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# PUTTING AUDIENCES FIRST

THE ROLE OF AUDIENCE FEEDBACK IN AUSTRALIAN JOURNALISM

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To cite this report:

Hanusch, F., Tandoc, E., Jr., Banjac, S., & Maares, P. (2017). *Putting audiences first: The role of audience feedback in Australian journalism*. Vienna: University of Vienna, Department of Communication.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**1. Australian journalists say a consumer-oriented role has become more important.** The majority say it has become more important to attract the largest possible audiences, provide entertainment and relaxing content, and focus on content that makes audiences feel good.

**2. Journalists say it has become more important to be transparent than objective.** Being transparent about both sources and the origin of verifiable facts has become more important for journalists over the past five years. At the same time, journalists think that the importance of objectivity has remained at similar levels.

**3. Journalists have a generally positive view of audiences.** They think audiences are interested in social issues and are far from naïve. At the same time, journalists feel they are different, mostly saying that their own interests in issues and news topics differ from those of audiences.

**4. Comments play an important role in journalists' work, with four out of five monitoring comments at least weekly.** Still, relatively few use comments to engage with their audiences. While audience comments are used more often than Twitter as a way to find out about audience interests and opinions, few also respond to the comments.

**5. Journalists do not necessarily perceive audience comments and user-generated content as being of poor quality.** In fact, more of them disagree than agree with the notion that comments are of poor quality, while they are evenly split in their opinion about the quality of user-generated content.

**6. Twitter plays an extremely important role in journalists' work.** More than 80% use the platform at least once a week, and two-thirds use it daily. Also, two-thirds say their organisation requires journalists to be active on Twitter. Journalists use Twitter predominantly to stay up-to-date with current events, interact with audiences, and break their own stories.

**7. Web analytics are used daily by only one-third of journalists, with another one-third never accessing such information.** Key uses are to find out what topics audiences are interested in and to more generally learn more about audiences. Further, four out of ten say web analytics are used by their organisation to evaluate their performance.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Technological innovations in the past two decades have undoubtedly had enormous impact on the journalistic field. One of the **greatest impacts has been that audiences now have unprecedented access to the news media**, allowing them to become news producers themselves and interact directly with journalists (Hermida, 2011). Online mechanisms tracing individual behaviour on the internet have further provided journalists detailed information about what audiences do with their news (Anderson, 2011).

These developments have **important implications for the relationship between journalists and their audiences**, yet this aspect has still not been examined in sufficient detail. To respond to this gap in our understanding, this report presents the results from an in-depth analysis of Australian journalists' use of and relationship with audience feedback mechanisms, as well as how they see their role change.

While journalists were originally reluctant to consider audience feedback, there is evidence that they are becoming more open to involving audiences in their work (Lasorsa et al., 2011; MacGregor, 2007). This, in turn, is beginning to influence news practices, with digital technologies reshaping journalistic cultures. Studies have inquired into changing news practices, but the impact of audience feedback on how journalists think about their role as journalists remains underexplored. A better understanding of the relationship between the two is important in light of scholarly, industry and public discussions which argue that journalistic activity on social media and the impact of audience measurement tools could lead to a dumbing-down of journalism (Nguyen, 2013).

This **study is based on an online survey of Australian journalists** working for mainstream news media across print, broadcast and online platforms. Much like in other Western countries, Australian journalism has recently experienced considerable declines in newspaper circulation and media profits, which resulted in significant job losses (O'Donnell et al., 2012). Technological innovation has seen a slow diversification of forms through the arrival of a range of digital journalism business models, which are now providing considerably more competition for traditional media outlets. Furthermore, social media play an important role in Australian journalism with a high take-up rate of Twitter among individual journalists (Hanusch, 2016).

Historically, Australian journalists have shown strong support for citizen-oriented roles (Henningham, 1998).

Recent survey found that Australian journalists followed traditional values of the media as the Fourth Estate, with a focus on non-partisan, adversarial reporting (Hanusch, 2008; Josephi and Richards, 2012). More recently, a representative survey of Australian journalists found a majority still support citizen-oriented roles, with consumer-oriented roles less important, though not by much (Hanusch, 2013).

