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DIFFERENCES IN THE PERCEPTIONS OF BRAZILIAN REPORTERS AND EDITORS REGARDING THE USE OF AUDIENCE METRICS IN NEWSROOMS

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ABSTRACT – This article is the result of a broader research aimed at understanding, from the perspective of journalistic ethics, how journalists perceive the metrification of Brazilian journalism, which has been guided by the fulfillment of audience goals. In this paper, we discuss one of the results achieved: the difference in understanding of metrics between reporters and editors. We conducted in-depth interviews with 10 journalists from major newsrooms and, through Discourse Analysis, identified that reporters express greater negativity, highlighting the pressure to produce stories of audience interest, while editors adopt a conciliatory tone, emphasizing the connection between the press and the audience's reading interests.
Key words: Journalism. Journalistic Ethics. Metrics. Audience. Discourse Analysis.

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DIFERENÇAS NAS PERCEPÇÕES DE REPÓRTERES E EDITORES BRASILEIROS SOBRE O USO DE MÉTRICAS DE AUDIÊNCIA EM REDAÇÕES JORNALÍSTICAS

RESUMO – Este artigo é resultado de pesquisa mais ampla que objetivou compreender, sob a perspectiva da ética jornalística, como jornalistas entendem a metrificação do jornalismo brasileiro, que tem se guiado pelo cumprimento de metas de audiência. Neste trabalho, discutimos um dos resultados alcançados: a diferença de entendimento sobre métricas entre repórteres e editores. Entrevistamos em profundidade 10 jornalistas de grandes redações e, por meio da Análise do Discurso, identificamos que repórteres expressam maior negativismo, ressaltando a pressão para produzir matérias de interesse da audiência, enquanto editores adotam tom conciliador, destacando a conexão da imprensa aos interesses de leitura da audiência.
Palavras-chave: Jornalismo. Ética jornalística. Métricas. Audiência. Análise do Discurso.

DIFERENCIAS EN LAS PERCEPCIONES DE REPORTEROS Y EDITORES BRASILEÑOS SOBRE EL USO DE MÉTRICAS DE AUDIENCIA EN LAS REDACCIONES PERIODÍSTICAS

RESUMEN – Este trabajo resulta de una investigación más amplia que buscó comprender, desde la ética periodística, cómo los periodistas perciben la metrificación del periodismo brasileño guiado por el cumplimiento de objetivos de audiencia. En este trabajo, discutimos uno de los resultados alcanzados: la diferencia en la comprensión de las métricas entre reporteros y editores. Entrevistamos en profundidad a 10 periodistas de grandes redacciones y, a través del Análisis del Discurso, identificamos que reporteros expresan mayor negativismo, destacando la presión para producir historias de interés para la audiencia, mientras que editores adoptan visión conciliadora, destacando la conexión entre prensa y audiencia.
Palabras clave: Periodismo. Ética Periodística. Métricas. Audiencia. Análisis del Discurso.

1 Introduction

This article presents findings of a broader research aimed at identifying and analyzing potential ethical conflicts arising from the use of metric analysis software in the practices of Brazilian journalists working in newsrooms where such tools are employed to measure audience behavior in real time. As such, it is situated within the theoretical fields of digital journalism and journalistic ethics. In this specific paper, we discuss one of the findings of the study: the differing understandings of audience metrics depending on whether the professional works as a reporter or as an editor.

We understand audience metrics according to the definition provided by the Digital Analytics Association, which defines web analytics as the "measurement, collection, analysis, and reporting of internet data for the purpose of understanding and optimizing web usage" (2008, p. 3). In Zamith's (2018) terms, we distinguish between audience analytics (technological programs that use algorithms to

collect and analyze online traffic) and audience metrics (the behavioral data of the audience itself).

Journalistic organizations have been using analytics software to better understand their audiences and the type of content they prefer. A newspaper, for instance, may observe that its audience prefers stories about private education while showing less interest in public education coverage. Some media outlets, as reported by journalists interviewed in this study, also examine whether their audience supports or opposes a particular government and adjust their coverage accordingly. "Combined, analytics software offers the potential to grammatically reshape journalists' imagined construction of the audience by introducing new insights. They enable real-time consultation of both individual and population-level behavior patterns" (Zamith, 2018, p. 422).

Nguyen (2016) classifies newsroom metrics into two categories: internal metrics (statistics related to content consumption within the outlet's own website) and external metrics (data concerning reading behavior across the internet, including other news sites and social media platforms, which guide journalists toward trending topics on competing sites).

Although monitoring audience interests is not a new journalism practice, we argue that the current moment represents a significant shift due to technological advancements. Digital metrics software such as Chartbeat, Google Analytics, Sophi.io, and Parse.ly has become ubiquitous in large and mid-sized newsrooms, offering journalists immediate, 24/7 feedback on the consumption of news content (Vu, 2014; Tandoc, 2014; Ouakrat, 2016; Canavilhas et al., 2016; Vargas, 2018; Vieira, 2018; Kalsing et al., 2018; Pithan et al., 2018; Kalsing et al., 2020; Zamith et al., 2019; Meijer, 2020; Blanchett, 2019, 2021a, 2021b; Kalsing, 2021).

