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‘Organizational, professional, personal’: An exploratory study of political journalists and their hybrid brand on Twitter

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Abstract

Political journalists rely heavily on their occupational status and reputation. This article addresses how political journalists negotiate their standing and enforce their legitimacy on Twitter amidst the online environment that directly challenges them. So far, practice-oriented studies have only looked at journalists in general. Studies have also tended to investigate the content published to journalists’ Twitter feeds, neglecting other aspects of the Twitter profile that can affect the perceived image of journalists. This exploratory study examines the Twitter profile pages of 20 political journalists who work for the top broadsheet newspapers in the United States. It uses the conceptual framework of personal branding to identify patterns and trends of how and where political journalists actively communicate their presence on the platform. This process is delineated by three complementary and co-existing brand identities – the organizational, the professional, and the personal – as well as a digital media skills-based dimension that political journalists use to position their journalistic brand on Twitter. Findings suggest that it could be most appropriate to think of political journalists’ Twitter profiles as digital business cards or digital portfolios, deliberately crafted to differentiate the journalist and establish competitive superiority.

Keywords

Hybridity, personal branding, political journalism, Twitter

Introduction

Today, within a matter of minutes, political journalists can design a profile page on Twitter that includes a short biography, images, and hyperlinks to their work as well as other external content that attest to their occupational achievements and status, indirectly portraying their legitimacy as news workers and building a reputation with followers and other users. This is in stark contrast to the resources (e.g. amount of time, effort, etc.) they used to invest in building relationships with politicians, sources, and the audience to win attention, earn

credibility, and establish their professional standing. Twitter itself promotes that '[m]oment by moment, your Twitter profile shows the world who you are' (Bellona, 2014) and thus claims to have become a new arena for journalists to cultivate and display their image and status.

Journalism has become increasingly fluid and contingent, detached from the stability institutions once provided (Deuze, 2007). In the current hyper-saturated and hyper-fluxed media environment, competition between news professionals heightens, while independent actors are moving into a space formerly controlled by journalists alone. User-generated content (UGC) and citizen journalism threaten the traditional boundaries that once secured occupational legitimacy and jurisdiction over the production and dissemination of news. Twitter has become one of the platforms – it is neither the only nor the consistently most prominent one – where the audience oftentimes beats legacy media to sharing information and breaking news (Canter, 2015; Wardle et al., 2014).

If 'the ongoing social media hype puts pressure on journalists to be active in social media 24/7 [sic]' and to capitalize on the many affordances of digital technologies (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre, 2013: 368), then how do journalists on Twitter negotiate their occupational legitimacy and relevance in a new media environment that directly challenges the principles and standards their profession is built upon? For example, having a 'voice' or showing 'personality' on Twitter by providing commentary, opinions, humor, or even sarcasm is a common way of tweeting, as news professionals seek to connect with the audience and generate engagement (Holton and Lewis, 2011). To varying degrees, these practices clash with long-standing ideals such as distance, neutrality, or balanced reporting, and represent one of the many possible alterations of norms and standards around journalism in digital spaces (Lasorsa et al., 2012; Singer, 2005). Similarly, the unprecedented immediacy of Twitter has amplified the demand for real-time news delivery as well as journalists' hunger to be first in breaking a story, raising concerns around speed over traditional standards such as fact-checking, verification, and accuracy (Bruno, 2011).

Thus, where do old, new, and hybrid strategies become visible to help maintain and reinforce journalism's status on Twitter? To address this question, this article looks at journalists' personal branding on Twitter's profile page and presents findings of an exploratory study of 20 political reporters who work for the top broadsheet newspapers in the United States.

Post-industrial journalism and the hybrid nature of news production

In Western democracies, the creation of news used to be a closely monitored, top-down process that involved the interactions and interventions of only a limited number of elites. For much of the 20th century, media organization's advantage of scarcity, exclusivity, and control of information made this business model a highly stable and successful enterprise (Lewis, 2012). It was during this time that journalism experienced a process of professionalization (Deuze, 2005) which established and enforced its occupational

boundaries. Much of the classic prestige and status of journalism is rooted in both its professional ideology (Deuze, 2005) and cultural authority (Zelizer, 1992), which encompasses its public service role, credibility, autonomy, and legitimacy as fundamental elements. Lewis (2012) argues that traditionally, news workers 'take for granted the idea that society needs them as journalists – and journalists alone – to fulfill the functions of watchdog publishing, truth-telling, independence, timeliness, and ethical adherence in the context of news and public affairs' (p. 845).

