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The nonpartisan, the equidistant and the allied: How journalists negotiate their digital selves on social media

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Abstract

Due to the ongoing digitalization process and the emerging importance of social media in shaping news access and distribution, prior studies have examined how journalists respond to the shifting media environment. While these studies have provided valuable insights on the ever-changing habits, norms, and role performance of contemporary journalists, there is limited knowledge on how these practices, once imported to social media, transform and shape the traditional expectations of news organizations. To fill this gap, this study problematizes journalists' self-construction on social media to further understand how the dynamics of these platforms influence the potential conflicts of interest that can arise between journalists and the companies they work for when building their digital selves. Based on 30 in-depth interviews with Spanish journalists, this study conceptualizes three different social media selves: Nonpartisan, Equidistant, and Allied. Findings also show that the latent surveillance that has traditionally governed journalism is still rampant on social media. However, we argue that the disassociation between the physical newsroom and the digital environment influences journalists' agency, allowing them to redefine their digital selves from a position of greater power and autonomy.

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Actor–network theory, agency, conflict of interest, journalism practice, journalists' self-construction, social media

Traditionally, journalism has been theoretically understood as a hierarchical craft, in which conflicts of interest, typically defined as the threat posed by a set of diverse financial, political, or personal interests (Fisher, 2019), permeate journalists' labor conditions and autonomy. The study of conflicts of interest has been addressed from a corporative view, confronting media ownership and employees through the direct action of managers in the newsroom (see eg. Goyanes and Canedo, 2023), a phenomenon that has been traditionally approached from the agency/structure dichotomy (Reese, 2001; Hartley, 2013; Domingo, 2015). However, in a context where journalism is developed in newsrooms as well as across digital platforms, it becomes crucial for journalism studies to delve deeper into the potential conflicts of interest that may emerge during journalists' work in social media. Although both the process of digitalization and the changes that this brings to the identity of journalists have been extensively studied in previous literature (see e.g. Hanusch and Bruns, 2017; Kyser et al., 2018; Mellado and Hermida, 2022), there are still open questions regarding how journalists represent themselves online in relation to the company they work for. Accordingly, this study seeks to better understand journalists' identities on social media by focusing on how they deal with potential conflicts of interest with the company they work for and that arise when they construct their digital selves.

This study assumes that the traditional agency/structure dichotomy that has dominated the study of conflicts of interest in newsrooms may be extended to social media. Accordingly, we turn to actor–network theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987, 1993, 2005; Law, 2008) to explore the influence of social media in transforming the traditional power at the intersection of media companies and journalists. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with Spanish journalists, all of them occupying stable working positions in traditional newsrooms, our findings show that conflicts of interest between journalists and the company they work for is still rampant on social media. However, these platforms shift traditional power structures, making journalists change how they use distinctive self-construction strategies when defining a digital self. Thus, depending on the objectives of a journalist's social media presence, the identification with the news company they work for, and the type of content posted, we conceptualize three different digital selves: Nonpartisan, Equidistant, and Allied. Moreover, we also demonstrate that media companies have not yet confronted the possibility of conflicts of interest between ownership and employees on social media, which can be inferred from the lack of direct guidelines in this regard.

Agency as a theoretical framework to explain journalists' behavior

Relationships in workplaces are permeated by hierarchized power structures where monitoring agencies control the actions of subordinate positions. This phenomenon has been traditionally studied through the agency/structure dichotomy, which assumes that there is a significant gap between the structural interests of the company and the autonomy of its employees. From the economic theory, Ross (1973) studied how this deviation mediates professional action and introduced the "agency problem", referring to the function of the contractual arrangements between employers and employees, named in the theory as agents and principals, respectively. In parallel, Mitnick (1973) conceptualized agency theory to understand conflicts of interest created when employees (the agents) represent their employers (the principals), assuming they both face problems that influence their everyday practice and performance.

The theory has been mostly used for the description of economic phenomena, showing that the principal's main interest is economic profit (Pratt and Zeckhauser, 1985). However, there is no perfect agency, thus employees' behavior cannot perfectly match the expectations of the principals (Brennan, 1995). This leads to the question of how to balance the objectives of agents and principals in the company (Jensen and Meckling, 1976) as both parties assume costs in the process (Jensen and Smith, 1985). The employers' needs may not be fully satisfied because they and their employees have different objectives and predispositions towards the risks that the firm may take (Wright et al., 1996). In the case of employees, their professional autonomy is at stake.

