

# MEDIÁLNÍ STUDIA

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# MEDIA STUDIES

JOURNAL FOR CRITICAL MEDIA INQUIRY

Special Issue: Emerging topics of media and communication scholarship in Europe: Alumni of the ECREA doctoral school of 2021

**Flemish journalism students' perception of and preparedness for entrepreneurial job profiles in their future careers**

Dorien Luyckx & Amber Verstraeten

**Dividing and Uniting News Frames: Framing Russia-related Border Issues in the Estonian, Latvian, Finnish, US Public Service Media and Chinese State Media**

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**"Our fans are gonna go crazy when they know we are together": fandom identities and self-representation in YouTubers slash fiction**

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**Algorithmic (in)visibility tactics among immigrant TikTokers**

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**Migration and educational projects online:**

**A topic modelling approach of discussions on social media groups**

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**Bureaucracy and authoritative control in contemporary legacy news media companies: A Weberian analysis of a Flemish case study**

Nils Wandels, Jelle Mast & Hilde Van den Bulck

2/2022

# **MEDIÁLNÍ STUDIA | MEDIA STUDIES**

Journal for critical media inquiry

**SPECIAL ISSUE: EMERGING TOPICS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION  
SCHOLARSHIP IN EUROPE: ALUMNI OF THE ECREA DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF  
2021**

**Guest Editors:**

David Selva Ruiz

Miguel de Aguilera

Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt

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# INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

## CURRENT TRENDS IN EUROPEAN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

**DAVID SELVA RUIZ**

*University of Cadiz*

**PILLE PRUULMANN-VENGERFELDT**

*Malmö University*

**MIGUEL DE AGUILERA MOYANO**

*University of Malaga*

## SPECIAL ISSUE BASED ON THE SELECTED PAPERS FROM ECREA MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL 2022

As many stories online will tell you — life as a PhD student is hard. It is wrought with challenges of complicated theories, long nights in laboratories and poor pay. However, every year, large number of brightest students still choose this hard road to high academic specialisation as the life of a PhD student can also be rewarding. In September 2021, 46 of these people currently pursuing their PhD in media and communication or related areas combated Zoom fatigue and challenged themselves to building life-long academic networks of support and encouragement. The ECREA European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School has changed forms and format, moved from one country to another and combated COVID-19 induced isolation by bringing people together online to joy of learning, belonging, and recognition. Thus, the 2021 Summer School was organized by the University of Cadiz and the Interuniversity Doctorate in Communication but, due to the pandemic, it had to be held online. Despite these circumstances, it was attended by 46 doctoral students and 36 doctors from 26 different countries throughout Europe and the world.

The ECREA Doctoral Summer School has many strengths, among which is that doctoral students at European universities who attend this event can maintain close interaction (even held online) with experienced researchers from different points of Europe. Thus, they can enrich their approach to their objects of study. They also interact directly with other young researchers, so they are able to contrast their respective lines of research and even establish long-term academic relationships.

But another of the indisputable strengths of this Doctoral School is that the different researchers who participate in it, both the senior ones and those who are in an



earlier phase of their research career, can thus obtain a certain panoramic view of the lines of research which are being currently used by young researchers in European universities, since around fifty doctoral projects are presented at the ECREA Doctoral Summer School every year. The doctoral projects selected for presentation and discussion in this Doctoral School constitute a sample, not representative but indicative, of the lines used by research in Europe. The objects of study built by young people in the development of their doctoral theses show the enormous diversity of phenomena included in the extensive field of media and communication studies, and also highlight the essential role that communication have in our societies. In addition, these objects of study, as well as the focuses and methodological approaches with which they are addressed, reflect the orientations that have enriched research in communication science during the last decades. But, at the same time, the creative curiosity of young researchers to scientifically examine and understand the communication phenomena of our time — inscribed in the contexts of their daily lives, whose examination benefits from contributions and perspectives from other disciplinary fields which illuminate and broaden the understanding of contemporary communications, should be highlighted. And, sometimes, they do so with innovative methodological orientations — especially, with those that result from the application of computational methods to communication phenomena largely conditioned by their digital dimension.

This special issue gives a small selection of fresh voices from today's European media and communication scholarship. We hope that this special issue brings to you some insights of the high quality, interesting, relevant and timely research done in different institutions. Some of the papers are written by the students themselves, others co-authored with colleagues. This too reflects the current state of the media and communication research. It is not only about the solitary journey to academic excellence. Co-authoring shows that often PhD projects tackle research questions and issues that require pooling together resources, collaboration in question positioning and analysis. A PhD is also a journey from apprentice to mastery and these days, increasingly mastery means also to be able to work together.

The papers in this special issue have been through rigorous double-blind peer-review process, but in this instance, we have also seen how academia is slowly changing. Instead of unreasonable and narcissistic Reviewer2-s who have become another symbol of academic life, we hope our authors have encountered thoughtful, considerate and helpful reviews that have accomplished the goal of lifting up what is worthy and valuable in the papers. We, as editors, are grateful to many colleagues and proud of the process that has managed to remain supportive and encouraging despite exercising also rigorous quality control.

It is hard to find a unifying label to cover the diversity of scholarship presented in this special issue, so hopefully you will find that these “Current trends in European media and communication research” are both inspiring and encouraging. The special issue contains six papers with a broad variety of topics and approaches and coming

from different European countries. Below you will find a brief overview of the six papers.

For the first paper of the special issue, Dorien Luyckx, PhD student from ECREA summer school, and Amber Verstraeten carried out a survey study among Flemish journalism students to understand their position and preparedness for future in entrepreneurial journalism. In this paper, the entrepreneurial journalism is investigated through three aspects: capitalization — being involved in turning assets into capital, innovation — building innovative solutions to current challenges of news media, and individualization freelancing and self-employment. They conclude that innovation is still seen mostly as technical, thus less in the domain of journalists. Students see that the lines between different departments and different roles are blurring, but it is yet not clear how this will affect their future work life. The schools in Flemish-speaking Belgium prepare them for multi-media, social media, journalistic and writing skills, but they are less prepared with business, marketing and technological skills. While the surveyed students believe that it is also their future role to innovate to help journalism to survive, they are less equipped to tackle innovation as a business-challenge. The students seem to have realistic understanding of job opportunities — freelancing is by many seen as inevitable part of their careers, but they have a less clear connection with the idea that being self-employed may also mean that they will need to market their own skills. This important study highlights some discrepancies between job-market realities and student expectations while also demonstrating levels of reflexivity and awareness among the future journalists.

The second author in the special issue is Mihhail Kremez, a PhD student of media and communication at the Institute of the Social Studies, University of Tartu (Estonia). In his paper “Dividing and Uniting News Frames: Framing Russia-related Border Issues in the Estonian, Latvian, Finnish, US Public Service Media and Chinese State Media”, he examines the frames of Russia-related border issues in the public service media of Estonia, Latvia, Finland, the US, and the state media of China, which had or have territorial disputes/conflicts with Russia. This work underlines the importance that past and present tensions between Russia and its neighboring countries can be reflected in frames that increase the differences between them. Although positive frames were also detected. Hence, the responsibility that frame-setters have in this regard is relevant.

Ona Anglada-Pujol is a PhD student in Communication and a member of the MEDIUM research group at the Communication Department of Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona, Spain). Her paper on “ ‘Our fans are gonna go crazy when they know we are together’: fandom identities and self-representation in YouTubers slash fiction” explores slash fiction written about four gaming YouTubers. Namely, texts that narrate fictional romantic and sexual stories between two male characters or celebrities who define themselves as heterosexuals. She use the thematic analysis to examine the fandom self-representation, their role and identity as fans, and the portrayal of the relationship with the YouTubers. Ona Anglada's study deals with a type

of subject that has not yet been deeply studied, relying on certain scientific orientations. The results show, among other issues, the interest of youtubers in slash fiction and the high degree of acceptance among the majority of fans of LGTBQ+ identities, compared to a minority of toxic fans. Fans give themselves much agency to intervene in the YouTubers' lives and expect transparency and authenticity from them.

The research of Daniela Jaramillo-Dent focuses on the mediated (self)representations of immigration on social media platforms including Instagram and TikTok. She is a Doctoral Candidate pursuing a joint PhD in Communication at the University of Huelva (Spain) and Erasmus University Rotterdam (Netherlands). In her paper, entitled "Algorithmic (in)visibility tactics among immigrant tiktokers in the US and Spain", she explores migratory narratives of othering, belonging, identity, and minority celebrity on TikTok. More specifically, the paper analyses the specific challenges faced by immigrant content creators on TikTok and the way they use their knowledge of platforms to negotiate their algorithmic positioning. Drawing from a 14-month digital ethnography involving content created by 53 Latin American immigrant tiktokers in the US and Spain, Jaramillo-Dent analyzes 80 videos to identify the strategies deployed in order to having their content promoted by TikTok's algorithmic feed. The author detects well-known tactics, such as the use of specific hashtags, but also more subversive schemes. Jaramillo-Dent is Key Regional Leader in the TikTok Cultures Research Network and a member of FemLab, a research collaborative focusing on the Feminist approaches to labor collectives.

Helena Dedecek Gertz is a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hamburg and a lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Groningen; Florian Süßer holds an MSc in Psychology from University of Hamburg. In their paper "Migration and educational projects online: a topic modelling approach of discussions on social media groups", they discuss the prevalence of topics relating to education in information exchanges on Facebook groups of Brazilians migrants to Germany. Against the background of the mediatization theory, social networks and transnational education research, they conduct an explorative quantitative study based on a text-as-data approach on the terms of conversation of this Brazilian that live -or want to live- in Germany. This paper by Helena Dedecek Gertz and Florian Süßer explores the topics of conversation that certain communities that are seen as unidimensional in our societies maintain; in this case, the community of Brazilian migrants related to educational issues.

The final paper of the special issue by Nils Wandels, PhD student from ECREA's summer school, Jelle Mast and Hilde Van den Bulck employ Weberian theoretical framework and concepts of bureaucratic ideal type, Herrschaft and Lebensordnung to examine the organisational properties of two international media conglomerates to discuss limits to journalistic autonomy. Wandels and his colleagues argue that such analysis helps to understand how independent modes of production are affected. They have interviewed chief editors to understand how autonomy is influenced by the authoritative control exercised in organizations (Herrschaft) and how

rational-legal authority of bureaucracy is playing being internalised in a particular organisational rational (Lebensordnung). They find that formalised rationality is present in targets and evaluation procedures, budget allocation and division of labour. The central management does not control what journalists write, but they are present and embedded in the organisational structure, expressed via functional synergy, cross-functional harmony and internal budgetary competition. The chain of command is top-down and news organisations are highly bureaucratised. The centralised management's focus on economic or business rationale is at odds with the professional logic, but continuous exposure to this organisational rationale means that newsrooms nevertheless are compliant with the rationale. Key performance indicators are used to supposedly measure journalistic quality and confirms the similar boundary blurring that was discussed in Luyckx and Verstraeten's paper. We believe that the paper makes a strong case for further investigations of newsrooms with the help of Max Weber's analytical framework.

We hope that this special issue provides an interesting overview of some of the research proposals coming from the fresh blood of media and communication scholarship that participated in the ECREA Doctoral Summer School 2021.

**David Selva Ruiz** (david.selva@uca.es) is an associate professor in advertising and public relations and coordinator of the Interuniversity Doctorate in Communication at the University of Cadiz. He holds a PhD from the University of Seville with a thesis about music video as a commercial communication tool. For his thesis, he received the SGAE / Author Foundation Research Award and the PhD Prize from University of Seville. His research focuses mainly on the intersection between new trends and tools in commercial communication and popular culture, with dozens of academic publications in books and journals. Therefore, his research addresses topics such as music video, videogame, the use of data for creativity, or advertising applications of virtual reality.

**Miguel de Aguilera** (deaguilera@uma.es) is Professor of Communications at University of Malaga. He has been Dean of the School of Communication Sciences at University of Malaga (1996-2002) and General Director (Deputy Rector) of Communication and Information at this University (2004-2011). He holds (2006) the International UNESCO Chair on Communications at Universities of Grenoble and Lyon (France), has been Visiting Researcher or Visiting Professor at several Universities (San Jose State University -California-, Paris 8, Sheffield, Vienna, and others). General Secretary of the Research Committee on Communication, Knowledge and Culture of the International Sociological Association from 1990 to 1994. Member of the European Institute for the Media (Manchester-Düsseldorf) (1994-2000). He has researched, taught, advised and cooperated with Spanish, European, American and African universities. Author of more than 100 publications with editorials and

journals from Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, France, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, United States, Mexico, Brazil and Austria, as well as Spanish. His research focuses in digital culture, popular culture and its users.

**Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt** (pille.pruulmann.vengerfeldt@mau.se), a member of Academia Europaea, is a professor in media and communication at Malmö University. Methodologically, she takes a critical, creative and action-oriented approach. Her research examines how digital technologies and their impact on our everyday lives are co-created through cultural, professional and interpersonal contexts. Much of Pille's recent research efforts are dedicated to understanding datafication of people in museums and media. She is treasurer of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and the international director of the European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School.

She blogs at <https://pillepv.voog.com/> and tweets @pillepv

# FLEMISH JOURNALISM STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF AND PREPAREDNESS FOR ENTREPRENEURIAL JOB PROFILES IN THEIR FUTURE CAREERS

DORIEN LUYCKX & AMBER VERSTRAETEN

*University of Antwerp*

## ABSTRACT

*Digitalization and failing traditional revenue streams have led to some news companies blurring the lines between commercial, technological and editorial departments to survive the digital transformation, innovate and remain financially sustainable. Future journalists will enter news companies that stimulate this cross-functional approach to tackle challenges and fuel innovation, but we know less about how journalism students expect to navigate the blurring lines between technology, business and journalism. Moreover, entrepreneurial journalism has focused on studying innovation, individualization and capitalization to understand journalists' part in creating the future of journalism. Still, it is less clear how future journalists perceive these aspects. We surveyed 150 Flemish journalism students (bachelor's and master's level) to understand how they perceive this cross-functional trend and the different aspects of entrepreneurial journalism. Flemish journalism students believe journalists should innovate to help journalism survive, and a large portion of journalism students also anticipates becoming journalism innovators or entrepreneurs. However, innovation is still largely perceived as technological and multimedia and not as entrepreneurial. We did see a convergence of commercial and editorial skills to respond to the changing news context (native advertising, the audience turn) and journalism students gave some importance to business skills. We also noted pull and push dynamics towards freelancing. Finally, Flemish journalism students seem to have a realistic understanding of job opportunities. In response to job scarcity, some prepare to become a freelancer, while others look at career opportunities in other industries.*

Keywords: Journalism innovation ▪ journalism education ▪ entrepreneurial journalism ▪ boundary work ▪ interpretive repertoires

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The digitalization and the struggling, traditional business model of news has impacted newsrooms immensely and has led to organizational transformations and changing practices ever since the turn of the millennium, putting high pressure on journalists to reconstruct their professional practice (Cottle & Ashton, 1999; Witschge & Nygren, 2009). Over time, media owners have increased their influence on how newsrooms operate (Strömbäck & Karlsson, 2011). For one, decision-makers in news media believe that barriers between editorial, commercial and technological departments are slowing down innovation and progress (Boyles, 2016; Vos & Singer, 2016). Already in 2014, the leaked NYT innovation report stated that the first step towards successful change “should be a push to abandon our current metaphors of choice: ‘the wall’ and ‘church and state’ - which project an enduring need for division” (p. 61). Removing the barriers has led to new journalistic profiles, renegotiations of the line between commercial and editorial departments (Ferrer-Conill et al., 2020) and the development of job profiles that bridge these traditionally separate departments in news media, dubbed as ‘bridge roles’ by practitioners and in industry publications (Cherubini, 2017; Ciobanu, 2018). These bridging job profiles and the changing boundaries that come with them entail several challenges. They aren’t always accepted by newsrooms or scholars, especially regarding entrepreneurial journalism, the convergence of entrepreneurship and journalism. (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Meyen & Riesmeyer, 2012).

Nevertheless, the next generations of journalists might be asked to rethink these boundaries as they will enter an industry that is different from the one that existed in the previous century. Even if traditional role perceptions remain, it does not remove the increasing pressure on news media to change these boundaries. Several news companies are stimulating a cross-functional approach to tackle challenges, while lines between technological, editorial and commercial departments are redrawn further (Cornia et al., 2018). These changes largely determine the professional future and work environment of young journalists. However, little research looks at their perspective on these trends.

In this study, we look at journalism students’ views on three aspects of entrepreneurial journalism: capitalization (being involved in turning assets into capital), innovation (building innovative solutions to current challenges of news media) and individualization (freelancing and self-employment).

Via a survey among 150 Flemish journalism students, we wanted to understand how they perceive this cross-functional merger in journalism practice. Future journalism innovators are expected to have cross-medial skills and an entrepreneurial mindset to take advantage of opportunities the internet and technology might offer (Briggs, 2012). However, research looking into the needed skills of journalism students to enter this work environment is scarce, so we expanded our survey to have them evaluate the skills and tasks of journalists that are connected to traditionally separated departments (commercial, technological and editorial) and to

indicate their proficiency in performing these tasks. We also asked them about their expectations of their future careers, which can shed light on the supply of change agents within the Flemish news industry and the divergence of journalism graduates towards other industries.

The continuing financial struggles in news media mean that a growing number of journalists will start as freelancers. In Flanders, one in four journalists were working as freelancers in 2018, two years earlier, one in five were active as a freelancer (De Cock & de Smaele, 2016; Van Leuven et al., 2019). Freelancing can be a voluntary or forced decision, for instance, due to lay-offs, unappealing job profiles or limited job opportunities (De Cock & de Smaele, 2016; Zion et al., 2016). Many young journalists also start as freelancers before landing a fulltime job. Freelancing demands entrepreneurial skills to, e.g. pitch stories, promote work and negotiate contracts. In this study, we want to understand the pull and push towards freelancing among journalism students and how prepared they feel to develop their freelancing activities.

Some studies looked at the impact digitalization and financial struggles have on the journalism profession and how to implement these cross-functional skills in the curriculum of journalism education (Mensing, 2010). Journalism educators have been looking for ways to implement cross-functional skills in their educational programs to prepare students. They take different approaches: focus on multimedia training (audiovisual and social media), technological skills (coding and data) or entrepreneurial skills. In general, innovative journalism seems to be interpreted as technological rather than entrepreneurial, as a survey by Singer and Broersma (2020) among journalism students from 'two leading journalism programs' in the UK and the Netherlands showed, suggesting future innovators might be mainly focused on technological advances. However, without a functioning business model, journalism struggles. So, innovative journalism might have to enclose the business model as well. These insights are often strongly embedded in their locality, so research from other countries helps to expand our understanding of future journalists view on innovation and entrepreneurship.

In the following section, we will outline how digitalization, financial struggles and media executives are pushing to change boundaries between commercial, editorial and technological job profiles at news media and how this impacts newsrooms. Furthermore, we will expand on three aspects of entrepreneurial journalism: capitalization, innovation and individualization and how journalism educators try to implement cross-functional and entrepreneurial skills in journalism training.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Bridges between editorial, commercial and technological departments in news media**

One of the main challenges for news media in the 21st century has been to recalibrate



the balance between their commercial and democratic activities while advertising revenue decreases and the audience's willingness to pay for news remains low (Chyi & Ng, 2020). Since the turn of the millennia, news media have been struggling with their business model, and some argue that the future of journalism depends on innovative enterprises that focus on new technology and the profitable production of editorial content (Depuydt, 2017; Harlow, 2018). Therefore, many of the necessary changes have focused on developing innovative solutions to remain in business or generate growth. For instance, at the New York Times, innovation isn't perceived as just digital progress but also the strengthening of their advertising business (Leonhardt et al., 2017).

Journalists have been encouraged to be a part of the solution by implementing entrepreneurial thinking in the newsroom, but it also puts high pressure on journalists to reconstruct their daily job (Cottle & Ashton, 1999; Witschge & Nygren, 2009). In several studies and industry publications, experts have voiced the need to lift the silos between technological, commercial and editorial departments in news media to cultivate innovative changes (Baron et al., 2017; Boyles, 2016; Ellick et al., 2014). For instance, the lower revenue from advertising in the digital space has increased the pressure from media executives on newsrooms to create an advertiser- and subscriber-friendly environment by blending commercial and editorial tasks (Artemas et al., 2018; Cornia et al., 2018; De Smet & Vanormelingen, 2011; Hanusch et al., 2020). Some researchers and news media even suggest that changing the boundaries between commercial and editorial activities is necessary for journalism's survival (Cohen, 2015; Picard, 2015; Vos & Singer, 2016). However, these changes aren't always accepted (Boyles, 2016), nor without challenges for journalism's democratic role and independence (Carlson, 2015; Carroll, 2019).

Nonetheless, journalism innovation has resulted in less clearly defined boundaries between technology, commerce and journalism. Within journalism studies, many scholars have been studying this boundary work (Lewis, 2015). Boundary work is a standard process all professions engage in to delineate their profession from adjacent professions and to "marginalize nonprofessionals encroaching on their turf" (Lewis, 2012, p. 837). This concept helps to understand "how distinctions such as professional/amateur, producer/user, and journalist/non-journalist are forged, maintained, and continuously reconfigured amid changing circumstances" (Lewis, 2012, p. 842). These blurring boundaries have led to different reactions from journalists: some develop coping mechanisms, instigate collaborations (Drew & Thomas, 2018), redefine their position within this hybridity or reject the interaction with other stakeholders altogether (Luyckx & Paulussen, 2022).

In this context, entrepreneurial journalists are often defined by crossing boundaries, merging journalistic ideals or creating new job profiles (Lewis, 2015; Ruotsalainen & Villi, 2018). Meyen and Riesmeyer (2012) showed how different journalistic profiles tailored to commercial goals have already emerged: "service providers" want to connect with the audience, "traders" look at the audience as customers,

and “promoters” try to include advertisers’ needs. Grubenmann and Meckel (2017) argued that some journalists take a “service-oriented” approach in an attempt to improve journalism online. In industry publications, these job types have been called bridge profiles: as they bridge the traditional gaps between the commercial, editorial and technological departments at news media (Cherubini, 2017; Ciobanu, 2018; Searles, 2018). Several of these new bridge profiles cross these boundaries purposefully to accelerate innovation (Kosterich, 2021; Royal & Kiesow, 2021):

- Commerce and editorial: social media editors, native advertising creators, entrepreneurs, e.g.
- Technology and editorial: data journalists, computational journalism, newsroom developers, e.g.
- Technology and commerce: data analysts, growth hackers, AI developers, e.g.
- Commerce, technology and editorial: product developers, e.g.

For instance, social media editors and audience engagement have become standard to newsroom practices to increase traffic, promote editorial content and attract people to the news medium’s platforms fulfilling democratic and commercial goals simultaneously (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Lischka, 2018). A study of US journalistic job postings from 2010 to 2015 showed how social media skills have become equally important besides traditional skills such as writing and reporting (Wenger et al., 2018). With the implementation of online advertising that matches the form and function of editorial content, advertisers have been moving from the side-line (banner ads) to a more embedded position (Wojdyski, 2016). Thus, advertising demands a much closer interaction with the advertiser, resulting in the development of content studios within news media, often enlisting current or former journalists (Palau-Sampio, 2021).

However, many journalists remain skeptical regarding commercial and strategic activities, as the growing influence of the audience and advertisers could threaten their autonomy, one of the five journalistic core values (Deuze, 2005). Increasing corporate or commercial pressure across western newsrooms has made journalists feel less autonomous in their profession (Hanitzsch, 2011). Moreover, tensions between the audience, advertisers and newsrooms seem to temper the enthusiasm among journalists to change their daily activities (Duffy et al., 2018; Johnson & Dade, 2019; Luyckx & Paulussen, 2022; van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). In a study by Grubenmann and Meckel (2017), digitalization was considered a threat by some journalists. When studying the interpretative repertoires of journalism students, traditional views of journalistic roles remained dominant (Singer & Broersma, 2020). These recent studies seem to continue resonating with a long-established division between those journalists exploring the opportunities of the internet and those who remain hesitant to change their journalistic performance (O’Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008). This tension between market orientation and professional autonomy lies at the core of entrepreneurial journalism and academics and media professionals do

not yet have a clear answer on how to approach the hybridity, change culture and complexity of a journalist's job.

In any case, future journalists will enter these newsrooms that might be resistant, cooperative or forced to redefine boundaries. Because of the recent technological and commercial aspects of journalism practice, the job of journalists has also become much more complex (Barnes & de Villiers Scheepers, 2018). Therefore, we need to expand our current insights by understanding how journalism students view this merging of skills in a journalist's practice, originally allocated to other departments in news media. Their perception regarding the boundaries of what is included in a journalist's job can have an impact on how journalism practice will evolve, and it is important to understand their view to increase our understanding of future newsrooms.

*RQ1: How do journalism students perceive the job of a journalist regarding commercial, editorial and technological skills or tasks?*

In 2005, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defined skills as part of competencies: "the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual's knowledge of [a] language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating" (OECD 2005, 4). Building on that definition, we define skills for this study as what journalism students need to be able to do in order to perform journalistic tasks competently in a newsroom.

Many studies have looked into what media professionals believe to be important skills to have as a journalist and compared these results with the curricula of journalism schools (Ferrucci, 2017; Larrondo Ureta & Peña Fernández, 2017; Vasilendiuc & Sutu, 2021; Wenger et al., 2018). Other studies pointed out how over time and space, the desired skills for journalists change (Fahmy, 2008; Örnebring & Mellado, 2016). However, many of these studies focus on more traditional or digital editorial skills such as reporting, networking and writing. Scholars studying entrepreneurial journalism have been expanding research into skills further by including technological, commercial and entrepreneurial skills. The entrepreneurial journalist tends to combine skills from technological, editorial and commercial profiles, but is still quite contested among journalists as this type of journalist could be viewed as going against the protected division between church and state (Vos & Singer, 2016). However, in the following paragraph, we will outline how the concept of entrepreneurial journalism goes beyond this specific type of journalist and how it actually encloses many aspects of the current professional reality of young journalists, making it crucial to understand how journalism students view these aspects.

## 2.2. Entrepreneurial journalism

Innovation is strongly connected to entrepreneurialism. According to Drok (2013) entrepreneurship and self-employment have been two of the six major innovative changes in journalism. Entrepreneurialism is a multifaceted concept studied intensely in management studies, but only recently has it been of interest to journalism studies (Martiarena, 2013; Parker, 2011; Singer, 2018). It has become an important part of certain journalists' jobs that bridges the gap between commerce, technology and journalism and has been studied as entrepreneurial journalism (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016; Porlezza & Splendore, 2016). Despite the fact that entrepreneurial journalism isn't easily defined and most attempts focus on different aspects or fail to be all-encompassing (Ruotsalainen & Villi, 2018), the majority of academic work puts three main elements at its core: capitalization, innovation and individualization.

**Capitalization** is defined as the process of converging assets into capital. In general, entrepreneurs are considered as people who take the risk of developing and growing a new venture independently of existing corporations (Luchsinger & Bagby, 1987). Within journalism, one key element is the fact that individuals are being called upon to bridge the existing separation between journalism and commerce to reinstate journalism's relevance and revive the faltering business model (Cohen, 2015). For instance, we see that individual journalists use newer, online formats such as podcasting or newsletters to develop an audience through platforms like Substack or Patreon that can support them financially in their journalistic careers and can help grow the team behind the brand. Other journalists go out on their own to build sustainable journalism startups and new business models for news like BuzzFeed (USA), De Correspondent (NL), Republik (CH) or Krautreporter (D). For instance, Siapera and Papadopoulou (2016) argued that some of these journalism startups have found innovative ways to reconcile business and democratic goals by operating for social benefit and take advantage of the cooperative and collaborative nature of the digital space.

A lot of scholarly attention has gone towards another group of entrepreneurial journalists that remains employed within newsrooms and is capable of capitalizing on their journalistic content in an innovative way to turn a profit (Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016). In contrast to entrepreneurs, these intrapreneurs develop new opportunities in an existing organization to create economic value by taking advantage of a changing landscape (Parker, 2011). They distinguish themselves from entrepreneurs because they operate within existing corporations to push them in a new direction (Singer, 2018). Entrepreneurs are self-employed and independent innovators, while intrapreneurs are focused on results, ambition and competition in the workplace (Luchsinger & Bagby, 1987).

Entrepreneurial journalists are seen as change agents that push for **innovation** and creative solutions to current challenges of journalism, both inside and outside of legacy media, depending on who is defining the group (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016). As argued by Slappendel (1996), innovation is being produced by "the interaction

of structural influences and the actions of individuals”. So innovation in organizations builds on individual agents within the necessary structures in place. In accordance, Steensen (2009) argued that newsroom culture, management and innovative individuals are important determinants for innovation processes in journalism. These determinants can be accelerators or barriers to innovation (Spyridou et al., 2013). Several researchers have argued that newsrooms have been slow to innovate (Boczkowski, 2005; Ryfe, 2013). It meant that innovation has often been reactive rather than proactive and a process of mimicry (Paulussen, 2016). Moreover, innovation in journalism is often mainly considered in connection with technology (Singer & Broersma, 2020), even though it is much broader than technology alone and encompasses business innovation as well, like developing a production process, tapping into a new market segment or finding new revenue sources (García-Avilés et al., 2019). In many cases, technology has been the solution, but the driving force is often the need for the news business to survive or to create new journalism enterprises (Mierzejewska, 2011). For instance, being innovative technologically can attract investors, generate new revenue or make production processes more efficient or effective (Leurdijk, 2015; Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016). However, journalists seem to accept technological changes to their job much more than changes to their relationship with the audience or their professional culture (Ekdale et al., 2015). Therefore, we expect to see a strong connection between technology and innovation in journalism students’ mindsets and a lesser connection between innovation and audience engagement or business modelling.

**Individualization** is described as employing yourself and the self-determination of journalists to discover new opportunities and niches and develop successful ventures (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016; Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Mathisen, 2017). Fulltime jobs in newsrooms have become more scarce (Bridges, 2017), but newsrooms are still expected to put out increasing quantities of quality content, so freelance journalists have become an integral part of the daily workings of newsrooms (Achtenhagen, 2017). In 2018, one in four Flemish journalists were working as a freelancer, up from one in five in 2016 (De Cock & de Smaele, 2016; Van Leuven et al., 2019), while other neighbouring countries have even higher percentages. In the Netherlands, half of all journalists are active as a freelancer (De Cock & de Smaele, 2016). Job scarcity and the expected work experience in job vacancies meant that more starting journalists were being pulled or pushed into freelancing before they could land fulltime employment. Other, more experienced journalists are being forced to start as a freelancer because newsrooms have shrunk due to budget cuts and digitalization (Holton, 2016; Mathisen, 2017). This distinction between being pushed and pulled is important, as a qualitative study by De Cock and de Smaele (2016) showed how free choice determined job satisfaction among freelance journalists.

Working as a freelancer can be precarious, and one could argue that it is shifting a large group of professionals away from secure employment towards the insecure gig economy. News media from several countries have been consolidating in only

a handful of media conglomerates, which impacted the negotiation power of freelancers in regards to their rates, leading to legal action by Dutch freelancers against the Belgian media company DPG Media (Kivits, 2019). Generally, freelancers earn less than their employed peers with the same skills and experience, and financial insecurity pushes many laid-off journalists towards other better-paying industries (Bridges, 2017; Zion et al., 2016). De Cock and de Smaele (2016) also showed how entrepreneurial skills seemed pivotal to freelancers' mindset change from a 'slave to' to a 'master of' their careers. Moreover, some scholars argue that freelancers can offer insights into how newsrooms can implement entrepreneurial thinking ethically, as freelancers have to deal with the tensions between commerce and the normative principles of journalism on an individual level. Moreover, many journalists start out as freelancers but become fulltime employed journalists in newsrooms after a couple of years, bringing along their entrepreneurial thinking (Holton, 2016; Mathisen, 2019).

With freelancing being one of the employment options for journalists, journalism students need to be adequately prepared to be able to develop their freelancing activities. As freelancers, journalists must be able to promote themselves, negotiate contracts and manage their business. However, there is a growing concern about this job prospect among journalism students because they often do not know how to start as a freelancer (Wake, 2016) nor how to generate revenue from journalistic content (Oller Alonso et al., 2019). Therefore, we need to understand if journalism students are pulled or pushed into this type of employment and if they feel prepared to become freelancers. Moreover, Standaert (2018) interviewed early-career journalists, which showed that they were not aware of how their career goals did not correspond with freelancing expectations and job scarcity. In this study, Standaert (2018) argued that a disillusion arose further along in their careers when young journalists realized a fulltime job in a newsroom might be hard to achieve, and many ended up leaving journalism altogether. This could increase the divergence of journalistically trained people towards other industries.

The process of innovation is supported by individuals working with and within supportive organizational structures. Some journalism students will become innovators, entrepreneurs and change agents, and others might become freelancers or create bridges between newsrooms and technological or commercial partners. Therefore, it is important to understand how they perceive innovation, entrepreneurship and individualization in journalism, as this will influence the process of innovation within news media. Their perception could give insights into how journalism innovation and bridge profiles might evolve in the next decade. It is yet unclear how future journalists understand entrepreneurial journalism, with little research looking into their point of view, leading to the second research question.

