

## **Taking the Audience Seriously? The Normative Construction of Engaged Journalism**

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Journalism researchers and publishers worldwide have begun focusing their attention on understanding and encouraging “engagement.” As more newsrooms took up engagement, the issues of journalists have begun to shift from whether to encourage more audience interaction in news to how much audience interaction is desirable, and what kind of engagement should be pursued in the first place. This study explores the ways in which two distinct conceptualizations of interactions between journalists and the audience evolved (“audience engagement” and “engaged journalism”) and the normative ideals underlying each by performing a qualitative analysis of articles written by journalism practitioners, funders, and researchers within public-facing outlets. The goal is to understand (1) the ways in which journalism as a field conceptualizes the risks and benefits of engagement and (2) the normative assumptions inherent within these conceptualizations. We conclude that the evolution of engagement offers scholars a template by which they can study the interlinked construction of cognitive roles and occupational norms to better understand the motivations, goals, and underlying assumptions of new types of journalism.

*Keywords: audience engagement, engaged journalism, news production, metajournalism, normative ideals*

More and more journalism researchers and publishers worldwide have begun focusing their attention on understanding and encouraging “engagement.” Many journalism students and professionals believe that more interactions between journalists and their audiences in and through news work are vital to overcoming journalism’s ongoing crises of public distrust and economic instability (Min, 2020; Wenzel, 2017). Yet, after more than a decade of the term’s use in journalism practice and theory, a noticeable conceptual differentiation has occurred. While some in the news industry increasingly focus on “audience

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engagement” (Batsell, 2015), others have advanced the notion of “engaged journalism” (Wenzel, 2022). Therefore, as engagement gets taken up by more newsrooms, the issues of journalists—and the scholars who study them—have begun to shift from whether to encourage more audience interaction in news to how much audience interaction is desirable, and what kind of engagement should be pursued in the first place (Schmidt, Nelson, & Lawrence, 2020).

This study explores the ways in which these two distinct—and to some extent competing—conceptualizations of interactions between journalists and the audience evolved and the normative ideals underlying this bifurcation. We define “normative ideal” as the ideas of journalists and other members of society regarding desirable, achievable, and beneficial practices of journalism. More specifically, this study examines the discursive construction (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017) of normative ideals around engagement (i.e., ideals about how journalists practice engagement and why it should be conducted in this way) and the way this collective effort has evolved over the last decade. It does so by performing a qualitative analysis of articles written by journalism practitioners, funders, and researchers within public-facing outlets such as *Columbia Journalism Review* and *Nieman Journalism Lab* to understand (1) the ways in which journalism as a field conceptualizes the risks and benefits of engagement and (2) the normative assumptions inherent within these conceptualizations. Examining this metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016) that spans from 2010 to 2021 allows us to delineate how proponents of engagement promoted, conceptualized, and justified engagement as a new type of journalism.

We find several shared normative assumptions. These include the ideas (1) that journalists should take seriously their responsibility to interact with audiences, and (2) that interactions with audiences should determine news content. At the same time, we trace how, over time, the discussion surrounding “engagement” within the news industry trade press split into two distinct conversations—one focused on “audience engagement” that embraces *reception-oriented* notions of engagement and another focused on “engaged journalism” that embraces *production-oriented* notions. These discussions differ considerably, with the former focusing primarily on how the news industry might improve the amount of time and money that audiences devote to news, and the latter focusing on moral, reformist aims, such as improving journalism’s relationship with the public generally and with marginalized communities specifically. They also differ with respect to their implications for journalistic roles. Audience engagement advances the role of a monitorial journalist; engaged journalism promotes the role of an immersed journalist.

Our analysis contributes to ongoing conversations in journalism studies focused on the emergence of new forms and types of journalism, especially those interested in capturing the constant evolution of the field over time (Loosen et al., 2022). By revealing the dynamics at play concerning the discursive construction of engagement, we hope to illustrate how journalism producers, advocates, and funders have attempted to transform a novel set of assumptions, values, and ideals into specific—and differing—institutional practices. Moreover, we argue that analyzing these normative assumptions of journalists as they advocate for and justify engaged journalism and audience engagement in the trade press also offers the field of journalism studies an opportunity to reflect on our own role in contributing to the potentially overly optimistic conceptualizations of engagement—an opportunity that is perhaps increasingly relevant given the “audience turn” unfolding throughout the field (Swart, Groot Kormelink, Costera Meijer, & Broersma, 2022). Finally, we conclude that the evolution of engagement offers scholars a template they can

use to study the interlinked construction of cognitive roles (beliefs about desirable practices; Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2020) and occupational norms (allegiance to professional ideals; Schudson, 2001) to better understand the motivations, goals, and underlying assumptions of new types of journalism.

