

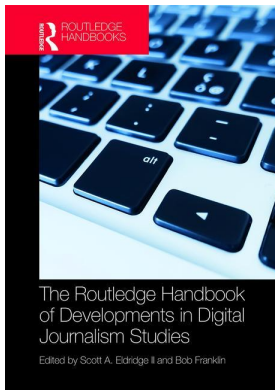
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SOCIAL MEDIA AND JOURNALISTIC BRANDING

Explication, enactment, and impact

Avery E. Holton and Logan Molyneux

Not so long ago, journalists were content creators who were largely tucked away behind the pseudo-anonymity of bylines and headshots that told audiences little more than which journalist they were reading, watching, or listening to. The public could only readily identify those journalists with celebrity status or marked cultural relevance. In essence, journalists were the bodies behind the curtain, rarely revealed or engaged with in any way that could be construed as personal. They were represented, at least in part, by the content they produced and the organizations that employed them.

The proliferation of social media has created cultures of ambient sharing and engagement, which in turn prioritizes personal, intimate, and seemingly ‘authentic’ details about people’s lives on a public scale. As Marwick (2013) has noted, social media has prompted the nearly 4 billion people who make use of its various platforms (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) to consider who they are and how they want to be perceived. As users decide what pictures, videos, memes, or gifs to post to their profiles and how to best describe themselves, so too do they consider what content to share, where to direct that content (e.g., at other users, at specific topics with hashtags), and who to engage with. These choices are driven by complex layers of consideration that broadly take into account, for better or for worse, the user’s audience, real or imagined. After all, the decision to post a weekend’s worth of vacation videos to a personal YouTube channel is much different from the process of selecting which previous employment to include on a LinkedIn profile.

The point is this: social media have given rise to the necessity of impression management, or branding (Marwick, 2013), wherein individuals differentiate themselves through the selection and presentation or exclusion of particular information and the platforms used to convey that information. Journalists in particular curate professional images on social media that, while often peppered with personal information and insights, tend to reflect organizational and institutional norms and expectations (Bossio and Sacco, 2017). By considering how they want to represent themselves to particular audiences, journalists (and social media users) rely on profile photos and videos, memes, GIFs, biographical statements, status updates, and a multitude of other content options to create a digital self. While the social construction of the digital self, particularly through social media, is relatively new, the effects are already seen across a breadth of professional industries. Journalism in particular has felt the impact that branding on social media has, as journalists and news organizations wrestle with how to best personalize content and engage

with people in ways that build sustained audiences. Several recent studies (Holton and Molyneux, 2017; Molyneux et al., 2017) have shown that journalists have begun to work beyond simple back-and-forth exchanges with audiences via email, comment sections, and tweets, instead finding ways to make their content more approachable while also casting themselves as relatable. In many ways, they have taken on the notion of personal branding, using their profiles and related content to demonstrate their value. More importantly, they have intermingled personal information about their lives – who they are married to, what their children look like, what their hobbies are, which presidential candidate they prefer, their pets' names – alongside their professional content (i.e., the news), creating a journalistic brand that is uniquely positioned as both personal and professional, relatable and reliable.

This chapter considers that while journalists work to represent themselves as individual professionals serving an organization and/or the journalism profession, they combine some of the traditional tenets of journalism (e.g., truth, accuracy, transparency) with newly established norms (e.g., opinion, personality, life casting). These are expanding the domain of what may be called 'journalistic branding' from something once demonstrated only by organizations or celebrity journalists to an everyday aspect of individual journalism practice. As such, journalistic branding can occur at the *individual*, *organizational*, and/or *institutional* levels. Here it is important to note that while organizations certainly take on their own branding strategies, the focus here is on the practices of individual journalists. As such, this chapter begins by considering the recent turn toward journalistic branding, offering an explication of journalistic branding before moving into a brief examination of how such branding is enacted in practice and what opportunities and challenges have arisen from its relatively recent adoption.

