

**“WHAT IS A NEWSFLUENCER?”: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT
IDENTITY, SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, AND JOURNALISM
BOUNDARIES**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the journalistic field position and perspectives of U.S. and Canadian “newsfluencers”: a portmanteau coined by Edward Hurcombe (2024) of “news” and “influencer.” Newsfluencers are content creators who regularly post about news across social media platforms and employ social media influencer (SMI) marketing practices, like self-branding, to cultivate engaged and participatory audiences. SMIs are internet personalities with substantial followings that ‘influence’ their audiences’ lifestyle and purchasing decisions. Focusing specifically on non-affiliated newsfluencers—or creators with no formal journalistic training or media background—through semi-structured interviews, this research explores how they: 1) navigate platforms and SMI strategies to gain followers, 2) establish relationships of trust and credibility, and 3) identify as ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of journalism. Using field theory and boundary work to guide analysis, the findings add to existing literature surrounding newsfluencers and illuminate the role of non-affiliated newsfluencers in connecting with contemporary news audiences.

Keywords: platform studies, audiences, news, influencer studies, newsfluencers, journalism and journalists, social media, journalism boundaries

Dedication

To my grandpa, Cliff, who encouraged my life of learning and survived a stroke halfway through obtaining this degree. And to my bunny, Charlie, who accompanied me during many years of thinking, writing, and burnout prevention via Netflix binge marathons and cuddles. Rest in peace. May 17, 2016—December 23, 2024.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 RESEARCH CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, I was a first-year university student. I quickly returned home to quarantine and, like most people my age experiencing isolation, went on social media for entertainment and connection. In 2020, TikTok reigned supreme, and the algorithm presented me with multiple video themes: where to buy clothes online, how to deal with face mask acne, influencer house drama, and—breaking through all of the neoliberal consumption—tips to avoid police tactics at protests. The U.S. #BlackLivesMatter movement, which gained increased international support after the death of George Floyd in May of 2020, garnered a massive online audience. Activists, influencers, celebrities, and regular users alike took to social media to share information that, as many echoed, “the news won’t show you.”

Post-2020, many young adult users regularly turn to social media for political information (Leppert & Matsa, 2025; Youngs, 2025). Although the terminology regarding who they were was initially unclear, certain digital actors emerged as sources for such information. Figures like Dylan Page, known as “News Daddy” to his 15+ million followers, or Vetus Spehar, who created UnderTheDeskNews and was one of the first content creators to attend White House briefings in 2022, became popular on social media around this time and continue to grow today. Page is called the “number one news account on TikTok” and has stated on his LinkedIn page that he “set out to revolutionize the way news is consumed by making it engaging, accessible, and entertaining for the new generation of digital audiences”, covering “breaking news, current affairs, politics, entertainment and culture” (Page, n.d., para. 1). Likewise, Spehar has stated their

platform is “a ‘safe space’ for news” that “aims to make news media less intimidating to watch and easier to understand” (Spehar, n.d., para. 2).

News organizations and political figures also took notice of these actors, criticizing how the Internet and influencers have become the new space for news consumption and negatively impact traditional media. Outlets such as *Forbes* (Adgate, 2024), *Teen Vogue* (Odejimi, 2024), Cable News Network (CNN) (Darcy, 2022), *The Washington Post* (WaPo) (Newman, 2021) and research centers like the Nieman Lab (Amos, 2023), The Royal Melbourne Institute for Technology (2023), the Center for Media Engagement (Joseff & Woolley, 2020), and the Pew Research Center have all published on this phenomenon. A common denominator across headlines? That social media content creators are becoming more successful with audiences than traditional media, and that journalists may be able to learn from them.

Over the last few decades, Western traditional media has faced an audience deficit that has caused a significant drop in views and revenue for news organizations—as a result, over thousands of jobs have been cut in the U.S. and in Canada (Nadler, 2016; Schudson & Downie, 2009; Walters, 2021a; Kelly, 2024). Instead, scholars have found that the traditional consumers of news have become “part of the process of journalism” (Witschge, 2012, p. 117). From independent actors who function as an alternative to traditional media to the participation of the audience, the profession of journalism is transforming: news organizations and journalists are no longer able to sustain what once worked and must confront the future of journalism through technology (Witschge, 2012). Many journalism scholars and industry professionals have responded to the growing “tension between tradition and change” by questioning the boundaries around professional journalism, as well as critiquing the quality of social media content and its

potential for damage (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, p. 575, as cited in Witschge, 2012; Lewis, 2012; Johnson & Kelling, 2017).

This tension was exacerbated at the 2024 Democratic National Convention (DNC) when the Biden administration invited over 200 influencers—including content creators who had never posted political content before—to participate in his party’s political discussions¹ (Moore, 2024). Biden was quoted stating that influencers “are the future”, “the source of news”, and “the new breakthrough in how we communicate” (Associated Press, 2024). A Reuters article about the DNC titled “At DNC, influencers battle journalists for space and access” made the disparity between attendees obvious: the influencers reportedly had better access than the journalists, reaffirming a ‘competition’ between traditional media and content creators (Kelly, 2024). Shortly after the DNC, a flurry of writing about these content creators was published.

While the academic terms that emerged during this time are interchangeable, I will use “newsfluencers” in my research, following Edward Hurcombe’s (2024) work as crucial to my overall aims and specific definition. Newsfluencers, which would categorically include Spehar and Page, are content creators who follow social media influencer (SMI) marketing and branding practices and regularly post about news, like current events and civic issues, on social media platforms for engaged and participatory audiences (Hurcombe, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2024). Hurcombe published a conceptualization of newsfluencers in September of 2024, and the Pew Research Center came out with a study on ‘news influencers’ a month later. Along with the difference in name (one being a portmanteau and the other an addition to the standalone influencer role), the Pew Research Center describes news influencers as:

¹ Biden’s decision to invite influencers to the DNC was an unprecedented move for the Democratic Party as they typically only invite media and journalists to cover the event (Moore, 2024).

individuals who regularly post about current events and civic issues on social media and have at least 100,000 followers on any of Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter) or YouTube. News influencers can be journalists who are or were affiliated with a news organization or independent content creators, but they must be *people* and not organizations. (para. 2)

Meanwhile, Hurcombe defines newsfluencers as “platformatised creators who operate according to the economic and cultural logics of online influencers to produce news content for participatory audiences” (p. 2). The Pew Research Center does not acknowledge platformization or audience relationships, although they specify the popular platforms used by newsfluencers. As well, their definition limits news influencers to accounts with at least 100,000 followers, which excludes many new creators (and some of the individuals included in my recruitment). Ultimately, I pull from both of these definitions to describe newsfluencers based briefly on their role in platformization, as creators who cultivate engaged audiences, and the broad content they post about.

Also in November of 2024, the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas offered a month-long course with modules that teach content creators and journalists how to post ‘trusted’ news content online. The Center and its associate director, Summer Harlow, published an open access e-book, *Content Creators and Journalists: Redefining News and Credibility in the Digital Age*, which includes newsfluencer interviews, media literacy promotion, ethical digital news practices, and a comparison of content creator and journalist positions.

Furthermore, in January of 2025, Harlow and Spehar did a joint interview moderated by Eric Deggans, a correspondent for the National Public Radio (NPR) *Weekend Edition Saturday* news show. The digital piece, titled “How influencers are impacting journalism,” discusses the role content creators play in contemporary journalism and how they navigate social media logics

and journalistic professionalism, introducing the term newsfluencers. In the interview, Spehar is quoted saying:

There's a lot of folks who will look at social media newsfluencers and try to make it less than journalism. I think that's a mistake. There's been this idea that there's some hierarchy or right way to do journalism and news. This is simply another form of digital journalism. The way that blogs were before, the way that digital newspapers were before. Folks have always had a resistance to what comes next, but I don't think it makes it less than. (Deggans, Tworek, & Parvaz, 2025, paras. 11-12)

Later, Spehar posted a video to both TikTok and Instagram reacting negatively to the interview and completely rejected the term 'newsfluencer.' While NPR has released a statement and conducted another interview with them about the issue, in their video, Spehar argued that the interview reinforced the narrative that "Anyone who delivers the news online is somehow *less than or not a journalist*, or not a professional" (Spehar, 2025).

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Although a 2025 study found that about one-in-five U.S. adults (21%) are getting news from newsfluencers, the "idea of 'news influencers' is relatively new" and requires further exploration (Pew Research Center, 2025). In the Further Research section of his paper, Hurcombe (2024) posits that newsfluencers "encourage researchers to investigate and reassess the boundaries of journalistic practice and the norms that guide it" (p. 12). With this remark in mind, the goal of this study is to utilize the perspective of content creators who post news content and are not affiliated with a traditional news organization or have a journalism background to understand how they are impacting the boundaries of the journalism field as 'strangers' and establishing new methods of building (and maintaining) an audience. Through this research, my objectives are to 1) explore how newsfluencers utilize social media platforms and social media influencer (SMI)

marketing strategies to distribute news content and build audiences; 2) understand how newsfluencers fit inside/outside the journalism profession and their impact on traditional media practices; 3) establish a conception of platform weaknesses, capabilities, and limitations for both newsfluencers and their audiences.

By interviewing newsfluencers who fit the criteria above, my thesis aims to achieve those research objectives by answering the following research questions:

1. What unique social media influencer practices and platform affordances are non-affiliated newsfluencers utilizing to gain their followers?
2. Do non-affiliated newsfluencers utilize traditional journalistic practices to maintain a credible relationship with their audiences?
3. How do non-affiliated newsfluencers identify and position themselves as inside and/or outside of the journalistic field?

1.3 THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis is structured as follows. *Chapter 2: Literature Review* provides an overview of the scholarly literature of newsfluencers and non-traditional actors; historical context of journalism as a profession and its associated legitimacy; and platforms, news platformization, social media critiques, and regulation. *Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework* introduces the theoretical framework, including field theory (Bourdieu, 1971, 1972/2008) and boundary work (Gieryn, 1983, 1999; Carlson & Lewis, 2019) which will be used to frame my data analysis. *Chapter 4: Methodology* describes the qualitative method used to collect data (semi-structured interviews with six creators) and the overall research process. *Chapter 5: Analysis* details the themes that emerged after coding and shares participant's responses. *Chapter 6: Conclusion* attempts to

answer the research questions using data from the interview, and provides concluding remarks detailing the contribution of this research to the 'new' newsfluencer academic field and future avenues of research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this work, my objectives are to understand how social media actors blur and challenge the traditional boundaries of journalism and news dissemination to gain the viewership of contemporary audiences. The research questions guiding this objective are: **RQ1)** What unique social media influencer practices and platform affordances are non-affiliated newsfluencers utilizing to gain their audiences? **RQ2)** Do non-affiliated newsfluencers utilize traditional journalistic practices to maintain a credible relationship with their audiences? **RQ3)** How do these creators identify and position themselves as inside and/or outside of the field of journalism? In this chapter, I examine the necessary historical context of Western journalism's 'evolution' from print practices to digital mediums in order to set the stage for social media actors, as well as discuss the key values of journalism practice that dictate legitimacy. Further, I shift between the existing categorical literature that discusses 'outsiders' to journalism, finishing with an exhaustive conceptualization of said social media actors. I conclude by discussing platforms and the domination of news work via platforms, as well as more specific social media logics (e.g., a brief summary of how algorithms impact digital information dissemination, critiques of information existing online, and the political content policies employed on different social medias).

2.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FROM PROFESSIONALIZATION TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Since I will be exploring how the boundaries of journalism change when different actors produce news content, it is important to distinguish between what is "journalism" and "news" as they have become intertwined terms over time. First, *journalism* has been defined as:

...a set of values—such as breaking news, uncovering the truth, and providing a public service. Second, these values would get meaning in the news culture of a specific time and place—a country, a medium, and a news organization. Third, individual journalists would come to embody these values and their meanings in their everyday routines and practices at work. (Deuze, 2019, p. 1)

Mark Deuze, a journalism and media scholar, originally published a heavily cited variation of this definition in 2005. However, he now argues that it must be modified as the traditional structure of news work (e.g., individuals work for a news organization) is no longer relevant to the occupational ideology of journalism (Deuze, 2019). A *news organization* is any business or company that employs journalists and publishes news reports to the public, including newspapers, websites, and magazines, among other mediums. This evolution or transformation of journalism requires a definition that separates the industry from the actual working professionals (news workers, journalists, freelance reporters) who ‘do’ journalism through their news production (Deuze, 2019). In this work, *professional journalists* are considered news workers or reporters formally affiliated with a news organization that follow a set of norms, or a journalistic code of ethics.

With this definitional dilemma in mind, I view journalism as “an activity rather than as a registered profession” (Jahng, et al., 2023, p. 228) that simply “refers to the systematic gathering, filtering, and circulating of information deemed to be news and in the public interest” (Lewis, 2019, p. 1), or in other terms, is “both news and the discipline of reporting news” (Nerone, 2013, p. 196). John Nerone (2013) expands on this duality to say that journalism is “the stuff produced by” news workers or organizations and also the “particular set of norms, standards, and procedures that govern the proper production of news” (p. 196). Nerone’s understanding reaffirms the need to differentiate both terms, but also presents an issue that I explore later in this chapter: what is ‘proper’ news production?

“News,” on the other hand, typically consists of relevant current events that are socially or politically significant and interesting to the public (Hannabuss, 1995) that are selected and communicated to the public by news workers based on what they deem “current,” “newsworthy,” or “important” to the audience (Rosen, 1999, p. 3; Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020, p. 27). To elaborate further on ‘what news is,’ it can be:

- 1) information about the real world,
- 2) that is new,
- 3) and outside of one’s immediate purview. (Robertson, 2021, p. 380)

However, there are many factors that contribute to the “news-ness” of information as understood by the audience, including the:

- 1) scope or relevance,
- 2) social importance or utility,
- 3) source,
- 4) facticity,
- and 5) impartiality. (Robertson, 2021, p. 383)

As well, there are different criteria that journalists apply to determine if something is “newsworthy,” such as exclusivity, conflict, shareability, entertainment, and/or relevance (Harcup & O’Neill, 2016, p. 1482).

An accepted fact of journalism is that it is changing (Anderson, et al., 2007). The occupational ideology that defined the industry stems from *professionalization*—the process through which an occupation evolves into a profession—which began in the 19th century, turning news work into a ‘respected profession’ (Banning, 1999). A profession is “an exclusive domain patrolled by various cultural and sometimes legal and regulatory apparatuses” (Carlson & Lewis, 2019, p. 124). Professionals have a democratic role and are “a key element to claims of social legitimacy and cultural authority”, who adhere to *professionalism*, or a “system of shared norms, rules, and practices” (Örnebring, 2019, p. 106). Ernest Greenwood’s (1957) definition of

professionalism characterized “a profession as having: (1) systematic theory, (2) authority, (3) community sanction, (4) ethical codes, and (5) a culture”, and Everett C. Hughes (1958) emphasized a connection to university or educational training (as cited in Banning, 1999, p. 158). With a combination of on-the-job, formal training and educational programs, journalism became a recognized profession in the twentieth century.

Simultaneously, the medium of news delivery transformed as the introduction of technologies allowed for new methods of reporting and commercialization (news organizations ‘sold’ news for profit), moving journalistic output from print (newspapers) to broadcasting (radio and television) (Schudson & Tift, 2005). Yet perhaps the largest impact to journalism occurred in the 90s to the early 2000s with the introduction of computers, the internet, Web 2.0, and blogs (Anderson, et al., 2007). These technologies effectively changed traditional media and the journalism profession: news organizations no longer dominated the news industry and journalists were no longer the sole deliverers (or dictators) of news (Franklin, 2014; McNair, 2009; Sixto-García, et al., 2022). As coined by Tim O’Reilly (2005/2010), Web 2.0 is the World Wide Web “as a medium for participation” (Helmond, 2015, p. 5), “that enables people to have interactions that go beyond consumption to the creation, dissemination and sharing of digital content” (Witschge, et al., 2016, p. 82). Media and journalism scholars and industry workers have recognized that the future of journalism is, inevitably, online (Sixto-García, et al., 2022).

At the 2013 Future of Journalism conference hosted by Cardiff University and convened by the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, scholars posited that digital and mobile developments are creating new possibilities for journalism practice while simultaneously impacting the traditional business model of news organizations (Franklin, 2014). Currently, the model based on advertising revenue is unsustainable as search and social media companies

control digital advertising (Flew, et al., 2023), decreasing profits for news organizations and resulting in layoffs. With the availability of technology, audience's news consumption has shifted online, prompting legacy media, news organizations, and independent news production to follow (Diel, 2017; Ismail, et al., 2019).

Legacy—or old—media are the mass media institutions (Pérez-Latre, 2014) that dominated and dictated news production prior to the normalization of information and communications technology (ICT) and computerization (Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020). These news organizations have felt “pressured to innovate” their news production due to increasing computerization and decreasing viewership and revenue (Chua & Duffy, 2019). The normalized use of technology in the newsroom has brought news organizations and journalists to the “final frontier” of audience engagement: social media (Domingo, 2019). This era has been deemed digital journalism, characterized by “the use of digital technologies to research, produce, and deliver (or make accessible) news and information to an increasingly computer-literate audience” (Kawamoto, 2003, p. 4).

In 2010 during the Andrew Olle Media Lecture, then editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger, spoke that “news happens first on Twitter” as the availability of technology allows the public to put forward stories (Hatte & Zhuravskaya, 2023). Web 2.0 and social media have given non-traditional actors (individuals who are not journalists, do not work for a news organization, or never had journalistic education/training) entry into the journalistic field. Rosen (1999) saw the movement of journalism in the 1990s from traditional media to public, civic, or community journalism as a “restyle” of the work of journalists “so that [journalism] supported a healthier public climate” (p. 4). Blogs and personal Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) allowed individuals to publish news content, ushering in citizen journalism.

Citizen journalism is “the involvement of nonprofessionals in the creation, analysis, and dissemination of news and information in the public interest” (Roberts, 2019, p. 1), often emerging “outside mainstream media” as alternative voices (Luce, et al., 2016, p. 267; Witschge, 2012). As well, the simultaneous media “financial downturn” led to mass layoffs of journalists and the development of digital newspapers and “entrepreneurial journalism” (Cohen, 2015, p. 513). Entrepreneurial journalism, whereby “enterprising individuals” utilize digital technologies to adapt to the shifting media landscape, proposed solutions for unstable “journalistic employment” (Cohen, 2015, p. 513). Such “enterprise culture” led to freelance work and the emergence of freelance journalists, or “self-employed workers who do not employ others and who sell pieces of journalism or contract their services to several media outlets without being employed by a single firm” (Cohen, 2015, p. 521).

During this period, journalism studies looked at the relationships between professional journalists and audiences, conceptualizing terms like “user-generated content,” “citizen witnessing” (Allan, 2013), “audience material” (Wardle & Williams, 2008), “networked journalism” (Beckett, 2008), “process journalism” (Jarvis, 2009), “participatory journalism” (Singer, et al., 2011), “alternative journalism” (Atton & Hamilton, 2008), “liquid journalism” (Deuze, 2008), or “ambient journalism” (Hermida, 2010) (as cited in Luce, et al., 2017). Citizen journalism opened space for marginalized groups to create journalism content and develop their identity, while enabling conversations of social change (Luce, et al., 2017, p. 266). Yet citizen journalists faced critique, expectations, and barriers from traditional actors and news organizations as they exercised their authority in the journalistic field (reflecting citizen journalist’s lack of authority in this social space) (Miller, 2019). Therefore, the legitimacy of

citizen journalists—and of the non-traditional actors that followed them as news content continued to shift online—is challenged (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2017).

2.1.1 Legitimacy in Journalism

Revisiting the problem I identified from Nerone (2013), in order for news production to be ‘proper,’ it must be deemed legitimate. Yet referring back to Rusbridger who claimed that “news happens first on Twitter”, ultimately news and journalistic legitimacy is further challenged. *Legitimacy* is the justification that “makes it acceptable to the public that journalism has the cultural authority in collecting, producing, and disseminating credible information, and in defining reality” (Tong, 2017, p. 257). Such legitimacy is a dynamic, ongoing process that needs to be sustained (Tong, 2017; Clayman, 2002) by journalistic actors and by “external social actors” (e.g., the audience) (Carlson, 2015, p. 350). A major step to maintaining legitimacy is “the establishment of professional norms and the public’s acceptance of these norms” which shape the boundaries of entry into journalism (Tong, 2017, p. 257).

Journalists have a code of ethics and practices to validate information, maintain credibility, and establish trust with their audience (Waisbord, 2018; Tong, 2017; Costera Meijer, 2020). Ethical values include independence, emotional and political neutrality, credibility, reliability, and objectivity (Örnebring, 2020; Anderson & Schudson, 2019). Ethical practices include conducting thorough fact-checking and research (Anderson & Schudson, 2019). While variations of an ethical code are formally written, these values are also instilled during journalistic training/education and internalized by professional journalists. The U.S. Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), founded in 1909, has a formal code of ethics recommended to journalists. The SPJ states that ethical journalism “strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough” with an emphasis of reporting the *truth* (Society

of Professional Journalists, 2014). Further qualities include accuracy, gathering correct information, identifying sources, avoiding deception, holding powerful figures accountable, citing sources, avoiding stereotypes, and never plagiarizing (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). Norms also guide how journalists recognize news and select stories to share with their audiences, further contributing to their legitimacy (Harcup & O’Neill, 2016). These norms include stories having elements of exclusivity, conflict, entertainment, relevance, good news, and/or celebrity (Harcup & O’Neill, 2016).

2.2 IDENTIFYING ACTORS INSIDE/OUTSIDE OF JOURNALISM

As stated in Chapter 1, while scholars can now use “newsfluencer” to describe these creators, the surrounding terminology did not start clearly. Social media actors include any individuals who have or continue to post news content but are not considered professional journalists. However, there have been a plethora of classifications assigned to such ‘outsiders’ who have approached or entered the journalistic field. Regarding Spehar’s comments and RQ3, the identity (and albeit name) of these actors is important to understand their journalistic role and field position. This section defines newsfluencers—including scholarship on what an ‘influencer’ is, provides a taxonomy of newsfluencer-adjacent terms, and closes with a discussion and clarification about the specific subgroup that I study.