Despite the overarching influence of agency theory, its particular theoretical approach has been also severely criticized. Shapiro (2005) argued that agency theory has not implemented the sociological perspective, but has mainly focused on other theoretical lenses, such as economics (see e.g., Ross, 1973; Jensen and Meckling, 1976), political science (see e.g., Mitnick, 1973; Waterman and Meier, 1998) or law (see e.g., Pratt and Zeckhauser, 1985; DeMott, 1998). Therefore, the theory should focus on the sociology of work and employment as well because it "provides a window on agency as expertise, problems of asymmetric information, and one kind of model for delivering agency services" (Shapiro, 2005: 276).

In journalism studies, critical scholars have applied agency theory to better understand the dynamics of how journalists behave in the newsroom (Dickinson and Bigi, 2009), where the interests of news organizations are defended by the principals and imposed on the agents (Goyanes and Cañedo, 2023; Reese, 2001). This conflict of interest between journalists and the company jeopardizes the autonomy of the former (Lauk and Harro-Loit, 2016), who might refrain from making their own decisions and even apply self-censorship (see e.g., Clark and Grech, 2017; Schimpfössl et al., 2020).

The challenges influencing autonomy – an essential foundation of the profession (Singer, 2007) – are diverse. The literature highlights political and economic pressures as the main causes (Blumler, 2010; Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro, 2019; McChesney and Pickard, 2011). Nonetheless, these pressures are now amplified by the inclusion of technology in the newsroom, which has shifted the working practices of journalists and reduced their autonomy (Dickinson and Bigi, 2009). For instance, journalists are being replaced by automated technologies capable of performing tasks formerly linked to humans (Wu et al., 2019). Moreover, technology increases business pressures on journalists, forcing them to prioritize audience reach over quality of the content (Hartley, 2013; Hanusch and Tandoc, 2019; Mellado and Hermida, 2022).

Considering that technology has the power to influence journalists' work, Domingo (2015) draws on actor–network theory (ANT) to link journalists' agency to the technological space in which they work. In his opinion, further research should be conducted on the networks that, due to technology, can be established beyond the newsroom (Domingo, 2015). Thus, a burgeoning line of research on the performance of journalists on social media is getting traction, focusing on the negotiation of the power relationship established with audiences (see e.g., Hanusch and Tandoc, 2019; Mellado and Alfaro, 2020; Holton et al., 2021; Mellado and Hermida, 2022). However, the issue of how the affordances of social media influence the traditional negotiation between journalists, as employees, and media companies, as employers, has not yet been significantly addressed. So, based on the theoretical assumption that journalists' agency could be modified by the networks established through social media, we propose to integrate ANT with agency theory.

Actor–network theory and journalists' agency on social media

Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law pioneered the use of ANT for societal analysis. Actor–network theory is based on the idea that social order is not univocally constructed through a preconceived notion, but through networks of connections between human individuals, technologies, and other societal phenomena such as ideas, organizations, or geographical arrangements (Latour, 2005; Law, 2008). Thus, a social agent is a hybrid entity of relations between subjects and objects, both considered "actants" (Callon and Latour, 1992). Moreover, according to the principle of generalized symmetry (Latour, 1993), humans and technology have the same importance in social processes.

Law (1986, 2008) observed that ANT consists of several different factors. First, *semiotic relationality* refers to the existence of a network of elements that define and shape each other. Second, *heterogeneity* is applied to the diversity of actants who make up the network. Third, *materiality* implies that the network is a space for social structuring, while the fourth concept, *precariousness*, refers to the unstable nature of the relationships within the network. Fifth, ANT includes the conception of *power* as an effect, in the sense that power is always dependent upon the actions of others. And, finally, *space and scale* allude to the possibility of network expansion into other actants.

Based on the features of networks, ANT suggests that the individual elements of any system should be understood in the set of relationships they have with other elements, with which they develop different translation strategies (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987). In other words, ANT explains "how people's cognitive and emotive frameworks are shaped by the underlying features of the networks in which they are situated" (Couldry, 2008: 104). Thus, social phenomena are continually being made, rather than simply existing. Likewise, it could be understood that journalists' agency is shaped depending on the network in which they are embedded.

