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Up or Out? The Role of Audience Analytics in Post-Publication Gatekeeping

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ABSTRACT

Audience analytics significantly shape journalistic workflows and topic selection, challenging the traditional gatekeeping concept. However, as the lifecycle of news extends beyond initial selection, the role of audience analytics in post-publication processes, particularly content de-selection, requires closer examination. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a 3 × 4 experimental design among German-speaking journalists (n = 412) and in-depth interviews with 15 participants from diverse editorial backgrounds. Findings reveal that articles yielding high performance metrics are more likely to remain visible, while service journalism faces higher de-selection rates compared to politics or culture. The interviews underscore how situational factors – such as breaking news events and newsroom practices, including the prioritization of in-house productions – influence these decisions. While audience analytics provide valuable insights, editorial autonomy and journalistic integrity remain critical in determining content duration and placement. This study contributes to the evolving post-publication gatekeeping framework by illustrating the interplay between data-driven decision-making and organizational requirements. It calls for a balanced approach that aligns audience engagement with the production of diverse, socially relevant content. The findings highlight that gatekeeping remains integral to editorial post-publication processes and continues to shape the practice of digital journalism.

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Introduction

The selection and placement of topics is a mainstay of journalistic news production, traditionally guided by journalists' instincts or peer input. This gatekeeping role, however, is challenged in digital news environments and with it established production routines (Tandoc 2014b). The rise of audience analytics and content platforms has made audience behavior visible in real time (Anderson 2011), influencing topic selection, placement, and performance evaluation (Lamot and Paulussen 2020). While audience analytics have become a new standard in news production, their adoption and the focus on audiences

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raises concerns about compromised journalistic values and a decline in originality (Elsheikh, Jackson, and Jebriil 2024; Fürst 2020; Tandoc and Thomas 2015).

Research on the impact of audience analytics finds that topics with strong audience performance are more likely to be selected or receive follow-up coverage (Lamot and Paulussen 2020; Lee and Tandoc 2017; Tandoc 2014b). Audience analytics also influence homepage article placement, with higher-click articles gaining prominence (Blanchett Neheli 2018; Lee, Lewis, and Powers 2014; Zamith, 2016). However, a news item's lifecycle extends beyond selection and placement; its duration and visibility are equally critical for entering public discourse (Bright and Nicholls 2014): When underperforming articles disappear too rapidly, especially those covering controversial or less popular topics, their chances of contributing to democratic deliberation diminish. This may foster homogeneity in visible content, discouraging journalistic risk-taking and limiting the presence of perspectives that contest dominant assumptions, thereby narrowing the spectrum of public debate. Tandoc (2014b) finds that the removal and replacement of news items, called de-selection, is driven by audience analytics. Popularity cues boost a news item's chance of remaining prominently displayed (Bright and Nicholls 2014; Zamith, 2016), while less popular items may be demoted or removed. Nonetheless, other factors like content diversity can offset popularity cues (Karlsson and Clerwall 2013). Most research on the impact of audience analytics relies on interviews or ethnographic approaches, offering insights into editorial processes (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016; Lamot, Paulussen, and van Aelst 2021; Nelson and Tandoc 2018). Lamot and van Aelst (2020), however, argue that they fall short in quantifying analytics' impact. To address this, they used experimental data to examine how audience analytics shape news ranking.

While Lamot and van Aelst (2020) advanced the field by using experimental data to quantify audience analytics' influence on news ranking, their work focuses on selection and placement, rather than the full news lifecycle. Using quantitative observational data, Haim (2019) explores the influence of article performance metrics, such as shares, comments, and appearance in "most read" lists, on their retention on the homepage. The relationship is, however, only observed in US newsrooms, with no comparable pattern in the German sample. Complementing this prior work on selection and retention, this study investigates how audience analytics drive de-selection decisions. By combining experimental methods with qualitative interviews, it addresses the need for precise causal evidence and contextual insights involving situational and professional factors. Our survey-embedded experiment, involving 412 German journalists, employs a 3×4 factorial design manipulating analytics performance (above average, below average, average, none) and topic areas (politics, culture, service). This design enables an analysis of the influence of both factors and their interactions, addressing the question: To what extent do audience analytics influence post-publication gatekeeping processes? We acknowledge, however, that the exact reasons for these decisions, as well as (social) dynamics within the newsroom, can hardly be captured in an experimental setting. To address this, 15 in-depth interviews with journalists from various German outlets were conducted. These interviews explore editorial routines, metric usage, and de-selection practices, contextualizing the experimental findings and uncovering underlying processes. The analysis is framed by the post-publication gatekeeping framework (Hermida 2020; Salonen et al. 2023), which incorporates broader influences for a holistic understanding of de-selection.

Our findings expand the literature on the impact of audience analytics on editorial processes by incorporating post-publication activities, particularly de-selection. The quantitative part estimates the extent of this influence, while the qualitative part explores de-selection patterns and underlying motives.

This paper is structured as follows: The literature review examines the role of gatekeeping in news selection, laying the groundwork for analyzing the impact of audience analytics on post-publication gatekeeping. The research methodology details both the experimental and interview approaches, including sample information and analysis methods. The findings show how de-selection is influenced by audience analytics performance, depending on the topic, and contextualize these results with insights into the underlying processes. Finally, the discussion addresses the implications of these findings, contributing to the debate on whether journalism is shifting toward “new populism” (Bright and Nicholls 2014), or finding a new balance between audience analytics and news values.

Literature Review

The New Normal: Audience Analytics in News Production

The “audience turn in journalism” has rendered the integration of audience analytics into workflows mandatory, establishing them as an industry-wide standard (Costerá Meijer 2020; Ekström, Ramsälv, and Westlund 2022; von Rimscha and Riemann 2024). Audience analytics systems collect and analyze user behavior, displaying various metrics that quantify behaviors such as clicks, time spent on articles, or subscriptions generated by a news item (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016).