The major current shift lies in the evolution of audience analytics software and its consequent use to measure audience consumption with precision, as well as the possibility of accessing data from all user devices. In practice, news outlets now know: (1) how long an individual interacts with an online article (time spent on page); (2) how far a user scrolls or how much of a video is watched (a proxy for how much was read); (3) whether a story attracts more or fewer readers when it includes videos, audio, or infographics; (4) the times of day when different types of stories are consumed (e.g., political news in the morning and cultural content in the late

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afternoon); (5) the traffic source (whether the reader typed in the website's address, came through Google, or from social media); and (6) the geographic origin of the reader's access.

News organizations also know which sections are preferred by their audiences and, within them, which topics generate the greatest interest. Some tools even allow real-time headline testing for the same article, enabling editors to select the version with the highest click-through rate. According to Wang (2017), the use of metrics in journalism reflects a broader shift in how statistics have come to be tracked and employed in other fields of knowledge and sectors of the market. Tandoc and Thomas (2015), as well as Kalsing et al. (2018), emphasize that these metrics originate from marketing, a field centered around transactional interactions.

Based on these findings, marketing departments in newsrooms now establish weekly and monthly audience goals for each news desk – targets that journalists are expected to meet. This transformation takes place in a context of economic instability in the journalism industry and shrinking subscriber bases, prompting newsrooms to rely on metrics in order to better understand audience behavior and increase website traffic for greater advertising revenue (Tandoc, 2014). In his study, Tandoc observed that articles and headlines were often selected by journalists according to a logic aimed at pleasing the consumer, with metrics weighing heavily in editorial decision-making.

> Initially used to help predict which stories, visuals, and advertisements would attract more traffic, newsrooms now rely on analytics tools to determine what content should be published, where it should be placed, how long it should remain in a given position, and when it deserves follow-up coverage. (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018, p. 493).

Metrics, therefore, also play a role when editorial decisions must be made about whether to invest in or abandon journalistic coverage. However, journalism must be guided by the public interest, beyond merely ensuring the financial sustainability of a news organization. The old dichotomy between public interest and audience interest is renewed when journalistic production is driven by the constant effort to captivate the public and avoid "clashing with" its social, cultural, or political convictions. As Sartor (2016) points out, taking audience interest into account is not necessarily negative from a journalistic standpoint. Nonetheless, as Fonseca

(2005) warns, there is a risk that the press may cease to be a source of knowledge and instead become a discourse shaped to please the audience.

The growing importance of metrics in journalism is further evidenced by the hiring of specialized professionals to analyze statistics and apply their insights to journalistic production. "Monitoring teams – including SEO specialists, designers, and programmers – are gaining influence in editorial decisions across newsrooms around the world" (Canavilhas et al., 2016, p. 140). The authors even refer to these professionals as "techno-actors", upon whom journalists increasingly depend in their daily routines, signaling a shared responsibility in the gatekeeping process.

This adaptation has altered newsroom routines to the extent of reshaping the "rules of the game". Metrics are no longer accessed only by top-level executives at major newspapers; individual journalists and even interns can view them on their own computers, and they are also displayed on large screens in the middle of newsrooms, ranking the most-read articles in real time. Bueno and Santiago (2019) argue that metrics are now irreversibly embedded in the journalistic process and the economic model of media organizations – therefore, they can no longer be ignored. According to them, digital journalism must monitor audience statistics and, more importantly, swiftly translate this information into actions that benefit both the newsroom and the reader, as such actions may lead to improvements in the quality of the journalistic product (Bueno & Santiago, 2019, p. 108).

From a more critical perspective, Anderson (2011) contends that metrics themselves are not inherently problematic; rather, the issue arises when news organizations mask economic imperatives under the rhetoric of audience empowerment and democratic concern. Due to such tensions, changes in newsroom routines take place through negotiation, with journalists accepting – but conditionally – the adoption of new practices (Blanchett, 2021a).

2 Audience interests

It is important to emphasize that concern about the public's perception of journalistic production is not new, nor did it begin with the internet. It dates back to the 19th century, when newspapers calculated the average number of readers per copy (Lucena et al.,

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2021), and continued through focus groups, public opinion surveys, reader letters published daily in newspapers with comments on news stories, phone calls, emails, and even the redesign of front pages to display large headlines and photographs – a strategy to attract buyers at newsstands.

French-Canadian scholars Brin, Charron and Bonville (2004) note that, as early as the 1970s, Western journalism was undergoing a series of technological changes whose broader outcome was the subordination of news supply to audience demand. The phenomenon is referred to by the authors as "communication journalism" or "market-driven journalism", held hostage by the pressures of capitalist logic. Borden (2007) recalls that, as early as 2000, a survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in partnership with the *Columbia Journalism Review* showed that journalists do not usually distort news coverage deliberately to please their employers' interests. However, there is evidence of self-censorship among professionals. The study, which surveyed 300 journalists and news executives, revealed that newsrooms tend to avoid or tone down stories that might alienate their audiences or harm relationships with advertisers. That said, the current context is different.

