

Attract, Engage, Convert, Retain: Building Loyal Audiences in Canadian Newsrooms

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In this presentation:

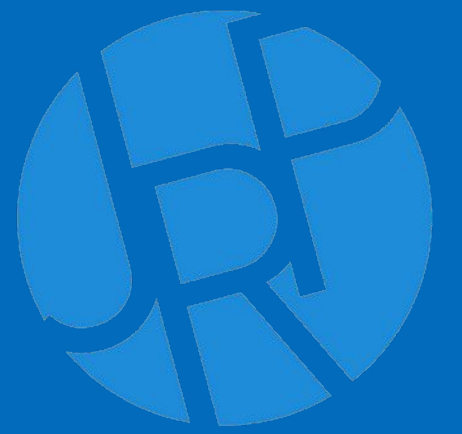
- What's happening in newsrooms
 - Changing measures of engagement and story-value based on audience data
- Segmenting audiences
- New thoughts on participative gatekeeping



The Journalistic Role Performance project



- **37 countries**
- **Almost 150K stories**
 - **3700+** in Canada
- **2800+** surveys
 - **113/133** Canadian
- **Interviews**
- **HuffPost Canada**
- **Observation**
- **Thematic analysis**





SITES OF



STUDY



Bots, analytics and other tech-tricks: How AI is impacting journalism

Is it a good thing for journalism that artificial intelligence can be used to write journalistic stories, measure a story's value, and help decide who sees it? Join School of Journalism associate professor Nicole Blanchett as she talks with a panel of industry experts about how AI is shaping journalistic work, including the benefits and ethical challenges of using tech to perform and/or inform the reporting and promotion of news stories.

APRIL 6, 2022 | 10 A.M.



SONALI VERMA

Verma is Director, Business Development of Sophi.io, an artificial-intelligence and machine-learning platform that helps publishers build sustainable revenue models by using Sophi's automation, prediction and optimization technology. She was previously manager of digital production and audience engagement teams at The Globe.



LUCAS TIMMONS

Timmons is news automation developer with Torstar. He writes software to find, clean and automatically process structured and unstructured data into written narrative stories. Before that he was the head of the Digital Data Desk, doing automation and interactive graphics at the Canadian Press.



KATIE KUTSKO

Kutsko is the education & strategy manager for the American Press Institute's Metrics for News program, as well as its source diversity tracking tool Source Matters. Katie trains MFN newsroom partners on analytics skills, including how to think strategically and solve problems using audience data.



PRASANNA RAJAGOPALAN

Rajagopalan is Director of Journalism and Programming at CBC Toronto, where he oversees CBC's local presence in the GTA. Prior to that, Prasanna worked on CBC News' digital strategy and products, where he developed best practices, experiments and new data-driven approaches to maximize the impact of CBC's journalism.

Other important sources:

- Information from April 2022 panel on artificial intelligence in journalism
- 2022 discussion with American Press Institute on its analytics tools



Framework of analysis:


- **Journalistic role performance** (Mellado ed., 2020): **push** and **pull** between conception of **ideals**, perceived **enactment**, actual practice/**performance**
- **Participative gatekeeping** (Blanchett, 2021a):
 - news + audience data + newsworkers + economics
 - promotional, developmental, experimentation channels
- Overarching lens of **media logic** (Altheide & Snow, 1979 etc.; Blanchett, 2021b): **standardized** formats, **streamlined** production, focus on **predicting** what the audience wants



How do you measure engagement?

- Time spent (**30** seconds is considered “good”, **15** or less common)
- Click-through
- Comments (**number received**)
- Sometimes pageviews/traffic
- Conversions (**what made someone subscribe?**)
- Public/political references to stories – **are people talking about it?**
- Social media metrics (**shares, likes**)
- **Interactions** with the audience that are not “measured” (and often not considered in workload)





I'm **engaging** with the audience. I want to know what people think about political coverage. I absolutely think it's in my interest as well as my organization's interest . . . It just means really being out there and being a facilitator. Pointing people to resources. Being a curator. *-Reporter 4*



Different engagement goals for “segmented audiences” ...

