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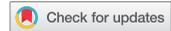
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My tweets are (not) my own! “Normalizing” journalists’ branding and digital identity on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the complex issue of journalists’ branding and digital identity on Twitter. The challenge for journalists is to meet both one’s own media employer’s and the public’s expectations. Some journalists, designated in this article as “nonrepresentative,” apply a “disclaimer strategy” by mentioning the formula *My tweets are my own* in their profiles. In this article, we propose to compare the use of Twitter between these journalists and those who do not employ this kind of formula through a content analysis of their tweets. Results reveal four common types of journalists’ branding: corporate branding, professional self-branding, institutional branding, and personal self-branding. We show that nonrepresentative journalists are mainly using Twitter in a professional way. Like representative journalists, they normalize their messages, even if they diffuse more personal life content. These findings suggest that journalists behave as a homogeneous group on Twitter, despite the “disclaimer strategy” they may use.

Introduction

The use of social media platforms by journalists and media companies has become significant and has reengineered journalism (Bell & Taylor, 2017). On the microblog platform Twitter, journalists must deal with traditional journalistic norms and practices but on a medium with its own logic (Hermida, 2010), mostly used to diffuse opinions and to establish interpersonal communication (Domingo et al., 2008; Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Hermida, 2010; Lasorsa, 2012; Noguera-Vivo, 2013; Revers, 2014; Singer, 2005). That leads to a major evolution of the forms of expression by journalists. Beyond professional practices such as diffusion, sharing, and gathering of information (Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Giles & Pitta, 2009), Twitter is considered as a powerful tool to express views and judgments and to share personal contents (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012; Mercier & Pignard-Cheynel, 2014; Noguera-Vivo, 2013). Thus, the use of this social medium seems to challenge the existence of a well-structured boundary between journalists’ professional digital identity and their personal one (Cardon, 2008). Confronted with multiple and overlapping audiences such as family, relatives, and the public—with a high demand of transparency and engagement (Hedman, 2016; Olausson, 2017b; Revers, 2014)—they are also guided by the imperatives of professional control demanded by their employer

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(Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Therefore, it can be difficult for journalists to evaluate the kind of content they may diffuse (Bossio & Sacco, 2017). Recent research has approached this issue in terms of journalistic branding (Canter, 2015; Hanusch & Bruns, 2017; Hedman, 2016; Molyneux & Holton, 2015; Molyneux, Holton, & Lewis, 2017; Olausson, 2017a, 2017b). These studies show that journalists build distinct brands or identities on social media to try to face institutional and media companies' norms and to deal with their personal and private lives. However, there is still a lack of knowledge regarding journalistic branding on social media. Specifically, little is known about how journalists' different self-presentation strategies may be related to different branding involvements, in particular in the case of journalistic contents on Twitter.

This article seeks to illustrate the complex reality of social media appropriation by journalists by focusing on two different kinds of journalists' Twitter profiles: those who mention their employing company, designated in this article as "representative" journalists, and those, designated as "nonrepresentative" journalists, who indicate a *My tweets are my own* (or alternative variations) disclaimer, whether they mention their employing company or not. The goal is to investigate overlaps and differences in terms of tweets' branding contents, as one could expect that representative journalists, as ambassadors of their employing media organization (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012; Larroche, 2013; Mersey, 2009), act differently compared to nonrepresentative journalists. Furthermore, we aim to contribute to the existing literature on journalists' branding by comparing Twitter practices of 30 popular Belgian, French, and Swiss journalists working at different hierarchical levels and in various media outlets. We show that four main levels of journalistic branding stand out from the content analysis of tweets: corporate branding, professional self-branding, institutional branding, and personal self-branding. We highlight that, in an unexpected way, representative journalists and nonrepresentative journalists act similarly on Twitter. These findings suggest that the *My tweets are my own* disclaimer formula does not perform the expected media organization detachment role.

