

## Debate

Nora Hespers

# All twittered out

What @ichbinsophiescholl tells us about platform criticism in journalism

**Abstract:** Journalists and media houses use a wide range of social media platforms to reach their audience. Yet this use is rarely subject to critical examination. The downfall of Twitter, now X, is the ideal opportunity to take a critical look at the structures and economic conditions behind these networks. But still there is no great debate – just as there wasn't in the case of the Instagram project @ichbinsophiescholl. Does journalism lack expertise in social media?

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Martina Thiele and Tanja Thomas' analysis of the Instagram project @ichbinsophiescholl, run by SWR and BR, found a great deal of PR journalism and very little critical reflection (cf. THIELE/THOMAS 2023). That revealed a deficit that is seen throughout digital journalism. Media criticism in Germany is already very limited, and interest in platform criticism is even lower. What are we journalists actually using to reach our audience? How do social networks change and develop depending on who has the power at the company in question?

Every one of us is currently witnessing first-hand the development of a social network into a dystopian juggernaut. Social networks have never been a ›safe space‹ – it does not take much to trigger a furor on a national or even international scale within just a few hours. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine in particular have seen yet another increase in hate and harassment on social media (cf. HOVEN 2022) – not just in the German-speaking world, but internationally. In a paper published in January 2023, the UN refers to

hate speech as a growing international threat (cf. UN 2023). Yet threats on and via social media are rarely taken seriously – or seriously enough. This was demonstrated with tragic consequences by the case of doctor Lisa-Maria Kellermayr (cf. VICHTL 2023), who took her own life after being on the receiving end of massive hostility and threats. Although multiple suspects were investigated, there was no trial and no conviction. Apparently it was impossible to prove the crimes beyond reasonable doubt (cf. TILLACK 2023).

That is the dark side of social media. At the same time, Twitter – now renamed X – in particular has created enormous connection between people in recent years. People from the worlds of science, media, and politics create a public sphere, making themselves visible, approachable, but also vulnerable to attack. Communicating in a multi-faceted public sphere takes specific skills. After all, it faces an individual with a potential audience of millions, all of whom can join in the discussion. Having an enormous reach, but without the financial and time resources with which to provide communication services, is undoubtedly a dilemma.

Of course, this is not news. But it clearly demonstrates once again how important it is to moderate exchanges on social media well. Otherwise, discussions get out of hand and a furor becomes almost impossible to manage. Useful, evidence-driven debates become impossible. That brings us to what has happened with a certain platform after Elon Musk took it over on October 28, 2022 (cf. *Spiegel* 2022). Anyone who took even a passing interest in Elon Musk's actions at Tesla in the months and years leading up to his takeover of Twitter will rightly be concerned. Yet reporting on the Twitter case remained largely at the level of phenomenon reporting – chronologies of a catastrophe without deeper analysis of the causes, almost as though it were a soccer game. Dennis Horn and Gavin Karlmeier were the only journalists to give the takeover the attention it deserved from the very start in their daily podcast *Haken dran*. You could call it platform analysis as a kind of volunteering. All other media focused on reporting on isolated aspects, making it difficult to understand the overall development as a whole. As a result, it is impossible to have or gain an awareness of the effects of the technical – especially in terms of the algorithm – and economic changes to the platform. The most common argument used? ›Not many people are on Twitter anyway.‹ So it is strange that so few journalistic media today publish articles that do not include tweets. Things that are published on Twitter – and on which journalists gather information – do appear to be relevant after all. Yet, apart from *Haken dran*, there is a complete lack of systematic and transparent consideration and reflection by media and media representatives themselves in connection with the use of this and other platforms; of a large-scale discussion of when which platforms can be used in a useful way – besides their promise of reaching a large audience in the relevant target groups; and of with whom one is actually getting into bed by continuing to play the platform's game.

