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An Intersectional Approach to Exploring Audience Expectations of Journalism

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ABSTRACT
Audience expectations of journalism reveal how well journalism is performing its role in society in the minds of its consumers. In an increasingly fragmented media and audience landscape, it has become more important to consider how social identity shapes audience expectations. However, scholarship has tended to examine expectations based on single identity categories (e.g., class or gender), revealing a crucial but disassembled understanding of how audiences perceive the journalism they consume. This study relies on an intersectional framework and eight focus groups to examine how class, race, and gender, as intersecting and mutually constitutive modes of power/oppression, shape audiences’ expectations of journalism in South Africa. It identifies intersectional differences in audiences’ expectations of solutions journalism, perceptions of journalism’s unaffordability and inaccessibility, and normative evaluations of quality and popular journalism that reveal classist and racist discourses of distinction and stereotyping. The study demonstrates the importance of intersectionality as a critical framework for studying audience expectations and the extent to which they are in/excluded and rendered (in)visible to journalism’s dominant ideology.

KEYWORDS
Audience expectations; intersectionality; class; race; gender; South Africa

Introduction
Digital technology has changed the relationship between audiences and journalists, enabling audience engagement in the production and criticism of news in unprecedented ways (Karlsson, Clerwall, and Nord 2018; Craft, Vos, and David Wolfgang 2016). In a high-choice media environment, audiences build cross-media repertoires to reflect particular interests and needs (Schröder 2011), easily move across media (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2015) or avoid news for diverse reasons (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). As a result, journalists have become more responsive to audience feedback and interested in forming a relationship with them (Hanusch and Tandoc 2019). This makes it all the more important to study audiences and their expectations of journalism in society (Eldridge and Steel 2016), and what makes news valuable and
meaningful to them (Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017). However, as this article will argue and existing literature suggests, not all audiences are treated equally. These deep structural inequalities are born of an analogue media era and continue to define how audiences see the journalism they have access to, or not, in the digital space (Eldridge et al. 2019).

Journalism is a field defined by dominant class, gender and race dimensions (Hovden 2008; Steiner 2020; Slay and Smith 2011), that create and maintain dominant worldviews (Bailey and Harindranath 2005). While studies have examined how such social constructs independently shape audience expectations, fewer have taken an intersectional approach. Drawing on role theory’s concept of ‘expectations’ (Biddle 1979), and scholarship on intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; 1991), this article examines how the intersections of mutually constitutive dimensions of social identity (class, race, gender) shape audiences’ perceptions and expectations of journalism.

The study focuses on South Africa, where a history of racial and economic segregation under apartheid, and identity politics continue to shape everyday life (Bosch 2014), offering one context to explore how intersectional identities shape audiences’ relationship to journalism. South Africa’s class structure is nuanced and intersects with race (Seekings 2008). The working class includes those in chronic and transient poverty (Schotte, Zizzamia, and Leibbrandt 2018), and the middle class consists of both established and vulnerable members (Burger et al. 2015).

The study demonstrates an intersectional approach to studying audiences’ expectations of journalism can reveal their diversity and nuance. By considering class, race, and gender not as independent variables, but as intersecting modes of power/oppression, it shows particular audiences’ expectations are in/excluded and rendered (in)visible in journalism’s core professional ideology.

**Audience Expectations**

Expectations reflect a set of internalized standards of behaviour for self and others (Biddle 1979). Audience expectations are frequently studied in response to role conceptions that have been discursively established and reinforced by journalists (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). As such, journalistic roles are common knowledge to audiences, and their expectations tend to reflect these normative expectations of the journalistic field. However, beyond norms (prescriptive expectations), audiences may also hold beliefs about journalism (descriptive expectations) and feelings about journalism (cathetic expectations) (Biddle 1979).

A growing body of literature juxtaposing journalistic role conceptions and audience expectations shows that more often than not they differ, both within and across national contexts. While most journalists in the US believe they are doing an “outstanding” job of informing the public, only about a quarter of the public agrees (Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit 2019). However, both agree that educating the public is an important role, while supporting government policy or conveying a positive image of political leadership is not (Vos, Eichholz, and Karaliova 2019). In Israel, journalists value interpretation of news over neutral reporting, while audiences prefer neutrality and objectivity (Tsfati, Meyers, and Peri 2006). In Germany they share an expectation
of reporting things as they are, though journalists value attracting large audiences, and audiences expect journalists to motivate public/political participation (Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020). Online, audiences expect journalists to incorporate opinions, enable user-generated content, and facilitate conversations (Schmidt and Loosen 2015).

In these expectations, journalism’s key professional ideologies and sources of journalistic legitimacy surface through their commitment to roles of public service and addressing broadest possible audiences on- and offline (Vos, Eichholz, and Karaliova 2019). Audiences’ expectations, however, also depend on what affects them personally, and their lived experiences (Schroder 2019). Expectations research accounts for this by examining the impact of various identity strands on expectations, including political orientation, age, gender, and factors of education, media trust, media use, medium type, but rarely class or race despite studies showing these shape audiences’ experiences of news and journalists.

