The structures that shape news consumption: Evidence from the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
Researchers and practitioners increasingly believe that journalism must improve its relationship with audiences to increase the likelihood that people will consume and support news. In this paper, we argue that this assumption overlooks the importance of structural- and individual-level factors in shaping news audience behavior. Drawing on Giddens’ theory of structuration, we suggest that, when it comes to the amount of time that people devote to news, consumers’ choices are guided more by life circumstances than by news preferences. To illustrate this point, we draw on a combination of interview and audience analytics data collected when so many people’s life circumstances changed: the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. We find that people consumed more news during the early months of the pandemic than normal because (1) they had more time on their hands due to things like shelter-in-place orders, layoffs, and shifts to working from home and (2) they were more interested in understanding the coronavirus’ spread and risks as well as the preventative measures being pursued. We conclude that journalists should embrace “journalistic humility,” thereby acknowledging and accepting that they have much less control over the reception of their work than they would like to believe.

Keywords
Audience studies, journalism, mass media, mixed methods, news, online/digital journalism

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Many journalism researchers and news professionals increasingly believe that journalists must improve their relationship with audiences to increase the likelihood that people will consume and support news, particularly at a moment of waning public trust in journalism in combination with flagging business models for news. This idea has been used to motivate a variety of efforts within the news industry to increase journalists’ understandings of and interactions with the people they hope to reach. For example, the industry’s current focus on audience analytics (Zamith et al., 2020)—to monitor audience interest in news—and audience engagement (Wenzel, 2020)—to increase audience interest in news—stem from the same underlying assumption: that journalists’ success depends on the extent to which they identify what audiences want from the news, and subsequently meet those desires. This assumption appeals to journalists not only because it is straightforward about the challenge at hand but also because it implies that journalists have considerable agency and influence when it comes to shaping how audiences respond to their work.

Yet, news audience preferences and desires are but one piece of the puzzle that is news audience behavior. People’s media choices are also guided by structures that shape the media environment and our everyday lives. These structures, such as people’s daily routines, the languages they speak, and the mechanisms by which they find and consume media, are so obvious as to be easily overlooked—yet they play an important role in determining how people engage with media generally as well as news media specifically (Taneja et al., 2012; Webster, 2014). This study builds on the body of literature that has previously examined the role of these structures in shaping news audience behavior by exploring the question: What happens when those structures change?

To answer this question, we draw on data collected at a moment when so many people’s life circumstances were upended: the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our mixed-methods approach comprises both quantitative and qualitative data. First, we examine U.S. online audience data provided by the audience analytics company Comscore, which allow us to see the extent to which news consumption increased or decreased during the initial months of the pandemic. However, these data show how news audience behavior changed, but not why. We therefore complement these observations of online audience behavior with data collected from 60 Zoom-based qualitative interviews in the United States, with adults selected to represent a cross-section of age, political leaning, socio-economic status, and gender. These interviews took place throughout April and May 2020, meaning that we spoke with people as they were sheltering-in-place as well as immediately after those restrictions were lifted.

We find that interviewees described consuming more news during the early months of the pandemic than normal, which mirrors the behavior of the online audience more broadly. The most frequent explanations given for this increase in news consumption were (1) that people had more time on their hands because of disruptions to routines brought on by things like stay-at-home orders, layoffs, and shifts to working from home and (2) they were more interested in understanding the coronavirus’ spread and risks as well as the preventative measures that were being pursued. In light of these findings, which capture both preferential and structural explanations for news audience behavior, we argue that the “audience turn” currently unfolding in journalism research and practice (Costera Meijer, 2020) should focus not just on audiences’ innate preferences, nor solely
on the structures that shape their encounters with media, but on the convergence of the two. Bridging these two discussions into one will not only improve journalists’ understanding of their own agency when it comes to influencing news audience behavior, but will also improve journalism scholars’ understanding of the relationship between journalism and the public.

Literature review

The news industry faces serious challenges. To overcome economic instability and public distrust, a growing number of journalism stakeholders have begun to more explicitly measure and engage with news audiences, in hopes that an improved awareness of audience needs will help media companies improve the value proposition of news. As a result, journalists now believe they must build better relationships with their audiences, which marks a significant departure from journalism’s traditionally detached approach to the public (Nelson, 2021). Most journalism studies scholars have followed suit, such as by exploring the extent to which journalists’ output aligns with audience expectations and preferences (Wenzel, 2020). Costera Meijer (2020) refers to this development as the “audience turn”—a turn evident nearly as much in journalism research as it is in journalism practice.