This study adopted an approach used by previous studies in defining journalists as those who had some editorial responsibility over news content at an established Australian news organization (e.g. Weaver and Willnat, 2012). The **original survey was developed and conducted at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**. The first author has since moved to the University of Vienna to take up a role as Professor of Journalism.

A list of 3,114 email contacts was generated through the media contacts database AAP Medianet, which lists a range of media workers with the possibility to select respondents by a variety of characteristics. A personalized invitation email was sent to each of the accounts on 30 May 2016, but 259 emails were undeliverable, with respondents either no longer working at the address or out of the office during the research timeframe. Four reminder emails were sent, with the final date for data collection on 31 July 2016, yielding 386 responses, of which 358 were completed sufficiently to warrant inclusion in the study. This resulted in a response rate of 12.5%, an acceptable rate comparable with previous online survey studies involving journalists (Vu, 2013).

The sample consists of 58.5% women, with an average age of 40.1 years ( $SD = 12.35$ ). The typical respondent has 15.6 years ( $SD = 11.12$ ) of journalism experience. Some 84% completed a university degree. These demographic parameters are quite similar to earlier surveys of Australian journalists (see Josephi and Richards, 2012; Hanusch, 2013), providing this current study with a sample that is a reasonably accurate depiction of journalists in Australia.

Readers should note that this report provides merely a first snapshot of the descriptive aspects of the results. We are currently working on more explanatory analyses in terms of how uses of technology impact changes in role perception, for example. These will be published in academic journals in the future.

We are extremely grateful to the journalists who took the time to provide information for our survey.

## 2. ROLE PERCEPTIONS IN TRANSITION

Looking at how journalists perceive changes of their role in society, we can observe a shift towards a stronger consumer orientation. This means they increasingly aim to provide news that audiences want, rather than news that audiences need. More than three-quarters say that over the past five years it has become more important to provide news that attracts the largest audience, while nearly two-thirds say the same for providing entertainment and relaxation. Around half say it has become more important to provide content that makes audiences feel good. Journalists also believe it has become more important to let people express their views.

Relatively little change can be noted in terms of other journalistic roles, with a majority feeling that providing information people need to make political decisions, advice, orientation and direction for daily life, advocating for social change, as well as influencing public opinion, and setting the political agenda have not changed in importance. If any have become less crucial, it is the professional norm of being a detached observer, with 27% saying this role perception has decreased in importance. This is also reflected in their assessment of the importance of objectivity, explored in more detail in Section 3.