With the rise of digital journalism, the pressure to become more attentive to audience interests intensified in newsrooms, especially from the 2010s onward (Meijer, 2020). Meijer recalls the surge of citizen journalism, which enthusiastically embraced the idea that the audience could also be a content producer. In his study of Norway's second-largest news site, *dagbladet.no*, Steensen (2009, p. 11) observed that journalists "relaxed the culture of gatekeeping, and they did so because they wanted the audience to participate as producers". A different perception of the audience, therefore, shaped a new work culture. Meijer (2020) argues that, over time, journalists realized that the general public is not as interested in producing content as once imagined. However, from that point on, news outlets began to see the participatory audience not necessarily as producers, but as active consumers with specific interests.

Understanding these interests led newsrooms to create new journalistic roles, such as "engagement editor", "audience editor", "audience development editor", and "growth editor", as shown in a study by Nielsen and Cherubini (2016) with European newspapers. In today's media landscape, high audience engagement is associated with success, while low audience numbers are equated with failure.

As a result, reporters are encouraged by editors to monitor the online performance of their stories and to suggest follow-ups to reports that previously attracted high readership. Digital editors, community editors, and audience analysts are now hired to better understand the outlet's readership and to propose storylines and coverage angles that, in addition to serving the public interest, align with audience preferences.

With the new demands to meet objectives and metrics, journalists "position themselves as a self-enterprise competing within the editorial environment and with themselves" (Kalsing et al., 2020, p. 2), thereby incorporating market concerns and performance into their professional practice. Vieira and Christofoletti (2015, pp. 77–78) draw attention to this context that overemphasizes the value of metrics, so that "these measuring systems do not only function as tools that help (re)orient business and editorial agendas, but also fuel a fetish for numbers". Empirical research on the influence of metrics in online newsrooms shows that

> the pursuit of audience prevails over professional values in decision-making at different levels. Coupled with the accumulation of roles in newsrooms, workers do not have time to reflect and balance editorial autonomy and audience influence, and decisions tend to favor increased traffic. (Kalsing et al., 2020, p. 3).

of this entire context, we were interested in understanding the differences in perceptions about metrics between reporters and editors. The study that gave rise to this article sought to comprehend how journalists reconcile traditional ethical values with these new demands related to audience metrics. To achieve this objective, from a qualitative perspective, we conducted in-depth interviews with 10 journalists from Brazilian newsrooms in the Rio-São Paulo axis, the Midwest, and the South regions of Brazil, of different age groups and positions, using a semi-structured questionnaire.

In this specific article, we present the differences in perception regarding the use of audience metrics in journalism depending on whether the individual is a reporter or an editor. We understand the interviewees' statements as discourse, produced within specific socio-historical conditions. Therefore, we employed French Discourse Analysis as a method to examine their responses.

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3 Research participants and method

Throughout 2023, we interviewed 10 reporters and editors from different age groups and Brazilian geographic regions based on the understanding that "the account of an interview should be understood as discourse, produced under specific conditions, and should be analyzed as such" (Pereira & Neves, 2013, p. 45). We selected professionals from some of the country's most admired media outlets, according to a 2021 survey by Meio&Mensagem and the Grupo Troiano de Branding, which interviewed 1.055 people, including advertising agency professionals, executives, and marketing companies. Since the research required newsrooms with a large structure capable of implementing a metrics-driven culture, we chose to interview journalists from major newsrooms, which limited the selection to professionals from the Rio-São Paulo, South, and Center-West regions.

The questions were designed to help understand each interviewee's position within the newsrooms and their capacity to face ethical dilemmas caused by the demand to consider audience-pleasing topics. To understand journalists' perceptions of metrification, we worked with the notion of the immediate context in which the statement was made, and the broader context, which involves the society the subject is inserted into, the historical moment, and the institutions (Orlandi, 2007). The interviewed journalists were situated in an immediate context that placed them in a subject position (determined by their role as reporter or editor), with specific responsibilities regarding what can and should be said about the journalistic routine of their workplace. For Discourse Analysis, "the individual, when speaking, occupies a determined position, from which they must speak in that production context. This means that the same individual, divided into multiple subjects, moves between subject positions" (Benetti, 2007, p. 117).

The identity of the interviewees and the name of their media outlet were kept confidential (table 1) to ensure honest statements about ethical dilemmas and to avoid risks to their employment. The methodology was approved by the university's Ethics and Research Committee (Approval No. 5,906,877).

TABLE 1

Interviewees by position and age group

Name*	Position**	Age Group*	Work Region
Isadora	Reporter	20-25	Rio-São Paulo
Aline	Reporter	25-30	Rio-São Paulo
Ricardo	Reporter	25-30	Rio-São Paulo
Carolina	Reporter	30-35	Rio-São Paulo
Carla	Reporter	30-35	Center-West
Bernardo	Reporter	30-35	Rio-São Paulo
Rogério	Reporter	45-50	South
Verônica	Editor	40-45	South
Bruno	Editor	45-50	South
Marcelo	Editor	45-50	Rio-São Paulo

* Names changed and age grouped to preserve interviewees' identities.
** At the time the interviews were conducted.