An explication of journalistic branding

The idea that an individual and his or her social network combine to develop the individual's identity has been around much longer than social media. Building on the work of Erikson (1968), scholars have suggested that identity exists only to the extent that others recognize it, necessitating the presence of an audience. Individuals perform certain aspects of self for this audience in accordance with the traits they wish to emphasize, essentially creating and putting on different faces for different groups (Goffman, 1959). These ideas have garnered renewed interest in the age of social media, wherein individuals and their multiple audiences are collapsed into a single context (Marwick and boyd, 2010). Thus in many ways social media are now a hub for the creation and presentation of identity, often in very public fashion. As more journalists take up social media, often working daily on multiple platforms, questions arise about self-presentation and the mingling of the personal with the professional (Bossio and Sacco, 2017, and this volume, Chapter 25; Carpenter et al., 2016; Kelly, 2017). Collectively, these studies have indicated that journalists, including those performing freelance work, often consider organizational and institutional policies and norms as well as their personal and professional audiences as they form their digital selves. That is to say, journalists make decisions about their profiles and biographical information as well as the content they post based largely on the expectations, real or perceived, of those who employ them, those working in their profession, and those who will see what they post.

Journalists have not always needed to establish such a complex and publicly recognizable identity nor a collaborative/sharing relationship with audiences. With the exception of some broadcast personalities or syndicated columnists, most working journalists had little more than a byline to tell their audiences about themselves. This has changed in recent years for a number of reasons, but it is no coincidence that this shift has been coupled with journalists' adoption of social media, especially Twitter. The groundwork was laid more than a decade before Twitter launched, when an article in *Fast Company* magazine popularized the notion of a personal

brand (Peters, 1997). This made immediate sense for freelance journalists, but most other journalists could still borrow from the strength of their news organization's brand ("I'm so-and-so, a reporter for the *Washington Post*" carried substantial clout.). It wasn't until these organizations were weakened by economic and cultural crises and journalists had a means of interacting directly with their audiences that they began pitching themselves as individual experts as well as people with lives outside of their professions ("Law & Ethics reporter covering the statehouse and city hall. Mother of two").

Self-promotion and identity formation online, particularly in the era of social media, is not something unique to journalism. Scholarly work building on Marwick and boyd (2010, 2011) indicates that one of the defining features of social media is the personal profile, which is at its core a billboard for users to display what they wish for an imagined online audience. In general, social media communications are marked by phatic expression and are strongly influenced by celebrity practices – not that everyone is a celebrity, but everyone senses the potential for celebrity status and tends to view followers as fans. This orientation toward treating the self as a marketable entity and friends as consumers is a common way of understanding social media practice generally, but journalists have built upon and customized these practices in specific ways in response to challenges unique to their profession.

While news audiences and profit margins had been sliding for decades, it was the Great Recession of the early 2000s that caused upheaval in the news industry (Anderson et al., 2012). As advertisers began spending their money elsewhere and news organizations saw their revenue streams drop by two-thirds, every journalist's job seemed to be in peril. A natural response for journalists was to seek to shore up their own stock, whether by building an audience of their own that could follow them into a freelance career or by building a reputation that created value in the eyes of their employer. Journalists not only had the impetus to do this but the autonomy to do it for the first time, as organizations were distracted with keeping the ship afloat. Journalists have said the early days of social media use in the newsroom (in 2008–2010, the depths of the recession) were like a Wild West of experimentation as everyone sought ways to save themselves and the industry they worked in.

This economic crisis also brought to a head another crisis within the news industry that had been brewing for some time – a crisis of trust. When revenues disappeared and calls to save journalism began to multiply, many began to wonder, "We are saving what, exactly?" (McChesney and Pickard, 2011). Observers have noted that years of anonymous sourcing, tabloidization, and general softening and dilution of the news product had caused audiences to lose trust in news media generally. One of the ways journalists responded to this problem was to seek transparency, whereby journalists allowed audiences to see more clearly how news is reported, linking to original documents and exposing their processes. This, again, is quite easily achieved on social media compared to more traditional news formats. Journalists and news organizations, while continually hesitant to adopt the latest trends in social media for ethical, financial, and other reasons, nonetheless have used Twitter, Facebook Live, Snapchat, and a number of other channels to broadcast content and to invite viewers into the news process either as a fairly passive audience or as hyper-engaged content contributors. Letting the audience see the person behind the curtain – and, in fact, be behind the curtain on occasion – was billed as a way to increase trust and thereby audience size, and this pushed journalists not only toward their audiences but toward revealing themselves as individuals.

