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## Examining Platforms' Affordances: Bridging Journalists' and Users' Practices of Online Engagement

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### ABSTRACT

Digital technologies, especially social media platforms, are crucial to journalism's engagement with audiences. Journalists depend on these information technologies to distribute news, while users largely rely on social media platforms for informing themselves. However, research on the role of platforms in journalism appears to have mainly focused on the risks they pose to the profession with little attention given to how platforms' affordances facilitate engagement. The aim of this study is to examine how the expectations of journalists and users about the role of digital platforms coincide or differ in terms of the affordances for engagement with each other. We conducted in-depth interviews with 31 news users and 10 professional journalists in Chile, focusing on their use of social media related to news. Our study reveals some alignments and misalignments on the platforms' digital affordances in three dimensions: contextual flexibility, informational access and use, and interactive communication. Journalists primarily focus on mobile use on the go, while users often access news at home. Both groups align on the exposure function of platforms but differ in their perceptions of content personalization and availability. Additionally, while journalists encourage interaction, users are often reluctant to engage deeply or are unaware of these expectations.

### KEYWORDS

Digital platforms; digital affordances; journalists; news users; qualitative research; expectations

## Introduction

"If I don't get those first comments, first likes, the story won't circulate and I won't reach the audience that I want it to reach (...). If I don't captivate the person's interest, none of the other things I do will work" (Journalist)

"When a journalist publishes an article on social media, what does he want the me to do?... I don't know, you tell me." (Valentina)

The contrast between the answers of Valentina, a 34-year-old engineer, a journalist of a digital news organization illustrates how platforms can play a role in journalism. As the “platformization of the news” (Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal 2018, p. 49) pushed journalists to be responsible not only for producing content but also for distributing it, their ability to engage with the audience has come to depend as much on creating high-quality news as on securing “reactions” from users through the social media platforms interactive features, such as *likes*, *shares*, or *comments*. Consequently, if journalists’ attempts to engage with the audiences across platforms are not aligned with the ways in which people use those platforms, then their efforts may be largely futile. Considering that the present and future of journalism is to be strongly shaped by digital technologies, particularly social media platforms, this research seeks to gain a detailed understanding of how these platforms play a role in journalism’s ability to engage with its audience. Here, engagement is understood as the habitual tasks and routines journalists undertake to interact with their audience, the analysis of how audiences use news across different times and spaces, and the understanding of the physical and emotional experiences that news content evokes in people (Gajardo & Costera Meijer 2023)

Engagement in journalism is driven by industry digitization and social media’s role in news distribution, often described as “marketing the news” (Ferrucci 2020; Tandoc and Vos 2016). However, studies on platforms’ role in journalism have primarily focused on the threats they pose to the profession, with less attention given to how these platforms influence or shape engagement. Research has examined how journalists adapt to social media (Hermida, Lewis, and Zamith 2014; Djerf-Pierre, Ghersetti, and Hedman 2016) and navigate the blurred lines between personal, professional, private, and public spaces (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013; Molyneux, Holton, and Lewis 2018; Hedman 2020). These studies have centered on audience analytics and metrics (Christin 2020; Bell et al. 2017), exploring how digital transformations challenge journalistic values and professional identity (Walters 2021; Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc Lee and Tando). Yet, how platforms enable (or hinder) journalism’s understanding of and engagement with audiences remains underexplored.

Parallel to this, audience studies have advanced our understanding of the role of digital platforms in journalism by investigating how news users (Picone 2018) experience and interact with their news media as material objects. Research shows that while journalism is content-driven, its technological features, material form, and sensory aspects also shape engagement. Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink (2021) note that users are influenced not only by interface design (Van Dijck 2013) but also by how news devices and platforms invite or inhibit different modes of interaction. However, despite growing insights into online news consumption, much of the research has concentrated on the influence of dominant platforms, particularly in relation to news exposure (Van Damme et al. 2020) and misinformation risks (Mayerhöffer et al. 2022). While these concerns are important, they primarily address content effects rather than exploring how users navigate platform affordances to engage with news.

Technology, particularly digital platforms, has significantly influenced the development of new logics and forms in journalism (Hermida 2020; Zamith and Braun 2019; Hendrickx and Vázquez-Herrero 2024). Understanding the transformations in the news environment brought about by the emergence of the platform society (Van Dijck,

Poell, and De Waal 2018) is crucial for the future of news media. In this context, it is important to explore how digital platforms enable or hinder alignment between the ways journalists create and distribute news and the ways audiences use and interact with it. Such exploration is essential for uncovering the opportunities and limitations these platforms present for journalism to effectively engage with its audience. To achieve this, we must examine how technological affordances align (or do not align) with users' expectations.