For this article, we defined the following research problem: what are the differences in perception about metrics between reporters and editors? We sought to investigate possible differences in understanding of metrics across different age groups by asking all interviewees: "Do you think the concern with metrics changes depending on whether the journalist is a reporter or an editor?". Everyone answered yes and stated that editors are more concerned than reporters, which partly addresses our research problem. Furthermore, during the interviews, we aimed to deepen this issue through dialogue. Since this study stems from concerns about ethical issues related to the profession, we were also interested in identifying which ethical frameworks reporters and editors invoke to accept, or reject, the metrification of journalism.

In the discussion of journalistic ethics, there are two classical approaches: duty-based systems, founded on Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and consequentialist systems, which assess the outcomes of the good generated by actions (Bucci, 2000; Plaisance, 2011; Christofoletti, 2012). It is important to point out that these approaches are not "opposite" or "mutually exclusive". In many cases, they even complement each other. Therefore, this is not a debate

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about "good vs. evil". The approaches overlap and interact, providing a foundation for the ethical behavior of reporters and editors.

Bucci (2000) points out that journalistic ethics is usually guided by deontology, since there are duties and obligations journalists must follow. The deontological rules of journalism derive from reflections developed over the years, in which values are debated. Paul (2018) observes that Kantian deontology is grounded on respect for a universal moral law. One of the bases of this approach, founded on Kant's thinking, is the categorical imperative: the idea of acting as if the action in question could be a universal law followed by all. Deontology states the duties of professionals, indicating what should and should not be done. By establishing norms, a journalistic code of ethics, for example, sets principles that, if followed by all journalists, would contribute to positively impacting society.

Other ethical approaches have been used to discuss journalism. One of them is virtue ethics, based on Aristotelian ethics, according to which actions that seek happiness should be oriented toward a specific end (*télos*). This specific end of all human life, says Aristotle, is *eudaimonia*, a concept that can be translated as "happiness". In professional practice, a virtuous journalist acts according to the purposes of their profession. A fourth approach gaining traction is care ethics, which emerged from the studies of philosopher and psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982). Christians (2014, p. 20) understands that, applied to journalism, care ethics contributes to reflections on core values, relationships with the audience, and the purpose of journalism. It would be compassionate journalism, the one that seeks to improve the world and, therefore, challenges the premise of reporter detachment from the story. Other approaches may guide studies in journalistic ethics, but we highlight those mentioned, which helped us elaborate and analyze the interviews.

We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with journalists – including closed and open questions – initially to confirm the current use of metrics in newsrooms and then to understand whether journalists believe such practice improves journalism or not, as well as whether it raises ethical dilemmas. The questions posed to interviewees aimed to understand each person's role within the newsroom and their ability to face ethical dilemmas caused by the demand to think of stories that please the audience's interests. After conducting the interviews with journalists, the next

step was to read and reread the journalists' responses to identify Discursive Sequences (DSs), i.e., excerpts directly related to the theme of metrics and/or the ethical dilemmas associated with differences in understanding between reporters and editors on the subject. Finally, we sought repetitions of meaning – discursive paraphrases – within each journalist's statements and across all. From these paraphrases, we identified the meanings brought by journalists that led us to answer the proposed research problem. Below, we present the analysis of the interviews, bringing DSs to exemplify our findings.

4 Analysis of the interviews

The reporters and editors interviewed point out that journalism is experiencing a new moment, in which audience preferences are identified in real time, providing unprecedented knowledge about the public's preferences and instantly altering the way journalism is produced. Metrics today can be considered one of the guiding axes of newsrooms and help, for example, in the decision to shorten or extend coverage, as reporter Bernardo summarizes: "[Metrics] are mainly to evaluate the weight of the coverage of topics". In the following Discourse Sequence (DS), reporter Rogério confirms the importance of metrics in organizing the newsroom routine:

> They [the metrics] are the axis of the newsroom. And they are an axis that guides the entire system of publication, news editing, and even the formulation of story ideas. Not that they dictate what will be published, nor when, nor the time. Journalism comes from the unexpected; the less you expect it, something happens and changes everything. But metrics are the north star. All desks and the newsroom as a whole have goals, especially digital audience goals on the website. [...] Metrics are the main compass for editors in shaping the daily agenda. And, at the end of the month, when goals are not met, they are given more consideration. Not that this greatly interferes with the final result that is measured. But it has a lot of relevance, a lot of preponderance, over everything that is produced. (Rogério, reporter, 45-50).

According to interviewees, editors have, as one of their responsibilities, contributing to reach the audience goals of their desks by proposing story ideas with high reading potential, editing texts and headlines considering SEO strategy, and managing the team

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to deliver results to meet the audience target at the end of the month. Therefore, editors are more pressured than reporters to meet metrics. This happens because, given the newsroom hierarchy, one of the editors' roles is to manage teams to, among other responsibilities, meet audience goals. The pressure on reporters, therefore, happens later – a supervisor pressures the subordinate editor, who then pressures the reporter.