*RQ2: How do Flemish journalism students perceive individualization, innovation and capitalization in journalism?*

### 2.3. Bridge profiles and entrepreneurship in journalism education

The professional routines that were successful in the past century are no longer adapted to the current journalistic processes (Deuze, 2008). Future journalists will enter news companies that stimulate a cross-functional approach to tackle challenges while lines between technological, editorial and commercial departments are redrawn further (Cornia et al., 2018; Westlund et al., 2021). Much research has been dedicated to studying the impact of these changing boundaries (Ferrer-Conill et al., 2020; Hanusch et al., 2020; Luyckx & Paulussen, 2022).

In journalism education, the implementation of entrepreneurial skills has been especially strenuous, as it exposes one of the biggest challenges of news media today: how to rebalance the financial and democratic well-being of news media. The clear separation of commercial and editorial departments used to safeguard this balance in the past century, but today it can no longer guarantee the survival of journalism, and many researchers have pointed out its deficiencies (Coddington, 2015; Lewis et al., 2008). However, there isn't really a proposed framework that works instead of it. As argued by Baines and Kennedy (2010) and Barnes and de Villiers Scheepers (2018), the need for entrepreneurial journalists in the industry does not mean that the whole curriculum should be addressing this need, but journalism students should be able to think critically about cross-functional developments at news media and how different skills from other job profiles can be used and adopted.

In the earliest part of the past decade, several journalism programs have adapted their program to these changes (Ferrier, 2013; Hunter & Nel, 2011). To adhere to industry demands, some journalism programs dedicated more time to entrepreneurship, as they argue that these are necessary to build the future of journalism and should help future journalists to create their own jobs and develop a change in the digital landscape (Massey & Elmore, 2013; Schaich & Klein, 2013). However, it is still a fairly new development to implement entrepreneurial skills in journalism programs (Ferrier, 2013; Lepistö & Ronkko, 2013). In 2011, three in ten of the American journalism programs surveyed by Becker et al. (2012) were teaching entrepreneurial and managerial skills. An early study by Schaich and Klein (2013) showed how journalism educators still held traditional views about entrepreneurship in journalism (Vasilendiuc & Sutu, 2021). Over the past ten years, more and more journalism programs have been looking at ways to implement entrepreneurialism. Nowadays, specialization in entrepreneurial journalism can be found in the UK, Canada, France, Denmark, Colombia, Mexico and the Netherlands (Deuze & Witschge, 2018). Some argue that entrepreneurship should be 'more a mindset than a skillset' as voiced by Mark Harrison, Head of Digital Production at the BBC (Baines & Kennedy, 2010, p. 101; Quinn, 2010). Vos and Singer (2016, p. 150) argued that entrepreneurial journalism is described both in terms of "an 'entrepreneurial spirit' as[...] a specific practice or set of practices". Others focus more on an orientation towards change or the "discovery and exploitation of opportunities"

(Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016; Schultz & Jones, 2017, p. 12). According to Barnes and de Villiers Scheepers (2018) such an entrepreneurial mindset can be taught best via problem-solving techniques.

Singer and Broersma (2020) used the concept of interpretative repertoires to understand how journalism students from the UK and the Netherlands perceived change and innovation in the news industry. The researchers proposed to study graduates from these two journalism programs because they were considered to be at the forefront of journalistic innovation, which resulted in students having a modernistic view of journalism practice and a self-perception of themselves as future innovators. Casero-Ripollés et al. (2016) noted that most journalism students link the entrepreneur with freelancing and entrepreneurship with innovation and creativity, rather than economic and financial issues or audience engagement. They also noted a high willingness to venture into entrepreneurship initially, however, the more advanced the program, the less willing journalism students were to be entrepreneurial.

Not all journalism programs are the same, so different results might appear when surveying other students. Moreover, Belgium has taken a protectionist stance in regards to their media industry, which according to some has led to slowed down innovation, despite its necessity. So, it might be interesting to see how this impacts journalism programs and journalism students' perception of entrepreneurial journalism. Therefore, this study aims to increase our understanding of the entrepreneurial mindset across six different journalism programs within one local media market. This study helps to get a full picture of Flemish journalism students' perception of innovation in journalism, and by reusing some of Singer and Broersma (2020) survey questions, we could connect past and current results.

A study by Chen et al. (1998), supported by insights from Wakkee et al. (2010) on developing entrepreneurial employees, showed that when people believe that they are capable of entrepreneurial behaviour, this will be reflected in their actual level of entrepreneurial behaviour. To develop entrepreneurial minds, people should be able to recognize what they are capable or not capable of, increasing their self-efficacy. Moreover, future journalists need entrepreneurial skills in their careers as many new journalists struggle to find jobs or have been disappointed by the ones that remain (Massey & Elmore, 2013; Singer, 2016). Rather than looking at how entrepreneurial skills and mindset are being translated to the curriculum, we wanted to understand how journalism students evaluate their own skills in the three domains: technology, commerce and journalism, leading to the final research question.

*RQ3: How do Flemish journalism students evaluate their acquired skillset in different domains (commercial, editorial, technological) in light of their future careers?*



### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Survey design

To understand how journalism students perceive the future of journalism and their future as journalists, we surveyed 150 Dutch-speaking, Flemish journalism students (both bachelor and master level) at the beginning of 2020. The survey was developed in Qualtrics, and the data was processed in SPSS. The first set of nine statements (5-point Likert scale) were taken from the survey by Singer and Broersma (2020) and translated for this study to Dutch to understand how journalism students perceive the current landscape, entrepreneurship and innovation. We also asked them in an open question to give three different words that describe what innovation in journalism means, followed up by a multiple choice question on different types of journalism innovation (artificial intelligence, business, clickbait, native advertising, process optimization, etc.). This set of six questions was meant to get a general view of how they perceive innovation and entrepreneurship in journalism. The answers to the open question were then coded and categorized according to semantic closeness and similarity. The open question allowed analyzing interpretive repertoires. Repertoires can be seen as building blocks speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes, and other phenomena (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). This method thus allows understanding how people use language to build stories about the social world by using cultural frames.

The next eight questions helped understand how journalism students evaluate certain skills and tasks for journalists that are connected to different parts of news media (commercial, technological and editorial). They were also asked to evaluate their own proficiency and to what level their educational program offered training in these skills. We finally asked eight questions about student's future careers with a focus on freelancing and different career options (innovator, entrepreneur, fulltime employed and so on).

#### 3.2. Context

The Flemish news industry counts three large private media groups (DPG Media, Mediahuis and Roularta), a large public broadcaster (VRT) and eight smaller news media represented by Media.21. The public broadcaster VRT and two private media groups (DPG Media and Mediahuis) represent more than 80 per cent of the online news media market in Flanders (Cools et al., 2018). In 2020, the Vlaamse Vereniging van Journalisten counted 2.537 professional Flemish journalists (VVJ, 2020). This number has been decreasing in the past years. In 2018, 25.3% of Flemish journalists worked as independent journalists or freelancers, and 72.7% were employed at a media organization (Van Leuven et al., 2019).

### 3.3. Sample

Flanders is the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium with about 6.65 million inhabitants. In 2019-2020, 942 students were enrolled in a Flemish journalism bachelor's program, and 190 students were enrolled in a Flemish journalism master's program (AHOVOKS, 2020). In Belgium, we have three Flemish universities offering a journalism master's program and six Flemish colleges offering a journalism bachelor's program.

We surveyed 150 students during the second term of the school year 2019-2020. Students were enrolled in six Belgian universities and colleges that offered a journalism program. Three Flemish universities offer journalism master degrees, so we included them all in the survey: Vrije Universiteit Brussel, KU Leuven and Universiteit Gent. We also selected the three largest journalism bachelor's degrees offered at Flemish colleges, representing 75 per cent of Flemish students enrolled in a journalism bachelor's program in 2019-2020 (AHOVOKS, 2020): Arteveldehogeschool Gent, Thomas More Mechelen and Artesis Plantijn Antwerpen.

We only sampled students that were more advanced in their journalism training in the school year 2019-2020, so we excluded first-year bachelor students and focused on master's students and second-year bachelor's students. We did not set out to survey third-year bachelor's students, because they have traineeships during the second term, which made it difficult to survey them via a paper survey. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we had to change our approach in the middle of the data collection from offline to online data retrieval. However, as we had already collected data via the paper survey for the second-year bachelor's students, we continued with this selection for the online data collection.

*Table 1 Surveyed percentage of total journalism students per institution*

Paper survey in March 2020		Online survey in April 2020			
Artesis Plantijn Antwerpen	Thomas More Mechelen	Vrije Universiteit Brussel	KU Leuven	Arteveldehogeschool Gent	Universiteit Gent
72%	83%	50%	50%	28%	30%

Online surveys have the disadvantage that longer surveys have a more challenging time to achieve completion, and respondents lose interest (Wright, 2005). Due to the pandemic, many more online surveys were sent out, so people's willingness to participate decreased as well. We surveyed 57% of all master's and second-year bachelor's students in the selected programs. 114 respondents were from a bachelor's program, 36 respondents were from a master's program. The sample was more male (67%) compared to the complete population (40% men, 60% women) based on data from AHOVOKS. Respondents' age ranged between 21 and 24 years old ( $M=22.8$ ). The survey took, on average, about 15 minutes to complete.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Flemish journalism students on innovation and entrepreneurship

We asked the students to evaluate ten general statements, nine derived from Singer and Broersma (2020) and the statement ‘There exists a clear separation between advertising and journalism’, on a five-point Likert scale (see Figure 1). Almost all students (strongly) agree that journalism is a lot more different than ten years ago (99%), and journalism has to constantly change to remain relevant as our society changes (93%). About eight out of ten agree that journalists should innovate to survive (83%).

71% of the students (strongly) agree that journalists need to be up to date on new revenue models. Half of all students believe that ‘journalism in the future will be dependent mainly on external funding via e.g. crowdfunding or donations’. This result is much lower than in Singer and Broersma (2020), where 69% of the British students and 75% of the Dutch students agreed. This could suggest that journalism students in Belgium still believe in the sustainability of the dual revenue model of subscriptions and advertising that exists in many news media. Even though half of the surveyed group believe that there exists a clear separation between advertising and news content, one in four students does not support this statement.

Half of the students agreed (strongly) with the statements that referred to the traditional journalistic role perception like keeping power accountable (53%), and three in five agreed that journalism should contribute to positive change (65%). These results are more in line with the Dutch students’ evaluation (resp. 60% and 70%) than the British students’ evaluation (resp. 89% and 88%) of these statements from the 2016 survey by Singer and Broersma (2020).

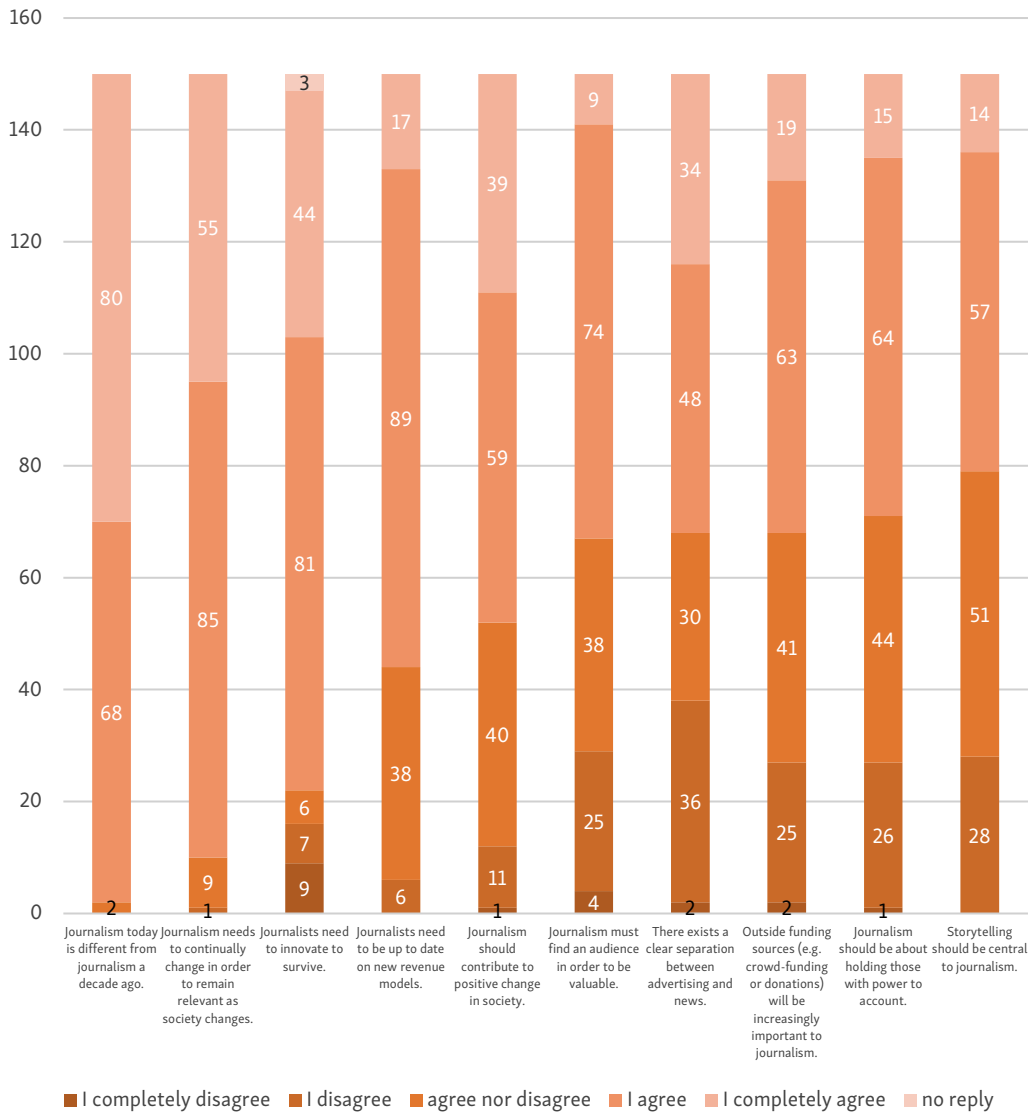


Figure 1 Students' evaluation of ten statements on innovation and entrepreneurship in journalism (N=150).

Regarding innovation, we also asked the respondents to give three keywords to describe 'an innovative journalist'. We collected those keywords that were mentioned more than five times in Table 2. Our findings show that the interpretative repertoires of Flemish journalism students are dominated by associations with creativity (68 times), cross-media skills (32 times), and technology (32 times). These keywords can be clustered into five different skills and/or mindsets: technology-related, journalistic, audience-related, entrepreneurial and change. Technology is the cluster most

strongly connected with innovation, and the cluster audience is least connected with innovation.

Table 2 Discursive clusters from analysis of answers to open question ‘what is an innovative journalist?’

Different words to describe ‘innovative journalist’	Total # mentions	Clusters
Cross-media skills	32	Technology/platforms
Technological change	17	
Curiosity	16	
Technology	15	
Digital	12	
Progressive	11	
Originality	11	
Newness	9	
Social media	8	
Up-to-date	8	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>139</b>	
Creativity	68	Journalism
Storytelling	6	
Being critical	5	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>79</b>	
Open-minded	18	Change
Change	14	
Flexible	8	
Adaptive	6	
Out-of-the-box thinking	5	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>51</b>	
To dare	10	Entrepreneurship
Insight	8	
To do something	5	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>23</b>	
Knowledge of the audience	9	Audience
Targeted audience	6	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>15</b>	

#### 4.2. Flemish journalism students on a journalist’s job and profile

The majority still consider traditional tasks of journalists as important, like adhering to ethical principles, delivering information quickly to an audience and having reporting, writing and editing skills (see Figure 2). We see that journalism students

also emphasize the importance of knowing their audience and knowing how to use digital technology. Knowledge about business insights such as competitors and basic business principles is seen as important as well, but actually being involved with matters that relate to generating revenue is seen as one of the least important tasks of journalists, besides attracting the largest audience with their news content. Half of them find the skill to create stories to generate as many clicks as possible unimportant.

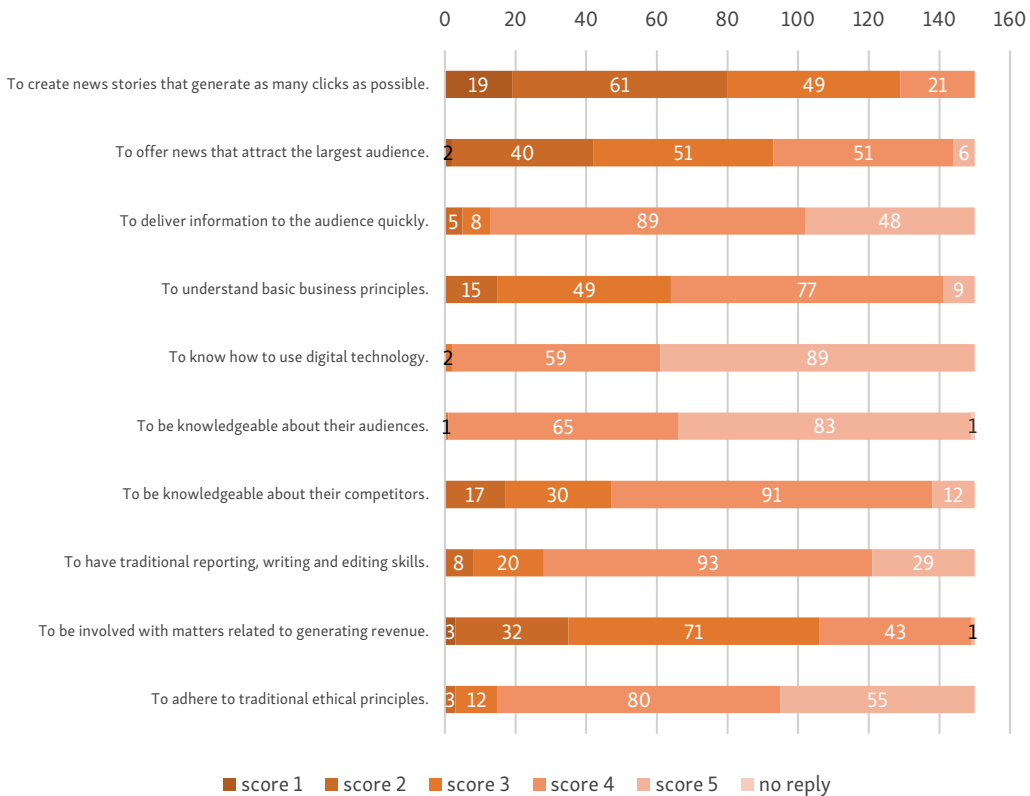


Figure 2 Perceived importance of different skills (1= not at all important, 5= very important).

In Figure 3, we see an overview of the perceived importance per skillset. Journalism students find it less important to be able to code computer programs than other skills. Only 23% gave it a score of seven or higher, and almost one in three said it to be not important at all. Marketing skills and business skills are found important by a bit less than half (marketing) or half of the students (business), with many scoring it around the middle. Multimedia, writing and journalistic skills are scored as the three most important skills to have as a journalist, with social media and technical skills not too far behind, resp. 89% and 75%. Besides marketing and programming skills, students generally do not find any of the other skills completely unimportant.

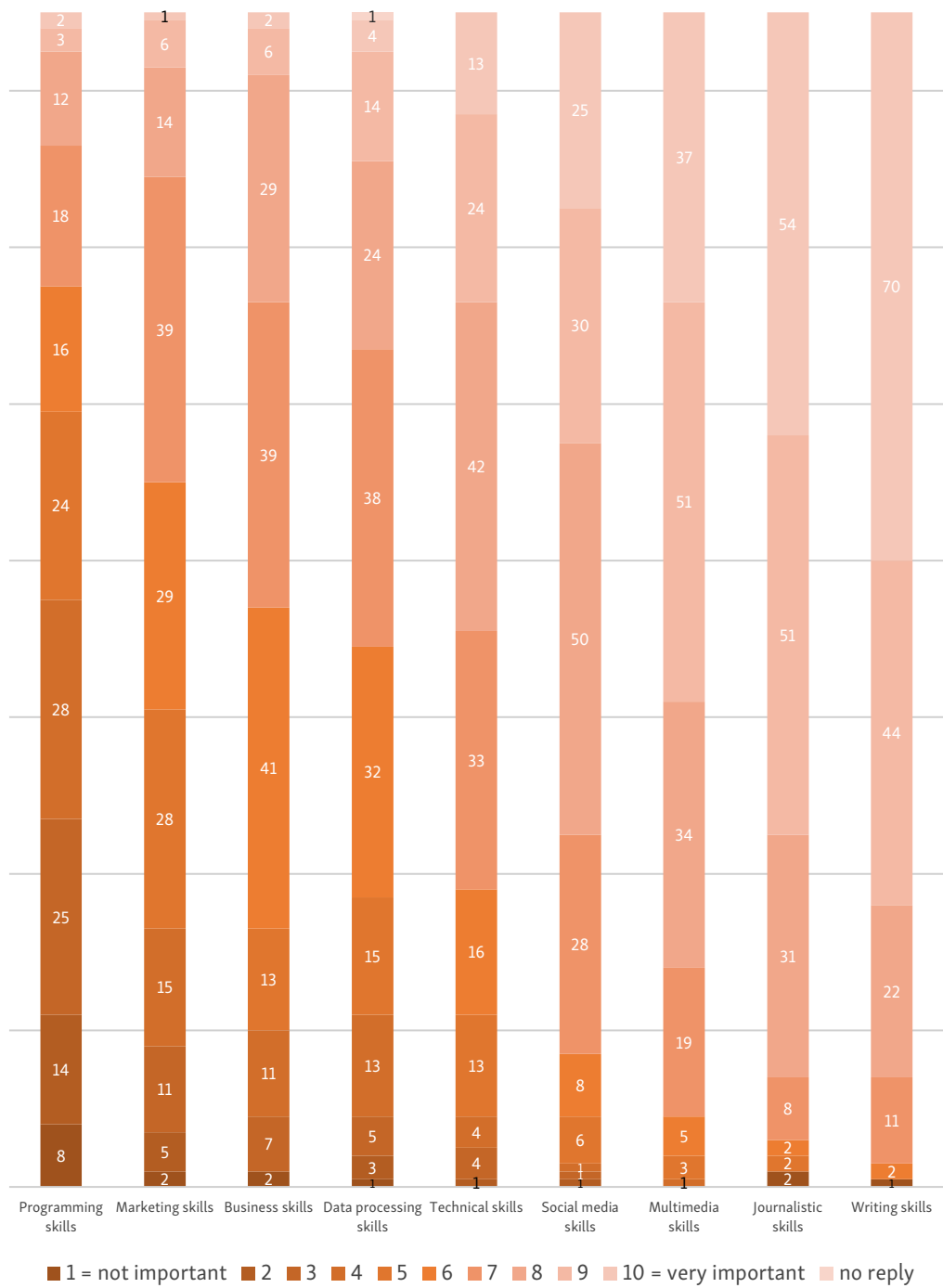


Figure 3 Perceived importance of different skills (N=150)

In Table 3, we see that business, programming and marketing skills are evaluated as the least present in their educational program. Writing, journalistic and multimedia skills are considered to be a large part of their educational program. Social media skills and data processing skills are somewhere around the middle.

Table 3 Presence of skills in an educational program (1-4, 1 = not at all present, 4 = strongly present).

Skillset	Mean score
Writing skills	3.7
Journalistic skills	3.5
Multimedia skills	3.5
Social media skills	3.0
Data processing skills	2.8
Business skills	1.9
Programming skills	1.8
Marketing skills	1.6

When students evaluated their own skills, we noticed two domains they felt competent in: technology and journalism (ethics and production). However, they felt less competent to attract a large audience or to deliver news quickly (see Figure 4). They evaluate their entrepreneurial skills (generating revenue, business know-how and understanding competitors) as the least developed skillset.

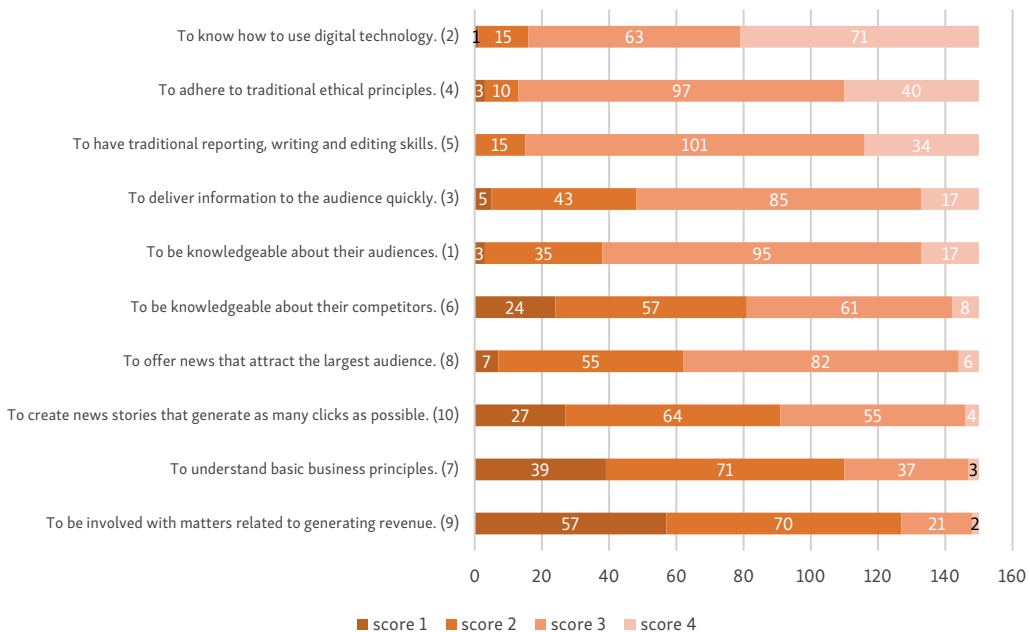


Figure 4 Perceived personal capability of different skills (1= I can't do it at all, 4= I'm very good at it).



We asked the students to evaluate their entrepreneurial skills and how entrepreneurial they want to be on a scale from zero to ten. We noted a significant difference between the level of entrepreneurial skills they assign themselves ( $M=6.46$ ) and the level they want to be at ( $M=8.50$ ).

Social media can be used for several different aims: obtaining feedback, monitoring an audience, self-promotion, window for your articles, measuring the impact on an audience, gathering information or following politicians and others in power. However, these different tasks originally stem from different areas: (self-)promotion could be seen as a commercial task, using it as a source or to stay up to date to politicians are journalistic uses and monitoring or obtaining feedback from the audience signal the audience turn in journalism (Costera Meijer, 2020). We wanted to see which tasks journalism students deem important. We asked them to select up to three uses (see Table 4). Most students value social media as a tool to connect and understand the audience: measuring the impact of stories on the audience and obtaining feedback from the audience were two of the top three prioritized uses. Using social media as an information source is the second most prioritized use. Regarding promotion, self-promotion is far less prioritized than promoting articles.

Table 4 Journalism students' prioritization of social media uses (respondents were asked to select between 1 and 3 items).

Question: "Social media are important ..."	Total # (%)
... to measure the impact of stories on the audience.	90 (22%)
... as an information source.	87 (21%)
... to obtain feedback from the audience.	69 (17%)
... to promote articles.	67 (16%)
... to follow politicians.	33 (8%)
... to promote yourself.	33 (8%)
... to monitor the audience.	29 (7%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>408 (100%)</b>

### 4.3. Flemish journalism students on their future careers in journalism

The survey also showed that 38% of the students are willing to **freelance**, 30% aren't, and 32% might be willing to freelance. We also asked them how likely they deem it to be that they will have to work as a freelancer. We ordered the data for the perceived likelihood of working as a freelancer according to the willingness to freelance. Students who wanted to freelance deem it likely (score 6-10) that they will indeed work as a freelancer (84%). However, those who do not want to freelance are more or less split in half. 44% deem it likely to be working as a freelancer, even though they do not wish to work as a freelancer. Their mean score for likelihood to freelance ( $M=5.02$ ) isn't as low as one might expect but still lower than for those who were willingly

(M=6.95) or perhaps willingly to freelance (M=6.35). It shows that future journalists experience both the pulling and pushing regarding freelancing in journalism, but also that many journalism students take this prospective future job into account.

Those who said to become an entrepreneur have the highest score of believing they will also be active as a freelancer (M=6.33) after those who said they wanted to be a freelancer (M=7.77), as visible in Table 5. Those who saw themselves as innovators deem it less likely that they will have to work as a freelancer (M=5.75). Students who anticipated to remain employed at a news company all their lives also deem it unlikely (M=5.83). Almost one in five students believes not to be active in journalism in their future careers.

Table 5 Job perspectives for future careers. Respondents had to select one option of the above to answer: “how do you see yourself as a future journalist?”.

Job perspectives for future careers (N=146)	# students selecting this option	% of students choosing this statement	Mean score of this subgroup on the likelihood of freelance
I anticipate being a journalism innovator during my career.	28	19%	5.64
I anticipate being a journalism entrepreneur during my career.	21	14%	6.33
I anticipate being employed fulltime in a newsroom for my whole career.	17	12%	5.82
I anticipate that most of my journalistic work will be as a freelancer.	26	18%	7.77
I would prefer working for a print or broadcast news organization rather than a digital-only one.	24	16%	6.00
I expect not to be active in journalism.	27	19%	5.89
Journalism will be my secondary occupation.	3	2%	4.00

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Innovation perceived as mainly technology and multimedia

Journalism students are very much aware of the importance of innovation and technology to help journalism survive the challenges of digitalization. More than four out of five also recognize the need for journalists to innovate. Consistent with

survey results from other countries, Flemish journalism students perceive innovation mainly as taking advantage of technology and multimedia and less as finding entrepreneurial opportunities. This finding is consistent with the willingness of professional journalists to adapt to technological changes (Ekdale et al., 2015). However, as demand for audience-engaging skills increases (Wenger et al., 2018), the low connection between innovation and audience engagement might leave journalism students unprepared for entry-level jobs in newsrooms.

About one in five also anticipated becoming a journalism innovator. The interpretative repertoires regarding an innovative journalist further confirmed a strong focus on multimedia and technology and much less on entrepreneurship. Although Flemish journalism students recognized the importance of technology, they did not evaluate coding or programming as relevant skills for a journalist. Thus, it is possible that journalism students see technology more as something to use and take advantage of rather than actually building technology themselves. Therefore, it might be interesting to dedicate future research to newsroom developers. What type of profile and background do news developers have? Why do they choose to work in journalism? How can newsrooms support effective interactions between them and journalists? Further insights into news developers could increase our understanding of the cross-functional work culture at news media and how innovation in journalism unfolds.

## **5.2. Capitalization as knowledge and mindset, not practice**

From the results of this study, we argue that Flemish journalism students believe a certain degree of knowledge about revenue models of journalism is necessary but that journalists are not the ones in news media who should also put this knowledge into practice. This insight connects to the challenge of implementing entrepreneurial training in journalism education: whether it's a skillset, a mindset or both. When we look at how they evaluated their educational program, business and marketing skills were among those skillsets that were the least present in their training. The need to be entrepreneurial could be connected to the likelihood of working as freelancers or entrepreneurs in their future careers, as several expected to become freelancers or entrepreneurs. In line with Vos and Singer (2016), a large portion of journalism students found that developing an entrepreneurial mindset was important. However, journalism students felt far less entrepreneurial than they wanted to be.

## **5.3. Individualization as pull and push**

When looking at the responses regarding Flemish journalism students' willingness to freelance and how they estimate the likelihood of actually being active as a freelancer, the survey results seem to indicate that there exists both a push and pull towards freelancing. Feeling pushed into freelancing might lead to lower job

satisfaction because these journalists do not feel in charge of their careers (De Cock & de Smaele, 2016). Freelancing comes with freedom but also uncertainty. Those students who do not expect to be active in journalism also seem unwilling to work as freelancers. Journalism students who are not willing to work as freelancers can be motivated more to work in other industries, as shown by Zion et al. (2016), who stated that job insecurity leads to many journalists venturing into other adjacent industries. Further studies into how to support young journalists with adequate training to be successful as a freelancer are needed, as it seems to become an increasingly important task for journalism education to offer it. Further studies into the relationship between freelancers, newsrooms and news media could also help understand what skills are needed to be successful as a freelancer.

#### **5.4. Blurring lines and journalists as a jack-of-all-trades**

In general, we see that the different departments (technology, commerce and editorial) have been growing closer in the mindset of future journalists. Skills that were traditionally allocated to non-journalistic departments have increased importance for journalism students.

A bit more than half of the students agreed that a clear separation between advertising and news existed, but almost one in five disagreed. Several studies have shown the blurring lines between commercial and editorial content. This trend could contribute to a growing belief among several journalism students that there exists no clear separation between advertising and journalism. Embedded advertising formats like native advertising or podcast hosts voicing advertisements have been increasingly used by news media to increase their advertising revenue (Wojdyski, 2016). Together with a growing influence of commercial departments and management on news media to accommodate advertisers' needs, this is instigating a reconfiguration of how to balance commercial and democratic goals in news media (Cornia et al., 2018). Further qualitative research might be interesting to understand how journalism students believe this blurring line is changing and what possible solutions they envision to tackle this challenge.