Journalists with local, regional, national, and international prominence suddenly found themselves working in shared spaces. The opening up of a larger and more recognizable presence is part of the performances Goffman identified, wherein individuals show off aspects of themselves to whomever may encounter the information (the classic example is posting pictures of what you had for lunch). This being a norm on social media, it was natural then for journalists to

begin sharing and showing off their work in a similar fashion. In order to make such engagement more relevant for audiences on social media spaces, journalists began reworking their norms to include humor, opinion, and personality above objective accounts of the news (Lawrence et al., 2014). In order to gain a following on social media and in order to fit into those online networks, journalists have begun turning away from straight-ahead news reports and toward sharing more of themselves within the limitations imposed by personal boundaries and organizational policy (Bossio and Sacco, 2017). In fact, in some ways, audiences have been demanding this type of interaction.

Scholars have identified a growing perception among both audiences and journalists that these two groups are expected to be co-participants in creating and distributing news (Rosen, 2006; Lewis, 2012). This is especially the case on social media, where journalists and their audiences occupy the same space and compete for attention. Journalists have often sought to establish their authority by separating themselves from their audiences (Singer, 2003). But in the social media arena, the lines between personal and professional are blurred, and what it means to be a journalist is harder to define. Thus, without strong, trusted news organizations to borrow credibility from, and without a clearly defined professional membership to distinguish themselves from laypeople, journalists embedded in the sea of voices on social media have turned toward branding as a way to help themselves stand out from the crowd.

This evolution in professional work has been somewhat tempered by news organizations, many of which retain some level of influence over how their employees represent themselves and the company online. It's worth noting that, when it comes to audience engagement and branding, organizations often have different goals from rank-and-file journalists. This includes loyalty to the news organization itself, a commitment to coworkers and, in some cases, an assigned beat. Thus, if audiences have been pressuring journalists to put on a more transparent, personal face, employers have been pressuring journalists to put on a more professional face, one that enhances credibility or, at the very least, does not reflect poorly on the organization.

This mingling of the personal and professional has come at a time when journalists are wrestling with how to maintain, if not increase, their market value (Brems et al., 2017). In order to remain relevant, journalists have had to rethink the boundaries that traditionally separated themselves from their audiences, searching for ways to engage with and include the public in the news process while also rising to meet expectations of personalization on social media. Journalists have largely faced a 'join or die' state on social media and, once there, find themselves juggling traditional professional norms and demands for more personal and approachable (e.g., humorous, opinionated, transparent) content from the public. Not surprisingly, this has left some journalists feeling anxious, worrying about the ethics of embedding personal information in news content or struggling to understand exactly what news organizations and audiences expect of them (Bossio and Sacco, 2017; Brems et al., 2017; Molyneux et al., 2017).

These consternations are coupled with what some journalists have described as a loss of personal identity, wherein they are exchanging intimate content for more professionally oriented material to appease news organizations (Holton and Molyneux, 2017). While this seems to suggest journalists continue to value organizational and institutional norms and policies over audiences, other studies have indicated that journalists are increasingly finding value in marketing themselves as engaged, reliable, and personal on social media platforms (Bossio and Sacco, 2017). The development of journalistic branding is thus the result of a convergence of influences including economic and cultural crises within journalism, the rise of social media, and the resultant collision between journalists and their audiences. Such branding takes into consideration a multitude of factors that extend beyond the personal or individual to include the organizational and the institutional.

Thus, journalistic branding may broadly be defined as 'seeking to establish and promote a public-facing journalistic identity'. This identity distinguishes the journalist from others in the

field and from other sources of information online and seeks to establish her or him as a person worth attending to. This identity may have one or many constituent parts, whether personal or professional in nature; if professional, it may serve individual, organizational, and/or institutional goals. This is different from gathering sources, presenting news, and other journalistic activities in that it is primarily focused on developing a journalistic identity (i.e., the brand), generally for commercial purposes. Evidence of this practice is most readily found on social media, but brand development may happen in various mediated and unmediated communications.