The use of analytics varies within newsrooms based on individual, organizational, and technological factors (Lamot, Paulussen, and van Aelst 2021; Riemann 2024). At the organizational level, market orientation and competition increase analytics use (Belair-Gagnon, Zamith, and Holton 2020; Ferrucci 2020), while managerial pressure, top-down approaches, and organizational guidelines support this practice (Christin 2018, Belair-Gagnon, Zamith, and Holton 2020). On an individual level, journalists’ attitudes and perceived behavioral control – such as confidence in using analytics – affect their frequency of use (Tandoc and Ferrucci 2017). Role orientation also influences this, with analytics often seen as more useful for targeting users as consumers rather than citizens (Belair-Gagnon, Zamith, and Holton 2020). Hence, adherence to journalistic values, experience, and a citizen-oriented approach are linked to reduced use of analytics (Vu 2014; Welbers et al. 2016). On a technological level, the design of analytics systems impacts their adoption, especially when tailored to journalistic needs and emotions (Petre 2021). These shared technologies may mitigate differences in media systems, especially in a Western context (Blanchett 2021). However, in some cultural contexts the impact of audience analytics may be superseded, for instance, when certain topics are avoided despite positive performance metrics (Dollah and Tandoc 2022).

The use of audience analytics leads to adaptations in news production: In the short term, they entail constant performance evaluation and guide selection, placement, editing, and distribution of news items. In the long term, performing topics receive follow-ups and shape perceptions about the audience. As a result, financial and human

resources are reallocated based on audience analytics (Blanchett Neheli 2018; Lamot and Paulussen 2020; MacGregor 2007; Tandoc 2014a). This raises concerns about diminishing journalistic autonomy, reduced topic diversity, and a distorted understanding of audience preference (Fürst 2020). Moreover, journalists often fail to critically assess the limitations of audience analytics, viewing them as accurate reflections of audiences' desires (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2018). These shifts call into question journalists' agency in making deliberate publication decisions, a concern at the core of gatekeeping.

Beyond Selection: Post-Publication Gatekeeping

Deciding What is News (and What is Not)

Gatekeeping addresses the fundamental question of why, from an abundance of information, certain items are selected as news while others are not (Shoemaker and Vos 2009; White 1950). This process, shaping how social reality is constructed, has traditionally been the domain of journalists and their judgments alone (Wallace 2018). Despite having a vague sense of their audience, journalists primarily produced for peers or superiors, relying on intuition. Audience feedback or data was rarely available, and when it was, it was often met with skepticism or outright rejection (Gans 1979). With the advent of real-time audience analytics and increasing economic pressures, this relationship has become less unidirectional, with audiences more integrated (Wendelin, Engelmann, and Neubarth 2017). Additionally, space and outlets are no longer scarce, transitioning the traditional gatekeeping concept (Vos 2015).

Post-Publication Gatekeeping

The role of audiences extends far beyond the initial selection of news. To adequately capture this, and to account for factors influencing the lifecycle of content, we draw on the post-publication gatekeeping framework developed by Salonen et al. (2023) and Hermida (2020). The framework identifies four key dimensions: **audiences, platforms, practices, and regulations**.

Audiences, the first dimension, refer not only to aggregates of audience groups but also encompass social systems and institutional levels, such as organizational or societal expectations placed on journalism. **Platforms** represent content distribution channels which, with their own publication rhythms and algorithmic requirements, influence how published news is treated, for instance, whether it is adjusted or considered suitable for distribution. **Practices** refer primarily to journalistic routines. This dimension is particularly important for the act of taking down news items, since this project aims to identify patterns of practice that reflect situational factors. The fourth dimension, **regulations**, includes both legal frameworks (e.g., the European General Data Protection Regulation) and journalistic self-regulation, each of which can impact post-publication processes.

Audience Analytics in Post-Publication Gatekeeping

De-selection touches on the factors of audiences, practices, and to some extent platforms, rendering post-publication gatekeeping a promising framework to analyze the role of audience analytics in this process. Tandoc (2014b) finds that de-selection is a common practice to keep an outlet's homepage updated. When deciding to remove already published news, journalists rely on audience analytics. Mixed results have been found

regarding the placement of topics: Some scholars find popular articles, such as the most-read pieces, are less frequently removed from prominent spots (Bright and Nicholls 2014), while others find no such relationship (Haim 2019). However, this effect is generally small, underscoring the relevance of other (de-)selection criteria (Zamith, 2016). Popular articles may even be removed from prominent spots, assuming they have already been sufficiently read, thus allowing other items the chance to gain momentum (Lee, Lewis, and Powers 2014). Findings regarding market orientation as a driver of post-publication activities are also mixed: While Ferrucci (2020) finds that market-driven news organizations are more likely to engage in post-publication activities to boost analytics performance, other studies suggest that the integration of audience analytics increasingly occurs regardless of the funding model (Blanchett 2021; Lamot, Paulussen, and van Aelst 2021).

Different Topic – Different Approach?

Topics can be mapped within the practices and the audience factors in the post-publication gatekeeping process: They serve as a structuring element in news selection for both journalists and audiences. We employ the distinction between public affairs and non-public affairs topics, resembling the classification into soft and hard news (Wendelin, Engelmann, and Neubarth 2017). Hard news is associated with political relevance and societal consequences, while soft news typically encompasses less political relevance and focuses on individual consequences of topics and catering to emotions (Reinemann et al. 2012). An example of addressing readers as individuals rather than citizens is service journalism (From and Nørgaard Kristensen 2018).

Regarding audience analytics, it is frequently assumed that their use in news selection results in more soft news (Fürst 2020). However, the influence of audience analytics appears to vary depending on the topic: While public affairs content tends to be published regardless of its performance metrics, soft news items are closely monitored and often removed when performance expectations are not met (Nelson and Tandoc 2018). Lamot and van Aelst (2020) further demonstrate that audience analytics impact the placement of soft news, while hard news remains largely unaffected. Haim (2019) demonstrates that among the most-read articles, those covering politics or the economy remain on the homepage longer than articles on other topics. Moreover, the blend and balance of topics may be crucial for post-publication gatekeeping, again conditioning the effect of audience analytics (Karlsson and Clerwall 2013). Hence, audience analytics' influence on selection and placement is neither absolute nor universal, but often topic-dependent. While the impact of audience analytics on topic selection has been extensively researched (Dodds et al. 2023; Lamot and Paulussen 2020), and Haim (2019) has explored how topics affect article retention on homepages, there remains a need for further investigation into how different topics interact with audience analytics in shaping post-publication gatekeeping decisions.

