
Miscellaneous

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Journalists' Personalization: How Self-Promoting, Branding, and Ideological Positioning Redefine Journalistic Practices, Products, and Institutions

Abstract

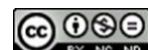
This research extends the existing discussion on political personalization by examining it from a different angle: exploring how this phenomenon manifests within journalism and journalistic practice. Based on in-depth interviews with 18 prominent journalists from Israel, Italy, and the United States, alongside a quantitative content analysis of 600 tweets by 30 journalists from the same countries, our analysis compares political personalization processes with journalistic personalization, highlighting both commonalities and differences. The discussion explores how journalists' personalization—including branding and celebrification practices through social media—is intertwined with broader trends of populism and polarization that are reshaping journalism in the digital age.

Keywords

Personalization, populism, celebrification, branding, journalistic identity, journalistic practice, social media.

1. Introduction

Political personalization refers to the phenomenon whereby individual politicians gain distinctive prominence within the political landscape while the collective significance of political groups, such as parties, declines (Sheafer & Rahat, 2007). Several factors have contributed to the increasing prevalence of personalization in democratic systems over recent decades. First, political discourse has become increasingly mediated. With the rise of television as a dominant source of information in the latter half of the 20th century, visual and personal attributes of politicians gained precedence over party platforms. Second, the bond between political parties and the electorate has weakened, as evidenced by declining party loyalty, membership, and voter turnout, allowing individual politicians—particularly party leaders—to assume more prominent roles. Third, broader societal and cultural transformations have reduced the emphasis on collective identities, enhancing the political relevance of the individual. This trend is exemplified by the shift from materialist politics, focused on socioeconomic divides, to post-materialist concerns such as self-fulfillment, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. Together, these developments reflect the broader "individualization of politics" (Karvonen, 2010; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). In the 21st century, the rise of social media has further



accelerated this process by enabling direct, personal interactions between politicians and voters, thus bypassing traditional institutional filters.

While the personalization of politics has been extensively studied, the parallel processes affecting journalists and journalistic practices have received comparatively little attention. Yet, the digital age—particularly the emergence of social media platforms—has profoundly altered the professional roles of journalists. Journalists now operate across three primary dimensions: the platform, the content, and the media persona. This study focuses on the transformation of journalists as media personas, examining how their professional identities are reshaped by the convergence of traditional, online, and social media.

In contemporary newsrooms, social media has accelerated the pace of news production, reshaped interactions between journalists, sources, and audiences, and fostered the creation of personal digital identities (Hedman, 2020; Brems et al., 2017). As a result, journalists increasingly engage in personalization practices such as self-promotion, branding, and positioning (López-Meri & Casero-Ripollés, 2017), blending professional activities with personal disclosure. This blurring of boundaries between journalists' public images and private personas has transformed news consumption, where journalistic content often appears alongside glimpses into journalists' personal lives, hobbies, political views, and social commentary.

This repositioning of journalism in the digital age (Ekström & Westlund, 2019) occurs within a fragmented media environment populated by multiple platforms and diverse content forms. Against this backdrop, our study examines how journalists in Israel, Italy, and the United States personalize their public personas on Twitter, analyzing both the motivations behind these practices and their broader implications for public discourse. Through a comparative lens, we seek to contribute to the growing body of research on journalism and political communication, offering new insights into how journalists cultivate influence, align with political narratives, and shape audience perceptions.

Finally, it is important to note that following Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter and its rebranding as "X" in 2022, platform policies regarding content moderation and misinformation changed, including the loosening of rules regarding misinformation and a shift from outright bans for rule violations to limiting content visibility. However, because our data was collected prior to these changes, we contend that the observed personalization patterns remain valid—and may even be reinforced—under the new platform dynamics.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Political and Journalistic Personalization Processes

Political communication scholarship (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013; Rahat & Kenig, 2018) agrees that in recent decades, contemporary democracies have undergone a significant shift characterized by an increased emphasis on the charismatic abilities of individual politicians. This development has weakened the traditional model of party-centered democracy, with political leaders increasingly replacing parties as the central axis of political power and the primary intermediaries between citizens and government. As a result, voters increasingly identify with individual leaders rather than political parties.

The process of personalization in politics and elections is not deterministic but dynamic, shaped by the unique personal attributes and charisma of individual leaders and political actors. These figures have skillfully adapted to the logic of media-driven communication, centralizing their roles and elevating their visibility above that of their parties. Moreover, the

manifestations of political personalization have been particularly pronounced in the digital sphere (McGregor, 2017; Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018).

Zamir (2024) refines the concept of political personalization in the online context by emphasizing "personalism," a concept defined by Pedersen and Rahat (2019) as a situational rather than procedural phenomenon. Within this framework, online personalism refers to circumstances in which individual politicians—especially party leaders—dominate their political parties in terms of online presence. This dominance is reflected in higher levels of digital consumption, including greater followership, interest, and engagement with the leader compared to other political figures (Rahat & Zamir, 2018).

