

Jacob L. Nelson, **Imagined Audiences: How Journalists Perceive and Pursue the Public**, Oxford University Press, 2021, 222 pp., \$30.95 (paperback).

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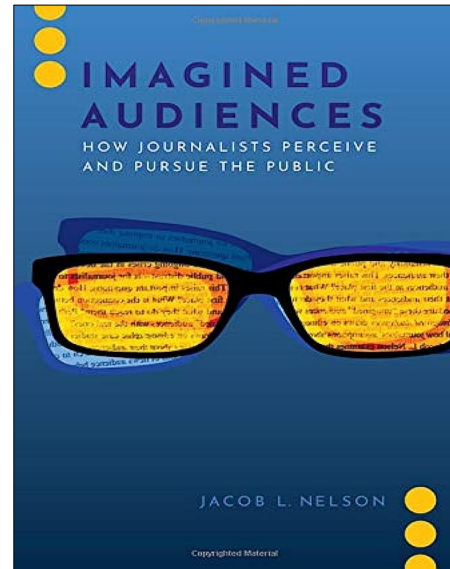
Journalists generally believe that the solution to a social or political problem is to do more, and better, journalism. After 2016 when Donald J. Trump won the U.S. presidential election, the United Kingdom voted for Brexit, and autocrats were in the ascendant globally, journalists doubled down on the view that covering communities and building trust with audiences would help fix democracy. How that belief was put into practice in two Chicago-area newsrooms is the subject of **Imagined Audiences: How Journalists Perceive and Pursue the Public** by Jacob L. Nelson.

If audiences understood the process of journalism and became involved, then surely they would appreciate it more. They would consume high quality information and become better informed, see themselves represented, and would be less resentful of “the media.” They might even pay for a subscription, or become a member, which would help news outlets survive.

It was not just journalists who believed that rebuilding public trust in journalism was critical; so did many scholars. In a special 2019 issue of the prestigious journal *Journalism*, well-known voices argued that rebuilding trust with audiences is essential to the survival and effectiveness of journalism. Because of polarization in the United States, the “public” had become “niche-oriented groups susceptible to commercial and political manipulation that encourage people to assume binary interests and pick sides to protect discursive territory” (Robinson, 2019, para. 2), the University of Wisconsin’s Sue Robinson said, arguing that journalists need to focus on developing audience trust. Scholars suggested reclaiming the narrative through films such as *Spotlight*, which came out in 2015 and portrayed *Boston Globe* journalists who, under the guidance of editor Marty Baron, tirelessly worked to expose the extent of Catholic priests’ abuse of children (Robinson, 2019, para. 4).

In the same issue, Katherine Fink (2019) of Pace University urged journalists to spend more time with their readers:

My suggestion for building trust is modest, low-tech, and unoriginal: journalists should have more conversations with strangers. That is, once a week, every journalist should meet someone new. Go out for coffee, or ice cream, or whatever. It should be face-to-face, because in-person conversations are better for building trust. (Nilsson & Mattes, 2015, para. 1)



Seth Lewis, who carried out rigorous research on civic journalism, had by 2019 linked the problem of trust in media with the problem of authoritarianism. He called for a new relationship with the public, singling out Chicago-based audience engagement consultancy Hearken for praise (Lewis, 2019).

Donor enthusiasm for community engagement as a solution to the trust problem grew, even though it was not supported by research showing its effectiveness. In 2017, Knight Foundation allocated \$1 million in grants to organizations trying to tackle misinformation, including community engagement work, suggesting that major donors had decided that this was a useful strategy in the battle against disinformation (Mullin, 2017).

At the time, scholar Jacob L. Nelson was one of the few questioning whether the push for more audience engagement would work. As Nelson (2018) put it in *Columbia Journalism Review*, "Little empirical data currently exists that can corroborate the belief that the public's lack of trust in journalism—and journalism's sometimes-related financial issues—can be solved by an increase in audience engagement" (para. 8).

Even so, interest in community engagement spread. Borrowing the phrase "imagined audiences" from communications scholar Eden Litt (2012), who was riffing on Benedict Anderson, Nelson's book is an ethnographic study of that movement and a portrayal of the well-meaning journalists who plunged in without fully defining or understanding what they meant. Or as Nelson wrote: "Whether general or specific, imagined audiences all share one unifying characteristic: they are manmade. All audiences are artificial attempts by media stakeholders to understand macro-level reactions to their offerings" (p. 15)

Nelson compares two publications in the Chicago area. *The Chicago Tribune* reporters have a more traditional sense of their audience as people who may not be interested in political news or investigative journalism but who could become interested if it is presented in a way that they can relate to. Journalists there tend to take more of an "eat your broccoli" approach, Nelson writes, believing that it is important for the paper to provide investigative journalism but that there is not much public demand for it, and so they need to balance the broccoli with more popular news that the audience would be willing to pay for.