The following section pays close attention to enactments of journalistic branding. A small but growing number of studies have interviewed journalists (Brems et al., 2017; Holton and Molyneux, 2017; Molyneux et al., 2017) to better understand how they brand themselves, their organizations, and their profession, while others have examined journalists' social media content (Carpenter et al., 2017; Hanusch and Bruns, 2017; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017). Collectively, these studies indicate that journalistic branding is being incorporated and employed by journalists despite some continued trepidations toward social media and the inclusion of branding.

Branding enactment

As Tandoc (2013) and his colleagues noted, understanding changes in journalism practice requires constant attention to journalists and the content they produce. By paying close attention to journalists' attitudes and beliefs as well as their resulting behaviors and content, or enactments, a clearer picture of their identities can begin to emerge. In terms of journalistic branding, several studies have looked at how and why journalists incorporate branding on social media and what their profiles and shared content can tell us about the current state of journalistic branding. These studies indicate that while journalists' choices in branding are driven in part by news organizations or perceptions of what journalism ought to look like, they also contain personal information and professional content that is individual focused (e.g., links that point to a journalist's content or profiles that identify a journalist's beat or area of interest).

For example, Carpenter and her colleagues (2017) found that journalists do combine professional content with personal information on Facebook, though freelance journalists tend to present a more professional or "serious" front than journalists employed by news organizations. As the study suggests, this may indicate that freelance journalists are engaged in brand maintenance that takes into consideration potential employers viewing their content. They may also be striving for validation from audiences, who can sometimes associate credibility with employment. Nevertheless, journalists working for news organizations as well as those with professional autonomy wove personal content alongside the news, offering a representation of themselves that aligns with what other scholars have found on Twitter and other social media platforms: journalists are including more personal information than ever alongside their news content (Brems et al., 2017; Hanusch and Bruns, 2016; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017).

In their analysis of the Twitter profiles (384) and tweets (1,903) of journalists in the United States, Molyneux and his colleagues (2017) determined that, in addition to whatever personal content journalists include in their profiles (e.g.: Sports reporter by day, beer enthusiast by night; Mother of two; Purveyor of antiquities) and their tweets (e.g.: Off to the Ozarks today; Feelin' this new Drake album), journalists' professionally oriented tweets also exhibit journalistic branding on *individual*, *organizational*, and *institutional* levels.

At the individual level, journalists distinguished themselves by their areas of specialty (e.g., health reporter, sports broadcaster) and shared information about their work as well as content they had created. They relied heavily on links to direct people to their work, exhibiting what Brems et al. (2017) labeled an "explicit form of self-promotion". While freelance journalists have

long engaged in this practice, it's relatively new for journalists, who, as Brems and her colleagues found, continue to worry about offending their audiences with an overabundance of "look-at-me" content. Yet journalists reported in at least one study (Holton and Molyneux, 2017) that despite worries that working self-promotion into their news content could undermine audience trust, the ability to do so afforded them a renewed sense of self-worth and a means to distinguish themselves and their content. In fact, some felt like they had to.

Molyneux et al. (2017) also found journalists embrace their organizations in their profiles and in their tweets, sharing organizational level information such as the name of their employer or content from a coworker. Journalists mentioned their employer in 80% of profiles analyzed, with more than a quarter going so far as to include their organization in their Twitter handle (e.g., @AshleyG_KVUE). Nearly half of all tweets that contained branding referenced work from the journalist's news organization or co-workers, with links to that work appearing frequently. Such efforts may help journalists demonstrate loyalty and an adherence to organizational policies that encourage social media sharing of coworkers' content, though some journalists have expressed concern over the practice. In exchanging personal content or individual level branding for organizational, some journalists have reported a loss of self-identity online (Holton and Molyneux, 2017). Others have worried that by putting the organization first, they sacrifice the very sort of personalization that audiences now demand. Recently, the *New York Times* made this sacrifice explicit, stating in its published social media policy (2017) that giving up a personal social media presence in favor of a fully professional one is "the price of our employment by a major media institution".

