

# How social media affordances shape journalistic content production: A stimulus-based interview study on journalists' perceptions

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## Abstract

Social media platforms are increasingly central for delivering journalistic content. While evidence suggests that social media led to adaptations of journalistic production routines, comparatively little is known about the specific platform characteristics that shape coordinating, selecting, and editing social media content. Adopting an affordance lens, this study seeks to tackle this gap and investigates how social media journalists perceive platform properties and their influence on journalistic content production. To answer this question, the study relies on stimulus-based qualitative interviews with 34 social media journalists from Germany, focusing primarily on TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. By combining platform walkthroughs and reconstruction interviews, the analysis provides fine-grained insights into how a set of affordances, ranging from the perceived degree of algorithmic curation over (user-induced) spatiotemporal boundaries to platforms' communicative forms, shapes the different stages of content production. The proposed affordances are both universal and variable, forming a typology that facilitates systematic comparisons across current and future platforms.

## Keywords

affordances, digital journalism, news production, qualitative interviews, social media, walkthrough method

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**Correction (May 2025):** The link available in the Data Availability Statement of the article has been updated since its original publication.

Although social media platforms often complicate the dissemination of news (e.g., Hagar and Diakopoulos, 2023), they have become increasingly crucial for encountering and delivering news (Newman et al., 2024). News outlets utilize these platforms as a gateway to their own websites and channels as well as for branding and reaching (new) young audiences (e.g., Hendrickx, 2021; Nielsen and Ganter, 2018; Sehl et al., 2021). However, to achieve success on platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, journalists must at least partially align their decisions with the platforms' logic (Nieborg and Poell, 2018).

Researchers have undertaken various efforts to shed light on this “platformization” (van Dijck, 2018) of news and its impact on journalists and news organizations. At the individual level, the appropriation of social media has led to the adaptation and creation of new journalistic roles, such as entertainer, promoter, or “newsfluencer” (Hurcombe, 2024; see also Mellado, 2024; Negreira-Rey et al., 2022). At the organizational level, which is the focus of this study, adaptations to platform characteristics have reshaped journalistic content production routines. Although concerns about the potential loss of journalistic quality can be mitigated (Hase et al., 2023; Hendrickx and Vázquez-Herrero, 2024 see also Anter, 2024), news outlets frequently select entertaining soft- or non-news topics (e.g., Denisova, 2022; Piñeiro-Otero and Martín-Pena, 2020), edited in an emotionalized, personal manner (e.g., Hågvær, 2019; Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2019). Additionally, they have altered coordinating processes, most prominently by news outlets forming entirely new teams (David et al., 2019) or hiring social media editors. While these editors rarely see themselves as marketers, they still aim to optimize content distribution as effectively as possible (Opgenhaffen and Hendrickx, 2023; Tsuruel et al., 2021). Research also reveals differences between platforms: For example, journalists distinguish between platforms that are more of a “news medium” and those with a “social character” (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2014) such as Facebook and TikTok, where outlets focus more on trivia, lifestyle, sports, or non-news topics (e.g., Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020). Moreover, there are indications that outlets adapt their content production more extensively to audiovisual and multimodal platforms like TikTok than they did, for example, in the context of Twitter or even Instagram (e.g., Degen et al., 2024; Hendrickx and Vázquez-Herrero, 2024).

However, concepts for systematically explaining these differences are rare. Instead of identifying the specific influential characteristics, studies often treat platforms as a ‘monolithic bloc’ (see Hase et al., 2023 or Hermida and Mellado, 2020 as examples for exceptions). Additionally, many scholars focus on unifying dimensions of social media logic, such as the pursuit of popularity (van Dijck and Poell, 2013) or broadly acknowledge the importance of platform affordances without specifying *which* ones are influential. This conceptual shortcoming is particularly problematic in light of the “moving target” problem (Valkenburg et al., 2016) of platform research: the dynamic and ever-evolving platform landscape necessitates nuanced knowledge about (the combination of) single characteristics that shape journalistic production decisions.

To address this gap, this research proposes a platform-adaptable typology of affordances—perceived properties of a platform (Ronzhyn et al., 2023)—and investigates how these affordances shape journalistic content production. This includes *coordinating* the processes of selecting and editing within the newsroom. *Selecting* involves choosing topics, actors, events, and information, while *editing* focuses on presenting these elements in terms

of genre (e.g., comment or report), tone (e.g., subjective or neutral), and visualization (e.g., text only or video) (Blöbaum, 2004). The study employs innovative reconstruction walkthroughs with 34 social media journalists from Germany, focusing primarily on TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. By combining platform walkthroughs (Light et al., 2018) and reconstruction interviews (Reich and Barnoy, 2016), the study provides fine-grained insights into how journalists perceive affordances, ranging from the perceived degree of algorithmic curation over (user-induced) spatiotemporal boundaries to platforms' communicative forms, and their influence on content production. While some affordances, such as visibility, have extensive consequences for content production and even the mere presence of outlets on a platform, the influence of other affordances appears limited to specific stages of production. Ultimately, the typology presented here provides a framework for systematically comparing journalistic content across current and future platforms.

