

# WHEN CITIZENS AND JOURNALISTS INTERACT ON TWITTER

## Expectations of journalists' performance on social media and perceptions of media bias

**Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Trevor Diehl, and Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu**

*Twitter has become the leading social media platform for journalists to break news, build a following, and interact with the public. Social media offer journalists and citizens a communication space, where they can discuss issues, provide context for the news, and foster community values. This study examines how expectations about journalistic practices on social media influence audience engagement with journalists, and in turn, perceptions of editorial bias. Drawing on a two-wave panel survey from the United States, we first find that expectations about the practice of "good journalism" on social media predict engagement with journalists on Twitter. Second, these personal interactions lead to lower levels of perceived bias in the news media. Finally, expectations of journalists' performance on social media are explored as a moderator of perceived editorial bias. This study adds to the growing literature analyzing the causes and outcomes of audience engagement with journalists on social media.*

**KEYWORDS** expectations; journalism; media bias; news; reciprocity; social media; Twitter

### Introduction

The public mood toward the news media has reached an all-time nadir in the United States. According to a recent Gallup Poll, less than half of Americans (40 percent) say that they trust mass media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly (Gallup 2015). Nearly three-quarters (70 percent) of the population think that the news media intentionally bias coverage (Paulsen 2015; Rasmussen 2015). Perceptions of media bias are troubling, since they have been associated with a decrease in news consumption, and detachment from public life (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Jakob 2010; Pinkleton, Austin, and Fortman 1998; Tsati and Cappella 2003). At the same time, many Americans, especially young people, are getting their news online or through social media. About one-third of adults get some news and public affairs information from Facebook or Twitter (Pew Research Center 2015). These services offer a historically novel news environment, where users can curate information flows, and create their own content (Östman 2012; Wells and Thorson 2015). The ability to comment, like, share, and follow news has led to increased audience involvement with the news (Lotan et al. 2011; Thurman 2008). In turn, the very boundaries of professional journalism are now debatable, as the nature of information distribution becomes a more fluid, participatory exchange between citizens and the press (Lewis 2012).

In this changing news landscape, expectations about what constitutes good journalism are also changing (Gil de Zúñiga and Hinsley 2013). In particular, norms of interaction, reciprocity, and collaboration with the community are growing areas of interest (Borger, van Hoof, and Sanders 2014; Lewis 2015; Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014). These discussions represent the potential shifting role of the journalist in democratic society. Although Twitter is a popular tool for journalists around the world, they rarely take full advantage of the interactive and collaboration capabilities of social media (Engesser and Humprecht 2015). One explanation is that journalists might be careful of appearing biased. However, scholars have yet to explore how interaction on Twitter might (or might not) lead to perceptions of media bias.

This study builds on previous research that considers the potential for pro-social outcomes when journalists and citizens engage on social media (Borger, van Hoof, and Sanders 2014; Holton et al. 2015). This study considers whether having expectations of good journalism practices on social media might lead to increased engagement with journalists on Twitter, such as asking questions (via direct messages (DM) or @mention) or re-tweeting members of the media and citizen journalists. Second, we test whether having those expectations influences perceptions of editorial bias. Finally, this study also explores how citizens' engagement with journalists on Twitter might shape perceptions of editorial media bias. Drawing on survey panel data from the United States, we tested these relationships in regression models that include a full range of control variables, including: demographic information, trust in the media, political orientations, and overall news use. We find that expectations of journalists' use of social media for providing context, discussing issues, sharing news, and connecting to the community are directly related to re-tweeting news and asking questions via Twitter. In addition, we find that the more individuals engage with journalists on Twitter, the less likely they are to perceive that the news media has an editorial bias. Finally, we tested for group differences (moderation effect) in levels of perceived bias between those with high and low expectations of journalists on social media.

### Twitter and the Shifting Professional Role of the Journalist

Twitter is an ideal social networking platform to study the interaction of journalists and the public. The micro-blogging platform boasts 320 million users worldwide, and is a favorite reporting tool for journalists in the United States (Farhi 2009; Twitter 2015). The short, instant bits of communication text are used for breaking news, covering a beat, or linking back to the news organization's website (Manjoo 2015; Parmelee 2013). Journalists are the largest group of verified users on Twitter (Mullin 2015). Twitter is also a popular way to get news and public affairs information. More Twitter users get news on the platform than any other social media site (Pew Research Center 2015). Micro-blogging also makes two-way communication between users rather effortless. It is not surprising then, that one of the key appeals of Twitter is that it allows for collaboration between citizens and journalists (Hermida et al. 2012).

The extent to which journalists are actually allowing citizens to participate in the news-making process is a point of open contention among professional journalists (Ekdale et al. 2015; Lewis 2012; Robinson 2011). This is because networked communication technologies, and especially social media, alter the traditional relationships between content producers and content consumers. In this environment, journalists may be hesitant to break with traditional reporting practices (Deuze 2007). Thinking of the audience as a

collaborator, instead of source or consumer, has been unevenly applied among news workers. Journalists have reported being hesitant to engage in collaboration, or citizen journalism initiatives, because they feel that the quality of news would suffer in terms of accuracy and objectivity (Singer 2010). Interaction with audiences on Twitter is likely to be based, at least in part, on the expectations of the news workers. Some evidence suggests that journalists are less likely to support increased collaboration with the audience if they view the practice as conflicting with their conception of “proper” reporting practices (Deuze 2007; Ekdale et al. 2015).