**How Class, Race and Gender Shape Audience Expectations**

Class distinguishes audiences’ news preferences and “such dissimilarity is difficult to disentangle from social inequality” (Lindell 2018: 3030). Following Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of class, Lindell and Sartoretto (2018: 2057-8), found elite audiences (avid news consumers) highlight their news preferences and practices to distinguish themselves from ‘lower’ classes who experience news as exclusionary. Audiences also mobilize their perceptions of news consumptions to symbolically distance themselves from other classes; middle-class audiences ‘other’ working-class audiences whom they perceive as lacking motivation, intellectual capability, and interest in news, characterizing them as news avoiders (Lindell 2020: 6). In South Africa, class impacts whether audiences access international or local media content (Schieferdecker 2017) and use consumption as a “marker of social distinction” (Bosch 2014: 908). Class can be understood as a position within the classed social space as determined by access to resources or various forms of capital (economic, cultural, symbolic, social) that affect a person’s opportunities in life (Bourdieu 1984). Varied access to resources also shapes a person’s predispositions, or preferences, for cultural products (news and beyond) in ways that affect their sense of self, social interactions, and lived experiences (Bourdieu 1984). Whereas Bourdieu might refer to such an awareness of self as habitus, Hogg et al. (1995) refer to such dynamics as one’s social identity. In this study, class is thus seen as a resource-established position that shapes one’s sense of self, or identity.

In terms of race, studies show Black audiences want journalists to forefront their identity (Slay and Smith 2011). African American communities in the US expect White journalists to attend community events, cover positive stories, and develop relationships with the community to build trust and improve coverage (Robinson and Culver 2019). African American audiences interpret news on discrimination as reflecting systemic racism, whereas White audiences focus on the story’s characters and situations (Lind 1996). African American and Latino audiences expect news to propose solutions to problems, be “in-depth and inclusive of community perspectives, (...) facilitate positive community change” and go beyond reporting positive stories as a “balm” or
appeasing distraction (Wenzel et al. 2018: 659-660). In South Africa, Black, Coloured, and Indian audiences say journalists “focus too much on societal problems, without also seeing solutions to those problems” (Malila et al. 2013: 421). Solutions journalism and specifically principles of peace journalism are deemed important in South Africa, where the media often rely on emotion and divisive “conflict narratives” in their coverage of political leaders (Hyde-Clarke 2011: 52).

Women expect journalists to convey a positive image of political leaders, support government policy, foster dialogue among audiences, build a community, include audience comments, and explain story selection criteria (Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020), seeing the adversarial role as less important (Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit 2019). Women are more likely to avoid news due to structural limitations of household labour and the perception that political news targets male audiences (Toff and Palmer 2019). Generally, audiences avoid news because it affects their mood negatively, they do not trust news, and see media as driven by political and economic interests (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020).

This review shows that expectations of audiences marginalized along gender, race, and class often fall outside of journalists’ traditional role repertoire and ideology. However, studies that employ different axes of identity as independent variables do not fully account for identity as a composite of categories. This article argues intersectionality offers a useful lens to expand our understanding of audience expectations.

Not All Audiences (or Expectations) Are Treated Equal: An Intersectional Approach

An intersectional approach asks how various identity categories intersect to form axes of power and/or oppression. Intersecting categories (gender, class, race) across multiple dimensions (e.g., female, middle-class, Black) expose inequalities that shape individuals’ experiences of privilege/advantages, marginalization/disadvantages within society. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term ‘intersectionality’ to capture “the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s […] experiences” (Crenshaw 1991: 1244) of institutional racism and antidiscrimination law, and within exclusionary feminist and anti-racist movements (Carbado et al. 2013). Intersectionality rejects “single axis” frameworks which treat identity as disassembled rather than mutually constitutive of a person’s sense of self and lived experiences (Crenshaw 1989). Past research surveying the use of intersectionality in mass communication scholarship has found limited application of the concept. Nielsen argues, instead, that research tends to view identity as “discrete categories” (Nielsen 2011: 6). Specifically within Critical Discourse Analysis research, Kitis and colleagues stress that work has been “largely concerned with discrete axes of social categorization” (Kitis, Milani, and Levon 2018: 152). In response, media studies scholars arguing the benefits of an intersectional approach have emphasized the importance of “accounting for intersections between overlapping forms of social distinction” (Alper, Katz, and Clark 2016: 110).

Where intersectionality has been incorporated specifically within journalism research, studies have predominantly focussed on news media representation,
revealing discrimination. US news coverage of sexual violence against African Americans “minimized the seriousness of the violence” (Meyers 2004), while crimes against White, affluent women drew significant news coverage (Liebler 2010). News media frame the ‘new’ South African Black-middle-class in both optimistic and condescending discourses, signalling a prosperous, racially equal, class-based society, that simultaneously embraces an immature and inadequately ‘Western’ lifestyle (Iqani 2017). Using the term ‘black diamond’ news media imply “ostentatious consumption or corruption” and “pejorative senses of materialism or immorality/corruption” (Kitis, Milani, and Levon 2018: 167). Online, coverage of the trial of Oscar Pistorius, a disabled, White, male athlete convicted of murdering his girlfriend, White, model Reeva Steenkamp “largely perpetuated existing hegemonic gender, race, class, sexuality and ability inequities” and “reasserted social hierarchies in ways that would resonate with its most enduring readers: middle-class, English-speaking whites” (Geertsema-Sligh and Worthington 2020: 221). This study extends the use of intersectionality within journalism studies to explore audiences and their expectations of journalism, an area where intersectionality has been underused.

