Between the expected and the experienced: assessing the public's perception of journalism ethics and objectivity in Latvia

Anda Rožukalne[1]* and Ieva Strode[2]

[1]Social Sciences Research Centre, Faculty of Social Sciences, Riga Stradiņš University, Riga, Latvia,
[2]Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia

Introduction: Our study refers to the calls of various scholars to add the media users' view and the audience's agency role to the evaluation of media and journalism. The objective of this study is to explore the audience's perception of media and journalistic ethics in times of various global and geopolitical crises.

Methods: We use a quantitative survey (N = 1,019, 2022) and two focus group studies (14 groups, N = 80, 2022, 2023) to describe the Latvian audiences' assessment of professional journalism ethics principles and their implementation.

Results: The Latvian public is critical of the ethical practice of journalists, with almost half of the respondents observing various violations of professional ethics and recognizing different journalistic cultures according to their degree of responsibility.

Discussion: Evaluating data according to the journalistic ethical orientation model, it is found that representatives of the Latvian media audience support absolutist and exceptionist approaches, as they place high demands on journalists, putting the principle of objectivity and the duty of journalists to ensure the diversity of opinions in the foreground.

KEYWORDS

journalism ethics, ethical orientation, media audience, audience involvement, objectivity, diversity of opinions, accountability, meta-journalism

1 Introduction and context

Professional and scholarly communities agree that journalism depends on its relationship with the audience (Uth et al., 2023), however, compared to the volume of journalism research, the study of audience-journalism interaction is disproportionate. Our study is a response to several scholars' call for journalism and media studies to place a greater emphasis on audience agency or to "audiencisize" media studies (Banjac, 2021; Loosen and Schmidt, 2016; Schrøder, 2017; Schrøder, 2019; Peruško et al., 2013). Knowing that studies of journalism and its audience have mostly been production-oriented, researchers offer a radical turn in audience studies (Hess et al., 2022; Skovsgaard et al., 2024; Swart et al., 2022), and to recognize 'uncomfortable truths' (Mellado and Gajardo, 2024) in the audience's attitude toward journalism and media. Scholarly interest in audience and journalism studies has grown over the last 10 years, focusing on discursive and expectation-based conceptualization, and emphasizing technological and organizational conceptualization (Uth et al., 2023). The current research on journalism ethics is fueled by the challenges of journalism in the digital age, competition with other information providers, blurred professional boundaries, and media cynicism. These changes simultaneously raise doubts about the legitimacy of journalism and

call for a review of existing ethical norms (Karlsson et al., 2023), launching a debate on the ethics of bloggers and influencers to assess whether new journalistic 'competitors' (Craft, 2017) and digital platforms (Johnson, 2017; Price, 2021) follow any ethical principles.

With the ever-changing relationships between journalists and the society, which for several decades has now been characterized by news platformization (Hase et al., 2022) and the involvement of the audience in content creation (Degen et al., 2024; Hendrickx, 2021), discussions about journalism ethics show the current relationships between journalism and the audience. Studies of journalism ethics become more topical with the society's reaction to the influence of disinformation and fake news (Creech, 2020; Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Lien et al., 2021; Miró-Llinares and Aguerri, 2021), populist politicians' attacks on journalism (Macaraig and Hameleers, 2022; Waisbord, 2020) and the fluctuating data on society's trust in media (Strömbäck, 2021). Audience attitudes toward the performance of journalism became even more important during the Covid pandemic and now, when societies in many countries are shaken by the war and military conflicts in Ukraine (Rožukalne, 2023) and Gaza that bring with them socio-political and economic consequences, contributing to insecurity, division and polarization.

Research on the role of media in different countries and historical context shows that while the core ethical principles of journalism are universal (Craft, 2017), their interpretation and understanding, as well as their application in practice of specific media systems and cultures, are important (Bucholtz, 2019; Karlsson et al., 2023). We, therefore, argue that research on audiences' perceptions of journalism ethics in small countries can contribute to media studies and media sociology, both by offering insights into the general understanding of audiences' attitudes toward ethical journalism practice and by assessing audiences' perceptions of ethics in specific journalistic cultures.

Even if researchers show a growing interest in studying media audience/demand side, research usually focuses on the analysis of Western and in some cases Global South audiences (Banjac, 2021; Banjac and Hanusch, 2022; Mont'Alverne et al., 2023). Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are not represented in these studies. Several scholars have viewed this situation critically, concluding that the analytical criteria employed for analysis of Western countries are only partially usable for the evaluation of CEE media systems (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Harro-Loit, 2015; Jakubowicz, 2004) representing media development contexts of historically and culturally different countries.

1.1 The context of Latvia

The Latvian media environment is characterized by liberal media regulation, a new self-regulation system, a high level of media commercialization, oligarchization in the media environment, and a gradual decline of trust in the media (Jõesaar et al., 2022).

Analyzing the accountability of Latvian media, three competitive cultures of journalism are observed (Dimants, 2018). Professional or modern culture is represented by media that follow the core professionalism and editorial independence principles and work in the interests of society. A post-Soviet or instrumental culture is represented by media that are not independent from their owners. These media are often used for political and/or economic goals. They form alliances, publish hidden advertising and content supporting or criticizing a particular player of the political or economic field. The Russian journalism culture is characterized by a publicist style and non-separation facts from opinions. Competing journalistic cultures reflect the hybridity of the Latvian media system, which lacks a dominant paradigm (Rožukalne et al., 2022b).

The development of media ethics in Latvia is characterized by its recent institutionalization, which was influenced by both the adoption of international practices and the response to public demand. Latvia's tradition of building media and audience relationships is underdeveloped. There are no active non-governmental organizations in Latvia advocating the interests of the audience. Media neither offer regular media critiques nor explain their editorial decisions to the audience, demonstrating lack of market accountability (Kreutler et al., 2024).

