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# From *Cultivating Fans* to *Coping With Troublemakers*: A Typology of Journalists' Audience Relationships

**Wiebke Loosen[1], Julius Reimer[1], Louise Oberhülsmann[1], and Tim van Olphen[2]**

**Abstract**

The journalism–audience relationship has become central in journalism research, yet it is not singular but diverse, varying even for individual journalists. Based on 52 in-depth interviews, we develop a typology of 11 distinct forms of audience relationships that journalists can maintain and combine. Each form represents a communicative figuration encompassing a specific audience construction, unique relationship practices, and a certain frame of relevance. Emerging forms—in response to the challenges facing journalism—complement traditional role-based relationships to a general public that is merely imagined by emotionally rooted connections to specific social groups and individuals who are observed and even interacted with.

**Keywords**

journalism–audience relationship, typology, relationship practices, audience, audience interactions

## Introduction

Journalism can only exist in relation to an audience. This is not only true in an economic sense but also more fundamentally in that, without an audience that reads, watches, or listens to it, journalism has no consequence, no societal relevance, and

[1]Leibniz Institute for Media Research|Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI), Hamburg, Germany
[2]plan p, Hamburg, Germany

**Corresponding Author:**
Julius Reimer, Leibniz Institute for Media Research|Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI), Rothenbaumchaussee 36, Hamburg D-20148, Germany.
Email: j.reimer@leibniz-hbi.de

cannot fulfill its functions (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). While under the conditions of mass media, this fundamental relationship was relatively stable, it has undergone significant transformation with the advent of the internet and continues to evolve (Dvir-Gvirsman & Tsuriel, 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen & Kilby, 2019). In a changing media environment, journalism faces increased competition for the audience's attention, declining reach, and fragile trust among users. At the same time, journalists and audience members have access to an expanding array of channels and tools to observe, address, and interact with one another.

One consequence of this shift is that journalists increasingly experience—and often struggle with—a multiplication of audiences (Kramp & Loosen, 2018). They no longer perceive their audience as *a singular unit* but instead differentiate among an expanding number of subgroups defined by various factors. These factors include the media channels and social networks through which audiences are reached (e.g., website users, Facebook followers, TikTok viewers) and the differing forms and degrees of engagement (e.g., "passive" recipients, "active" users, civil commenters, and "trolls"). While this phenomenon is widely recognized, there is still limited research on how journalists navigate this complexity and construct their relationships with these diverse audience segments (Coddington et al., 2021).

Against this backdrop, we examine how journalists' relationships with their audience(s) are evolving within a transforming media environment, shaped significantly by the affordances of social media. In this paper, we introduce a *typology comprising eleven distinct forms of audience relationships that journalists can maintain.* This typology is based on interviews conducted with 52 journalists from across the field in Germany. Our holistic approach provides the benefit—but also the challenge—of addressing the full spectrum of phenomena relevant to this context, including user participation, audience metrics, and membership models. Moreover, we deliberately avoid focusing solely on new and emerging trends, ensuring that we also account for elements of stability and continuity (Papanagnou, 2023).

Our paper is structured as follows: the next section provides an overview of recent research on the relationship between journalism and its audience. This is followed by an introduction to our conceptual approach, along with a specification of our research objectives and design. We then present our findings, which are subsequently discussed. Finally, the article concludes with a summary and an outlook on future research.

## Perspectives and Previous Research on the Journalism–Audience Relationship

The fundamental importance of the audience for journalism means that any research on journalism is, at least implicitly, connected to the audience and journalists' relationship with it. For example, journalistic role conceptions—as one of the classic objects of study—often include implicit or explicit understandings of the audience and how to serve it. This applies to the role of the "*advocate*" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 155, emphasis in original), who stands up "for the *socially disadvantaged*" (Hanitzsch &

Vos, 2018, emphasis added), or that of the "*populist disseminator*" (Hanitzsch, 2011, p. 484, emphasis in original), who focuses on reaching "the *widest possible audience*" (Hanitzsch, 2011, p. 484, emphasis added). However, under the conditions of mass media, both practitioners and scholars paid little attention to journalism's audience (Costera Meijer, 2020; Gans, 1979).

## *The Audience Turn in Journalism (Research)*

The continuous and profound transformation of the media environment over the past decades (Chadwick, 2017; Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018) has reshaped the journalism–audience relationship (Wahl-Jorgensen & Kilby, 2019). This shift led to what Costera Meijer (2020) terms the "audience turn" in journalism (research). While, historically, audiences and their interests were often dismissed as "irrelevant" (Costera Meijer, 2020, p. 2338) or even viewed as contributing to the "popularization and thus trivialization of journalism" (Costera Meijer, 2020, p. 2331), users have now become the "main targets" of journalistic practice (Costera Meijer, 2020, p. 2338).

As a result, the body of related research is as diverse and extensive as the transformations and challenges journalism currently faces. Among the most relevant aspects for this study is the *multiplication of media channels* (e.g., websites, social media, apps) for which journalists create content. This evolution has turned journalism into a form of "multichannel communication" (Neuberger et al., 2019). Each channel or platform introduces its own distinct affordances, communicative features, and algorithms, as well as unique audience segments (e.g., website users, Facebook followers, or Twitter/X users). Additionally, these platforms foster specific communication cultures that continuously evolve through the interplay of user interactions and the technological possibilities of the respective channel or platform.

The evolving media environment has created *expanded opportunities for audience participation* in journalism, fostering the concept and practice of "participatory journalism" (Domingo et al., 2008). This approach allows audiences to engage in the selection, production, distribution, and (the publicly visible) interpretation of news.

Over time, however, the initially high expectations for the democratization of newsmaking were met with disappointment (Wahl-Jorgensen & Kilby, 2019). For instance, comment sections, once celebrated as spaces for deliberation, have become more widely associated with incivility, harsh criticism, and even insults or threats directed at journalists (Reimer et al., 2023). Research has examined not only audiences and their *user comments* but also the emotional toll of such *harassment* on journalists, alongside the related *emotional labor* and coping strategies (Bossio & Holton, 2021; Kantola & Harju, 2023). As a result, many newsrooms have scaled back their *audience engagement* efforts to focus primarily on content dissemination, reframing users' roles "from co-producers to distributors" (Krumsvik, 2018, p. 19).

This shift was undoubtedly also facilitated by the widespread adoption of *audience metrics*, such as click rates and social media analytics, which enable more granular observation of certain aspects of user behavior (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019). These metrics are often assumed to provide a deeper understanding of the audience (Schaetz

et al., 2025) but also criticized as "oversimplifying" (Gajardo & Costera-Meijer, 2023, p. 653) and not measuring adequately what makes journalism valuable from the users' perspective. In metrics-driven journalism, these numbers guide editorial decisions concerning news selection, placement, and presentation, with the goal of maximizing reach. Unsurprisingly, such practices have been found to correlate with a stronger "*market orientation*" (Hanitzsch, 2011, p. 481, emphasis added).

### *Interpersonalization, Celebrification, and Influencerization*

Alongside the increasing datafication of journalists' audience relationships, the digital media environment also enables more *interpersonal communication and interactions* between journalists and their audiences. This can occur through user comments (e.g., on news websites or social media platforms), personal emails, direct messages, and direct encounters at a growing number of journalistic live events (Wilhelm et al., 2021). These interactions add a new dimension to the relationship, often leading to enhanced expectations of journalists' approachability and responsiveness. Like metrics, these interactions increase audiences' *visibility* to journalists and provide qualitative information about users' preferences, expectations, and criticisms of journalism (Gajardo & Costera Meijer, 2023; Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019).