Research Question and Hypotheses

This study examines how audience analytics influence post-publication gatekeeping, particularly de-selection. While research has addressed their role in the initial selection and placement of news, their impact on the lifecycle of published content, including removal of articles, warrants greater scrutiny. This gap is critical, as de-selection

potentially affects topic diversity and the visibility of socially significant content (Bright and Nicholls 2014; Tandoc 2014a).

Using the post-publication gatekeeping framework (Salonen et al. 2023), this study examines how audience analytics affect journalistic routines, focusing on the following research question:

RQ1: To what extent do audience analytics influence post-publication gatekeeping processes?

To address this, we propose several hypotheses in line with the literature. Prior work shows that high performance in audience analytics drives news selection and placement (Blanchett Neheli 2018; Lamot, Paulussen, and van Aelst 2021; MacGregor 2007; Tandoc 2014b). Thus:

H1: Higher performance in audience analytics metrics is associated with lower levels of article de-selection.

This effect, however, may vary by topic. The literature review demonstrated that public affairs topics – traditionally tied to journalistic values and societal relevance – are less prone to being analytics-driven than non-public affairs topics (Lamot and van Aelst 2020; Nelson and Tandoc 2018). Consequently, topic areas likely play a role in shaping de-selection decisions:

H2: The topic area influences article de-selection.

To capture a broad range of variation in public affairs relevance, three thematic areas were selected: politics (high public affairs relevance), culture (moderate public affairs relevance), and service journalism (low public affairs relevance). The consumer-oriented approach of service journalism, coupled with its dependence on measurable utility, makes it particularly susceptible to de-selection when performance metrics are not met (From and Nørgaard Kristensen 2018). Therefore:

H2a: Articles in the service area are associated with higher levels of article de-selection than articles in the culture or politics areas.

Conversely, politics articles are closely aligned with journalistic values and often carry societal importance. This connection likely affords them greater protection from de-selection compared to less societally relevant topics, such as service journalism or culture (Haim 2019; Lamot and van Aelst 2020). Thus:

H2b: Articles in the politics area are associated with lower levels of article de-selection than articles in the culture or service areas.

Since the influence of audience analytics varies by topic area – non-public affairs topics rely more heavily on audience feedback, while public affairs topics adhere primarily to established journalistic values (Lamot and van Aelst 2020; Nelson and Tandoc 2018) – we posit that the impact of audience analytics on de-selection interacts with topic areas, with some areas being more strongly influenced by performance metrics than others:

H3: The effect of audience analytics performance on article de-selection depends on the topic area.

While the experimental data helps to quantify the influence of audience analytics on editorial decisions, it offers limited insight into how de-selection unfolds in practice and what forms of reasoning or conflict it involves. This is particularly relevant given that prior research has identified opposing patterns (Lee, Lewis, and Powers 2014). To contextualize the quantitative findings and explore dynamics and patterns of de-selection processes, we address the broader question:

RQ2: How is de-selection carried out by journalists, and what considerations inform these decisions?

To further explore the potential interaction with topic areas examined in the experiment and to scrutinize the role of organizational influences regarding the use of audience analytics (Riemann 2024), a subsequent research question is posed.

RQ2.1: How do de-selection decisions relate to topic areas and organizational context?

Moving beyond the broader term “audience analytics” and acknowledging the different goals associated with metrics (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016), we further analyze the role of specific metrics when engaging in post-publication gatekeeping.

RQ2.2: How do de-selection decisions relate to specific metrics?

Mixed-Methods Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore post-publication gatekeeping by combining quantitative and qualitative methods, leveraging their strengths to address the complexities of de-selection in journalism. The quantitative component consists of a survey-embedded experiment designed to examine causal mechanisms in de-selection decisions by manipulating key factors such as audience analytics performance and topic area to explore their effects on editorial judgments. Complementing this, in-depth interviews with journalists provide insights into motives, organizational norms, and situational factors influencing de-selection.¹ By contextualizing experimental findings, the interviews uncover the reasoning and professional considerations behind these decisions, offering a detailed understanding of how audience analytics interact with journalistic practices and values. However, journalistic practice and narration may not always align (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017), potentially limiting insights from interviews and surveys.

Survey Experiment – Quantifying the Impact of Audience Analytics

Research Design

The quantitative component of this mixed-methods study examines the impact of audience analytics and topic areas on de-selection decisions in journalism. The analysis seeks to identify factors determining which articles remain visible on news websites – a critical process in post-publication gatekeeping (Shoemaker and Vos 2009; Tandoc 2014a). Using a survey-embedded experimental design inspired by Lamot and van Aelst (2020), the study isolates key variables and analyzes causal mechanisms.

A 3 × 4 factorial design was used, manipulating three topic areas (politics, culture, service) and four levels of audience analytics performance (none, below average,

average, above average), creating twelve experimental groups. An online survey format was chosen for its efficiency in reaching a broad audience and simulating realistic newsroom scenarios.

Operationalization

De-selection was measured using a scale to capture both active de-selection behaviors and attitudes toward de-selection. The scale reflects newsroom realities, where responsibility is often shared or delegated to analysts or colleagues, accounting for direct and indirect influences. Participants' willingness to de-select an article or advocate its removal by others was measured through multiple items on a five-point Likert scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). Negatively phrased items were reverse-coded to ensure higher scores uniformly indicated stronger agreement with de-selection decisions. The scale demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$), supporting its robustness. A mean index was calculated to represent the overall level of agreement with de-selection decisions in the analysis.

Two key factors were operationalized to examine their influence on decision-making. Audience analytics were represented as aggregated performance indicators visualized with a traffic light system (red, yellow, green), indicating performance levels of below-average, average, and above-average, with a control group that received no analytics. To enhance external validity, we used an aggregated score instead of specific KPIs such as click counts or reading time, which vary in relevance across newsroom contexts. Given the diversity of tools and metrics in editorial settings, we aimed for a universally interpretable indicator. The traffic light system provided a shared framework, enabling consistent interpretation of analytics levels and alignment with various newsroom systems, ensuring comparable conditions for all participants.