> The task of daily monitoring [metrics] and bringing it to the weekly conversation falls on the desk leaders and digital coordinators. Who are the digital coordinators? They are journalism leaders who are part of the distribution editing team [the metrics team in the newsroom] and are responsible for content distribution and strategic content monitoring. Ultimately, the idea is for the entire newsroom to follow and have the tools available to monitor the audience of any story. And that there are predefined moments to discuss only this subject. There is another moment as well, which is the morning editorial meeting, when the digital coordination brings to everyone's attention the topics that generated the most audience the previous day. Desk leaders are responsible for their desk's goals and bring this discussion every week to a meeting led by the digital coordinators, who are responsible for monitoring the overall target. And in that meeting, action plans are made for the following period, for the next week, to correct course or make more specific plans. (Bruno, editor, 45-50).

According to interviewees, metrics provide information for journalists to know whether they are successful in their work of connecting with the audience. High reading and engagement rates are linked to success, and low readership can be synonymous with failure. Companies' obsession with metrics is passed on to journalists, who internalize the concern about the performance of their reports, as discussed by Kalsing, Hoewel & Gruzyinski (2020). Reporter Carla makes a statement that exemplifies this concern:

> I even had Chartbeat on my phone, checking if the story was performing. After I left [COMPANY], I stopped worrying about that. Because the companies I worked for afterwards didn't have that concern so much. And that reflects less on the reporter. (Carla, reporter, 30-35).

Editors are therefore hired to ensure, ultimately, the production of journalism considered to be of quality, taking into account the statistics measured by metrics software, in order to contribute to the company's positive financial balance. Besides managing teams, they are requested by superiors to monitor and take responsibility for producing journalism that meets audience

targets by the end of the month. "Instead of focusing on investigative journalistic work, editorial leaders opted to follow a form of non-news, signaled by third-party systems, in search of quick traffic gains (confirmed by metrics)" (Conyers, 2024, p. 1222). The outcomes of the editor's management are assessed weekly and at the end of the month through the analysis of performance reports. Power, as Foucault (2021, p. 187) reminds us, "is exercised through surveillance and not discontinuously by means of systems of rates and obligations distributed over time".

The information provided by audience metrics drives decisions made by news organizations to reduce, merge, eliminate, or expand desks that cover topics with lower or higher levels of audience interest, as noted by Nguyen (2016, pp. 90–91): "Some media outlets, including highly traditional ones like The Washington Post, have openly reduced teams that generate little traffic, reallocating resources to more popular content areas".

In an attention economy model, where numerous tools exist to track individuals' digital traces, that type of software functions as a panopticon to (1) diagnose audience interests and (2) monitor journalistic output to ensure alignment with readers' preferences. In practice, audience metrics programs indicate what readers want to read and generate reports confirming whether stories expected to perform well actually achieved high readership – thus signaling the success or failure of the journalists involved in the coverage. As editor Verônica (aged 30–35) explains in the following Discourse Sequence (DS):

> If the desk leader doesn't care about audience numbers, they'll be replaced. If something's not going well and the person in charge isn't concerned, I imagine the team will be restructured. So I think the pressure falls much more on them than on those lower in the hierarchy. It's a broader issue: if something isn't working, we'll have meetings and the team will be pressured to come up with strategies to turn things around. Every so often, desk chiefs are required to present an action plan to fix the situation. That pressure doesn't reach me. But for them, if audience numbers are down, they have a month to present a plan to recover. That's what they're held accountable for.

We highlight the use of the word "pressured" and the testimony that editors will be held responsible if they fail to meet the monthly audience targets. The internal dynamics of the newsroom unfold within a system where orders are passed from top management downward, and journalists are expected to

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accept that metrics will guide their work – otherwise, they risk being replaced.

The metrification of journalism enables closer alignment with audience interests and responsiveness to readers' doubts, but it also provides data to assess whether reporters and editors are producing stories that resonate with readers – and by extension, whether their performance meets expectations. In practice, metrics serve as tools of both control and surveillance. If statistics repeatedly indicate low readership, it signals that editors have made "poor" decisions and must adjust course – hence they face greater pressure. High readership, in this context, increases the likelihood of converting casual readers into subscribers.

> Editors are in a position where they have to deliver numbers – they're team leaders and they need to meet the targets they've been given. It's just like: I need to deliver this, I need to do my best, I need to pass that pressure on to my team.
> (Aline, reporter, age 25–30).

> The editor has much more responsibility for [reaching metrics] and is under a lot more pressure. If a story doesn't perform, the editor-in-chief or even the section editor won't come to your desk and say the story didn't perform and that it was a failure. But editors are in a hierarchy – they have targets and they have to meet them. They are held accountable. I've never been scolded for a story that didn't get views – no one ever said, "Your story didn't get any traffic, that's awful". What they say is: "Your story was off, you were too heavy-handed here..." That usual obsession with balance. They discuss the content. But I've never been criticized for metrics – nobody's ever said anything like that. The pressure is bigger on those in leadership roles. (Rogério, reporter, age 45–50).

> There's concern in both roles [reporter and editor], because it affects the work and the job security of both. But I think editors have a greater obligation to analyze and understand these aspects. Maybe the greater responsibility lies with the editor. It's more intrinsic to the editor's job than the reporter's to analyze, worry, and chase after that. But it impacts both roles – reporters do check their audience numbers. Still, I think it's more natural for editors to carry that concern than for reporters. (Verônica, editor, age 45–50).