Conversely, many journalists use their greater visibility to audiences for *personal branding* (Dvir-Gvirsman & Tsuriel, 2022). This culminates in newsworkers performing a "*celebrity role*" (Mellado & Hermida, 2021, p. 5, emphasis added), for example by "providing audience access to a manufactured backstage" (Mellado & Hermida, 2021, p. 6) of their journalistic work or "offering a glimpse into carefully curated parts of their private lives" (Mellado & Hermida, 2021, p. 6), especially on social media platforms with their algorithmic, interaction-promoting structures. On these platforms, journalists' relationships with audiences are shaped by the newsworkers' need to coorientate themselves with and distinguish themselves from other actors—particularly social media influencers, who play a key role in the information repertoires of young people (Wunderlich, 2023). Instagram, in particular, has emerged as a popular platform for such journalistic practices, contributing to what one might call the *influencerization* of journalism (Mellado & Hermida, 2024).

### *New Business Models, Audience Engagement, Change and Stability*

In response to dwindling advertising revenues and audiences' reluctance to pay (Newman et al., 2023)—challenges that have evolved alongside the hybrid media environment—media organizations are developing *new business models* centered around subscriptions and memberships. These models have, in some ways, "revitalized the role of the audience" (Zambelli & Morganti, 2022, p. 19). Instead of focusing solely on metrics and reach, media organizations now engage in "*relational labor*" (Bossio & Holton, 2021, p. 2479, emphasis added), such as "exploiting social media for community-building purposes" (Zambelli & Morganti, 2022, p. 29).

The two distinct approaches to audience engagement (Nelson, 2021)—metrics and reach vs. members and relationships—highlight how journalists have adapted their methods of addressing the audience and presenting news to align with the affordances of social media and other platforms (Dvir-Gvirsman & Tsuriel, 2022). This work is undertaken by journalists in addition to their traditional tasks, as well as by new "*bridge roles*" (Cherubini, 2017, emphasis added) in the newsroom, such as community managers, social media editors, and audience data analysts, who serve as intermediaries between journalists and their audience.

These transformative trends must not overshadow the fact that media organizations and individual journalists vary in the extent to which—and the way in which—they make use of new channels and interactive features (Kramp & Loosen, 2018). A significant portion of journalistic organizations, working routines, and products remain characterized by *stability and continuity* rather than change. Therefore, the new phenomena should not overshadow the "persistence of 'we write, you read' journalism" (Thomas, 2022, p. 143). This is evident in the enduring presence of the "populist disseminator" (Hanitzsch, 2011, p. 479), who focuses on audience interests to attract large numbers of consumers, and the "detached watchdog" (Hanitzsch, 2011, p. 479), who prioritizes providing a mass audience of citizens with objective information on societally relevant/public interest topics to enable political decision-making.

## *New Conceptual Approaches and a More Holistic Perspective*

These developments have also led to new conceptual approaches to the journalism–audience relationship. Drawing on inclusion theory, Loosen and Schmidt (2012) argue—and Heise et al. (2014) show empirically—that this relationship is characterized by mutual inclusion expectations and practices, performed through co-orientation. Audiences' inclusion practices involve aspects such as news use and participatory practices. These practices correspond to complementary actions on the part of journalists, including news production and the management of participatory features, such as comment sections. Practices on both sides are shaped by and either reinforce or challenge mutual expectations, such as users' desire for interactivity and motivations to engage, as well as journalists' role conceptions and perceptions of their audience.

Wilhelm et al. (2021) build on this framework and apply expectancy violation theory to highlight how new opportunities for interpersonal communication and interaction between journalists and audience members are reshaping their mutual expectations, increasing the risk of these expectations being unmet. Interpersonal communication also plays a key role in Lewis et al.'s (2014) concept of reciprocal journalism, which suggests that journalists in a hybrid media environment can more easily cultivate reciprocal exchanges with their audiences.

To summarize, there is substantial evidence that the ways in which journalists understand and relate to their audiences are being challenged by various phenomena in the evolving media environment, resulting in the transformation and diversification of audience relationships. However, existing research has largely addressed these *relationship dynamics* in isolation, often focusing on specific aspects or trends.

Furthermore, studies that concentrate on what is new and changing may overlook the enduring elements that continue to hold influence (Papanagnou, 2023).

Our goal is to complement these important insights and conceptualizations with an approach that offers a more holistic perspective on the transformation of the journalism–audience relationship in the context of on-going media change. We believe a theoretical framework capable of achieving this is that of *communicative figurations*: a media-sociological approach that takes a repertoire-oriented perspective on how the evolving media environment influences society and the social construction of reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018). Beyond this holistic conceptual view, communicative figurations also serve as an approach for empirical research, enabling the reconstruction of social entities or domains as communicative figurations, which consist of the following components: (a) a specific *constellation of actors*, (b) the particular *communicative practices* those actors perform through a given *media ensemble*, and (c) the dominant *frames of relevance* that guide these practices (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018). In the following, we outline how we apply this approach in our study.

## Research Objective and Approach

The review of the extensive research on the journalism–audience relationship demonstrates that, in the hybrid media environment, journalism faces a polycrisis of reach, revenue, and reputation. At the same time, this media environment has significantly expanded the communicative options available between journalists and their audiences. Scholars have highlighted the importance of concepts such as relational and emotional labor, interpersonal communication and interaction, harassment, metrics, audience engagement, and bridge roles in examining journalists' relationships with their audiences.

With this in mind, we adopt a *holistic perspective* to empirically identify the various forms that journalists' audience relationships can take. To achieve this, we draw on the concept of communicative figurations (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018) and examine journalists' audience relationships through this lens (Kramp & Loosen, 2018). These relationships can take different forms, depending on the actor constellation, communicative practices, and media ensemble involved, as well as the guiding frames of relevance.

In the context of a journalist's audience relationship, the actor constellation encompasses individual journalists, newsroom editors or leadership roles, bridge roles such as community managers or social media editors, and specific *constructions of the audience*. These journalistic audience constructions reflect particular understandings of the audience, such as assigning them an ideal-typical role (e.g., citizens or consumers), or differentiating between sub-audiences based on various criteria (e.g., younger vs. older, active vs. passive, TV viewers vs. Instagram users).

We use the term *relationship practices* as a specification of communicative practices encompassing all actions journalists perform *in relation to*, or in order *to relate to* their audiences. This includes how journalists engage with their audience through

their reporting (e.g., tailoring stories for a social media audience) and other touchpoints with audiences (e.g., analyzing metrics, engaging in user discussions on social media, meeting at live events).

Finally, we investigate the frames of relevance that guide these practices. Research suggests that these frames may include *journalistic norms and role conceptions*, as well as the *strategic and economic goals* of media organizations (Heise et al., 2014; Zambelli & Morganti, 2022).

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 52 journalists in Germany between December 2019 and June 2022,[1] focusing on their audience relationships.[2] The interview guideline (see Table 3 in the Supplemental Appendix) was structured around the three components of communicative figurations, while allowing ample flexibility to explore additional aspects and the specificities of each case. On average, the interviews lasted 67 minutes.