The focus on consumption is crucial, as it enables two-way interaction between political actors and citizens. A social media account without followers, much like a newspaper without readers, lacks real influence. Thus, follower count serves as a key indicator of exposure and public interest in a political actor. This broader shift toward personalization has also profoundly altered the role of journalists. Whereas journalists traditionally focused primarily on reporting—leaving distribution and marketing to others—they now actively disseminate their content through social media platforms. In doing so, they aim to build the symbolic and cultural capital necessary for greater digital visibility (Lasorsa, 2018). To achieve this, journalists increasingly prioritize audience engagement strategies, closely mirroring the personalization tactics employed by political actors.

2.2. Journalists' Social Media Branding, Celebification, and Polarizing Practices

Historically, journalists have played a crucial role as opinion leaders, shaping public discourse and framing societal narratives. However, the advent of digital communication channels, the fragmentation of the media landscape, and the emergence of new actors—including alternative information sources and citizens acting as prosumers (Saltzis & Dickinson, 2008)—have disrupted traditional media hierarchies. These shifts have diminished journalists' dominance as primary information mediators, prompting them to adapt by establishing strong social media presences and employing personalized, engaging narratives (Marwick, 2015).

Despite the rise of digital influencers (McCorquodale, 2020), journalists continue to exert significant influence online. Alexandre et al. (2022) found that journalists and media outlets constituted 41% of Twitter opinion leaders discussing Trump, representing the largest group in their sample. Alongside nonconservative media outlets, journalists maintained a prominent role in shaping public discourse through the online sharing of political information.

Social media offers journalists a unique opportunity to challenge the traditional relationship between publishers and products, allowing them to cultivate both personal and organizational brands (Mellado & Hermida, 2022). In this environment, journalists can market themselves directly, bypassing the historical mediation of news organizations. Furthermore, the convergence of personal and professional identities, though often seen as a breach of journalistic norms, has become a defining feature of journalists' online presence (Mellado & Alfaro, 2020). Social media accounts, inherently tied to individuals rather than institutions, blur traditional professional boundaries and reframe journalists as entrepreneurial figures operating in a competitive attention economy.

At the individual level, personal identity has become increasingly commodified. As brands increasingly collaborate with influencers and micro-celebrities (Marwick & Boyd, 2011a), journalists have also adopted strategies of self-branding and audience engagement, treating followers as fan communities (Marwick, 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2011b; Mellado & Hermida, 2022). Journalists thus emerge as public personas, employing celebrity-inspired tactics to enhance visibility and influence. This trend connects to the broader phenomenon of

"celebrification," understood as an acquired, discursive behavior continuously reproduced through digital performance (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016). Celebrification enables ordinary individuals, including journalists, to attain heightened visibility that transcends the digital realm (Hanusch & Bruns, 2017). Social media platforms facilitate this process by enabling "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), emphasizing personalized, flexible political identities over traditional collective affiliations.

Personalization practices in journalism also intersect with the dynamics of populism and polarization. Social media's architecture favors populist communication styles, characterized by directness, emotional appeals, and the bypassing of traditional gatekeepers. The interplay between populism and polarization is profound: social media not only facilitates populist rhetoric but also exacerbates ideological and affective divisions (Mason, 2018). Druckman et al. (2022) demonstrate that affective polarization intensifies as individuals judge opposing parties through distorted, media-driven stereotypes.

In this polarized landscape, journalists—particularly those with ideological branding (Kedem & Neiger, 2024)—are perceived through similar lenses, amplifying hostility toward out-groups. The competitive drive for engagement reinforces these divisions, as media outlets and individual journalists alike seek to maximize visibility (Lelkes et al., 2017). Conservative media activists further fuel this trend by framing traditional journalism's "norm of objectivity" (Schudson, 2009) as an ideological cover, promoting ideological loyalty over neutrality (Hemmer, 2016).

Social media's attention-driven logic, rooted in algorithmic amplification and the viral appeal of sensational narratives (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, 2016), complements populist strategies that target media elites through explicit, often derogatory, language (Angser et al., 2017). Consequently, the populist spirit—the "popular Zeitgeist" (Mudde, 2004)—has become a mainstream force across Western democracies. This trend was evident in the 2014 European elections and subsequent political developments in Hungary, Poland, Italy, and Austria.

The convergence of populism and polarization poses significant challenges to democratic systems, contributing to the centralization of power, legislative paralysis, and declining public trust (Lee, 2015; Wagner, 2021). As journalists increasingly adopt personalization and celebrification strategies influenced by celebrity culture and populist rhetoric, they inadvertently deepen polarized attitudes. A self-reinforcing cycle emerges, wherein social media's structural dynamics and populist communication mutually amplify polarization, destabilizing democratic institutions.

Despite its critical relevance, the concept of personalization in journalism remains underexplored in scholarly literature. When addressed, it is often framed narrowly through self-branding rather than recognized as a multidimensional phenomenon with complex epistemological implications akin to political personalization. Pavlik (2001) identified personalization as one of the major advantages of internet-based journalism, alongside multimedia formats, global accessibility, hypertextuality, interconnectivity, and real-time reporting. López-Meri and Casero-Ripollés (2017) further distinguish two core dimensions of journalistic personalization: (1) the humanization of journalists, blending professional content with personal narratives such as family details, hobbies, anecdotes, and humor, and (2) enhanced audience interaction, which fosters engagement and transparency.