Although some mass media have formed ethics codes and inquiry committees since their establishment, a media self-regulation system in Latvia started to form after the media politics guidelines developed at the end of 2016 (Ministru Kabinets, 2016) envisaged improving media accountability. In 2018, a Latvian Media Ethics Council (LMEC) was established (Latvijas Mediju ētikas padome, 2024). Following the new Law on Public Electronic Mass Media and Administration Thereof (Saeima, 2020), in 2022, a new public service media (PSM) ombudsman institution was formed.

The ethical orientations of Latvian journalists have been studied in two rounds of the Worlds of Journalism Study. Data from both studies show that the Latvian journalist population combines absolutist-like views with strong tendencies toward situationism (Lauerer et al., 2025; Ozoliņa, 2016).

Relations between the Latvian society and the media have been affected by several successive crises. In Eastern and Central Europe, as well as in Northern European countries, the Covid crisis was followed by societal security related crises caused by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of 2022, which affected social, political and economic processes (Rožukalne, 2023) in countries relatively close to Ukraine or bordering Russia. In the field of media, it forced changes in politicians' views regarding media independence (Rožukalne et al., 2024), narrowed the boundaries of freedom of speech (Latvijas Radio, 2024), increased political pressure on public and professional media (Brauna, 2022), and promoted the development of anti-media discourse in Latvia's public sphere.

Emphasizing the peculiarities of Latvia, it should be noted that the media content published in Latvian and Russian is relatively separate, and the Russian-language media content is influenced by media culture and traditions of neighboring Russia. An ethnically divided society also means a linguistically divided media audience because about a third of Latvian residents consume media in Russian (NEPLP/ Latvijas Fakti, 2022). This gap is formed by several socio-demographic factors. The social divide is both geographical (there are more Russophones in big cities, including the capital Riga, and in the eastern region bordering Russia and Belarus), and age-specific—there are fewer Russian speakers among young Latvians, and older Russophones know Latvian poorly (Krumm et al., 2023). The audience's attitude toward the media has also been affected by recent crises, which divided the society into hostile camps. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was determined by the attitude toward vaccines and restrictions (Rožukalne et al., 2022a), but after the Russian invasion of Ukraine—emotional affection for Russia or hatred toward it (Krumm et al., 2023).

2 Professional ethics in journalism–public interaction and research questions

In democratic countries, journalists work for the society. Craft (2017) attributes the importance of ethics to the public nature of the journalistic profession and argues that ethics should not separate news producers from news consumers.

Highlighting the importance of the audience, Waisbord (2013) points out that the autonomy of journalism is not absolute, it is vulnerable to public (audience) pressure and to pressure from sources (government, politicians). Thus, ethical principles are also shaped, and the ethical practice of journalism develops in interaction with the audience. In assessing journalists' obligations, Mitchell (2014) emphasizes that ethical attitude involve sensitivity to publics' expectations and assumptions about the quality of a journalist's work. Central to these attitudes is the public's concern that unfair media practices may have a negative impact on the development of society, and harm vulnerable groups. In communication science, these issues have been analyzed in the context of media effects (Meeus et al., 2018; Nilsson, 2019; Shehata et al., 2021), and in media sociology, by assessing the perceptions of journalistic ethics of different groups in society (Ghersetti and Johansson, 2021).

Ethics is part of the professional identity of journalists (Deuze, 2005), it represents the ideological characterization of professionalism in journalism (Tuchman, 1972; Waisbord, 2013), and defines the power relations between media, politics, and society, emphasizing professional autonomy and influence. In the context of media regulation, codes of ethics for journalism imply self-regulation, and define limits to media freedom to, first, reduce pressure from politicians to strengthen regulation and, second, demonstrate journalists' accountability to society (Mellado and Gajardo, 2024). These factors are interrelated, but some turn out to be more important than others in specific media environment (Plaisance et al., 2012).

The hierarchies of influences theory (Hanitzsch et al., 2010) describes the ideological, cultural and societal factors determining the way journalists interpret professional ethics principles. The hierarchies of influences model includes audience agency role among many factors in the internal and external settings.

Studies on journalism ethics is mainly concerned with assessing the ethical orientation of media professionals (Hanitzsch, 2007, 2011) and the practice of journalism, with a particular focus on ethics in the processes of digital transformation of journalism (Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Kreiss and Scott Brennen, 2016), as well as coverage of different minority groups in society (Sang et al., 2024). When evaluating different types of moral philosophy (deontological, utilitarian, and virtue-based approaches), the distinction between idealism and relativism is one of the ways that social sciences have been used to describe how individuals deal with ethical dilemmas (Detenber et al., 2012). At the same time, particular cultures and their ideological aspects determine the pluralistic nature of journalists' ethical orientations. These differences are manifested in various interpretations of codes of ethics, where similar but abstract professional principles can be narrowed or given conflicting meanings when editorial ethical decisions are based on individual beliefs and pragmatic responses to contextual circumstances (Bucholtz, 2019).

Discrepancies of ethical ideology are described by Forsyth (1980) who divides them into idealism and relativism sub-dimensions,

forming a matrix of ethical ideologies. Acknowledging context dependence in moral evaluation, this author offers a taxonomy which, depending on an idealistic (high or low) or non-idealistic (high or low) approach classifies people's actions by whether they believe moral rules are universal or relative. Forsyth's taxonomy is formed by four types of moral orientation: situationists representing a high-level relativism; absolutists have a high level of idealism; subjectivists are relativism-oriented and follow personal values and perspective more than universal moral norms; exceptionists mostly support moral absolutism but think that one must be pragmatically open to exceptions in these standards, demonstrating the approach of ethical utilitarianism.

While questioning the uniqueness of journalism ethics, Craft (2017) agrees that the ethical norm of objectivity makes specific demands on journalists. It implies a fact-based, fair, and neutral presentation of information, avoiding interpretation (Smeenk et al., 2023). Objectivity is related to other ethical principles: impartiality, balance, separation of facts and opinions, and the duty to avoid conflicts of interest.