An intersectional approach requires challenging whiteness as a non-race and the normalization of the invisibility of White privilege in society and scholarship (Alley-Young 2008). Scholarship also benefits from deemphasising the disadvantages that audiences face in accessing daily news and media (deficit-based approach) to instead consider their agency in overcoming challenges (asset-based approach) (Alper, Katz, and Clark 2016). Doing so departs from perceiving the values and experiences of “majority cultures” as desired norms against which all others are seen as “deviant or diminished” (Alper, Katz, and Clark 2016: 108). Employing intersectionality to understand audiences’ diverse expectations tackles one part of the story. The other part involves acknowledging that journalism itself is a classed, racialized and gendered field. While examining journalists is beyond the scope of this article, briefly discussing journalism’s dominant beliefs, rules, and visions of the field helps explain why the expectations of specific audience communities may end up in/excluded.

(Un)Met Expectations: A Reflection of an Unequal Journalistic Field

Why journalists become journalists, their education and recruitment, the beats they choose or feel ‘supported’ in, and their role orientations are a reflection of their personal and professional habitus; the classed, gendered, and racialized dispositions, reinforced or undermined by dominant newsroom cultures that socialize journalists to abandon aspects of their personal habitus in favour of the accepted and preferred journalistic habitus and doxa (Hovden 2008; Willig 2013). As such, the journalistic field becomes a classed (middle-class, elite), gendered (patriarchal), racialized (White) space. Women journalists experience sexism and impeded opportunities in newsrooms defined by “cultural masculinity” (Topić and Bruegmann 2021: 80). African American journalists negotiate their journalistic and Black identities as members of “stigmatized cultural groups,” engaging in practices that redefine dominant professional rhetoric and stigma through stories that challenge stereotypes about Black people (Slay and Smith 2011: 98). For journalists in South Africa, race is not a “master-signifier” but “one
of many floating-signifiers” in their journalistic identity, negotiated alongside professional values (Daniels 2016: 446-447). South Africa’s mainstream ‘quality’ media reinforces a middle-class worldview (Friedman 2011), and journalists recognize that they reflect an elitist logic, neglecting marginalized audiences (Rodny-Gumede 2015).

This results in a dominant journalistic culture constituting ‘us’ within an ‘us-them’ socio-cultural binary, prompting the “selective articulation” of news that reinforces “naturalized” differences between dominant and ‘other’ groups (Bailey and Harindranath 2005: 278). Issues are “considered newsworthy only if they are seen by journalists as affecting or being of interest to the ‘we’” (Sonwalkar 2005: 271). News content reinforces narratives that further marginalize audiences, by emphasizing, for instance, criminality in stigmatized communities and the neighbourhoods they live in (Wenzel et al. 2018), and binaries between physical skill (Black athletes) and mental skill (White athletes) (Ferber 2007). Such discrimination upends one of journalism’s stated ideological goals of providing a public service to all audiences (across intersectional identities).

Based on the above literature review and theoretical discussion the following research question was developed:

RQ: How does the intersection of class, race and gender shape audiences’ expectations of journalists in South Africa?

Methodology

One criticism of audience expectations research is a reliance on quantitative methods, including survey measures of existing Western journalistic role conception research. While these assess direct levels of congruence, they inadvertently limit the opportunity for alternative expectations to emerge freely. This study draws on data from eight focus groups, with 57 participants with diverse intersectional identities, conducted in Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa in 2018. Focus groups are ideal for exploring consensus and tension within a group dynamic (Kitzinger 1994).

Using intersectionality as a “method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytic tool” (Carbado et al. 2013: 303) brings unique challenges “when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis” (McCall 2005: 1772). McCall (2005) identifies three approaches with varying complexity:

Anticategorical – rejects categories as reductionist and responsible for reproducing inequality;

Intercategorical – rejects essentialization and treats categories as shaping social reality, and;

Intracategorical – treats categories as ‘anchors’ to compare across groups.

This study draws on intracategorical and intercategorical approaches to analyse audiences’ responses across and within groups. Participants were administered a questionnaire that asked their gender (Female, Male, Other ‘specify’), age, race (African/Black, Coloured, Indian, Asian, White, Other ‘specify’), and captured class (upper, middle, working class) following Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of capital as applied in recent studies of audiences and class (Lindell 2018; Lindell and Sartoretto 2018).
Given that apartheid’s economic and racial oppression was reinforced through residential segregation, and remnants of this logic remain visible today, the ‘neighbourhood’ was used as a sampling unit to identify participants (Blasius and Friedrichs 2008). Poor, working-class, Black, Coloured populations often live in townships, and middle-upper-class (across race categories) populations live in ‘the suburbs’ (Friedman 2011). As such, class was the primary organizing logic for identifying focus group participants. While this is a limitation, the possibility of organizing focus groups along other categories (e.g., race) presented logistical obstacles that could not be overcome. Focus group participants were identified from pre-existing groups or “clusters of people who already knew each other through living, working or socializing together” (Kitzinger 1994: 105). This engenders interactions that reflect “ordinary social processes and everyday social interchange” (Wilkinson 1998: 120).