To ensure a maximum variation sample, we selected journalists with diverse characteristics, including their affiliation with established media organizations, innovation units within these organizations, or startups; the media channels they produce for; gender; age; and other factors (see Tables 1 and 2 in the Supplemental Appendix). All participants actively produce content and are identifiable to their audiences through bylines; none work exclusively in behind-the-scenes roles, such as comment moderation or managing editing, although some interviewees' job profiles include such tasks.

We concluded the fieldwork after interviewing the final three highly diverse journalists, as no new audience constructions, relationship practices, or frames of relevance emerged, indicating that we had reached theoretical saturation.

Our data analysis followed a multi-step, iterative process. Initially, the second, third, and fourth authors, along with three student assistants, coded a subset of interviews they had attended themselves. Coding was conducted using Maxqda and was structured around the components of communicative figurations. To maintain a comprehensive perspective, the most experienced researcher (W.L.) was deliberately not assigned specific cases, allowing them to concentrate on identifying overarching patterns and connections across cases.

Second, the communicative figuration categories were inductively differentiated through weekly meetings. In the meetings, different cases were presented and discussed to identify recurring audience constructions, relationship practices, and frames of relevance, as well as the connections between these components. To give an example, through this process, we were able to establish the following insights:

- First, each individual journalist—either simultaneously or successively—addresses their audience in various roles. While some roles align with "rigid" ideal-typical audience roles (e.g., citizen, consumer), others required the development of new categories based on the interview data (e.g., discussion partner, knowledge carrier).
- Second, these different understandings of the audience are shared by several other journalists.

- Third, individual journalists use distinct practices to relate to these different "parts" of their audience.
- Fourth, the associations between certain practices and specific audience constructions were found to be consistent across cases.

This process led to the development of a preliminary inductive typology (Kelle, 2014) of relationship forms.

Third, the coders coded, analyzed, and discussed additional interviews to validate, revise, complement, and refine these relationship forms and their components multiple times until all relationship forms were thoroughly defined and all empirically observed aspects were incorporated.

## Findings: A Typology of Relationship Forms

Our approach reveals that journalists do not maintain a singular, unified relationship with their audience. Instead, we identified eleven distinct ideal-typical *relationship forms*, or "sub-relationships," that journalists can establish with their audience, or segments thereof. These forms act as the "building blocks" of the broader audience-relationship a journalist develops.[3] Hence, our typology does not categorize journalists but distinguishable parts of their audience-relationship. The manifestation and salience of a specific relationship form may vary between journalists.

Table 2 in the Supplemental Appendix outlines how many and which relationship forms are maintained by each journalist in our sample. A more detailed examination of these repertoires will be addressed in another publication as it is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, we focus on the individual relationship forms.

Figure 1 presents the relationship forms in a matrix, organized across three dimensions derived from the components of communicative figurations, which collectively characterize the nature of each relationship form:

1. The *y*-axis reflects an aspect of the actor constellation, specifically the "level of resolution" of the audience construction involved in a relationship form. It ranges from addressing a general public to focusing on specific social groups or individual users.
2. The *x*-axis provides a condensed representation of the type of relationship practices, spanning from merely imagining the respective audience to (additionally) observing it in some way, to actively interacting with it.
3. The shading behind the icons for each relationship form, refers to its frame of relevance and indicates the degree to which a relationship form is guided by professional norms and established journalistic role conceptions (white shading), and/or weaker and stronger affective aspects (gray and black shading, respectively).

The arrangement of the relationship forms along these dimensions in Figure 1 reveals four clusters: For example, in the upper right corner, we find relationship forms that are all strongly rooted in interaction-based practices and often focus on individual

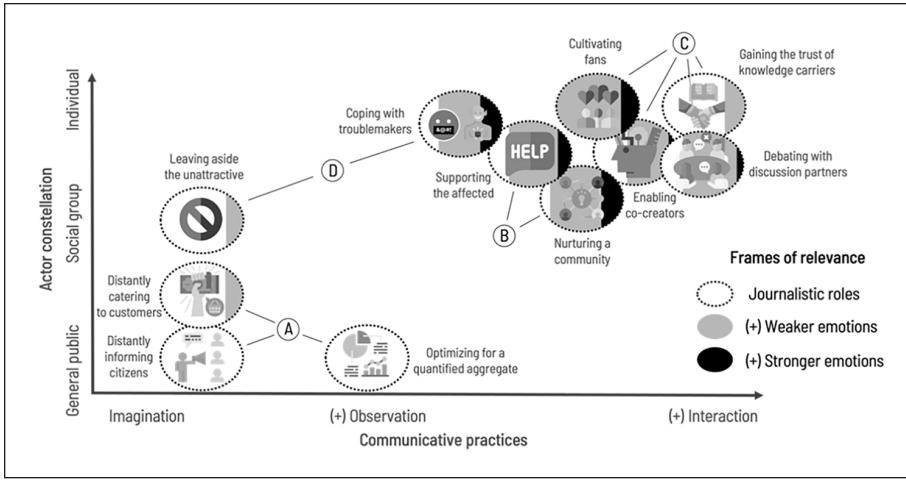


**Figure 1.** Typology of Journalists' Audience Relationships.

*Note.* The relative positions and shadings are approximations only and should not be understood as exact measures. The figure has been designed using icons from Flaticon.com and dreamstime.com.

- citizens: created by Becris, https://www.flaticon.com/free-icon/announcement_1239679
- customers: created by GOWI, https://www.flaticon.com/free-icon/purchasing_8030028
- quantified aggregate: created by nawicon, https://www.flaticon.com/free-icon/statistics_2672346
- affected: created by Freepik, https://www.flaticon.com/free-icon/help_1746667
- community: created by photo3idea_studio, https://www.flaticon.com/free-icon/online-community_3365355
- discussion partners: created by Freepik, https://www.flaticon.com/free-icon/meeting_4144551
- fans: created by Freepik, https://www.flaticon.com/free-icon/fans_5608338
- co-creators: created by small.smiles, https://www.flaticon.com/free-icon/creative_7100773
- knowledge carriers: created by wanicon, https://www.flaticon.com/free-icon/trust_3938843
- troublemarkers: created by Anastasiia Usenko, https://www.dreamstime.com/vector-color-bad-speech-language-icon-illustration-red-angry-emoji-censored-word-mouth-isolated-transparent-background-image191257606, and Freepik, https://www.flaticon.com/free-icon/troll_3387335
- unattractive: created by Freepik, https://www.flaticon.com/free-icon/forbidden_3359548

users. However, they differ in terms of their frames of relevance. We structure the following presentation of the eleven relationship forms around these four clusters (A, B, C, and D) to highlight similarities and differences. Each relationship form is contextualized with relevant literature to establish connections to existing research and highlight the broad range of topics the typology encompasses.

Additionally, we indicate how many journalists in our sample engage in each relationship form (see also Table 2 in the Supplemental Appendix). We further explored whether particular relationship forms are especially prominent among specific groups of journalists—for example, those working for legacy print publications versus those publishing almost exclusively on social media platforms. While only a few notable patterns emerged, any relevant associations are mentioned in the descriptions of the respective relationship forms.

## A. Relationship Forms Based on Imagination and Observation, and Oriented Toward a General Public

*Distantly Informing Citizens.* The first ideal-typical relationship form reflects a classic journalistic approach, centered on constructing the audience as a *general public* of citizens ($n = 37$). In this form, the audience remains "virtually unknown" (online/print journalist), described as an "impalpable mass" (online/print journalist), as journalists primarily *imagine* the audience and relate to it solely through their reporting—an observation already made by Gans (1979).

