

Personal branding in journalism: theory and systematization of a recent trend.

The Internet and particularly social media offer new means for individual journalists to present themselves and their competencies, products, networks, etc. This trend towards more visibility of and focus on the individual journalist is fostered by a shift in values related to digitally networked media (e.g., transparency of actors and attitudes instead of a focus on organizations and objectivity/neutrality), growing competition among journalists (due to: economic crisis of media organizations, difficult job situation, growing number of freelancers), and media organizations drawing on journalists to strengthen audience loyalty by acting as “brand representatives” on social networking sites and in commentary sections (e.g., Canter, 2013). Hence, personal branding is heavily discussed among media practitioners, which is also reflected by the upcoming of seminars and websites like *Newsmodo* or *jurnid* dedicated to the self-marketing of journalists. However, research on personal branding in journalism is rare and undifferentiated, since it has been conducted only “along the way” (while focusing on other aspects) and equates marketing efforts via social media with branding (e.g., Canter, 2013; Dickinson 2011; Herman/Djerf-Pierre, 2013). Thus, there is a need for a theoretical understanding and systematization of this recent trend.

The framework proposed here reflects business scholars’ works on branding (e.g., Keller/Lehmann 2006) and offers a process model of branding between journalists and their target groups. However, it does not remain limited to an economic view, but is complemented with regard to the societal function and responsibility of journalism. In short, journalists’ personal branding activities are regarded as practices meant to create potential for distinction, i.e. potential for being perceived as different from and superior to competitors by target groups. These practices are guided by two frames of reference: a) the social subsystem of journalism, its function for society, values, etc. (e.g., Görke/Scholl 2006); b) the social subsystem of economy in which the journalist offers his labour, competencies, products. Depending on which frame serves as the primary orientation, branding practices can be divided into journalistic performances as such (e.g., quality and characteristics of the journalist’s stories) and meta-communication (e.g., tweets promoting a new article or blog-posts presenting the journalist’s professional attitudes).

Both kinds of practices can aim at creating potential for distinction in several dimensions (mostly in the form of specialization or generalization): distribution media (print, online, radio, TV); topics of reporting and related expert knowledge (e.g., politics, business); reporting style (e.g., language, tone); forms of presentation (e.g., interview, feature, report); reporting scheme/model (e.g., objective reporting, interpretative journalism, precision journalism, new/literary journalism); socio-political orientation; “special skills” (e.g., skills in newsroom management, technology/programming, data processing/visualization); networks/informants; (prestigious) employers (“brand transfer”).

The systematization also considers the different target groups of branding practices (audiences, potential employers/clients, advertisers, sources/informants/contacts in one’s field of reporting) and three ideal types (in a Weberian sense) of self-branding journalists (employed reporters/editors; freelancers; entrepreneurs, i.e. journalists with their own blog or other publication platform). The ideal types differ in terms of their branding opportunities in the dimensions of distinction as well as the importance the different target groups have for them.

The theoretical considerations also point to a number of potential profits and perils of self-branding for individual journalists (e.g., better job opportunities vs. less time for research, etc.), media organizations (e.g., brand loyalty via personalization vs. conflict with organization’s brand) as well as

journalism and society (e.g., further fragmentation of journalistic offers and audiences undermines journalism's function to enable public discourse and the "synchronization" of society's subsystems (Görke/Scholl, 2006: 650)).