Overall, the focus groups reflected the societal racial composition within class groups (see Table 1). While the mixed composition of the eight focus groups – homogenous and heterogenous along different intersectional categories – is a limitation of this study, there are also advantages to this approach. Heterogenous focus groups allow for exploring diverging views and tensions around sensitive issues among individuals with different intersectional axes within a group setting. However, a strength-in-numbers approach of homogeneous groups allows participants to comfortably express synergies and disagreements around sensitive issues (Lunt and Livingstone 1996). Focus groups were also designed to minimize the silencing of marginalized voices (e.g., working-class-Black-Coloured-women) as often occurs in heterogenous settings with members of diverging identities. Some silencing, however, was detected in one group of all women, mixed-class-race participants, where upper-middle-class-White women often interrupted middle-class-Black-Indian women. While the researcher tried to moderate such interruptions, here, positionality become critical (Adeagbo 2021). Despite having lived and worked in South Africa for several years, as a White, middle-class, non-South African, female, the researcher’s own intersectionality inevitably factored in any interventions, and thus knowledge production.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group</th>
<th>‘Neighbourhood’</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Township</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2 F / 5 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Township</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1 Coloured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Township</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>6 Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Middle-class</td>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>4 Coloured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Middle-class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3 Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Elite social club</td>
<td>Upper-class / Middle-class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>6 White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Elite social club</td>
<td>Upper-class / Middle-class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3 Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Affluent suburb</td>
<td>Upper-class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1 F / 3 M</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Audience sample description.
Across focus groups, participants were asked to discuss what news they consume and why, and what they expect from journalists. Audiences used the term ‘newspaper’ to refer to both print and online news sources interchangeably. In the findings, participants are cited with their intersectional categories, e.g., W (working-class), M (middle-class), U (upper-class); BL (Black), CO (Coloured), IN (Indian), MX (Mixed)\(^4\), WH (White); F (Female), M (Male), O (Other). Where findings apply to audiences across intersectional categories they are collectively cited as such, however, where intersectional differences are detected this is noted by citing their specific class-race-gender intersectionality. For their participation, all members were given a supermarket voucher valued at ZAR150 (€10). Data was analysed in MAXQDA to generate concepts. Iterative processes of close reading and open coding led to the generation of initial codes (888 open codes), which were then grouped into axial codes using MAXQDA’s ‘MAXMaps’ function to identify the key concepts and relationships between them. This approach, following principles of “thick description” (Geertz 1973) and “informed grounded theory” (Thornberg 2012: 243), allowed for both deductive recognition of existing concepts within the data reflecting past research, while remaining open to new and emerging expectations and intersectional dynamics.

**Results**

This study’s findings begin to reveal how an intersectional approach can provide a more layered understanding of seemingly similar audience expectations. Commonly held expectations across intersectional identities are briefly highlighted, with more attention devoted to expectations where meaningful differences emerged.

Audiences expected many of the well-established and discursively cemented values (Deuze 2005; Hanitzsch and Vos 2018), including objectivity, truthfulness, and credibility. However, audiences also expressed beliefs (descriptive expectations), and feelings (cathetic expectations) about journalism and journalists (Biddle 1979) that paint a more nuanced picture of expectations beyond journalism’s dominant professional norms.

Common expectations among audiences across intersectional identities included mostly negative beliefs referring broadly to journalism’s economic and political capture. Audiences believed that 1) political and lifestyle journalism was increasingly market-oriented, competitive, serving to advertisers’ needs over audiences’, and concerned with capturing audiences’ attention over providing quality journalism, and 2) political journalism was captured by political powers who manipulate newsrooms/content, and was also racially bias in its coverage of political parties and leaders. Working-class-Black-Coloured audiences believed news media focus exclusively on exposing corruption within the historically Black, ruling African National Congress (ANC) party, omitting negative coverage of the historically White, opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) party. Middle-upper-class-White audiences believed some media were more likely to portray the ruling party and former president Jacob Zuma in a positive light, thus obscuring accusations of corruption. These views echo past findings of mainstream ‘quality’ media being concerned with “expressing the perceptions of middle-class (mainly White) suburbanites who feel threatened by a Black-led government”
Finally, audiences across intersectional identities avoided news because it’s “so bloody negative” (U-WH-M) and makes you feel like “everything is bad” (W-BL-F). They felt journalism was preoccupied with rape, death, crime, corruption, and gangsterism, and expected journalists to provide solutions to problems instead.

However, this is where the similarities appear to end, and intersectional differences emerge in the types of solutions audiences seek, perceptions of news affordability and accessibility, beliefs about what constitutes quality news, and classist and racist narratives drawn upon to reinforce these distinctions, as becomes evident in findings discussed below.

**Solutions Journalism as Antidote to News Avoidance**

While not an expectation *per se*, news avoidance emerged as a reaction to journalism’s failure to meet audiences’ expectations for solutions-driven journalism. Solutions journalism provides “rigorous reporting on responses to social problems”, which may lead to a more positive relationship with news (McIntyre 2019: 29). However, what these solutions should look like, revealed class-race-gender differences.

**Solutions Though Empathy and Empowering Stories**

In stratified societies, solutions journalism may be particularly important to stigmatized audience communities whose voices tend to be ignored (Wenzel et al. 2018). For working-class-Black-Coloured-female-male audiences, solutions journalism entailed addressing societal problems at a systemic level, through sustained reporting, on issues affecting their community, and especially children. Referring to news reports about a child that had been raped in public toilets, working-class-Black-Coloured-female participants said: “there was no solution on what to do!” (W-BL-F), and: “there must also be some sort of suggestions (…) that there are also measures being taken, so that you can at least be at ease and have hope…” (W-BL-F). News media’s overemphasis on crime in Black and poor communities left these audiences feeling hopeless, fearful, and discouraged, as stressed by this working-class-Black-male:

“…you know, the stories of these Black boys killing people in the community (…) there are no resolved issues, no further steps taken. They are trying to make us live in fear every day, trying to show us that there is no hope for us, that’s what the newspapers are selling” (W-BL-M).