Journalists and Twitter: professional and personal uses

With more than 330 million active users per month (Statista, 2018b), Twitter is, in 2018, the leading microblogging site for traditional media outlets and journalists (Hedman, 2016; Revers, 2014). In 2017, 70% of French journalists spent up 2 hours a day on social networks in the framework of their professional activities (Statista, 2018c). Facebook (72%) and Twitter (69%) are the most popular communication channels among journalists (Statista, 2018a), and they are considered effective tools for sharing and commenting on the news (Hermida, 2010). Scholars have considered professional use of Twitter as an innovative appropriation, as well as a challenge to professional norms. Indeed, social network sites constitute a new field to expose journalistic standards and ideals (Singer, 2005) and are an opportunity to renew some professional practices (Mercier & Pignard-Cheynel, 2014)—even if most contents are said to be normalized to fit traditional ways of news production and diffusion (Hermida, 2010; Lasorsa et al., 2012; Singer, 2005). Social media are currently integrated into journalists' professional practices and routines. Various studies in the United States and in Europe show that journalists are massively present on social media outlets, particularly on Twitter (Hanusch & Bruns, 2017; Jeanne-Perrier, 2012; Péliissier & Diallo, 2013). Social interactions with the audience and public

participation are some of the main goals for using social networks (Antheaume, 2013; Neuberger, Vom Hofe, & Nuernbergk, 2013). Indeed, engagement with users is considered to be a priority for media outlets (Mayer, 2011) and is even believed to be a key to the economic sustainability of media companies (Fallows, 2012), so that to “find, gather, and ‘harvest’ [users’ commenting] efforts and to stimulate people to contribute is at least as important as producing contents” (Bakker, 2014, p. 598). This engagement results in a change in journalists’ traditional skills and professional norms. At the same time, scholars have identified challenges that these new uses pose to professional norms (Singer, 2015). Gatekeeping and gatewatching, which are considered being shared among journalists and the participatory public, are affected (Bruns, 2011; Hermida, 2010; Lasorsa, 2012), and so is agenda setting, as users “are creating new topics through hashtags and other mechanisms to promote conversations” (Noguera-Vivo, 2013, p. 95). The presence of the public has an impact on the nature of communication, on the nature of contents, and on how these contents are being diffused. It seems that hyperlinking (e.g., source mentioning in the case of journalists) enhances transparency and accountability norms (Lasorsa, 2012)—among others. This transparency and openness to the public also encourage some journalists to provide information about their work life, share opinions, and even talk about their personal life (Hedman, 2015; Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013; Lasorsa, 2012; Mercier & Pignard-Cheyne, 2014; Noguera-Vivo, 2013), so that they are “deviating from their role as nonpartisan information providers” (Lasorsa et al., 2012, p. 23). In other words, journalists’ use of social media is not strictly professional (Jeanne-Perrier, 2012; Jeanne-Perrier, Smyrnaios, & Noci, 2015).

The scientific literature about use of social media by journalists therefore suggests some evident conflicts on one hand between a logic of professional control and transparency (or openness) to the public (Francoeur, 2013; Lasorsa, 2012; Revers, 2014) and on the other hand between the professional expectations of media organizations and the motivations of some journalists who wish to talk freely (Jeanne-Perrier et al., 2015).

Journalists’ digital identity on social media

This ambiguous tension between professional and personal use of social media leads us to the issue of digital identity. As stated in the preceding, journalists have to find a way to introduce themselves that respects both the professional and the personal parts of their identity. Past and recent studies on digital identity and self-representation on social media have underlined what a struggle can this be for users, depending on which social media they use (Cardon, 2008) and whom they address. According to Lough, Molyneux, and Holton (2017), “Each social media platform offers its own properties and affordances, and so the more groups or contexts the user interacts with on social media, the more fronts that person must curate and present” (Lough et al., 2017, p. 3). Social network sites offer specific visibility policies to users, so that they can show or hide certain aspects of their personality (Mercier, 2013). Digital identity on social media can thus be defined as the sum of three interrelated features. The “declarative” identity (Georges, 2009, p. 172) corresponds to the profile information indicated by users, which is visible to the audience (profile picture, name, profession, etc.). The “acting” identity corresponds to the collection of publications and requests by the user, and the “calculated” identity refers to the number of relations, subscribers, followers, and so on. Another way of defining social media digital

identity is to take into account all the contributions of individuals (Mimeche, Fallery, & Rodhain, 2014) or to consider the sum of all traces of an individual on the 2.0 Web (Merzeau, 2013). Generally, the majority of researchers indicate that the social construction of an identity is made of a balance between public and private aspects (Papacharissi, 2012).

