A Dummy's Guide to Using Instagram Like a REAL Journalist

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Abstract

Journalism is an ever-growing industry. In the digital age of the 21st century, social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Meta) have become a place for engaging with audiences in an attempt to humanize news publications. Until the summer of 2023, social media platforms were open spaces for the accessible sharing of news. The reliance of journal publications on social media to interact with the audience not only built a boundary between personal and professional image for journalists but also made journalists' interactions with their audiences very passive. With the changes implemented by Meta in response to Bill C-18, which took away news accounts from their social media platforms in Canada, the process of engaging with audiences and presenting news changed to become more journalist-oriented. Furthermore, journalists participated more actively as they had to brand themselves to present their news on social media is using their personal accounts. Now that the line between professional and personal identity on social media is blurred, it provides space for discourse on how a journalist brands themselves on a platform that is silencing their work. My study investigates a local independent student news publication's editorial board practices to observe how student journalists are resisting the news-sharing ban Meta has introduced. I found that the platform's policy changes were mostly superficial, and loopholes were easy to find and abuse. The findings were used to make an Instagram account in the form of a guide for student journalists, documenting the process of bypassing the content-sharing ban.

Keywords

Social media, journalism, Instagram, ethnography, resistance

Introduction

First and foremost, this guide is intended to function as a reliable manual for student and citizen journalists. It asks why Instagram is so important to journalists and what happens now that journalists 'officially' cannot use it anymore to share their work. It is founded upon data gathered from an autoethnographic study of a journalist working at the University of Calgary's student-run publication, *The Gauntlet*, and draws on previous literature to establish and challenge theoretical frameworks around journalism in a digital age and how notions of traditionalism can be contested.

Social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook were created to bring people together and create community, and until this summer, they were conduits of information-sharing in terms of news and creating awareness about various issues. For publications, these platforms provided a means to engage with audiences and to humanize the newspaper itself. In doing so, it made the journalists' interactions with their audience very passive as their personal social media accounts were not prioritized. Since the changes implemented by Meta took away news accounts' ability to post, the process of engaging with audiences and presenting information changed and became more journalist-oriented. Their participation and personal engagement with the platform became more active as they had to brand themselves to present their news. Using a personal account to share news brings a new definition to the idea of a journalist's professional identity. Bill C-18 introduced by the Canadian government put pressure on media conglomerates like Meta and Google to pay news sources for their work on the platforms; instead of complying, these companies decided to take news off their platforms entirely. Since then, the role of journalists has gone beyond the newsroom. Preliminary observations show that their online engagement has increased because they are under pressure to use their personal accounts to share news media. The study behind this guide intends to examine how practices have changed in digital student journalism after Instagram's policy change prohibiting news sharing on their platform.

The study is centered around my position at *The Gauntlet*'s Editorial Board and my Instagram account where the news-sharing practices were documented in a journal and supplemented with screenshots provided from my account. Documenting my online practices from when the summer ended allowed me to explore common themes around humour being used

as a tool to draw attention and examine loopholes in policy changes that I could use to my advantage.

Literature Review

Social networks force news media to adapt to their "logic" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 11), which includes the strategies and economics that direct the platforms' dynamics and affordances. van Dijck and Poell's (2013) conceptualization of social media platforms acknowledges how "every major institution is part and parcel of this transformation by a revamped media logic" (p.11) and their notion creates a foundation upon which we can study journalists' social media. Bossio (2023) studied image-focused social media and how journalists present themselves on a platform like Instagram, where they found that "creating an engaged community of followers on Instagram was a way to combine professional labour with personal enjoyment" (p. 1785) for journalists. They found that some journalists felt a unique sense of community that was not available on other platforms and even felt safer on Instagram (Bossio, 2023). The unique visual affordances of Instagram, including the ability to see 'behind the scenes' assist in humanizing journalists. However, these affordances can also introduce issues in the examination of online. Interviewing their sampled journalists, Bossio (2023) found that this personal branding on a journalist's Instagram can bring a sense of engagement to a personalized audience that can be used to share work. Beyond that, the sharing of this 'behind the scenes' content such as work ethics, day-to-day life, and aesthetic images is used to build a sense of micro-celebrity. Micro-celebrities commodify their unique online personas and promote an aesthetic to a garnered audience (Bossio, 2023). This study focused on what is being posted by journalists, leaving me with the opportunity to continue the investigation and examine how personalized branding strategies on platforms can influence forms of resistance in light of news-sharing policy changes. I also aim to acknowledge how personal business accounts are being used for similar purposes now. Instead of trying to be influencers, journalists are using their accounts as an extension of the news outlet.