On the other hand, content analyses of reporting practices on Twitter find that traditional norms are being challenged in some cases. For example, one study analyzing political reporters covering the 2012 presidential campaign found a high percentage of personal opinion in tweets (Lawrence et al. 2014). Other studies found substantial use of humor, opinion, and personal brand development work on Twitter (Holton and Lewis 2011; Molyneux 2015). However, in each of these cases authors argued that, overall, journalists tend to avoid major deviations from traditional practices (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012). This was particularly the case in terms of fact checking (deferring to authority) and avoiding critique of presidential candidates (Coddington, Molyneux, and Lawrence 2014; Mourão, Diehl, and Vasudevan 2015). One common explanation across these studies is that journalists take great care not to appear biased. They are willing to make some concessions to the technology, but are ultimately still guided by rules of engagement from the offline world.

The growth of Twitter, and other networked communication technologies, coincides with a steady decline in the newspaper industry over the last decade. Newsroom staff has shrunk dramatically, readership is down, and revenues have fallen by more than half (Pew Research Center 2015). Whether or not journalism can survive in this environment depends on the extent to which newsrooms are able to adapt to new technologies (Ryfe 2012). In this vein, at least one group of scholars suggests exploring the conditions under which the audience successfully engage with journalists, as acts of sustained, direct, and indirect reciprocity (Holton et al. 2015; Lewis 2015). According to this view, interacting with journalists on social media leads to the expectation that, in turn, journalists will reciprocate with quality content.

### **Expectations of Performance and Engagement**

The conditions of journalistic engagement on social media are mostly clear: they are reluctant to engage in social media if it challenges traditional roles, or gives the impression of media bias. According to some scholars, journalists seem to expect that the news on social media should look like the news offline (Deuze 2007; Domingo et al. 2008; Quandt 2008; Singer 2010). The conditions determining audience participation with the news are rather different. Overall, individuals tend to participate in the news rarely, if at all (Bergström 2008; Larsson 2011). Instead, they use social media for personal purposes, to broadcast themselves, express opinions, and engage in frivolous activity (Bergström 2008; Fröhlich, Quiring, and Engesser 2012; Papacharissi 2007; Quan-Haase and Young 2010).

When citizens do consume news on social media, it is often related to their impressions about the credibility of the news, personal identification with the source, or for surveillance needs (Lee and Ma 2012; Turcotte et al. 2015; Zolkepli and Kamarulzaman 2015). These perspectives borrow from cognitive and social psychology, which postulates

that expectations are the precursors of behavioral outcomes (Bandura 2001; LaRose and Eastin 2004). As Van Dijck (2009) argues, the underlying mechanisms that drive individuals to share content in digital spaces is incredibly nuanced and complex. However, Borger, van Hoof, and Sanders (2014) identify a general pattern of engagement with the news media online through a series of experiments and interviews. The authors propose a model of participation with journalists based on five parts: *influences*, *anticipation*, *participation*, *evaluation*, and *reconsideration*. *Participation* (posting, sharing content, etc.) with the news is determined by expectations (*anticipation*) about the roles of the actors involved. Those expectations are informed by previous experiences, and personal images of the news organization or journalist (*influences*). After a participatory experience, individuals reflect (*evaluation*) on how the interaction met expectations, and then decide whether or not to continue participating (*reconsideration*). Put simply, expectations about the role of the journalist in society drive participation in digital news environments, and accordingly, influence future interactions.

Based on this rationale, those that follow the news on Twitter are likely to be influenced by the basic norms of social media in general: social interaction, collaboration, two-way communication, and reciprocity (Benkler 2006; Lewis 2015; Van Dijck 2009). These influences alter *expectations* about the news—expectations that are shaped by their social media experiences (Lee and Ma 2012). In other words, for those that rely on social media for news, they might expect journalists to operate outside traditional roles. Journalists may be asked to directly engage in a discussion with the public, share news from other sources, or foster community values. In this context, expectations about how a journalist should behave will be shaped by the norms of digital culture. Following Borger, van Hoof, and Sanders (2014), these expectations will drive participatory behaviors. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Expectations of journalists' performance on social media (first wave,  $W^1$ ) are positively associated with engagement with journalists on Twitter (second wave,  $W^2$ ).

### Expectations, Engagement, and Perceptions of Editorial Bias

Bias in the news media has been widely discussed in political science and media studies.

