

Essay

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Content creation

A new phase of journalism?

Abstract: Conventional providers of news and journalism have now been joined by a new group of actors, known by terms like ›influencer‹ and ›content creator.‹ While the job description ›content creator‹ usually describes professions from the world of content marketing, some successful content creators also adhere to journalistic standards and are received accordingly. This essay uses games journalism as an example to present a model for the way a segment of journalistic functions, such as communicating knowledge and providing information that allows people to form their own opinions, is shifting onto new actors and channels.

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A small company from the Allgäu region of Germany recently published an advertisement on LinkedIn for a vacancy as a content creator. But what does someone with this job title actually do? According to the advert, the person is responsible for »providing content in line with our marketing goals« and for »visualizing and planning content that reflects the brand style and corporate values« (CONTENT CREATOR 2022). So far, so clear – the job profile is all about marketing. Ten or fifteen years ago, it might have been called ›PR editor.‹ The requirements asked for in the advert, however, are more interesting:

- »You have a degree in a creative field and/or enjoy writing, photography and filming
- You have basic technical understanding and experience of a production environment
- You are curious about innovative product technologies

- You speak German and English well, and are a team player with good communication skills«

The salary is not mentioned, but the advert does make the statement: »We have a ›Chief Happiness Officer.««

Private institutions offer relevant courses and degree programs. At the SAE Institute, students can study content such as storytelling, visual language and social media in the faculty of »Content Creation & Online Marketing.« Their requirements for the job profile are »professional networking, multimedia competence and, of course, journalistic expertise« (SAE INSTITUTE 2022).

The job profile is part of the field of content marketing – a field that by definition is based on journalism and its tools, but is subordinate to marketing objectives (cf. FRÜHBRODT 2016).

Is content creation journalism?

The distinction is not so easy to make in practice. The latest user research in communication sciences confirms the private findings of the author, who regularly presents her students with examples from both fields: These students, and people in general, are essentially able to differentiate between journalistic content and marketing-led content, but this ability needs to be honed and trained. ›Content‹ is often more attractive to a young audience than journalistic output.

When asked specifically, young adults are certainly aware and conscious of the differences. The question of the extent to which the content creators' social media channels can be considered journalism regularly leads to intensive discussions in seminars: What is journalism?

Leonie Wunderlich and Sascha Hölig from the Hans Bredow Institute have examined the ›new‹ actors in the journalistic field. They describe the subject objectively: »With the establishment of social network platforms as a source of information, conventional providers of news and journalism have been joined by a large number of private individuals and non-professional communicators who spread their content via their accounts« (WUNDERLICH/HÖLIG 2022: 12). The authors also use the term ›content creation‹ to describe this phenomenon: »These providers and actors are referred to hereinafter as ›social media content creators‹ (SMCCs). This appears appropriate particularly with regard to journalism in social media, as the term ›influencer‹ implies influencing the users in a targeted way« (WUNDERLICH/HÖLIG 2022: 13).

The good news from the study is that young people (aged 14-17 years) and young adults (aged 18-24 years) are aware of the economic conditions under which SMCCs work. Furthermore, they certainly differentiate between people who focus primarily on beauty, fashion, lifestyle, and fitness (›real, real

influencers« and those like Tilo Jung, Ole Nymoen, and Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim, whose content they use to gain information (WUNDERLICH/HÖLIG 2022: 20).

This audience of young people states that »knowledge and information« play a key role as a reason to use social media, alongside »entertainment and fun,« »social closeness and insight,« »inspiration and motivation,« and »orientation and values.« The study's authors then took a closer look at the young people's relationship with journalism. They found »that journalism and journalistic providers and actors are granted a special position in the sense that they are associated with certain evaluations and expectations that are also applied as criteria to differentiate them from other social media content creators« (WUNDERLICH/HÖLIG 2022: 33).

These expectations include impartiality and objectivity, especially showing »no personal opinion« (WUNDERLICH/HÖLIG 2022: 35). In connection with this, the young people surveyed classify the SMCCs in a sophisticated way by function, for example those that help them form their own opinion.

Games journalism as an example

Surprisingly, none of the young people in Leonie Wunderlich's survey mentioned the topic of games and the associated actors on social media platforms. It is impossible to say whether this is due to the choice of interviewees or the way in which the question was asked.