2.2.1 Defining (News) Influencers

Newsfluencers, alternatively referred to as news influencers, are content creators who follow social media influencer (SMI) marketing and branding practices and regularly post about news, like current events and civic issues, on social media platforms for engaged and participatory

audiences (Hurcombe, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2024). I refer to ‘social media’ as platforms and not social network sites in order to address the corporatization and economic design behind crafting platforms (Baym, 2015; Helmond, 2015). Social network sites are:

...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

In contrast, Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond (2018) define social media platforms as “digital intermediaries that draw together and negotiate between different stakeholders, such as end-users [the consumers], developers and advertisers” (p. 244). I use social media and platforms as they broadly refer to the applications users are able to create, share, and consume information on, instead of being based more on users’ social connections. Platforms are “infrastructures that can be programmed and built on”, focusing specifically on their *reprogrammability* and economic model that directly connects users to advertisers (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 244). In a non-computational understanding, Alfred Hermida (2018) defines these platforms “as networks for people to connect, communicate and create” (p. 498) that encourage the sharing of information and self-presentation between users online. Social media platforms include YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and X. These platforms have millions of global users and are powerful sites of influence that foster participatory culture, allowing users to become prosumers and produce their own content (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022; Dias, et al., 2022). Participatory culture is a culture where users are not just passive consumers but actively contribute to the development of content. Participatory culture consists of:

1. relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement,
2. strong support for creating and sharing creations with others,
3. some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices,
4. members who believe that their contributions matter,

5. members who feel some degree of social connection with one another. (Jenkins, 2009, pp. 5-6)

The affordances— “the mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action” (Devito, et al., 2017, p. 741)—of these platforms permit influencers the ability to establish a following via their connections.

Before I can provide an in-depth definition of newsfluencers, it is helpful to review the root word: influencer. Crystal Abidin (2015) defines influencers as:

...everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in “digital” and “physical” spaces, and monetize their following by integrating “advertorials” [portmanteau term combining advertisement and editorial] into their blogs or social media posts. (p. 1)

Influencers are online personalities with often substantial followings on a variety of social media platforms (Creely, et al., 2019) that have “the power to affect the purchasing decisions” (Pitafi & Awan, 2024, p. 2) of their followers and receive monetary benefits from their content creation (De Gregorio & Goanta, 2022).

Similar to how ‘branding’ is used to differentiate between goods or products in crowded markets, influencers build a ‘self-brand’ typically around a niche like “cooking, beauty, gaming, lifestyle, and more”, sharing parts of their daily lives and advising their followers via their authority, knowledge, position, or audience relationship (Creely, et al., 2019; Goanta & Ranchordás, 2019; Pitafi & Awan, 2024). This has become a marketing strategy norm for influencers: self-branding is “a strategy of success in which one thinks of oneself as a ‘brand’ and uses social media to promote it, through creating, presenting, and maintaining a strictly ‘edited self’” (Marwick, 2013, p.16). Self-branding is also an internet micro-celebrity trait, as described by Alice Marwick (2013): “Becoming a micro-celebrity requires creating a persona, producing content, and strategically appealing to online fans by being ‘authentic’” (p. 114).

Micro-celebrity, as defined in the ethnographic book *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks* by Theresa M. Senft (2008), is “a new style of online performance that involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites” (p. 26). Different from “conventional celebrity,” micro-celebrities brand themselves with an online identity and use this to connect with their audience, to the point of describing them as “family” (Senft, 2008, p. 26). The audience is a defining factor for micro-celebrities as their viewers do not primarily turn to them for product endorsements but to debate their “obligations to those who made her *what she is*” (pp. 25-26). Conventional celebrities, then, are personalities with distance from the audience and the ability to persuade their purchasing decisions (Senft, 2008).

In her exploration of contemporary influencers, Abidin (2018) notes that both Marwick and Senft’s works usefully highlight fan interactions as a key characteristic that structures micro-celebrity, contributing to the influencer industry in the 2010s and beyond. Values like authenticity, closeness, and accountability establish online connections with a fan base or audience, and technology allows them to directly communicate (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008). The audience places trust in creators who they deem authentic and will be more likely to support their content, though what authenticity actually looks like is highly subjective (Marwick, 2013). Typically, authenticity is based on the openness the creator shares with the user, or “how genuine an influencer’s actual lifestyle and sentiments are” (Abidin, 2018b, p. 4). For influencers, Abidin (2018) says this is the manipulation of one’s self-presentation to “appear more ‘real’” in order to feel “‘relatable’” to the audience (p. 3). Relatability is “tacit labor,” or the invisible work necessary to “make a practice seem natural or effortless”, and is a vague blanket term for other

qualities like accessibility to the influencer, believability of an influencer’s self-presentation, authenticity, replicability, and intimacy with the influencer (Abidin, 2018b, pp. 3-4).

Newsfluencers fall under this umbrella of influencers and, like other types of creators, are distinctly named for the niche of content they produce (e.g., beauty influencer, food influencer, and so on). Another method of classification for influencers is based on their follower counts, as studied by Rita Conde and Beatriz Casais (2023). Mega-influencers consist of popular and widely known experts, micro-influencers are “ordinary people that have a relative influence on a smaller circle”, the in-between group of macro-influencers, and nano-influencers who have very specific, often local audiences (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 2). See Table 1 for a comparative breakdown of influencers’ characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages based on the size of their followings.

Table 1

Definitions and Characteristics of Micro, Macro, and Mega-Influencers.

	Micro-influencers	Macro-influencers	Mega-influencers
Followers	1,000-100,000	100,000-1,000,000	> 1,000,000
Characteristics	Strong voice in one community or niche; local authority Uniform audience with whom they establish a close relationship Perceived as highly credible by their audience	Substantial number of loyal followers A more diverse audience in comparison with micro-influencers	More famous on the Internet Globally recognized Their status is similar to traditional celebrities
Advantages	Loyal audience; higher levels of trust Excellent engagement rates	Higher reach in specific markets Better Return On Investment in	Able to reach masses High visibility and recognition

	Authenticity; their recommendations are similar to Word-Of-Mouth Lower cost	comparison with micro-influencers Accessibility; easier to contact compared to micro or mega-influencers	Halo effect; they create global trends Professionalism Easier to measure Return On Investment
Disadvantages	Lower reach and visibility Large-scale activation is harder Less control over output; volatile and harder to measure Return On Investment	Engagement rates around 5 to 25 % – smaller than micro-influencers They charge more than micro-influencers	Charge premium rates The audience may be tired of commercials Less engagement

Note. Adapted from “Micro, macro and mega-influencers on Instagram: The power of persuasion via the parasocial relationship”, by R. Conde and B. Casais, 2023, p. 2.

In reference to this categorization, newsfluencers also range from micro to mega-influencer status, seen through content creators like Sonduren Fanarredha (@lifewithsonduren) who has 84,700 followers on Instagram, Jordan Berman (@unbiasedjordan) who has 512,000, or Josh Helfgott (@joshhelfgott) with 1.1 million (follower counts as of May 2025).

As evidenced by the literature reviewed above, the definition of newsfluencers illustrates their proximity to influencers, prompting scholarship to question their legitimacy in comparison to other traditional actors within journalism. I anchored this work with Hurcombe (2024) and the Pew Research Center’s (2024) conceptualizations of newsfluencers, which positions newsfluencers as content creators of news, meaning they are categorized according to their influencer niche and not by their ability to share information.

2.2.2 A Newsfluencer Taxonomy

Definitions of non-traditional actors—and the term(s) by which scholars refer to them—vary as this group is often categorized ‘outside’ of the legitimacy associated with professional journalists that act within the journalism industry/institution. Avery E. Holton and Valerie Belair-Gagnon (2018) examined the “prominence of technology-oriented strangers in journalism” in order to categorize those who have impacted the field (p. 72). They state that:

These individuals and groups of strangers are especially relevant in journalistic change, which often comes from the edges to the mainstream “where change is less encumbered by tradition, by an established way of doing things” (Bruns, 2014, p. 16). This innovation push, wherein a new media model is found to be workable and useful and spreads to mainstream outlets, has been under way for some time now, driven partially by journalistic strangers. These strangers have helped to introduce new ways of identifying what news is, how to deliver it more effectively, and how to better engage with news audiences. (p. 72)

They further identify three types of journalistic strangers: explicit interlopers, implicit interlopers, and intralopers. Explicit interlopers include bloggers and citizen journalists; they are “physically distant” from news organizations but “professionally proximate” to journalists (Chua & Duffy, 2019, p. 114). These non-traditional actors may not be accepted into the mainstream but contribute directly “to the production and distribution of news” (Chua & Duffy, 2019, p. 114) as they drive innovation and audience engagement. In contrast, implicit interlopers hold value to professional journalists and traditional journalism, although they are non-traditional actors outside of the news organization. These actors include programmers and web analytics professionals that similarly advance content production, engagement, and technological tools. Lastly, intralopers include non-editorial workers that are non-traditional actors operating *within* news organizations to assist journalists and news content, acting opposite to explicit interlopers: they are “physically proximate but professionally distant” (Chua & Duffy, 2019, p. 114; Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018).

A study conducted by Sherwin Chua and Andrew Duffy (2019) which used this typology found that professional journalists gradually accepted the work of non-traditional actors as useful towards developing the overall industry, though there remains a disregard for explicit interlopers. Explicit interlopers, while acknowledged, were viewed as occupying their own unique space and representing “alternative perspectives” (Chua & Duffy, 2019, p. 119). These contributions from Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018) and Chua and Duffy (2019) set the stage for the discussion of newsfluencer legitimacy: this typology classified actors based on their role to journalism, which can inform how scholars place newsfluencers.

Ultimately, since non-traditional actors are viewed as ‘outside’ of journalism due to non- or less professional characteristics, it is important to understand how they are positioned amongst traditional journalism conventions. Holton and Belair-Gagnon have created clear categories, yet Aljosha Karim Schapals (2022) further argues that non-traditional actors “are neither *inside* nor *outside* the journalistic field, but—somewhat awkwardly—sit at its periphery, leading some to question their claims to journalistic *belonging*” (p. 16). Peripheral actors are inherently unified by being non-traditional which prompts the field to expand its already loose boundaries and, therefore, what is constituted as legitimate as journalism continues to be innovated (Schapals, 2022).

Alternatively, the motivations behind existing in a peripheral space and maintaining uncertain legitimacy contributes to identifying these individuals. While many peripheral actors come from a traditional media background within the field, others have no previous professional qualifications or training. For actors without traditional backgrounds, motivations often stem from: desires to story-tell, participating in the democratic process, political and/or activism interests, engagement with new media and platforms, or “trial and error” when starting their

news production (Schapals, 2022, p. 29). Another factor is the “crisis/opportunity dichotomy” which occurs when non-traditional actors “fill a gap” during a crisis in traditional journalism, such as the traditional business model breakdown (Schapals, 2022, p. 31); others simply become “turned off” by traditional journalism (p. 34). For peripheral actors working in non-traditional news organizations like BuzzFeed, the financial model is unreliable and varies by funding, donations, and grants (Schapals, 2022).

Recently, journalism and media scholars have argued that the relationships between audience, platform, and influencer have further transformed and blurred occupational boundaries within journalism. Hurcombe (2024) posits a portmanteau of news influencer—newsfluencer — which “purposefully suggests hybridity. These individuals are not simply influencers who do news content” but have reshaped both the influencer and news fields (p. 8). Thus, Hurcombe’s robust conceptualization of this group firmly differentiates newsfluencers from other actors, stating that:

Newsfluencers share characteristics with bloggers, citizen journalists, and other kinds of news content creators who emerged in previous phases of digital adoption. However, I argue that newsfluencers are generally more journalistic than bloggers, more professionalised than citizen journalists, and operate in a mature platform creator economy, unlike the amateur blogosphere characteristic of the Web 2.0 era. Newsfluencers are also not just professional journalists who use social media platforms to interact with audiences: they instead embrace online creator practices in their content production. (p. 3)

Newsfluencers’ legitimacy, then, does not entirely stem from how they are perceived by professional journalists. Hurcombe identifies four unique key dimensions to newsfluencers which construct their persona: “platforms, business models, labour, and cultures” (p. 2). The amalgamation of news and influencer practices across these dimensions contributes to the breadth and interdisciplinary nature required to study and define news influencers.

Platformization is the “first key dimension” which focuses on the distribution and monetisation

models embedded in the platforms utilized by newsfluencers (Hurcombe, 2024, p. 3). In the context of digital journalism, platformization is the process through which social media platforms and social media logics dictate news production (Foxman, et al., 2024; Dvir-Gvirsman & Tsurriel, 2022; Hutchinson, 2019).

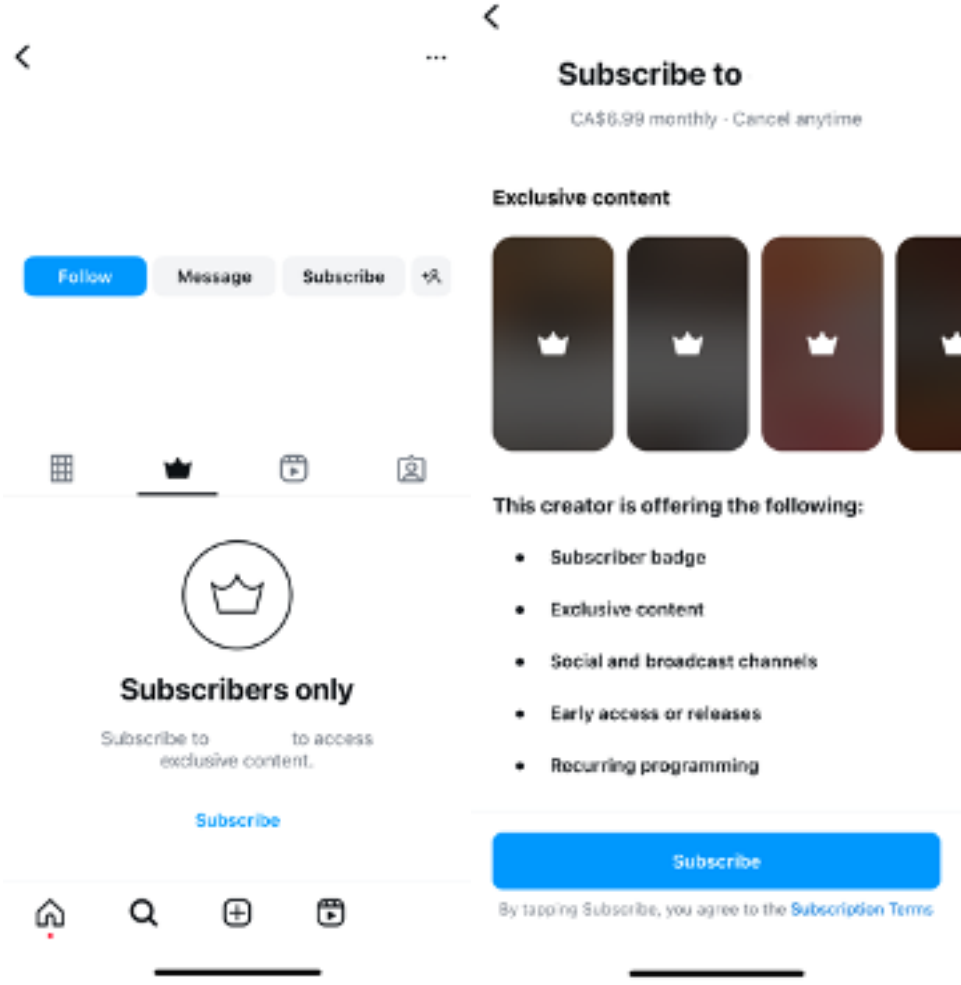
Due to increasing changes in the news industry, newsfluencers have adopted and operate from specific business models. Social media like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and X are *distribution* platforms: newsfluencers utilize the affordances of these media and audience-engagement strategies to distribute news and establish a following (Hurcombe, 2024). These media are also monetization platforms as they act as a revenue source for newsfluencers who utilize SMI marketing models to gain profit (De Gregorio & Goanta, 2022). Sites like YouTube “offer ad-supported revenue” directly to creators, while some newsfluencers promote subscription platforms like Patreon where audiences opt to pay the creator (Hurcombe, 2024, p. 4). Dependent upon geographic location, TikTok offers multiple monetization streams to SMIs including: the TikTok Creator Marketplace (TTCM) which facilitates brand and creator collaboration; the Creator Rewards Program that eligible creators apply to in order to receive rewards; and TikTok LIVE where creators can offer subscriptions and livestream to receive monetary gifts from viewers (TikTok, 2025). It is important to note that some of the TikTok monetization options are unavailable to Canadian creators.

Further, *subscriber-led* models support both small and popular creators. See Figure 1 for an example of an Instagram creator’s subscription sign-up menu with a monthly price set by the creator, including their exclusive offerings (Meta, n.d.-a). This option requires the creator to have an Instagram professional account, 10,000 or more followers, and be 18 years or older to be eligible for monetization (Meta, n.d.-b). Further, in January 2022, Meta introduced creator

subscriptions where users can pay a monthly fee to “support” their favourite creators (Meta, 2022; Facebook, n.d.). American creators that are 18 years old or older and have 10,000 or more followers are eligible; Canadian, Australian, and United Kingdom-based creators must be invited by Meta to have a subscription service available on their account (Facebook, n.d.).

Figure 1

Example of an Instagram Creator’s subscription sign-up menu and exclusive offerings for \$6.99 a month from the perspective of a user.



Brand deals also greatly contribute to SMI marketing and revenue; such marketing transcends traditional celebrity endorsement or promotional advertising (Pitafi & Awan, 2024). Instead, SMIs commonly receive revenue in four ways: “revenue from brands (influencer marketing), revenue from platforms (ad revenue, channel subscriptions, tokens, and crowdfunding), unmediated revenue from peers (web monetization), and direct selling of products like ‘merch’” (De Gregorio & Goanta, 2022, p. 209). Political content can also be monetized, however certain regulations apply internationally (De Gregorio & Goanta, 2022) and any advertisements or brand sponsorships are transparently publicized on platforms like Instagram (Instagram, n.d.-b). Such revenue streams are starkly different to traditional journalism, allowing newsfluencers with sufficient followings and views (Hurcombe, 2024) to profit whilst remaining self-sustaining and independent.

Yet audiences’ financial contributions are subjective: while brand deals and partnerships are well-paid, even successful newsfluencers are at the whim of the subscriber’s fluctuating financial situation. Thus, these individual revenue streams are often unstable, and therefore *insecure* models, as self-branding, gig work, and subscriptions are inconsistent financial sources long-term. As a result, many newsfluencers participate in entrepreneurial models and “experiment with diversified revenue sources” (Hurcombe, 2024, p. 5). These sources include common SMI tactics to achieve success such as establishing brand recognition and a cross-platform audience, as well as direct profit sources like content collaborations, “brand sponsorships, merchandise, and live shows” that can create some income stability (Hurcombe, 2024, p. 5). The overlap of influencer business models has also led to “converging labour practices” such as self-branded, relational, and passion-led methods that “have risen in response to” the news industry (Hurcombe, 2024, p. 6). A distinct factor of SMI marketing, self-branding

describes the work of content creators to build an audience, promote their content to gain significance online, and manage their digital image. For newsfluencers not affiliated with traditional organizations, self-branding is crucial to their marketability and financial potential.

Additionally, Hurcombe notes that newsfluencers replicate participatory and active culture with their audiences through “the context of fandom culture” and parasocial relationships (p. 7). Parasocial relationships are interactive but non-mutual relationships between a creator and an audience member. As previously stated, successful subscription models require a relationship with a newsfluencer’s followers, thus they need to be “active, loyal, and participatory audiences”, otherwise seen as “fandoms” (p. 7). To build a fandom, SMIs and newsfluencers often engage in parasocial relationships as they establish an ‘intimate’ connection with their fans via platforms. Direct messaging (DM), live streams, comment sections, and other platform affordances allow fans to interact with content creators. These relationships have several benefits and consequences outside of monetization, like fan versus anti-fan conflict or political activism. Overall, fandoms are able to support and shape news distribution.

Though Hurcombe’s conceptualization of newsfluencers and audience relations does not directly discuss co-creative labour, it is an integral aspect of defining newsfluencers who are dependent upon their audiences. Co-creative labour is the participation of consumers in the media-making process, becoming the non-traditional “co-creators of content and experiences” like that of information-sharing (Banks & Deuze, 2009, p. 420). John Banks and Deuze (2009) posit that co-creative labour and participatory culture are undeniable practices within media industries and will impact the future practices of the profession. This labour is already a prominent effect of parasocial relationships and is significant to further understand the influencer-audience relationship.

In this section, I have included the major works that pertain to identifying this ‘outsider’ category that has led to Hurcombe’s (2024) exhaustive conceptualization of newsfluencers. These works illuminate the issue of legitimacy that has framed scholarship regarding non-traditional actors. Further, unlike other terms, newsfluencers are not defined by their outsider status: it has emerged as their audience success has increased this group’s proximity to journalists. My thesis aims to understand how newsfluencers have worked to achieve success by using social media logics which have challenged journalism boundaries and introduced competition.

Non-Affiliated Newsfluencers

As identified by Hurcombe, Schapals, Holton, and Belair-Gagnon, as well as the Pew Research Center, there exists two sub-groups within newsfluencers: those who have been affiliated with a traditional news organization and those who are completely independent (Pew Research Center., 2024). The Center’s study on American news influencers found that 77% are non-affiliated and have no professional journalism education or background (2024). Further, they found that non-affiliated newsfluencers have varying backgrounds prior to establishing their platforms, are more likely to state their political stance, and one-in-five will discuss their identification with certain values online. These values include showing support to LGBTQIA2S+ rights or identifying as such, and expressing an opinion on abortion. Furthermore, non-affiliated newsfluencers are more likely to engage in parasocial relationships and manage their fan communities, as well as being more likely to participate on sites like TikTok and YouTube (Pew Research Center, 2024). Lastly, non-affiliated newsfluencers are more likely to monetize content and actually earn more online than their affiliated counterparts. In this research, I focus solely on non-affiliated newsfluencers as they exist further outside the boundaries of traditional journalism and will

provide key information on the rise of non-traditional, untrained actors who are actively transforming the “activity” of journalism.

