A question of perspective: Exploring audiences’ views of journalistic boundaries

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Abstract
While scholarship has studied the boundary discourses of (quasi-)journalistic actors on social network sites, how audiences perceive these boundaries and engage with these interlopers’ work has been examined far less frequently. Drawing on 11 focus groups, this article explores how audiences construct boundaries by examining and comparing their expectations of content creators on Instagram, YouTube and blogs, with traditional journalism and journalists. Findings show audiences expect journalists to embody established, normative journalistic values, largely excluding content creators from this field. Audiences’ expectations of content creators reveal a more nuanced picture, which includes expectations of authenticity and transparency, engagement, and quality, slow content. Interpreted against broader debates in journalism, we argue that they reveal implicitly journalistic values and expectations, thus blurring normative boundary distinctions. Furthermore, audiences feel an increase in market orientation among both journalists and content creators leads to lower connection and perceptions of credibility, thus further disrupting boundaries.

Keywords
Audiences, authenticity, blogs, Instagram, interloper media, journalistic boundaries, market-oriented journalism, public connection, social media, transparency, YouTube

Introduction
Journalists have always engaged in efforts to define their role as authoritative storytellers in society. However, journalistic boundary work (Carlson, 2015) has become even more
important since the arrival of new journalistic actors who challenge and ‘do not easily fit existing understandings of journalism’ (Eldridge, 2018: 6). Journalists use long-established occupational norms and shared ideologies (Deuze, 2005) to assert boundaries between themselves and those they perceive as not fulfilling these – often referred to as interloper media (Eldridge, 2018) or peripheral actors (Belair-Gagnon and Holton, 2018). Studies have largely focused on these journalistic actors and production, and less on how audiences are involved in boundary work (Tandoc and Jenkins, 2018), despite their increasingly important role as critics of journalism (Craft et al., 2016). For example, there has been a strong focus on journalistic roles from a production perspective (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2018; Hanusch, 2019; Hanusch and Hanitzsch, 2013), whereas audience expectations of journalists’ roles remain underexplored (Tandoc Jr and Duffy, 2016), despite the argument that expectations shape role conceptions (Biddle, 1986).

Social media have enabled audiences to connect and consume information in diverse ways (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2014; Nielsen and Schröder, 2014), suggesting that journalism studies need to broaden their approach to ‘study what feels like news and journalism to users’ (Broersma, 2019: 516). A key concern of this study is to examine what audience expectations of online content creators (i.e. interlopers) and their content can tell us about journalistic boundaries from an audience perspective. Although we conceptualize content creators as interlopers, in the study design, we referred to them as content creators to minimize any association with journalism, and thus continue to use this term throughout the paper. Drawing on the concept of connection in digital spaces (Swart et al., 2017) and the concept of expectations (Biddle, 1986), this study explores how and where audiences draw journalistic boundaries. By asking audiences to describe what journalism is and who journalists are, and whether content creators belong to the journalistic field, we expose an important but normative and narrow understanding of boundaries. To overcome this limitation and expand scholarship on journalistic boundaries, we also explore boundaries by examining audiences’ expectations of three interloper media – Instagram, YouTube and blogs – and contrasting these to their normative perceptions of journalism. Our findings reveal a set of expectations and commonalities that at first glance appear to be distinct from journalism and audiences’ normative perceptions of who is and is not a journalist. However, on closer inspection, we also recognize values that can be interpreted against broader, existing discussions in journalism. In doing so, we argue that these expectations of content creators can be understood as implicitly journalistic, thus disrupting normative conceptions of boundaries.

**The boundaries of journalism**

Bloggers were among the earliest forms of ‘interlopers’ and were seen as a ‘disruptive’ force to the journalistic field, able to ‘inject new interpretations of otherwise-orchestrated mainstream media messages’ (Eldridge, 2018: 8). In response, journalism has engaged in ongoing boundary work; discursive struggles between social groups over the ‘social recognition to rightfully perform an action or occupy a social space’ and claim ‘epistemic authority’ over the production of legitimate, dependable knowledge (Carlson, 2015: 3). This work draws on Gieryn (1983: 782) who applied the concept of ‘boundary-work’ to examine how scientists use institutional characteristics to discursively
Banjac and Hanusch distinguish themselves from ‘non-scientists’. Boundary maintenance work is not only about distinctions drawn between the work of core and peripheral actors, but also embedded in these actors’ discursive claims about who belongs (Eldridge, 2018). These claims can be both explicit and implicit. In his analysis of news coverage on WikiLeaks, Eldridge (2014) argues traditional journalists reaffirmed boundaries among themselves through direct and overt language, but used passive and covert language to react to interloper media. Traditional journalists were a spoken-to in-group, while interlopers were the spoken-about out-group.

As such, we ‘interrogate [. . .] the normative expectations of what journalism should be’ and re-examine who is doing journalism and where it may occur beyond the newsroom (Deuze and Witschge, 2018: 166). Journalists have adopted social media into their work routines (Singer, 2015) but perceive those who produce on social media platforms (SMPs) as non-journalists (Ferrucci and Vos, 2016). Journalism scholarship itself has reinforced the legitimacy of political journalism, while neglecting softer forms (Hanusch, 2019). This opposition is arguably driven by ‘gendered’ and ‘ethnic assumptions’ visible in public–private and rationality–emotionality dichotomies (Costera Meijer, 2001).

