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What Does the Audience Expect When Interacting with Journalists? A Q-sort Study

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ABSTRACT

In a post-digitalization age, journalist-audience interactions are an indispensable part of journalistic routines. By conducting a Q-sort study, we analyze what expectations recipients have regarding digital interactions with journalists and how to typify them. Our study gives insights as to what the audience expects when it comes to their online interactions with journalist in a nuanced way. As we see, interaction expectations differ vastly. We differentiate between two prevailing types of expectations within the audience when it comes to interacting with journalists: *the quality-oriented traditionalists* and *the deliberation-oriented interactionalists*. While the traditionalists mainly see interactions as a mean to improve journalistic quality, for example by pointing out errors or missing information, the interactionalists' expectations are closer to those we know from interpersonal relationships and focus more on the relationship between journalists and audiences. Our results leave us with practical implications for news outlets on how to tackle interacting with their audiences.

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Relevance

Participation and audience engagement have become an indispensable part of journalism. Over the past decade(s), a multitude of participatory and engagement-options within journalism have emerged both online and offline, including user comments, live events or engaged journalism in form of journalistic theatre performances. Participation, engagement and interpersonal interaction between journalists and audience members have grown in importance within the past years (Wilhelm, Stehle, and Detel 2021), which can be traced back to several reasons, including public discussions about trust in journalism as well as decreasing revenue stemming from advertising sales, forcing journalism to look out for new sources of revenue – the audience. This led to a reconfiguration of the journalism–audience relationship beyond the traditional framework of mass communication towards a relationship characterized by equality and reciprocity (Lee 2015; Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014). In the past years, and particular the digital

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age, we have witnessed the emergence of what can be termed “masspersonal” communication (O’Sullivan and Carr 2018). This renewed understanding of journalism as a two- or multi-way-conversation has led to changes in expectations within the journalism audience relationship. The audience nowadays expects journalists to give people the opportunity to express their views, that journalists engage in a dialogue with their audience about the issues they report on and that journalism offers opportunities for discussions among users, for example in comment sections or on the outlet’s social media presence (Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020).

We thus witness increasing calls for a more interactive and responsive journalism in the digital age. However, while engagement and interaction rise in value both in journalistic outlets as well as in the perception of the audience, we know only little about what audience members actually expect when it comes to journalist-audience interactions – how and why audience members want to engage with journalists are thus far underexplored. Understanding the expectations that audiences have towards their interactions with journalists is highly relevant for journalism and functioning journalist-audience relationships (Banjac, Juarez Miro, and Hanusch 2024).

A first explorative study analyzed which expectations both journalists and audience members have towards each other using a case study approach (Detel et al. 2023). This study showed high variances when it came to the different expectations the recipients named. Audience members seemed to place value on vastly different aspects when it comes to their expectations when interacting with journalists, pointing out the necessity of a more nuanced typology of audience expectations towards their interactions with journalists. In this study, we shed further light on these nuances in audience expectations regarding journalist-audience interactions and uncover the subjective viewpoints of audiences concerning their desired relationships with journalists. Furthermore, we identify how these perspectives can be categorized into different approaches towards journalist-audience interactions.

We start by elaborating on the concept of expectations within the journalism-audience relationship before taking a closer look at engagement and journalist-audience expectations as one key dimension of this relationship. Afterwards, we give a short overview on the Q methodology and method we used to answer our research question, a card-sorting method embedded in a qualitative interview and present the results on audience’s expectations towards journalism-audience-interaction we found based on our study with 21 audience members. We end by discussing limitations and giving an outlook for future research.

Expectations Within the Journalism–audience relationship

Journalist-audience relationships and interactions are to a high degree influenced and structured by reciprocal expectations (Uth et al. 2025; Loosen and Schmidt 2012). To analyze the expectations that are prevalent in digital journalist-audience interactions, we follow the conceptualization of expectations by Burgoon (2016), who defines expectations as “enduring cognitions about the behavior anticipated of others” (2). Transferring this to journalism studies and journalist-audience relationships, Wilhelm and Detel (2024) define audience expectations as “beliefs, predictions, or demands” (2172) concerning journalistic performance and behavior, journalistic content as well as regarding the journalism-audience relationship and relational behavior. Such expectations are based

both on societal and situational norms as well as previous interactions with the counterpart (Burgoon and Walther 1990; Wilhelm, Stehle, and Detel 2021).

Within expectation research, we can differentiate between three different expectation modes (Banjac, Juarez Miro, and Hanusch 2024; Wilhelm and Detel 2024; Wilhelm, Stehle, and Detel 2021):

- Prescriptive or normative expectations can be traced back to societal norms, such as role conceptions, describing how relationship partners *should act*.
- Descriptive or belief-informed expectations pertain to how the interaction partners *are assumed to act* based on earlier experiences.
- Valuative (according to Wilhelm, Stehle, and Detel 2021), cathectic or affective expectations (according to Banjac, Juarez Miro, and Hanusch 2024) describe *wishes and preferences* that the relationship partners have towards each other's behavior.

Within relationships – such as the journalism-audience relationship – expectations are multi-dimensional and complex: Expectations oftentimes stem from different sources and thus can be traced back to different modes, which might be contradicting at times (Banjac, Juarez Miro, and Hanusch 2024; Biddle 1979). For example, in regards to interactions within user comments, from a prescriptive and normative viewpoint (personally and normatively desirable behavior), participants might expect others to behave in a civil and friendly manner – however, based on previous experience (descriptive expectations), they might expect that online discussions oftentimes involve hate and insults. The specific expectations people have are generally influenced by several factors situated within the relationship, such as the parties involved, their joint history as well as by characteristics of the specific interaction (Burgoon 2016). Expectations within journalist-audience interactions thus are complex constructs that are highly situational and depend heavily on the interaction setting, personal preferences as well as the relationship history recipients have with journalists and journalistic products (Burgoon and Walther 1990; Wilhelm, Stehle, and Detel 2021).

