steinmaurer 2009). In recent decades, however, Austria has shown signs of a more liberal media system, namely a high market concentration, with ORF and the tabloid newspaper *Kronenzeitung* dominating (Sparviero et al. 2023;

Steinmaurer 2009). Despite exceptionally high rates of daily newspaper readership and trust in the ORF, news media use and trust have been steadily declining in Austria, as in many other media markets globally (Newman et al. 2024; Sparviero et al. 2023). Therefore, we expect our findings to relate to countries with similar journalistic cultures, particularly in identifying unmet audience expectations while also highlighting those that may already be fulfilled in Austria.

Observations and Interviews

Employing an observation-centered qualitative methodology, we integrated the (1) think-aloud and (2) watch and discuss methods (Groot Kormelink 2020) into (3) an in-depth interview protocol. The think-aloud protocol (e.g., Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2018) asked participants to consume media as they normally would and, while browsing, prompted them to describe what they were seeing, thinking, and feeling (Groot Kormelink 2020). This was combined with the watch and discuss method, which aims to collect reactions to news media content immediately after its consumption (e.g., Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2018). The guide (see online appendix) included a section asking participants to describe their media use throughout a typical day. For each media actor or platform mentioned, participants were asked about their normative ideals, observations, and emotional responses. Questions also explored whether expectations were individual or shared by others, as well as personal or positional. Finally, we asked participants about their relationship with these media actors and platforms.

The sessions were audio and video recorded, using a frontal camera facing the participant and another one facing the media consumed (if offline) or participants' screen(s) (if online). The observations and in-depth interviews, along with video reenactments (Pink and Leder Mackley 2014), allowed us to capture different expectation modes, as they made it possible for participants to encounter, think, feel, and articulate their expectations and

experiences with journalism during the recording sessions (Groot Kormelink 2020). As the think-aloud protocol and the watch and discuss methods integrated elicitation techniques, they were useful in avoiding inaccuracies and social desirability biases typical when self-reporting news use.

We conducted 35 observations in total, 27 at the university and eight in participants' homes. The observations at the university had the disadvantage that participants were unfamiliar with the location, potentially affecting how easily they shared and enacted news media consumption. However, providing them with the option to bring their usual media consumption devices and materials along allowed us to employ these ethnographic methods with participants with whom researchers lacked previous rapport, consequently making it possible to recruit a more diverse sample. Further, it made it possible for participants to retain more control over their data, which was helpful in the context of an already invasive methodology. Measures were taken to protect participants' privacy and the study was assessed by the IRB of the [University] and classified in the category of minimal risk, ID: [ID code].

Participants

The recorded sessions averaged close to 2.5 hours long and took place between March and September of 2023. They were conducted in German and subsequently transcribed, translated into English, and verified by a native German speaker. To achieve a diverse sample, participants were recruited through a screener survey distributed via strategically placed flyers across [city], a market research company, Facebook ads, and snowball sampling. Recruiting strategies were approved by the IRB, including compensation.

The sample included 19 female, 15 male, and one non-binary respondents, with ages ranging from 17 to 79 years (average 46). Most participants had a higher education degree (21), around half were employed (18), nine were students, seven retired, and one was

unemployed. Participants' median monthly salary after taxes ranged between 1201€ and 1800€. Thirty-two participants were born in Austria, and most were left leaning (21), compared with seven who leaned to the right side of politics. Our sample is broadly consistent with nationwide demographic data collected between 2020 and 2022 by the Austrian Bureau of Statistics (Statistik Austria n.d.), but is also more ideologically left-leaning, with highly educated participants. While we went to great lengths to recruit participants with diverse ideological positions, our sample is reflective of research that shows that right-leaning citizens tend to be reluctant to participate in academic studies (Blee 2007). Additionally, most participants resided in [city], an urban area whose population reflects these characteristics (European Commission 2020). We report respondents using random pseudonyms alongside their gender identity (F=female, M=male, NB=non-binary) and age. This information is not intended to structure the analysis but to provide context about the participants.

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted using MAXQDA and followed (1) data immersion, (2) first-cycle coding, and (3) second-cycle coding (Saldaña 2013; Tracy 2013). The analysis was inductive and focused on participants' articulation of their expectations in diverse modes. Since the methods used do not allow us to assess the frequency of these expectations beyond our sample, we intentionally refrained from reporting quantifiable results. Nevertheless, their consistent presence across the sample suggests that these findings were not merely anecdotal.

