

Essay

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Your vibe – new standard or hype?

Journalistic credibility in the digital public sphere

Abstract: This essay analyses the shift in how journalists construct and present credibility in the context of social media. It begins with the observation that journalistic authenticity is increasingly shifting away from institutionally underpinned credibility towards personalised, emotionally driven forms, described in platform jargon as ›vibe‹. The essay situates this development within a media-historical continuum stretching from the printing press through traditional mass media to digital platforms. It demonstrates that with every media innovation, the criteria of credibility and the public sphere also change. Whilst traditional mass media rely on objectivity, standardisation and institutional legitimacy, personal presence, emotional resonance and algorithmically amplified visibility are gaining importance within the digital platform environment. The essay views this shift not as a rupture, but as an expression of the ongoing singularization of the public sphere in general and the mediated public sphere in particular. The interplay between platform logics and cultural change is giving rise to a form of journalism that relies more heavily on individuality and performative authenticity. Finally, it is argued that journalistic credibility must be renegotiated under these conditions, presenting an opportunity to intertwine institutional and personal forms.

Keywords: Platform journalism, journalistic quality, authenticity, credibility, social media, media transformation

Let's imagine this essay were to appear on social media (in which case it wouldn't even be a text to begin with, but never mind). And let's further assume we'd do everything in our power to succeed on the platform of our choice: a sensational opening, a credible protagonist who's personally affected, a »story,« a direct

appeal, and a healthy dose of emotion. Our opening example might best begin like this:

»Money or love: Who will take care of my children?« This is the question posed by a ZDF documentary in which Katja (one of this text's authors), who had previously remained exclusively behind the camera, appears on screen for the first time as a reporter. She had resisted this for a long time and absolutely did not want her own face to appear on screen. That is, until the aforementioned topic proposal for the investigative reporting format *ZDF-Zoom: the Global Care Chain* – mothers who leave their children with fathers or grandparents in order to travel to Western Europe to – illegally – care for children or the elderly. A key component of the program is the reporter answering a question that personally affects them, thereby drawing the audience in through a direct emotional connection. Her own presence as host is thus indispensable. And so Katja's film about mothers who leave their own children at home to care for other people's children became a personal reflection: with four children of her own at the time, she herself was urgently seeking flexible childcare that the German market did not readily provide. Katja's search became the central theme – and the filmmaker was on screen from the very first minute of the 45-minute documentary.

All of this happened 15 years ago, yet it has much in common with the way content is produced and marketed on social media today. The origins of this development lie in the era of linear television when Facebook and YouTube had just begun to turn the media – and journalistic – landscape upside down. As the names suggest: Facebook is about faces, YouTube about the »you,« that is, the creator's »I.« No wonder, then, that the reporter's »I« has only increased its relevance since then: whether in a report on gambling addiction, life as a family with (eventually five) children during the COVID-19 lockdown, or a report on a woman who wants to leave prostitution – Katja's face has been and remains an integral part of her journalistic work. And, arguably, it lends her work that quality which good journalism must constantly strive for: credibility.

The media products cited here are reflections of the time in which they were created. The material, technical, and intellectual infrastructure that we can or must use to convey a specific message significantly determines what content can be conveyed at all. Media are tied to the given circumstances, to technical resources, but also to the aesthetic and cultural habits of the era in which they were created. Or, as the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) wrote: »The medium is the message.« The medium itself shapes as well as dictates what can be communicated at a specific time, in a specific place, within a specific society, and what can be considered credible within it. On social media, this credibility often depends on what is referred to in the jargon as »vibe« – one of the many Anglicisms in the field that can be translated into other languages such as German with varying degrees of ease; »vibe« is perhaps best understood

through association with the concept of »vibration.« The »personal vibe,« the »right vibe,« the »appropriate vibe« ensures that there is a connection between the audience and the creator and that the post can hold the audience's attention beyond the first three seconds. This essay addresses the questions of how things came to this point, how quality and credibility have been and continue to be discussed in times of media transformation, and how we might deal with them today.