### Literature Review

As the news industry suffers ongoing losses in public trust and revenue, many people within the profession have called for more “engagement” between journalists and their audiences. Scholars who have studied the ascent of the term throughout the profession have noted that its advocates often frame it as an antidote to both journalism’s sustainability and credibility crises (Nelson, 2021; Wenzel, 2020). If journalists make more deliberate effort to interact with and listen to the public, the argument goes, members of the public will be more likely to trust—and ultimately pay for—the news that those journalists produce. Although “engagement” has been a buzzword within journalism for at least a decade, its popularity has grown considerably in the past few years.

The effort to label audience interactions as engagement emerged because of technological affordances, economic imperatives, and reformist ideas about making journalists more responsive to their audiences. Against this backdrop, our focus on the discursive construction of engagement highlights how actors in the journalistic field responded to the following questions: Why should journalists pursue engagement? What makes this approach a better type of journalism?

To situate our analysis of the normative construction of engagement, we delineate how the term conceptually evolved at the intersection of participatory journalism, digital affordances, and civic engagement. Then we discuss our understanding of journalistic norms.

### ***Defining “Engaged Journalism” and “Audience Engagement”***

Scholarly conversations about engagement initially focused mostly on “audience engagement,” that is strategies for attracting more attention—and, subsequently, more profit—from digital audiences. Audience engagement tends to take center-stage in discussions surrounding the use of audience analytic data within journalism (e.g., recent debates surrounding the importance of measures of time spent with news as compared with measures of news exposure (Nelson & Webster, 2016)). In discussions surrounding best practices for news publishers aspiring to keep audiences on their websites for longer periods of time, “engagement” is often synonymous with online interactions with news, such as “liking” or “sharing” a news story on social media (Hiaeshutter-Rise & Weeks, 2021), commenting or reading comments on a news website (Krebs & Lischka, 2017), or—perhaps the most important kind of this form of engagement—becoming a paying subscriber to a news organization (Hansen & Goligoski, 2018). These approaches to engagement can be best described as *reception oriented*, as they focus primarily on audience reception of news, often for market-driven reasons (Nelson, 2019).

At the same time, the term “engaged journalism” has evolved over the past few years both as a moral ideal and a set of practices that emphasize interactive, collaborative (Brannock Cox & Poepsel, 2020) and reciprocal (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014) relationships between journalists and their audiences.

Journalists and nonprofit foundations increasingly tout the benefits of engaged journalism (Das, 2017; Green-Barber & McKinley, 2019; Knight Commission on Trust Media and Democracy, 2019), while various companies (e.g. Hearken, GroundSource, Coral Project) offer a range of tools and consulting services to help newsrooms facilitate these interactions with their audiences. Many of these initiatives hope to build public trust in journalism, improve the diversity of voices in news coverage, and boost the status of journalism as arbiter of public deliberation (Wenzel, 2020).

These notions of engagement take a *production-oriented* approach, since their focus is primarily on bringing the public into the news production process to improve their sense of agency and, subsequently, trust in the news stories about them (Nelson, 2019).

Professional activities in both of these areas have been accompanied by a growing body of academic research that explored if and how various forms of engagement were transforming as well as challenging news routines in particular, and journalistic work in general (Brannock Cox & Poepsel, 2020; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Lawrence, Gordon, DeVigal, Mellor, & Elbaz, 2019; Lawrence, Radcliffe, & Schmidt, 2017; Wenzel, 2019). Despite this growing interest in journalistic engagement, however, its normative dimensions are often overlooked, taken for granted, or only indirectly addressed (Gajardo & Costera Meijer, 2022; Steensen, Ferrer-Conill, & Peters, 2020). To better contextualize the normative dimensions of audience engagement and engaged journalism, we can look at the evolution of participatory journalism and the role of assumptions and attitudes about the benefits of interactions between journalists and audiences in shaping its understandings. We turn to this evolution next.

### ***From "Participatory" to "Engaged" Journalism***

Like "engagement," "participatory journalism" is often used as an umbrella term that comprises various practices such as online comments, interactions on social media, user generated content, crowdsourcing, and others (Deuze, 2006; Domingo, Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer, & Vujnovic, 2008). As these participatory practices began to evolve and expand starting in the mid-2000s, a range of ethnographic studies documented how journalists predominantly resisted these interactions with their audiences (Anderson, 2013; Boczkowski, 2004; Hermida, 2011; Lewis, 2012; Paterson & Domingo, 2008; Ryfe, 2013; Singer et al., 2011; Usher, 2014). When Borger, van Hoof, Costera Meijer, and Sanders (2013) examined in a genealogical analysis how journalism scholars interpreted the first decade of participatory journalism, they concluded that most studies often "find that news organizations offer participatory opportunities, but not in a way that overthrows the existing journalistic paradigm" of top-down journalistic control over news (p. 127). In short, despite the excitement surrounding participatory journalism and its positive impact on both the news industry and the public, its implementation did not revolutionize pre-existing news practices so much as it conformed to them.