When it comes to defining the (digital) identity of journalists, it is important to remember its complex and permanent changing nature. According to Pélissier (2002), journalists' traditional activities evolve continuously, integrating more and more commercial and technical aspects, which means that their professional identity is shared with other professions. Thus, professional boundaries are unstable, as journalists today have to face internal and external pressures coming mainly from time and economical imponderables.

The question of their profession's legitimacy and their professional norms is more than ever a major concern on social network sites. Participation and content management, self-presentation, and visibility issues are some of the issues related to the appropriation and use of social media sites that journalists have to deal with. Moreover, given the multiple expectations of multiple audiences they have to meet (the public and their employing organizations), as stated in the preceding, managing the digital identity on social media is a very complex task for journalists.

Journalists' branding practices on Twitter

In a relatively new set of studies, scholars focusing on the self-representation of journalists and the representation of their employers on social media outlets have considered their commercial or motivation oriented message contents as branding (Bossio & Sacco, 2017; Canter, 2015; Hanusch & Bruns, 2017; Lough et al., 2017; Molyneux et al., 2017; Olausson, 2017a, 2017b). This concept is originally a marketing tool, which can be generally defined as promoting and differentiating a commercial entity for customers' attraction and loyalty (Aaker, 2003). Individuals can, however, also be considered as brands (Bendisch, Larsen, & Trueman, 2007). Journalists seek to promote different brand levels: individual, institutional, and organizational (Molyneux et al., 2017). Individual branding refers to one's self-promotion, as when journalists talk about their professional achievements. Institutional branding makes reference to the promotion of the profession of journalism in general, whereas organizational branding applies to the media employer. Indeed, according to scientific research, journalists on social media are believed to act as sort of ambassadors 2.0 of the media companies for which they work (Hermida et al., 2012; Larroche, 2013; Lough et al., 2017; Mersey, 2009). Thus, this is a matter of professional legitimacy (Jauréguiberry, 2011; Wiik, 2010). In addition, journalists also tend to act on their own behalf or as an individual brand in order to promote themselves (Mercier, 2013; Noguera-Vivo, 2013), which encourages them to seek relationships with the public (and their recognition) (Granjon & Denouël, 2010; Honneth, 2005). Given the competitive context of the media landscape and the crisis of employment in the journalism sector, the need for personalization has increased (Cottan-Nir & Lehman-Wilzig, 2018; Nessmann, 2009).

These studies have analyzed journalists' branding phenomena from different perspectives, but always considering social media as solid popular communication tools for enhancing personal and/or professional brands (Arruda & Dixson, 2007; Artwick, 2013; Hedman, 2015; Neuberger, Vom Hofe, & Nuernbergk, 2013; Peters, 1997). In most

studies, the two brands are interrelated. A recent study by Hanusch and Bruns (2017), based on the analysis of more than 4,000 Australian journalists' Twitter profiles, revealed that "journalists brand themselves mostly through professional attributes, such as their job title or the name of their employer, but a significant number also mix these with personal attributes related to their private lives" (p. 11).

To try to overcome tensions with their media employers, some journalists may create a private and a professional social media account (Bossio & Sacco, 2017). Indeed, many examples of reputational damages to media organizations because of journalists' tweets have been outlined since this popular communication tool has been adopted by journalists (Mercier, 2013; Millette, 2013). When using Twitter, a rather popular strategy for gaining autonomy and avoiding issues with their employers consists in managing a single account, but indicating disclaimer formulas such as *My tweets are my own* or *my Twitter account is personal* (Fincham, 2015; Hanusch & Bruns, 2017). In general, the use of disclaimers in Twitter profiles is controversial. Some companies and public relations managers suggest it is useful and recommend it or impose it; some argue it is unnecessary and even potentially harmful, as "it can engender a false sense of security,"¹ because using a disclaimer does not guard against legal liability. However, in the particular case of journalism, disclaimers are considered as being part of ethical "best practices" with regard to private opinions (Fincham, 2015, p. 174).