At the same time, objectivity is the most contested ethical norm in journalism (see Haq, 2024; Karlsson et al., 2023; McNair, 2017). Discussions about objectivity show contradictions between the normative ideals and practices of journalism (Helberger et al., 2022; Ward, 2009), or the possibilities of journalists to fulfill the strategic ritual of objectivity (Møller Hartley and Askanius, 2020; McNair, 2017; Tuchman, 1972). As Craft (2017) reminds us, the principle of objectivity emerged not as an ethical ideal, but as a method for collecting and verifying claims. It helped the society to understand the work of the media in a context where the public began to rely on the media more for information about an increasingly complex world.

An analysis of audience assessment of objectivity in journalistic practice helps to understand the gap that occurs between journalism role perception and role performance (Mellado, 2015). While objectivity, autonomy, impartiality and neutrality are highly valued in professional settings (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2018; Mont'Alverne et al., 2023), research shows that audiences may have contradictory perceptions of professional ethics norms (Mont'Alverne et al., 2023; Mellado and Gajardo, 2024).

Given the potential of each audience member to participate in the production of content, Emmons (2010) argues that audiences can no longer afford to sit passively at the crossroads of asymmetrical media-society relations, but must take an active role in terms of their responsibility to society by forcing media to respect their ethical obligations as media producers. This idea reflects the discussion (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2021) that normative beliefs about media functions also apply to the audience's duty to follow information about current events.

In our research, we view journalism as a discursive institution (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2018), in the context of the interactions between different actors in the media ecosystem. As journalists and other actors in debate the role of journalism in society and compete for discursive authority, the current discourse of journalism is shaped. Meanings of journalism are constructed and transformed through the discourse of meta-journalism; as Carlson (2016) writes, audiences and the public are key actors in the construction of this discourse.

Understanding the importance of professional ethics in journalists' professional practice, our research aims to explore how audiences perceive journalistic ethics, expanding the boundaries of

understanding journalism-audience relations (Costera Meijer, 2020). Thus, we take a research path that uses well-known principles of journalistic ethics to ascertain audience attitudes.

We use a quantitative survey data (N = 1,019, 2022) and two focus group studies (14 groups, 80 participants, 2022, 2023) to analyze how audience members evaluate the quality of journalism and what their attitude is toward the most important norms of professional ethics.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

> *RQ1:* How does the Latvian audience/public perceive violations of media ethics?

> *RQ2:* From the audience's point of view, what is the role of objectivity in the evaluation of media practices?

> *RQ3:* How does the media audience assess the professionalism and ethical values of journalism?

3 Methodological approach

Journalists' moral duties can be viewed as either specific to the job or general. Craft (2017) substantiates the importance of ethics with its moral character given to a journalist's profession by it being public. The ethics of morality emphasize the journalist's role of the moral agent. Deontology includes the universal moral duties of any person (Slattery, 2020). A utilitarian approach is key in the context of the society as it distinguishes the result (impact and consequences) of the agents' actions.

The public's view on media ethics develops over a longer period, it is also influenced by the actual experience of using media (Strömbäck, 2021). Research also reveals discrepancies between norm-based views of ethics and actual practice (Ozoliņa, 2016; Bucholtz, 2019). Thus, we decided to combine an audience expectation-based (survey) and an audience discourse based (focus group discussions) approach (Beckers, 2024; Uth et al., 2023). We chose a mixed research design to explain both the public's general perception of journalistic/media ethical behavior and offered audience representatives to assess specific ethical norms and violations. We operationalized ethical orientation model (Forsyth, 1980) criteria for audience perception analysis. Additionally, we interpreted the characteristic features of Latvian journalistic cultures (Dimants, 2018; Dimants, 2022) in relation to ethical principles to find out to what extent the evaluation of ethical behavior is related to the experience of the media user.

Taking into account the structure of Latvian society, whose distinctive use of media has been analyzed in many studies and which during the crisis has led to the securitization of the Russophone part of the society in the public-political discourse (Juzefovičs and Vihalemm, 2020; Andžāns, 2024), we included questions about interest in events in the survey and in the FGD script, in order to analyze the discourses created by the representatives of different audience groups based on language use in the family.

4 Method and data

The article uses the results of sequentially conducted quantitative and qualitative research. Two methods are employed in the study—a

public opinion survey (2022) on the perception of media ethics (N = 1,019 respondents) and two focus group discussions (FGD) studies (7 small and medium FGD conducted in each study, total N = 80 participants) on the evaluation of journalistic professionalism (7 FGD, N = 42, 2022) and ethical values (7 FGD, N = 38, 2023).

The Latvian Media Ethics Council commissioned the survey, and the authors of this paper were involved in the design of the study. The fieldwork was carried out by the research center SKDS. Survey data is available here: https://www.lmepadome.lv/jaunumi/params/post/4191560/petijums-ari-stridigos-jautajumos-latvijas-iedzivotaji-no-medijiem-sagaida-. Secondary data of the Objectivity Index (2003–2022, SKDS) were used to supplement the survey data on the audience's attitude toward media objectivity.

4.1 Sampling and participants

The public opinion survey is based on stratified random sampling, the research was conducted at 126 sampling points throughout the territory of Latvia from September 2 to 12, 2022. The general population of the sample is Latvian residents aged between 18 and 75, the survey method—face to face interviews at the respondents' places of residence.

The survey consists of questions about the respondent's sources of information and interest in events in Latvia and the world; evaluation of the work of mass media and journalists, views on the usefulness of information provided in the mass media; opinions on ethics violations in the Latvian media. The survey protocol included up to 10 statements per question, evaluated using a Likert scale (see Charts 5; 9). For example, the question assessing views on journalists' work included statements related to diversity of opinions and professional ethics (Likert scale from "completely agree" to "completely disagree"): articles and stories should aim to reflect diverse opinions, even if some are unacceptable to parts of society; to understand what is happening, I try to read, watch, and listen to materials that express views I completely disagree with; most Latvian journalists follow ethical principles; I have noticed at least one Latvian media outlet or journalist publicly apologizing for a mistake; I know where to turn if a media outlet or journalist violates ethical principles; among others.