In their Journalism-Audience-Expectancy Model, Wilhelm, Stehle, and Detel (2021) differentiate between three expectation objects that expectations in journalism can be directed to: first, the interaction counterpart (e.g., journalists and/or media outlets), second, the media product and production processes and third, the journalist-audience relationship and -interactions. Previous research within journalism studies mainly focused on audience members' expectations regarding the first two dimensions (Wilhelm and Detel 2024): We have profound insights into what both audiences expect of both of professional journalists (e.g., studies on journalistic roles; e.g., Hanitzsch 2017) as well as the media product and production processes (e.g., studies on journalistic routines or journalistic quality; e.g., Arlt and Wolling 2018; Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020). However, we only have little knowledge about expectations regarding the relationship and interactions between journalists and audience. Analyzing these expectations is particularly of interest within the digital realm, where the expectations recipients have towards journalism have shifted within the past decade, with new expectations regarding participation and being added alongside previous expectations regarding journalistic quality and role perceptions (Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020).

Journalist–audience interactions in the Digital Realm

Pre-digitalization, journalism was primarily conceptualized as one-way-communication, with only little options for audience members to actively engage or interact with journalistic content (Marchionni 2013). The digitalization however has profoundly changed this – and this way changed journalism as a whole. Ever since, there is a multitude of different ways for audience members to actively interact with journalists and their content: By introducing features such as like and share buttons as well as spaces for user comments, interactions between audiences and journalists have been highly facilitated (Lee 2015). Marchionni (2013) describes this change by the introduction of “journalism-as-a-conversation” instead of the former “decades of traditional journalism as a lecture” (131). Due to these changes, journalist-audience interactions have risen to become one of the main emerging new expectations within the journalism-audience relationship (Wilhelm, Stehle, and Detel 2021). Even though they rank slightly lower than other expectations towards journalism such as objective, detached and factual reporting, studies show that the audience nowadays expects journalists to “let people express their views”, to “enter into a dialogue with the audience about current issues”, to “moderate discussions among users (e.g., in commentary sections or on social networks)” as well as “to form and maintain a “community” with the audience” (Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020, 1750). In order to meet these expectations, audience engagement has become a strategic priority within newsrooms (Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt 2018). Broersma (2019) defines audience engagement as “the cognitive, emotional, or affective experiences that users have with media content or brands” (1). To foster audience engagement, many news outlets have launched various initiatives aimed at actively involving the public in the creation and dissemination of journalistic content. When these forms of audience inclusion become central to the journalistic process, it is often referred to as *engaged journalism*. Green-Barber and McKinley (2019) define engaged journalism as “an inclusive practice that prioritizes the information needs and wants of the community members it serves” (6). Engaged journalism and audience engagement thus aim to create a community between journalists and audience, similar to related forms of journalism such as “reciprocal journalism” (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014) or earlier initiatives such as “public journalism” (Nip 2006).

Following Nelson (2021), audience engagement and interactions between journalists and audiences can take many forms, ranging from reception-oriented engagement that mainly focuses on time spent with and attention given to news content (e.g., likes, shares) to production-oriented formats of audience engagement, which actively integrate audience members into journalistic processes (e.g., by incorporating audience members into researching information and selecting topics; citizen journalism) (Nelson 2021). While reception-oriented forms of engagement such as likes and shares have long since been established within journalism, production-oriented forms of audience engagement such as user comments, online events or enacted journalism have been on the rise lately and are seen as particularly promising for building journalism-audience relationships (Uth 2024a). However, as a recent study on audience engagement shows, managing audience expectations is crucial for successful journalist-audience interactions (Uth 2024a). The quality of journalism-audience relationships is determined by the degree to which expectations audience members have towards it are being perceived as fulfilled

or violated (Prochazka 2020) – when expectations go unmet, it can negatively impact audiences' relationship with news outlets and journalism as a whole, eroding trust and weakening journalism-audience relationships. As such, understanding the expectations that audiences have towards their interactions with journalists is highly relevant for fostering trust and journalist-audience relationships in a digital environment (Banjac, Juarez Miro, and Hanusch 2024).

However, thus far we only have limited knowledge on the audience's subjective expectations toward interactions with journalists. An earlier study using a qualitative case study approach analyzed which expectations both journalists and audience members have towards their interactions with another (Detel et al. 2023). In this study, several key expectations regarding journalist-audience interactions emerged: Audience members expected journalists to be approachable, responsive, interested in and appreciative of audience contributions and respectful. Furthermore, audience members placed value on the fact that journalists meet them at eye level, hear and accept criticism as well as take up topic suggestions from the audience. Additionally, interviewees wished for a civil and constructive interaction climate which is adequately moderated by journalists (Detel et al. 2023). As this study showed, audience expectations are diverse and shaped by multiple factors, such as their previous relationship with a news outlet and their individual motivations for media use.

However, while this study revealed a range of different expectations, it left unanswered how audience members prioritize and evaluate these expectations in relation to one another. This presents an important question, particularly as news organizations seek to build more meaningful and sustainable engagement strategies. To address this, our study uses Q-sort methodology to systematically identify and analyze the different types of interaction-expectations within the audience, asking the research question: *How can the expectations audience members have regarding their interactions with journalists in the journalist-audience relationship in digital media environments be typified?* By doing so, we explore underlying patterns in expectation structures, offering new insights into how audiences conceptualize their ideal interactions with journalism and how these may vary across different user profiles.