The journalistic field is never autonomous from external forces, including audiences as journalism’s critic (Craft et al., 2016). While most work on boundaries has focused on journalistic actors (Örnebring, 2013), boundaries are also maintained or disrupted by audiences as members of journalism’s ‘interpretive community’ (Zelizer, 1993). Boundary work has been conceptualized as a process occurring in three forms: expulsion or rejection from the core of those who challenge established journalistic practices and values; expansion or acceptance of peripheral actors into the legitimate field; and protection of autonomy from external influences (Carlson, 2015). This exertion of autonomy is most visible in journalism’s claims of resistance to market pressures and commercial influences (Coddington, 2015: 67). In expanding this framework beyond its focus on journalists, this study is interested in how audiences respond to: (1) ‘who is appropriate’ to do journalism; (2) ‘what is appropriate’ to be considered journalistic; and (3) at which point might audiences perceive content creators as legitimate professionals?

**Audience expectations as boundary markers**

Expectations are expressions of what audiences perceive is the value of journalists and journalism in society. The extent to which audiences’ expectations of traditional and peripheral journalistic actors differ, indicates where they demarcate the boundaries.

Until the arrival of participatory technologies, journalists typically relied on ‘gut feelings’ (Lewis and Westlund, 2015: 26) to imagine audiences, while in the digital age, web analytics and online reader comments offer journalists more detailed audience feedback. Still, gauging audiences’ expectations is an elusive process, and when misconstrued, can land journalists in trouble (Eldridge, 2018). Gawker’s story outing the sexual orientation of a media executive drew condemnation and ‘disgust’ from commenters, resulting in the story’s removal, thus demonstrating ‘the increasingly important roles of audiences in journalism’s ongoing boundary work’ (Tandoc and Jenkins, 2018: 582–583).

Studies of audience expectations and journalists’ roles have often detected incongruence. Journalists place more importance on factual reporting, while audiences want their
interests accounted for (Tsfati et al., 2006), to express their opinion, and engage in conversation with journalists (Schmidt and Loosen, 2015). Audiences rely on interpersonal networks as sources of news (McCollough et al., 2017) and experience news reading as entertaining, understand the commercial imperatives behind news production, and don’t expect higher quality reporting (Eldridge and Steel, 2016). They expect media to represent diverse voices, promote social integration and belonging, offer inspirational storytelling and understanding through humour and empathy (Costera Meijer, 2010). Audiences find news stories that are dramatic, vivid and demonstrate the human-interest element relevant because they allow them to connect with others (Bird, 1998). Nielsen (2016) has found that cultural, folk theories of the relevance of news – from holding a community together to being irrelevant or non-existent – determined how audiences interpreted the meaning of news. A bottom-up approach to exploring audience expectations allows us to re-evaluate normative roles of journalists (Eldridge and Steel, 2016).

Social media audiences

Social media’s presence has been ‘normalized’ within journalistic functions and how audiences consume news (Broersma and Eldridge, 2019: 194). Mobile devices have become ‘the most important platform for news audiences’ (Nelson and Lei, 2018: 628). Audiences rely on diverse digital media repertoires to meet their information needs (Schrøder, 2015) and drift from one source of information to another with relative ease and speed (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2014). This arguably exacerbates the competition between core and peripheral media for a stake in the dispersed attention economy and increases pressure to reassert authority. How audiences nowadays consume and engage with new online media are in many ways ‘intensifications of existing processes’ (Carpentier et al., 2013: 6). Although heightened, cross-media use and participation have characterized audiences’ media consumption practices for a long time (Schrøder, 2011).

Despite concerns about what audience fragmentation would do to democratic engagement (Katz, 1996), it potentially enables journalists and media organizations to form more meaningful connections with niche audiences. Journalists should define their audiences more narrowly, because ‘pursuing a more collaborative relationship with the news audience is ill-suited with a mass audience approach to news production’ (Nelson, 2018: 215). Rather than focusing on audience size, news producers should try to understand their audience’s traits (attention devoted, loyalty) and ‘focus on generating unique content [and] value’ to set themselves apart (Nelson and Lei, 2018: 629).

Given that social connection, participation and engagement are increasingly important to audiences, it is useful to explore these expectations through four dimensions of public connection in digital spaces: inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness (Swart et al., 2017). While scholarship on mediated public connection has traditionally focused on exploring normative ideals and expectations of how news facilitates political engagement and civic culture, Swart et al. (2017) reposition the concept of public connection to take a user-based perspective on how they experience connection in daily life and what makes news meaningful and valuable to them. Their model allows us to explore expectations by asking: what issues people connect with (inclusiveness); how
users engage and when it becomes meaningful (engagement); how connection with content creators and content becomes valuable in everyday life (relevance); and how these let them navigate everyday problems and solutions (constructiveness).