In evaluating skills, we see that journalism students complement multimedia and social media skills with journalistic and writing skills. They also noted that these skills were most prominent in their training. In general, journalism students consider business and marketing skills less important. However, we would argue that a certain level of marketing and business skills has transferred to a journalist's job profile. Journalism students reported that they would use social media mainly for audience insights, as an information source and to promote articles. These different tasks surpass traditional lines between marketing and journalism, as understanding the needs of an audience and promoting stories are more recent tasks of newsrooms and connect to the editorial and business goals of the news company. In contrast, journalism students scored programming skills with very low importance

for journalists. This coincided with a low presence of training towards these skills in their educational program evaluation.

In this study, we see a convergence of commercial and editorial skills to respond to the changing news context (native advertising, the audience turn), and journalism students do not fully discard business skills. Journalism students believe journalists should innovate to help journalism survive, and a large portion of journalism students does also anticipate becoming journalism innovators or entrepreneurs. However, innovation is still largely perceived as technological and multimedia and not as entrepreneurial. We noted the pull and push dynamics towards freelancing, but also that Flemish journalism students seem to have a realistic understanding of job opportunities. In response to job scarcity, some expect to become freelancers, while others keep an open mind to finding jobs in other industries.

**Dorien Luyckx** works as a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Antwerp. She has a background as a multimedia journalist. Her work focuses on the business model of news media and how to resolve tensions between different stakeholders (advertisers, news media, audience) connected to the dual revenue model of audience and advertising revenue. She received a research fund from the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO). She teaches digital storytelling to journalism students at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and sits on the board of the science journalism publication EOS. She previously published on how Flemish journalists perceive important stakeholders of news media and journalists' relationship with them.

**Amber Verstraeten** obtained a bachelor in business management (specialization Marketing) at the AP Hogeschool in 2018. She later obtained a master degree in communication sciences at the University of Antwerp. Her master thesis was centered around entrepreneurial journalism. In her thesis she explored the perception of journalism students about innovation and entrepreneurship in relation to the changing industry of journalism.

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# **DIVIDING AND UNITING NEWS FRAMES: FRAMING RUSSIA-RELATED BORDER ISSUES IN THE ESTONIAN, LATVIAN, FINNISH, US PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA AND CHINESE STATE MEDIA**

**MIHHAIL KREMEZ**

*University of Tartu*

## **ABSTRACT**

*The research reveals frames of Russia-related border issues in the public service media of Estonia, Latvia, Finland, the US, and the state media of China, which had or have territorial disputes/conflicts with Russia. The focus of the research conducted from 1 January 2021 until 31 December 2021 (N=115 of articles on the subject) is on border issues: border treaties and territorial disputes, border security, cross-border cooperation. By using the framing analysis, I have detected similar and specific frames, dividing and uniting Russia with its neighbors and defined the frame-setters (agents). The results show that historical and present tensions regarding the border issues dividing Russia and neighboring countries may cause setting negative, dividing news frames. There is also a significant share of positive similar and specific frames on border issues acting as uniting constructs. The frame-setters include officials, politicians and other speakers of neighboring countries, rather than journalists and Russia's speakers.*

Keywords: frames ▪ Russia ▪ border ▪ news ▪ public service media

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. Brief historical background and current relations**

Possessing the biggest territory in the world the Russian Federation borders many countries in Europe and Asia and has different historical and current relations with them in joint border issues including territorial disputes or conflicts and cross-border cooperation. The study covers certain, not all, Russian neighbors, such as Estonia, Latvia, Finland, the US, and China, that have various historical and current relations with Russia, and all of them had or have territorial disputes/conflicts with the big

neighbor, that might, according to the author's assumption, cause differences in the construction of the reality by news frames.

The territorial dispute between Russia and **Estonia** is related to a different understanding of the border line after the restoration of independence of Estonia in 1991. Estonia wished to sign the border treaty according to the Treaty of Tartu concluded in 1920 after Estonian Liberation War, but Russia considered the temporary control line as the border, which would result in the loss of some Estonian territories (most of Petserimaa and some areas behind the Narva River) in favor of Russian Federation (Piirimäe, 2021). In November 1995 Estonia renounced any intention to reclaim the above-mentioned territories (Day *et al.*, 2004; Piirimäe, 2021). The first version of the border treaty between Estonia and Russia was signed in 2005 (Gromilova, 2016). Estonian Parliament decided to add to the ratification act a declaration with the reference to the Treaty of Tartu, and Russia withdrew its signature (Piirimäe, 2021). The latest border treaty was signed by both sides in 2014 and the Estonian Parliament concluded the first reading of it in 2015 (Gromilova, 2016). The treaty is still not ratified by the Russian side.

Also, there is still a territorial problem around Saatse boot, a boot-shaped area of the Russian territory of 115 hectares that extends through the Väraska-Saatse road between the two Estonian villages in Setomaa (Gromilova, 2016). This part of the border is considered by Russia as potentially conflictogenic (Kharybin, 2017).

The dispute over the border between Russia and **Latvia** is connected to the Latvian-Soviet Peace Treaty (1920) signed after the Latvian War for Independence (Levinsson, 2006). This dispute has affected the Abrene (Pytalovsky) district that belonged to Latvia according to the above-named treaty (Levinsson, 2006). However, Latvia officially renounced any territorial claims in 2007 when the Border Treaty was signed and ratified by both sides (Lannin, 2007).

**Finland** used to be the Grand Duchy of Finland as a part of Russia from 1809 until 1917 with wide autonomy and declared independence in 1917 (Meinander & Geddes, 2011). During three wars between Soviet Russia/USSR and Finland, Soviet-Finnish war (1918–20), the Winter War (1939–40) and the Continuation War (1941–44) the border has changed many times (*ibid.*). Now some former Finnish territories belong to the Russian Federation (Kharybin, 2017). Despite this Finland has been considered as the most friendly and cooperating Western world's country by the USSR after WWII until the collapse of the Soviet Union and by the Russian Federation beyond the communist period (Gordon Dickinson, 2003).

Russian Federation has a border with the **US** State of Alaska in the Bering Strait. The Russian Empire sold the Alaskan territory to the US in 1867 (Kaczynski, 2007). However, marine border line was not regulated, and in 1990 the countries signed the USA/USSR Maritime Boundary Agreement<sup>1</sup> which is still not ratified (Kharybin, 2017). The Agreement is under fire in Russia and Alaska as not profitable (Kaczynski,

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1 [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/US\\_Russia\\_1990.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/US_Russia_1990.pdf)

2007). Due to the non-ratified agreement this dispute will likely continue (Kharybin, 2017), especially considering the background of the very complicated relations between countries which changed from being allies in WWI and WWII to the Cold War during the soviet period and even the Hybrid War in 2022 (Wigglesworth *et al.*, 2022).

Despite the fact that **China** has been an ally of the USSR in WWII and considers the Russian Federation to be more than an ally ("MID KNR", 2021), it has had territorial disputes both with USSR and Russia (Kharybin, 2017). "Territorial disputes with China concern the aquatic area of Amur River and, in particular, Damansky Island, while at a certain stage China put forward claims to about a million square meters of the Far East" (Kharybin, 2017: 91). The dispute has escalated into armed border conflict over Damansky (Zhengbao) Island in the Ussuri River in 1969 (Sidorov, 2014). The border was demarked based on the agreement in 1991 by which Russia ceded a part of the disputed territories. In 2011 China has put forward its claims to "17 hectares of Altai mountainous area", creating a new territorial dispute (Volodin, 2012). Kharybin resumes that most likely, "over time, Russia will make concessions on this issue as well" (2017: 91).

Currently, in the beginning of 2022, Russia's relations, especially, but not only, in international politics, with neighboring EU countries, such as Estonia, Latvia, Finland as well as the US, may be considered strained or even unfriendly by above-mentioned countries and by Russia because of the war conflict in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU (Wigglesworth *et al.*, 2022). To the contrary to the Western coalition China is "more than an ally" of Russia ("MID KNR", 2021).

Regardless, Russia and the above-mentioned neighboring countries must cooperate in crucial border matters, e. g. in border security. Also, there are regular cross-border issues such as the crossing of the border by people from both sides and functioning or potential cross-border cooperation such as the transit of goods including energy transfers, regional development projects, cross-border cultural and environmental projects, etc. Significant Russian native speaker minorities also live in Estonia and Latvia, 33% and 37% of the total population respectively (Vihalemm & Juzefovits, 2020), including citizens of Russia, with the biggest share of Russian citizens in Estonia ("Kto kogo?", 2022). Finland also has a growing Russian-speaking minority (Pikkarainen & Protassova, 2015). The small native Russian minority lives in the US state of Alaska bordering Russia (Kern, 2021), and Indigenous Alaskans have also relatives in the Chukotka in Russia on another side of the Bering Strait (Grove, 2021a). The significant and growing Chinese minority lives in the Far East of Russia (Kogan, 2019).

This study focuses on the detection and description of the frames of the Russia-related border issues on the public service media news portals of Estonia, Finland, Latvia, the US and the Chinese state media news portal. The research covers the period from 1 January 2021 until 31 December 2021 selected due the rising tensions between Russia and Western world countries in 2021, which led, after the start of the war



in Ukraine, to a hybrid war (Wigglesworth *et al.*, 2022), wherein Chinese position regarding the war in Ukraine and relations with Russia differs in many aspects (She-makov, 2022).

## 1.2. Borders that divide and unite

It is difficult to define the border unambiguously (Marsico, 2016), because it is multidimensional (O'Dowd, 2010), geographical and political, but also philosophical category and fundamental social phenomena (Kolossoff & Scott, 2013). Borders are political and social constructs that are established by human beings (Paasi, 2005). As a social representation (Kolossoff 2005), that is directly connected to how geographical and political borders influence the real life of people divided by them and how borders play their role in the social construction of reality tending to fix themselves to people's minds (Bal & Chambugong, 2014). Border impacts both spaces and people, including mind-changing process (Haselsberger, 2014) taking a form of "fabricated truth" (Van Houtum, 2011:51).

Despite "the state borders are the most widely recognized and institutionalised dividers of world space" (O'Dowd, 2010: 1031), being the sources and areas of territorial disputes and conflicts (Kharybin, 2017), at the same time borders are considered as spaces of dialogue between people (Konrad, 2015). This inherent ambivalence of borders creates "a space for negotiation and dialogue, but also where misunderstanding and possible confusion may arise" (Español *et al.* 2018: 457). Hence, they simultaneously divide and unite (Marsico, 2013, 2016; Maduagwu, 2011; Español *et al.* 2018; Bal & Chambugong, 2014). Borders not only separate communities, but also regulate contact between them (Español *et al.* 2018), e. g. the border may be used for consolidating people (Maduagwu, 2011; Bal & Chambugong, 2014). Thus, the border issues may be framed as dividing countries and communities or as supporting dialogue and cooperation between them.

The discursive nature of borders is "especially important when they are disputed and provoke a conflict" (Kolossoff 2005: 624). "Often political discourse perpetuating negative stereotypes causes the lack of communication between the sides involved in such a conflict" (*ibid.*). Wherein the negative news frames (Schuck & de Vreese, 2009) may contribute to deepening perception of the border issues in a negative way.

Due to the above-mentioned multidimensionality border studies encompass a wide range of disciplines, social geography, political science, history, etc., and certainly media studies (Scott, 2020) that use the methods of studying the social construction of reality as framing analyses. In media studies, framing is a process of how the media construct a "meaningful, comprehensible reality for the audience, selecting and organizing ideas for the audiences to interpret" (Solopova & Kushneruk, 2021: 725). Thus, this study is focused on the analyses of the frames of Russia-related border issues in the neighboring countries' media.

The aim of the study is to use the research on the framing of Russia-related issues

in the neighboring countries' media to find out whether the relations in the border issues are framed as negative (dividing frames) or positive (uniting frames) in the context of complicated historical background, included territorial disputes and/or conflicts, and present international relations.

The following research questions were asked for the framing analyses:

*RQ1: Which uniting and dividing frames are used for framing Russia-related border issues?*

*RQ2: Which dividing and uniting frames are similar on more than one news portal, and which are specific for the defined news portal?*

*RQ3: Which frames are dominant?*

*RQ4: Who are frame-setters, agents of the detected frames?*

## 2. DATA AND METHOD

According to the classical widespread definition of framing by Entman “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993: 52; emphasis in original). In the frame certain aspects of an event are selected, connected and presented in a narrative to the audience to promote a particular interpretation; several characteristics of an event remain hidden or may be removed from the construction (Entman, 2010; Kremez & Kõuts-Klemm, 2021).

As mentioned above, by framing the media construct a “meaningful, comprehensible reality for the audience, selecting and organize ideas for the audiences to interpret” (Solopova & Kushneruk, 2021: 725). According to Saleem the media frames provide “moral judgment, causal interpretation and remedy/solution for media-focused problems” (2021: 134). However, the frame-building process is “influenced by the complex and dynamic interplay among politicians, journalists, news organizations and social factors” (Liu, 2022: 3). The researcher should distinguish the framing through media and framing by media or journalistic framing (van Gorp, 2007), because media frames may be created, besides the journalists, by audiences and strategic agents (actors), e. g. political parties and other organizations (Kokurina & Khoreshkaya, 2018), where strategic agents aim to influence journalists (Boyle & Mower, 2018). The media outlet and journalist personally may play two different roles: the frame-sender being a conduit for the source of the frame or the frame-setter as an agent who selects a frame himself or herself (Brüggemann, 2014). The news media in the frame-sender role may reflect the viewpoints of those who hold dominant positions in society, such as politicians, diplomats, powerful organizations, and business

elites (Matthews, 2020; Tirosh, 2021). Thus, the framing is connected to news slant and bias and ultimately to political power (Entman, 2010). That is why it is crucial to define the information sources, the speakers of the news with the aim to detect the frame-setter, the agent of the frame in the framing analyses.

Based on the above, the framing analyses may be applied to researching the effects of news coverage of social and political issues that include different interpretations of these issues by competing sides (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Detecting the elements of the frames as thematic and stylistically colored vocabulary, stylistic techniques based on a pragmatically motivated deviation from the linguistic norm and its stylistically neutral version (Kokurina & Khoretskaya, 2018: 61), clickbait headlines (Blom & Hansen, 2015), emotionally-charged words (Pan & Kosicki, 1993), tropes and figures (Franzosi & Vicari, 2017), etc. help to determine the “tone” of media coverage of an event or issue (Saleem, 2021). Some news frames emphasize positive or negative aspects of an issue carrying an inherent valence as positive or negative frames (Schuck & de Vreese, 2009) and can influence the support of the audience, its preferences related the framed issues (Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003; Busby *et al.*, 2018), e. g. joint border issues.

The choice of most media outlets (except for Chinese state media) for the research is based on the public service media (PSM) specifics as the observance of a principle “to be public, of all, for all” (Paulino *et al.*, 2016: 71). Strong PSM strengthens the association between news use and political knowledge, supporting political learning (Park *et al.* 2020), and performs educational, social, and cultural functions (Goyanes, 2021), especially in Europe where it plays the “leading role as a reliable source of information, provider of quality entertainment, and educator” (Jöesaar & Kõuts-Klemm, 2020: 97). PSM is considered to be an important foundation of democratic societies (Jacobs *et al.* 2016) developing and defending democracy (Lowe & Maijanen, 2019). Lowe & Maijanen also emphasize as PSM values serving domestic cultural institutions and maintaining and developing the national identity (*ibid.*).

However, the “public” may be designated as relating or belonging to the government that has “certainly inspired many debates questioning the autonomy of the public service media in relation to official information” (Paulino *et al.*, 2016: 72). Despite PSM tend to develop a higher degree of professionalism and independence from political control in countries with a strong democratic tradition (Sehl, 2020) they are under pressure from different inner and outer factors such as problems with funding (Campos-Freire *et al.*, 2020; Hagey, 2010; Lowe & Berg, 2013), opposition from privately held media (Sjøvaag *et al.* 2018: 1), populist parties and the manipulations of the governments (Campos-Freire *et al.*, 2020: 671).

The more complicated situation is in China where in 2010s the public broadcasting policy was focused on the ‘basic cultural right’ of access to broadcast media and on the social equalization of access to broadcast networks in cities and countryside (Chin, 2012). Other values, such as “high-quality programming, independence and impartiality, are still marginalized” (*ibid.*). Rohrhofer argues that Chinese media is

first and foremost dependent on the political framework within which it operates (2015). Thus, the Chinese state-controlled media is no doubt public broadcasting, but not yet public service media in Western understanding.

Hence, the influence of the PSM and public broadcasting state media (in the case of China) on the audiences cannot be overestimated, that is why I chose precisely the PSM outlets of Russia's neighboring countries and the Chinese state media channel for the analyses of framing of the border issues.

For the data collection I chose the news portals of the next media outlets that have been available without registration or fee in 2021:

- Eesti Rahvusringhääling (ERR) – Estonian Public Broadcasting, a news portal in Estonian<sup>2</sup> <https://www.err.ee>. According to Kantar Emor research Estonian residents trust ERR news portal the most (Kantar Emor, 2020), which, in addition to publishing news, broadcasts live on all Estonian Public Broadcasting TV channels, wherein the main TV channel ETV had the biggest TV audience in Estonia (Kantar Emor, 2022).
- Latvijas Sabiedriskais Medijs (LSM) – Public Broadcasting of Latvia, a news portal in Russian <https://rus.lsm.lv>. Portal LSM.lv has one of the largest audiences in Latvia, holding 5-6th place in the ranking of the most visited Latvian websites (“Aprīli liela”, 2022). Because the share of Russian-speaking residents in the population of Latvia is 37% (Vihalemm & Juzefovits, 2020), it can be concluded that a significant proportion of the portal's audience is made up of readers of the Russian-language version.
- Yleisradio Oy (YLE) – Finnish Broadcasting Company, a news portal in Russian <https://yle.fi/novosti>. Media channels and programs of YLE are most viewed/listened in Finland<sup>3</sup>. As the results of the preliminary search have shown, the Finnish version of YLE news portal, with certainly bigger audience than Russian in Finland (due the predominance of native Finns in the population<sup>4</sup>), covers the same topics in a similar amount as Russian. Since my Finnish language skills were not sufficient for frame detection I selected the Russian version for the analyses, which could also show framing trends in YLE.
- Alaska Public Media – the media of the State of Alaska, which has a border with Russia, a non-profit US organization with member television and radio stations that are part of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), National Public Radio (NPR) and other public broadcasting networks, news portal in English, <https://www.alaskapublic.org>. As a preliminary search of suitable US news portals has shown, US broadcasters with more wide cover, as Fox News, CNN, etc., do not cover USA and Russia border issues, and as a result I selected local

2 I selected the language versions according to my language skills that are sufficiently good for analyzing the frames.

3 Finnpanel: [https://www.finnpanel.fi/en/tulokset/tv\\_reportlist.php](https://www.finnpanel.fi/en/tulokset/tv_reportlist.php)

4 Statistics Finland: [https://www.stat.fi/tup/julkaisut/tiedostot/julkaisuluettelo/yyti\\_fif\\_202000\\_2020\\_23214\\_net.pdf](https://www.stat.fi/tup/julkaisut/tiedostot/julkaisuluettelo/yyti_fif_202000_2020_23214_net.pdf)

PSM of the Russia-neighboring US state that is more focused on border issues. The Alaska Public Media network reaches 97% of the state of Alaska (Gloria, 2019).

- China Global Television Network (CGTN) - international division of the state-owned China Central Television (CCTV), a news portal in Russian <https://russian.cgtn.com>. Broadcasting is aimed at foreign Russian-speaking news consumers, official information on the size of the Russian-speaking audience is not published in Russian or English, but the audience of the CGTN in Russian in Twitter is 88 700 followers as of September 2022<sup>5</sup>.

As a first step, I used search engines of the news portals to find articles related to Russia and the respective country using keywords in the language of the respective news portal in the form of “Russia [the name of a neighboring country]”, for example “Russia Latvia”. The number of articles found using the search engines is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Search results and numbers of manually selected articles on the Russia-related border issues

Media outlet	ERR (Estonia)	LSM (Latvia)	YLE (Finland)	Alaska Public Media (US)	CGTN (China)
Number of the articles found by search engines	770	45	171	9	35
Number of articles on the Russia-related border issues	55	6	40	7	7

As a second step, I got acquainted with each found article and carefully manually selected the articles corresponding to such Russia-related border issues as border treaties and territorial disputes, border security, cross-border cooperation (border crossing issues, transit, culture, environment, regional joint projects). The number of selected articles on the subject is presented in Table 1 above.

For the analyses of the selected articles, I used the manual inductive approach to framing analyses where the frames derive from the research material during the analysis (Vreese, 2005). This approach allows refraining from analyzing news stories with prior defined news frames in the researcher’s mind (*ibid.*).

Using the qualitative analysis from the previous study I focused on the semantic frames in the news headlines, sub-headlines, and body texts, including emotional and evaluative words, etc. (Kremez & Kõuts-Klemm, 2021). I systematized all the data, entering it into a table that includes all the necessary parameters for analysis regarding each news portal: title of the article, translated title if needed, author, date of publication, link to the article, frames(s), information sources max 4. While

<sup>5</sup> CGTN na russkom: <https://twitter.com/cgtnrussian>

analyzing each frame, I considered it as a whole (in the context) (Jensen, 2020), taking into account all the agents, activities, highlighted problems and proposed solutions involved (Kremez & Kõuts-Klemm, 2021).

### 3. FINDINGS

All the analyzed news portals published articles regarding the Russia-related border issues, but in different numbers and not all the articles included frames (see Table 2), at the same time, some articles include more than one frame.

Table 2. Number of the articles on the Russia-related issues VS number of the frames in these

Media outlets	ERR (Estonia)	LSM (Latvia)	YLE (Finland)	Alaska Public Media (US)	CGTN (China)
Number of articles on the Russia-related border issues	55	6	40	7	7
Number of frames	34	4	24	5	7

Below I present detected dividing and uniting frames, similar for at least two news portals and specific according to historical and present relations between the respective country and Russia. I also try to define the frame-setter (the agent of the frame) based on detected information sources, including speakers.

#### 3.1. Similar dividing and uniting frames and their setters

One of the aims of the study is to detect commonalities in the news framing of border issues regarding Russia and each above-mentioned country. The frame analyses revealed similar dividing and uniting frames presented in the news of more than one news portal described above. Similar frames are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Similar frames and the frequency of them occurring on the news portals of Russia’s neighboring countries. Dividing frames are in red, uniting ones are in green.

Media outlet	ERR (Estonia)	LSM (Latvia)	YLE (Finland)	Alaska PM (US)	CGTN (China)
Russia is a provocateur	5	1			
Stability and success in cross-border regional projects	3	1			3
Cooperating Russia	3		1		4
Russian tourists are highly valuable	2		9		
Cooperating with Russia in saving the common environmental resources	1			1	

Only one similar dividing frame “Russia is a provocateur” was detected on more than one news portal: in ERR (Estonia) and LSM (Latvia), wherein it was presented in 5 articles in ERR as dominant and in 1 article in LSM. Russia is constructed as a provocateur with whom it is extremely hard to cooperate, as a provocateur against Estonia, Latvia and/or the EU/Western countries, e. g. in the emotionally charged comment in ERR news:

*Marko Mihkelson, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Riigikogu, called the detention of Lätte [Estonian consul in Saint-Petersburg] a **provocation**. "Unfortunately, this **provocative** step by Russia confirms **the deep slump** in not only Estonian-Russian, but also Russian-Western relations," he commented. (Nael, 2021) (emphasis added)*

The speakers, frame-setters (agents of the frame) in the example above are Estonian officials, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This frame was used also regarding other steps of Russia, e. g. by using the metaphor of Russia as a conductor of an orchestra by ERR journalist as frame-setter (the article’s genre is indicated as “Opinion”):

***Russia's orchestrated** mass migration flow on and around the Belarus-Poland-Belarus-Lithuania border has been able to take precedence over coronavirus stories. (Mõttus, 2021) (emphasis added)*

In the LSM frame the speaker, the agent of the frame “Russia is a provocateur” is the Latvian side represented by the Minister of Defense:

*“Now the situation on the external borders of Latvia is relatively calm, but we need to be prepared for a possible increase in illegal migration and related **provocations** at the border (...)” said Minister [of Defense] Pabriks. (emphasis added) (“Armiya pomozhet”, 2021)*

The setters of that dividing frame transmitted by journalists are mostly Estonian and Latvian officials which emphasize the official position of both countries towards Russia’s steps.

In contrast to dividing frames several similar uniting frames in the news on studied news portals are detected.

Two similar uniting frames are detected in the news of three news portals. The frame “Stability and success in cross-border regional projects” on ERR (3), LSM (1) and CGTN (3, dominant) news portals constructs the cross-border cooperation between respective country and Russia as successful and stable, e. g. in ERR news:

(...) Mihkelson cited cross-border joint projects with Russia funded under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) of the European Union, which he said has created **significant stability and transparency** in south-eastern Estonia and the Narva region. "All such infrastructure projects are **crucial and will create predictable stability**, as any instability could threaten us," he said. (emphasis added) (Ots, 2021)

The agent is above-mentioned influential Estonian politician Marko Mihkelson, a researcher of Baltic-Russian relations (e. g. Mihkelson, 2003, 2002). Thus, his positive framing of the cross-border projects is highly valuable in the Estonian public sphere. The other agents in this frame in Estonian PSM are mostly Estonian officials.

The same frame "Stability and success in cross-border regional projects" is detected in the Latvian article of LSM connected to the Latvian-Russian cross-border cooperation program 2014–2020:

*Well, of course, **I wait with impatience** when the Latvian-Russian border opens for tourism. Because the project partners - in Pytalovo, Ostrov, Palkino, Pskov **also did not waste time**, equipping their part of the "green" route.* (Odiņa, 2021)

The agent is the author of the article LSM journalist Tatjana Odiņa, who took part in the action and speaks using emotionally charged first person words and cites Latvian speakers in the field of tourism.

The same frame uses in the CGTN news by Konstantin Kosachev, Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council of Russia:

*Russia and China are starting joint preparations for the Forum of Regions. **It is important to actively use the potential of interregional cooperation**, according to the Federation Council.* (emphasis added) ("Rossiya i Kitai", 2021)

Chinese speakers only, as technical specialists, are cited in the next sample with the same frame, hence, the agent is the Chinese side, but the frame-setter is CGTN journalist:

*The launch of the gas pipeline **gave a new impetus** to cooperation between Moscow and Beijing in the energy sector. **Let me remind you that...** (...).* (emphasis added) ("Po vostochnoi", 2021)

The next similar frame "Cooperating Russia" detected on the ERR (3), YLE (1) and CGTN (4, dominant) news portals constructs Russia as a potential cooperation partner in many areas, e. g. in ERR news the agent is a businessman Tiit Vähi, former prime minister of Estonia in 90s, whose business is strongly connected to Russia (Fefilov, 2022), using a metaphoric argument:



"(...) *Why are we **annoying the Russian bear? Better let's cooperate,**" Vähi told at the Economic Conference of the Center Party. (emphasis added) ("Tiit Vähi", 2021)*

In Finnish news of YLE speaker Ville Skinnari, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development of Finland, considered Russia as a cooperating partner in many areas seeing "big opportunities" in cooperation with it (Mikkonen, 2021).

The same frame is dominant in Chinese CGTN news, e. g.:

*Nikolai Kharitonov, (...), noted: "I think that **no pandemic will destroy our economic relations, between Russia and China.** (...)" (emphasis added) ("Posol KNR", 2021)*

Russian officials are cited in the text: Nikolai Kharitonov, Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Regional Policy and Problems of the North and the Far East and Alexey Chekunkov, Head of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East. China is also presented as an agent by speakers: Zhang Hanhui, Chinese Ambassador and Zhou Liqun, President of the Russian-Chinese General Chamber of Commerce. Therefore, the Russian and Chinese sides both have an agency. The article also includes another uniting frame "Stability and success in cross-border regional projects" described above.

Both parties may be considered as agents in another CGTN article with the frame "Cooperating Russia" regarding the opening of the Russian center in China as a metaphoric bridge:

*Meng Qingsheng, Deputy Head of the Committee for Management of the China-SCO Cooperation Area, said: "(...) We will promote this center as a new platform, **a new bridge for cooperation between China and Russia.**" (emphasis added) ("Rossiiskii tsentr", 2021)*

The similar uniting frame "Russian tourists are highly valuable" is met both in ERR (2) and YLE (9, dominant), e. g. in YLE starting from headlines emphasizing the value of the tourists:

*South Karelia **called for** the Russians vaccinated with Sputnik to be allowed into Finland ("V Yuzhnoi Karelii", 2021)*

*Trade with Russia is gradually recovering, **tourism is waiting** for the opening of borders (emphasis added) (Zidan, 2021)*

The agents of the frame are Finnish regional or government authorities or professional associations, e. g. Jukka Kopra, Chairman of the Regional Government of

South Karelia, Jaana Rekolainen, Director General of the Finnish-Russian Chamber of Commerce, etc.

Russian tourists are also highly valuable for the border regions of Estonia as Ida-Virumaa County, e. g. in a metaphoric headline:

*The head of the spa regarding Russian tourists: **it was like God's blessing** (emphasis added) (Nikolajev, 2021)*

The agents are CEOs and sales managers of Estonian spas in the Ida-Virumaa County, who had to save their business during the pandemic.

The last similar uniting frame “Cooperating Russia in saving of the common environmental resources” is detected in ERR (1) and Alaska Public Media (1), e. g. in ERR article:

*Harry Liiv: The **cooperation has saved Lake Peipus** from phosphorus and nitrogen deaths (emphasis added)*

The author of the article, the agent is Estonian official Harry Liiv, Deputy Secretary General of the Estonian Ministry of the Environment.

In the American article with the same frame journalist interviewed several speakers from the US, and the general message is that the scientific work in the borderlands connected to saving common environmental resources unites people despite the tensions between governments:

*While the governments of both countries have had a sometimes-tense relationship in recent years, [Paul] Conn [NOAA Fisheries] says he was impressed with the scientific community's good-natured approach.*

*“You hear about Russia and us, and this antagonistic relationship, but when you actually get to the people it's just amazing the amount of love they have for their science,” Conn said. (Early, 2021)*

Thus, the agent of the frame is the US in the roles of journalist and interviewed researchers.

### 3.2. Specific for each news portal dominant and other dividing and uniting frames and their setters

The Estonian PSM online portal **ERR** is the leader in the number of articles on border issues and in the number of frames. The topic of the ratification of the Estonian-Russian border treaty specific for Estonia-Russia relations described in the Introduction was covered in 10 articles in the ERR news by using the dividing frame “No interest

from the Russian side” blaming Russia in the absence of interest in the ratifying of the border treaty, giving it the dividing role of non-cooperating party. The frame-setters are Estonian influential politicians, e. g.:

*“Can the border treaty be [ratified] if the other party does not want to do so? At present, Russia has not shown that it wants to conclude a border treaty. (...)”*  
(Mälberg, 2021)

The speaker is Marina Kaljurand, the former Estonian Ambassador to Moscow and former Foreign Minister. Russia is framed as a non-active in the border treaty issues, and Estonia, on the contrary, as an active agent.

Estonia is shown as an active party also by journalists acting as agents, e. g. in the emotional metaphoric headline by ERR journalist:

*Toomas Sildam: Estonia reached out a hand, Russia did not accept it* (Sildam, 2021)

There are specific Estonian ERR dividing frames used less frequently such as “Russia is an occupier” of Estonian border areas according to the Treaty of Tartu, “Bureaucratic Russia”, “The high level of the coronavirus infection in Russia as a danger for Estonia”, “Russia restricts travel of its citizens” and “Russia could turn off electricity in Estonia”.

Russia is also framed positively as cooperating or open to dialogue in the uniting frames specific for ERR that are detected per 1 article only: “Ready for consultations on the border treaty” and “Russia is ready to cooperate within the OSCE”.

The dividing frames, especially the first specific dominant one regarding the unratified border treaty, prevail on the Estonian PSM news portal ERR in 2021. Therefore, the construction of the Russia-related border issues is rather negative and dividing. However, the above-mentioned uniting frames show that the cooperation between Estonia in Russia in cross-border regional projects may be considered as effective and even may have progress in other issues, such as cross-border tourism, OSCE, etc.

The agents in the Estonian PSM are Estonian authorities, politicians and other influential speakers rather than PSM journalists being frame-senders, besides the opinion articles representing journalist’s own views on the border issue, that appeal to the right for freedom of speech in the Estonian PSM. Hence, in most of the frames the agent is the Estonian side.

No dominant frames are detected on the Latvian **LSM** news portal, probably because of the limited number of frames (4, including two frames presented above) in the articles related to joint border issues.