In this context, Humayun and Ferrucci (2022) emphasize the importance of analyzing the epistemologies underlying individual journalists' social media practices. Understanding these epistemologies and the training processes shaping them offers critical insights into the normative implications of journalism in the digital age. Thus, this study frames journalistic

personalization as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon essential to understanding contemporary transformations in the field.

This study addresses a gap in the literature on journalistic personalization and represents a significant contribution. It examines journalistic practices, emphasizes the importance of personalization, and explores its implications for role performance. By advancing the theoretical framework and providing empirical insights, this research clarifies and refines the defining characteristics of personalization in journalism. In light of these conceptual foundations, the following research question emerges: If and in what manner do personalization processes manifest in journalists' practices, in journalistic products, and in journalism as an institution?

Thus, the main question entails three sub-questions:

1. Journalists: If, how, and in what manner do journalists recognize the impact of personalization processes on their daily work, products, and practices?
2. Products: If and in what manner do personalization processes define the character, quality, and quantity of journalistic products?
3. Journalism as an Institution: If and in what ways do personalization processes prompt transformation within the institution of journalism in general and within journalists' interactions with their organizations in particular?

3. Methodology

In order to address these research questions comprehensively, we employed a mixed-methods approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

3.1. Sample Selection

The initial qualitative phase involved conducting in-depth interviews with a cohort of 18 prominent journalists evenly distributed across three countries: Israel, Italy, and the United States, with six journalists from each nation. These participants were recruited through a snowball sampling technique and represent a diverse range of major media outlets, including print, radio, television, and online platforms. The demographic composition of the sample included three women and fifteen men aged between 25 and 55.

Notably, almost all journalists in the study were employed full-time and were not freelancers. Efforts were made to achieve data saturation within this cohort. Israel and Italy were included to exemplify multi-party democratic systems, while the United States was selected as a binary two-party democratic system. By integrating and synthesizing findings from these distinct political systems across three countries—each situated within significantly varied sociopolitical contexts—this study aims to provide representative examples that span the spectrum of global democratic political environments.

3.2. Data Collection and Interview Procedures

The interviews were conducted between February and October 2022 in English and Hebrew, with each session lasting an average of 40 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to the interviewees. The primary objective was to analyze these interviews to identify recurrent themes, evaluate the alignment of these themes with journalists' professional conduct on Twitter, and assess their adherence to the guidelines and interests upheld by their organizations. Through comparative analysis, we aim to illuminate the motives and intentions behind journalists' use of Twitter, as well as their perceptions and attitudes regarding personalization processes. This approach recognizes the absence of universal models within

developed communication systems, underscoring the value of comparative analysis in delineating aspects of these systems that warrant further exploration (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). By heightening our awareness of variables and drawing attention to significant parallels, comparative analysis enriches the analytical discourse surrounding definitions and research findings.

3.3. Quantitative Content Analysis

We employed quantitative content analysis as a complementary approach to our qualitative examination. A coding scheme was developed through a process grounded in field-based theory and the conceptual framework of politicians' personalization practices (Balmas & Sheafer, 2014). The comprehensive qualitative analysis of the contextual nuances within the interviews has revealed recurring thematic elements, thereby expediting the comprehension of conceptual constructs that journalists deem integral in defining their personalization practices. It underscores the paramount importance of the personal level when referring to journalists besides the professional one.

3.4. Operationalization: Indices of Personalization

Accordingly, two primary indices were formulated:

1. The "self-promotion" index encompasses dimensions of personal-political expression, organizational and personal branding, content dramatization, and self-marketing.
2. The "ideological branding and positioning" index includes appeals to a sympathetic audience, ideological and polemical expressions, and polarization.

The systematic coding scheme was designed in concurrence with the two indices above to quantitatively assess the connection between the level of personalization in the journalist's tweet and the number of likes and retweets the tweet received. This assessment was calculated using the Spearman correlation for a monotonous connection between variables in each country. Each metric was scored on a scale ranging from "0" (absence of any of the identified content types within the tweet) to "4" (presence of all content types within the tweet). Consequently, a higher score on either measure denoted a heightened level of personalization within the journalist's tweet.

3.5. Dataset Construction

Our study entailed the examination of a dataset comprising 600 tweets (N=600). The data collection process was executed meticulously, entailing the comprehensive examination and analysis of the initial 20 consecutive tweets posted by 10 journalists from the United States, 10 Italian journalists, and 10 Israeli journalists during a 12-day period preceding and following the most recent elections in their respective countries, namely Italy in September 2022, Israel in November 2022, and the US midterm election in November 2022. This temporal scope was intentionally selected due to its significance, as anticipated by our research, marked by a discernible escalation in political-ideological discourse evident within journalists' tweets content. In addition, we recorded the number of followers, posting frequency during the analyzed dates, total likes on the analyzed posts, and whether the journalists' profiles highlight the media outlet or company they work for (see Appendix II). The dataset extracted from this process serves as a representative sample for our quantitative case study analysis, with the primary objective of facilitating the derivation of empirical conclusions.