Scholarship has explored SMPs as spaces of news consumption (e.g. Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018; Nielsen and Schröder, 2014), and how users engage with news (e.g. Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2014). More recently, scholars have begun considering SMPs as spaces where non-traditional journalists may do journalistic work, thus challenging existing boundaries. Maares and Hanusch (2020) found that Instagram micro-bloggers’ roles reflect those of traditional lifestyle journalists, in providing audiences with ‘exemplars of lifestyle, inspiration, orientation, entertainment, relaxation, as well as educating their audience and providing a service and giving advice’.

As the media landscape becomes more fragmented and diverse, so do audiences’ media repertoires and niche interests and needs. They demand more connection and expect journalists to express their opinions, engage with audiences more directly and speak to smaller audience communities. This study investigates to what extent these and other expectations can be found in audiences’ interactions with SMP content creators and their content, and what this can tell us about where audiences draw boundaries between interlopers and journalists.

Based on the literature reviewed here, we developed the following research questions:

RQ1. How do users draw boundaries between content creators and traditional journalists?

RQ2. What do users of SMPs expect from the content they consume and its creators?

RQ2a. To what extent do these expectations reflect audiences’ views of journalism?

Method

This article reports the results of 11 focus groups conducted with 54 (30 females and 24 males) students at the University of Vienna, Austria, during May and June 2018. Data were collected by BA and MA students in fulfilment of their final assignment for a research seminar. The final question guide was prepared by the authors in collaboration with the students. All students were taught how to conduct focus groups and were given identical instructions. It is important to clarify that the students collected the data and were not the participants themselves. The participants were selected by the students based on criteria (being social media users and in their 20s). Students had to submit an audio recording of the focus group discussions and a questionnaire with participants’ demographic information. Three focus groups were conducted in English, eight in German. Participants were between 19 and 25 years old, (three were 27, 28, and 33), had diverse nationalities (Germany, Austria, Italy, Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iran, Ukraine), and were completing BA and MA
degrees in different disciplines (Law, Biology, Chemistry, IT, Business, Engineering, Literature, Communications). Groups were heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, nationality and study background, but homogeneous in that participants were drawn from the focus group moderators’ social networks, which potentially reduces diversity of views.

We acknowledge the growing criticism of student samples in research, and realize that our findings are constrained by this choice (Peterson, 2001). Selecting university students implies a sample with a particular socio-economic background, which can shape audiences’ news consumption practices (Lindell and Sartoretto, 2018). However, our demographic data suggest some socio-economic diversity. Most participants felt either very or somewhat satisfied with their economic situation. Just over half of our participants’ parents were university-educated (fathers more often than mothers) and had diverse occupations, including professional (IT, engineering, law, medical doctor, teacher, nurse), clerical and sales (marketing, accounting, project management), service, (chef, baker), agricultural (farming), machine trades and structural (builder, mining, bricklayer), and some were retired or unemployed. For this exploratory study, we feel that a student sample was justified, as it was important that participants be mostly digital natives and users of SMPs. Most owned their first smartphone in their early to mid-teens (ages 12–16). This group is also overrepresented in the total of Instagram and YouTube users. Collecting data in fulfilment of a student assignment potentially increases the pressure to invite socially desirable answers (Landis and Kuhn, 1957). To minimize this risk, students were told that the content of focus group discussions was not graded, only their ability to facilitate a discussion. Participants were also advised that only the student themselves and the authors of this study would have data access, and that they could withdraw at any stage without consequences. Keeping in mind these limitations, we approached this as a pilot study and a convenience sample which would allow us to identify dominant themes for a future, more representative study.

Based on Swart et al.’s (2017) four dimensions of public connection, we explored participants’ expectations of interloper media by asking them which content creators they followed, why and how they engaged with them, and how this content was valuable and relevant. To minimize priming, moderators initially made no reference to journalism and only towards the end of the focus group discussions, asked participants to discuss two broad questions: (1) ‘What is journalism to you?’ and (2) ‘Who are journalists?’.

Data were analysed by the authors in MAXQDA using both a thematic and an open coding approach. Participants are cited in the findings using a pseudonym and their age.

We chose the three platforms – blogs, YouTube and Instagram – because they represent interloper media that engage with distinct modes of communication and have been studied in relation to journalism (Djerf-Pierre et al., 2019; Singer, 2015; Maares and Hanusch, 2020). The exclusion of Twitter here is a limitation. Blogs were chosen instead as they were one of the earliest forms of interloper media, and in being longer and more text-heavy allowed us to explore whether they were perceived as closer to traditional journalism. The participants in this study pointed to several distinctions. Instagram was perceived as live, on-the-go, with the quickest, newest, most diverse content, requiring minimal time investment, and appealing to young users. YouTube and blogs were perceived as slower, offering educational, in-depth analysis, requiring sustained attention.
and time investment. YouTube was labelled ‘TV for young people’ and blogs were seen as intended for mature audiences. Most participants rarely read blogs, unless they needed in-depth information, and because they have a smaller followership, bloggers were perceived as more likely to engage with users.

Findings

Normative claims about journalism

To address our first research question, we asked audiences who journalists are and what journalism is, and whether those who publish on Instagram, YouTube and blogs were in this field. Our participants expressed mixed but mostly normative ideas, typically noting that content creators did not qualify as journalists.