As far as we know, there has been no study focusing on journalists' personal expression forms of interacting and publishing under this kind of "regulatory principle" [our translation] (Mercier, 2013, p. 173). In this article, we propose to fill this knowledge gap by analyzing uses of Twitter by journalists and distinguishing two main categories of journalists, on the basis of their profile information: representative journalists and nonrepresentative journalists. We define representative journalists as those who explicitly choose to mention their media company in their profile information. This refers to the idea that journalists are expected to behave exclusively in a professional way on social media (Whitehouse, 2010) and that as "celebrities" and human brands (Thomson, 2006), they are associated to their media employer through an endorsement contract (Jayawardane, 2011; Zamudio, 2016). Nonrepresentative journalists are those who seem to distance themselves from their employer by stating a formula such as *My tweets are my own* in their Twitter profile.

We therefore address two research questions: (RQ1) What part of their professional and personal identity do the representative and nonrepresentative journalists brand on Twitter? (RQ2) To what extent can the differences be linked to the two different kinds of journalists' profiles?

The two following hypotheses are formulated: (H1) Representative journalists tend to act according to their professional identity. (H2) Nonrepresentative journalists tend to act according to their personal identity. This leads to four operational subhypotheses: (H1a) Representative journalists tend to diffuse more corporate branding-related tweets than nonrepresentative journalists; (H1b) representative journalists tend to diffuse more professional self-branding-related tweets than nonrepresentative journalists; (H2a) nonrepresentative journalists tend to diffuse more institutional branding-

¹Stuart B. (2014, March 3). Why you should drop your Twitter disclaimer. Retrieved from <https://www.ragan.com/why-you-should-drop-your-twitter-disclaimer/>.

related tweets than representative journalists; and (H2b) nonrepresentative journalists tend to diffuse more personal self-branding-related tweets than representative journalists.

Method

We based our research on a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the 2014 Twitter messages of 30 French-speaking journalists based in Belgium, France, and Switzerland. The rationale for a focus on journalists' profiles from these three countries is that they share (a) a common language, (b) similar media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and (c) a French-speaking tradition of journalistic practices and norms favouring "opinion journalism" (Davier, 2009; Woltersdorff, 2001). These elements suggest the existence of a francophone journalist (Bonin et al., 2017).

Data selection took place in several stages. First, we looked for journalists' accounts on Twitter through the analytic Web tool Followerwonk, by entering the keywords "journalist + Switzerland," "journalist + Belgium," and "journalist + France." The search results yielded respectively 320 accounts, 4,700 accounts, and 3300 accounts. The list was then refined to search for profiles that mention one of the following formulas: *My tweets are my own*; *Twitter account is personal*; *Views are my own*; and their equivalents in French: *Mes tweets n'engagent que moi*; *Compte perso*; *Tweets perso*. We carried out a second refining to ensure a heterogeneity in the functions held by journalists. At the end, we selected 30 popular (mean number of followers = 31,015) and active nonrepresentative ($n = 15$) and representative ($n = 15$) journalists working as editors-in-chief, managing editors, and journalists. The types of media outlets they work for are also diverse (public and private television, public and private radio, print and Web media, news magazines, and press agencies) and hold high market reach in their respective countries. This sample is nonrepresentative, but we argue that it is qualitative in the sense that it represents profiles which might have a high interest in promoting their profession, employer, or personal brand on Twitter.

Two units of analysis were considered for the research. The first unit is the profile data of each journalist, which includes a profile image and structured data (number of followers and number of followings). The second unit is the individual tweet. We used NVivo to capture the structured data of profiles and the 2014 tweets of each journalist ($n = 24,076$). The profile image and the background illustration of each journalist were manually captured, via screenshots.

A reduced sample of the last 100 tweets diffused by the journalists—if there were that many—was analyzed qualitatively ($n = 2,906$). This represents approximately 28% of the total tweets diffused by all journalists in 2014. Each tweet was manually coded. Mutually exclusive codes are issued from studies outlined in the review of the literature and also inferred from the analysis. We coded each tweet according to whether it consisted in corporate branding, institutional branding, professional self-branding, or personal self-branding (regarding these four categories, see the authors quoted earlier). The following variables are defined: Corporate branding contents consist of (a) promoting one's own media; (b) retrieving news from one's own media; (c) incentives for participation to one's own media; and (d) work-life messages (e.g., comment of a photo taken in the TV studio). Institutional branding-related tweets include (e) commenting on other media or other

journalists' news; (f) retrieving information from other media or journalists; (g) retrieving information from other sources; (h) commenting about other media; and (i) promoting other media or other journalists. Professional self-branding variable corresponds to (j) professional self-promotion messages (e.g., promotion of own program, "selfie" with a guest, retweet of a message that talks about the journalist). Personal self-branding includes all messages that are related to (k) the personal life of journalists (e.g., commenting and sharing private photos). The data analysis was conducted with SPSS, to compare the mean number of tweets related to each category.