As such, coverage of socioeconomic inequality affecting marginalized communities fails to address “structural causes of inequality and poverty” (Chiumbu et al. 2018: 14). For working-class-Black-Coloured-female-male audiences, solutions journalism involved in-depth reporting and, importantly, journalists having a sense of sympathy, empathy, and care for the people and stories they report on so “people can relate to that” (W-BL-F). “We are exposed to a lot of bad things and we need to take a step back and go back to humanity and to expose people to the goodness of our country as well” (W-BL-F). For working-class-Black audiences, “humanity” and “goodness” meant exposing them and especially younger generations to alternative visions of their lived reality
and perspectives that could instil a sense of hope and choice for the future. As this working-class-Black-male participant said:

“… the community where we are, we have a lot of people doing good things, but you never have those stories covered (…) We want to hear stories that can encourage us, that can change our lives” (W-BL-M).

Finally, the parents among these audiences stressed solutions journalism could empower news-consuming children to develop a resilience to problems and optimism about the future. However, they observed such stories are more likely to be found in ‘quality’ news media such as the Sunday Times, targeted at middle-class audiences, and inaccessible to them (Friedman 2011).

**Solutions through Accountability, Societal Change, and the ‘Rainbow Nation’**

A need for solutions journalism was also voiced by upper-middle-class-White, only female participants who wanted journalists to report on positive outcomes to problems. As they said:

U-WH-F: “… to be honest, the positivity, even if it is a negative situation, show or illustrate the positive outcome, say that we are getting somewhere, because we all feel like we are stuck in a rut, because there is no …

U-WH-F: … light at the end of the tunnel.

U-WH-F: … no, like, discussions about how we are going to fix it. If there is any light to be shown it should be shed, that would make me read the news again.”

For these audiences, ‘positivity’ could be achieved through stories that offered “tips” (U-WH-F) on how to prevent crime, “accountability for the things that were going wrong” (U-WH-F), and “feel-good stories” (U-WH-F) that showed unity and societal change.

When journalists have to “report that bad news”, referring to the rape of a child in public toilets, it is preferred that they at least “give little bits of tips on how to prevent it” (U-WH-F). Upper-class-White audiences also demanded accountability in response to perceived lawlessness in the country, ranging from political corruption to daily frustrations about taxi drivers ignoring rules and endangering passengers. Said one participant: “if there was accountability for the things that were going wrong (…) if people were actually held accountable for the wrongs they have done, then I would have faith in the news.” (U-WH-F). These discussions also highlighted intra-racial differences between Whites with British passports able to ‘escape’, and those who felt left behind. These audiences expected journalists to bridge racial divisions, focussing more on “situations where the rainbow nation gets together and unites” to show “we live in a country where people care about each other” (U-WH-F). A good journalist should “get down to the people that it’s really affecting (…) I mean we are the rainbow nation; we are a beautiful country with a lot of diversity” (U-WH-F). Lastly, they expected news to address actions taken to improve society. Examples included news stories about violence against teachers and a school social worker in the Eastern Cape who was able to increase students’ pass rates and reduce violence. A participant said: “there was a positivity that came out of that and that’s so rewarding” (U-WH-F).
Diverging types of solutions outlined here reflect the lived experiences of audiences with different intersectional identities. Although both groups expected journalists to contribute to ‘societal change’, working-class-Black-Coloured-female-male audiences expected sustained, in-depth, empathetic journalism that empowers them, similar to stigmatized communities in the US (Wenzel et al. 2018), and upper-middle-class-White-female audiences expected accountability, and stories of the ‘rainbow nation’. References to the ‘rainbow nation’ by White South Africans is what Steyn and Foster (2008: 29, italics in original) describe as “White Talk” – a discursive strategy that allows ‘safe’ positive self-presentation through “non-racialism and democratic principles, concern for poverty, and good blacks” narratives, while resisting transformation. Lastly, solutions journalism was expected by both women and men of Black-Coloured-working-class identity, but was not raised by upper-class-White men. Although middle-class-Black-Coloured-Indian-White-female-male audiences claimed political journalism was negative, they did not talk about solutions journalism.

**Classist and Racist Narratives around News Quality: Intelligence, Education, and Violence**

Intersectional differences were also found in how audiences evaluate ‘quality’ and popular (tabloid and lifestyle) journalism (Costera Meijer 2001), including how these valuations are used to distinguish themselves and their expectations of journalism from ‘others,’ using classist and racist narratives. These discussions revealed frustrations about journalism’s unaffordability, and how inaccessibility to diverse types of news reinforced class inequality. At the intersection of class and race, audiences’ perceptions of news quality also revealed racist stereotypes, pivoting around narratives of intelligence, education, and violence. These are discussed below.

**The Unaffordability of Journalism**

News unaffordability and inaccessibility most acutely affected the working-class-Black-Coloured-female-male audiences with limited economic capital to spend on news: “I don’t have money to buy the newspaper” (W-BL-F). In discussing the tabloid Daily Sun and ‘quality’ Mail & Guardian, these audiences reflect an awareness of a stratified news media landscape:

W-BL-F: “It’s all about levels. Levels, that’s it.