The notion of affordance refers to the range of functions and constraints that an object provides for, and places upon, structurally situated subjects (Gibson 1979; Bucher and Helmond 2018). Evans et al. (2017) adapted this conceptual framework to understand affordances in communication research, making two key analytical distinctions. First, that while individuals may agree on common features of an object, such as a [Table 1](#) (e.g., number of legs), they may disagree about its affordances (e.g., eating, storing, or hiding). Second, that affordances can remain relatively constant even if an actor's goals change. This means that while affordances invite behaviours and other outcomes, they are not the outcome itself. As Evans et al. (2017) explained, a smartphone's built-in camera is a feature, while an affordance is recordability (i.e., the ability to capture images or video of a person, place, or thing), and an outcome could be the documenting of human rights violations. This distinction between feature, affordance and outcome suggests a non-media-centric perspective that can help to examine how technology, and particularly digital platforms, shapes an alignment between journalists' expectations for using these platforms and audiences' expectations of interacting with them.

The aim of this study is to examine the expectations that journalists and news users have regarding the affordances of digital platforms for engaging with each other. Specifically, it investigates how these expectations align or misalign.

1. What are the expectations of journalists regarding the affordances of digital platforms to engage news users?
2. What are the expectations of news users regarding the affordances of digital platforms to engage with journalism?
3. How do the expectations regarding the affordances of digital platforms align or misalign between journalists and news users?

Answers to these questions will ultimately contribute to a better understanding of how journalism can adapt to existing developments or to build in-house technology that contributes to more effective engagement with audiences through digital platforms. Moving beyond traditional Western perspectives, it examines Chile, a country where digital transformation in journalism is particularly pronounced. With 74% of Chileans accessing news online and 47% relying on social media as their primary news source (DNR, 2025), Chile illustrates broader trends in digital news consumption, particularly the growing reliance on platforms for accessing news. On the one hand, the widespread use of social media for news reflects shifting consumption habits among Chilean audiences; on the other, it may also influence how journalists produce and distribute their content. This dynamic unfolds in a media system largely dominated by private stakeholders and commercially driven content. Despite these structural constraints, journalists uphold values of impartiality

**Table 1.** Alignment and misalignment of digital platform affordances with journalistic and user expectations.

Dimension	Affordance	Description	Alignment/Misalignment
Contextual flexibility	In-house adaptability	Ability of smartphones to be conveniently used in various home settings (e.g., during breakfast, in bed) for continuous news use.	Misalignment: Users place more emphasis on using smartphones for news consumption at home, appreciating the ease of use in various parts of the house and fewer limitations, which results in more time spent. Conversely, journalists focus on mobile use for on-the-go consumption, assuming shorter time spans.
	Mobile portability	The capacity of smartphones to facilitate news access on the go (e.g., during commuting, at work) and for journalists to reach their audience.	Misalignment: Journalists assume mobile news use is primarily on the go, but users access news more conveniently at home.
Informational access and use	Exposure facilitation	The potential of platforms to expose users to news content and for journalists to reach a wider audience.	Alignment: Both journalists and users agree on the exposure function of platforms.
	Insight generation	Capability of digital platforms to provide journalists with detailed analytics about user behaviours while also allowing users to gain insights into journalists' lives and perspectives through direct engagement on social media.	Misalignment: Journalists rely on data, but users feel their behaviours can be often misrepresented.
	Content personalization	The ability of platforms to tailor news content to individual user preferences through algorithmic recommendations (e.g., personalized news feeds).	Misalignment: Users appreciate personalization, but journalists struggle with algorithmic control.
Interactive communication	Continuous news availability	The provision of constant access to news (e.g., 24/7 updates, notifications), regardless of time or location.	Misalignment: Users find constant availability overwhelming, whereas journalists aim for continuous updates.
	Interactive communication facilitation	The capability of platforms to facilitate communication between users and journalists through features like comments, likes, and follows.	Misalignment: Journalists encourage interaction, but users are often reluctant to engage deeply or are unaware that journalists expect interaction from them.

and public service (Mellado & Hermida, 2021) while increasingly relying on digital tools and social media for audience engagement. This growing dependence on platforms highlights both the opportunities and challenges of Chile's evolving news environment.

## Literature Review

### *Digital Affordances and Engagement*

Digital technologies have played an important role in the ways in which journalism relates to its audience, as well as in the ways in which that audience relates to journalism. On the side of practitioners, the digital shift has enabled journalists to gain deeper insights into their audiences' tastes, preferences, and needs, allowing them to

tailor stories to better capture attention on topics deemed relevant by professionals (Belair-Gagnon, Zamith, and Holton 2020; Gajardo, Costera Meijer, and Domingo 2023). Over the last decade, embedding real-time audience data into newsroom routines has become valued as a top priority by news producers—news organisations around the world have adopted metrics in their operations, not only to measure the performance of their content, but also to make editorial decisions to improve the quality of their work (Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt 2018).

