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Decoding Audience Needs: A Critical Analysis of Turkish Digital Journalism through the User Needs Model

Sarphan UZUNOĞLU
Assistant Prof., Dr.
Izmir University of Economics
Faculty of Communication
sarphan.uzunoglu@ieu.edu.tr
ORCID: 0000-0002-9736-1763

Abstract

This study examines how digital news platforms in Turkey address and ideologically reconstruct user needs within a polarized media environment. It is grounded in the User Needs Model (UNM), which combines audience engagement, platform logic, and metric-driven journalism. However, the model's neglect of social structures—such as class, race, and gender—limits its critical capacity and treats audiences as atomized individuals. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative content analysis of 200 news items from four platforms with a discourse analysis of 30 purposively selected stories. The coding process showed high inter-coder reliability (Cohen's Kappa ≥ 0.81). The findings reveal that narrative formats, most notably "Give Me Perspective" and "Connect Me" embed political and emotional cues through historical references and affective framing. In the Turkish context, user needs are not merely unmet but ideologically repurposed. Consequently, UNM should be reconsidered not only as a practical taxonomy but also as a critical lens to interrogate editorial logic and the democratic function of journalism in hybrid media systems.

keywords: *User needs model, headline strategies, Turkish media landscape, editorial imagination, digital journalism*

Résumé

Décoder les besoins du public : une analyse critique du journalisme numérique turc à travers le Modèle des Besoins des Utilisateurs

Cette étude analyse comment les plateformes d'information numérique en Turquie répondent aux besoins des utilisateurs et les reconstruisent idéologiquement dans un paysage médiatique polarisé. Elle s'appuie sur le Modèle des Besoins des Utilisateurs (User Needs Model – UNM), qui articule l'engagement du public, les logiques des plateformes et le journalisme guidé par les métriques. Toutefois, ce modèle présente des limites critiques importantes en ignorant les dimensions sociales telles que la classe, le genre et la race, traitant ainsi les publics comme des entités isolées. Une méthodologie mixte a été adoptée: une analyse quantitative de contenu portant sur 200 articles issus de quatre plateformes, et une analyse de discours sur 30 articles sélectionnés de manière raisonnée. Le codage a montré une forte fiabilité inter-juges (Kappa de Cohen ≥ 0,81). Les résultats révèlent que les formats narratifs comme « Donne-moi du recul » et « Relie-moi » mobilisent des références historiques et des cadres émotionnels porteurs de signaux politiques. Dans le contexte turc, les besoins des utilisateurs ne sont pas seulement négligés, mais aussi reconfigurés idéologiquement. Le modèle UNM doit ainsi être reconsidéré comme un outil critique permettant d'interroger les logiques éditoriales et le rôle démocratique du journalisme au sein des systèmes médiatiques hybrides.

mots-clés: *Modèle des besoins des utilisateurs, stratégies de titres, environnement médiatique en Turquie, imagination éditoriale, journalisme numérique*

Öz

Kitle İhtiyaçlarının Kodunu Çözmek: Kullanıcı İhtiyaçları Modeli Üzerinden Türkiye'de Dijital Gazeteciliğinin Eleştirel Analizi

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki dijital haber platformlarının kullanıcı ihtiyaçlarını nasıl karşıladığını ve bu ihtiyaçları nasıl ideolojik olarak yeniden biçimlendirdiğini incelemektedir. Kuramsal temel olarak, medya kurumlarının kullanıcı etkileşimini, platform mantığını ve metrik odaklı üretimi bir araya getiren Kullanıcı İhtiyaçları Modeli (User Needs Model - UNM) kullanılmaktadır. Ancak bu modelin izleyiciyi bireyci ve apolitik bir çerçevede ele alması, toplumsal ilişkileri (sınıf, cinsiyet, ırk) göz ardı etmesi önemli bir eleştiri noktasıdır. Araştırmada, dört farklı dijital haber platformundan seçilen 200 haberin nicel içerik analizi ve amaçlı örnekleme yoluyla seçilen 30 haberin söylem analizi yapılmıştır. Kodlama sürecinde yüksek düzeyde güvenilirlik sağlanmıştır (Cohen's Kappa ≥ 0.81). Bulgular, özellikle "Bana Perspektif Sun" ve "Beni Bağla" gibi anlatı türlerinin tarihsel göndermeler ve duygusal çerçeveler aracılığıyla kullanıcı ihtiyaçlarını politik ve ideolojik kodlarla

yeniden tanımladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda UNM, yalnızca pratik bir sınıflandırma aracı değil; aynı zamanda hibrit medya sistemlerinde dijital haberciliğin demokratik potansiyelini ve editoryal tahayyülünü sorgulayan eleştirel bir çerçeve olarak yeniden konumlandırılmalıdır.

anahtar kelimeler: *Kullanıcı ihtiyaçları modeli, başlık stratejileri, Türkiye medya ortamı, editoryal tahayyül, dijital gazetecilik*