- More importance is placed on certain types of metrics depending on the audience being considered
 - “Fly-by” or “one and done” reader; **loyal** reader; **subscriber**
 - Audience segments can also be formed based on interests, age, other demographics



Segmented audiences & revenue...

- For articles targeted to get wider traffic, **pageviews** might be more important
- For loyal readers **time spent** and/or **conversion** might be more important
- For hard to reach audiences, comparatively **less** traffic might be **good** traffic
- **More** or **less** weight can be placed on specific metrics for specific audience segments, in 'overall' or 'blended' engagement scores



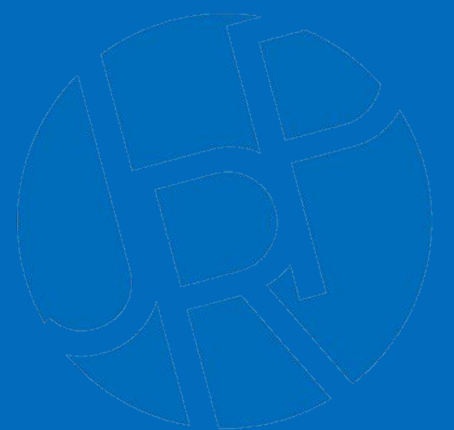
Segmented audiences & revenue con't...

- *Toronto Star*: most content is **paywalled**, but not stories with **affiliate** links
 - wider traffic = **more revenue**
- *Globe and Mail*, processes deeply connected to use of in-house Artificial Intelligence (**Sophi**)
 - Sophi determines **what** is paywalled based on calculated revenue generation
 - decides for **whom** content is paywalled





If you go to the Globe and Mail website and you read an article Sophi may ask you to **pay**; Sophi may ask you to simply **register**; it may decide you should not be asked anything and that you should be **allowed to read** because that's helping us increase our reach. *-Sonal Verma, Globe & Mail*



How do you engage the audience?


- Natural language processing, what **words**/terms frequently appear in stories?
 - How can they be **leveraged** to a particular audience?
 - How might they be **disengaging** a particular audience segment?
- Search engine optimization (**SEO**)
- **Formatting**/developing stories based on data
- Personalization based on **past behaviour**
- **Pushing** to content aggregators for amplification



How do you engage the audience con't?

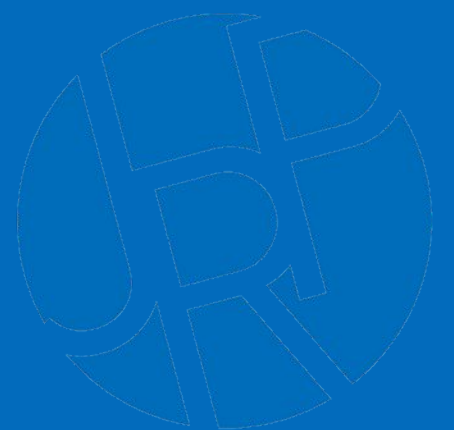
- Virtual or in-person **town halls**
 - ‘What questions do you want us to answer?’
- Show “**human face**” to audience – interact/respond
- Facebook groups
- Watch for **unique visitors** returning on regular basis
 - “Grab gateway users” to keep them in “cycle of loyalty”
- **Identify** topics that generate conversions
 - More Canadian content means “more subscribers”
- Use of paywall to **drive subscriptions**





This is all **algorithm stuff** that I don't entirely understand, but it does help the **eggheads** figure out how to **customize** your user experience when you go to the website. So it's showing you stuff **you're interested in** much the same way of Facebook and Twitter, which keeps people **engaged** with your website, which means more subscribers, which means I get to stay **gainfully employed**.

-Reporter 2



Tracking engagement


- Social targets (followers on social, clicks from etc.)
- At HuffPost Canada, post-mortems on the week's "**lowest performing**" stories
 - **When** was it posted on social? Was it packaged in "**wrong way**"? (similar process seen at NRK in Norway)
 - "You can write **the best story** in the world, but if **no one sees it**, then **why write it?**" – almost exact wording of quote from NRK



Engagement context ...