In summary, newsfluencers have emerged on social media as non-traditional actors producing news content for increasingly large audiences; one-in-five U.S. adults (21%) report regularly getting their news from newsfluencers (Pew Research Center, 2025). This section provided an in-depth understanding of newsfluencers by dissecting Hurcombe’s (2024) portmanteau. I outlined influencers as online personalities that use self-branding and marketing techniques to advertise lifestyles or products to their audiences. Then, I discussed implicit interlopers (Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018) and peripheral actors (Schapals, 2022) to frame newsfluencers as a continuation in this outsider group. My research will build on this understanding to further conceptualize and understand how newsfluencers produce content, gain audiences, and operate in the journalistic field.

2.3 PLATFORMIZATION, CRITIQUES, AND CONTENT

MODERATION

Now that I have defined the key terminology surrounding non-traditional journalistic actors and argued that their position presents challenges to the established boundaries of journalism as a profession, I will expand on the literature discussing platforms crucial to newsfluencers’ success. Social media, the consequent process of platformization, and the affordances of said platforms relates to my overall objectives as I aim to determine how SMI practices enable newsfluencers to build audiences, as well as identify how newsfluencers can obtain audience-approved legitimacy via traditional professional journalism practices on unregulated platforms.

2.3.1 Platforms, The Platformization of the News, and Algorithms

User-participation through Web 2.0—the Internet as a medium of user participation—allowed for the rise of platforms. As discussed earlier, platforms are “infrastructures that can be programmed and built on”, focusing specifically on their *reprogrammability* and economic model that directly connects users to advertisers (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 244). Platforms are also the “active *mediators* between users, technologies and content” as defined (and emphasized) by José van Dijck (2013). To reiterate, platforms are more complex than social networking sites, which are “web-based services” in which users can “construct a public or semi-public profile”, build “a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and” view other users’ lists (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). Instead, platforms are programmable, “computational and architectural concepts” that establish connection, user interactions, and cultural production (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck, 2013, p. 142; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018; Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

Platforms have been studied from information systems, economic, and media studies perspectives: as Helmond and Fernando N. van der Vlist (2019) argue, I utilize all three perspectives to mitigate the contemporary programmability and social use of platforms. In information systems, platforms are “extensible codebases of software-based systems that provide functionality to connected apps and services” (Helmond & van der Vlist, 2019, p. 7). As an economic model, platforms are “multi-sided markets that mediate the interactions between multiple stakeholder groups” (p. 7). Lastly, platforms are critically considered “non-neutral intermediaries” in media studies (p. 7).

In the late 2000s, external websites and applications started integrating platforms into their code—or “enabling their programmability” (Helmond, 2015, p. 1)—by using a software

interface that allows two software components to communicate, or an Application Programming Interface (API). With this implementation, platforms gradually gained internet dominance. For example, *WaPo* allows users to sign in or create an account on their site through a user's account on the platform, Facebook. In the past, *WaPo* featured 'like' buttons on articles that were linked to a user's Facebook account. The API that communicates between Facebook and *WaPo* creates a digital relationship reliant upon Facebook's infrastructure (Helmond, 2015). Thus, Helmond (2015) argues that platforms have risen to be the "dominant infrastructure and economic model of the social web" and calls this process "platformization", or "the transition of social network *sites* into social media *platforms*" (p. 3).

Social media are "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (UGC) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media, like social networking sites, provide individuals with "networked structures and mechanisms" that connect users "with mutual values, concerns or interest" and affords collaboration (Witschge, et al., 2016, p. 82). Social media allows consumption and participation, creating prosumers (a consumer that also produces media content) who are able to shape, appropriate, and reinterpret media messages (Witschge, et al., 2016). Such platforms include traditional social networking sites like Facebook or X, UGC sites such as YouTube, "and knowledge production sites (KPS) including Google Scholar and Wikipedia" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 45).

With this understanding of platformization, the issue of consumers transitioning to platforms can be reevaluated: platforms have *led* consumers away through the *platformization* of the news. Platformization is the process through which social media platforms and social media logics dictate news production (Foxman, et al., 2024; Dvir-Gvirsman & Tsurriel, 2022;

Hutchinson, 2019). Though Helmond initially acknowledges platformization as the process of platforms gaining dominance, van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal (2018) note that the “ascent of social media platforms as central actors in the news sphere should be seen in the light of the evolution of platformization” (p. 51). Essentially, platforms have continued gaining dominance over cultural and institutional elements, including the news.

As previously stated, Web 2.0 and computerization commercially impacted traditional news production, whereby “distribution and revenue models suffered from the rise of search engines, news aggregators, and classified advertisement websites” (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018, p. 51). Platforms “have taken on some of the functions of the traditional news media, from newsgathering to publication” (Hermida, 2018, p. 498). As argued by van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, platforms only represent one of the challenges/opportunities facing contemporary journalism: “on social media everyone can share news or other content from anyone and from anywhere” (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018, p. 52). Others include search engines that disrupt news and advertising and news aggregators that collect news content from a variety of sources and “rebundle” said information (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018, p. 52). Social media platforms anchor this research, as newsfluencers operate on platforms based on this lowered barrier of entry into news production.

Algorithms

Social media platforms employ computerized algorithms that “make decisions and take actions about what to selectively show, filter out, emphasize, or diminish” based on the platforms’ “rules or criteria” (Diakopoulos, 2019, p. 21). News organizations, independent journalists, and newsfluencers alike rely on algorithms as “a way to distribute content to audiences” (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020, p. 27; Zantal-Wiener, 2021). As a part of platformization,

news content is often optimized by the distributor to suit the algorithm based on social media logic (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020). For example, newsfluencers can utilize hashtags to direct their content and appeal to algorithm filters on platforms like Instagram or TikTok (e.g., #news, #breakingnews).

With algorithms and platforms dictating audience engagement, news organizations are no longer the authority as the landscape is increasingly crowded, and distribution is impossible to control (Waisbord, 2018). Social media has a direct “influence on editorial decision making” and has encouraged news organizations to hire influencer consultants or influencers themselves (e.g., *WaPo*’s Star Talent Unit laid off about 100 public relations workers to make room for personalities and content creators [Ruderman, 2025]) to compete in the media ecosystem. In summary, news platformization and social media algorithms posed significant challenges for traditional media to maintain viewership, consequently setting the stage for newsfluencers to fill in the gap and have success with modern audiences.

2.3.2 ‘Real’ Versus Fake News and Other Critiques

Post-truth is “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeal to emotion and personal belief” (Carlson, 2018, p. 1879). The late 2010s saw the rise of a ‘post-truth era:’ a widespread observation of public discourse that critiqued the media and boasted a lack of the public’s belief in the truth. While a descriptive term, Carlson (2018) argues that post-truth “is not a proper analytical term with a developed history... but a popular term invoked as a sense-making lens for a series of troublesome developments” (p. 1881).

These ‘troublesome developments’ saw other terms introduced into the mainstream, including fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. Fake news is the “manipulation of

information” either “through the production of false information, or the distortion of true information”, and is often sensationalized and distributed in an official news format on social media like Facebook or X (Aïmeur, Amri, & Brassard, 2023, p. 30; Muhammed & Mathew, 2022). Misinformation is “information which is fake or misleading and spreads unintentionally”, prevalent online and seen as a global risk by the World Economic Forum after the 2016 U.S. federal election (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022, p. 271). While the terms misinformation and disinformation are often used interchangeably, disinformation refers to “information that is fake or misleading” but is spread *intentionally* (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022, p. 271; Tucker, et al., 2018). Platforms have “increasingly grown in power and influence and [have] acted as a medium to accelerate sociopolitical movements” (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022, p. 272). Participation on social media often involves the spread of information, as seen with the ‘post-truth era,’ and platformized news is no exception. The spread of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation pose a risk to journalists’ and newsfluencers’ work and the audience’s overall trust in journalism (Waisbord, 2018; Nielsen & Graves, 2017).

There are also other risks with platformized news, such as echo chambers and polarization, that “may limit [a user’s] exposure to diverse perspectives” in favour of “the formation of groups of like-minded users” that reinforce “a shared narrative” (Cinelli, et al., 2021, p. 1). The echo-chamber effect occurs when “repetitive exposure to contents that coincides” with a user or group’s “pre-existing beliefs” increases the “believability and shareability of content”, and as a result, potentially move the “group toward more extreme positions” (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022, p. 272; Cinelli, et al., 2021, p. 1). Echo chambers are fueled by confirmation bias, which “is the tendency of” an individual “to support information that reinforces” their pre-existing beliefs and often neglects opposing perspectives (Muhammed

& Mathew, 2022, p. 272). Polarization is the division of a group's political attitudes towards opposing ideologies, often extreme public opinions (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996). Since social media allows for the sharing of information and ability to connect online, "exposure to like-minded media increases polarization" (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021, p. 195; Tucker, et al., 2018).

Scholars and media professionals have warned audiences that social media actors have the potential to spread misinformation and disinformation, as well as pose issues to the traditional practice of news (N'tchoreret-Mbiamany, 2025). Along with critiques of their legitimacy, newsfluencers as sources of information can produce such harms, though there is little existing research on any 'bad' actors. Journalistic professionalism and ethics are structured to limit such harms to the audience; thus, my objectives aim to determine what methods newsfluencers use to maintain credibility that may align with those of journalists or be platform specific.

2.3.3 Political Content Policies on Social Media Platforms

In his book *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*, Tarleton Gillespie (2018) considers moderation an element of defining platforms: "platforms do, and must, moderate the content and activity of users, using some logistics of detection, review, and enforcement" (p. 21). A response to the post-truth era and rise in false information, most social media platforms have specific policies in place to moderate the content available on their sites, including user-report processes and penalties for offending accounts. While journalists typically publish their work for news organizations that uphold certain standards or have had significant professional training, the only formal regulations for non-affiliated newsfluencers—and other social media actors—are content

moderation policies. One of my objectives is to determine how non-affiliated newsfluencers build and sustain a relationship of trust with their audiences, therefore, I must examine these policies as they impact both users and creators.

Political content, according to Instagram, refers to content posted to social media platforms that discusses laws, “governments, elections or social topics that affect many people” (Instagram, n.d.-a). In response to fake news claims over the 2010s and the failure of Facebook to regulate false stories leading up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Garrett, 2019), many platforms have continued to improve or rework their political content policies. Gillespie (2018) states:

Platforms must, in some form or another, moderate: both to protect one user from another, or one group from its antagonists, and to remove the offensive, vile, or illegal—as well as to present their best face to new users, to their advertisers and partners, and to the public at large. (p. 5)

As of 2016, Meta used independent fact checking organizations to moderate content across its platforms (Facebook and Instagram) (Kaplan, 2025). However, in February of 2024, the company announced that it would cease to push content about politics and social issues on its platforms Instagram and Threads. Instead, Meta introduced the ability for individual control of the amount of political content in their algorithms in early 2025, completed through the Content Preferences section under the Settings of the platform (Meta, 2025a). This move was done under the guise of creating ‘free speech’ and exercising user autonomy on their platforms. However, an open platform is a “fantasy. There is no platform that does not impose rules, to some degree” (Gillespie, 2018, p. 5).

Furthermore, Meta executive, Adam Mosseri, stated that Meta platforms are no longer actively recommending political content from accounts unfollowed by the user (Darcy, 2024; Instagram, 2024). Some news content creators and political activists created an open letter to

Meta, arguing that this policy negatively impacts the ability for content creators (especially marginalized creators) to successfully reach their/an audience (Lorenz, 2024). The letter suggested that instead of such policies being default settings, users should be able to opt-in to political content restrictions (Lorenz, 2024). As of January 2025, Meta is phasing political content recommendations back into users’ algorithms. However, the company is no longer using third party fact checkers in the U.S. but is “moving to a Community Notes program” modelled after regulation on the platform X. This Community Notes program intends to allow platform users access to content control: “contributing users” will write and rate Community Notes that “require agreement between people with a range of perspectives to help prevent biased ratings” (Meta, 2025b). This self-regulation makes invisible the labour of content moderators who, “on behalf of the firms that solicit user participation”, screen “hundreds of pieces of” uploaded content on social media and decide which posts follow policy guidelines (Roberts, 2019, p. 1; Gillespie, 2018, p. 112). Sarah Roberts (2019) argues that moderation requires “human intervention” in order to curate safe or enjoyable online activity (p. 220). See Table 2 for a comparison of platform content policies and enforcement.

Table 2

Content Policies per Social Media Platform.

Platform	Content Policy (as of May, 2025)	Prohibited Content	Penalties	Source
Facebook	Community Notes program	Posts containing false or misleading information. Some posts containing election or political information.	Content that violates is removed. Individuals can appeal this decision.	https://about.fb.com/news/2025/01/meta-more-speech-fewer-mistakes/

				https://transparency.meta.com/policies/ad-standards/siep-advertising/siep
Instagram	Community Notes program	Posts containing false or misleading information. Some posts containing election or political information.	Content that violates is removed. Individuals can appeal this decision.	https://about.fb.com/news/2025/01/meta-more-speech-fewer-mistakes/ https://transparency.meta.com/policies/ad-standards/siep-advertising/siep
TikTok	Use independent fact-checking partners to check for misinformation that may cause harm.	Ads featuring political content are not monetized. Politicians and political parties are not able to advertise. Misinformation that may cause harm. Creator content endorsing politicians or branded political content do not receive compensation or promotional tools.	Removes content that violates content rules.	https://ads.tiktok.com/help/article/tiktok-ads-policy-politics-religion-and-culture https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/ https://ads.tiktok.com/help/article/tiktok-ads-policy-politics-religion-and-culture/?lang=en
X	Use a 'cross-functional team' to judge case-by-case. Has a Trust & Safety Council for policy creation. Global reviews teams.	Allows promotion of political advertising and campaigns (in the U.S. but not in Canada). News publishers that meet exemption criteria can run ads that refer to political content but cannot advocate for or against the	Posts may be removed. Individuals may be DMed by the X team. Individual's account(s) may be deactivated. Placing a visible notice on a post. Withholding content from certain ages.	https://business.x.com/en/help/ads-policies/ads-content-policies/political-content https://help.x.com/en/rules-and-policies/enforcement-options

		subjects. News content that has an impact on the public, has a legitimate source, and the coverage is only available on platforms are allowed.	Withholding posts/ accounts from a specific country.	
YouTube	Automated detection and human reporting.	Content that violates Community Guidelines, including election content. Misinformation (candidate eligibility, voter suppression, incitement to interfere with democratic processes).	Removal of violating content.	https://www.youtube.com/howyoutubeworks/our-policies/#community-guidelines https://www.youtube.com/intl/ALL_ca/howyoutubeworks/our-commitments/supporting-political-integrity/

Note. Data collected as of June 2025.

Political content policies—while potentially harmful to creator success due to algorithm shadowbanning, suppression, or censorship—are meant to protect audiences from fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. Shadowbanning is “a unique content moderation strategy” where platforms invisibly remove or de-promote certain content (e.g., posts) through their algorithms (Delmonaco, et al., 2024, p. 1). Shadowbanning has reportedly negatively impacted minority communities, decreasing their content outreach (Delmonaco, et al., 2024). This is especially important when creators who produce content that impacts minority communities (e.g., newsfluencers who post stories about police brutality) are unable to reach those audiences.

Overall, content moderation policies differ between platforms and may cause consequences for creators of political content that impact their ability to gain followers or upload according to their self-brand.

2.4 CONCLUSION

My literature review grounds newsfluencers in existing research on non-traditional journalistic actors, positioning them during an evolutionary journalism moment due to the rise of social media as a major medium for audience news consumption and resultant news platformization. Despite the media coverage on this shift and newsfluencer popularity, academic research is still limited on this group. Thus, my research aims to contribute to this significant literature gap on newsfluencers, especially non-affiliated actors and those located in Canada as I have found no scholarship on Canadian creators thus far. In their work on peripheral actors, Schapals, Phoebe Maares, and Folker Hanusch (2019) posit that “the vast majority of [non-traditional journalistic actor] scholarship tends to be based on single-nation case studies, with a particular focus on the US” (p. 20). Ultimately, I offer perspectives from both Canadian and U.S. actors, contributing to established U.S. literature and bringing Canada into the conversation. The next Chapter discusses the theoretical framework I will apply to newsfluencers to bring them into context with the journalistic field and its boundaries.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

In the previous chapter, the literature review, I discussed a brief history depicting how journalism and the news industry have changed up until the social media platform takeover, which allowed non-traditional actors (e.g., individuals who have no professional journalism training) to produce news content and establish large audiences. I further elaborated on this platformization transition and provided a robust definition of the non-traditional actors, including newsfluencers, that emerged. With this review, I found that classifications of non-traditional actors employ definitions based on their role outside of journalism, demarcating them as non-journalists. Further, I determined that newsfluencers' inherent social media position challenges traditional media, thus creating a competition for news audiences.

My theoretical framework is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's (1971; 1972/2008) concept of field theory as it is applied to the journalism profession. Additionally, I use Thomas F. Gieryn's (1983; 1999) boundary work and Matt Carlson and Seth C. Lewis' (2019) expansion into journalism boundaries. These lenses engage in themes of classification and legitimacy/authority, which will be used to interpret the data collected from my interviews.

3.1 COMPETING IN THE JOURNALISTIC FIELD

To understand how newsfluencers compete in the journalistic field, I position them as transformative emerging agents that challenge traditional rules. Field theory is prominent in journalism studies (Tandoc, 2012), "employed to investigate the differentiation of the journalistic field, its constraints, and technologically-induced change, as well its social structures and power relations" (Hanusch & Maares, 2020, p. 737). French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1971; 1972/2008) examines *field* as a social space made up of agents that occupy positions in relation

to the field and compete for better positions and/or power (1972/2008; 1997; 1990; 2005). Power is the material (economic) or symbolic (form of material power when viewed through social categories that make them legitimate and reinforced by authority) advantages an individual or institution possesses (Pellandini-Simányi, 2014; Christensen, 2023). Field is an “autonomous domain of activity that responds to rules of functioning and institutions that are specific to it and which define the relations among the agents” (Hilgers & Mangez, 2014, p. 5). Journalism, for example, is a field (Tandoc, 2012). Within the social world, fields possess a certain degree of autonomy from each other: in each field exists a relational space with rules, yet the proximity of a field to other fields—and a field’s construction of power or influence—can shape an agents’ ability to act advantageously (i.e., participate in a field’s “economy of exchange and reward”) as they move between them (Hilgers & Mangez, 2014; Thomson, 2012; Leander, 2009; Benson, 1999, p. 464).

Bourdieu referred to social life as a game, like a football game, where the *field* “consisted of positions occupied by agents (people or institutions) and what happens on/in the field is consequently boundaried”, meaning that there are limits on the actions of an agent shaped by “the conditions of the field” and “rules of the game” (Thomson, 2012, p. 67; Bourdieu, 2005; Benson, 1999, p. 464). Such conditions can be found through the structuring of *habitus*, another concept from Bourdieu, that explains an individual’s or group’s habitual thinking and acting as “formed through the accumulated experience of people” (Leander, 2009, p. 3) and their *capital* (Thomson, 2012; Maton, 2012). “Interactions, transactions and events” occur through fields, and the ‘game’ becomes competitive as agents try to improve their position (Thomson, 2012, p. 67). Positions are determined “by the distribution of economic, social, and cultural capital”; the

ability of an agent to accumulate and reinvest capital; and are transformed “across different fields” (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017, p. 952; Moore, 2013, p. 99).

Capital, according to Bourdieu, “is accumulated labor” (2011, p. 78) in its material form (such as collected knowledge or skills) that an individual or group “can mobilize to develop influence, gain power, or bargain other elements of this collection” (Neveu, 2018, p. 347). Examples of capital include having important relations like an influential network (social capital), having access to higher education or ‘good taste’ (cultural capital), having a prestigious or recognizable status like that of a socialite (symbolic capital), and having financial assets (economic capital) (Neveu, 2018; Moore, 2013; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). Field theory “assumes that actors are willing to compete” in the struggles over capital “because they believe it is worth it (*illusio*) and at the same time, they do not question the rules (*doxa*) that organise it within the field” (Maares & Hanusch, 2020, p. 739).

‘Taste’ is further explored by Bourdieu (1979) as a critique of those in possession of great cultural capital. These individuals or groups participate in determining what aesthetic goods or values correlate with ‘good taste,’ thereby constructing what visibly and socially distinguishes between lower (less cultural capital) and higher classes (more cultural capital) in society (Bourdieu, 1979). Such a distinction of ‘taste’ also represents the limitations of habitus. As *influencers*, newsfluencers possess taste and multiple forms of capital that contribute to their field movement. I apply the concept of field to the journalism industry as it is a social space (made up of news organizations, digital organizations, and freelance workers) with agents (journalists, news workers, and non-traditional actors) that compete for better positions using their capital. I use field, capital, and taste to map how newsfluencers enter and change the

journalistic field. As previously cited, Schapals (2022) states that non-traditional agents “are neither inside nor outside the journalistic field” but “sit at its periphery” (p. 16).

The journalistic field engages “agents who possess high volumes of capital” as it is a field of cultural production (a social space that produces cultural goods like literature or art) with little autonomy (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Bourdieu 1996; 2005). While the field has its own laws, it is a “microcosm set within the macrocosm”: journalism is dependent upon other fields to continue cultural production, seen through current economic constraints due to the loss of advertisement revenue for traditional news organizations and its relationship with the audience (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 5; Bourdieu, 2005; Bourdieu, 1998). Building on Bourdieu’s theory, Rodney Benson (1999) investigates the microcosm and macrocosm issue (Maares & Hanusch, 2020). Benson argues that, while journalism is subject to homogeneity from surrounding institutions that hold power, Bourdieu’s concepts of competition, cultural capital, and autonomy provide a better understanding of agents’ positions in the field and what occurs internally and externally.