Introduction

In response to audience disengagement and fragmented attention spans, news organizations have increasingly embraced audience-centric practices. Engaged journalism—emphasizing connection with digitally empowered audiences—has emerged as a strategic response to declining trust and institutional legitimacy in legacy media systems (Batsell, 2015). Yet, the roots of audience-centered thinking can be traced back to earlier forms of public service journalism, where informing, educating, and entertaining were foundational goals. This historical continuity underscores that current models like the User Needs Model (UNM) are not abrupt innovations but contemporary articulations of enduring normative commitments. Among the most widely cited frameworks shaping this transformation is the User Needs Model (UNM), which offers a typological approach to understanding news consumption motivations—ranging from "Update Me" and "Inspire Me" to "Keep Me Engaged" and "Give Me Perspective" (Costera Meijer, 2020; Costera Meijer & Bijleveld, 2016). However, while pragmatic for newsrooms, the model carries significant critical limitations. By framing audiences as atomized individuals detached from their social contexts, it largely ignores structural dynamics such as class, gender, and ideology. This study argues that when applied in a polarized and economically precarious media environment like Turkey's, the UNM risks becoming a tool that reinforces hegemonic narratives under the guise of audience-centricity. These approaches are designed to recalibrate journalism's public value by aligning editorial choices with users' cognitive, affective, and informational expectations. These expectations often carry emotional and social dimensions—such as the need for belonging, the desire for justice, or the experience of political frustration—that go beyond mere information retrieval. Understanding user needs, therefore, also requires attending to the affective structures and social imaginaries that shape media consumption in polarized environments. In Turkey's media landscape, shaped by economic precarity and platform dependency (Yeşil, 2014; Tosuner, 2023), user needs reflect not only audience demand, but a strategic balance of institutional aspiration and structural limitation. This dynamic is not unique to Turkey and likely resonates with the realities of journalism in other hybrid regimes, such as those in Hungary, the Philippines, or India, where journalists must similarly navigate pressures from populist governments, concentrated ownership, and the economic imperatives of digital platforms.

However, most of the literature grounding the UNM originates from relatively stable democracies with robust public service traditions. This creates a conceptual blind spot when attempting to translate audience-first models to hybrid political regimes and economically strained media environments. In this regard, Turkey offers a particularly instructive case: the country's media system is marked by authoritarian pressure, political polarization, and constrained editorial independence (Akser & Baybars, 2023). Meanwhile, a prolonged financial crisis—marked by inflation, currency devaluation, and investor flight—has undermined the economic viability of both legacy and digital newsrooms (Tosuner, 2023).

In such precarious settings, audience metrics have become both a survival strategy and a source of editorial distortion. Analytics systems, while seemingly objective, increasingly dictate the allocation of editorial attention based on measurable performance indicators, such as clicks, dwell time, and bounce rate (Blanchett Neheli, 2018; Carlson, 2018). Although they offer real-time feedback and surface actionable insights, these systems risk narrowing the scope of news content, incentivizing sensationalism, and blurring the boundaries between editorial and commercial logic (Moyo, Mare, & Matsilele, 2020). However, such an account risks veering into technological determinism by overstating the inevitability of metric-driven distortions. It is essential to consider how journalists negotiate, resist, or selectively embrace platform logics, often developing hybrid editorial strategies that balance algorithmic incentives with professional values.

In Turkey's case, this dynamic is further compounded by an increasing reliance on foreign funding and platform-based visibility. Historically marginalized by a state-dominated advertising regime and private sector pressures, many independent outlets have turned to international donors and grant-based journalism for financial viability. As recent field research suggests, while this support is vital for editorial survival, it also introduces complex tensions—including perceptions of external influence, ideological misalignment with local audiences, and fragmented newsroom priorities. Such dependencies may unintentionally produce content that resonates more with donor expectations than with domestic publics, thereby widening the disconnect between journalism and its intended users.

Meanwhile, platformization has further altered the ecosystem. As platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and X continue to dominate news distribution, editorial autonomy is increasingly subordinated to algorithmic curation, engagement metrics, and content moderation policies. These platform affordances not only shape what becomes visible but also condition journalistic practices around virality, visibility, and monetization, creating a double-bind between editorial integrity and audience reach (Napoli, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the present study diagnostically examines how four leading Turkish digital news outlets—*BBC Türkçe, Cumhuriyet, Milliyet, and Hürriyet*—operationalize the User Needs Model (UNM) in their editorial strategies over a one-month sampling period. The inquiry focuses not only on surface-level categorization but also interrogates how these outlets interpret, recontextualize, or selectively ignore different user needs in line with their institutional mandates, ownership structures, and audience imaginaries.

Moreover, the concept of the 'user' itself warrants scrutiny. Far from being a monolithic entity, users in the Turkish context are fragmented along lines of class, education, ideology, and geography. This heterogeneity challenges the assumption that editorial strategies can universally 'satisfy' user needs without reproducing new exclusions or hierarchies.

Specifically, the study addresses three core research questions:

1. How do editorial priorities and the distribution of UNM categories vary across different media institutions, and what patterns of convergence or divergence emerge in relation to the eight distinct user motivations articulated by the model?
2. Which user needs are systematically overrepresented or neglected, and what do these editorial asymmetries reveal about underlying ideological logics, commercial imperatives, and political constraints operating within the Turkish media system?
3. To what extent do engagement-driven analytics and platform incentives shape the framing, packaging, and publication of content, and how do these forces align with—or depart from—the normative goals of public service journalism, particularly in politically polarized and economically fragile environments?

In approaching these questions, the study combines quantitative content analysis of 200 headlines with in-depth discourse analysis of 30 purposively sampled full-text articles. This two-pronged methodology allows for both macro-level pattern identification and micro-level narrative unpacking, providing a more layered understanding of how user needs are not only distributed but discursively constructed.