1. The history of media revolutions

A quick overview of history immediately reinforces McLuhan's finding: in an era when texts had to be laboriously carved into stone or inscribed on clay tablets – and once done, were set in stone – their content largely consisted of laws and accounting records designed to organize societies and secure property. When parchment was a precious commodity and the few literate people copied texts by hand, the clergy's role as intermediaries was based on transcriptions of a divine message in a sacred language that preserved the mystery for the initiated and excluded the uninitiated. Credibility back then was a matter of authority and privileged access to knowledge.

With the advent of the printing press, access to texts became increasingly more democratic. Their technically simple and cost-effective reproducibility allowed for the translation of the Holy Scriptures into national languages and, following the Protestant message, rendered the mediation of divine knowledge by priests superfluous. At the same time, space emerged for many other, more secular topics, ranging from medicine to astrology: instead of God's word carved in stone, treatises and controversies now emerged, transforming what were once fleeting local conversations into far-reaching discussions. The price of this generalization was standardization. Only a written language understandable to many – one that was just as standardized as the typefaces required for printing – made dissemination possible. The text itself thus became an independent object that encapsulated the knowledge to be conveyed. In this way, bodies of knowledge became available in a standardized and reproducible form. Knowledge was thereby increasingly detached from specific speakers, situations, and local contexts of transmission, appearing to be objective. Consequently, objectivity developed into a central ideal of credibility in modern media systems (Daston & Galison, 2024; Eisenstein, 1979; McLuhan, 1962).

However, it is now important not to confuse cause and effect in this history. The world did not become more democratic – at least for a privileged segment of the population – simply because books suddenly existed, but, as the press historian Robert Prutz (1976) wrote, because the »intellectual state of the world«

needed such an instrument to express itself: »Where a great idea seeks to come into being,« people invent the appropriate means of communication, according to Prutz (1976, p. 211).

Against this backdrop, what do social media networks reveal to us about the intellectual state of the world? What idea seeks to come to life through them in a late-modern society? Upon closer examination, it is still the old idea of democratization in a new guise and with a different focus. While the printing press initially meant that more and more people could become readers and thus an audience, the means of production used to achieve this remained in the hands of a few – and access to them depended on many factors, including the goodwill of regulatory and censorship authorities. A similar tendency toward control could also be observed among newspaper publishers, radio stations, and television broadcasters. And even today's digital media ecosystem is dominated by the Big Five – Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, and Microsoft, which undermines the idea of the internet as a democratizing force, but let's set that aside for now.

Nevertheless, even if corrupted by economic and political influence, what Bertolt Brecht (1932) once dreamed of has, at least in part, become reality: the distribution infrastructures of mass media have been supplanted by the communication apparatus of social networks; listeners have become speakers; and the isolation of the individual has given way to mediated relationships, however superficial and »parasocial« (Horton & Wohl, 1986) they may often be. And yet another prediction has come true: as per Andy Warhol drawing on a 19th-century French bon mot, anyone can become famous today, even if only for 15 minutes. In doing so, social networks are accelerating a process begun by television.

2. Media foster community (and communities)

As Benedict Anderson (2006) traces in his work »Imagined Communities«, the emergence of communities is closely linked to specific forms of media. Books and newspapers, for example, contributed significantly to the formation of nation-states by creating »community despite anonymity« (2006, p. 26). Radio, too, possesses precisely this capacity and thus became a central propaganda medium for the Nazis and other nationalist movements, which deliberately infused their political messages emphasizing the primacy of the nation into a sea of musical entertainment. With the advent of television, however, this development began to be slowly overcome. As described by Gustave Le Bon (2021 [1895], p. 14), mass society in the early twentieth century absorbed individuals into a unified crowd, fostering a sense of irresistible collective power while simultaneously eroding their sense of personal responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This configuration was gradually superseded by the capitalist consumer society, in

which individuals were increasingly interpellated not as members of a crowd but as autonomous consumers whose personal preferences and choices became the principal means of social participation.