## Social media logic and affordances

Like other forms of media, social media have their own logics (van Dijck and Poell, 2013), that is, “the assumptions and processes for constructing messages within a particular medium.” Media logic thus encompasses the processes, rhythms, grammars, and formats through which information is processed and communicated (Altheide, 2016: 751). To succeed on social media platforms, outlets must balance their established mass media logic with social media logic.

However, social media logic should not be understood as a “collective whole” that applies uniformly across all platforms (Hendrickx and Opgenhaffen, 2024). To illuminate how journalists make sense of the specific logics of a platform, the concept of affordances is particularly useful. Originally introduced by Gibson (1982), affordances describe a “unique combination of qualities that specifies what the object affords” (p. 11). In this sense, they articulate the range of possible actions within a given logic. Since affordances are conceptually contested (Evans et al., 2017), this research adopts the comprehensive definition provided by Ronzhyn et al.'s (2023): “Social media affordances are the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual [factors], that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms” (p. 14). Thus, an affordance-based approach builds on the argument that while affordances may refer to platforms' actual features (e.g., their algorithmic curation), it is the *perception* of platform characteristics that guides action and warrants investigation (see also Nagy and Neff, 2015). This is particularly relevant in personalized and dynamic media environments, where understanding individual perceptions is crucial to analysing the (journalistic) use of platforms.

## Social media affordances and journalistic content production

This paper focuses on the affordances identified as journalistically relevant by Hase et al. (2023) as a conceptual foundation, supplemented by affordances derived from existing research on social media journalism and the broader affordance literature. The resulting typology of six possibly relevant affordances will be introduced in the following section.

The perceived *degree of algorithmic curation* refers to the relevance of algorithmic selection in deciding which content is (or is not) displayed to users (Hase et al., 2023; Thorson and Wells, 2016: 317). TikTok, for instance, represents a platform with high algorithmic curation: Usage is centred around the algorithmically curated “For You Page,” with users ‘training’ the algorithm rather than following specific accounts (Schellewald, 2023). Other platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, are characterized by moderate degrees of algorithmic curation, as the default feed displays both algorithmically selected content and those posted from followed accounts (Hase et al., 2023). While research emphasizes that journalists generally view algorithmic curation as particularly influential for editorial decision-making (Lischka, 2021; Peterson-Salahuddin and Diakopoulos, 2020), there is little insight into how journalists perceive varying degrees of algorithmic curation.

While algorithmic curation determines which content users see, *interactivity* describes the modes and types of engaging with posts through features such as likes, shares, and comments (e.g., Bucher and Helmond, 2018; Hermida and Mellado, 2020). Journalism research has explored metrics-driven content production (e.g., Lamot, 2021), but less attention has been given to how journalists interpret and utilize *different* interaction features and their impact on content production (e.g., Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023).

Next, *hypertextuality* refers to the possibility of including hyperlinks that allow users to access content outside the platform (Hase et al., 2023). This affordance has proven crucial for strategic considerations: where hyperlinks can be included in posts, newsrooms are more likely to pursue a traffic/conversion strategy aimed at directing users to their own outlet. In contrast, when hyperlinking is not possible, strategies that focus on building brand recognition and reaching new audiences are more common (e.g., Sehl et al., 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022).

The final affordance proposed by Hase et al. (2023) is *visuality*. While current social media are generally characterized by at least a certain degree of multimodality—that is, the combination of sound, image, and text (Geise and Baden, 2015)—, the relationship between textual, visual and audiovisual content varies across platforms. Consistent with evidence that *visuality* promotes personalization and emotionalization (Sonnevend and Steiert, 2022), studies show that outlets often select human interest and positive topics on Instagram (e.g., Al-Rawi et al., 2021; Kallio and Mäenpää, 2025). However, these mostly platform-specific and content-analytical approaches offer little insight into how journalists perceive different forms of *visuality* and, particularly for non-visual legacy media, the organizational changes it might necessitate.