This relationship form is strongly defined by the absence of certain relationship practices. Interviewees frequently emphasized feeling, and preferring to be, "relatively disconnected from the audience" (online/print journalist). They perceive this disconnection as essential to "ensuring our independence" (print/online journalist). Accordingly, in the context of this relationship form, journalists refrain from soliciting audience preferences or insights and, in some cases, even avoid examining click rates, user comments, or other information about their audience. Instead, their work is guided by "classic journalistic principles" (online/print journalist), such as relevance, accuracy, and comprehensibility.

The frame of relevance guiding these relationship practices is entirely *role*-based, rooted in the traditional conception of the journalist as a "detached observer" (Hanitzsch, 2011, p. 484). When practicing this relationship form, journalists see themselves as professionals equipped with the expertise to determine which topics are "relevant for society" (YouTube/podcast journalist)—that is, topics of public interest that the *general public*, conceived of as citizens, needs to be informed about. Their goal is to deliver this information through objective, fact-based reporting and analysis.

In essence, this relationship form embodies the "persistence of 'we write, you read' journalism" (Thomas, 2022, p. 143), despite the new opportunities afforded by the hybrid media environment for observing and interacting with the audience.

*Distantly Catering to Customers.* Another relationship form that emerged from the interviewees' reflections centers on catering to a *general public*, or more specifically, a mass audience which is viewed not as citizens but as customers ($n = 22$). In this context, the audience is seen primarily as consumers of the media product—whether paying subscribers whose loyalty must be maintained or non-paying users whose attention is crucial for attracting advertisers or converting them into subscribers. Additionally, the audience is often constructed as potential customers of other industries, seeking information about products, services, or lifestyles. Finally, this audience construction sometimes includes advertising customers whose interests need to be considered to ensure continued financial support. One print journalist who covers fashion notes, for example, that "[t]he fashion industry [. . .] really reads very carefully what you write about them, and they are also very quick to take offense." For that reason, they call the fashion industry their "grey audience."

Consequently, the relationship practices in this form focus on attracting attention and catering to the interests of customers. Journalists aim "to reach as many people as possible" (Facebook video journalist), often by producing content such as "red carpet and [. . .] celebrity stories" (local TV journalist). While this differs from the first relationship form, there are also similarities: in both cases, journalists do not have direct contact with their audience, nor do they engage with metrics. Instead, the customers' interests and expectations are solely *imagined*. As one blog journalist explains, "That's just the way we approach it: Who are our target groups, or how do we imagine them?" This constructed image of the audience is shaped by journalists' own assumptions or by insights from "colleagues who have simply been there for ten to 15 years, and who then say: That doesn't interest the readers. Or: That's what they're interested in right now" (magazine/Instagram journalist).

The frame of relevance that guides these practices is heavily influenced by market orientation. This distinction between the first and second relationship forms reflects the classic divide between journalism focused on citizens and journalism focused on consumers. In this second form, the frame of relevance still involves journalistic *roles*, but they shift from public interest and political concerns to "roles of journalists in the domain of everyday life" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 158). These roles may include "act[ing] as [an] entertainer" or "provid[ing] inspiration for new lifestyles and products," sometimes "by presenting exemplars [. . .] through celebrity news," and "potentially serv[ing] advertising clients" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 159).

*Optimizing for a Quantified Aggregate.* This relationship form introduces the first instance in which having some form of contact with a particular audience construction plays a role, though it remains indirect and based solely on the *observation* of the audience as a quantified aggregate, that is, essentially, a digital version of the *general public* ($n = 19$). The relationship practices focus on optimizing media offerings through the systematic *observation* of the audience through user metrics. This optimization aims to better align (journalists') supply with (audiences') demand, reflecting a market orientation similar to that of *distantly catering to customers*. However, in contrast to the latter, here journalists do not rely on intuition or tacit knowledge; instead, they base their decisions on data-driven insights. As one print journalist explains, "We don't leave this to chance or just gut feeling."

The observational relationship practices include both traditional audience measurement methods, such as circulation figures and standardized reader surveys, and the more recent practices of metrics-driven journalism. The actor constellation typically involves "bridge roles" (Cherubini, 2017) like social media editors, community managers, or audience developers, who are responsible for monitoring and reporting audience metrics and managing other forms of audience engagement, such as comments. In this relationship form, audience engagement is quantified, turning interactions into measurable data. For example, bridge roles may inform journalists when the number of user comments featuring the same question, criticism, or request reaches a specific threshold, prompting the newsroom to take actions. Similarly, if a story "generates a high click rate" (online journalist) or a significant number of comments, journalists

interpret this as an indication "that people are interested" (online journalist), signaling that more coverage on the topic is desired. Journalists also report "checking Google Trends, and LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook to see what is currently being discussed there" (YouTube/podcast journalist) and then strategizing about "what we can do in relation to this [trending topic]" (online/newsletter journalist).

Observing the audience through metrics not only influences story selection but also shapes how stories are presented, especially on social media. Journalists closely monitor data such as "how many people start watching, what [parts of an Instagram story] people react to" (TV/Instagram journalist), as well as "exit points" (TV/Instagram journalist), where many users stop reading, listening to, or viewing a story. By comparing these metrics across different posts, journalists identify which methods of structuring and presenting stories resonate most with the audience. This process aligns with previous research suggesting that "journalist-audience relations have been reshaped to fit social-media logic" (Dvir-Gvirsman & Tsuriel, 2022, p. 3).

The frame of relevance in this relationship form largely resembles what Hanitzsch (2011, p. 484; emphasis omitted) describes as the "populist disseminator" *role*, which is marked by "the strongest orientation towards the audience." Unlike *distantly catering to customers*, this role is not necessarily consumer-orientated. It can instead be performed with a citizen orientation, depending on how it intersects with other relationship forms the respective journalist engages in. For instance, one online journalist clearly describes their work as *catering to customers*: "We don't say, 'This is an important topic, [. . .], and our readers *must* be interested in this.' Instead, we do it the other way around: Our readers tell *us* what is interesting." They combine this with practices of *optimizing* their content to increase *quantified audience interest*: They use a tool that allows users to suggest and rate topics, and when the rating is high, "we say, now we cover the topic [. . .], this will be read" (online journalist). One Instagram journalist explains how they, too, *optimize* their posts based on analyses of *audience metrics* in weekly meetings where "we go through all the numbers, [such as] story exits [per frame]." However, they do so to promote content that is aimed at *informing citizens*, as their "overarching topic is generally politics. We explain current political news at a level that people can understand" (Instagram journalist).

## *B. Relationship Forms Additionally Based on Interaction and Oriented Toward Social Groups*

*Supporting the Affected.* In this relationship form, journalists construct their audience as *groups* or *individuals* in need of support ($n = 20$). This may include marginalized or minority communities, such as women, LGBTIQA+ individuals, young people, those with specific ethnic or social backgrounds, individuals living with disabilities, or working mothers. Journalists often engage with this audience by *imagining* or *observing* the *group*'s needs but occasionally supplement these practices with meaningful, direct *interactions* with *individuals*.