In this form of society, television tames the population by providing vicarious experiences through entertainment. Through these incentives created by advertising, the audience is addressed not as citizens but as consumers, so that the satisfaction of personal needs replaces the will to collectively shape political reality (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947). For the Frankfurt School, late-modern capitalism thus succeeds through (pseudo-)individualization in stabilizing the political system, which until then had always had to fear the uprising of the propertyless masses. In the process, political convictions increasingly align with consumer behaviour. And this consumer behaviour is uncompromising, expects to be addressed as a coherent whole and represented in all its diversity. This development, too, is closely linked to television. In and through it, the blurring of the boundaries between the private and the public is taking shape (Scannell, 1989). For the first time, television makes major public events such as the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain¹ experientially accessible within the private confines of the home living room, while simultaneously offering, in the form of soap operas and reality TV, insights into the private daily lives of »perfectly ordinary people.«

Whereas radio addresses in the late 1920s and 1930s were still a continuation of public speech by other means, the gaze of modern news anchors is directed in a characteristic way directly at every individual in front of the screen – at »anyone-as-someone,« as the British media historian Paddy Scannell (2014, 32f.) puts it. In line with this privatization and individualization, the tone gradually shifts from distant, almost solemn, to personal and conversational, and the topics deemed newsworthy also become increasingly private (Scannell, 1989). The people in front of the screens are then no longer a mass audience, but an increasingly heterogeneous one.

The same development is also evident in the treatment and presentation of topics, as the opening example demonstrated. Following the logic of hybrid media systems characterized by Andrew Chadwick (2017), television, at the peak of its dominance as the leading medium, adopts and integrates the strategies that shape the new world of social networks: personalization, visualization, sensationalism, and infotainment. This in turn entails a changed understanding of the role of journalists: away from a form of journalism that primarily holds the powerful to account, towards an interventionist, at times even activist or entertaining approach (Hanitzsch et al., 2025).

1 The coronation was broadcast live by the BBC from Westminster Abbey on June 2, 1953, making it the first major global television event in history.

3. The limits of mass media

This tendency is curtailed by the nature of mass media: television structurally precludes interaction with the audience and proceeds on the assumption that audiences will unproblematically accept broadcast content (Luhmann, 2009, p. 11). It was only a matter of time before the audience would break out of its technologically conditioned passivity and demand the right to respond, to have a say, and to present itself on that stage, which has long since become more real than material reality.

The internet provides the infrastructure in which this longing can find an outlet, and so the first platforms flourished there early on, where »the people formerly known as the audience,« as journalism researcher and pioneer of citizen journalism Jay Rosen (2006) put it, networked with one another. The advent of MySpace, Wikipedia, YouTube meant that journalists found themselves in the same position as clergy and nobility had before them: their claims to authority and exclusive representation were relativized in the context of a media upheaval and replaced by in many respects more democratic models.

The Reformation, closely linked to the printing press, made the Holy Scriptures accessible to the people and ended the church's exclusive role as mediator between God and humanity. The political public sphere of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which expressed itself in magazines and newspapers, at least notionally, replaced the aristocracy's power based on birth with the reasoning of citizens and ultimately with parliamentary democracy (Habermas, 2015). In this context as well, people were no longer willing to leave power in the hands of a single individual or a privileged few, and instead fought for a say in decisions and a role in shaping the society in which they live.

Through social media, democratization – at least conceptually – in the sense of equal inclusion of all citizens (Habermas, 2021, p. 488) has fully taken hold in journalism, thereby merely continuing what had already begun in the age of television (Scannell, 2014, 14of.): Ever-larger segments of the population have succeeded in demanding and securing representation of their lived reality, their interests, and their identities. It is therefore only logical that diversity in newsrooms has also become a major issue (Lünenborg & Medeiros, 2021). Thus, digital platforms undermine the editorial guardianship (Habermas, 2021, p. 488) of established publishers and broadcasters, while simultaneously menacing this very development through economic concentration of power, algorithmically distorted distribution mechanisms, and libertarian idealizations. With the help of these platforms, the means of communication that previously allowed only a select few to address the public are now falling into the hands of the many. Thus, journalism – once again – faces a radical challenge: as a result of media

transformation, it must answer the question of how credibility can be established and conveyed.