Method

To answer our research question, we conducted a Q-sort study in the second half of 2023. The Q-method and methodology is often seen as located in the intersection between qualitative and quantitative methods (Stenner, Watts, and Worrell 2017). A Q-sort study, stemming from a psychological-constructivist viewpoint, allows us to explore, capture and typify subjective perceptions of individuals on a topic of interest in a qualitative way (Brown 1994; Stenner, Watts, and Worrell 2017). This way, it enriches existing research with an innovative, micro-theoretical, and interpretivist approach by shedding light on individual, subjective perceptions and cognitions. Thus, the Q-sort study is ideal for capturing highly subjective constructs such as expectations, that can be very different between individuals and previous experiences (for the latter see Burgoon 2016).

The main element of a Q-sort survey consists in a card-sorting task to explore individual's subjective perceptions on a topic, which is embedded in qualitative interviews to allow for a further contextualization and explanation of the card-sorting. In the Q-sort survey, we

provided participants with a compilation of different expectations on individual cards, which they sort into a pyramid shape according to their subjective relevance in relation to each other. These statements (also called q-sample) are selected from a concourse (Watts and Stenner 2012), which is recommended to entail all potential relevant expectations that audience members might have towards journalist-audience expectations. To build our concourse and to allow for a comprehensive understanding of potential expectations within journalist-audience interactions, we conducted a comprehensive literature search, mainly building on journalism studies (e.g., research on user comments), but also adding previous results from other strands of communication science, such as interpersonal communication (e.g., research on (in)civility) and strategic communication (e.g., research on relationship management). We included these additional disciplines to capture the complex nature of journalist-audience interactions in a digital environment, which audience members might not only see from a professional, but also a more interpersonal viewpoint. In many instances, journalism studies already rely on insights from interpersonal and strategic communication, for example when it comes to research on incivility and online discourse norms, or relationship management which helps explaining how journalists or news outlets attempt to engage with their publics in ways that build trust. Additionally, we used data from our preliminary qualitative study on mutual expectations within journalist-audience interactions (Detel et al. 2023) in order to capture all potential expectations for the concourse. To reflect the whole spectrum of expectations on digital journalist-audience interactions, we structured the concourse along the different expectation modes (normative, probabilistic, valuative; Wilhelm and Detel 2024) as well as the point of reference for the expectation and selected a q-sample that equally represents all combinations of these dimensions.¹ In the end, we ended up with 39 statements listing expectations audience members may have towards journalist-audience interactions and which were then ranked by participants in our Q-sort survey, following the question: *"Imagine you are interacting with a journalist (e.g., in the form of an email, a comment on a news site or as part of an online event with journalists), what do you expect regarding this interaction? Regarding this interaction, it is important to me that ..."*

One advantage the Q-method offers is that instead of solely rating isolated statements on a scale, participants rank expectations in relation to another and – in our case, using a forced grid – are forced to follow a certain grid when ranking their expectations (Serfass and Sherman 2013). We used a forced grid to force recipients to make a distinction within the relevance of their interaction-expectations and to reach a higher comparability of the two endpoints of the scale. As previous studies have shown, when audience members are asked to rate expectations towards journalistic roles and work, many items receive very high scores and only few items receive scores slightly below the midpoint of the scale (e.g., Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020), reflecting a lack of variation in the participants' responses. The Q-sort technique allows us to bypass this methodological limitation by forcing respondents to sort expectations in comparison with each other and along a forced grid (see Figure 1). For our study, we decided to use a pyramid-shaped grid with a scale ranging from –5 (very unimportant) to +5 (very important), with the two endpoints of our scale offering two spots as well as an additional field on the zero point of the scale.

The study was approved by the ethics board of the Department of Communication at the University of Münster (date of approval: 17th of July 2023).