The next largest set of statements addressed ethical violations, including the following: failure to distinguish facts from opinions; lack of integrity (distortion or exaggeration of information); inclusion of unverified information; lack of diversity; publication of hidden advertising; presence of discriminatory content or hate speech; intentional dissemination of false information; and others. We identified specific journalistic ethical principles and ethical violations mentioned in the survey, linking them to different journalistic cultures (see detailed data analysis Charts at Annex 1).

Focus group discussions were conducted in 2022 and 2023 to find out the public's attitude toward the work of journalists, its quality criteria and ethical values. The Public Electronic Mass Media Council ordered both FGD studies, the field work was carried out by the research company "Latvijas Fakti." One of the authors of this article designed both focus group studies. Data from the 2022 study are available here: https://www.seplp.lv/lv/media/789/download?attachment.

The purpose of the 2022 focus group discussion (FGD) study is to examine the discourses of media users about the role of journalism

and media in their everyday life and assessment of the professionalism of journalists. In the 2022 study, FGD participants assessed journalists' professional roles, defined journalism quality criteria, evaluated perceptions of public media, and reflected on professional standards. To support the discussion, specific examples of public media content were presented.

Research method: online heterogeneous FGDs. 7 FGDs were organized (4 FGDs in Latvian and 3 FGDs in Russian). The target groups of the study: audience members living in Riga (the capital city), divided according to the language used in the family (1 FGD—Latvian and 1 FGD—Russian); media consumers living in the cities of Latgale (Eastern region of Latvia) (1 FGD—Latvian and 1 FGD—Russian); media users living in Kurzeme cities (Western region of Latvia) (1 FGD—Latvian and 1 FGD—Russian language); media users living in rural areas (FGD in Latvian).

The purpose of the 2023 FGD study is to investigate the audience's perception of media professional ethics, clarifying the assessment of professional ethics compliance, effectiveness and quality of professional ethics monitoring. Thematic blocks for focus group discussions in the 2023 study included: self-assessment of personal media use and awareness; public media values and professional ethics; possibilities for defending one's rights when media act unethically; evaluation of ethics-related examples.

The structure of the 2023 FGD study is the same as of the 2022 study. Data of the 2023 study are available here: https://www.seplp.lv/lv/media/1434/download?attachment.

4.2 Measures

The SPSS software was used for the initial processing of the survey data, comparison, and grouping, mainly using the functions of descriptive statistics and correlation. The data for this study is based on 8 survey questions. 2 of them are multiple choice questions, six are Likert scale questions. When analyzing the data, Cramer's V was also used—a statistical measure that quantifies the strength of association between two categorical variables. It serves as an effect size measure for the chi-square test of independence, offering insight beyond mere statistical significance.

The FGD discussions were analyzed using thematic reflexive analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A thematic coding table was created to analyze the FGDs data, and the transcript of each FGD discussion was coded and analyzed using the qualitative data processing tool MAXQDA.

5 Results

5.1 Audience involvement and its influencing factors

When exploring the audience's assessment of media performance and journalistic ethics perception, we used data that characterizes Latvian residents' media use and interest in events in Latvia and the world, identifying the involved, the interested and the uninterested (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2021) sub-groups.

Although more than half of the surveyed Latvian citizens (Chart 1 and Chart 2) are generally interested in current events (interested),

only one in five chose the highest rating (completely agree) to identify their interest (involved), and about one third (35% [27% rather agree, 8% disagree]) are uninterested. The effect of socio-demographic factors is also noticeable: respondents with higher education, medium and high incomes, as well as middle-aged respondents (45–54 years old) (Chart 4) indicated interest more often. Lack of interest (uninterested) was indicated more by the low-income group respondents and young people (18–24 years old).

The influence of socio-demographic factors can also be observed when analyzing the sources of obtaining information. Respondents choose three main public sources (Chart 1): social networking sites (SNS)—56%; public service media (PSM) (54%), commercial mass media (CMM) in Latvian (50%). The difference in obtaining information from SNS is formed between the youngest and the oldest group of respondents (respondents older than 64 use them less often), while PSM is a more important source of information for respondents aged 55 and over.

As predicted, media consumption is determined by the language used in the family: Latvian speakers mainly use media in Latvian, and Russophones—in Russian (Chart 1). The study confirms the involvement gap in Latvian society (Chart 5), which separates media users with a high interest in events (20%) and research participants who do not use mass media (30%) or only use SNS (10%) The sources of information of the uninterested groups' representatives are uniform and their interest in current affairs is low.

Qualitative research data allows us to draw similar conclusions. Among the FGD participants, there are three distinct groups of media users, as per data of focus group discussions research in 2023: (1) active media users who understand the differences between public and commercial media and their funding models; (2) heavy consumers of commercial media because their content is considered more interesting and diverse; and (3) casual media users who obtain information from SNS and the Internet without distinguishing various sources.

FGD participants' (2022) media use also can be divided into three groups, depending on their choice of information sources and their attitudes toward them. Well-informed participants use a variety of media and are interested in different topics. The partly informed group chooses specific topics and do not regularly follow current events. The low informed and interested participants admit that they stay at the level of headlines.

«*We read the headlines superficially. Where do I see the headlines? Maybe I walk by the TV when mum is watching, maybe on Facebook, Instagram, something pops up, I look at it, read it.*» (Male, 21, high-school ed., Riga, student.)

«*I feel informed because as much as I discuss these things with colleagues, friends or my partner, nothing surprises me, everyone has read or heard similar information. /…/.*» (Female, 27, higher ed., Riga.)

The uninformed group is passive in their information acquisition, relying on social networking platforms and feeling that "algorithms know better."

«*I could regard myself as poorly informed because I don't look for information on purpose, /…/. There are a lot of other things to do,*

and I have a big load during the day. I know where to get information if I so desire or need. » (Female, 46, higher ed., Riga.)