Scholars have debated the nature of framing, authority, political, and economic forms of news bias (e.g. Bennett 1996; Entman 1993; Hamilton 2004; Herman and Chomsky 2010; McCombs and Shaw 1972). Based on the sheer volume of research discussing the pressures that shape news content, it is hardly surprising that individuals may be inclined to adopt the perception that the news media are biased in some way. It is important to note that the extent to which bias does exist is a matter of debate (see Hamilton 2004). For the purposes of this article, bias is operationalized as *a perception of the news media*—one characterized by editorial bias toward: (1) the owner of the media organization; (2) the need to attract an audience; and (3) the tendency for news content to influence the viewer in some way. This definition is roughly equivalent to corporate and framing conceptions of news bias (Fico, Richardson, and Edwards 2004; Hamilton 2004; Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005). This type of bias is particularly germane to the modern media environment, since many news organizations are facing increasing economic pressure.



Public perceptions of bias in the news media can lead to political and media cynicism, generally defined as negative attitudes toward public private media institutions (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Kiousis 2001). Low evaluations of the news media are associated with a decrease in news consumption, and increased preference for entertainment (Jackob 2010; Tsfaty and Cappella 2003). Decreased attention to public affairs is especially troubling, since news consumption is considered the foundation of democratic citizenship, and is associated with a range of pro-social activities (Bennett 2008; Norris 2000; Paek, Yoon, and Shah 2005; Schudson 1998).

As hypothesized earlier, expectations about the role of journalists on social media might influence engagement with journalists on Twitter. In addition, there is theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that expectations are also related to perceptions of media bias. Scholarship in this area offers several explanations for the prevalence of perceived media bias. These perceptions among the public have been explained as the result of political partisanship, strength of ideology, elite discussions of the topic, and the tendency for liberal-leaning journalists to over-compensate for their own bias (Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; Gunther and Schmitt 2004; Hamilton 2004; Morris 2007; Watts et al. 1999). One rationale is that individuals form opinions about the news based on “media schemata” (Kosicki and Mcleod 1990). Media schemata are internal images, and include a range of beliefs and orientations toward the news media that operate as guides, or expectations that influence how individuals process messages (Chaffee 1990; McQuail 1987). Media schemata help explain attitudes of bias, because they include normative expectations about the role of the press, and influence trust in the news, perceptions of credibility, political fragmentation, and the view that journalists serve themselves over their audience (Fredin, Kosicki, and Becker 1996; Watts et al. 1999). According to this literature, media schemata (however flawed) result in perceptions of bias when media content appears to conflict with, or conforms to, a pre-existing set of schemata. Based on this literature, it is reasonable to suggest that expectations of journalism performance on social media will be related to perceptions of media bias in some way.

Empirical evidence suggests that normative expectations about the role of the press in society are lofty ones, rooted in the idea of an adversarial press that holds public officials accountable to the public (Elliott and Schenck-Hamlin 1979; Schudson 1998). These normative expectations often coincide with negative views of actual press performance. This is illustrated in the divergence between what people say journalists *should* do, versus what people *actually* think of the press. For example, most Americans expect journalists to be accurate, objective, act as a watch dog for the public, and cover stories that should be covered (Gil de Zúñiga and Hinsley 2013; Heider, McCombs, and Poindexter 2005). The irony here is that normative expectations set a standard for criteria that often conflicts with internal media schemata. In other words, although the norms may be general standards, individuals still view the news as bias, because the content they come across conflicts with a range of individual characteristics—like partisanship, ideology, or general levels of trust in the news (Eveland and Shah 2003; Gunther and Schmitt 2004; Lee 2005). This conflict explains, at least in part, why public perceptions of media bias remain so high. Therefore, if an individual holds high expectations about social media press performance it is likely that they still view traditional media as failing to meet these expectations.

Expectations alone may be associated with perceptions of media bias. However, an alternative explanation is that *how* individuals interact with media content will influence

their perceptions of bias. This is an area of increasing interest for scholars of online news media, since these technologies alter the nature of the news audiences in general (Lewis 2012; Robinson 2011). For example, some scholars note that there is a difference between consumptive and expressive behaviors online (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2013; Pingree 2007). According to this literature, those who passively consume media in a digital environment are less likely to reap the rewards of increased interpersonal interaction. One reason for this is that, without expressive and communicative engagement, individuals do not do the cognitive work of reflection and re-evaluation necessary for learning from news media (Gil de Zúñiga 2006; Pingree 2007). When individuals share information in networked spaces, information exchanges over time help build trust, and lead to more sharing over time (Hsu et al. 2007). Thus, without engaging in reciprocal behaviors, expectations alone might not lead to changes in levels of perceived bias, because they are unable to build trust and learn from the media.

There is further reason to propose that expectations alone will be associated with higher levels of perceived media bias. Those with high expectations of journalism performance on Twitter may also be critical of the news media in general, because their expectations of performance are set by experiences with alternative habits of media consumption (in this case, social media). If the news media are expected to conform to standards set in social media spaces, and an individual does not interact with journalists on Twitter, it is likely that they will evaluate mainstream news in general as bias. This rationale, in combination with the above theoretical and empirical evidence around media schemata, leads to the following hypothesis:

**H2:** Expectations of journalists' performance on social media ( $W^1$ ) are associated with higher perceptions of editorial media bias ( $W^2$ ).