In recent years, journalism has been deemed a 'profession under pressure' (Witschge and Nygren, 2009) or 'in crisis' (Young, 2010) that is faced with mounting troubles of confidence and credibility (Tumber et al., 2000). Much of this is deeply intertwined with the subversive shifts overarching the whole media industry symptomized by eroding business models, declining revenues as well as harsh competition for markets and audiences. Change or crisis are, however, not unusual in journalism. As a product of modernity, journalism has always been seen as 'historically situated amidst social transformations' (Waisboard, 2013: 5).

Notwithstanding this precarious position inherited by journalism, Anderson et al. (2012) argue that the current state of the news media indicates a new era altogether. Termed the age of post-industrial journalism, they argue that through all previous crises and historic change, the news industry used to be one held together by the usual things that hold an industry together: similarity of methods among a relatively small and coherent group of businesses, and an inability for anyone outside that group to produce a competitive product. Those conditions no longer hold true. (Anderson et al., 2012: 1)

They identify a range of key trends and characteristics of this new era, which include digitized workflows that allow for journalistic content to be produced, added to, altered, and reused forever; an ever increasing variety of actors and actions as well as the fundamentally transformed role of the audience with the possibility of persistent, dramatic amounts of participation by people previously relegated to largely invisible consumption; and the unprecedented magnitude of change, as new tools can accelerate existing patterns of news gathering, sharing, and publishing so dramatically that they become new things. Anderson et al. (2012) conclude that those broader shifts in the media landscape and the restructuring of the current media ecology demand re-thinking and re-shifting of 'every organizational aspect of news production' (p. 3).

Chadwick (2013) propels the understanding of journalism in the post-industrial age further by highlighting the notion of hybridity as a central feature of this era. He refers to the current communications environment as a 'hybrid media system' which, in essence, conveys the idea of the strategic mix of the old and the new, the traditional and the innovative, and the long-standing and the pioneering. Chadwick (2013) argues that journalism, as a key institution in Western media systems, is now 'built upon interactions among older and newer media logics – where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational

forms' (p. 4). One of those new 'media logics' that complements journalists' existing practices is the professional engagement with the micro-blogging service Twitter.

Political journalists and Twitter

While in its early days, Twitter was met with a dismissive attitude and criticized as a 'torrent of useless information' (Arceneaux and Schmitz Weiss, 2010: 1271). It was the change of Twitter's tagline in 2009 from 'what are you doing?' to 'what is happening?' that symbolizes its evolution from chatter to news (Rogers, 2014). Ever since then, a 'Twitter Explosion' (Farhi, 2009) has been attracting the kind of people who are interested in, and engaged with, the news. Be it breaking news, international crises, natural disasters, or even sports and entertainment, much of the information cycle around these events simultaneously evolves on and through Twitter. As a result, media organizations and journalists have been keen to adopt the platform (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre, 2013), and today, they are among its most enthusiastic users (Farhi, 2009; Hermida, 2010; Rogstad, 2013). A number of buzzwords have emerged to capture this phenomenon that range from 'networked journalism' (Beckett and Mansell, 2008) to 'liquid journalism' (Deuze, 2009), 'social news' (Goode, 2009), 'ambient journalism' (Hermida, 2010), and 'social journalism' (Hermida, 2012).