The specific Latvian dividing frame “Russian coronavirus requirements are less stringent” presents Russia as a danger to Latvians travelling to Russia because of the high level of coronavirus there, see in the headline:

*Transportation **with health risks** – private traders offer trips to Russia. Through Estonia (emphasis added) (“Perevozki s riskom”, 2021)*

The agents are the Latvian media as Russian Broadcasting LTV7 (part of LSM) which is the main information source and Latvian authorities and transport companies.

The specific positive frame “Russian television offers more entertainment” than Latvian is connected to the ban of Russian TV outlets, and is constructed by the emotional comments of Latvian residents in border areas and transmitted by Latvian Radio, e. g.:

*“(...) I want good entertainment, I want a good concert, I want a good show, I want to talk to people. And, for example, Russian television offers me all this. We do not politicize! You must be able to critically evaluate. (...)” Elvira is sure. (“V prigranich'e nedovol'ny”, 2021)*

The agents of the frames on the LSM portal are Latvian authorities and other Latvian speakers competent in the field, not journalists.

No frames regarding territorial disputes were found in the Latvian PSM.

On the Finnish news portal **YLE**, the dominant uniting frames concern tourism. The frame “Russian tourists are highly valuable” similar for ERR and YLE is presented above. Another dominant uniting frame detected in 4 articles in YLE only “Russia makes tourism easier” frames Russia as a positive agent in the development of cross-border tourism between Finland and Russia, e. g. in headlines:

*Foreign tourists will be able to stay longer in Russia on a single or double entry visa (Fedorov, 2021a)*

*The Russian Foreign Ministry eased restrictions on entry and exit (Fedorov, 2021b)*

YLE journalists play the role of the frame-sender in case of these frames being a conduit for uniting frames set by Russian authorities presenting Russia as very cooperative regarding cross-border travel.

There are many other unique uniting frames detected in 1–2 YLE articles as “Russian schoolchildren learn Finnish in border regions”, “Russia is the most important supplier for the timber industry”, “Russian students are needed to work in Finland”, “Most Russians are positive about Finland”, “Transport connection with Russia is highly important”. In most of the above-named uniting frames agent is the Finnish party. Contrary to other analyzed news portals the Finnish uniting frames are focused on concrete fields of cooperation.

Only two specific dividing frames are detected in YLE: “Russia creates tension near the borders of Finland” in 2 articles and “Protectionism intensifies in Russia” in

1 article. The frame-setters/agents of the first frame are Finnish military authorities, e. g. the headline emphasizing the persistence of the Russian military threat:

*Military intelligence report: armed activity in Finland's neighboring territories continued despite the pandemic* (“Otchet voennoi”, 2021)

The agent of the frame “Protectionism intensifies in Russia” is Finland represented by speakers of Finnish business.

No frames regarding territorial disputes were found in the Finnish PSM.

The uniting frames prevail in the Finnish YLE in 2021. Here the agents are Finnish authorities, governmental and regional, and other influential and expert speakers in the connected fields, rather than YLE journalists holding as neutral a position as possible. Thus, in most of the frames the agent is the Finnish party. The construction of the Russia-related border issues in YLE is mostly positive and is related to successful Finnish-Russian cooperation in border issues from the period after WWII.

Mostly specific uniting frames are detected in the **Alaska Public Media**. One of them is focused on the Alaska region, the frame “Russians have a long history in Alaska” used in 2 publications:

***Russians have a long history in Alaska**, with some Siberian migrant groups dating back as far as the early 1700s.* (Kern, 2021)

***Alaskans** we’ve lost to COVID: Vladimir Khadjinov, **Russian** father of four* (Feidt, 2021)

In this frame the Alaskan Russians are shown as a respected native nation of the State of Alaska and the US. The agents of the cited publications are journalists of the news portal; therefore, it is an example of journalistic framing.

The unique uniting frame “Russia brings Russian and US people together” is related to the Bering Strait Festival planned for August 2022, “the seven-day event is a multi-year effort to bring together residents of the high north from both sides of the strait, some of whom are relatives, and to honor their shared culture” (Grove, 2021a). The journalist has interviewed the festival’s head, the US coordinator in Alaska, Mille Porsild, who highly appreciates the role of Russia connecting it to its chairmanship in the Arctic Council:

*“I mean this is a **really, really significant event**, and initiative to do this. I **really can’t emphasize that enough**. (...) It’s **really a result of the Arctic Council, and the fact that the Russians now have the chairmanship**, and they hold it until 2023.”* (emphasis added) (Grove, 2021a)

Thus, the frame-setter and agent of the frame is the US and the frame itself is completely uniting.

There is a unique dividing frame “Russia’s expansion in the Arctic” in the 1 article, considering Russian expansion a threat, detected in the interview with Norway’s ambassador to the US Anniken Krutnes:

*CG: Speaking of security issues and NATO, are there shared concerns between the two countries about Russia’s expansion in the Arctic?*

*AK: We see military buildup on the Russian side. And of course, we have to keep an eye on that. I would say that the Arctic region is still a peaceful and prosperous and predictable region. (Grove, 2021b)*

No frames regarding territorial disputes were detected in the US Alaska Public Media. In general, the framing of Russia is revealed as mostly positive, uniting. More often the agents are the US authorities and experts in connecting fields, but also journalists. The Russian officials are not presented as agents in the US outlet.

The construction of the Russia-related border issues on the **CGTN** news portal (the examples of frames are presented in 3.1 as similar and dominant) is absolutely positive, Russia is considered a very important strategic partner in all aspects of cross-border cooperation. No frames regarding territorial disputes were detected.

The agents are both Chinese and Russian authorities, governmental and regional, other influential and expert speakers in the connected fields, and journalists. Thus, the agents of the frames in the CGTN news are both China and Russia, and met-journalistic framing corresponds to the official statements of China.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to the reviewed literature on border studies and framing, the borders are not only geographical and political, but they are also social constructs able to both divide and unite at the same time. Thus, the border issues may be framed both negatively and positively, dividing, or uniting countries and communities, and the framing analysis is a method for detecting the dividing and uniting constructions in the news.

An undertaken framing analysis revealed some patterns, including certain commonalities as similar dividing frame regarding Russian provocative behavior in border issues and several uniting frames regarding effective cross-border cooperation and valuable tourists from Russia, in the framing of Russia-related border issues in the news media of neighboring countries that has different historical and current relations with Russia. The historical background and current relations influence the framing of the Russia-related border issues, especially in the case of actual territorial disagreements as in Estonian-Russian relations, but it is not an insurmountable obstacle for setting several uniting frames.

The represented EU countries and the US, which PSM outlets are analyzed in the study, have had tensions in their political and economic relations with Russia in the past, including territorial disputes and conflicts, and in 2021, including sanctions and retaliatory sanctions, but all of them have cooperated with Russia in at least some border issues and this cooperation is framed as positive, therefore uniting. China is an exception considered Russia's strategic partner by officials and Chinese state media CGTN has framed Russia-related border issues very positively, without mentioning any disagreements between countries.

However, the study has some limitations, as the number of found articles on Russia-related border issues in Latvian and Chinese outlets was significantly lower than in Estonian and Finnish outlets, which may be due to the use of their Russian language versions with limited coverage.

In conclusion, the main generalization may be made – the tensions in the relations between countries as territorial disputes, political divisions, sanctions, different approaches to joint history, etc., dividing countries in the past and/or in the present, may lead to the setting of dividing constructs of reality – dividing frames regarding border issues by frame-setters (agents of frames), who are officials, politicians, other speakers of neighboring countries, rather than journalists or Russia's speakers. In this case the journalists are frame-senders being a conduit for the dividing frames created by the outer agents. At the same time, the significant share of frames on border issues, considering cross-border cooperation and tourism from Russia, are the uniting constructs. And again, this is more often not journalistic framing, because the agents are officials, politicians and other speakers of neighboring countries and sometimes Russia's speakers.

**Mihhail Kremez**, PhD student (Media and Communication) at the Institute of the Social Studies, University of Tartu, Estonia. Holds a MA (Communication) from Tallinn University, Estonia and has worked many years as a lecturer in Estonian universities and as a journalist in the Estonian media. Also has plenty of experience in PR, advertising, and translation. Research interests include the agency of journalists and media audiences, framing, social constructionism, news about Russia in the EU media, and their perception.

E-mail: [mihhail.kremez@ut.ee](mailto:mihhail.kremez@ut.ee)

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# “OUR FANS ARE GONNA GO CRAZY WHEN THEY KNOW WE ARE TOGETHER”: FANDOM IDENTITIES AND SELF-REPRESENTATION IN YOUTUBERS SLASH FICTION

ONA ANGLADA-PUJOL

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores slash fiction written about four gaming YouTubers: El Rubius, Mangel, Jacksepticeye and Markiplier. Slash fiction are texts that narrate fictional romantic and sexual stories between two male characters or celebrities who define themselves as heterosexuals. Through thematic analysis, this research analyses fandom self-representation, their role and identity as fans, and the portrayal of the relationship with the YouTubers. Results show that fans represent themselves positively and are acceptant of LGBTIQ+ identities, even though gaming communities are often misogynistic and homophobic. Toxic fans are presented as exceptions within the majority of the fandom. In these texts, the YouTubers appreciate slash fiction and desire to have a close bond with their audience. Fans give themselves much agency to intervene in the YouTubers' lives and expect transparency and authenticity from them.*

Keywords: YouTubers ▪ real person slash ▪ fan fiction ▪ gamers ▪ micro-celebrities  
▪ fan representation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*He closed his eyes again, smiling as he remembered when they attended the Club Media Fest Concert in Argentina a few months after breaking the news [that they were dating]. When they got out to the stage, they were received by screaming, by love, by thousands of fans holding signs with messages supporting their relationship. Fans were crying in the M&G, saying that they were proud of them.*

*To do something that was already written.*



*Mangel was happy and fulfilled as he hugged Rubius when he heard the fans say they were proud of them<sup>1</sup>.*

This quote is from a fan fiction about two YouTubers, Rubius and Mangel. Fans write fanfiction: stories based on the canonical material from previously published fiction (Mackey & McClay, 2008). The audience takes existing texts and appropriates them to respond to their interests or concerns. Fans also like to write about their favourite celebrities and explore and fictionalise their private life: musicians, actors, sports players, or internet celebrities. The texts often focus on writing about romantic and erotic relationships between two male celebrities that identify themselves as heterosexual. This type of fanfiction is called Real Person Slash (RPS). The main difference between RPS and fanfiction is that the characters are real people, not fictional characters.

This paper wants to study the self-representation of fandoms that can be found in the RPS of 'Septiplier' – which is the fictional relationship between the YouTubers Jacksepticeye (28,2M subscribers on YouTube) and Markiplier (32,5M) – and 'Rubelangel' – the fictional relationship between El Rubius (40M) and MangelRogel (6,2M). Jacksepticeye and Markiplier are friends in real life, as well as Rubius and Mangel. They all identify as heterosexual, but in the RPS, they are presented as homosexual and in a relationship. Thus, fans read queer desire in their friendship interactions and explore this desire in the texts. Furthermore, RPS allows us to see how fans introduce themselves in the narrative since the characters are portrayed being YouTubers, and often fans appear in the text.

Hence, this research aims to analyse how fans portray themselves in these texts and the representation of the relationship between fans and YouTubers. To fulfil this aim, I will use Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) on 12 of the most popular fanfics published in Archive of Our Own (AO3) and Wattpad about Septiplier and Rubelangel.

Jacksepticeye, Markiplier, Mangel and Rubius are all gamers that became popular on YouTube. Gaming communities are often toxic spaces, especially for girls, people from the LGBTIQ+ collective or non-white people (Condis, 2018; Shaw, 2012). Nevertheless, the writing of RPS is a way for girls and LGBTIQ+ fans to participate in the community, which might be hostile to them otherwise (Hoad, 2017).

All four of them have a close relationship with their fandom and encourage fans' participation in the community, as most YouTubers do (Gallardo-Hurtado & Selva-Ruiz, 2021). Rubius and Mangel have a positive and playful relationship with this content. In the past, they have contributed to it by kissing each other on camera or pretending they were jealous of each other. However, Jacksepticeye and Markiplier react in quite a different way. They have publicly stated that they do not

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<sup>1</sup> This text is translated by the author from Spanish. All the following Rubelangel RPS quoted in this article will be translated, as they are all written in Spanish.

feel comfortable with fans creating this content and have asked many times for the fandom to stop writing and sharing RPS or any other romantic or erotic material about them.

Even though fanfiction writing has been widespread among fans for a while, in some fandoms writing RPS was considered unethical (Roach, 2018) precisely due to the concern that the celebrities involved might read the texts and feel uncomfortable.

Whereas the relationship between fan and producer has been widely studied (see Jenkins, 1992; Lewis, 1992; Michaud Wild, 2020; Nordin, 2019; Pearson, 2010), less research has addressed the relationship between celebrities and the practice of RPS (Hills, 2015; Popova, 2017b; Southerton & McCann, 2019) or the intra-fandom regulatory practices or self-representation (Busse, 2018; Goor, 2015; Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018; Stanfill, 2013).

This article will contribute to the current fan scholarship by addressing an under-researched topic: fandom self-representation and the dynamics between fandom and celebrity through the RPS lens. This case study will also help better understand the specificities of the female and queer fandom of gaming YouTubers.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Being a fan and writing fan fiction

The practice of fan fiction is one of the most common activities among fandoms. Early fan studies scholars devoted significant attention to these practices (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; L. A. Lewis, 1992). It has been one of the practices that have drawn more attention from the fan studies field from many perspectives: fanfic writing and authorship (Busse, 2013; Herzog, 2012); textual analysis regarding issues around sexuality and queer desire (Hedrick, 2020; Popova, 2018; Spacey, 2018; Woledge, 2006); fan labour (Busse, 2015; Kosnik, 2009; Milner, 2009) or the production and distribution context of fan fiction (S. R. Black, 2020; Dym, 2018; Fiesler et al., 2016), among many others.

The practice of slash fiction – a subgenre focused on male gay relationships – has been one of the most studied subgenres, especially concerning *who* writes slash fiction. For a long time, slash was believed to be written by straight women (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Russ, 1985), and slash was regarded as a space of transgression or feminist activism. As Lucy Neville argues, “if women writing about sex is still seen as transgressive, then women writing about sex using the male body and inviting other women to enjoy these stories is doubly transgressive” (Neville, 2018b, p. 386).

However, the assumption that only straight women write slash has been contested in recent years (Duggan, 2020; Neville, 2018a). Firstly, due to the lack of recent data to support this claim. The last extensive survey about fanfic authors’ sociodemographic characterization was done in 2013 (CentrumLumina, 2013). Secondly, fan fiction writing has become a more mainstream practice and thus, its demographics

have changed (Coppa, 2006; Hellekson & Busse, 2006), and some smaller studies suggest that the fan fiction writers community is queerer than it was previously assumed (Duggan, 2020). Thirdly, more awareness has been directed to the racism and whiteness of many fandoms. Therefore, exclusionary practices were not considered when looking into the demographic of specific fan communities (Wanzo, 2015).

The question of why fans write slash fiction has also been central. It has been regarded as a subversive and transgressive practice (Spacey, 2018), feminist and queer activism (Popova, 2017a), a queering of a heteronormative media product (McCann & Southerton, 2019) or space for discovering and exploring their sexuality and desire (Haynes & Ball, 2010). However, the assumption that slash fic writing is inherently transgressive or subversive has also been contested for more nuanced approaches, although there is a radical potential in these fandoms and their practices (Massey, 2019).

## 2.2. Writing Real Person Slash

Regarding the writing of RPS, most of the motivations mentioned above are also present in this sub-genre. However, we must consider the specifics around the celebrity culture and the queer readings of real people. As Emily E. Roach noted, “RPF has the transformative effect of creating a more intimate (albeit fictional) depiction of the private spaces of celebrities, it can also serve to make fans feel more ownership over the actual celebrity” (2018, p. 169). Thus, this feeling of closeness with celebrities has increased due to the promises of proximity that social media platforms offer, and is not that different as “other forms of celebrity engagement that blend frontstage performance with a mediated representation of backstage life” (Fathallah, 2018, p. 4). Traditional celebrities tried to distance themselves from their audience, but micro-celebrities – such as YouTubers – depend on the audience connection and the promise of access to their private and intimate life to succeed (Raun, 2018).

In this context, RPS tries to “bridge the divide between the real and the fictional” (Popova, 2021, p. 94), and fanfics try to build a canon regarding that celebrities’ life that might be used to write the RPS and share a common ground for all the readers. Fanfic based on existing media fiction has a clear and defined canon from which to draw the fanfics. However, in RPS, the canon is built from celebrity media appearances, social media posts and activity, interviews, etc. Then, the canon of a celebrity is communally constructed based on traits and events incorporated with the fandom’s consensus (Hagen, 2015). This canon helps to connect the altered reality of the fan fiction and the celebrity itself (Winter, 2020) and helps us to see what elements are included or excluded, what traits are emphasised or reduced, or how the canon is constantly being negotiated based on the celebrity life and events (Brennan, 2019; Popova, 2021).

Fans get involved in discussions about the “true” meanings or subtexts of the original fiction, and they engage in debates around authorship or hierarchies between

creator and audience (Franklin, 2019). However, sometimes celebrities are accused of queerbaiting, and then the discussion about the “true” meaning of a text is constructed around the celebrity’s sexuality and private life (Brennan, 2019). These debates about what is “real” and what is not in a celebrity life emerge and often disrupt heteronormative paradigms (Southerton & McCann, 2019).

### 2.3. Insider and outsider fan perception

We have seen some differences between fanfic writing based on a fiction media text and RPS writing, particularly regarding the “source text”, the canon building, and some of its motivations. Another big difference that we must consider is the perception of these practices, both inside and outside the fandom.

Fans have generally been stereotyped and portrayed negatively by the media, creators, and general audiences. Being a fan had a stigma associated for a long time since they were portrayed as pathological, overly enthusiastic, and weird. As Joli Jenson identified, fandoms are often portrayed under one of these two categories: “the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd” (Jenson, 1992, p. 9). However, fandom is more popular nowadays and deeply entwined with the cultural and media industries. Hence its perception has changed and improved and is no longer considered a stigma (Bennett & Booth, 2016, p. 2). Nevertheless, some of these negative representations are still mainly directed towards specific fandoms, fans, or their practices. But the stereotyping and negative representation is not only perpetuated by traditional media or general outsider audiences, since inside the fandoms we find fan hierarchies and policing of behaviours considered “good” and “bad”.

RPS is very controversial among many fandoms. Even though the fandom does not contest fanfic writing, RPS is perceived differently. As Bronwen Thomas points out, “it seems that a boundary is crossed when the stories impinge on the ‘real lives’ of actors or personalities in the media, particularly where this involves casting aspersions on their sexuality” (2014, p. 173). Thus, many fans participating in the RPS are often criticised within their fandoms, and the reasons used to criticise them are aligned with the stereotypes associated with fandom by outsider accounts: they consider their behaviour is “immature, obsessive, or extreme” (Thomas, 2014, p. 174). This reaction inside the fandom could answer to the aim of avoiding negative public representations, thus the alignment between the intra-fandom criticisms with the outside ones (Proctor, 2016).

In the case of RPS, this criticism intensifies because it is girls and LGBTIQ+ fans who primarily practice it, and we must consider how this intra-fandom policing is often heavily gendered. Some fan practices that are accepted among men are considered inappropriate when done by women (Busse, 2018, p. 75). Hence, female fans are more stigmatised, “especially due to the “feminine” characteristics ... such as hysteria, oversentimentalism, aloofness and lack of criticism” (Yodovich, 2016, p. 291). This criticism grows when female fans express their sexual desire or construct their

erotic fantasies because they are perceived as “crazy” or “embarrassing”, and therefore they are policed both by the fandom and the outside (Neville, 2018a, p. 18).

However, even though many female and LGBTIQ+ fans might face these criticisms and reticence from other people inside their community, fandom is still an essential part of their life (Busse, 2018, p. 88). Furthermore, no matter how hostile the fandom might be to girls or queer fans, the writing of RPS allows these fans to explore their interests and sexual desire (Neville, 2018b) as they engage with the objects of their enthusiasm “in ways that may disrupt the dominant ideologies of a subculture” (Hoad, 2017, p. 10).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to analyse the fandom self-representation and the representation of the fan-celebrity relationship to understand the nuances and specificities of RPS and YouTubers’ fandom. The specific research questions that guided the analysis were:

1. How does fandom represent itself in Rubelangel and Septiplier RPS? What practices are coded as a “good” or a “bad” fan? Is RPS writing considered popular among fandom?
2. How is the relationship between the fandom and the YouTubers portrayed in the Rubelangel and Septiplier RPS? How do the YouTubers perceive their fandom and the RPS?

I will use thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to answer these questions. This methodology is used to identify and organise patterns of themes and meanings. Thematic analysis has been used in previous fandom and fan fiction research (e.g. Barker, 2002; R. Black et al., 2019). Thematic analysis allows us to use a deductive and inductive hybrid approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), i.e., some themes and topics were previously established during the literature review and based on previous research about fandom representation, while some other concepts and themes emerged during data coding and analysis (Gibbs, 2007). The data collection and the analysis were happening simultaneously, and the coding process was iterative, since different levels of analysis and coding were conducted. The texts were coded with the qualitative analysis software Nvivo.

The sample consists of 12 RPS of Rubelangel and Septiplier posted on Archive of Our Own and Wattpad. Half of the samples (6) are Rubelangel RPS, and the other half (6) are Septiplier RPS. The RPS come from Wattpad and Archive of Our Own, two of the most popular fan fiction websites. AO3 is exclusively devoted to fan fiction work, whereas Wattpad also hosts original fiction (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018).

To determine the sample, I established the following criteria: the RPS must be finalised and at least be 3000 words long; the RPS must have at least 10 thousand reads, and the Septiplier or Rubelangel ship must be the main one in the text. In addition, fans must appear in the story, whether they are referenced or have an active role and presence in the RPS. Some works were excluded from the sample if they fell

into specific fanfic genres, such as *omegaverse*, fantasy or sci-fi. These genres were excluded because, firstly, as they were primarily situated in alternate and fantasy set-ups, the characters did not work as YouTubers and, therefore, did not have any fans. Secondly, genres such as *omegaverse* have particular rules and conventions; thus, the fandom presence in the RPS was also lower.

These RPS are published on public websites, intended for public consumption, and written under pseudonyms. This goes to the core of the ethical considerations when doing internet research: are this RPS posted in public or private websites? Is informed consent needed? Even if the websites and their materials are publicly accessible, people might have expectations or perceptions of privacy (Franzke et al. 2020, 22).

In the case of RPS this issue is more sensitive since the practice of RPS is controversial outside and inside fandoms, and many of these stories have much sexual content. Thus, many of the authors might have posted them with a perception that Wattpad or AO3 are more closed and private spaces or might be worried that these stories are shared in other platforms as where they were published initially (Dym & Fiesler, 2020; Freund & Fielding, 2013).

However, since it is very hard to contact the authors of the RPS (many are not active in the platforms) to obtain informed consent, an established practice among fan scholars is to not attribute the person's name or pseudonym to the works (Dym and Fiesler 2020, para. 5.11; Hedrick 2020, 6). To protect the authors' identities and reduce the risk of these stories being traceable to their source and harm the authors, I will not attribute quotes to the author's usernames, pseudonyms or quote the titles of the RPS. Thus, the RPS will be identified with "S" for the Septiplier RPS and "R" for the Rubelangel ones, followed by a number (1-6) to identify each one.

Rubelangel stories, as they are written in Spanish, will be translated and, therefore, hard to trace back to their source. Concerning Septiplier stories, written in English, some words of the direct quotes will be altered – keeping the meaning and the original sense of the sentence – with the same purpose. These measures will assure that the quotes in this article cannot be entered in Wattpad, AO3 or any other search engine to trace back the original RPS.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Fandom self-representation

In the RPS analysed, fandom always appears in the story as a character or referenced by the main characters. In two stories (R1, R6), the fandom has a close relationship with the YouTubers. In 6 stories (R3, R5, S1, S2, S3, S6), fandom participates and has an active role in the story: mostly through interactions at YouTube conventions or in events such as concerts. In the rest of the stories (R2, R4, S4, S5), fans are only mentioned or appear through online interactions (such as comments on videos, Twitter messages...).

Nevertheless, all these stories share the same trait: the fandom appears passionate, enthusiastic, and excessive. Passion is one of the main characteristics of a fan. They engage and relate with media products and celebrities through passion and enthusiasm. This is often perceived as negative or inappropriate conduct since it is a transgression of the “aesthetic distance Bourdieu suggests is a cornerstone of bourgeois aesthetics” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 18).

However, even though this passion and excessiveness are present in the analysed RPS, it is not portrayed as a bad attitude. Instead, it is represented as a usual and meaningful way of engaging with the YouTubers' content. In R1, a fan says: “I don't really think there's anything wrong with remembering the people who taught me so much all my life... And I'm not ashamed to ask for an autograph or a picture”. This way of engaging is often represented through the practice of drawing fanart (“He liked seeing fanart of he and Mark being cute together” [S1]) or cosplaying (“Not long after they got there, a small group of cosplayers ran up to them, excited. “Markiplier!”, the leader of the group cried” [S1]). There are a lot of interactions between fans and YouTubers, where they show their enthusiasm to them: “I'm Celeste and you're my favourite youtuber ever! Can you sign my teddy bear?” (S2).

Fans also portray themselves as being unconditional and attached to the celebrities in their content for long periods. In some of the RPS, the main characters leave YouTube and social media for a while, sometimes for years, but fans are still waiting for them to get back, as we can see in S2: “Even though you haven't posted in ages I'm still subscribed to your channel!” or in R1: “Apparently, they loved you a lot. There are millions of comments that say that they miss you and that they hope that you get back one day”.

In one of the Rubelangel RPS (R6), Rubius has been away from YouTube for almost 20 years. He has a teenage daughter who starts to date a boy, who recognises him because his parents have been showing El Rubius and Mangel's videos: “I haven't seen all your videos, but my parents are true *criaturitas*<sup>2</sup>. It's thanks to them that I've seen your videos. They told me that when they were young that they watched your videos with their friends for fun”.

Nonetheless, fans are not always represented in this positive light. This enthusiasm and passion are sometimes coded as toxic and disrespectful to celebrities. Thus, RPS usually understand passion as a positive and emotional way to relate with the YouTubers, but sometimes it can be too extreme and result in harmful behaviours:

*When he started to be famous, he had to get away from it all. He couldn't leave the house from the constant harassment from his fans, blinded by the idea of getting a picture of him. He couldn't even walk down the street like a normal person. (R4)*

<sup>2</sup> “Criaturitas del Señor” (“Creatures of the Lord”) is how El Rubius refers to his fans and always starts the YouTube videos greeting them with this phrase.

However, these fans are always presented as isolated individuals within the whole fandom, and their behaviour is never portrayed as mainstream. Other fans reject these behaviours coming from other fans: “They were stopped a couple of times by fans, but others understood that they had somewhere to be and asked the others to back off” (S1).

The fandom is mainly portrayed as a community that supports LGBTIQ+ rights and that has no problem with the YouTubers being in a gay relationship. For example, in S3, Jacksepticeye and Markiplier come out of the closet during a YouTube convention. The fandom's reaction is the following: “Mark and I... have been dating... for 2 years, Jack said, closing his eyes and scrunching his face, awaiting the roars of screams from the audience. The crowd was yelling and screaming and even crying”.

Fans often position themselves as a supportive community within a homophobic society and thus as a space where the YouTubers can feel comfortable with their sexuality. In S6, Jack and Mark are going to get married, and they are very excited to share it with their fandom, as they feel they will accept it and be happy for them. They oppose it to the receiving it might get from people outside the fandom: “They recorded the video for the channel. ‘We’re engaged! Marryplier, guys. It’s a thing now! And who cares what people not in the community think. We’re happy and we believe you’ll be too!’. We see the same idea in R2; Mangel and Rubius have to kiss in the camera as part of a challenge. However, Rubius is afraid to show the kiss publicly: “I didn’t like to show myself too much, other than to my fans. I always receive a lot of critics, the ‘what will they say’, the typical comments from haters and homophobes, they wait for the first opportunity to attack and destroy you”.

There are some exceptions: in S1, the RPS portrays a very bad encounter with a fan who first approaches Mark in a friendly manner, but he suddenly gets angry with him because he genuinely likes a video created as a parody.

*Hey! Markiplier!” [...] “I love your Flappy Fedora video. I’m glad that one of YouTubers I am subbed to shares my intellectual views”.*

*Everyone within earshot either chortled, laughed, or snorted. Mark shook his head a bit. “You know that was a spoof, right? I don’t actually think that way.”*

*The man appeared confused. “What?”*

*“Yeah, man. That’s a really gross way of thinking. I wouldn’t want anyone subjected to that”. Now the creep was angry. (S1).*

This fan is presented as an outsider of the fandom that does not properly know how to “read” Mark’s content. A while after this incident, the fan tries to stab Mark, and Jack tries to protect him from the attack and ends up receiving the hit. When the fan is stabbing him, he calls them “fags”. Thus, the attack is not only prompted by the dissonance regarding Mark’s content but is also a homophobic attack. Then, the assaulter is quickly kicked out of the fandom by the rest of the fans since “he has no space in our community”.



We previously stated that RPS is controversial among many fandoms, and particularly, Septiplier fans are often conflicted about this practice. However, in the analysed fanfics it is portrayed as a common practice and not censored by most fandom, quite the opposite. In S2, Jacksepticeye reads the responses to a tweet he has posted with a picture of him and Markiplier, not engaging in any romantic activity: “Septiplier awaaay!’, ‘I ship it!’, ‘They are very cute together!’, ‘Lol finally!’”. If it is referenced that not the majority of the fandom, it is nonetheless portrayed as the majority of it: “I guess it doesn’t matter if people don’t like us going out. The septiplier shippers are gonna go crazy though, you realise that?” (S2).

Rubius and Mangel have a more positive relationship with the fanfics and encourage this practice. Thus, in the Rubelangel RPS, we find more references to fanfic writing as a common practice, becoming more aligned with the “source text” than in the Septiplier case. For example, as we see in R3: “We are trending topic!’, said Rubius. He showed Mangel the laptop with all the tweets and links to fanfics. They had posted a video a couple of hours ago, and everyone was shipping them. Again”.

Many of the RPS explore homosexual desire that emerges from homosocial bonding. Hence, the interactions can be understood as heterosexual male bonding between two friends or as homosexual desire and love (Sedgwick, 1985; Woledge, 2006). For example, in S4, we see how Mark describes an interaction between Mark and Jack in the following terms: “They had been play fighting, just being cute for the cameras: two friends rough-housing each other, nothing unusual about that”. These interactions are picked up by fans, who read them as romantic interactions and use them to build fanfics.

As fans feel very close to the YouTubers and spend lots of time consuming their content, they build themselves as agents able to sense romantic interactions between them:

*“Well... Then we will be together. As a couple. Rubelangel is real” He laughed, he couldn’t believe it yet. “It feels weird to say it out loud”.*

*“Why?” [...] “Rubelangel has always been real. They always knew.” (R1)*

But fans can go further than just ‘deciphering’. They also depict themselves as being able to “predict” and sense the attraction between the two YouTubers, even when they are oblivious. Then it is thanks to the fandom and their interaction through social media, that they become aware of their feelings for each other. In R1, this breakthrough moment is narrated this way:

*Thanks to the comments, they knew that some fans had started to ship them. Some said it was because they made a fantastic couple. Some others said it because of the magnetism and thought they could really get along...*

*As a couple.*

*They called them Rubelangel.*

*And Rubius had started to like it! Damn, he was even smiling in front of the computer when he saw a comment talking about it. Mangel was smiling too...*

Thus, fans are not only engaging in a fantasy imagining the life of the celebrities or guessing what might be going on. In some cases, the fans create and stimulate feelings, making the YouTubers fall in love and start to date each other. In S5, Mark is reading the comments fans have left in Jack's video, where he explains that he is moving to Los Angeles and will share an apartment with Mark. Not as a couple, just as friends. Mark is having fun reading the comments that are shipping them, but he suddenly starts questioning if he would like it to be true:

*The septiplier fans have gone crazy in the comments. Many of them say that even if the move isn't for romantic purposes, he and Jack will almost certainly fall madly in love ... That'll never happen, both have made it clear that they have no romantic interest in the other. He can't help but wonder though... Nope, we're not even going there!*

Therefore, in these RPS, the fans give themselves a lot of agency and capacity to influence the real lives of the YouTubers and position their creations as actors that impact reality.

#### **4.2. Representation of the celebrity – fandom relationship**

In the previous section, we saw that fandom portrays itself as passionate, excessive and unconditional. But how do the YouTubers receive this passion in these RPS?

In general terms, the celebrities receive it with thankfulness and appreciation. They are grateful that they have a supportive community that will back them no matter what: “you know that our fans will do anything to see us happy” (R5). In R6, Rubius has not posted for years. He does not want to come back because his life is very different, but he explains to Mangel what is the thing that he misses the most about being a YouTuber:

*I'd like to say “hello criaturitas del señor!” [Creatures of the Lord] one more time... To see their comments, which are always so funny. Their millions of “thank you” that they sent me every day. Their letters... Their drawings... The support they gave me. I'd like to live this again, just one more time.*

Hence, he does not miss the job, the money, or the fame: he misses the fandom and the bonds built around it. In all the RPS, many scenes describe where the main characters read the comments left by the fans. For example, in S6, Mark and Jack spend a whole afternoon reading comments and crying: “He was always amazed at how we have touched so many lives. He always got emotional when he heard their stories”.