We expected the above relationship with perceived media bias to be different when one participates in the news environment on Twitter. On Twitter, individuals can share news, directly ask journalists questions in real time, follow a conversation around the news, and see details about the journalist (Hermida 2010; Hermida et al. 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2014). These interactions involve a higher level of closeness and personal acquaintance when compared to the traditional, offline relationship between journalists and their audience. Instant, inter-personal interactions with the news, and news workers, are a unique product of social media. When individuals share inter-personal experiences on social networks, they also receive pro-social, learning benefits from interactions on the network (Borger, van Hoof, and Sanders 2014; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2013; Hsu et al. 2007; Pingree 2007). Personal experience with journalists, and experiences of reciprocity with the news, might lead to lower levels of perceived media bias. As outlined above, journalists are reluctant to use social media in any way that violates long-standing conceptions of proper reporting: objectivity, accuracy, and quality (e.g. Deuze 2007; Singer 2010). It stands to reason then, that the more one directly interacts with journalists on Twitter, the more likely it is that one will learn about how journalists do their job. In addition, drawing on research on the cognitive benefits of interaction on social media (Borger, van Hoof, and Sanders 2014; Hsu et al. 2007), any positive experience with a journalist on Twitter is likely to lead to a re-evaluation of the role of journalists in society (through evaluation and reconsideration). This re-evaluation will force an individual to reconcile their experience with prior expectations of performance. Thus, those that previously had media bias concerns would learn from interactions on Twitter. In contrast, those individuals

pre-disposed to engagement on social media would have their positive expectations re-enforced. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H3:** Engagement with journalists on Twitter ( $W^1$ ) is associated with lower perceptions of editorial media bias ( $W^2$ ).

Finally, how might expectations and engagement interact to reduce, or increase, levels of perceived media bias? It is possible that those with low expectations of performance might be influenced by their experiences with journalists on Twitter more than others. Since the key objective of this study is to test the relationship between interaction with journalists on Twitter and perceptions of media bias, while also exploring the potential group differences in this relationship between those with higher and lower expectations of press performance on social media, we propose the following research question:

**RQ1:** Do expectations of journalists' performance on social media ( $W^1$ ) moderate the effect of engagement with journalists on Twitter ( $W^1$ ) on perceptions of editorial media bias ( $W^2$ )?

## Methods

### *Sample*

To test these hypotheses, a two-wave online panel survey was conducted over the course of three months in the United States. The questionnaire was developed by a Research Unit at a level 1 Research University in the United States, and administered by the media-polling group Nielsen. The sample was constructed from over 200,000 people previously registered with Nielsen, applying a stratified quota sampling method based on demographics for an accurate representation of the US census. The study was conducted using the Web survey software Qualtrics.

A total of 2060 participants, from an initial sample of 5000 individuals, completed the first wave from December 15, 2013 to January 5, 2014. Only 1813 of these observations were retained, as 247 participants had to be excluded due to incomplete or invalid data. From February, 15 to March 5, 2014, 1024 participants completed the second wave of the survey. The response rate for the first wave was 34.6 percent, while the retention rate for the second wave was 57 percent. Both response rate figures fall within acceptable parameters for data integrity for online panel surveys (Bosnjak, Das, and Lynn 2016; Watson and Wooden 2006). The sample demographics are similar to the US census, although slightly older, better educated, and with fewer Hispanics (see below).

### *Independent and Dependent Variables*

This study had two main objectives. First, we wanted to examine the influence of expectations about journalists' performance on social media on (1) the likelihood of establishing closer relationships with journalists via engagement on Twitter, and (2) perceptions regarding editorial bias in media coverage. Second, we also assessed the effects of engaging with journalists on Twitter on perceptions of editorial bias. Thus, our models include engagement with journalists on Twitter, both as a dependent and independent variable, while perceived media bias is always analyzed as a dependent variable. Accordingly, the paper includes a series of measures of these constructs, considered as key

variables. All items are 10-point Likert scale, unless otherwise noted (1 = strongly disagree, 10 = strongly agree).

*Perceived editorial media bias.* To measure perceptions of media bias, respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements: “news companies choose stories based on what will attract the biggest audience,” “production techniques can be used to influence a viewer’s perception,” and “the owner of a media company influences the content that is produced” ( $W^2$  Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.91$ , mean = 7.87, SD = 2.26).

*Expectations about journalists on social media.* This variable comprises personal expectations about the positive role journalists can play on social media, through fostering conversation and contextualizing current events. Expectations about journalists’ performance on social media were measured with six items. Respondents were asked how much they expected journalists on social media to “give interpretations/analysis of the news,” “discuss news events with other users,” “share news from other sources,” “connect community members to each other,” “encourage conversation about solving community problems,” and “foster community values” ( $W^1$  Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.97$ ; mean = 2.91, SD = 2.34;  $W^2$  Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.97$ ; mean = 2.94, SD = 2.38).

