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Are News Media Biting Hard Enough? Public Watchdog Role Expectations and Performance Evaluations in the Era of Big Tech

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, concerns have been raised about journalism's watchdog role over Big Tech corporations in particular. Exploring the evolving watchdog role of journalism from an audience perspective, we examine audience expectations and performance evaluations towards news media's role in Big Tech accountability. Drawing upon a cross-national online survey (n=2737) conducted in the Netherlands, Germany, France, United Kingdom, United States, Poland, and India, we demonstrate how journalism's monitorial role towards Big Tech differs from its traditional watchdog role. Compared to the media's traditional watchdog role, audiences' higher expectations towards the media's critical scrutiny of Big Tech go more persistently unfulfilled, highlighting the particularly complex challenge in holding these powerful digital players accountable. These expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies positively correlate with perceptions of the media's relative role in Big Tech accountability and general media trust. Additionally, we show how discrepancies are associated with traditional news consumption, while social media news consumers' expectations are more frequently met by their performance evaluations. Overall, our study rehearses the importance scholars, and not least publics, place on the role of news media for Big Tech accountability, and the need to further adapt specialized digital accountability reporting.

KEYWORDS

Watchdog journalism; Big Tech; media trust; corporate accountability; survey; comparative

Introduction

The unprecedented impact of corporations like Microsoft and Meta on society as a whole, but particularly the journalistic institution (Neilson and Balasingham 2022), has triggered concerns about the ability and responsibility of news media in holding corporate power to account (Napoli 2021). Watchdog journalism, traditionally aimed at exposing political power abuses and advocating for public accountability (Bovens et al. 2014; Mellado, 2015), has expanded to tackle Big Tech's opaque algorithms and

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data practices (Schwinges et al. 2023). As algorithmic watchdogs (Diakopoulos 2015), news outlets like *The Markup* in the United States or *Spiegel Online* in Germany critically report on social media platforms, search engines, or artificial intelligence. Through this algorithmic accountability reporting, journalists uncover critical infrastructure capture (Simon 2022) and biases behind computational power structures (Diakopoulos 2015) "to contribute to accountability by mobilizing public pressure" (Diakopoulos 2021, 220).

Big Tech accountability hinges on critical audiences (Kemper and Kolkman 2019). The news media's watchdog role in particular lies in the discerning eye of the beholder, who assesses the normative and actual vigilance of journalists to hold those in power accountable (Bovens et al. 2014). In light of a turn towards an increasingly audience-focused journalistic discipline (Swart et al. 2022), that calls to understand expectations that different audiences hold of journalists (Banjac, Juarez Miro, and Hanusch 2024), news consumers are essential in assessing whether the media fulfill their role. Moreover, the gap between journalists' role narration—what they say they should do—and role performance—what they actually do (Mellado and Van Dalen 2014; Mellado et al., 2020)—makes audience perceptions crucial for obtaining robust insights into the watchdog role in the digital age. But how do audience perceptions fit this evolving watchdog role in the era of Big Tech?

The journalistic watchdog role encompasses both what critically monitorial role journalists *play* and *should play*. A noticeable discrepancy occurs when audiences demand from the media—what we define as *role expectations*—remains unmet by their *role performance evaluations*—their perceptions of journalism's actual performance. When role expectations remain unmet by performance evaluations, we label this *role expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies*. Only one study to date has investigated this gap. Fawzi and Mothes (2020) investigated public perceptions of news media's performance in Germany and showed that, while citizens have high expectations towards the media, those remain mainly unfilled. While media trust is often a subject of debate (Strömbäck et al. 2020), examining the role of journalism in the age of Big Tech from a perceptual lens is essential for ensuring the continued relevance, credibility, and effectiveness of news media in serving the public interest in today's digital society.

This article complements an increasing body of audience-centric journalistic roles literature (Riedl and Eberl 2022) by exploring public perceptions of the journalistic watchdog role in the digital age. We leverage insights derived from an online survey ($N = 2737$) conducted across several countries (the Netherlands, Germany, France, United Kingdom, United States, Poland, and India), and thus pay tribute to the transnational impact wielded by these globally operating corporations. Following a most different systems design logic (Esser and Vliegenthart 2017), we selected countries with a large variation in potentially relevant context characteristics, allowing us to assess the degree to which individual-level findings hold in highly varying circumstances. We compare national contexts with different levels of press freedom, regulatory oversight, and media system characteristics, examining diverse expectations—from strong watchdog traditions in Western Europe (Hanitzsch et al. 2019) to more challenged contexts like the U.S. or India (Koliska, Bhat, and Gandhi 2023). Notably, the

EU, and Germany in particular, foster a regulatory environment designed to keep Big Tech accountable, aiming to ensure that these corporations operate with greater transparency and responsibility. In our analysis we are guided by the following research question:

> *To what degree do audiences perceive the media as responsible for scrutinizing Big Tech, and to what extent are their expectations met?*

In addressing Big Tech accountability, we focus on several elements. Firstly, we look at the extent to which audiences differentiate between a traditional and Big Tech specific role. Examining the two alongside each other allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving dynamics of power, accountability, and responsibility in society and addresses the importance of including digital accountability reporting into the journalistic repertoire. Zooming into digital accountability, we investigate the extent to which expectations towards this newly emerging role are met (*role expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies*). While audiences' traditional watchdog role expectations and role performance evaluations have both been subject of extensive research, they have hardly been considered jointly (Kalogeropoulos, Toff, and Fletcher 2024) or comparatively (see Fawzi and Mothes 2020, for an exception). We argue that a comparative perspective is necessary because expectations serve as a benchmark against which performance is assessed. Previous studies indicate that when audience expectations remain unfulfilled, it often gives rise to media criticism (Craft, Vos, and David Wolfgang 2016), ultimately affecting media trust and the perceived quality of the public sphere (Kalogeropoulos, Toff, and Fletcher 2024). Hence, secondly, we explore how these role expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies are linked to audiences' trust in the media. Thirdly, we investigate how these discrepancies explain audiences' evaluation of news media as a potential Big Tech accountability mechanism. Particularly against the backdrop of ongoing but slow national efforts to regulate these globally operating behemoths (Lindman, Makinen, and Kasanen 2023), the role of the media as part and parcel of corporate accountability becomes essential. Lastly, exploring news consumption patterns offers valuable insights into how audience engagement with news content influences their perceptions of the media's role in scrutinizing Big Tech. Ultimately, the normative external pressure exerted by journalists has shown to impact platforms' policies and procedures (Barrett and Kreiss, 2019).