> The pressure is very much concentrated on editors, who often don't even pass it down. Reporters complain more about ethical dilemmas. I'm a reporter, so I work closely with other reporters. When it comes to doing a story that drives traffic, even if the topic isn't all that relevant, it's usually reporters who complain the most. (Carla, reporter, age 30–35).

> [Editors worry more about metrics because] I think it affects how many reporters they'll have next year, the budget for sending reporters on trips, the freelance budget... Audience numbers have become a kind of production safeguard. If a section brought in 30 million views this month and the goal was 20 million, that means it's a section worth investing in.

> So it's like "fine, the budget stays, and maybe we can hire an extra freelancer next year". It's the editor defending their turf. (Bernardo, reporter, age 30–35).

On the other hand, reporters are expected to pitch stories that resonate with the audience's interests, but they often end up diving deep into the subject of the story, dealing with sources, and embracing the concerns and pressures related to the topic they're covering. Their main focus is on sources and real-life events, on what's happening in the streets – not on the day-to-day details of newsroom workflows, even if they're expected to consider those aspects, and often do.

Their practice is closely linked to journalistic deontology, especially in terms of behavior regulation, which philosophically grounds codes of conduct. Deontology defines the duties of professionals – what journalists should and should not do. "From a deontological and traditional point of view, the terms 'public interest' and 'audience interest' are mutually exclusive – that is, they stand in opposition to each other, just like the notions of 'relevance' and 'interest'" (Sartor, 2016, p. 125). The Kantian approach tends to be rigid and does not allow exceptions to the rules. "Moral action is guided exclusively by respect for the law, regardless of any social reaction toward the individual. Likewise, the subject's decisions do not take notions of responsibility into account. It is solely about the idea of duty" (Paul, 2018, p. 75). Guided by this principle, reporters tend to stick more firmly to journalistic values than to concerns about audience metrics.

> The boundaries are often more strictly set by those at the lower levels than by people higher up the hierarchy. The moral bar is much more ours than it is the upper layers', and it's deeply tied to the idealization of the profession and the values we still attach to it. And I'm not sure if those values will remain. Many websites that resemble journalism don't always have that same concern. But a lot of people still resist because they feel things have already gone too far. (Carolina, reporter, 30–35).

> Sometimes, what brings in audience numbers is something simpler to produce. It's more of a decision made by editors than by reporters. I see that some reporters don't worry much about it [audience metrics]. An older colleague says we shouldn't be concerned with that, that it's not our job – and I understand their point. But fighting it doesn't get us anywhere. We have to see how to use it to our advantage. It's worked for me. I've seen it work – I use these tools to address the issues I care about, in the way I want to address them. (Carolina, reporter, 30–35).

> Editors are in a position where they have to deliver numbers – they lead a team and must hit the targets that were set. It's just:

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> I need to deliver this, I need to do my best, I need to pass this on to my team. (Aline, reporter, 25–30).

In the first discourse sample (DS), reporter Carolina expresses deontological principles concerning a "moral bar" and the boundaries she believes should be upheld in her daily work. Editors, on the other hand, are positioned closer to the newspaper's leadership. Hired to manage teams or editorial workflows, they are responsible for ensuring reporters comply with the company's values. Editors thus occupy a higher hierarchical level than reporters and receive editorial directives directly from senior management.

Micropolitics (Foucault, 2021) is exercised through this chain of work, in which journalists internalize the company's values and transmit them down through the newsroom hierarchy. As Foucault (2021) states, power is disseminated across all instances – in this case, editors and reporters both internalize journalistic metrication in their daily practices to sustain broader editorial decisions oriented toward audience interests.

Editors tend to activate an ethics of care and consequentialism, while reporters lean more heavily on deontological ethics and virtue ethics. Editors, being closer to senior leadership and responsible for managing teams, are expected to deliver results in the form of audience metrics. It is up to desk leaders to regulate their editorial agendas and ensure the journalism produced aligns with the interests of readers.

Reporters, conversely, rely on deontology and virtue ethics because they are more distanced from high-level editorial and financial strategy roles, do not hold managerial responsibilities, and are deeply immersed in the narratives of their sources. This proximity to the ground often places a stronger emphasis on accurately portraying reality rather than meeting financial goals. Testimonies from interviewed reporters point to concerns such as "hunting for good stories", "investigating", "holding power to account", and "defending the oppressed" – highlighting a journalistic purpose preserved by professionals who perform what is arguably the core function of journalism: reporting reality with qualified and meaningful information (Reginato, 2019). The following discourse samples illustrate how journalists perceive and adopt the strategies required by their news organizations.

> [An editor who didn't care about metrics] wouldn't be [employed]. The pressure and accountability fall on the digital coordinator and the desk leader. It is primarily the desk leader's role to meet that target. It's much more their responsibility than mine, hierarchically speaking, to figure out how to achieve the goal. Then it's like dominoes, a cascade, right? The responsibility is theirs, and they pass the pressure down to those below them. That's why, when something goes wrong and targets aren't being met, I see it more as a collective group pressure to think: where are we going wrong, what strategies are we going to put in place to turn this around? It's not something I perceive as individual pressure. That pressure is placed on the head of the desk. (Verônica, editor, 40–45).