Changes in Role Perceptions

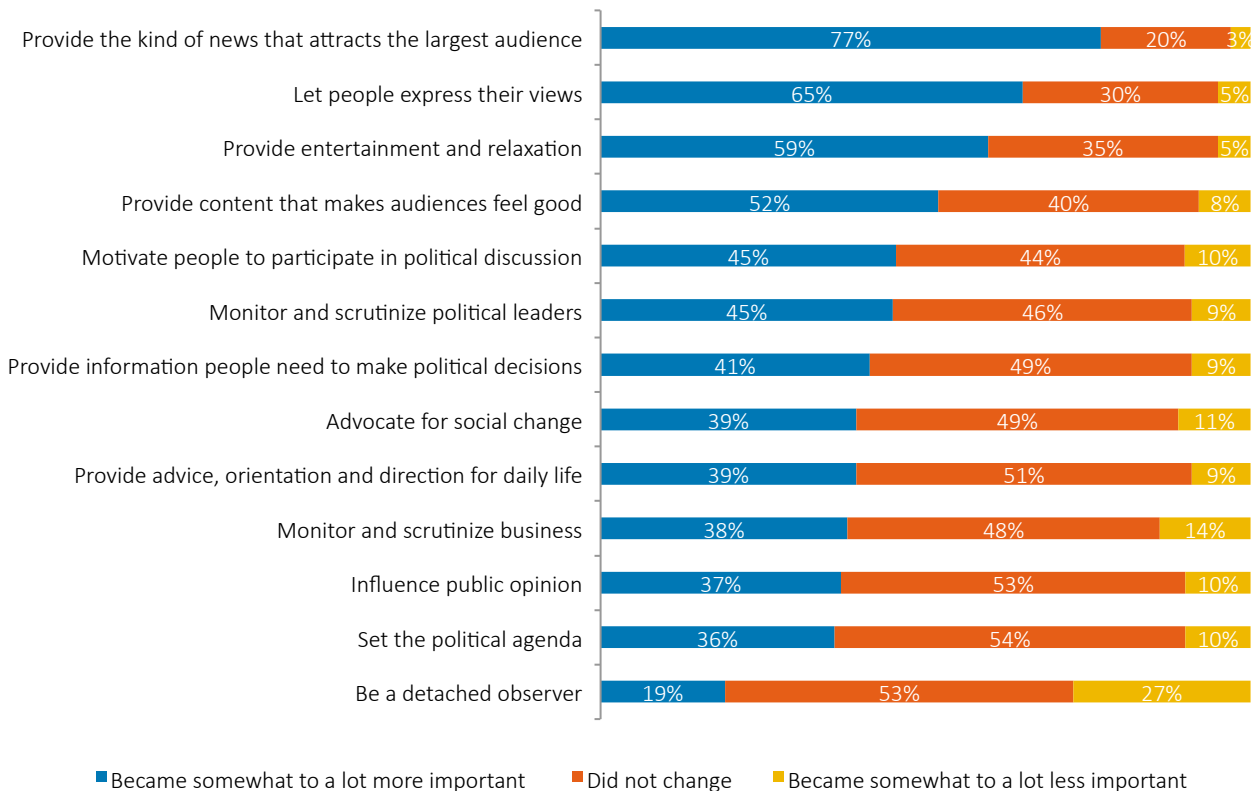


Fig. 1: Percentages of respondents evaluating the item *Changes in Role Perceptions*: To what extent do you think has each of the following functions of journalism become more or less important in your own work over the past five years? N=305-311

### 3. TRANSPARENCY AND OBJECTIVITY

When it comes to specific journalistic practices, journalists see comparatively few changes over the past five years. Figures 2 and 3 show various journalistic practices regarding transparency and objectivity and how journalists evaluate them – whether they have become more or less important or remained the same. What has become somewhat more important is being transparent in their reporting (Fig. 2), a development that is in line with recent research elsewhere (Vos and Craft, 2016). One-third say it has become more important to include all concerned parties in their stories, and one-quarter claim it is increasingly crucial to use verified facts as well as to include details of where these facts originated.

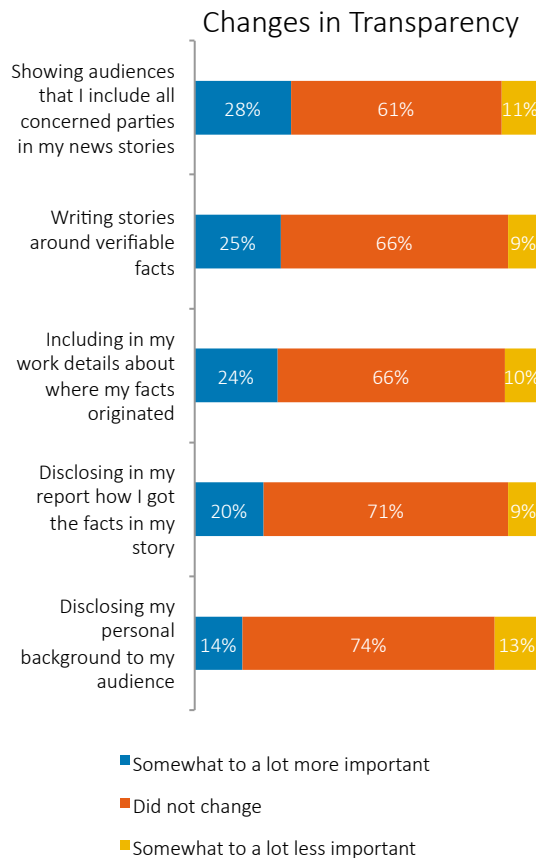


Fig. 2: Percentages of respondents evaluating the item *Changes in Journalistic Practices – Transparency*: Thinking about a range of journalistic practices, to what extent do you think has each of the following practices become more or less important in your own work over the past five years? N=299-303

When it comes to perceptions about the journalistic norm of objectivity, we also see little change. If anything, there is a slight move away from objectivity, but this is very marginal. For example, 17% say that not causing readers to feel one way or another about stories has become less important over the past five years, while 14% say it has become more important (Fig. 3).