The journalistic uptake of Twitter has sparked a great degree of interest among scholars and has become a rapidly expanding research field. Studies have investigated how journalists engage with Twitter and identified distinct activities, such as content dissemination, sourcing, and audience interaction, particularly during times of heightened political activity or crisis (Cozma and Chen, 2013; Holton and Lewis, 2011; Vis, 2013). Others examined how journalists exercise their traditional professional norms, values, and standards in this non-traditional media space (Gulyas, 2013; Lasorsa et al., 2012). Typologies of different user groups have also resulted from the scholarly attention given to journalists' engagement with Twitter. For example, Hedman and Djerf-Pierre (2013) suggest that journalists can be classified as either skeptical shunners (those who avoid having anything to do with social media), pragmatic conformists (those who regularly use social media, but who are selective in their usage), or enthusiastic activists (those who are always connected and constantly tweet or blog). Research has also looked at how UGC is opening up the news processes to non-elite and non-traditional actors. Twitter's low barriers to entry and flat hierarchies allow for citizen journalism (Allan and Thorsen, 2009) – termed 'open-source' (Deuze, 2001), 'participatory' (Bowman and Willis, 2003), or 'grassroots' (Gillmor, 2004) journalism in the literature – to move into a space that was formerly controlled by professionals. Bruns (2007) discusses this phenomenon as 'produsage', a portmanteau of the words 'production' and 'usage' that indicates the blurred boundaries between passive consumption and active production. In more deliberate circumstances, Twitter users are seen as 'parajournalists threatening the jurisdictional claims of [news] professionals by fulfilling some of the functions of publishing, filtering, and sharing information' (Lewis, 2012: 850). To a large extent, journalism 'no longer has a centralized and powerful gatekeeping role as mediator between news sources and the

general public, as was the case during the era of traditional mass media' (Neuberger et al., 2014: 346). In fact, journalists have ceased to be gatekeepers who control news organizations' publishing technologies. Instead, they are 'gatewatchers' (Bruns, 2005, 2008, 2011) who act as intermediaries and curate news products based on observation, selection, and aggregation of already published material (Stanoevska-Slabeva et al., 2012).

How journalists on Twitter negotiate their status and enforce their legitimacy in this 'new' media environment that directly challenges their occupational standing and its borders becomes a central question. It may be especially significant to those groups of journalists who cover 'hard' news topics and heavily rely on the enactment and maintenance of their occupational reputation, such as finance and business reporters, correspondents in conflict and war zones, or political journalists (as opposed to those journalists who work on 'softer' subjects, such as lifestyle and entertainment). In this respect, political journalism is particularly striking due to its unique position as mediator of power in the mutually dependent relationship between civil government and the public. Trust, credibility, and professional integrity play a crucial role for political journalists: on the one hand, these virtues enable very close and dependent relationships with an essential source group (namely, politicians) who rely on media coverage (as discussed in Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; Rogstad, 2013), on the other hand, they allow for building and maintaining an audience that contributes to a news organization's relevance and sustainability as a business. However, the socio-technological affordances of platforms like Twitter have altered traditional notions of trust and credibility (Metzger and Flanagin, 2013) and put pressure on journalists, as the public plays an ever more active role in the news process. For example, citizens learn about news via selective scanning, a strategic form of media consumption to manage vast information loads, which involves choosing and avoiding content depending on interest, perceived importance, and personal relevance (Eveland and Dunwoody, 2002). Furthermore, the public holds and exercises the 'power of clicks' and the resulting traffic to certain websites essentially translates into revenue, mostly from digital advertising.

Yet, research on political journalists and Twitter is limited (Rogstad, 2013), as previous studies have focused on journalism in general as an occupational umbrella group without differentiating between particular journalistic genres and specialization. In addition, practice-oriented studies have considered forms of content creation such as tweeting, retweeting, favoriting, and @replies published to the so-called 'Twitter feed' as the sole contributors to and markers of a journalists' Twitter presence. While these represent the platform's most distinct functionalities, the often-neglected profile page is just as much an integral feature of any Twitter account. In order to fully understand how journalists – and political journalists in particular – cultivate a presence and negotiate their status, we need to move beyond just solely examining their Twitter feed and take a closer look at the elements and design of their profile page.

Twitter profiles and journalistic branding

Lasorsa et al., (2012) have recognized Twitter's efficiency as a marketing tool and journalists today use it to show off their personalities (Holton and Lewis, 2011), to present themselves to the public, and to build celebrity status, even (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Sanderson, 2008). Increasing one's exposure and visibility across the platform becomes a central strategy to capitalize on the affordances of Twitter – especially in an environment that has an unprecedented signal-to-noise ratio. This suggests the concept of *branding* as a useful framework to investigate how political journalists design and engineer their profile pages on Twitter.