«*I mostly use social media, but I get information on more serious issues from my parents. All information I need or am interested in I get from my friends.* » (Male, 21, high-school ed., Riga, student.)

The source of the news (professional media) is not important for this group; the source that posted, shared, or sent it is more important. Alongside SNS, friends, family members, and colleagues are another "filter" of news sources and quality. It is the intermediary, not the medium—the creator of the news—that determines to what extent the news can be used.

Because of the volume of information, FGD participants stress the importance of saving time in the use of news. There is relative news fatigue (tired of a particular topic the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine, but not completely ignoring them).

5.2 Media quality as a factor affecting audience engagement

In general, FGD representatives demonstrate normative requirements for the professional quality of media, using such concepts as neutral, objective, diverse, watchdog role toward those in power, analytical, and predictive of future developments.

We used criteria of normative and practice-based views to analyze the audience's assessment of main themes on the journalism quality (Figure 1), finding that the audience understand various practical aspects of a journalist's work. The professional performance assessment includes all the most important ethical norms, highlighting also the use of good language, and other criteria that leads beyond of list of normative principles. Professional characteristics include both the attitude toward those in power and the sense of professional mission, self-motivation. Professional behavior of journalists in the view of FGD group participants is characterized by practice-based qualities, highlighting humanity, empathy, tolerance.

The FGD participants have a longing for humanism and humanity, and people want to see these qualities in the media. The news has become too harsh, dominated by negativity. The demand for humanity and simplicity is in line with the desire to see less representatives of elites as sources of information in the media. The journalist is also expected to empathize emotionally, but in a way that does not compromise the objectivity of the narrative.

5.2.1 Objectivity

The assessment of the objectivity of the media information is moderately low ($N = 1,005$; SKDS August 2022), it is influenced by the language used in the family, citizenship status and income level. When answering the question whether the information presented in the media is objective and corresponds to reality (Chart 7), less than half agree (38%; 3% say it is always objective, 35%—mostly objective), 53% disagree (even more, 12% assume that it is never objective, 41%—mostly unobjective). Objectivity of the media is rated higher by respondents with higher education, Latvian language speakers, those employed in the public sector, respondents with high incomes. Objectivity of the information provided by the media is more often questioned by respondents who speak Russian in the family (67% believe that media information is never or mostly not objective), non-citizens of Latvia (69%), residents with low incomes (69%), Kurzeme (65%) and Latgale (71%) residents.

The research company SKDS has data on Latvia's residents' views on media objectivity since 2003, when the Objectivity Index was created. It shows the difference between assessments: information is objective, and information is not objective. The data of 2022 identify the lowest assessment of the level of media objectivity during the entire study period—14.6% (Chart 8) (data of 19 out of 20 years are available, study was not conducted in 2004). At the beginning of 21st century, when Latvia was preparing to join the EU and NATO the Index is positive, it reached its highest level in the first decade of the century in 2007—it was +20.3 (Latvia was admitted to the EU in 2004). After that, the index falls rapidly, and this dynamic could be related to the fact that Latvia is one of the EU countries that was severely affected by the global economic
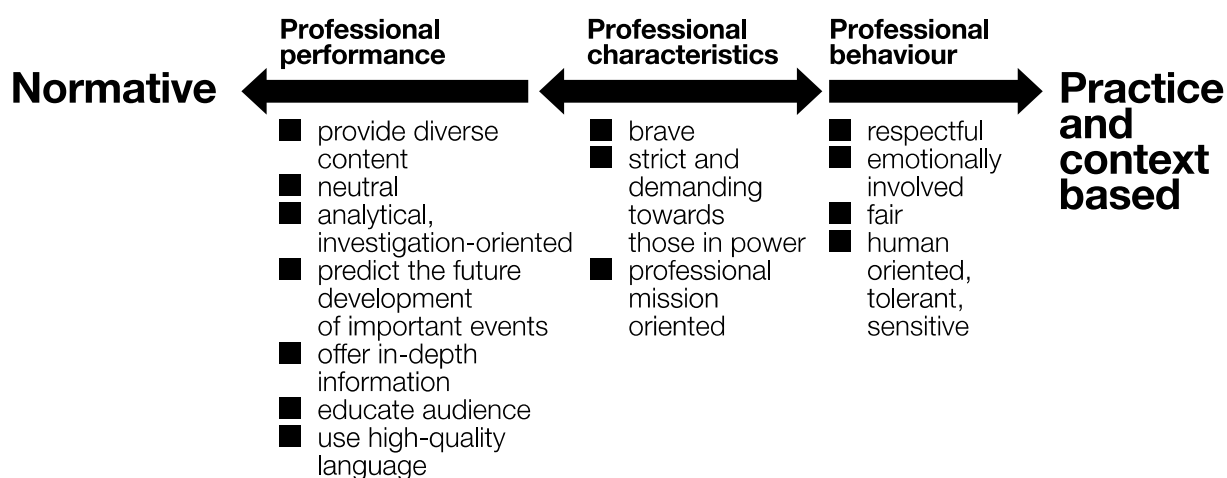

FIGURE 1
Structure of journalism professional quality-related themes and sub-themes.

recession in 2009 (Purviņš, February 21, 2023). During that time, the standard of living of the population dropped sharply, several hundred thousand inhabitants became economic migrants in other EU countries (Hazans, 2011). The media market lost almost half of its income, the advertising market decreased by 46% (Kantar, February 17, 2010), and it still has not returned to its former level (LRA, February 23, 2024). The second decade of the study begins with a decline in the index: −9.2 in 2011. In the following 5 years it slowly improved, reaching the highest level in the entire study period (+24.6) in 2017 and was positive for two more years. In 2020, when the global pandemic began, it fell by more than 20 points from +20.9 in 2019 to −0.4 in 2020, the index also decreased slightly in 2021 (−3.3), reaching a 20-year peak of the lowest level in 2022 (−14.6).