Following the traditional advocacy *role* (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018), the practices emphasize giving a voice to affected *groups*, raising public awareness, fostering social empathy, and empowering these *groups* to confront their challenges. Alongside the *role*-orientation, *emotional* involvement is a notable aspect of the frame of relevance. Journalists often express empathy for their subjects, and experience joy and pride when their work provides meaningful support: "When you notice [. . .] how it helps [. . .] that gives you a real boost" (Facebook/YouTube/Instagram/TV journalist). However, managing these *emotions* is crucial to prevent emotional strain or burnout. As one podcast journalist explains, "We simply must not get into this mode of wanting to help everyone."

As a result, journalists engage in emotional labor, carefully managing their emotional involvement to ensure it remains within professional boundaries. They often limit their support to providing self-help guidance and supplementary resources, such as helplines, alongside their reporting. One podcast journalist shared how they adhere to a fixed protocol when discussing highly sensitive topics like suicidal thoughts with audience members. By "professionalizing" (podcast journalist) these interactions, journalists can avoid becoming overly emotionally entangled or feeling personally responsible for their audience. This approach allows them to "disconnect" (podcast journalist) after the *interaction*, maintaining their emotional well-being while still offering support.

Even if the "emotional turn" (Wahl-Jorgensen & Pantti, 2021) has only recently gained traction in journalism research, this relationship form clearly illustrates that emotional labor is deeply intertwined with traditional journalistic roles, such as the advocacy role.

*Nurturing a Community.* In this relationship form, journalists extend beyond traditional role conceptions by actively creating, maintaining, and fostering a "community" (as described by a podcast/YouTube journalist and 12 others; $n = 19$). Here, the audience is constructed as a *group* unified by shared interests, mindsets, lifestyles, or backgrounds, brought together around a journalist or the media brand they represent and their unique journalistic approach and content.

Unlike *optimizing for a quantified aggregate*, the practices in this relationship form focus on enhancing the quality rather than the quantity of audience contacts. Practices are rooted in *observation* and, particularly, *interaction*. As one podcast journalist explains, the number of followers "is not that important to us. But on some days, we get 15, 20 direct messages. People find a direct line to us—and that's the important thing." These interactions are seen as a result of the co-evolution and alignment of journalists' and audiences' expectations and practices: "The users have grown with us" (Instagram journalist).

Interviewees attribute this alignment to their commitment to engaging directly with their audience: "[W]e reply to every comment and try to build a community that way" (YouTube journalist). However, in some cases, the community has grown "so large that we can no longer manage it" (YouTube journalist). These practices exemplify "relational labor" (Bossio & Holton, 2021, p. 2479), which, in this context, is

explicitly aimed at fostering "sustained exchanges that have an enduring dimension, building relationships over time and laying the groundwork for future interactions" (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2019, p. 561).

To further foster a sense of community, journalists actively promote prosocial behavior among users, for example, by "rewarding good comments with a response" (Facebook journalist). This approach contributes to what journalists describe as a notably positive interaction climate. They perceive the discussions with and among users as "friendly, actually understanding" (magazine/Instagram journalist), "very constructive" (Instagram journalist), and characterized by "dedicated, substantive comments" (YouTube/podcast journalist). These qualities, they emphasize, are "not a given" (magazine/Instagram journalist) and stand out as being "much better than elsewhere" (online journalist). Journalists also note that the community itself recognizes and values this positive atmosphere. According to one Instagram journalist, "they don't comment anywhere else" (Instagram journalist).

The community-centered approach also shapes how journalists select and present stories. They prioritize topics that, based on previous *observations* and *interactions*, they perceive as "issues the people [in the community] are potentially interested in" and that resonate with "their lifeworlds" (podcast journalist). Additionally, the reporting style is tailored to the community's preferences, characterized by a personal, casual tone. One TV/podcast journalist describes this as narrating the story as if they are telling it "to a friend."

Interestingly, while such practices are often associated in the literature with new business models, the frame of relevance described by the interviewed journalists is not primarily driven by an economic rationale. Instead, we found a strong *emotional* frame: Journalists view the community and its feedback as a source of "human motivation" (Facebook/YouTube/Instagram/TV journalist) and personal gratification. They describe feeling a "kind of connection" (Facebook/YouTube/Instagram/TV journalist) with community members, which they experience as engaging "at eye level" (Facebook journalist, Instagram journalist, and six others, similarly worded) and as "what gives us strength" (Facebook/YouTube/Instagram/TV journalist). This relationship makes journalists "insanely happy through very appreciative messages" (podcast journalist), leading them to view community members as "a great gift for us" (Facebook journalist) and a key reason they continue to "do the job and love it" (Instagram journalist).

## *C. Relationship Forms Based on Interaction and Oriented Toward Individuals*

*Debating With Discussion Partners.* Some journalists ($n = 18$) reported they occasionally engage in debates about their stories through direct *interactions* with *individual* users or smaller *groups*, whom they perceive as discussion partners. A common practice in this relationship form is addressing inaccuracies in user comments by correcting false interpretations or debunking misinformation. For instance,

journalists may "post a fact-checking article below" (YouTube journalist) to clarify misconceptions. This effort aligns with their *role* of maintaining factuality in public discourse. Additionally, these *interactions* often provide personal satisfaction, with one online/print journalist admitting, "It is almost a bit of fun when you can say: 'That's why, unfortunately, I'm right and you're not.'"

Journalists also occasionally respond to critical "but not offensive" (online/print journalist) emails or letters from *individual* audience members. In rarer cases, these *interactions* evolve into "longer exchange[s]" that turn into "really pleasant and also very interesting conversation[s]" (online/print journalist). Engaging with audience critique can prompt self-reflection and learning. For example, journalists sometimes realize, "F**k, they're actually right" (Facebook journalist). When users miss an angle in a story, journalists sometimes produce a follow-up piece to address that perspective. Alternatively, they may read a comment and think, "Yeah, I see it differently, but I get the point" (Facebook journalist), leading to a more nuanced understanding of a topic. Some journalists "genuinely enjoy this discourse with audiences because it challenges you" (YouTube journalist).

The frame of relevance guiding these practices aligns with professional *roles*, such as delivering factual information and offering individuals a platform to voice their opinions publicly. This engagement not only enables journalists to refine their work by learning from others but also brings an *emotional* dimension, as some take joy in (and derive satisfaction from) the competitive nature of discussions.

When respectful discussion breaks down and productive debate is no longer possible, journalists often shift to alternative relationship forms, such as *coping with troublemakers* or *leaving aside the unattractive* (see below).

*Cultivating Fans.* This relationship form involves a construction of audiences as "fans" (TV/online journalist; online/print journalist and five others). The interviewees engaging in this relationship form ($n = 11$) describe "their" fans as users demonstrating loyalty to, support for, and a sense of personal identification with the individual journalist whom they perceive as sharing similar experiences or values. For example, one TV and Instagram journalist noted that "some people confide secrets to me or think we've known each other forever, [. . .] because they think we have something in common [. . .]." At the same time, fans see the journalists as sources of inspiration. A TV/Instagram journalist recounted a follower expressing admiration, "saying: 'Wow, you're really a kind of role model for me. I've been watching you for so long and you just keep going your own way.'"

Unlike the above-mentioned community, fans are considered and addressed *individually*, without an expectation that they engage with one another. In this relationship form, journalists often present aspects of their private selves alongside their professional personas.