Actor–network theory is more widely known than well understood (Nimmo, 2011), which could explain its late integration in media theory despite Latour's own interest in the field (Latour, 1993; Couldry, 2008). In the context of digital journalism, Turner (2005) observed that ANT "offers a powerful tool for analyzing shifts in the practice of journalism under new technological conditions” (p. 321). Thus, research has focused on the extent to which technology exerts power in the news production process (see e.g., Plesner, 2009; Weiss and Domingo, 2010; Micó et al., 2013; Anderson and De Maeyer, 2015; Wu et al., 2018). However, Ryfe (2022) claims a broader view and emphasizes that ANT makes it possible to conceive journalism as the result of a series of assemblages in which the actants of the network can adopt multiple identities.

Actor–network theory also relates to the role of the media in the social sphere, where journalists occupy a privileged position simply because they belong to a media company (Couldry, 2008). This also occurs on social media, where journalists are perceived as representatives of the company they work for (Gil De Zuñiga et al., 2018). Thus, the mixing of personal and professional life is inevitable in the construction of a journalist’s digital identity (Hanusch and Bruns, 2017; Kyser et al., 2018). Moreover, although journalists do not perform their tasks within a symbolic space of company control (i.e. the newsroom), tensions between individual and organizational interests are still present (Molyneux et al., 2017). However, the issue of who owns the media could not be longer understood as the key element affecting journalists’ agency, as the audience also has a significant influence on the latter (Tandoc and Vos, 2015; Hanusch and Tandoc, 2019; Mellado and Hermida, 2022).

Here, ANT would introduce subjectivity as part of the journalistic practice. Latour (2005) explains that individual subjectivity, the self, is constructed as a computer “plug-in” that must be installed depending on the network’s needs. Likewise, the self-construction of each individual will be the sum of these plug-ins. Accordingly, in the framework of ANT, journalists who work for a media company and operate on social media determine their self-construction by the plug-ins that they need to install in those networks. Based on this, we propose the following research questions:

> RQ1: How do journalists self-construct their identities on social media in relation to their media companies?
>
> RQ2: How do social media influence the agency/structure negotiation process that journalists implement?

Methodology

To answer our RQs, we carried out 30 in-depth interviews with Spanish journalists between October 2020 and January 2021. All interviews were conducted via telephone and lasted 30–45 min, using a semi-structured format which allowed us to uncover unexpected issues during the conversation, depending on the respondents’ social position and relationship with the enterprise they worked for. To bring to light issues that are usually veiled, all the participants were guaranteed anonymity and consented to having the interview be recorded.

We selected the respondents through snowball sampling and achieved data saturation after completing the 30 interviews referred to in the next section. The result is a diverse sample (Table 1) that comprises a variety of participants in terms of employers, sections,

Table 1. Characteristic of the sample.

Gender	Age	Newspaper	Sections	Position of responsibility
Female (n = 14)	20 – 30 (n = 9)	National (n = 20)	National; Regional; International; Courts; Human Rights; Feminism and Macho Violence; Current Events; Culture; Sports; Tourism; Defense	Management team (n = 4)
Male (n = 16)	30 – 40 (n = 10)	Regional (n = 6)	—	Head of section (n = 6)
—	40–50 (n = 5)	Local (n = 4)	—	None (n = 20)
—	50–60 (n = 6)	—	—	—
—		—	—	—

responsibilities, gender and ages. At the time of the interview, participants worked for national, regional or local news providers in Spain such as *El País, La Razón, ABC, elDiario.es, InfoLibre, El Salto, La Voz de Galicia, EsDiario* or *La Nueva España*.

As a first point of contact, a set of general questions were asked: age, education history, professional experience, and current responsibilities. The interview guide was structured around three subsections in which the interviewees were asked to answer with as many examples as possible. The first part concerned participants' use of social media and was oriented to introduce and familiarize participants with the aim of the study. First, the interviewees were asked about their use of social media. Next, they were asked about their main objective when using it, from a personal and a professional point of view. Finally, emphasis was placed on habitual patterns of sharing content on these platforms and interactions with other journalists, both from the same newsrooms or competitors.