Central to affordances is their dual role in both facilitating and constraining human action, which is particularly exemplified by *spatiotemporal boundaries*. These include length restrictions (e.g., for text or videos) and ephemerality, referring to the limited visibility of posts. Such boundaries influence not only what users share but also the tone of their content (e.g., Bayer et al., 2016; Jaidka et al., 2019). For instance, research has well established that outlets often use short or ephemeral formats, such as Instagram Stories or Tweets, for current affairs and live reporting (e.g., Hermida, 2016; Kallio and Mäenpää, 2025). However, less is known about how (challenging) journalists perceive these limits.

Lastly, research suggests to include *communicative forms* into the typology, which Schellewald (2021: 1439) defines as “platform-specific languages or memes, trends, and aesthetic styles of users’ meaning-making practices” that evolve through users’ interaction with platforms’ features. For instance, TikTok’s video editing features encourage popular

platform trends such as duets (Zulli and Zulli, 2022). Outlets occasionally adapt to the platform's perceived entertainment character by posting "funny and silly things" (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020), although, particularly among legacy outlets, humour is rarely used on TikTok (Zulli et al., 2024). Similarly, journalists reflect the common use of Instagram Stories for life updates and self-presentation (Kofoed and Larsen, 2016) by using them for live reporting and personal documentaries (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019).

This typology indicates that different platform affordances influence the production of journalistic content. However, the existing evidence is often platform-specific and derived from content analyses (see also Anter, 2024), which allow only cautious conclusions about the *perception* of different affordances and their *distinct* on content production. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following question:

*RQ*: How do journalists perceive social media affordances on different platforms and their influence on coordinating, selecting, and editing of journalistic content?

## Method

To study journalists' perceptions, qualitative in-depth interviews are an appropriate methodological choice. However, conventional qualitative interviews take a retrospective perspective, which could bias platform evaluations over platform perceptions or lead to salience bias (Flick, 2019: 268f.) if participants primarily refer to particularly 'prominent' affordances. Additionally, it is cognitively challenging for interviewees (and interviewers) to explain (and understand) how specific affordances are reflected in content production without referring to the same piece of content. This study therefore adopted an innovative methodological approach which enables the investigation of theoretically relevant affordances while also allowing for the exploratory identification of additional affordances not yet addressed in journalism research: the *reconstruction-walkthrough*.

## Design

The reconstruction-walkthrough is a stimulus-based interview method that combines the sociotechnical approach of platform walkthroughs (Light et al., 2018; Troeger and Bock, 2022) with reconstruction interviews developed specifically for journalism research (Reich and Barnoy, 2016). Walkthroughs are a "rendition of a user journey" (Dieter et al., 2019), where interviewees are invited to navigate a platform in their usual manner and think aloud about the platform and its affordances. Specifically, reconstruction-walkthroughs employ a "truncated walkthrough" (Troeger and Bock, 2022: 49) that focuses only on platform spaces particularly relevant to the research question, excluding other spaces (such as the login screen). During reconstruction interviews, journalists are confronted with their content and asked to retrace its production. As a form of "stimulated recall" (Dempsey, 2010), reconstruction-walkthroughs are effective for gaining context- and experience-based insights into (consequences of) journalists' platform perceptions. This method allows for both *identifying* journalistically relevant platform affordances in situ and systematically *retracing* their distinct impact on specific content production decisions.

The interviews consisted of four steps. They began with a 1) *warm-up phase* during which contextual knowledge was gathered: Journalists were, for instance, asked to describe their role within the newsroom and how the production of social media content is organized. This was followed by the 2) *walkthrough*, during which interviewees were asked to navigate through the platforms' main feeds and their outlets' account sites (as well as any other platform space they considered relevant, e.g., Instagram's 'Search & Explore'). After an initial open description of their platform perceptions, journalists were asked about the affordances discussed above. Interviewees typically illustrated their answers with examples from the respective feed, thereby providing a rich understanding of their perceptions. Subsequently, the interviewer transitioned to the 3) *reconstruction* of two to three posts recently produced by the participants. Through detailed inquiries about various aspects of the content piece—ranging from newsroom discussions and topic selection to specific design decisions such as the use of emojis—it was gradually “reverse engineered” (Reich and Barnoy, 2016). As in the walkthrough, the questions first prompted the interviewee to generally explain the production process, then aimed at a more specific understanding of how the affordances previously identified as relevant shaped coordinating, selecting, and editing. The interviews concluded with a short 4) *cool-down phase* that provided space for critical reflection on platform affordances and their relevance to journalistic content production.

Since the interviews were conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, phases 3) and 4) were facilitated through screensharing. In some cases—for instance, if interviewees were using work devices that disabled screen sharing—this was done by the researcher (who then received ‘navigation advice’ from the interviewees), but in most cases, it was carried out by the interviewees themselves. While having the researcher execute the navigation may have resulted in a slightly less intuitive process, all participants were easily able to articulate their platform perceptions. Moreover, the walkthroughs were similar in terms of duration and the platform spaces visited to those conducted independently.