Though the reception of participatory journalism appears to have been tepid within journalism practice, Borger et al. (2013) found that journalism scholars embraced it much more optimistically, especially in terms of its democratic potential. Scholars' optimistic, normative assumptions were at the heart of a critical meta-analysis of Kreiss and Brennen (2016). "There is a tendency throughout the participatory journalism literature," they

observed, “to hold up ‘users’ and empowered ‘audiences’ as undifferentiated and previously disenfranchised masses in ways that ignore structural constraints in open markets for speech” (p. 4).

The process by which journalism’s approach to the news audience has transitioned from one of detachment to one of engagement was further accelerated and amplified by the advent of audience tracking and audience metrics, leading to the “quantified audiences” (Zamith, 2018) and “measurable journalism” (Carlson, 2018). The advent of sophisticated measures of online audience behavior has resulted in a news media environment in which journalists now have the means to gather tremendous amounts of data about how—and how often—people interact with their content (Christin, 2020; Petre, 2015). These data have serious limitations, and some journalists have embraced these data with more skepticism than others (Kormelink & Meijer, 2018; Tandoc & Thomas, 2017). However, there is no denying that audience analytics have become an important piece of the equation by which news organizations conceptualize their audiences and determine the best paths to pursuing them. More often than not, these paths focus on increasing journalists’ interactions with audiences in an effort to make those audiences more “engaged” with their offerings.

Concurrently, as Anderson and Revers (2018) argue, a “participatory epistemology” evolved, “a form of journalistic knowledge in which professional expertise was modified through public interaction” (p. 24). In delineating this evolution, Anderson and Revers (2018) identify two separate but related notions in journalistic discourse of how citizen engagement could improve journalism.

The first is largely “cybernetic” in orientation and sees the relationship between news producers, products, and consumers as part of a series of feedback loops in which digital communication acts as a functional bridge that improves accuracy and relevance of news products. The second is largely deliberative, in which digital journalists are understood as embedded in a “conversation” with citizens, one that produces a journalism more likely to incorporate the perspectives and points of view of ordinary people. (p. 26)

These insights from research on participatory journalism indicate that the default position is to think about participation and engagement in positive terms. However, as online trolling, hate speech, digital incivility, misinformation, and other forms of destructive online behavior became more pervasive and disruptive, exploring these iterations of “dark participation” (Quandt, 2018) has garnered more attention. At the same time, Quandt (2021) cautions, “Just focusing on dysfunctional effects and being fascinated by the doom and gloom of the dark side would be as wrong as naively expecting every user in online environments be a heroic, liberal savior of democracy” (p. 85).

### ***The Normative Assumptions Underlying Audience Participation in News***

Our interest in analyzing the evolution of engagement in journalism begins with the basic observation that advocating for more interactions between reporters and their audience leads to advancing certain value judgments (e.g., that interactions between journalists and their audiences is good). We analyze this observation informed by the framework of discursive institutionalism (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; see also Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2020). According to this view, “Journalists’ professionalism, identity, and roles have

no true `essence.'" Rather, "they are they are subject to continual discursive (re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation . . ." (Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2020, p. 105).

Normative assumptions are a key component in this process because they articulate with moral force what journalistic practices are deemed more desirable than others in the institutional context of journalism. In applying a particular element of this theoretical framework, we analyze the discursive construction of engagement as a process of role contestation. As journalists express ideas about how their practices (e.g., engagement) are not in line with dominant institutional norms, they challenge the tacit consensus to destabilize hegemonic journalistic norms (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 128). As a result, they attempt to normalize emergent institutional norms and negotiate subjective cognitive roles. Ultimately, this process might lead to new *occupational norms*—professional rules by which practitioners feel compelled and to which they profess allegiance (Schudson, 2001).

As this process relates to engagement specifically, it is complicated by the fact that engagement continues to be defined, practiced, and measured differently by different stakeholders within the journalism studies and practice. While some conceptualize and pursue engagement from a reception-oriented perspective, meaning they seek to better understand how audiences interact with news after publication, others prefer production-oriented engagement, meaning they seek to create opportunities for collaboration between journalists and members of the public throughout the news production process. This situation raises a number of important questions: First, what exactly are the implicit assumptions in the pursuit of "engagement" within journalism, and how do those assumptions differ depending on the notion of "engagement" being advocated? Second, what do these assumptions reveal about journalists' feelings about their professional role, their expectations of themselves, and their relationships with their audiences? Finally, what is the impact of these normative assumptions on journalism and the public?