> I do feel that pressure because [boosting audience numbers] is part of my team's mission. But if it's Friday and we didn't meet the target, I'm fine with it – life goes on. But my editor gets extremely worried about it, because he's under a lot of pressure. And that's because the editors above him are also under a lot of pressure, and so on. It narrows down and ends up hitting editors much harder than reporters. (Isadora, reporter, 20–25).

> Many times, I understand and agree [with edits made to stories]. Which newspaper do I work for? I think we have to be conscious of the newspaper we're working for. Having worked for this paper for over ten years, I know its editorial profile and find it natural to 'clean up' a piece. There are things I'll push back on – and I have pushed back many times, saying: no, this is common sense, we have to point out that this is wrong. But in many cases, I understand that for the newspaper I work for, I need to 'clean up' the text. Take the Pfizer vaccine case[1]. If I'm editing a story about the political dispute over the vaccine purchase, where Bolsonaro is clearly in the wrong on several points, I understand highlighting that. But when it's a story about what's in the vaccine, how many children are getting the Pfizer shot, I get that it's not the time to bring up the political angle and say Bolsonaro didn't buy the vaccine. I'm constantly torn. What guides me is always an awareness of which newspaper I work for. If I worked for [ANOTHER NEWSPAPER], I'd understand its profile and would be more assertive in defending the inclusion of criticism against Bolsonaro. But knowing the outlet I'm at, I feel more comfortable making cuts and edits to stories. What guides me is a sense of which media outlet I work for and its profile. But that doesn't override things I think are too blatant or just common sense – those need to be in the piece. That's when I'll defend it. (Verônica, editor, 40–45).

In this last Discourse Sequence, editor Verônica shows that she understands the newspaper's editorial line and puts it into practice. She disagrees, but implements it – except when she believes that editing content to please readers crosses the journalistic line and implies manipulating information. In those cases, as she says, she defends her point of view and fights to include information she considers essential.

Editor Bruno, who holds a high hierarchical position at the outlet where he works, defends the use of metrics in journalism

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from the perspective of caring for the audience's interests to prevent journalism from becoming arrogant:

> I advocate for a critical view, but not one that simplifies things by looking at this week's audience results just so I can then do whatever I want [in terms of story pitches]. What I advocate is that what 'I want' [journalist-proposed stories] must be infused with the information the audience is giving us, because what I want must be what the audience needs. And the audience tells us all the time what it needs, right? It needs a lot of different things that we sometimes don't realize. (Bruno, editor, 45–50).

> Journalism has a central role in helping people live better. And that takes countless forms: providing entertainment, knowledge, a deeper perception of life, opening doors for people to question the world, helping someone leave their house and take the right bus... For each kind of need, there's a way of doing journalism and a tool to meet it. The better you understand those interests and needs, the more you help. Even if money didn't exist in the world, but journalism still did, we would still need to talk to the audience. What would that conversation be like? Maybe it would be different – certainly different. We'd probably use other metrics. I'd likely worry less about quantity and more about quality. (Bruno, editor, 45–50).

> The role of a journalist is to help people become better human beings and live better lives. So how do I help someone? If I tell you now – I want to help you – the next thing I'll ask is: how can I help you? There's no point in saying I want to help and sending you a pineapple cake if you hate pineapple. I haven't helped you at all. That's the key point when we talk about the audience. It's the best way to do things – and by 'things' I mean fulfill the role of journalism. (Bruno, editor, 45–50).

We highlight editor Bruno's strong emphasis on the importance of journalists serving their audience, even if this occasionally becomes a justification for coping with performance metrics. Yet there are also movements of resistance – even among editors – who take on the role of gatekeepers, filtering out stories that, despite driving traffic, are overly superficial:

> Sometimes, in this pursuit [of audience], serious excesses are committed. If there's even a tenuous connection to anything involving a celebrity... Sometimes, in the race for views, we treat someone who calls themselves an influencer as an artist, and therefore part of a cultural debate. And then if that influencer is in a car crash or hits someone, we start digging into the details – were they drunk, were they cheating on their partner, people start digging into the sibling's Instagram... Then people ask: do we really need to publish this story? Do we really need to follow up? I don't want to do it – I don't think it's right. And so, we [as editors] end up doing some filtering of leadership's requests. Saying: I think we've crossed a line here – it's too much. (Marcelo, editor, 45–50).

Editors, being closer to the leadership responsible for a media outlet's editorial decisions and managing newsroom teams, are expected to deliver results in the form of audience metrics. It is up to desk leaders to ensure that the journalism produced aligns with the interests of readers. Further down the hierarchy, digital editors and assistant editors are hired into roles that require constant tracking of performance metrics. Their responsibilities include not only editing and ensuring the quality of content reported by journalists, but also monitoring audience analytics tools, suggesting story ideas based on performance, and adapting headlines and texts according to SEO strategy.