An example that illustrates how some media organizations are leveraging digital platforms to better understand and engage with their audiences, thereby enhancing their editorial strategies and content delivery, is Al Jazeera Network (AJ+). According to Zayani (2021), the editors of AJ+ are inspired and guided by users' experiences as well as the dynamics a particular story creates on social media. AJ+ has moved away from the traditional web-based approach of "pushing content to traditional audiences to offer unique products for audiences with different user habits" (Zayani 2021, 9). Their decisions are now made based on people's habits of using portable devices, their user interface experiences, and their narrative or stylistic preferences.

However, while attention to and engagement with audiences through digital platforms appears central to journalistic practices, little is known about how journalists' use of these platforms aligns with that of their audiences. This is particularly relevant since journalists often base their decisions on the assumption that they are meeting audience needs, which may not always be accurate (Nelson, 2021). For instance, journalists often believe they are engaging with their audiences by catering to their interests, determined through time-spent metrics provided by the platforms. However, time spent might not necessarily indicate genuine interest in content, as people have different strategies for managing their use of technology (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2020). Therefore, the ways journalists use platforms—even with the intent to engage the audience—may be misaligned with how audiences actually use the affordances of technology.

Ekström and Westlund (2019) define platforms as a "digital infrastructure with affordances offering diverse kinds of information and communication, as well as opportunities to produce, publish and engage with content" (259). In journalism studies, while research has examined how journalists use platforms, their interpretations of platform affordances remain a subject of ongoing investigation. Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger (2018), for instance, demonstrated that temporal possibilities and constraints, shaped by material conditions and technological aspects of news production, influence news narratives. Their findings highlight how the final form of news stories emerges from an interplay between temporal affordances and factors such as journalists' roles, professional norms, commercial pressures, political orientations, and audience perceptions. This suggests that platforms shape journalists' engagement with audiences not only through technological affordances but also through the interpretations journalists make of these affordances in achieving their goals.

Similarly, Hermida and Mellado (2020) examined the social media presentation of news organizations and journalists, showing that platform adoption has led to new genre conventions. They found that on Instagram and Twitter, journalists are expected to communicate instantaneously or create an illusion of instantaneity, with Twitter

prioritizing the latest updates and Instagram favoring engaging, visually driven content. The authors argue that platforms impose a distinct “grammar” for content production and distribution, though how this grammar aligns with audience engagement remains uncertain.

### ***The Role of Affordances in Digital News Use***

The rise of social platforms (Bell et al. 2017; Gillespie, 2018) and widespread mobile use (Hermida 2010; Sheller 2015) have significantly reshaped audience engagement with journalism (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2015; Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017; Duffy et al. 2020). As news becomes integrated into social media, users can access it anytime *via* their mobile phones, whether scrolling through Instagram (Larsson, 2018) or chatting on WhatsApp (Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2019; Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim 2020).

This shift has led to a diversification of audience engagement, which is more varied than traditionally assumed (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2021). Beyond actively reading, watching, or listening to news, users also engage through actions such as scrolling, tagging, checking updates, or even avoiding news altogether. Mobile platforms, in particular, foster fragmented consumption habits like “snacking” or “grazing,” which have been associated with lower public knowledge and civic engagement (Boukes 2019). While studies on digital affordances highlight how technology shapes interactions with journalism, they often fall short of examining how these affordances influence deeper engagement. For instance, Kiesow, Zhou, and Guo (2023) identified six affordances that facilitate online news navigation but did not assess their impact on audience engagement. Similarly, Shin (2022) found that algorithmic affordances shape users’ trust and perceptions of quality, value, and satisfaction, yet did not address the broader emotional, sensory, and habitual dimensions of news consumption (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020; Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer 2019).

Against this background, and despite growing research on platform dynamics and affordances (Dvir-Gvirsman et al. 2024; Harmer and Southern 2020), little is known about how cross-platform news use affects journalists’ engagement with their audience. As technologies influence not only news consumption but also reshape journalism through algorithmic curation and shifting audience dynamics, such analysis becomes increasingly relevant both for understanding audiences and also for informing how journalists adapt their engagement strategies across platforms.

### **Methods**

To answer our first research question, we conducted two rounds of in-depth interviews with 10 professional journalists. These interviews correspond to a case study of BiobioChile, a news organisation that stands out in Chile for maintaining both high levels of popularity and trust. Given that this research explored various aspects of journalism practice and audience engagement, we selected journalists with varying levels of responsibility for audience engagement within the newsroom. Interviewees included three founding directors (serving as editor-in-chief, editor-in-chief, and trends editor), the incumbent and former editors of the social media team, three area editors, and two reporters.

The development of our interview questions was guided by our research objectives and informed by a review of relevant literature on journalism and audience engagement (Gajardo & Costera Meijer, 2023). The interview guide was composed of two sections. The first section focused on getting to know the background of journalists, their roles in the organization, and their work routines. The second section explored their experiences dealing with audiences as part of their professional routine, with a special emphasis on providing illustrative examples of how their engagement with the audience was integrated into their work. This approach allowed us to gain a detailed understanding of how digital platforms played a part in this process. The first round of interviews was carried out online between July and August 2018, and the second between October and December 2021 (after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic), online and offline.