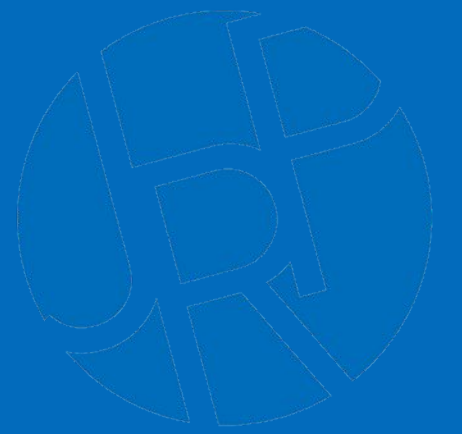
- **Time spent** is a difficult metric: **length** of story, text vs. video
- Other, **better measures** of engagement/loyalty
 - Regularly using the **app**, regularly accessing content through **homepage**
- Some homepage editors still manipulating page **manually** – using metrics to amplify reach (**attract**)
 - Whatever is getting **most views** is often what's promoted the most – **views** drive efforts to “**engage**” or “enhance”





It's not uncommon for an editor to say to a reporter 'that story **did really well**' – based on **time spent or pageviews or a combination . . .** at one time, it was the pageviews, but it doesn't really apply anymore. We've got a paywall so it's **time spent and conversions.**

-Reporter 5



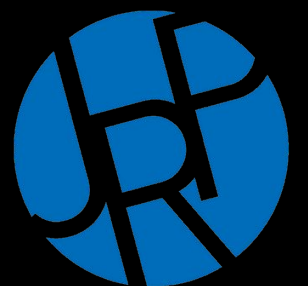
- “Twerking” (Tandoc, 2014); “traffic whoring” (Petre, 2021)
- Pageviews/impressions tied to ad revenue
- Easily understood signifier of success
- Certain content geared towards **attracting a wider audience**



David Skok  @dskok · Mar 11

This well-reported story includes a Google News VP saying that its payments are based on scale. I cannot overemphasize how much this will poison the media ecosystem by rewarding publishers for producing cheap, clickbait journalism instead of in-depth original reporting.

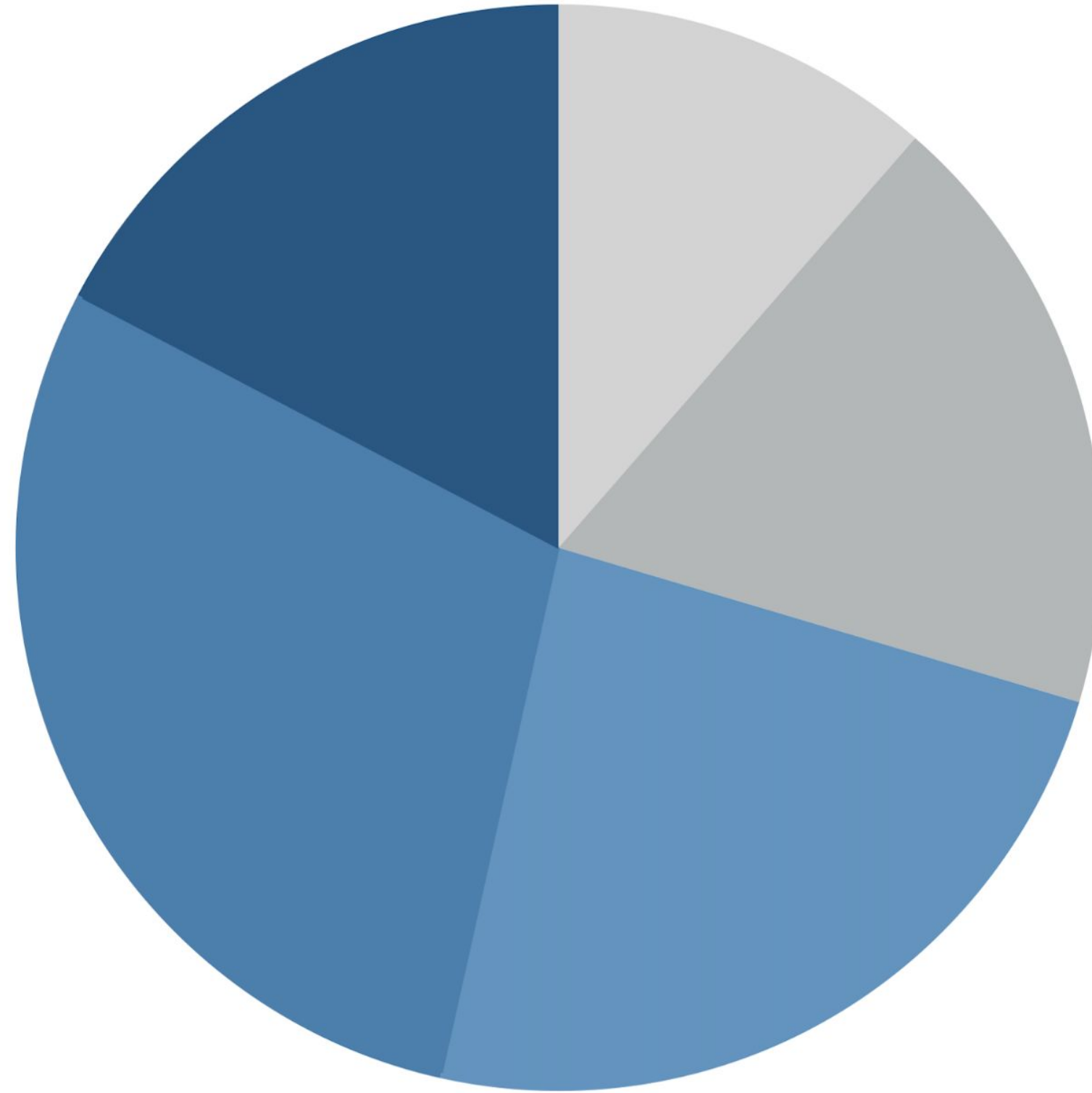
Google **says** its payments are based on scale. The company looks at “how many news articles” sites are producing, says Richard Gingras, vice president for news, as well as their “existing audiences, the size of the market they are serving.”