The rise of audience measurement and engagement

For news organizations (and those who study them), the “audience turn” has unfolded in two primary ways: as a newfound focus on audience measurement as well as a related but distinct interest in audience engagement. As news consumption shifts away from print and television to digital platforms, journalists are increasingly turning to audience analytics firms to offer them sophisticated measures of audience behavior (Petre, 2021). These metrics show journalists how large their online audience is, how much time that audience spends with their content, and how many stories they click on before closing the site, among many other dimensions of audience activity (Cherubini and Nielsen, 2016). The appeal of these metrics is that they supposedly remove the guesswork from determining what audiences want from news.

In addition to increased attention to the quantification of their audiences, journalists have also begun devoting considerable effort to improving how they engage with those audiences. Though the term “audience engagement” is inconsistently defined (Nelson, 2021), it tends to refer to the process by which journalists solicit feedback from or interact with the people they hope to reach. This is often done with the ultimate goal of improving the relationship between journalists and audiences—or at least the level of interaction between them—so as to engender a greater sense of community and commonality (cf. Lewis et al., 2014). Engagement efforts include everything from encounters between journalists and audience members via social media, to news publishers soliciting questions and story ideas from the public via their websites, to in-person events intended to cultivate deeper bonds between journalists and community members (Nelson, 2021; Wenzel, 2020). The reason why journalists increasingly feel compelled to engage with their audiences is because they believe that audiences will be more likely to follow
and support the news if they feel more personally connected to its production (Lewis et al., 2014).

Both of these audience-focused priorities—measurement and engagement—stem from the same underlying assumption: If journalists can publish news that is more aligned with the public’s preferences, then the public will be more likely to reward those journalists with their trust and money. News media are more committed than ever to understanding and engaging their audiences, and underlying this audience turn within the news industry is an assumption that journalists can do more—that if journalists can more effectively reach audiences and turn them into loyal followers, they might succeed in making news both more relevant and more profitable at the same time. While this assumption, elaborated by Nelson (2021), makes sense intuitively, it also raises an important question: What are the factors aside from audience preferences that shape news audience behavior?

A structurational approach to news audience behavior

Many researchers and journalists alike take as a given that media exposure can be explained primarily by people’s preferences. The process by which people consume media, in this view, is a straightforward one in which people seek out and consume the media that most align with their preference, as in the “motivational consumption model” described by Lee and Chyi (2014). While this way of thinking is appealingly straightforward, it overlooks structural factors that play significant roles in shaping audience behavior (Webster, 2014). Because the media environment is overwhelmingly large and complex, a person cannot be expected to navigate all existing media to find exactly what would best suit them.

Consequently, in addition to relying on their own preferences and desires, media audiences and producers also rely on the structures that comprise the media environment to help work their way through the clutter. For example, audiences who consume journalism via Facebook, Twitter, or Google rely on the algorithms used by these search engines and social media platforms to help them navigate to news. The result is what James Webster refers to as a structurational framework by which media consumption unfolds: “In a nutshell, structuration sees agents (media users) drawing on the resources of the media to achieve their own ends,” write Taneja and Webster. “These resources include the available technologies, programs, and services” (2015: 163).

This framework stems from sociologist Anthony Giddens’ notion of structuration. Giddens defines these as “the structuring properties allowing the ‘binding’ of time-space in social systems, the properties which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them ‘systemic’ form” (1984: 17). Structures, according to Giddens, “express forms of domination and power” (1984: 18). Yet, as he explains, structures alone do not determine the course of social behavior. Instead, it is the interplay between people and the structures in which they find themselves that shape what they do and how they do it through a process that Giddens refers to as “the duality of structure” (1984: 19). For example, while social media platforms and search engines play an important role in determining which media people see (and which they do not), they are also reactive to online
audience behavior, shuffling links to places of prominence depending on what people click on (Webster, 2014).

One structure that shapes audience behavior is so obvious that it often goes overlooked altogether: *audience availability*, or the amount of time a person has available for media in the first place. The extent to which a person will consume media generally—and news media specifically—is not just a question of their interest in news or in a particular source of news, but also the amount of time they have available to act on that interest. A person’s audience availability is shaped by other structures as well—such as their employment, their leisure, their commute, and other demands on their time. In other words, a person’s media behavior is not just based on their interests and preferences; it also stems from the structures that comprise “the rhythms of day-to-day life” (Taneja et al., 2012).