They do not only expect to receive comments on their videos or social media, but they also sometimes even actively look for it on platforms such as AO3 or Tumblr: “I was just on Tumblr.’ Sean<sup>3</sup> couldn’t help but laugh at that; ah, Tumblr, of course” (S1). This activity of searching for texts or images about them is always fun and positive, often done by the couples, as we can see later on S1: “They liked seeing fanart of him and Mark being cute together”. Consuming these stories is portrayed as a romantic activity with their partner to remember how their relationship was born.

However, in some RPS the relationship of the YouTubers with fan productions is portrayed with a lack of understanding or with mockery: “They’ve always laughed so much with all the pictures, the novels, the videos and the nonsense that the fans created about them” (R1). In some cases, this is received with rejection or disapproval: “Sometimes he got upset with all the fans insisting and sending them these drawings or writings. It especially bothered Mangel” (R6). However, this is later connected to the idea that it was bothering because they were pointing out the attraction between them: “Then he realised that maybe Miguel was upset because both Mangel and the fans knew it wasn’t a joke after all. But I was clueless”.

In general, the YouTubers enjoy reading comments, receiving fan art..., to feel close to their fandom. The relationship between YouTubers and fandom is portrayed as being very close and often as a dependent relationship. The YouTubers feel very thankful for all their support: “We had a lot of fun at the convention, meeting you guys, getting gifts; we apologise for not being there Sunday ... Thank you so much for watching and being here, as always” (R4).

When they talk about their relationship with the fandom, they often do it in terms of being in “debt” or “owning” things to them. For example, in S6, Mark explains this feeling: “He’d do anything for his community, no matter how large it is, because they’ve done everything for him”. Thus, a correlation is established between what the YouTubers give the fandom and what the YouTubers receive, creating a more equal or balanced relationship.

Whenever there is a development in their personal lives, they need to disclose it to their audience: “We gotta do a livestream vlog to explain this” (S2) or “we oweit to the fangirls, they would never forgive us if we didn’t deliver with a video of us kissing” (R2). This idea connects with the imperative of being true and authentic with the audience and generating a sense of intimacy (Hou, 2019; Lovelock, 2017; Marwick, 2016; Raun, 2018).

This imperative to be authentic to the audience is especially acute when related to the “coming out” of the closet. In many RPS, when the main characters confess their attraction for each other and thus start a relationship, one of the first things they think about is telling it to their audience. For example, in S2, shortly after they agree to start dating, Jack asks Mark, “What should we do? How are we going to tell our

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3 Sean is Jacksepticeye real’s name. However, most of the time he calls himself Jack and in most of the RPS the other characters also call him Jack. In some ocasions, though, in intimate situations, his real name is used.

fans that we are together?”. We can also see it in R3, where Mangel tells Rubius “We have to tell them [the fandom] about our thing”, to which Rubius answers saying, “Yes, they must know, but not yet. Let me process it first!”.

Sometimes this dependency and closeness are coded with fear, particularly fear of disappointing the fandom or letting them down. For example, in R6, when Rubius is thinking about coming back, he expresses his fears:

*He was amazed that his criaturitas [little creatures] were still waiting for him. He started to feel bad since he had abandoned them, he had disappointed them, that's why he couldn't watch his old videos ... He guessed it was fear, fear of them hating him for leaving, fear of being rejected.*

Following this fear of disappointing them, the YouTubers always warn their audience whenever they are going to be away from the cameras for a while, and they apologise in advance: “We’re on our honeymoon! Yay! But Mark and I won’t be uploading for a bit, so sorry. We need a little bit of a break from recording. We hope it’s ok” (S2). In R5, Rubius and Mangel feel that they must quickly record a video for their audience: “We can do it when we get home. Then they’ll be satisfied, and we’ll have a little bit of time for us”. This duty with the fandom is not perceived as a load, but as giving back what the fandom has done for them.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Rubelangel and Septplier RPS offer us an opportunity to see the representation of fandom in the fanfic and, at the same time, to understand the imagined relationships with the YouTubers. The 12 analysed RPS have allowed us to see how fans insert themselves into the text to fulfil their desires.

We have seen that fans mostly portray themselves positively and present the bad behaviours as isolated incidents perpetrated by individuals but not representative of the fandom. Even though fans are represented as enthusiastic and sometimes excessive, it does not have negative connotations as it usually does when portrayed in mainstream media. Instead, it is presented as a meaningful way of engaging with the YouTubers' content. In the same vein, celebrities are represented as being grateful for all the fandom engagement and the RPS production. In these fanfics, fans who ship the YouTubers or write RPS are portrayed as a majority, whereas in their fandom inside the YouTube gaming community, they are smaller groups.

We have seen how this RPS sometimes are presented as “predictions” of what will happen or as the trigger for the YouTubers to acknowledge their feelings. Thus, fandom attributes itself a lot of agency and power over the lives of the celebrities, therefore reverting the unequal and unbalanced relationship between fan and celebrity. Fans not only stay away from the passive consumer role, but they can influence the private life of the YouTubers through their RPS.

This is especially relevant in the Septiplier and Rubelangel fandom, where the female and queer writers of the RPS might sometimes feel excluded from the fandom. Gaming communities are highly hypermasculine and hyperheterosexual, and these fans reclaim their space as RPS writers, even though it might be considered a “wrong” way of being a fan (Busse, 2018; Yodovich, 2016). However, through the writing of these RPS, these fans position themselves as important actors in the YouTubers' life, and they also imagine how their idols might receive this practice and that their reading of the celebrities' private life is the correct one.

In the Rubelangel case, there is a correspondence between what Rubius and Mangel have expressed about the RPS – positive and encouraging – and what we see in the RPS. But in the Septiplier case, where they publicly said they do not like this kind of content, the correspondence link is broken. In the RPS, both Jack and Mark are happy to read this content and are often depicted actively looking for it. This connects with one of the main tensions of RPS; the building of the canon. Which events or traits does the fandom incorporate in the texts, and which are left out? In this case, the RPS writers consistently ignore the requests and feelings of discomfort of the YouTubers and exclude them from the fanfic.

The YouTubers are also portrayed as feeling in permanent debt to their audience and having to be transparent and available to them or apologising when they are going to be away from the social media platforms. It connects with the imperative of being transparent and authentic with the audience since the fandom demands this constant availability (Guarriello, 2019) from the celebrities. It becomes especially acute when disclosing their personal life, mainly coming out of the closet. The YouTubers feel the obligation to communicate to the fandom their relationship as quickly as possible to give back and maintain the bond with their audiences.

Future research should address this self-representation in other fandoms and fanfics. Analysing the micro-celebrities public responses to this kind of content would help better understand the relationships and hierarchies with fans and connect it with authenticity and transparency promises.

This article has contributed to the current scholarship on RPS and fandom relationship with the celebrities and fandom representation. By analysing these RPS, this article has shown how these fanfics can become spaces of resistance for female and queer fans in masculine and heterosexual environments and how they use the RPS to reinforce their bond with the YouTubers and their belonging to the fandom from which they are often excluded.

**Ona Anglada-Pujol** is a PhD student in Communication and a member of the MEDIUM research group at the Communication Department of Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona). She has the UNICA PIF-UPF fellowship. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Audiovisual Communication (UPF, 2016) and a Master's Degree in Social Communication Research (UPF, 2019). Her doctoral thesis is about slash fiction practices about gamers and its discourses about gender, sexuality and romantic love. Her

main research interests are gender and queer studies, fan studies, popular culture and television series.

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# ALGORITHMIC (IN)VISIBILITY TACTICS AMONG IMMIGRANT TIKTOKERS

DANIELA JARAMILLO-DENT

Erasmus University Rotterdam and University of Huelva

## ABSTRACT

*It is well established in scientific literature that immigrants are excluded from their own stories, which are often instrumentalized to fulfill specific communicative, othering intentions. In this sense, migrant agency and voice are, in many cases, absent from narratives related to their life experiences and subject to various symbolic, digital, and material borders. Moreover, although social media has been recognized as a prime space for self-representation across different segments of society, immigrants are often excluded from these spaces due to the risks that sharing certain information publicly represent to them. In this article I draw from a 16-month digital ethnography and inductive, multimodal content analysis of videos created by 53 Latin American immigrant tiktokers in the United States and Spain. This enables the conceptualization of their algorithmic (in)visibility practices which refer to the set of strategies deployed by immigrant content creators on social media —and possibly other marginalized and vulnerable populations— to negotiate the conspicuousness of their controversial content with the aim of avoiding its deletion from the platform. The findings unveil three exemplary algorithmic (in)visibility practices that include content reuse and re-upload, vernacular visibility, and partial deplatforming. I find that these strategies shift between collective and individual approaches to achieve selective visibility and concealed conspicuousness within algorithmic moderation systems.*

Keywords: algorithms ▪ social media ▪ migrants ▪ visibility ▪ multimodal analysis

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the strategies deployed by immigrant content creators on TikTok to convey controversial content by harnessing the unique genres, functions, and narrative configurations available on the platform. In the case of TikTok, these practices may include well-known tactics that are widespread among generalist tiktokers, such as the use of specific hashtags —e.g. #fyp, #viral and #foryou. They may also involve other, more subversive schemes, where creators negotiate the conspicuousness of their content through the deployment of specific platform vernaculars

(Gibbs et al., 2015). In some cases, immigrant tiktokers do this by creating videos that follow mainstream logics and grammars of the platform to present contentious content under the concealment of TikTok humor, choreography, overlaid text, and popular audio tracks. This content relates to intimate accounts of border crossing, tips to navigate life in the receiving country while undocumented and audio-visual evidence of discrimination and oppression against immigrants.

Videos that reflect overt discussions by content creators about their perspective of the algorithm and their interpretations of the platform's moderation practices (Gillespie, 2018) are also interesting, and they serve to assess the unique challenges faced by immigrant tiktokers to present their content. Thus, the paper focuses on the specific ways in which immigrant TikTok creators deploy their knowledge of platform vernaculars to negotiate their algorithmic positioning (Bucher, 2012) through an array of strategies adapted to their unique experiences, needs and identities.

In this article I draw from a 16-month digital ethnography involving content created by 53 Latin American immigrant tiktokers in the United States and Spain to assess and conceptualize their *algorithmic (in)visibility* practices on the platform. The exploration of these two countries is justified by their status as key destinations for immigrants from the Latin American region. For instance, Spain has seen a large increase in Latin American immigration in the last decades, with around 1.5 million Latin American immigrants residing in the country in 2022 (Cueto, 2022). The country boasts significant immigrant populations from different Latin American countries such as Colombia (295K), Venezuela (200K), Honduras (133K), and Ecuador (132K), recorded in 2021 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2021). In the case of the US, Latin American migration is key, with around 51.3% of all migrants in the country originating from Latin America (Yemane & Fernández-Reino, 2019).

Research on minority and sensitive TikTok content is also relevant to understand the strategies and challenges faced by this community. For instance, research on Holocaust-related TikTok reflects the use of functions and affordances that are unique to the platform such as green screen and duet to establish a dialogue with existing audiovisual content within this community of creators to describe and present sensitive information about the Holocaust (Ebbrecht-Hartmann, & Divon, 2022). Moreover, minorities on TikTok have voiced their perception of algorithmic injustice reflected by unequal moderation processes that seem to disproportionately affect them. This is the case of racial minorities who have reported problematic differences that allow phrases such as "I am a neo nazi" to be accepted and "Supporting Black voices" to be flagged as inappropriate. In response, TikTok has justified these instances as algorithmic glitches and errors (Ohlheiser, 2021). Moroccan-Spanish mixed couples on TikTok also receive attacks from different spheres of society as they attempt to (self)represent their relationship as an example of hybridity and coexistence, taking advantage of affordances and features such as *respond to comment* to challenge and discuss specific misrepresentations of who they are, while making their content visible using popular audio tracks (Civila & Jaramillo-Dent,

2022). Interracial couples in the United States have also been able to harness the visibility power of TikTok to monetize and attract support and hate on the platform (Trent, 2022).

The paper starts with a description of the challenges for immigrants creating content on social media, it then moves to an explanation of the uniqueness of TikTok as a platform, its affordances, and vernaculars, followed by a theoretical framework related to issues of visibility and conceptual notions of strategies and tactics within social media-based algorithmic systems. The research design and methods are then described, explaining the purposive sampling method (Palys, 2008) to extract illustrative examples that identify these strategies through an inductive, multimodal content and critical discourse analysis. In this paper the aim is to deepen the understanding of the different forms of *algorithmic (in)visibility* (Jaramillo-Dent et al, 2022), which refers to the set of strategies deployed by immigrant content creators on social media —and possibly other marginalized and vulnerable populations— to negotiate the conspicuousness of their controversial content with the aim of avoiding its deletion from the platform. These practices resemble Brit Rusert's (2017) description of the ways in which Black people become strategically visible and opaque in the face of oppressive representations of who they are. In this sense, the findings of the present paper unveil three exemplary *algorithmic (in)visibility* practices that include content reuse and re-upload, vernacular visibility, and partial deplatforming. I find that these strategies shift between collective and individual approaches to achieve selective visibility and concealed conspicuousness within algorithmic moderation systems.

## 2. IMMIGRANTS, DIGITAL (SELF)REPRESENTATION, AND ALGORITHMS

It is well established in scientific literature that immigrants are excluded from their own stories, which are often instrumentalized to fulfill specific communicative, othering intentions (Szytniewski & Spierings, 2014). In this sense, migrant agency and voice are, in many cases, absent from narratives related to their life experiences and subject to various symbolic, digital, and material borders (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019). Furthermore, Immigration is deeply rooted in colonial structures that define who migrates and where, through a hierarchized perspective of the representations, knowledge, and ideas of who immigrants are and what is involved in their experiences.

Although social media has been recognized as a prime space for self-representation across different segments of society, immigrants are often excluded from these spaces due to the risks that sharing certain information publicly represent to them. In this context, Appadurai (2019) described the difficulties faced by immigrants and their narratives to fit mainstream expectations set by modern nation-states. Moreover, Mitchell (2019) argues that social media storytelling by refugees creates a collective space of meaning-making which enables them to shape, resignify, and remix

these stories collaboratively from the bottom-up. She describes the ways in which the power of mainstream media industries has been replaced by social media platforms' algorithmic systems, who own these stories and have the power to shape, expand or constrain the reach of these contents (Mitchell, 2019). This is due to the combination of human and algorithmic moderation systems, which determine what is available, visible, and viral (Gillespie, 2010, 2018). Thus, colonial structures of dominance are perpetuated through coded biases (Benjamin, 2019) and algorithmized oppression systems (Noble, 2018). The internal functioning of these moderation infrastructures is obscure, although we can glimpse at them through the contents and discourse of creators who describe their experiences with the platform, its algorithm, and the moderation policies that shape and affect their content creation practices.

### 3. TIKTOK'S ALGORITHM AND VERNACULARS: THE GRAMMARS AND LOGICS OF THE PLATFORM

To explore algorithmic visibility, the role of platform vernaculars becomes key. Gibbs et al. (2015) defined platform vernaculars as the specific genres of communication employed by users and enabled and constrained by the design of the social media platform and its affordances (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). In this section I will describe the unique content configurations and affordances of TikTok that comprise its vernacular logics. Emphasis will be placed on the uniqueness of TikTok's platform vernaculars due to their memetic and imitational nature, since they promote and facilitate imitation among users at different levels (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Defining and establishing the affordances that characterize TikTok when compared to other platforms is key to understanding the ways in which content creators deploy *algorithmic (in)visibility* tactics.

Audio is central to TikTok, it functions as a connector and cataloguing element on the platform (Abidin, 2021). It has been analyzed as a mode of storytelling (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022) and a structurally memetic affordance (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) that is especially prominent prompting users to "use this audio". The platform features an audio track page where the user can follow and find every video that has used the audio track, with the "original" poster listed first and followed by other videos in an order defined by a combination of popularity and recency. This page also includes the number of videos on the platform that use that specific audio track, which serves to assess the popularity of a specific audio track.

Furthermore, reuse and resignification content creation possibilities are also noteworthy on TikTok. In this sense, the duet, stitch, and green screen affordances enable creators to incorporate existing videos in their new creations and interact with this content in different ways. Figure 1 describes these different affordances and their functions.

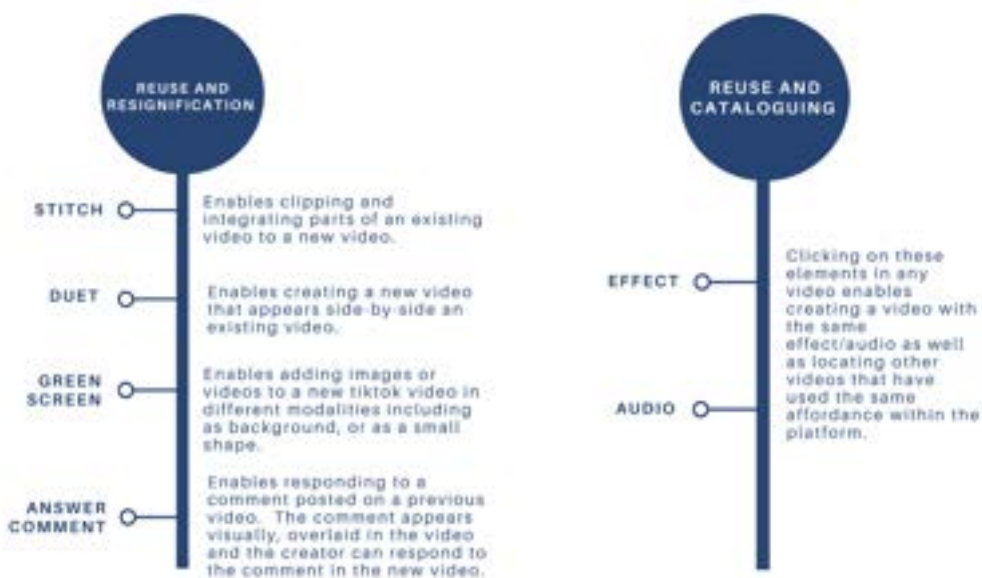


Figure 1. Affordances for reuse, resignification and cataloguing on TikTok. Adapted from Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022)

The algorithmic functions of TikTok related to visibility and moderation have prompted conversations and controversy among content creators, users, and other stakeholders. In this sense, research on aspects that users consider influential to the TikTok algorithm include “video engagement, posting time and adding and piling up hashtags” (Klug et al., 2021, p. 84). Klug et al. (2021) also provide evidence, through a content analysis, that two of these assumptions seem to affect the algorithmic popularity of a video. These include different forms of engagement such as likes, comments and shares, along with specific posting times. However, the use of hashtags such as #foryou or #fyp and using many popular hashtags on one video yield uncertain results regarding the likelihood of the video becoming “trending”.

In the next section, previous research on algorithmic visibility and its implications for minority creators is presented.

#### 4. ALGORITHMIC (IN)VISIBILITY IN THE FACE OF DIGITAL AND ALGORITHMIC BORDERS

Critical data expert Stefania Milan defines visibility as “the digital embodiment and online presence of individuals and groups and their associated meanings, which are (and need to be) constantly negotiated, reinvigorated, and updated” (Milan, 2015, p. 6). She suggests that politics of visibility begin and end with individuals and “ultimately create individuals-in-the-group rather than groups.” (Milan, 2015, p. 1). She

also argues that, since social media are not neutral actors, content creators engage in a sensemaking process that harnesses their technical components to build their collective identity (Milan, 2015). This is relevant for research on immigrant creators because they are far from a monolithic group and their narrative and content-creation strategies often rely on individual stories that are unique and dependent on individual characteristics including their nationality, mode of entry to the country, and whether they fled due to a recognized crisis, a search for opportunity, among others. These narratives are also located within a public sphere of mediatized events that prompt content creation by different groups to clarify, position themselves or counter existing narratives and representations (Jaramillo-Dent & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2021; Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022).

Moreover, it is relevant to delve into conceptual notions of *strategy* and *tactic* as key within this study. For this, an adaptation of De Certeau's (1984) conceptualizations to digital and algorithmic spaces is relevant. He describes the importance of considering the marginality that exists in cultural production and the power relationships that are created among members of society. According to De Certeau (1984), strategies and tactics emerge in response to existing power imbalances and lack of recognition by marginalized individuals in society. He argues that they are deployed to organize non-mainstream forms of communication in ways that resemble mass media. A *strategy*, according to the author, refers to the process in which power imbalances can be shifted by isolating dominant subjects (of superior power) by separating them from their context. A *tactic*, on the other hand, refers to an action that takes advantage of a lack of locus, where a subject/institution/entity is able to partially occupy the space of the other in order to take advantage of it. It is different from the strategy because of its lack of "place" and its need to seize any opportunities available.

Moreover, Karizat et al. (2021) describe how TikTok users' sensemaking process of the algorithmic *For You* feed is related to their identity. Their findings suggest that marginalized individuals' experiences with the algorithm differ due to personal identity characteristics that shape their feed. TikTok users identifying as minorities in terms of race, language or sexual orientation reported perceiving that their minority identities were not represented in their feed and considered that it would be less likely to become visible when creating content as a person from a non-dominant group.

Previous research on vernacular visibility has explored the ways in which feminist groups in Latin America appropriate the potential of four different social media platforms to gain visibility and argue that this process of adaptation shapes the feminist movement (Sued et al., 2021). These researchers describe how the aesthetics of their TikTok videos use specific features such as overlaid text and an emphasis on audio. Humor, role-play, and music are also mentioned as part of TikTok's unique narrative genres. Visually, these researchers also describe how female bodies are shaped by TikTok's configurations and appear sexualized. They also describe that a lot of this



content related to feminist activism does not follow established vernacular aesthetics of the platform. The findings of this study are relevant to our analysis because they point to TikTok as one of the main platforms that shapes the formats and configurations of content for visibility by minority groups discussing issues of abortion and women's rights. This case also differs from the present study in that their study focuses on established activist initiatives and this paper is geared towards a combination of users and microcelebrities who self-identify as Latin American immigrants making immigrant issues visible on the platform.

The concept of *algorithmic (in)visibility* is useful to explore the visibility practices of immigrants and other creators who advance controversial content. As mentioned before, *algorithmic (in)visibility* is defined as the set of strategies deployed by a community of creators to have their content picked up by the platform's algorithmic feed regardless of its level of controversy (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022). I argue that these strategies ensure different levels of visibility within the platform depending on the degree of controversy of the content. In the case of immigrants, controversial content may include discussions related to entering a country as a tourist to stay as an immigrant, supporting undocumented immigrants through fundraising initiatives, narrating very intimate stories about crossing the border, or providing information about how to navigate the system without documentation. They do this by using specific affordances and platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015) to negotiate their visibility within TikTok's algorithmic structures.

These behaviors are closely related to algorithmic resistance tactics, understood as behaviors that work within the framework of the algorithm with the intention to prompt specific algorithmic outcomes (Velkova & Kaun, 2021). They also emerge in response to users' perspective of the straining nature of algorithmic social feeds which refers to

*(...) an algorithm recognizing, classifying, sorting and suppressing social identities based on its conception of which social identities are (or are not) 'valuable' and 'wanted', or which ones (do not) deserve visibility* (Karizat et al., 2021, p. 21)

Algorithmic resistance emerges in response to perceived *algorithmic privilege* (Karizat et al., 2021) which refers to the idea that certain identities are at an advantage and less likely to be suppressed by the feed.

Thus, attempts to avoid moderation and ensure visibility on social media platforms emerge in the face of various coded biases that exist within algorithmic systems. These include the digital borders built through exclusionary narratives, representations, and symbols that place immigrants in established frames and classifications as victims or threats and reproduce these narratives constantly, constraining the ability of migrant creators and communities to challenge them (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019). In parallel, coded borders exist in these sociotechnical systems that recognize and classify information such as Google, which have been found to be profoundly

biased when searching terms related to racial minorities (Noble, 2018). The problem of coded biases goes beyond narratives, representations, and searches to affect the likelihood of surveillance a specific group may receive (Benjamin, 2019). This becomes even more relevant for immigrants and refugees as their migratory status and personal safety can be affected by the contents they create and post online due to legislation that enables social media screening to establish refugee status (Brekke & Balke Staver, 2019) which means that creating social media content is often not an option for many immigrants, as they don't have the same communication rights as other members of society (Leurs, 2017).

Considering previous work and the implications of social media visibility for immigrants, in the next section I describe the methodological approach followed in this study.

## 5. METHODS

This paper relies on observations from a 16-month digital ethnography exploring immigrant creators on TikTok, it was done through a five-step process:

1. Monthly walkthroughs (Light et al., 2018) of TikTok using the mobile app to understand the specific affordances and content configurations that are available on the platform. Two types of walkthroughs were carried out. The first included navigation of existing content, focusing on the aspects that imitate previous videos and the affordances that derive from existing TikTok trends, for instance navigating from a video through the audio link to explore the videos that used that audio track before. The second type of walkthrough involved the creation of new content to explore the process of content creation and understand whether some components of the content were created within the platform or if they used an external tool.
2. Identification of immigrant creators through searches of hashtags and keywords related to immigration in Spanish and English and the subsequent identification of cooccurring hashtags that refer to specific nationalities residing in Spain and the US. This was followed by and the observation of specific profiles that featured migratory narratives to establish the creators' self-identification as immigrants.
3. Daily observations of the general TikTok feed and selected immigrant creator profiles five days a week for a minimum of one hour a day to understand general TikTok trends and specific practices of immigrant creators, as well as their adaptation to wider platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015). Observations were recorded using a system of fieldnotes and screenshots to exemplify phenomena of interest and connections between generalist content creators and immigrant creators.
4. Identification of content that mentions platform moderation practices and/or promotes actions to avoid content elimination and/or to make content visible

in the face of previous deletion. The final sample is purposive (Palys, 2008) as the examples analyzed were extracted from a wider observation due to their illustrative value to exemplify *algorithmic (in)visibility* tactics by these creators.

5. Manual, inductive coding of selected content to identify the characteristics and practices of these content creators and establishment of the types and subtypes of *algorithmic (in)visibility* tactics among these creators.

### 5.1. A note on ethics

Due to the structural difficulty of contacting immigrant content creators directly to get their informed consent to use their data —as the platform does not allow users to contact creators directly unless they follow the user— following an adaptation of Markham's (2012) proposal of *fabrication as ethical practice* to protect vulnerable content creator's privacy. In this sense, the contents included in this paper have been translated from Spanish and presented as illustrated renderings of their content rather than screenshots. This was done to ensure that their identities remain protected while enabling the exemplification of the data analyzed with minimal risk for content creators.

## 6. FINDINGS

In this section, the main findings are described and explained. The results are contextualized within TikTok as a unique platform, but these content creation practices provide insights about the possibilities of social media platforms for visible controversial storytelling by traditionally marginalized groups such as immigrants. In the digital/algorithmic spaces where this study is located, it is possible to consider De Certeau's (1984) strategy/tactic concepts. For instance, the strategic processes that happen when a popular audio track or effect on TikTok is considered a digital "space" that is occupied by a community of creators who reuse it and is also appropriated by immigrants for a specific narrative aim such as the example in section 6.2.2. On the other hand, tactics are more in line with the partial deplatforming example where the creator occupies and shifts between different digital spaces, to take advantage of the platforms that allow him to present his content more freely at any given time.

### 6.1. Content reuse for visibility

The first tactic involves different forms of content reuse as well as the promotion of certain interactions by creators attempting to make their content visible and avoid deletion by the platform. This process follows the four mechanisms within the politics of visibility proposed by Milan (2015) by (1) centering on the performative nature of the migrant experience by giving voice to the original creator of the content; (2) prompting certain engagements and interactions by users through overlaid text or

in the caption; (3) expanding the duration of the protest by creating new, updated videos on the basis of existing content; (4) reproducing social action through the use of TikTok's imitation possibilities. In this case it involves more committed forms of interaction in which users are called upon to create new content using the existing video. This may involve the reuse of the audio track or the entire video through one of the affordances and content configurations available on TikTok such as green screen or duet. In this section, a few different examples of this tactic will be explained.

### 6.1.1. Audio re-upload and reuse to avoid deletion

This tactic is exemplified by narratives that rely on an audio track as the main controversial aspect of the content. An example of this is the recorded audio of a Latin American immigrant worker in Spain who was verbally abused by her employer and whose recording was used by several creators who expressed their support and empathy using captions and overlaid text. Creators who reshared this audio track also commented on their own experiences of abuse and the parts of the audio that are especially shocking. This strategy is deployed through two separate tactics that are seemingly opposite but may respond to a process of negotiation and learning of the creator community with the algorithmic feed to make content visible on the platform regardless of its level of controversy.

The first tactic involves creators uploading audio tracks as originals more than once to trick the algorithm into thinking that it is an "original" track. It is important to understand that the "original" label on TikTok audio tracks denotes that the creator uploaded (or recorded) the audio from their device. This means that a second creator who wants to share the same audio track without connecting with the original poster may upload it again and two "original" tracks featuring different creator names may indeed be the same recording that has been uploaded by two different creators. This has also been identified as a strategy to avoid attributing authorship to the original creator on TikTok by reuploading existing audio tracks that appear as original (Kaye et al., 2021). This practice arguably makes it harder for the algorithm to delete an audio track from all the videos where it appears because they keep emerging as different audio tracks under different names and connecting a different set of videos that have reused said track. In this case at least five different audio tracks featuring the exact recording under different creators' names were identified. Each of them had been reused between 20 and 40 times. The visual part of these videos often shows an empty wall or ceiling where no person appears and in other instances a person is looking at the camera, in most cases they are female creators. In the case of this recording, it is hard to know where the abuse is taking place, but it is so violent that the audio is successful in expressing the violence and fear experienced by the immigrant worker who recorded it. It is also possible to discern the Latin American accent of the immigrant woman as compared to the Spanish accent of the female voice who uses slurs and yells.

Almost all the videos that share this audio track also include overlaid text with

various functions which include: (1) describing the emotions of the poster about the audio track; (2) expressing having experienced similar instances of abuse; (3) explaining how common this type of experience is for other immigrants in Spain; (4) promoting specific actions to avoid the deletion of the video and/or audio track.

Figure 2 reflects a rendering of one of these “original” videos on the left and the audio track page that reflects the number of videos that have used the audio track on the right.



Figure 2. Rendering of (in)visible content made visible through audio reuse and re-upload. (Created and translated from Spanish by the author).

At the same time, the overlaid text in this case mentions the importance of sharing this video because it had already been taken down by TikTok. In this sense, this audio-based strategy follows two different actions, which may include re-uploading the audio track under a different name and then promoting the reuse of the audio track to avoid deletion. It is possible to argue that these are forms of algorithmic resistance (Velkova & Kaun, 2021) in which immigrant users reclaim their narratives and present them through the use of a range of the possibilities offered by the platform and through a process of negotiation with the algorithmic feed.

Moreover, TikTok videos that use this tactic often express in some way that they are the type of video TikTok eliminates, in the case of Figure 2 they describe that the video is a repost due to its previous deletion. It is noteworthy that many creators promote the reshare and reuse of the video and audio as a form of protest towards abusive employers and moderation guidelines. In this case the possibility to reuse the audio track —which is one of TikTok’s main features and one of its main organizing principles (Abidin, 2021)— is instrumentalized for visibility and protest in the face of the TikTok community, society in general, and the algorithm.

It is noteworthy that this audio track goes against platform moderation guidelines under its “Abusive Behavior” guidelines, as it contains content that falls under

*(...) expressions of abuse, including threats or degrading statements intended to mock, humiliate, embarrass, intimidate, or hurt an individual. (...) Do not post, upload, stream, or share content that insults another individual, or disparages an individual on the basis of attributes such as intellect, appearance, personality traits, or hygiene (...) To minimize the spread of egregiously offensive terms, we remove all slurs from our platform (TikTok, n.d.).*

This suggests that strategic use of audio tracks may bypass algorithmic moderation and enable instances of abuse to become visible on the platform. It is also possible that human moderators have allowed the content to stay up due to its value to public interest, as the intention of those who share this content is not to discriminate against immigrants but to provide visibility to an instance of abuse. This suggests that moderation processes may follow some forms of contextualization in order to decide to eliminate content, in line with internet scholar Tartleton Gillespie’s (2010) description of the ways in which different platforms handle graphic content, mentioning context as an important aspect in moderation decisions. The issue of which content is moderated, and which content remains up is problematic considering the recent reports by Black TikTok creators who have experienced what they see as unfair moderation instances where their content is flagged citing “harassment and bullying” when they reshare content exemplifying racist attacks while the original discriminatory videos remain on the platform (Contreras & Martinez, 2021). This may be due to hybrid moderation systems that rely on a combination of algorithms, human moderators, responses to user reports and flagging. Regardless, the obscure nature of moderation systems (Myers West, 2018) makes it hard for creators to more effectively approach visibility on the platform.