Although some of our participants perceived content creators as doing ‘some form of journalism, but not the proper kind’ (Larz-22), the majority emphasized that ‘someone who gives me make-up advice, I don’t see as a journalist’ (Lois-21). Content creators sharing ‘selfies’, or ‘a diary of their day’ (Sena-21) had ‘nothing to do with journalism’ (Niko-25) because ‘anyone can do that’ (Ines-21). Others added: ‘Just because you have a certain number of followers doesn’t mean you are a journalist’ (Eva-22) stressing that ‘journalists write for better newspapers, quality newspapers, magazines’ (Mark-20).

A few, however, engaged in ‘well, it depends, really . . .’ debates that somewhat challenged these views, although characterized by self-doubt and redactions:

Gio-23: Who is actually a journalist . . .
Bruno-24: I believe, yes, people with a large following [. . .] function as journalists . . .
Moderator: So, you believe content creators are also journalists?
Bruno-24: Yes, among other things, they could be . . . subconsciously, and others certainly consciously.
Gio-23: I believe they could be perceived in that way.
Lara-21: Yes.
Moderator: OK.
Gio-23: Whether they then actually are, is an entirely different question . . .

Furthermore, some said ‘journalism will go extinct’ (Tom-23) and that ‘social media is taking journalism’s place’ (Elma-23). Being a content creator was seen as a ‘full-time job’ (Troy-22) that is ‘a lot of work [. . .] and also stressful’ (Lisa-22), demanding ‘a lot of effort behind the scenes’ (Gabby-23).

These debates surfaced in more pointed ways in discussions around a set of norms that audiences used to draw boundaries between ‘real’ journalists and content creators. In many cases, participants struggled to define what journalism is, reached for established journalistic norms, and also doubted and contradicted themselves in defining the boundaries. These are outlined below.

Journalism requires selfless activity in the public interest: Journalists report on news which is of interest to the collective (selflessness), while content creators do their work
first and foremost for themselves: ‘their persona is in the foreground’ (Mia-20). They ‘blog only about themselves, and journalists about the community’ (Lea-21). Also:

Mia-20: They [journalists] don’t reveal anything about themselves.
Mary-20: They report on a higher level.

What journalists write about ‘isn’t as personal as a blogger posting, so they talk about politics [. . .] so it’s more something that relates to the whole world; it’s like a broader picture’ (Maya-27). For journalists, ‘the quality of the article is the primary focus, and for bloggers it is the person behind it’ (Jona-22). Asked whether content creators are journalists, participants said:

Mary-20: Not really.
Mia-20: No. I also wouldn’t say so.
Mary-20: Because, it makes a difference for me whether you write about yourself, or whether you really want to tell the truth and something new, and not just present yourself in a good light.
Pia-19: Yes, because their life is really in the centre.

*Journalism requires an organization with autonomy:* Journalists were organization-bound, ‘hired by somebody’ (Adam-22), salaried and had a ‘newsroom behind them’ with ‘more rules [. . .] where you can’t include your opinion’ (Tara-21). This ensured diverse perspectives and content that is ‘approved’ (Gabby-23). It also meant journalists ‘do not represent a brand’ and were therefore more ‘honest’ (Ines-21) about products, implying autonomy from external pressures: a journalist ‘should not advertise products in their work’ (Gio-23). Journalists had ‘credentials’ versus the Internet where ‘everyone can write’ (Esma-23).

Content creators, on the other hand, were self-employed, ‘need to obey fewer rules’ were ‘much freer, but unreliable’ (Julio-22), and able to ‘influence a lot of people who don’t question that behind it all is just money’ (Ines-21). Content creators were perceived as influenced by sponsors, primarily motivated to sell, rather than inform:

Dave-25: Because they don’t inform people about a specific topic.
Gabby-23: Yeah, they do. Because when you refer to a product, then they want to inform you about it.
Dave-25: Yeah about a product maybe, in order to sell it to me.
Gabby-23: Yes ok, but in the end . . .
Dave-25: They don’t want to inform me about cancer research, but want to get me to click on their content to look at advertising.

However, some audiences were less convinced by journalism’s claim to autonomy, stressing that ‘journalists are far too dependent nowadays on those who finance it’ (Ray-23), and are ‘under duress or simply paid to have an opinion’ (Uli-23). This perceived dependence jeopardized journalists’ ability to be honest, with one participant claiming: ‘Journalism can no longer be associated with trustworthiness’ (Uli-23). Another said: ‘I
expect honesty, that they are honest, but journalists are not honest [. . .] the vloggers and others who do this freely by choice, I believe are honest’ (Ray-23). The same participant added content creators were ‘honest and able to simply say what they think’ because the ‘public finances him and he can express his opinion, and when the public likes it, he can grow more’ (Ray-23). In particular, those ‘who are smaller and can reach a much smaller public, and do not get paid as much as the real journalists, really express their own opinion and are not influenced by third parties’ (Uli-23). Journalists’ dependence on advertising increased organizational pressure to publish ‘what the supervisor or the director [. . .] want to see’ so they no longer ‘care about what the public or what the young people want to see’ (Olga-22).