Yet games journalism or »computer game journalism« (WIKIPEDIA AUTHORS 2021) can serve as an example of a classic special interest topic whose forms, formats, and channels can represent a model for the shift of journalistic functions to new actors and channels.

Sociodemographic data shows why the field of video and computer games is such a useful example: More than 37 million people in Germany aged 16 years and over play computer games regularly, with the players relatively evenly divided between women and men. A lot of gamers are more than 50 years old; 11 percent are over 60 (cf. STATISTA 2022b). Sales of computer and video games and games hardware were worth around EUR 4.4 billion in Germany in 2018 (cf. HOOFFACKER/BIGL 2020). Another argument is that the games journalism audience has an above-average affinity with IT, making them likely to be among the first to apply future developments to their usage behavior.

Games journalism has its roots in tech journalism, but today is a classic special interest topic (cf. HOOFFACKER 2012). With the advent of home computers in the 1980s, numerous magazines emerged aimed at a lay audience interested in computers. Following their heyday in the 1990s, both the number of print titles and their print runs continued to fall until 2015 (cf. KOHLICK 2016).

Games have now entered the mass media. Journalistic pieces on the topic can be found in sections as diverse as business (economic significance of the games sector), culture (pop culture classification of games as a mass phenomenon), sport (professional e-sports), politics (significance of a particular region as a games location), technology (growing demands on hardware, software, and internet connection), and, of course, media (reviews, game tips) (cf. HOOFFACKER/KOHLICK 2023, not yet published).

With its stars, the »let's play« format achieves access figures on social media platforms like YouTube and Twitch that even established online platforms of conventional media can only dream of. The lists of the most successful channels are all topped by content creators from the gaming sector. Gronkh, for example, has around 4.89 million subscribers to his YouTube channel (STATISTA 2022a). The 2022 ranking of German Twitch streamers was led by MontanaBlack88 with around 4.7 million followers, followed by Trymacs with 3.15 million followers, and TheRealKnossi with 2.06 million followers (TWITCHMETRICS 2022). The »let's play« format has long been the subject of research in communication sciences. The book *Phänomen Let's play-Video*, published by Judith Ackermann (2017), is also fundamental to user research.

Games journalist Robert Kohlick, who today runs the news desk at *spieletipps.de*, wrote his bachelor's thesis on the shift in computer game journalism from print to online (cf. KOHLICK 2016). He found that the online sector had grown more and more, in parallel to the dramatic fall in print runs. Yet this trend, too, had begun to slow even during the period of the study.

The sales figures for the period 2007 to 2015 show a significant drop in sales on average across all the selected magazines. The biggest fall over the nine years, in both absolute and percentage terms, was suffered by *Computer BILD Spiele*, which sold just under 291,000 fewer copies in 2015 than in 2007 – a fall of 81.25%.

Sales at shops and kiosks have suffered particularly dramatic falls since then. Although the absolute number of subscriptions also continues to fall, it is not dropping anywhere near as quickly as the total sales figures. This phenomenon is seen across the magazine sector. As a result, subscriptions make up an ever-increasing percentage of total sales and are thus becoming ever more important.

However, the number of subscriptions also fell for all magazines within the selected period. Just as in the overall sales figures, *PC Games* and *Computer BILD Spiele* suffered most, with both magazines losing around 60% of their subscribers over the nine years. *Computer BILD Spiele* then ceased publishing.

Stagnation and decrease in online reach, too

According to its own figures, the main GameStar site had more than four million unique users per month in 2015. Those interested gained free access to news and tests related to gaming. Today, GameStar keeps its test reports behind a paywall (GameStar Plus). The operating company no longer publishes online access figures individually, but merely across all five portals together. The figure for June 2022 was 4.82 million unique users according to agof (cf. HOOFFACKER/KOHLICK 2023, not yet published).

The IVW's data for the period 2007-2014 was used as the basis for estimating how the reach of the selected magazines' online portals developed. All the magazines saw an average annual rise in visits up to 2012 or 2010 (GamePro). While the ratio of page impressions (PI) and visits varies between the magazines, the average values for all magazines do show a pattern. In 2007, the average is still 5.69 page impressions per visit. The year after, this average rises to 6.32. In the years that follow that, the value falls to 6.04 by 2011, but remains relatively constant.

