

The New Face(s) of News: Journalistic intermediaries in the YouTube universe

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Proceedings of the Weizenbaum Conference 2021

Democracy in Flux

Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres

The New Face(s) of News

Journalistic intermediaries in the YouTube universe

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In today's "high-choice media environment" (van Aelst et al., 2017) transmission and reception of political news increasingly shifts from the legacy media to new participatory online media (Newman, 2018), resulting in new forms of political reporting and challenging established forms of mediated democracy (Blumler, 2013). On social network sites, activists and extremists in concert with commercial and political influencers compete for attention, clicks and users' support. In addition, new intermediaries emerge, which are particularly influential among the digital natives (Freberg et al., 2011). They converge the coverage of political and societal issues with the sociable and affective cultures of social media, by making use of personalization, emotions, humor, and opinion (Hurcombe, Burgess & Harrington, 2021; Miltner & Highfield, 2017; Highfield, 2016; Shifman, 2013).

Over the last decade, journalism scholars have started paying more attention to journalistic practices on the video-sharing platform YouTube (e.g., Djerf-Pierre, Lindgren & Budinski, 2019; Peer & Ksiazek, 2011). YouTube is a hybrid medium in which TV's audiovisual content and the participatory culture of social media converge (Burgess & Green, 2018). Whereas the great majority of YouTubers publish entertainment or lifestyle videos (Bärtl, 2018; Frühbrodt & Floren, 2019), *journalistic* YouTubers produce and distribute content that can be described as news. They combine the originally text-based practice of blogging about societal and political issues with audiovisual presentations, YouTube's community culture. Additionally, they deal with social media's interactive and algorithm-driven logic. Journalistic YouTubers must be considered for shaping political knowledge and opinion formation among the digital natives and to complement or supplement traditional media outlets in their functions. Even though knowledge on these new intermediaries is crucial to understanding their role in modern democracies (Pfetsch, Löblich & Eilders, 2018; Schweiger, 2017), research on their motivation, role orientations, and their ability to fulfill normative functions of the public sphere (e.g., information or orientation) is scarce (Wegener, 2019).

This paper analyses journalistic YouTubers in Germany, considering their journalistic role orientations in this new media environment. Journalistic role orientations entail normative and cognitive dimensions, and the analysis of such orientations reveals the dynamics involved in the construction of journalism's identity and its boundaries (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). In Germany, public service broadcasters and other public institutions fund several journalistic YouTube formats with financial and editorial resources in order to provide quality content to younger audiences in the *funk* network (funk, 2020). Yet, some intermediaries are associated with commercial media networks or funded independently. In order to gain explorative insights in the way the new intermediaries on YouTube *perceive their role in political communication* and how YouTubers within and without the funk network differ in their role orientation, we conducted 16 qualitative semi-structured interviews with journalistic YouTubers from which 11 YouTubers are integrated in the *funk* network. We identified journalistic YouTubers in a combination of an automatic search and snowball system and checked for journalistic qualities of their content, including YouTubers only who provide a recent, relevant and rather universal spectrum of topics (Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010; Wegener, 2019). The average age in our sample was 32 years, ranging between 22 and 35 years, with two outliers at the ages of 40 and 58. Follower counts ranged from 19,000 to 1.3 million, with an average of 323,031 subscribers. We analyzed the data following a grounded theory-based approach, through a consistent coding system (Pentzold, Bischof & Heise, 2018), identifying similarities and contrasts in the role conceptions.

Most of the interviewed YouTubers have at least some experiences in the practical work as mass media journalists and identify with journalistic norms and ethics. Results indicate that our respondents

identify the most with monitorial role orientations and strive to disseminate information, contribute to opinion formation, and enhance political participation. In difference to what is known about mass media journalists (Steindl, Lauerer & Hanitzsch, 2017) they have a strong accent on the motivation to activate users on the basis of information and opinion. They strive to inform their young audiences in a user-friendly way, to provide an overview on issues and to stimulate engagement. They seek to motivate their audience to search for further information and facilitate discussion. In addition, our participants reported that they ‘close gaps’ in legacy media’s reporting. This refers mainly to missing representations of young people and minorities in society, and secondly to the younger perspectives on current affairs and societal issues. They further employ critical positions, which they perceive as otherwise excluded from legacy media’s reporting. Yet, they report to select their presented issues along their personal lines of interest and highlight the need for entertainment. Citing entertaining journalism and a high responsiveness to audience inquiries as the future of journalism and political communication in a digital world, they promote different approaches to reporting. Addressing the logic of social media, they highlight opinion-heavy or even provocative content to foster distribution and ignite further discussion, instead of legacy media’s neutral reporting.

Moreover, they believe that their work contributes to the modernization of journalism by pushing journalism towards younger target groups, entertaining presentation styles, and a strong focus on audience interactions. Accordingly, they emphasize the benefits of a “generation-specific” journalism which they perceive, however, as a complement rather as a substitute to mass media journalism. Finally, funk YouTubers are incorporated into professional editorial structures and must follow qualitative and quantitative success criteria. While the funk membership enables for a strong audience management, regarding content production, editorial support is perceived as a “reasonable limitation” and as a driver for professionalization. In sum, our findings reveal a “normalized revolution” (Klotz, 2019): while public broadcasters benefit from young YouTubers acting as a gateway to a younger audience, the YouTubers integrated in the funk network profit from the resources and professional standards of media organizations.

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