Journalism requires facts, sources and research: Journalism was about relying on ‘facts’ and ‘sources’ (Maya-27). ‘Real journalists [. . .] should just file facts, and not influence our opinions’ (Ole-24), while content creators ‘can write whatever they want’ (Julio-22). Likewise, journalists were ‘people who do research’ (Dave-25), while content creators’ personal thoughts and activities ‘have really nothing to do with research’ (Tara-21). Some, however, claimed content creators ‘do a lot of research’ (Lejla-25) evident in their analysis of topics, mostly associated with bloggers, and to some extent YouTubers:

Adam-22: [. . .] some channels make a 20-minute video analysing a movie [. . .] that for me is lifestyle journalism, sort of . . .

Maya-27: [. . .] they don’t see themselves as journalists maybe but they are reporting about a specific genre.

Content creators who ‘collected, processed and compared the data so that you don’t have to come up with 10 spreadsheets’ (Jan-26), were perceived as ‘real journalists [. . .] almost like scholars’ (Pete-24). Others said:

Lejla-25: Yeah, it’s sometimes easier to follow a content creator, because we don’t have to research and you can actually get the information from them.

Tom-23: They do the research for you.

Despite some perceived commonalities, it also became clear that participants were conflicted and unable to see this act of research as comparable. The participant ‘Maya-25’ who had claimed YouTubers could be journalists later redacted her claim to say that actually only ‘real’ journalists who also post on YouTube were journalists; an outcome, we argue, of the participant’s inability to overcome the deeply engrained normative view of journalism.

Journalism requires long, in-depth text: Providing in-depth analysis, as noted above, was also linked to in-depth text. Journalism was about ‘holding something concrete in your hand’ (Leia-23), having ‘a good text in front of me’ (Lara-21) and as ‘more informative [. . .] than Instagram’ (Jess-21) where text was minimal. ‘For some reason, I don’t know why, journalism should also always have some kind of written part’ (Adam-22), whereas ‘you can be very successful on Instagram even when you don’t write anything’ (Ines-21). Blogs, and in particular travel blogs, were more likely to ‘qualify
as journalism’ (Ilse-22), because they posted longer text and provided more in-depth information. Comparing lifestyle magazines and content creators, a participant said: ‘Actually, from a magazine I expect better quality [. . .] and more information [. . .] when I read through an article and it’s two pages long, it’s a different type of information content’. Another said: ‘journalism is a craft . . . [content creators] don’t have the repertoire to do good journalism’ (Leia-23).

Journalism requires detachment and objectivity: Journalists were seen as objective because ‘they are impersonal [. . .] you remove yourself from the story’ while content creators were subjective and ‘decide themselves what they find interesting or not interesting’ (Eva-22) and ‘just post about their thoughts on a topic. That’s not journalism’ (Julio-22). Emotion also factored in: ‘Journalists are much more neutral [. . .] they don’t convey so much emotion’ (Erin-23), compared with content creators: ‘Sometimes when I watch something, it’s like I’m watching a theatre production’ (Kira-23). Conversely, audiences ‘don’t expect them to be objective. I follow them because I care about their opinions’ (Julio-22). Others agreed:

Mia-20: It would be preferable, but I don’t believe they are always objective.
Zoe-20: In actual fact, here and there you want to know what they like . . .
Mia-20: Yes, that too.
Zoe-20: . . . what they have to say on a topic.
Mary-20: I don’t believe it would be so great if they were always objective.
Pia-19: It really depends on the situation.

Journalism requires education and training: Being a journalist was connected to the ‘need to have studied journalism’ (Tom-23) and involved ‘educational work’ (Niko-25), while content creators were seen as having ‘no education behind them; anyone can do it’ (Tara-21). Journalism is ‘professional and the other is done in free time as a hobby, just because they want to’ (Kira-23). In an exchange between two participants that is too long to include here, one argued that ‘journalism has changed a lot’ and nowadays ‘a journalist is any person who posts something publicly’ (Mark-20), while the other claimed that calling anyone without an education a journalist was ‘problematic’ and ‘simply has to be separated, otherwise it disrupts the profession’ (Erin-23). At the same time, journalists were seen as increasingly lacking the education, specialist training or skills to correctly interpret complex information, which in the end ‘will be presented differently to what it actually is. It is the job of the journalist to convey this, but often they cannot’ (Pete-24).

Journalism requires a slower pace: Journalism was seen as more permanent or having longevity, and also limited in diversity and scope. Content creators and their content were ‘fast-paced and a lot gets deleted all the time’ (Ines-21) and limitless: ‘you can look at it around the clock’ (Thea-22). At the same time, some remarked that ‘journalism has changed in recent times [. . .] and has lost its credibility because they simply post everything, every nonsense’ (John-23).

The above assertions demonstrate that audiences broadly frame journalists as selfless, autonomous and detached, fact- and research-driven, educated professionals providing in-depth analysis, text-heavy content, and are predictable and stable. In contrast, content creators were perceived as ego-centric, industry-dependent, subjective and emotional, laymen providing superficial and mostly visual information, and are unpredictable and evasive.
However, some key tensions that begin to disrupt these boundaries also emerged. To illustrate these, we explore audiences’ expectations of content creators and compare these with their expectations of journalists.