In these cases, journalists engage in relationship practices closely resembling those Mellado and Hermida (2021, p. 5) associate with the journalistic "celebrity role." Specifically, these practices align with "*interaction* with the audience to create a fan–celebrity relationship" (p. 6, emphasis added). For example, a journalist active on

Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TV recounts that when recognized by fans in public, they take selfies or "politely talk to them [. . .]. I also always ask people: How are you?" In digital spaces, journalists make an effort to respond to every public comment, and private email, or direct message from fans, even when inquiries touch on personal topics like their clothing, pets, or health. At the very least, they acknowledge these *interactions* with an emoji, a like, or a simple "thank you" (TV/podcast journalist; YouTube/podcast journalist).

Such interactions can evolve into ongoing exchanges of messages when "a solid core of people crystallizes who then write again and again, and whom I then also answer" (TV/online journalist). Regarding the frame of relevance, these practices of engaging with fan behavior are shaped by an *emotional* dimension, driven by a genuine sense of obligation, gratitude, and even affection for the fans' loyalty and support. Journalists express particular appreciation for those who "have been with us from the beginning" (YouTube journalist).

Other relationship practices are more proactive and primarily strategically oriented. These include maintaining a consistent presence on social media by posting regularly because "you won't keep them [the followers] if you don't deliver" (magazine/Instagram journalist). Furthermore, journalists aim to present themselves on social media as "more than just a journalist" (TV/Instagram journalist), showcasing their multifaceted identities "as a person with all their facets, who sometimes makes podcasts, sometimes hosts events, sometimes is at a gala, and also sometimes just fools around" (TV/Instagram journalist).

This relationship form is distinct in that it is closely tied to a specific platform—Instagram—which is used by nine of the eleven journalists who reported engaging in *fan* relationships (and nine of the nineteen interviewees who use Instagram). This aligns with Mellado and Hermida's (2024) finding that Instagram is particularly conducive to personal branding practices. Moreover, certain relationship practices within this form bear resemblance to "para-social interaction" (Horton & Wohl, 1956), a concept traditionally examined from the audience's perspective (Wunderlich, 2023). However, since *fan* relationships also include moments of "real," or "ortho-social" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215) *interaction*, these can be characterized as "hemi-social" relationships, blending both para-social and real social dynamics.

*Enabling Co-Creators.* In this relationship form, the focus is on enabling *individual* audience members or *groups* of them to become active participants or co-creators in the journalistic process ($n = 21$). The relationship practices include two main forms of *interaction* with the audience. The first involves "participatory journalism" (Domingo et al., 2008) where audience members are given opportunities to contribute to various stages of the journalistic production process. For example, users are invited to suggest topics, leading to coverage on "many topics which we wouldn't even be able to find" (TV/podcast journalist). Crowdsourcing is also utilized during the research phase, where journalists invite users to share their knowledge about, experiences with, or opinions on a particular issue. As one journalist explained, "Every Saturday we present the 'Berliners of the Week,' where readers can nominate people—and we also look

for people who have done something special in Berlin—who may not be in the spotlight but have made the city better in some small way" (newsletter/podcast journalist).

A local online journalist describes how their medium allows users to vote on suggested stories, giving them not only a voice in the process but also some decision-making power, transforming them into collaborators rather than just contributors (Domingo et al., 2008). Similarly, there are formats where users engage in discussions with experts, politicians, and other figures, with journalists taking on the role as moderators (radio/podcast journalist, newsletter journalist). In these instances, users have significant control over certain aspects of the content.

The second category of interactive relationship practices has emerged more recently and focuses on co-creation in product development (Malmelin & Villi, 2017). In this form, journalists engage with users through qualitative interviews and other consultations, asking for their expectations, preferences, and ideas, or inviting them to test prototypes to develop new "products" (video/podcast journalist) or "projects" (online/print journalist), such as new formats or apps. Once a new product is launched, users are regularly consulted for their input, which informs future developments. These practices are designed to better tailor products to specific target *groups* and are common in the field of "pioneer journalism" (Hepp & Loosen, 2021).

The frame of relevance for both categories of co-creation involves audience members contributing to value creation for the journalist or medium (Wahl-Jorgensen & Kilby, 2019). In the first case, the value is journalistic as the contributions from the audience help journalists perform their role more effectively, such as through story suggestions, crowdsourced information, or collaborative research. In the second case, the value is more economic, with audience input influencing the development of new products or formats that are tailored to their preferences.

*Gaining the Trust of Knowledge Carriers.* Gaining and maintaining the trust of, and contact with, so-called "knowledge carriers" (print journalist) is another relationship form found in our interviews ($n = 19$). Knowledge carriers are *individuals* who possess valuable information related to the journalist's field of reporting or who can enrich stories through their perspectives or accounts of their personal experience with a particular issue. This relationship form overlaps with journalists' relationship to sources and includes source-related practices that also influence their relationship with (other) audiences.

For instance, journalists regularly publish stories on a specific field of coverage and promote them on social media as part of their overall audience relationship because they believe that "an article is like a beacon signaling that you work on that topic" (YouTube/TV journalist). They hope to gain the attention and trust of informants and whistleblowers from the related domain, who may be part of the audience, so that if they "want to say something or have some documents [to leak], they might get in touch of their own accord or tip me off" (print journalist). Similarly, they honor their "responsibility towards the protagonists" (TV journalist) that stems from the fact that "I can shape the image of a protagonist" (TV journalist).

Besides these mediated *imagination* and *observation* practices, our interviewees stress "the importance of meeting in person for building trust" (print journalist), that is, face-to-face *interactions*, particularly in cases "that require special sensitivity" (print journalist). They try to make knowledge carriers "feel comfortable" (podcast journalist), because even if they decide not to participate, they are "incredibly important multipliers" (podcast journalist) who may inform other potential sources or the audience about how well, or badly, they were treated. In the case of citizens who share their personal experience of being affected by a particular issue, journalists "ask if everything is really okay" (podcast journalist) with how their story is told. Political interviews, however, "are something else. I don't want to offer politicians the opportunity to retract statements" (podcast journalist). These are clearly examples of what Bossio and Holton (2021, p. 2479) call "relational labor."

Due to the focus on trust, the frame of relevance certainly comes with an *emotional* component. Ultimately, however, depending on the knowledge carrier in question, it revolves around *roles* related to investigative and watchdog, advocacy, or lifestyle journalism.

### *D. Relationship Forms Turning Away From the Audience or Having Negative Connotations*

*Coping With Troublemakers.* This relationship form involves addressing *individual* audience members or *groups* identified by journalists as "trolls" (video/podcast journalist), "haters" (print/online journalist; online journalist), or "stalkers" (TV/Instagram journalist) ($n = 26$). For the sake of clarity, the term "troublemakers" will be used as an umbrella term to encompass these various labels.

Here, the relationship practices are a variety of coping mechanisms that journalists adopt when dealing with troublemakers, often to mitigate *emotional* stress. One common practice is to avoid contact with troublesome individuals. This can include strategies such as reading comments only after community managers have removed uncivil remarks, ignoring messages from users altogether, or even refraining from appearing as a journalist in public. These practices reflect what Bossio and Holton (2021, p. 2488) refer to as "strategies of disconnection," which journalists use to protect their (emotional) resources. Another strategy is to preemptively avoid triggering conflict by being "a little more careful" (online/newsletter journalist) when covering contentious topics. While it is "not that we decide we better not touch that topic" (online/newsletter journalist), journalists adjust their approach to minimize the risk of negative reactions.

Journalists are also careful not to disclose too much personal information to stalkers, such as users who "think we are friends or something" (TV/Instagram journalist) and overstep boundaries with "strange messages that somehow go too far or come too close" (TV/Instagram journalist): For example, one journalist mentioned, "I do not show my apartment" (TV/Instagram journalist) on social media.