### **6.1.2. Content reuse and resignification for visibility**

This tactic is similar to the audio reuse tactic but in this case the entire video is

integrated into the new video. Creators use TikTok’s reuse and resignification functions such as duet and green screen, as reflected on Figure 3.

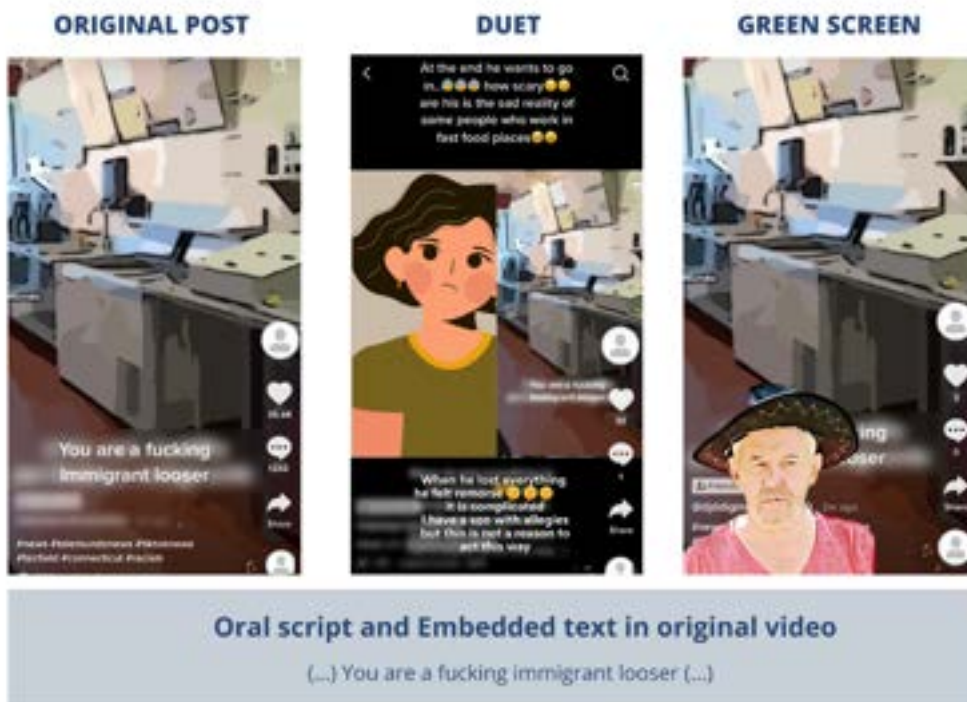


Figure 3. Rendering of different forms of content reuse for visibility. (Created and translated by the author)

In this case the original video is shared by the official profile of news channel Telemundo. This video was recorded by a fast-food restaurant worker who witnessed a xenophobic attack by a customer who was upset about his order. The customer utters the words “you are a fucking immigrant loser” and overlaid text is added to emphasize this part of the video. After the video was posted, immigrant creators appropriated the video and shared it through the duet and green screen affordances to comment about their own experiences and opinions about the attack.

Similar to the audio reuse strategy, overlaid text is often employed to express the creator’s opinion or experiences related to the instance of abuse depicted in the video and it provides interesting insights as to the uses and functions of overlaid text for marginalized creators attempting to make abuse and oppression visible on the platform. The visual component provides more context and is more illustrative of the development of the specific instance of abuse. The presence of this content and its continued reuse and resignification exemplifies Mitchell’s (2019) argument of digital narratives as collective spaces for meaning making. In this case immigrants use the green screen and duet configurations to asynchronously discuss their views on

this recorded instance of oppression, as well as its connection with wider collective experiences of discrimination.

## 6.2. Vernacular visibility on TikTok

This section explores how some of the specific TikTok platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015) are instrumentalized by immigrant creators to convey controversial topics, bypass moderation and enter the algorithmic feed. In this case it is possible to suggest that narrative configurations that are repeatedly present on the platform are part of these vernaculars. Zulli and Zulli (2020) suggested that there is a relationship between imitation of existing content and increased visibility on the platform by linking —through audio and effects— new content to existing, often highly viral content. These authors also explain that creating videos that follow a certain type that is available on TikTok may also boost their visibility through physical imitation, this includes modeling specific uses for available affordances such as overlaid text and imitating visual configurations.

### 6.2.1. Vernacular humor and sarcasm

Some of these content creators publish videos that discuss topics that are highly controversial such as strategies to enter a country as a tourist to stay. They are successful by following some aspects of the platform vernacular understood as the set of grammars, logics and narrative configurations that characterize a social media platform (Gibbs et al., 2015). Users learn these vernacular languages and their implications for visibility through their use and navigation of the platform, as well as through a set of folk theories that are shared by the community of users and creators (Karizat et al., 2021) which have also been described as algorithmic gossip (Bishop, 2019). Cotter (2022) proposes the notion of *practical knowledge* as a socially constructed process in which social media users gain familiarity with algorithms. Her proposal involves non-technical, collective, and contextual understandings of algorithmic processes. Moreover, vernacular visibility practices are made possible through the strategic use of vernacular affordances, understood as the sociotechnical aspects of the platform that reflect how users appropriate and make sense of available affordances for their own goals within the platform (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015).

In the case of TikTok the example provided includes two components of its vernacular: (1) the use of the “answer comment” affordance and (2) sarcastic humor. As can be seen in Figure 4, the creator explains that he entered the country as a tourist and managed to stay and obtain documentation. His message is surrounded by a series of humorous statements, many of them shocking. It is possible to suggest that this format is successful in tricking the moderation system and reach people, in this case with 71.3K views and 2.6K likes. This creator has 91.6K followers which suggests that he is very successful in presenting his content although it may be controversial.



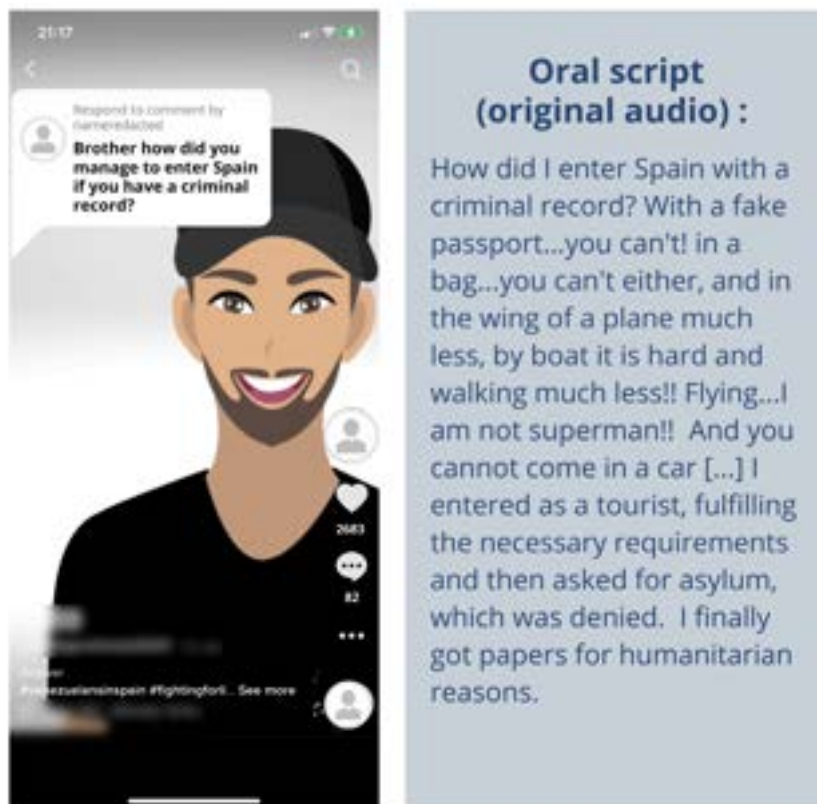


Figure 4. Rendering of visibility of controversial content through humor and sarcasm. Created and translated by the author from Spanish.

### 6.2.2. Overlaid text for (in)visibility

The use of a popular audio track was covered in a previous section but in this case, it is combined with an affordance that is part of the TikTok vernacular which is the use of overlaid text to customize the narrative while connecting to other creators through a popular music clip. In this case, a section of Natalia Lafourcade’s song *Hasta la Raíz* with the lyrics: “Looking back you’ll know that I haven’t forgotten you. I carry you inside me” is appropriated by the immigrant community to tell controversial and profoundly intimate stories about crossing the border. It illustrates the ways in which this micro challenge is configured among immigrants who crossed the US-Mexico border around an audio meme (Abidin, 2021) extracted and curated around this song as a form of storytelling (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022) to express this very specific experience of memory and identity. Figure 5 illustrates the different overlaid texts present in a few of the more than 6000 videos that use this audio track.



Figure 5. Examples of overlaid text used in videos with clip from the song “Hasta la raíz” by Natalia Lafourcade describing controversial intimate practices. Created by the author.

It is evident that these are stories of pain, difficulty, and gratefulness involving people who helped these immigrants to cross safely through the US-Mexico border and obtain documentation. This is considered controversial for many reasons but one of them is the fact that they are publicly announcing that they crossed the border. Moreover, two of them refer to situations of abuse *en route* and the involvement of coyotes, while one of them discusses marrying to gain documented status. The other two texts refer to ICE agents who helped these immigrants cross, and this is very relevant because there is very little content that mentions ICE agents as possible allies for immigrants, which is rare within immigrant narratives which often present ICE agents as abusive and deceiving (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022). These narratives are disruptive and unexpected, and they are presented using TikTok vernacular logics, accompanied by a culturally relevant music genre, which derives from Huapango (a traditional Mexican genre) with lyrics from a song that refers to identity through the metaphor of roots and the ways in which memories become an integral part of who we are. These immigrant creators are positioning these characters in their immigration story as key in their current lives and identities, as well as their possibilities to be part of their new country. This very short video —which lasts only nine seconds— is a powerful example of the way in which this community of creators followed the imitational nature of TikTok to convey their most intimate stories of gratefulness and migratory resilience through overlaid text connected by a short musical clip. In this sense the controversial content becomes visible through a connective audio track, but it is concealed by the use of overlaid text —in Spanish— which

enables creators to customize their narrative. It is possible to argue that this content is (in)visible and it successfully bypasses moderation systems due to its alignment with TikTok’s vernacular.

### 6.3. Partial deplatforming for renewed visibility

The elimination of content related to immigrant rights for going against the platform’s guidelines reflects colonial moderation practices. In this context, Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022) describe how an immigrant activist got his Facebook account banned due to its mentions of white supremacists and MAGA supporters. In the present study an example of this was found in an immigrant creator who supports other immigrants and their rights and has achieved more than 2 million followers. In this case the creator had turned to his alternate social media profiles to explain what happened on TikTok and to promote alternative channels such as his Instagram account. His strategy is threefold and can be seen in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Rendering of threefold strategy to maintain visibility and interaction from followers. Created and translated from Spanish by the author.

This resembles digital methods expert Richard Rogers’ (2020) analysis of *deplatforming* practices by extreme internet celebrities who flee to alternative social media platforms to continue sharing their content in as a response to moderation by mainstream platforms. In the case of this creator, he engages in partial deplatforming, as he creates an alternative profile on TikTok alongside his Instagram account and expresses hope about his original TikTok profile which was repeatedly blocked before being completely banned citing his engagement in unlawful activities in content that fundraised to help undocumented individuals in the United States. His detailed description of the moderation process through an Instagram video and his

negotiation with TikTok illustrate the obscurity and cluelessness that prompts the emergence of folk moderation theories that attempt to make sense of these processes with no clear pathway to figure out why some content is moderated while other — seemingly more damaging— content remains on the platform (Myers West, 2018).

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

This paper provides insights about the strategies that immigrant tiktokers deploy to bypass moderation processes and negotiate the visibility of their contents in the face of algorithmic systems that reflect biased structures for minority creators. These strategies include (1) content reuse and re-upload (2) vernacular visibility and (3) partial deplatforming to guide users to the channels where content can become visible and accessible when TikTok profiles are banned. It is important to note that the goal of this study was not to generalize across creators on the platform but to identify instances of controversial content by immigrants on the platform and inquire about the possible aspects of the content that make it more likely to remain visible regardless of its level of controversy. These practices provide insights as to the difficulties faced by immigrants in some platforms and their attempts to make their content visible through subversive narratives and platformed strategies.

The strategic concealment of aspects of the narrative behind overlaid text and popular audio tracks is relevant to the need of minorities to model and shape their narratives to their context due to their difficulty to fit (Appadurai, 2019). This translates into the algorithmic aspect of the narrative, i.e. ensuring its presence and visibility within the platform. In this sense, one more analytical dimension is added to the mix of digital borders (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019) faced by immigrants in user-generated-content contexts: the algorithmic visibility border. It is noteworthy that, although traditional indicators of success such as the number of views or likes are mentioned in this analysis, the goal was not to ascertain whether this content is highly visible but how it has remained present on the platform. In many cases, it is possible to suggest that tactics such as re-uploading audio have a twofold consequence, which includes limiting the video's visibility, while minimizing the possibility that it will be flagged or banned.

This paper's limitations include the non-participant ethnographic approach and content analysis, which are limited by the lack of engagement with creators. It is important to note that TikTok makes it very difficult to contact creators directly which limits the feasibility of engaging directly with them. Future research could use quantitative methods to assess moderation experiences by immigrant creators through surveys and reach results that are more applicable to the general population of creators rather than the qualitative, unique observations made in the present study.

**Daniela Jaramillo-Dent** is PhD Candidate at Erasmus University Rotterdam and University of Huelva (Joint PhD). Her research combines Internet studies with

media and migration scholarship. She currently focuses on the mediated (self)representations of immigration on social media platforms. Her research has explored notions of othering, belonging, identity and minority celebrity, considering the platformed, interactive and algorithmic nature of visual social media such as Instagram and TikTok.

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# MIGRATION AND EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS ONLINE: A TOPIC MODELLING APPROACH OF DISCUSSIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA GROUPS

HELENA DEDECEK GERTZ & FLORIAN SÜSSER

*Hamburg University*

## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the prevalence of topics relating to education in information exchanges on Facebook groups of Brazilians who live in – or wish to migrate to – Germany. Against the background of mediatization theory, social networks and transnational education research, we conducted an explorative quantitative study based on a text-as-data approach. Concretely, we collected posts from 14 migrant groups and analysed them using topic modelling. Our results reveal that vocational education and training (VET) are prevalent in these debates and topics associated with language learning and certification. We contend that latent ties (Haythornthwaite, 2002) on migrants' social networks are relevant in migratory pathways involving education – regardless of educational level.*

Keywords: Brazilian migration ▪ latent ties ▪ migrant's online communication  
▪ migrant's media use ▪ transnational education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, social inequality and poverty have been important drivers of Brazilian migration, but specialists and students seeking higher education also make up for Brazilians who decide to leave the country. Migration for educational reasons has been mostly related to high and middle-class contexts since it requires a considerable amount of economic resources and academic certificates. However, studies about Brazilian migration to Germany have described how educational aspirations drive the migration of young people also in underprivileged socioeconomic contexts. For these migrants, transnational social networks are decisive, as they provide valuable resources for their pursuit of educational opportunities through migration (Carnicer, 2019, 2018; Fürstenau, 2019). As in other migratory contexts, these social networks are constituted mainly by rather strong ties between relatives and friends who usually maintain long personal relationships (Boyd & Nowak, 2012). In this



paper, we explore the role of online social networking sites (SNS). These networks can usually be accessed without a prior personal relationship. In this way, they offer not yet ‘weak’ but rather latent ties: technically available connections that have not yet been activated by social interaction but can be activated online at any time (Haythornthwaite, 2002, p. 385). An example of those ties is migrant Facebook groups: participants of such groups do not necessarily know each other but they gather online around a common nationality (implying a common language and similar bureaucratic procedures required to migrate, for instance) and interests (e.g. aspirations to migrate to Germany to pursue a degree). By posting a question in such online groups, participants activate connections with unknown people who can help solve doubts and provide valuable information about the migratory process (Jayadeva, 2020). As a first approach to evaluate the influence of SNS in migration and transnational educational pathways, we assess in this paper the relevance of education in communication through SNS. Concretely, we address the research question, what is the prevalence of education-related topics in Facebook groups of ‘Brazilians in Germany’? In a second step, we look at the ways how these topics are clustered in particular migrant Facebook groups. This allows a first characterization of the main topics addressed in the education-related discussions on SNS. This research aims to assess if SNSs provide latent ties that support migration pathways associated with educational projects. To do that, we resort to a topic modelling approach of posts written on those groups.

The next section places this paper within transnational migration, mediatization and social network theory, with a focus on latent ties and Brazilian migrants’ SNS use, followed by an overview of studies relating education to migration. To contextualise the empirical data and justify the choice to analyse Brazilians in Germany, the fourth section provides information about the educational system in Brazil and the German educational system. After that, our decisions in regards to the topic modelling approach are explained and the results are presented. In the discussion, we contend that education is among the most prevalent topics debated in these groups, in particular vocational education and training (VET).

## **2. TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION, ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THEIR LATENT TIES**

Transnational migration theory relies on evidence from migrants’ activities, patterns of behaviour and network connections to claim that migrants build social fields spanning beyond national borders and thereby securing “cultural, social and economic bases” (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992, p. 9). Here we set the focus on transnational migrant networks, particularly those established in online environments, understanding networks as “a set of socially relevant nodes connected by one or more relations” (Marin & Wellman, 2014, p.11). These nodes represent members of a network – for the case of this paper, participants of Facebook groups. The connections

among these nodes are our patterns of interest, namely connections established by exchanging information about educational opportunities in Germany. Following, this section highlights the roles of online media within migrants' social networks, focusing on its uses among Brazilian migrants, and on the concept of "latent ties" (Haythornthwaite, 2002) found in such networks. The next section then draws the connection between education and migration.

Information exchange is a core aspect of the establishment and maintenance of transnational social networks. In migratory contexts, constantly developing media platforms and information and communication technologies (ICTs) are a means for parenting from a distance, providing financial and emotional support, and forming identity (Cabalquinto, 2019; Gomes & Yeoh, 2018; Leurs, 2019; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Among Brazilian migrants, the uses of SNS have been shown to serve as a source of "a variety of social capital ... which assists in the migration transition" (Schrooten, 2012, p. 1801). Analysing Brazilian migrants in Europe who participated in groups on the now deactivated SNS "Orkut", Mieke Schrooten (2012) and Martijn Oosterbaan (2010; 2013) report about mutual aid in regards to bureaucratic procedures and job-seeking, revealing the uses of such online connections for newcomers to establish themselves in the new settings. These groups are also used to arrange in-person gatherings (Oosterbaan, 2013; Schrooten, 2012), evidencing an interest in establishing or reinforcing ties with acquaintances made in SNS groups. After Orkut was shut down in 2014, new groups of Brazilian migrants were created on Facebook with the same purposes. Recent reports show that these groups are highly active, with a mean of 66.8 monthly posts in one group only (Foletto, 2018, p. 99) and some with more than 24 thousand participants (Dedecek Gertz, forthcoming). Those findings from different points in time (first Orkut, now Facebook) demonstrate the relevance of online networking in transnational migratory contexts regardless of the platform: when Orkut was no longer available, migrants gathered on Facebook and kept using the platforms for similar purposes. If Facebook was to be no longer active, migrants would likely re-organise on other digital platforms.

As of February 2022, 174 million Brazilians had a Facebook account and, of that total, almost 30 per cent are between the ages of 25 and 34 (NapoleonCat, 2022) – when people are more likely to migrate through and for educational opportunities (Kandel & Massey, 2002). With such a large number of users, these migrant groups are likely to be heterogeneous in terms of socioeconomic background and educational attainment. While the aforementioned studies provide an overall impression of what is discussed and of the uses of Brazilian migrant online groups, analysing information exchanges specifically about education helps map the roles of SNS in transnational educational projects across socioeconomic backgrounds.

### **2.1. Migrants' latent ties and mediatization of transnational education**

Departing from an attempt to measure media effects on migration, the sensitising

concept of mediatisation serves to explain societal changes in connection to developments in media and technology. Mediatisation can be understood as the experience that “technological communication media saturate more and more social domains which are drastically transforming at the same time” (Hepp, 2020, p. 3). By putting human practice at the centre through the analysis of information exchange on SNSs, we produce empirical evidence that can build up arguments about how mediated connections may result in broader social transformations and consequences (Hepp, 2020; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). In other words, we are rather interested in how media use by humans transforms social practices than in how media developments provoke transformations in human behaviour and social practices. In that sense, an analysis of the prevalence of education-related topics in migrant Facebook groups provides insights into how mediated communication transforms migration pathways and contributes to the transnationalisation of education. In our analysis, we consider mediated communication as a process (Hepp, 2020) and focus on individuals’ interaction through media. Other analyses about the mediatisation of education focus on aspects of pedagogy (Friesen & Hug, 2009), policy (Rawolle & Lingard, 2014), or institutional perspective (Breiter, 2014). Here, we propose an analysis of the mediatisation of education that focuses on the implications of media use for migration and transnational educational pathways.

Brazilian migrants were already using SNSs in the early 2000s and their use of transnational latent ties has already been described a decade ago (Schrooten 2012, Oosterbaan 2013). What is new in the case of Facebook groups in comparison with participants of Orkut groups in the past relates to particular quantitative trends (Hepp, 2020, p. 40). The groups of Brazilian migrants on Orkut described by Oosterbaan (2013) and Schrooten (2012) were mostly general groups, gathering Brazilians in a given city or country. Nowadays on Facebook, those groups are still popular yet there is a differentiation process happening that gives way to the creation of niche groups with similar high amounts of participants and levels of interaction. Medias’ omnipresence is another quantitative aspect of mediatisation that shapes media use of migrants. To access Orkut, one had to be (media) literate and have to access a personal computer, internet connection, and free time to browse that SNS sitting in front of a computer. With the increase in digitalisation and the accessibility of gadgets with an internet connection, Facebook groups can be accessed from a smartphone on a bus on the way to work, for instance. Formally illiterate people are also able to use SNS on their smartphones, as described in an ethnography study in a rural area in Brazil (Spyer, 2017).

In this paper, we offer a snapshot of online information exchange on a specific topic: migratory projects involving transnational education. In that sense, this study contributes to analysing the mediatisation processes of transnational education by describing the relevance of education-related topics in migrants’ activation of latent ties on online forums.

### 3. MIGRATION AND EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS

Transnational education (TNE) is often associated with international private schools or university education. That association often results in analyses that highlight the role of TNE among socioeconomic strata that hold resources to access a global educational market (Adick, 2018). On the one hand, the transnational mobility of students within that socioeconomic context tends to be regarded as a strategy to gather social and cultural capital (Brooks & Waters, 2010). On the other hand, the transnational mobility of people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds pursuing educational pathways tends to be disregarded as TNE and associated with issues of “migration” and “integration” (Carnicer & Fürstenau, 2019). Nevertheless, recent qualitative data have highlighted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds also migrate to pursue educational aspirations and thereby contribute to the transnationalisation of education (Carnicer, 2019; Fürstenau, 2018).

Educational opportunities abroad and own educational aspirations are relevant factors in migration decisions. Both the lack of access to formal education in the country of origin and the possibility of securing a stable migratory status and a job by accomplishing a degree in the country of destination are both reasons and means to migrate (Carnicer, 2019; Fürstenau, 2019). Migrants from these backgrounds are likely to see in TNE “an educational strategy that is not directed towards a symbolic capital that legitimates an inherited social position, but towards overcoming social exclusion” (Carnicer, 2019, p. 22). Differently than trajectories of migrants from socioeconomic strata who can migrate autonomously (e.g. those accepted at universities and who thus have access to institutional infrastructures that provide information and assistance), migrants who may feel excluded from educational opportunities in their countries of origin and seek such opportunities abroad, are likely to rely on interpersonal social networks composed by strong and weak ties (Carnicer, 2019; Fürstenau, 2018). In this paper, we argue that SNS provide aspiring migrants with information and resources comparable to those of personal networks.

Within information exchanges among migrants in SNS, educational opportunities are present as topics for discussion, as seen in Facebook groups gathering migrants who wish to pursue university degrees abroad (Jayadeva, 2020). Even in groups in which the focus is not on education, but rather on specific cities, jobs, and other opportunities, such as Au Pair work, educational aspects are also mentioned, such as what aspects one has to be aware of when looking for a school for children, what options for vocational education and training (VET) are there, and what certificates are needed to navigate the job market (Dedecek Gertz, forthcoming). The centrality of education is clear within groups that gather migrants who aspire to pursue degrees abroad. Nevertheless, discussions about issues relating to education within other groups might be present as well and are likely to be more diverse, encompassing migrants interested in educational levels other than university degrees, such as VET. Putting in perspective how relevant educational issues are within these diverse

groups can help to map the role of SNS in migratory movements involving transnational education "from below" (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998).

#### 4. EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS: INEQUALITY IN BRAZIL, DISCRIMINATION AND OPPORTUNITY IN GERMANY

The Brazilian educational system faces inequalities across all its levels, from children's education to access and permanence at universities (Windle, 2021; Sampaio & Oliveira, 2016; Câmara & Almeida, 2012). In Germany, migrants who manage to access the educational system are likely to suffer discrimination. A central factor that shapes the access and successful conclusion of degrees in both countries is socioeconomic class.

With a Gini Coefficient of 53.4 as of 2019, it is not surprising that poverty has been the main driver of Brazilian migration since the 1980s, although labour migration of skilled professionals is also prevalent (Evans et al., 2013) and some young people from low-income backgrounds also migrate following educational aspirations (Carnicer, 2019; Fürstenau, 2018). One of the main reasons for Brazilians to quit formal education is the need to find gainful employment (IBGE, 2020). That is particularly the case for 'Black' and 'Brown' people who compose only 31% of university graduates in the country, while 'white' people comprise over 66% of that total (Silva, 2020, p. 23). Despite affirmative actions to facilitate the access of high school graduates to the public, tuition-free, and prestigious universities, access to tertiary education in Brazil is highly competitive and lectures schedules hardly allow students to accommodate studying with gainful employment - resulting in either a high drop-out rate or in the choice for less-prestigious, private universities (Pereira & dos Reis 2020; Trevisol & Nierotka 2016). Javier Carnicer (2019) and Sara Fürstenau (2019) describe how migrants who feel excluded from educational opportunities in Brazil and thus have fewer options for socioeconomic upward mobility, find ways to fulfil their educational and mobility aspirations in Germany, making use of social networks and some particularities of the educational systems.

In Germany, migrants, as well as non-migrants from low-income backgrounds, might have easier access to formal education in comparison to the Brazilian situation, however, these populations are still discriminated against within the German educational system (Dumont et al., 2014; El-Mafaalani, 2020). That is evidenced in German schools' selection pattern: at the age of 10, students are recommended to continue towards the prestigious *Gymnasium*, which allows direct access to university after completion of final exams, the *Abitur*, or to other school modalities that do not enjoy the same status as the *Gymnasium* (*Gesamtschule*, *Gemeinschaftsschule*, *Stadtteilschule*, *Realschule* or *Hauptschule*, depending on federal-state legislation). Students who complete their schooling within these other modalities can access VET (the *Ausbildung*) without constraints, however, their pathway toward university education is longer than that of *Gymnasium* graduates. Some areas of VET in Germany are

remunerated (e.g. hospital care work and children's nursing), however, university stipends are hardly available for non-German citizens with foreign school degrees and no residence permit. School students who migrated to Germany, or those born in Germany to migrant parents, are more likely not to be recommended to access the *Gymnasium*, which in turn results in a lower representation of this population in German universities (Hunkler, 2016).

In 2020, almost 31% of all Brazilian migrants lived in Europe (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2021, p.4) and, following a contemporary feature of the feminisation of migratory movements (Lutz, 2010), around 64% of Brazilians in Germany are women (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022), what is likely due to the high labour demand in the care sector, which is still predominantly perceived as a female area. While the rate of women in Brazil who earn university degrees is higher than that of men, this does not reflect higher salaries for women (IBGE, 2021). In Germany, a pathway for some Brazilian women is to take advantage of the gendered perception of care-work and pursue paid VET degrees in that area, thus accomplishing a tertiary educational degree in the country leading to more chances of landing a job and a secure residence status (Carnicer, 2019; Fürstenau, 2019). These women rely first on Au Pair programmes and on personal connections to fulfil their educational and upward mobility projects (Carnicer, 2019; Fürstenau, 2019). Our focus on Germany as a destination country is due to the existence of such paid VET programmes and because German university fees are comparatively low, which attracts migrants who feel excluded from the Brazilian educational system (Carnicer, 2019).

Social networks based on personal ties are central to migration pathways associated with educational projects. As latent ties are also formative of social networks, they are likely to be relevant for such projects as well. While that is the case within SNS groups of migrants and aspiring migrants who wish to pursue university education abroad (Jayadeva, 2020), little is known about information exchanges surrounding educational aspirations and education-related migratory projects in SNS groups that gather migrants with more diverse backgrounds. To fill up that gap, we investigate the prevalence of topics relating to education in discussions within these diverse groups. A further question relates to the clustering of these topics: that provides indications about what professional areas, degrees or levels of education are more discussed and in which particular groups. To address these questions, we resort to a topic modelling approach, which is detailed in the next section.

## 5. TOPIC MODELLING

To select relevant groups for analysis, first, we searched Facebook for the terms “Brazilians” and “Germany” (in Portuguese). After that, all groups relating to migration were selected and these were once again filtered according to their level of interaction: using the information provided by Facebook itself, one of the authors joined 14 groups with at least a thousand participants and three selected made in one week.

Brazilian migrant groups are varied and highly active, ranging from the general “Brazilians in Germany”, to the many “Brazilians in [German city]”, and to niche groups, such as “Brazilian women in Germany”, “Brazilian IT professionals in Germany”, “Brazilian nurses in Germany”, “Brazilian Au Pairs in Germany”, “Brazilians seeking VET in Germany” – and even “Gardening for Brazilians in Germany”. Brazilian migrants’ fondness for SNS groups is not new, as its use has been reported already over a decade ago (Oosterbaan, 2010; Schrooten, 2012), nevertheless its use for educational projects has not been studied.

Our research design is based on a text-as-data approach (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Text-as-text approaches (as used in qualitative analyses) are organised according to the rules of language and are used for analysing the meanings of what is being communicated. Processing text-as-data involves imposing some abstraction and structure that summarises large amounts of text which can be used to uncover patterns (Benoit, 2020, p. 463-465). Based on this text-as-data logic, we follow a structural topic modelling (STM) approach (Roberts, Stewart & Tingley, 2019), which allows assigning metadata to the documents to be analysed. That way we can correlate posts with the groups where they were written.

The data we analyse is composed of posts and their comments written in the selected groups on Facebook. We collected posts written between December 2020 and January 2021 using the WebDriver API Selenium, which allows automatic control of a web browser. The software was programmed to copy and save what users wrote in the groups: because only visible data was collected, a human could do the same procedure, however with a more significant investment of time and effort. In other words, automation sped up the process of data collection.

In the data cleaning phase, we subsumed relevant multiple-word expressions, words, and acronyms that have the same meaning, so that the weight of the topic could be properly accessed (for instance, “Ausbildung” is sometimes misspelt like “Ausbilung” and the Portuguese expression “curso técnico” is also used in the groups to refer to the “Ausbildung”, hence both the misspelling and the Portuguese translation were assigned as equal to the German word “Ausbildung”). We also removed diacritics (e.g. “ç” and “ã”), punctuation, numbers, hyperlinks, symbols (like emojis), and stopwords both in Portuguese, German, and English, as these languages are the most used ones in the groups. The first results revealed that our code included other irrelevant words for topic clustering such as greetings, pronouns, proper nouns, and expressions used in SNS communication such as “haha” or abbreviations. We manually included these in the list of words to be ignored. The remaining words were then stemmed so that words like the noun “escola” and the adjective “escolar” would be clustered together.

In topic modelling, a topic is “a mixture over words where each word has a probability of belonging to a topic” and a document is “a mixture over topics, meaning that a single document can be composed of multiple topics” (Roberts, Stewart & Tingley, 2019, p. 2). In our case, documents are each post and comment made on each group.

We have 7,389 documents. The content of these documents can be composed of one or more topics, a mixture of covariate words. For STM “the sum of the topic proportions across all topics for a document is one, and the sum of the word probabilities for a given topic is one” (Roberts, Stewart & Tingley, 2019, p. 2). In simplified terms, word clustering on STM occurs through a process similar to Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) distribution, accounting for covariate words across documents which affect the “proportion of a document devoted to a topic ... and the word rates used in discussing a topic” (Roberts, Stewart & Tingley, 2016, p. 989).

We defined relevant words to be selected to compose topics as those that appear at least 20 times and in 5 or more documents. That decision was useful also in cleaning the data given that texts from social media tend to be short, sometimes consisting of only one word, which can skew the results of topic modelling (Albalawi, Yeap, & Benyoucef, 2020). The number of topics must be established by the researcher and the appropriateness of that number depends on the interpretability of the outcome. A high number of topics gives a fine-grained insight into the data, but at the cost of being less precise. After running the code with a different number of topics, ranging from 5 to 25, we found that 7 topics resulted in a model with good interpretability. With fewer topics, the contents are condensed and the relevance of the topic is clearer. The assignment of words to topics is arbitrary: Topic 1 is not necessarily more relevant than Topic 7. In Figure 1 (p. 14), in the results section, we see the top 14 words that compose these seven topics.

