



Your Brand, Their Product: A Critical Look at Teaching Personal Branding in Journalism Education

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Abstract:

Journalism instructors today often teach the use of social media for the purpose of personal branding, or the strategic crafting of an online identity for career gain. However, this instruction has implications for students' understanding of themselves, their participation in journalism, and for the integrity of the profession itself. This essay investigates critical perspectives on personal branding and social media to delve deeply into this area of journalism education and to offer insights that may alter journalism instructors' classroom choices. It also provides assignment and activity suggestions for the exploration of these issues in the classroom.

Every semester, I introduce students in my Introduction to Media Writing course to the concept of "personal branding." This is the first course that my department's likely majors take, and we discuss the current media job market and the need to be able to represent themselves online as prospective media professionals. That representation, I tell them, happens through their personal websites and their social media accounts, wherein they must not only write well, but also—through a carefully concocted, personalized blend of media—put forth a sense of their individual identities, strengths, and aspirations. This online identity expression, I say, will appeal to future journalism or media employers.

Every semester, I have misgivings about these lessons, which are reinforced throughout the course with graded assignments and mandatory participation in various social media. Though I feel future journalists must be aware of the professional realities of the field and must develop relevant skills, I struggle inwardly

with requiring students to package themselves as a brand, like any other product. I always encourage students to remain critical of the media tools they use for online self-expression, and to be true to themselves in this practice, but these never feel like sufficient disclaimers.

In this essay, I explore more deeply my concerns regarding the teaching of personal branding as part of journalism education. I believe that, though personal branding through social media may in fact be a necessary vocational skill, there are serious potential effects of its embrace within journalism education. It seems that personal branding through social media may co-opt these forms of online expression in ways that personally limit the individual student journalist and, perhaps, may even damage the practice of journalism. Furthermore, these personal branding activities encourage the conflation of the individual student journalist with his or her labor in ways that are potentially exploitative both during their education and

when utilized in professional work.

Though these effects may be inevitable for our students and the profession as online personal branding becomes a prerequisite for journalism employment, I also offer specific ways we might mitigate these potentially negative effects through our teaching.

Social Media and Personal Branding in Journalism Education

Bor (2014) provides a glimpse of the type of instruction in social media skills offered by many journalism educators. Based on a case study of one major university's implementation of social media instruction, Bor argues that educators should focus on technical skills; the distinction between personal and professional social media use (primarily with regard to tone, spelling, and capitalization, as well as the quality of images and video shared); and the potential for career advancement through social media class assignments. Bor also includes the ethics of journalists' use of social media, though she focuses primarily on attribution, accuracy, and fairness, not larger questions of the personal and societal impact of social media. Though Bor's study was published in one of the major pedagogy journals in the discipline, her work does not mention instructing students about the nature of social media companies, ethical concerns regarding their operation, or their effects on the journalism profession, among other possible critical elements that might be addressed.

Hirst & Treadwell (2011) offer an overview of the development of integration of digital and social media into journalism curricula, as well as insight into the challenges educators have faced in this process. Like Bor, they note that students are generally not "professionally competent" in media production (emphasis in original), despite often extensive use of these media in their personal lives (p. 450). Students also expressed fear and discomfort regarding use of Twitter, and disinterest in long-term blogging or other public media production. In their resulting recommendations for curriculum reform, Hirst and Treadwell suggest that social media be "an integrated aspect of the curriculum... [T]he tools and techniques that empower digital story-telling are now essential learning for our graduates" (p. 458). They also emphasize that this technical instruction should be accompanied by critical discussions of these tools and the ethical concerns related to their use by journalists—an ele-

ment Bor did not include.

Personal branding is a framework some instructors use to promote students' engagement in social media—the "career advancement" potential Bor (2014) mentions. Social media used in journalism courses often include blogs, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, SlideShare, and other digital tools. An online search quickly locates numerous journalism course syllabi that include the development of a personal brand as a significant goal of students' engagement with social media (e.g., Batsell, 2013; Hinsley, 2014; Swain, 2013). Marwick and boyd (2011) describe this kind of personal branding as "using social media instrumentally for self-conscious commodification... [S]trategically appealing to followers becomes a carefully calculated way to market oneself as a commodity in response to employment uncertainty" (p. 119). These uses are explicitly linked to the goal of obtaining employment by many journalism instructors and commentators. As Buttry (2011) notes, "I'd rather be a brand-name journalist than a generic journalist. Branding pays better than generic and branding makes it easier to get hired in a tough job market. Branding increases your value" (para. 36).