Findings and Discussion

In analyzing the data, it became apparent that a number of expectations related to well-known roles extensively discussed in scholarship, highlighting the inherent interconnectedness of journalistic roles and expectations. However, our audience-centric

approach allowed us to unearth expectation categories that extend beyond roles, and offer a more nuanced understanding of established ones.

Overall, descriptive and cathectic expectations emerged as particularly pervasive, underscoring their importance alongside the traditionally prioritized prescriptive, or normative, expectations. Furthermore, expectations were highly complex, showing that focusing on a single mode risks oversimplification and can limit deeper understandings. Participants' narratives combined linguistic markers for demands, observations, and assessments, as illustrated by Julia's (F21) statement about the news: "*You should be able to understand it* [prescriptive] even if you don't consume media all the time. And that, I find, sometimes *it just isn't like that* [descriptive], because many things are assumed to be known, and *I don't like that* [cathectic]." This complexity, and the interactions among modes, are highlighted where relevant throughout the identified expectation categories.

The following sections discuss each of the seven categories of audience expectations identified in our analysis. They include (1) *information*, (2) *interpretation*, (3) *investigation*, (4) *activism*, (5) *emotional connection* between audiences and journalists, (6) *audience interaction*, and (7) *societal relevance*.

Information Expectations

Audiences expressed the prescriptive expectations that journalists should provide first-hand, accurate, neutral, and accessible information that expands their worldview, thus corresponding to the informative-instructive function of journalism encompassing the disseminator, curator, and storyteller roles (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). Here, audiences described journalists witnessing and chronicling important events (e.g., the war in Ukraine), and providing them with *neutral and objective* information, but they also believed journalists were not neutral at times, noting ideological leanings in the news. This descriptive

expectation was also expressed cathectically as a dislike: “If it goes too much in a political direction, [...] I do not like it, because then neutrality is no longer there” (Elisa, F60).

Relatedly, audiences shared their observations of *learning about unfamiliar topics* from journalists. They appreciated it when journalists provided them with information that was *accessible* to them in form (concise, or including pictures) and content (clear, or well-explained). They demanded that journalists contribute to *expanding their worldview*, a prescriptive expectation also expressed in the descriptive and cathectic modes, thus suggesting it was fulfilled: “That’s what makes Nina Horaczek’s [political journalist specialized in Austria’s far-right] work so valuable to me because she really confronts me with views of this world and this everyday life that I will never have because I will never be in these situations” (Viktor, M62).

While respondents generally valued learning from journalistic work, they also expressed their displeasure (cathectic) with journalists *talking down* to them: “I find it annoying. If I want a moral sermon, I go to church, for example, and don’t necessarily read a newspaper. I then also consider the journalist to be less competent than another journalist” (Dominik, M20). Importantly, participants made explicit how these reactions affected their assessments of journalists in their professional capacity. In this case, the moralizing journalist was assessed as “less competent,” which suggests that emotional reactions to news play a key role in shaping perceptions. This insight is valuable for understanding broader trends of declining interest and trust in the news (Newman et al., 2024), as focusing on emotional reactions adds nuance to studying the discrepancies between audience expectations and perceived journalistic performance.

Interpretation Expectations

Audiences argued that journalists should draw on their expertise to analyze and interpret events while including and amplifying diverse voices to inform their perspectives,

positions, and decisions, aligning with the analytical-deliberative function of journalism that encompasses the analyst, access provider, and mobilizer roles (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). Furthermore, audiences' prescriptive expectations expanded the access provider role by explicitly demanding that journalists *talk and listen to a diversity of actors* to bridge ideological differences in society, an expectation connected to their perceptions of political polarization: “[The ideal journalist] is someone who can talk to all camps [...]. Even if [they] find their views really awful. [...] There is far too much mutual demonization in Austria” (Ada, F53).

Audiences felt journalists actively try to *foster dialogue* between opposing sides, “allow other opinions” (Esther, F23), and introduce “a lot of new perspectives into this whole social discussion” (Cecilie, F26), which they appreciated. They also observed the presence and absence of journalists' explicit positioning in their analysis. These kinds of descriptive expectations were pervasive across categories, highlighting their role in shaping audience engagement with news and revealing when journalism meets or fails to meet audience demands.