By embedding the User Needs Model within the Turkish media context—characterized by state influence, market volatility, and platform dependency—this study addresses a key theoretical and empirical gap in the literature on audience-centric journalism outside of Western liberal democracies. It seeks to advance the field by demonstrating how global engagement frameworks like the UNM are locally interpreted and operationalized under conditions of political uncertainty, algorithmic pressure, and institutional fragmentation. In doing so, the research contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on the performativity of

audience models, the politicization of editorial decision-making, and the limits of metric-driven news production in delivering on journalism's democratic promise. However, while the UNM has gained traction as a pragmatic tool for organizing editorial strategies around measurable user needs, it is not without critical limitations. Its conceptualization of audiences as atomized, rational consumers overlooks the deeply embedded social and political contexts in which "needs" are articulated, interpreted, and reconstructed. This decontextualized framing aligns with a broader market logic that privileges engagement metrics over structural inequalities, thereby obscuring how editorial choices are shaped by class, gender, ideology, and power relations. In highly polarized environments, such as Turkey, these omissions risk reinforcing hegemonic narratives under the guise of audience responsiveness. Thus, this study not only applies the UNM but also interrogates its normative assumptions and ideological blind spots, arguing for a more contextually grounded and critically engaged application of audience models in journalism research.

Literature Review

The concept of audience-oriented journalism has undergone significant transformations over the past two decades, primarily influenced by digitalization, evolving socio-political landscapes, and the integration of real-time analytics into editorial practices. Historically, the audience in journalism was perceived largely as an imagined entity, characterized by relatively homogeneous needs and preferences. Journalists traditionally operated within paradigms shaped by professional instincts and normative judgments, guided primarily by considerations of public interest, civic responsibility, and notions of editorial autonomy (Coddington et al., 2021). However, the rise of digital analytics tools such as Chartbeat and Google Analytics has substantially altered this dynamic, shifting journalists' engagement with their audience from abstract speculation to empirical measurement based on quantifiable metrics of user behavior (Nelson, 2019).

This transition towards measurable journalism, as conceptualized by Carlson (2018), underscores how editorial practices have become increasingly dominated by metrics and algorithmically driven evaluations. Performance indicators—such as page views, click-through rates, engagement times, and emotional reactions—now guide newsroom priorities, often subordinating traditional journalistic values to commercial imperatives and visibility demands. Blanchett Neheli (2018) supports this viewpoint by documenting the historical evolution of analytics from simple traffic measurements to sophisticated metrics that intricately influence editorial decisions. However, while these analytical tools offer journalists actionable insights into audience behaviors, they simultaneously create new pressures to produce content optimized primarily for algorithmic visibility and commercial viability.

Moreover, this measurable logic, though initially emerging from Western media contexts, has expanded globally, influencing newsrooms operating under various socio-economic conditions. For instance, Moyo, Mare, and Matsilele (2020) have illustrated that even in African newsrooms with limited technological infrastructure, metrics-driven journalism has reconfigured editorial strategies, demonstrating the pervasive influence of performance-based imperatives. Yet, such metrics are far from neutral, as their application frequently biases editorial agendas towards sensationalism and shallow engagement, potentially undermining the social significance and critical depth traditionally associated with quality journalism (Fürst, 2020).

The emergence of the User Needs Model (UNM), prominently advocated by scholars such as Costera Meijer (2020) and operationalized by organizations like Smartocto (Shishkin, 2022), represents a concerted attempt to reconcile audience analytics with journalistic quality. The UNM delineates various audience motivations, such as informational ("Update Me"), educational ("Help Me Understand"), emotional ("Make Me Feel"), and practical ("Give Me Perspective") needs, thereby offering a structured framework for aligning content with audience interests. This approach signifies a deliberate shift from viewing journalism solely as information dissemination towards a more relational, emotionally resonant, and user-responsive practice.

The UNM's focus on audience motivations shares deep conceptual roots with the classic Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, which shifted the focus of media research from the media to the audience (Ruggiero, 2000). Originating as a subtradition of media effects research, the U&G approach studies how audiences actively select media and content to satisfy their social and psychological needs (Ruggiero, 2000). It seeks to understand why people engage with media, with motivations often categorized into typologies such as diversion, social utility, personal identity, and surveillance (Ruggiero, 2000). However, while U&G is a broad theoretical framework for explaining media consumption from the audience's point of view (Ruggiero, 2000), the UNM is a production-oriented model designed for direct implementation by journalists. The UNM can therefore be seen as a practical application of U&G principles, translating the theoretical understanding of audience needs into an actionable editorial strategy for the contemporary news environment.

However, despite the UNM's structured and seemingly user-centric nature, its conceptual framework carries significant critical limitations. The model's primary weakness is its conceptualization of audiences as atomized, rational consumers, a framing that overlooks the deeply embedded social and political contexts in which "needs" are articulated and reconstructed. This decontextualized approach aligns with a market-driven logic that privileges engagement metrics over structural inequalities, thereby obscuring how editorial choices are shaped by class, gender, and power relations. In highly polarized environments

like Turkey, such omissions risk reinforcing hegemonic narratives under the guise of audience responsiveness. Scholarly critiques explicitly caution against this oversimplification of audience diversity. For instance, Banjac (2021) and Banjac and Hanusch (2022) emphasize the significant role of intersectional identities in shaping audience expectations, arguing that the singular conception of the audience embedded within standardized engagement frameworks overlooks nuanced socio-cultural differences. Similarly, Riedl and Eberl (2022) underscore the influence of political ideology on how audiences interpret journalistic credibility, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all model inadequately captures the complexity of reception and engagement. Therefore, this study not only applies the UNM but also interrogates its normative assumptions and ideological blind spots, arguing for a more contextually grounded and critically engaged application of audience models in journalism research.