One of the main challenges of studying journalistic practices on social media is that the professions' conceptual boundaries are increasingly blurred. Brems et al. (2017) studied personal branding on Twitter, choosing the platform for its "public and interactive features" (p. 444), finding that journalists are loyal to their news outlet and their identity on the platform revolved

around their colleagues' work (p. 456). Although focused on Twitter, the study provides a foundation upon which the study of practices of personal branding can be expanded.

Brems et al. (2017, p. 444) use Goffman's (1959) metaphor of roles to conceptualize journalists as performers on a stage, where the stage is the platform (p. 444). They highlight that the location of where the conversation takes place and the people at the other end of communication are very important to the context of the metaphor. He differentiates between a front stage and a backstage - the front is visible to the audience where the performer presents and, in the back, actions that are not supposed to be seen are exposed. Using a similar framework to Brems et al. (2017), we can establish the Instagram profile of a journalist as the front stage where they 'perform' by posting for their audience. These are posts that have been 'built and shaped,' effectively establishing their content as a 'performance' for their audience.

On TikTok, the boundaries between a journalist and an influencer continue to blur as observed by Negreria-Rey et al. (2022) in their study about journalistic performance on the platform. They observed that journalists often apply journalistic values to the platform and become influencers to "connect with the younger generations" (Negreria-Rey et al, 2022, p. 153). Their study focused on TikTok as they believed it to be "different from other social networks because of its main audience, language, and logic" (p. 152). They used Mellado & Hermida's (2021) study that defined journalistic performances on social media into three categories: The Promoter, The Celebrity, and The Joker; the three roles assume different positions on social media and how they share their content. The Promoter uses professional branding and promotion tactics, whereas The Celebrity uses their fame and branded hashtags for event exposure, and the Joker uses self-deprecation, deliberate jokes, and ridicule rhetoric to characterize themself (Mellado & Hermida, 2021, p. 4). Using Mellado & Hermdia's (2021) conceptualization of the roles and Goffman's (1959) *The Presentation of Self In Everday Life,* I obtained the theoretical concepts that will structure the project. The studies using TikTok and Twitter as platforms of journalistic branding form a framework around social media practices as I include the discussion of Instagram as a platform for self-branding.

Since the studies on the uses of social media by journalists largely focus on brand building and personal identity, my study aims to fill the gaps regarding uses and negotiations between platforms and news producers. My work will also build a foundation for expanding on the uses from a production and journalist perspective.

Sharing News Content on Instagram After Bill C-18

Over around a month from October 17th to November 24th, I documented my news-sharing practices on my personal Instagram account. Before I started the study, I examined how news publication accounts on Instagram were blocked, and I explored what I could do on the platform to find any loopholes in the policy changes. As I will soon describe, I documented the entire experience.

I initially found that anything I shared on my story from a news source would not be visible to my audience, however, sharing posts from Threads was possible. As a result, the official *Gauntlet* account moved to other platforms while my personal account on Instagram remained an outlet to repost content shared from *The Gauntlet*. Figure 1 shows how our social media team employed humour to attract viewership onto different platforms and as I noted, "the effort went in vain" since we could not bring much attention to either X (formerly Twitter) or Threads (Singh, 2023, Journal Entry 1).