Global Summary

Question 140:

What importance is placed using ratings, circulation numbers, or traffic metrics to measure the relevance/value of a story?



70.4%

Importance

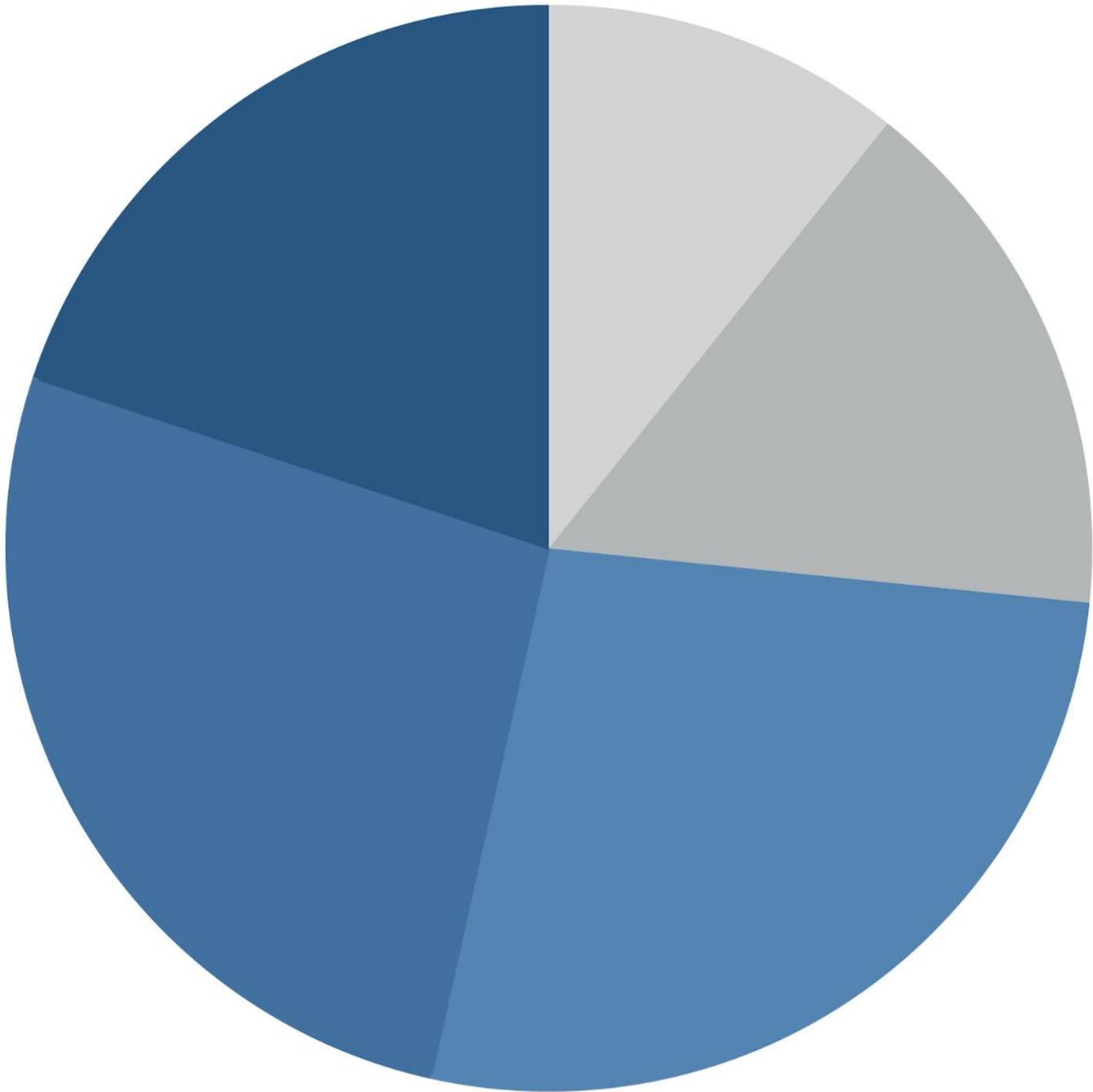
- Not important at all
- Not very important
- Quite important
- Somewhat important
- Very important