The Journalistic Watchdog Role and Big Tech

A large body of research has analyzed which roles journalism plays and ought to play in our digital societies. Journalistic role scholarship thus seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the evolving journalistic practice vis-à-vis normative expectations across various dynamic settings (Mellado and Van Dalen 2014). The traditional watchdog role stands out as one of the most widely discussed journalistic roles. The metaphor commonly suggests a critical-monitorial role of journalists overseeing powerful societal actors (Bovens et al. 2014). Often referred to as the "fourth estate" (Schultz, 1998), news media represent one essential element in the checks and balances within most democratic systems, safeguarding the public interest. Role

perceptions are integral elements of the relationship between news media and their objects of scrutiny (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996).

While journalists generally tend to consider the watchdog role as one of the most valued ones, there is considerable variation across different national contexts (Hanitzsch 2011). The countries in this study's selection are significant for studying Big Tech accountability due to their diverse media landscapes, varying levels of press freedom, and different democratic traditions (see Table 4 in Supplementary Appendix A). Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020) identified a strong presence of watchdog role performance across countries, where the United States and the United Kingdom as partisan and opinion-oriented journalistic cultures demonstrated a stronger presence of an interventionist watchdog role, while in countries with high traditional objectivity, like Germany and the Netherlands, a detached orientation was found more common. Alongside regional differences, watchdog role performance has also shown occur across different news beats and topics (Mellado et al. 2024).

Big Tech have amassed an unprecedented level of power and have also unmistakably changed the role journalism plays in our digital societies (Ferrucci and Eldridge 2022). Towards Big Tech, a predominantly passive role perception is present and journalists report adhering to passive watchdog role ideals, such as providing a balanced report on Big Tech regulation compared to directly challenging the narratives or practices of these companies, critically questioning information and thus providing audiences with the ability to form their own opinion on these tech giants (Schwinges et al. 2024). This cautious role perception reflects in a rather detached watchdog role performance of journalists covering Big Tech who only in recent years are becoming somewhat more pro-actively critical (Schwinges et al. 2023).

Public Perceptions as an Indicator

The relationship between journalism and its audiences is reflexive and reciprocal (Loosen and Schmidt 2012; Riedl and Eberl 2022). As a discursive institution which "only makes sense in relation to the public" (Christians et al. 2010, 158), journalists formulate role perceptions in regards to (presumed) audience expectations (Schwinges et al. 2024). Here, the audience serves as external directive for role behavior. The watchdog role stands in especially close relationship with the audience, as journalists watch over a "public at risk" (Weaver and Willnat, 2012), who, as news consumers, assigns the mandate to critically monitor those in power. When the media's performance does not meet audience expectations, it means that, in the eyes of the audience, the news media do not effectively serve the public interest to their satisfaction.

The extent to which journalists' role performance meets normative expectation thus lies in the eye of the beholder. The normative importance audiences place on the journalistic watchdog role (i.e., *role expectations*) varies across countries and media systems in systematic ways, as we know from previous studies. Those studies have only partially addressed the audiences' watchdog role expectations across the diverse range of countries under scrutiny in this study, often in direct comparison with journalists' own role perceptions (Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020; Riedl and Eberl 2022; van der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014). While the journalistic watchdog role finds broad

public support (Mellado et al., 2017), audiences in the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany in particular deem the watchdog role in form of a detached observer central to news media (Fawzi and Mothes 2020; Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020; van der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014; Willnat et al., 2019). Audiences' *watchdog role performance evaluations* are intricately tied to the normative value audiences place on the watchdog function. The watchdog role performance evaluations vary across countries, meaning that audiences in different national contexts, like Germany, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, evaluated the extent to which "news media monitor and scrutinize powerful people and businesses" differently (Kalogeropoulos, Toff, and Fletcher 2024, 9). To what extent this applies to news coverage in India, or on Big Tech in particular, however, remains unknown.

To investigate how the public perceptually expands the media's role in holding those in power accountable to large technology corporations, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1a: To what extent do audiences' watchdog role expectations differ between the media's traditional and Big Tech specific watchdog role across countries?

RQ1b: To what extent do audiences' watchdog role performance evaluations differ between the media's traditional and Big Tech specific watchdog role across countries?

RQ2: To what extent do we find discrepancies between audience expectations and performance evaluation regarding a Big Tech specific role and how does this discrepancy differ across countries?

Watchdog Journalism and Corporate Accountability

In a networked Fourth Estate (Benkler 2011), news media form part of a diverse accountability landscape. While a legislative regulation of these tech giants is rising on the political agendas in different areas of the world, regulatory accountability remains complicated (Lindman, Makinen, and Kasanen 2023). Alongside supranational regulatory bodies like the European Commission (Helberger 2020; Helberger and Diakopoulos 2023), independent oversight boards like those seen in Facebook's attempted self-governance (Medzini 2022), and not least the public (Borden and Zhang 2024), they are engaged in holding power to account (Schwinges et al. 2024). Their role as a nexus between a societal actor that gives account and audiences who "pose questions and pass judgement" (Bovens 2007, 452) is central. Journalists across Europe, however, hesitantly agree to their watchdog role in holding Big Tech accountable, reflecting a cautious approach to covering these corporations (Schwinges et al. 2023). Particularly transparency and answerability as communicative behaviors become interesting in the digital age, as both regulators and the media struggle with algorithmic opacity (Napoli 2015, 2021).