Results

Research questions asked whether there are overlaps and differences between professional- and personal-related tweets contents diffused by representative journalists and nonrepresentative journalists, and whether these can be linked to the two different kinds of profiles. To address these research questions, and in order to get a first general impression of the overall activity of both groups of journalists on Twitter, we analyzed differences in mean numbers of tweets (original tweets and retweets) in 2014, as well as respective number of followers and followings. The results show that in 2014, representative journalists tweeted on average about 831 messages. They posted on average 379 original tweets and 452 retweets. Nonrepresentative journalists tweeted an average number of 774 messages, among them 529 original tweets and 245 retweets. Representative journalists have many more followers than the nonrepresentative journalists (respectively 48,745 and 13,285, on average), which is quite expected, as representative journalists accounts could be interpreted as mainly professional. They also follow fewer individuals (respectively 922 followings and 1,287 followings, on average). However, the differences between the two groups for these indicators are not significant according to the independent-samples *t*-test ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that representative and nonrepresentative journalists' activity on Twitter is quite similar.

Results from the qualitative content analysis of journalists' tweets show slightly different branding attitudes between both groups of journalists. As [Table 1](#) shows, the mean number of institutional branding-related tweets of representative journalists (33 tweets) is barely higher than that of nonrepresentative journalists (30 tweets). The difference is, however, bigger for tweets consisting in retrieving information from other source (average of 10.13 tweets for representative journalists and 5.00 for nonrepresentative journalists). Regarding corporate branding-related tweets, results show that representative journalists tweeted on average 30.0 messages, while nonrepresentative journalists tweeted on average 22.73 messages. For both types of journalists, the majority of messages consist of retrieving news from one's own media. In particular, the difference regarding the mean number of tweets consisting in promoting of one's own media is large (9.33 vs. 4.73). Professional self-branding tweets concern about 13 messages of representative journalists and 8 messages of nonrepresentative journalists. A more substantial difference can be pointed out regarding the average number of personal self-branding tweets of both kinds of journalists. Representative ones sent an average of 17 tweets while nonrepresentative ones sent about 29 personal messages. Again, these results reflect minor differences in terms of branding attitudes of both groups of journalists, except for personal self-branding. They tend to confirm hypotheses H1a, H1b, and H2b, and to reject hypothesis H2a

Table 1. Mean number of tweets by representative and nonrepresentative journalists per type of category.

Variable		Category	Type of journalist	
			Representative (<i>n</i> = 15)	Nonrepresentative (<i>n</i> = 15)
Type of content	Corporate branding	Promoting of one's own media	9.33	4.73
		Retrieving news from one's own media	18.6	16.47
		Incentive for participation to one's own media	0.07	0.27
		Work life message	1.93	1.27
	Professional self-branding	<i>Total</i>	30.0	22.73
		Self-promotion	12.67	8.13
		Institutional branding	Commenting on other media or other journalists' news	3.27
	Retrieving information from other media or other journalist		18.53	20.60
	Retrieving information from other source		10.13	5.00
	Commenting about other media		0.27	0.40
Promotion of other media or other journalist	0.73		0.27	
Personal self-branding	<i>Total</i>	32.93	31.20	
	Private message	17.13	29.53	
	Other	4.33	5.07	

Note. Independent-samples *t*-test results are not significant for both groups of journalists ($p < 0.05$).

indicating that nonrepresentative journalists tend to diffuse more institutional branding-related tweets than representative journalists. As a consequence, hypothesis H1 tends to be accepted, while H2 tends to be partially rejected. However, these differences are not statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) for any of the four (self-) branding types variables, according to the independent-samples *t*-test conducted ($t = 0.204$, $df = 28$, $p = 0.840$; $t = 0.839$, $df = 28$, $p = 0.409$; $t = 0.723$, $df = 28$, $p = 0.475$; $t = -1.644$, $df = 28$, $p = 0.665$).