These same concerns bleed over into considerations of institutional-level branding, where journalists reference their profession, other news organizations, or other journalists. While journalists more frequently promote work from themselves and their employer (Brems et al., 2017; Carpenter et al., 2017; Molyneux et al., 2017), they do share or cross-promote work from other outlets and discuss journalism and its norms broadly. They explicitly point out examples of guiding principles such as objectivity and truth and police other journalists who tweet erroneous information (Holton and Molyneux, 2017). In a sense, they work to ensure social media is a space where the institutionalized values of journalism practice remain intact. This work has taken on increasing intensity recently as journalism's credibility is doubted in the uproar over "fake news". When those in power question the very necessity of a free press, it falls to journalists to make the case for their work as an institution – all of this while continuing to meet the needs and expectations of their organizations, their peers, and their audiences.

Overall, the evidence noted here points to a rise of journalistic branding from nearly zero to an activity that now takes up a substantial portion of nearly all journalists' activity on social media. Developing a personal brand is something all journalists interviewed were familiar with (Molyneux and Holton, 2015), and the idea is taught in journalism schools and industry publications. As a recent *Columbia Journalism Review* article pointed out, it appears that, indeed, "personal branding is key to building a career in journalism" (Bech Sillesen, 2015).

Branding's impact

As journalists respond to their environment, in part by enacting journalistic branding on social media, it's worth considering what effects this might have on them, their industry, and their audiences. A key narrative in this discussion is the selection of priorities as journalists, their employers, and their audiences all seek attention and control in the digital news arena.

Journalists working to prioritize their time on social media and in their jobs in general must balance promoting themselves, their employers, their co-workers, and to a lesser degree, the institution of journalism. The benefits of promoting oneself are obvious – by building a social media following based around individual identity, a journalist is more valuable as an employee and as

an individual, simultaneously improving job security and opening up opportunities in freelance work. Yet pushing self-interest too far could risk upsetting a journalist's employer or employers, which in many cases have by now developed policies encouraging or requiring certain behaviors on social media, including organizational-level branding. That a balance must be struck is clear to journalists, who have noticed when news organizations fire or reprimand employees for behavior on social media that does not align with organizational policy (Holton and Molyneux, 2017). However, where that balance lies is not quite clear given that journalists continue to lament a lack of clear organizational policy.

Rather, journalists rely on what they believe their organization, and indeed their colleagues and their audiences, may want. Those perceptions are often tested with an adherence to employer mandates and journalistic norms in mind, restricting some journalists from extending their branding practices beyond those of others around them. While freelance journalists have more autonomy and thus would seem more likely to test the boundaries of acceptable branding behavior, they may also be more cautious if they are actively seeking employment with news organizations. Regardless, journalists across the board are engaging in new forms of audience interaction that call into question the inclusion of journalistic branding.

Audiences have made it clear that they do not like ads (judging by the widespread use of online ad blockers), and so journalists might do more harm than good if their social media time is spent exclusively in promoting themselves and their organization. For their part, journalists have expressed this as a chief concern (Brems et al., 2017), worrying that promoting their organizations or journalism in general may strip away their individual identity and that marketing themselves too much might cause audiences to question their motives. Thus, journalists must seek to balance promotional activities with other forms of engagement that the audience may enjoy more in their efforts to retain followers, such as reciprocal exchanges of information or public praise of individuals who provide news tips and content.

That raises the question of where exactly news fits into the schedule. If a journalist spends all of her social media time propagating news stories, would followers retain interest? Perhaps assuming that the social media audience wants only personal interactions misses the mark, so again it becomes a question of balance in which the target equilibrium is not clear. Of deeper concern, perhaps, is the thought that journalists risk losing independence when they place any other priority in competition with reporting the news. Independence has traditionally been interpreted as freedom from the interests of government, advertisers, and those journalists cover. But is it possible that journalists have become more concerned with their public image than with their work? For instance, might a journalist skip a story if he knows the audience won't love and share particular content across social media, either because the analytics say so or because of some internal intuition, essentially prioritizing the news judgment of the audience over his own? Many feel journalism should operate in the public interest, but with these trends in branding it's worth asking whether audiences, or at the very least journalists' perceptions of their audiences, could have too much influence over journalists.