The brand of a product, organization, or individual is an 'association in the minds of customers and other important constituents [which] differentiate the brand and establish (to the extent possible) competitive superiority' (Keller and Lehmann, 2006: 740). Thus, branding refers to the deliberate actions and practices that are aimed at creating those associations (Chan-Olmsted and Cha, 2008). In general, the branding of products, services, or individuals rises in importance when the market is over-populated. Due to the saturation of the media landscape and increased competition – further intensified by content aggregators like Blendle or specialty publications like Politico – we live in 'an age where the experiments of individual journalists [...] are ideal for identifying possible new sources of value' (Anderson et al., 2012: 110). Thus, cultivating a particular brand on Twitter may be a key market opportunity for journalists to maintain and increase competitiveness in the environment of news and information.

The concept of individual-based branding, often referred to as personal branding, was first popularized by Tom Peters (1997) in his article 'The brand called you'. While it was once considered a tactic for celebrities (Rein et al., 2006) – including celebrity reporters in broadcasting (Higgins, 2010) – and leaders in business and politics, it has also become an increasingly important tool for everyone else (Shepherd, 2005). This exploratory research is based on the premise that branding is inevitable when participating on an online environment (Labrecque et al., 2011), as all content and engagement on the Internet leaves a digital footprint which explicitly and implicitly brands people (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007; Madden et al., 2007). This includes print journalists who, due to the nature of their publishing medium, have traditionally had less public visibility and opportunities for branding than, for example, broadcast journalists.

In terms of explicit branding, Chadwick (2013) argues that in today's hybrid media system, '[a]ctors create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or disable others' agency, across and between a range of older and new media settings' (p. 4). Then how do political journalists communicate via their Twitter profiles in such ways that suit their goals of (1) successfully competing for attention with other journalists in the current hyper-saturated and fragmented media market and (2) asserting themselves

against non-professionals from entering their occupational territory? If users increasingly consult Twitter accounts as ‘trusted sources of information, insights and opinions’ (Jansen et al., 2009: 2186), how do political journalists ensure that their Twitter profile is the beneficiary of that attention and trust?

This study conceptualizes political journalists’ Twitter profiles within the structure of the conventional branding model, which consists of three phases: developing a brand identity, using this identity to position the brand, and assessing the brand image (Aaker, 1996). The *brand identity* refers to a set of attributes, beliefs, values, and so on that indicate how the journalist defines himself in his role which is based on his strengths and uniqueness in relation to the expectations of a target audience. The *brand positioning* reflects the active communication of that brand identity to the target audience. Finally, the dimension of the *brand image assessment* captures how the brand is perceived by the audience. This process is based on journalists’ conscious and deliberate efforts to explicitly manage their brand on Twitter, but also implicitly ‘shaped by those with whom they associate’ (Labrecque et al., 2011: 48). It reflects a dynamic environment where future efforts depend on prior assessments and evaluations of the brand’s image (Labrecque et al., 2011). The adapted branding model is illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Adapted branding model based on Aaker (1996).

This exploratory study focuses on the dimension of brand positioning, and it is necessary to first conceptualize journalists’ brand identity that underlies and shapes any such efforts. Based on existing research findings discussed in the previous literature review, it distinguishes between the following three brand identities and investigates how and where political journalists actively communicate them on their Twitter profiles:

1. The *organizational identity*, which reflects a journalist’s institutional affiliation, traditionally associated with the employing news organizations’ existing status and cultural authority

2. The *professional identity*, which reflects the occupational ideals, role conception, and standards of journalistic production that may speak to their legitimacy as a skilled professional
3. The *personal identity*, which reflects characteristics of an individual's personality or the inclusion of personal details, associated with more affective aspects, such as 'showing a human side' and being 'likeable' or 'funny'

Method

This exploratory study is part of a larger research project that examines the underlying forces that shape political journalists' strategic Twitter engagement. It aims to triangulate (1) the phenomenological dimension of journalists' brand positioning with (2) their occupational ideology and (3) the technological affordances of the platform. The present study of political journalists' profile pages was conducted in April 2014 with a sample of 20 US-American political reporters who worked for the top 25 commercial broadsheet newspapers¹ in the country. The sampling was carried out by drawing on a combination of three resources: (1) each news organization's website and directories of their political news staff, (2) news organization's institutional Twitter profiles which contain so-called 'Twitter lists' of political journalism staff members and their respective Twitter accounts, and (3) the independent online database MuckRack² which compiles digital directories of journalists and their accounts on Twitter as well as other social media platforms.