## Sampling

The reconstruction-walkthroughs were conducted with 34 German journalists. Similar to other European countries, the German media system is characterized by a strong public broadcasting, but also widely circulated newspapers acting as opinion leaders (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Reflecting global trends, social media platforms have become increasingly relevant, with about one-third of German news users relying on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter/X for news (Newman et al., 2024: 83).

To ensure diversity in terms of platforms and media (both regarding type and revenue model), a sampling plan (Lamnek and Krell, 2010: 185) was developed, aiming for an equal distribution of interview partners across platforms and media. However, as shown in the sample overview (Table 1), recruiting interview partners for Facebook and Twitter/X proved challenging. Many rejections were attributed to the fact that Facebook does not reach a relevant (young) target group. Additionally, journalists indicated that content for these platforms is often created automatically—partly due to platform affordances (see section ‘Results’).

**Table 1.** Sample overview ( $n = 34$ ).

	Twitter	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok	Other (LinkedIn, Reddit)	Total
TV	1	1	4	7	1	14
Radio	1	2	1	1	0	5
Newspaper	0	1	4	2	1	8
Digital/Social Born	0	0	2	4	1	7
Total	2	4	11	14	3	34

Note. Four interviews focused on more than one platform, with the more dominant platform being counted. One interview was conducted with two interviewees, as required by their outlet's management (I32a/b). Among the interviewees, 19 worked for a public broadcaster; 24 had leading positions (e.g., Product Owner or Head of Social), but were mostly also occupied with content production. 22 interviewees were female.

Potential interview partners were contacted both via mail and direct messages on social media. Participation in the study was based on freely volunteered informed consent, and all interviewees were ensured anonymity, including the names of their outlets. The remotely conducted interviews took place between July 2023 and February 2024, lasted between 45 and 80 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed afterward. The videos were not analysed separately but served as aids in interpretation.

### Coding and analysis

The research employed qualitative content analysis that combined inductive category formation and deductive category assignment (Mayring, 2014). First, the codebook includes categories that capture the interviewees' perceptions of the *affordances* outlined above. Resulting from the walkthrough method and its 'step-by-step'-approach, these were inductively supplemented with categories that capture the perception of specific platform spaces (e.g., *start page*, *account feed*, *broadcast channels*). During the analysis, these 'spatial' categories were linked to the other categories to achieve a nuanced understanding of the affordances and their relevance within the platforms. Second, the codebook included categories to capture the postings that were discussed and reconstructed during the interviews, with a focus on the stages of journalistic production (*coordinating*, *selecting*, *editing*). For example, sub-categories within editing were used to code explanations related to the *look*, *format*, *genre* and *tone* of the respective content. These categories, too, were supplemented inductively, such as to account for the relevance of *resources* available to an outlet.

During the coding process, transcripts were thoroughly read, and text segments were assigned to one or more categories. The researcher then analysed coded segments both horizontally (i.e., all coded segments for one interviewee) and vertically (i.e., all coded segments for one category). This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how social media affordances shape journalistic production processes.

All study materials, including the interview guideline, category system, and a detailed overview of participants' characteristics are accessible via OSF: <https://tinyurl.com/someaff>

## Results

The following analysis presents overarching findings on journalists' perceptions of affordances and their influence on content production. Since not all affordances were equally impactful across the three stages of content production, the presentation focuses on the most salient stages for each affordance. [Table 2](#) summarizes the overarching findings regarding the affordances' implications for journalistic content production.

**Table 2.** Typology of journalistically relevant social media affordances.

Algorithmic curation		
Degree of algorithmically selected content	High Moderate	Higher topic diversity, attention-generating editing Lower topic diversity, attention-generating editing
Interactivity		
Modes and types of engaging with posts	Meaningless Meaningful	– Community-based topic selection, attention-generating editing, storytelling frameworks
Hypertextuality		
Possibility of including hyperlinks	High Low	Less autonomous social media team, repurposed content, uncomplete presentation (teaser) More autonomous social media team, native content, complete presentation
Spatiotemporal boundaries		
Length and time restrictions	Loose/long Tight/short	(Partly) complex topics, editing richer in texts and graphics Lighter/simpler topics, attention-generating editing
Visuality		
Relevance of (audio-) visual content	Text-based Image-based Audiovisual	Automated content production Balance of image-prone content and visualization strategies (e.g., infographics, animations), diverse teams Additionally: host-based-storytelling
Communicative forms		
Platform-specific languages or memes, trends, and aesthetic styles	Rich, unconventional Plain, conventional Valence (unfriendly)	Participating in/covering platform trends and popular topics, adaption of journalistic aesthetics and formats Less adaptation of aesthetics and formats (Partly) abandonment of polarized topics
Searchability		
Ease and mode of searching content	High Low	Selection of current topics, SEO-optimization –