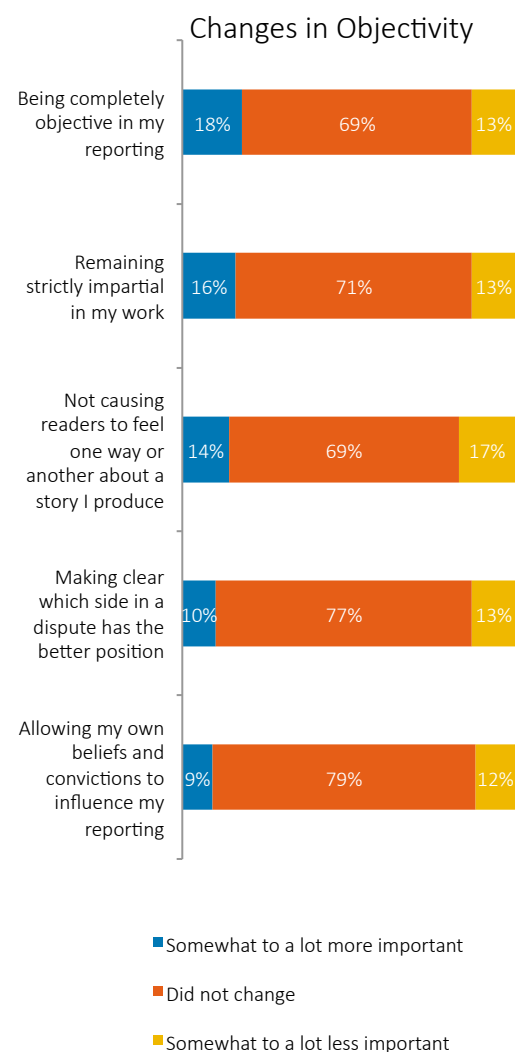


Fig. 3: Percentages of respondents evaluating the item *Changes in Journalistic Practices – Objectivity*: Thinking about a range of journalistic practices, to what extent do you think has each of the following practices become more or less important in your own work over the past five years? N=299-303

## 4. INTERACTIONS WITH THE AUDIENCE

Audiences are becoming increasingly involved in the co-production of news alongside journalists and have certain expectations of journalists and the news they produce (Bruns, 2008; Hanusch, 2016). Hence, it is important to examine the frequency and ways in which journalists engage with audiences, and particularly how online tools inform journalists about audiences' interests and expectations.

In contrast, analytical tools such as Google Analytics or Chartbeat, which are used to provide more abstract information about audience behaviour, are not as commonly accessed by journalists. Roughly one-third use them once a day (34%) and another third do not use these tools at all (31%). Online journalists are most likely to use these tools frequently.

### 4.1 FREQUENCY OF USE

The majority of journalists use Facebook at least once a day (73%), while they are also prolific users of Twitter (66% - Fig. 4). Just over half also read reader comments at least once a day. Thus, they rely especially on media platforms where they can have immediate access to concrete feedback.