Global Summary

Question 139:

What importance is placed on using metrics and analytics, such as pageviews and time spent, to inform the selection, development, and promotion of stories?



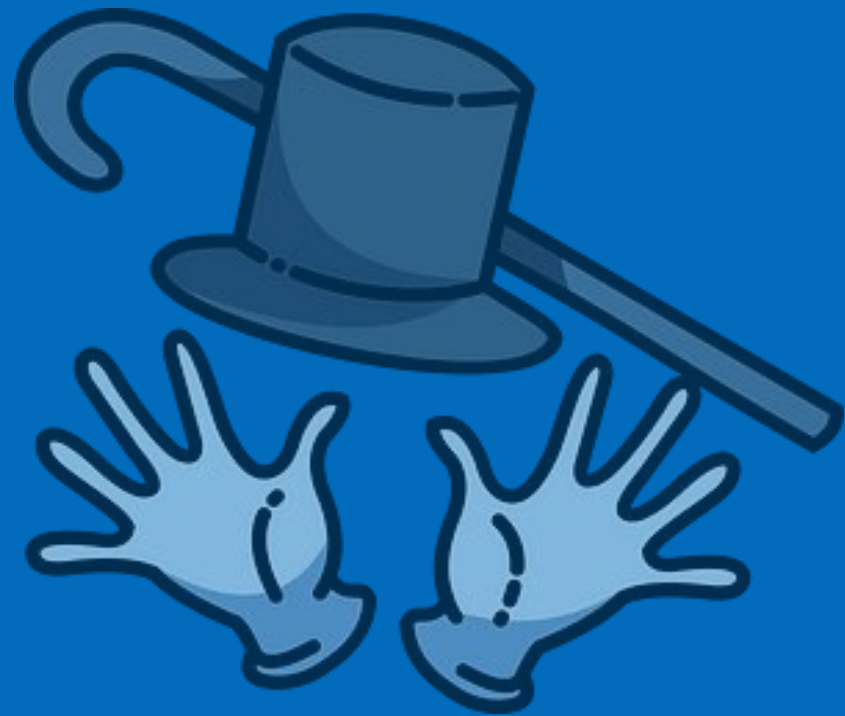
73.4%

- Importance
- Not important at all
 - Not very important
 - Quite important
 - Somewhat important
 - Very important