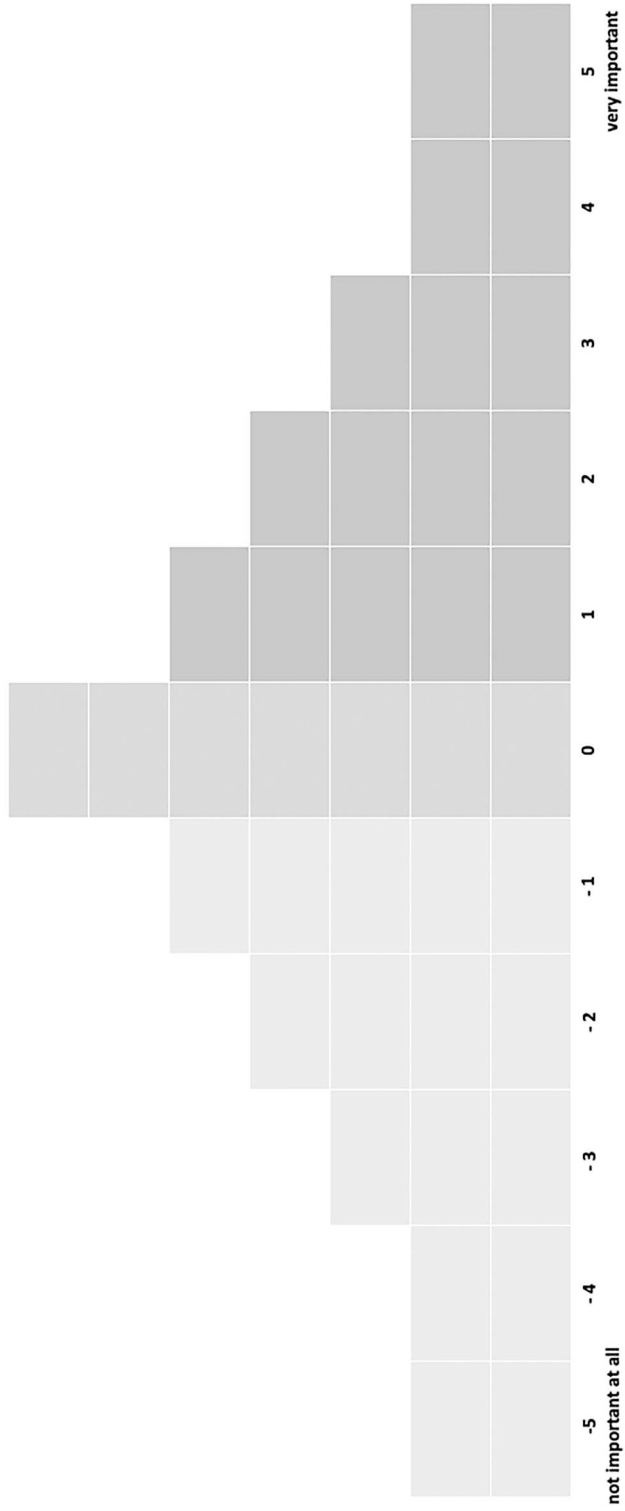


Figure 1. Forced Q-sort grid.

In a Q-survey, the sample size—also known as the p-set—is typically based on the number of statements in the Q-sample and is ideally about half the size of the concourse (McKeown and Thomas 2013; Watts and Stenner 2012). As our Q-sample encompasses 39 statements, this leaves us with a recommended sample size of around 20 interviews. Between July and December of 2023, we conducted 21 Q-sort interviews according to a balanced-block design using a quota to maximize the heterogeneity of our sample regarding interaction expectations (McKeown and Thomas 2013). While smaller sample sizes are a common component of Q-surveys, it is strongly recommended to strategically sample a broad variety of viewpoints (Watts and Stenner 2005). We thus organized sampling along a quote using different factors known to influence expectations from previous studies (e.g., Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020; Riedl and Eberl 2022) in order to capture diverse viewpoints on expectations regarding journalist-audience interactions: gender (female vs. male), age (18-35 years, 35-55 years, 55+ years), education (low vs. high) and interaction frequency (rarely vs. often). Our final p-set included 21 participants (10 male, 11 female; 8 aged 18-35, 6 aged 35-55 years, seven participants aged 55+ years; 11 low interaction, 10 high interaction; 10 low education, 11 high education).

By applying correlation, factor and regression analysis (Watts and Stenner 2012)², the Q method produces a typology that illustrates the participants' subjective viewpoints on what they expect in digital journalist-audience interactions, leaving us with a typology of the different expectation types within the audience. As the sorting procedure is embedded in a qualitative interview, we also get answers to contextual questions (e.g., about expectancy violations and confirmations and their impact on the interaction/relationship) as well as hints for contextualizing and evaluating the individual sorting. Our interview guideline covered three major topical blocks. We started the interviews by asking recipients about their perceived relevance of interactions with journalists as well as about the last interactions they had with journalism. Afterwards, we moved online to carry out the Q-sort sorting process: In a first step, participants were able to pre-sort each single statement as rather relevant, or less relevant. Afterwards, we asked them to sort the statements into the pyramid grid according to their personal relevance, using QMethod Software. Both processes were accompanied by a think-aloud process (Ericsson and Simon 1998), in which recipients were asked to articulate and share whatever thoughts they had while carrying out the task at hand. After finishing the sorting process, we asked further questions to contextualize the sorting as well as regarding the perceived fulfillment of their expectations. Additionally, we also collected contextualizing variables such as education, interaction frequency and media trust. We analyzed the answers from the interviews using qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2021) to contextualize and interpret the findings from the Q-sort survey which we analyzed using KADE. When comparing different models based on eigenvalue, cumulative explained variance, composite reliability, Humphrey's rule, and the amount of cases reflected in the types, a two-factor

Table 1. Factor correlation, eigenvalues, and variance among types.

	Type 1	Type 2	Σ
Type 1	–		
Type 2	.331	–	
Composite Reliability	.98	.97	–
Eigenvalue	5.843	2.641	–
Variance in %	28	13	41
Defining Q sorts (absolute frequency)	12	8	20

solution proved to be most stable and meaningful (see [Table 1](#); Watts and Stenner 2005; Brown 1980). The two types found accounted for 41% of the total variation, which can be interpreted as a good result. The reliability of our result can be rated as excellent (.97–.98; Brown 1980). All participants except for one loaded on one of the two types found in our sample, proving the comprehensiveness of the two-factor solution.

Results

The analysis of our Q-sort survey reveals two different expectations types within the recipients we interviewed. Each type entails a certain set of statements that this type rates significantly different than the others, which characterize the type, the distinguishing statements (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Distinguishing statements.