To answer our second research question, we conducted two rounds of in-depth interviews with 34 news users aged 18–65 from two of the biggest cities in Chile: Santiago and Concepción. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Atkinson and Flint 2001), following the criteria of an “expert view” (Lindolf, 1995). This means that they recognised themselves as regular news users—an “expert view”—and were willing to describe their motivations for and interest in journalism. The socioeconomic background of participants was diverse, although most of them held a professional degree and resided in two big urban areas of the country. The first round of interviews was conducted during the months of December 2019 and January 2020 and the follow-up set of interviews involving the same group of news users was carried out in December 2021.

Both rounds of interviews were conducted in person following an interview guide composed of three sections. The first section consisted of a day-in-the-life interview where participants were asked to describe their use of journalism throughout the week. This allowed us to identify the news media or platforms they preferred or used most frequently. The second section focused on understanding what participants were referring to when they talked about “news stories,” “news media” and “journalism.” We were careful to avoid imposing definitions or labels on what constitutes journalism and what does not. Thus, we emphasised asking participants “when you talk about journalism or news, what specifically are you talking about, how do you distinguish between what is news and what is not?” In the third section of the interview, we asked participants to think of what informing themselves meant and to describe how informed they felt they were.

Finally, the fourth and final section of the interview consisted of the think-aloud protocol (Ericsson and Simon 1998). Since most of the interviews were conducted in the habitual environment where participants interact with journalism (e.g., living room of their houses), we asked them to use their habitual devices while doing this. This exercise encouraged them to comment on elements that they did or did not appreciate in their habitual information experiences, bringing out the affordances of digital platforms for doing so. For example, when Pedro sat down on his sofa to use his iPhone, he immediately described how important it was for him to have a moment alone with the news at home, a feeling not mentioned in the previous stages of the interview.

The two rounds of interviews with both journalists and news users aimed to assess whether the changing technological environment of digital platforms influenced perceptions about affordances. Inspired by the theoretical framework, which posits

that affordances evolve very slowly, we wanted to observe any shifts in perceptions over time.

To answer our third research question, we conducted a comparative analysis of participants' responses. Following Evans et al. (2017) framework for studying affordances in communication, we mapped journalists' and news users' information experiences in terms of outcome, affordance, and feature, and analysed the responses through a thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012).

## Results

The findings from our study reveal nuanced differences and similarities in how journalists and news users perceive and utilize the affordances of digital platforms. The analysis focuses on Facebook, Twitter (we will keep the name it had at the time of the interviews), and Instagram, which were the most mentioned platforms by both journalists and news users.

At a general level, these three platforms reveal differing perspectives on how journalists and news users perceive and engage with digital spaces. Journalists view Twitter as a valuable tool for sharing breaking news and networking, while audiences often avoid it due to its hostile and argumentative tone. Regarding Facebook, journalists express frustration with its algorithm's tendency to amplify negative comments, which complicates efforts to foster meaningful conversations, whereas audiences appreciate its personalized news feeds but often feel overwhelmed by the constant flow of information. Instagram, meanwhile, is favored by journalists for its visual focus, although they feel pressured to prioritize aesthetic content, while audiences enjoy its design but find navigating to full news stories unnecessarily complicated.

More concretely, both groups view these affordances through three dimensions, which emerge from our analysis: contextual flexibility, informational access and use, and interactive communication. These three dimensions comprise the range of perceptions, ideas, and feelings that news users and journalists have in relation to the affordances of platforms.

### ***What Are the Expectations of Journalists regarding the Affordances of Digital Platforms to Engage News Users?***

#### ***Contextual Flexibility***

The contextual flexibility dimension refers to the situatedness of the news experience. According to the general editor, news access increased during the pandemic as people stayed home but reverted to normal levels afterward. Here, journalists emphasize the importance of the affordance of *mobile portability*, designing content with the assumption that news is primarily accessed not only on smartphones, but on the move. As one journalist noted,

"When I write, I only have in mind someone who wants to be informed. I know that we are read by young people, people who are traveling by bus or in the subway, who do not want to read something very long and that want to be informed about something with concise facts."

Interestingly, this perspective overlooks how frequently news is accessed at home *via* smartphones—an expression of the affordance of in-house adaptability, which users experienced in diverse ways. As discussed further, users' accounts suggest that mobility does not necessarily imply movement; rather, the portability of devices also supports stationary, routine-based news consumption within the home.

### **Informational Access and Use**

Journalists recognize platforms' capacity to provide unprecedented exposure, allowing them to reach wider audiences. Professionals noted that platforms enable them to reach their audience "in ways that were unimaginable," reflecting the affordance of *exposure facilitation* (see Table 1).