*Engaging with journalists on Twitter.* This variable measures the degree to which individuals engage in an active online relationship with journalists. Respondents were asked how often they “retweet a member of the news media,” “retweet citizen journalists,” “ask questions (via DM or @mention) to a member of the news media,” and “ask questions (via DM or @mention) to a citizen journalist” (four-item averaged scale;  $W^1$  Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.97$ ; mean = 1.49, SD = 1.56;  $W^2$  Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.97$ ; mean = 1.62, SD = 1.60).

### *Control Variables*

In order to control for potential confounds, our statistical models also include a variety of variables that may explain relationships between the variables of interest. The first set of controls includes socio-demographic variables: *age* (mean = 52.71, SD = 14.72), *gender* (49.70 percent females), *education* (highest level of education completed, range = 1–8; mean = 3.61, median = some college), *income* (total annual household income, range = 1–8; mean = 4.46, median = \$50,000–\$59,999), and *race* (77.9 percent white). A second set of variables included political orientations: political interest, political knowledge, discussion network size, and discussion frequency. Finally, two more variables controlled for the effect of trust in traditional and alternative news media.

*Political interest.* This composite variable captures respondents’ degree of interest in “information about what’s going on in politics and public affairs,” as well as their level of attention to “information about what’s going on in politics and public affairs” (two-items averaged scale,  $W^1$  Spearman–Brown = 0.97; mean = 6.67, SD = 2.70).

*Political knowledge.* This study also controls for the effect of individuals’ awareness of current events and knowledge about the overall functioning of the political system. Correct responses were coded as 1, while incorrect or missing ones were coded as 0. The authors

created items based on recommendations by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997) (eight-item additive scales, range = 0–8,  $W^1$  Kuder–Richardson 20 (KR20) = 0.75; mean = 4.58, SD = 2.17).

*Discussion network size.* We also controlled for the approximate number of people that make up a respondent's discussion network, as this variable has been previously related to political attitudes and behaviors, including news use (Mutz 2002). We asked respondents in an open-ended fashion about the number of people they "talked to face-to-face or over the phone about politics or public affairs," and "talked to via the internet, including e-mail, chat rooms and social networking sites about politics or public affairs," during the past month. As expected, the additive scale consisting of these two items was highly skewed ( $W^1$  mean = 4.36, median = 1.00, SD = 16.89, skewness = 10.86). The natural logarithm was then used to convert the distribution of a variable to a more normal distribution ( $W^1$  mean = 0.33, median = 0.24, SD = 0.37, skewness = 1.32).

*Discussion frequency.* Respondents were also asked about the frequency of political talk with both near and far people. The questionnaire asked how often respondents talk about politics or public affairs with: "spouse or partner," "family and relatives," "friends," "acquaintances," "strangers," "neighbors you know well," "co-workers you know well," and "co-workers you do not know well (10-item averaged scale,  $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = 0.87; mean = 3.27, SD = 1.74).

*Traditional media trust.* This variable taps the level of confidence and trust subjects report concerning traditional news media. Thus, the questionnaire asked respondents how much they trusted news from "mainstream news media" and "news aggregators" (two-item index,  $W^1$  Spearman–Brown = 0.50; mean = 5.00, SD = 1.95).

*Alternative media trust.* In order to provide a more comprehensive measure of trust in the media, we also considered individual's trust in non-mainstream, alternative news media. Respondents were asked about their level of trust in news from "alternative news media (e.g., blogs, citizen journalism)," and "social media sites" (two-item index,  $W^1$  Spearman–Brown = 0.70; mean = 3.56, SD = 1.98).

*Traditional news media use.* Respondents were asked several questions to tap frequency of exposure to news from local television news, cable, national and local newspapers, and radio news (nine-item averaged scale,  $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = 0.76; mean = 5.26, SD = 1.85).

*Social media for news.* Respondents were asked questions related to news consumption on social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, Instagram, Tumblr, and Reddit (seven-item averaged scale,  $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = 0.87; mean = 1.73, SD = 1.75).

*Overall social media use.* Since individuals use social media for a range of activities beyond news (Quan-Haase and Young 2010), three items were included related to general social media use for social and connective purposes. The items asked how often respondents use social media "to stay in touch with friends and family," "to meet new



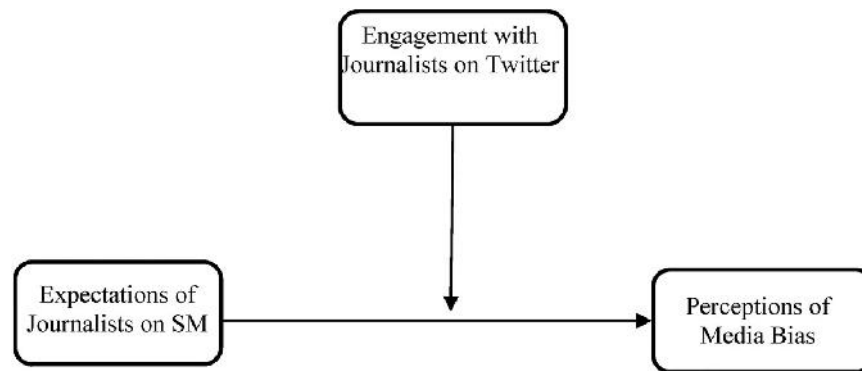
people who share interests,” and “On a typical day, how much do you use social media” (three-item averaged scale,  $W^1$  Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.75$ ; mean = 3.63, SD = 2.29).