Conversely, organizations working to understand how best to reach and maintain audiences must balance their desire to control their public image – directing audience attention toward their brand – with their desire to allow their best journalists to do their work and form meaningful relationships with audiences. Workers in general value autonomy, and journalists perhaps even more so; but experience has led many employers to set boundaries and expectations for social media behavior. Complicating matters for employers is the need to sustain a commercial enterprise. If a journalist sometimes develops a personal brand as a backup plan (becoming a freelancer in case the news organization fails), the news organization develops a brand as a primary means of success, and therefore has more at stake. Businesses of all stripes now have social media strategies and social media managers, but these efforts don't translate directly into revenue for all businesses.

What audiences are left with, then, is a combination of shouting match and tug-of-war as journalists and news organizations compete among themselves and with each other for attention and control in the social media space. Economic theory generally suggests that competition is good for the consumer as it drives down prices and encourages innovation, but this logic may not apply in the case of digital journalism. First, the price is already zero and cannot be lower. For some audience members wishing to get above the fray, online subscriptions are rising as they begin to value certain commitments to quality or specialization that set news organizations apart. In this situation, competition may be good for audiences to the extent that it diversifies news offerings rather than creating increasingly cheaper versions of the same product. Second, news organizations have shown themselves to be startlingly resistant to innovation, ceding this territory to technology companies that benefit from different structures, funding models and positions within the market. Competition among news organizations and journalists, then, has in many cases felt like fighting over what's left rather than spurring a race toward the future. This is echoed in the findings of many of the studies included in this chapter that note the tension journalists express (and demonstrate in their social media profiles and content) as they wrangle with what personal information to include as part of their self-representations and what individual, organizational, or institutional-level branding to include alongside their news.

This brings us back to the evolving personal and professional identities of journalists. As journalists consider the changing norms of their profession and the evolving demands of their organizations and audiences, they are constantly reshaping their content as well as their self-representations in ways that are altering the institution of journalism and their roles within it. Even as some news organizations work to provide clearer policies of social media engagement and branding that encourage rather than punish experimentation, others continue to place restrictions on such behavior. Such an approach puts journalists in the precarious position of aligning their branding efforts, and indeed their social media practices, more with their organizations than themselves, a decision that journalists have observed is diminishing their personal identities as well as their professional individuality.

As this chapter has illustrated, journalistic branding is a complex technique journalists are employing more frequently to promote and differentiate themselves. More pointedly, this chapter explicated journalistic branding as being personal or professional in nature and occurring at the individual, organizational, or institutional levels to help construct identities at each of those positions. This definition is put forth with the hope that future discourse surrounding evolving journalism and identity will build upon its beginnings. Journalistic branding is, after all, but one evolving practice journalists and news organizations have begun to incorporate and understand. It will be important for journalists and researchers alike to examine the ethical, cultural, and informational consequences of this emerging practice, with an eye toward the democratic mission of the press. At a broader level, these findings hint at changes in how identity is formed and enacted in networked society, where the personal and the professional increasingly interweave and blend together.

Further reading

Our work in the area of journalistic branding began several years ago, originally culminated in *Branding (Health) Journalism: Perceptions, Practices, and Emerging Norms* (Molyneux and Holton, 2015), and has since benefitted greatly from other scholars with similar interests. In *Journalistic Branding on Twitter: A Representative Study of Australian Journalists' Profile Descriptions*, Folker Hanusch and Axel Bruns (2016) offer an intensive examination of how personal journalists can be on social media despite their wariness in sharing such information. Cara Brems and her colleagues (2017) provide a glimpse of the identity struggles journalists today face in *Personal Branding on Twitter: How Employed and Freelance Journalists Stage Themselves on Social Media*. Finally, the

work of Diana Bossio and Vittoria Sacco (2017) in *From 'Selfies' to Breaking Tweets: How Journalists Negotiate Personal and Professional Identity on Social Media* has provides a much-needed critical lens with which to view the professional, organizational, and institutional drivers behind journalists' attitudes toward and engagement with social media.

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