Building on Benson’s application of field to understand how agents move and compete, Ida Schultz (2007) uses field theory and doxa to explain journalistic practices and values (like deciding what is newsworthy) as discussed in Chapter 2. For journalists, the ‘game’ follows the 24-hour news cycle and begins over again each day with little continuation from the day before: however, news work is quite “routinised” (Schultz, 2007, p. 192). Journalists navigate the busy day-to-day by “a practical mastering of the news game involving a strong, bodily sense of newsworthiness” or an exercise of habitus (an agent knows the ‘rules’ of the journalism ‘game’) (Schultz, 2007, p. 193). Agents’ capital dictates their position within news organizations or news production (e.g., an editor has more capital than an intern). Jan F. Hovden (2012) identifies

journalistic capital as capital specific to the journalistic field that categorizes news workers hierarchically (Schultz, 2007). Lastly, Schultz describes the norms of journalistic practice as ‘journalistic doxa’ (Bourdieu, 2005), or the “set of professional beliefs which tend to appear as evident, natural and self-explaining” (2012, p. 194). This doxa is a learned skill that differentiates agents (those with more capital or experience have journalistic doxa ingrained).

To further understand the roles of agents in the journalistic field, Hovden (2012) highlights role stratification and boundaries of journalism (Hanusch & Maares, 2020). Through analysis of responses from Norwegian journalists from a questionnaire regarding field structure, Hovden finds two hierarchical divisions between news workers: 1) “division of seniority” (older versus younger journalist) and “field-specific capital”; and 2) “internal division separating journalists according to their volume of journalistic (symbolic) capital” (those who have more awards, degrees, or general prestige) (2012, p. 62). The field is also changing with audience influence, as argued by Edson C. Tandoc (2014). The internet and social media have increased interactions between journalists and audience members as Web analytics (data from website visitors) provide a wealth of feedback (Tandoc, 2014). Journalists can use this information to cater content toward the audience’s preferences; however, this goes against journalism ethics (Tandoc, 2014; Christians, et al., 2009).

Similar to Schultz (2007), Hovden (2012), and Tandoc (2014), I apply field and Bourdieu’s other concepts to newsfluencers to gain an in-depth understanding of how newsfluencers gain capital and compete in the journalistic field. Abidin (2018a) refers to Bourdieu’s framework of capital in order to understand influence on social media. Capital explains how a society judges taste, expresses “aesthetic dispositions, and assign(s) status and distinction towards different social behaviours” (Abidin, 2018a, p. 23). Applying capital and

taste to influencers, these agents hold economic capital (monetization from social media), cultural capital (they ‘influence’ the audience based on what products they deem as ‘good’), and symbolic capital (a prestigious position from a large platform audience). Since newsfluencers operate in the journalistic field and as influencers, they can possess capital that contributes to their position from outside of journalistic capital (e.g., unlike editors, they may not need to seek advertising revenue). As well, newsfluencers increase the field struggles for other agents as they challenge journalistic doxa and practices, contributing to potential tension from news workers. They also possess habitus from outside of the field (e.g., mastering of influencer ‘rules’) that other agents may not have, which impacts their approach to news production and challenges the already-established journalistic ‘laws.’

3.2 INSIDE/OUTSIDE OF JOURNALISM BOUNDARIES

Field theory allows me to examine the competition between newsfluencers and traditional actors in the journalistic field based on agents’ abilities (or lack thereof) to adapt and transform their positions. Yet to explore questions of legitimacy and further understand the practices that dictate journalism as a profession, I draw on the concept of “boundary work” to further establish the theoretical lines mitigating between social media and journalism domains and actors. Thomas F. Gieryn (1983, 1999) is credited with “the most explicit attempt to conceptualize boundaries” via the concept of boundary work (Carlson & Lewis, 2019, p. 124). Gieryn first discussed boundary work as a method of “demarcation” (1983, p. 781) within the institution of science and scientific epistemology, aiming to understand “how groups establish epistemic authority that is recognized by others not in the group” (Carlson & Lewis, 2019, p. 124). Though it is rooted in the sociology of science, boundary work is an ideological analysis for professions or occupations across a variety of disciplines (1983). I further refer to Matt Carlson and Seth C. Lewis (2019) who have

expanded upon Gieryn and other scholars' understanding of boundary work to identify journalism boundaries.

Drawing boundaries—specifically social boundaries—creates distinctions and relationships between agents, such as identifying “between ‘us’ and ‘them’ or ‘this’ and ‘not this’” (Carlson & Lewis, 2019, p. 124). Carlson and Lewis identify boundaries as important to the structuring of classification systems (e.g., boundaries inform the “moral sorting of society”, or classification, that contributes to hierarchies of power) and the study of professions and professionalization (e.g., professions are exclusive domains that allow membership based on certain cultural or regulatory apparatuses, thus boundaries permit “the acceleration of professionalization within a field”) (2019, p. 124; Bishop, 2004, p. 32). Gieryn outlined “three reasons why members of a profession build and maintain boundaries” (Bishop, 2004, p. 33), stating that:

(a) when the goal is *expansion* of authority or expertise into domains claimed by other professions or occupations, boundary-work heightens the contrast between rivals in ways flattering to the ideologist's side; (b) when the goal is *monopolization* of professional authority and resources, boundary-work excludes rivals from within by defining them as outsiders with labels such as “pseudo,” “deviant,” or “amateur”; (c) when the goal is *protection of autonomy* over professional activities boundary-work exempts members from responsibility for consequences of their work by putting the blame on scapegoats from outside. (Gieryn, 1983, pp. 791-792)

These reasons, referred to by Gieryn (1999) as genres of a competition between authorities for credibility, were further developed into a model of genres that divides the goals of boundary work (Carlson & Lewis, 2019). These genres are: 1) *expulsion* defines the contest between two authorities who both seek to legitimize their claims within their profession, thus boundary work becomes a form of control that places borders on what agents can deem legitimate and forms who can *belong* within the boundary; 2) *expansion* describes when two or more authorities attempt to make claims on a domain that others have already claimed; and 3)

protection of autonomy occurs when others *outside* of the boundary (e.g., politicians) attempt to assert their own claims (Gieryn, 1999). These genres explain how and why boundaries are upheld in order to push out actors that are not deemed credible, which can be applied to and establish the boundaries of other professions, like journalism.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the professionalization of journalism (whereby journalism evolved as a profession in the 20th century with distinct codes of ethics, norms, and values) has produced boundaries around news forms, practices, and the participation of the public (Carlson & Lewis, 2019). Initially, Samuel P. Winch (1997) applied boundary work to journalism as the boundaries between news and entertainment blurred; journalism became playful in order to reach audiences which deviated from professional norms. Building on Winch's argument that the boundaries of journalism are shifting, Ronald Bishop (1999) explored the differences of what constitutes a legitimate news professional versus an illegitimate actor, comparing news workers and paparazzi. Winch and Bishop both employ case studies to argue that journalism as a profession is being changed, a theme that has emerged in scholarship as the boundaries blur with the constant introduction of new actors and mediums.

More recently, journalism scholars have applied boundary work to digital journalism, which required journalists to develop new skills and obscured the separation of audiences and news workers. The introduction of social media and digital mediums to the profession has further extrapolated boundaries and required journalistic authorities to re-evaluate the borders that dictate membership and legitimacy, seen through boundary management and defence (Carlson & Lewis, 2019; Revers, 2013). Boundary management, as posited by Matthias Revers (2013), is a form of boundary maintenance seen through boundary performances that assert "professional boundaries" which can "signal affirmation of symbols or professionalism or opposition to

symbols of *unprofessionalism*” and boundary blurring that creates cooperative platforms between members and illegitimate actors (p. 39).

Similarly, Tong’s (2017) boundary defence sees journalists define themselves by emphasizing their experience and work as professionals. Carlson and Lewis (2019) note that such boundary management work is pushing towards a “boundary evolution” where journalists and professionals should reconsider gatekeeping, the ongoing profession changes, and what constitutes a professional. They argue that, since a primary function of boundaries is to demarcate access to the profession, technological advancements lower the barrier to entry into journalism/news making, especially for marginalized groups (Carlson & Lewis, 2019). My research objectives aim to understand how newsfluencers appeal to news audiences despite being (or perhaps because they are) ‘strangers,’ inherently marking them as beyond the boundaries of journalism. Thus, I focus on this evolution, specifically how ‘outside’ agents (newsfluencers) permeate, expand, and regulate such borders.

Platformization has transformed the practice of sharing news stories, reflecting how conflicts over boundaries and boundary work have developed. This includes “struggles over who gets to claim authority, status, and control” (Carlson & Lewis, 2019, p. 126). Carlson and Lewis (2019) break down boundary work based on the involvement of such actors, applying Gieryn’s goal-model concept to the boundaries of journalism, proposing a typology divided into three categories: *participants*, *practices*, and *propositions*. See Table 3 from Carlson and Lewis (2019) which applies Gieryn’s (1999) general concept of expansion, expulsion, and protection of

autonomy to Carlson and Lewis’ (2019) journalism boundary work that maps the actors involved in boundary-making.

Table 3

Journalistic Boundary Work Typology.

	<i>Expansion</i>	<i>Expulsion</i>	<i>Protection of Autonomy</i>
Participants	Actors accepted as journalists	Actors rejected as journalists	Actors outside of journalism perceived as threats
Practices	Actions accepted as journalistic	Actions rejected as journalistic	Actions outside of journalism perceived as threats
Propositions	Norms/beliefs/ideas accepted as journalistic	Norms/beliefs/ideas rejected as journalistic	Norms/beliefs/ideas perceived as threats to journalism

Note. Adapted from “Boundary Work”, by M. Carlson and S. C. Lewis, 2019, p. 127. Copyright 2019 by Routledge.

This typology focuses on the actors or competing authorities, “the means by which actors work, and the shared beliefs that support this work” (Carlson & Lewis, 2019, p. 126). For example, objectivity within news production falls under *propositions*; using this boundary work lens (categorizing under *expansion*, *expulsion*, or *protection of autonomy*) will answer questions regarding “the resilience or hindrances” of that norm or belief (Carlson & Lewis, 2019, p. 127). With such an understanding, boundary work can ascertain the stability of journalism as a *field*, as well as identify and discuss different actors, their motivations, audience participation, and newsgathering methods (Carlson & Lewis, 2019).

In Chapter 2, I discussed a taxonomy of terminology that scholars have constructed to refer to non-professional or non-traditional journalists (e.g., news influencers), including the understanding that these actors are ‘outsiders’ to journalism. Such terms included peripheral actors who are neither inside or outside the journalistic field but sit at the peripheral; explicit interlopers; and strangers. *Expulsion* is consistent within journalism boundary studies, for example, the language that Gieryn uses to describe non-professionals as “outside”, “scapegoats”, “deviant”, or “amateur” informs many conceptions of ‘outsiders’ (1983, pp. 791-792). In this research, I primarily focus on the exclusionary aspect of boundary work as described in Gieryn’s second reason for maintaining and building boundaries, (b) *monopolization*, and explore any data that correlates to the third, (c) *protection of autonomy*. Though the borders drawn by professionals and the legitimacy that they authorize are often used to expel ‘outsiders,’ this research will use boundary work to examine journalism as a *thing* (as argued by Carlson and Lewis) that is subject to change amid internal and external challenges, and move beyond differentiation to accentuate the values shared by those in the peripheral (Eldridge, 2019).

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This research focuses on understanding how newsfluencers blur and challenge the traditional boundaries of journalism and news dissemination to gain the viewership of contemporary audiences. The literature review introduced the historical context of social media as the contemporary medium for news content, posing the issue of legitimacy that pushes non-traditional actors to the edges of news work. I discussed terms that defined journalistic outsiders prior to introducing a robust overview of U.S. newsfluencers and a subsection on non-affiliated newsfluencers, then explained news platformization as it pertains to social media platforms as a news medium. As well, I included scholarship on platform critiques that can be applied to newsfluencers since they are viewed as non-journalists. Further, I outlined the theoretical framework that guides this research, consisting of Bourdieu's field theory (1971, 1972/2008) and Gieryn's boundary work (1983, 1999) as understood by Carlson and Lewis (2019). The journalistic field informs the competition between journalists and non-traditional actors, and the unique capital possessed by newsfluencers that assists their navigation and challenging of the rules of the field. Lastly, journalism boundaries explain how actors with authority or legitimacy (professional news workers) create barriers around the profession that prevent others from entering.

The intent of this research is to prioritize non-affiliated newsfluencer perspectives in the exploration of blurring journalism boundaries, thus I employed a qualitative methodology: in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Data collection took place between January and May of 2025, primarily working around the participants' busy posting and researching schedules (e.g., during

the 2025 Canadian federal election, post-2024 U.S. federal election and continuous executive order updates). In total, I collected data from and conducted interviews with six newsfluencer participants.

4.1.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method that allows for participants to speak in-depth about their own experiences and provides avenues for new topics or information not conceived by the researcher prior to the research (Cook, 2008). Semi-structured interviews encourage informal, free-ranging conversation and participant-led discussion “without the researcher’s use of predetermined, focused, short-answer questions” (Choi & Roulston, 2018; Cook, 2008, para. 1). Interviews are conducted one-on-one and typically last one hour (Adams, 2015). Per semi-structured style, I created an interview guide with questions to probe and direct the conversation (Cook, 2008; Adams, 2015), but follow-up questions were formulated relative to participants’ answers (Choi & Roulston, 2018). By allowing my participants to guide the conversation, I have gained valuable insight on how they perceive their role and the dynamics surrounding news content creation. This method also simulates journalism practices, as interviews are “the central activity in modern journalism... [through] which reporters and feature writers gather their material” (Hicks, 2001).

Current literature on newsfluencers have utilized multiple methods, including profile-style interviews (Knight Center, 2024), surveys (Pew Research Center, 2024), social media content analysis (Pew Research Center, 2024), and case studies (Hurcombe, 2024). SMI research also utilizes multiple methods such as content analysis and interviews, though a lot of this literature focuses on the marketing ability of influencers (De Veirman, et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Schouten, et al., 2020; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014; Jiménez-Castillo &

Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Harrigan, et al., 2021). Other scholars that introduced heavily cited definitions of SMIs like Karen Freberg, et al. (2011) used the California Q-sort, while Abidin (2015; 2016) conducted participant observation, fieldwork, interviews, archival research, and visual and textual analysis. Early research on this group included interviews and ethnography (Senft, 2008). Likewise, journalism studies are a multidisciplinary field that employs multiple research methods, including in-depth interviews, surveys, observation, and focus groups (Palacios & Díaz Noci, 2009; Conboy, 2013). Digital journalism has prompted the use of new methods from other fields like information sciences, such as textual analysis and automated data scraping, as well as case studies, content analysis, link analysis, and ethnography (Sjøvaag & Karlsson, 2016).

For newsfluencers specifically, this method has been underused and will offer valuable insight as a unique study in a relatively unexplored area of research. Fundamentally, semi-structured interviews will allow for the perspectives or in-depth knowledge of the subject of study to be a key component of the research objective.

4.1.2 Recruitment and Sampling Strategies

Due to my specific participant criteria and the small population of potential participants (Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017), I used purposive and network (or snowball) sampling strategies to recruit participants. Purposive sampling is “used to select respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate or useful information” and produce efficient research results (Campbell, et al., 2020, pp. 653-654). Network sampling is a method to draw “statistically valid samples of hard-to-reach populations” through networking or referrals, whereby the researcher will begin with a small number of participants who are then asked to recommend other potential participants, creating a link (Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017, p. 101; Parker, et al., 2019).

Through purposive sampling, I compiled a list of over 40 Canadian and U.S. non-affiliated newsfluencers. I searched “news” on various social media platforms and filtered this search to ‘accounts,’ ‘tags,’ and ‘videos.’ I sorted through the results to find content produced by newsfluencers. A Google search of “newsfluencer” also brought forward several news articles discussing creators (e.g., “How News Influencers Are Reshaping Media” from Salcius, 2025) and social media profile links. A similar search on LinkedIn was later conducted. I also used the pool from the Pew Research Center’s American newsfluencer study (2024) of 2,058 newsfluencers. From these searches, I was able to locate the social media accounts and publicly available contact information (such as names and email addresses) of relevant creators who fit the criteria to participate in the research. Then, I looked through their profiles to find comments from other creators, collaborative content, and/or mutual followers (where a newsfluencer will follow or support other newsfluencers). Several newsfluencers, despite making their names available, did not have a public email address, which required me to message them from my personal social media account via DM.

As public figures and/or highly visible individuals, newsfluencers are consistently contacted by a number of sources (e.g., news media, scholars, or social media). Thus, I found it important to establish a network with referrals from my participants in order to become a noticeable and trusted link. Using snowball sampling, at the end of the interview(s), I asked participants to recommend peers or other non-affiliated newsfluencers they believed would be a potential participant. Some participants offered to facilitate contact between myself and potential participants, however, I first wrote a record of all of the suggested names. I then used this list to confirm they matched the participant criteria. I either emailed or sent a DM to the creator’s social

media account. One creator's social media account setting prevented DMs, so I sent the recruitment message through a contact form on their website.

4.1.3 Participants

Participants had to meet a specific inclusion criteria to be eligible for my research. As I am particularly interested in the perspectives of non-affiliated newsfluencers in North America, participants had to be based in Canada or the U.S. and have no news background or formal journalism training. Non-affiliated newsfluencers face increased delegitimization as they are further removed from traditional journalism than newsfluencers with professional experiences. As stated in Chapter 2, this perspective will provide deeper insight into the challenges both experienced and caused by newsfluencers blurring boundaries in the journalism field, as they have less professionalism and perhaps a different relationship with social media as a news medium. As well, I chose to interview participants in the U.S. and Canada as a majority of newsfluencer research has come from U.S. academics, but there is a significant scholarship gap in Canada despite the geographic proximity.

I received interest from nine creators and sent the ethics informed consent form to seven (see Appendix B). Three interviews were unable to be completed (one respondent had scheduling issues, one ceased replying, and one agreed to interview after the data collection period ended), so six total interviews were conducted (see Table 4).

Table 4*Participant Profiles.*

Name	Social Media Handle	Type of Content	# of Followers	Year Began	Career/ Background	Location
Frank Domenic	@thefrankdomenic or @frankdomenic	Canadian politics	~154,800	2021	Teacher, experience creating YouTube videos in university, internship at Chorus media	Canada
Brandon Chatman	@chxtman	U.S. politics and popular culture	~37,300	2024	Marketing manager with a public relations education (undergraduate journalism courses)	U.S.
Steve Boots	@steve_boots_	Canadian politics and video gaming	~273,500	2022	Former teacher, university student journalist, Stand-up comedy	Canada
Cole Bennett	@cole.notcole	Canadian (Alberta) politics	~181,700	2025	No prior news experience/full-time work in Alberta	Canada
Dara Starr Tucker	@daratuckerb or @darastarrtucker	U.S. politics and issues impacting the Black community	~1,223,000	2021	Radio show host, singer/songwriter	U.S.

George Lee	@theconsciouslee	U.S. politics and issues impacting minority communities	~3,457,000	2020	MA in education, degrees in African American and HR studies, top college debater, public speaker	U.S.
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Note. Data pulled from Instagram and TikTok as of June 2025.

4.1.4 Inclusivity

The Pew Research Center study on American newsfluencers found that 63% are male and 27% are more right-leaning (versus 21% left) (2024). To ensure a diverse participant pool, I contacted content creators who were right and/or left-leaning or who did not openly politically-identify online, as well as creators who belonged to multiple minority groups (e.g., identified as LGBTQIA2S+, Indigenous, or a person of colour). The final interviews included one woman, three people of colour, and two members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Though the participant pool is small, it does offer a range of perspectives that can be used to discuss themes regarding the role of newsfluencers in the broader media ecosystem.

4.2 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

4.2.1 Interview Process

Each participant agreed to use a video conferencing software, Zoom, for their interview. Though virtual, Zoom provided a direct and face-to-face opportunity for me and the participants to build rapport and assess non-verbal behaviour or body language (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013).

Most interviews were clear with minimal technical difficulties, though some instances required

the participant or me to repeat a question or answer. I sent a Zoom link and a copy of the informed consent form prior to the interview date. Interviews were only conducted after I received a signed copy of the form.

The interviews lasted between 33 and 54 minutes, with an average of 40 minutes, which fits within the parameters of semi-structured interviews. During the introduction, I welcomed each participant and thanked them for their participation. Then, I informed them about myself and the research purpose, reminded them of their ability to withdraw from the research or to stop the interview at any time, and acquired their consent to an audio recording. Before starting each audio recording, I asked if they had any questions for myself, about the research, or about the ethics consent form. I answered any questions, or if there were none, I launched into the interview questions using the interview guide.

After the last question, participants were asked if they had any comments they would like to make or final thoughts that we did not cover, allowing them to add any relevant or unfinished ideas. In closing, I obtained the preferred gift card merchant (either from the Apple or Google Play Store) of each participant and explained how the incentive of a \$20 CAD gift certificate would be received. As well, I asked each participant if they had any peers or collaborators that met the research criteria and would potentially be interested in participating. Most participants suggested a few names or offered to make a connection.

Interview Guide

The interview guide, a staple of semi-structured interviews, was initially planned during the ethics review process and submitted for approval from the York University research ethics board (REB). See Appendix A for the full interview guide. In order to determine the time commitment for participants, the guide provided a number of questions and potential follow-up questions so I

could calculate an approximate length (between 30 minutes and one hour). However, the inductive nature of semi-structured interviews resulted in additional questions being added to the guide, with a final total of 15 questions. Prior to the start of each interview, the guide was slightly altered based on the participants' backgrounds and public information. For example, I asked each participant about their platform use (e.g., does engagement differ from one platform to another?) and only listed the platforms on which they are active.

4.2.2 Transcription

Following each interview, I uploaded all recorded files from Zoom to a secure York University Microsoft365 drive (where I also stored all signed informed consent materials) and permanently deleted the original copies. Each interview was then transcribed using Microsoft Word and manually checked for accuracy. I removed any unnecessary repetition, assigned lines to the correct speakers, and amended any mistakes. Phrases, filler words like “um” or “uh,” and pauses were kept in the final transcript for data analysis purposes, though I edited these out to maintain flow in the quotations used for my findings. Lastly, I italicized words or phrases that were spoken emphatically and included notes when a participant laughed or took a long pause. After I transcribed each interview, the transcripts were coded.