It appears that many journalism instructors teach social-media skills to bring students' personal use of these technologies up to a "professional" level, and that correct application of this advanced competency for self-promotion is considered necessary, or at least highly advantageous, when seeking journalism jobs. Instruction in social-media uses for journalistic purposes (e.g., in the reporting process) is, of course, also taught in many programs. However, regardless of the specific use, social media typically cannot be used without an individual's identity attached to his/her interactions. A personal profile is necessary. Therefore, the individual journalism student is also required to accept some degree of fusion of the personal and professional for this coursework and for long-term success.

To my knowledge, this fusion of the personal and professional in social media for personal branding has not been problematized in journalism education. As shown in Bor's (2014) example above, typical discussions of social media in journalism classrooms appear to focus on 1) the ethical practice of journalism using social media and 2) the need for students to maintain personal/professional boundaries on social media. The latter might be summarized as "don't post anything that will upset your [prospective] employer" and "format everything well." But the fact that social media

require the blending of personal and professional—and the implications of that reality—are rarely mentioned and addressed for themselves.

It is clear that students in the journalism classroom shift from personal to professional usage of social media, as Hirst and Treadwell (2011) describe. However, numerous scholars outside of journalism education have identified aspects of identity construction through social media that should give journalism educators pause if currently teaching social media with reference only to the concerns described above. This movement from personal to professional identity construction raises questions about the promotion of particular identities as more or less desirable than others.

Personal Identities Enforced By Like Buttons

To address the construction of identity offline and online, McEwan and Mease (2013) contrast the concept of the “crystallized self” (drawn from Tracy & Trethewey, 2005) with what they call the “compressed crystal.” The “crystallized self” represents the individual’s normal daily life, in which different elements of one’s personality emerge in different contexts. The professional self may be different from the self expressed at home or with friends, but all aspects of the self are equally real and significant. The visible “facets” simply differ in construction and expression to reflect the surrounding context and discourse at any given moment.

However, the presentation of the self in social media is different, McEwan and Mease argue: “Facebook and other mass-mediated self-presentations merge multiple identities into one presentation of self to multiple audiences” (2013, p. 91). When the various personal and professional contexts in which an individual participates are all collapsed in the world of social media, the facets of the individual’s crystal are “compressed.” Supported by existing research and numerous case studies, McEwan and Mease suggest that

people who do not perform appropriately compressed selves online may be subjected to organizational and societal repercussions. [...] Workplace identities gain dominance over other identities due to the capacity of organizations to discipline and control desirable identity performances, consequently shaping individuals’ self-contemplation and performative constitutions of self. [...] Individuals may find themselves playing to the most salient,

powerful, and threatening audience in their online performance of self. (2013, p. 97)

In other words, when individuals present themselves online and know that a variety of audiences may be listening, they are likely to tailor their self-presentation to please the audience that possesses power over them: their (prospective) employers, whose reactions to social-media usage could endanger their financial security and well-being. Therefore, the workplace identity—that deemed most valuable to the employer—is prioritized, resulting in what McEwan and Mease call a compression of the self.

Moreover, the compression of the self within social media is not restricted to the online environment, these researchers argue. Online and offline familiarity “bleeds” from space to space because of face-to-face interactions with various online contacts that also occur. Therefore, no activity, online or offline, is without a potential recorder and an audience, both of whose reactions must constantly be considered. When individuals have little to no control over what others may post on social media, any activity that is even quasi-public must be undertaken with that caveat in mind.

Given these concerns about the availability and tailoring of self-presentation to employers and co-workers, it is easy to see how journalism educators’ instruction in the use of social media for personal branding swiftly transports students into the Panopticon, in which those in power “discipline” their identities. Indeed, McEwan and Mease apply Foucault’s use of this concept in their discussion. Journalism educators’ concern that students’ social media activity might upset employers is legitimate. This common concern regarding social media use assumes the employer’s surveillance, as on an industrial factory floor—or within a traditional newsroom.

Intriguingly, though, Lianos (2012) offers an alternative perspective on the operation of social control in the digital, post-industrial age that is an even better fit for the critical analysis of personal branding, as it currently is employed by journalism professionals:

Far from being a centralized surveillance, social control emerges in these [post-industrial] circumstances as an apprenticeship in compliance around several competing poles. The subject is obliged to choose his own range of involvement but must exist and act by conforming independently and intelligently to the multitude of institutional poles. [...] It is no longer the

brute strength of a centre inculcating compliance that controls contemporary subjects, but the capacity to attract their gaze, which, by this common but atomized focusing, establishes and legitimizes their point of convergence as a de facto centre of normativity. (p. 19)

Applying Lianos' perspective suggests that when we encourage students to engage in personal branding through social media, we socialize them into more than a fear of Foucauldian surveillance. We also teach them to anticipate and adhere to multiple institutional and personal demands upon self-presentation, i.e., to compress their self-presentation accordingly. Students' training in the use of these media for personal branding is part of the "apprenticeship" Lianos mentions. Students can act "independently and intelligently" online, but their compressed selves must now concurrently satisfy multiple audiences: instructors, current employers, future employers, friends, family, and others.