**Audience expectations of content creators**

To answer our second research question and sub-question, we asked audiences what they expect from content creators and their content, and compared this with their normative views of journalism. We found that audiences’ expectations of content creators revolve around notions of authenticity and transparency, engagement and quality content. Importantly, however, these expectations emerge in response to audiences’ perception that content creators are increasingly pursuing commercial interests. When content creators abandon affective work and migrate towards entrepreneurial work, audiences disconnect. We discuss how this shift gives rise to the below outlined audience expectations and contrast these to audiences’ expectations of journalists.

**Shifting priorities: From affective to entrepreneurial work.** When audiences noticed a sudden change in content – an increase in performed positivity and perfection, sponsorship, diminished engagement, and incessant posting – they had the impression that content creators had switched priorities. Rather than performing affective labour of self-expression (communicating their thoughts, feelings, experiences and being ‘down-to-earth’), they now perceived them as engaging in entrepreneurial labour of running a business, where content is moulded to reflect sponsorship opportunities and money has become the primary motivator.

This shift was attributed to followership size: ‘First it starts as a personal blog, and then, only because they have more followers, they advertise products, and that’s really annoying. So that someone moves away from what they once were’ (John-23). Witnessing such a reorientation towards entrepreneurship led users to question content creators’ motivations and made them feel like a ‘consumer’ (Tom-23), ‘pure . . . money . . . money-maker’ (Lara-21), ‘number’ (Maya-27), and source of ‘livelihood’ (Gio-23). This made audiences doubt whether the information content creators shared was ‘true or whether they only do this to make money’ (Jenn-21). While claiming there was nothing inherently wrong with a consumer orientation, it made them feel invisible, and believe that content creators had little interest in forming a relationship with their followers. One participant remarked that over time if ‘they start doing mainstream stuff, just to get my clicks, you will see how those channels go to zero. How they get destroyed just because he wasn’t loyal to himself’ (Chris-25).

However, this disconnection caused by a reorientation to entrepreneurial labour is remedied somewhat when content creators fulfil three audience expectations: authenticity and transparency, genuine engagement with users and provision of quality, well-paced, consistent content.

**Authenticity: Transparency about personal life and sponsorship.** Users expected content creators to demonstrate authenticity in two ways: (1) be transparent about the imperfect aspects of everyday life and (2) be transparent about sponsorship or product placement
by exposing their motivations for collaborating with a brand and pointing out negative aspects of a product.

Audiences followed content creators who blog about everyday life because they had a ‘curiosity to know what others are doing’ (Doug-22), and felt drawn to those that share ‘the same attitudes’ (Gabby-23) and made them feel ‘emotionally connected’ (Troy-22). They felt it was difficult to evaluate what is ‘real’ or authentic on social media, and perceived content creators as performing a selectively perfected and strategic authenticity that reveals only aspects of their full identity and true character. Content creators were perceived to only show ‘the perfect life’ (Jona-22) a ‘selection of reality’ (Eva-22) which led some audiences to feel ‘disappointment in myself’ (Pete-24). They felt most connected to those who were truthful and transparent about life’s ordinariness and downsides. This meant exposing ‘negative things’ (Jona-23), and seeing people who ‘also make mistakes’ (Mary-20), struggle with health issues or weight insecurities, or sports people admitting that ‘they actually didn’t train today and ate unhealthy food’ (Pia-19). Videos, in particular Instagram Stories, were perceived as more authentic because ‘you cannot just play-act for an hour’ (Troy-22).

Users were aware that content creators ‘also work for a living and they also need to be paid’ (Ilse-22), lowering their independence. Audiences did not mind sponsored content or paid partnerships as long as it spoke to their interests, allowed them to discover new goods. Rather than just advertise incessantly for profit-sake, content creators also had to be truthful and explicitly transparent about sponsorship: ‘I find it really great when it’s marked’ (Eva-22), or by stating outright why they are engaging with a brand. When content creators were committed to a single brand long-term, or highlighted negative aspects of a product, they were perceived as somewhat more trustworthy: ‘When he [. . .] also specifies the bad things, so not only promotes, then I find it more believable. You can trust in this moment’ (John-23); or ‘when he says ‘okay I am using [. . .] this tool right now, but that’s not because I’ve been sponsored [. . .] and really tries not to kind of sell themselves out, that increases my trust factor for them, obviously’ (Adam-22).