As journalists continue to increase their efforts to "engage" with the public, it becomes more important for journalism scholars to identify the normative assumptions underlying those efforts to better understand *why* those efforts are being pursued in the first place, what they reveal about journalism's perceptions of the news audience more broadly, and, perhaps most importantly, how much—or how little—those assumptions align with the way audiences actually think about and interact with news.

With that, our research questions are as follows:

*RQ1: How do journalists implicitly or explicitly define "engagement" in public discourse?*

*RQ2: What specific ideas, practices, and ideals do they associate with engagement?*

*RQ3: How do they justify "engagement" as a "better journalism"?*

### **Data and Methodology**

To examine the ways that journalists define and discuss "engagement" in public conversations and subsequently uncover the normative assumptions underlying these definitions and discussions, we perform

a qualitative analysis of metajournalism, drawn from the journalism trade press. Our approach follows the process set out by Vos and Singer (2016) and more recently used to pursue similar explorations focused on engaged journalism (Ferrucci, Nelson, & Davis, 2020). This form of analysis is a useful method for uncovering themes and patterns within a body of content (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The definitions used within journalism mirror the profession's practices and norms more broadly. They are socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1990), making an analysis of metajournalism a fitting tool for exploring the consistencies surrounding definitions of terms like "engagement," as well as the assumptions underlying those definitions.

We assembled our data set by searching journalism trade outlets for articles that included the terms "engagement" and "engaged journalism." These articles come from *NiemanLab* and *Columbia Journalism Review*, which were chosen because they are two of the most well-known trade publications within the profession; they frequently produce content focused on engagement within journalism (indeed, *NiemanLab* has an "Audience and Social" section of its website); and they have been used in similar, previously published analyses of metajournalism (Ferrucci et al., 2020). Our data set included (1) write-ups of field developments related to audience engagement and engaged journalism, written by *NiemanLab* and *Columbia Journalism Review* staff; (2) opinion pieces written by audience engagement and engaged journalism advocates; and (3) summaries of academic studies focused on audience engagement and engaged journalism written by journalism studies scholars. We intentionally cast a wide net when it came to the types of people writing these articles to more effectively capture the full range of discussion related to engagement within journalism. However, we only collected data from U.S.-based publications to eliminate confounding variables in the form of national differences. The data set comprises 171 articles spanning from January 1, 2010 to June 1, 2021.

Each article was then read and coded in its entirety, with a focus on passages explicitly or implicitly pertaining to the concepts of engaged journalism. In keeping with the approach set out by Vos and Singer (2016), we chose not to identify names of publications, writers, or speakers when using quotations in the findings section that follows. We analyzed this discourse without identifying information because, as Ferrucci et al. (2020) noted, identifying sources

would inevitably privilege some outlets and not others. The majority of readers of trade discourse do not know who, for example, Emily Bell is, and naming her would take away from the themes presented by the industry as a whole. (p. 1593)

Furthermore, the goal of this project is not to examine the specific arguments about engagement put forward by individual journalism practitioners and scholars, but to identify the normative assumptions underlying *the whole* of the discussion surrounding engagement within metajournalistic writing.

Our analysis involved a process similar to that established by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), which began with one of the two authors reading through all of the articles in the data set, while taking note of how each article described, defined, and discussed the notion of "engagement." The author then reread the articles within the data set, this time searching for and taking note of recurring themes and patterns related to normative assumptions underlying conceptualizations and pursuits of engaged journalism. The

analysis continued with the author copying and pasting all the passages that pertained to engagement within journalism into a blank document, which allowed the author to sort through each to determine how they did—or did not—fit together to form a comprehensive discussion of engagement across the profession. These passages were sorted into sections based in part on the study's overarching research questions (e.g., "Goals of engagement," "Measuring engagement," and "Outcomes of engagement"), and then separated into subsections to better identify the differences and similarities that emerged during the data analysis. For example, the "Normative assumptions about engagement section" included the following subsections: "Engagement is a means to sustainable journalism via audience revenue" and "Audiences are knowledgeable and are important sources that journalists should incorporate into their reporting."

When it came to identifying the actual normative assumptions implicit in this engagement discourse, the author began by examining how those writing about or advocating for engagement described its purpose within news production. The more important step, however, involved examining ways these texts described engagement's *benefits*. This analytical decision was made because, as the data analysis quickly revealed, these benefits were often described in ways that brought the advocates' assumptions into sharpest relief. One article, which summarized recommendations from a 2019 report focused on restoring trust in journalism, included the following statement: "Engage with citizens and communities to strengthen the quality and relevance of reporting to increase trust." The normative assumption underlying this recommendation is straightforward—the public will reward journalists' efforts to engage them by becoming more trusting of the news they produce.