Our data collection approach brought problems with it. First, since the human interface to Facebook, which we used, does not order groups’ posts by time, we could not arbitrarily set the time frame of posts we wanted to have. For example, posts with high activity are promoted by Facebook and thus jump up in the timeline. Second, the human user interface to Facebook is limited in requests per time. Therefore, our data collection was inhibited, and as a result, we collected about 26,000 posts (by their ID), but could only retrieve the text body of 7,389, which are the ones that went into our analysis here. Nevertheless, that amount is still significant as posts with high activity are likely to be more representative of the interests of group participants.

## 6. RESULTS

In this section, we first describe which are the most prevalent topics found in our data, particularly those relating to education. Then we comment on the estimated proportion of these topics across all 14 groups.

Of the seven topics from all groups, two relate to education. One of these two is among the top three most prevalent. The three most discussed topics (Topics 5, 2, and 4) have no similarity among themselves. Topic 5, the most discussed one, contains words such as “need”, “Brazil”, “speak”, “help”, “to get/to reach”, “health”, “person”, “father”, “document”, “payment”, “receive” and “arrive”. This topic is likely related to requests for information regarding bureaucratic procedures and family relations.



Topic 2, contains words such as “buy”, “sell”, “live”, “friend”, “know/meet”, “to find”, “pretty”, “share”, and “shop”. This topic most likely relates to commerce, as it implies people offering products or services and recommendations by friends. The verb “to share” probably relates to those users who are offering their products or services inviting those interested in it to share the information, following a common logic of SNS.

The most relevant topic relating to education is the third most prevalent topic of all seven. Topic 4 contains words like “German”, “class”, “Portuguese”, “English”, “learn”, “exam”, “course”, “teacher”, “know”, “Brazilian”, “speak”, “online”, “book”, and “information”. This topic covers information exchanges about learning languages. It encompasses both people seeking information about language certificates needed to enrol in formal education courses or to request a residence permit and language teachers who offer their services on these migrant groups. Some language teachers who participate in the active groups offer online classes as well.

In the fourth position appears a topic relating to job and apartment search (Topic 1), which contains words like “search”, “help”, “message”, “company”, “apartment”, “work”, “job”, “live”, “rent”, “pay”, and “contract”. The words clustered in this topic, and also on Topic 5, are aligned with Oosterbaan’s (2013) and Schrooten’s (2012) descriptions of newcomer migrants’ using SNS to look for jobs and navigate bureaucratic procedures.

The fifth most prevalent topic is Topic 7, which contains words such as “Ausbildung” (VET), “school”, “search/look for”, “course”, “experience”, “vacancy”, “need”, “diploma”, “begin”, “company”, “get”, “work”, “process”, and “recognition”. This topic encompasses questions regarding access to VET, as words are either explicitly related to educational levels (“VET”), institutions (“school”), studies area or teaching situation (“course” in Portuguese can relate both to “class” and to “subject”), or degree outcomes (“diploma”). Other words relate to educational requirements to access higher levels of education or to exercise certain professions, such as nursing. That is the case of nouns like “diploma” and “recognition”: having certificates, diplomas, and school records that have to be recognised by German educational authorities is an issue, especially for nurses who obtained their training in Brazil. The connection between education and the interest in landing a job is also revealed through the relevance of words like “get”, “work”, “vacancy”, “experience”, or “company”.

The last two topics relate again to commerce (Topic 3) and health issues (Topic 6). Topic 3 contains words like “deliver”, “order [a product]”, “send”, “WhatsApp”, “delicious”, “food”, “sweet”, “Christmas”, and “product”. Similar to the other commerce-related topic (Topic 2), this one also points out the use of other SNS platforms for business (the mention of WhatsApp). Differently from Topic 5, this topic seems to relate to the commerce of food items, possibly connected to the Christmas season. The last relevant topic, Topic 6, contains words like “test”, “psychologist”, “father”, “medic”, “clinic”, “airport”, “secure”, “quarantine”, and “flight”. This topic most

likely relates to the Coronavirus pandemic, its consequences on physical and mental health and travel requirements.

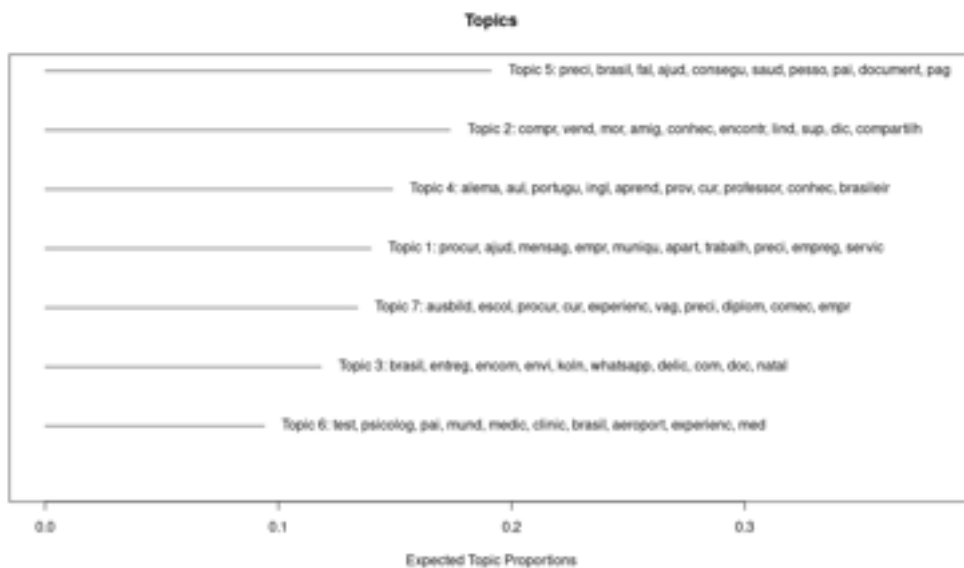


Figure 1. Two of the seven topics discussed in migrant groups relate to education (Topics 4 and 7). Topic 5 is the most present one and Topic 6 the least present among the seven most discussed topics.

After assessing the seven most relevant topics, we estimated these topics' proportions across all groups (see Figure 2). We comment on the results following the order of prevalence presented in Figure 1.

Topic 5, the most prevalent one and which relates to requests for information regarding documentation, is only not relevant in two groups, one about working in Germany and in one of the two groups gathering Brazilians living in Frankfurt. Interestingly, that is not the case for the second group of Brazilians in Frankfurt. Topic 5 is most relevant in a group gathering Brazilians who wish to participate in the German paid volunteer work programmes (the “voluntary social year”, FSJ, or the “federal volunteer service”, BFD<sup>1</sup>) and in a general group of Brazilians in Germany. Because it encompasses topics relating to documentation for applications, we can say this is a bureaucracy-related topic.

Topic 2, the second most prevalent one and which relates to commerce, has little relevance for the FSJ/BFD group, for groups of Brazilians seeking employment in Germany, for a group of Brazilian nurses in Germany, and for a group to exchange VET

1 FSJ/BFD participants receive a stipend and a residence permit to work up to one year in different areas, from environmental conservation to elderly care. Non-Europeans can also apply for those programmes provided they show a certificate of language knowledge and are accepted by the institution managing who offers FSJ or BFD. Usually, applicants must be under 30 years of age.

information. This topic is more popular in cities and general “Brazilians in Germany” groups. We could assume that people gathering in work, VET, and FSJ/BFD groups are not as established in the country as most participants of city and general groups, hence the lack of interest to advertise and sell products in these former groups.

The third most relevant topic is also the first education-related topic: Topic 4 relates to language learning and certification. This topic is mostly present in two general groups of Brazilians in Germany. Surprisingly, even though language knowledge is a requirement for enrolling in formal education courses and pursuing FSJ/BFD, Topic 4 has low scores in these groups. We cannot say however that language learning is constantly relevant for all city and country groups, as it has a low score for instance in groups of Brazilians in Frankfurt and Hamburg, and in one of the general groups of Brazilians in Germany. Both high score results could be skewed by the activity of language teachers who intensely advertise their service in these groups. The fact that some group administrators ban advertising could also justify the low score on the topic.

Topic 1, related to job and housing search, is particularly relevant in a group of work in Germany, and two city groups. The high score in the work-group is given, as the topic relates to job search. The fact that these issues are more prevalent in city groups than in general “Brazilians in Germany” groups could be due to migrants' interest in settling in specific cities.

Topic 7, the second education-related topic, has the highest score of all topics but is concentrated in only four groups. The commonality among these four groups is that none is a city or a general “Brazilians in Germany” group. Unsurprisingly, Topic 7 has the highest score in the VET group, followed by a nurses' group, a “work in Germany” group, and an FSJ/BFD group. Although with a considerably lower score in comparison to these four groups, Topic 7 is also somewhat relevant in a group about “first steps” in Germany. This latter group is composed of aspiring migrants who are gathering their first pieces of information about their possibilities to migrate. Probably, once they find out about the VET or FSJ/BFD opportunities, they move on to those other groups. Topic 7 scores low in all other groups.

Topic 3, related to food commerce, has low scores in the VET, FSJ/BFD, nurses', and “Work in Germany” groups, and medium scores throughout the other groups. A similar outcome for the other commerce-related topic (Topic 2). Participants of the former four groups are probably focused on exchanging information only about education and work opportunities and/or administrators might moderate posts containing advertising – hence the low scores on these topics.

Topic 6, the Coronavirus-related topic, is probably present among the most relevant topics due to its urgency and implications. It was mostly present in a group of Brazilians in Frankfurt, a city where the German airport with most connection flights to Brazil is located. The topic is also mostly discussed in the most populated group of Brazilians in Germany. Probably, the high participant density and the fact that the Coronavirus affected people regardless of their cities and national regulations,

instead of local ones, were more important instead, contributed to the high score on the topic in that group. Although this topic was highly discussed, Topic 6 is not more important than commerce-related, bureaucracy-related, or education-related topics.

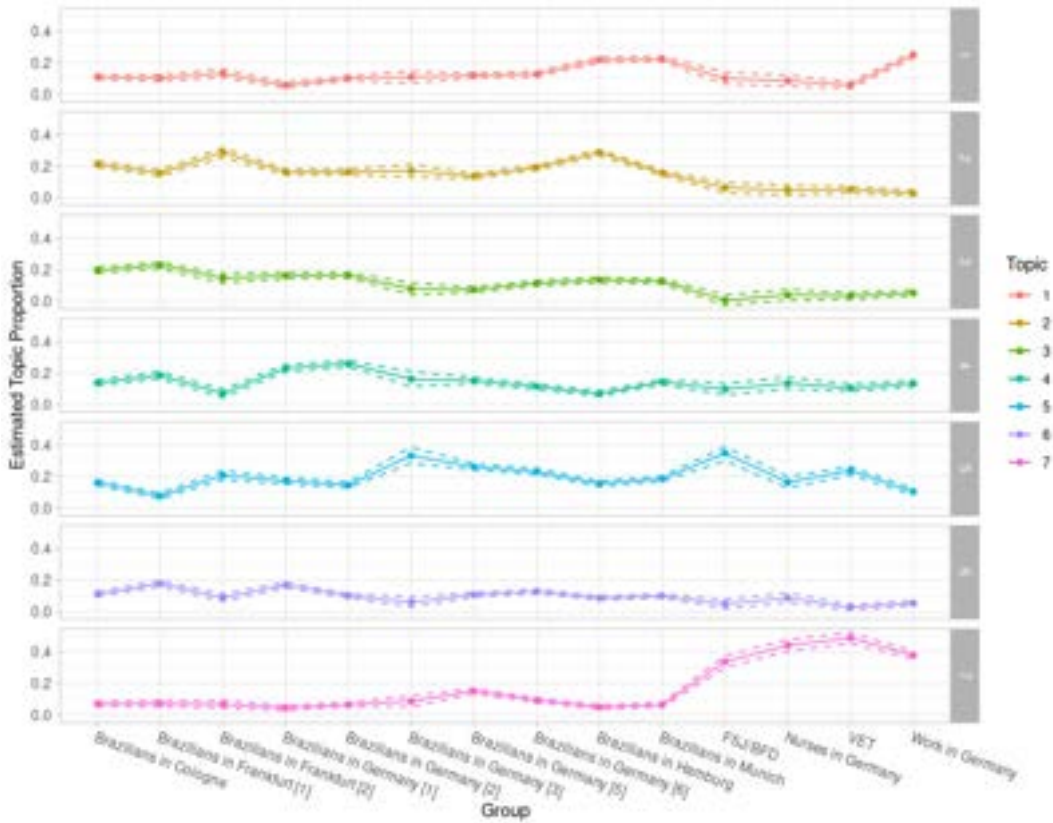


Figure 2. Estimated topic proportion across groups. Topics 4 and 7 are the education-related ones.

Interestingly, schools and university education are not prevalent terms in the topics, as Figure 1 shows. This does not mean that Brazilian migrants are not interested in accessing German universities or that children and teenage education are not relevant topics for them. Questions about language learning, for instance, might be posed in city groups by people who wish to achieve one of the requirements to be accepted at a German university or from parents concerned about the role of language in their children’s school performance.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The fact that education-related topics figure among some of the most prevalent on migrant Facebook groups serves as evidence that a mediatization process is probably

taking place on migration pathways involving educational projects. In this section, we first comment on what is the prevalence of education-related topics in “Brazilians in Germany” Facebook groups. Then we discuss the implications of these results for migration involving educational projects and for transnational education. We contend that the increase in the use of technology-mediated communication and the consequently increased access to latent ties has the potential to facilitate the migration of people who otherwise would possibly not have easy access to information about education abroad.

### **7.1. Latent Ties on Facebook Groups as Relevant for Migration Pathways Through Educational Projects**

To find out what is the prevalence of education-related topics in “Brazilians in Germany” Facebook groups and how these topics are clustered, we resorted to an exploratory quantitative approach using topic modelling. While we cannot imply causality, our data provides insights into the relevance of latent ties in transnational migratory pathways associated with educational projects. The outcome reveals that education-related issues, clustered in language learning and vocational training and education (VET) topics, figure among the top seven most discussed issues in Brazilian migrant Facebook groups.

We cannot claim that those who asked for information about education in these groups indeed migrated and pursued degrees or language courses in Germany. However, such information exchange reveals that there is a relevant demand to pursue a degree and acquire language knowledge. Based on that observation we can claim that educational-related questions are core topics that lead to the activation of latent ties in migrant groups on Facebook. Consequently, those latent ties are potentially relevant for information-gathering to fulfil migration pathways associated with educational projects, also for those beyond university degrees.

Our results indicate a high score of the topic relating to VET and an absence of a topic relating to university education among those with high scores. Based on our data, we cannot state the reasons for that, the low prevalence of terms such as “university”, “bachelor” or “school” in comparison with VET, reveals a potential quantitative preference for VET among those who resort to latent ties to gather information. What also serves as evidence for this quantitative preference is that the two groups of Brazilians who wish to study in Germany did not meet the threshold of the number of participants and posts to be selected for analysis.

Language learning is another educational-related topic revealed as relevant but not usually discussed in transnational education studies (TNE) and is traditionally associated with debates about migrants’ “integration” rather than transnational education. The low score on the language-learning topic in the VET and FSJ/BFD groups might be due to an instrumental interest in learning German. Language learning might be present in FSJ/BFD groups embedded in references to “certificates” and

“courses” since migrants interested in these opportunities have to prove language knowledge, hence learning German appears as a means to reach a specific objective in these groups, i.e. migrants requesting information in VET and FSJ/BFD groups discuss language learning as another requirement in their check-list. This assumption is backed up by the high score on the topic related to VET, diploma, and certificates both in the VET and FSJ/BFD groups, and also in a “Work in Germany” group and a group of Brazilian nurses in Germany.

People who discussed education-related topics in these groups did not necessarily migrate to pursue educational aspirations. However, the high prevalence of education-related topics within these groups reveals trust and interest in the experiences of group participants in accessing the German educational system, particularly VET. Both education-related topics and other high-score topics from our sample (commercial activities, health, bureaucracy, and job and apartment seeking) are not particularly connected to social gatherings in person where latent ties might develop into stronger ones, as highlighted in earlier studies (Schrooten, 2012; Oosterbaan, 2013). The interest in activating latent ties through commerce and job-seeking topics is given. However, the activation of latent ties for education-related topics implied that there are migrants asking questions about it and other migrants answering those questions. This can be an indication that latent ties activated through education-related topics could be established for solidarity toward aspiring migrants.

## 7.2. Transnational Education and Mediatiation

By establishing that education-related topics are among one the most prevalent in information exchanges among migrants on Facebook groups, we can claim that latent ties have an important role in sharing information among migrants who wish to pursue educational projects abroad.

In the 2000s, Oosterbaan (2013) and Schrooten (2012) described the existence of SNS groups of Brazilians who lived in certain cities or countries outside Brazil. While we cannot claim that there was a quantitative increase in the participation of these SNS groups on Facebook, that is likely to have happened with the increase in internet access in Brazil. Hence, hypothetically, these quantitative developments of mediatiation might have led to an increase in participation in SNS by migrants and aspiring migrants, among which there are some who migrate to pursue educational projects.

Studies about transnational education have described how youth from the middle classes in the Global South see educational opportunities abroad as a means to improve cultural and social capital, particularly of their younger members (Adick, 2018; Brooks & Waters, 2010). Migrants from such backgrounds usually already have access to enough economic capital or strong network ties, hence they can either have information provided by the institutions where they are going to study or they can resort to family or friends’ connections who are already in the country where they aim to study. As a qualitative aspect of mediatiation, the relevant position of information

exchanges about VET and language courses described in our paper points toward a migration of people who either cannot resort to institutions to gather information or rather trust best the experience of the latent ties available on SNS (Jayadeva, 2019). This also adds a mediatised aspect to the descriptions of migratory pathways of people from low-income families who successfully pursue tertiary education through VET in Germany (Carnicer, 2019; Fürstenau, 2019). In these previous descriptions, pioneer migrants who accomplished their education abroad serve as strong network ties for other family members or friends who also consider pursuing educational projects abroad. This outcome serves as the first evidence that qualitative and quantitative processes of mediatisation and the consequent establishment of latent ties through SNS are likely to contribute to the transnationalisation of education from below (Smith & Guarnizo 1998), reinforcing the argument that educational levels beyond university or private schools are also part of transnational education (Adick, 2018).

Agreeing with Justin Grimmer and Brandon M. Stewart's (2013) position about the wrongfulness and, at the same time, the usefulness of topic modelling approaches, on the one hand, we demonstrated that there is good evidence that education-related topics assume a relevant position in information exchanges on Facebook groups of Brazilian migrants and aspiring migrants in Germany. Latent ties from these groups have been activated to gather information about educational opportunities, processes, and enrollment requirements. More importantly, we have shown that mediatisation processes are also present in migration pathways involving educational projects. That occurs through latent ties and the potential increase in access to them due to processes of rapid digitalisation.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Using the case of migrant Facebook groups, we have discussed the connection of mediatisation for migration pathways involving education through the concept of latent ties (Haythornthwaite, 2002). We argued, along with other authors (Adick, 2018; Carnicer, 2018, 2019; Fürstenau, 2018), that transnational education goes beyond university degrees. Furthermore, we have shown that education-related topics beyond university degrees figure among the most discussed ones in migrant Facebook groups. Based on that outcome, we argued that education is a central motivation to activate latent ties in online migrant networks. For our empirical case, that high interest in finding out about education-related possibilities to migrate could be yet another consequence of blocked educational opportunities in Brazil.

Comparisons with other groups of migrants and on other SNS could reveal other relevant aspects and provide new insights into transnational education movements. Although migrants most likely gather information across other media, following a manifold perspective of media use (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), our focus on one SNS only was relevant because of the forum-like structure of Facebook groups. That

structure was ideal to answer our research question which required measuring the prevalence of interactions about education among migrants. A structure like Twitter or Instagram would not suit our aim because of its focus on individual posts. A qualitative study that accounts for the media manifold can fill up this gap and add details to the use of media to pursue educational projects abroad. Such a study would provide context to how education is debated in migrant groups and shed light on social inequalities in migratory pathways involving educational projects by assessing the uses of media according to migrants' socioeconomic backgrounds.

Based on the tendency of increasing mediatisation (Hepp, 2020), the entanglements between migration involving education and digital media use will keep evolving. In that case, a pressing aspect that deserves further analysis is that big-tech companies like Facebook/Meta are possibly taking a relevant position in migratory pathways for people fleeing war and conflict or seeking educational opportunities abroad (Dekker et al., 2018; Jayadeva, 2020). The use of latent ties in migration pathways might be facilitating information gathering and decision-making processes, but thereby migrants are not only sharing information but also generating information about their interests and decisions that is stored by a company with profit interests and that can be used for purposes unknown to migrants and aspiring migrants.

**Helena Dedecek Gertz** is a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Education of Hamburg University and a lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Groningen. She holds a MA in Media, Journalism, and Globalisation from the Universities of Aarhus and Hamburg. Her research interests combine social inequalities, migration, transnational education, media use, and media literacy.

**Florian Süßer** holds an MSc in Psychology from Hamburg University and has studied simulations of statistical models such as multilevel models. When using real-world data he works with large datasets of online-behavioural information that can be collected or obtained on the web.

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# **BUREAUCRACY AND AUTHORITATIVE CONTROL IN CONTEMPORARY LEGACY NEWS MEDIA COMPANIES: A WEBERIAN ANALYSIS OF A FLEMISH CASE STUDY**

**NILS WANDELS, JELLE MAST & HILDE VAN DEN BULCK**

*Vrije Universiteit Brussel | Vrije Universiteit Brussel | Drexel University*

## **ABSTRACT**

*Autonomy is considered a prerequisite for the press to function in service of the public. Over the past few decades both news organizations and society at large have been subjected to significant change and instability, potentially affecting journalists' independent modes of production. We argue that a re-evaluation of journalism's institutional strength to perform the societal functions bestowed upon it by the public is imperative. In this paper we contribute to this re-evaluation by examining to what extent the organizational structure of contemporary legacy news media organizations has a constraining effect on the autonomous modes of production of the newsroom. We draw on the theoretical framework of Max Weber and his concepts of the bureaucratic ideal type, Herrschaft and Lebensordnung to engage in an examination of the organizational properties that characterize two Flemish-based international media conglomerates (DPG Media and Mediahuis) and discuss how these properties might interfere with newsrooms. Our analysis is based on the rarely considered perspective of chief editors, who (as the most powerful representatives of the newsroom within the context of the news company) provide unique insights into the organizational limits to journalistic autonomy.*

Keywords: Media sociology ▪ journalistic autonomy ▪ Weber ▪ qualitative analysis  
▪ interviews ▪ chief editor

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Autonomy from external influences is an integral part of the journalistic professional ideology (Deuze, 2005) and a “conditio sine qua non” for journalists to act in the interest of the general public (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Nonetheless, the attainability of autonomy for journalists is frequently debated in both professional and academic circles. Specifically, the impact of news companies' business

considerations on independent journalistic production has been a recurring topic of inquiry (Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021; Coddington, 2015; McManus, 2009; Bagdikian, 1989). Champagne (2005) claims that “newspapers are economic enterprises directly subjected to economic laws which often come into conflict with the imperatives of intellectual production”, referring to the crucial influence the organizational context wherein journalists operate has on their professional behaviors.

Over the past two decades, the news media landscape has changed significantly. Western news media companies had to adapt to professional and economic crises of journalism (Nielsen, 2016), declining public trust (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021), and the impact of technological innovations (Steensen, 2019; Whittaker, 2019). Additionally, Western societies became increasingly unstable due to financial crises, political polarization and social unrest. Against this backdrop of instability and change, we argue that a re-evaluation of journalists’ institutional strength to perform the societal functions bestowed upon them by the public is imperative (Waisboard, 2019; Beam, 2009). This paper aims to address this issue by examining the constraining impact of contemporary legacy news media companies’ organizational structures on autonomous journalistic production.

Our decision to focus on organizational constraints is inspired by recent research on the discrepancies between journalists’ self-reported role perceptions and the overall media performance of the news organizations they work for (Mellado, 2020). The findings of this research suggest that the influence news companies have on journalistic production is not adequately recognized or interpreted by journalists themselves. This has methodological implications: studies on the topic of journalistic autonomy that rely on self-reported survey data provided by journalists arguably do not reflect the actual impact of organizational circumstances on journalistic production.

If we wish to make the organizational factors that interfere with the autonomy of legacy media newsrooms explicit, we consider it necessary to adopt a qualitative methodological approach that is embedded in a theoretical framework that incorporates both organizational and sociological perspectives. We argue that the often-overlooked Max Weber can provide this theoretical depth: his ideal type of bureaucracy offers reference points for the examination of the organizational structure wherein journalists operate. Additionally, his concepts of authoritative control (*Herrschaft*) and organizational rationale (*Lebensordnung*) provide sociological foundations for an in-depth examination of the relationship between organizational attributes/mechanics and autonomous modes of production pursued by newsrooms and individual journalists. In this research paper, we will apply the Weberian perspective to the case of two Flemish media conglomerates: *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis*. Our analysis will primarily be based on data obtained via semi-structured interviews with high-agency individuals belonging to the newsroom (e.g. chief editors). The perspective of newsroom executives has largely been overlooked by journalism scholars, though we argue that the boundary-spanning nature of their organizational role can offer unique insights into journalists’ working environment. The goal of this paper

is twofold: a) to extrapolate theoretical dimensions that can be utilized to evaluate news companies' organizational structure and its impact on journalistic autonomy; b) to demonstrate the theoretical value of the Weberian perspective for the examination of authority in contemporary news media companies.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This research paper focuses on journalistic autonomy and the organizational structures and attributes that shape its boundaries. In the following paragraphs, we will briefly define the notion of journalistic autonomy before engaging in a discussion of scholarship concerning organizational impact factors. Afterward, we will move on to a more general discussion of the sociology of Max Weber and its relevance to the field of journalism studies.

Journalistic autonomy concerns the freedom of journalists to shape or create their own workflows and practices independently from outside interference (Lauk & Harro-Loit, 2016; Deuze, 2005; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). It refers to the capacity of journalists to act according to their own professional logic. As a result, the concept is regularly discussed in terms of journalism's relation to external logics (primarily of a political or economic nature) and the boundaries imposed by the structures and environments wherein journalists operate (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; McQuail, 2010; Örnebring, 2013; Scholl & Weischenberg, 1999; Blassnig & Esser, 2022; Champagne, 2005).

In the social sciences, there is a long tradition of research that is preoccupied with understanding news work within the boundaries imposed by the news organization (Schudson, 2002). This research has focused on the impact of organizational rationalization and synergy (Williams, 2002; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), the emphasis on markets and profitability (McManus, 2009; Underwood, 1988), and corporate consolidation (Lebrun et al., 2022; Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021; Bagdikian, 1989). A recurring observation in these analyses of journalists' professional environment is the emergence of increasingly bureaucratic control structures. Especially the consolidation process strongly contributes to this development: with every merger or acquisition, the size and complexity of news companies grow, leading to increasingly hierarchical organizational structures. Consequently, the distance between journalists and corporate management increases, making the latter less sensitive to the concerns of the former (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Additionally, the pressure put on newsrooms to conform to organizational interests is exacerbated within these large company structures. As a result, chief editors and newsroom executives increasingly start behaving like managers of any other corporate entity (Underwood, 1988). As Fancher (1987) describes it: "Keeping newsroom operating expenses within budget isn't enough. Editors must understand where their budgets fit within the larger financial picture of their company, and where news priorities fit in the overall strategic plan".

Other authors have discussed how bureaucratic control collides with the newsroom's capacity to produce autonomously according to journalistic professional orientations (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1991). Hallin (1992) argues that journalists themselves have come to accept this bureaucratic organizational structure and the professional routines it propagates. Similarly, Merrill (1989) claims that journalists are not "professionals who deal with their clients directly and independently, but [functionaries] who fashion their work in accordance to the supervision and direction by their editors, publishers and news directors". In line with Breed's landmark study on social control in the newsroom (1955), these findings seem to suggest that the subjection of journalism to organizational goals has gradually been socialized.

Over the past two decades, the concentration of media ownership has increased significantly ("Media Action Plan" research report, commissioned by the CULT committee of the European Parliament, 2021). Furthermore, the market environment of news organizations has transformed under the impulse of increased competition for advertising revenues (Björkroth & Grönlund, 2018) and technological innovations (Steensen, 2019; Whittaker, 2019). These developments arguably had a considerable impact on the organizational structure of contemporary legacy news media companies and their level of bureaucratic control over newsrooms. However, there appears to be a lack of academic interest in the examination of news companies' organizational structures. Consequently, attempts to analyze the bureaucratic properties of media companies and their effect on journalistic practice remain largely absent from the contemporary scholarly debate.

Nevertheless, recent research redirects the focus towards the organizational perspective. Mellado (2020) contributes to this development by providing evidence for a normative-performance gap, which measures the distance between journalists' normative discourse and companies' actual media performance. Furthermore, Ferrucci & Kuhn (2022) have made a compelling argument for the recalibration of Shoemaker & Reese's classic "hierarchy of influences"-model towards a more central role for the organizational context.

Considering a) contemporary developments affecting media organizations, b) the lack of research on the organizational attributes of news companies, and c) recent efforts to re-introduce the organizational perspective in journalism studies, we argue that an examination of the bureaucratic properties of contemporary legacy news media organizations and their constraining effects on newsroom autonomy is long overdue and can help to illuminate blind spots in contemporary journalism scholarship. To adequately examine this issue we invoke the sociological framework of Max Weber, who wrote extensively on the subject of bureaucratic control and its relation to individual or professional autonomy.

### 3. THE WEBERIAN PERSPECTIVE

Autonomy is a central concept in the sociology of Max Weber, who was preoccupied



with the authoritative control exercised by organizations (“*Herrschaft*”) and its effect on individual freedom (Davis, 2013; De Jong, 2007; Bartels, 2009). Weber argued that organizations are guided by “institutionalized authority systems” (Dash & Padhi, 2019) and distinguished three basic types of authoritative control: traditional, charismatic and rational-legal authority. He considered bureaucracy to be the pinnacle of rational-legal authority, which is characterized by “laws, rules and the power stemming from a legitimate position or office” (Houghton, 2010). Weber thought that bureaucracies had the “potential to enhance as well as imprison individual freedom” (Bartels, 2009) and, as a result, paid considerable attention to the way rational-legal authority mechanisms interact with the individuals that populate bureaucratic organizational structures. He argued that bureaucracies promote certain patterns of action and behavior via formalized rules, procedures and structures. By adhering to these formal expressions of organized coordination, individuals are conditioned to internalize a particular organizational rationale (“*Lebensordnung*”) (De Jong, 2007, Bartels, 2009). This rationale requires the individual to act “in obedience to social organizational structures” and might conflict with the individual’s personal or professional values. The tension between this organizational rationale and individual/professional logics is fundamental to understanding how Weber’s *Herrschaft* manifests itself in the organizational context.

Weber introduced an *ideal type of bureaucracy* that can be utilized to adequately examine this tension between structure and agency. The purpose of this ideal type was the conceptualization of bureaucracy in its purest form, in an attempt to capture the essence of the phenomenon (Van Hoof & Ruysseveldt, 1999). To this end, Weber defined specific reference points that may serve as analytical tools to examine how real-life organizational structures resemble the bureaucratic ideal type (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019; Bartels, 2009).

One of the main reference points in Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy is the development and application of *standardized rules*. Weber considered bureaucracy to be the most efficient organizational form to achieve organizational goals. He argued that this efficiency was the result of the bureaucratic emphasis on procedures, standardized rules and formal structures, and its tendency toward the division of labor and specialization. In Weber’s view, all these mechanics contribute to the predictability of organizational action and, as a result, control over the environment. In other words, bureaucracy improves efficiency by “reducing business decisions to calculable rules” (Dash & Padhi, 2019). Individuals operating within the context of a bureaucratic structure are expected to subscribe to these expressions of “formal rationality” (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019; De Jong, 2007; Van Hoof & Ruysseveldt, 1999; Weiss, 1983). A second major dimension of Weber’s ideal type is the presence of a *hierarchical command structure*. This refers to the organization of roles and functions in terms of managerial positions and subordinated services (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019; De Jong, 2007; Van Hoof & Ruysseveldt, 1999; Weiss, 1983). Hierarchical command emphasizes discipline, which is enforced in a top-down fashion. As a result,

the hierarchical structure generally displays a “tendency towards maximum centralization” of power and command (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019). It is via this combination of centralized hierarchical command and an emphasis on formal rules and procedures that bureaucracies are able to exercise authoritative control (*Herrschaft*) over employees and propagate certain modes of behavior (*Lebensordnung*).