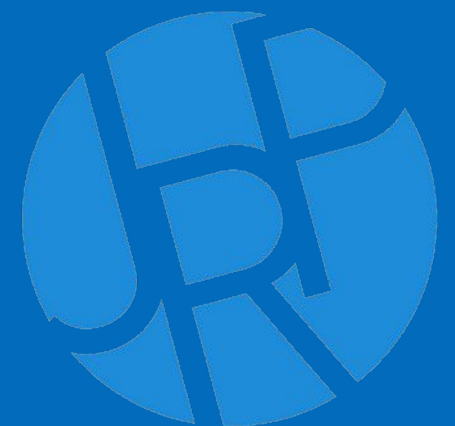
Early analysis of JRP data

INFOTAINMENT



- Performance of infotainment and interventionist roles slightly higher where metrics & analytics seen as important
- Could audience engagement support news-industry compliant roles more than news-quality compliant roles?

WATCHDOG



...Depends on Goals + Values

- Because it's about matching “measures” and “mechanisms” to **values** then setting **goals**
 - revenue + mandates = prioritized resources
- More potential for reader satisfaction (**positive media logic**)
 - more **innovation**/better **user experience**
 - **better than** “one or two top editors, mostly white men, historically, that were determining what you would see”
 - **more** emphasis on **audience-generated** story development



Goals + Values = Engagement Strategies

- **But** there's also potential to
 - **amplify** processes that encourage creation of clickbait
 - **blur lines** of “journalistic” content
 - **serve** audiences who need it least
 - **leave** the audience behind that needs to be served most
 - **concentrate** on attracting/holding eyeballs over informing (**typical or negative media logic**)