Parallel to these debates, trust and credibility in journalism have undergone reconceptualization, shifting towards participatory and dialogic frameworks. Batsell (2015) introduces the concept of "engaged journalism," emphasizing direct and meaningful interactions with digitally empowered audiences. According to this perspective, trust-building involves not only accuracy and transparency but also emotional connection and community engagement. Similarly, Fisher et al. (2020) and Harcup (2015) argue for more participatory journalistic formats, advocating for interactive practices such as comment moderation, crowdsourcing, and community journalism that enhance the reciprocal relationship between journalists and their audiences. Steensen, Ferrer-Conill, and Peters (2020) further emphasize the need for co-creation and the acceptance of ambiguity within audience engagement, promoting an anti-essentialist view that views audience participation as inherently complex and multifaceted.

The rise of analytics and engagement-oriented practices has also reshaped internal newsroom dynamics and power structures. Loosen and Schmidt (2012) and Lindén (2017) have documented how the integration of real-time metrics has transformed newsroom hierarchies and routines, often creating tensions between editorial independence and commercial accountability. The performative nature of the audience constructed through analytics dashboards challenges traditional journalistic autonomy, making editorial decisions increasingly reactive to immediate audience feedback. This trend has necessitated deliberate institutional safeguards, particularly in Scandinavian contexts, where attempts have been made to decouple editorial judgments from purely commercial motivations (Lindén, 2017).

Despite these institutional adjustments, structural constraints continue to limit the potential of audience-oriented journalism, particularly in politically repressive or economically unstable media environments. Research focused on the Turkish media landscape vividly illustrates these challenges. Studies

by Akser and Baybars (2023) outline the pressures from political censorship, media ownership concentration, and widespread self-censorship, all of which severely constrain the scope and depth of audience engagement strategies. Similarly, Tosuner (2023) highlights the impact of economic crises on Turkish journalism, emphasizing how financial instability and shrinking advertisement revenues force editorial strategies toward short-term audience acquisition rather than long-term journalistic quality or depth. These findings demonstrate that audience-oriented journalism in Turkey is inherently shaped by broader economic and political forces, underscoring the necessity of contextually adaptive engagement models.

The evolving dynamics of algorithmic visibility and platform economics also substantially influence the viability of audience-centric practices. Thurman and Fletcher (2018) argue that platform distribution algorithms profoundly shape news consumption patterns, thereby influencing both the visibility of certain content and the corresponding editorial strategies. Consequently, editorial practices are increasingly compelled to conform to platform-specific algorithms, which prioritize highly engaging but potentially superficial content over substantive journalism.

Given these complex realities, scholars have increasingly advocated for ethically grounded, human-centered approaches to journalism. Dierickx and Lindén (2023) highlight the importance of embedding user needs within automated fact-checking technologies, proposing that ethical journalism must prioritize transparency, accountability, and user comprehension. Similarly, Chen et al. (2022) emphasize the critical importance of explainable and transparent artificial intelligence systems within journalistic practices, arguing for a design philosophy that prioritizes user understanding and trust. Swart, Nielen, and Sikkema-de Jong (2022) contribute to this discourse by exploring pedagogical approaches that leverage audience feedback for enhancing comprehension and engagement, positioning journalism as not merely informational but also instructional.

Ultimately, the integration of these diverse perspectives and critical analyses suggests that audience-oriented journalism today must strike a balance between technological infrastructures, commercial imperatives, political contexts, and user expectations within specific institutional frameworks. The continuous evolution of these factors implies that audience engagement models, while offering innovative potentials for newsroom strategies, also necessitate careful navigation of ethical complexities and socio-political realities. Future research should prioritize a nuanced exploration of these intersections, particularly in underrepresented and constrained media contexts, to ensure audience engagement strategies genuinely enhance journalism's democratic and public-oriented mission.

Methodology

The study utilizes a stratified purposive sample comprising 200 digital news headlines sourced from four ideologically and institutionally distinct Turkish news outlets: *BBC Türkçe, Cumhuriyet, Milliyet*, and *Hürriyet*. Each outlet contributed 50 headlines, randomly selected from publicly accessible digital platforms (primarily their official websites) over a specified one-month period. These outlets were selected to represent a stratified sample of the Turkish digital news landscape, encompassing distinct ideological positions and ownership models. The sample includes: *BBC Türkçe*, representing a transnational public-service broadcaster known for its commitment to impartiality; Cumhuriyet, a historically prominent, secularist-republican newspaper with a strong oppositional stance; and *Milliyet* and *Hürriyet*, two of the country's longest-running mainstream legacy newspapers operating under corporate ownership with pro-government alignment. This selection allows for a comparative analysis of how user needs are operationalized across different institutional and political logics. Each news item collected from these publications was defined as a standalone digital article, including its headline, lead paragraph, and main body text, allowing for a comprehensive and consistent comparative analysis across outlets.

The research employs a convergent mixed methods design, integrating quantitative content analysis with qualitative interpretive analysis. Initially, each news item was quantitatively coded by three independent coders according to the eight predefined user needs categories of the User Needs Model: "Update Me," "Keep Me Engaged," "Give Me Perspective," "Educate Me," "Divert Me," "Inspire Me," "Help Me," and "Connect Me." This categorization was systematically applied based on the dominant communicative function identified across the headline, lead, and body text of each article. Detailed definitions and representative examples for each category utilized in this study are outlined in Table 1.

To ensure coding consistency, a comprehensive coding manual was developed and iteratively refined through pilot testing, taking into account cultural and linguistic specificities relevant to the Turkish context. Intercoder reliability was calculated on the entire sample (n=200) using Cohen's Kappa statistic, revealing substantial agreement among the coders.

Following quantitative categorization, a qualitative content analysis was conducted by the lead researcher, specifically analyzing 30 articles selected based on full agreement between coders on the primary UNM category. These items were drawn from the 200-article Stage 1 dataset to ensure analytical consistency. This qualitative phase involved a deeper interpretative analysis of additional discursive layers and narrative techniques not explicitly addressed in the quantitative coding. Elements such as framing, thematic emphasis, rhetorical strategies, and narrative structure were examined to contextualize how user needs were editorially constructed and conveyed within articles.

Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics to quantify the prevalence and distribution of user needs categories. Cross-tabulations and chi-square tests were employed to assess significant differences in category alignment among outlets. This dual methodological approach enabled a thorough exploration of both the extent and the nuanced nature of user-needs-driven editorial strategies within Turkey's complex media landscape.

Table 1. User needs model

User Need	Definition	Example
Update Me	Provides factual, timely updates on current events.	"Earthquake Hits Malatya at 5.3 Magnitude"
Educate Me	Explains complex topics or processes to deepen understanding.	"What Is the Constitutional Court?"
Give Me Perspective	Offers analysis or expert commentary to contextualize events.	"Why Turkey's Economic Policy Shift Matters"
Inspire Me	Highlights uplifting stories or personal achievements.	"From Garbage Collector to University Graduate"
Divert Me	Offers entertaining or light content.	"Social Media Reacts to Eurovision Finale"
Help Me	Provides actionable advice or guidance.	"How to Apply for Earthquake Relief Funds"
Connect Me	Facilitates community or civic engagement.	"Where to Volunteer After the Flood"
Keep Me Engaged	Focuses on trending or buzzy topics sparking public conversation.	"Reactions to the President's Tweet"

This categorization framework was comprehensively applied to each article (headline, lead, and body text), instructing coders to prioritize the primary communicative function of the content. While some articles may reflect multiple user needs—such as blending informational updates with calls for reflection or con-

nection—the dominant editorial logic, operationalized through thematic emphasis, tone, and narrative structure, determined the final category assigned. Coders were trained to identify the central intention of the article, asking: what is this story fundamentally trying to do for its audience?

To ensure coding consistency, an extensive codebook was developed, featuring operational definitions, prototypical examples, and borderline cases for each category. This not only minimized interpretive ambiguity but also anchored the coding process in systematic, replicable criteria. In instances of uncertainty, coders engaged in consensus-based adjudication, reinforcing intersubjective reliability. Thus, categorization was not treated as a superficial tag, but as an interpretive judgment grounded in editorial framing and audience-directed intent.

Findings and Discussion

This section interprets the empirical results of a two-stage analysis, designed to capture both the structural and discursive dimensions of audience-centric journalism in Turkey. The first stage provides a macro-level reading of content distribution across the eight User Needs Model (UNM) categories, revealing quantitative patterns that reflect each outlet's editorial priorities, institutional constraints, and audience imaginaries. This structural mapping not only identifies which user needs are emphasized or marginalized but also serves as a diagnostic tool for understanding editorial behavior under economic and political pressure.

The second stage offers a micro-level examination of how user needs are discursively constructed. Through in-depth analysis of narrative modes, tonal registers, framing techniques, and implicit editorial assumptions within a purposive sample of 30 articles, this phase explores how the language of journalism encodes affective appeals, ideological positions, and audience engagement strategies. By connecting these two analytical layers, the study provides a multi-dimensional account of how the promise of audience-first journalism is both operationalized and undermined in a media landscape marked by polarization, platform dependency, and epistemic contestation.

Category Distribution and Editorial Tendencies

Drawing on 200 headlines from *BBC Türkçe, Cumhuriyet, Milliyet,* and *Hürriyet*, this study found a disproportionate emphasis on a few dominant UNM categories. "Update Me" was the most frequent (n = 54), followed by "Give Me Perspective" (n = 43), "Explain This" (n = 37), and "Educate Me" (n = 20). Less frequent but still significant were "Make Me Feel" (n = 19), "Inspire Me" (n = 14), "Divert Me" (n = 8), and "Connect Me" (n = 5). Each headline was assigned a primary UNM category using a two-coder protocol, and intercoder agreement was evaluated using Cohen's Kappa ($\kappa = 0.87$), indicating "almost perfect agreement" (Landis & Koch, 1977). This figure af-

firms the methodological soundness of the coding process and strengthens the empirical foundation of the patterns observed.

A closer look at outlet-specific distributions reveals contrasting editorial logics. *Cumhuriyet*'s use of "Give Me Perspective" and "Explain This" aligns with its oppositional editorial stance, prioritizing interpretive depth and systemic critique. *BBC Türkçe*, while displaying similar category preferences, tended to balance explanatory content with a public-service orientation shaped by its transnational remit. In contrast, *Milliyet* and *Hürriyet* displayed a heavier concentration in "Update Me" and "Make Me Feel" categories, suggesting a platformized editorial strategy geared toward virality and immediacy. These patterns resonate with Carlson's (2018) notion of "measurable journalism" and Blanchett Neheli's (2018) warnings about analytics-driven editorial decision-making.

The stark underrepresentation of "Connect Me" (n = 5), alongside other civic-oriented categories like "Inspire Me," reveals more than a simple narrowing of journalistic imagination. It is a direct reflection of the UNM's inherent weakness when deployed in a risk-averse media environment. These absences are ideologically generative: by avoiding content that fosters solidarity, empathy, or collective action, news outlets effectively depoliticize their audiences, treating them as individual consumers rather than a connected citizenry. This editorial silence aligns with both the commercial logic of platformization, which prioritizes low-risk virality, and the political pressures that discourage civic mobilization. These absences are not ideologically neutral. As Riedl and Eberl (2022) and Akser and Baybars (2023) emphasize, editorial decisions in illiberal political contexts often reflect systemic pressures. Content scarcity in categories that foreground civic solidarity, hope, or critical reflection can be interpreted as forms of self-censorship or algorithmic compliance. In this sense, silence becomes ideologically generative: certain needs are ignored not because they lack audience relevance, but because they challenge the editorial status quo.

