

Abstract PhD

One of many voices: Understanding the role of journalists through

News Users' Personal Curation Practices

Sarah Vis

Supervisor

Prof. dr. Ike Picone

As media users increasingly turn to digital platforms for news, they navigate an environment in which journalistic and alternative non-journalistic voices blend. In here, journalists no longer serve as primary gatekeepers of news but compete with countless other news providers for people's limited attention. At the same time, news users themselves have become more autonomous in navigating this 'foggy' news space, actively managing their media environments through *personal news curation practices* such as liking, following, muting, or unfollowing content. Through these everyday actions, news users now construct their own news feeds aligned with their current interests, emotional needs, and values. As a result, navigating the news has become highly fragmented and personalized.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation examines how these personal news curation practices shape the role news users (still) assign to journalists within their self-curated news space. Rather than treating journalistic authority as given or declining, the study investigates how journalistic authority is actively negotiated through everyday curation decisions. It addresses three research questions: (1) how news users' personal curation practices inform their engagement with news providers, and with journalists in particular, (2) what roles journalists (continue to) play for the self-curating news user, and (3) how these practices can be methodologically grasped and reflected upon. Responding to ongoing debates about journalism's authority in platform mediated societies, the study adopts a radical user perspective to explore how users encounter, evaluate and make sense of news in their everyday digital life.

Theoretically, the dissertation combines insights from both journalism and audience studies to conceptualize news use as a relational process between media users, platforms, and (non-)journalistic news providers. Methodologically, the research reflects upon how we can grasp these personal news curation practices by proposing a novel mixed method approach: the *data mirroring method* that combines social media data donations with qualitative interviews. Additionally, the empirical material is drawn from three qualitative case studies.

The findings show that news users curate their news feeds in pursuit of a personalized news *comfort zone* that is both meaningful and emotionally manageable. They engage in a constant balancing act between protecting their autonomy through self-curation and selectively granting journalists access to their curated spaces. While journalistic content is often avoided when perceived as negative or overwhelming, journalists remain valued as sources of *clarity*, *credibility*, and *diversity* when users seek explanation in times of confusion. These findings highlight journalism's ambivalent yet persistent role within news users' digital space and show how journalistic authority is negotiated through everyday personal curation practices in a news ecosystem that is co-shaped by both user and platform logics.

The study concludes that journalism's contemporary public role must be understood through people's everyday media practices rather than solely from institutional perspectives. By foregrounding audience agency and personalized news navigation, it contributes to debates on journalistic authority by offering a user-oriented framework for examining journalism in a deeply mediatized society.