Another core platform function is the provision of analytics. This affordance, *insight generation*, allows journalists to track user behaviours *via* metrics on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Reviewing interaction reports on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram was part of the journalists' routine of evaluating their performance and identifying which areas needed improvement to catch users' attention and stay close to them. However, despite the potential benefits, journalists experienced these insights as being sometimes distorted or too partial, complicating their understanding of "true audience" sentiment. As one social media editor explained, Facebook's algorithm feeds an aggressive type of user that has co-opted their audience on this platform: "Facebook boosts comments that get most likes often positioning negative opinions over positive ones (...) this creates a bubble effect because people who differ from the most visible opinion often refrain from participating."

The third affordance, *content personalization*, was largely viewed with skepticism by journalists. Although platforms personalize content to match user preferences, journalists emphasized the lack of control over algorithmic distribution, which imposed technical, editorial, and economic constraints. Echoing findings from prior studies (Rashidian et al. 2019; Nielsen and Ganter 2022), interviewees described their relationship with Facebook as problematic. One journalist called it a "necessary evil" while another described it as a "monster."

This loss of control over content personalization manifested in two specific ways. First is the loss of agency in the news hierarchy. One editor-in-chief explained that particularly on Facebook and Instagram, the stories that users get in their timelines do not reflect the editorial relevance that they want to give to it, which complicated the engagement with the audience.

"We often get complaints saying that we didn't report on a certain topic or that we put too much emphasis on another, which isn't the case. If they would go to the website, they would see that we covered the most important issues, and they are on the front page."

Second is the constant adaptation to the type of interaction the platforms fuel. This is related to, first, the number of news stories they produce each day, and second, the writing style and presentation format of the stories. As the algorithm is a "black box," this adaptation is guided by experimenting and performing A/B testing of the stories to "see what works." As explained by the audience editor of one news outlet:

"Normally, we post about 80 stories in six hours, so we experimented posting between 55 and 60, which is a lot less. As a result, we found that the number of views didn't change much, but the interactions (reactions, shares, comments) increased dramatically. This made us realize that Facebook was punishing us for stories that didn't attract much attention, which are usually the local pieces. It felt like Facebook was saying: "OK, this media outlet publishes a lot, they have a lot of followers, but not everything they publish goes viral, so they are inefficient."

This reflects the affordance of *continuous news availability*, which shaped not only how news circulated but also what kinds of stories were prioritized. Journalists described a constant pressure to produce content that could go viral quickly and remain visible in timelines, a demand driven less by editorial value and more by platform incentives.

### **Interactive Communication**

A final dimension we identified is interactive communication. This includes features on social media platforms that are highly valued by journalists as they are expected to facilitate engagement with the audience. These features include *tap*, *follow*, *comment*, and *like*, each serving a purpose in enhancing the interaction between journalists and users.

First, the *tap* refers to the tapping on the link that each post has on social media. While journalists interviewed were aware that scrolling was the most common way people navigate the news, getting users to *tap* on the link referred to in the description of the information was of crucial importance. On the one hand, because tapping allowed users to read the information in greater depth and detail, and on the other, because it results in visits to the news site.

Second, the *follow* feature was described as crucial for content visibility and boosting platform rankings. Getting users to *follow* their accounts allowed journalists to know that users will be exposed to their content, and it positions the account and content of the news organization higher up the platforms' rankings. Regarding the *comment* feature, journalists said that they explicitly promote users to post comments on Facebook and Instagram. As one journalist mentioned, "we rely on comments and likes to drive engagement, but many users are reluctant to comment due to concerns about exposure."

Despite this encouragement, journalists were concerned about the incentives that the need for comments placed on their news. A senior audience editor explained that they realised that Facebook favours posts that get the most comments, and so they have started to write stories in ways that provoke debate, either by "crafting headlines that emphasize confrontation" or by "framing stories in competing narratives." This strategy has been commercially effective because people do comment more when the stories are controversial. However, from an editorial point of view, journalists' assessment is not equally positive. Journalists claimed that while there are comments that are constructive and help them to produce more content or to know people's opinions, they recognize that most of the responses are aggressive, which they are unable to moderate due to time constraints. According to our interviews, journalists would not be so eager to stimulate discussion and debate around their topics if Facebook did not reward high volumes of comments.

Finally, similar to the *follow* feature, the *likes* that news stories receive are also highly valued by journalists, as they feed the algorithm to better position the content, making it more visible on users' timelines. Therefore, journalists use likes as an indicator to evaluate both the relevance of the content for the public and the reach it may have. As one journalist put it: "If I don't get those first comments, first likes, the story won't circulate and I won't reach the audience that I want it to reach (...) If I don't captivate the person's interest, none of the other things I do will work."

### ***What Are the Expectations of News Users regarding the Affordances of Digital Platforms to Engage with Journalism?***

Our second research question examines how news users perceive and utilize the affordances of digital platforms to engage with journalism. These user interpretations are analysed across the dimensions of contextual flexibility, informational access and use, and interactive communication, providing a comprehensive understanding of their interaction with the news.