Perhaps we should provide a few examples. Elon Musk regularly tweets anti-Semitic content that reflects conspiracy theories. By the time the *New York Times* accused the entrepreneur of crossing a red line on September 11, 2023, this line had already been far crossed (cf. WALSH 2023), again and again, long before. Under Elon Musk, users who had previously been barred from the platform for hate speech, racism, far-right statements, or anti-Semitism were reinstated. Many of the content moderators responsible for removing discriminatory and violent content were fired under Musk, and similar contracts with contractors ended. The platform thus has no interest in protecting vulnerable groups and minorities.<sup>11</sup> Nor is the platform now secure at a technical level (cf. DAN 2023). For example, users who had limited the visibility of their profiles to hand-picked followers suddenly found that their tweets were publicly visible. In *Forbes magazine*, a security expert warned users to delete private messages in order to prevent data leaks after numerous software developers were fired (cf. COLLINS 2022). While many people have left the platform and looked for alternatives, most media have continued as though nothing about the platform's relevance and content had changed – even when it became possible to purchase the blue tick (to show that the profile had been verified as authentically belonging to a famous personality from sports, politics or the media), negating its original significance. After all, there is not really an alternative to Twitter/X. And the other dilemma: There is not even a public discussion. Discussion is reserved for a small, critical section of society, as though the media were not responsible for how social networks are used.

What does all this have to do with criticism of the @ichbinsophiescholl project? Both cases are about journalistic skill and expertise – and about the difference between project PR and descriptions of phenomena on the one hand, and critical journalistic classification and contextualization on the other. Comprehensive insight into a social network like Instagram and projects like @ichbinsophiescholl takes expertise that does not appear to be widespread and, where it does exist, appears unappreciated. After all, although the detailed, objective, and well-informed criticism of the @ichbinsophiescholl project across various levels of communication and interaction ultimately received a great deal of praise, the work was largely a hobby project – just as *Haken dran* was journalistic voluntary work until the completion of this essay.<sup>12</sup> Competent, critical, complex appraisal of platforms and the content published on them demands social media experts: people who are able to understand, analyze, and dissect a public service project like »Sophie Scholl on Instagram« or a micro-blogging service like Twitter/X

1 This article was written before the Hamas massacre of Jews on October 7 and 8, 2023. A contextualization of the role of social networks in the dissemination of videos of terror can be found here: HÜBSCHER, MONIKA: Krieg der Bilder. In: *taz.de* dated 19. October 2023. <https://taz.de/Nahost-Konflikt/15963808/> (date of last retrieval 1 November 2023)

2 The podcast temporarily ceased broadcasting on September 29, 2023, with the departure of host Dennis Horn.

in all their complexity because they have been aware of certain regularities and developments over an extended period. It is important to critique content and report on developments as they occur, but this kind of journalism is often insufficient if it does not also look at structures. And if established media with a large reach do not provide space for this criticism of social media phenomena and the platforms of large tech corporations, then criticism and discussion remain the realm of a small, selected audience. This is not the way to encourage large debates across society.

### The invisible work in the background

That brings us to the work involved in this form of media and platform criticism. After all, in order to gain expertise, people need to actively use the relevant platforms. This work is very rarely paid. It is ongoing, voluntary, unpaid training that can only be turned into capital if it gives rise to products with a large reach, i.e., posts that are shared or quoted by a lot of people – when the regularities of the platforms are used in the way demanded by the platforms' current, constantly changing rules. Among journalists in particular, there is a significant gradient between media representatives who create content for publishing houses' or broadcasters' own platforms and those who use social media to distribute their own content and to discuss it in the communities they themselves have created. This gap is seen not only between older and younger media representatives, but also between those in fixed employment and freelancers. After all, freelance journalists in particular have to rely on communication and community work. Their reach is then used by media providers, usually without appropriate payment, even though their explicit goal is for this work to pay into their medium's own reach. No additional resources, like time and therefore money, are provided for this community-building and the reach it produces.

In order to look at the content of @ichbinsophiescholl, various female authors – Charlotte Jahnz, Heike Gumz, and Katharina Helling, who initiated the Instagram channel »Nicht Sophie Scholl,«<sup>[3]</sup> historians Bianca Walther with »frauenvondamals« and Laura Baumgart with »frauabgeordnete,« and journalist Jasmin Lörchner with the podcast *HerStory*<sup>[4]</sup> – continuously received the content on the Instagram channel @ichbinsophiescholl, posted several times a day by SWR and BR, and commented on it to provide context and critique. This

3 The project was nominated for the Grimme Online Award in 2022.

4 In reaction to the account, the latter three began a Twitter thread under the hashtag #frauenimwiderstand [women in the resistance], in which they published 60 brief biographies and sources on cis women and LGBTQ+ in the resistance against National Socialism over around 60 days between June 2021 and July 2021. In order to retain the biographies for the long term, the Instagram account @frauenimwiderstand was also set up.

meant investing resources into researching sources, into formulating criticism objectively, and into exchange with the community, the editorial office and SWR's community management. All these contextualizing comments and the author of this text's expertise from many years as a social media and community manager form the basis for the three articles that were ultimately published under a single name on *uebermedien.de*. Acknowledging joint work like this appropriately is of course a challenge. And it is not the fault of *Übermedien*. The articles themselves were paid for very appropriately. But, given the wide range of resources and work that went into them, it feels wrong for only one person to receive payment – which is why all payments were donated to charity.