Sharing troublesome experiences with colleagues can also provide relief: "If I get such a totally stupid email, then I just read it out loud to the team, and then we say

together, Oh, this one is stupid!" (online journalist). Kantola and Harju (2023, p. 495) describe those coping strategies as connective acts between journalists "to tackle the emotional toll." Thus, colleagues play a significant role in the actor constellation of this relationship form.

Altogether, these coping practices are based on both *imaginations* (e.g., anticipating what might trigger troublemakers or predicting their inevitable appearance in the comments, leading to avoidance) and *observations* of troublemakers' behavior. Some practices also involve *interaction*, such as confronting troublemakers. For instance, when one user wrote they wished that the journalist "would be raped and then drowned" (podcast/radio journalist), the journalist was "so shocked by this that I called him to ask what's the matter with him."

The frame of relevance of this relationship form is primarily *emotional*, as the relationship practices involve emotional labor. However, there is also a functional, *role*-oriented component, as the goal is to maintain or restore an emotional state that allows journalists to continue fulfilling their professional role.

*Leaving Aside the Unattractive.* The final relationship form could be described as a non-relationship, where journalists choose not to engage with a user *group* that, in comparison to others, is *imagined* to be too "unattractive" to invest in due to limited resources ($n = 12$). With reference to Bossio and Holton's (2021, p. 2488) "strategies of disconnection," the relationship practices involved in this form could be called "strategies of not connecting in the first place." Journalists often make this decision based on specific experiences with certain social media platforms or user groups. For example, one podcast journalist finds platforms like Twitter (before it became X) to be "a bubble too small and too intellectual" and Facebook users to be "too old" while an online journalist views Facebook users as "only lunatics." In these cases, the effort to connect is deemed not worth the resources or emotional investment.

Other audiences are not served because the affordances of the platform they use are perceived as inadequate. One podcast journalist, for instance, states that "it would definitely be interesting to get involved" on TikTok as the "target group is there," but compared to Instagram, the interaction options "on TikTok unfortunately are not so cool" (podcast journalist). The journalist suggests that TikTok's features are less conducive to establishing the *community* and *affected* relationships they aim for, making it less appealing as a platform for engagement.

In contrast to *coping with troublemakers*, the frame of relevance guiding these practices is not emotional but rather neutral. It is more of a strategic cost-benefit analysis, where journalists assess which audiences they want to engage with and the effort required for each case.

## Discussion

In this study, we explored the journalism–audience relationship from the perspective of journalists, drawing on interviews with 52 German journalists of diverse profiles. By identifying recurring patterns in the data and applying the concept of

communicative figurations, we developed a typology of 11 distinct forms of audience sub-relationships that journalists can maintain. Each relationship form builds on: (a) a specific audience construction that journalists engage with, (b) particular relationship practices employed by the journalists, and (c) a frame of relevance that guides these practices. We find that the variety of relationship forms revealed in this study expands the journalism–audience relationship in three key ways. First, with regard to audience constructions, the traditional focus on a general public is supplemented by orientations toward specific social groups and even individual users. Second, in terms of relationship practices, merely imagining the audience is complemented by actually observing or even interacting with it. Third, with regard to frames of relevance, the sense-making and guiding principles of audience relationships, which traditionally align with journalistic role conceptions, are enriched by emotional motivations and orientations.

This is not to say that these supplementary aspects expanding the journalism–audience relationship are entirely new. Journalism has always catered to specific demographics and niche audiences, journalists have always had to contend with "*troublemakers*" and "*unattractive*" audiences, and emotions have always been part of these dynamics. However, these aspects were once marginal phenomena. Today, they are significantly amplified by the possibilities and pressures of the "hybrid media system" (Chadwick, 2017) in which journalism exists and to which it contributes.

We know from extensive research that the affordances of social media platforms play a central role in this media environment, particularly by being much more strongly geared toward interaction and personalization. This has led to a certain degree of "social-mediatized" journalism shaped by the features of these platforms (Zayani, 2021). Consequently, the relationship forms that heavily rely on these aspects have become significantly more prevalent and relevant, whether at the micro level of individual journalists, the meso level of media organizations, or the macro level of journalism as a whole.

This is connected to the fact that our 11 relationship forms reflect more-or-less well-researched and current topics in journalism research, as can be seen from the references that link our results to previous studies. Research on journalistic roles, for example, plays a crucial role in understanding how journalists relate to their audiences. The relationship form of *distantly informing citizens*, for instance, represents a comparatively classic conception of the journalistic role (vis-à-vis the audience) that has been studied for decades (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). *Coping with troublemakers*, on the other hand, clearly relates to much more recent research on harassment and threats from audience members that many journalists are increasingly confronted with (Bossio & Holton, 2021; Kantola & Harju, 2023; von Garmissen et al., 2025; Willnat et al., 2025). This highlights that there are relationship forms that are not (solely) shaped by traditional journalistic roles, as these roles are not nuanced enough to capture the various ways in which journalists relate to their audiences, that is, all actions of journalists that are oriented toward their audience.

We find corresponding fields of study for all the relationship forms, which we think confirms our holistic approach: for instance, research on audience analytics (Hanusch

& Tandoc, 2019; Nelson, 2021) is linked to *optimizing for a quantified aggregate;* works on journalists' personal branding (Mellado & Hermida, 2021) align with *cultivating fans*; studies on participation (Domingo et al., 2008; Heise et al., 2014) and product development in journalism (Krumsvik, 2018; Malmelin & Villi, 2017) are relevant for *enabling co-creators*, and so on. These connections demonstrate that the emerging forms of relationship rely heavily on the communicative opportunities afforded by the same transformation in the media environment that have caused or exacerbated the challenges to which they are supposed to respond: the advancing differentiation of digital media, the resulting increases in connectivity, and the rapid pace of innovation and datafication in times of deep mediatization (Hepp, 2019).

We regard these correspondences with previous research as an external validation of our findings and confirmation of our approach which offers a holistic perspective on the various relationship forms that journalists (can) maintain with their audiences. We argue that the development, or growing relevance, of these emerging relationship forms represents journalism's response to the pressing challenges that co-evolved with digitalization—particularly the crises of reach, revenue, and trust addressed in current research. This is particularly evident in the increasing importance of understanding a (potential) audience as a *community* that needs to be built and nurtured.

Against this background, we argue that what we theoretically refer to at the macro level as the transformation of the social relationship between journalism and the audience manifests itself empirically at the level of individual journalists as a multiplication of different forms of audience relationships that can be maintained.[4] Overall, this alters the spectrum of journalistic performance, role conceptions, and audience constructions. Nevertheless, most journalists seem to focus on a specific audience, whether users in their role as *citizens*, members of a (medium's) *community* (including paying subscribers and crowdfunders), users contributing as *co-creators*, or *knowledge carriers* such as experts, potential informants, and other sources. Since we are discussing relationships, emotions play a significant role: they can motivate certain relationship forms and practices, inhibit others, and be elicited by them. This reflexive interconnection illustrates that "[t]he emotional features of journalism are clearly growing in importance" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 158), and that this is true not only in terms of emotionalized and emotionalizing content or on the side of the audience and its use of news.