3.6. Journalist Selection for the Quantitative Phase

The selection of journalists from the United States, Italy, and Israel was methodologically grounded in a systematic examination of the Twitter profiles and tweets of the majority of the

18 journalists previously interviewed for this study. Subsequently, additional journalists were chosen for analysis from the primary journalists, followed by the interviewees on Twitter, as well as specific journalists they mentioned or referred to during their interviews. This process facilitated a discerning selection of journalists guided by dual criteria: first, their affiliation with media entities, ensuring balanced representation across conservative and liberal spheres; and second, their substantial follower base, with accounts boasting a minimum threshold of tens of thousands of followers' indicative of their significant media influence and power.

Despite significant variations in population size among the United States, Israel, and Italy, we chose an equal number of journalists from each country. This systematic approach enabled a meticulous analysis to discern and quantitatively compare the attributes of these journalists' tweeting strategies. Furthermore, this cohort provides a robust basis for elucidating the cognitive predispositions and predominant social media strategies employed for professional branding and promotion by journalists who maintain substantial followings and activity profiles on Twitter.

3.7. Reliability and Validity

The coding questionnaire (see Appendix I) was tested and amended using a reliability test between two coders, an independent assistant, and the first author. Final reliability was assessed by double encoding 10% of randomly selected items (N=60). The Cohen's Kappa index for reliability among coders was high, with 0.758 for the "self-promotion" index and 0.781 for the "ideological branding and positioning" index (see Appendix III).

4. Findings

During the qualitative analysis, three predominant themes emerged, which were later corroborated by the quantitative findings.

4.1. Theme 1: In the social media age, journalists' personalization processes are intricately linked to analogous processes undertaken by politicians

This theme addresses the first sub-question: If, how, and in what manner do journalists recognize the impact of personalization processes on their daily work, products, and practices?

The discourse that journalists and politicians echo between themselves on Twitter often extends beyond their intended confines, encompassing both fake news and linguistic nuances that journalists and politicians use reciprocally. Dan from National Public Radio elaborates:

Trump had a huge Twitter following that was based on memes and clips of himself. There is a journalist named Greg Kelly at News Max, a very conservative site, who mimics Trump and his millions of followers, which has helped his career a lot. They use social media very much to engage people who are interested in what they have to say and their critiques (9/2/22).

Jeckall, an Italian radio correspondent, says:

I have 30,000 followers, not that many, but it includes a lot of journalists and politicians, so when I say something, it echoes very strongly within this community. So, I don't want to say that it makes it true because it's not true, but it enters the circle of discussions of that day (5/2/22).

Italian investigative reporter Sico elaborates:

Some journalists use a really aggressive strategy on social media, and their aggressive strategy is really close to political ideology. It is really confusing to recognize what is journalistic and what is political. A group of journalists became more important than their media or network, and this is good on one side, but on the other side, I think it's the same as

politics; it's dangerous; you need to develop networks and media companies, and not just one person and his opinion (27/6/22).

The journalists say that content that politicians post is a source of inspiration for journalists, similar to reading a good book or watching a good movie from which the writer draws inspiration, and that is how things get assimilated. Dan, from National Public Radio, explains:

There's a congresswoman from California named Kenny Porter who is a law professor, so her presentations are very factual and smart, and her questions are tight and sarcastic. I can imagine being inspired by how she does it and using the same approach. There is also a congresswoman from the Bronx who is very involved, and she gets a lot of questions from the public and answers them on video and passes them back, and it can be a very effective thing; I've seen journalists do things like that (9/2/22).

Israeli journalists believe that implementing personalization processes and branding strategies on social media is not necessarily motivated by politicians because media professionals have more experience communicating with audiences. Therefore, they are the ones who create these modes, and it is the politicians who replicate them. Israel Today newspaper correspondent Beco says:

There is no doubt that populism created through social media clearly creates status. I think that's why the genie came out of the bottle in the sense that politicians are the ones nowadays who learn from other people, and they are the ones who bring into politics the people who have made careers on Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok (1/10/22).

Maly, an Israeli ultra-Orthodox online influencer who became a prominent journalist, substantiates that idea:

I don't define myself as a digital expert, but every politician I can think of has approached me to run Twitter for him (23/6/22).

Greg, a veteran Washington Post reporter, says:

Social media motivate journalists and politicians to take extreme ideological positions and present them emphatically to promote their narrative and themselves. It's a bit like the chicken and the egg; it's unclear whether politicians are the ones driving it and the journalists are following, or the journalists are driving it, and sometimes the politicians are following. You know, I think it's symbolic and that they go together (2/2/22).

