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PERSONAL BRANDING ON TWITTER
How employed and freelance journalists stage themselves on social media

Cara Brems, Martina Temmerman ⬤ **, Todd Graham** ⬤ **and Marcel Broersma** ⬤

Social media are increasingly embedded into everyday communication. This challenges journalism to anticipate the changes that social media trigger in the use and production of (news) media. In this paper, we focus on personal branding on Twitter. Journalists are increasingly encouraged to develop a personal brand on Twitter. This offers them the opportunity to become news and opinion hubs and to increase their "market value". Erving Goffman's theatre metaphor is used as an analytical framework in which journalists are conceptualized as performers who are acting on a stage in front of an audience. Through a quantitative content analysis of the tweeting behaviour of 40 employed and freelance journalists, we explore the way they use social media to present themselves and which dilemma's they are facing. We analyse tweeting behaviour in terms of the types of tweets, functions of tweets and modes of interaction. The quantitative content analysis is supplemented with in-depth interviews with 12 journalists, in order to analyse the reasoning behind their social media habits. Our findings show that journalists particularly struggle with being factual or opinionated, being personal or professional, how to balance broadcasting their message with engagement and how to promote themselves strategically.

KEYWORDS   identity; journalism practice; personal branding; self-presentation; social media; Twitter

Introduction

The past decade, has witnessed a sharp increase in the use and popularity of social media. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are increasingly embedded into the structures, forms and processes of everyday communication (e.g. Duggan et al. 2015; Lenhart 2015; Van Dijck 2013). Journalism is among many of the social institutions that have to come to terms with the changes that social media triggered in the use and production of (news) media. For a long time, journalists in a democratic society have been considered to be society's watchdogs. The rise of networked communication does not demolish this task, but it undeniably urges the rethinking of professional practices and norms. Now that virtual acts such as "liking" and "sharing" have become part of daily human communication, journalists are forced to redefine their public task in an online environment.

Research indicates how social media transformed traditional newsroom practices such as sourcing, gatekeeping, verifying and broadcasting news (e.g. Broersma and Graham 2013, 2016; Canter 2015; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012). In this paper, we focus on transformations at the level of the journalist. Due to the rise of network-based platforms, not only news organizations but also individual journalists have the opportunity to become credible news providers and popular household names (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Picard 2014). Now that newsrooms are downsized and budgets are cut, newsmen and newswomen are increasingly encouraged to develop a personal brand on social media. Employed journalists might brand themselves on these platforms to preserve the sustainability of their news organizations. Online, these organizations are after all very much dependent on traffic coming from social media. Freelance journalists, on the other hand, might benefit from social media platforms to become self-branding entrepreneurs who can get or stay on the radar of potential media clients. Social media platforms offer an apt environment for designing a potentially lucrative image of the self.

Twitter is an appropriate platform to study this transformation. Because of its public and interactive features, the micro-blog is a convenient channel to find, break and share news in messages that consist of only 140 characters (see e.g. Broersma and Graham 2013; Hermida 2010; Hermida et al. 2014). Media-savvy journalists and news organizations therefore have a strong presence on the platform. For research that focuses on the production of news in the twenty-first century, these novel ways of self-presentation are a rich source of information on how newsmakers adapt to creating and spreading news in a virtual environment.

Research on the rather young phenomenon of personal branding by journalists on social media is still very limited and confines itself mainly to the United States (e.g. Molyneux and Holton 2015; Molyneux 2014). This paper builds upon this work to provide a more thorough understanding of the branding activities of journalists in a European context. We use Goffman's (1959) theatre metaphor as an analytical framework, wherein the journalists are conceptualized as performers who are acting on a stage (i.e. Twitter) in front of an audience (i.e. other Twitter users). Through a quantitative content analysis of the tweeting behaviour of 20 employed and 20 freelance journalists in the Netherlands and Flanders (*N* = 5978 tweets) and in-depth interviews with 12 of these journalists, we investigate and explore the way they use social media to present themselves. By comparing the Twitter practices of employed and freelance newsmakers, we analyse a variety of potentially different forms, motives, benefits and pitfalls of virtual self-presentation by journalists.