On the cathetic level, participants appreciated journalists who used their platform to *highlight social issues* they considered important. Contrary to information expectations, in which detached neutrality and objectivity played a key role, interpretation expectations encompassed an appreciation for journalists' subjective *interpretations*. Although these preferences may seem to conflict with expectations for neutrality and objectivity, audiences reconciled this by demanding a clear separation between the two. For example, Greta (F31), acknowledged the tension before requesting space for journalists to express their views:

“You should also give the authors – and I'm saying this straight out – a place where they can express their opinion. [...] First comes the factual, sober thing, and then a

paragraph where you say: ‘As a journalist, I think ...’. Then that’s okay, I don’t have to adopt their opinion. [...] It just makes it more authentic, I think, or more credible. This example highlights the importance of centering audience perspectives in research, as it allows them to articulate nuanced expectations that may challenge traditional journalistic roles.

Accountability Expectations

Participants argued that journalists should have the autonomy to hold the powerful accountable through exhaustive research and verification, corresponding with journalism’s critical-monitorial function, which includes the monitor, detective, and watchdog roles (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). Once again, however, the prescriptive expectations clashed with participants’ descriptive observations of journalists and their work, in that they expressed mixed beliefs about *in-depth research and verification* in the news:

Especially because few people go there or (laughs) few people are stupid enough to go there in a war zone, you have to be very careful about what’s really going on there. Say, okay, what are the facts there now? Because... There is speculation in all possible directions. Most of the time, you know what really happened a month later anyway. But before that, headlines are created, and clicks are generated, just with... questionable facts. (Benedikt, M47)

Similarly, participants described journalists as *holding authorities accountable* and talked about encountering and enjoying investigative journalism, which positively influenced their perceptions of journalists engaged in this work:

If I found them good, well-researched on a certain level, and factual and objective... if that is somehow the case in my perception, then these are serious sources for me. And if not, if the research is questionable, if a clear framing is recognizable, then they tend to be not-so-serious sources for me. (Simon, M22)

However, audiences also observed journalists aligning with authorities, with the latter eliciting negative cathectic expectations: “I also have a problem with Mr. [Hans] Bürger [political journalist and economist at Austrian public broadcaster], because, in my opinion, he’s always adapted to the party in power” (Irene, F61). Audience members believed *journalists faced pressure* from editors to follow “an agenda they have to keep” (Isabel, F23)—often political for public service and legacy media, or aimed at boosting circulation for tabloids—suggesting a perceived limitation on journalistic autonomy.

Like information expectations, the normative ideals shaping journalistic roles (i.e., watchdog) were salient in prescriptive expectations of accountability. However, these expectations were often unmet, with audiences failing to observe them in journalistic work, leading to negative emotional reactions, all of which can help us understand the growing distrust in journalists around the globe (Fawzi and Mothes 2020; Newman et al. 2024).

Activism Expectations

Audiences argued that journalists should sternly, directly, and persistently challenge political powers, advocate for social justice, and uphold their principles. These prescriptive expectations correspond to the advocative-radical function of journalism encompassing the adversary, advocate, and missionary roles (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). Activism expectations were strongly shaped by Armin Wolf, arguably Austria’s most prominent journalist who works at public broadcaster ORF and whose interviews with politicians served as a key reference point for these expectations. While participants viewed *persistent questioning* as desirable, exemplified by the call for journalists to “remain annoying” when “tak[ing] politicians to task” (Vincent, M47), descriptive expectations of *hostility* associated with an adversarial role (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018) were judged to be “below the belt” (Natascha, F41) and invited cathectic expectations of such journalism being unpleasant: “Then it gets really boring because then it’s clear, then it’s ping pong” (Erik, M76). Moreover, these

cathectic expectations contributed to negative attitudes towards journalists: “I’m not a friend of Armin Wolf [...] I think he’s too provocative and aggressive towards the interviewees and too disrespectful” (Nils, M31). Instead, participants praised the ability to challenge interviewees “not in an attacking way, but in a determined way” (Ola, NB23).