Figure 1

A screenshot of a Threads post being shared on Instagram stories.
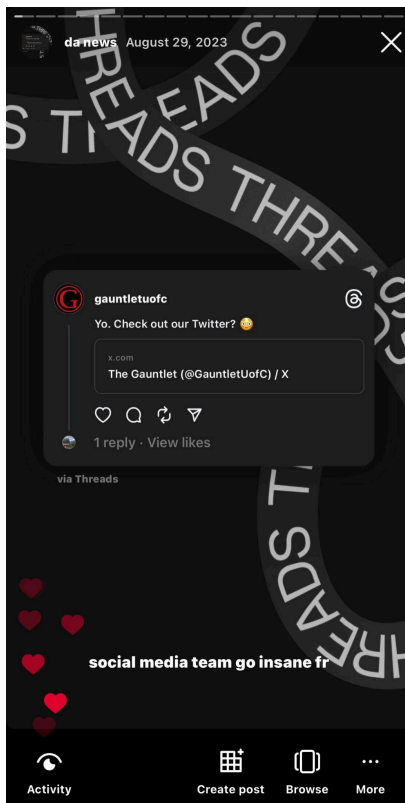
While we kept our Threads account active alongside X and TikTok, I tried something new. I observed how Instagram does not block content if it is a screenshot from the news website or a photo, I noted that "maybe it's because they can't analyze content that way or could be that they aren't bothered" (Singh, 2023, Journal Entry 1), giving me my first insight into how unfinished and even 'rushed' the policy change was. A few days after I started sharing screenshots of articles from *The Gauntlet* website on my story (Figure 2), I had to limit my personal comments on the screenshots as I believed my engagement with the content would reflect badly upon the notion of "objectivity" and make the content seem "somewhat ironic" (Singh, 2023, Journal Entry 2).

Figure 2

Screenshot of a news article on an Instagram story from The Gauntlet *website that includes minimal personal voice.*
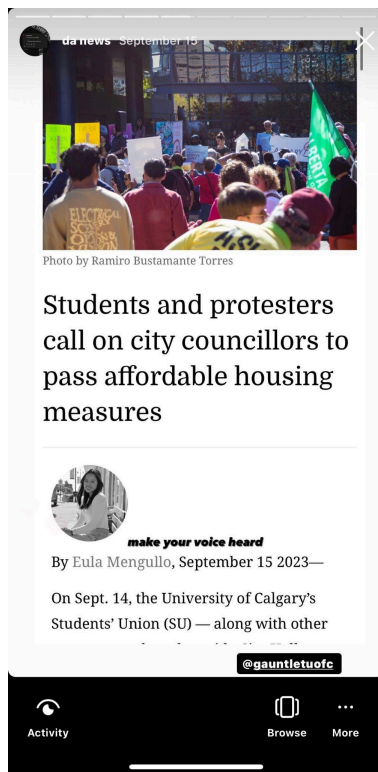
Anderson and Schudson (2022) make note of how professionalism in journalism is heavily equated with being 'objective' when such a notion is contested. As a result of this arbitrary emphasis on 'objectivity,' I had a great deal of anxiety when including my voice in the article. Soon, the question of 'what is objective' started arising in my mind and I came to terms

with the fact that journalism has transformed: "It [journalism] is not supposed to be separated from social reality" (Singh, 2023, Journal Entry 2). I realized that employing my voice in these stories might allow me to garner more attention. Going forward, I started picking and choosing the articles that would be shared in my story seeing where I could include personal anecdotes, and I found myself leaning towards introducing my humour into the stories to see if they would pull more attention towards the news content. Mellado & Hermida (2021) established roles that journalists employ in their social media performance that I started observing in my online presentation. I employed my humour: what started as "this is where your money goes!!!" (Figure 3) turned into a whole paragraph presenting the newspaper like an advertisement (Figure 4), I assumed the traits of "The Joker" with a rhetoric of ridicule, and deliberate jokes (Mellado & Hermida, 2021, pp. 6-7) that I used to engage with my audience.