From that time, however, the value falls significantly until 2014. Even in 2012, the figure is only 5.34 page impressions per visit, followed by just 4.81 in 2013 and 4.34 in 2014. It is a clear and rapid drop.

Users appear to access fewer subpages each time they visit the website. More and more people are accessing the site via search engines or news aggregators and then leaving it again quickly – the complete opposite of regular readers who generate many more PIs per visit.

All in all, the comparison between print and online clearly shows that the magazines' range continues to shrink, while that of the websites continues to rise. Yet here, too, it is clear that the increase in range becomes smaller and smaller from 2012, before turning into a decrease in 2014. Despite this, the increase in range of the online segment exceeds the loss of range of the magazines significantly, both in percentage terms and in absolute figures.

»It looks a little as though the future of games journalism lies with YouTubers, influencers and content creators on Instagram, TikTok and Twitch« (HOOFFACKER/KOHLICK 2023, not yet published).

Games journalism as a model?

Why does the author believe that games journalism is suitable as a model for the way actors and channels shift in journalism? Games journalism began in the conventional print sector, before the internet became significant as a medium. Its heyday was the 1990s, when the advertising markets in the sector exploded. The fall in print runs and sales figures for conventional computer magazines began

in around 2007, accompanied initially by an increase in access figures online. Yet this development, too, stagnated as early as 2012 – at just the same time as the topic became dramatically more relevant.

Although more people are playing computer games than ever before, conventional games journalism has become a niche product once again. In contrast, social media content creators are a mass phenomenon for which monetarization is working.

What hypotheses could emerge from this for a model of the development of journalism – as bold as this may be? In the author's view, the following distinct phases can be observed (cf. Fig. 1):

The rise of print journalism begins as a niche market where advertising revenue is secured from a growth market. While the topic develops into a mass phenomenon, however, the advertising markets begin to disappear due to the shift to online platforms.

First, the print ranges and print runs fall, while online advertising revenue rises. But this development and the increasing importance of subscriptions are not able to compensate for the drop in revenue.

The editorial offices try to counteract the fall by using audiovisual forms such as podcasts and live streams – but they are unable to match the success and the revenue of the new actors. The advertising market has shifted to influencers and SMCC.

To qualify this, it is important to note that games journalism is a topic trend in the special interest segment. The findings could best be transferred to other special interest topics, such as the popular rural living craze (the key example is the rise and fall of the magazine *Landlust* – shift of the use value-oriented topic to platforms like YouTube or Pinterest). Despite this, a thought experiment does not hurt here: What if the special interest field of games journalism in nuce describes a possible path for local journalism, for example?

One can only speculate on how the story continues, how long the content creation boom will last, and what might come next.

»For journalism, it raises the question of what we can learn from the success of social media content and how we can better serve the usage motivation of young people and young adults with our own services.« Meinolf Ellers is quoted as saying on the website of the Hans Bredow Institute, about the Wunderlich and Hölzig study quoted above (HANS BREDOW INSTITUTE 2022). One goal of the overall project, he continues, is to work with media partners to design options for collaboration between influencers and editorial offices and test these in pilot projects – something that is done regularly at *funk*, the website from ARD and ZDF, for example.

Figure 1
Shifts of actors and channels occurring in journalism



Source: Own illustration

Which functions of conventional journalism can be adopted by which variety of social media content creators, and which cannot? The obvious functions verifiably include communicating knowledge and providing information for people to form their own opinions. The study by Wunderlich and Hölzig provides starting points for this from user research. But there is still no answer to the fundamental question.

About the author

Gabriele Hooffacker, Prof. Dr. phil., (*1959), is co-editor of *Journalistik* and teaches at HTWK in Leipzig in the field of »media-compatible content preparation.« During her career as a professional journalist in the 1990s, she wrote for computer magazines such as *Happy Computer*, *Computer Welt*, *Chip*, and *c't*. Gabriele Hooffacker edits the textbook series »Journalistische Praxis,« founded by Walther von La Roche (1936-2010) and published by Springer vs, and the »Leipziger Beiträge zur Computerspielekultur« series. She is a judge for the Alternative Media Prize.

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