## Degree of algorithmic curation

Interviewees expressed varied perceptions of how the platforms' algorithms—repeatedly described as a “blackbox” (e.g., I13, I22)—function. However, they shared a common understanding of how the degree of algorithmic curation differs across platforms. Consistent with previous descriptions, TikTok is perceived as a platform with a particularly high degree of algorithmic curation, where following specific accounts is largely irrelevant: “What makes TikTok unique is that it is much less about who I follow and much more about what content I like” (I3). In contrast, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter/X, and Instagram are perceived as being considerably less algorithmically curated, making it the primary goal to “reach our followers in the feed” (I29).

These perceptions proved pivotal for *selecting* and *editing*. On platforms with high degrees of algorithmic curation, journalists focus primarily on attention-generating editing that aligns with the platforms' communicative forms (see below), as each post must succeed on its own. Selecting specific topics, however, is less important, since “we are dependent on which bubble we slip into” (I6). This perception leads to a high topic diversity, as any topic that fits both the outlet's scope and the interests of the imagined (young) audience is considered.

On platforms perceived to have moderate degrees of algorithmic curation, attention-generating editing remains important. However, since journalists assume that their content reaches at least some of their followers, they strive to select topics that suit their “community” (e.g., I9, I12, I17). Nearly all Instagram and Facebook interviewees were able to list topics that resonate well with their audience. For example, one interviewee perceives the outlet's followers particularly interested in restaurant tests (P12). As one interviewee put it: “I know my people” (I9).

## Interactivity

Corroborating existing research (e.g., [Kallio and Mäenpää, 2025](#)), journalists regard engagement as a crucial indicator of success and use it for performance evaluations in regular newsroom meetings. However, participants attributed different levels of importance to various engagement cues: Likes are often perceived as (too) low-threshold and are mostly relevant for positive (non-news) topics: “A like is a vanity metric. It looks cool, but I feel it's less and less effective.” (I2). In contrast to such ‘meaningless’ cues, comments, shares, and saves are considered more meaningful. For example, one interviewee noted that if posts receive many saves, “it's something that users want to look at afterwards and that is an appreciation of our content” (I27). For videos, journalists also observe users' ‘silent interaction’ such as views and watch-through-rates. These metrics are often seen as particularly honest and trustworthy, as they remain private, reducing users' potential concerns about how their interaction with content is perceived by others. Unlike likes or comments, these metrics reflect behaviour from all viewers—everyone either continues watching or drops off.

In terms of *selecting*, several interviewees mentioned blending their news with timeless “service content” (I22) that people might save. Similarly, comments—their

content, not just their quantity—inspire future content, as illustrated by this TikTok journalist: “We benefit most from discussions, because we get targeted feedback, further perspectives and possibly open questions that we can address” (I15). Next to such community-based topic selection, these cues contribute to attention-generating *editing* that aligns with platforms’ communicative forms (see below). To increase watch-through rates, journalists from both digital-born (e.g., I3, I6) and legacy outlets (e.g., I1, I34, I28) explained that they adopt specific storytelling frameworks to sustain viewer engagement. These strategies, sometimes formalized as internal guidelines in digital-born outlets, include cliffhangers or engaging animations at the start of the video, personalized storytelling, and loops, where the video’s last sentence connects to the first: “It’s just a way to make gags (...) the more subtle, the better it is, the higher the rewatch” (I6).

### *Hypertextuality*

The hypertextuality of platforms that allow hyperlinks in posts is unanimously perceived as high. In contrast, Instagram and TikTok, which allow hyperlinking only in the account description or Stories, are mostly perceived to have low hypertextuality: “When users are in this app metric, they only scroll up or down (...) and aren’t keen to click on a link” (I23).

Corroborating existing research (Sehl et al., 2021), perceived hypertextuality is crucial for *coordinating* since it shapes outlets’ platform strategies, as this quote illustrates: “We use TikTok and Instagram as awareness platforms. As Facebook and Twitter have more potential to generate conversions, we’ve focused on link posts there” (I28). High hypertextuality thus necessitates close integration within the newsroom. For instance, interviewees in leadership positions explained that they regularly participate in newsroom meetings to identify topics that could be repurposed for Facebook or Instagram. Conversely, low hypertextuality favours autonomous social media teams that encompass all traditional newsroom roles to be able to produce native content for the platforms.