The second part focused on the strategies/guidelines/orientations (if any) used by their companies to influence journalists' use of personal social media accounts. Participants were asked about the existence of these guidelines and their particularities depending on the social media platform. Other questions concerned respondents' compliance with these guidelines. Specifically, this section paid attention to the most likely development of conflict of interest between structure and agency.

Finally, the third part focused on the impact that a journalist's personal social media account might have on their company. Accordingly, respondents were not only asked about their self-perception as possibly having an impact on the audience of their employer, but also about the development of possible brand differentiation strategies for the media organization. Then, they were asked for their assessment of the use of social media by the Spanish journalists.

Interviews were digitally recorded and manually transcribed to implement a thematic analysis of data. The six-step procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed to systematize the data, code it, and recognize themes.

Results

Journalists' performance on social media: The configuration of networks as a professional extension

Journalists use different social media platforms for personal and professional purposes. Instagram and Facebook are preferred for personal interactions, where the digital network is configured with exclusive access to people with whom there is contact in real life and which are also "blocked from the bosses" (P19). However, most of our participants acknowledge that their main use of social media is professional. Twitter is the favorite platform, while a minority consider this to be LinkedIn and Facebook instead. A generational gap can be detected here, since younger interviewees include TikTok and Twitch, both of which are booming in development. Participant 28 states that "we investigate with these ones at a professional level and evaluate what possibilities they allow us to develop when it comes to journalism".

Overall, there is a consensus that Twitter is "the most powerful [social media] for the practice of the craft of journalism" (P16). As an interviewee with a long professional career points out, "at the beginning it wasn't like that, but today it's clear to me that I wouldn't have it if I didn't dedicate my life to journalism" (P25). Another respondent concurs by stating that "Twitter is work" (P5).

According to our evidence, journalists are literally hooked on Twitter: "I go to bed with it and wake up with it" (P8). Participant 14 indicates that "when I wake up, I open both my professional email and Twitter". This has effects to the point that a minority of respondents have become jaded: "for mental health reasons, I find it difficult to keep up with social media so much" (P7). As Participant 1 notes, this especially affects journalists who manage the newsrooms' social media profiles: "it's like the saying about 'a wooden knife in the blacksmith's house', I don't take this aspect of my profession home with me. I'm watching Twitter all day long, so when I leave the newsroom, I can't take it anymore."

Twitter is journalists' preferred social media for searching sources or to finding updated information about public affairs and politics. Participant 9 notes that when he is working, he keeps an eye on Twitter "because there's a lot of information coming out there". Similarly, Participant 14 illustrates: "it's a window to the world. You discover news because someone comments on it or because the source contacts you directly." He adds that it is the way to know what people are interested in. This idea is reinforced by Participant 29: "Twitter is a reflection of the social conversation." A minority of respondents hold a diverging perspective and consider other platforms as their main source of information. For instance, Facebook is key in local journalism because "there's a very strong neighborhood organizing movement on it" (P25). Instagram, on the other hand, is linked to the most visually appealing journalistic content, as Participant 6, a society and television journalist, acknowledges.

Another highlighted use is creating community. Participant 11 explains that he uses Twitter as "a sense of belonging to the journalists' professional group" and points out the importance of creating a thematic community. Echoing this perspective, Participant 14, a specialized journalist at a national newspaper, indicates that "my main objective is to generate a proper community of readers." The digital community serves "to generate engagement" (P23), not only for the media companies journalists work for, but also for themselves as a brand. Thus, other interviewees highlight the importance of the community for "being discovered by new contacts interested in your work" (P30). In this sense, the dissemination of content is key in the journalistic use of social media:

> *Our main objective today is the distribution of content. We no longer elaborate the content and forget about it, but we must integrate it with the social media team. Once it's published in the traditional media, we post it on our personal accounts. Then, the company retweets it to create virality and reach the widest possible audience.* (P28)

For some interviewees, this new reality does not generate major problems: "you post your article with a phrase that heads it and that's it, it's quick" (P7). Participant 8 even defines it as "one more process in the journalistic craft." However, Participant 21 complains that, sometimes, the content does not matter and "the only objective is to spread those links to increase traffic around them." The latter generates a change in practice for journalists who may not feel comfortable with some actions performed by their digital selves on social media.