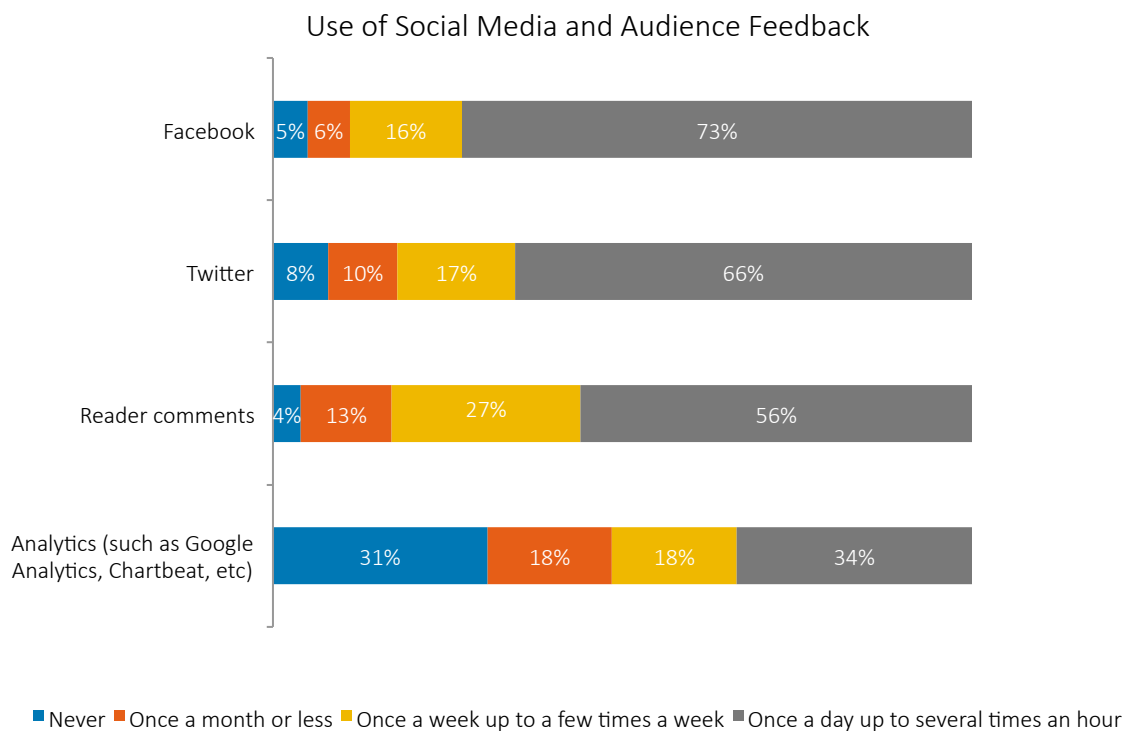


Fig. 4: Information about journalists' use of online tools: How often do you use each of them in your work? N=346-356

## 4.2 WHAT DO JOURNALISTS PREFER TO USE TO FAMILIARIZE THEMSELVES WITH THEIR AUDIENCE?

When comparing the same evaluative statements about three social media and online tools discussed here, we see that Twitter plays a less important role for journalists when it comes to learning something about audiences. Journalists rely mostly on audience comments and web analytics to find out more about their audiences, their interests and expectations (Fig. 5).

On the other hand, the answers further show that journalists are most likely to rely on information sourced through web analytics when choosing topics to report, e.g. they use the raw number of clicks and ratings.

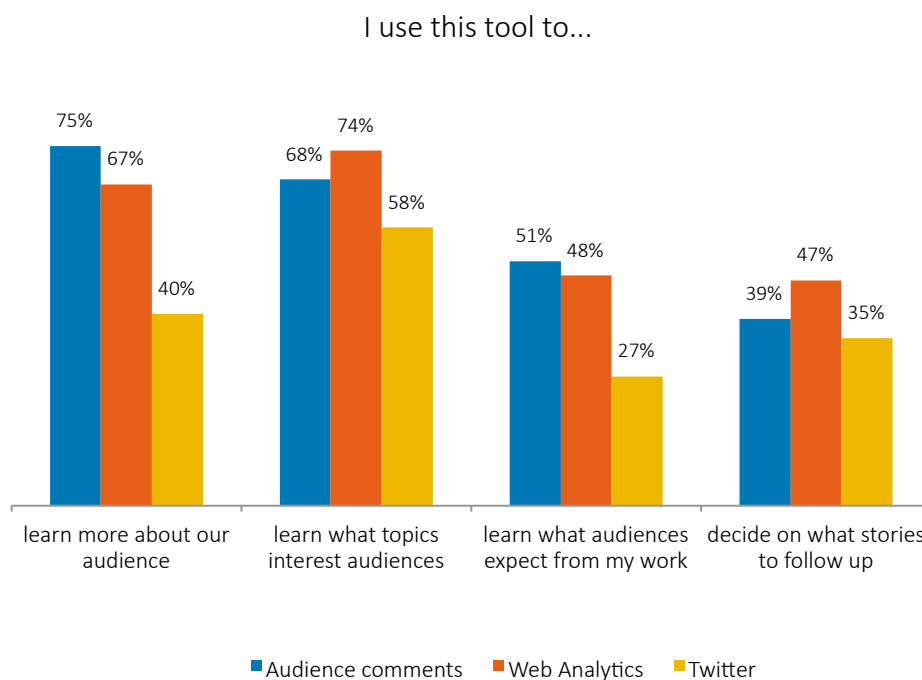


Figure 5: Comparing the use of tools to familiarize oneself with the audience. Percentages of respondents who somewhat or strongly agree with above statements. N= 235-310