RESEARCHER: Levels?

W-BL-F: Yeah, levels.

W-BL-M: Like around here, [the township], everyone can afford the Daily Sun. So, like I’m telling you… the Daily Sun is feeding us stories of witchcraft only, and you check someone who can afford the Mail & Guardian, maybe they are based in town (…) so it’s levels… the one who can pay is the one who can get relevant news.”

This exchange centres around a frustration with the tabloid’s focus on witchcraft stories, however audiences did not dismiss the newspaper’s value in their lives. As one of South Africa’s most read newspapers (online and in print), the Daily Sun, plays an important role for a population largely ignored by other news media (Steenveld and
Rather, audiences stressed that this was the only media available to them, and critiqued their lack of access to more diverse news.

These participants also had agency and spoke matter-of-factly about creative ways of overcoming this limitation (c.f. Alper, Katz, and Clark 2016). Working-class-Black-Coloured-female-male audiences consumed radio or free township newspapers, went to a local clinic where “they give it to you for free” (W-BL-F), or read the “Mail & Guardian, sometimes when you get an old one from someone who used it last week” (W-BL-M). While accessing old news is not (and should not) be a permanent response to news access inequality, these solutions illustrate marginalized audiences’ alternative ways of accessing news.

Journalism’s unaffordability and inaccessibility was also problematized by middle-class-Black-Coloured-Indian-Mixed-female-male audiences, as captured in the following exchange

M-MX-F: “I think that different papers aim at different classes (…) like the Daily Sun is more for lower-income-classes, and the Sunday Independent is for the upper-class (…) so I think that also shows agenda and how they will frame certain things for certain people, and I also think that affects the quality of what you are reading…. Like, Daily Sun is not the best newspaper.

M-BL-F: I’ve read some crazy headlines… like about a cat killing a man, and I’m like…

(…)

M-MX-F: But that’s kind of problematic…

M-BL-M: It is problematic.

M-MX-F: … the economic classes are different (…) and now you wanna give lower-income-classes lower news quality because it’s more accessible…

M-MX-F: Shitty news…”

In the above exchanges, working-middle-class-Black-Coloured-Indian-Mixed-female-male audiences reveal frustrations about unequal access to news, but also normative beliefs about what constitutes ‘quality’ versus “shitty news” about “witchcraft” or “a cat killing a man” and who consumes what. In their view, class inequality reinforced unequal access and distinctions between the haves (quality news consumers) and the have-nots (tabloid consumers). This resonates with past research (Lindell and Sartoretto 2018, Lindell 2020), however as the following sections illustrate, these valuations also intersect with race, where narratives around intelligence and education are used to reinforce both classist and racist distinctions.

**Education and Intellect**

The consumption of quality versus tabloid journalism was attributed to the presence or absence of education and intelligence, respectively. Middle-class-Black-Coloured-Indian-Mixed audiences believed that different journalists and media had prejudiced perceptions of their audiences’ levels of intellect, and highlighted us-them distinctions along both class and race. They believed news media reinforce an ‘intellectual divide’ between themselves as middle-class (university-educated) consumers of “intellectually challenging” news and working-class tabloid news consumers who journalists...
stereotyped “as not being the smartest bunch [who] just like entertainment stuff” (M-CO-M). In expressing this, we see these audiences highlighting their sense of middle-class belonging or (self-)inclusion. However, they also argued journalists see tabloid audiences as people who “just read cheap news and we don’t need to try and challenge them, whereas the larger White majority who read our newspaper, we like to challenge them and put this intellectual stuff here” (M-CO-M). In claiming that journalists target quality news at White audiences, which these audiences are not, we see evidence of racial (self-)exclusion. Therefore, the middle-class-Black-Coloured-Indian-Mixed audiences saw themselves simultaneously included along class and excluded along race.

Similar intelligence- and education-based distinctions were evoked (and challenged) in a group of middle-upper-class-Black-Indian-White-female audiences. Here audiences both united and diverged in their observations of tabloid journalism at intersections of class and race. Across race, both middle- and upper-class audiences rejected the Daily Sun’s legitimacy, labelling it “rubbish, but people buy it for the jokes” (M-BL-F). Asked if it serves a unique purpose, a participant demarcated: “To their life, yeah” (M-BL-F). However, racist stereotypes emerged and were challenged when upper-middle-class-White-female audiences described Daily Sun readers as seeking ‘scandal’ and ‘sensation’ and lacking the ‘education’ and ‘intelligence’ of a Sunday Times reader. A counter to this assessment is reflected in the exchange below:

(U-WH-F) “… you know, you just have to look at the demographics to understand what the difference is between the Sunday Times and the Daily Sun…

[…]

(M-BL-F) I don’t necessarily think that that’s true (…) we have a number of staff that live in Alex and Diepsloot and I don’t necessarily think they read the Daily Sun, I think if anything they have access to phones and you know when you get to work you’ve got access to WIFI so you read news online…”

This exchange again highlights perceptions of working-class-Black audiences’ agency and creative solutions to news unaffordability by using work-based WIFI to access online news.