And, because a significant goal of journalists' personal branding is to build a larger audience for one's work and for one's employer's online properties, it is not always an employer's rebuke that these students should fear, but rather the failure to gain positive attention for their online actions. Indeed, in this model of social control, it is the Facebook post without Likes and the tweet without retweets that indicate a deviation from the desired norm.

The personal brand that "attracts the gaze" of the audience in a world saturated with media is the winner, and the student who adopts and expresses whatever compressed self gains such attention appears to have made wise choices. The same student's compressed self may or may not be the same as the self who started a journalism course, and this compression may or may not affect his or her life in other significant ways. However, as future participants in the journalism profession, students trained in the use of social media for personal branding also may pose a larger challenge to the current dominant ideology of the profession.

Personal Branding as a Challenge to Journalism

Professionals in many fields seek to establish personal brands through social media to advance their careers. It makes sense that dentists and real estate agents with appealing online personae will draw more customers. These professions differ from journalism, however, in that journalists share a distinct "occupational ideology

... which functions to self-legitimize their position in society" (Deuze, 2005, p. 446). These include specific attitudes toward their public-service role, objectivity, autonomy, ethics, and the immediacy of their work (Deuze, 2005, p. 447).

The uncritical use of personal branding through social media by journalists challenges some of these ideals. Specifically, journalists must reconcile their public service-oriented work with the presentation of an attractive personal brand, even when their work may be controversial or less appealing to the audience. Journalists must strive to remain objective, even if their public brand may seem to coincide with a specific perspective. They need to report objectively and autonomously on the creators of the technological tools with which they craft their brands every day, and upon the larger societal implications of these technologies.

On a more abstract level, journalists ideally also would remain somewhat distanced from the internalization of institutional and market forces required by the crafting of the compressed self for the personal brand. As McEwan and Mease point out, "As a society we seem to be complying with the mandates of the [virtual panopticon] while rarely questioning the source of these mandates, and who exactly this virtual panopticon serves" (2013, p. 101). When the need to create a personal brand using social media appears unquestioned in journalism education, and students' attention is directed away from the forces that have created such a need, the very people who might investigate and publicize the economic and social forces behind this development are distracted by their own deep engagement within it and their reliance upon it for career sustenance.

Of course, journalists have always operated within larger constraints on their work, including limitations from their employers, the marketplace and hegemonic ideologies. For example, more critical journalism instructors may and should still caution students about the self-censorship and effects on reporting that could result from employment by mainstream, traditional journalism organizations, where there are also risks for independence and professional ideology (e.g., within a news division of a larger media conglomerate).

However, I would argue that the rise of personal branding through social media—indeed, the very term "personal"—may tempt journalism educators to believe we are sending students down an inherently more independent path upon which they can define themselves and their work more authentically. But the

path of personal branding carries its own complications for the individual and perhaps especially for the journalist, if recognized as requiring the compression of the self, to suit all audiences at all times, online and potentially also offline.

The questions raised here about personal branding through social media should discourage the idea that strategic online self-presentation offers aspiring journalists some greater independence or self-determination. The use of personal branding and self-promotion in today's fluid journalism industry presents its own ideological challenges to journalism's norms. Journalism instructors must be aware of these challenges and should educate their students about them.

Your Life, Our Product

A final aspect of aspiring journalists' personal branding through social media that merits attention is the fact that their creation of an online identity—and the constant stream of original content that supports it—is actually an asset in itself, though not one the student exclusively owns. Journalism employers find monetary value, though difficult to quantify, in their employees' construction of personal brands and in the content they manufacture on those brands' behalf, which typically is disseminated or at least amplified by their employers' online platforms. Journalism students should be aware that, when they move from amateur production of online content to the professional level that Bor (2014) and Hirst and Treadwell (2011) prescribe, they are in fact manufacturing a product that—even when it appears merely “personal” in nature—is salable by an employer and likely benefits other companies as well.