Branding the Self

In the social media age, individual journalists have become more visible than ever. Their virtual presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram offers unique insights in their working habits, opinions and personal activities. Journalists, who often were not more than a name or initials under an article or a news item, have now become household names with whom it is easy to communicate (Reich 2010). When journalists operate from a private Twitter account which is attached to their personal name, they are actively constructing a brand of their own

(Hermida 2013). Presenting themselves as a brand offers journalists the opportunity to attract an audience and become news and opinion hubs on social media. They thus increase their "market value". For freelance journalists these new ways of taking the stage offer interesting opportunities to advertise their skills and stay in the picture of potential media clients. For news organizations this newfound virtual self-presentation of reporters can strengthen the reputation of their media brand. But visibility online also has pitfalls: the personal or organizational brand can easily be harmed by a slip of the tongue or public quarrels.

Although social media offer new opportunities, branding is by no means a new phenomenon. Early definitions of branding (Lair et al. 2005; Murphy 1987) focus on the way producers try to sell products as unique and distinctive. Since the 1990s, the concept is also used to describe the marketing of people. Tom Peters (1997) popularized the term "personal branding" in the article "The Brand Called You" (Lair et al. 2005; Labreque et al. 2011). He—early on—emphasized the potential of the Web and personal websites for building a personal brand, without yet being familiar with the branding potential of the social media giants that would develop later. Lair et al. (2005, 308) contend that personal branding differs from branding in general because: "Here, success is not determined by individuals' internal sets of skills, motivations, and interests but, rather, by how effectively they are arranged, crystallized, and labelled—in other words, branded". Personal branding is thus a matter of knowing your skills and persona, and presenting them on a well-arranged platter to others.

With the development of social media the individual is placed on a pedestal. Every citizen, including journalists, can create a personal profile for multiple purposes such as publishing, sharing and interacting. Marketing has always been an important part of selling news, but it was a task primarily set aside for commercial departments of news organizations, not for individual journalists (cf. Carlson 2015). Since the arrival of Web 2.0, organizations lost their exclusive position as makers and breakers of news. But, as Briggs (2012, 5) writes: "Whenever monopolies are disrupted, investors and entrepreneurs see opportunity. New technology may cause some income streams to disappear … but usually it opens new doors at the same time". The increasing importance of social media traffic to attract readers, as well as job insecurity as a result of budget cuts, has encouraged journalists to create a face of their own on social media. In addition to branding news products, the branding of individual journalists has now become a common phenomenon: "News organizations increasingly regard social media as not only a place for research or distribution of content but also as an important platform for audience participation and branding" (Hedman 2016, 11). Social media give journalists the opportunity to communicate transparently about their work and private life to their followers and/or friends. They can leave the pack and become individual news hubs, while especially employed journalists can easily push the news of their own organization through their network.

The explorative work on personal branding by Molyneux and Holton (2015) indicated that journalists branded themselves more as individuals than as employees working for a certain news outlet. The interviewed journalists not only said that personal branding is an essential part of their practice, but also that it is important that not only their work but also their being is accepted by their audience—independent of the organization they are working for. Molyneux (2014) took the research regarding personal branding on social media further by examining the specific retweet behaviour of

journalists on Twitter. He analysed "any tweet that is self-referential, be that a notice of an upcoming television appearance, a link to one's own story or positive or negative discussion of oneself" (Molyneux 2014, 13). When discussing the reasoning behind the personal branding activities of some journalists, Molyneux (2014, 12) wonders whether there is an economic (job security), an activist (become a "valued voice") or an egocentric (stand in the centre of attention) motive behind this practice. Nevertheless, it is clear that journalists—just as everyone else—construct an image on social media by carefully curating the information that is connected to them. They present themselves in a moderated way to their social media audience and in that perspective they perform a role-play.

All the World's a Stage, and so is Twitter

"All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts" (Shakespeare 1980, 246). Shakespeare wrote these often-quoted words centuries ago in his play *As You Like It*, but the citation seems to be just as applicable now as it was back then. In their research on audience and identity on Twitter, Marwick and boyd (2010, 114) claim that humans present themselves differently depending "on who we are talking to and where the conversation takes place". Goffman's well-known *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 1959) still offers a useful theoretical framework to study the self-presentational daily practices of individuals (cf. Hermida 2014). Goffman uses the metaphor of theatre to analyse how individuals try to control the (first) impression they make on others. They can do so by "giving", i.e. communicating in a traditional verbal way, or "giving off" expressions, i.e. communicating in a more theatrical and unintentional way. Just as Marwick and boyd, Goffman underlines the importance of the location where the conversation takes place and the people the conversation is directed towards. He distinguishes between a front and a back stage. In the front the performer is performing and an audience is essential: without it the performance of a player would be real, not performed. In the back the actions that are not supposed to be public are exposed.