Q statement	Type 1 (n = 12)		Type 2 (n = 8)	
	Z-Score	Q-sort value	Z-Score	Q-sort value
... that my counterpart is open and curious about different points of view.	1.605	+5	-0.365	-1
... that I can criticize the journalistic work of my counterpart.	1.537	+4	-1.7884	-5
... that I can draw attention to errors in the reporting.	1.12	+3	-1.381	-4
... that I can draw my counterpart's attention to missing information in the reporting.	1.1183	+3	-1.093	-2
... that both sides listen to and accept feedback in a positive and negative sense, i.e., praise and criticism.	0.947	+2	0.082	0
... that both sides listen to one another.	0.819	+2	1.502	+5
... that the interaction is constructive and solution-oriented.	0.703	+2	1.381	+3
... that my counterpart behaves professionally in the interaction.	0.578	+1	1.167	+3
... that both sides can give feedback in a positive and negative sense, i.e., praise and criticism.	0.504	+1	-0.137	0
... that both sides meet on eye level.	0.47	+1	1.417	+4
... that my counterpart gives me an insight into journalistic work and behind the scenes.	0.179	0	-1.102	-3
... that my counterpart is accessible and approachable.	0.082	0	1.488	+4
... that I can draw my counterpart's attention to things that are important to me (e.g., certain actions, groups, events).	0.044	0	-0.659	-1
... that both sides are interested in each other's contributions, comments, etc.	-0.208	0	0.708	+1
... that my counterpart deals appropriately with hate messages, e.g., in comment sections, through moderation or in e-mails.	-0.223	-1	0.856	+2
... that my counterpart reacts and responds to my posts, questions, feedback, comments, etc.	-0.445	-1	1.18	+3
... that both sides can express their individuality and develop personally.	-0.666	-2	-1.356	-3
... that both sides are interested in each other and show mutual understanding.	-0.755	-2	0.487	+1
... that I can support my counterpart in her/his work.	-0.96	-2	-0.37	-1
... that my counterpart can be convinced by good arguments.	-0.96	-3	-0.204	0
... that the interaction initiates sustainable changes in society.	-1.676	-4	0.703	+1
... that my counterpart responds quickly (e.g., to inquiries, posts, e-mails).	-1.762	-4	-0.489	-1
... that I receive a solution from my counterpart for a problem that concerns me.	-1.964	-5	-0.785	-2

Note: Statements significant at $p < .01$. Z-scores show how the prototypical respondent of a type would rank a specific statement in relation to the other cards in the grid, Q-sort values show the reflective visual position of the statement in the grid.

The Quality-oriented Traditionalists

The first expectation-type we found in our sample can be described as “the quality-oriented traditionalists”. Respondents of this type are mainly classified by a focus on normative, rather traditional quality expectations towards journalism – even when it comes to their online interactions with journalism. For participants of these type, journalism’s main function lies within the factual and correct reporting of current information, which is then reflected in their expectations towards journalism in general and journalist-audience interactions. Audience members of this type thus want to contribute to an increase in journalistic quality with their interactions, for example by adding information to existing coverage, by pointing out errors or missing information within the reporting as well as by offering criticism to journalistic content.

This type’s most highly ranked expectation focuses on the idea that the journalists are open and curious about different points of view within their interactions. For these respondents, one main characteristic of journalistic quality consists in a balanced coverage that includes a diversity of perspectives and opinions: “That is at the heart of my understanding of journalism. What fascinates me about it is that there are so many different perspectives. They don’t all have to be incorporated into the finished product, but what matters is that the journalist is aware of all the perspectives and draws their own conclusions from them.” (*m, 18–35y, regular interaction, higher education*) Journalist-audience-interaction then are seen as a way for journalism to integrate a variety of viewpoints and perspectives into their reporting, leading to a more diverse and balanced reporting. Respondents of this type often show a very purpose-driven understanding of interaction. Interacting with journalists is connected to a clear task, such as using interactions to express criticism of the journalistic work, to draw attention to errors in the reporting as well as to draw attention to missing information in the reporting: “Pointing out errors, that would be extremely important to me.” (*m, 18–35y, rare interaction, lower education*)

While the respondents of this type thus want to contribute to an improvement of journalistic quality, they do not pursue any larger, society-level aims with their interaction, such as for example inducing sustainable changes within society through interaction. This is primarily attributed to the perception that triggering sustainable change is a too ambitious goal for journalism-audience interactions: “I wouldn’t assume anything I do would initiate a lasting change in society.” (*m, 18–35y, regular interaction, higher education*)

The most important interaction-expectations for this type thus are primarily focused on the motivations underlying interaction, which are mainly connected to the aim of strengthening journalistic quality. Typically interaction-oriented expectations on the other hand, such as receiving a quick reply, as well as criteria of deliberative discourses, such as being interested and understanding of the counterpart and being able to convince others with better arguments (Habermas 1971), are in comparison rated as less important by these respondents. Furthermore, recipients of this type place in comparison lower value on the idea that both sides can express their individuality and develop personally. This shows again that in the eyes of these respondents, journalist-audience interactions are not understood as a form of interpersonal connection and entertainment, but rather as a means to improve journalism. This idea of interaction as a service for journalism

is also reflected in the statement this type ranked as the least important: the idea that journalists should use interactions to provide recipients with solutions to problems that concern them. Recipients of this type do not see this audience-oriented form of service as a task of professional journalism: “That’s not what journalism’s for. For me, if it’s a big problem, journalism’s job is to draw attention to it and get the person responsible for finding a solution to deal with it.” (*m, 18–35y, rare interaction, lower education*)

For this group of respondents, we thus see a rather “traditional” understanding of journalism’s role in society, which mainly consists in providing current, correct and factual information – which then is also reflected in their understanding of journalist-audience interactions, which are mainly seen as a way to support journalism in this task. When we further look at other factors characterizing this group of recipients, we see that a large share of this type consists of men (eight out of twelve participants scoring on this type were male), regarding other factors such as age, education or interaction frequency, we do not see any major differences. It thus appears that at least in our sample, it is predominantly men that portray this more traditional, quality-oriented view of journalism’s role in society and journalist-audience interactions.