The structuring dynamics of these everyday rhythms of life are apparent in recent research on news consumption. For example, while much communication research emphasizes “media-centric” factors such as content types or technological features in shaping how people engage with media, Boczkowski and colleagues (2021), drawing on interviews with nearly 500 news consumers in five countries, show that this perspective misses the point of how media are actually experienced by people in the day to day. They argue that by “de-centering” the media from analysis, communication scholars can better appreciate exactly how media processes and everyday life are interwoven—and thereby recognize how it is the daily rituals, routines, and environmental and structural elements that more greatly influence media use. Boczkowski et al. (2021) found, for instance, that people’s use of the print newspaper was more a function of such structural factors as cultural habits, patriarchal family patterns, and market dynamics in particular countries than it was a matter of preference-based choices by individual consumers. For example, people often encounter newspapers in coffee shops or in their parents’ homes—but they do not visit these places primarily to get the news.

Such analyses of structuring influences on news consumption tend to focus on the semi-permanence of these structures—such as the role that desk-bound office work has played in shifting the timing of news consumption toward the mid-day lunch hour (P. Boczkowski, 2010). But what about moments when even the most routinized structures around work and family life are upended? This study thus seeks to answer a question that arises in light of recent events: What happens to news audience behavior when those “day-to-day” structures change? The COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in its earliest phase, presented a unique opportunity to test this question. By creating a situation in which people were suddenly faced with drastic changes to their life circumstances—and a sense of urgency to learn more about the virus causing those changes—the pandemic also created an opportunity to better understand the interplay between individual interests and larger social structures when it comes to shaping news audience behavior.

This study thus examines how people approached news coverage at a time when day-to-day life disruptions caused by the pandemic were just beginning and may have been at their most salient for many people. In doing so, it joins a growing body of journalism studies research drawing on data during the early phase of the coronavirus pandemic to examine ongoing, global issues pertaining to news production and
consumption (Mellado et al., 2021; Nelson & Lewis, 2021; Poole & Williamson, 2021; Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2021) Our overarching research questions were as follows:

RQ1: How did the pandemic change people’s daily routines?
RQ2: How did the pandemic change people’s level of interest in news?
RQ3: How did these combined changes affect how people engaged in news consumption?

Data

Our data come from two sources: (1) online audience data provided by Comscore, an audience measurement company that reports monthly estimates of online audience behavior; and (2) in-depth interview data collected by the researchers during the initial months of the coronavirus pandemic. We describe these data in more detail in the following sections.

Comscore data

Our Comscore data included monthly counts of online news consumption via desktop computers and mobile devices between January 2019 and January 2021. Because Comscore data are actual observations of audience behavior, they tend to be more reliable than self-reports collected via surveys or interviews, which are often exaggerated (Prior, 2009). Comscore collect news consumption data passively, by using software installed onto digital devices that automatically records audience behavior (Taneja, 2016), which results in more precise counts of audience exposures to news (Hindman, 2018). This passive data collection uses both user panel data and online publishers’ data to validate online behavior. After Comscore collects these data, the company runs data cleansing and validation processes, which results in a dataset of online usage data divided by site.

Though Comscore’s enlists panels from around the world, our study focuses specifically on two of the company’s U.S. panels: the first comprises a million desktop computer users, and the other comprises 30,000 mobile device users. Comscore’s meter tracks the URLs that each user visits, as well as the time they spend looking at each address. These panels are then weighted and projected to the U.S. online audience at large. Comscore employees further examine desktop panel data to assign different online behaviors to different household members. Both panels comprise people who are 18 and older, and who are recruited by market research firms such as PermissionResearch and OpinionSquare. These panelists are offered benefits to participate, such as opportunities to win money, donate to charity, or participate in an online rewards program.

Comscore websites are classified into categories such as “Automotive,” “Entertainment,” and “Lifestyles.” This study’s sample comprised the websites within Comscore’s “News” category. In this analysis, the number of News/Information web entities analyzed included 1050 entities in the desktop dataset and 1525 in the mobile
dataset. These sites included national newspapers digital native news outlets, local news sources, and broadcast news channels.