Engagement: Acknowledging users’ interests, wants and needs. Another outcome of content creators’ reorientation towards entrepreneurship was a decrease in reciprocal engagement. Audiences felt content creators (and their assistants) monitored analytics data and manipulated their content to better target their audiences: ‘Of course, they have their statistics, they check who’s visiting [their site]’ (Gabby-23). Although audiences rarely commented, they felt direct and sustained engagement was impossible when followership was so high: ‘When this person has one million followers, and receives, I don’t know, a thousand questions a day, I cannot imagine they can respond to each question’ (Ray-23). Audiences found it frustrating when content creators ignored their questions (e.g. where to buy the featured product): ‘If you want to present something to the people then you expect some kind of feedback [. . .] It’s not a one-way street’ (Esma-23). They said that content creators should at least read their comments to integrate into future content: ‘You have to very consciously be responsive to your followers’ interests, and what people comment on. You have to engage with it and keep it in mind for future videos or blog posts and write something about it’ (Ray-23).
Less inundating content: New, diverse, consistent, well-produced and knowledgeable content. Other reasons to disconnect included posting incessantly, clickbait or misleading headlines, too much advertising, loss of quality or change in content genre, due to a spike in followership, sponsorship pressure, or a change in a content creator’s lifestyle (e.g. becoming pregnant). Inundating users with repetitive and irrelevant – ‘every nonsense’ (Jen-21) – posts which overcrowded their feed were perceived as obnoxious. The content became irrelevant because it was impossible to consume, and users attributed such persistent posting with pressures faced by content creators to increase sponsored content and bank on users’ attention. Users felt particularly overwhelmed if someone posted too many Instagram Stories: ‘Some of them are very annoying, to be honest. They start around one hundred Stories per day. I really don’t have the time to watch all those things’ (Kira-23). At the same time, it was important that they post regularly and consistently, or else they were ‘forgotten about’ (Esma-23), and unfollowed. Striking this balance, users expect content creators to post new, diverse, genre-consistent, well-produced, and knowledgeable content regularly. ‘They have to really engage with current topics’ (Ray-23), and fresh content: ‘I don’t want her to make the same cake, like, again, you know. I want, like, new stuff’ (Maya-27). Likewise, content creators should be knowledgeable in their genre: ‘If they are providing a travel channel, they should be involved in traveling and have all the information’ (Tom-23).

Comparing audience expectations of journalists and content creators: A growing market orientation leads to distrust and disconnection

Audiences’ expectations of journalists revealed mostly normative ideas about who belongs to the field. As our findings illustrate, these boundaries were constructed by highlighting the absence of journalistic norms among content creators.

While audiences often framed content creators as opposite to journalists, they also revealed some key tensions that begin to disrupt the boundaries they drew between journalists and content creators. For example, audiences (somewhat doubtfully) suggested content creators perform research as a service to audiences in a somewhat similar way to journalists. They also raised doubts about journalists’ having adequate education and skills to interpret and report on complex information, and expressed concern that journalists were increasingly posting ‘every nonsense’ and around the clock – similar to audiences’ perceptions of content creators as laymen who post incessantly. Audiences also expressed concern about journalism becoming more responsive to economic influences which jeopardizes its autonomy, credibility and quality; a shift in orientation we also see reflected in audiences’ expectations of content creators.

Audiences’ criticism of journalism’s growing market orientation and loss of autonomy relates to the overarching reason why audiences expect authenticity, engagement, and quality content: a reorientation towards commercial imperatives and a greater market orientation. In other words, the perception that journalists and content creators have become driven by the market and not by their public, lowers audiences’ trust and connection. As such, these common perceptions and expectations begin to challenge the boundaries between the journalistic core and periphery. We discuss the implications of these findings in the next section.
Discussion: Implications for boundary work

In this study, we have explored journalistic boundaries from the perspective of audiences by examining their expectations of journalists, content creators and contrasting the two to locate their demarcation. What we found are tensions that begin to blur what may appear to be distinct boundaries.

Audiences’ boundary markers between journalists and content creators resemble deeply embedded discursive claims about who is a journalist (Eldridge, 2018), and normative beliefs about who holds the ‘epistemic authority’ over the production of knowledge (Carlson, 2015). They are somewhat predictable and have been well-researched in journalism scholarship. In essence, journalists are seen to be those who embody long-established normative professional ideologies (Deuze, 2005), similar to how peripheral actors such as Instagram Influencers articulate these boundaries (Maares and Hanusch, 2020). To some extent, these norms also resemble boundaries between hard and soft forms of journalism (Hanusch, 2019), seen, for example, in public–private, rationality–emotionality, autonomy–dependency and detachment–involvement dichotomies (Costera Meijer, 2001). Furthermore, across the three platforms, blogs and YouTube were perceived as closer to journalism, when they provided longer text and in-depth analysis.

Key findings of this study emerge when we examine and compare audiences’ perceptions and expectations of content creators and journalists. A shift towards commercial and market-driven imperatives among both actors leads audiences to disconnect. Among other things, it makes audiences feel like consumers sought out primarily for financial gain. In many ways this reflects the idea that in organizations with a stronger market orientation, journalists are more likely to perceive their audiences as consumers (Hanitzsch, 2007). This reorientation prioritizes profit by responding to the wants of audiences and attracting advertising (Ferrucci, 2015). To combat this perception of content creators, audiences expressed three key expectations: authenticity and transparency, engagement and quality content.

At first glance, these expectations may appear to be distinct from journalism, and audiences may judge content creators by different criteria. However, we argue that these reveal several norms that are far closer to journalism than first thought. These expectations could in fact be understood as implicitly journalistic, and may be an antithesis to audiences’ criticisms of journalism’s growing market orientation and waning autonomy and credibility. We argue that these findings contain some potentially valuable implications for journalism in a time of the so-called crisis.

When it comes to authenticity, audiences expect content creators to perform authenticity labour, which includes fostering intimacy with audiences by being transparent about the ordinariness of the persona and their daily life (McRae, 2007). However, these findings also reflect growing scholarship on the ‘celebrification’ of journalists through self-branding online (Olausson, 2018) suggesting that greater transparency about their personal identities and lives may benefit them professionally (Bossio and Sacco, 2017).