This demonstrates another structural problem in journalism: *Übermedien* was not the only medium to offer media-critical consideration and analysis – but it was the only journalistic medium to understand the significance of the criticism of @ichbinsophiescholl and to provide space for it. Of course the comprehensive criticism of the @ichbinsophiescholl Instagram project and its complexity cannot be summarized in two-and-a-half minutes. Longer formats would have been needed. But high-quality media with large reaches did not see the importance, and certainly not the hard work, that went into the well-founded criticism – because the media took only a very superficial look at the project.

What is the relevance of ›women's issues?‹

This brings us to another question: Why was so little relevance ascribed to the project? In their paper ›Really?! Sophie Scholl on Instagram,‹ the authors find that most of the people who had written about the project were read by women, and most were relatively young. It is possible, the authors say, that many were interns or freelancers (THIELE/THOMAS 2023: 22). Is this evidence of a gender bias? A history project for young women – how important can that be? How challenging? Especially if it is ›only‹ on social media. Journalists still have reservations about the relevance and quality of social media content. The prejudice that its content tends to be shallow, under-complex, and of low quality and importance results in it being perceived and discussed less. It is a vicious cycle.

And if anyone is about to object that some big names did write about @ichbinsophiescholl and express their criticism: This is true, but their content focused on other areas. It was rare, say Thiele and Thomas (2023: 23), for it to be examined at the level of communication and interaction, let alone placed in the context of media politics and media economics.

I also want to mention the following: Among all the critics on Instagram itself, it was predominantly the women who provided context and additional information, sometimes on a daily basis. It was they who formed the basis for criticism,

but whose work remains largely invisible to this day. Ultimately, this is another example of unpaid care work.

It was only once Jan Böhmermann looked at the @ichbinsophiescholl project on his program *ZDF Magazin Royale*<sup>5</sup> that it became the subject of criticism. Yet the articles on the program and the discussions in social media rarely mentioned the work of the journalists and historians named. Hardly any of the female critics was invited to an interview; instead, renowned male historians were asked to provide context.

Journalism thus has some questions to answer: Which structures are necessary – not least in view of the increasing use of AI to create social media content – in order to react more appropriately to developments like in the case of Twitter or projects like @ichbinsophiescholl in future? Why was, as Thiele and Thomas found, the reporting on »Sophie Scholl on Instagram« more PR than journalism? Was it really mostly young women with no fixed contract who wrote about the project and, if so, why? Why do so many editorial offices ascribe so little relevance to these topics, even though they achieve an impressive reach? Where is the kind of large-scale, broad-based platform discussion that we need to hold, not least since the Twitter disaster? Why are there these gaps between journalism on publishing houses' and broadcasters' own pages and that which they publish on social media platforms and channels? Where is the discussion of dependencies on entrepreneurs, commercially-operated reach algorithms, their influence on content creation on social media, and, last but not least, users' data security? After all, the data linked to the content and topics on commercial platforms is largely used to generate profit via personalized advertising. Or via political propaganda, fake news, and hate speech. What role do media and media representatives want to play on these commercial platforms? Where are the famous red lines, at which we say: We can no longer accept this if we take democracy and human rights seriously? After all, only these values can guarantee us free, independent, and diverse journalism – on any platform. Finally, we need further research on gender bias and the lack of diversity in journalism, and on the way money, time, and attention are distributed.

## About the author

**Nora Hespers** (1978) has worked predominantly for public service broadcasters in various roles since 2003. For eleven years, she worked with the TV format *Zeiglers wunderbare Welt des Fußballs* as a content producer and community manager

5 The program also benefited significantly from the work conducted by the aforementioned media critics in advance, as the sources named in the closing credits showed.

on social media. Since 2014, she has blogged and presented podcasts under the name *Die Anachronistin*, among others. The project was nominated for the Grimme Online Award in 2018, just like her philosophy podcast *Was denkst du denn?*, which she has produced since 2017 together with philosopher Rita Molzberger. Hespers has presented the WDR sport background podcast *Sport inside* since 2020. Contact: [norahespers@web.de](mailto:norahespers@web.de)

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