Moreover, affective content under the "Make Me Feel" category deserves particular scrutiny. Drawing on Fürst (2020) and Truyens and Picone (2024), these stories often mobilize emotion not for civic engagement but for algorithmic performance—a strategy we might call "editorial emotionalism." Outlets facing commercial pressure or operating under populist constraints frequently employ affect to induce clicks, rather than fostering empathy or dialogue.

Even the relatively marginal presence of categories like "Inspire Me" and "Connect Me" within *Cumhuriyet* and *BBC Türkçe* takes on disproportionate analytical significance. Referencing Drok and Hermans (2016), these can be interpreted as acts of slow journalism—intentional deviations from platformized speed and spectacle. While statistically rare, they function as narrative refusals to accept the rhythm of digital news cycles, and instead invite audiences into moments of depth and deliberation.

These category allocations also reflect audience performativity as theorized by Loosen and Schmidt (2012). *BBC Türkçe* and *Cumhuriyet* appear to imagine reflective, globally aware publics. In contrast, Milliyet and Hürriyet seem to construct their audiences as emotionally reactive and passively consuming, guided more by infotainment than deliberation. These editorial imaginaries are not mere assumptions—they function as structuring devices that shape what journalism gets produced and for whom.

Discursive Patterns in Editorial Construction

The second stage of analysis examined a purposively selected subset of 30 articles to understand how user needs are discursively constructed within Turkish digital journalism. Moving beyond categorical classifications, this stage sought to explore the symbolic and narrative work of journalism: how public needs are framed, narrated, and selectively emphasized or silenced across different editorial ecosystems. The findings indicate that even when outlets ostensibly address the same user needs category—such as "Update Me"—they do so through divergent rhetorical strategies. "Update Me" articles were consistently event-driven, structured with institutional voice and neutral chronology, but tonal and affective registers varied considerably. *BBC Türkçe* employed a restrained, formal tone that foregrounded detached professionalism, whereas *Hürriyet* and *Milliyet* adopted a more dramatized and urgent style. This contrast not only reflects different editorial cultures but also indicates subtle ideological alignments: by omitting critical context or reinforcing dominant narratives through tone, these articles reproduce what Yeşil (2014) has identified as structural silencing. While appearing apolitical, such reporting legitimizes institutional power through what is left unsaid.

More analytically rich were the articles categorized under "Give Me Perspective," which relied heavily on historical references, systemic critique, and expert voices. Found predominantly in *Cumhuriyet* and *BBC Türkçe*, these stories went beyond surface reporting to interrogate the 'why' behind events, constructing actor-centered narratives and ideologically textured framings. As Tosuner (2023) argues, this form of interpretive journalism functions as editorial resistance—particularly vital in a context marked by economic precarity and political repression. These stories exemplify what Fürst (2020) has called "interpretive labor": the cognitive and narrative effort to contextualize, explain, and challenge hegemonic discourses.

Equally revealing was the sparse yet powerful presence of "Connect Me" content, which surfaced communal experiences and personal struggles—ranging from youth detentions to stories of public figures dealing with illness. Produced mostly by *BBC Türkçe* and, to a lesser extent, *Hürriyet*, these stories employed affective proximity and human-interest techniques to foster civic empathy. However, their low frequency suggests that empathy is not an editorial default but

a selectively allocated resource—offered strategically, not reflexively. The emotional architecture of news, therefore, is deeply uneven and often aligned with brand identity or ideological positioning.

The categories "Help Me" and "Educate Me," meanwhile, mainly appeared in *Cumhuriyet* and *Milliyet* and served a functional journalistic role. These stories provided expert-based advice, legal explanations, and how-to guidance—content that was low in emotional texture but high in civic utility. Despite their marginal representation, they represent an essential, if underappreciated, form of public service journalism. In environments where state institutions are opaque or unresponsive, such content plays a crucial role in helping citizens navigate bureaucratic ambiguity.

In contrast, the most platform-optimized categories—"Divert Me" and "Keep Me On Trend"—were dominantly featured in *Hürriyet* and *Milliyet*. These stories capitalized on sensationalism, celebrity appeal, and the rhythm of trending topics, often mirroring the algorithmic preferences of social media platforms. Their narrative construction emphasized spectacle over substance, validating concerns expressed by Moyo et al. (2020) about the trivialization of digital news under commercial pressure. The prominence of these categories reveals the extent to which editorial agendas are shaped not by civic imperatives but by the demand for engagement metrics and virality.

These findings are further complicated by the politics of absence. The consistent underrepresentation of categories such as "Connect Me," "Inspire Me," and even "Help Me" in commercially driven or pro-government outlets illustrates how editorial imagination is constrained by both political risk and platform imperatives. In such contexts, the User Needs Model—though designed to capture diverse audience motivations—risks becoming a tool of editorial conformity if its application is uncritical. The model, when deployed without reflexivity, may reinforce existing editorial silences rather than disrupt them.

Indeed, the interplay between frequency of categories, discursive strategies, and imagined audiences reveals that audience-centric journalism in Turkey is less about pure responsiveness and more about negotiated visibility. Editors navigate a fraught terrain between risk and reach, platform and principle, ideology and imagination. This reinforces the idea that the User Needs Model, while useful, functions less as a neutral diagnostic tool and more as a mirror to existing constraints, particularly in illiberal or non-Western media systems. The high intercoder reliability achieved in this study (Cohen's Kappa = 0.87) provides confidence in the consistency of these interpretations, but it is the qualitative, discursive layer that most vividly captures the political economy of Turkish journalism. It is through the framing, tone, and symbolic omissions that the actual contours of editorial power, limitation, and agency become visible.