4. Vibe over authority

On social media, authority backed by institutions or supported by expert knowledge is no longer enough to be considered a credible source. Although established news brands like *Tagesschau* are also successful on TikTok and other platforms, in certain contexts – and especially with target audiences like Gen Z – a post which is clearly associated with legacy media institutions may struggle to be taken seriously.

A journalist who produces social media content for public broadcasting describes this strategy as follows: »The most important thing for us is that people don't notice it's an ARD product if possible. It should look like a random TikTok video from just anyone. That's why we often don't show the *funk* logo until late in the video. As soon as people immediately recognize, »Ah, this is public broadcasting,« the authenticity is lost for many. Then it quickly seems as if someone is trying to pull off their TV thing on TikTok. But TikTok thrives on the fact that it feels like anyone can just make a video there.«

In the age of platforms, credibility has once again become a personal matter; it finds its ultimate expression in a concept that is as ubiquitous as it is mysterious: their own »vibe« mentioned in the title, situated somewhere between the irresistible charisma that sociologist Max Weber (1922/2009) already counted among the three different forms of legitimate rule, and the neoliberal marketing tool »Unique Selling Point«. The latter now applies not just to products but also to people, and so this vibe becomes operationalized and relevant to action – for example, in the selection of new »journalistic *talents*« who are to produce content for the German public-service content network *funk*. There, vibe is understood as a blend of personality and originality of media style albeit at *funk* it is always underpinned by journalistic competence. In the eyes of *funk* editors, the right combination of both determines whom Gen Z trusts.

»Having your own vibe basically implies that I [...] have something special about me. [...] Who do you still remember? [...] And the one or two people you can name are, in all likelihood, the ones who brought their own vibe to the table,« says a *funk* editor who, together with his colleagues, selects the new *talents* from hundreds of applications.

And how do the chosen ones themselves see it? Probably the same way: »In social media journalism, I'm also somehow myself – that is, me as a person – simply much more important,« admits one of the *talents*, who previously worked in traditional TV editorial routines. But this personal presence comes at

a price and requires significant effort to create. Another talent sums up how the whole thing should ultimately come across: »I hate that word, [...] but that's just how it is: authentic.«

So that's what the vibe is all about: authenticity. And what is that? For journalism, it's nothing new at all. Authenticity means genuineness, reliability, and credibility – the finest journalistic virtues and key components of the concept of trust. What is new is that this genuineness and credibility are not visibly tied to established media brands with well-established and high-quality editorial routines, but rather to »faces,« to a »you,« to a personal identity, a distinctive face that presents the journalistic content – and, when in doubt, also finds, researches, questions, and handles the follow-up communication in the comment sections. Then authenticity, which is not inherently tied to a person, forms a partnership with a face that credibly embodies and represents it. And what emerges is the vibe that has the potential to resonate with the audience.

The vibe makes the presenter credible because it makes them approachable and turns them into someone who makes mistakes and then stands by them. They naturally research from their own viewpoint and thus express very personal and specific perspectives. But unlike the old-school journalist, these people take the freedom to stand by this standpoint and make a virtue out of the necessity (felt only in journalism). So it's no wonder that content creators like Honey Balecta, aka Raphael Klein, confidently claim that these very content creators are more honest than the established media. What Klein means by this is: for those who give the impression that they always report objectively, a mistake becomes a matter of survival. But those who make it clear from the outset where they stand and that their perspective as a reporter is informed by their subjective position (Nagel, 1986; Rosen, 2010; Schultz, 2021) are less vulnerable to criticism in this regard: they reinforce that personal vibe by acknowledging their own fallibility and offering an honest »sorry, guys«.