In a similar vein, journalists on Twitter can be compared to actors on a stage. We can consider the Twitter profile and feed as a front stage, i.e. the place where the performance happens, and the direct messages (DM) and locked profiles as back stages, i.e. places that are not visible for the audience.[1] When journalists are performing in the front, i.e. in the public feed, they are aware that they have an audience, but also that they build and shape it. They thus actively try to control the impressions they make in this virtual environment. The concept of the "imagined audience" helps to make sense of branding practices on social media. "When we talk, we think we are speaking only to the people in front of us or on the other end of the telephone, but this is in many ways a fantasy" (Marwick and boyd 2010, 115). In real life the person you talk to does not have to be the only one that hears the conversation. According to Marwick and boyd, this is also true for online communication. Although the audience on social media is limitless, social media users still tend to imagine the audience as a restricted and manageable group of people.

Goffman's framework has been applied before by Papacharissi (2002) to examine how people presented themselves via personal home pages. Her pioneer research shows that self-presentation occurred via design elements like font types, hyperlinks and banners to make the audience acquainted with personal preferences. A guestbook served as a tool for confirmation, i.e. a way of learning if the self that is portrayed is also accepted. Papacharissi (2012) similarly analyses the self-performance of individuals on Twitter as a networked performance via trending hashtags. She concludes that the self is performed by reorganizing grammar and language conventions to fit messages in the scope of 140 characters. Marwick and boyd (2014) add that self-presentation on Twitter is a moving process; it is word-based rather than pictorial. Indeed, the only static elements on Twitter are the possibility of choosing a profile photo, a header photo and a personalized description of the self in the bio section. Personal branding on Twitter can thus be considered an ongoing, fast and intensive task with a limited number of options to present the self. Since the platform works primarily public, we can expect the journalists to construct versions of themselves that are strictly curated. Because on Twitter, "users maintain impressions by balancing personal/public information, avoiding certain topics and maintaining authenticity" (Marwick and boyd 2014, 124).

Method: Content Analysis and In-depth Interviews

This paper analyses personal branding by investigating and exploring the self-presentation of Dutch and Flemish employed and freelance journalists on Twitter. By combining a quantitative and qualitative method, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do journalists present themselves on Twitter and which dilemmas do they face by branding themselves?

RQ2: Are there significant differences in branding practices between employed and freelance journalists?

RQ3: What are the professional or personal motives for journalists to present themselves in certain ways on Twitter?

Quantitative content analysis has been applied to analyse systematically Twitter data produced by a delimited number of journalists. Although content analysis is a rigid method, it is limited because of its "quantitative nature", "fragmentation of textual wholes", "positivist notion of objectivity" and its "lack of a theory of meaning" (Hansen 1998, 91). Therefore, it is combined with a series of in-depth interviews to discover the motives and intensions of journalists and thus examine the data to the fullest.

Sampling Procedures

In the first phase of sampling we made a selection of journalists ($N = 40$) who actively use the micro-blog Twitter. In earlier research on Twitter, researchers used trending hashtags or online Twitter ranking lists to select a number of research subjects—often based on the number of followers they have (e.g. Papacharissi 2012; Lasorsa et al. 2012). Since we were interested in "active" journalists to get a bigger picture of the journalistic network on Twitter, we asked our followers for input. To get

to know who they perceived as the most active journalists, we tweeted: "Research Question: who are the most active Dutch/Flemish journalists on Twitter?" This tweet was retweeted multiple times by the journalists in our networks and resulted in multiple suggestions. Based on this input and our own field research on the platform, we made a list that contains 40 Dutch-speaking journalists that are actively using Twitter.[2] In our selection process, we took variables like country, sex and professional status into consideration, and made sure that there was an equal division between gender, journalists working in the Netherlands and journalists working in Flanders, and freelance and employed journalists. As an additional restriction we decided to focus on journalists of print media. Print journalists do not enjoy the public exposure and associated branding opportunities which television and radio journalists enjoy. We can thus presuppose that personal branding on Twitter is more important to them. In terms of functions, we selected beat reporters, general reporters and editors-in-chief. From these 40 Twitter accounts, we archived all the tweets that were produced in two random weeks (the first two weeks of June 2014) from the Twitter API using our own computer script (TwitterCrawler).[3] This resulted in a data-set of 5978 tweets.