Hypertextuality’s most notable influence on specific content is evident in editing decisions. In low hypertextual environments, posts often contain complete stories and, along with many of their captions, are quite detailed: “You can’t give up a promise if it’s not realized” (I21). Conversely, higher perceived hypertextuality favours the use of incomplete presentation and teasers: “Readers should learn something, but they should also have enough residual curiosity to consider going to the site via the link” (I12).

### *Spatiotemporal boundaries*

The interviewed journalists perceive a range of spatiotemporal boundaries, such as character and time limits or the ephemerality of Instagram Stories. Many interviewees perceived tighter limits as those imposed by the platforms’ architecture. For instance, although TikTok allows videos up to ten minutes in length, several interviewees perceive that “you only have 40 to 50 seconds” (I3), due to TikTok users “short attention span” (I33). Additionally, the platforms’ non-exclusivity (Kümpel, 2022) plays a significant role: Since journalistic content competes with “cat videos or someone dancing somewhere” (I18), it must capture viewers’ attention immediately. Especially on visual

platforms, users can instantly identify the topic of a post and thus have an “extremely fast thumb” (I3). Accordingly, several participants mentioned a “3-second rule” (e.g., I1, I18) for TikTok, describing the brief window within which content must be compelling.

The implications for *selecting* are nuanced. Generally, participants often mentioned that they prefer simple news stories and light non-news stories for formats perceived as shorter, such as text posts or reels, since “it doesn’t fit that much information” (I16) into them. In contrast, longer formats such as Instagram feed posts and Stories with multiple slides are perceived as more suitable for documentaries and analyses: “On Instagram, you can tell stories a little slower” (I4). However, there are differing views on whether complex topics are suitable at all. Some interviewees were sceptical, particularly on platforms with low hypertextuality, as a youth-oriented public broadcaster expressed:

“Some topics are too big for social media. (...) Some editors assume that if you have a link in the bio, people will click on it. I doubt it (...). You must think carefully about whether this teaser could possibly lead users to save something that they shouldn’t save because it’s simply too complex.” (I15)

Other interviewees—often from legacy outlets—believe that complex topics can loosen soft boundaries, as illustrated by this quote: “Regarding the Middle East situation, there is almost no limit, except for Instagram’s limit” (I10). Accordingly, while avoiding “walls of text” (I16), these journalists incorporate more textual and graphical elements or extend captions to convey these stories.

However, the tight constraints on capturing user attention apply across formats and topics, shaping the *editing* process. While participants unanimously emphasized, “we do not want to do clickbait” (I28), they prioritize crafting concise introductions: “We are always working on our punch line (...),” one interviewee explained regarding TikTok, “both linguistically and visually, so that (...) people give us at least a few more seconds” (I1). Similarly, on Instagram, a “catchy headline” and an “appealing picture” (I13) are considered essential.

## Visuality

Visuality is perceived as low on (formerly) text-based platforms where “design options are limited” (I11). Concerning visual-centric platforms, the case of Instagram highlights how users shape a platform’s visuality: Although “reels play an important role” (I16), interviewees consider standard feed posts more relevant: “Maybe Instagram wants to be close to TikTok, but users say ‘no’” (I10). In contrast to this image-based visuality, TikTok as a “pure video platform” (I28) embodies the affordance of audiovisuality, characterized by fast-cut, effect-rich clips: “The more that happens in the video, the better” (I7).

Generally, perceived lower visuality particularly favours automated content production: Several interviewees reported that their outlet publishes every Web site-teaser (including the image) on Facebook or Twitter, often without further editing. According to the interviewed journalists, more text-based platforms such as Facebook attract an older audience whom, as one interviewee put it, “I can reach with a link. I must put it that bluntly” (I22).

Higher visibility is perceived to have more nuanced consequences for *selecting* and *editing*. Interviewees frequently mentioned selecting topics with “beautiful imagery” (I21) for Instagram or “impressive video material” (I18) for TikTok. These topics are often mere “sideways glances” (I21) that balance less image-prone news content which is adapted through various visualization strategies. For image-based visibility, journalists often include infographics and text/quote tiles. In the context of audiovisuality, a common strategy is “host-based storytelling” (I17), where the focus is on presenters in front of a green screen, whose explanations are illustrated by pictures or graphics in the background.

Visibility is also one of the affordances that is very important for *coordinating*. Producing audiovisual content is “definitely more time-consuming” (I9) than text, also requiring more diverse teams that include non-journalistic staff such as video editors and graphic designers. As one TikTok interviewee recalled:

“The old social media world consists of link posts on Facebook (...) and of graphic tiles on Instagram where you slap on quotes and pictures. (...) the new complexity that results from videos has to be mapped in the team (...) we adjusted shifts, we reorganized entire working methods.” (I19)

This resource intensity keeps some newsrooms away from audiovisual platforms, particularly smaller ones and those without a visual legacy. Thus, perceived visibility often determines whether outlets are present on highly visual platforms at all.