The sampling rationale followed four pre-defined criteria. First, each journalist had to work for one of the top 25 commercial broadsheet newspapers in the United States. Second, selected journalists had to specialize in the genre of political news, as ascertained by a combination of news organizations' staff pages and recurring authorship of political news stories. Third, journalists were selected in a manner so as to reflect aspects of diversity within their occupational group (e.g. gender, age, level of professional experience, and position within the employing organization's hierarchy). Fourth, due to the study's concern with the active communication of a brand, journalists had to have a minimum amount of platform engagement (i.e. at least 10 tweets per week). Finally, another criterion was added to the sampling procedure. On 8 April 2014, Twitter announced a redesign of its profile page layout to be done over the following weeks (Bellona, 2014). This redesign coincided with carrying out the exploratory study, and at that moment in time, switching to the 'new' profile was yet an optional feature for users, before Twitter completed migrating every account to the new layout as the default design. Therefore, to maintain ecological validity of the sampling frame and to follow the rationale of 'active engagement', only those journalists were selected who had already switched to the new Twitter profile page. The final sample comprised 20 journalists from 13 different news organizations,³ of which eight were women, so as to reflect the 36–38 percent of female staffers in US news-rooms, a number that has been largely

consistent since the new millennium (Pew Research Center, 2015; Women's Media Center, 2014).

The free software tool Awesome Screenshots⁴ was used to capture, annotate, and archive the desktop version of political journalists' profile pages on Twitter. Each screenshot was then manually coded using a combination of content and visual analysis. Overall, the coding frame was broken down into three categories, which reflected the various elements of the profile page: (1) the Twitter profile details and history (e.g. total number of tweets, followers, location, date of profile creation, URL to an external site, etc.), (2) the user's biography statement, and (3) its visual elements (i.e. profile and header photograph). Each category was coded with a range of variables that recorded those features, which communicated journalists' organizational, professional, and personal brand identities.

Findings

The detection of patterns was a core objective in the investigation of how and where political journalists position their brand on the Twitter profile page. The exploratory nature of this study and its sample size do not allow to generalize the findings to a wider population. However, the analysis suggests a range of distinct within-sample trends, presented in the following.

1. Most journalists' brand positioning on Twitter is hybrid: it simultaneously reflects all three brand identities – organizational, professional, and personal – but their respective prominence varies.

The organizational brand identity is actively and prominently communicated through a range of features on journalists' profile pages. All journalists in the sample used the biography statement to specify their position in the news organization and all but one explicitly refer to their employer. For example, Aamer Madhani said in his bio statement 'I cover the White House for @USAToday', David Sanger introduced himself as 'National Security Correspondent, The New York Times', and Jackie Borchardt even referred to her institutional affiliation with more than one news organization: 'I cover Ohio politics/ government for @ThePlainDealer & @Clevelanddotcom'. The majority of journalists further used Twitter's dedicated URL field to link to the news organizations' homepage or their organizational staff profile and many included the news' organization's acronym or abbreviation in their Twitter handle. Some of the journalists' Twitter pages featured profile or header photos that communicated their institutional affiliation with a news organization. For example, Bill Ruthard's header photo zoomed in on the *Chicago Tribune* logo mounted to the building facade at the newspaper's headquarter, while Rachel Stassen-Berger's profile photo showed a notepad with a handwritten memo of her name, her journalistic specialization in politics, and her institutional affiliation with the *Star Tribune of Minneapolis*.

Features that actively communicated the professional brand identity were more diverse, but overall less common within the sample as compared to the organizational brand identity. Some journalists explicitly stated their educational background in the Twitter biography, such as a university degree, giving testimony to the training and professional socialization they received. For example, Meghann Cunniff of the *Orange County Register* stated that she is an ‘@UOSOJC grad’, Bill Ruthard of the *Chicago Tribune* is an ‘Eastern Illinois grad’, and Matthew Watkins of the *Dallas Morning News* is a ‘@tamu grad’. Journalists also occasionally referred to previous employments in their biography statement, which draws attention to their occupational history and career progression as professionals. For example, Juan Perez Jr. of the *Chicago Tribune* said he is ‘Ex - @WHNews’, referring to his previous role at Kentucky-based *What’s Happening News*. A minority referred to other projects they pursued as journalists, thus displaying their unique professional expertise. For example, David Sanger of the *New York Times* highlighted that he is the ‘Author of [the book] Confront and Conceal: Obamas Secret War’s and Surprising Use of American Power’ and Charlie Savage stated that he is ‘the author of the book Takeover’.