Representative journalists and nonrepresentative journalists tend to act mostly according to their professional identity. Nevertheless, there is a relatively high difference in the average number of tweets related to professional self-branding, suggesting that journalists showing a clear engagement to their media employers give their Twitter accounts a more professional orientation than journalists mentioning an employer disclaimer. While we expected nonrepresentative journalists to present themselves mostly according to their personal identity, it seems that disclaimers allow them to simply share a few more personal-related tweets than representative journalists.

Summary and discussion

This study has examined the social media appropriation by journalists and related implications for managing their professional and personal digital identities. Using the analytical framework of branding, we aimed to study whether contents diffused by journalists could be different, specifically when disclaimers are indicated on their Twitter profiles. In line with previous research, we showed that journalists tend to act professionally on Twitter, promoting institutional, corporate, and professional self-branding contents. The results of the analysis of this microblogging platform uses by representative journalists and nonrepresentative journalists outline that both groups seem to

behave as a relatively homogeneous group. Nonrepresentative journalists are using Twitter in a much more professional way than expected, even if they tend to diffuse more personal life contents than representative journalists. Just like representative journalists, they follow traditional journalistic norms and standards, normalizing their content (Lasorsa, 2012), but by using the formula *My tweets are my own*, they also allow themselves to act as individual persons, in accordance with both facets of their digital identity (professional and personal). We argue that this strategy fits into the journalistic 2.0 practices, which are more largely embedded in an information ecosystem characterized by a “networked production of news” (Lotan et al., 2011, p. 1378), in which different actors contribute to the co-construction of news.

On one hand, even if this context challenges traditional norms, it also gives rise to unique opportunities to renew these norms by enabling new practices and insights for the profession (Olausson, 2017a). For instance, as our study shows, journalists retrieve information from other media outlets, other journalists, and other diverse sources, which can be interpreted as a share of their gatekeeping role (Lasorsa et al., 2012). Tweets concerning work life and personal or private messages are indicators of accountability and transparency norms (Lasorsa et al., 2012), and may reinforce the relationship with the audience (Revers, 2014) toward a more symmetric two-way communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

By relaying news on social media, journalists are also meant to attract new audiences (Asur, Huberman, Szabo, & Wang, 2011), and this has a positive impact on the media company brand. Furthermore, “the changing business model and challenging job market make it increasingly critical that journalists know how to ‘maintain and market’ their social media identity” (Fincham, 2015, p. 174). Media companies can benefit from significant value creation from perceived personal brand value of journalists (Bendisch, Larsen, & Trueman, 2013), which implies that managing one’s personal social media identity is also essential for present and future employments (Glaser, 2009). On Twitter, journalists with many followers are meant to contribute positively (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995) to the reputation of their (future) media employer.

But on the other hand, by behaviors (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986) such as commenting on news and sharing their personal opinions, journalists expose their employers to reputation damages. At the beginning of this article, we assumed that some journalists show a willingness to self-regulate uses of social media by applying a “disclaimer strategy.” But the most salient result of our research tends to indicate that this strategy is not really clear, in terms of the type of content that is diffused. By sharing a vast majority of normalized contents on Twitter, journalists may try to intentionally avoid bias and contents that could be parented to tacit approvals (Fincham, 2015). To complete our results, we examined the profile indications of the 15 nonrepresentative journalists in 2018, and we found that for half of them, the disclaimer was not present anymore. Without having the ambition to generalize this finding, and without overinterpreting it, we suggest that (1) this could mean that journalists are well aware of the “nonlegal” value of disclaimers (Shear, 2015), and that they may consider these unnecessary as they practice social-media self-regulation, and/or (2) this could also be the consequence of media companies’ imperatives, which aim to increasingly regulate the ethical use of social media by establishing charters and guidelines (Fincham, 2015) that specify that journalists are supposed to act as representatives of their employers (Whitehouse, 2010). On social media, journalists cannot stop being journalists.

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