The quantitative analysis findings presented in the next section illuminate discernible patterns within the context of the three countries under examination—namely, the United States, Italy, and Israel. The empirical findings underscore the transformative nature of journalists' personalization practices, encompassing self-promotion, ideological positioning, branding, and producing authentic content tailored to specific audiences. Collectively, these practices signify a paradigm shift towards ideological self-reflection and proactive self-commercialization, where audience responses are construed as a manifestation of self-expression. Through this process, the journalists strengthen and improve their visibility, narrative, and personal brand. Remarkably, these practices also replicate the very same personalization strategies often utilized by politicians, harmoniously aligning with the deductions drawn from our qualitative investigation.

4.2. Theme II: Journalists proactively produce polemic and contentious content on social media to stimulate audience engagement.

This theme addresses the second sub-question: “To what extent and in what ways do personalization processes shape the character, quality, and quantity of journalistic outputs?”

The significance of this issue lies in the emergence of a discernible public appetite for polemic discourse, coinciding with an era marked by people's heightened expectations for forthright, blunt speech and statements. Journalists understand that mainstream media cannot ignore what is transpiring on social media because it reflects the vibrant variety of societal inclinations. Therefore, because social media platforms provide journalists with a basis that enables them to infiltrate mainstream media, not only does it amplify the intensity with which they express opinions and topics that are intertwined to extremes and bluntness, but it also creates a public appetite for this kind of language, perceptions, and ideologies that could not exist otherwise.

Washington Post reporter Greg specifies:

I think the best way to get attention on social media is by saying things that create controversy or that express a strong position, and you know, at least in the American press, out of ethics, we shouldn't show a strong bias or opinion in one direction, and that's why tension is created there. I think I can do things that will create a lot of followers on Twitter, but it will hurt my credibility and the credibility of the Washington Post, so it's a complex action. For both conservatives and liberals in the United States, the extreme edges of the party tend to have the most followers.

Italian television reporter Sico explains:

For example, Cambridge Analytica, we saw last year that a lot of elections were influenced by these kinds of journalists. They express and spread a lot of information with a strong ideology on the conservative side, spreading anger, for example, to divide the population, to grow on one side, and to divide the population on the other side. I think it's really dangerous; we have a responsibility because we are influencers on social media to speak to people. So, I think that on many occasions, these kinds of journalists use that power to divide people and to concur on times like elections or to promote a candidate, and this is very bad and dangerous (27/6/22).

The use of cynical terminology and witty linguistic constructs are particularly notable on Twitter, and the platform's strict character limit promotes the necessity of using such language. Scott from the New-York Times explains:

Trump drew a considerable audience probably by being president of the US but also partially by people, including journalists like myself, who would turn on to his Twitter account saying, 'oh, what's he said lately?' And the whole point, of course, which he understood in some visceral way, was that if he says outrageous stuff, calls people idiots, and so on, people like it, and they would turn to his Twitter account more often (8/2/22).

Alice, an Israeli journalist, elaborates:

Branding in itself is not a bad thing; the question is whether, in return for this branding, you are sinning against journalistic ethics. In my view, many people are sinning, both on the right and the left. For you to stand out and for your words to resonate, you must also be much blunter. Like Trump, it's much more repulsive, much more inciting, waving your red flags much higher, and that's something that really makes the discourse shallow; it's not something that is just in Israel. The whole world is like this (12/7/22).

Hemi, an Israeli "Haaretz" newspaper reporter, clarifies:

The more provocative you are, the more people will read you, but the question at the end is, what do you want to be? I prefer quality over quantity. According to this, Big Brother is also watched by many people. That doesn't make it quality. The same thing is in the press. I can

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now write an opinion column in Haaretz whose headline will be very provocative, and obviously, there will be many reactions and curses (31/7/22).

Within social media, journalists engage in discourse across a wide range of topics and possess the capacity to coerce a concrete narrative through corresponding real or fake content to stimulate audience engagement. As a platform, Twitter facilitates the rapid dissemination of news, allowing journalists to establish themselves as authorities within their respective domains and as purveyors of exclusive reportage. Furthermore, it serves as a means to influence individuals within and outside the field, thereby endowing Twitter with the potential to function as a force multiplier. Wall Street Journal correspondent TJ elaborates:

Natasha Bertrand became quite popular in 2016 with Trump Russia gate allegations, and as we know today, she had very few hard substances, and really, who knows what happened? But her ability to bring things at an incredible pace caught people's attention. I could see that she was someone who caught people's attention very early on in this kind of social media frenzy surrounding Russia Gate, and I think she kind of rolled to the top through that (13/7/22).

Dan, from National Public Radio, provides another insight:

Brent Greenwald used Twitter to transform from a typical center-left critic to a right-winger. He went all the way around to embrace the far right, attacking vaccines and things like that. It's a way of branding himself as a dissenting figure, and it's very charismatic for people looking for a strong opposition, and that's how he gained a huge following. He is an intelligent but controversial guy. He's also done real stories and commentary, but the things he does on Twitter are very performative and seem to be designed to get him on cable TV and to gain attention.