### **Findings**

Our findings are organized into three sections that, taken together, illustrate the normative assumptions about the audience underlying the discourse surrounding "engaged journalism" and "audience engagement." The first examines how journalists implicitly or explicitly define "engagement" in public discourse. The second examines the specific ideas, practices, and ideals associated with "engaged journalism" and "audience engagement" within these trade press articles. The final section examines how these articles either implicitly or explicitly justify "engaged journalism" as better journalism.

### ***Defining "Engagement"***

Consistent with the ways in which "engaged journalism" and "audience engagement" have been written about in journalism scholarship, these terms were broadly defined in two ways throughout the trade press articles that comprised our data set. The first was *reception oriented*, focusing primarily on how audiences interact with news that has already been published. These articles tended to focus on offering advice to news publishers regarding the best ways to keep audiences on their sites. For example, one article read, "Local newsrooms depend on Facebook to boost their audience engagement," while another observed that "Audiences are engaging more with longer videos." These articles also focused on the best ways news publishers can measure the online engagement of their audiences with their offerings. One piece referred to an audience analytics provider as "a real-time tool that measures traffic and audience engagement." Another posed the question: "Some of your audience is engaged, and some of it isn't. So why do we treat them all the same?"



The other strand of engagement-focused articles within the trade press embraced *production-oriented* conceptualizations of “engaged journalism.” These articles explained engagement not as the means by which audiences interact with news, but as the means by which journalists interact with audiences. One article referred to “engaged journalism” as “a concept that emphasizes conversation alongside information. It invites listeners into discussions and addresses a very real obstacle journalists face: how to constantly interact with audiences.” Another piece offered a definition of engagement that similarly privileged journalist-audience interactions:

Engagement journalism means reaching out to audiences in new ways—through social media, community events, and various other methods of building trust—to get them more involved in reporting. It’s something that lots of newsrooms want to do, but some are further along than others. So how can they learn from each other?

It is worth noting that each of these definitions includes an implicit, normative assumption about the audience. The first one assumes that audiences are seeking opportunities to interact with journalists, and the second engagement is indeed effective as a means of building trust between journalists and audiences.

### ***Practicing “Engagement”***

These articles’ different conceptualizations of “engagement” resulted in different ways of practicing it. The pieces in our data that stressed reception-oriented approaches (i.e., audience engagement) tended to describe two kinds of practices: the first focused on measuring audience interactivity with news and the other focused on creating opportunities for audiences to interact with news media and making audience interactions with news media as seamless and user-friendly as possible. In one article, a managing director of a media company used engagement as a catch-all for audience attention to and interaction with content:

We look at whether stories get actual engagement: time on page, bounce rate, will a reader come back to us organically afterwards, are they engaging with our social platforms outside of any targeting, are they really reading the content on the site, or can we tell they just have the tab open?

Another article referred to “an analytics dashboard” intended to offer a news company’s employees “more granular, real-time data such as view counts, engagement time, device and browser use, and location.” Taken together, these pieces presented engagement as a measure to be captured by analytics tools and service providers.

Speaking of the second focus, one report that explicitly set out to connect audience engagement with revenue stated:

Editorial engagement entails reporters and editors in the newsroom incorporating reader comments, questions, insights, and feedback into different parts of the story generation cycle—from generating story ideas to reporting to distributing . . . At a higher level, the structure of your site should foster reader engagement by offering clear ways to participate.

The rationale behind these practices is that they create opportunities for audiences to stay on these media sites for longer periods of time (leading to more digital advertising revenue) and can motivate them to pay for the content on these sites (leading to more audience-supported revenue).

When it comes to the discussions within the trade press surrounding production-oriented engagement, on the other hand, the practices tended to privilege more direct, often offline forms of interactions between journalists and their audiences. In fact, these discussions tended to distinguish between a news organization's *audience*, which comprises the people that consume the organization's content, and its *community*, which comprises the people that organization seeks to cover. This distinction was frequently made to suggest that journalists do their jobs better—and report the news more fairly and accurately—when they more actively solicit feedback from the latter rather than maintaining their focus exclusively on the former.

In one article, an engaged journalism service provider said, "Our mission is to help journalists get closer to the communities they serve." Another journalist, in a different article, echoed this idea: "If you have an audience right now, you know, are you reaching everyone in your community? Or are there sections of your community that you're missing out on? And how do you develop a relationship with them?" This distinction between audiences and communities went hand-in-hand with engaged journalism practices that focused on creating offline opportunities for journalists to learn from and converse with members of the public, not necessarily to report on a story so much as to build stronger connections with the people that these journalists seek to report and write both *for* and *about*.