4.2.3 Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis to analyse my transcript data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (or themes) within data to organize and describe the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As used by Maxwell Foxman, et al. (2024), I employ an inductive thematic analysis approach that allows “themes to emerge from” the data “without a priori assumptions, while targeting [my] specific research questions” (p. 520).

Inductive analysis is a qualitative, ‘data-driven’ approach where findings are sought “from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (Thomas, 2003, p. 2; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As outlined in Chapter 3, this work is grounded in field theory and boundary work which guided the creation of nine codes (with subcodes) prior to starting data analysis. These a priori codes were intended to categorize the data around identity; the content creation process; audience interactions and methods of building an audience; recurring feelings regarding their role and labour; their relations to journalism/journalists; how they self-positioned inside or outside of the field; how they establish themselves as trusted voices; and any difficulties they experienced entering the field (e.g., boundaries faced). A final six thematic categories emerged, which will be interpreted in Chapter 5: 1) Social Media Influencer Practices, 2) Audience: Interactions and Community, 3) Content Creation, 4) Newsfluencer Ethics: Trust and Transparency, 5) Identity: Not a Journalist, Not an Influencer, and 6) Discussions on Journalism and Belonging. Additionally, I applied inductive thematic analysis as the collected data produced unexpected themes due to the nature of semi-structured interviews.

Furthermore, to practice *knowing* (Braun & Clarke, 2022), I positioned myself during the analysis process as not only the researcher but an audience member to my participants, as well as a white Canadian cis-gendered woman. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2022) suggest this practice during thematic analysis so that researchers can “‘own’ their perspectives, both personal and theoretical” while being reflexive and deliberate in decision-making (p. 1).

I conducted thematic and inductive data analysis using the qualitative coding software, Dedoose. I inputted the initial nine codes (with subcodes) into the project on Dedoose. Through rounds of combining, changing, and adding codes to establish validity, I recorded patterns by

comparing participants' quotes and refining individual experiences. During this process, three more themes emerged for a total of twelve codes and 54 subcodes (see Appendix C) from the interview data which could be used to answer my research questions. The codes and subcodes will be given additional context before the analysis and discussion of my findings in Chapter 5.

4.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To conduct interviews with human participants, I was required by the York University Faculty of Graduate Studies to receive ethics approval from the York University REB and a certification from the Canadian Panel on Research Ethics. By acquiring ethics approval, I ensured that my ethics protocol was developed prior to recruitment participation, data collection, data analysis, and the review of my findings. I received ethics approval (see Appendix B) from the York University REB on January 16, 2025, and completed the TCPS 2 certification on May 15, 2024 (see Appendix B).

In the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) (Government of Canada, 2022), the Canadian Panel on Research Ethics states that researchers have a duty to protect participants' privacy, confidentiality, and identifiable information. This protection is meant to reduce potential harms and risks caused by participating in the research, including psychological discomfort or social repercussions. Since my participants are public figures and/or highly visible individuals, there was an increased risk to their confidentiality and other harms as their career is dependent upon public perception. In both the interview and informed consent materials, I explained the risks associated with this research, how participants would be protected, how their data would be securely stored, and their right to exercise their autonomy during the entire research process. As well, I included mental health resources for both Canadian and U.S. participants and the benefits of their participation.

While I prioritized participant privacy and minimal risk, I also considered how including certain identifiable information (e.g., social media account names, geographic location) could provide positive contributions to the research and livelihoods of the participants. To establish due deference, I offered each participant the choice to waive their anonymity and allow direct quotes to be utilized. In accordance with TCPS 2 standards, participants were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the research, to not answer questions, and to retract any information (see Appendix B).

4.3.1 Limitations

I experienced several limitations throughout recruitment and data analysis. First, my participant pool is small with only six participants. Although I interviewed more than my desired minimum number of participants (I set out with a minimum of five and a maximum of fifteen) to achieve data saturation and methodological rigor (Ahmed, 2024), purposive sampling and cold-emailing made it difficult to recruit participants during the research period (January to May 2025). As well, the research period was a particularly busy political season (Canadian and U.S. federal elections occurred during or around this time frame) that impacted my participants' availability. Time and resource constraints were another limitation as I was delayed from recruiting for several months while attempting to attain ethical approval.

Further, semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth research as I was able to dedicate more time to allow them to share relevant ideas and understand their experiences. However, this method often does not yield a large participant pool which can contribute to the underrepresentation of specific subgroups (e.g., only one of the six participants was a woman), resulting in an overall lack of diverse perspectives (Adams, 2015). As well, semi-structured interviews are critiqued because the researcher and participant have a limited ability to articulate,

recall, and probe (Cook, 2008), thus some recommended the use of mixed methods. While social media research could further enrich an understanding of newsfluencers, this work prioritizes newsfluencer perspectives and only uses direct interview quotes. As well, the Pew Research Center (2024) has conducted a preliminary understanding of 2,058 U.S. newsfluencers through social media data analysis and automatic scraping tools. Therefore, while this method may have limited the data set, it aligns with my objective of exploring newsfluencer experiences and journalism boundaries through a phenomenological lens and is appropriate for this work. I return to this discussion of research methods to conduct future newsfluencer research in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

Lastly, semi-structured interviews—and qualitative research in general—present the possibility for researcher bias as I play a role in shaping the outcome of the research due to my participation. To mitigate bias, I use positionality and standpoint theory to self-scrutinize my interpretation of the data and responses during the interviews. Rooted in feminist epistemology, Sandra Harding's (1991) standpoint theory suggests that the experiences of marginalized individuals allow them to know more about social structures and reality than those who are comparatively socially or politically privileged (Wylie, 2003). Also, I discussed positionality as a reflexive practice of *knowing* during my use of thematic analysis, which considers how individuals have “multiple overlapping identities” that inform how they make meaning (Bourke, 2014, p. 1). As a white Canadian cis-gendered woman, my position and standpoint of privilege may have shaped which aspects of this research that I paid more or less attention to and/or considered prior to my interviews.

Chapter 5: Analysis

As discussed in Chapter 4, I inputted a total of twelve codes and 54 subcodes into Dedoose to analyze my interview data. See Appendix C for the full coding frame. The codes 1) Newsfluencer's audience perceptions, 2) Content, 3) Content production and ethics, 4) Digital labour, 5) Finances, 6) Identity, 7) Journalism field affiliations/discussions, and 8) Motivations became major themes to this work. The remaining four (Personal experience and history, Relationship[s] within their field, Relationships with/usage of social media, Educational or work background) provided additional personal context and a deeper understanding of each participants' social media journey, but may not contribute directly to my research questions. The following is a list of definitions for each major code.

- **Newsfluencer's audience perceptions:** includes any mention of the participant's relationship with their audience or actions to develop an audience.
- **Content:** used whenever a participant discusses a social media platform they have used, the type of content they produce, their filming process, or the sources used to create their content.
- **Content production and ethics:** when a participant discusses the practices they utilize to be a trusted voice, through the full production of their content and personal code of ethics.
- **Digital labour:** used to code for mentions of a participant's labour, primarily for discussions of the negative work aspects.
- **Educational or work background:** includes the participant's disclosure of their professional career experience and knowledge (e.g., knowledge from SMI marketing or other knowledge that assists their social media presence).

- **Finances:** used to code for mentions of a participant’s financial position, specifically when they discuss their monetization, compensation, brand deals, and subscriptions.
- **Identity:** includes any mention of the participant’s perspective of self, including how they label themselves, their perception of being called an influencer, or their perception of the term newsfluencer. As well as discussions of their positionality (e.g., disclosure of race, privilege, sexual orientation, et cetera).
- **Journalism field affiliations/discussion:** applied when a participant discussed being inside/outside of the journalism field and/or their experiences with journalists and the media industry in general.
- **Motivations:** used whenever a participant mentions their personal motivations for creating their account or creating specific types of content.
- **Personal experience and history:** when a participant mentions their experience starting as a newsfluencer as well as any relevant professional background that has contributed to being a newsfluencer.
- **Relationship(s) within their field:** applied when a participant discusses other newsfluencers, both positively and negatively, as well as if they have used an editor to create their content.
- **Relationships with/usage of social media:** includes any mention of the participant’s preferential usage of social media platforms or how their experiences have differed between platforms.

In the following sections, I discuss the themes and sub-themes identified in Chapter 4 through descriptions and excerpts of my participants’ responses. The first section of this analysis examines the participants’ SMI practices, including how they earn revenue; methods to gain and

sustain followers; and a comparison of their content creation processes. The second section delves deeper into content creation by discussing how each participant establishes themselves as a trusted content creator and news source. The third section explores each participant's response to the term 'newsfluencer' and how they, as well as their perspectives and relationships with journalists or the broader journalism field. The final section brings forward important themes that emerged from the interviews. In Chapter 6, I will use the analysis and data from these sections to answer my research questions.

5.1 GAINING AN AUDIENCE: “A DEEPER CONNECTION”

In this section, I focus on data concerning SMI practices, audience interactions, and content creation that contribute to each participant's social media development. The overview of SMI practices focuses on their methods of self-branding that lead to revenue, resulting in three streams: monetization, brand deals, and subscriptions. Further, I outline how each participant interacts—or does not interact—with their audience, including any discussions of parasocial relationships, participatory culture, and co-creative labour. Additionally, participants shared their filming and story selection processes that comprise their content creation, delving deeper into their opinions on social media and experiences as creators. I conclude this section by applying Bourdieu's (1971; 1972/2008) field theory and Abidin's (2018a) development of capital to explore how newsfluencer's SMI practices and platform usage cultivates additional capital and introduces an outside habitus that assists their competition in the journalistic field.

5.1.1 Social Media Influencer Practices

SMI self-branding and authenticity can create a distinct brand or identity for newsfluencers, like having a specific humour, demonstrating political stances, or using 'memes' (Hurcombe, 2024).

The marketability of a brand is also dependent upon a newsfluencers' relationship with their audience, or "relational labour", whereby newsfluencers extend their authenticity through connecting with their audience "in real-time" which actively contributes to their subscription numbers (p. 7). For news influencers, the audience plays a role in their success and within their work, often heavily involved in the distribution of content. Hurcombe (2024) rationalizes newsfluencer labour as platformized self-branding and relational labour, driven by the "passion and freedom" of independent (low paying) journalistic work (p. 7). I asked participants if they considered themselves to be a type of influencer, to elaborate on their labour as content creators, and their work outside of social media. This line of questioning allowed for me to understand the degree to which each participant is 'authentic' on social media, utilizes self-branding, and follows platform trends. I then assigned most of these answers codes under the Content and Newsfluencer's audience perceptions themes, as well as the subcode Influencer knowledge which emerged as a part of their Educational or work background.

Steve Boots said "what you see is what you get. Who I am on camera is who I am, but it's amplified! Inward thoughts are externalized, right? And so I think audiences can see through an inauthentic person pretty easily." He did not intend to cultivate a persona, but rationalized that:

The longer you spend on camera, the closer who you are on camera is to who you are off camera, and that means that you're a better performer, right? Because there's always some degree of a performer, right? You're expressing yourself to an audience, and there's always got to be some awareness of that. And so I think... the more you practice it, the more authentic you get in that performance. And in that portrayal of yourself.

He produces gaming content along with his news stories. For Boots, this is "a surprisingly important ingredient because it gives me time to exist publicly, apolitically. It gives me time to just be a person in public view. And I think that makes the other stuff work better. I think it's very humanizing." It also establishes his brand beyond political conversations and creates a

neutral audience. “We all sort of put the swords down for a little bit figuratively, and do it a little more literally, right? ...It's a community building exercise. I mean, it sounds cynical to say it's a brand-building exercise, but it is good for me as a public figure to be more than just a politics guy.”

I followed up about negative follower interactions and he discussed a type of content he stopped creating as it cultivated negative energies. “I used to make TikToks dunking on comments and be like ‘haha, look at this goofball.’ And then I'd get lots of heat back. And then I'd be like, ‘why do I get all this heat back,’ right? But at a certain point, it stops being about actual content and starts being about the heat, because that gets you clicks, right?” As Boots puts it, ‘drama’ draws in views. Marwick and boyd (2014) define drama as “performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media” (p. 1191). Influencers partake in or create drama, often deemed scandals, which garners views and increases their metrics (Christin & Lewis, 2021). Boots alluded to this type of content, both between two creators and when creators use negative comments to boost their reach.

Honestly, lots of the TikTok drama you see—more than you'd expect... there's been a conversation between those people of, like, ‘we're gonna have a fight.’ Because it's views! It's a gazillion views! But your space gets filled up with people seeking that sort of energy, seeking that sort of content. And so it sort of cultivates itself. That doesn't mean that content creators who get harassment, that doesn't mean it's their own fault. There's obviously a huge layer of it you can't control, but I've found since I've started just focusing on [creating content about] the powerful and not really talking about comments, I've gotten a much different sort of energy back from my audience, and I think that's an important takeaway for me is, if you focus on the powerful and not the goofballs in your comments, you tend to have better luck.

While George Lee's full-time job is workshop facilitations and keynote speaking, “social media is a way for me to promote and advertise my work... [it] is a part of my full-time job. I don't think it is the job, but I wouldn't be offended if somebody said I'm a full-time social media influencer or... full-time content creator... It wouldn't offend me.” Many of my participants

disliked the influencer part of the term newsfluencer, which I will discuss later in this Chapter, but they admittedly operate with some influencer social media strategies. After I made Lee aware that he was listed in the Pew Research Center's appendix of news influencers studied for their 2024 report, he said "it's fair use. A lot of us content creators use other content creators' content, we don't notify them... Shout out to Pew Research for helping me expand my virtual footprint. I feel like in terms of branding, at the end of the day, that's what every content creator got to be able to admit."

Monetization

Hurcombe (2024) identifies newsfluencer's major monetization models through social media, including subscriptions, brand partnerships, and ad-supported revenue, based on their ability to self-brand. I asked each participant if and how they receive compensation for their content. I used the parent code Finances to separate how each participant earned money online as well as any discourse relating to that process (including which platforms suited a specific revenue stream). These subcodes included Brand deals/sponsorships, Career or passion, Earning on social media, and Monetization or subscriptions.

Despite starting his content in 2020, Frank Domenic said that "it takes years to really build up the proper audience in the places that you need them." The amount of effort it takes to earn money on platforms like YouTube is "too much" with his full-time teaching job. The "Tilt's 2023 Creator Economy Benchmark Research" report surveyed over 1,000 content creators and found that it typically takes creators (who do social media full-time) roughly 18 months to start making enough money to support themselves, but that it takes an average of \$10,000 to get started. "If I was younger... if I had found my niche at a younger age and I started seeing my success online between the ages of 18 and 24, I would have taken maybe a one-to-two year run

at it.” However, Domenic’s social media did not see success until after he became a parent, so pursuing a social media career is too much of a risk. “At the age that I'm at now—not that I'm old—but I have a mortgage, I have two kids, and I need to think about my future.”

Instead, “the amount of financial risk that it took for me to start doing the long-form video stuff with hiring an editor; that was me putting aside any money that I had made from... doing [social media] side hustles. [It] immediately went back into trying to make this work, and that’s already a risk in a way.” As a Canadian creator, the revenue from social media is still low.

We’re essentially contractors working for the social media platforms that are profiting off of our work. It’s like when you go to the grocery store and use the self-scanner. Yeah, it might be faster for you and you might just want to do it yourself, but also you are providing unpaid labour to a corporation, right? My responsibility is, if I’m not gonna be the one who’s gonna be asking for money to create more content, I’m glad that there are other creators who can sustainably do it. I can’t.

Instead, Domenic urges his audience to seek out information from his own sources: Canadian-owned and local journalism media like The Narwhal and Canadaland. Though his aim now is to create content on the side, he does take opportunities “to go speak at a conference or consult with a company or when the odd campaign comes up that I can get paid for that promotes a survey or something like that.”

With over 3 million followers across several platforms, Lee said “Not even a significant part of my income comes directly from Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, whatever.” Some platforms like YouTube and TikTok pay creators based on their eligibility (e.g., number of views). However, creators can be demonetized and no longer earn through revenue-sharing models if they violate certain policies. When a creator is demonetized, they are no longer able to earn revenue from a platform, often a result of said platform determining that their content violates platform policies. The YouTube Partner Program, for example, requires creators to

follow their Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines in order to receive payments through ads: content can be demonetized if it is deemed shocking, unreliable, sensitive, or controversial as according to YouTube (YouTube, n.d.; Google, n.d.). Lee stated that “Because my content is so politically-charged, it’s very hard for my content to be monetized through ads because... it’s not seen as being ad-friendly, typically.” Further, he spoke about the compensation disadvantages faced by marginalized creators. “There are a lot of pay and opportunity disparities across the lines of race, class, gender, ability, sexuality that I think [are] also very interesting.” He went on to suggest that conservative, right-leaning content creators and white, liberal newsfluencers are well-paid in comparison. Similarly, Dara Tucker said “I’m a part of the... creator fund for most of the platforms that I’m on.” Despite her eligibility to be monetized, she has also faced revenue loss and is not earning much across platforms. “I’ve been demonetized on Meta at this point for reasons that they have not explained. My views are really being throttled on TikTok, so I’m not really making much over there.”

Boots’ has profited from monetization and ad revenue, but has found disparity between the platforms. “I used to make dedicated TikToks and then dedicated YouTube videos, but the problem is that making short-form video is a really poor time investment. You don’t make any money on it.” He reported that he makes “functionally no money” on TikTok, estimating about \$100 CAD on his account (though he has yet to set up a withdrawal system). This is despite “years of being a content creator with... 20 million likes on [TikTok] or something right now. And you make no money.” Instead, he focuses on long-form content on YouTube which many of the participants acknowledged as the most stable stream. “My time is way better spent on something like a YouTube video where there’s actual revenue or something like a livestream where there’s actual revenue. This is how I pay my bills... YouTube AdSense makes up... about

60-70% of my earnings.” While it is “by far the most lucrative platform... because it’s the most established... where mainstream advertisers go”, it is “also the hardest platform to break through on.” In early 2025, Boots “became one of the top 10,000 creators on Twitch, which sounds awesome. [But] I still make less than somebody would make... working minimum wage.” Instead, Boots uses Twitch to create content that he can cross-post. “Twitch is not a money-making platform. The way you make money off of Twitch is by using your screens for clips to post to monetized platforms” like YouTube.

Chatman has not “gotten any monetization for [my] videos. I don’t get paid for views on either [TikTok or Instagram], mostly ‘cause I don’t make videos long enough. I’d rather people watch and digest the information. It’s pennies. It’s not really worth the trade-off, in my opinion.”

Brand Deals

Yet Chatman has received brand deals and posted monetized videos through the partnership. “I have started reaching out to and collaborating with some Black-owned brands, especially starting during Black History Month to highlight products that they sell.” Abidin and Mart Ots (2016) argue that monetization puts influencers at a constant risk of “breaching their contract of trust with their followers” (p. 160). Certain brand partnerships, for example, can negatively impact the connection between an influencer and their followers if it is considered unethical, or influencers can be accused of “selling out” due to their commercialism (Duffy, et al., 2022; Wood, 2025). As a Black creator of political content, Chatman prioritizes partnerships that reflect his personal ethics. “I want to be strategic about it. If people come to me for a certain type of content, I don’t want them to randomly be like, ‘why are you selling sneakers?’ Unless it’s something where I really believe in this brand and their message and what they do.”

Most of the participants echoed this sentiment, stating that their ethical standpoints guide who they will or will not partner with. Domenic stated that “I take those opportunities as long as it's something that's aligned with my ideology.” He also explained that he is deliberate with compensation for such advertisements.

I don't take... for example, there's... a juice company or something. They said ‘hey, you wanna make an ad for us?’ And I said, ‘yeah, sure.’ They only wanted to pay me a couple hundred bucks and I said, ‘that's just not worth it for me.’ Simply because, if I'm going to use my audience for personal gain, either I have to believe in the product that much that the \$200 is worth it, or you have to offer me enough where I can temporarily say [to my followers], ‘hey I'm going to do an ad here. I don't normally do that. This is to help create more content.’ So I'm picky, not just with what companies I work with, but how much I will accept in terms of payment. I would rather get \$0.00 than get something that's not worth what it takes for me to essentially ask my audience for their attention and for their pocketbooks as well. You know what I mean? So I don't do any affiliate marketing. I don't do affiliate links. If you want me to promote something, I tell people straight up. And the video could get 1,000 views... [or] 100,000 views. It really depends on how the algorithm works and whether or not my audience cares, but I tell them I work on flat rates only.

Lee has done multiple brand partnerships. “I work with a lot of brands, organizations... I worked with the NAACP, PBS, BET, TikTok... different universities, nonprofits... politicians... [and] networks.” But “in my line of work, it just depends on what entity aligns with or view themselves as aligning with what I do and what I say and what I believe in.” Tucker worked with a similar brand category: “I’ve done partnerships in the past... with HBO and promoting a Frederick Douglass documentary... Microsoft, and the King Center.” However, “it’s been a while since any brand has reached. But I also do work with Planned Parenthood. I do advocacy work with 501C4 organizations... political action-type organizations.” Tucker had numerous partnerships with advocacy groups during the 2024 U.S. federal election and described this work as, essentially, what she does.

It’s really when you do have organizations [and] nonprofits that reach out and ask you to do content for them because it’s perfectly aligned with what I’m already out there talking about. So I don’t have to even question ‘is this something I should do?’ Because... if I’m

already out here advocating for certain marginalized groups, and you're willing to pay me to put our content, that's the best of both worlds. I would be doing it even if no one was reaching out [and] asking me to do it.

Bennett has also been approached by “a number of different brands to do things”, but—as mentioned earlier—has not accepted any partnerships for ethical purposes. “You never really know who's exactly behind the brand and who's affiliated with them, and if it's not something that really fits into what I'm doing, I'm just not interested.”

Subscriptions

I touched briefly on subscription models in Chapter 2, which Hurcombe (2024) describes as inconsistent profit for newsfluencers because it depends on 1) their ongoing relationship with their followers, and 2) their followers' ability to pay overtime. Most of my participants offer subscriptions through Patreon or Substack and/or donation options, but do not rely on this model for their income. Patreon is a “creative crowdfunding platform” that has offered subscription-based crowdfunding for content creators whereby followers can subscribe to them for a one-time or continual fee (Hair, 2021, p. 197; Crosby & McKenzie, 2021). Similar to Meta—as evidenced in Chapter 2, creators can also offer exclusive content as an incentive for subscribing (El Sanyoura & Anderson, 2022). Substack is a “subscription network for independent writers and creators... to send email newsletters directly to readers” and set their own subscription fee (Cohen & Hewa, 2024, p. 113). These subscription or membership platforms have established a “creator economy”, whereby independent creators use membership platforms to connect with followers that want to financially support them (El Sanyoura & Anderson, 2022).