Topic areas were categorized as politics, culture, and service, with articles selected to maintain equivalent newsworthiness based on Galtung and Ruge's (1965) criteria for prominence, relevance, and timeliness. To avoid bias from dominant topics, articles were designed around consistent themes with moderate public relevance across all areas. All stimulus articles were based on the same overarching theme, namely coffee consumption, to ensure comparability across topic areas. The political article featured a café named after Vladimir Putin, the culture article addressed the decline of Italian espresso bars, and the service article focused on the convenience of coffee capsules. All teasers were standardized in both format and length to minimize stylistic influence.

The topics were selected for moderate public relevance, avoiding highly dominant or emotionally charged content that might override the influence of audience analytics. The topics were formulated to remain moderately relevant throughout the entire data collection period, avoiding time-sensitive or quickly outdated issues. Articles were adapted from international sources to reduce familiarity among German-speaking participants. While their absolute relevance may be limited, the topics were designed to be relatively comparable across their assigned area, reflecting the experimental logic.

Procedure

The stimulus material simulated a fictional news website's content management system (CMS), immersing participants in a newsroom scenario during a Monday morning editorial meeting. They were tasked with deciding the fate of a highlighted article prominently

featured on the homepage. The layout displayed six articles arranged in three columns and two rows, with the stimulus article placed in the top-left cell and highlighted in red to draw attention (see [Figure 1](#)).

To simulate a realistic newsroom, the homepage included five additional articles, constant across all experimental groups, acknowledging the comparative nature of editorial decisions. Article previews included titles, teasers, images, CMS symbols, and, where applicable, audience analytics metrics. After this overview, participants were shown an enlarged preview of the specific article to be evaluated, which retained the same elements but did not include the full article text.

The survey comprised three sections to capture data relevant to the study's objectives. In the experimental section, participants evaluated the target article, deciding whether to retain or remove it (de-selection DV), and assessed their awareness of the manipulated audience analytics levels. The de-selection item was phrased to capture both direct and indirect influence (e.g., "I would advocate for removing the article from the homepage"), ensuring applicability across different newsroom roles. The second section covered news values, the perceived importance and use of audience analytics, de-selection practices, and participants' newsroom roles, exploring how analytics integrate into editorial decision-making. Demographic information, including gender, age, employment status, and department, was collected in the final section.

Sample Description

Data were collected between September and November 2023 via an online survey. During this period, journalists and editors from 777 newsrooms in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland were contacted via email invitations, social media outreach, and collaboration with professional associations and educational institutions. The recruitment

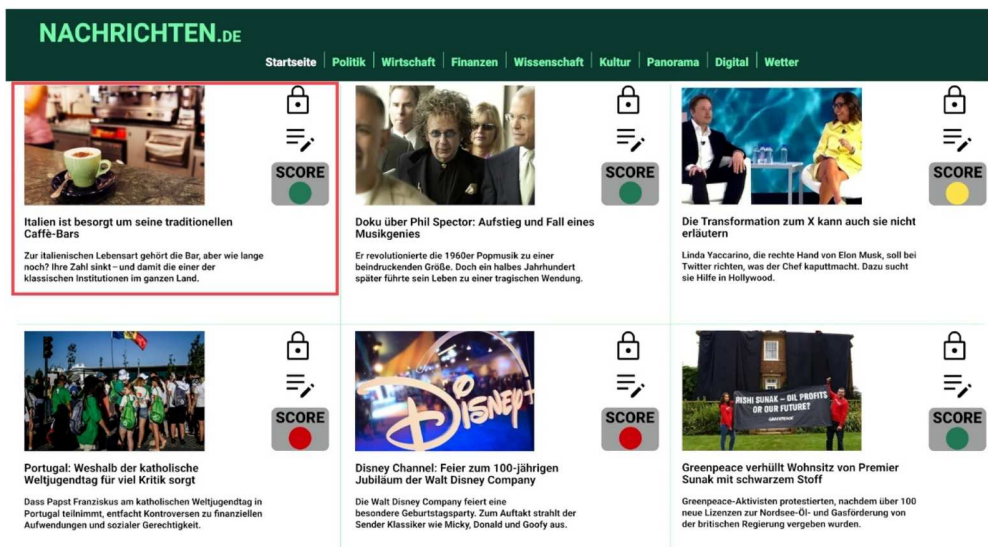


Figure 1. Experimental stimulus: simulated newsroom homepage.

Note. The presented stimulus is an example of one of 4 × 3 variants, in which the topics (economy, culture, politics) and the traffic light score for analytics (no score, below average, average, above average value) were varied.

emails followed a standardized invitation format and were sent not only to general newsroom addresses but also to individually researched professional email addresses of editorial staff. In total, 1,582 email messages were sent, including at least one reminder per newsroom. The survey link was accessed 1,991 times, resulting in 763 respondents who started the survey. Initial exclusion criteria ensured that participants were professionally engaged with news content in a newsroom context. 33 participants who did not meet this criterion were excluded. Of the remaining 730 respondents, 423 completed the survey in full. After further quality checks – i.e., comprehension questions, consistency tests, and plausibility of response times – a final sample of 412 valid cases remained. Participants included journalists and editorial staff who produced content and/or might be involved in decisions about article placement or de-selection within their professional routines. The sample was well-balanced by gender (57% male, 42% female) and had a mean age of 41.63 years ($SD = 12.03$), encompassing both early-career and experienced professionals (age range: 19–67 years). Most participants (83.3%) were permanently employed, and 79.6% worked for Germany-based media companies. A majority of respondents (91%) actively produced news content, ensuring authentic and practical insights into journalistic de-selection decisions (see [Table 1](#) for details). Participants represented