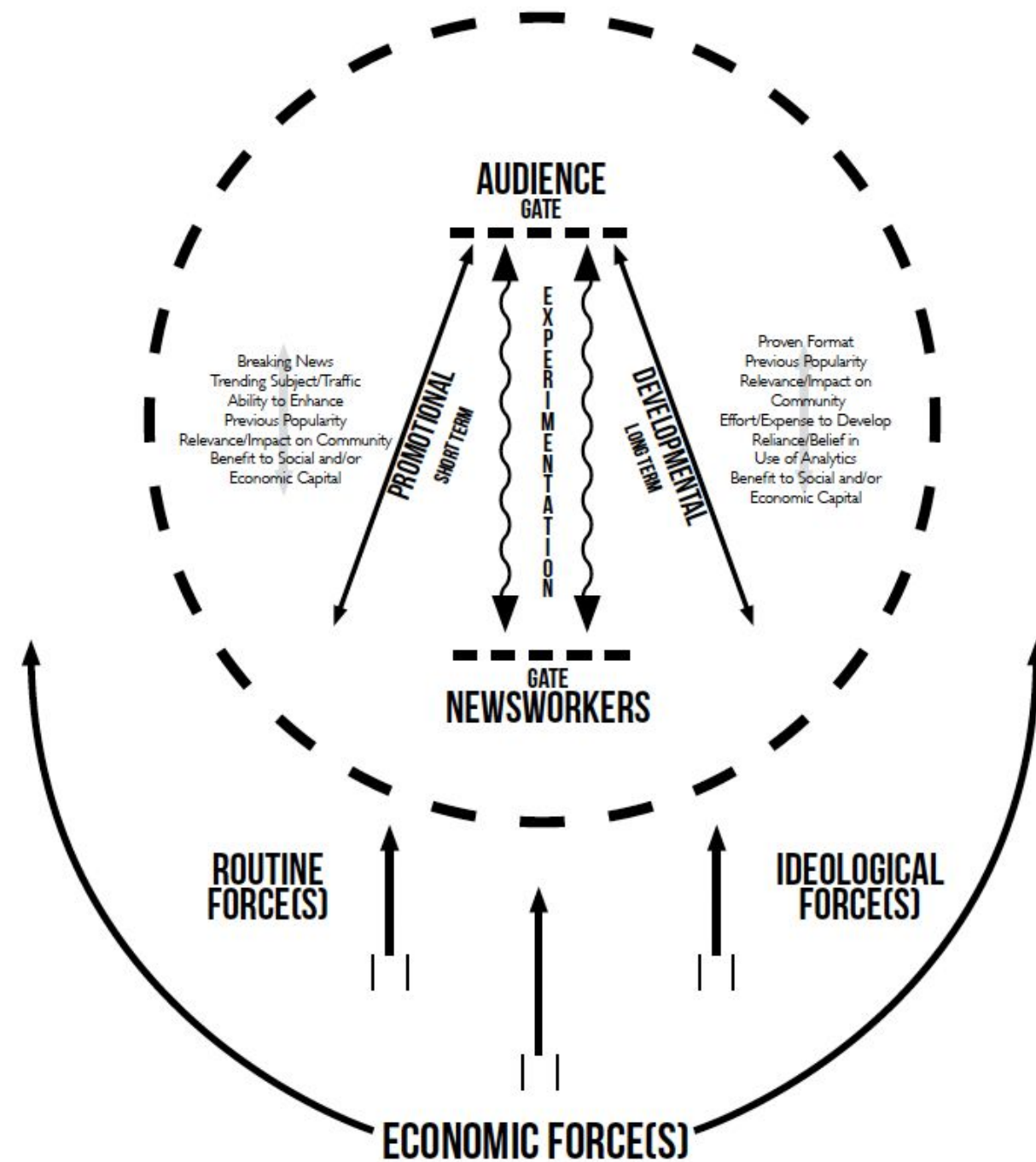


Future inquiry

- **Audience-parting** (including at reporter-level): next step from platform- and dayparting (Hanusch 2017)
 - HuffPost: “We know Adela is on Insta at 10pm”
 - that information is also used to determine **what** types of stories “Adela” might like
 - reporters expected to select audience profile BEFORE writing a story
- Examine editorial decision-making based on data that determine what **attracts** someone, **converts** someone, and **keeps** someone



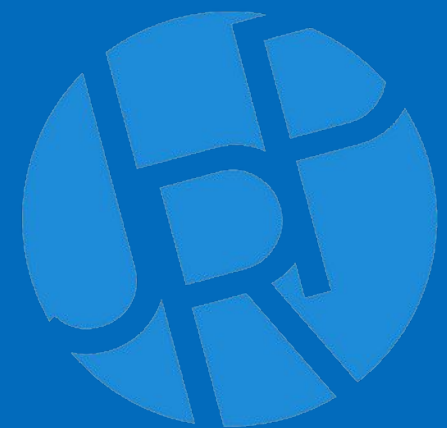
THE IMPACT OF METRICS AND ANALYTICS: PARTICIPATIVE GATEKEEPING