### 4.3 EVALUATION OF WEB ANALYTICS, TWITTER, AND AUDIENCE ANALYTICS

Looking more closely at the motivation to use web analytics, journalists say it is an important tool to learn what topics audiences are interested in (74%) and to learn more about the audience overall (67%). In contrast, journalists see web analytics as an insignificant indicator of their professional performance (Fig. 6). When it comes to Twitter, journalists use this tool primarily as a way to stay up-to-date with trending issues (81%), but not necessarily to decide which topics to report (27%). At the same time, even though 71% of journalists use Twitter to interact with audiences, they do not rely on it to better understand what audiences expect from them (27%). For this, audience comments

seem to be more useful. Figure 8 shows that the majority of journalists uses audience comments to learn more about their readers, listeners and viewers (75%), their interests (68%) and opinion on specific issues (65%), which is interesting, considering that only a small number of audiences who have the possibility of commenting will actually do so (Krebs & Lischka, 2017). Despite their interest in audience feedback, only a small number of journalists say they respond to this feedback (34%). Like Twitter, audience feedback is rarely used by journalists to make decisions about which topics to follow up (39%) or report on (34%).

Use of Web Analytics



Fig. 6: Percentages of respondents who somewhat to strongly agree with the item *use of web analytics*: Please tell us about the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about web analytics. N=235-237

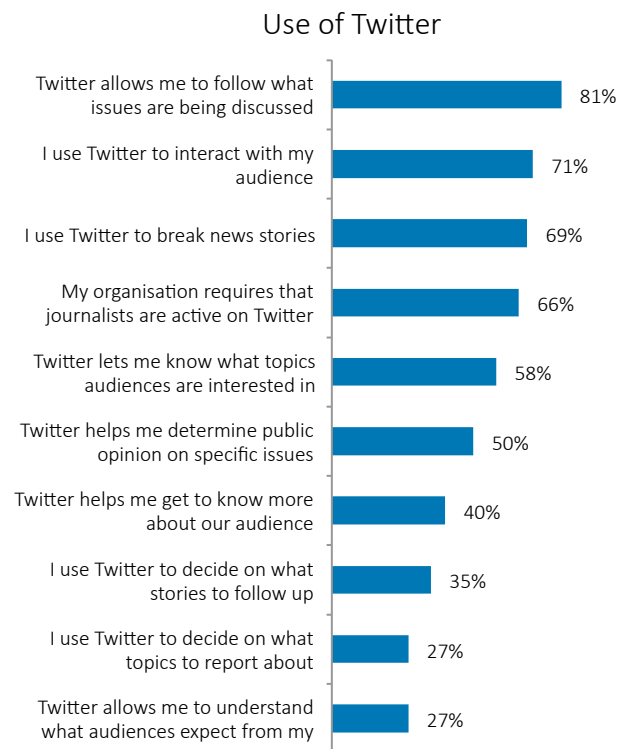


Fig. 7: Percentages of respondents who somewhat to strongly agree with the item *use of Twitter*: Please tell us about the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about Twitter. N=304-310

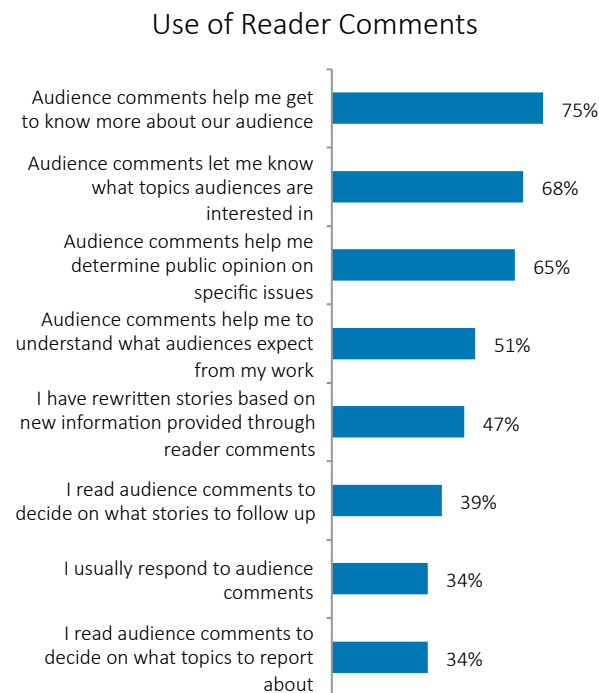


Fig. 8: Percentages of respondents who somewhat to strongly agree with the item *use of audience comments*: Please tell us about the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about audience comments. N=299-306