Although activism expectations that emphasized confrontational and antagonistic exchanges with politicians can resemble accountability expectations, they also encompassed participants’ recognition of journalists *taking a stand* in support of their values and social causes more generally. As one participant put it: “I think it’s good to take a clear stand. That is important. And especially when you have a large reach, I think that’s important” (Esther, F23). In confronting political authorities, supporting social causes, and standing by their convictions, participants explained that using an assertive yet respectful approach, characterized by “empathy” (Rachel, F65) and a “calm” tone (Irene, F61), was a positive and necessary practice.

Our findings suggest that the prominence of particular expectations can vary based on a society’s democratic standing, journalistic culture (see Hanitzsch and Vos 2018; Hanitzsch et al. 2011), and broader sociocultural values. This is evident in Austrian audiences’ expectations for journalists to take a clear stand in interactions with politicians and on social issues, while simultaneously favoring a congenial approach. This emphasizes the need for nuanced comparative research that considers cultural and social differences and explores expectations beyond prescriptive modes. Additionally, these findings suggest a spillover effect, by which participants’ emotional reactions to news can affect their perceptions of the journalists producing it.

Emotional Connection Expectations

Our analysis revealed that audiences expect an emotional connection with journalists, aligning with the *mood manager* role typically associated with lifestyle journalism (Hanitzsch

and Vos 2018), but which here also extends to political reporting. Audiences described positive engagement with the news: “Yes, easy to read. I’d eat my bread roll with it. That’s relaxing” (Natascha, F41). They also valued journalists’ *Schmäh* (Austrian charm/humor), which they associated with professional competence. Cathectic expectations included sensorial aspects, such as journalists’ pleasant voices and appearances, reflecting expectations partly beyond journalists’ control. However, participants also reported overwhelming negativity led to news avoidance, especially when distant events amplified their feelings of powerlessness: “I am a bit tired of information because it is often very overwhelming, and I have the feeling that I can’t really change anything” (Katarina, F54). This highlights a contradiction between prescriptive expectations of broad dissemination of information and cathectic expectations that assess this work negatively, presenting a challenge for journalists who may be punished for meeting audiences’ demands. News avoidance driven by expected and experienced negative emotions has been documented and connected with political disenfranchisement (e.g., Toff and Nielsen 2022), although research suggests that lending more control to audiences can help alleviate these emotions (Groot Kormelink 2020; Juarez Miro 2023).

Furthermore, as audiences consistently expressed emotional connection as a core expectation in all modes and for all journalistic genres, these findings highlight the potential of emotion to strengthen the relationship between audiences and journalists. This is particularly relevant in the context of rapidly evolving journalistic forms driven by emotion and enabled by digital technologies, alongside a broader sense of audience disenfranchisement in the digital age (Lecheler 2020). While a growing body of scholarship continues to highlight the central role of emotion in news production (Wahl Jorgensen 2020), our findings emphasize the importance of understanding how emotions shape the ways news becomes meaningful for audiences.

In that sense, audiences' expectations of emotional connection expanded beyond mood management to include *closeness*. In their prescriptive mode, expectations of closeness included demands for public emotional displays from journalists. Political journalists, for example, should be "relatable to people" (Isabel, F23) by expressing their true feelings, while lifestyle and sports journalists should express their emotions so audiences can "share in the excitement" (Roman, M41). In their descriptive and cathectic mode, expectations of closeness encompassed emotional proximity, personal relevance, and physical proximity.

Emotional proximity included descriptions of journalists as "really there with the people and close to the people" (Magdalene, F46), being familiar, similar to, and caring about their audiences. It also encompassed positive assessments of journalists' authenticity (not "cringe"), humor ("being funny"), and likability ("being cool"), raising questions about whether such positive emotional responses could influence evaluations of their work. Conversely, emotional proximity also included negative beliefs about journalists being distant, out of touch, and emotionally disconnected: "That's the assignment and [they] just do that to get something in the can" (Vincent, M47). These expectations can legitimize journalists' epistemic authority but jeopardize their societal relevance (Carlson et al. 2021). These findings suggest that perceptions of journalists as distant elites can shape news engagement beyond populist audiences (Juarez Miro 2023), suggesting a cause of declining news use and emphasizing the need for stronger connections with audience communities.