Figure 3

Screenshot of an Instagram story that includes a humorous anecdote and a call to action link to follow
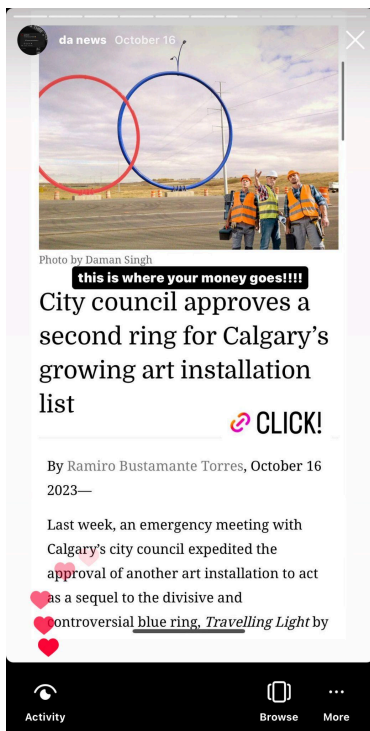

Figure 4

Screenshot of an Instagram story that is a photo of a newsstand with an advertisement-like text.

Incorporating humour also brought more engagement in the form of likes on my story. Figure 3 shows the first time I was able to share links to my story, the first loophole I found to bypass Instagram's policy changes. I realized I could bypass the ban on sharing links to news articles by using a URL shortener. Figure 5 shows what I would originally see while trying to include a link in my story. This loophole I found "showed how rushed Instagram's policy was and how easy it is to bypass it" (Singh, 2023, Journal Entry 3). In doing so, I observed Nelson & Ganter's (2022) notion of platform power. Some local publishers cannot use the opportunities that Bill C-18 presents, and suffer due to the policy changes because of an increasing reliance on platforms: "local isn't valuable anymore" (p. 162). I could work freely despite the bans given my experience with social media platforms, but the thought of using a URL shortener came from years of using platforms like Instagram and Facebook. This solution may not be as obvious to others.

Figure 5

Screenshot of Instagram blocking a news link being put in a story
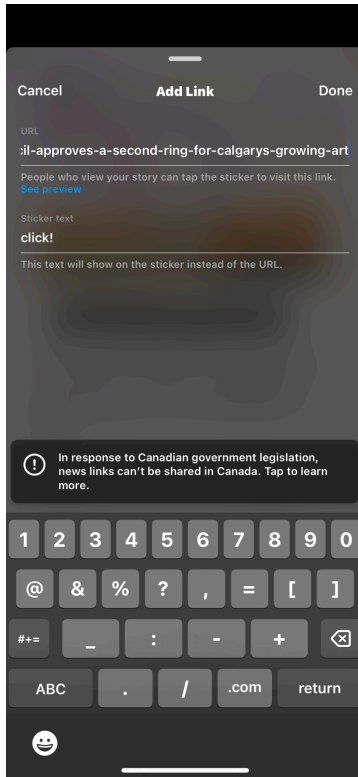
The study also provided insight into how journalism has transformed. Journalism is not just a privileged, elite newsroom anymore. In my case, it is active engagement with my content and putting my face out there to get people to read *The Gauntlet* because we do not have an alternative outlet to do so. Even though I found loopholes to work around, "my identity is blurred with my professional identity" (Singh, 2023, Journal Entry 4), and this obscurity changes the way I interact with my account now. Where once I would post without thinking anything, now every time I share something I have to keep in consideration that my publication is directly attached to me.

Final Notes & Conclusion

Before we go into the guide, I would first like to acknowledge that the study was fairly limited given time constraints and the sample was only one journalist in a local student publication. Despite the limited sample, the study still allowed for an expansion of journalism studies in a world where social media is a completely new challenge. My study works to dilute fearmongering around the notion of journalism and Instagram. There is fear around the reliance of student journalists on social media platforms, and since the content-sharing ban dictates what is permitted and what is not on Meta platforms. This study also focused on local student

journalism which often gets neglected in the dialogue between governments and legacy media, who will eventually benefit from this policy change.

Now finally, *A Dummy's Guide to Using Instagram Like a REAL Journalist* is not finished, but it will grow. It is a step in the right direction in learning how to incorporate humour and resistance into the use of these platforms that hold too much power. Making the guide on Instagram is a deliberate choice to foment resistance.

I hope you find this guide both helpful and laughably ironic: [A Dummy's Guide to Using Instagram Like a REAL Journalist](#)

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