Similar to Brummel and de Blok (2024), we argue that the media's role in covering regulatory processes bears an important signaling function to the audiences that accountability processes are fair and appropriate. Thus, gaining insights into public

perceptions regarding the media's efficacy as a corporate accountability mechanism, particularly in comparison to other societal institutions tasked with corporate oversight, is essential to complement our understanding of journalists' roles. To explore whether audiences hear the news media bark, we ask:

> **RQ3:** Across countries, to what extent do Big Tech watchdog role expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies predict the audience's evaluation of the news media, relative to other institutional actors, as corporate accountability mechanism?

The Watchdog Role and Media Trust

Media trust, at its core, is the audience's confidence in the media's reliability, rooted in the perception that their needs are being met (Strömbäck et al. 2020). Trust in news media is essential for journalism itself and its effects on audiences (Quiring et al. 2021; Strömbäck et al. 2020; Tsfati 2003), but also a well-functioning society and democracy. It plays a vital role in sustaining an informed public discourse and holding power to account. Like other journalistic functions, the journalistic watchdog role relies on audiences using and trusting news media. However, when there are significant discrepancies between audience expectations of the media's watchdog function and their evaluation of its performance, it can potentially erode trust and thus, hamper news media's ability to foster corporate accountability.

Despite a decline in media trust on a global level (Newman et al. 2023), few nationally oriented studies have explored the audience's expectations towards the media's watchdog role in direct comparison to the audience's evaluation of said performance. In Germany, Fawzi and Mothes (2020) demonstrated that expectation-evaluation discrepancies in the traditional watchdog role are significantly related to lower levels of media trust. Meanwhile, Kalogeropoulos, Toff, and Fletcher (2024) conducted a comparative study across 38 countries into the associations of traditional watchdog role performance evaluations and media trust and showed that in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, role performance evaluations are positively associated with trust in news. For doing so, they included a country-level measure of the importance journalists ascribed to the watchdog function as control—while telling, the extent to which perceived media performance needs to meet prior audience expectations remains unexplored. This also becomes interesting in a digital age in which new, powerful actors have entered the playing field—how news media deal with these new challenges might determine today's media trust. We postulate the following research question:

> **RQ4:** Across countries, how are expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies in the Big Tech specific watchdog role associated with levels of media trust?

The Watchdog Role and News Consumption

Where audiences consume news influences their exposure to information and approach to watchdog journalism. Moreover, digital technologies have facilitated

a mutually reinforcing connection between journalists and their audience, as emphasized by Riedl and Eberl (2022). The consumption of news online is becoming increasingly prominent (Kalogeropoulos 2018). From a watchdog role performance perspective, scholars found that, across countries, online news media maintain a similar commitment to the journalistic watchdog function, including the accountability of societal actors, compared to traditional news platforms (Mellado et al. 2023). In both Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, digital journalism has strengthened the watchdog role (Tomaz 2024). However, existing research on the association of news media consumption with watchdog role perceptions presents a somewhat hazy picture. While Fawzi and Mothes (2020) found news media consumption to play a minor role in explaining expectation-evaluation discrepancies in Germany (Fawzi and Mothes 2020), other scholars argue for its relevance in shaping role expectations in Germany (Hasebrink and Hölig, 2020), the United States (Willnat et al. 2019) and Austria (Riedl and Eberl 2022). It, thus, becomes imperative to scrutinize the relationship between perceptions of the watchdog role and news media consumption habits:

> **RQ5**: Across countries, how are news media consumption and Big Tech specific watchdog role expectations-performance evaluation discrepancies related?

This study adopts an exploratory approach seeking robustness rather than a national comparison to understand how the global phenomenon of Big Tech accountability plays out across different national contexts. While we test for variation, we do not posit clear-cut expectations regarding these country-specific differences. However, it is plausible that discrepancies might appear larger in countries with lower levels of media trust or media freedom. Similarly, countries can be classified within different media systems along varying levels of regulation, structure, and independence (see Table 4 in Supplementary Appendix A). By exploring these dynamics, we seek to capture the broader patterns that emerge as global powers like Big Tech interact with national media systems.

Materials and Methods

Audience Survey and Sample

A comparative online survey was conducted in the Netherlands, Germany, France, United Kingdom, United States, Poland, and India in November 2022. As outlined above, countries were selected based on a most different systems design logic and offer substantially different political and media contexts. The study received ethical approval from the institutional review board. Launched by Kantar, the sample profile included census-based soft quota on age, gender, and education in each country (see Table 1). Overall, 3074 participants completed the questionnaire. In the process of data cleaning, we excluded respondents that completed the survey faster than two standard deviations of the completion time average and respondents with missing values on our core watchdog role measurements, resulting in a final sample of $N = 2737$.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Variables (*n*)	All (2737)	France (369)	Germany (364)	India (387)	Netherlands (372)	Poland (376)	United Kingdom (396)	United States (473)
Age	48.41 (17.04)	50.26 (16.3)	52.85 (15.71)	36.91 (14.45)	52.15 (15.77)	46.28 (15.91)	50.97 (17.19)	49.55 (18.01)
Gender (male)	44.65%	44.17%	44.23%	53.23%	45.43%	44.95	44.44%	37.63%
High school education	30.65%	37.94%	27.75%	26.61%	42.74%	20.74%	9.84%	46.3%
College education	37.89%	34.42%	41.21%	45.48%	44.62%	54.52%	31.06%	19.03%
Graduate education	31.46%	27.64%	31.04%	27.91%	12.63%	24.73%	59.09%	34.67%