### ***Justifying "Engagement"***

Finally, we turn to the justifications for these conceptualizations of and approaches to engagement within journalism because within these justifications, we were able to identify the normative assumptions about the news audience underlying the pursuit of and advocacy for engaged journalism within the trade press. The justifications for reception-oriented engagement efforts within journalism were relatively straightforward. In a saturated digital media environment, it is incumbent upon news publishers to do everything they can to understand how audiences are interacting with their content so that they can use this information to make their content even more appealing and, consequently, more profitable. "The cornerstone of next-generation, sustainable business models for news, we believe, will be direct audience revenue supported by high levels of reader engagement," one article read.

When it came to articles focused on production-oriented engaged journalism, we found that the justifications for these efforts did not tend to rely on empirical evidence, because that evidence is so difficult to capture. One writer summarized the limitations journalism stakeholders face as they attempt to draw on audience measurement data to demonstrate the value of engaged journalism:

Some say there is a strong business case to be made for crowdsourcing done right. They assert that loyal and engaged consumers are much more valuable than itinerant advertisers. While there are promising clues, no one has made a firm business case yet that inviting audience members to be sources directly impacts the bottom line as much as it strengthens the journalism.

“Does audience engagement-focused reporting actually improve a news organization’s revenue?” another writer asked in a piece published in 2019. “It’s still unclear.” In light of this lack of empirical evidence supporting the claims underlying engaged journalism, a different writer went as far as to conclude that “Engagement journalism has a measurement problem.”

Instead, the justifications relied on explicitly normative claims about what audiences want and expect from journalism. One of the most recurring of these claims is that audiences are more likely to trust journalists if journalists create more opportunities for audiences to interact with them. “Audience engagement can be a daunting project for newsrooms to tackle on their own,” one article read, “but an important one, especially in an era of declining trust in the news.” In another article, a journalism consultant said, “When trust in journalism is extremely low, and many readers are suspicious about bias, engaging with them is often the best way to convince them you deserve their trust.”

Although the justifications for each of these different kinds of engagement pursuits differed from one another, those justifications stemmed from the same underlying assumption: that journalists hold a great deal of power over shaping audience interactions and audiences’ perceptions of the news media. Reception-oriented engagement advocates appear to believe that this power should be exercised to reimagine news websites so that they keep audiences for longer periods of time, thus increasing the potential advertising and audience revenue. Production-oriented engagement advocates believe this power should be exercised to create opportunities for members of the public to more actively journalism, thus improving audience trust in—and, ideally, support for—journalism. We explore this assumption, as well as the others underlying the pursuit of engaged journalism, in the next section.

## **Discussion**

For this project, we set out to examine the normative assumptions lurking within the news industry’s ongoing discourse surrounding audience engagement and engaged journalism. With that in mind, this section begins with a discussion of the normative assumptions implicit in the pursuit of “engagement.” We then reflect on what these assumptions reveal about how journalists feel about their professional role, their expectations of themselves, and their relationships with their audiences. Finally, we consider the impact of these normative assumptions on journalism and the public.

### ***Normative Assumptions***

As our data show, the conversation surrounding engagement has been unfolding for more than a decade, and its approach to—and excitement about—the role of engagement has been fairly consistent throughout that time. The most consistent normative assumption underlying the articles in industry trade presses is that journalists should take seriously their responsibility to interact with audiences. Implicit in this assumption is the view that audiences *want* more engagement with journalism and that journalism that more actively engages with the audiences will be more impactful and profitable. Yet, our analysis also shows that journalists feel compelled to take the audience seriously in different ways, for different reasons. Indeed, we find that the discussion surrounding engagement in journalistic discourse can more accurately be

understood as two parallel conversations—each of which comprising its own assumptions about and, consequently, approaches to the audience.

The first conversation, which tends to comprise discussions of “audience engagement,” focuses primarily on news *reception* and privileges audience measurement and monetization. The other, which tends to comprise discussions of “engaged journalism,” focuses primarily on news *production* and privileges more mission-driven and ideological concerns such as community impact and public trust. This finding corroborates Nelson’s (2021) previous claim that engaged journalism conceptualizations, while varied and inconsistent, tend to fall into two broad categories: reception oriented and production oriented. They also suggest a growing awareness among journalism stakeholders that audiences and members of the public are not one and the same, but instead comprise different groups of people with different relationships with news.

The second consistent normative assumption we found is that interactions with audiences should play a role in determining news content. Again, this assumption takes different meanings depending on which of the two approaches toward engagement is foregrounded. The reception-oriented approach tends to be used in pieces exploring opportunities for news producers to better reach and, more importantly, monetize their audiences. The other conceptualization of audience engagement seen throughout our analysis takes the production-oriented approach to the term, focusing less on the measurement and monetization of audiences and more on ongoing efforts throughout a small (but growing) subset of the industry to bringing the audience into the news production process.