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

Characteristic	Count	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Age (n = 405)			
19–29 years	82	20.2	20.2
30–39 years	107	26.4	46.7
40–49 years	92	22.7	69.4
50–59 years	94	23.2	92.6
60–69 years	30	7.4	100.0
Gender (n = 409)			
Female	172	42.1	42.1
Male	233	57.0	99.0
N/A	4	1.0	100.0
Educational Qualification (n = 411)			
Secondary school diploma	2	0.5	0.5
Advanced technical college entrance certificate	14	3.4	3.9
University entrance qualification	76	18.5	22.4
Undergraduate degree (e.g., Bachelor's)	95	23.1	45.5
Postgraduate degree (e.g., Master's)	205	49.9	95.4
Doctorate/ habilitation	7	1.7	97.1
Other qualification	12	2.9	100.0
Employment Status (n = 412)			
Permanent employment	343	83.3	83.3
Temporary employment	24	5.8	89.1
Self-employed	3	0.7	89.8
Freelancer	19	4.6	94.4
Trainee program	19	4.6	99.0
Vocational training	1	0.2	99.3
work	3	0.7	100.0
Country of Company Headquarters (n = 412)			
Germany	328	79.6	79.6
Austria	14	3.4	83.0
Switzerland	56	13.6	96.6
Other country	14	3.4	100
Work with News Content (n = 412)			
Individuals who create news content themselves	375	91.0	91.0
Individuals who do not create news content themselves	37	9.0	100.0

Note. The table summarizes the demographic and professional characteristics of the sample (N = 412).

diverse editorial departments, including politics, business, culture, regional reporting, and news desks, offering a comprehensive perspective on de-selection across journalistic contexts.

The data reveal distinct patterns in the purposes and frequency (1 = “never” to 5 = “very often”) of audience analytics usage in journalistic workflows (see Figure 2). Audience analytics are most frequently used for evaluating article performance ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.49$) and reviewing the performance of journalists’ own articles ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.41$). They are also commonly employed for article placement ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.45$) and planning ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.40$), highlighting their strategic importance in organizing and prioritizing content. In contrast, less frequent uses include removing one’s own articles from the homepage ($M = 2.26, SD = 1.45$) and responding to competitor actions by removing content ($M = 1.34, SD = 0.61$), indicating that post-publication de-selection based on audience analytics is a selective and infrequent practice among respondents. However, this pattern may partly reflect differences in newsroom roles, as not all journalists are equally involved in decisions about content visibility.

The analysis of journalists’ perceptions of audience analytics underscores their practical significance alongside perceived limitations (see Figure 3). Ratings collected on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”) show that participants generally regarded audience analytics as important ($M = 3.96, SD = 0.93$) and moderately reliable in reflecting audience interests and opinions ($M = 3.37, SD = 0.90$). However, their role in guiding news selection ($M = 2.49, SD = 1.05$) and supporting traditional journalistic values ($M = 2.06, SD = 0.98$) was viewed more critically. Opinions were divided on whether audience analytics foster internal competition among journalists ($M = 2.93, SD = 1.17$), reflecting varied newsroom dynamics and organizational cultures.

These findings demonstrate that, although audience analytics are recognized as a valuable tool for understanding audience behavior, their integration into journalistic

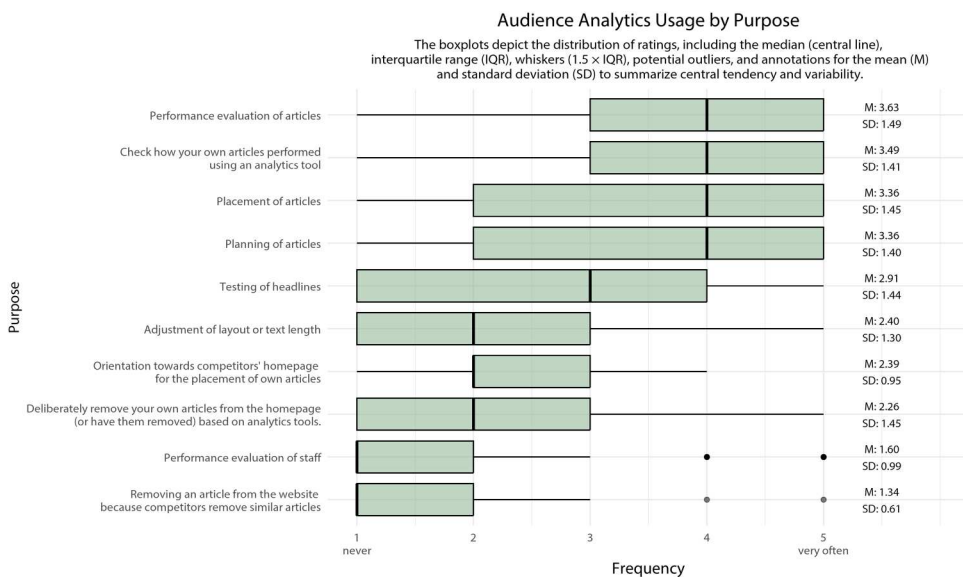


Figure 2. Frequency of audience analytics usage.

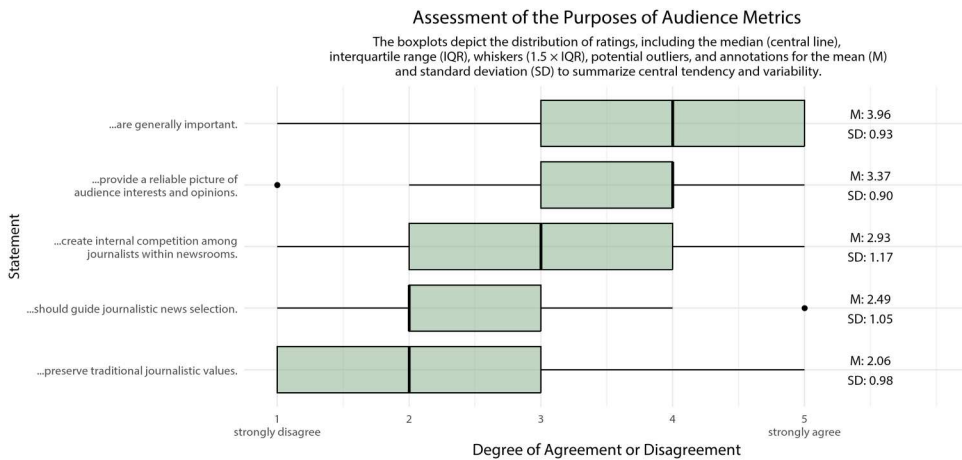


Figure 3. Journalists' assessment of audience analytics.

workflows is met with cautious acceptance and considerable concerns, particularly regarding their impact on editorial autonomy and professional values.