Measurements

The study's design, measurements, and analysis approach were preregistered on the Open Science Framework before data access. We employed single item measurements for the watchdog role perception measurements. These were based on earlier studies on journalistic role ideals (Hanitzsch 2011) and audience expectations (Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020; Riedl and Eberl 2022). Chosen indicators center around the detached quality of watchdogs (Hanitzsch 2011) to scrutinize and monitor elites in power, instead of focusing on the more investigative or adversary nature of some watchdog role definitions (Abdenour, McIntyre, and Dahmen 2021), or the revelation of political scandals (Fawzi and Mothes 2020). This detached role orientation has also been primarily stressed by journalists themselves (Hanitzsch 2011; Schwinges et al. 2024) and has been found most widely performed (Márquez-Ramírez et al. 2020; Schwinges et al. 2023). For the following seven variables, participants were asked to indicate their agreement to the statements below on a scale of 1 ("completely disagree") to 7 ("completely agree").

Traditional Watchdog Role Expectation

We asked participants to indicate the extent to which, in their opinion, the media should fulfill the watchdog role and indicate their agreement with the statement "The news media ***should*** [italic and bold in original survey] monitor and scrutinize powerful people and businesses" ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.64$).

Traditional Watchdog Role Performance Evaluation

Participants rated the media's watchdog role performance ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.57$) by assessing the statement: "The news media ***do*** monitor and scrutinize powerful people and businesses" in relation to current fulfillment.

Big Tech Watchdog Role Expectation

Participants rated their expectations of the media's monitoring role toward Big Tech by indicating the extent to which they believed news media ***should*** scrutinize these corporations ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.56$).

Big Tech Watchdog Role Performance Evaluation

Mirroring earlier questions, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they perceived news media ***do*** actually monitor and scrutinize big technology corporations ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.54$).

Role Expectation-Performance Evaluation Discrepancies

We calculated the discrepancy by subtracting role expectations from role performance evaluations. Negative values for example indicate that expectations regarding news media's Big Tech watchdog role remain unmet (56.12%), a score of zero indicates that the media's performance meets audiences' expectations (33.14%) and positive values indicate that role expectations are exceeded (10.74%).

In addition, we measured the media's role as an accountability mechanism, media trust, and news consumption.

Big Tech Accountability Mechanism

To study the interplay of different entities serving as corporate accountability mechanisms, we assessed the media's relative role in comparison to others. By presenting respondents with a range of actors to compare, rather than solely focusing on the role of news media, we provide a more contextualized measure. In a matrix, we asked participants to what extent they thought (1) news media ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.61$), (2) national government ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.58$), (3) independent oversight board ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.57$), (4) the public ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.54$), or (5) a regulatory body ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.55$) such as the Bundeskartellamt (Germany) should deem big technology companies responsible for their actions (see Table 3 in Supplementary Appendix A for descriptives per country). Overall, these variables show moderate positive correlations, suggesting that there is some degree of association between them (see Table 2 in Supplementary Appendix A). Deviating from the pre-registration, we calculated the average rating for other entities by taking the mean of their accountability scores. Then, we determined the relative rating of the media compared to these other entities by subtracting the average accountability score of the other entities from the media's accountability score.

Media Trust

Media trust ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.11$; Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$) was measured based on Quiring et al. (2021). It comprised three dimensions: *General trust* ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.56$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$) was measured by three items, e.g., "the established news media can be trusted"), *media skepticism* ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.3$; four items, e.g., "the established news media sometimes are biased, but overall, they reflect the different opinions of the society well", Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$), and *media cynicism* ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.69$; four items, e.g., "The established news media and politics conspire to manipulate peoples' opinions", Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$).

News Media Consumption

Participants' news media consumption was assessed by recording the number of days (1 indicating "0 days" and 7 indicating "7 days") during a normal week they followed the news *via* different sources. *Traditional news media consumption* was computed by averaging consumption across paid newspapers (printed or digital versions), the website or app of a newspaper, TV news, the website or app of a TV news program, other online news websites and apps, and radio news. The measurement of *social*

media news consumption averaged their news consumption *via* Twitter, Reddit and other forums, Facebook and Facebook groups, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube.

Personal Attitude towards Big Tech

To account for participants' overall attitudes toward Big Tech, we asked them to rate their perception of technology companies' growing role in society ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.47$) on a 7-point Likert scale from "very negative" to "very positive".

Sociodemographic Information

Age, gender, and education were additionally included as control variables. We created dummy variables for gender (1: male; 0: female, as groups formed on other answer categories were small), and education (higher education: 1; no or completed high school diploma: 0).

To address research questions RQ1a, RQ1b, and RQ2, comparing watchdog role perceptions across countries, we conducted paired sample *t*-tests. To explore how the Big Tech specific watchdog role expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies relate to the media's relative role as corporate accountability mechanism (RQ3) and media trust (RQ4), we estimated linear regression models on pooled data, controlling for sociodemographic information, media consumption patterns, and fixed effects for countries by including dummy variables. To investigate how these discrepancies are explained by news media consumption patterns, we performed another linear regression model across the pooled data, with controls for sociodemographic information. Regression models were also conducted per country, including interaction terms for Big Tech watchdog role expectations and performance evaluations (see Supplementary Appendices C and D).