The Deliberation-oriented Interactionalists

In contrast to the first type, the second expectation-type within our interviewees places high value on respectful and constructive behavior within journalist-audience interactions as well as the accessibility and availability of journalism for interactions, which is why we call this type “the deliberation-oriented interactionalists”. The most important expectations of this type primarily refer to fundamental tenets and requirements known from interpersonal interactions and communication, such as interactivity in the sense of mutual replies, civility and constructiveness. As their most important expectation towards journalist-audience interactions, respondents of this type name the expectation that both sides listen to each other. This is seen as a prerequisite of all interactions, including journalist-audience interactions: “Obviously, both sides have to be willing to listen to each other, otherwise there’s no point in even bothering.” (*m, 18–35y, rare interaction, higher education*) Furthermore, recipients place high value on the expectation that journalists are accessible and approachable, so that valuable interactions are made possible in the first place and journalism no longer remains anonymous and distanced: “I really like it when there is the opportunity to express oneself to journalists.” (*f, 35–55y, regular interaction, higher education*). However, despite wishing for accessibility (valuative expectation), audience members are also aware that journalists might not always have the capacity for such interactions and thus do not necessarily expect accessibility in a probabilistic sense. Closely related to the accessibility of journalists is the expectation that journalists actually react and respond to audience members’ posts, questions, feedback and comments: “That my counterpart reacts to my contributions, questions, feedback and comments, I would almost rank that as the most important thing, because otherwise I don’t need to interact if my feedback is not heard. Otherwise, interaction is just an empty shell that you do because you have to because it’s trendy or because you should do it.” (*f, 18–35y, regular interaction, higher education*) This share of the audience thus expects to be able to start an active and profound exchange between journalists and audience members. While these expectations all concerns parameters of the

interaction itself, other expectations that this type rates as most important expectations concern the way, style and manner this expectation takes place. Important factors here are the expectation that both sides meet at eye level, that journalists behave professionally as well as the idea that the interaction is constructive and solution-oriented: “It’s always good to be constructive and solution-oriented. If you don’t work like that, I don’t think you’ll get the results you’re after.” (*f, 18–35y, rare interaction, lower education*)

Looking at the expectations that respondents of this type rate as less important, it shows that they place little value on the more quality-oriented interaction-expectations which the first type perceived as particularly important: For this type, it is less important to engage in interactions that allow them to criticize journalistic work, point out errors, or highlight missing information in the reporting. The respondents name different reasons as to why they do not perceive these expectations as important. One reason behind this is that these audience members feel that they are in no position to criticize the work of professional journalists, who they mostly perceive as more trained and knowledgeable: “I don’t consider criticism of journalistic work to be that important because I haven’t learnt how to do it and I don’t know any better” (*m, 18–35y, rare interaction, higher education*). Some more disillusioned respondents however rate this expectation as less important due to their perception of journalism, which they feel is often characterized by a lack of time and resources to address audience criticism, or a general disinterest in doing so. Respondents furthermore point out that they primarily interact with journalistic content to state their own opinion, rather than to discuss the journalistic work itself. The expectations audience members of this type thus mainly concern the style of the interaction rather than its content (e.g., criticism, suggesting topics etc.). Looking at factors characterizing this type, we see that overall, this type is a bit less represented in our sample compared to the quality-oriented traditionalists. Furthermore, we see that this type is more strongly represented by female participants (six out of the eight participants scoring on this type are female) and such participants that only seldomly interact with journalists (five out of the eight Q sorts representing this factor are from participants only seldomly interacting with journalists). This can lead to the assumption that participants of this type might also show a more idealistic view of interaction based on normative and valuative expectations (expectations based on societal norms and personal preferences), which might less be influenced by potentially negative experiences and thus probabilistic expectations (such based on previous interactions and experiences).

Overall (un-)Important Expectations Towards Journalist-Audience Interactions

Despite the differences expectations different sections of the audience have towards journalist-audience interactions, there are certain expectations that both *the quality-oriented traditionalists* and *the deliberation-oriented interactionalists* perceive as similarly (un-)important when it comes to interaction (so called “consensus statements”, Watts and Stenner 2012, see Table 3). One expectation all respondents rate as less important is that interactions between journalists and audience members should be entertaining. This can be traced back to the perceived democratic, professional and predominantly fact-based role the respondents ascribe to journalism:

Table 3. Consensus statements.

Q statement	Type 1 (n = 12)		Type 2 (n = 8)	
	Z-Score	Q-sort value	Z-Score	Q-sort value
... that the interaction is entertaining.	-1.919	-5	-1.619	-4
... that the other person understands my feelings, e.g., even when I am angry or frustrated.	-1.139	-3	-1.108	-3
... that both sides have and represent common values.	-1.628	-3	-1.842	-5
... that both sides are committed to creating a sense of community and cohesion between journalism and the public.	-0.749	-2	-0.856	-2
... that both sides are working on the common relationship between journalism and the audience.	-0.332	-1	-0.671	-2
... that both sides share their knowledge and experience.	-0.235	-1	-0.342	-1
... that I can suggest topics that are important to me.	-0.28	-1	-0.187	0
... that my counterpart gives me food for thought.	0.227	0	-0.15	0
... that the interaction provides impulses for new or further reporting.	0.204	0	0.529	+1
... that my counterpart is open to my opinion.	0.581	+1	0.214	0
... that both sides can ask each other questions.	0.562	+1	0.173	0
... that both sides - journalists and audience members - can express their opinions equally.	0.851	+2	0.79	+2
... that both sides take each other seriously.	1.072	+3	1.093	+2
... that my counterpart is tolerant and respectful of different perspectives (e.g., different cultures, social backgrounds) and opinions.	1.124	+4	0.781	+2
... that both sides treat each other fairly and respectfully, i.e., that the rules of good manners are observed.	1.551	+5	1.539	+5