### Statistical Analyses

In the light of our hypotheses and research question, we conducted a series of lagged panel regression analyses. First, we conducted a time-lagged ordinary least-square regression (OLS) to assess the predictors of expectations about journalists on social media. Next, we ran a model where expectations about journalists on social media is regressed on engaging with journalists on Twitter in time. In the model, the independent variables (taken from  $W^1$ ) were introduced in different blocks. The first block of variables comprised the set of demographics, the second included sociopolitical antecedents, and the third contained variables related to media antecedents (trust in traditional media, trust in alternative media, traditional news use, social media for news, and overall social media use). The fourth block comprised just our variable of interest: expectations of journalists on social media. Second, we conducted a series of time-lagged OLS regressions to explore the effect of our variables of interest on editorial media bias perceptions (the first model to assess the direct effects and the second to test the interaction effect). The first three blocks of variables were identical to the above-mentioned, while the fourth included expectations of journalists on social media, and the interaction term (expectations of journalists on social media  $\times$  engagement with journalist on Twitter). Finally, to plot the interaction effect, we used the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes 2013; Model 1; Figure 1).

### Results

The first hypothesis (H1) proposed that expectations of performance are positively related to engaging with journalists on Twitter at a later time. Table 1 shows that, consistent with H1, expectations for journalists’ performance on social media ( $W^1$ ) is positively and strongly associated with engaging with journalists on Twitter ( $W^2$ ) ( $\beta = 0.224$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Younger adults ( $\beta = -0.140$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), men ( $\beta = -0.066$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), those who discuss politics ( $\beta = 0.117$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and those that rely on social media for news ( $\beta = 0.352$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were also likely to say that they engaged with journalists on Twitter. Table 1 also



**FIGURE 1**

Conceptual model: interaction effect of normative expectations about the press on the relationship between news use and civic participation. SM, social media

**TABLE 1**

Lagged panel regression model of expectations about journalist on social media ( $W^1$ ) predicting engaging with journalists on Twitter ( $W^2$ )

	Expectations of journalists' performance on social media, $W^1$	Engagement with journalists on Twitter, $W^2$
Block 1: Demographics $W^1$		
Age	-0.129***	-0.140***
Gender (female)	-0.015	-0.066**
Education	-0.014	0.011
Income	-0.049*	-0.012
Race (white)	0.013	-0.020
$\Delta R^2$ (%)	6.7	11.2
Block 2: Social and political antecedents $W^1$		
Political interest	0.029	-0.035
Political knowledge	0.012	-0.048
Discussion network size	0.034	-0.012
Frequency of discussion	0.206***	0.117***
$\Delta R^2$ (%)	24.7	12.4
Block 3: media antecedents $W^1$		
Traditional media trust	0.008	-0.011
Alternative media trust	0.183***	0.026
Traditional news	0.030	0.050
Social media news	0.048	0.352***
Overall social media	0.365***	0.084**
$\Delta R^2$ (%)	20.8	20.0
Block 4: Variables of interest $W^1$		
Expectations about journalists on social media	-	0.224***
$\Delta R^2$ (%)		2.7
Total $R^2$ (%)	45.4	46.4

Sample size = 1020. Cell entries are final-entry OLS standardized coefficients.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

shows the individual factors related to expectations of performance on social media. Younger people, those that discuss politics more frequently, those with higher levels of trust in alternative news sources, and those who use social media for non-news also expected journalists to give context to the news, share content, and foster community discussions on social media. These findings are in line with the central thesis of the paper, which proposes that social media experiences set standards for a type of reciprocity between journalists and their audiences. H1 is supported.

H2 predicted that expectations about journalists on social media are positively associated with perceptions of media bias. According to the second series of lagged OLS models and consistent with H2, expectations of journalists' performance on social media are directly related to perceptions of editorial media bias, and the relationship is positive and statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.113$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (Model 1; Table 2). Older adults ( $\beta = 0.108$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), females ( $\beta = 0.073$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), whites ( $\beta = 0.091$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and those with higher levels of political knowledge ( $\beta = 0.189$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were more likely to report holding perceptions of media bias. H2 is confirmed. Our third hypothesis stated a direct, negative effect of asking journalists questions and re-tweeting content via Twitter on perceptions of media bias (H3). Consistent with H3 (Model 1; Table 2), engaging with journalists

**TABLE 2**

Lagged panel regression model of expectations about journalists on social media and engaging on Twitter with journalists ( $W^1$ ) predicting perceived media bias ( $W^2$ )