Coding Procedures

After a pilot study, a coding manual was developed, based on earlier research by Graham et al. (2013, 2014) on the use of Twitter by politicians. A set of carefully formulated rules guided the coding process that was conducted on four different levels. The first level of analysis focused on the type of tweet, i.e. which Twitter communicative modes—singleton, @-reply, retweet, retweet with comment—were being used by journalists? The second level was constructed in order to research the specific function or purpose of the tweet. Finally, we focused on interaction, i.e. when journalists used the @-reply feature, with whom were they interacting?

The tweets were manually coded by two coders. They were randomly assigned to 20 Dutch and Flemish journalists. The individual tweet was the unit of analysis and context unit of analysis was the Twitter feed. The practical aspect of the coding process is not to be overlooked. In order to help minimize (human) coding errors and boost the performance of the coders, we moved beyond the usual tabular approach based on spreadsheets and text files and developed custom software for our coding scheme. The program is Web-based and coders can access the interface through their browser. Tweets were coded in chronological order in order to take the context of the Twitter feed into account and better understand the course of interactions. The program also displayed @-reply tweets within the context of the conversation they were situated, and coders were able to access user profiles and feeds via Twitter if more context was needed.

Reliability

Intercoder reliability was conducted on a random sample ($N = 329$) by two coders. Calculated using Cohen's Kappa, coefficients met appropriate acceptance levels (Viera and Garrett 2005): type 0.98, function 0.70 and interaction 0.70.

In-depth Interviews

After the quantitative results were gathered and analysed, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 of the 40 journalists. They were chosen after the analysis of their tweets because their online behaviour stood out, thus realizing maximum variation. Again we made sure that there was an equal division between journalists working in the Netherlands and journalists working in Flanders; women and men; and freelance and employed journalists. By discussing their social media activity we want to analyse the reasoning behind their social media habits and the way they construct virtual identities.

Two of the interviews were conducted via Skype; the other 10 interviews were face-to-face conversations that lasted from 40 minutes to two hours. The interviews were held using a topic list with five thematic clusters (social media, journalism practice, professional status, personal branding and future perspectives) that were discussed in every conversation. The content of these thematic clusters was adapted to the professional status of the interviewee. A freelancer would not be asked to elaborate on organizational matters and an employed journalist would not be asked about independent entrepreneurial motives to use social media. The 12 interviews were transcribed and analysed with the qualitative research tool NVivo. Unless otherwise stated, the journalists' quotes used below were chosen because they captured most effectively the views expressed by a majority of interviewees.[4]

The Four Struggles of Virtual Self-presentation

"You know it's bad for you, but it tastes so good", one of the interviewed journalists said while comparing Twitter to a box of candy.[5] To come to a better understanding of the virtual presence and the personal branding of journalists on the micro-blog, all the interviewed journalists were asked to compare Twitter to something they felt suiting. The answers varied from "your personal pub" to "a playground" to "the new news wire". This illustrates the multi-functionality of the platform and the different meanings it carries for various users. Not surprisingly, none of these journalists directly acknowledged Twitter as a billboard or an easy way to brand the self. When asked explicitly, the journalists often conceived direct self-promotion as a negative and an excessively assertive characteristic. They did, however, collectively recognize the benefits that social media can offer to journalism as a profession: in the process of doing research, contacting sources and spreading work, social media have become a common, and to some even indispensable, tool. However, when relating the findings of the content analysis with the self-perception of journalists in the interviews, we found that they struggled with four dilemmas.

Broadcasting or Networking?

When the changes in journalism practice brought on by Web 2.0 are discussed, one development always stands out: news organizations traditionally communicated in a one-way direction to the audience but now have to cope with an interactive and—in

some cases even competing—networked audience. The quantitative results that are presented in Table 1 suggest that interactive communication is prevailing among journalists on Twitter.

Interestingly, both the employed and the freelance journalists mostly used @-replies. Using this type of tweet is a way to start a conversation with other Twitter users, but also a strategy to be noticed by others because an @-reply will show up in their notifications. Although the number of singletons (i.e. the type of tweet that represents a one-way communication) is also high, the journalists appear to use Twitter more as an interactive platform to exchange information than to simply broadcast information. Freelance journalists generally tweeted more than the employed journalists: they produced 60.4 per cent of the total number of tweets and they also produced more @-replies (freelance: 55.8 per cent; employed: 47.3 per cent).