Results

Audiences across all countries show consistently high expectations for the media's traditional ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.64$) and Big Tech-specific watchdog roles ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.56$) on a 7-point Likert scale (Table 2). The United Kingdom stands out with the highest expectations for both roles (traditional: $M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.43$; Big Tech: $M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.34$), while France shows the lowest expectations (traditional: $M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.52$; Big Tech: $M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.45$). With a few exceptions, these role expectations remain unmet, with the traditional role performance across all countries being evaluated at an average of $M = 4.15$ ($SD = 1.57$) and the Big Tech watchdog role performance at an average of $M = 4.09$ ($SD = 1.54$). For a majority of the audience (54.52%), expectations remain unmet, while roughly a third of the audience reports that their expectations are met by performance evaluations (34.20%). Approximately 10.74% of participants across all countries reported role performance evaluations that exceeded their expectations. Notably, expectations were surpassed for 20.41% of Indian audiences, whereas only 5.49% of German audiences experienced this trend. Indian audiences demonstrated the highest role performance evaluations for both traditional ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.85$) and Big Tech ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.75$) watchdog roles. Conversely, French audiences consistently

Table 2. Descriptives.

Variables	All	France	Germany	India	Netherlands	Poland	United Kingdom	United States
Traditional watchdog role								
Role expectations	5.19 (1.64)	4.98 (1.52)	5.37 (1.48)	4.94 (1.95)	5.20 (1.43)	5.28 (1.62)	5.55 (1.43)	5.06 (1.82)
Role performance evaluations	4.15 (1.57)	3.84 (1.45)	3.8 (1.46)	4.65 (1.85)	4.19 (1.34)	4.14 (1.46)	4.17 (1.43)	4.21 (1.72)
Big Tech watchdog role								
Role expectations	5.27 (1.56)	5.03 (1.45)	5.38 (1.42)	5.033 (1.84)	5.34 (1.34)	5.32 (1.56)	5.67 (1.34)	5.13 (1.73)
Role performance evaluation	4.09 (1.54)	3.8 (1.39)	3.85 (1.35)	4.75 (1.75)	4.13 (1.35)	3.97 (1.46)	4.05 (1.40)	4.06 (1.75)
Other variables								
Media as accountability mechanism	4.71 (1.61)	4.56 (1.67)	4.49 (1.56)	4.95 (1.77)	4.66 (1.40)	4.72 (1.46)	4.83 (1.52)	4.74 (1.79)
Media trust	4.22 (1.11)	4.01 (1.09)	4.5 (1.27)	4.31 (0.76)	4.61 (1.08)	4.16 (0.94)	4.18 (1.08)	3.86 (1.24)
Social media news consumption	2.85 (1.83)	2.66 (1.67)	2.17 (1.48)	4.30 (1.79)	2.39 (1.43)	3.21 (1.65)	2.19 (1.58)	2.94 (2.03)
Traditional media news consumption	4.03 (1.75)	4.61 (1,.60)	3.93 (1.63)	4.68 (1.97)	4.28 (1.59)	4.42 (1.62)	3.74 (1.61)	3.64 (1.87)

Note: Values denote mean (standard deviation).

rated media performance the lowest, with traditional role evaluations at $M = 3.84$ ($SD = 1.45$) and Big Tech-specific role evaluations at $M = 3.8$ ($SD = 1.39$).

Differences in Watchdog Role Perceptions

The comparison of the audience's expectations across a traditional and Big Tech specific watchdog role (RQ1a) revealed significant albeit small mean differences in role expectations between a traditional ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.64$) and Big Tech watchdog role ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.56$), $t(2736) = -3.08$, $p = .002$, two-tailed. Across all sampled countries, role expectations regarding a Big Tech specific role ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.56$) surpass expectations regarding the media's traditional critical monitorial role towards people and businesses, $\Delta M = 0.08$ ($SD = 1.31$; see Table 2). This discrepancy is the largest in the Netherlands ($M = 0.14$, $SD = 1.33$) and the smallest in Germany ($M = 0.01$, $SD = 1.27$). Similarly, the audience's role performance evaluations (RQ1b; see Table 2) differed significantly but marginally between a traditional ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.57$) and a Big Tech ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.54$) watchdog role, $t(2736) = 2.36$, $p = .02$, two-tailed. Overall, mean differences, albeit showing significance, remain small. These public role perceptions show weak to moderate positive correlations with each other, suggesting some degree of association between them (see Table 1, Supplementary Appendix A). Comparing a traditional and Big Tech watchdog role, we see that role expectations ($r = 0.67$, $p < .001$) and role performance evaluations ($r = 0.66$, $p < .001$) are moderately correlated.

When zooming into the Big Tech watchdog role (RQ2), we observe significantly higher role expectations ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.56$) compared to role performance evaluations ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.54$), $t(2736) = 32.90$, $p < .001$, two-tailed (see Figure 1). While this pattern holds across countries, this discrepancy is the largest in the United Kingdom ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 1.91$) and the smallest in India ($M = 0.28$, $SD = 1.61$). Also, the

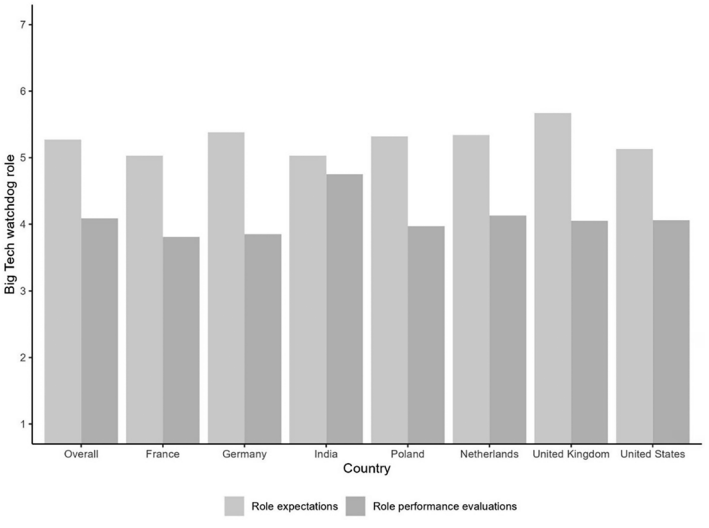

Figure 1. Expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies within Big Tech watchdog role (RQ2).