#### ***Contextual Flexibility***

A relevant aspect of this finding is that the portability of the smartphone not only facilitates access to news in mobile contexts, but also at home. In the two rounds of interviews -before and during the pandemic- we found that the extended use of the smartphone for news consumption was attributed to two main affordances: *in-house adaptability* and *mobile portability*. *In-house adaptability* refers to the capacity of using the device in different situations at home without any limitations. Participants would check the news while having breakfast, watching television, going to the bathroom, having dinner, or while gathering with friends or family. As Romina, a 25-year-old teacher explains, "Before I get up for breakfast or whatever... I stay in bed and start checking my phone... It helps me wake up (...) I look at Instagram, mainly... I see what my friends posted... things I don't care about... and in between I start checking the news."

The affordance of *mobile portability*, which journalists strongly emphasized in their content design, was also present in users' routines, but shaped by limitations that journalists often overlooked. Participants reported that they "carried their mobile phones everywhere" and checked the news on platforms while on public transport, at university, at the workplace, or during other activities outside the house. However, this portability is constrained by factors such as mobile data plans, network coverage, and work regulations. Claudia, for example, said she only checks the news at home because at her workplace it is generally inappropriate to be on smartphones. Meanwhile, Matías mentioned that he avoids using his data plan by only checking the news displayed on platforms while commuting. These accounts show that while both affordances are part of users' everyday news engagement, they operate within material and social boundaries.

#### ***Informational Access and Use***

*Exposure facilitation* through digital platforms plays a crucial role in how users manage their exposure to news. From the audience's perspective, this exposure is not merely

about staying informed but is also intimately tied to a need for social interaction and connectivity. Sebastián, a 26-year-old psychologist, shared his rationale for transitioning to a smartphone:

“I only bought a smartphone two years ago because I wasn’t initially interested in social media—I wanted to feel freer. But my friends were sharing a lot of news stories on WhatsApp, so I realized they were getting breaking news on Twitter, and as someone who values being informed, I had to download it.”

Direct engagement with journalists through social media platforms also emerged as an important part of their engagement with the news. One user explained, “I enjoy following journalists on social media because it offers insights into their personal lives and opinions.” This more relational form of engagement reflects how users experience the affordance of *insight generation*: not as access to analytics or metrics, but as a sense of personal connection that can foster trust.

Moreover, participants underscored the role of digital platforms in *content personalization*. Platforms like Facebook were lauded for delivering news customized to users’ specific interests and preferences. Tito, a 39-year-old educational psychologist, elaborated, “My main page for consuming news is Facebook... I don’t know why... well maybe it’s the algorithm... it gives me the right news... (...) I like my algorithm because I usually get things about movies... music... events here in the city... it did well.” Here, the affordance of *content personalization* -criticized by journalists as a loss of editorial control- is embraced by users as a convenience that supports their own interests and rhythms of attention. Interestingly, such an approach to algorithms seems to respond to a feeling of convenience rather than an idea of being well-informed. If anything, the *constant availability* of news on these platforms led to a feeling of being overwhelmed. Most participants noted that the platforms made news available 24/7, and that “being too informed” was an outcome that entailed detrimental consequences to their emotional well-being, especially after the pandemic.

Participants felt the need to keep their smartphone and platform use “under control” by resorting to a variety of strategies for managing the *continuous news availability*. One of them was to keep the smartphone on silent mode. As Sebastian stated: “I use the mobile phone on silent [mode], so I check my phone when I have time to look at it... sometimes a whole afternoon goes by.” Camila, a 35-year-old stay-home mom, admitted that she has recently stopped keeping herself informed through Twitter and Facebook because of the dangers of dependency. After watching a documentary on “platform addiction,” she decided to define timetables for smartphone use at home, which has meant becoming less informed. “I don’t keep my phones on the bedside table anymore, I leave them in the bathroom or in the living room.”

### **Interactive Communication**

Users’ interaction with platforms involves features such as tapping on links, following news accounts, commenting, and liking. These features hold distinctive meanings and uses for users. While users consciously choose to follow specific news sources to stay updated, they often prefer engaging with the content directly on the platform without tapping on the link to read full stories. Tapping on links to go to the website is also

limited by the design of Instagram. Some participants pointed out that finding the link to the news item on Instagram was “very complicated” as it required going to the account profile and tapping on a link that would then lead to a list of links where they would eventually find the story they want to read. Another reason users avoid tapping on links is cost. Fernando, a 23-year-old nurse, said that when commuting to work, he avoided tapping on news items on platforms because he did not want to spend his plan’s browsing data on this. Like many Chileans, his mobile internet plan allowed unlimited navigation on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp apps, making it more convenient to use the news only through the information shown on the platform. Others simply do not find reading the full news story necessary. Lourdes, a 35-year-old engineer, stated, “If it’s a news item that affects me directly or I can use it for my work, I’ll look for the link, but if not, it’s not necessary.”