The findings illustrate that Turkish outlets construct user needs not only through content but also through imagined audience personas. *BBC Türkçe*'s audience is imagined as curious, rational, and globally aware; *Cumhuriyet* addresses critical citizens seeking systemic critique; *Hürriyet* and *Milliyet* envision a distracted, emotionally reactive user primed for infotainment.

This editorial imagination not only reflects but also shapes how publics come to understand their informational desires. In politically polarized and platform-dominated media systems, these constructions become key mechanisms of both journalistic power and limitation.

The near-absence of "Connect Me" and "Inspire Me" categories in pro-government or commercially oriented outlets suggests a structural narrowing of what news is imagined to be for. These silences reveal how the User Needs Model, if not reflexively applied, risks reproducing editorial myopia. Moreover, user needs like "Help Me" or "Educate Me" often lack emotional texture, limiting their civic potential despite practical utility.

Conclusion

This study has critically reframed the User Needs Model (UNM), arguing that it is not a neutral taxonomy for audience engagement but an ideological framework whose application in polarized contexts reflects and reinforces systemic pressures. The findings from a two-stage analysis of 200 news articles, validated with high intercoder reliability (Cohen's Kappa = 0.87), strongly support this central thesis. The study reveals that in the Turkish media landscape, user needs are not simply met but are actively constructed, ideologically filtered, and repurposed according to institutional logics, market imperatives, and political constraints. This critical assessment allows for a nuanced evaluation of the study's initial hypotheses.

H1: Editorial alignment with specific user needs varies by outlet and reflects institutional and ideological orientations.

This hypothesis is strongly confirmed through comparative analysis of editorial patterns across four distinct news outlets. *BBC Türkçe*, aligned with a transnational public-service broadcasting ethos, demonstrated a diversified user needs profile that emphasized "Educate Me," "Update Me," and "Give Me Perspective." This balanced approach reflects an institutional commitment to civic information, context, and interpretive journalism. *Cumhuriyet*, known for its oppositional stance and critical tradition in Turkish media, heavily emphasized "Give Me Perspective," constructing its audience as politically conscious citizens seeking analytical depth and structural critique. This editorial posture affirms the paper's legacy of advocacy journalism and signals its resistance to platform-driven content uniformity.

In contrast, *Hürriyet* and *Milliyet* showed a pronounced concentration around "Update Me" and "Keep Me On Trend," prioritizing immediacy, surface-level novelty, and visual or stylistic appeal. This clustering suggests not just editorial preference but systemic adaptation to platformized media logics—driven by metrics, virality, and ad-oriented performance indicators. These distinctions reflect how institutional ownership, political positioning, and revenue strategies converge to shape how the User Needs Model is interpreted and enacted.

Thus, user needs are not neutrally distributed across the media landscape but refracted through the ideological and operational frameworks of each outlet. The editorial invocation of certain categories becomes a strategic act, designed not only to respond to audience demand but also to align with the organization's imagined public and institutional mission. This supports growing arguments in journalism studies (e.g., Hanusch & Tandoc, 2020) that audience models are applied differentially across contexts, reflecting the complex interplay of commercial pressures, political alignments, and journalistic cultures.

H2: Engagement-oriented categories like "Connect Me," "Help Me," and "Inspire Me" are significantly underrepresented.

This hypothesis is also robustly validated. Quantitative content analysis revealed that categories oriented toward engagement, empathy, or solutions—such as "Connect Me," "Help Me," and "Inspire Me"—are minimally present across all four outlets. These findings are further deepened by the discursive analysis, which shows that when such categories do appear, they are marginal in placement, tone, or narrative centrality. This symbolic marginalization suggests more than editorial oversight—it points to deeper structural disincentives embedded in the Turkish media ecology.

The underrepresentation of these civic and affective categories is particularly salient in pro-government or commercially driven outlets, where the risks of fostering communal critique or hope-driven mobilization may outweigh editorial benefits. In such contexts, engagement-oriented journalism may be perceived as politically destabilizing, or simply unprofitable within the metrics-driven logic of platform capitalism. This reflects broader global trends in which participatory journalism is constrained by both authoritarian tendencies and neoliberal media structures.

What emerges is a pattern of editorial risk aversion and affective containment: instead of enabling solidarity, compassion, or civic agency, most outlets default to performative, reactive, and commodified content. The omission of engagement categories becomes, in itself, an ideological act—limiting the horizon of what journalism imagines and enables for its audiences. These patterns resonate with Harcup (2015), Costera Meijer & Bijleveld (2016), and Zelizer (2019), who argue that absences in coverage can be as politically meaningful as content inclusions. The

consistent exclusion of connective and empowering content reflects an editorial imagination that is bounded by fear, metrics, or ideological orthodoxy.

H3: The discursive construction of user needs is ideologically charged and narratively textured.

The discursive construction of user needs emerges as a deeply ideologically charged and narratively textured process. The qualitative analysis conducted in this study reveals that categories such as "Give Me Perspective" and "Connect Me" are not applied as fixed or neutral taxonomies. Rather, they are carefully constructed through editorial decisions involving rhetorical strategies, narrative framing, and affective alignment. These categories often invoke historical analogies, expert commentary, and emotional resonance to build a specific worldview, reflecting the outlet's broader institutional ethos. Far from being technical classifications, user needs function as performative acts of audience imagination, positioning readers not just as consumers of news but as particular kinds of publics—critical citizens, empathetic peers, or passive spectators.