**Interview data**

We complemented our online audience data with qualitative data derived from 60 Zoom-based interviews in the United States. Our sample included adults selected to represent a cross-section of age (younger, middle-age, older), political leaning (liberal, conservative), socio-economic status, and gender. This sample came together in three steps. First, working with the survey company Qualtrics, we secured a list of randomly selected individuals \( N = 200 \) who indicated a willingness to be interviewed about their attitudes regarding media. These people also filled out demographic quotas for gender (half men, half women), age (a third each in categories of 18–34, 35–54, and 55 and older), race/ethnicity (a maximum of 70% non-Hispanic white), education (half with some college or less and half with an associates’ degree or higher), and political affiliation (29% Democrat, 30% Republican, and 39% Independent).\(^1\) We then attempted to schedule interviews with the people on this list by sending a combination of emails and text messages. Finally, we complemented our Qualtrics list of individuals with a list of potential participants compiled via snowball sampling, to increase our total number of interviews and to make our sample more representative of the U.S. population.

Interviews unfolded in April and May 2020 and typically lasted about an hour. Though the interviews drew from a fixed list of questions, they also included frequent follow-up questions to offer participants opportunities to expand upon their answers. These questions focused on news consumption habits, media consumption habits more generally, as well as questions about life changes in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. We recorded the interviews with each participant’s consent. The institutional review boards at our universities exempted all research involving human subjects in this study.

**Data synthesis**

Our synthesis of these two data sources began with the researchers taking notes and discussing the interviews throughout the period of time in which they unfolded. Once the 60 interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were closely examined by the researchers to identify recurring themes related to participants’ news consumption and life experiences during the early months of the pandemic. After establishing the existence of recurring themes, researchers examined the Comscore data, to determine the extent to which interviewees’ claims about news consumption aligned with broader patterns within the passively collected online audience data. We focused on two metrics available within the Comscore data. The first is *unique visitors*, which refers to “a person who visited a site at least once in a given month” and “is one of the most commonly used within the digital media industry to evaluate audience reach” (Nelson, 2019: 6). The second is *average minutes per visitor*, which refers to the average number of minutes spent on a news site in each month. We chose this mixed-methods approach to help mitigate the gaps that arise within studies that draw solely on either kind of data.
Findings

Our analysis of online audience data revealed that online news consumption in the early months of the coronavirus pandemic did indeed change in two ways: audience size and time spent with news. Between January 2019 and January 2021, the desktop audience for news was never larger than in March 2020, during which about 200 million people navigated to a digital news source at least once. This surge coincided with the changes to people’s lives that resulted from the coronavirus’ arrival in the U.S. and the steps taken to counteract its spread. This growth in the online audience for news is consistent with a number of studies and news reports that observed similar trends in reviewing media habits throughout 2020 (Casero-Ripollès, 2020). Figure 1 shows how the online news audience changed throughout that time.

Although we found an obvious increase in the size of the news audience during the initial 2 months of the pandemic, the increase in time spent with news during this period was even more pronounced. As Figure 2 reveals, time spent with online news by desktop users was at its highest in March and April 2020.

It is important to note that the increased time spent with online news in March and April 2020 did not last long. As Figure 2 shows, the average minutes per visitor to news sites began to drop in May and continued to decrease from there. Despite the fact that, in addition to the pandemic, 2020 was also an election year (when news interest tends to be higher, see Boczkowski et al., 2012), time spent with online news consumption hovered at around 100 min per month between August 2020 and January 2021. This suggests that the increase in time spent with news during March and April was the result not only of
an increase in interest in news but also an increase in audience availability for news because of the introduction of shelter-in-place orders throughout the country (Mervosh et al., 2020). This makes sense considering that a majority of the nation’s states and territories introduced mandatory stay-at-home orders between March 1 and 31 (Moreland et al., 2020). Furthermore, many of these orders expired in April or May (Johnson and Fritz, 2020), suggesting that, at least to some extent, people’s daily routines began returning to something closer to normal as spring came to a close.

**Patterns hold true for mobile news audience**

Because people found themselves at home more than they expected to in March and April of 2020, it is worth wondering if these results are actually capturing not an increase in time spent with news, but a change in the medium used to interact with news. Perhaps people were on their desktop computers more because they were home more, and on their mobile devices less because they were out and about less. To test this supposition, we turned to the mobile panel data.

We found that the mobile news audience did not decline during March and April of 2020. It also did not grow much during these 2 months. As Figure 3 shows, the mobile news audience’s change in composition from January 2019 to January 2021 reflects a gradual increase over time rather than the sharp jump during the start of the pandemic that is visible in the desktop audience data.