Our evidence also suggests that a minority of journalists are beginning to feel uneasy on social media because these platforms have become "a squabbling henhouse, a place in which all respect has been lost" (P7). The discomfort comes from the interaction that takes place there, "where attacks on journalists have been normalized, especially on Twitter" (P25). A process of cancel culture may consequently emerge from the identification of the journalist with the company, as acknowledged by Participant 16, who states that he has been insulted for the mere fact of working at a certain newspaper. Participant 3 also related that he has been called "red shit" because of the ideological tendency of the news organization he works for. As illustrated by Participant 25: "I get involved with what I write but I do not want to interact in topics that hurt me and serve no purpose."

Journalists' self-construction on social media: The nonpartisan, the equidistant and the allied

When it comes to building the journalist's digital self, many of the interviewees suggest that their media company plays a decisive role in negotiating their self-construction on social media. However, there is no single construction in this regard. Throughout our evidence, three types of digital self are typically portrayed: Nonpartisan, Equidistant and Allied (Table 2).

Nonpartisan journalists prioritize the development of their professional identity over that of the company. As expressed by various testimonies, "social media is a space for personal branding" (P22). Participant 16 clarifies that on social media "you address your 'personal readers', who may or may not be your company's readers." Similarly, Participant 21 explains: "I opened a profile on Twitter to create a professional identity, to publish my work and my journalistic style". This is especially relevant among younger journalists because "it allows you to show your work and focus your public career going

Table 2. Categorization of a Journalist's digital self on social media.

Digital self	Main objective for social media interactions	Identification with the company	Type of content posted
Nonpartisan	Generate personal identity	Independent	Mostly self-created
Equidistant	Develop constructive dialogue	Impartial	Primarily self-created, but also influenced by the company and content published by competitors
Allied	Build audience loyalty for the media company	Explicit	Self-created content and content prescribed by the company

forward" (P29). Participant 18 sums it up: "probably it's not the best way to prove you're a journalist, but the day you get fired from a company, if your name isn't on social media, you're nobody. Social media helps you make a name for yourself." In this sense, although gender or position of responsibility in the company do not influence adherence to each profile, we saw that the most novice journalists (under 30 years of age) only adhere to this profile.

Amongst Nonpartisan journalists, we found different attitudes regarding the dissemination of their content. While a minority of respondents post everything they publish in the traditional media to gain visibility, other journalists consider this attitude "a bit egocentric" (P26). Accordingly, many participants acknowledge that it is better to make a prior selection. Participant 24 states that he only posts "what has a sufficient time of elaboration and is linked to the concept of *author*."

As a rule of thumb, Nonpartisan journalists do not generally share content taken from other journalists. However, they make exceptions when it comes to content related to their subject matter/specialty. Participant 21 clarifies that she only shares "what can contribute to shaping my journalist identity". The idea of building a thematic community becomes essential here. This strategy, highlights participant 26, is "to add some personal commentary to the external content, as an added value".

Journalists in the second category, Equidistant, are characterized by seeking a balance between their personal identity and the company they work for, although some interviewees identify themselves in their profiles as journalists of their organizations. There is no dispute that "the power of the journalist's byline is linked to the company" (P15) and that "trying not to mix each other [journalist and company] is impossible" (P12). However, due to the hostility of social media, a minority voluntarily choose to omit this connection. Participant 7 justifies herself because "there are too many prejudices", adding that "readers think they know your opinion just because you work for a certain company". Likewise, Participant 13 notes that "I consider myself a journalist, independently of the company I work for".

Regarding the authorship of content posted, Equidistant journalists point out that the general pattern is to regularly post their own content and sometimes that of co-workers and competitors if "that news has a relevant input" (P7). Thus, the main criterion for sharing content is the interest. Participant 3 states that the default guideline is to first post the work of newsrooms peers but qualifies this statement by noting that "the immediacy of journalism rules and, in the case of breaking news, if my media hasn't published it yet, I take it from another". There is agreement that "when posting articles from other media, what we try to do is to raise the quality level" (P5). For Participant 10 it is "a question of collective recognition. If other news organizations publish a good article on my topic, I like to share it and acknowledge the value contributed by my colleague". In Participant 6 words: "I don't retweet companies, but I do retweet people". Therefore, Equidistant journalists reinforces the idea of promoting the thematic community on social media, understood not only as a place where journalists can showcase topics, but also where they can develop a constructive dialogue: "Most of the content I post comes from my company […] but if another media publishes relevant information on the topic, it's important to share it with to form this reading community" (P14).