5. Journalism in the society of singularities

These developments can be explained through the interplay of Andreas Reckwitz's concept of a »society of singularities« (2017) and Liesbet van Zoonen's concept of I-Pistemology (2012). What this brings into focus is the interplay between technological and economic change on the one hand, and a profound cultural transformation on the other, which is reshaping journalistic knowledge production, forms of representation, and standards of evaluation. Reckwitz describes the specific late-modern form that our society has taken on as one in which the particular, the unique, and the attention-grabbing are gaining increasing significance. Or, as Matthias Stolz put it back in 2014: »Liking things that are available

in vast quantities is considered to be in bad taste.« (Stolz, 2014, p. 28) Value no longer arises through standardization and generalizability, as was the case with the printing press at the dawn of the modern era, but through visibility, distinction, and emotional resonance (Reckwitz, 2017, 72f.).

For journalism, this creates a structural tension: While it traditionally functions as a producer of the general – objective, universal, and depersonalized – the currently expanding distribution channels of platform-based publics operate according to a logic of the singular. Whereas previously the limited space available in books, newspapers, and television broadcasts encouraged the publication of the universally valid and generally comprehensible, an »economy of abundance« (Staab, 2021) now favors maximum individualization. This shift is particularly evident in subjective, presenter-driven formats, in which not only content but also personalities, »vibes«, and the staging of authenticity (Schultz, 2023) are central to capturing attention – which becomes increasingly difficult to achieve wherever an abundance of information is found (Simon et al., 1971).

6. The self as a source of credibility

Van Zoonen's (2012) concept of »I-Pistemology« complements this perspective by emphasizing the epistemic status of the self. Knowledge is increasingly generated from the perspective of the »I«; legitimacy and credibility no longer arise (exclusively or primarily) through institutional authority – such as established media brands like ZDF or ARD – but through experience, identity, and personal appeal. In light of Reckwitz's argument, this development appears as a logical continuation of singularization: when the particular is structurally elevated, subjective experience also gains weight as a source of knowledge. In this context, established media and institutional journalism – as bearers of the general – lose ground to creator media as bearers of the unique and extraordinary. The rise of influencers, newsfluencers, and journalistic content creators is thus not a marginal phenomenon, but an expression of precisely this late-modern logic, which, for Janis Brinkmann (2025), constitutes the basis of subjective journalism.

Instead of criticizing this change as a loss of traditional values, it may help to take a step back and view journalism as what it has always been: a »craft of place« (Carey, 2007, p. 4), grounded in local knowledge and more interested in the concrete than the universal, as James Carey, drawing on the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, puts it. This is precisely where its particular strength lies: newsrooms and journalists here, too, function as seismographs of social change (Bonfadelli et al., 2008) and make transformations visible.

If one accepts the »vibe« for what it is – namely, a new, additional quality criterion for contemporary journalism in late-modern society – it loses some of its

mystique. It reflects the central conflict of our society: the logic of an industrial society geared toward standardization and universality, with a correspondingly standardized media landscape, clashes with the new logic of singularity, which emphasizes uniqueness, diversity, and difference and elevates them both culturally and economically. What once guaranteed credibility through standardized journalistic practice now achieves it through aesthetic differentiation. For journalism, this represents a fundamental challenge, especially for public media, whose legitimacy is historically based on universal content, that is, on an offering intended for a mass audience and designed to serve society as a whole.

There is no alternative to mastering this challenge. For late-modern society not only rewards personal differences but also differences within society, raising awareness of exclusions that were less visible in earlier, more homogenizing public spheres. Drawing on Benedict Anderson (2006), it can be said that for a long time, societies imagined themselves through the media in a way that systematically excluded certain groups. With the opening up of access and the pluralization of media spaces, these blind spots are becoming increasingly visible. It is no coincidence that target audiences for social media formats are being defined more precisely, narrowly, and specifically than ever before; the mass market has become a niche market – anyone and everyone can find content on social media that matches their own interests, no matter how obscure or rare they may be. For journalistic offerings, this means that they must not only reflect diversity but also actively engage with it.