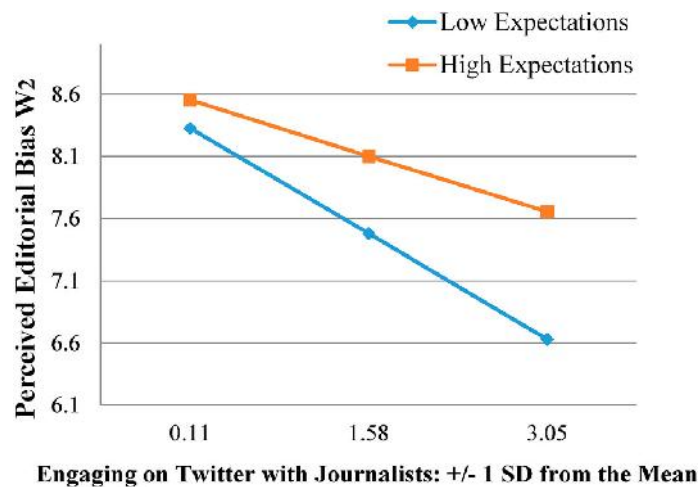
	Perceived media bias, $W^2$	
	Model 1 (main effect)	Model 2 (interaction effect)
Block 1: Demographics $W^1$		
Age	0.108**	0.101**
Gender (female)	0.073*	0.075*
Education	-0.006	-0.002
Income	-0.021	-0.020
Race (white)	0.091**	0.090**
$\Delta R^2$ (%)	5.0	5.0
Block 2: Social and political antecedents $W^1$		
Political interest	0.063	0.061
Political knowledge	0.189***	0.191***
Discussion network size	0.062	0.067
Frequency of discussion	0.071	0.062
$\Delta R^2$ (%)	7.8	7.8
Block 3: Media antecedents $W^1$		
Traditional media trust	0.049	0.047
Alternative media trust	0.001	-0.002
Traditional news	-0.022	-0.030
Social media news	-0.025	-0.025
Overall social media	0.022	0.028
$\Delta R^2$ (%)	0.6	0.6
Block 4: Variables of interest $W^1$		
Expectations about journalists on social media	0.113**	0.043
Engagement with journalists on Twitter	-0.128**	-0.358***
Interaction: Expectations $\times$ Engagement	-	0.282*
$\Delta R^2$ (%)	1.3	1.8
Total $R^2$ (%)	14.6	15.1

Sample size = 1020. Cell entries are final-entry OLS standardized coefficients.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

on Twitter lowers an individual's perception of media bias ( $\beta = -0.128$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Those more engaged with journalists on Twitter tend to perceive the news media in general as less biased. H3 is confirmed.

Finally, our research question explored a possible interaction effect of expectations and engagement on perceptions of media bias. Table 2 shows a positive, statistically significant interaction effect ( $\beta = 0.282$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) (Model 2; Table 2). Overall, a closer relationship with journalists on Twitter is associated with lower levels of perceived media bias. However, concerning the influence of the moderating variable, this positive effect is less intense among those with high expectations regarding the role of journalists on social media. Put differently, those who report higher levels of engagement with journalists on Twitter, and have lower expectations about their role on social media, tend to benefit more from their Twitter interactions, at least in regards to altering their perceptions of overall media bias (Figures 1 and 2).

**FIGURE 2**

The figure shows the interaction term of expectations about journalists on social media (moderator) on the relationship between engaging on Twitter with journalists and perceived media bias. Group differences in expectations of journalists and engaging on Twitter are the mean  $\pm$  1 SD from the mean

## Discussion

Public evaluations of press performance (including media bias) are at all-time lows (Gallup 2015; Paulsen 2015; Rasmussen 2015). Interacting in social media spheres is one possible way to meliorate the situation, through sustained engagement with the public on micro-blogging platforms like Twitter (Lewis 2015). This study explored how expectations of good journalism on social media (giving analysis of the news, discussing events, sharing news from other sources, fostering community values, etc.) lead to audience engagement with journalists on Twitter, and in turn, lower levels of perceived media bias. Citizens' perceptions of proper journalism practice on social media include a range of activities associated with reciprocity, collaboration, and public service. The news industry is struggling on two fronts: contests over the role of journalism in networked information spaces, and increasing economic pressures (Lewis 2012; Ryfe 2012). Fulfilling citizens' expectations of "good journalism" practice on social media is one way to maintain professional integrity, and engage news audiences.

### *Engagement and Editorial Bias*

Our models indicate that expectations of performance on social media are a strong predictor that one will engage with journalists on Twitter. However, in order for individuals to lower their levels of perceived editorial bias, they had to engage with the news on Twitter. That is, those with high expectations alone were also more likely to report seeing an editorial bias in the news. The results indicate that individuals who do not interact online are not experiencing the potential pro-social benefits of social media (Bond et al. 2012; Pingree 2007). This is in line with previous studies outlining the differential effects between consumptive and expressive media uses (Gil de Zúñiga and Rojas 2009; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2013).