Journalists have a proclivity towards aligning with specific agendas, and it is plausible to identify news anchors and media celebrities affiliated with particular channels that attract viewers with certain perceptions, thereby rendering a particular news presenter more appealing to a distinct segment of the population. Consequently, these journalists' followers on social media serve as an extension of their television audience, amplifying their capacity to vigorously advocate only one side of a story they tell on social media. Scott, a New York Times correspondent, elucidates:

I think conservative journalists often abuse it in a way that they are not playing the journalism game. They are playing a political game, telling people that your story is the product of liberal bias when, in fact, it's the product of a collection of reports. They are unhappy about the facts and do not want you to present them because they conflict with their ideological and political agenda, so Twitter can certainly be abused in this sense. If we're just expressing our opinion, literally, without the facts, it's a kind of dialogue of the deaf, and it's meaningless, and you can definitely see it on Twitter (8/2/22).

The quantitative findings, as illustrated below, substantiate the thematic analysis. They affirm that the personalization practices adopted by journalists on social media, as categorized under the "ideological branding and positioning" index, encompassing the use of polemic and polarizing content tailored to specific target audiences, effectively increase tweet likes and retweets and heightened followers' engagement. Inextricably linked to this phenomenon is the manner in which social media contribute to the professional strengthening of journalists, engendering tensions within the field of journalism. This stems from their platforms acting as spaces that transcend the boundaries of traditional journalistic ethical roles.

4.3. Theme III: Journalists' personalization processes on social media serve to leverage a robust personal brand alongside the conventional norms of their roles and, therefore, are reshaping media institutions and journalists' ties with their organizations

This theme addresses both the first and third sub-questions: “if, how, and in what manner do journalists recognize the impact of personalization processes on their daily work, products, and practices?” and “if and in what ways do personalization processes prompt transformation within the institution of journalism in general and within journalists' interactions with their organizations in particular?”

Pragmatic professional journalists leverage the advantages of navigating both online and offline media platforms. They recognize that Twitter, in particular, serves as a powerful tool for gaining exposure and disseminating independent content and commentary. Consequently, it has become an essential component of their operations, proving highly effective for many. As a result, journalists cultivate personal brands that are vividly expressed on social media. Today, it is easier to function as an individual media entity and establish a distinct identity outside of major news organizations, which may create potential professional conflicts. Jackall, from Italian radio, explains:

I say things on Twitter that I can never say on my show. On Twitter, it's very clear that I take a stand even if it is disguised as a question, and then it's clear whether or not I like something. And yes, becoming someone familiar is not always just someone from the radio because, on the radio, they don't see me. They don't see how you move or react. So, being on Twitter is a way to create a personal identity for yourself that I can't convey on a radio show. Journalists know that mixing radio and social media gives them a kind of power to intervene in public debate.

Hemi from "Haaretz" newspaper, elaborates:

Twitter, that's its advantage because in the end, I'm undersigned, I'm not a media outlet, and there's almost no point in tweeting something that isn't with some personal tone, which I'll say if I want to be part of the discourse.

Israel Today political correspondent Beko specifies:

It is precisely the sharpness of the message on Twitter that makes it possible to bombard more stories. Yes, I post most of the things I publish in the newspaper on Twitter and Facebook. It is a circulation multiplier because there are people who don't have time to read the newspaper, and there are people who update only through social networks, which definitely increases the resonance.

Some journalists enjoy greater latitude than their peers due to their established social media presence and following, which is considered advantageous for their employers. New York Times reporter Jonathan explains:

Yes, you know that the newspaper recognizes the value of promotion on social media. Maggie Haberman has a million followers, and they're more reluctant to deprive her and roll her in, in fishing terms, because she has real power to get readers to the paper (18/2/22).

Journalists from the United States, Italy and Israel assert that the power and influence conferred upon media players who employ personalization and self-branding practices through social media results in the current tensions existing within the realm of journalism. Alice, an Israeli reporter, elaborates:

The journalist becomes the subject instead of being the tool or the conduit. In my opinion, this is a bit of a disruption of the event, and I see it happening to many journalists who are stronger than their media outfit. At least their branding is stronger than their organization,

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and they maintain it. It's not healthy in a lot of ways because there's no editing figure over them actually because they're so powerful, so no editor can tell them do this, don't do this, don't say or say this thing, and then basically the whole mechanism of checks and balances of the gatekeeper's, kind of falls apart in light of this fact. Moreover, the second problematic thing about Israel, which is less common in the US, is the fact that a journalist works for several media outlets simultaneously.

Journalists from both the United States and Israel alike emphasize the existence of a perceptible gap and intergenerational conflict in comprehending the journalistic role. Greg, a veteran Washington Post journalist, explains:

I think older reporters see themselves as representing the Washington Post brand, and younger reporters tend to think you're representing your own brand. I think that creates an inevitable conflict.

Scott of The New York Times reinforces this argument:

I think there's an intergenerational conflict here. When I teach young people, I find they don't understand why I can work and research an article for a month and then not speak my mind. Isn't that what it is all about? Moreover, to some extent, they're right, and that's what it's all about.