5.2.2 Diversity of opinions

FGD participants expect media content to be diverse and analytical and include investigative journalism and serious topics. The media are expected to play a more educational role on a wide range of issues, including practical ones. Journalists are seen as experts in a complex information environment. People are confused by the large and fragmented flow of information, thus, on topics of public importance, audiences want a clear answer and help to identify disinformation. The desire for attractiveness, concise form, simplicity and clarity is emphasized.

An ambiguous assessment of the media can also be observed in the survey conducted in 2022.

When answering the questions to what extent the media helps the public understand important problems (Chart 5), (events in Ukraine, the Covid pandemic, parliamentary elections), two thirds admit that media information is useful, one in five fully agrees.

An important criterion for involvement is trust in the media. Assessment of trust is determined by perception of independence. According to the results of the FGD, evaluation of independence allows to ensure objectivity, which Latvian residents often associate with the opportunity to see their views represented in the media.

Among minority representatives and Latgalians, there is a higher level of distrust in the media and media independence. FGD participants especially distrust media information on controversial, sensitive socio-political issues—pandemics, ethnic relations, war in Ukraine, politics, inequality, and social division.

Among Latgalian FGD groups (Latvian and Russian), among ethnic minority participants in other FGD's there is skepticism, even cynicism about the media independence. Some participants believe that the media in Latvia are not free because someone owns them, someone finances them, some have noticed that politicians persecute journalists. At the same time, support for journalists is expressed, and there is an expectation for them to act professionally.

In this regard, the results of the survey on the need to ensure the diversity of opinions should be mentioned. A majority of respondents (87%) (Chart 5) support the task of the media to present different opinions even if they seem unacceptable to a part of society (including about elections, ethnic relations, vaccination, etc.). The willingness of the respondents to find different opinions from the existing ones is relatively high: two-thirds of the respondents agree with it, one-third disagree.

The data, which compares the audience's support for the presence of diverse opinions in the media and expressed willingness to use media that offer opinions that the audience representatives do not agree with (Chart 6), show that the respondents set higher requirements for the diversity of opinions to the media, compared to the readiness to get to know different opinions. In the group of respondents who "completely agree" that media should be diverse (42%), less than half (17%) seek out different opinions themselves, and an even smaller share (15%) of those who "rather agree" that the media should offer diverse content (44%), agree that they try to read, watch, or listen to media content that expresses opinions with which they completely disagree. One in three respondents who indicated the media's responsibility to ensure the diversity of opinions is ready to follow this principle in their media use. There is a moderate statistically significant correlation between expectations toward the media and self-reported activities to clarify different opinions (Chart 14).

There is no unified support in the focus group discussions, even one of the professional norms—diversity of opinion—is commented on in detail by FGD participants. Some admit that they are sometimes uninterested or bothered by opinions with which they disagree (e.g., vaccine skepticism, intolerance). In such cases, the avoidance of irrelevant views is due to the sufficient presence and uniform repetition or polarized nature of these views, rather than a desire to hear and see only one position. Overall, FGD participants see diversity of opinion as an important value that helps them to evaluate the media and journalism. A professional journalist is expected to present different points of view neutrally, revealing their weaknesses and strengths, thus helping people to navigate the information and reach conclusions.

5.3 Ethics of journalists—the expected and the experienced

During the research, the FGDs participants discussed the values of media professional ethics—freedom of expression, independence, truthfulness, honesty and openness, and responsibility. Respondents considered all values important.

Analyzing the perception of professional ethics in the interaction between the normative approach and the context of practice (Figure 2), we noticed that the normative requirements in FGD discussions are applied to media organizations, but the practice related themes characterize the perception of journalists' work. In the view of the FGD participants, the appropriateness of the activities of media organizations means independence, trust, accountability and respect for public interests. In the evaluation of journalists' performance, a combination of normative views (objectivity, truth, reliability, etc.) with practice-based characteristics (integrity, respect, information quality assurance, avoiding the spread of bias, and sensationalization, commercialization etc.) can be observed.

Freedom of expression (FoE) was highlighted as the most important of all the values listed above. It is associated with the ability of mass media to provide diversity of opinion. A large majority of FGD participants believe that there is FoE in the Latvian media, including the PSM. This assessment is determined by the extent to which the respondent sees the coverage of topics important to him/ her in the media content, as well as the representation of him/herself and others like him/herself. Criticism that such representation is absent or insufficient was more often expressed by participants of Russophone FGDs.

FIGURE 2
Structure of journalism ethics values-related themes and sub-themes.

Some respondents speak of "artificial" FoE, characterized by "political correctness," or how it is or is not appropriate to speak about certain issues. Both Latvian and Russophone FGDs showed a phenomenon that could be called a sense of "topic-based freedom of expression." That is, freedom of expression may be high overall, but there are topics (minority school reform, Covid, the war in Ukraine, LGBTQ) on which freedom of expression is said to be significantly lower or non-existent, because dissenting opinions are restricted and, if voiced, can endanger the speaker.

Hidden advertising in media content, one-sidedness, and dishonest behavior of journalists are not supported during the discussions, because journalists are authorities and people trust them.

Answering the questions about professional ethics, almost half of the survey respondents (46%) agree that majority of the Latvian journalists follow professional ethics requirements, a third disagree with this statement, and one in four cannot answer this question (Chart 6).

To assess how frequently journalists' violations are noticed, the survey participants were asked to answer the question "When reading, listening to or watching Latvian media, have you noticed violations by journalists and editorials during the last 12 months?" (Chart 9). 48% of the respondents have noticed specific violations, 43% have not. From the list of nine different violations, those that have a direct connection with objectivity, integrity, the diversity of the information provided, verification of sources and information, are most noticed. 22% of the respondents have noticed that facts and opinions are not clearly distinguished in media publications, 21% found lack of honesty, 21% have noticed that the material is created according to someone's interests, uncritically; 20% noticed that insufficiently verified news was published, and the diversity of opinions was not respected, 16% noticed discrimination and/or incitement to hatred, 15%—noticed hidden advertising, 12% noticed that the media has deliberately published false, fabricated information (fake news), 7.9%—NA.