7. Journalism needs to change – again!

This heightened sensitivity to diversity, differing perspectives, and positions, combined with the general celebration of the unique, is also transforming internal editorial work. The negotiation of journalistic pieces is becoming more complex, guided less by universal standards and more by heterogeneous experiences and viewpoints. And the more of a digital native a contributor is, the more willing they are to stand by their viewpoint. In this context, the general thesis of reciprocity formulated by Alfred Schütz (1974) – the assumption that others in comparable situations would perceive, think and act similarly to oneself – is losing its status as a self-evident communicative constant. Instead, the journalistic self now emphasizes precisely what journalism claims for itself as a system: independence, or at least transparent dependence. This gives rise to productive tensions, but also to potential for conflict, as established routines are called into question and new forms of consideration become necessary – and all of this clearly has to be part of journalistic training.

At the same time, the platform-driven logics described above influence journalistic practice. Reach, visibility, and engagement are the key indicators of success and are shaping content production – from dramaturgy and visual design to topic selection. This leads to ongoing tensions between professional standards and platform-specific requirements: between depth and performance, between neutrality and personality, between journalistic ethos and algorithmic logic. These conflicts are not only experienced externally but are increasingly internalized by journalists, who align their work simultaneously with traditional quality criteria and platform-specific success metrics (C. W. Anderson, 2011; Belair-Gagnon et al., 2020; Lamot, 2022; Petre, 2021; Vu, 2014; Woodford et al., 2015).

This, in turn, is shifting the understanding of the journalistic role. The boundary between journalists and other providers of related content – whether they call themselves content creators, influencers, newsfluencers, or infoencers – is becoming more permeable, and identities are becoming more hybrid. Journalism is no longer merely the standardized delivery of high-quality content that can be measured against a set of objective criteria; journalists themselves are now engaging in relationship-building. Success is increasingly measured by whether they succeed in generating attention, initiating follow-up communication, and building lasting audience loyalty.

However, these developments cannot simply be interpreted as the decline of journalism. In the context of a hybrid media system, older and newer logics coexist, competing and intertwining with one another. The current transformation should therefore be understood more as a process of cultural reconstruction. It is precisely in grappling with new demands that the opportunity lies to redevelop journalism's ›cultural power‹ and secure its democratic function.

But if one takes authenticity literally and links ›vibe‹ – as all the *talents* recruited by funk whom we spoke with do – to journalistic quality criteria, indeed base their work on it, and spend a significant portion of their working hours reconciling the two, then none of this poses a threat (which lies, rather, in the omnipotence of the large corporations that operate these platforms). To paraphrase the French statesman and philosopher Joseph de Maistre: Every society gets the journalism it deserves – and this is now also the case for late-modern society of singularities. Its journalism lives up to I-Pistemology (van Zoonen, 2012), gives space to the vibe, and is ultimately a reflection of those social circumstances that challenge and shape journalism – and thus, in the truest sense, keep it alive.

So – let's set out in search of our own vibe. Finding it doesn't mean becoming a ›sloppy journalist‹ who discards everything learned about the standards of journalistic quality. Quite the opposite. Based on a genuine relationship of trust with the audience, it enhances transparency regarding one's own blind spots and, in turn, one's own credibility and – on the whole – journalistic quality.

In this way, a form of journalism may emerge that moves with the times and is aware of its own responsibility. What is happening right now is not the end of journalism, but another step in an evolution that we must actively shape. And instead of constantly lamenting the end, we should engage constructively with this evolution and focus on its inherent challenges, such as the question of how our society can prevent dependence on Big Tech platforms and actively shape a future in which not only the tools of communication but also the communication infrastructure are not confined to the hands of a tiny elite. The potential for progressive democratization, which is always linked to media transformation, can only be realized if networks cannot engage in backdoor censorship and creators produce not for the algorithm, but for the people.

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