It was common for journalists to conclude their biography statement by providing an email address, phone number or both, and some even prompted Twitter users to ‘email me’, ‘contact me’, or to send a direct message. On the one hand, those journalists may seek out story tips and ideas to aid them in performing their occupational duties; on the other hand, the inclusion of contact details also actively communicates their accessibility to citizens, reflecting their traditional role (and possible self-understanding) of providing a public service. In terms of visual elements, some chose to feature a profile or header photo that show the journalist ‘in action’ on the job. This suggests the journalist to be in the center of where politics and news are happening and being discussed, reflecting the occupational value of timeliness. For example, Jackie Borchardt’s profile photo was a screenshot of her giving a broadcast interview in the capacity of an expert, and Josh Richman of the *San Jose Mercury News* chose a header photo that showed the US President’s Air Force One, inviting the association of exclusive access that professional journalists traditionally have to power and elites.

The display of the personal brand identity was overall common and, similar to the professional brand identity, diversely communicated. The majority of journalists included personality attributes, individual traits, or private details in the profile biography, such as the explicit mention of a hobby or passion, their background and origin, or even family. For example, Meghann Cunniff of the *Orange County Register* said ‘I like politics, sports, humor, music, crime, Mexican food and the odd’. Mark Barabak of the *Los Angeles Times* is a ‘Proud California native, happiest when in the Sierra’, Matthew Watkins of the *Dallas Morning News* is an ‘NBA fan, Dad’, and Amer Madhani of *USA Today* is a ‘Father, husband, reporter, living in the mean streets of upper NW DC’. Journalists also communicated the personal brand identity through the means of visual elements, despite less frequently within the sample. For example, Yvonne Wingett-Sanchez of the *Arizona Republic* featured a family snapshot as both

her profile and header photo, the latter being a close-up of her husband and herself holding their two children. Her biography further stated that she is 'Mateo & Diego's Mom, @JesseSanchezMLB's wifey'.

Some journalists also made use of humor, sarcasm, or wittiness, displaying some personality. For example, Susan Davis of *USA Today* bantered about the fact that 'I'm a reporter, other than that people seem to like me', Juan Perez Jr. of the *Chicago Tribune* challenged followers to contact him with 'questions, care packages, hate mail', and Jackie Borchardt of the *Plain Dealer* played with the notion of sharing the trivial, as do many other social media users: 'I tweet about my dog and Instagram my breakfast' (while she, in fact, did not recently tweet about her dog). Interestingly, while most journalists drafted their biography statements in passive voice, some used the first person narrative perspective. Generally, the use of the personal pronoun 'I' gives the audience access to the narrator's, that is, the journalist's perspective of events, possibly including experiences, observations, thoughts, feelings, and motivations. The occasional use of disclaimers such as 'all tweets personal' supports this notion.

2. Journalists have diverse approaches to positioning their brand within the affordances and constraints of Twitter's user interface design.

As is the case with any technology and product, Twitter enables and simultaneously disables particular uses of the platform. More specifically, the platform allows for customization of specific user interface elements, but not of the general layout itself. To that effect, there is only so much 'opportunity' for journalists to position their brand. The analysis indicates that some journalists were more creative in seeking out various means to communicate and manage their brand identities within the platform's design limitations.

In the profile details and history section, Twitter only allows for the inclusion of one URL. This means that journalists had to actively choose one link (most likely over others) and, as previously discussed, most journalists included the URL of the employing news organization's homepage or their staff profile. However, some journalists responded to this constraint by adding one or more short links to other (predominantly non-institutional) sites in their biography statement. For example, Jackie Borchardt (*Plain Dealer*) included her professional homepage, Maeve Reston of the *Los Angeles Times* linked to her Instagram account, and Yvonne Wingett-Sanchez to her Facebook profile.