Scholars have noted the relevance of these concerns to the general public's participation in social media. Fuchs (2010) demonstrates that, in today's “informational capitalism,” users “produce and coproduce parts of the [new media] products, and therefore [also create] parts of the use value, exchange value, and surplus value that are objectified in these products” (2010, p. 191). Additionally, the production of these “information commodities” occurs at all hours, at work and outside of work, generating profitable assets for social media companies even when we are recreating (Rey, 2012, p. 416). Rey also notes that not only the specific content users create may have value to corporate hosts; the metadata attached to this content are also valuable. At least in my own experience, students do not typically think of their Facebook

posts and Instagram photos and videos as information commodities.

Fuchs and Rey both raise questions about the degree to which these users are thus “exploited,” as they receive no compensation for this ongoing stream of content creation. Lanier (2013), among others, argues for such compensation through micropayments, which would substantially alter users' relationship to social media companies. Is it a unique form of exploitation when a student journalist is required to compress his or her identity and create a personal brand and original content? If so, does that exploitation go beyond that which Fuchs argues is the norm for students? (2010, p. 187)? Rey (2012) states that, although social media users are exploited to some degree,

the rate of exploitation on social media is inversely related to the utility of the content to the prosumer [producer/consumer]. [...] The reason that social media users are not economically deterred from engaging in prosumption of content is that they find this content to be so useful that the rate of exploitation winds up being relatively minimal—at least no more than in their other laboring. (p. 415)

In this case, because journalism students may gain long-term economic benefit from their engagement in personal branding through social media, this effort is perhaps not any more exploitative than other aspects of their education. In fact, the often enjoyable nature of social media participation further obscures the exploitative elements that exist.

However, critically minded journalism instructors may still be somewhat disturbed by the fact that a student's personal identity may be altered—compressed and perhaps altered when it is performed online and offline—when it is commoditized for personal branding and online distribution. Moreover, all of this is occurring at a time when students' personal identity development is very much in flux, responding to the complex mix of new influences and opportunities available to them in the college environment (Jones & Abes, 2013). It is worth recognizing that journalism educators' emphasis on the formation of an employer-friendly identity/personal brand via social media may be particularly influential at this time in students' lives.

Refinements to the Teaching of Personal Branding

After exploring these perspectives, I still find myself in a quandary: How do I continue to teach this

skill, seemingly common among my journalism education colleagues' curricula, in a way that satisfies my concerns? I don't think omitting this topic from my course would be fair to students' vocational aspirations, and yet I want to ensure that they are fully aware of its implications for their lives, their careers, their chosen profession, and the larger information economy in which we live.

For me, the answer will likely come in the inclusion of additional course content about the nature of online identity construction and performance (in general and in the personal branding context); about the intersection of journalism's traditional ideology with new technologies that may alter and challenge it; and about the economic basis for the success of new media companies that rely on "prosumer" (producer/consumer) contributions for their profit (cf. Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Though I have touched upon these topics in class in the past, a more explicit discussion of these specific aspects of the students' incipient redefinition of themselves and their professionalization of their social media participation could perhaps further lessen the exploitation that Fuchs and Rey identify—or at least create workers within informational capitalism who are less alienated from the true nature of their labor, to put it in Marxian terms.

Activities and assignments on these topics could take many forms, and might in an undergraduate class include some of the following:

- An assignment in which students analyze their own social media posts, either "casual" or "professional," and consider how the posts were composed for a specific audience(s) and/or in support of a specific identity the student wished to present;
- A classroom discussion on the traditional social, economic, and political role of the individual

journalist, and how the use of social media today has supported or challenged it;

- A research project in which students delve into the business model of a specific social media company in greater detail to understand how the content they produce is monetized and distributed for that company's benefit;
- A classroom discussion comparing and contrasting unpaid journalism internships with the unpaid generation of social media content for career development (see Kanigel, 2013, for in-depth discussion of the former issue); or
- A "critical service learning" project in which students teach community members about these issues in order to engage in media activism, while deepening their own learning (Clark, 2013, offers one example of this kind of project).

A wide variety of classroom exercises could help students appreciate the true complexity of the role of personal branding via social media in their own lives, while also helping them become journalists who are knowledgeable and critical about these media.

As Donsbach (2013) says, journalistic skills can and should be taught in the context of larger theoretical and social concerns, increasing students' understanding of the communication process of which they aspire to be a part. I want to ensure that my students are aware of the benefits, drawbacks, and greater implications of the practices I teach. Even when students' work may appear on the surface to be entirely for their own benefit, journalism educators must be watchdogs for the practices we choose to teach, and ensure that our students think deeply about the nature of their work even before they graduate.

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