This might have an economic incentive, as a freelance Dutch journalist indicated: "You need to hold on to customers. You see that people have questions about [the beat]. And, I think, if you answer them, they will stay. They are just customers of mine, so that is important." Since freelance journalists have to ensure their own income, they have to pay more attention to interaction with potential customers. Conversely, employed journalists seem to be cautious that interactions might harm their news organization. A Dutch employed journalist said:

> I am a little bit afraid of this interaction. A lot of people that tweet me are angry about something in [his outlet]. And if I get involved in a conversation—and I did that in the past—it very quickly escalates to a fight.

These mixed feelings reflect insights from research (e.g. Graham and Wright 2015) that focuses on the comment sections of online news websites: some journalists think of it as a place where the audience rants and trolls. Others cherish the opportunity of useful public input on trending topics.

The quantitative results point out that journalists use Twitter in a conversational way, which leads to an important follow-up question: who are they talking to? Table 2 indicates that the journalists in our sample interacted mostly with the public, i.e. 46.8 per cent of the total @-replies were directed to citizens. Of the total @-replies, 31.8 per cent were directed to other journalists and 19.9 per cent of the total @-replies to professional contacts such as experts, public relations practitioners, authorities, celebrities, politicians and businesses. A significant difference can be seen in the interaction with journalists: freelance journalists clearly interacted more with journalists from other news outlets (30.7 per cent) than the employed journalists (24.3 per cent) did. Employed

TABLE 1
Type of tweet posted by journalists per professional status (%)

Type	Employed	Freelance	χ^2 (df)	Phi
Singleton	36.1*	34.5*	1.66 (1)	−0.017
@-reply	47.3*	55.8*	41.3 (1)	0.083
Retweet	13.9*	8.6*	43 (1)	−0.085
Retweet with comment	2.7*	1.2*	18.7 (1)	−0.056

Chi-square tests for independence:
*$p < 0.001$.

TABLE 2
With whom were journalists interacting per professional status (%)

Interaction (N @-replies = 3134)	Employed (N = 1119)	Freelance (N = 2015)	χ^2 (df)	Phi
Public, citizen	48.2	46.1	1.32 (1)	−0.021
Outlet accounts	1.1	0.3	7.6 (1)	−0.049
Journalist working for the same media organization	9.6*	0*	195.8 (1)	−0.250
Journalists working for other media organizations	24.3*	30.7*	14.47 (1)	0.068
Professional contacts	16.4*	21.8*	12.85 (1)	0.064
Other	0.4	1.1	3.92 (1)	0.035

Chi-square tests for independence:
*$p < 0.001$.

journalists communicated often with journalists from their own news outlet (9.6 per cent). Freelancers also had significantly more interaction with professional contacts (21.8 per cent) than the employed journalists (16.4 per cent).

These results indicate that freelance journalists work more actively on the construction of their social network, as they do not always have a news organization and newsroom filled with professional colleagues to depend on. A Flemish freelance journalist said that Twitter makes it easy to connect to others: "It has built a bridge between me and senior journalists." An employed Dutch journalist adds to that idea: "It is very accessible. Otherwise you would have to call a newsroom to get somebody on the phone and then ask if that person wants to meet you." This does not necessarily mean that their network has gotten bigger or that the process of physical bonding with contacts gets bypassed. "It is often a step towards added value and not really a replacing value", a Flemish employed journalist said.

A general comment the journalists made when they were asked about the composition of their Twitter audience is that it is a rather select club. An employed female journalist from Flanders calls the Twitter population "the twitterati": "the wider media world and people that are involved in advertising, illustrating, acting or copy writing. I notice these are all more or less creative souls. But they are not only journalists". A Dutch employed journalist has an even more narrow idea of the Twitter audience: "I sometimes get the idea that we are all media people talking in a circle." Since they are aware of this, most journalists do not perceive the input they receive on Twitter as representative of the world: "Twitter does not equal the common people. We sometimes have the tendency to say: Twitter explodes, so the world explodes. No, Twitter explodes … so we explode", an employed journalist from a Dutch newspaper stated.