Examining mobile users’ time spent with news, however, tells a different story. Figure 4 reveals an even more exaggerated version of the trajectory exhibited within the desktop news audience data, where people’s time spent with news jumped dramatically between February 2020 and March 2020—but in the case of mobile time spent with news, much
of this jump was sustained. The average minutes that a person spent with mobile news per month from January 2019 to February 2020 was about 280 min. From March 2020 to January 2021, that average jumped to 351 min per month—a roughly 25% increase. This suggests that once people got into the habit of spending much more time with news via their mobile devices, that habit endured in a way that people’s increased time with news via their desktop devices did not.
Pandemic-related disruptions to professional and social routines

Our interviewees consistently described undergoing a number of drastic changes to their work and social routines—essentially to the routines that comprise their daily lives—as a result of both the pandemic and the public health measures that it initiated. Though these changes ran the gamut depending on interviewees’ lifestyles and circumstances, they nearly always came back to the same general notion: People were spending much more time at home than they had before the pandemic began.

How people adjusted to spending so much more time at home varied depending on their circumstances. For example, those we spoke with who were parents discussed navigating their children’s schools shifting from in-person to online. Susanne described figuring out how to oversee her child’s Zoom education, while also adjusting her workout routine from one that had taken place at a nearby gym to one now unfolding at home. Describing her treadmill, she said, “My husband and I have to trade off. Who’s going to get time to themselves today? Who’s going to deal with the schoolwork and then the 2-year-old on top of that?” Others without children discussed shifting their social lives from revolving around in-person gatherings to Zoom-based get-togethers instead.

People’s professional lives were also upended by the pandemic. Some described reconfiguring their jobs so that they could do their work from home rather than at an office. “I manage a group of agents, about 25 to 30. Seeing them and interacting with clients daily, it’s something I’m used to,” said Richard. “I had never even heard of Zoom before until this happened.” Laura similarly said, “I used to travel a lot for work,” but now, “I’m spending quite a bit of time at home.” Others described losing their jobs altogether. Margaret, a pre-school teacher, said she had been laid off days before the interview. Roy, a massage therapist, described taking courses to get his real estate license because he had been unable to give massages since shelter-in-place restrictions had gone into effect.

More time at home means more time with news

How did people’s increased amount of time in their homes impact their media use generally and news consumption specifically? Both shot up. Interviewees consistently described spending hours with news during the start of the pandemic. As Jack explained,

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, I would still wake up and check the news, but it definitely didn’t carry on throughout the day the same way that it does now. It was more while I was focused in the morning on what I was doing. Then I’d go through my day and maybe look at night, but it wasn’t the same thing.

Hannah similarly described how her news consumption had changed:

It’s definitely increased. I used to casually browse before the pandemic. Then as it was in the formative stage where we weren’t really sure what we were doing as a country, I checked the news probably at least four times a day trying to see if we had any new information about what was going on. Now that I’m at home and interested in what’s the latest information on how to keep safe and all that, I check the news multiple times a day.
Hannah’s comment gets at another consistent finding from the interviews. The people we spoke with often gave the same two explanations for why their news consumption had increased: (1) They found themselves with more time on their hands and (2) they were very interested in learning as much as they could about the coronavirus. Some interviewees described a high level of news consumption pre-pandemic that still managed to increase even further because of the ever-changing nature of COVID-19. As Julia said,

My husband and I have always kind of kept up with the news, but generally it would be a morning and evening type thing. For us now, it’s watching the train wreck. You can’t take your eyes away. . . I feel like if I look away, I may miss something big. Then I’ll be behind on whatever it is that is happening now. I kind of want to stay on top of it at this point.

Indeed, some people said they were consuming large amounts of news despite the fact that doing so made them anxious and could take up more of their time than they initially realized. Sarah, for example, said her news coverage had jumped “80%” because she wanted to learn about the virus, as well as if she qualified for a stimulus check. However, in the same response she also said, “I try not to watch too much [news] because it can eat up my whole day.”

People’s increased time spent with news appeared to go hand-in-hand with increased time spent with media more generally. Many of the people we spoke with said they were watching much more television than they had typically watched before they were stuck at home. Indeed, some explained that they had grown far less discriminating in what they watched simply because they had so little to do with their time. Hank summed up this change: “I think we’re watching more Netflix than we’ve ever watched in our life.”