Domenic has started an account on Patreon in order to create more long-form content, to help pay for an editor, and to fund all of the software he uses. “I might shut down the Patreon 'cause I just don't feel comfortable taking people's money like that. It makes me feel not great...

like I have to be a certain way and do a certain thing.” He also feels that he does not “offer enough stuff that is worth people paying for”, though he contends that there are multiple creators that do: “Steve Boots, Rachel Gilmore... Millennial Moron. These are all content creators online who provide a good or service that the average person is unable to do.” Domenic thinks that “what I do, fundamentally, could be done by any other person who is interested in the news. I just happen to read a lot of news, be very opinionated and I have an ability to speak to people as a teacher at a level that they can understand... what I do is not inherently special or unique and I don't add anything that is worth compensation from my viewers.” Yet Domenic is arguably one of the most recognizable news content creators in Canada, who has not only been interviewed by major media but conducted interviews with high profile figures (including former leader of the New Democratic Party, Jagmeet Singh) (N'tchoreret-Mbiamany, 2025).

Boots also offers Patreon subscriptions. “I have a Patreon. It’s not humongous, but it’s very helpful. It’s a steady source of revenue that I can rely on when I’m taking time off.” However, aligning with Hurcombe, Boots states that “the only real way” to gain profit “is with multiple revenue streams, especially when you’re starting out. It’s a bunch of small revenue streams.” Tucker’s experience is similar. “You have to be everywhere... it is quite exhausting to do that if you don’t have an assistant working.”

She offers subscriptions through Substack and is attempting to maximize the membership model. So far, “I’ve gotten a minimal number of subscriptions.” Bennett has developed his Substack and has exclusive features factored into it. “People can become a paid subscriber... I have a... number of paid subscribers, a few hundred. They can do yearly or they can do monthly.” However, he said that:

I’m not sure that people get much more value by being a paid subscriber. I just kind of say that that’s the way you can sort of support my work, [that] sort of thing. I do some

more opinion pieces that are only for paid subscribers. I'll let them vote on like a bonus story for the week, [that] sort of thing.

Chatman has a newsletter operating off of his own website (www.chxtman.com), called “we the ppl.” Followers can subscribe for email updates, but the newsletter is free to read, though he has received “gifts” for his work. “I linked to two donation pages there and that’s where the gifts have come through as people being like, ‘thanks for gathering this news.’ That’s a full text newsletter. That’s where the gifts have come from—for that effort, not the videos.”

5.1.2 Audience: Interactions and Community

As evidenced by Hurcombe, newsfluencers interact with their audiences via parasocial relationships and participatory culture through the context of fandom culture (2024). Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships formed between users and media personalities such as characters, celebrities, and influencers (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Parasocial relationships evolve as the user continues consuming the media personality’s content and life, “spending time” with and “knowing” them through media consumption (Reinikainen, et al., 2020, p. 281). Consequently, these relationships contribute to SMI marketing as followers are more willing to purchase commodities advertised by influencers they admire and trust.

Hurcombe’s (2024) conceptualization of newsfluencers discusses their ability to establish parasocial relationships with their audiences. By calling these actors news *influencers*, the relationship to their audience becomes an important characteristic of their social media role. In Chapter 2, I identified participatory culture as a factor towards a newsfluencer’s audience and introduced co-creative labour as an expansion whereby, in this context, newsfluencers *and* their audiences are prosumers who contribute to content creation.

Parasocial Relationships

A Parasocial subcode quickly emerged under the theme Newsfluencer's audience perceptions and was used to code any explicit discussions of parasocial relationships or sentiments that I deemed parasocial in nature. I asked each participant: How do you interact with your audience, or do you interact at all? and How personal do you allow your social media to be? Most replied that, while they do interact to certain degrees, they try not to be personal online. Some participants even acknowledged the term 'parasocial' without being prompted and actively dismissed that type of relationship with their followers. For example, Bennett said that "I try not to be, like, too much of that... parasocial relationship with your audience. I try not to engage in that too much." He also prefers not to establish relationships with other creators in order to maintain control of his content. "There's a lot [of creators]... that... get into groups... and they're all kind of working together or posting together, and I think that's great if people like doing that and they build community around that... For me, I want to be able to... post what I want to post." He feels similarly about relationships with his followers. "I don't want to have a relationship with anybody, any one of my followers where I'm only doing things to get their validation. I post things that I think are interesting or that I think people want to know. I'm not going to talk about [something] because somebody just wants me to." He tries to keep his content relegated to opinion pieces or news- and storytelling-related, keeping his personal information offline. "I really make an effort to not include much about my life or where I live or what I do because I think that, then, you open yourself up to... other things on the Internet."

Further, Domenic stated that:

Generally, I don't do too much audience engagement. I think that's because TikTok, by its nature, is a very... what's the word I'm looking for? Parasocial on interactions, versus YouTube. While you can still form that parasocial relationship, you're not really engaging with the person in the same intimate capacity.

Lee brought up parasocial relationships and implied that connecting and building relationships with his followers helps to develop trust. “There are times that I’m thinking about the video I’m making and I’m thinking about it through being a content creator, in terms of thinking of my audience first. Other times... I don’t care what my audience thinks” or if they agree with him. Boots discussed parasocial relationships as well, stating one has to be careful. “People get good and parasocial. I get some wild emails.” With a public email address, “for every, ‘I love what you’re doing,’ there’s another who’s like, ‘I hate you, liberal.’”

Despite this, each participant has some form of engagement with their followers.

Domenic explained that he tries “to respond to DMs when I can. I read them all. I don’t respond to them all. I tried to engage with my Instagram story. I find that that’s a good way for people to kind of feel like they’re interacting with me.” Building on his comment on TikTok’s intimacy:

I can make a video [for TikTok] and I’m in a car wash and I’m like, ‘I got two minutes, let’s freaking talk about this thing!’ Versus me sitting down with the camera, setting up, being all formal. I think that the nature of TikTok allows me to have that authenticity with my audience, and so I don’t tend to engage in too much outside of [that].

Bennett, meanwhile, said that “lots of people will send me a message. If people send me nice messages that they appreciate my work, I try to send a message back.” His typical replies consist of thanking those followers for their support. He also said that audiences tend to prefer his content or content on social media (e.g., TikTok) over traditional media.

I typically, in many cases, will get more views than [news media] or more people will follow me. I think that’s because of the personal aspect of it. People... they form that online relationship with me, my audience and me, and they want to come to me for information.

Boots has a “super active community” with a Discord server of around 2,000 individuals.

Discord is an integrated messaging and voice chat application “popular among the gaming and streaming community, which allows messaging between users and voice over internet protocol

(VOIP) (Lauricella, Craig & Kay, 2023; Espinoza Dayana, et al., 2020). For Boots, “it’s just not realistic to have as much interaction with the public as I’d like because there’s a lot of them across the platforms... It becomes really overwhelming and the number becomes really overwhelming.” Instead, he turns to livestreaming to interact with his followers. “I’m back and forth with the chat tons. That’s the primary place that it happens. I hang out in the Discord some, but that’s a very busy place.” He has a team of around a dozen moderators who volunteer to help manage the amount and type of comments and messages in the server and during streams. Lee also does livestream interactions, as well as replying to comments.

Chatman’s newsletter provides “a deeper interaction. It’s the same people that I recognize from Instagram who will DM me things they find interesting. It has helped to build a deeper connection.” He also spoke of expectations from his followers:

I feel like they have come to expect a certain level of depth. Even though I can only put so much in a minute-long video, they're aware that there's more research going into those kind of things. And from a community-building aspect, it's been nice to start conversations with people.

Participatory Culture and Co-creative Labour

For discourse regarding participatory audiences and co-creative labour, I assigned the subcodes Community-building and Interactions. From this, I found that Boots’ Discord is a co-creative space. “There's a whole channel on my Discord of ‘Suggestions for Boots,’ like stories for me to check out, you know, ‘have you seen this?’” His livestream chats also offer up questions and ideas for content, as well as his comment sections. Although, he is cautious about validating such information:

There's always a conversation there. There's always a back and forth, even sometimes when it's not readily apparent. I get way too many comments to respond to, but I see lots of them, obviously. And when there's sort of themes that seem to be emerging within the comments, that gives me direction for future videos.

Chatman enjoys posting reply-videos. “Some of my favourite videos to make are responses to a comment, especially a comment that I feel like someone left in good faith.” His videos aim to answer questions, but also “gives other people the language to use when they have those conversations. So I love comments like that, that inspire videos.” He also looks to the comments to determine the type of content or subject matter his audience is connecting with for future videos. “Seeing what they find the most interesting and being like, ‘OK, you guys really like when I talk about these topics as opposed to these ones,’ and trying to make more videos about those things... like the stories people actually care about.”

Interestingly, Domenic expressed concern over the amount of engagement and participation that he is seeing. He said:

More people than ever before are engaged—which is a good thing. But I’ll have students in my classes talk about the news. And I’m like, ‘why are you guys talking about this?’ This doesn’t impact you. You should be talking about whatever random crap you and your friends are interested in. And they’re like, ‘yeah, but it’s on my TikTok feed.’ And I’m like, ‘I know, but that’s not fair to you.’ It’s not fair that people have to engage as much as they do. And so, it’s twofold. 1) Social media pushes a lot of this stuff, especially when it’s negative, and 2) we have a crazy person in the White House, and we have premiers across the province—across the country—who are willing to give in or actively making the fight harder or worse. And so, the kids—these kids are affected. More than they should be. And it ripples up. It’s not just children, right? Young adults and people, middle-aged, who normally would get involved and they would vote, but normally outside of election periods, wouldn’t be too engaged. [They] are now being inundated with the day-to-day drama of the politics of things. And it’s like, let’s make politics boring again. That’s what I wish, I wish we were there. I wish that what I did was only for the real nerds who really wanted to stay involved. I wish that average people didn’t have to follow my type of content.

Especially considering younger audiences, he would prefer his followers to consist of those with a specific interest in politics rather than seeming like necessary content to general users. News consumption is important for the democratic process as it informs the public’s decisions, but Domenic argues that news content on social media is pushed algorithmically onto audiences and may negatively impact them.

5.1.3 Content Creation

I asked each participant to walk me through their filming process, their platform usage (e.g., preferences and noted differences), and the various ways they deliver their content. I then coded their answers under a broad theme of Content which had specific subcodes for each subject that emerged, including comparisons of short-form and long-form content, any sentiments that touched on specific platforms (e.g., a subcode for TikTok, YouTube, et cetera), and any other types of content they create. The following section discusses their comments on platforms, any software that they use to create content, their personal style, how they select stories, and their editing practices. Participants identified TikTok as the primary platform for news content, but agreed that YouTube is fundamentally better organized for content creators. Further, content selection tends to be more personal and based on the participant's interests; however, trending topics and breaking news stories do play a role in what they post. As well, platforms require specificity in order to make sense and perform well, which requires editing and informed cross-posting.

Platforms

Most of the participants either started out by posting their content on TikTok or amassed their followings there. Bennett said "I love TikTok. I'm addicted to it like most people... I think, as far as sharing [news] content, I'm not sure where else you would go." The main platforms that participants discussed are TikTok, Instagram, Substack, and YouTube. Each platform possesses positive and negative attributes to content distribution, but it is interesting to note that participants do not rely on only one platform for their audience and even find stark demographic differences across platforms. While this could be related to the need to diversify their revenue, participants also make an effort to reach followers wherever they are online.

Domenic noticed an algorithm disparity between Instagram and TikTok. He could have “100,000 views on a video [on Instagram] that got 500 views on TikTok. Whatever. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. I try to be everywhere to accommodate for as many people as possible.” Bluesky became popular in 2024 as users wanted to use a “decentralized social media” (Burgess, 2024, para. 15), but Domenic is unable to cross-post (post the same video across platforms) to Bluesky due to the software—called Repurpose—that he uses. He aims to “keep on top of [cross-posting] when I have a big video and I put it out. But you can also only put up to a minute [on certain platforms]. So I forget, ‘which ones can I do? Which ones can't I do?’” Domenic relies on software to distribute content as it is an unrealistic use of his time to manually post and cater to each platform’s parameters.

Opposingly, Tucker recognized this and said that she stopped using software so she could cater her posts to each platform. She explained:

They all require different things, like on Reels, on Facebook, they'll have a place for a title and then you're writing in a little caption versus TikTok, which there's only a caption. Instagram, there's only a caption... And then you can say ‘link in bio’ on Instagram or TikTok, but if you say ‘link in bio’ on Facebook or YouTube, then that doesn't mean anything. So, you really have to think, you know, individually for each platform. It's just a different ecosystem. It's just—you can't—it's not a one-size-fits-all thing.

Further, she introduced a term, “algo-rot,” to describe how TikTok deprioritizes a creator’s content and led to her slow departure from the platform. Initially, “TikTok was great. During the pandemic, the first couple of years being on there was great because the algorithm was stacked for virality... a lot of people could really blow up very quickly, get very high numbers and stuff like that.” After “algo-rot” set in for her and other creators from that period, she feels that TikTok has “served its purpose.” While Tucker got her start there (which led to her current

professional media position), “I feel like my time of being a hot creator on TikTok is passed, and that's fine.”

Now, she has turned to Instagram and Facebook, noticing a significant demographic change through this change. On TikTok, she had a more millennial and Generation Z audience, with the prominent racial identity skewed to white users. On Instagram, she has an older audience (mid-thirties) with more Black and POC followers. On Facebook, she has an even older audience. She commented on how Facebook is often disregarded by users and content creators as a distribution platform despite its access to a broad audience with more financial stability. “If you're trying to, you know, get the word out about things that you're doing or selling or whatever, I say don't sleep on Facebook.” Lastly, she has a white, male-centric audience on YouTube. As mentioned earlier, Tucker ultimately had a negative experience on TikTok and endured manual review processes for each post which caused them to be “sidelined.” She resolved that YouTube offers the best communication to content creators and intends to grow that platform. She stated:

They have the best communication with creators, they have the best model for payment, for disputes If they happen, for copyright infringements, and questions... if you use a piece of music that has copyright attached to it, then they say this video is flagged. There's actually a process for you to dispute that and say, ‘no, I have the license for this and here it is.’ And you know, if you're using someone’s content or if they're using yours, you're notifying each other. It's a much more organized structure and there are actual people that you can communicate with on YouTube.

The potential TikTok ban in early 2025 also became a prominent topic for Chatman as a U.S.-based creator (Maheshwari, 2024). Chatman “wasn't one of those people who had, like, hundreds of thousands of followers on TikTok [prior to the potential ban] and then was suddenly shocked or trying to transition. Like, it was maybe five videos.” In response, he started posting on Instagram and noticed the algorithms pushed different content on either platform, with both

resulting in around fifteen to twenty thousand followers. He found that breaking news stories performed better on Instagram versus opinion videos unrelated to news on TikTok. He is unsure “whether it's a timing thing with the algorithm, or if it's an audience thing, but I've noticed that trend. Like, more general stuff does better on TikTok.” The video format does make it more difficult to provide extended context and ongoing updates on certain issues, so he prefers the newsletter as “it gives me a place to put all that, even if I don't make a video, which has been nice.”

Platforms become mediums for self-enjoyment as well as gaining followers. Social media became the outlet for Bennett’s personal passion for news and politics, it is “just convenient that I can get on the Internet and yap about it and then people can decide to listen or not.”

Style and Selection

A part of their self-branding, each participant has an intentional style to their posts, whether that be the quality of their content or the topics and ideological lenses discussed. Lee is:

A little bit more leftist-leaning... a little bit more questioning of the establishment, a little bit more critical of how institutions and systems prop up the Empire of America and how [the] Western world is fucking over the global South... like, that's more of my content. That's more of my news spin... [and] that impacts, a lot of times, how I relate to the algorithm and to the audience.

His filming process “is very easy, streamline. I take the same tenacity and energy I had when making Snapchats, and just put my phone out and record.” Lee’s personal website states that he is “purposely provocative”, which I asked him to elaborate on (*The Conscious Lee*, n.d., para. 1). “When I say purposely provocative, I'm talking about me engaging in topics... engaging them in ways that is challenging the status quo, that is challenging practices and norms and values and... standards, and that's what makes it provocative.” As a former collegiate debater, he posts content he believes he can defend, but his main approach is to “make it where, when people leave the

video, they walk away with something.” For example, he tries to give audiences a word or historical information they might not know. Lee reminds himself not to overthink his content: “just going with the flow... have you feeling that moment, find you some good lighting... You can create a banger.”

Domenic’s content typically consists of him “commenting on a news article or on a piece of breaking news.” He focuses on stories that personally interest him, typically Canadian provincial and federal events, though he includes American politics that impact Canada.

Meanwhile, along with his news and gaming content, Boots adds comedy. When I asked why he includes comedy, he referred to a televised meeting between Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney and U.S. President Donald Trump and how he covered it.

Comedy makes it way more welcoming. It's so much easier to take this stuff in if you're laughing... You have to laugh at it, because if you don't laugh at it, you're going to be faced with the madness of King Trump, right? Like you have to.... laugh to get through it a little bit. There's sort of a whistling through the graveyard element to this. And so, I think it helps people to cope with how scary the news can be sometimes, because we never minimize the reality of it. But we recognize that you can still laugh in the face of all of it, because if you laugh at it, it doesn't have so much power over you.

Likewise, Tucker enjoys producing a myriad of content, including satirical posts. “I just have always been a Jack-of-all-trades. I've always been interested in a million different things. I've always loved comedy. I've always loved satire. It's a big part of, you know, my media diet, I guess. And so, it's a natural way for me to express myself.” She intends to post more “silly comedy sketches” and some that “make a larger point” as she feels it helps to mix up her content. “People feel like they get accustomed to you, and they think that they know what to expect.” She vocalized the importance of multi-faceted content. “It's like you, kind of, always want to leave people on their toes just a little bit. Like, ‘hey, well, she didn't just come and look at the camera this time in this very, kind of professorial way.’” For Tucker, adding a sketch or two possesses

an element of surprise that allows her to catch her audience off guard. Further, she is “constantly teeming with ideas for” videos which suit the expansive framework she created for her content, unlike other creators who “just do one thing and... do not give themselves permission to come out of that framework.” Her content ranges from satire to music to silly comedy sketches to informational to off-the-cuff comedy and highly produced breakdowns. She tries to consider what topics are relevant and current. She once did a deep dive on water fluoridation which she “saw as something that I should be commenting on, something that I am very concerned about”, yet after posting, she felt that nobody cared about it due to low viewership numbers. Thus, she “has to make sure that my content is a mix of topics where I'm like, ‘this is what I feel that I should be talking’ about versus... something that I'm not terribly interested in” but has emerged as an important issue to users and prompts her to comment on it.

Bennett said that he does not have a formal filming process, but usually “write[s] down what I'm going to say and... just try to make sure the lighting's good.” He follows the news and consumes a lot of press conferences, which informs his content selection. He typically picks something interesting to speak about, even if “other news outlets might not find that interesting, and they may not talk about that.” He considers some topics “irrelevant” and not worth his time as it lacks “substance”, despite its popularity with news organizations or virality online. “I don't know how I decide exactly what is interesting because what I find interesting, to some people may not be interesting. But clearly it relates because when I talk about things, people... they want to sit and listen.” He tries “to pick up on stuff that maybe most people wouldn't be hearing about or that may have gotten missed... There's always front-page news that you can cover, but I feel like people wanna know something that they don't already know.”

Chatman's content does "focus a lot on the United States news. I post on my stories a lot when I see stuff that's going on with, like, Palestine or Sudan or any other countries. But I think it's just a matter of like, what I feel most comfortable talking about because of what I understand." He does not "want to be a spokesperson or mouthpiece for an issue" that he has only read about but not experienced. "There are just other people who are better experts on it that I can repost as opposed to, like, taking up space talking about it." He does try to chime in or share information when he can as his "whole channel is about how the media doesn't necessarily tell you the whole story." Chatman's style is face-to-face and conversational, which he started out with and has seen other people doing. "I just started a stream of conscious... talking to the camera and had people be like, 'Oh, I really like your pace. I really like the way you speak.'" He plans to start posting long-form videos on YouTube as he acquired "better lighting and a background", which he also uses in his short-form videos. He said:

I definitely know the importance of having a solid brand, even if it's just a solid visual identity that people can come to expect. So there's probably a switch, like halfway through my page, where [there's] different lights in the background. Now I have a light on me, but the main style has stayed the same... I've just gotten good feedback, it seems like people like it. I haven't really felt the need to, like, try something else necessarily, but I do want to do more edited videos, longer form content, that kind of thing. I have some ideas for research-based style, like deep dive kind of videos on broader topics as opposed to in the moment news. So those will have more visual elements.

As a former public relations professional, "most of the video work that I've done in my full-time career has always been wide frame format, like, marketing style, videos, and stuff. So I've always just done a lot of YouTube-style content in general, but never anything like this on my own." He plans to transition to posting video essays as well as building his newsletter and relying less on social media. "So that I can build up a presence outside the social media so that the social media is an archive of what I'm doing in the real world. I want it to be more than just posting videos." He aspires to other creators who post social media content and make a "real impact" by "having

conversations, opening up dialogue, that kind of thing.” Eventually, he would enjoy making debate livestreams, including “directly answering questions, directly talking to people on the pages like... [Where] people have the ability to call-in and ask a question or... an issue they disagree with, like, being able to debunk things in real time.”

Editing

Domenic said that he purposefully does not edit his videos, preferring to have a direct conversation with the camera (and later, the audience). “I press the record button at the right time and then I stop it at the right time, and then I press it again and I stop it again. And if my words are cut off, I don't care.” He tries to “be snappy in the style that fits” him, rather than copying others he films based on how he “would want to hear it. So this is how I'm delivering it. And sometimes I talk for three minutes and those videos do amazing, and sometimes I talk for three minutes and those videos do awful.” Instead of trying to chase the algorithm to gain followers, he is “chasing the type of content that I would want to consume on the topic.”