When I interact with journalists, it's mainly about a professional exchange. (...) That the interaction is entertaining, for me, that's not the reason why I write to them. And in my opinion, it's not their role as journalists to be funny, but to do their work, which is also important from the perspective of democratic theory. (*m, 18-35y, regular interaction, higher education*)

For the participants we interviewed, entertainment is not considered one of journalism's core functions in society, which explains why they do not view it as important when it comes to journalist-audience interactions. While not essential, some participants however do see it as a nice addition: "So, just to be clear, it's not that it's not nice if it's entertaining. I just don't think that's the point of these interactions." (*m, 18-35y, regular interaction, higher education*)

Another expectation respondents generally rate as unimportant is that journalists and audiences should have and represent common values. This perspective is rooted in the understanding that interactions serve primarily as spaces for the exchange of diverging opinions, for which shared values are not considered essential. Rather, some participants even regard diverging opinions and values as an important element within public debates. "I'm always happy when people share my values, of course. I have those for a reason, but I also find it very exciting to listen to and look at the other side. Maybe they've got good arguments too. If not, then I can feel vindicated. If they do have good arguments, I'd like to hear them." (*m, 18-35y, regular interaction, higher education*)

Another expectation that is generally perceived as unimportant pertains to the idea that the other person in the interaction understands one's feelings, e.g., even when angry or frustrated. This personal and emotional component is not seen as a part of journalism's role in society, and emotions or frustration are not given space within journalist-audience interactions: "In my opinion, journalists doesn't have to show any understanding for my anger or frustration ... it's my own problem when I'm frustrated." (*m, 18-35y, rare*)

interaction, higher education) This shows that expectations towards interactions stemming from interpersonal interaction settings are not necessarily transferable to journalist-audience expectations which are embedded in a more professional context, especially regarding emotional dimensions such as mutual understanding of emotions or the expected entertainment value of interactions.

On the other hand, there are also several expectations all respondents unanimously rate as important. These expectations mainly reflect core values of civil discourse and interactions, such as that both journalists and audience members are able to express their opinions equally, that both sides take each other seriously and that the counterpart is tolerant and respectful of different perspectives (e.g., different cultures, social backgrounds) and opinions. These expectations are regarded as the bare minimum for meaningful interaction, as illustrated by one participant who described the expectation that both sides take each other seriously as the “basis for any conversation at all” (*m, 18–35y, rare interaction, higher education*). Furthermore, the expectation that both sides treat each other fairly and respectfully, i.e., that the rules of good manners are obeyed, is rated as highly important by both groups in our sample:

I think that when it comes to good communication, the way you approach someone is really important. Firstly, it’s important to treat each other well. If I don’t treat someone with respect, then I can’t have a conversation or discussion. (...) Then the conversation is over before it’s even started. (*f, 18–35y, regular interaction, lower education*)

As the respondents point out, “respect and appreciation are part of every interaction, whether it’s journalism or not” (*f, 18–35y, regular interaction, higher education*).

Both types thus place high value on a professional, civil and constructive way of interacting with journalists, reflecting the ideas and norms of deliberative discourses that was initially hoped for when introducing interactions to journalism.

Discussion and Outlook

Expectations play a key role within the journalism-audience relationship (Detel et al. 2023; Uth et al. 2025; Loosen and Schmidt 2012; Meusel 2014). Based our Q-sort study, we reach a more nuanced picture of the expectations audience members have towards digital interactions with journalists, identifying both different expectations towards journalist-audience interactions within the audience, but also areas of consensus. As our study shows, audience members can have quite diverging expectations towards their interactions with journalists and while audiences generally appreciate and value the possibility to interact with journalists online, their motivation behind these interactions however differ. While some recipients, *the quality-oriented traditionalists*, mainly perceive interaction as a means to enhancing journalistic quality instead of being interested in a mutual interpersonal exchange between journalists and audience, other parts of the audience, *the deliberation-oriented interactionalists*, value this bilateral relationship with journalists, placing value on an understanding of interactions that stems from interpersonal communication.

Similar to earlier studies researching how news outlets work on the relationship with their audiences in a digital age (Uth 2024b; Zahay et al. 2021), we thus once more see a distinction between a rather quality-oriented, traditional and a rather interaction-

oriented mindset in regards to journalism-audience relationships. Studies analyzing the journalistic perspective find a separation between such journalists that mainly see the quality of their work as their most important way to strengthen the relationship with their audience whilst others place value on interaction and participation (Uth 2024b; Zahay et al. 2021). For the audience, we found a similar typology in the audience in our study, with certain audience members perceiving their role in the journalism-audience relationship as narrowly focused on a professional understanding of interaction as focused on journalistic quality, whilst others are more interested in interacting for the sake of actual interactions with the people behind the news.