An important caveat of the content analysis is that conversations via DMs—the "back stage" of Twitter—are not included in the results because of their private status. According to the interviewed journalists, these messages are often used for professional communication with fellow journalists and professional contacts, but remain hidden for the general public in "a separate room" (employed, Dutch). "Sometimes you wonder: what shall I do? Text message, DM, email?", an employed Flemish journalists said when discussing his sourcing practices, "I have the impression that the DM of Twitter is really becoming a communication channel." The fact that the journalistic profession is not

entirely transparent on social media has everything to do with protecting information: "Everything you do in your timeline … can alert other people", a Dutch freelancer said. Therefore, some parts of the journalistic work process, such as contacting sources and requesting interviews, take place off stage.

Factual or Opinionated?

A second dilemma refers to the norm of factuality and verification. Our findings (see Table 3) indicate that objectivity is not thought to be an essential of journalists' Twitter accounts. On the contrary, the journalists in the sample use Twitter primarily to argue with other users and to share their opinions. On social media they are willing to voice their opinion, which used to be reserved for the opinion sections in newspapers and magazines. A Dutch freelance journalist explained this by stating that on Twitter he is not solely a professional but also an authentic person: "For me that is a fun combination: you can see the journalist and the person, rather than only the journalist." These Twitter opinions can be seen as a way of self-profiling online: by being witty on social media a journalist can deliver unique insights in matters that satisfy the potential customer and make them come back for more.

Table 3 also demonstrates that there is a significant difference between the amount of "arguing and debating" tweets that were sent out by employed (16.5 per cent) and freelance journalists (22 per cent). This shows that freelance journalists not only sent out more @-replies than employed journalists, but indeed use Twitter in a more interactive way than their employed counterparts do. From a personal branding perspective, this indicates that freelance journalists maintain a more intense relationship with their Twitter audience and their professional network. Having a strong network is not only interesting for professional reasons. For a Flemish freelance journalist, his

TABLE 3
Function of tweet posted by journalists per professional status (%)

Function	Employed (N = 2366)	Freelance (N = 3612)	χ^2 (df)	Phi
Sharing news	17.7*	7.3*	147.1 (1)	−0.165
Live reporting	0.7	1.5	7.3 (1)	0.35
Self-promotion	3.1*	5.9*	24.8 (1)	0.064
Promoting other individual journalists	1.6*	0.7*	13.3 (1)	−0.047
Opinion, critique, interpretation	16.9	14.9	4.2 (1)	−0.27
Arguing, debating	16.5*	22*	27 (1)	0.067
Request for non-journalistic input	9.3	8.5	1.26 (1)	−0.14
Request for journalistic input	0.7	0.7	0.00 (1)	0.00
Giving advice, helping someone	5.6	7.6	9.1 (1)	0.039
Acknowledgement	10.1	8.7	3.44 (1)	−0.24
Share personal information	8.4*	11.5*	14.5 (1)	0.049
Correcting an error	0.9	0.7	0.72 (1)	−0.11
Reflecting on journalism practice	2.5	3.5	4.6 (1)	0.029
Other	5.9	6.6	1.0 (1)	0.013

Chi-square tests for independence:
*p < 0.001.

Twitter network also has a social function: "You are less lonely. I sometimes work at night and it is comforting to see that other people are awake as well."

Professional or Personal?

Closely related to the dilemma about facts and opinions is that between professional and personal communication. Both viewpoints determine the way in which the audience perceives personal branding and add a distinguishing touch. In pre-social media times, less was known about journalist's private lives. Today, journalists can decide to remain strictly professional or to open up to the public about private issues on social media (cf. Hedman 2016). As Table 3 shows, there is a significant difference regarding the sharing of personal details: the freelance journalists shared more personal information (11.5 per cent) than the employed journalists (8.4 per cent). Personal information can be considered as all things regarding the personal life of the journalists, e.g. family, hobbies and emotions. By tweeting about these non-professional and very personal subjects, the journalists give—or at least create the illusion of giving—their audience a glimpse of their private activities. This personal content can make a tweet more attractive to read for the audience, as is the case with adding attachments such as links and pictures. These details can give the virtual performance of the journalist multiple layers that appear to be close to who the user really is as a person.