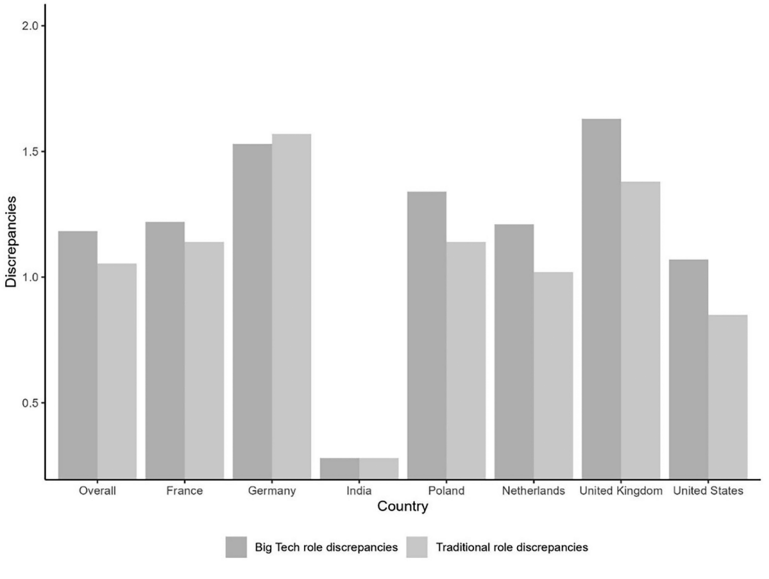

Figure 2. Differences in role expectation and role performance evaluation scores compared between a traditional and Big Tech watchdog role (RQ2). The higher the discrepancy score, the more role expectations remain unmet by performance evaluations.

traditional watchdog role bears significant discrepancies between role expectations and performance evaluations (Figure 1, Supplementary Appendix B). Comparing means across countries (see Figure 2), role expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies within a Big Tech specific role are significantly larger than discrepancies within a traditional role, $t(2736) = -4.04$, $p < .001$, two-tailed. These discrepancies are also reflected in the weak correlations between Big Tech role expectations and performance evaluations ($r = 0.27$, $p < .001$; see Table 1, Supplementary Appendix A

Table 3. Overview of discrepancies in watchdog role perceptions in different countries.

Countries	RQ1a: Discrepancies in role expectations	RQ1b: Discrepancies in role performance evaluations	RQ2: Expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies
All	0.08 (1.31)**	−0.06 (1.29)**	1.18 (1.87)***
Germany	0.1 (1.27)	−0.05 (1.22)	1.53 (1.74)***
Netherlands	0.14 (1.33)**	−0.05 (1.22)	1.21 (1.63)***
France	0.06 (1.34)	−0.03 (1.17)	1.22 (1.77)***
Poland	0.034 (1.59)	−0.17 (1.20)***	1.34 (1.92)***
United Kingdom	0.12 (1.04)**	−0.13 (1.20)**	1.63 (1.91)***
United States	0.07 (1.26)	−0.15 (1.35)**	1.07 (2.09)***
India	0.1 (1.46)	0.1 (1.55)	0.28 (1.61)***

Note: Paired samples *t*-test with national samples were conducted, $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$.

in Supplementary Information file). Comparing the media's traditional role with their specific mandate to critically scrutinize Big Tech, we see that audiences have similarly high expectations regarding the media's watchdog role towards these large digital players, but evaluate their performance as lower compared to their monitorial role towards people and businesses in general (see Figures 1 and 2). This shows that the public sees Big Tech as a sector that needs just as much, if not more, oversight as traditional businesses or political institutions, but that a perceived shortfall of this mandate might lead to a general dissatisfaction with news media. Germany and India present notable exceptions, where, in the eyes of the audience, algorithmic accountability is pursued to a higher satisfaction compared to news media's traditional role in public accountability.

Differences in role expectations (RQ1a), performance evaluations (RQ1b), and expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies (RQ2) within countries (see Table 3) are more prominent in some countries over others. Between news media's traditional and Big Tech specific watchdog role expectations, we find significant differences specifically in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, significant differences in role performance evaluations across both watchdog roles emerge in Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Whereas observed mean differences are context-dependent, we see that significant discrepancies between Big Tech watchdog role expectations and performance evaluations emerge across all seven countries.

Effects of Big Tech Watchdog Role Discrepancies

We tested whether discrepancies between performance evaluations and expectations within a Big Tech watchdog role significantly predicted, relative to other entities like national governments or independent oversight boards, the media's evaluation as suitable to hold Big Tech accountable (RQ3). The model controlled for age, gender, education levels, personal attitude towards Big Tech, news consumption, and country level effects (see Table 4). The overall regression model was statistically significant [$R^2 = 0.04$, $F(13, 2690) = 10.26$, $p < 0.01$] but showed limited explanatory power. The more performance evaluations aligned with or exceeded role expectations, the more audiences perceived the media as a suitable accountability mechanism in comparison to other existing entities ($b = 0.05$, $p < .01$). These findings are particularly driven by effects found in Poland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (see Table 1, Supplementary Appendix C).

Table 4. Regression models (RQ3 and RQ4).