Likewise, participants described *following* a news organization account as an important part of their engagement. They saw the accounts they followed as relevant and said that *following* was a way of showing support and interest in what the organization had to say. Following news accounts ensures users see content from these sources in their feeds, helping them stay updated without actively searching for news. Conversely, unfollowing a news organization indicated dissatisfaction with their content, signalling a withdrawal of support and interest.

Using the *comment* feature was less frequent among participants due to concerns about exposure and potential backlash. Few participants acknowledged posting their opinions. The main reason for not commenting was the high degree of exposure it entailed. Valentina explained, “Commenting on the news I read on Instagram or Facebook represents a big commitment because I feel I am exposing myself forever.” Many participants stated that they do not actively use Twitter because anonymity allows discussions to be conducted in a violent and unfriendly tone.

Users face interpretative challenges with the *like* feature. The simplicity of a *like* does not always align with the complexity of news content. Katherine, a 31-year-old social worker, illustrated this by saying, “I see a news story of something horrible, and I think: how can I “like” this horrible thing, what does this heart mean? That I’m happy because this is happening?” Likewise, users were often unaware that journalists and news organizations value likes and other interactions. Pedro, a 29-year-old psychologist, pointed out that he frequently likes videos from YouTubers but has never done so with the news stories he sees on other platforms.

“I give likes to these types of videos [YouTubers] to support them... and because they always say ‘give me a like’... but I don’t do that with the news... they are not asking me for likes so I don’t know...”

As such, participants were unaware that journalists and news organizations are interested in getting interactions from the audience. Valentina, for example, was surprised when asked if she thought that journalists expected interaction from her:

“I don’t know what an online news organization wants. I guess to have more informed people to have a more elevated discussion, but I don’t know what they want in return...I had never asked myself that question... letters to the editor? (...) When a journalist publishes an article, what does he want me to do?... I don’t know, you tell me.”

## ***How Do the Expectations regarding the Affordances of Digital Platforms Align or Misalign between Journalists and News Users?***

One first finding emerging from the comparison of platform affordances identified by journalists and news users is the shared perception that platforms facilitate a user-friendly, engaging, and relationship-oriented news experience (see Table 1 for areas of alignment and misalignment).

The *user-friendly* nature of these platforms lies in their easy deployment of information, where precise headlines allow users to quickly grasp the essence of a story and share it with friends. This ease of use caters to fast-paced, on-the-go news consumption, making platforms essential for distributing content. Additionally, *content personalization* and visual elements—such as infographics and videos—further engage audiences, helping platforms facilitate exposure by making news widely accessible. However, journalists remain critical of their dependence on algorithms, which influence exposure in ways they cannot fully control.

Despite these engagement opportunities, misalignments emerge in *contextual flexibility* and *content personalization*. Journalists expect mobile portability to be paramount, designing content for users on the move. Yet, many users consume news at home, where they have fewer time constraints and expect a more versatile experience. This misalignment highlights that while journalists focus on mobile-first strategies, users prefer platforms that support both mobile and in-house news engagement. Similarly, *content personalization* fosters convenience but also creates information overload, leading users to adopt strategies like silencing notifications or limiting news-checking times. While journalists see *exposure facilitation* as a core advantage, audiences often struggle with algorithm-driven news distribution, which shapes what they see in unpredictable ways.

Further misalignment appears in *interactive communication*. Journalists expect tapping, comments, likes, and follows to enhance audience engagement, but users do not always recognize these actions as expected behaviors. Many hesitate to comment due to concerns about visibility, while others avoid *tapping* links because of platform design limitations or data constraints. Similarly, *liking* a news post is often interpreted differently by users; some see it as support, while others find it inappropriate for serious topics. Without clear cues from journalists, users remain unaware of the significance of these interactions for content visibility and engagement metrics. This gap underscores the need for clearer communication between news organizations and their audiences regarding digital platform affordances.

## **Conclusions**

This study aimed to uncover how the expectations of journalists and users about the role of digital platforms coincide or differ in terms of the affordances that facilitate engagement with each other. Our analysis first revealed that for both audiences and journalists, the platforms enable a user-friendly, appealing, and relationship-building experience. However, the ways in which both groups made sense of platforms' affordances show alignments and misalignments across three different dimensions: contextual flexibility, informational access and use, and interactive communication. These findings carry distinct implications for the practice and research on digital journalism.