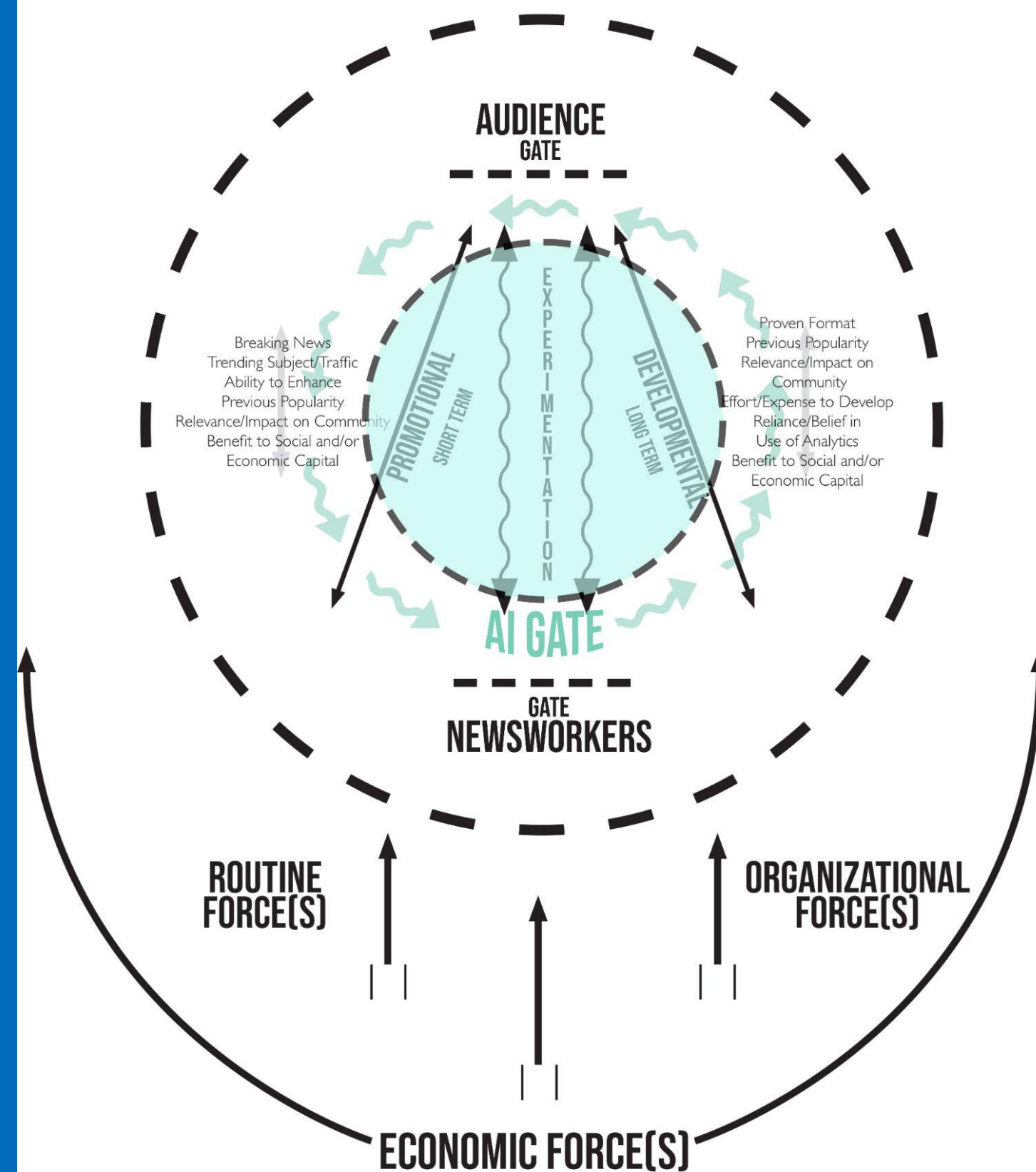
- Reconsideration of **participative gatekeeping** model?

- **Ecology of communication:**

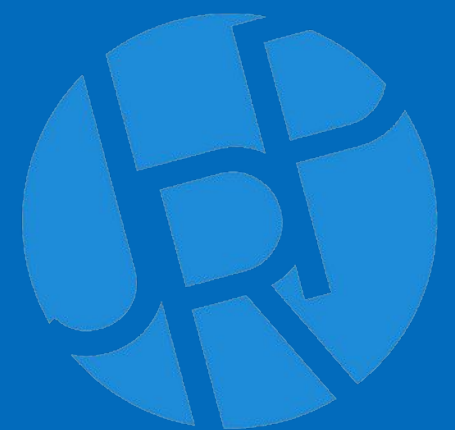
“Activities that share information technology and formats will have a similar social form”
(Altheide, 1994).



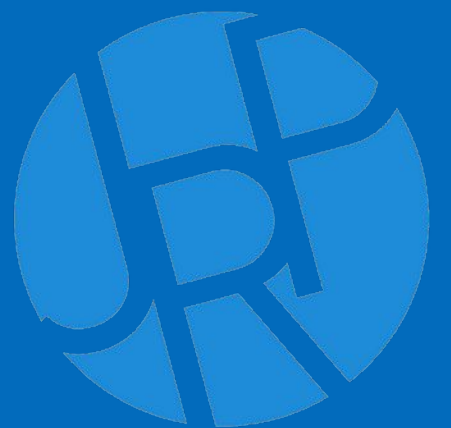
THE IMPACT OF METRICS AND ANALYTICS: PARTICIPATIVE GATEKEEPING



- “Machines as co-creators” (Wu et al., 2019)
- More machine learning = **more complexity**
- Fluid interaction/feedback loop
- “Machine habitus” (Airoldi, 2021)



Thanks for listening!



RESOURCES

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