These acknowledgments from our respondents indicate that interest in the topic of coronavirus was just one reason why they found themselves consuming more news about the coronavirus. The other reason was that they simply had more time available to devote to media, so when they were not scrolling through Netflix or watching reruns on television, they were spending time with news.

Discussion

Taken together, our findings suggest that there indeed exists a meaningful relationship between people’s life circumstances and their patterns of news consumption—and that this relationship, therefore, deserves greater attention in the study of news and media audiences. The Comscore data reveal that people spent a great deal more time with news during March and April of 2020, which is also when people found themselves stuck at home far more than they had ever expected to be. The desktop news audience grew, but that growth did not come at the expense of the mobile news audience, which suggests that even as more people were using their home computers to consume more news media throughout the day, they were still also finding time to check the news on their phones as well.

Our in-depth interviews corroborate the connection between people’s routines and their news consumption. Our respondents explicitly stated that they found themselves in their homes with less to do, for several reasons. Some could not go out to socialize with friends or family, while others had been laid off, and still others just found themselves
with more time in the day—time that had previously been devoted to activities so mundane they often go overlooked, such as schoolwork, commutes, and errands. In other words, these findings indicate that, consistent with the audience studies literature (Nelson and Taneja, 2018; Taneja et al., 2012), as people’s availability for media increased, their consumption of news media increased as well. These findings thus demonstrate that audience availability is an important variable when it comes to understanding people’s patterns of media behavior. In short, audience attention to and interaction with news depends on far more than the extent to which news content aligns with audience interests. It is also about the amount of time that people have available for news in the first place.

To be sure, availability alone does not explain people’s decision to spend considerably more time with news. Interviewees also pointed to their intense interest in learning as much as they could about a rapidly changing and unfolding subject—COVID—as another explanation for their increased news consumption. The fact that respondents so often discussed their increased news consumption not only in connection with their increased availability but also in relation to their curiosity about the pandemic indicates that broad preferences do indeed matter when it comes to news audience behavior (Lee, 2013; Meijer, 2013). Our study, however, reinforces a point sometimes lost in the literature: that a focus on the uses and gratifications of news is insufficient—and even potentially misleading—for developing a broader understanding of the structural factors that play a significant role in shaping news use.

**Implications for journalism research and practice**

When it comes to the news industry, our findings suggest that while journalists have a role to play in building and maintaining their audiences, what journalists choose to cover is just one factor that shapes news audience behavior. There are other factors that influence the size of the news audience and the amount of time that audience devotes to news, factors so obvious that they often go undiscussed in journalism research and practice: time and interest. Journalism scholars and practitioners tend to think about the journalist–audience relationship as one where the largest determining factor when it comes to news consumption is the extent to which the news that gets produced aligns with the preferences of the people that journalists hope to reach. However, as our findings suggest, structural circumstances may, in fact, play similarly influential roles in shaping news audience behavior, specifically the amount of time that people have for news media as well as their overarching interest in current events.

These findings have important implications for journalists increasingly embracing the notion that cultivating a better relationship with the public alone will solve journalism’s economic problems. While journalists’ efforts to improve their relationships with their audiences may result in news that is more aligned with audience tastes and preferences, they will not necessarily lead to larger audiences for news or more time spent with news. Journalists cannot control the amount of time that audiences have available for media consumption, nor can they control the level of interest that audiences maintain when it comes to current events. The pandemic is one example of an event that is so fascinating to people that it pushes them to spend more time with news; the campaign, election, and presidency of Donald J. Trump was another (Molla, 2018). Yet journalists cannot control
when these kinds of attention-grabbing events occur. All they can do is determine the amount of coverage devoted to these events.

In light of these findings, we believe that journalists would do well to consider that their influence over audience behavior is more limited than they might care to believe. Instead of assuming that they can single-handedly recover financial sustainability by perfecting their understanding of their audiences, journalists should embrace what Nelson (2021) calls “journalistic humility”—the acceptance that audience behavior will always be to some extent outside of journalists’ control (2021). Doing so would allow journalists to more honestly deal with the serious crises they face, in addition to their capacity to overcome them. Journalists’ pursuit of a better, more comprehensive understanding of their audiences’ preferences is admirable and should be encouraged. However, this pursuit should not be expected to lead the news industry to economic stability. That likely requires larger, structural changes to the news media environment (Pickard, 2020).