Hypotheses Testing

To assess the impact of audience analytics levels and topic areas on de-selection decisions, a two-factor ANOVA was performed (see Table 2). The analysis revealed a significant main effect of audience analytics on de-selection decisions ($F(3, 408) = 6.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .046$), supporting H1. Post-hoc analyses further examined differences across audience analytics levels. Tukey's HSD tests indicated that articles with below-average analytics ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.08$) were de-selected significantly more frequently than those with above-average analytics ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.98$; $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.23, 0.94]). Additionally, articles with below-average analytics were de-selected significantly more often than those with no analytics ($p = .026$, 95% CI [0.031, 0.724]). No significant differences were observed between the control group ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.97$) and average analytics ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.01$; $p = .981$). The small effect size ($\eta^2 = .046$) indicates that while audience analytics influence de-selection, their impact remains limited.

A significant main effect of topic areas on de-selection was also identified ($F(2, 408) = 12.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .059$), supporting H2. With a medium effect size ($\eta^2 = .059$), topic areas emerged as a slightly stronger determinant of de-selection than audience analytics. Post-hoc comparisons revealed that service articles ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.99$) were de-selected significantly more frequently than culture ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.95$; $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.75]) and politics articles ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.05$; $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.27, 0.81]). This finding supports H2a, highlighting service articles' vulnerability to de-selection. However, no significant difference was found between culture and politics ($p = .845$), refuting H2b, as politics articles were not de-selected less frequently than culture articles.

The interaction between audience analytics and topic areas was not significant ($F(6, 408) = 1.91$, $p = .079$, $\eta^2 = .028$), rejecting H3 and indicating that the influence of audience analytics on de-selection does not depend on the topic of the article.

Table 2. Results of a two-way ANOVA examining the effects of audience analytics and topic area on de-selection decisions.

Topic	Audience analytics														
	None			Below-average			Average			Above-average			Overall		
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N
Culture	2.85	.98	34	2.97	1.09	32	2.62	.93	28	2.55	.78	33	2.75 ^a	.95	127
Service	2.91	.94	39	3.69	.90	33	3.18	.90	34	3.18	1.10	33	3.23 ^b	.99	139
Politics	2.77	1.03	32	2.96	1.09	42	2.81	1.11	38	2.13	.75	34	2.69 ^a	1.05	146
Overall	2.85 ^b	.97	105	3.19 ^a	1.08	107	2.88 ^{ab}	1.01	100	2.62 ^b	.98	100	2.89	1.03	412
Effect	F			p		df		η^2		R ²			Adj. R ²		
Audience analytics	6.41			<.001		3		.046		.12					.10
News area	12.59			<.001		2		.059							
Audience analytics x News area	1.90			.079		6		.028							

Note. N = 412, means with different subscripts differ at the $p = .05$ level by Tukey HSD post-hoc comparison.

Interview Study – Contextualizing the Experimental Findings

Participants

To contextualize the quantitative findings and better understand post-publication gatekeeping processes involving audience analytics, we conducted 15 in-depth interviews with different editorial roles, aged 26–43 (see Table 3). The interviews were conducted across 13 private media organizations, ranging from local to national publishers, including hybrid (print and online) and online-only outlets. Participants were recruited via outlet contact addresses or LinkedIn. Interviews lasted 25–59 min and were conducted in September and October 2023. Interviews were held in parallel to the experiment and were recorded via MS Teams, while it was ensured that there was no overlap in participation.

Participants were responsible for managing the homepage or contributing to editorial meetings on content decisions. To avoid introducing post-publication gatekeeping and its link to audience analytics prematurely, the interview guide began with broad questions about the lifecycle of news items before narrowing to de-selection and audience analytics.

Analysis

The analysis involved thematic coding in MAXQDA using the post-publication gatekeeping framework and inductively derived categories. Existing categories were refined when necessary (Braun and Clarke 2006). We relied on four main categories including post-publication gatekeeping with de-selection, audience analytics use, topic areas, and specific metrics. As the interviews covered the entire news lifecycle, editorial practices related to news selection were also incorporated for comparison. In the first round, the coding scheme was applied to the material, followed by a second round with a refined scheme, especially focusing on de-selection processes. This resulted in 1,347 coded segments, with the most frequently applied codes related to topical considerations, editorial processes, including de-selection practices, and the use of audience analytics. We summarized each category across all interviews to aggregate the material, and by linking post-publication gatekeeping with audience analytics use, we identified overarching themes in their relationship. The themes encompassed patterns of de-selection, involvement of topic areas and the use of specific metrics within de-selection decisions to extend

Table 3. Overview of interview participants.

Pseudo	Distribution	Professional Role	Age	Gender
I1-MO1	Regional	Editor-in-Chief and Content Management Head	37	Male
I2-MO2	National	Homepage Chief	43	Male
I3-MO3	Local	Editorial Management	38	Male
I4-MO4	National	Editor – Germany Desk	41	Female
I5-MO5	Regional	Editor	29	Male
I6-MO6	Regional	Editor	26	Male
I7-MO7	National	Editorial Management	35	Male
I8-MO7	National	Social Media Team	26	Female
I9-MO6	Regional	Audience Team	29	Male
I10-MO8	Regional	Audience Developer	35	Male
I11-MO9	National	Editorial Management	30	Male
I12-MO10	Local	Editor	26	Female
I13-MO11	National	Deputy Section Head – Politics, Economy, Society	33	Male
I14-MO12	Regional	Editor	43	Male
I15-MO13	Regional	Editor	36	Female

the experimental data. Thereby, the interviews may not only provide insights into underlying motives for de-selection but also reveal interactions between analytics performance and topics not covered in the experiment.

Results: Identifying De-Selection Patterns

Data from the 15 participants interviewed revealed diverse de-selection patterns, enhancing the experimental findings by uncovering motives and organizational rationales behind post-publication gatekeeping practices. To answer RQ2 and the respective sub-research questions posed, this section highlights broader patterns of de-selection and differences from selection processes before pointing out the role of topics and organizational context (RQ2.1). Lastly, the impact of specific metrics in this process is discussed (RQ2.2).