Personal relevance encompassed expectations about using and valuing journalistic work when it had practical applications in participants' daily lives, offered validation of their ideas and personal identification with journalists, or aligned with niche personal interests. As one participant described: "You learn in school that a newspaper is supposed to be neutral, focused on reporting the facts, and so on. Then, beyond that, there's a shift toward personal relevance: what interests me and what is important to me?" (Elisa, F60). Additionally,

physical proximity played a key role in respondents' expectations of local journalists, evoking familiarity and comfort associated with shared regional identities. This included references to regional dialects, feelings of homeliness, and a sense of being nearby. Such sentiments, particularly strong among rural participants, suggest a potential rural-urban divide in news expectations.

In summary, the inductive analysis suggests a central role of emotional connection expectations. These include expectations of journalists as mood managers across various news genres, as well as demands for closeness, encompassing emotional and physical proximity and personal relevance in journalistic work. Aligned with audience-centric research on trust in news, which emphasizes ritualistic, identity-based emotional attachments and news habits (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024), our findings suggest that audiences expect journalists to help them connect with themselves, their networks, and the broader social world in everyday life.

Interaction Expectations

Participants also articulated a range of expectations relating to a *bidirectional* relationship with journalists: Audiences should be able to access journalists, and journalists should listen and respond to them. Participants observed and welcomed opportunities to contact journalists directly. Strong emotions, especially negative ones, motivated them to reach out. For instance, one participant felt “insanely annoyed by an article” before contacting a journalist (Odetta, F50). When journalists listened and responded, audiences *felt heard*, which was highly rewarding: “That made me incredibly happy, [...] when you get a letter back, it gives you a different feeling of solidarity [...]. Well, [it was] directly from the journalist!” (Greta, F31). This emotional dimension ties interaction expectations to emotional connection expectations, yet the emphasis here lies on the tangible relationship between audiences and journalists, forged through direct exchange and communication.

Participants prescribed face-to-face engagement with journalists at events or informal gatherings, like “discussion evenings at the Heuriger [Austrian wine tavern]” (Ada, F53). Younger audiences expressed stronger demands for journalists to interact with them on social media. Furthermore, participants’ descriptive and cathectic expectations about *firsthand encounters* with journalists, both in person and mediated, were predominantly positive and shaped audience expectations by reducing perceived social distance. One participant fondly described a journalist’s approachability during an interaction at her workplace, an elderly care facility: “He’s just down-to-earth, also talks to the residents [...] He doesn’t come across as arrogant [...] I think he does a really good job” (Sophie, F54). However, audience expectations for meaningful engagement with journalists clashed with observations that their feedback was rarely integrated, which made them feel disempowered.

Relatedly, audience expectations of interaction additionally included participants’ beliefs about *journalists’ goals* when engaging with their audiences. Participants identified self-improvement as a main goal, but the lack of observed feedback-informed changes led them to suspect financial motives, such as boosting readership and advertising revenue. In this sense, audience members described their belief that journalists viewed them mainly as customers. This is important, as perceptions of economic interest can negatively affect perceptions of genuineness and authenticity (Maares et al. 2021). However, despite audiences’ descriptive and cathectic expectations about feeling heard by journalists, participants expressed prescriptive expectations urging journalists to limit the impact of metrics and individual feedback on their work to maintain their *independence*: “It’s not his job to worry about the sensitivities of the individual. He should simply do good, independent and neutral journalism” (Ian, M62). While they supported journalists’ independence in deciding whether to act on feedback, they appreciated explanations from journalists about those decisions.

In summary, audiences expected deeper engagement with journalists, accessible channels for direct contact, and consideration of their feedback, while still respecting journalists' autonomy. They expressed mixed feelings, balancing a desire for authentic, constructive dialogue aimed at improving journalistic work with perceptions of being treated as mere customers. These expectations align with research emphasizing audiences' desire for greater engagement and deeper connections between journalists and their communities (Carlson et al., 2021; Vos and Hanusch, 2024). Positive outcomes are evident in cases where interaction efforts, aided by digital affordances, have contributed to significant economic growth for news outlets (see *Zetland's* case in Kaufholz et al., 2020).

