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# Book Review

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Jacob L. Nelson, *Imagined Audiences: How Journalists Perceive and Pursue the Public* Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2021, 222 pages, ISBN no.: 9780197542606 (paperback); 978019754290 (hardcover), Paperback: \$27.95 USD; Hardcover: \$99.00 USD

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With trust in the news at a historic low and economic barriers and pitfalls at a high, journalism continues to be at a crossroads for who and what it would like to be in the future. This is clearly seen in Chicago, the third largest city in the United States, where the leading publication, the *Chicago Tribune*, is currently amid a battle for ownership. In February, Alden Global Capital reached an agreement to take ownership, beyond its current 32% stake, of all Tribune Publishing papers—a deal valued at \$630 million (Channick, 2021). On March 14 another “suitor for Tribune Publishing” emerged to compete with the AGC hedge fund to take ownership of the Tribune properties, which, as some assume, will lead to non-profit and local ownership of the various publications within the Tribune Publishing portfolio (Tracy, 2021). AGC’s majority stake acquisition in 2019 resulted from a lack of profitability in Tribune Publishing as a whole, with many blaming journalism’s inability to connect with their audiences (Channick). All the while, across town, covering the South and West sides of the city, *City Bureau* looked to fill in the coverage gaps that they believed the *Chicago Tribune* left wide open. The publication’s emphasis on community and participatory practices of journalism has meant increased audience engagement. Jacob Nelson’s *Imagined Audience* examines how these two publications have understood, interacted with, and leveraged their audiences. Additionally, Nelson’s work includes Hearken, an audience engagement company founded in Chicago in 2015, that creates opportunities for engagement between journalists and their audiences. From nearly 550 hours of ethnographic field work and interviews spanning from November 2016 to June 2017, Nelson sought to understand the complex and evolving relationship of audiences to the past, present, and future of journalism. It is in this critical act of understanding, as Nelson posits, that journalism may come to terms with

something “more enduring: the relationship between those who make the news and those who consume it” (p. 9).

*Imagined Audiences* is not a book about the economic crisis of journalism; rather, Nelson looks at the industry through the lens of audience and reception studies using interviews with newsmakers and observations within each organization. Through this approach, Nelson addresses not only who journalists write about, but also who they write for, which, as he sees it, is a discrepancy among the three organizations his book is about. Both the “Introduction” and “Chapter 1: The Journalist-Audience Relationship” provide the framework for his book. By operationalizing terms like “audience” and “audience engagement,” Nelson guides the reader, who he identifies both as scholarly and professional, through the context of which his larger argument would be situated. These opening chapters also gave historical context to the concept of audience in journalism, emerging from John Dewey and Walter Lippman’s arguments. For Nelson, the foundation of the Dewey-Lippman audience debate could be boiled down to issues of civic life and participation, the Deweyian approach, to press as objective observer, the Lippman model. From there, journalism has historically diverged, which continues to be seen a century later in the current debates surrounding the relevance of objectivity in news. Here is where Nelson introduces his readers to the namesake of his book: *imagined audiences*. He claims that regardless of which side of the fence one falls on, there is a shared assumption about audiences—and these assumptions, as Nelson citing Anthony Nadler states, “do not simply reflect essential truths” (p. 21). And it is from that, that Nelson begins to build his path in search of that truth.

“Chapter 2: Promise of Audience Engagement” introduces the three ethnographic spaces. It is also where, outside of the economic woes, Nelson writes about a return to and of public journalism, something he believes, in conjunction with audience engagement, would mean a “more inclusive reporting and more sophisticated audience awareness” (p. 35). As he would later develop in later chapters, the rise of public journalism, and the diehard believers in its values, would claim that the increased communication would result not only in better journalism, but more profitable journalism as well. What this chapter also does, and what is both argumentatively appropriate and necessary, is explain the relevance of Chicago as hub of the research. While Nelson shares a strong rationale for the city, emphasizing the social and economic importance of the city and the *Chicago Tribune* being the 11th largest newspaper in the nation, he also provides an instance of openness. Nelson explains that this work was also of convenience given it was done while completing his doctoral education at Northwestern. This would not be his only illustration of vulnerability. Nelson’s honesty and transparency throughout are two of the reasons *Imagined Audience* is effective for both his target audiences.

The meat of *Imagined Audiences* comes in Chapters 3–7, which separately dissect the Dewey-Lippman debate in their contemporary forms through the *Chicago Tribune*, *City Bureau*, and Hearken. Nelson first identifies who each organization sees as their perceived and pursued imagined audiences, positioning the *Chicago Tribune* with a predominantly suburban and white audience and the *City Bureau* with a more diverse black and brown audience. Where the *Chicago Tribune* sees their audience “as a constant source of anger,” the *City Bureau* sees their audiences as “an inspiration” (p. 45). On that premise, Nelson situates the two publications as two roads diverged, with Hearken serving as an external organization hoping to be a catalyst for newsrooms like the *Chicago Tribune* to adopt citizen and engaged journalism practices that were seen at the *City Bureau*. The root of the discrepancy comes from the sentiment that journalism is forgetting members of the audience, causing outlets like the *Chicago Tribune* to claim disinterest and the *City Bureau* and Hearken to see injustice and alienation. Nelson’s development of Chapters 3–7 begins with the imagined audiences, extends to how data is used, develops into the pursuit of audiences, and concludes with obstacles to engagement and understanding audience behavior. This progression is inclusive of a through line of diverse entities versus economic boundaries. On one hand, the *Chicago Tribune* is determined to create a stronger economic future for the publication and utilizes data and pursues their audiences from that data to attempt to reach the economic mecca that eludes so many. On the other, the *City Bureau* and Hearken see audiences as civically and democratically minded and in search of more participatory practices while ambivalent to analytics and servicing more niche populations.

This leads to Nelson’s conclusion, which asks journalism to exercise humility with their audiences and position trust at the forefront of their practice; he believes journalism cannot be economically successful without the audience trusting the content—a seemingly obvious assumption, but critically relevant, nonetheless. Nelson asks his readers to think about the goals of journalism before diving into future approaches and methods for audience engagement. And, he thinks, if we do that, journalism may be better at accepting that the imagined audiences we’ve relied so heavily on are a powerful force in the shaping and structuring of our news moving forward. His challenge to academics also includes making their work more accessible to practitioners, something Nelson modeled exceptionally in his book.

Despite the effective presentation of research and the thoughtful use of language and methodology, Nelson’s book did leave me wanting more in certain circumstances. In particular, Nelson’s fourth chapter, “When Data and Intuition Converge,” felt the weakest given the intricate connection to economics and the current crisis of journalism—something he states is not necessarily the purpose of his text. The chapter left me asking what we do with these assumptions being made about the disparities between data-driven engagement

and imagined audiences, and how do we arrive at these assumptions in the first place without a consideration of the intricate connection the two seem to have. However, the chapter does also include what I think Nelson makes as one of his most effective points: data leaves out audiences. The intimate connection throughout the book between race and journalism is only elaborated on by elucidating the data-driven holes in audiences and communities. Arguably, this minor criticism should not take away from the overall success of this text.

Nelson's writing, both in its thoughtfulness and argumentation, make this text appropriate for both audiences he defines in the "Introduction": academics and professionals. The accessible language coupled with the thorough method appendix showcase the universality of the book, which could be used in graduate-level courses in journalism studies, audience studies, or qualitative methods.

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