Finally, Allied journalists show an explicit identification with the company they work for, both in terms of semantics and attitude, although the behavioral patterns that describe them are in the minority among our interviewees. These journalists define themselves on social media in connection with their employer:

> *We are involved with the company we work for. We all have a professional identity because we have the support of the newsroom behind us, and it's assumed that the company is part of us in the debate we generate on social media.* (P8)

Allied journalists ensure the visibility of their company on social media, even if this means ignoring any references in their personal accounts to quality work published by competitors. Reflecting on this, Participant 2 says that "I practice self-censorship, I don't post anything from direct competitors." Participant 4 justifies the practice on the grounds that it "means giving them traffic to their websites." Another participant noted facetiously that if he disseminated competing content, his employer would kill him, and that he would understand this (P20).

Identification with the employer can be so intense that Allied journalists recognize that they promote the media organization through their personal accounts. For example, they share posts "that celebrate the fact that we've been in existence for so many years or that we're ahead of other media in terms of audience" (P19). As we will discuss in the next section, this promotion is free and voluntary because, as Participant 30 reveals, "I haven't been asked or forced to do it". However, "if I was told to, I would have done it" (P30), thus evidencing that Allied journalists subordinate their digital selves to the interests of their companies.

Conflict of interest revisited on social media: Self-censorship against latent corporate guidelines

Ascertaining the extent to which journalists are conditioned by their employers when interacting on social media is key to understanding the self-construction of journalists' digital selves. Beyond the fact that, in some newsrooms, there are newly created departments in charge of the newspaper's social media strategy, journalists agree that this environment is still “a loophole” (P9). The trend identified in our sample is the paucity of guided behavioral patterns, while the only guideline is given on the using of the online profiles of the company, but mostly “in an informal way” (P25). These recommendations have a twofold mission. First, to give visibility to the content to generate clicks. This dynamic of clickbaiting, in which the media’s economic interest prevails over the journalists’ agency, has become standard: “We know that news of blood, sweat and sex sells a lot. We don’t need to be told to post it” (P12). Second, more economic reasons are brought by our participants: to promote media subscriptions and not to offend advertisers.

These “recommendations” from the media organization to its employees are not identified as interventions in the journalist’s accounts: “I have been told to post something. I did disseminate the content, but I don’t consider that I have been corporatizing” (P30). Some respondents justify it by stating that “community managers are clear about posting on social media, but journalists are not” (P10). Another interviewee defends the practice, saying that although she receives such recommendations, “I have never been forced to do so” (P21). Moreover, many do not recognize these recommendations as guidelines. In fact, one of our interviewees, a newspaper deputy editor, acknowledges having had conversations with his staff on the subject, “not to give them instructions, but to alert them of the risks of social media when I saw someone making a comment that was a bit exaggerated or wild.” Thus, these recommendations become a form of latent control over the journalist’s digital activity.

The fact that these recommendations are not corporate guidelines highlight the usual lack of institutionalization of the day-to-day work in newsrooms while unmasking the uncertainty to which journalists are exposed on social media. Consequently, the proposal to create a style guide on the use of personal accounts on social media is mentioned by several interviewees. The potential usefulness of such guidelines would be to “know how to not mess up” (P6). Participant 8 emphasizes that “this might make it seem that the company is strict but, what is clear is that it would be more honest for everyone”.

Our study reveals a generational difference: younger respondents consider that “my social media accounts are mine, not the media’s” (P22) while older participants see them as linked to the company. However, among younger journalists, concern about the limits of their agency is relevant. Participant 4 clarifies: “It’s my digital self, but I have to make common sense prevail.” This common sense represents the intent of ensuring that their digital interactions do not generate conflicts between journalists and their employers. Or, in other words, “don’t bite the hand that feeds you” (P17).

Generally, our respondents state that they do not post personal opinions, especially on politics (if they do, they specify that these are personal opinions, notably in the case of senior journalists), or content that runs contrary to the ideology of their employer. This shows the existence of a latent control exercised in a veiled form by the media company’s interests, implemented through the journalist’s self-censorship, applied as a standardized practice.