Although we expected that engagement would lower perceptions of editorial bias, the result is also somewhat counter-intuitive. Several studies show that the traditional conception of the “objective” reporter does not apply on Twitter. On this particular social media platform, journalists share opinions, engage in humor, and discuss “job talk” with the public (Lawrence et al. 2014; Molyneux 2015). If this is the case, one might argue that increased interaction with journalists on Twitter would *increase* perceptions of bias. That is, certain violations of professional objectivity might further stimulate notions of a bias press corps. However, journalists only partially abandon traditional reporting norms on Twitter. In fact, evidence in this area suggests that reporters on Twitter still strongly defer to authority, rarely criticize politicians, and often act more like stenographers than fact checkers (Coddington, Molyneux, and Lawrence 2014; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Mourão, Diehl, and Vasudevan 2015). Other scholars point out that journalists are hesitant to relinquish control over the news, and often attach traditional norms to their digital work (e.g. Quandt 2008; Singer 2010). We expect that perceptions of bias decrease, because individuals are experiencing, at least in part, these more traditional values of reporting. In response, the social interaction on Twitter stimulates long-held assumptions about the “objective” reporter.

#### *Interaction Effect*

Expectations of “good journalism” practices in social media matter when explaining effects on an individual’s level of perceived editorial bias. In other words, the more people engage with journalists on Twitter, the less likely they are to report viewing the media as having an editorial bias. However, the effect is stronger for those with lower expectations. Those with low expectations of journalists’ performance on social media benefit the most from increased engagement. This may be because these individuals are learning more about the intentions of the individual journalist, the processes of reporting, and the potential social utility of journalism on social media. In turn, these individuals are less likely to view the overall news media as biased, because they derived some positive sense of the role of the news in society. Those with higher expectations also tend to perceive the media as less biased when they engage with the news on Twitter, compared to those with high expectations who do not engage on Twitter. However, they do not seem to be lowering their perceptions of editorial bias to the same extent as respondents with lower expectations. This may be happening because those with higher expectations tend to learn less from their Twitter experiences. They may also hold journalists, and the news media in general, to higher normative standards that are difficult to meet in reality.

Overall, these results suggest that when expectations of journalistic performance are in line with the ethos of digital culture, respondents tend to see bias in mainstream media. However, these positive expectations also lead respondents to engage more frequently with journalists on social media. That social interaction seems to be strengthening positive perceptions of the press. These relationships hold, after including a range of demographic and personal traits. However, it is interesting to note *who* tends to engage with the emerging digital news culture. According to the results, it is younger men, with higher levels of trust in alternative news sources. Future studies might investigate whether, and why, a gender gap might exist for these behaviors (Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela 2010).

This study has some important limitations that should be mentioned. First, this study looked at Twitter specifically. Future work should investigate the effects of interactions on



other social media platforms. We also do not have pre-engagement and post-engagement measures for editorial bias. Future research in this area might experiment with the various types of social media activities, and with different types of news content, to better determine when and why engagement might have positive social outcomes. Thus, more work needs to be done to determine the underlying causes for how social interaction leads to improved perceptions about media bias. The number of individuals who use Twitter for news is still relatively small, so results should be interpreted with caution for generalizing to other contexts of interaction with journalists.

The findings offer valuable evidence for an argument that encourages newsrooms to take advantage of the collaborative and networking capabilities of Twitter. Much of the literature on professional practice on Twitter suggests that journalists refrain from certain types of engagement with the public, perhaps out of fear of being viewed as bias in some way (e.g. Engesser and Humprecht 2015). Results from the regression models suggest that the opposite is true. The more individuals interact with journalists on Twitter, perceptions of editorial bias decrease. This result offers empirical support for researchers and professionals who are encouraging journalists to re-think their role in democratic society. As newsrooms shrink and economic pressures continue to squeeze the industry, reporters will come under increasing pressure to maintain a public service role. In the case of social media, reciprocity with citizens and collaborative news making is one solution (Borger, van Hoof, and Sanders 2014; Holton et al. 2015; Lewis 2012; Lewis et al. 2014).

As long as journalists resist technological changes that conflict with a preferred (often pre-internet era) conception of their role in society, engagement with the audience will likely be limited in some areas (control over content, collaborative news making). However, by living up to expectations of good practices on social media, journalists and citizens will both benefit. In short, “good journalism” and how both citizens and journalists perceive journalistic practices matter (Gil de Zúñiga and Hinsley 2013). Increased citizen engagement means higher likelihood of reaching a larger audience, while at the same time increasing traffic to news websites. For citizens, the increased exposure to individual journalists may alter orientations toward the media, thus increasing their news consumption. This could lead to greater involvement in public life through social media, particularly for younger citizens.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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**Homero Gil de Zúñiga** (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Austria; Facultad de Comunicación y Letras, Universidad Diego Portales, Chile. E-mail: [homero.gil.de.zuniga@univie.ac.at](mailto:homero.gil.de.zuniga@univie.ac.at)

**Trevor Diehl**, Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Austria. E-mail: [trevor.diehl@univie.ac.at](mailto:trevor.diehl@univie.ac.at)

**Alberto Ardevol-Abreu**, Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Austria. E-mail: [alberto.ardevol-abreu@univie.ac.at](mailto:alberto.ardevol-abreu@univie.ac.at)