The interviews made clear that most journalists have a clear view on what they want to share on Twitter. Some of them choose to construct a very personal profile, while others have a rather professional approach. However, most of them seem to balance both. A freelance Flemish journalist, who chose to open up about private details, said: "Twitter is full of details about my personal life. Especially because I feel that it is rather fleeting. Here, I will write things about my partner or my cats or a stupid mistake I made." One of the freelance Dutch journalists connected the sharing of personal details with popularity: "I have many followers and not only because I tweet in a professional way about journalism. You need to show something from yourself … They get an image of you, and that works." On the other side of the continuum we find a Flemish employed journalist who runs a complete professional Twitter profile: "My private life is completely uninteresting and nobody's business." But whether or not the journalists share elements of their personal lives, most of them have clear boundaries when it comes to tweeting about other people. Especially, the privacy of family members and those who cannot speak for themselves is respected. Some of the journalists who chose to tweet in a professional way even mentioned that they have their own guidelines: do not write on Twitter what you would not write in a newspaper or in a magazine.

Explicit or Implicit Self-promotion?

The final dilemma we discuss is the most logical one when thinking about personal branding: do the journalists explicitly or implicitly promote themselves? We understand self-promotion as "any tweet that is self-referential" (Molyneux 2014, 13). Next to tweeting links to their own articles, journalists can tweet pictures of their own

articles, announce new work or share a blog post. These are explicit ways to promote the self. As implicit self-promotion we consider keeping track of the number of tweets that are sent out, paying attention to peak hours and adding attachments in order to gain more audience approval.

First we discuss the explicit forms of self-promotion. The difference between the amounts of self-promoting tweets was significantly higher on the side of the freelance journalists (5.9 per cent against 3.1 per cent for the employed journalists). Since they are not exclusively attached to one media outlet, they often take responsibility for the distribution and advertising of their pieces. Indeed, it is beneficial to distribute one's work on social media since that might attract future media clients and a broader public. But the amount of tweets that was coded in the "self-promotion" category was rather small. According to research by Marwick and boyd (2010, 119), journalists see personal branding as an endangering habit for their "authenticity": "In bristling over the notion of audience, they are likely rejecting a popularly discussed act of 'personal branding' as running counter to what they value: authenticity. In other words, consciously speaking to an audience is perceived as inauthentic." This might explain why journalists are rather cautious with the most direct and explicit form of personal branding, i.e. self-promotion. Most of the journalists thought that self-promotion became annoying when it was simply too much, for example when people retweet compliments or exclusively share own articles. It is a "thin line", a freelance Flemish journalist said. A Dutch freelance journalist said: "For me as a freelancer it is a tremendously important platform, definitely to sell your pieces or maybe to sell a book. But, don't overdo it."

Sharing news that is produced by people other than the journalists has been coded as a distinct category because it is not a direct form of promoting the self. When it comes to sharing news, our findings indicate that the employed journalists (17.7 per cent) distributed more news than the freelance journalists (7.3 per cent) did (see Table 3). Sharing news was split up into three different categories: "sharing news from own media outlet" (reserved for employed journalists), "sharing news from another media outlet" and "sharing news from non-media organizations and individuals" (see Table 4). Of all the tweets the employees sent out to share news, 46.9 per cent was news from their own media outlet and 24.2 per cent from other media outlets. It thus seems that there is some sort of virtual loyalty to the outlet the journalist works for. An

TABLE 4
Details of "news sharing" variable (cf. Table 3) per professional status (%)

Function	Employed (N = 418)	Freelance (N = 264)	χ^2 (df)	Phi
Sharing news from own media outlet	46.9*	0*	309.4 (1)	0.227
Sharing news from other media outlet	24.2	37.5	10.3 (1)	−0.042
Sharing news from non-media organizations and individuals	28.9	62.5	0.9 (1)	−0.13

Chi-square tests for independence:
*$p < 0.001$.

employed Flemish journalist confirms this by explaining why he posts small fragments of his articles: "The teasing is deliberate … I do that to lure people to the magazine."

During the interviews it became clear that self-presentation also occurs in an implicit way. A freelance journalist from the Netherlands admitted he paid attention to the peak hours on Twitter for sending out tweets: "If I want my tweet to have a large reach, I make sure I do it at 10 in the morning or at 8 in the evening". He even posted certain tweets multiple times: "You have the idea that when you tweet something, everyone sees it. But that is nonsense." A Flemish employed journalist was very aware of attachments that make tweets more attractive: "What works well? Infographical stuff…" Even aesthetics seem to be of importance, as a Dutch employed journalist said: "Lately, I don't tweet pictures from Instagram anymore because Twitter only shows that ugly little link." The implicit self-promotion can even take place on the level of the profile picture, as a Flemish freelance journalist said:

I believe that this picture is a part of your brand. I do not believe that you have to change your avatar. I think it is very confusing when people do that. It's something very visual, your timeline. I see that picture and associate it with people. That's why I don't change it.