By contrast, *City Bureau* is eager to represent underserved voices and bring community members into the processes of agenda setting and news gathering. Nelson explains that one represents the "reception-oriented" strand of audience engagement, which is focused on how audiences receive and respond to news. The other is more "production-oriented" and eager to involve audiences in producing and creating news.

What both have in common is that their engagement efforts are based on the idea that journalism practice affects audience views of and trust in journalism. In the case of *City Bureau*, transparency of process is key to community engagement efforts, opening up both newsrooms and the agenda-setting process to audiences.

Of course, small, niche news organizations have always been engaged with their audiences. The difference may be the technology and financing problems that ruptured the traditional patterns of engagement. Because of the funding crisis that hit local news, the number of reporters fell dramatically in many parts of the United States and the world, so journalists had less contact with the communities they covered than they had previously when they regularly left the newsroom as part of covering their local

beats. The move online, the rise of aggregation websites, and dissemination by Facebook also attenuated the relationship of audiences to journalists. Commenting and other forms of online engagement replaced earlier face-to-face contact.

Community engagement efforts, such as Hearken, solicit ideas from audiences as to what should be covered (Schmidt, Nelson, & Lawrence, 2020). In some ways they are taking on the “boundary work” described by Matt Carlson (2017), which helps delineate the traditional role of journalists as professionals creating, safeguarding, and transmitting knowledge. They are also helping Michael Schudson’s (2011) “Monitorial Citizen” become more engaged and informed, and thus better able to carry out his/her monitorial function. Nelson explains how the Walter Lippmann/John Dewey debates are relevant here. Journalists, while believing in the Walter Lippmann idea of delegating knowledge-gathering on subjects removed from the experience of audiences to experts, also believe in the active participation of audiences in the agenda-setting process (Carey in Glasser, 1999; Rosen, 1999;). The different approaches of *City Bureau* and the *Tribune* naturally mean different views as to expertise. Journalists at the *Tribune* believe they have skills and expertise that their readers do not have. *City Bureau* reporters and Hearken staffers “believe that journalists tend to know much less—and their audiences much more—than they think they do” (p. 103).

Nelson explores the underlying assumptions of community engagement efforts and the lack of certainty about what characteristics the audience actually has. Nelson makes this point in *Imagined Audiences* as well as in a coauthored paper that compares the assumptions of the community engagement movement with those of the public journalism movement of the 1990s (Ferrucci, Nelson, & Davis, 2020). Nelson and his coauthors write that both movements were based on the assumption that

the audience includes marginalized populations who want to contribute to the news production process yet are traditionally not allowed to do so. Second, the audience knows more about its needs than journalists do. And, third, the audience is disdainful of journalists’ elitist approach to their work. (Ferrucci, Nelson, & Davis, 2020, p. 1596)

While the Chicago area is Nelson’s focus, the efforts he describes have spread globally and include reporters spending time with audiences and showing them the inside of newsrooms, going out to meet members of the public, getting audience members to help find and analyze information, training them in reporting skills, and asking them to become members or to contribute to crowd-funding efforts. Many organizations, such as the Dutch *De Correspondent*, are transparent about their finances and gave audiences a voice in editorial decisions. In other journalism traditions, journalists are taught to explain themselves and their outlet to people before interviewing them (Schiffrin, de Martino, Hume, Pope, & Santa-Wood, 2017).

Although Nelson has studied audience engagement movements closely, he retains his distance and is frank about the lack of evidence for many of the foundational assumptions. Moreover, he notes the possible risks:

Journalism that focuses on creating strong, collaborative relationships with carefully chosen audiences risks further polarizing a society already marked by growing political extremism by giving citizens less opportunity to interact with those of differing backgrounds or perspectives . . . If all news publishers decide to more explicitly target specific groups and successfully segment the public into a large number of small, loyal and distinct audiences will public life grow even more fragmented and polarized? (p. 123)

As the United States and other countries head into the 2024 elections, Nelson's question is as relevant as it was when he wrote *Imagined Audiences*.

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