In addition to improving journalists’ understanding of news audience behavior, we hope that our findings encourage other journalism studies scholars to give more weight and attention to non-journalism factors that nevertheless play pivotal roles in shaping people’s interactions with news. Although audience studies research has long focused on the structures that shape media audience behavior (Taneja and Webster, 2015; Webster, 2014; Webster and Wakshlag, 1983), these discussions tend to play out parallel to those surrounding journalistic production when it would be more useful for these two conversations to converge. Doing so will allow journalism studies researchers to reach a more comprehensive understanding of how news audience behavior unfolds, which is especially important considering the “audience turn” (Costera Meijer, 2020) playing out within journalism practice. To be sure, a number of scholars within journalism studies regularly draw upon audience studies literature in their analyses of news audiences (Edgerly et al., 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017). We hope this trend continues.

Finally, this study raises important questions for the scholarly study of the journalist–audience relationship. For years, this line of research has tended to focus on the interplay of perceptions and practices: for example, how journalists imagine their audiences (Coddington et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2014; Nelson, 2021), what they do in response to those conceptions of the audience, whether in following cues from traffic metrics (Petre, 2021) or in “listening” to their communities in more personal, face-to-face ways (Craft and Vos, 2018). This line of inquiry, however, has largely overlooked how the structuring effects of time, availability, and related resources may be implicated in shaping perceptions and practices—whether from the perspective of journalists envisioning audiences, or from the viewpoint of audiences imagining who journalists are and why they behave the way they do. In this sense, the structuring factors explored in this study point to limitations in existing research on the journalist–audience relationship and suggest that future research should better attend to macro forces and influences beyond the level of individual, social-psychological, and/or organizational perceptions and practices.

Limitations

Though our study attempted to overcome the sorts of blind spots typically associated with quantitative and qualitative methods by fusing both, it nonetheless has limitations.
First, our data were based in the U.S. and thus may not be generalized to news audience behavior in other countries. Second, although our Comscore data allowed us to overcome concerns about exaggerated news consumption that often arise in self-reports of media use, the Comscore panel comprised different people from the people we interviewed. Additionally, the Comscore data examined the online news audience as a whole, rather than distinguishing between different socio-economic demographics. Furthermore, while we attempted to conduct most of our interviews within a narrow span of time so that the circumstances our respondents faced would be relatively stable, we were only partially successful in this regard, simply because of the fast pace in which coronavirus-related developments unfolded. For example, data collection began in early April 2020, when stay-at-home orders had just begun to be implemented in many parts of the country. By the time data collection ended in late May, many of these orders had begun to expire. Although we still found a great deal of consistency in our responses despite this lag in when the interviews unfolded, there is no doubt that some of the people we interviewed toward the end of data collection faced different life circumstances and knowledge about the coronavirus than they would have if we had spoken to them at the beginning.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study is an important step toward understanding the structures that shape news audience behavior. By studying what happens when the everyday routines and circumstances that comprise our daily lives are drastically disrupted, this study identified the extent to which those circumstances influence how many people choose to consume news as well as the amount of time they choose to spend with it. Previous studies have examined other structures that shape media audience behavior (Taneja et al., 2012; Webster and Wakshlag, 1983; Wu et al., 2021), yet even these studies focus less on people’s habits and routines than they do on other aspects of the media environment (e.g., social media platforms, online recommender systems, and television channel flows). By focusing on a moment when so many people’s lives changed, this study is able to shine a light on the powerful role played by daily routines in perpetuating news media habits (Boczkowski et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding the relationship between journalists and the public tends to suggest that this dynamic exists a vacuum, leading to an over-emphasis on tools and techniques intended to build trust, engagement, and support for journalism among news audiences. This framing consequently over-estimates the role of platforms and the value of opportunities for journalist–audience interactions, while underestimating the structures that play similarly important roles in shaping how these interactions actually unfold. We hope that our findings lead to more comprehensive discussions surrounding journalists’ perceptions of and approaches to the people they hope to reach. Audience preferences are but one piece of the puzzle that shape news audience behavior. By exploring the way that changes to people’s everyday lives led to changes in their patterns of news consumption, this study reveals the importance of another. If we, as journalism scholars, truly want to understand what is happening with media and news consumption, we need a wider lens that considers the roles of both.
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Notes

1. These are standardized quotas that Qualtrics uses to approximate U.S. demographics.
2. Names of interviewees have been changed to protect their privacy.

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