Conclusion: The Self as a Journalistic Tool

The growing popularity of media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram has created opportunities for individual journalists to become independent online personas rather than names or initials under articles. Especially Twitter, because of its public and networked nature, is a suitable stage for constructing a personal brand. In this paper we have analysed the reasoning behind, the construction of and the external factors that influence the personal branding of journalists. By combining the quantitative and qualitative results, the specific construction of a personal brand was disclosed. Goffman (1959) states that individuals always try to manage the (first) impression they make on others. When looking at Twitter, the impressions that are made by the journalists indeed seem to be carefully curated by balancing between the four discussed dilemmas: broadcasting information and interacting; remaining factual and being opinionated; sharing personal information and remaining professional; and promoting the self in an implicit or explicit way.

The results created a clear image of the three different elements that mark a personal brand. The first significant element is the stage. When looking at Twitter as a stage there is, as Goffman indicates, a front and a back region. The first can be identified with the public areas of Twitter, i.e. the open profile and the news feed. The latter takes shape in DMs or in locked Twitter profiles. It is the front—and thus public—stage where performers try to control their image in front of an audience. According to a Dutch freelance journalist, the size of that stage can easily expand: "It is all about reach. Otherwise you're just tweeting for a couple of people. Everyone wants a stage. It's a stage, and that stage enlarges when people retweet you." By actively cultivating an extensive network, journalists can reach more people at once. A well-built stage can be a useful tool for producing and spreading news. By using the props that Twitter offers —e.g. links, visual attachments, a header image or a small biography—the stage can be constructed in a way that adds to the character the performer is trying to play.

The second element that is indispensable when one is performing, is the audience. As our research indicated, the @-reply was the most used type of tweet: the journalists mostly communicated with citizens, other journalists and professional contacts. Twitter thus seems to be a primarily interactive platform where journalists and other Twitter users ("the audience") actively talk or argue and participate in their personal and/or professional thought processes. According to Molyneux (2014, 12), journalists who discuss professional matters on Twitter are breaking down "the fourth wall between the media and the audience and increas[ing] intimacy, essential in developing a personal brand". In a time where individual news consumption looks more and more like cherry picking (e.g. Blendle), building a strong connection with the audience can be an optimal way to create customer loyalty.

The final and most vital element in the construction of a personal brand is the performer, i.e. in this case the employed or freelance journalist. We defined personal branding as the distinctive presentation of a person's character and capacity (see Lair et al. 2005). The way the employed journalists presented themselves seemed to differ from how the freelance journalists did. The freelance journalists used Twitter significantly more in an interactive and personal way: they argued more often with other users and shared more non-professional details. The employed journalists, on the other hand, were shown to be loyal to the news outlet they work for by often sharing news written by their colleagues. It was not a surprise to see that most of the employed and freelance journalists seldom promoted their own work in an explicit way. The act of personal branding seems to be best performed in a subtle and authentic way.

This paper, of course, has limitations. Our focus on print journalists who are active on Twitter enabled us to carry out a first analysis of journalists' personal branding. As we noted, radio and television journalists have more means to (also) brand themselves through their "main" platforms. For future research it might therefore be useful to also study the branding practices of online, television and radio journalists and include other platforms such as Facebook and Instagram too. This would allow the study of the influence of different online communities on the construction of virtual identities. However, our study clearly shows that journalists, empowered by social media, have added a new tool to their traditional toolkit: the self. Journalists can now individually combine tasks such as gatekeeping, spreading news, breaking news and maintaining a relationship with the audience via social media. Independent of any professional status, it is clear that building a personal brand on social media is of value: employed journalists can strengthen the sustainability of their news organization and freelance journalists can build an audience for themselves and develop and nurture relations with potential media clients.

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NOTES

1. See e.g. Wodak (2014): in "Politics as Usual", Goffman's theatre metaphor is used to study the "backstage" behaviour of politicians.
2. News organizations in the Netherlands and Flanders, unlike those in some other countries, do not have dedicated social media editors who provide journalists with tweets to promote their content.
3. The script is available at https://github.com/valeriobasile/twittercrawler.
4. The interviews were conducted in Dutch. The first author made all the translations of the interview quotes. The used quotes were translated as closely as possible to the original utterances.
5. All journalists are referred to as "he", independent of their actual sex.

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