The biography statement is almost as short as a tweet itself and only allows for a maximum of 160 characters. The length restriction puts limitations on how much detail and context a journalist can share. Few journalists opted for brevity, such as Michael Levenson whose bio statement merely said 'Boston Globe reporter'. The majority of journalists appeared to seek out information richness, and in doing so, they did not follow proper style or form, such as using full sentences and punctuation. Instead, they used lists, abbreviations, punctuation, and

occasional symbols to make the bio statement as informative as desired within Twitter's length constraints.

Finally, some journalists' profile pages featured images that carry distinct symbolic meaning. For example, Jackie Borchardt's (*Plain Dealer*) header photo showed an old-fashioned typewriter and Rachel Stassen-Berger's (*Star Tribune*) profile photo featured a notepad, both of which are professional artifacts and cultural icons of the occupation. Josh Richman's (*San Jose Mercury News*) header photo of the Air Force One and Susan Davis' header photo of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC speak to a political dimension of symbolic meaning, one worth noting in relation to their professional specialization in the genre of political journalism.

3. Digital media skills emerge as an additional kind of brand identity.

The ways in which journalists increasingly embrace non-traditional media spaces like Twitter to incorporate them into their existing occupational practices give testimony to the existence and salience of what Chadwick (2013) describes as new 'media logics' in the hybrid media system. The analysis indicated that while all political journalists are active Twitter users, the level of engagement with the platform and its connective features varies, locating journalists on a diverse spectrum of digital media and information and communications technology (ICT) engagement.

Some journalists explicitly mentioned disclaimers (e.g. 'retweets don't imply support of the message or messenger') that point toward their awareness of risks and harm associated with Twitter engagement. Many asked for story tips and included contact details, reflecting how journalists recognize the 'collective intelligence' and value of audience participation on Twitter. Those journalists who further featured multiple links on their profile page provided their Twitter audience with the immediate opportunity to seek out additional external content that may aid the journalist's respective brand positioning. Many journalists made use of Twitter's connective features, such as the @mention of another individual, initiative, or organization on Twitter in the biography statement, demonstrating how they may be tapping into the network potential of the platform. Almost half of the journalists in the sample had verified accounts, which requires an application to Twitter and the receipt of formal approval, making the 'verified badge' a mark of distinction. This gives further testimony to the legitimacy of a journalists' Twitter presence.

On platforms like Twitter, there is an increasing demand for professional journalism to not only publicly justify itself, its norms, and its practices vis-a-vis non-professionals and the general public (Braun and Gillespie, 2011; Skovsgaard and Bro, 2011) but to also convince others that as central agents in the media industry, they are keeping up with innovations and technological developments. When digital media and platforms like Twitter are yet another skill to master (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre, 2013), then we may have to consider the public

display of such skills as another form of branding.

Discussion

Previous studies have shown how journalists use Twitter for a number of classic journalistic activities such as content dissemination, publishing, and sourcing, as well as relatively novel endeavors around audience interactions. This exploratory study has moved away from the Twitter feed approach and has investigated how a selected group of 20 political journalists who work for the top 25 broadsheet newspapers in the United States position their brand on Twitter's profile page. It analyzed how and where three brand identities – the organizational, the professional, and the personal – and an emerging fourth identity around digital media skills, are actively communicated on the profile page within the socio-technological affordances and constraints of the platform. The findings suggest that political journalists' brand positioning on Twitter is of a hybrid nature: the four brand identities are neither mutually exclusive nor are they exhaustive; they coexist and complement one another, they are fluid and subject to change as the opportunities (and thus, limitations) of the platform evolve.

How can we make sense of the relationship and dynamics between these identity dimensions? From a user experience perspective, potential followers often engage with a journalists' Twitter profile page as an introduction to the journalists' presence on the platform. To that effect, we might think of a political journalist's Twitter presence as a digital business card or digital portfolio that, to use Twitter's own words, 'shows the world who you are' (Bellona, 2014). Because of their possible media-richness and hybrid nature – textual *and* visual elements, static content *and* hyperlinks to external sites, and so on – these digital business cards enable other users to evaluate a political journalist's presence over those of others on the platform. Ultimately, this may help Twitter users to decide whom to follow and engage with. This notion relates to the third dimension of the personal branding model, the *brand image assessment*, which has not been a concern in this article. However, understanding the effect of a brand's positioning on the audience is crucial and requires more research, as future efforts depend on prior assessments and evaluations of the brand's image (Labrecque et al., 2011).