Boots hired an editor in the last year to assist in the content creation process. “He cuts clips of the [live]stream into TikToks for me and it's been a huge driver of traffic. They've been super, super successful because he takes the stuff that I do and cuts it into a TikTok pace.” He recognized that there needs to be some “platform specificity” in his content but it does not “have to be super platform dependent”—as long as it makes sense and meets audiences where they are. He explained how his editing process on TikTok informed his style, revolving around his pace. “TikTok rewards very fast pacing, lots of visuals, lots of things happening all the time. And so that sort of made its way into my natural style, just because that's what got rewarded, right?” Videos with a fast pace and brisk editing style performed well which carried into his YouTube content. He said:

If you watch my videos, I cut out basically any pause longer than about one-third of a second. Just cause nobody wants to listen to me breathe, right? But it also depends on your subject. People want their politics at a brisk pace. They don't want their quilting content at a brisk pace, right. So it is niche-dependent, but for politics in particular, I think fast-paced is really, really important.

His livestreams are much different as repetition and clarity are “really important... In particular because people are not there for super” fast-paced livestreams, they want “a much more relaxed atmosphere and I think slowing it down and being a little more, sort of intentional of how you go through the content really helps with that.”

5.1.4 Cultivating Capital and Challenging the Field

In Chapter 3, I argued that newsfluencers cultivate additional capital as influencers that benefits their competition in the journalistic field. Due to news platformization, other agents (e.g., journalists) are at a disadvantage in comparison as they must adapt to social media logics and gain more capital. This section identified how newsfluencers amass followings, challenge field rules, and compete through SMI practices that expand their capital and introduce influencer habitus.

The participants build self-brands and portray authenticity to their audiences to establish themselves as trustworthy and to receive revenue. Explained by Hurcombe (2024), newsfluencers earn on social media through monetization (e.g., ads) and subscriptions, as well as via brand deals and sponsorships. Despite having hundreds of thousands of followers across platforms, most participants struggled to monetize their content and needed to diversify their revenue streams to make a profit. Certain platforms deprioritize or demonetize political content which increases the difficulty for newsfluencers to succeed on the algorithm and be eligible for monetization. Yet SMI strategies are arguably the most effective ways to earn on social media (Pitafi & Awan, 2024). News organizations have had to “reconsider their business model” due to

the shift to digital mediums which has seen a revenue crisis (Olsen, et al., 2021, p. 1261). As consumers turn to social media for news, these agents must adapt to social media logics to gain followers and make a profit. Through monetization, subscriptions, and brand deals, newsfluencers have access to and cultivate online economic capital. This ultimately challenges the rules of the journalistic field. However, since the participants are non-affiliated, they enter the field without journalistic capital and/or doxa.

As well, newsfluencers establish connections with their audiences. For example, Boots has a digital community space through Discord where his followers are able to interact with him closely and make suggestions towards his content. Tandoc (2014) argued that the journalistic field is changing due to audience influence: journalists can interact with their audiences and use their data to cater content towards the audience's preferences. Yet this violates journalism ethics and puts newsfluencers at an advantage as audience relationships are a staple to their social media position. Thus, their habitus from outside of the field and symbolic capital again advances their field position and poses challenges to other agents.

Lastly, their habitus also impacts how they approach news production as their content is dependent upon platform logics and algorithms. While some participants, like Domenic, state that they disregard the algorithm and make content for their personal interests, others post short- or long-form videos that are edited and filmed to perform well. They select stories that are interesting to them and may not cover breaking news or pressing issues. The journalistic field requires agents to possess doxa and habitus to determine what is newsworthy, allowing them to appeal to audiences and participate in cultural production (Schultz, 2007; Hovden, 2012). Newsfluencers do not have this doxa ingrained which would cause them to struggle in the field, though this can contribute to their self-branding and audience relationships.

5.2 BEING A TRUSTED VOICE: “YOUR AUDIENCE WILL HOLD YOU ACCOUNTABLE”

In this section, I discuss how participants establish trust with their audiences through ethical practices, journalistic values, crediting the appropriate sources, and holding accountability with their audiences. I delve briefly into a comment from one participant about newsfluencers who are ‘bad’ and threaten the capacity for audiences to trust other digital actors. I conclude by applying Gieryn’s (1983; 1999) and Carlson and Lewis’ (2019) boundary work to the data in this section to understand how newsfluencers’ use of journalistic values positions them within journalism boundaries. Katherine Fink (2018) posits that “The single biggest challenge facing journalism today is the public’s lack of trust in it” (p. 40). The Reuters Institute’s “2023 Digital News Report” found that only 32% of Americans and 40% of Canadians actually trust the news. As the media is meant to participate in and uphold the democratic process, they must be considered legitimate through public trust (van Dalen, 2020).

In Chapter 2, I discussed legitimacy and how journalists establish trust with their audience through ethical practices like maintaining credibility and objectivity. Credibility is “perceived believability... [and] the perceived truthfulness of information” derived from messages, events, or pieces of information (van Dalen, 2020, p. 358). To be trusted, the media must be deemed a credible source by the audience; in comparison, “The foundation for success as an influencer is credibility” (Bahar & Hasan, 2024, para. 2; Kim & Kim, 2021; Ozuem, et al., 2023; Reinikainen, et al., 2020). Influencers are considered credible sources by their followers due to their “seemingly authentic content” and marketing transparency (Chen, et al., 2024; Kapitan, et al., 2021; Wang, et al., 2024; Bahar & Hasan, 2024, para. 2). Although the trust that

journalists strive to establish is in the validity of their claims, influencers attempt to gain an audience's trust in their online (supposedly real) self.

Newsfluencers participate in news dissemination from either side (influencer and journalist), having to maintain trust, authenticity, transparency, and credibility as content creators and journalistic actors. Yet Hurcombe (2024) states that self-branding challenges the norms of journalism as incorporating the personal or “authenticity” into news content can conflict with the traditional value of objectivity (p. 5). This creates an internal dilemma: how can newsfluencers cultivate a following as influencers and maintain a legitimate journalistic position? The Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas has argued that teaching content creators traditional journalism values can protect credibility. Introduced in Chapter 1, the course aimed “to equip all communicators with [media and information literacy] skills, knowledge, and tools needed to ‘Be a Trusted Voice Online,’ thereby enhancing the quality of information in the public sphere” (Harlow, 2024). I asked each participant: How do you go about establishing trust with your audience? and How do you navigate between having a social media career in news/political content creation and your own personal code of ethics? These answers were coded under Content production and ethics, separated into two subcodes: one focusing on sentiments related to trust and the other to authenticity. Many of the responses correlated directly with their content creation, thus the subcode Sources emerged under the Content parent code and was assigned to these discussions.

5.2.1 Newsfluencer Codes of Ethics

Boots' personal code of ethics focused on the unintended consequences of his work. He said he tries to “minimize harm, in particular to the vulnerable people in stories.” As well, he is informed by his experiences as a teacher.

It's always a tricky balance, but trying to have a very sort of defined internal moral code around things and trying to have some internal sense of right and wrong... A lot of the same responsibilities you have as a teacher to your students in your class are the same sort of responsibilities you have as a presenter online, right? You want to make sure that you got your facts right. You want to make sure that you're not harmful to your audience or harmful to individuals, right? You want to build a culture of respect in your space and all this sort of stuff.

Boots essentially summarized my findings in this sentiment. The interviews identified two overall practices that the participants utilize to establish themselves as trustworthy: 1) citing their sources of information, and 2) being transparent when they make mistakes.

Sources

Chatman's main ethics code is to "credit as much as possible." He makes a clear distinction between his perspective of a story or topic and the credited researchers behind the facts he uses to make a point. "I'm not finding the facts; I'm just presenting them." He "always [tries] to put screenshots of my sources and include the journalist's name. I always try to talk about, 'Oh, I was reading this article and had this thought.' I try to talk about it more from a media angle and acknowledge that I'm not actually doing the research." His process usually consists of reading numerous articles or going to the library to inspire his videos, then: "I just archive them, summarize them, and give people a rundown." He includes these sources within the video.

For Boots, "Step one is showing my work. If I am pointing to a statistic or a piece of evidence, it's on the screen, right? And there's a link available, right? Because you want it to be very easy for your audience to retrace your steps and your thought process through the research you did." He also livestreams his research sessions:

I make my weekly show that... is called 'What the Hell, Canada?' The research document for that is public. And so I do my research publicly, in full public view. I stream it and it's surprisingly popular. People just want to sit there and work quietly with me. But in publicizing that research process, they see how it all comes to be. And so they see how I check my facts. They see how I check... how all of this stuff—my work—is always visible. That's one big part of it.

Boots pulls his sources from “kind of everywhere. I try to keep a diverse news diet. I try to follow a lot of interesting people on different platforms, like a lot of journalists on Bluesky and Twitter in particular.” He tries “to focus on verifiable facts” and be responsible: “a big audience comes with big responsibility, right? You’ve got to make sure you’ve got your facts straight.” As discussed in the previous section, Boots also utilizes his participatory audience. “Sometimes I’ll check to see what are the top stories on a couple of different provincial subreddits to see what’s going on there. ‘Cause that’s usually a pretty good way to get a sense of what’s going on in each individual province. I’ll ask my audience.” If he feels that he does not have a perspective or thoughts to contribute to an interesting story, he shares the story on Discord or Twitter. Similarly, Bennett’s “number one thing is, you can’t lie. It has to be actual truthful information.”

Likewise, Chatman added that it is important to have “a fact to back up something that I say if somebody comes and questions it because I don’t think it’s helpful to promoting leftist ideologies to say things and not be able to back them up.” Research and filming can take a considerable amount of time, which usually means he takes a momentary break from posting. However, delaying a post can reduce the urgency of the topic, as well as leave room for another event or story to pique the public’s interest. “By the time I’ve done all the research and everything, I really don’t feel like I have anything new to add to this or something.” His content does not prioritize breaking a news story, but rather “giving people tools” and continuing his aspirations for a public speaking career.

Bennett also uses a number of news sources. He makes sure “to credit other work where I’ve collected information. Obviously, if I’m getting something from a Globe and Mail article or A New York Times article or whatever, to credit them. I think the number one thing is that you

have to provide the best, factual information that you can.” Domenic tries “to include sources where I can.”

Tucker aims to “be well researched in what I present. And [I] try to make as few mistakes as possible. That's, I guess, the best way that I can build trust with my audience is that they know that I'm not just jumping on a trend or doing commentary just to get views. But that I'm really taking time to consider the issues thoroughly before I just start talking.” In order to flesh out the information surrounding an event or issue, she will take time before posting. “A lot of times I'll wait a day, a week, a month, whatever, to comment on certain things because... I don't wanna add to the cacophony... I don't wanna be wrong.” She prefers in-depth content versus clickbait or a “hot take” that will drive traffic to her account. Tucker also takes into account the potential harm of her content and the importance of validating what she says, as she has been contacted or spoken with the individuals she has discussed. “Oftentimes, I've been connected with a lot of people who I've done breakdowns on. And so then that motivates me that much more to be really, really careful about what I say, how I say it, researching, double-checking information.”

She also factors in the potential harm of the information, opinions, or claims that she posts. “Is anybody going to be hurt by this? Is this going to... what's the impact? Those are questions that I have to ask before I put information out there.” Boots learned this through trial and error. “I covered a story—I won't share any personal details... and the individual reached out. And they were like, ‘you got this wrong and it really hurt.’ And it was like, ‘ah, I shouldn't have done that.’” He further stated that “You've got to make sure that your words aren't harmful to people who are not... in a position of power or to people who have nothing to do with the story... It's really just always actively thinking about who is potentially hurt by sharing this story.”

While it would be easy to post on recent stories that have traction online or jump on a bandwagon, Tucker would rather understand the issue in order to provide nuanced commentary. “I have to learn how to disappoint people. I have to learn how to not be the most liked or cheered creator all the time.” She may face backlash from users for this:

Sometimes people are going to be like, ‘what's your problem? What's wrong with you? Why aren't you just calling a spade a spade?’ It's like, well, everything's not that straightforward. And I have to... I have to accept that grey area and the ambiguity at times myself.

While she cannot claim to always be right, Tucker uses a wide variety of sources to have a well-balanced perspective. She tries not to get “locked into, ‘well, this is just where I get my news,’ because you're going to hear things from ten different perspectives depending on who you're listening to. I would not probably rely on most right-leaning sources.” As a media literacy advocate, she makes an effort to consume from sources that do not push a certain interpretation or slant of the news, which includes “super left-y news sources either ‘cause that can really give you a skewed perception of even what normal is.” She shared that:

I end up using a lot of the Newswires, like AP News or Reuters. I use Vox... I've done some work for Ground News, which is like a news aggregator, and it kind of helps you understand left-leaning, right-leaning... stuff... PBS, NPR... I think there's a site called [More] Perfect Union [that] has some really interesting explainer videos.

She also discussed other creators that she turns to for information. “I really love a guy named Johnny Harris who does some really deep dive explainers. Leeja Miller is a YouTuber that I really enjoy watching. People who do breakdowns and deep dives and that kind of thing.”

Transparency

In journalism, transparency “has been equated with ‘being open about how news is made’” in order to produce proper journalism and was “institutionalized as a legitimate norm of the journalism field” in the mid-2010s (Heim, 2024, p. 61). For example, “audiences want news

media to be transparent about their sources, journalistic principles, and mistakes”, often seen through publishing bylines and corrections (Hedman, 2016, p. 2; Phillips, 2010). Further, news organizations want audiences to consider them “objective, accountable, and transparent” (Hedman, 2016, p. 2). Yet acknowledging the perspective of the audience challenges traditional journalism ideals and authority (Walters, 2021a). Co-creative labour and participatory culture are concerns of technology, as social media may “enable and even encourage user participation”, thus “transparency is one way to relate to all those people outside the news organization”, like newsfluencers (Hedman, 2016, p. 2). While influencers can utilize transparency with their followers when they promote or advertise products (Balaban, et al., 2022), newsfluencers relate their transparency to the journalistic ethics and values brought to social media.

Chatman said: “the biggest thing for me is transparency.” As well as highlighting his sources, as I discussed earlier. “I like to be as transparent as possible because I do the risk. I think journalists deserve [the] credit [of collecting the information]. Obviously, they’re the ones who gave me the info.” He further explained that Instagram’s algorithm prioritizes a video if the user does not scroll during the first three seconds of watching. “So I take a journalistic approach of trying to put the most interesting thing in the very beginning of the video with usually some sort of visual... So trying to get the point across and be like, ‘but there's more to come.’” Chatman builds the “initial spark of interest” with users and then backs up his claims with sources to establish trust, hoping that it builds over time. For many of the participants, being transparent about their mistakes and taking accountability contributes to trust—but it takes time to prove their trustworthiness to the audience. Lee said that “Everything is about consistency and being able to acknowledge when you are wrong. But also being able to just be consistent and making it where people trust you over an amount of time.”

Domenic also tries “to own up... when I’m making a mistake. I try to be honest about that. I try to clarify where possible.” He spoke on his personal skill set (e.g., ability to read and understand things) and privilege as well. “At the end of the day, I think part of it is that I speak with [a] voice of authority. Part of that can be my undeserved, white male privilege... I get that not everybody would feel as confident and comfortable doing what I’m doing.” He acknowledged that:

I make mistakes all the time and I'll own up to that. And I'll never hide from those mistakes. But I think, at the end of the day, what it boils down to is [that] I speak with confidence, and I speak consistently with people. I'm never really coming out of left field.

With this confidence comes scrutiny from the audience. “Some people were like, ‘oh, well, I didn't expect you to take this stance.’ And it's like, you're not watching enough of my content, which is fine, but usually the people who consistently watch me have a pretty solid understanding of who I am.”

Some of the participants endeavor to limit or disclose bias in their distribution. Boots, while providing ideological tools to his followers so they can decipher politics, tries “very hard not to tell people what to think. I try to walk them through what's happening and give them a path to thinking about it. Give them a framework to think about it within.” He admits to not being partisan. “I’m very clear about what I believe and what I stand for and the ideological frameworks that I’m using to think about things... It’s really about those interpretive tools.” Domenic said that users will “apply their political leaning [to him] as they see fit. I have people on Instagram thinking I'm a conservative. I have people on TikTok and Twitter thinking that I'm a liberal staffer or I'm an NDP, or I'm actually a secret Green Party plant or whatever.” Like Boots, Domenic said:

I am what I am. I don't tell people who I vote for. That's not my place, and I let people apply whatever they want to me. And I think that that lends to the credibility because...

it's so hard for people to figure out what party I vote for.” I think that it's OK that I obfuscate that part of my life, but if it was very obvious that I was in favor of one specific party over another in every scenario... I think people know who I don't like. But I think it's harder for people to peg down who I do like. And so, I think that if it was a scenario where it was very, very obvious that I support XYZ Party, I would have to come forward about it and say ‘yes, I support this party.’ But because nobody knows, right? It's better that I leave it, because people can trust that I'm doing my best to be unbiased.

On the other hand, Bennett openly recognizes the personal bias that can be found in his content.

He lets his audience know ahead of time that “I am biased in this direction... You know, I’m writing about Donald Trump. I don’t like him... and you should be able to understand that by reading my article. That shouldn’t be something that you have to guess.” He typically wants his followers to understand that he is writing from a left-leaning, progressive position, but he also writes Substack articles that he considers relatively unbiased. “I think there's a lot of my articles that are just providing the information and... I'm not really sure you could say that there's a bias to them.”

Further, Bennett said:

People like that personal, like, seeing somebody face-to-face sort of thing. I don't really like news when there's not a person behind it. I don't want to just read words on a screen or have a voice come over... I think there's that personal aspect, which I think people enjoy and I think that adds a layer of trust to it, too. When somebody's willing to put their name and their face out there and provide you with information that's sort of a level of like, ‘OK, they're willing to put their name and their face on the line and they're providing the information.’ Cause you could potentially get scrutinized more doing that.

Kyle Heim (2024) argued that “audiences have been largely absent from the conversation” regarding transparency as a journalistic strategy to “better serve” audiences (p. 61). For newsfluencers, the close relationship between themselves and the followers has inherently included them in ethical practices. Bennett explained that:

Your audience will hold you accountable. They’ll watch your content, and obviously there’s people on the internet that will just see something, hear something, and think, ‘oh, that’s true.’ But a lot of people aren’t like that. They’re hearing something, they’re researching it. They’re wanting to know if it’s true and that you provide reliable

information. And you... can provide inflammatory information a few times, probably for clicks and views, but that will only last so long. I think, if you want that long-term strategy of having an audience, then you have to hold yourself accountable first. Otherwise, the audience is going to hold you accountable and usually, an audience holding you accountable means that they're not going to watch you anymore.

Boots vocalized the importance of holding yourself accountable in order to establish trustworthiness. "The best way that I have found to build public trust is also the way that sucks the most. It is admitting you were wrong and correcting yourself." He highlights his relationship with the audience and the potential for backlash. "There are few things more humbling than telling the entire internet: 'I screwed up.' And I've been wrong before! And I've had to backtrack things. I've had to apologize." With mistakes, he emphasizes that there is no malicious intent to be wrong or to misinform the audience, but trust can be lost and must be regained. He said:

I'm a person! And when you make a jillion videos, you're going to put your foot in your mouth on occasion. So the only way you can recover from that and actually turn it into a positive, long-term, is by immediately saying, 'yeah, I screwed up. I'm going to fix it. Here's how.' I think that's been a big step to building public trust.

False Information, Bad Actors

Most of the participants did not have negative interactions with other content creators, though they did touch on the 'others,' or 'bad' creators who they do not associate with or act differently than. I used the subcode Negative peers to code this, under the code Relationship(s) within their field which emerged later during the coding process.

Domenic specifically mentioned actors who have malicious intent. "I don't think that what I'm doing is inherently wrong, [but] I think that there is a lot of people who maliciously do the type of stuff that I do... It happens on the left, but I do tend to see it more so from right-wing content creators." These creators "are able to gain mass following really quickly by essentially

spreading falsehoods, and they tend to monetize it a lot more frequently than I find people on the centre and the left do.” Domenic said that these creators seem to be aware of their actions and “actively... [push] the right buttons, and so I’ve always tried to not be like that.”

5.2.2 Sharing Values in the Periphery

Professionals draw boundaries in journalism by exercising their authority to demarcate certain actors as ‘outsiders.’ Those who possess such authority are viewed as legitimate and assign or withhold legitimacy from others who attempt to enter. The internet and social media lowered this barrier to entry which signalled professionals to ‘expel’ new and non-traditional actors.

However, these actors were able to compete and stay at the periphery of journalism’s boundaries due to their large audiences. As news distributors, newsfluencers use certain journalistic practices, norms, and values to gain the audience's trust. They also use social media to connect with the audience in order to maintain said trust. In Chapter 3, I referred to Carlson and Lewis (2019) to situate journalism as a *thing* that may be changed due to internal and external challenges in order to accentuate shared values with agents at the peripheral of journalism boundaries (Eldridge, 2019). As well, I aimed to outline how newsfluencers permeate, expand, and regulate these boundaries.

Like journalists, the participants have codes of ethics that inform their content and establish them as trusted voices. These ethical practices include being transparent, crediting sources, holding themselves accountable, being well-researched, limiting the potential for harm, and acknowledging or limiting bias. While some of these are shared with traditional actors (e.g., transparency, limiting harm, and being well-researched), other values are specific to social media. Newsfluencers’ relationships with their followers requires them to take accountability publicly or risk losing their audience, as explained by Boots:

...I've been wrong before! And I've had to backtrack things. I've had to apologize... the only way you can recover from [making a mistake] and actually turn it into a positive, long-term, is by immediately saying, 'yeah, I screwed up. I'm going to fix it. Here's how.' I think that's been a big step to building public trust.

While there are 'bad actors' as mentioned by Domenic, non-affiliated newsfluencers who practice professional journalism standards are expanding the borders. Essentially, they challenge the authority of traditional actors by sharing the values that comprise legitimacy, permeating through the periphery as they continue to be trusted news sources.