	Dependent variable	
	News media's relative role as suitable Big Tech accountability mechanism	Media trust
Role expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies	0.046*** (0.014)	0.081*** (0.011)
Age	−0.005*** (0.002)	0.004*** (0.001)
Gender (male)	0.021 (0.051)	−0.040 (0.039)
Higher education	−0.142** (0.057)	0.107** (0.043)
Personal attitude towards Big Tech	−0.021 (0.019)	0.211*** (0.014)
Traditional news consumption	0.039** (0.018)	0.141*** (0.013)
Social media news consumption	0.064*** (0.019)	−0.066*** (0.014)
Constant	−0.300** (0.145)	2.519*** (0.109)
Observations	2704	2704
R^2	0.047	0.218
Adjusted R^2	0.043	0.214
Residual Std. error	1.312 ($df = 2690$)	0.984 ($df = 2690$)
F statistic	10.261*** ($df = 13$; 2690)	57.616*** ($df = 13$; 2690)

Note: Beta (unstandardized) coefficients. The final models control for country-level factors, by including dummy variables for each countries with the United States as reference category. **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

To answer RQ4, we tested whether these discrepancies were significantly associated with media trust as the dependent variable (see Table 4). The overall regression model was statistically significant [$R^2 = 0.21$, $F(13, 2690) = 57.61$, $p < 0.01$]. Holding stronger explanatory power, performance evaluations that were aligned with or exceeded expectations were significantly associated with higher levels of media trust, $b = 0.81$, $p < .01$. This demonstrated that meeting audience expectations regarding news media's role as a watchdog over Big Tech organizations is important for trust in news media. Zooming into our sampled countries, individual analyses reveal that these patterns are particularly prominent in Germany, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States (see Table 2, Supplementary Appendix C). See Tables 1–3 in Supplementary Appendix D for further exploratory analyses per country.

Explaining Expectation-Performance Evaluation Discrepancies with News Consumption

Across the pooled data, we examined the relationship between expectation-performance discrepancies and traditional and social media news consumption, including control variables (Table 5). The model was statistically significant [$F(6, 2716) = 40.795$, $p < .001$] but only accounted for ~8.16% of the variance in role expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies ($R^2 = 0.083$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.081$). The coefficient for traditional news consumption was −0.05 ($p < .05$), suggesting a significant small negative association. The more audiences consume news *via* traditional media, the larger the discrepancies and the more their expectations remained unmet by their performance evaluations. Contrasting effects were found for social media news consumption. The coefficient for social media news consumption was 0.07 ($p < .01$), indicating a significant small positive association with expectation-performance discrepancies, in the sense that the more audiences consume news *via* social media, the smaller the negative discrepancy. However, caution is needed for the interpretation of these findings as those patterns hold marginally within France and the United States only (see Table 3, Supplementary Appendix C).

Table 5. Regression model (RQ5).

	Dependent variable
	Role expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies
Traditional news consumption	−0.050** (0.024)
Social media news consumption	0.071*** (0.026)
Age	−0.007*** (0.002)
Gender (male)	−0.140** (0.070)
Higher education	−0.077 (0.078)
Personal attitude towards Big Tech	0.250*** (0.025) (0.126)
Constant	−1.684*** (0.194)
Observations	2704
R^2	0.101
Adjusted R^2	0.097
Residual Std. error	1.775 ($df = 2691$)
F statistic	25.286*** ($df = 12$; 2691)

Note: Beta (unstandardized) coefficients. The model controls for country-level factors, with the United States as the reference category. **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

Discussion

This study examined audience perceptions of the journalistic watchdog role in the age of Big Tech in association with media's relative role in Big Tech accountability, media trust, and news consumption patterns, spanning seven countries. Our findings indicate that audiences across different national contexts hold greater expectations for a Big Tech watchdog role, and thus hold news media to higher standards compared to their traditional watchdog role. Aligning with existing literature (Fawzi and Mothes 2020; van der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014), and mirroring journalists' own perceptions of their own watchdog function (Schwinges et al. 2024), the importance audiences attribute to watchdog journalism extends to these digital players specifically. However, audiences evaluate the media's performance in this regard significantly lower than for the traditional monitorial role towards people and business in general. This results in a discrepancy between what audiences expect from the media and how they rate the media's performance towards those companies. Unmet Big Tech watchdog role expectations position this specialized journalism, such as algorithmic watchdog journalism as a challenging objective; Nonetheless, news media have a critical role in Big Tech's accountability. Such discrepancies may reflect the complexities associated with performing this role, such as access to information (Schwinges et al. 2024), algorithmic opacity, or meeting the global operative scale of these corporations. These results highlight a departure from journalism's traditional watchdog function, suggesting that as technology and the media landscape evolve, so too does the public understanding of journalism's monitorial role towards Big Tech. This underscores the continued relevance of journalistic oversight in the digital age (Diakopoulos 2015; Napoli 2021) and the need to continuously refine our understanding of how journalism can best meet its audience's expectations.

The importance to meet audience's role expectations with critical scrutiny of these players is demonstrated by its positive association with other phenomena important for a healthy digital democracy. Our analysis showed that when media performance met or exceeded audience expectations, audiences viewed the media as a more suitable mechanism for holding corporations accountable than other entities like governments or oversight boards. The expectation-performance evaluation

discrepancies in monitoring Big Tech shed light on journalism's evolving role in promoting corporate accountability. Amidst technological and regulatory challenge, such as artificial intelligence (Diakopoulos 2015; Helberger 2020; Napoli 2021) or data capture (Simon 2022), the enforcement of corporate accountability lies with several different institutions, one of which is news media. This suggests that news media hold a unique position, and, by promoting (algorithmic) transparency (Diakopoulos 2015) or informing citizens about formal accountability processes (Jacobs et al. 2022; Jacobs and Schillemans 2016), form one of many corporate accountability mechanisms. While traditionally, national governments or regulatory bodies have been perceived as primary entities responsible for regulation, our findings point towards a shift in this perception. This cements the important role of journalism as a cornerstone of digital democracy. While the global reach of these corporations often surpasses the regulatory capacities of these entities, the media's role becomes increasingly vital in filling these regulatory gaps. When designing regulatory frameworks within our digital economy to ensure effective Big Tech accountability, policymakers should consider accountability within the forum of a wider networked Fourth estate (Benkler 2011)—Within the European Union and beyond.