## 5. PERCEPTIONS OF THE AUDIENCE

When reflecting on their audience, journalists in this survey appear to have a positive perception of their readers, listeners and viewers, yet at the same time they believe their audience and its interest in issues and news topics is different from their own (Fig. 9). Moreover, journalists are divided when evaluating the quality of user-generated content and comments from the audience. While 38% think that content created by users is of poor quality, almost the same number of journalists somewhat or strongly disagree with this statement (37%). The same holds true for comments from the audience, where a third says they are of poor quality compared to 42% of journalists who disagree with this claim.

Even though a majority of journalists (67%) thinks their audience is far from naïve and even more (76%) believes that their readers, listeners and viewers are interested in social issues, they do not feel they share an interest in the same topics and issues as their audience.

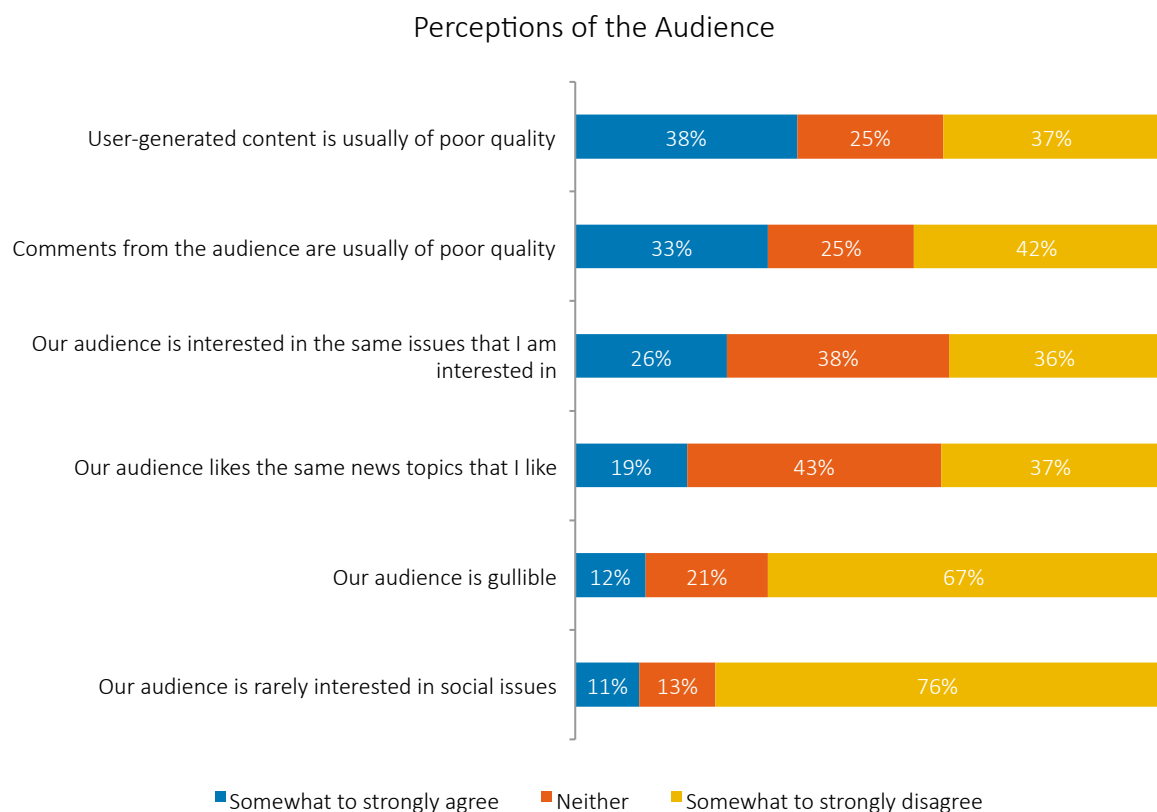


Fig. 9: Percentages of respondents evaluating the item *Perceptions of Audiences*: Please tell us to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements. N=299-301

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