Maly, the ultra-Orthodox Israeli journalist, corroborates:

Journalists have become the objects of the item in recent years, and instead of hearing the journalist's story, they deal with him and the program he works for. People raise an eyebrow and say; Hey, the journalist shouldn't be the item. Nevertheless, if this personalization hadn't happened, very few young journalists would have found themselves in the media.

In our quantitative analysis, we investigated the two key metrics to ascertain whether an elevated degree of personalization within journalists' Tweets, as the theme suggests, correlates with heightened followers' engagement in the three countries, as indicated by increased likes and retweets.

Table 1. The link between personalization indices and the number of tweets, likes, and retweets in Israel.

	Self-Promotion Personalization	Ideological Branding and Positioning Personalization
Number of likes	.31***	.55***
Number of retweets	.37***	.64***

p<.01, *p<.001.

Source: Own elaboration.

According to Table 1, positive and significant associations were observed between personalization based on the 'self-promotion' index (organizational and personal branding, content dramatization, and self-marketing) and the number of likes ($p < .001$) as well as the number of retweets ($p < .001$). Furthermore, positive and significant associations were also noted between personalization from the 'branding and ideological positioning' index (including practices such as ideological and polemical expressions and polarization) and the number of likes received ($p < .001$) and the number of retweets ($p < .001$). These findings suggest a correlation between a higher level of personalization in tweets, by the indexes mentioned earlier, and an increase in the number of likes and retweets among Israeli journalists.

Table 2. The link between personalization metrics and the number of likes and retweets in Italy.

	Self-Promotion Personalization	Ideological Branding and Positioning Personalization
Number of likes	.19**	.45***
Number of retweets	.23***	.42***

p<.01, *p<.001.

Source: Own elaboration.

Similar to the situation in Israel, we observed positive and significant associations between personalization based on the 'self-promotion' index and the number of likes ($p < .01$) as well as the number of retweets ($p < .001$). Additionally, we found positive and significant links between personalization based on the 'Branding and Ideological Positioning' index and the number of tweets likes ($p < .001$) and the number of retweets ($p < .001$). These findings also signify that a rise in tweet personalization level, as indicated by the abovementioned indexes, was linked to increased tweet likes and retweets among journalists in Italy.

Table 3. The link between personalization metrics and the number of tweets, likes, and retweets in the United States.

	Self-Promotion Personalization	Ideological Branding and Positioning Personalization
Number of likes	.01	.45***
Number of retweets	.06	.49***

p<.01, *p<.001.

Source: Own elaboration.

As depicted in Table 3, personalization from the 'Branding and Ideological Positioning' index exhibited a significantly positive association with the number of tweets likes ($p < .001$) and the number of retweets ($p < .001$). This association indicates that an escalation in tweet personalization level was linked to an increase in both the number of tweets likes and retweets. In contrast, unlike the situations in Italy and Israel, no association was discerned between personalization from the 'self-promotion' index and the number of tweets, likes, and retweets in the United States.

In summary, the findings from the quantitative analysis corroborate and significantly enhance the conclusions drawn from the qualitative research. These empirical results (see Appendix III) substantiate and further clarify the action patterns employ by journalists when utilizing personalization strategies on social media. Such strategies include ideological positioning and self-branding, as well as the production and dissemination of populist, polemical, and polarizing narratives that align with the journalist's ideological stance and resonate with like-minded politicians. These efforts are strategically designed to engage audiences with similar ideological inclinations, with the ultimate objective of cultivating a loyal following that actively disseminates, engages with, and advocates for the desired narrative, thereby shaping public discourse. Simultaneously, these practices enhance the journalist's professional brand, conferring symbolic, economic, and cultural capital. From these cumulative insights, it is evident that social media have intensified pre-existing processes

within journalism while also facilitating the emergence of novel practices, particularly in the operationalization of journalistic personalization processes.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The discussion examines the interconnections, similarities, and disparities underpinning the processes of personalization and professional branding among journalists. It also addresses the challenges and ethical dilemmas inherent in journalists' professional activities on social media platforms across diverse national contexts.

A notable divergence in our analysis emerges with journalists from the United States, where no significant correlation was identified between personalization, as measured by the 'self-promotion' index, and engagement metrics such as the number of tweets, likes, and retweets. This discrepancy may be attributed to the distinctive characteristics of US journalists, particularly in television, who are typified by a liberal, commercialized orientation that emphasizes infotainment and soft news. Operating in such a media environment (Aalberg & Curran, 2012), these journalists frequently employ self-promotion strategies in offline settings. Consequently, their audiences may be less inclined to recognize or value equivalent self-promotion efforts in online contexts. Furthermore, the urban-rural divide in the United States, often reflecting a liberal-conservative split, likely influenced the quantitative outcomes of our analysis. Despite this divergence, all other indicators revealed consistent patterns of journalistic behavior across the United States, Israel, and Italy.