De-Selection in the News Flow. In line with the experimental findings, audience analytics emerged as a significant driver of de-selection decisions in the interviews as well, although their impact varied depending on organizational conditions and situational factors. Frequently, de-selection occurs naturally within a news item's lifecycle due to limited homepage space, particularly when new topics emerge. The obligation to keep the homepage updated often outweighs analytics considerations, especially for national publishers with large audiences. This underscores the self-regulatory dimension of post-publication gatekeeping, occasionally prioritizing journalistic workflows over performance.

If other news become more relevant, more current, or if an event develops further, then it is, of course, clear that those items will be moved up, and other things will naturally move down. (I13-MO11, Deputy Section Head – Politics, Economy, Society, national news outlet)

Hence, the role of audience analytics in content removal is shaped by the news flow: While analytics often guide day-to-day de-selection decisions where topics of similar news value compete in a certain time frame, they are frequently disregarded for dominant events like elections.

Differences Between Selection and De-Selection. While the experiment focused specifically on de-selection decisions, the interviews extended these insights by capturing the broader lifecycle of news production, revealing distinct practices related to audience analytics use. A recurring theme was that initial story selection often adhered to journalistic criteria, the broader news environment, or competitor activity, whereas audience analytics became more pivotal when determining an item's duration. A common approach involved "giving a topic a chance" to gauge its performance, with rapid de-selection if expectations were unmet. This was particularly evident for public affairs topics covered out of a sense of obligation.

Yes, that's the thing – after testing and observing whether people are interested, and we realize they aren't because it simply doesn't get any clicks, then we react very quickly. So, you usually give the article about an hour at most and check whether it's being picked up or not [...]. (I12-MO10, Editor, local news outlet)

This dynamic underscores the importance of studying post-publication gatekeeping: Simply being published does not guarantee visibility, as low-performing news items may disappear immediately. In some cases, article placement and de-selection have become highly automated, with performance metrics significantly shaping outcomes and limiting editors' ability to intervene manually, a development that aligns with broader industry trends toward personalization and AI-supported decision-making (Diakopoulos et al. 2024).

Keeping non-performing items in prominent positions was perceived as unaffordable by some participants, again reflecting intersections between audiences and practices as well as economic pressures. However, de-selection does not necessarily result in disappearance. Some participants mentioned de-selecting articles strategically due to low performance, only to modify them and give them a second chance later on hoping for better audience analytics at another time of the day. This reflects what Hanusch (2017) identified as day-parting.

If we notice, okay, there are so few people on it, even though it's actually a hot topic, we take it down for now. And occasionally, we also handle it in such a way that we remove articles from the homepage for a certain time and then republish them later. (I6-MO6, Editor, regional news outlet)

Topic- and Organization-Dependent De-Selection. Within the practice aspect of post-publication gatekeeping, topics emerged as a key theme in de-selection process, further supporting our experimental results and addressing RQ2.1. Consistent with both the experimental findings and prior research (Nelson and Tandoc 2018), softer topics such as service journalism were more vulnerable to de-selection. Although the experimental data did not show a significant effect, the interviews suggested that political news, particularly stories with social relevance, tended to remain visible longer and were de-selected less frequently. Interestingly, this pattern was reversed for many local news outlets, where national political news, despite their social relevance, was often quickly removed (Haim 2019). Readers were expected to come for local news while they would prefer other outlets for national news. Here, softer news with community impact, such as traffic closures or hazardous events like fires, retained prominence regardless of performance, pointing to an interaction effect that could not be detected in the experiment. Moreover, resource-intensive or in-house-produced content was less likely to be removed in many outlets. These findings suggest de-selection decisions are shaped by organizational considerations, blending the audience and practice aspects of the post-publication gatekeeping framework.

Metric-Specific De-Selection. To differentiate assumptions about audience analytics and thereby address RQ2.2, we explored the role of specific metrics, extending the experiment's broader focus. Unsurprisingly, click counts remain a dominant metric, but subscriptions are gaining importance. Strategic use of metrics was identified as another theme: Some participants assigned distinct metric goals to articles, such as retaining subscribers, driving traffic, or acquiring new subscribers. However, no distinction between click count and conversions emerged regarding de-selection practices, with low numbers leading to de-selection for both. Metrics are often presented in aggregated

formats, such as traffic light colors, highlighting their integration into organizational practices and guidelines, underscoring their role in post-publication gatekeeping. Interestingly, high referred traffic from search engines could trigger de-selection, as article presence on the homepage was deemed unnecessary and to efficiently use space. This underscores that various – including external – metrics are considered when gauging if an article is gaining (enough) momentum:

If I then see that it's not being clicked on the homepage at all but has a very high reach via Google, then you can follow the principle of saying: 'Well, I'll take it down because obviously no one is reading it on the homepage, but they're finding the content through other means. So, I'd rather use the space on the homepage to offer something else.' (I2-MO2, Homepage Chief, national news outlet)

Overall, the interviews reinforce and differentiate findings from our experiment while uncovering distinctive patterns and underlying motives extending the quantitative results. De-selection appears more susceptible to audience analytics than initial selection, though its influence varies with the news situation and organizational culture, marking the critical intersection of audiences and practices. Moreover, de-selection can be provisional, stressing its strategic nature.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study combined an experiment and in-depth interviews with journalists to investigate the role of audience analytics in editorial practices following the initial selection of news (Blanchett Neheli 2018; Lamot and van Aelst 2020; Tandoc 2014a; Welbers et al. 2016). We highlight that selecting a news item is necessary but not sufficient for its inclusion in public discourse – visibility, duration, and placement are equally critical. Building on the practice of de-selection (Tandoc 2014a) within the post-publication gatekeeping framework (Hermida 2020; Salonen et al. 2023), we examined the role of audience analytics and topic areas in de-selection decisions and uncovered patterns and motives behind these practices.