Discussions of engagement that describe innovations that might help improve “interactivity” or analytic data breakthroughs like “attention minutes” meant to improve news publishers’ understanding of how audiences consume news are clearly aspiring to bring a data-driven approach to understanding the journalist-audience relationship in hopes of capturing more audience attention in a crowded media marketplace. Discussions of engagement that describe efforts to improve the relationships between journalists and community members, on the other hand, aspire to change journalistic practice—not necessarily in pursuit of more revenue (though audience revenue is indeed often cited as a benefit to doing so) but in pursuit a *better quality* of news. In short, reception-oriented engagement advocates begin with the normative assumption that people do not wish to play an active role in news reporting and instead would rather practice what Schudson (1998) refers to as “monitorial citizenship,” where they “engage in environmental surveillance more than information-gathering” (p. 311). Production-oriented engagement advocates begin with the very different normative assumption that an increase in opportunities for collaboration is, as Karlsson, Bergström, Clerwall, and Fast (2015) note, “something that the audience desires and appreciates” (p. 298).

### ***Journalistic Roles***

Taken together, our findings contribute to an ongoing critical discussion within journalism studies of the normative assumptions underlying journalistic practice generally and the profession’s increasing focus on its relationship with the public specifically (Eldridge & Steele, 2016; Peters & Witschge, 2015). If new normative assumptions challenge the status quo, we can expect—according to the framework of discursive institutionalism—that they also change the role orientations in the institutional context of journalism. While both audience engagement and engaged journalism share some common ground in pushing for changes,

their different emphases lead to dissimilar outcomes. From both perspectives, engagement seeks to dethrone the traditional norm of journalistic detachment. Both iterations of engagement operate on the assumption that observing events and trends from a distance without direct input from audiences does not take away but in fact impoverishes journalistic identity. As a result, proponents of engagement advocate for adjusting cognitive journalistic roles in the sense of adapting “their subjective aspirations and work-related ambitions” (Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2020, p. 114).

At the same time, a focus on engagement also leads to two different role orientations depending on which approach of engagement is being pursued. Building off of Schudson’s (1998) approach to citizenship, we believe that audience engagement advances the role of a *monitorial journalist*, while engaged journalism promotes the role of an *immersed journalist*. While both forms of engagement advance a professional orientation on interaction between journalists and audience, they do so by promoting different rules and standards to guide these interactions. For audience engagement, the monitorial role takes precedence. Here the goal is to optimize how journalists can track and interpret user data to make their work more responsive to popular appeal. For engaged journalism, the predominant journalistic role is that of an immersed—as opposed to a detached—observer. The task, then, is to become more sensitive and better attuned to the diversity of voices in a community.

Although the normative assumptions underlying audience engagement and engaged journalism differ from one another, they do share one important characteristic: Both stem from an equally important yet infrequently discussed assumption about journalists’ agency when it comes to shaping news audience behavior. Our analysis suggests that, regardless of their other differences, both those journalists who advocate for reception-oriented engagement as well as those who advocate for production-oriented engagement believe that journalists hold a great deal of influence over how audiences think about and interact with journalists. If journalists were to make the news more “engaging,” audiences would be more likely to trust it, consume it, and perhaps even pay for it. Neither of these is an established truth. This assumption is important to acknowledge considering there is in fact research that suggests the opposite might be the case: that audiences might actually not be all that interested in a more reciprocal relationship with journalism (Schmidt et al., 2020), and that journalists have much less power in shaping news audience perceptions and behaviors than they might like to believe (Hindman, 2018; Webster, 2014).

### ***Understanding Audiences***

In illustrating that the discourse surrounding engaged journalism unfolds via two parallel discussions—one market driven, and the other mission driven—this study aims not to present a limitation of the current conversation so much as present an opportunity. Although there is a great deal of faith that production-oriented engaged journalism will improve journalism as well as the profession’s relationship with the public, our findings also show that, more than a decade into the “engaged journalism” discourse, the jury is still out on whether it can deliver on these aspirations. Interestingly, the lack of data demonstrating the impact of engaged journalism is sometimes treated in these trade press articles as a challenge to be overcome, but in other instances, as a limitation to be acknowledged and then brushed aside. This might indicate the faith that some have in the power of engaged journalism, as well as an increasingly critical perception of audience analytic data, one that focuses less on its opportunities than on its potential to

misrepresent or overlook important aspects of the news audience. These circumstances speak to a broader irony: Despite increasingly sophisticated audience metrics, it remains incredibly difficult to determine what audiences want from news.