The positive associations of these discrepancies with media trust extend findings of previous research (Kalogeropoulos, Toff, and Fletcher 2024) and show that media trust is not only influenced by role performance evaluations, but in relation to whether the media's performance meets the benchmark set by role expectations regarding the media's scrutiny of Big Tech. Country-specific findings are in line with a robust tradition of investigative journalism and strong emphasis on media freedom in the United States (Glasser and Ettema 1989). Audiences in Germany and the United Kingdom perceive the greatest discrepancies among the seven countries, indicating that a lack in perceived critical scrutiny does not align with a long history of independent and outspoken media scrutiny in the United Kingdom (Newman et al. 2023). Similarly, in Germany, where Big Tech are more actively monitored (Schwinges et al. 2023), audiences may see this scrutiny still as insufficient, thus affecting their trust in news media. This might ultimately erode the media's effectiveness as a watchdog. However, while these findings point towards challenges, they also present opportunities for journalistic innovation, collaborative investigative efforts, and data accountability reporting (Diakopoulos 2015) to build a trustful relationship to audiences.

Lastly, we demonstrated that *how* audiences consume news matters. Our results suggest that larger expectation-performance evaluation discrepancies are associated with traditional news consumption, pointing towards a potential disconnect between traditional media outlets and audience expectations regarding Big Tech accountability. Traditional media, often characterized by established journalistic norms and practices (Schwinges et al. 2024; Skovsgaard et al. 2013), may face challenges in adapting to the rapidly changing digital landscape and the complexities of monitoring Big Tech in the eyes of audiences. Although social media news consumers appear to perceive a closer alignment between their expectations and performance evaluations, the effect sizes are modest, suggesting that the relationship may be more complex than previously thought. Social media platforms, with their algorithmic mechanisms and user-generated content, have the flexibility to cater tailored content to diverse audience interests and preferences. Consequently, social media news consumers may find their expectations

regarding Big Tech accountability more consistently addressed. This finding is particularly critical, as in this scenario, companies like Meta or X (formerly Twitter) fulfill a dual function: They are both a news consumption platform and object of journalistic scrutiny.

Across countries, national differences underscore the complexity and challenges of evaluating news media's watchdog role in algorithmic accountability, especially when covering global companies like Microsoft and Meta. Particularly strong associations between role discrepancies with important democratic factors like media trust and media's role in Big Tech accountability in countries like Germany and the United Kingdom highlight the tension between the global nature of Big Tech's operation and locally rooted news media perceptions that are shaped by distinct cultural, regulatory, and media system contexts. However, widespread perception that news media are not fully delivering on their accountability role towards Big Tech emerges, a dissatisfaction that is generally larger for algorithmic accountability compared to its traditional watchdog role. Journalists in countries with significant discrepancies, such as the UK, Poland, and the US, may need to adopt more proactive and investigative approaches when reporting on Big Tech, especially in their watchdog role. This might include engaging audiences through interactive reporting formats, stories that resonate with audience concerns, and explaining complex topics in accessible ways. For audiences, increased media literacy and engagement with critical sources are crucial (Kemper and Kolkman 2019), particularly for demanding better reporting. This could involve understanding how news is made, supporting media outlets that prioritize accountability, engaging in public discussions about the role of tech companies, and advocating for stronger regulatory oversight. Ultimately, both journalists and audiences play complementary roles in enhancing media trust, as well as the transparency and accountability of Big Tech.

Our study has some limitations. Our findings are consistent but are to some degree context dependent. While providing some first indications, small effect sizes and limited explanatory power highlight the need for further investigation and potential refinement of the models. When zooming into the respective national contexts of this study, we find that phenomena like media trust or journalism's role in Big Tech accountability may be less correlated with these discrepancies and instead more closely related to personal attitudes towards Big Tech or other aspects that remain unexplored in this study, such as media reputation (Marschlich and Eisenegger 2025; Vogler and Eisenegger 2021). The measurement design follows previous studies (Kalogeropoulos, Toff, and Fletcher 2024) employing single item measures to examine watchdog role perceptions. More extensive batteries of questions might provide more reliable and granular insights into complex public perceptions of the journalistic watchdog role; however, they would require substantial time, expertise, and resources, potentially limiting comparability with existing large-scale studies, which rely on single-item measurements for cross-study consistency. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the survey precludes inference of causal relationships between watchdog role perceptions and variables, such as media trust. Future research should investigate potential causal factors contributing to the observed discrepancies in the media's watchdog role amidst the rise of Big Tech. Understanding the nuances of these disparities can provide insights into the complexities of a triangular relationship between news media, Big Tech, and its audiences. Considering the expansive global reach of these corporations, which starkly contrasts with the primarily national focus of journalistic institutions and cross-national differences

in journalistic cultures (Mellado 2020), there is a clear need for additional comparative research. This research should delve into how the media's take on such powerful players is assessed in relation to audience expectations regarding the media's role in the era of technology dominance, technological and algorithmic accountability, and audience-engagement driven journalism (Borden and Zhang 2024; Diakopoulos 2015; Kalogeropoulos, Toff, and Fletcher 2024; Xia et al. 2020).

Overall, our study underscores the importance of Big Tech as an object of critical and robust journalistic scrutiny and news consumption channel, and news media's role in Big Tech accountability. Scholars should further dissect the unique role that journalism assumes to promote corporate transparency in the age of Big Tech. News media must adapt to these digital players, which may involve further specialized investigative or algorithmic reporting as described by Diakopoulos (2015), data journalism, and collaboration with other societal institutions to hold Big Tech accountable. Our findings rehearse the importance academics and not least public audiences have placed on the media's watchdog role in and for accountable digital democracies.

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