### *Communicative forms*

Communicative forms are closely linked to visibility and spatiotemporal boundaries, as highlighted by the interviews. TikTok, an audiovisual platform with extensive design features and rigid spatiotemporal limits, is perceived as a “very dynamic platform” (I19) where new trends constantly emerge. In contrast, Instagram, characterized by steady visibility and longer formats, is perceived as “less fast and nervous” (I26). The more text-based platform Facebook is even described as “relatively dead and incredibly reactive” (I6).

As a result, interviewees find it crucial to *select* content that is popular on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. For instance, they choose non-news, comedic content for the “distraction and comedy platform” (I21) TikTok. Similarly, some interviewees perceive landscape pictures suitable for Instagram, which is associated with stylized, nostalgic aesthetics (Hermida and Mellado, 2020). When it comes to (ethically) questionable trends, several interviewees have adopted a ‘platform watchdog’ role, opting for critical coverage instead of mere non-participation. On platforms such as Facebook, however, journalists perceive that there are few trends or genres that could inspire their topics.

Furthermore, the interviewed journalists have distinct perceptions of aesthetics and languages, which shape their *editing* decisions. For instance, they argue that TikTok’s users have shaped a mellow, unpretentious platform, which affords a “courage to be ugly” (I33) and fosters colloquial language “as if a friend speaks to you” (I1). Conversely, text-based platforms such as Facebook or LinkedIn are perceived as catering to an ‘older’

audience with a more conventional tone and style. On these platforms, journalists feel less need to adapt aesthetics and formats. Instead, they “try to keep it sober” (I29), opting for fewer memes or emojis and maintaining a serious, informative tone.

However, rich, unconventional communicative forms as on TikTok do not necessarily lead to fast, low-budget production. Instead, outlets balance this affordance with their own standards. For instance, they may use “in your face subtitles” (I7), fast cuts, and GIFs, but avoid artificially reducing the quality of their content: “We don’t need to pretend that we don’t have professional microphones” (I5).

Finally, it is worth noting the impact of platform languages’ *valence*. While highly visual and entertainment-oriented platforms like TikTok and Instagram are often said to have a “kinder community” (I21), Twitter/X and Facebook were overwhelmingly considered unfriendly spaces: “I never perceived as much hate as on Facebook” (I25). This is pivotal for *selecting*: Especially interviewees from smaller outlets explained that they abandon polarized topics because they lack sufficient resources for community management:

“Everything about asylum is difficult. Once you reach a certain number of comments, you can no longer control the discussion (...). We don’t have it under control in terms of personnel. Yes, the platform requires us to think about what we do and what we don’t do.” (I32a)

## Searchability

During the walkthroughs, interviewees repeatedly highlighted the relevance of the platforms’ search features. Therefore, searchability was inductively identified as a relevant affordance—whether and how (easily) content can be searched on a platform (boyd, 2010). Searchability has three roots: hashtags, search bars, and saving features. While the saving features are perceived as widely used on Instagram, the platform’s overall searchability is considered low due to the lack of a keyword search and the perceived irrelevance of hashtags. In contrast, despite the relatively weak actual searchability of content due to the algorithmically ordered search results, TikTok is perceived as a platform with high searchability: Some interviewees perceive that “TikTok is becoming a search engine” (I26) for young people, as its keyword search is directly integrated into videos.

High searchability may influence *selecting* by encouraging the focus on current topics that journalists perceive to be frequently searched on the platforms. Its impact is particularly notable in *editing*, where it not only motivates journalists to “let off steam” (I1) with hashtags but also to SEO-optimize their content. One interviewee described in detail his “keyword stuffing” (I6) process, both in the video and the caption. In contrast, journalists interviewed about platforms with perceived lower searchability did not report significant influences of this affordance, often stating that they “use hashtags a bit alibi-like” (I11).

## Discussion

This study set out to complement existing research on social media journalism by providing a nuanced perspective on journalists’ perceptions of platform affordances and

their consequences for content production. While some affordances—such as hypertextuality or visuality—have extensive implications for outlets’ strategies and their mere presence on a platform, the influence of other affordances such as searchability is more selective. Additionally, their impact on content production varied between outlets. For example, consistent with research conducted in other countries, journalists from digital-born (Hendrickx, 2021) and private outlets (e.g., Hågvar, 2019), who often face greater economic pressure, were more open to adapting to communicative forms. Similarly, they more extensively accommodated high levels of algorithmic curation by opting for lighter content and appealing editing. Corroborating existing research, journalists developed strategies to align platform affordances with their established standards and values (Degen et al., 2024; Lischka, 2021).