Our interviewees are aware of the impact that their digital self can have on their company. Some respondents refer to a commitment. Participant 20 points out that “you are an employee in a newsroom and that makes you, automatically, an image of the company”. Participant 11 adds: “I don’t want the company to be damaged by anything I say.”

Participant 9 goes even further by conceding that she owes a lot to her company. Notwithstanding, a minority of interviewees are confident that “readers are discerning” (P22). In Participant 14 words: “the public knows it’s my opinion, not my company’s”.

All in all, many participants acknowledge having experienced some conflicts of interest on social media. Examples have been given of cases where content produced by competitors has been retweeted: “A boss came to me and said ‘hey, we have that issue published too’” (P3). Journalists have also been called to task for criticizing the company they work for, for publishing questionably “humorous” content, both during and before their term of employment, and for engaging in discussions with readers. Another respondent refers to a conflict between colleagues that jeopardized the image of the media organization. Moreover, some interviewees report that there have been cases of outsiders – mainly from political parties – calling on media outlet bosses to reprimand journalists.

Against this backdrop, our respondents agree that the fear of future employment consequences influences journalists’ digital activity:

> *Using social media is a way to get a job that I like, I don’t want to burn my bridges because of a tweet.* (P22)

> *I could lose my job. That’s why, when my newspaper posts something that bothers me, I keep quiet out of fear.* (P17)

Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to explore how journalists deal with the conflicts of interest with the company they work for that arise when they construct their digital selves on social media. Prior research has mainly framed this phenomenon in terms of agency theory (Ross, 1973; Mitnick, 1973; Jensen and Meckling, 1976), whereby the mandate to comply with the interests of the media company limits journalists’ autonomy (Goyanes and Cañedo, 2023; Lauk and Harro-Loit, 2016; Reese, 2001). However, in the current context of news production, in which social media has become a crucial domain for journalists, agency may be transformed by the affordances of social media (Dickinson and Bigi, 2009; Domingo, 2015; Ryfe, 2022). Thus, our research aims to extend existing studies on conflict of interest in journalism.

This study originally reviews the employee/company conflict of interest based on ANT (Latour, 2005; Law, 2008), enabling us to delve deeper into the considerations journalists must balance when constructing their digital selves. Our results confirm the influence of audiences on the journalists’ performance on social media (Tandoc and Vos, 2015; Hanusch and Tandoc, 2019; Mellado and Hermida, 2022) and evidence that: (1) networks of aligned interests are created and maintained by journalists and their audiences beyond the media company they work for; and (2) these networks are built on the technological affordances enabled by social media. Based on interviews with Spanish journalists, we provide four contributions to these lines of enquiry.

First, our study confirms, according to prior research (Hanusch and Bruns, 2017; Kyser et al., 2018; Mellado and Hermida, 2022), that social media is a domain that influences a journalist's identity, which is not only linked to their offline byline, but also to their digital self. The construction of networks on social media have become a professional extension of journalistic work, generating journalists' presence and opportunities to develop a digital community that goes beyond the company they work for. This study illustrates how the constituent factors of ANT (Law 1986, 2008) are relevant in the ecology studied here. Firstly, social media are key spaces in social structuring processes (*digital materiality*), linking journalists' presence on Twitter with their identity as professional journalists. Secondly, in terms of *semiotic relationality*, social media enables actions that would not be possible outside the digital network: the generation of a digital self, the development of an alternative community, or the implementation of processes of direct interactivity with competitors, audiences, and journalistic sources or even with advertisers. Regarding *space and scale*, as opposed to what happens offline, on social media there is no limitation in terms of the audiences journalists can aspire to, as they now have the capacity to control their social impact beyond the newsroom. Indeed, this is the main justification put forward by those who believe that their digital actions did not give rise to a conflict of interest with their employer, although previous research indicated that journalists may be perceived on social media as representatives of their company (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2018).