Similar stereotypes were expressed in relation to political and lifestyle journalism. Upper-class-White-female-male audiences associated political journalism with ‘thinking’ and lifestyle journalism with ‘mindlessness’. Asked to give up one, they stressed they would “stick to Mail and Guardian” (U-WH-W) adding:

(U-WH-F): “But if you ask the same question of somebody who lives in the Transkei …

(U-WH-F): Oh yeah, completely different.

[…]

(U-WH-F): And again, we are going back to that question of level of intelligence and education…”

Although treated interchangeably by audiences, education and intelligence could be understood as different forms of discrimination. To Bourdieu (1984), the presence of education indicates availability of cultural capital, helping to locate an individual within a classed social space. However, references to intelligence, in particular, have racist roots in White colonialist ideologies which depict Black people in cultural
products (including news media) by emphasizing the body and physical faculties over the mind and intellectual aptitude (Collins 2004; Ferber 2007; Buffington and Fraley 2008). This includes distinctions where “white represents the mind and logic, perceiving natives as physical and illogical bodies requiring domination and control” (Alley-Young 2008: 309).

Such racist discourses were also observed by working-class-Black-Coloured audiences who argued that news media reinforced ‘aggressive Black’ stereotypes.

**Language of Violence**

Working-class-Black-female-male audiences said news media manipulated language to speak to specific class-race groups. They said news media “know our language”, “understand the psychology, our mentality” and use emotional language to “provoke” (W-BL-F). Traditionally, emotion has been treated as inferior and disruptive to journalism’s concern for rational discourse (Costera Meijer 2001). Emotionality arguably also implies irrational (i.e., physical) impulsiveness and “a lack of restraint associated with incomplete socialization, and a predilection for violence” long associated with African American men (Collins 2004: 152).

Journalists were seen to stereotype White audiences as non-violent: “when speaking to the White guys (…) they [journalists] know that they are not so violent” (W-BL-F), and Black protesters as violent: “when they are speaking about people striking, they know that they are directly speaking to Black guys” (W-BL-F). Community protests are a critical form of communication for marginalized audiences to express their frustrations about growing inequality, but are often ignored by mainstream ‘quality’ media or framed as incompetent, disruptive, and theatrical (Wasserman, Chuma, and Bosch 2018).

Referring to TV news coverage (SABC1 and ETV) of xenophobic violence against Somalis, working-class-Black-female-male audiences stressed journalists provoke xenophobic violence in the Black community: “they know that Black people won’t sit and be quiet … same as the Black guy that was like being beaten by the two White guys … they were telling us ‘what are you going to do about these two White guys?’” (W-BL-F). These findings echo scholarship which shows that central to the construction of White identity are narratives that construct Black people, and men in particular, as “inherently violent” by reducing them to their physical body, depicted as “hypersexual, animalistic, and savage” (Ferber 2007: 15). The implications of this and other findings are discussed below.

**Discussion**

This study explored audience expectations of journalists through an intersectional approach to gain insight into how class, race, and gender shape these. Audiences expressed not only normative expectations (prescriptions), but also descriptive (beliefs) and cathetic (preferences) expectations of journalism (Biddle 1979). Across intersectional identities, audiences shared the belief that journalism was captured economically and politically, diminishing its credibility. Audiences disliked and avoided news they perceived as negative and preoccupied with crime and politics, and demanded
journalists should provide solutions (c.f. Malila et al. 2013). However, this is where intersectional similarities across audiences’ expectations seem to end.

An intersectional approach reveals audiences expected different forms of solutions that reflect their specific lived experiences. Working-class Black-Coloured audiences expected systemic solutions to challenges facing their communities, through sustained, empathetic, in-depth reporting that empowered and instilled hope, similar to expectations expressed by African American and Latino audiences (Wenzel et al. 2018). Upper-middle-class-White audiences sought solutions through accountability, and a sense of law and order, as well as feel-good stories about the ‘rainbow nation’ that speak to imaginations of reconciliation, non-racialism, and freedom and reflect discourses of positive self-representation without structural transformation (Steyn and Foster 2008; Friedman 2011). Solutions sought in feel-good stories here act as a “balm” and appeasing distraction from deeper, structural, systemic problems (Wenzel et al. 2018). Further differences were found at the intersection of class and race with gender. Whereas both women and men of working-class-Black-Coloured identity expected solutions journalism, among upper-middle-class-White audiences, men did not.

Working- and middle-class Black, Indian, Coloured, and ‘Mixed’ audiences problematized news media targeting specific class-race groups unequally, and that ‘quality’ news is largely unaffordable to poor communities. Although tabloid journalism plays a key role in addressing otherwise-neglected working-class-Black audiences (Steenveld and Strelitz 2010), working-class-Black-Coloured audiences were frustrated by the lack of access to diverse news media. Importantly, however, they also conveyed agency and creative solution-seeking by relying on alternative means of accessing ‘quality’ news, off- and online.