Russian-language media users (Chart 10) noticed violations more often, 31% did not notice them. 29% of Russian-language media consumers have noticed that the facts are not separated from opinions in media content and diversity of opinions is not respected, 27% noticed unverified news, 25%—discrimination and/ or incitement of hatred, 24% lack of critical attitude toward

sources, content prepared in the interest of someone. Among Latvian media users, 12–23% of respondents have noticed the listed violations. This group also most often complained that facts are not separated from opinions or that the material is created in someone's interests.

We attributed media violations to different journalistic cultures depending on accountability, determining that Russian culture is characterized by not separation the facts from opinions and the publication of fake news. The instrumental culture in this analysis is characterized by a lack of integrity and respect, content created according to the interests of the source, situations when the news has not been sufficiently verified, hate speech has been found in the materials, the principle of diversity has not been observed, and hidden advertising has been found. Our data show (Chart 11) that more than half of the surveyed did not notice the violations, 25% noticed violations characteristic of both journalistic cultures, 20% noticed the signs of instrumental journalistic culture, 3%—Russian journalistic culture.

Comparing the information sources of the respondents (Chart 12), both journalistic cultures was noticed more often by users of the Russian federal media (40%), less often by the PSM audience. Comparing the groups of respondents according to the use of professional mass media, we found that it determines to a small extent the ability to identify different journalistic cultures: Russian and instrumental journalistic culture were noticed to a similar extent by users of different media (Chart 13), both journalistic cultures were more often noticed by Latvian CMM (33%) and Latvian and Russian CMM users (38%).

5.4 The audience's actions in cases of media ethics breaches

According to the survey data, a the surveyed are poorly informed about the practical side of obeying professional ethics. One in five respondents (20%) agrees that they noticed journalists' public apologies for mistakes (Chart 5). A small part of respondents (16%) knows where to turn if a medium or journalist has violated ethical norms, two thirds are not informed about it.

The data of the qualitative research also confirm underdeveloped institutionalization of media ethics. There is low awareness among

FGD participants about what to do and where to go when media breach professional ethics. Most would only act if their own interests or those of a family member had been harmed.

When asked what they would do if they felt that a journalist had acted unethically, participants in the study said they would discuss it with family or friends, do nothing, or approach the journalist directly.

> "*I called the television, because it was on the news. Phone numbers are available, no problem, you can call. At least I was heard.*" (Female, 49, Latgale FGD, Latvian).

A serious breach by the media would be an offense against honor and dignity.

> (Female, 49, Latgale resident group, Latvian): "[…] *I would also definitely turn to the media because reputation today is one push, and it spirals. Reputation is being built for years, not one day.*"

For some discussion participants, the first institution for complaints that comes to mind is the police, prosecutor's office or a law firm.

> "*If it all were made public and the facts were distorted, I would turn against it and fight because I don't think that just anyone can open their mouth and say all that comes to mind just because they want to.*" (Female, 44, Kurzeme resident group, Russian).

Some respondents say they would not spend their time fighting media ethics violations but would deal with them in other ways—for example, by comforting a person who has been unjustly harassed.

Respondents consider that serious breaches of media ethics, such as publishing fake news, disinformation, hate speech, should be punished. The participants do not support harsh punishments, e.g., dismissing journalists or closing a media outlet is seen as a disproportionate action. It is therefore important that the media informs the public and apologizes for misconduct.

> "*Well, maybe not as radical as closing a channel or penalize, but I would like the society to know that there has been an ethics breach, unprofessional conduct, that a withdrawal is published.*" (Female, 40, Latgale resident group, Latvian).

> "*I don't like people who think they are always right, they never make mistakes, I don't trust them very much. Owning up to your mistakes makes you more trustworthy.*" (Male, 59, Riga resident group, Latvian).

Some participants also mentioned sensation-seeking, intolerance, rudeness or violation of privacy as serious journalistic offenses, and considered that most of the offenses might be occasional and have a moral and ethical basis, meriting reprimand but not severe punishment.

6 Conclusions and discussion

In this audience-centered study, we analyzed the results of a survey and focus groups to understand audience perceptions of media quality and journalistic ethics, considering media usage patterns and interest in current affairs. Our data enable us to identify various gaps linked to media usage and interest in news/involvement, contradictory attitudes toward journalistic cultures, and discourses related to perception of media ethics.

Our quantitative data support the findings of other studies that the role of global platforms in news consumption is increasing, interest in news use is gradually decreasing, and fragmented news avoidance is developing (Newman, 2024). The use of media, especially SNS, differs only between younger and older survey respondents. Therefore, we believe that the *generational gap* in media use found in previous studies (Ghersetti and Westlund, 2016; NEPLP/Latvijas Fakti, 2022) is blurring.

Analyzing respondents' media use by family language (Latvian or Russian, other), we found more similarities than differences. Unlike previous studies of Latvian audiences' media use, which have analyzed differences in linguistically divided audiences or *digital and ethnicity related gaps* (Juzefovičs, 2022; NEPLP/Latvijas Fakti, 2022), we concluded that media choice in Latvia is determined by the language used in the family, but family language does not determine the segment of media chosen, diversity of information sources used or understanding of media ethics. Hence, our data do not allow ethnically or linguistically identified groups to be perceived as homogeneous, as they have an in-group fragmentation (Juzefovičs and Vihalemm, 2020) also in attitudes toward media.

Generally, Latvian residents are interested in news and their media consumption is characterized by diverse sources. Still, respondents who mainly rely on SNS for information or do not use media at all have less interest in events and the variety of sources selected. This group relies on algorithms and confirms tendency that the wide range of media available is leading to a narrowing of choices in information sources (Espeland, 2024). News feeds determined by algorithms are seen as convenient, rather than limiting the diversity and accessibility of information or demonstrating unacceptable power relations. We called this the *involvement gap* because interest in news affects not only media consumption but also media perception and quality/ethics assessment.