Our second contribution leads to a better understanding how journalists' digital self is constructed on social media, broadening previous perspectives on conflict of interest in journalism (Goyanes and Cañedo, 2023; Lauk and Harro-Loit, 2016; McChesney and Pickard, 2011). Our findings reveal that the debate is still ongoing, but with nuances that are specific to the evolution of the technological and social environment in which journalists work. According to Ryfe (2022), who postulates that in the framework of ANT actants deploy multiple identities according to the assemblages constructed in the networks, we identify three types of digital selves, depending – as per the approach mentioned by Latour (2005) – on the "plug-in" chosen: (1) Nonpartisan, (2) Equidistant, and (3) Allied.

Non-partisan journalists have installed a plug-in of independence, whereby their main objective is to generate their own identity. They do not pay attention to conflict of interest and seek to maintain their autonomy over and above the interests of their company, as they understand that the benefits of doing so outweigh the risks – and approach which runs counter to what previous literature has found applicable in the offline space (Clark and Grech, 2017; Schimpfössl et al., 2020). In this sense, Couldry's point (2008) is no longer evident in practice, because the inherent privilege of the journalist by virtue of being part of a media company is now replaced by being a brand online. It is perhaps for this reason that journalists who are starting out in their careers, not having experienced the traditional belonging to the newsroom, adhere to this profile in its entirety and are committed to strengthening their personal brand over the collective one.

Equidistant journalists deploy the plug-in of impartiality. Their performance on social media is guided by an interest in generating a constructive conversation with their network, in which there is no conflict of interest with the company. However, they recognize that their identity as journalists is linked to the company they work for. This is the most unique profile, because the ultimate mandate of journalism still prevails in the exercise of its agency: to inform.

Finally, Allied journalists –a minority of journalists, usually older – transfer to online activities the classic rules that operate in the offline world. These Allied journalists have installed the plug-in of explicit identification with their company, and would not, for example, post content produced by competitors even if it would interest their network community. In this case, journalists' autonomy is minimized in such a way that their actions directly and negatively affect the quality of the content they publish.

Our categorization shows that the construction of the journalist's digital self is mediated by the network in which they operate, which aligns with *the principle of generalized symmetry* (Latour, 1993). We evidence that the degree of journalistic autonomy is highly connected – and thus influenced by – the technology of the social media platform and the networks built through it.

Thus, our third theoretical contribution holds that conflicts of interest still exists in the journalist/media company relationship, but is now disrupted by social media, which redefines the power relations traditionally established between a journalist and their company. The element of *heterogeneity* (Law, 2008) comes into play here: it is no longer only the company and the journalist who are involved in the conflict of interest, but also social media audiences. Indeed, our participants highlight an inherent cost unique to social media: the so-called "cancel culture". This is linked to *precariousness*, understood as the volatility of the relationships established on social media, an aspect that forces journalists to be constantly alert to ensure the stability of their online network. Besides bearing the cost of not fulfilling the interests of the company, journalists are now also exposed to the costs of not fulfilling the interests of the social media communities which they have built up.

Finally, the fourth theoretical contribution of the paper is that it identifies the failure of media organizations to provide journalists with official guidelines governing their conduct on social media. Although this guarantees journalists a greater margin of freedom in building their digital selves, it does not prevent conflict of interest from arising. Journalists' behavior on social media is subject to a latent corporate control, which results in uncertainties for both journalists and media companies, a situation which makes it difficult to build a digital self. In practice, media companies, just as in the offline space, try to maintain the defense of their interests against political, economic and commercial pressures (Blumler, 2010; Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro, 2019; McChesney and Pickard, 2011) which results in a continuation of traditional costs in the digital space, primarily in the form of self-censorship (Clark and Grech, 2017; Schimpfössl et al., 2020).

However, on social media, journalists' performance is identified as a factor fueling conflict of interest: posting competitor content, publicly questioning their employer's editorial policy, expressing their opinions, or entering into direct confrontation with the audience. In this respect, there is no doubt that some action will be needed, which allows us to identify an important line of future research. We believe it is important to further research the development and consequences of these new forms of conflict of interest. Moreover, we argue that it is essential to look more deeply into the possibilities of managing conflict of interest on social media, since these platforms allow direct interactions with audiences, competitors and advertisers, thus altering the journalistic process as hitherto conceived. We also believe that taking ANT as a starting point for this study allowed us to broaden its field. Nevertheless, we are aware that most of the participants in our research focused on their experience on Twitter, which can be seen as a limitation of this study.

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