The selective use of storytelling conventions, such as explanatory depth or oppositional voice, further reveals that these categories are shaped by journalistic genre norms and intertextual conventions. For example, "Give Me Perspective" frequently mirrors the format and tone of interpretive columns or long-form analysis, while "Keep Me On Trend" borrows from listicles or algorithm-friendly language. Such genre-based structuring embeds each category in existing media grammars, which carry with them implicit hierarchies of legitimacy, depth, and emotional engagement. Additionally, the stylistic dimensions of the content—lexical choices, modal verbs, and sentence complexity—differ markedly across categories. Articles aligned with "Update Me" tend to employ assertive and fact-oriented language, while "Connect Me" or "Inspire Me" feature more hedging, personalization, and affect-laden narratives, signaling differing epistemological postures.

Platform dynamics further complicate this landscape. The architecture of social media—particularly the visibility logics of trending algorithms and reaction metrics—privileges certain user needs over others. Outlets may emphasize "Keep Me On Trend" or "Update Me" to align with platform incentives, while deprioritizing affective or civic-oriented categories that do not easily translate into virality. This indicates that user needs are shaped not only by editorial ideologies but also by platform affordances and their embedded economic rationalities. Moreover, temporal dimensions play a role in how needs are activated: categories like "Update Me" dominate in rapid news cycles, while "Give Me Perspective" or "Inspire Me" surface during slower cycles, revealing editorial time-horizons as an additional layer of narrative politics.

Emotional regimes are also unevenly distributed. Affect-rich categories such as "Inspire Me" and "Connect Me" are underutilized, not necessarily due to a lack of editorial interest, but possibly due to structural discomfort with emotions in newsrooms oriented toward objectivity or political neutrality. Drawing on affect theory, we see that emotions are not just expressed but curated—mobilized in ways that align with institutional branding or ideological goals. Even when empathy or hope is invoked, it is often narratively contained within frames that neutralize dissent or reinforce status quos.

Finally, the manner in which user needs to position the reader varies significantly. Some categories offer clear calls to action—inviting reflection, discussion, or communal engagement—while others position the reader as a passive observer of unfolding events. This distinction underscores that user needs do not just reflect audience desires; they actively shape audience behavior and identity through discursive interpellation. Taken together, these layers demonstrate that the User Needs Model operates not merely as a tool for engagement optimization, but as a symbolic field where editorial ideology, platform logic, and affective politics intersect. As such, its application must be understood as a complex act of meaning-making, rather than a neutral act of classification.

Together, the findings suggest that the UNM, while conceptually universal, is contextually embedded. In Turkey's illiberal media landscape, shaped by economic precarity and platform dependency (Yeşil, 2014; Tosuner, 2023), user needs reflect not audience demand alone, but a strategic balance of institutional aspiration and structural limitation.

This dynamic is not unique to Turkey but reflects a broader global erosion of media freedom, which now faces significant challenges not only from the state but also "from below" (George & Youm, 2022). The Hungarian case exemplifies a sophisticated model of top-down control, where the government dismantled media independence through economic and market manipulation, creating a vast pro-government media empire while preserving the "illusion of media freedom" (Griffen, 2020). In parallel, democratic backsliding in countries like India and the Philippines illustrates how toxic polarization can turn segments of the public against journalists who criticize popular leaders, creating hostile environments from the ground up (George & Youm, 2022). In such contexts—whether shaped by state capture or populist pressure—audience-centric models like the UNM risk being repurposed. They can become tools not for public service, but for navigating political risks and appeasing polarized audiences, thus reinforcing a trend where journalism's democratic role is diminished under the combined pressures of illiberalism and digital media.

The study aimed to contribute to journalism theory by reframing the User Needs Model (UNM) not only as a practical taxonomy for audience alignment but as a critical framework to interrogate the ideological, affective, and structural dimensions of digital news production. By applying the UNM in a non-Western, politically polarized, and economically fragile media environment, it questions the implicit assumptions of universality embedded in audience-centric models developed in liberal-democratic contexts. The findings reveal that user needs are not simply pre-existing desires to be measured and fulfilled but are rhetorically constructed, ideologically filtered, and editorially imagined.

The research advances the notion that editorial imaginaries of the audience—formed through platform logics, institutional positioning, and market constraints—play a crucial role in shaping content categories. It shows how different outlets selectively construct publics through their alignment with or omission of specific user needs, thereby transforming the UNM from a neutral engagement tool into a reflective mirror of systemic editorial logics. By mapping these selective emphases and silences, the study positions the absence of certain categories (such as "Connect Me" or "Inspire Me") as analytically meaningful—signaling ideological resistance, commercial avoidance, or political risk aversion.

Moreover, the study aligns with and extends existing critiques of metricized journalism, adding to the growing body of scholarship that interrogates how audience data reconfigure newsroom priorities and democratic functions. The UNM, in this light, becomes a site of symbolic struggle, where journalistic autonomy, civic purpose, and market imperatives are continuously negotiated. Ultimately, the study underscores that audience-oriented journalism is never ideologically neutral or context-free; it is a performative act shaped by editorial judgments, power relations, and discursive strategies.

Future Research

While this study focused on textual content from four major outlets, future work should extend the model to audiovisual formats and platform-native storytelling (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, TikTok), where different user needs may surface more organically. Additionally, incorporating audience reception studies would reveal whether editorially constructed needs align with actual user expectations, or whether a deeper dissonance exists between production and perception.

In sum, this research affirms the analytical power of the UNM but cautions against its normative deployment without critical contextualization. In constrained media systems like Turkey's, audience needs must be interpreted not only as communicative signals but as ideological battlegrounds—where journalism is less a reflection of the public than a construction of its possibilities.

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