The analysis explicates the emergence of disparities engendering ethical conflicts among journalists utilizing social media. On the one hand, journalists implement traditional journalistic norms, positioning themselves as impartial observers of the political landscape and emphasizing neutrality and objectivity. On the other hand, they engage in personalization and self-branding. These challenges transcend into ethical concerns pertaining to journalistic practices on social media platforms. Such platforms serve as conduits for propagating journalistic narratives infused with ideological underpinnings, with the explicit intention of normalizing these narratives within mainstream media and public discourse. Additionally, concerns arise about how these platforms facilitate professional empowerment.

Journalists' effective use of social media logic to frame reporting topics, ideological branding (Kedem & Neiger, 2024), promotion, self-empowerment, and polarization have become an important factor, marking a departure from past practices. This study seeks to scrutinize these phenomena, recognizing them as pivotal drivers of the escalating influence of both individual journalists and politicians. Our overarching objective is to provide a comprehensive and comparative perspective on these dynamics among journalists in the international arena.

Over the past decade, journalists and politicians in Western democracies worldwide have employed a strategy characterized by the intensive and effective use of personalization processes on social media platforms. Through their loyal followers, who actively share and retweet their content, they skillfully advance, frame, and direct their agendas and narratives directly to the public. These strategies allow them to bypass traditional media institutions and their perceived biases.

These processes have been exemplified by the ascent to power of charismatic and contentious leaders, notably figures such as Donald Trump in the United States. Trump, renowned for his prolific use of Twitter, employed the platform to directly communicate his messages to the public and engage in confrontations with his rivals. Similar trends have been observed in countries including Brazil, Argentina, Italy, Israel, England, Hungary, and Poland. Concurrently, conservative journalists like Tucker Carlson in the US, Yaacov Bardugo in Israel,

and Nicola Porro in Italy have become media superstars in these countries. This phenomenon underscores the mutual symbiosis between journalists and politicians, who draw upon shared views, information, and methodologies that incentivize them to adopt professional practices centered around individual performance and charisma. Such practices often come at the expense of their traditional roles as team players within party or media organization apparatuses, which in the past dictated their agendas. This transformation indicates a significant shift in journalists' orientation towards the public and their employers, as well as the cultivation of their personal brands.

In the same contextual framework, Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) research pivots on the concept of 'flexible political identities,' which adapt well to the thin ideology (Kriesi, 2014:369; Mudde, 2004: 544) and the chameleon-changing nature of populism (Taggart, 2004: 275). Notably, social media assumes paramount importance in facilitating the propagation of populism by serving as direct conduits between individuals. They enable populism to flourish and reach its goals with heightened efficacy, unimpeded by the gatekeeping traditionally exercised by the press.

Contemporary scholarship on journalism and populism highlights the multifaceted roles journalists assume in covering populist figures and political narratives. This discourse discerns three primary functions fulfilled by journalists in this context: (1) Gatekeepers, (2) Commentators, and (3) Message Generators, who may actively engage in populist coverage, positioning themselves either as conduits of the people's voice or as anti-establishment advocates. In this capacity, Western journalists may inadvertently contribute to the proliferation of political populism, not as direct collaborators with political forces but as initiators of indirect and unintended media populism. This phenomenon is largely driven by the commercial and economic imperatives inherent in the operational logic of news media (Esser et al., 2017; Krämer, 2017; Mellado et al., 2017).

Such practices exemplify personalization strategies that not only amplify journalists' brand influence and perceived efficacy in the public sphere but also facilitate the dissemination of populist narratives. These narratives often reflect journalists' ideological orientations and resonate with the perspectives of like-minded politicians, thereby shaping and influencing public discourse. This study's significance lies in recognizing the analogous practices of journalists and politicians stemming from the symbiotic relationship between politics and the media. The perpetual exchange of ideas, opinions, and actors between the two fields engenders parallel processes that characterize them and their conduct. Follow-up studies should delve into how other aspects of journalists' personalization processes, particularly the escalation of violence and polemics in political and media discourse, are further exacerbated by the propagation of fake news and disinformation, which lead to polarization and deepening of the rift and ideological gaps between different societal groups. An additional parameter worthy of consideration is the dissemination of fake news by conservative journalists and its implications, which raises the question of whether, as part of populist discourse, liberal journalists who respond to this inadvertently become distributors of fake news.

Although the data for this study was collected before Twitter's rebranding as X, which could be considered a limitation, we believe the platform's current policies are even more relevant for further research on Journalists' Personalization, given the lack of a ban on extreme polarizing content. Hence, future research endeavors could advance the study of polarization and media populism to elucidate whether these practices yield increased engagement, high exposure, and crowd-driven virality that drive a dynamic, iterative polarization process between journalists, politicians, and the public. This analytical approach facilitates a more

profound comprehension of contemporary social polarization's complex dynamics. Furthermore, it provides a novel approach to conceptualize and delineate the media's role in disseminating polarizing and populist discourse from a comparative multinational perspective—a perspective currently underrepresented in the scientific literature.

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Appendix

Appendices I–III are available in the Figshare data repository under the following DOI:
<https://www.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28855745>