First, the analysis calls attention to the editorial assumptions built into how journalists interpret the flexibility of platform use. While smartphones are central to how news is both produced and accessed (Slette-meås and Storm-Mathisen 2018; Fortunati and O’Sullivan 2020), the common idea that people primarily consume news on the go does not fully reflect everyday practices. This suggests that editorial strategies shaped by assumptions of mobility may overlook how news engagement actually unfolds in domestic settings where routines, rhythms, and motivations for news use may differ. At the same time, the idea that mobile news use allows people to engage with journalism “anywhere” requires closer examination. While mobile access is often seen as flexible, it can be limited by data costs, poor connections, or restrictions in work and public spaces. Similarly, while at-home access might suggest greater comfort or more available time, people often face constraints that limit when and how they engage with the news, such as caregiving duties, shared devices, or unreliable internet connections. Overall, these everyday conditions are shaped by socio-economic factors that can vary across contexts, influencing the extent to which platform affordances actually support meaningful news engagement. This calls for future research that examines how affordances are experienced and negotiated in relation to varying social, economic, and material conditions.

Second, these findings underscore the need to consider how affordances shape not just what journalism looks like, but also *when* and *how* it is produced and accessed. While research has often focused on how platforms influence content, our analysis draws attention to the temporal pressures embedded in platform logic pressures that can erode editorial autonomy by demanding constant publication and responsiveness to algorithmic demands. For users, these same affordances create an environment of urgency and interruption, where staying informed becomes emotionally and cognitively demanding. In this light, news avoidance may not only signal disinterest or distrust, but also a reaction to the pace and tone of platform infrastructures. Attending to these temporal and experiential dimensions invites new ways of thinking about what meaningful and sustainable engagement could look like what Swart et al. (2022) have called an *ethics of attention*.

Third, our analysis reveals a misalignment in how journalists and audiences interpret platform-based engagement. Journalists often view likes, shares, or comments as meaningful indicators of audience involvement, yet many participants expressed uncertainty about what these features actually signal or whether they are expected to engage at all. This asymmetry risks turning engagement into a one-sided exchange driven by metrics that may not reflect users’ intentions or understanding. As Salonen et al. (2023) suggest, the norms of interaction are not fixed but co-constructed through practice; however, our findings indicate that this process is frequently constrained by a lack of clarity. Because platforms are not designed to support journalism’s communicative goals (Willig 2022), it becomes essential for newsrooms to take a proactive role in shaping clearer, more intentional, and reciprocal interactions. This means moving beyond passive reliance on platform metrics to actively fostering understanding through clearer communication strategies such as adopting a more personal tone and explicitly inviting audience responses (Leith 2021). Such efforts matter because trust depends not only on content accuracy but also on how audiences navigate and interpret the socio-technical environment of digital news (Park et al. 2021; Aharoni et al. 2024).

Beyond the dimension-specific insights, the findings contribute to broader reflections on how platforms’ affordances shape both journalistic practice and audience

experience. While interviews were conducted before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, participants described platform affordances in relatively consistent ways, suggesting that key dynamics, such as algorithmic visibility and engagement metrics, remain stable across shifting contexts. What emerges is the need to take platform affordances seriously as structural conditions that shape not only the production and circulation of news, but also the temporal, emotional, and social experience of engaging with it.

Building on the study's findings, it is important to recognize how the platform environment continues to evolve. Since the data collection period, short-form video formats, especially on platforms like TikTok, have gained significant traction (Newman et al. 2025), intensifying the platform-driven pressures already identified in this research. These developments accelerate circulation, prioritize algorithmic visibility, and normalize rapid, attention-grabbing content, further pushing journalism to adapt its tone, pace, and modes of presentation. With this, journalists increasingly find themselves not only competing with influencer-driven content but also expected to adopt similar strategies of visibility and self-presentation (Hurcombe 2024). While these shifts open space for creative experimentation, they also risk eroding editorial autonomy and blurring the boundaries between journalistic and promotional forms. Future research should examine how these evolving dynamics shape the relationship between affordances, engagement, and the normative commitments of journalism in fragmented and highly personalized media environments.

Finally, our findings contribute to this discussion by showing that platform's affordances actively shape journalistic practice. By highlighting how design features condition the possibilities for meaningful interaction, our study underscores the need for responses that take these dynamics seriously. Such responses may include newsroom-driven innovation that incorporates affordance-aware design, as well as public policy aimed at strengthening journalism's capacity to engage audiences in increasingly platformized digital environments.

This study is not without limitations. We focused on participants who identified as well-informed and included a relatively small group of journalists, all from the same Chilean news organization. While this allowed for an in-depth exploration of how these groups interpret platform affordances within a specific institutional and national context, it naturally limits the broader applicability of our findings. The perspectives of casual or disengaged news users whose relationships with platforms and journalism may differ substantially, remain underexplored. Likewise, although the geographic focus on Chile provides valuable insights into non-Western platform dynamics, the findings may not fully capture variations in other media systems. Future research should broaden the scope to include a wider range of users, journalistic environments, and cultural contexts to better understand how perceptions of affordances and their implications for audience engagement vary across contexts. Also, future studies could specifically include less frequent or disengaged users to examine how platform affordances shape their relationship to journalism.

## Author contributions

CRedit: **Constanza Gajardo**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation,

Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **David Domingo:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Costera Meijer Irene:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

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