Measuring the impact of efforts to improve the relationship between journalism and the public is no easy task. However, reviewing the trade press articles about engaged journalism and audience engagement makes clear just how conspicuous it is that the discussion surrounding audience measurement continues to be so firmly rooted in one corner of the discourse and so consistently absent from the other. We believe that determining the extent to which the normative assumptions underlying engaged journalism are accurate must begin by converging these parallel conversations into one comprehensive discussion. Too often, the burden for measuring the outcomes of engaged journalism gets placed on the journalists pursuing it. These journalists already work in severely resource-diminished circumstances and also do not always have the tools and skills necessary to evaluate the outcomes of their efforts. Because the discourse focused on reception-oriented engagement is so detached from the one focused on production-oriented engagement, the news industry currently lacks an agreed-upon measurement that could be used by news producers, funders, and stakeholders to distinguish between successful and unsuccessful engagement efforts.

As a result, a metric for engaged journalism remains elusive (Nelson, 2018). Hence, those advocating on behalf of engaged journalism are doing so with a hand tied behind their backs. They strongly believe in the normative assumption that engagement is something the public wants and expects from news, but they lack an empirical framework with which to prove that this assumption is true. Addressing this gap will involve engaged journalism funders, practitioners, tool and service providers, and scholars making a deliberate effort to fuse the discussions surrounding audience measurement and audience engagement. Some university-based centers, such as the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin and the Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon, are already engaged in exactly this type of work. We hope others follow suit.

One final note: The normative discussions surrounding engagement in journalism tend to focus primarily on the extent to which audiences want to be involved in news production. However, an equally important conversation that has yet to unfold is one focused on the extent to which more sinister forms of engagement further erode the relationship between journalists and the public. As the pursuit of either engaged journalism or audience engagement (or both) becomes more of a given within journalistic practice, it becomes more necessary for journalism stakeholders—especially those advocating for these audience-centric forms of news production—to more explicitly grapple with the “dark participation” (Quandt, 2018) that journalists increasingly face online. Other scholars have noted that journalists increasingly find themselves in the unenviable position of feeling pressured to engage more with the public, especially via social media, only to encounter severe harassment and abuse (Holton, Bélair-Gagnon, Bossio, & Molyneux, 2021; Miller, 2021; Miller & Lewis, 2020), contributing to growing rates of burnout and other mental health issues within the industry (Bélair-Gagnon, Bossio, Holton, & Molyneux, 2022; Bossio & Holton, 2019). Going forward, we hope to fuse the conversation unfolding among those practicing, researching, and advocating on behalf of engagement in journalism with the one unfolding among those focused on understanding the impact of the dark side of engagement on journalists, the public, and the relationship between the two.

### Conclusion

By analyzing the normative assumptions of journalists as they advocate for and justify engaged journalism in the trade press, we as journalism scholars also reflect on our own role in contributing to the potentially overly optimistic conceptualizations of engaged journalism. As we have published numerous studies in this area and because engaged journalism is still a nascent set of ideas and practices, we acknowledge that part of our responsibility is to be self-aware of potential blind spots and biased assumptions. In fact, this article is inspired by and builds on previous studies that have critically examined the assumptions underlying the value of audience involvement in the news within both the professional world of journalism practice and the academic world of journalism studies (Borger et al., 2013; Kreiss & Brennen, 2016; Lewis & Molyneux, 2018; Quandt, 2018). These articles have argued that audience participation in journalism tends to be viewed rather uncritically as normatively desirable and as a goal worthy of pursuit within the news industry. Consequently, the normative assumptions underlying the pursuit of engagement within journalism have thus far prevented journalists, advocates, funders, and to some extent scholars from engaging more comprehensively with the limits and risks of interactions between journalists and audience.

To be clear, our study is not intended to suggest that the work focused on engaged journalism that has come before has been misguided or inaccurate. Instead, at what appears to be a turning point for engaged journalism—a transition from journalists debating whether it should be pursued to how best to implement it—our study is intended to encourage journalism scholars and stakeholders to take a more comprehensive, balanced, self-aware perspective. As U.S. based scholars, we acknowledge that our own thinking about and explorations of journalism's relationship with the public is undoubtedly shaped—and limited—by the fact that our experiences with news tend to unfold within the narrow confines of this country. We do not believe that the normative assumptions we have identified necessarily translate to other areas of the world, and we hope that future research will identify those that go beyond geographical boundaries, and those that do not.

Though many believe the pursuit of engaged journalism and the preservation of journalism's institutional norms are mutually exclusive, we believe that engaged journalism might simply be a step toward a different kind of professionalization—one where audiences have the opportunity to play a larger role in news production, while journalists bear the burden of determining how that role ultimately gets defined.

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