This has profound effects both journalism studies and practice: Seeing how audience members can have diverging, partly even contrasting expectations towards their relationship and interactions with journalists has several consequences. Our results further challenge the idea and assumption of a singular audience – rather, audiences are composed of several different groups that come with different understandings of what constitutes journalism and thus different expectations towards how journalists should act and interact with their audiences. Our results thus suggest the need for a reconceptualization of audience roles as well as a more nuanced theoretical view of audience engagement which accounts for variability, individual preferences and context instead of “one-fits-all”-models (see also Uth 2024a, 2024b). The diverging expectation types we found in our sample also open up new normative questions journalism studies and practice needs to confront themselves with regarding the function and role of journalism in society – including the question which expectations journalists should cater to, particularly in light of potential conflicts between normative tasks of journalism and sustainable financial business models that might more strongly focus on audience expectations.

Our study furthermore shows the multidimensionality of expectations within the journalism-audience relationship. Several times, audience members stated certain ideas or aspects as desirable, describing valuative expectations. However, oftentimes, they directly added that despite wishing for these things, they do not see them as particularly likely due to constraints within journalism, such as time, personnel or financial resources – the audience members thus have diverging probabilistic expectations (what do they expect to happen based on previous experience and likelihood?). Future research should dive deeper into how these expectations are weighed up against each other and what effects it has when certain expectations (e.g., probabilistic expectations) are fulfilled, however, contradicting normative or valuative expectations might not be fulfilled.

However, our study also revealed certain expectations towards digital journalist-audience interactions that can be regarded as generally agreed upon. These expectations mainly pertain to general normative standards of interaction, such as being respectful, civil and tolerant towards different perspectives and opinions. These expectations remind us of the normative standards known from deliberative discourses (Habermas 1971) and are oftentimes regarded as standard rules and baselines of interactions, which are transferred to journalist-audience interactions in a digital realm. We also witness several expectations that are widely rated as unimportant by all audience members we interviewed. These expectations mostly concern hedonistic values, such as the idea of the interaction being entertaining or a space to vent emotions. Additionally, the idea of the interactants sharing and representing the same values as well as creating a

community between journalists and their audiences is also agreed upon as rather unexpected. This calls into question several initiatives we currently witness within newsrooms that oftentimes operate under the label of audience engagement (Broersma 2019; Nelson 2021), engaged journalism (Green-Barber and McKinley 2019; Wenzel 2019) or reciprocal journalism (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014), aiming to create shared values as well as a community-feeling in order to build closer journalism-audience relationships and ultimately trust and new financing models for journalism. Green-Barber and McKinley (2019) for example define engaged journalism as “an inclusive practice that prioritizes the information needs and wants of the community members it serves” (6). However, in both types identified in our survey, the possibility of using interactions to suggest topics or draw journalists’ attention to things important to the audience members (such as certain actions, groups, or events), is often seen as only moderately important compared to other expectations. These results shed a skeptical perspective on in depth-audience projects that aim to engage recipients in the research and selection of topics with the goal of creating a shared community. As Uth (2024a) showed, in depth-audience engagement projects are connected to high investments of resources for both news outlets and their audience – journalists should thus thoroughly consider the implementation of such projects and only use them for topics of high relevance for their audience which come with a high willingness to actually interact and get involved into processes behind the news. This is not to say that in depth-audience engagement projects do not offer benefits – rather, it is crucial that news outlets know their own audience and create offers catered to the wants and needs of their specific recipients (Uth, Badura, and Blöbaum 2021). Our results strengthen the importance of further audience research within the newsrooms: News outlets should work more thoroughly on getting to know their audience, understanding their specific needs and in particular their expectations towards journalism and journalism–audience interactions and relationships.

Our study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interdependencies, dimensions, and characteristics of interaction expectations from the audience members’ points of view and thus enhances previous empirical findings on the interactions between journalists and audiences by its nuanced view. It enriches existing research with an innovative, micro-theoretical, and interpretivist approach and offers a consistent theoretical and empirical framework.

However, there are limitations to consider. Our Q-sort survey was conducted using the online software QMethod, which has its advantages regarding a better traceability of the sorting process, however, the use of online software is met with discussions in the Q community – mainly because of a potential decrease in engagement or reflection compared to in-person sorting (Stehle 2023). Furthermore, the interpretation of the types found is subjective to a certain degree (Stenner, Watts, and Worrell 2017). At last, we conducted our Q-sort survey in Germany, our results thus have to be contextualized in this cultural context regarding interaction expectations and might differ within other interaction cultures, such as for example within the US that displays a stronger focus on mutual interaction and community-building within journalism (see for example Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt 2018).

Nevertheless, this study gives us meaningful insights as to what are the different expectations audiences have when it comes to their interactions with journalist in a nuanced way. As we see, interaction expectations can differ vastly. News outlets thus

should invest into getting to know their audience (via audience metrics, market research and direct as well as personal interactions with their recipients) in order to get a better grasp as to what their specific audience expects when interacting with them. As often the case when it comes to relationship-building with the audience, news outlets have to step away from one-fits-all solutions and invest into tailored initiatives in order to reach and bind their audience. Future research and journalistic practice should explore how both journalists and audiences can become aware of and discuss their expectations. Formats that encourage direct exchange and dialogue appear particularly promising in this context. Additionally, we must consider the consequences of meeting – or failing to meet – the expectations found in our study. Experimental studies that examine the effects of expectation violations and confirmations can offer further insights.

Notes

1. In the interviews, we asked participants if they missed any expectations they have towards journalist-audience interactions. No respondents named any further expectations towards journalist-audience interactions, emphasizing the comprehensiveness of our Q-set.
2. Q methodology operates under a different statistical logic than the “R methodology” commonly known from quantitative analyses. Its aim does not consist in statistical generalization, but in the identification of distinct subjective patterns (for further information, see Brown 1980; Watts and Stenner 2012).

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