This study contributes conceptually to understanding journalistic content production for social media and helps addressing the challenge of studying the dynamic and evolving nature of platforms (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Rather than treating platforms as monolithic entities, the paper identified and systematically applied a typology of journalistically relevant affordances. The identified affordances are both sufficiently *universal* to apply across platforms and *variable* enough (Evans et al., 2017) to account for differences within and between platforms. For example, affordances such as algorithmic curation or searchability range from high to low, while communicative forms differ in their dynamism and compatibility with journalistic standards. The typology of journalistically relevant affordances allows for systematic comparisons of journalistic content production by enabling precise assumptions based on specific affordance constellations (see Table 2).

Importantly, the typology is grounded in journalists’ perceptions of platforms, offering insights beyond those derived from platform architectures alone (Bossetta, 2018). For example, while Instagram’s architecture increasingly favours reels, many journalists still perceive it as less audiovisual than TikTok, likely shaped by their observations of user behaviour or their preference for less resource-intensive static feed posts. This suggests that journalists’ *perceptions* of platform features—and not only their objective attributes—influence their actions.

While the impact of affordances varied between outlets, differences in how journalists from different organizational contexts perceived these affordances were less pronounced. Some journalists from legacy outlets, for instance, viewed Instagram’s hypertextuality as higher due to positive experiences with users accessing their websites via embedded referral links. Similarly, some journalists from TV broadcasters perceived Instagram as more audiovisual than image-based. However, the reverse was not observed—journalists from radio stations or newspapers, despite having less readily available image and video material, did not necessarily perceive the platform’s (audio-)visuality as less pronounced. Moreover, there were few notable differences in how journalists perceived other affordances, such as the degree of algorithmic curation or communicative forms. For example, journalists from both legacy and digital-born outlets consistently highlighted TikTok’s fast-cut and rough aesthetics.

Overall, there were strong commonalities in how journalists perceived platform affordances. Although this observation may partly result from the skewed sample, it supports the typology’s relevance beyond the German case, which is further reinforced by

the argument that the perception of affordances is also shaped by technical factors and audience expectations (Nagy and Neff, 2015; Ronzhyn et al., 2023). Not only are many platform features technically similar worldwide, audience research also highlights consistent practices and routines in social media information use across countries (e.g., Schulz et al., 2024). These findings suggest that journalists share common experiences and audience expectations in the context of social media. Nevertheless, further testing and refinement of the typology and their implications for journalistic content in other (non-Western) contexts are necessary.

Methodologically, the stimulus-based interview method of reconstruction-walkthroughs proved particularly useful for investigating these perceptions: Journalists navigated through platforms, commented on content that appeared in the feed, and reconstructed their own posts. This approach provided detailed, experience-based insights into their perceptions of both broad properties (such as algorithmic curation) and more specific ones (such as searchability). The need for such “thick data” (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017) extends beyond an affordance perspective. Researchers are increasingly confronted with constantly evolving, highly personalized platforms that can best be understood by considering journalists’ individual experiences and the perceived consequences for content production.

Notwithstanding these benefits, the study is not without limitations. First and foremost, it relied on a German sample with a bias towards visual platforms. Moreover, this study did not include a systematic content analysis to triangulate the findings on the impact of affordances revealed in the reconstruction walkthroughs. However, it highlights key content dimensions worth exploring through content analysis, such as topic diversity, text density, and aesthetic professionalism. A valuable next step would be a comparative content analysis across platforms and outlet types, building on this study’s findings to further validate the applicability of the identified affordance typology. In sum, the study provides multifaceted insights into (consequences of) journalists’ perceptions of platform affordances, which can inspire future research and contribute to a better understanding of journalistic content production for both existing and emerging social media platforms.

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### **Ethical statement**

#### *Ethical approval*

The interviews were conducted at TU Dresden, Germany, which does not have an Ethics Committee/Institutional Review Board, and no ethical approval was required.

### Informed consent

All interviewees participated in the study based on verbally given, freely volunteered informed consent.

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### Data Availability Statement

All study materials, including the interview guideline, category system, and a detailed overview of participants' characteristics are accessible via OSF: [https://osf.io/wcu68/?view\\_only=196d31e4b0e74b01b83cf35ac3c46a30](https://osf.io/wcu68/?view_only=196d31e4b0e74b01b83cf35ac3c46a30)[https://osf.io/wcu68/?view\\_only=196d31e4b0e74b01b83cf35ac3c46a30](https://osf.io/wcu68/?view_only=196d31e4b0e74b01b83cf35ac3c46a30)

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