These discussions revealed classist and racist beliefs and patterns of in/exclusion around what constitutes quality in journalism, who consumes it, and how. Upper-middle-class audiences across race and gender distanced themselves from tabloid-consuming working-class-Black audiences, revealing similar patterns of class ‘othering’ and distinction found in past studies (Lindell 2020). However, at the intersection of class and race, middle-class Black-Indian-Coloured-Mixed audiences felt simultaneously included (class) and excluded (race) from ‘quality’ and ‘intellectually challenging’ journalism they perceived as targeting middle-upper-class-White audiences. Such narratives reinforce “gendered” and “ethnic assumptions” and rationality-emotionality dichotomies between quality and popular media (Costera Meijer 2001). Lindell (2020) identified similar class-driven ‘othering’ among middle-class audiences who saw the working-class as lacking intellect and interest to be avid news consumers. In this study, however, narratives of ‘intelligence’ intersected with race, when upper-middle-class-White audiences evoked racist stereotypes about consumers of tabloid and lifestyle journalism as lacking education and intelligence – stereotypes rooted in colonialist ideologies and mind-body distinctions (Collins 2004, Ferber 2007). Working-class-Black-Coloured audiences identified these dichotomies also in the language journalists rely on to reinforce racist ‘violent Black’ and ‘non-violent White’ narratives, somewhat seen in ‘quality’ media’s emphasis on the theatrical spectacle and disruption of community protests (Wasserman, Chuma, and Bosch 2018).
In asking audiences what they expect from journalism, their answers often revealed what they do not expect, leaving expectations to be inferred. In problematizing unaffordability, working and middle-class Black, Indian, and Coloured audiences across gender implicitly expressed an expectation that in order for journalism to reach the public they purport to serve, news needs to be accessible and affordable to all. In expressing normative valuations of ‘quality’ journalism, middle- and upper-class audiences across race and gender implicitly expressed an expectation that ‘their’ journalism should be intellectually challenging. By deploying racist and classist narratives of intelligence, upper-middle-class-White audiences across gender implicitly expressed an expectation that intellectually challenging, ‘quality’ journalism is for South Africa’s White population. Finally, in critiquing journalism’s use of language to portray Black audiences as ‘violence-prone,’ Black-Coloured-working-class audiences implicitly expressed an expectation that journalism should re-examine the colonialist ideologies embedded in its discourses.

Conclusion

One of journalism’s key sources of societal legitimacy is its claim to serve the public. However, when we account for audiences’ various intersectional identities, this study shows that public is further fragmented and its expectations of journalism diverse and reflective of unique lived experiences. While some expectations mirror journalism’s dominant ideology, and an intersectional approach shows this is particularly the case for audiences with greater intersectional power, for audiences marginalized along class, race, and gender, expectations are not only rendered invisible to journalism’s dominant professional ideals, but these audiences are also further stigmatized and subjected to classist and racist narratives of oppression by audiences with greater intersectional power. In South Africa, as in other countries where class-race-gender oppression and inequality continue to be felt in everyday life, paying attention to journalistic expectations of marginalized audiences is critical. The findings here echo existing research, arguing that if journalism is to meet one of its key ideological goals of public service, and meet the expectations of all audiences (across the intersectional spectrum), it needs to speak to all of it diverse publics, not only those who reflect the dominant vision of the field. Studies such as this one help expose not only that fragmentation and inequality exist, but show how they manifest through racist and classist narratives. In the end, an intersectional approach reveals that not all audiences are equal.

This is all the more important in a digital era and a more vast and fragmented online news media space. Alongside its democratic function of informing the public, journalism has an economic imperative to reach the broadest possible audiences. While audiences have always been fragmented, they have not always had opportunities to express their expectations. Giving them that voice, we see marginalized audiences often do not have the economic means to access the same repertoire of news to meet their unique needs and wants, nor do they have the power to sanction those who do not deliver. While journalism confronts its economic crisis, including by relying on digital paywalls, structures that further exclude marginalized audiences should be
avoided if journalism also aims to reach the public it claims to speak to and for. While this study does not specifically deal with digital journalism, through an intersectional approach it has highlighted inequalities that are of equal concern to digital journalism scholars navigating the tensions between digital technologies and journalism’s normative ideals ( Eldridge et al. 2019 ). This resonates with work that shows marginalized audiences are increasingly empowered by and seizing upon digital technologies to tell stories of their lived experiences and expose injustices in ways that traditional, mainstream journalism has failed to do ( Richardson 2017 ).

Limitations of this study include not being able to draw on more focus groups, both homogenous and heterogenous, with diverse race-class-gender intersections to tease out further nuances and dynamics across the expectations, bearing in mind, of course, that more focus groups would not lead to any generalizations about race, class, or gender. This study’s contributions encourage future research to consider intersectionality as a framework for studying audiences’ diverse expectations, and better understand their location in relation to journalism’s core ideology.

Notes

1. ‘Coloured’ is an established racial category in South Africa representing multiracial ethnicities and cultures. Only broader race groups are differentiated, not to obscure or ignore intra-group and ethnic dynamics and diversity, but because of feasibility within the scope of this study.
2. Although Bourdieusian sociology of class differentiates across capital volume (cumulation of all capital) and capital composition (differences in volume of specific capital, e.g., cultural or economic), within the scope of this study, audiences are grouped into broader class groups based on capital volume.
3. Designing homogenous (and potentially heterogenous) focus groups along each intersectional axis and modes would have required conducting upward of 24 focus groups, which the resources available for this project did not permit. A greater number of focus groups might have revealed greater intersectional nuance and further dynamics across expectations, however the aim of this study is to qualitatively demonstrate the importance of intersectionality as a framework for studying audience expectations, not to draw any generalizations.
4. The survey offered participants an ‘other’ category for race, under which participants wrote ‘Mixed’.
5. Alexandra and Diepsloot are townships in Johannesburg.
6. An apartheid-era state established by the National Party to segregate Black South African’s of Xhosa descent.

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