In this sense, editors are guided by a consequentialist ethic. The principle of this ethical framework is to seek the best possible outcome among different consequences resulting from our actions. By weighing the amount of benefit and harm generated by a decision, consequentialism could justify editorial decisions driven by performance metrics. News organizations monitor audience data to ensure the financial sustainability of their operations. One possible interpretation is that catering to audience preferences is a way to increase subscriptions, contribute to the organization's financial stability, and support the continuation of a free press – which ultimately benefits democracy.

There is little room for editors who do not track metrics in today's metric-driven newsrooms, where journalism is increasingly focused on expanding the subscriber base. Reporters, on the other hand, while expected to remain aware of performance data, enjoy a bit more – albeit controlled – freedom to operate without being directly responsible for audience numbers.

In the following section, we present our final considerations, including the research findings that relate to the ethical frameworks explored.

5 Final considerations

By analyzing the interviews, we observed that editors, in order to secure their jobs and even the survival of journalism itself, draw upon consequentialism and the ethics of care to better understand reader behavior. This is because their work requires attention to audience statistics, as they are responsible for the results. From a

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consequentialist perspective, editors weigh the possible outcomes of their actions and understand that, for journalism to survive, great importance must be given to metrics.

Reporters, on the other hand, are more likely to invoke deontological ethics and virtue ethics, as they are further removed from high-level editorial and financial decision-making positions. Since they do not hold managerial roles and are deeply engaged in the stories of their sources, reporters feel more responsible for portraying reality as accurately as possible – a commitment that often outweighs financial concerns and, consequently, audience metrics. Testimonies from interviewed reporters highlight concerns such as "chasing good stories", "investigating", "holding those in power accountable", and "defending the oppressed", which align with the core mission of journalism: to report reality through high-quality information (Reginato, 2019).

It is important to note that these findings do not suggest a simplistic duality between idealistic reporters who uphold journalism and corporatist editors who undermine it. The reality is more nuanced and helps answer our research question – namely, how journalists perceive the differences in how reporters and editors relate to metrics. We found that editors are also committed to ensuring editorial quality and upholding journalistic values, while reporters do pay attention to metrics, track high-performing stories, and propose pitches that are likely to interest their audiences. The difference lies in how the nature of each role shapes how this concern is operationalized: since editors are required to submit audience reports daily and optimize content for search engines, their acceptance of and concern with metrics is more pronounced.

Reporters, in contrast, are mainly tasked with proposing story ideas, interviewing sources, organizing information, and crafting narratives based on journalistic goals. Even though many interviewed reporters stated that they do not worry about metrics, the interviews revealed that they do – to some extent. Not all editors agree with the use of metrics, and some engage in resistance, but none of them said they are indifferent to them. They understand that they are in positions where they must comply with company directives and even pressure their subordinates – reporters – to produce metrics-driven journalism.

Audience numbers serve simultaneously as a means of connecting with the public and a tool to monitor journalistic work.

There is no room for ignoring information about reader preferences, and decisions must be made with this data in mind to preserve one's job. Since journalism must survive somehow, journalists feel that they have no choice but to adhere to corporate values. Once they accept the need to become "metrified", they begin to negotiate ethical values to understand to what extent they should defend journalism's core purposes and values – and to what extent they can give them up to serve the reader's interest.

There is a flexibilization of journalistic practice and a "marketization" of both reporters and editors at a time when society is immersed in a context of metrification, which affects journalists as well. The concern with the financial sustainability of news outlets – a longstanding issue – now emerges more forcefully in journalists' discourse, as individuals from interns to editors internalize the logic of metrics. Nevertheless, journalists also criticize what Vieira and Christofoletti (2015) define as a "fetish for numbers": when metrics stop being one more tool to enhance the journalist-audience connection and instead become instruments of professional coercion.

Through the analysis of the interviews, we conclude that reporters tend to draw on principles associated with deontological ethics and virtue ethics, focusing more on journalism's core purposes. As they are in the field interviewing sources, they often refer to ethical values and consolidated journalistic principles when describing their practices. Editors, whose responsibilities include tracking audience metrics, draw more on consequentialism and the ethics of care. They are hired to supervise content production and are expected to ensure audience targets are met. Therefore, they tend to use these two ethical frameworks to argue that journalism must connect with the audience and guarantee the financial health of the company. So that, for example, more reporters can be hired or sent on field assignments.

Finally, we understand that the hierarchical structure of newsrooms echoes Michel Foucault's (2021) concept of microphysics of power: journalists reinforce macro editorial decisions through small, everyday actions. Editors are pressured by upper management to monitor audience data and follow public interests. They are surveilled through metric reports, and they pass on this pressure to reporters. Metrics are a present reality, but we argue that they must not override the boundaries of journalistic practice. Journalists must

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be aware of the values they will not compromise on – otherwise, they risk engaging in marketing. Marketing is an ethical activity in its own right, but its ethical values are fundamentally different from those of journalism.

NOTES

1 Former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro faced criticism for delaying the purchase of Pfizer covid-19 vaccines in 2020, despite repeated offers from the company. The Brazilian government initially declined early deals, which later became a point of political controversy as the pandemic worsened and vaccine access became urgent.

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