Our typology clearly reflects an expansion of the mutual communicative accessibility of journalists and their audiences, alongside the disaggregation of *the* audience into smaller clusters, such as particular social groups and individuals. The spectrum has undoubtedly expanded toward greater interaction, moving away from the traditional construction of the audience as a general public. This applies both equally and specifically to "weak" interaction (i.e., mediatized interaction) and "strong" interaction (i.e., communication among people in co-presence; Meyer, 2014). This shift is also evident in the different relationship practices: for relationship forms primarily built on imagination, conditions are such that no direct interaction takes place. Meanwhile, forms of mediatized or weak interaction between journalists and audiences expand relationship practices and forms. Face-to-face or strong interaction is evident, for example, in

personal encounters during live events, visits to the newsroom, or spontaneous interactions on the street.

Overall, this illustrates that we are dealing with a particular *interaction history* in the journalism–audience relationship. Interestingly, for this relationship, deep mediatization (Hepp, 2019) means that personal one-to-one interactions between journalists and audience members are becoming more important. In the past, this relationship was primarily shaped by mass media, where interaction was not a characteristic feature of journalists' connections with their audience. However, the disaggregation of the audience into social groups and individuals—moving away from the notion of a general public—leads to an expansion of journalists' relationship practices, shifting from mere imagination and observation toward (mediated) interaction, and vice versa.

## Conclusion, Limitations, and Outlook

Our study demonstrates the value of empirically exploring the journalism–audience relationship from the perspective of journalists' audience constructions and the relationship practices they engage in to address them. At first glance, a typology with 11 forms might seem unusually or excessively differentiated, but our relationship forms each differ in terms of their unique combination of relationship practices, audience constructions, and frames of relevance. Also, the individual relationship forms in our typology may seem familiar and they are indeed connected to various aspects and topics that have been researched since journalism (research) "(re-)discover[ed] the audience" (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012) and performed an "audience turn" (Costera Meijer, 2020).

However, our typology represents the first holistic approach that brings all these relationship forms together, highlighting both their similarities and differences. Our work also demonstrates that to fully understand journalists' audience relationships, it is insufficient to focus only on practices of *relating to* the audience. Given journalists' limited resources—such as time and emotional energy—audience relationships are more about balancing the *engagement with certain audiences* with the *disconnection from others*, particularly the *unattractive*, the *troublemakers*, and, to some extent, the *affected*.

Furthermore, our findings reveal that despite the significant *changes* affecting the journalism–audience relationship, there is also a surprising degree of *stability*. This is particularly evident in the enduring relevance of the long-established professional relationship form of *distantly informing citizens*, which remains prevalent even within our sample that includes many journalists from innovative journalistic ventures.

Of course, our study has limitations. The most significant of these is that we only interviewed journalists *in* Germany. Comparative studies on journalistic roles (Hanitzsch et al., 2019) and relationship studies comparing journalists and the public (Loosen et al., 2020) reveal differences between media systems and cultures. However, we believe that the relationship forms hold a certain degree of universality, even if they may manifest slightly differently in other countries. Our list may not be exhaustive

from a global perspective. We see our typology as a well-founded starting point for other scholars to adapt and expand upon.

Another potential limitation is that we only examine the journalists' perspective, incorporating the audience's viewpoint only indirectly through the journalists' perceptions. For future research, we suggest explicitly including the audience's perspective. We see great potential in adopting a similar repertoire-oriented approach on the audience's side (Hasebrink et al., 2023) and involving both journalists and audiences. For example, we could explore how journalists' perceptions of and approaches to their audience relationships relate to audiences' understandings and practices of their relationship with journalism (e.g., the four relationship dynamics identified by Gajardo & Costera Meijer, 2023). Our typology could be used as a starting point for group discussions with both journalists and audiences, enriching it with the audience's perspective on journalism (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022).

We found only a few connections between a journalist's organizational affiliation, main distribution medium, or similar characteristics of a journalist and the relationship forms they maintain. This could be attributed to the maximum variation sample we used. A (quantitative) survey of a larger sample could potentially reveal many more connections.

As our findings indicate that journalists do not maintain a "monogamous" relationship with their audience but instead engage with different audience subgroups in distinct ways, our future research will focus more intensively on the patterns of specific relationship forms that often appear together in journalists' repertoire of audience relationships. We hypothesize that these repertoires can be categorized into different "relationship styles," with journalists aligning themselves into "relationship types." In fact, our study could serve as the basis for developing a "relationship test" for journalists.

This approach could promote relational self-reflection and competence among journalists, helping them consciously build audience relationships that align with both their personal and professional goals, and supporting them in navigating the tensions that arise between different relationship forms. In today's media landscape, this has become more crucial than ever—not only for the job satisfaction of journalists but also for the success of media organizations and the broader societal impact of journalism. Ultimately, the value that journalism provides to society hinges on the quality of the relationship between journalists and their audiences.

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## ORCID iDs

Wiebke Loosen https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2211-2260
Julius Reimer https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5961-909X
Louise Oberhülsmann https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4109-5515

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. This study aimed to identify ideal-typical forms of audience relationships in their full breadth. The extended study period was advantageous for this because it allowed us to identify forms that did not yet exist at its outset. However, our interviewees reported only minor developments in their audience relationships in that time, with no emergence of new ideal-typical forms. Changes primarily involved shifts in the relative importance of different relationship forms within journalists' repertoires (e.g., the fan relationship becoming slightly more important due to the journalist's recent "successes" on social media). We assume this stability partly resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic which likely slowed innovation in audience relationships while accelerating innovation in other areas, such as work organization. Furthermore, we believe that the emergence of completely *new* relationship forms is rather unlikely anyway: even the most "innovative" relationship forms have historical antecedents (e.g., prominent journalists have always had "fans") and did not simply arise out of nowhere. Rather, already rudimentarily existing forms gained in distinctiveness, structure, prevalence, and salience.
2. This study followed the ethical guidelines set by the German Research Foundation. Participants were thoroughly informed about the study's purpose and provided their consent. Their responses have been anonymized.
3. From a repertoire perspective, a journalist's audience relationship can be seen as a combination of various relationship forms. For instance, the relationship repertoires of the journalists in our sample include a median of four different relationship forms. We will explore these repertoires further in upcoming papers.
4. This also applies at the organizational level, such as within newsrooms.

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## Author Biographies

**Wiebke Loosen** is a senior researcher at the Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI) in Hamburg, Germany, as well as a professor at the University of Hamburg (according to §17 HmbHG). Her major areas of expertise are the transformation of journalism within a changing media environment, theories of journalism, epistemology, and methodology. Wiebke's current research focuses on the changing journalism–audience relationship, forms of pioneer journalism, and the automation of societal communication through communicative AI.

**Julius Reimer** (he/his), is a white, male, middle-class father of two from Germany, a researcher at the Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI) in Hamburg, Germany, and a doctoral candidate at the University of Hamburg. His research focuses on how journalism and its place in society change in times of platformization, datafication, and artificial intelligence.

**Louise Oberhülsmann** (she/her) is also a journalism researcher at the Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI) in Hamburg, Germany, with scholarly interests in the journalism–audience relationship, feminist perspectives on science, representation, arts-based research, and computational social science. For her doctoral thesis, she is researching the study of journalistic roles.

**Tim van Olphen** was a research assistant at the Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI) in Hamburg, Germany (2020–2023). In his research, he focused on the relationship between journalism and audience, specifically on the two-way communication between journalists and their recipients. He currently works as a consultant at the communications agency plan p in Hamburg.