Despite its potential to add theoretical depth to discussions concerning the impact of news companies’ organizational structure on journalistic practice, the sociology of Max Weber is characterized by its absence from journalism scholarship. Dominant theoretical paradigms such as the liberal-professional view (which focuses on the individual journalist and their professional ideology) and the Marxist and political-economy views (which focus on the impact of macro-societal political and economic factors) leave little room to spare for the meso-level of analysis, i.e. the news organization and its specific properties (Davis, 2013). Additionally, landmark studies specifically aimed at investigating news workers’ organizational environment, such as Gans’ (1979) description of the news organization, seem to have ignored the Weberian framework of analysis. However, the absence of the Weberian perspective is not limited to journalism studies alone. Studies have shown a general decline in the number of articles citing Weber (Lounsbury & Carberry, 2005), despite the fact that empirical research suggests that bureaucracy is on the rise in increasingly consolidated market spaces dominated by a few large multinational corporations (Dash & Padhi, 2019). An explanation for the absence of the Weberian sociological approach may be found in neo-liberal misinterpretations of the ideal type of bureaucracy. Rather than an analytical concept that can be employed to examine empirically existing organizational phenomena, neo-liberal critics treated the ideal type as “an empirically existing phenomenon that embodies, or a normative theory that prescribes, the exercise of formal rationality” (Bartels, 2008). As a result, discussions drifted towards arguments “against” or “in favor of” the ideal type in normative terms rather than in a theoretical sense. Exemplary of this flawed argumentation is the neo-liberal opposition to government by characterizing it as bureaucratic and inefficient, without considering the possibility of market-oriented companies that are structured according to the same bureaucratic principles. A second explanation for the absence of the Weberian perspective is the idea that the bureaucratic ideal type is no longer a useful framework to examine modern organizational forms that emphasize employee empowerment, decentralization and self-managing teams (Houghton, 2010). We argue that this criticism is also based on a misinterpretation of Weber’s framework: not only would the reference points of the ideal type provide an adequate framework to examine this evolution, but when considered within the larger context of Weber’s sociology, each of these organizational characteristics constitutes an expression of *Herrschaft*. Moreover, the idea of self-managing teams might even be considered a step toward greater bureaucratic control, as they reflect how coercive authority becomes obsolete once the organizational rationale (*Lebensordnung*) is internalized by employees.

Despite the lack of direct references to his work, we argue that the spirit of Weber lingers in journalism scholarship that discusses the discrepancies between organizational demands and (journalistic) professionalism (Andersson & Wiik, 2013; Champagne, 2005; Evetts, 2003), company mitigation of journalistic output (Mellado, 2020; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) and the effect of the organizational rationale on journalists' labor conditions (Petre, 2018). Additionally, we observe that some scholars explicitly call for the re-introduction of Weberian sociological concepts (Bastin, 2013), for example as a means to examine the tension between formal rationality embedded in organizational structure and individual agency (Bartels, 2009). Davis (2013) explores this tension in the UK news media landscape and argues that bureaucratic formal rationality might discard "the very ideals that sit at the center of the journalist profession".

In light of our own research goals, we argue that the Weberian concepts of *Herrschaft*, *Lebensordnung*, and the bureaucratic ideal type will provide theoretical depth to our examination of the newsroom's level of autonomy in the increasingly complex organizational context of contemporary news media companies. We re-define our research goals in the form of three specific research questions: RQ 1) to what extent are the main traits of Weber's bureaucratic ideal type present in contemporary legacy news media companies; RQ 2) to what extent do these traits express mechanisms of organizational control (*Herrschaft*) over journalistic practice; RQ 3) to what extent is the organizational rationale (*Lebensordnung*) that is expressed via these modes of control accepted by the newsroom.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

In order to adequately address these research questions, we propose a qualitative approach that leans on three main methodological perspectives: the case study, the semi-structured interview, and thematic analysis. We steer clear of the pitfalls of survey-based quantitative methods that are grounded in self-reported perceptions of autonomy, as these fail to address how interpretations of journalistic autonomy might differ across journalistic communities, newsrooms, or individual agents. Furthermore, this paper is not preoccupied with perceptions of authority among the journalistic populace, but rather with the reality of institutionalized modes of organizational authority over the journalistic production process.

The case study is a useful method to examine organizational reality under specific circumstances. Additionally, it enables in-depth analysis of root causes for case-specific phenomena. Specifically, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are vague, the case study can provide detail and nuance that would arguably be overlooked if other research strategies were deployed (Yin, 1981). Gans (1979) and, more recently, Usher (2021) provide precedents for a case study approach toward analyzing the organizational reality of journalists.

We have selected the case of the Flemish-based mid-sized international media

conglomerates *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis*. We selected these companies based on their size, market share, and the expected complexity of their organizational structure. Both *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis* are the product of a series of mergers and acquisitions that took place over the past three decades. In 1990 the predecessors of both companies owned only one or two Flemish newspaper brands. Consolidation from that point onwards eventually resulted in a news media oligopoly in Flanders dominated by the national public broadcasting company on the one hand and commercial providers *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis* on the other (De Bens & Raeymaekers, 2010). We argue that the organizational structure of both companies has become increasingly complex as a result of this rapid expansion. This potentially has significant implications for the autonomy of newsrooms that operate within these media conglomerates.

Today, *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis* control the lion's share of the legacy newspaper market in both Flanders and the Netherlands. Additionally, they are expanding beyond the borders of the Dutch-speaking world into countries such as Ireland, Germany and Denmark. Both companies are of considerable size in terms of personnel, variety of news brands and media products, and revenue. *DPG Media* boasts a portfolio of over 20 international newspaper brands complemented by a wide array of audio and visual news media and entertainment. In Flanders, they own the most popular newspaper (*Het Laatste Nieuws*), a prominent quality newspaper (*De Morgen*) and the most-viewed commercial television news broadcast (*VTM Nieuws*). In 2021 *DPG Media* reported a total revenue of €1,9 billion and a net operational result of €414 million. In that same year, the company employed 5.836 people, 2.034 of whom are classified as journalists (annual report *DPG Media*, 2021). *Mediahuis* is a smaller media group with a more pronounced emphasis on international news brands (over 30 news brands in 4 countries). Their portfolio includes the most-read quality newspaper in the Flanders region (*De Standaard*) and popular (regional) newspapers *Het Nieuwsblad*, *De Gazet van Antwerpen* and *Het Belang van Limburg*. In 2021, the company reported a total revenue of €1,1 billion and a net operational result of €166 million. In that same year, they employed 4.601 people, 1.922 of whom are classified as journalists (annual report *Mediahuis*, 2021). Neither company trades stocks publicly; both are owned by a select group of investors represented by one dominant shareholding family (*DPG Media*: the Van Thillo family; *Mediahuis*: the Leysen family) (Flemish Media Regulator (VRM) report "Mediaconcentratie in Vlaanderen 2020", 2021). Analysis of both companies will be primarily based on their activities in the Flanders region.

Data for the analysis of our case study are primarily collected via semi-structured interviews with high-agency individuals (primarily chief editors and journalistic directors) that have worked/are working at one of these companies. The interview form allows us to both a) map organizational realities based on testimonies of people who have experienced them (RQ 1) and b) examine how these realities have affected journalistic practice (RQ 2, RQ 3). The perspective of high-agency individuals belonging to the newsroom is particularly valuable due to their privileged position within

the organizational structure. They are boundary-spanning figures involved with both managerial and editorial matters (Coddington, 2015; Gans, 1979). As they arguably contribute to the establishment and enforcement of organizational authority (White, 1950; Breed, 1955; Gieber, 1960; Crouse, 1962), their perspective is a valuable resource for examining to what extent bureaucratic control structures are deployed and normalized within the confines of the newsroom.

Seventeen interviews with a total of fifteen interviewees (approx. 2hrs per interview) were considered during the analysis. Each of the interviewees is or has been employed as chief editor, journalistic director, or equivalent by one of the Flemish news brands owned by either *Mediahuis* or *DPG Media* between 1989 and 2022 (for an overview of interviewees, we refer to appendix A). We incorporate a historical dimension in our data sample for contextualization purposes. The accounts of ex-chief editors can help us to understand current organizational realities as part of a longer historical development, rather than structures that exist in a vacuum. Nevertheless, the majority of our analysis is based on testimonies provided by chief editors that are currently in office. All interviews were conducted in a sphere of confidentiality and permission has been granted to publish quotes included in this paper (Koetsenruijter & Van Hout, 2018). Caution is required when considering the data as our approach leans heavily on interviewee interpretations of organizational reality. We mitigate the risk of untruthful or incomplete testimony by engaging in rigorous triangulation, comparing and reconciling interviewee testimonies amongst each other and with other available source material, such as public company data (annual reports, financial statements, company data published on the company website), reports prepared by independent third parties (report on media concentration published by the Flemish Media Regulator (“VRM”)), autobiographies of persons of interest (De Ridder, 2001; Ruys, 1999) and secondary literature on both media companies (Hendrickx et al., 2021; Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2020; De Bens & Raeymaekers, 2010).

We deconstructed our data via thematic analysis making use of NVIVO coding software. Over 400 A4 pages of interview transcripts were broken down into thematic excerpts which were allocated to one of five thematic categories. These categories were primarily defined based on the reference points that constitute Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy: “hierarchical command structure”, “formal procedures”, “standardized services, roles and competencies”, “disciplinary mechanisms” and “meta comments on the bureaucratic nature of the organizational structure”. Further sub-categorization was implemented based on criteria such as news company (*DPG Media; Mediahuis*), news brand (*De Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad*, etc.), and referenced period (the 2010s, 2000s, etc.). A total of 175 individual interview excerpts on the topic of the organizational structure were classified in one (or more) of the five abovementioned main categories. After initial coding, we applied other theoretical concepts of Weber’s sociological framework to the data (*Herrschaft, Lebensordnung*) to make sense of the tension between bureaucratic structure and journalistic autonomy. During this sense-making process, the interrelatedness of the five thematic

categories became apparent, requiring us to look beyond our initial categorization and pursue an interpretative analytical approach (Ritchie et al., 2013).

## 5. ANALYSIS

In the following sections, we discuss the bureaucratic features of the Flemish media conglomerates *Mediahuis* and *DPG Media* by deploying the Weberian reference points of “formal rationality”, “centralization” and “hierarchy”. Afterward, we examine how these features contribute to the exercise of authoritative control (*Herrschaft*) over the newsroom and ultimately limit journalistic autonomy. Throughout these discussions, we will reflect on the organizational rationale (*Lebensordnung*) that underpins these control structures.

## 6. FORMAL EXPRESSIONS OF A CENTRALIZED ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Simultaneous with the rapid growth of *Mediahuis* and *DPG Media* from the 1990s onwards, an increasingly centralized and formal organizational structure has been implemented by company executives to cope with the increased organizational complexity. Our data suggest that this centralized structure is expressed via the mechanisms of “functional synergy”, “cross-functional harmony” and “internal budgetary competition”. We argue that these three mechanisms have been formally embedded in the organizational DNA of examined companies. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss each of these mechanisms in more detail.

“Functional synergy” is a concept we introduce to refer to organizational mechanisms that aim to maximize efficiency within a specific functional department (e.g. the newsroom, marketing, IT,...) by centralizing expertise and subsequently allocating it (to projects, brands,...) in a cost-effective manner. Applied to the “journalistic” functional department (i.e. the newsroom), this means the centralization of news gathering processes across news brands to save on personnel costs. Analysis of our data shows that “functional synergy” has been introduced in the form of centralized news flows that stimulate shared use of news resources (articles, interviews, photographs,...) among journalists working for brands belonging to the same company. At one company an IT platform for content-sharing was introduced, which enables journalists to access each other’s work. At the other, a physical centralized news desk responsible for the supply of content to its main news brands was established.

[Interview excerpt 1:] “We moved our most popular news brands to the same floor, and implemented a centralized news desk. [...] The general idea behind the implementation of this structure is that all the news resources that are gathered by our journalists are openly shared. How each brand uses these resources to create a finished product is still up to them.”

The presence of a digital content management system or a centralized news desk are formal expressions of an organizational rationale that aims to promote journalistic routines that embrace the sharing of editorial production. This rationale or *Lebensordnung* is embedded in the principle of increasing shareholder value via cost-efficiency. As more news brands are gathered under the same company roof, the total amount of reporters covering the same beats can be reduced. The result is that newsrooms dedicated to one specific news brand have become smaller, more specialized, and more reliant on support from centralized content creation teams that supply to multiple brands simultaneously. One example from our case study concerns the centralization of sports coverage, with one dedicated team of journalists producing sports content for multiple brands. Another shows how brand differentiation is realized on the basis of region/location: national news is produced by the “national brand” and subsequently shared with local brands that create added value by producing regional stories. The result of this evolution is the general decline of news diversity in the Flanders media landscape (Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021).

A second mechanism that we have observed is “cross-functional harmonization”. This original concept refers to the centrally managed alignment of commercial and journalistic goals across different functional departments belonging to the same news organization. The main instrument to achieve this “harmony” is formal evaluation targets and procedures. These take the form of Key Performance Indicators (“KPI”), which are used to evaluate the performance of news brands, departments, executives and projects. Because KPIs primarily measure business performance (e.g. revenue, circulation, reach, etc.), newsroom executives are encouraged to seek alliances with other departments to achieve their targets.

[Interview excerpt 2:] *“If I launch an idea for a new journalistic product [ed. such as a podcast, a magazine, etc.] then I am mindful of the targets of our sales director. I want him to think: “Yes! Our brand revenue needs to grow another 3% this year, and the launch of this new product can help me achieve that. I will support your idea.”*

The example above illustrates how cross-functional harmony between the newsroom and the sales department contributes to the accomplishment of overarching organizational goals. The catalyst for cultivating this business-minded harmony is the system of formal evaluation procedures. Another formal organizational instrument that promotes cross-functional harmony is a structure of recurring meetings between newsroom executives and business executives aimed at aligning editorial and marketing initiatives and working together towards shared organizational goals.

The final mechanism that we will discuss in this section we have named “internal budgetary competition”. It refers to the fierce competition between news brands belonging to the same media conglomerate for scarce financial means that are centrally managed. Our case study provides evidence that this internal competition

is formally embedded in the organizational structure via budget allocation procedures. These procedures are grafted onto a “shareholder value rationale”: the better a brand’s financial and business performance, the likelier it is rewarded for its performance with additional resources. Illustrative of the intensity of this competition is the fact that interviewees refer to the budget allocation process as a “battle”. We argue that this internal competition contributes to the gradual adoption of a business-minded *Lebensordnung* by newsrooms: because business and journalism are structurally intertwined in the organizational context, the idea that this interconnection is a natural or “common sense” phenomenon is propagated.

Notice that the competitive nature of the budget allocation process stands in stark contrast with the concepts of “functional synergy” and “cross-functional harmony”. Generally, it appears that there is a pronounced aversion to competition where editorial matters are involved as this would contradict organizational goals:

[Interview excerpt 3:] *“Online journalism is where our news brands have the biggest margin to grow.” with “The biggest growth margin for our news brands lies with online journalism.”*

Therefore, the apparent contrast is only superficial, as the underlying *Lebensordnung* that is propagated by all three mechanisms is the same: the maximization of shareholder value. Synergy and harmony express this rationale by promoting the efficient deployment of available means of production and economies of scale. Institutionalized competition, on the other hand, expresses it in the form of structural financial austerity. As such, each mechanism contributes to the promotion of the same organizational goals.

## 7. HIERARCHICAL COMMAND STRUCTURE

In this section, we will discuss to what extent the examined media companies are managed by way of a formal hierarchical chain of command. We will examine hierarchy both within and beyond the confines of the newsroom.

### 7.1. Hierarchy in the newsroom

Our data confirm the presence of a clear hierarchical chain of command governing the newsroom. We distinguish four hierarchical levels, the “strategic level” (typically represented by a journalistic director or chief editor), the “general management level” (typically represented by a single chief editor, a group of chief editors, and/or their deputies), the “operational management level” (typically represented by news managers and beat managers) and, finally, the “operational level” (typically represented by journalists and editors). Mind that each level can be occupied by multiple



individuals, and that multiple levels can be occupied by one individual, depending on organizational needs.

[Interview excerpt 4:] *“The organization has become gigantic. As a result, we often need two or even three people on the editorial board. Or at least one general manager and beneath him/her a team of chief editors and beat managers.”*

The highest level of command in the newsroom (the “strategic level”) is the domain of the journalistic director. He/she is mainly preoccupied with strategic and creative management of brands belonging to a single organizational business unit and is part of the executive committee that governs this unit. Our data show that the scope and responsibilities of the individual operating at this hierarchical level may differ according to organizational demands. For example, one of our interviewees is tasked with the strategic management of two brands that share similar editorial properties. Another interviewee testifies to having been in charge of the strategic management of two news brands during a time that business performance was below management expectations. Once business performance stabilized, this specific strategic function became obsolete and disappeared from the organizational chart.

The second hierarchical tier concerns the general management of editorial matters and daily operations in the newsroom. In general, this tier is at least partly occupied by the chief editor. Data suggest that the extent of their involvement in day-to-day management depends on their strategic responsibilities (“strategic level”) and the size of the newsroom. It is not uncommon for the chief editor to delegate some managerial tasks to deputies. These deputies are in charge of specific fields of responsibility, such as human resources, online content, etc. This is illustrative of specialization and division of labor at the managerial level. Another way this hierarchical tier is organized is via co-editorship, which involves two or more chief editors splitting managerial responsibilities amongst each other.

[Interview excerpt 5:] *“If you seek the establishment of authority in the newsroom, then first and foremost you have to consider some of your most influential beat managers.”*

The third hierarchical level is that of “operational management”. This level is populated by news managers and beat managers who are usually in charge of specific editorial domains and answer directly to the chief editor. They too illustrate how hierarchy contributes to specialization, one of the traits of Weber’s bureaucratic ideal type. Operational managers are crucial for the top-down implementation of executive decisions at the fourth hierarchical level (the “operational level”) and enjoy some freedom regarding their method for implementation. Depending on the size of the newsroom, the body of operational managers can be quite extensive, which

suggests that further hierarchical differentiation further down the organizational ladder is possible.

## 7.2. Hierarchy beyond the newsroom

To comprehend the full extent of the hierarchical command structure wherein legacy media journalists operate, we look beyond the newsroom and consider its position within the organizational context at large. Based on our data we conclude that “strategic level” journalistic executives are included in the executive committee of their respective business units. These business units are generally determined based on location/region (Belgium, Netherlands, etc.) and/or product category (news media, magazines, television, etc.). However, when we move further up the organizational chain of command we notice that newsroom executives are barred. Three additional levels of authority transcend the level of the business unit. At the top of the pyramid sits the board of shareholder representatives, which appoints and monitors the executive team. This executive team consists of (at least) the company CEO and the CFO and constitutes the highest executive level. Below this level, we find the group executive team, which includes the chief executive of each of the aforementioned business units.



Figure 1. Simplified representation of organizational hierarchy

The extensiveness of this hierarchical chain of command and the considerable distance between the highest ranking journalistic executives and company executives in the pyramid leads us to argue that newsrooms have little to no possibility of formally intervening at the highest decision-making levels. Interviewees corroborate this finding:

[Interview excerpt 6:] *“As the chief editor, you are primus inter pares in the newsroom. But in the overall executive structure, you are the very least, the one with the least power and influence.”*

As a result, journalistic figureheads and executives have very limited capacity to weigh on organizational policy:

[Interview excerpt 7:] *“Real decisions are made by the executive committee. It’s the executives that decide on financial savings plans and staff reductions. [...] It’s at that level that essential discussions are held.”*

Additional evidence of the limited influence journalistic executives have on the highest echelons of the company hierarchy is provided by interviewees’ indirect referrals to hierarchically imposed decisions that coerce them to take top-down actions themselves (e.g. *“they want you to enact budget cuts”*).

## **8. AUTHORITATIVE CONTROL OVER THE NEWSROOM**

In the previous sections, we described the organizational attributes of the examined news companies. Multiple characteristics that constitute Weber’s bureaucratic ideal type were observed. In the following paragraphs, we will examine how these bureaucratic attributes contribute to the exercise of authoritative control and discipline (*Herrschaft*). For the sake of a more focused discussion, we zoom in on two phenomena that were introduced in the previous sections: formal evaluation procedures (KPIs) and centralized budget limitations.

### **8.1. Herrschaft through formal evaluation procedures**

As we have briefly discussed before, Key Performance Indicators are formal targets that are put in place to cultivate adherence to the company’s overall financial goals. Interviewees state that KPIs usually consist of a mix of qualitative and quantitative performance indicators. The former category of indicators supposedly measures journalistic proficiency and quality according to testimonies; a somewhat unconvincing claim if we consider the examples of qualitative KPIs they provide. These include *“the refurbishment of newspaper layout”*, *“the launch of a new magazine”* or (the rather vague) *“new journalistic projects”*. These examples seem to suggest

that qualitative KPIs are primarily aimed at measuring brand development rather than journalistic quality or proficiency. The reason for a lack of indicators aimed at measuring journalistic quality is arguably the fact that it would be hard to quantify this type of performance. Therefore it is easily overlooked by formal evaluation structures that are modeled on a rationale that favors quantification. The second category of indicators (“quantitative indicators”) is primarily aimed at measuring business performance and the overall financial contribution of news brands to the business concern. Examples of indicators used to measure business performance are circulation, turnover, and EBITDA (i.e. operational financial result). Other indicators mentioned by interviewees are attention time and clicks, which arguably measure a combination of both editorial impact and contribution to the advertising business proposition of the company. Testimonies suggest that newsroom executives have little control over the indicators that are used to assess the performance of their news brand. They must accept its evaluation in terms of business development and contribution to company results, though it appears that they can negotiate specific targets so as to mitigate unrealistic executive expectations.

[Interview excerpt 8:] *“For [chief editors] [KPI’s] are comprised of 60% quantitative and 40% qualitative indicators. For a news manager or beat manager, they are 40% quantitative and 60% qualitative. [...] So for them we also look at turnover and circulation, and, I suspect attention time and clicks.”*

The abovementioned quote suggests that the KPI system is not limited to the highest echelons of the newsroom hierarchy but rolled out to the hierarchical tier of “operational management” as well. The fact that quantitative indicators are deployed to measure performance at these lower hierarchical levels demonstrates the extent of authoritative control over the newsroom. Furthermore, it illustrates how control structures primarily service an organizational *Lebensordnung* of shareholder value maximization. We emphasize that these control mechanisms are not limited to the newsroom: we refer to the principles of “functional synergy” and “cross-functional harmony”, which both demonstrate how adherence to a shareholder-minded *Lebensordnung* is a cooperative process to which all organizational departments are expected to contribute.

The overall performance of newsroom executives is discussed during “end-of-year” performance reviews with executives. When discussing these reviews interviewees emphasize that on-target financial performance provides job security, with some describing it as a “lifeline”. Additionally, some interviewees refer to the existence of reward structures that constitute the payment of bonuses when newsroom executives succeed in meeting their targets. This is another mechanism that contributes to the propagation of the aforementioned *Lebensordnung*.

## 8.2. Herrschaft through budgetary constraints

Another way authoritative control is exercised is via the amalgamation of formal budget allocation and budget control procedures. As mentioned before, the yearly allocation of budgets determines whether news brands can invest in their development or are subject to budget cuts. This leads to a highly competitive atmosphere between brands that attempt to attract as much funding as possible. According to interviewees, the allocation of funds to individual news brands is determined based on financial performance and the business development initiatives proposed by newsroom executives. In other words, resources to invest in journalistic development are awarded in a quid pro quo fashion to newsroom executives who manage to procure the financial results that are required by owners/shareholders.

[Interview excerpt 9:] *“The yearly battle for budgets is key. And you win these by drawing investments to your brand based on the financial return you can promise to your CEO.”*

After budgets have been allocated, control mechanisms are in place to assure that these budgets are managed in alignment with executive management expectations. The hierarchical structure itself is the most important instrument for enforcing budgetary discipline: beat managers are subjected to KPIs that require them to monitor expenses within their editorial turf, chief editors must make sure that beat managers remain within the limits of their budgets, and journalistic directors are expected to do the same for the news brands over which they preside. Regular formalized budget control meetings with financial executives are aimed at keeping newsroom executives mindful of budgetary constraints. A financial controller who reports directly to the executive committee is present within the newsroom and is tasked with the continuous monitoring of newsroom expenses. Based on testimonies, it appears that chief editors consider it important to keep this financial controller close to their chest as they perceive them not only as an agent that enforces top-down supervision but also as an individual that might provide support for bottom-up mitigation of budgetary constraints.

## 9. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to examine how the organizational structure of contemporary legacy news media companies shapes journalistic autonomy. To address this issue we invoked the theoretical framework of Max Weber. We made use of the reference points of his bureaucratic ideal type to explore the organizational properties of two Flemish-based media conglomerates (*Mediahuis*, *DPG Media*). Additionally, we considered the concepts of authoritative control (*Herrschaft*) and organizational

rationale (*Lebensordnung*) to interpret how the autonomy of journalists working for these companies was constrained by these organizational properties.

Concerning the bureaucratic attributes of *Mediahuis* and *DPG Media*, we conclude that many of the reference points of Weber's ideal type can be observed. Formal rationality is present in the form of standardized targets and evaluation procedures, budget allocation procedures, and division of labor in line with company requirements. We determined how centralized management of the organization is formally embedded in the organizational structure and expressed via functional synergy (e.g. in the form of centralized news desks), cross-functional harmony (e.g. in the form of coordinated key performance indicators), and internal budgetary competition. Finally, we observed that the extensive organizational structures of both examined companies are managed via a tall hierarchical chain of command that primarily functions in a top-down fashion. All of these attributes suggest that the examined news organizations show a high level of bureaucratization, a finding which in and of itself should contribute to the re-introduction of Weber's bureaucratic ideal type to the field of journalism studies. Furthermore, this finding offers proof that neo-liberal criticisms of Weber's ideal type are fundamentally flawed, as its reference points provide an appropriate theoretical basis for the analysis of the organizational reality of private corporations.

Building on Weber's theoretical framework, we subsequently argue that these bureaucratic properties contribute to the establishment and exercise of authoritative control over the newsroom. The quantifiable performance targets that dictate newsroom executives' organizational priorities, evaluation and reward structures that are grafted onto the achievement of these targets, budget allocation procedures that reward business excellence, and the presence of financial controllers tasked with the supervision of newsrooms' obedience to budgetary constraints are all expressions of authority and discipline that interfere with the autonomy of journalists belonging to the newsroom. Furthermore, the extensive hierarchical chain of command both propagates the top-down implementation of executive decisions down to the lowest hierarchical levels of the newsroom and effectively prevents newsroom executives or other journalistic representatives from formally intervening at the highest decision-making levels of the company. Finally, centralized management of the company subjects the newsroom to cost-cutting measures and coerces newsroom executives to pursue business excellence in order to achieve their targets and attract investments to their news brand.

Complementary to these explicit expressions of authoritative control, we draw attention to a more profound and implicit manner in which the totality of these organizational structures and attributes propagates adherence to organizational demands. As our analysis has shown, most if not all mechanisms that were observed in our case study are to some extent expressions of an organizational rationale (*Lebensordnung*) that propagates the maximization of shareholder value. Functional synergy, cross-functional harmony, and internal budgetary competition all contribute

to the formation of a mindset that commands cost-efficiency, economies of scale, and budgetary austerity. Similarly, the formalized evaluation structure based on KPIs and the budget allocation and control procedures normalize the close interconnectedness between optimal business performance and journalistic production. This “economic” or “business” rationale is for the most part at odds with the journalistic professional logic (Champagne, 2005; Andersson & Wiik, 2013). However, we argue that continuous exposure to this organizational rationale by way of the abovementioned authoritative control mechanisms has effectively led the newsroom to adopt this mindset. We have noticed during the analysis of our data that most interviewees consider it common sense that business and journalism go hand in hand, suggesting that the organizational rationale has been normalized (at least among newsroom executives). The most telling evidence of this development lies in the examples interviewees gave of KPIs that are supposed to measure journalistic quality. As we have shown, most of the given examples seem to measure business development rather than journalistic quality. This finding could support the argument that the distinction between journalism and business has become somewhat muddled in the eyes of newsroom executives. Considering the literature on the influence executives have on their subordinates in the newsroom (Breed, 1955), we must remain open to the possibility that this attitude has been adopted by the newsroom at large. This could potentially contribute to an explanation for the existence of a gap between journalists’ perceptions of their journalistic prowess and the media performance of the companies they work for (Mellado, 2020). It would also further problematize quantitative research that is based on journalists’ self-reported evaluations of their own level of autonomy.

To conclude this paper we emphasize that our theoretical approach to the discussion of our case study should be interpreted as an attempt to recalibrate scholarly attention within the field of journalism studies toward the sociological framework developed by Max Weber. We argue that the bureaucratic ideal type offers remarkably useful guideposts to engage in the analysis of complex organizational realities. Additionally, the concepts of *Herrschaft* and *Lebensordnung* provide opportunities to engage in in-depth theoretical discussions about journalistic autonomy. Based on our findings we reject the claim that contemporary organizations have moved past the bureaucratic organizational paradigm, a criticism that had falsely rendered Weber’s bureaucratic ideal type outdated (Houghton, 2010). If anything, we argue that it would be highly beneficial to apply the Weberian lens to analyze fashionable organizational forms that emphasize self-managing teams or employee empowerment. Such an analysis might show how these too are expressions of an organizational rationale that is operationalized via the exercise of authoritative control. Other potential future applications of the Weberian perspective include the empirical verification of claimed diversity among organizational contexts wherein journalists operate (Ferrucci & Kuhn, 2022) or the examination of “alternative” media companies’ organizational evolution as they grow in popularity and size.

**Nils Wandels** has obtained a Master's Degree in Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of Ghent and a Master's Degree in Business Economics at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Since obtaining his degrees in 2012 he has been active in the private sector as a corporate finance consultant for 7 years. In February 2020 he has started as a Ph.D. fellow at the department of Journalism Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. His research focuses on the transformative impact of political and economic influences on journalistic values, attitudes, and practices, and on the ways these transformations are facilitated by journalists' organizational environments.

**Jelle Mast** holds a Ph.D. in Communication Sciences. His research is typically located at the intersection of visual communication, journalism practice, and professional ethics. Current research interests include visual gatekeeping and user-generated imagery in mainstream news media; journalism and terrorism; metajournalistic discourse; and genre hybridization in journalism and screen documentaries.

Prof. Dr. **Hilde Van den Bulck** (Drexel University) combines expertise in media structure and policies with expertise in media culture. Her work on media structures and policies focuses on the impact of technological, political, economic and cultural processes, especially how digitization and convergence affect legacy media. She specializes in public (service) media in that regard, recently analyzing how personalization strategies based on algorithms affect the core public media value of universality. Her most recent project focuses on American public media, especially on the potential of PBS as the most trusted US institution in a post-truth era. With regards to media culture, next to analyzing the relationships between media culture(s) and collective (national, ethnic, gender, and age-related) identities, she focuses on the role of mediated communication in celebrity culture and the celebrity apparatus. Before coming to Drexel, Hilde was a Professor of Communication Studies, Head of the Department of Communication, then Associate Dean of Research, and later Dean of the Social Sciences at the University of Antwerp in Belgium.

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**Appendix A: list of interviewees**

Interviewees	# interviews considered	Position	Company: title	Tenure	Start journalistic career	Other career highlights/ positions
Karel Verhoeven	1 + 1 ("Alleen Elvis blijft bestaan")	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	2010 - today	1995	Journalist
Bart Sturtewagen	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	2006 - 2013	1988 (DS)	Journalist, chief editorialst DS
Peter Vandermeersch	2	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	1999 - 2010	1988	Journalistic director, chief editor NRC Handelsblad, CEO Mediahuis Ireland
Dirk Achten	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	1994 - 1999	1983	Journalist, political advisor (VLD), diplomat
Lou De Clerck	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	1991 - 1995	1961	Journalist
Hendrik De Belder	1	Editorial manager	Mediahuis: De Standaard	/	1966	Journalist
Mark Deweerdt	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: De Standaard	1989 - 1993	1981	Journalist, political advisor (CVP, NVA)
Liesbet Van Impe	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: Het Nieuwsblad	2013 - today	2004	Journalist
Pol Van Den Driessche	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: Het Nieuwsblad	1995 - 1999	1982	Journalist (DS), political spokesman, political advisor, senator
Roger Schoemans	1	Chief editor	Mediahuis: Het Nieuwsblad	1968 - 1994	1963	Journalist, writer
Jörgen Oosterwael	1	Chief editor	DPG Media: De Morgen	2018 - today	1989 ( <i>De Morgen</i> )	Journalist, chief editor other publications
Yves Desmet	1	Chief editor	DPG Media: De Morgen	1994 - 2000; 2005 - 2007; 2012 - 2014	1982	Journalist, editorialst
Paul Goossens	1	Chief editor	DPG Media: De Morgen	1978 - 1991	1973	Journalist (DS)
Dimitri Anthonissen	1	Deputy chief editor	DPG Media: Het Nieuwsblad	2016 - today	1999	Journalist
Karl van den Broeck	1	Chief editor	Apache	2014 - today	1987	Journalist