Our findings confirm that audience analytics significantly influence decisions regarding the duration and prominence of published news articles, though their impact is not absolute (see effect size in Table 2). The fact that the impact on de-selection only differed significantly between high and low performing analytics – but not between high and average performance, nor between low and average performance – points to a threshold effect, suggesting that the influence does not seem to be entirely linear. As the qualitative interviews revealed, the impact of audience analytics was often shaped by situational context, such as the news flow and dominant events, which remained on the homepage even if they did not perform well. This illustrates the intersection – and occasional tension – between audience considerations and editorial practices in post-publication gatekeeping. It also underscores the persistence of editorial judgment in determining which articles remain accessible and visible to audiences, even in the face of increasing reliance on real-time audience metrics, reflecting the self-regulatory aspect within the post-publication framework. Organizational characteristics, reflecting the practices aspect of the framework, play a crucial role in de-selection decisions as well. Resource-intensive content and in-house productions are less likely to be de-selected, even when failing to meet performance benchmarks. This underscores the interplay of

economic and social considerations: Promoting brand-specific content or satisfying authors often takes precedence over strict adherence to audience analytics. However, de-selection was frequently described as an economic necessity, a constraint that smaller outlets face more acutely. To conclude, audience success may not be universally decisive, but it has become a permanent fixture in editorial practices (Lamot and van Aelst 2020).

Regarding topic area, the experiment revealed a stronger influence on de-selection decisions than audience analytics performance, suggesting that content-specific factors play a more decisive role in post-publication practices. The topic areas politics and culture were less frequently de-selected than service-related content, reflecting the prioritization of societal relevance and the alignment with traditional news values. However, political content was not significantly less de-selected than culture pieces, indicating no clear advantage for high public affairs relevance. Here, the qualitative interviews revealed a more nuanced picture: While political news maintained a strong position within national outlets, it was less central in local newsrooms. This divergence highlights how organizational focus and perceived audience expectations shape the relative prominence of topic areas and provides a potential explanation for why the effect was not significant in the experiment, where such contextual factors could not be fully captured. Moreover, journalists reported greater autonomy in the initial selection of topics, often “giving several topics a chance”. However, once a topic was selected, its performance in audience analytics frequently became a determinant of its duration and placement. This reflects a heightened awareness of the need for balanced and diverse coverage during the *selection* phase, contrasted with more performance-driven rigor during *de-selection*.

The experimental findings reveal no interaction between topic area and audience analytics in de-selection decisions, contrasting with Lamot and van Aelst (2020) and Nelson and Tandoc (2018), who found a stronger influence of analytics on soft news. In contrast, the interviews revealed interrelations based on whether outlets served local or national audiences, similar to the effect observed for topic areas. In national outlets, socially significant topics were reported to be less likely de-selected despite low performance. In contrast, local outlets quickly removed these topics when performance declined. These contrasting approaches may explain the absence of a detectable interaction effect in the experimental setting, as opposing tendencies likely cancel each other out when averaged.

Limitations and Outlook

The integration of experimental and qualitative methods in our mixed-methods design proved productive, underscoring the value of diverse methodologies. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. While the quantitative experiment isolated key variables and examined causal mechanisms, its external validity is inherently limited. Controlled settings cannot fully replicate the nuanced, real-world conditions shaping de-selection decisions. For instance, market-driven news organizations may engage more heavily in post-publication activities, yet audience analytics’ influence remains moderated by traditional selection criteria (Zamith, 2016). These complexities highlight situational and organizational variation that the experimental setting could not fully capture.

While in-depth interviews address the issue of external validity, they are subject to potential social desirability bias. Participants may underreport their reliance on audience analytics and overstate adherence to journalistic values, potentially skewing insights to protect their professional or personal image. Additionally, our experiment relied on static performance conditions to simulate audience analytics, while real-world de-selection often responds to short-term traffic momentum or cross-platform trends. This simplification may help explain the modest variance explained in the model. Moreover, both samples focused on professional journalists from established media organizations, excluding freelance journalists, alternative media, and semi-professional players like news influencers, who may approach de-selection differently. In addition, although our survey recorded participants' involvement in content production, it did not allow us to assess who actually holds the greatest structural influence over de-selection decisions. Decisions were made in a simulated CMS environment, which limits ecological validity and may not fully capture the dynamics and authority structures of real-world homepage management. This limits the extent to which we can accurately attribute impact or authority to specific newsroom roles. Moreover, the German news market's strong differentiation among local, regional, and national outlets significantly shaped the results. Local and regional outlets exhibited unique de-selection patterns that may not generalize to more concentrated or nationally oriented media markets. Given the similar adoptions of technology among journalists, we expect our results to be relevant to other contexts and media markets. However, cultural and social factors can easily alter or offset the influence of audience analytics (Dollah and Tandoc 2022).

To address some of these shortcomings, we propose the use of in situ data collection methods. The qualitative interviews revealed that the application of audience analytics is highly situational, suggesting that contextual factors significantly influence their role in post-publication gatekeeping. To better capture and quantify these situational influences, future research could employ experience sampling methodology (Schnauber-Stockmann et al. 2024). This approach involves short surveys multiple times a day, collecting real-time data on the use of audience analytics and the contextual factors informing decisions. By examining individual, situational, and organizational-level influences, this method could yield more granular insights into the dynamics of post-publication gatekeeping.

Lastly, our study demonstrates that audience analytics have a limited but nuanced impact on newsroom practices after initial selection. Journalistic and organizational considerations, such as topical areas, often exert a greater influence, confirming Lamot and van Aelst (2020). Employing the post-publication gatekeeping framework proved to be a fruitful approach for gaining a holistic understanding of analytics' impact beyond selection. Our findings highlight situational factors that can mitigate or even reverse analytics' influence. We emphasize the need for balanced post-publication practices that align audience preferences with journalistic principles to ensure all topics "get their chance" to enter public discourse. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for fostering newsroom transparency and accountability, building trust with audiences, and countering concerns about the homogenization of news. To conclude, gatekeeping remains central to editorial processes embedded in organizational cultures. Facing an abundance of (mis)information, it assumes a moral obligation (Ferrucci

and Hopp 2024). Living up to this responsibility requires ongoing reflection on audience analytics use and the role of audiences in both selection and de-selection.

Note

1. Please refer to the data availability statement.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.29839973>

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