Societal Relevance Expectations

In their prescriptive mode, expectations of journalists' societal relevance called for self-reflection to recognize their prominent social position and *potential for influence*. Participants emphasized demands for *transparency* in journalistic work, for example, in source selection. They also expressed a desire for journalists to understand their audiences so they can "fulfill the[ir] mission" (Melina, F60), catering to their interests and fostering connection: "So the viewer has the feeling: 'Yes, I feel connected to it'" (Magdalene, F46). Audiences also stressed *ethical responsibility*, urging journalists to issue honest statements, apologize, and rectify mistakes. In their descriptive mode, expectations of ethical responsibility were connected to observations of journalists doing crucial work, providing a service by following the "right and honest path [...] so that everyone really gets the fair answer, the honest answer that a free speech state deserves" (Valeria, F49).

Furthermore, audiences' descriptive expectations of journalists' societal relevance were closely tied to their perceptions of journalists' authority to be chroniclers of reality (Carlson 2017) and their *trustworthiness*. Respondents viewed particular journalists as "serious, trustworthy people" (Ada, F53) due to their reputation and social standing, which

they described as having “a certain special position in Austria” (Dominik, M20). This relationship was reciprocal, with journalists’ perceived trustworthiness reinforcing their reputation. As one respondent put it: “I do believe that people trust Armin Wolf, he has earned that reputation more than others” (Valeria, F49). Additionally, respondents’ perceptions of journalists’ trustworthiness were shaped by previous interactions with their work, especially when these were positive: “He just comes across as so honest to me and I take it all from him and I think to myself, amazing, what you achieve” (Sophie, F54). Conversely, participants compared journalists’ trustworthiness to other professions they perceived as more societally relevant and reliable, such as doctors. They also noted that external actors (e.g., on social media) could contest journalists’ societal relevance by providing similarly trustworthy, accurate, and “serious” information (Simon, M22).

Related cathetic expectations expressed *admiration* for journalists, recognizing their work as requiring immense time, effort, and resources invested in research. Admiration stemmed from an appreciation for journalists’ dedication and resilience in facing risks participants believed were inherent in the job: “I appreciate the work they do and have done. [...] These are people who—admire is too much to say—but yes, I admire, because they put themselves in such great danger” (Vincent, M47). Participants’ awareness of journalists’ societal functions and challenges reinforced their belief that they themselves could never do the job, especially when it came to improvising, and staying calm and composed in highly uncertain or stressful situations. This perception was further shaped by their understanding of the *precarious* working conditions journalists endure, including limited resources, tight deadlines, and inadequate financial compensation: “I don’t think you’ll necessarily get rich with this job either” (Valeria, F49). Once again, emotions emerge as a key element in these expectations, consistent with growing research on emotions in news production and consumption (Lecheler 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). However, societal relevance

expectations primarily focus on how audiences understand journalistic authority and journalism's role in society. As such, they are both connected to, yet independent from, the prescriptive expectations linked to normative journalistic roles explained above.

In summary, audiences articulated expectations of journalists' societal relevance, recognizing the influence of their professional position. Consequently, they expected journalists to engage in self-reflection, uphold ethical responsibility, and maintain transparency, particularly when addressing mistakes. To fulfill their societal mission, audiences expected journalists to understand and cater to their needs. Journalists' trustworthiness, as perceived by their audience, was shaped by their standing, past work, and overall reputation. Awareness of journalists' societal relevance led audiences to acknowledge the challenges they face, such as time constraints and stress, fostering admiration for their dedication, resilience, and ability to work under pressure.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine audiences' prescriptive, descriptive, and cathectic expectations of journalists (**RQ1**), as well as how the diverse modes relate to one another (**RQ2**). Our analysis unearthed seven distinct categories of audience expectations of journalists in the digital age, four of them aligned with but also complicating well-established roles (e.g., Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). However, findings underscore the need to go beyond normative prescriptions and journalistic roles when considering audiences' expectations. Descriptive expectations were most pervasive in our data, highlighting the relevance of audiences' everyday experiences with journalistic work. This builds on studies that have so far explored expectations on a prescriptive or normative level (see, e.g. Loosen et al. 2020; Vos et al. 2019; Willnat et al. 2019).

Moreover, our findings support research suggesting that while audiences and journalists share a general understanding of what constitutes good journalism, disparities

exist in their evaluations of journalists' performance (Kalogeropoulos and Fletcher 2019; Fawzi and Mothes 2020). Through our analysis, we were able to clarify the beliefs and emotional reactions stemming from such disparities. Notably, a key contribution of this study is the recognition that audiences' expectations are highly complex, encompassing not only prescriptive but also descriptive and cathectic modes. Therefore, while our theoretical framework, based on role theory (Biddle 1979) and expectancy violation theory (Burgoon and Jones 1976), informed the distinction of expectation modes, our analysis suggests that they work together to form rich and complex expectations.