The demand for diversity of opinions and media responsibility, similar to other studies (Beckers, 2024) goes hand in hand with a lack of willingness to learn opinions that do not align with previous stances of audience members. In fact, we found an *objectivity gap*, because the high demand for a diversity of opinions in the media does not correspond to the self-assessed interest of the audience members in seeking different opinions in the media.

This illustrates the complex and often contradictory relationship between journalists and their audiences today: even when journalism is honest and diverse, it may still struggle to capture public attention—despite the audience's expectation that high-quality journalism should be readily available. A closer analysis reveals that while ethnicity does not determine media repertoire or perceptions of journalistic quality, Russophone and low-income respondents tend to be more skeptical of the objectivity of media content, which is already perceived as relatively low.

Our findings suggest that in times of crisis, public trust in the objectivity of media declines significantly. One key insight from this study is that audience members may consciously suppress their openness to diverse perspectives when overwhelmed by emotionally charged and polarized content. This helps to expand current

explanations of news fatigue and news avoidance, which are often attributed to the high-choice media environment (Gurr, 2022) and the prevalence of negativity in professional journalism (Espeland, 2024).

Assessing media quality and ethics audience representatives recognize different journalistic cultures, supporting professional modern culture, and pointing out aspects of instrumental and post-Soviet or Russian journalistic culture as undesirable.

A part of the FGD participants, although they are active and regular users of the media, expressed cynicism about media. This attitude is shaped by a general, pre-existing belief that truthful information and reporting are impossible, that the media and any person are limited in their ability to communicate honestly and act independently, as all have to face the constraints of power. This attitude does not imply a rejection of the use of the media, it does not sound like a reproach addressed to the media, but it shows a general view of power relations in society, emphasizing the powerlessness of the individual under the unjust influence of power. This attitude, more often represented by Russophone or economically disadvantaged regions FGD participants, also shows a kind of tolerance toward restrictions on media freedom and lower expectations of FoE in the face of its inevitable limitations. This could indicate that the audiences recognize various media practices, and its perception of the media identifies the user experience, in which the instrumental journalistic culture plays an important role.

FGDs in Latvian and Russian show the influence of the language used in the family on media assessment, which points to the divide of Latvian society (Auers, 2023) where socio-economic aspects rather than language or ethnicity are more important (Juzefovičs, 2022). Russophone and Latgale (the least economically developed region of Latvia) FGDs are the most critical about the media. The reasons given are insufficient media freedom, the influence of owners and management on content, and a general belief that media are ideologically biased. Such attitudes can signal the personal experiences of media users and effects of prolonged socio-economic backwardness in Latgale where the number of Russophones exceeds the Latvian-speaking population (Andžāns, 2024). Russian-language media in Latvia and media in Latgale, as well as part of national and local media in Latvian (Kruks, 2007; Rožukalne, 2013) are more often associated with an instrumental and Russian journalistic culture, demonstrating long-standing tendencies of political parallelism and oligarchization.

FGD participants make a clear distinction between the content of journalists and that of other information providers. Audience members perceive journalists as epistemological authorities. They support the role of journalists in educating the society and a hierarchical, top-down model of the relationship between media and audiences. The perception of journalistic quality and ethics is based on a normative approach and emphasize the idea that morally saturated journalism can change the relationship between the audience and the objects of journalism (Danielson, 2023).

Audience members that expect journalists to be human, similar to other recent studies (Mellado and Gajardo, 2024), are empathetic toward journalists and their work, showing a demand for more humanity in media-society relations, and transparency of values in the work of media professionals. Generally, the audience members support an absolutist approach to the ethical orientation of journalists; it is combined with an exceptionalist approach, as the audience

members are aware of the presence of external and internal influences on the work of journalists.

Large part of respondents surveyed believe that the media act in accordance with the principles of professional ethics but emphasized lack of objectivity, especially in regard to geopolitical crisis related issues. When the survey assesses journalists' ethical breaches, a large majority of respondents have noticed them, and they are directly or indirectly related to the principle of objectivity. It is a broad and universally applicable concept (Helberger et al., 2022) that, in the eyes of FGD participants, encompasses the value of FoE, diversity of opinion, independence, truthfulness, professionalism and integrity of journalists. Russian FGD participants associate objectivity with the need for media to reflect people like "me" and criticize the insufficient presence of minority opinions in media content, excessive coverage of officials' opinions, already criticized in Latvia's media content studies (Kruk and Skulte, 2022).

The basis of journalistic evaluation by audience representatives is formed by recognizable and normative journalistic "legitimacy discourses" (Banjac and Hanusch, 2022, p. 719). When the audience representatives discuss the journalistic practice in detail, then alongside the normative interpretation, we can observe a look that takes us beyond the limits of the normative perception of journalism (Banjac and Hanusch, 2022, p. 720). We concluded that the audience's attitude toward the media ethics could fluctuate under the influence of crises (Broda and Strömbäck, 2024; Krumm et al., 2023; Strömbäck et al., 2020) which can be connected to the shrinking of FoE and the exclusion of some stances from public discourse. However, audience assessment is much more balanced and supportive to journalism compared to the polarized views observed in the political discourse (Rožukalne et al., 2024), which questions the role of journalists and professional media in democracy.

The results of our research are useful for editorial decision-making to consider more investments in transparency of internal editorial practices, creating a better understanding of journalistic quality and accountability.

6.1 Limitations of the study

First, since we present an audience assessment of journalistic quality and ethics in a single country, our study resembles a case study. To generalize the findings, comparable data would be needed at least in the CEE countries, which have been affected in different ways by the geopolitical crisis. Second, our data shows the audience's perception of media ethics in a particular period, so it is not possible for us to show the dynamics of perception over time. Third, even when combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, our study is limited by the self-reporting approach. To find out in what way the audience's assessment of journalistic ethics affects the actual practice of using media and the attitude toward journalists, it would be necessary to continue the research with ethnographic methods or an experiment.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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