So far, this article has largely discussed personal branding from a standpoint of opportunity, but it is not without drawbacks. Journalistic branding efforts open up three distinct fields of potential conflict for the news worker, both in terms of explicit (i.e. deliberate, active) and implicit (i.e. shaped by others, which is usually out of the journalists' control) brand positioning. First, the long-term effects of a particular brand are uncertain, as the journalistic occupation, technological innovation, and society continue to change. Second, there may be reduced mobility and opportunity in the labor market due to potential incompatibility of a journalistic brand with the core values and cultures of other media organizations. Third, building and cultivating a successful brand requires resources and consistent effort that,

despite today's hybrid nature of journalistic workflows and duties, may divert from the occupational core task of news production and curation. This may occur at the expense of quality reporting, thus diminishing and undermining both the carefully positioned brand and political journalism, which is a traditionally highly esteemed genre of journalism, as a whole.

In this context, future research should inquire into what journalists' underlying strategies of personal branding on Twitter are, apart from the functional affordances of the platform that aid journalistic workflows and outcomes. Furthermore, we do not yet fully comprehend which particular internal and external forces determine and shape how, when, and why journalists position their brand on Twitter in a particular way or another. Finally, there is the question of how the links between institutional logics and journalists' individual motivations can be understood. If, traditionally, journalists' affiliation with legacy news media warranted their adherence to a set of institutionally defined procedures and ethics, then how does this play out on Twitter? For example, as news organizations implement institutional social media policies aimed at guiding journalists' behavior on the platform, how do they monitor individual journalists' Twitter metadata to evaluate performance and, in return, stimulate certain practices, and what are journalists' incentives and strategies to remain autonomous from these influences?

Conclusion

The use of Twitter has become an integral part of journalist's occupational practices. At the same time, this new media environment and its hybrid nature, which strategically mixes the old and new, the traditional and innovative, the long-standing and pioneering, operates beyond the classic publication structures of traditional mass media. It thus directly challenges political journalists and their occupational boundaries. Therefore, the central question has become 'how do political journalists negotiate their status and enforce their legitimacy in those digital and hybrid spaces'? This article presented findings from an exploratory study that investigated 20 political journalists who work for the top 25 broadsheet newspapers in the United States and their brand positioning on the Twitter profile page.

Findings suggest that most journalists' brand positioning on Twitter simultaneously reflects three brand identities – the organizational, the professional, and the personal – in addition to an emerging fourth brand identity around digital media skills. Furthermore, journalists have diverse approaches to positioning their brand within the affordances and constraints of Twitter's user interface design. Overall, the analysis revealed that the journalistic brand on Twitter is, in itself, hybrid: for each individual political journalist, it is made up of a mix of brand identities, and their active communication varies both in prominence and diversity. Findings further suggest that it could be most appropriate to think of political journalists' Twitter profiles as digital business cards or digital portfolios designed in such a way that differentiate the journalist and establish competitive superiority.

The scope and exploratory nature of the selected study approach limits the generalizability of findings beyond the sample group. Nevertheless, the present study has bridged a gap in digital journalism research in the context of Twitter by identifying a range of behavioral patterns and trends which may aid in formulating hypotheses about journalists' active and hybrid brand positioning on Twitter to be tested for a larger and more representative sample. Further research is also required to understand the effects of a brand's positioning on the audience and its impact on future branding efforts.

Notes

1. By online and print circulation size as of 31 March 2013. These numbers are periodically compiled by the Alliance for Audited Media: <http://www.auditedmedia.com/>
2. See <http://muckrack.com/> for details.
3. The 20 journalists considered in this exploratory study work for the following newspapers (numbers in parentheses indicate their position in the national ranking of broadsheets): *the New York Times* (2), *USA Today* (3), *Los Angeles Times* (4), *San Jose Mercury News* (5), *Washington Post* (6), *Chicago Tribune* (8), *Dallas Morning News* (9), *Houston Chronicle* (10), *Orange County Register* (11), *The Plain Dealer* (14), *Star Tribune* (16), *Arizona Republic* (17), and *The Boston Globe* (21).
4. See <http://awesomescreenshot.com/> for details.

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