Still, disentangling these modes enhanced our understanding of their connections, interactions, and mismatches. In several instances, the interplay between modes revealed important implications for audiences' engagement. For example, participants believed journalists should be adversarial to politicians, but their actual observation of such behavior was experienced as unpleasant. Additionally, participants expressed that journalists should report things as they are, yet exposure to negative news led them to regulate or interrupt their news consumption. These findings can be interpreted in light of research suggesting that discrepancies between audience expectations and media performance can erode media trust (Fawzi and Mothes 2020). Exploring the interplay among expectation modes can help explain the decline in news use, emphasizing what audiences deem important as well as engaging and enjoyable.

This study can raise the question of whether journalism ought to be guided by audiences' expectations or journalists' professional assessment of the public interest (Tandoc and Thomas 2015). Indeed, some expectations identified in our analysis may appear contradictory. We interpret this not as audience confusion, but as evidence of their inherent complexity. Our findings demonstrate that audiences may hold multiple expectations for a single piece (e.g., expecting both information and interpretation from a news report) or apply

different expectations to different types of content (e.g., information for breaking news and accountability for investigative reporting). Such complexity also emerges within individual expectation categories and expectation modes (e.g., activism expectations may involve demands for journalists to antagonize political elites while simultaneously rejecting excessive hostility). This very complexity, we think, is why audience expectations deserve attention. Rather than simplifying or overlooking these nuances, we argue for embracing theoretical and methodological approaches that help disentangle them. Our theoretical focus on expectation modes and audience-centric inductive methods is a first step. We also encourage future research to explore these patterns further, for instance using generalizable methods to explore and compare how widespread they are across broader populations.

This study's insights are valuable as they shift the focus from the news prioritized by scholars and professionals to the news that audiences genuinely value and enjoy (Costera Meijer 2019; Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2018). This, in turn, sets the stage for developing news content that best serves audiences. The three categories of audience-centric expectations identified in this study suggest several strategies in this direction. First, producing journalistic work that fosters an emotional connection and helps audiences manage their moods, create a sense of closeness, and reduce social distance between them and journalists. Second, technological advancements and hybrid meetings can create spaces for bidirectional communication, showing that journalists are embedded in the communities they cover and value their perspectives. Third, maintaining journalism's societal relevance requires transparency, not only in addressing shortcomings but also in openly sharing journalistic processes to build trust and reinforce the profession's societal role.

Although these strategies may be costly, and the industry continues to face financial challenges, they should be seen as an investment, one that digital technologies can help facilitate. In the digital age, technological infrastructure enables audiences to provide

immediate, public, and collective feedback to journalists (Craft et al. 2016; Napoli 2011). To capitalize on this, news organizations can embrace this breadth of audience data, either independently or to contextualize and interpret analytics (Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer 2018). If audiences find journalism meaningful, trustworthy, enjoyable, and ultimately worthwhile, they will naturally rely on and return to it. Furthermore, as digitalization and top-down interpretations of analytics can increase managerial control and pressure in newsrooms (e.g., Jämsen et al., 2025), audience-centric approaches can also sustain the meaningfulness of journalistic work for journalists by reinforcing the symbolic dimensions of autonomy, recognition, and a sense of belonging (Olsen, 2025). Autonomy can be supported through journalists' meaning-making in collaboration with audiences, while recognition and belonging—both within the newsroom and in relation to audiences—can be strengthened by meeting audience expectations, thus enhancing journalists' relevance in an increasingly crowded information landscape.

Certainly, some caveats should be considered in this study. While the Austrian media system shares similarities with other Western democracies, further work is needed to compare media systems to identify which expectations may overlap and which may vary. Moreover, while our purposive sample suits our qualitative exploratory approach, it also constrains the generalizability of our findings. Therefore, we suggest that future studies consider larger, randomly selected samples to examine the prevalence of expectations and specific modes on a broader scale. Despite these limitations, this study highlighted the complexity of audiences' expectations of journalism and extended the literature by identifying specific categories of expectations beyond normative journalistic roles.

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