Authenticity expectations were also about disclosing sponsored collaborations using tactics that increased audiences’ trust (Dekavalla, 2019). Reflecting ongoing debates about journalism’s market orientation (Hanitzsch, 2007), these notions go to the heart of questions of autonomy, and the need to disclose potential economic influences.
Authenticity has been explored as a foundation for credibility in journalism (Hayes et al., 2007) and calls for greater transparency in journalism are nothing new (Broersma, 2010). While bloggers were among the first proponents of such full disclosure (Lasica, 2005), journalists have continued to resist. Rather than adopting it as an occupational norm, they have performed transparency as a ‘strategic ritual’ (Karlsson, 2010). Looking at audience perspectives, our findings indicate that a ‘radical transparency’ (Heemsbergen, 2013) – whether exposing personal vulnerabilities and imperfect lives, or disclosing sponsored content and commercial imperatives – was a value that mediated perceptions of credibility and connection. Rather than claiming autonomy from commercial influences (Coddington, 2015), journalism may be better served by being transparent about its dependence on the market.

The audiences in our study appear torn: while they understand that content creators cannot engage with an ocean of followers, they seek out reciprocal engagement within the realm of affective work and smaller audience communities. These expectations reflect those of journalism’s audiences, who increasingly expect journalists to facilitate ‘conversation’ (Schmidt and Loosen, 2015) and perform affective labour by engaging with audiences (Neilson, 2016: 13). They also seem to suggest that by defining audiences more narrowly (Nelson, 2018), and fulfilling their interests with ‘unique content [and] value’ (Nelson and Lei, 2018: 629), journalism may build a more collaborative and enduring relationship with its audiences. Audiences were also aware that content creators rely on analytics to better understand and target their audiences’ consumption patterns, a trend we also see in journalism (Hanusch, 2017).

Finally, our audiences expect well-produced, consistent, meaningful and perhaps slower content that rewards their seemingly exhausted attention. Once again, somewhat torn, audiences appear to want constant novelty, but seeking it out can also be overwhelming, a tendency we have also been witnessing in journalism. Technological developments and journalism’s market orientation have increased competition and pressure to produce news updates around the clock with fewer resources (Ferrucci, 2015). Journalism’s work ethic is driven by the motto to ‘speed it up, spread it thin’ (Fenton, 2010: 561), which leads to more content, and also more information overload (Holton and Chyi, 2012). As a result, Le Masurier (2015: 148) argues, audiences are feeling ‘overwhelmed’ and experiencing ‘fatigue, indifference, apathy’ and asks whether a ‘slower approach to journalism with its emphasis on quality, pleasure, storytelling and a focus on what matters to particular communities (may be) one way to engage a distracted, overloaded, disinterested audience?’.

The above discussion illustrates that exploring audiences’ expectations of journalism highlights recognizable and normative discourses of journalistic belonging and legitimacy. However, audiences’ expectations of content creators expose the extent to which they may have implicitly normalized interloper media as journalistic. When we interpret audience expectations of content creators against existing discussions in journalism studies, we begin to see these expectations as implicitly about journalism, thus disrupting audiences’ normative boundaries. Of course, we cannot be sure that audience expectations of content creators do not to some extent, at least subconsciously, reflect those they hold of journalists, and where those boundaries truly lie when we remove all other boundary cues, such as, source, platform, producer, and so on. That in itself would be a
valuable question to examine in the future. Nevertheless, we argue that exploring these expectations discursively, without reference or explicit comparison to journalism, allows us to look behind normative perceptions of boundaries.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrates the value of exploring audience perceptions of journalistic boundaries. While questions about expectations of journalists yield well-worn normative concepts, deeper insights emerge when asking audiences about their expectations of peripheral journalistic spaces beyond the newsroom (Deuze and Witschge, 2018) that do not look like journalism, but may feel like journalism (Broersma, 2019).

Our findings reveal an important parallel between core and peripheral journalistic actors. The more market-oriented both become, the less connection audiences (at least young ones) feel towards them. Furthermore, values that offset this disconnection — authenticity and transparency, engagement, and quality, slow content — reflect broader debates in journalism, thus blurring boundaries. While audiences’ normative boundary markers seem to indicate a rejection of interlopers from the journalistic core, their expectations of interlopers seem to suggest some acceptance (Carlson, 2015), at least implicitly. Importantly, when it comes to the exertion of autonomy as a boundary marker, in the minds of audiences, both journalists and interlopers need to rethink their relationship to commercial influences (Coddington, 2015). Going forward, we argue journalism, as well as audiences, might benefit from greater transparency, a collaborative relationship with narrower audience communities, and perhaps even slowing down.

Audiences are becoming a critical and ‘disruptive’ force in the journalistic field (Eldridge, 2018) and need to be listened to. As members of journalism’s ‘interpretive community’ (Zelizer, 1993), audiences, alongside journalists and interlopers, are a part of the discursive struggle over who does journalism and what constitutes journalism (Carlson, 2015). Considering audiences’ perspectives allows us to potentially broaden the boundaries of journalism’s field beyond those discursively constructed, protected and negotiated by journalistic actors. Expanding on this research, future studies could examine these audience expectations more deliberately and closely, in particular audiences’ perceptions of journalism’s growing market orientation and business models, with a broader audience population sample.

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