5.3 IDENTITY: “NOT INFLUENCE-Y ENOUGH”

As discussed in Chapter 2, legitimacy can decide who is an 'insider' and an 'outsider' in the journalism field. Many of the participants described their content as providing tools to their followers so they can understand the news, as well as contributing to media literacy. Creators like Chatman, Tucker, and Lee provide historical context that is relevant to understanding contemporary issues (e.g., U.S. history of marginalization towards Black communities). With this in mind, I refer to Fink (2018) who states that “Audiences depend upon journalists to help them make sense of current events by explaining them in context, such as by providing a history of events that led up to the latest news” (pp. 40-41). The following section explores how the participants simultaneously blur journalism boundaries and question the work of influencers.

5.3.1 Not a Journalist, Not an Influencer

When asked, all of the participants did not identify with the terms newsfluencer or news influencer. I used the Identity code for most of these responses, specifically the subcodes 'Influencer' identification and Thoughts on 'newsfluencer' identification. I assigned this code to Lee's strong reaction: “First time I'm hearing that term. Definitely, adamantly, rejection.” He later referenced a quote from Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party, who said

“power is the ability to define phenomena and make it act in a desired manner” (Hilliard & Weise, 2002, p. 227). For Lee, being called a newsfluencer or classified by others was like letting someone else define his phenomenon.

My mind is like, a newsfluencer? That sounds like something that Fox News or Donald Trump or CNN can throw around like [a] keyboard or social justice warrior, or like BLM. That sounds like something that has the potential to be very derogatory... Nah, I'm good on any term that can be popularized or is popularized.

He also said that, on face value, such terminology or classification can be delegitimizing. While he finished by acknowledging the need for classification in research, he is still not a fan of the term. “News influencer. Whatever, man... I get it. What that tells me is that I need to be able to... sprinkle a little bit more uniqueness in what I do to make it not as easy to lump what I do with everybody else.”

On the other hand, Chatman thought the ‘influencer’ aspect “is accurate, but I would personally say politics or culture [instead of news]. I guess influencer is an accurate word. It just describes the category.” Like Chatman, Bennett expressed nonchalance to what term individuals use to refer to him, and reported that he has been directly asked “are you a newsfluencer?” before. In regard to the term, however, Bennett said that others may “think of ‘newsfluencer’ as almost, like, a less-than type name or creators, like they’re not really the news. They’re just people, they’re kind of like wannabes, almost sort of thing, which I think is the wrong way to look at it.” See Table 5 for a list of the terms each participant self-identified with. While Bennett says he does not know “what” he is, he likes to think of himself as an online educator. Similarly, most of the participants identified as an educator or discussed educating others as the intent behind their content.

Table 5

A List of Terms that Each Participant Self-Identified with.

Participant	Term(s)
Frank Domenic	“Oration”
Brandon Chatman	“Politics or culture influencer,” “educator”
Steve Boots	“Internet’s Social Studies Teacher,” “commentator”
Cole Bennett	“Online educator”
Dara Starr Tucker	“Social media/online commentator”
George Lee	“Educator,” “news commentator,” “political influencer”

Boots actually said that “I always think of myself more as the Internet’s social studies teacher than as a journalist... I view myself as somebody trying to give people a toolkit [to understand the news].” He also called himself a commentator, but as a former teacher his education skills transfer into his content creation. “What I do isn’t journalism: it’s analysis, it’s commentary, and it’s education.” Lee also identified as “an educator, first and foremost. I’m an educator that makes intersectional content about politics, history, and social issues. I’d be more comfortable to be considered a news commentator and political influencer.” He acknowledged that there are multiple aspects of his content (including journalism, news, and empowerment), “But at the heart of what Conscious Lee do? I’m an educator... My motto is ‘education is elevation.’” Domenic is also a teacher full-time, saying that:

I do think that what I provide is an armchair analysis. I’m not an expert. I have an economics degree... I’m kind of like a Jack-of-all trades, but a master of none in that capacity. What I am good at is communicating. I’m a good communicator. I am good at explaining things to people. I’m good at breaking things down into small, digestible bites and having it delivered in a way that the average person can understand regardless of their education level. That’s why I tend to use the term oration, because what I’m really

good at more than anything else is speaking.... I can explain [something] to [someone] in a specific way and they'll make their own decision.

Though Tucker did not outright identify as an educator, she stated that education played a role in the motivations behind her content during and post-BLM. "I started to suddenly realize, 'oh, wait a minute, we have a lot of education and understanding around race and culture that's necessary in this country.'" She also replied that part of creating her content requires educating herself: "it forces me to go back and study."

Furthermore, half of the participants specifically disliked the 'influencer' part of the term. As discussed in Chapter 2, influencers are "everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles... and monetize their following" (Abidin, 2015, p. 3). Tucker's dislike of the term was rooted in her perception of influencers in general:

It tends to be something a little more shallow. It's like beauty or lifestyle, or it tends to be used a little bit pejoratively.... The term itself just feels loaded, with a lot that doesn't feel like it has much to do with my world.

She further responded that the term feels "a little bit tied to the profit motive. Influencing you to buy a Cologne or influencing you to wear something or influencing you to participate in something." For Tucker, her work is about more than the promotion of material goods or experiences, an advertising strategy centrally tied to Abidin's (2015) definition.

Domenic also related influencers with commercialization. "I hate being called an influencer because I'm usually not changing people's votes and I'm not influencing them to buy a product... I don't think that I'm influence-y enough." Chatman iterated a similar sentiment:

My marketing brain hears 'influencer' and I think, like, influence to buy something or influence to change a lifestyle, or that kind of thing... I think of influencers as people you want to be like. People whose lifestyle you want to achieve, products that they use, that you want to attain... I don't think I'm influencing anyone to be like me. I'm just trying to present what's going on.

However, he did acknowledge the potential influence of his account in relation to his objectives and identity. “I think of it more as being an educator than an influencer... It’s more of giving people new perspectives, so I guess I am influencing people’s behaviour or their thought processes, but I think of it more as being an educator.” Tucker went on to say that if she is doing “a good job”, then it is possible for her content to change viewers’ minds. “In a technical sense, everyone and anyone who does anything online is going to influence people,” she rationalized.

5.3.2 Discussions on Journalism Affiliations

As discussed earlier in this section, none of my participants identified as a newsfluencer, with some answering that the term deems them unprofessional or ‘less than’ a traditional news worker. Yet when asked about their affiliation to journalism (Where do you think you fit inside/outside of the field of journalism?)—something that would make them ‘professional’—most did not identify as journalists or even journalist-aligned. Thus, not only do scholars and workers in the news field see newsfluencers and non-traditional actors as ‘outside’ of journalism, newsfluencers also position themselves this way. For some, this is on purpose. Participants’ reasons varied, but the consensus revealed that it is because they view journalism as a profession that requires more than their work and/or their work is specifically not meant to follow the rules and boundaries of traditional media. I assigned these conversations the code: Journalism field affiliations/discussions, distinguishing two subcodes of sentiments that detailed their field position or boundaries they experienced and interactions with other professional members in the field.

While Bennett admires mainstream media and would not mind being compared to traditional actors, he has more freedom as an independent creator. “I think my goal has been to

be different and I wouldn't want to work for mainstream media because that would defeat the purpose. My goal is not to work for them. My goal is to be different than them because I can be. Because in many cases, they can't do that. For a multitude of reasons.”

Boots stated that it is important to distinguish himself from journalists. “I don’t do original journalism and so I think I always try to make that really clear because original journalism is its own skill set with its own responsibilities.” He went further to say:

I don’t even want to make comparisons [to journalists]... because that seems self-aggrandizing. But I think [my content is] an important role because people don’t necessarily always have the tools to interpret the news. They know how to read it, they know how to take in the events that are happening, but they don’t always have the ideological framework or the tool set to interpret it.

For example, in selecting what stories to cover, he finds that “there's lots of stories where... that's outside of my field. I'm not a crime reporter and reporting on crime is hard. You have to do it very sensitively... There's a lot to do there. So I might just share that story ‘cause I don't have anything to contribute.” Boots’ work, instead, could be considered an addition to journalism. “I view myself as being very adjacent and complementary, but definitely not overlapping in really super significant ways.” He does not view himself “as any sort of competitor [to journalists]. My work relies on what they do, and I'd like to think that their work is enhanced by what I do. I think it's very symbiotic.” He shared that he has done interviews for different outlets seeking a left-leaning comment and finds it to be a “mutually beneficial sort of relationship...” Discussed in a previous section, Boots gives credit to the journalists and news organizations where he pulls his information from which creates a “healthy” relationship between him and traditional actors. “Citing my sources very actively helps to make sure that they don't feel like they're getting ripped off. It helps to drive some traffic to them... I always make sure that the byline is visible when I'm citing articles, things like that.”

Chatman responded similarly. “I’ve never worked as a journalist myself. I’ve never really done any investigating... I don’t want people to think that I’m a journalist because I have a lot of respect for people who actually do conduct interviews, do research, do the digging.” While he took some journalism classes during his undergraduate degree in public relations, the intent was to understand what journalists do. Many of my participants argued that their skillset and content are inherently different to what they perceive to make up a journalist. Chatman continued to say that:

I just have a certain set of skills that allows me to understand news angles and media angles and that kind of thing, and break it down for people to kind of understand bias in the news. So [I’m] more of a media regurgitator... I do make media and news a big focus of what I do, and I do talk specifically about how the news is presented... I just don’t actually do any journalistic research aside from reading articles and synthesizing them.

However, Chatman stated that “a lot of people still don't have the bandwidth to take in [a news] story, or they're reading it and they might not be fully understanding what the issue is. Or [they] might not be understanding why that article doesn't have the full story and you need to read up.” As a result, his content focuses on the “narrative that I'm seeing in the media about, ‘this thing is not telling you the full picture.’”

Additionally, I asked Domenic if the interviews he has conducted with prominent Canadian political figures (like Ontario NDP leader Marit Stiles and Ontario Liberal Party leader Bonnie Crombie) made him feel more journalistic. He replied that:

It made me feel less journalist aligned because the interviews that I do are... not that they're not formal. But I'm usually not coming out to get a gotcha [moment] and I'll tell people ahead of time, like, I've tried to get Conservatives on, too... But I think that people in the Conservative world are too worried that I'm gonna, like, *get them*. ‘Cause that's what they think that their people do. They know that the people in Rebel News and the conservative influencers... they're always going for a gotcha. That's not what I'm doing.

Domenic questioned their apprehension as he typically aims to be “open and honest” and friendly with them prior to any filming. He referenced his interview with Jagmeet Singh as an example. “You can see on my Jagmeet Singh video like, he completely dodged one of my questions. And I asked him a second and kind of a third time, the same thing, over and over again. And that video where I asked him the second time, that was the clip that went viral.” He thinks the attention around that video was due to Singh’s “non-answer” that Domenic did not accept as a resolution to his question (among other conversation points made). However, he does not think that “a journalist would have allowed for that same thing, ‘cause at the end of the day—not that I'm going for clicks, but I don't need to be a gotcha journalist because that's not my bread and butter.” He is typically contacted by a politician to do an interview, though he has reached out in the past. “Even if they know that I have a small reach, they know that the people who I do have a reach with are people who are highly engaged, and that's a grassroots-type thing where you really engage those core supporters and then it ripples out from there.”

For Boots, Canadian politicians “are extremely reluctant to come on live streams. They're extremely reluctant to do interviews with non-traditional outlets... Generally, they avoid it because it's unpredictable. It's an unknown quantity.” For example, a politician would not have prior knowledge of the questions before a livestream interview, nor would they “like” to publicly answer his questions. “Canada has a very—controlled is the wrong word because it's not... nobody's got their thumb on it. It's just a very careful media environment. Establishment journalists tend to ask questions within a fairly narrow ideological band.” He has conducted interviews with certain politicians who express excitement over and interest in the discussion topics, but he finds that:

Leaders are terrified to do this sort of stuff because they might get pinned down, making a statement they don't want to make, and they like to give their canned press conference-y things. They value predictability and we [non-traditional actors] don't provide that.

On the other hand, Lee feels “like I've been doing journalism for a long time before I was in college.” Though not traditional journalism, Lee’s background and use of social media puts him into the field. “I think that I got the middle road of ‘I do have a formal educational background that does inform a lot of the things I talk about, and I do have a lot of experience using different intersectional interdisciplinary ideas and traditions, and talking about current events.’”

Domenic has actually broken news himself, but tries not to do this because he does not have the liability insurance required to mitigate any legal ramifications “of knowing information that I shouldn’t have known.” When he is contacted about covering a story, he considers his journalistic integrity. “I can't report on something that big without knowing, because that is.. that if I got it wrong, that would be bad for me and that would be bad for society as a whole, putting that type of misinformation out there.” Instead, he sends scoops to journalists that he has become familiar with over time. When the story is published, “that lets me know that media is still doing its job.” He continued to advocate for jobs in journalism. “We need to ensure that media is funded properly so there are people who can take on these tasks, right? Because if you're doing this as a hobby, you don't have the time or the capacity to take it on and really dive into these topics.” However, he does connect with sources online and said that “because I’m not operating as a journalist, it’s a lot easier for me to speak to things that haven’t yet been confirmed without, obviously, spread[ing] rumours about people.” His position means he does not have “to go through all the layers of approval” that a traditional journalist affiliated with a news organization would. He can connect with individuals impacted by or around an issue and, in his posts, is able

to say “‘somebody in Ottawa says this happened’... then it would be the responsibility of real journalists to go out and confirm that that story happened.”

Lastly, similar to other newsfluencers outside of my participant pool (e.g., Spehar), Tucker’s content creation resulted in a point of entry into the journalistic field as a ‘professional.’ She relayed the story:

I’ve been doing online stuff—commentary— for several years. Since late 2020 or so. And Stevie Wonder owns a radio station out here in Los Angeles, and apparently he had gotten wind of it. I think his son was somebody who followed me. And the station manager has been following me. So they’ve been letting him hear my stuff. And they decided to bring me out to do a show. So... this is really my first foray into radio. This year, starting in January of this year [2025]. I was doing a once-weekly show for them last year and kind of sending that in. But yeah, I moved here to do radio this year.

Tension

A few participants commented on the negative perceptions of their role from journalists or other members of the news industry. Boots said, “When online creators enter into more traditional journalistic forums, they sometimes get some friction, but like it’s been few and far between.” He argued that there are positive interactions, referencing Domenic’s foray into a ‘professional’ role with a news organization. “I think of Frank’s experience during the election. I think he did a fair bit with CBC and that went really smoothly... he was welcomed pretty well.” Overall, Boots says that non-traditional content creators have a wide range of experiences as they enter the journalistic field. “There’s always going to be some degree of just terminally online nonsense, right? And just people talking... talking smack on Twitter and stuff.” Usually, it is not journalists themselves that are “pushing back against folks like me”, but commentators. “It’s generally opinion writers or... sometimes journalists. Like senior political journalists in some cases and... people who are very established but also have something to lose.” He continued to rationalize this pushback:

We're challenging their position to some degree. And so, when your position is threatened, there's lots of different ways to respond to that. Yeah, some folks lash out. Some other folks have embraced it. The example I think of is Dale Smith who does traditional journalism but he also has a YouTube channel. Or David Moscrop, who overlaps both a little bit, too. There's different ways that folks have approached it, and *yeah*, some establishment journalists like to talk some crap, but there's honestly very few, and my experience has been way more welcoming aside from getting blocked by, you know, the occasional journalist who blocks everyone. It really hasn't been a big thing.

As one of the content creators invited to the DNC and being “a bigger content creator”, Lee spoke to the tension between actors like himself and traditional media. “I have a different relationship to mainstream or traditional media.” One example he gave was that pivotal moment for U.S. newsfluencers. “At the DNC, when it came to the content creators being there with our phones and looking at major networks... there was a lot of animosity and/or legitimizing and delegitimizing around who should be there.” Lee feels like there is “a little battle going on right now in the status quo that deals with new school media journalists and old school, traditional media journalism, and it’s all colliding now on social media.” After I narrowed our focus on legitimacy and being delegitimized, Lee commented that “I feel like they [traditional media] envy me. That they believe that we’re still in their audience.” He acknowledged ‘good’ actors in traditional media, but “in general, [they’re a] whole bunch of haters... that, I say, want to use their traditional appeals to authority and try to legitimize and delegitimize who gets to give the news, who gets to cover the news. And what it means for them to give correct news.” He continued to speak about misinformation as an issue on both sides: some “of us street journalists that just swapped onto social media do be incorrect... But... a lot of y’all traditional media... not only are y’all incorrect many times, y’all been incorrect so much [that] we don’t trust you.”

He views the current moment as a time of mitigation or resolution for this tension. While attending the First State of the Union address from Biden, he was briefed and told “about how the average American now gets their news from TikTok and social media and not mainstream

media... One of the reasons why we were getting invited [was] because they recognized that we... have more access to Americans than they do.” For Lee, mainstream media is “dying” due to consumers’ desire to curate their own channels and consumption based on their timelines and through their phones. He cites the BLM movement as a moment of distrust between Americans and mainstream or traditional media. “As a Black man... mainstream media always already had a negotiated legitimacy for my community... Mainstream media would cover [the murders of Black individuals] in a particular manner that made it where my community started following back.” Ultimately, Lee posits that mainstream media lost the trust of the public before newsfluencers even entered the field. He called it “a self-inflicted wound.”

Another difference suggested by Lee is the timing of his posts versus traditional media. “By the time [a story] is on the news, it’s already 48 hours, 72 hours, a week old. That’s really what people are looking for... real time news that’s raw and organic [and] not curated by a corporation or some type of profited perspective.”

5.3.3 Are Newsfluencers Competing?

While certain participants placed themselves broadly in the journalistic field, most distinguished themselves from journalists as they typically do not investigate or ‘break’ news. As well, almost all of the participants had positive relationships with journalists and viewed them as important sources for their work. This evidence suggests that some newsfluencers may be choosing not to compete in the field despite their advantages due to their economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, as well as habitus from SMI practices. However, Chatman and Bennett both create content that rejects traditional media angles, thus producing content that may appeal to audiences who place distrust in news organizations. As well, Boots argued that newsfluencers are competing in the field:

We're challenging their position to some degree. And so, when your position is threatened, there's lots of different ways to respond to that. Yeah, some folks lash out. Some other folks have embraced it.

By embracing it, Boots referred to journalists who have become content creators (and potentially newsfluencers) themselves. These affiliated newsfluencers are an example of agents who are 'playing the game': they have adjusted to social media and cultivated the additional capital to compete for online audiences.

Further, Lee's noted differences between non-affiliated newsfluencers and traditional agents in the field suggest a competition and boundary management. For example, he stated that newsfluencers post "real time news" in comparison to journalists who may be delayed due to following certain ethical standards. Moreover, his experience of being delegitimized at the DNC reflected the field in-person: journalists and influencers were actively competing for coverage and access, though journalistic doxa and habitus separated the two groups and what they posted (Kelly, 2024).

5.3.4 Monopolization: Beyond the Boundary

I will now refer back to Gieryn's (1983) three reasons why professionals build and maintain boundaries. He stated:

(a) when the goal is *expansion* of authority or expertise into domains claimed by other professions or occupations, boundary-work heightens the contrast between rivals in ways flattering to the ideologist's side; (b) when the goal is *monopolization* of professional authority and resources, boundary-work excludes rivals from within by defining them as outsiders with labels such as "pseudo," "deviant," or "amateur"; (c) when the goal is *protection of autonomy* over professional activities boundary-work exempts members from responsibility for consequences of their work by putting the blame on scapegoats from outside. (pp. 791-792)

His second reason, *monopolization*, can inform why non-traditional actors like newsfluencers have been defined based on their 'outsider' status. From terms like journalistic strangers

(Foxman, et al., 2024) to explicit interlopers (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018) and peripheral actors (Schapals, 2022), individuals who entered the boundaries of journalism have been demarcated and delegitimized so traditional actors can maintain control. While some participants acknowledged the term, each participant chose *not* to identify as a newsfluencer, opting for terms like “commentator” or “educator.” By classifying newsfluencers based on definitions from Hurcombe (2024) and the Pew Research Center (2024), I argue that the term categorizes them according to their influencer niche (e.g., beauty, lifestyle) and not by their ability to share information. This is evidenced through most participants objecting to the implication of ‘influencer,’ with only one disagreeing with the use of ‘news.’

Further, Lee described the current state of journalism as a “self-inflicted wound.” He argued that, while traditional media may blame the loss of their audiences, lower revenue, and audience’s distrust in their capabilities on newsfluencers, it can be attributed to their own actions. Gieryn’s reason c) *protection of autonomy* describes this phenomenon that has impacted Lee’s legitimacy. By placing the blame on newsfluencers, journalism and its authorities are shifting the responsibility for repairing or changing the institution internally onto non-traditional actors who have seen success using a fluctuating medium.

5.4 FURTHER FINDINGS: EXPLORATIONS OF MOTIVATIONS AND LABOUR

Explained in Chapter 4, semi-structured interviews intend for participants to lead the conversation and introduce relevant topics of information that the researcher may not have predicted. Other themes emerged from the data that, while not directly contributing to my research questions, offered valuable insight into newsfluencers personal decisions. This section

presents these two themes. The first provides an overview of each participant's Entry into their social media role and their motivations to distribute news content. I used the subcode Origin story for sentiments about their motivations and entry. The second covers the negative aspects of influencer's Labour under the context of unpaid digital work and cultural production, including personal experiences of being overwhelmed and negative interactions with other users. I created the code Digital labour for these conversations, a theme that emerged during the interview process, and used two subcodes: Negative aspects of newsfluencer work and Well-being.

5.4.1 Entry

As outlined in Chapter 2, Web 2.0 and social media have lowered the barrier of entry into journalism, allowing non-traditional actors to construct news audiences (Luce, et al., 2016; Witschge, 2012; Tandoc & Jenkins, 2017). When asked about their origin stories, each participant highlighted a specific event that motivated them to use social media and distribute news content. Overall, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for many newsfluencers' entry into news content production and information dissemination. As well, each participant cited a significant political event or issue that kickstarted their content.

Domenic stated that “most people got started on TikTok around the same time [as] the pandemic. If you were above the age of sixteen, you didn't start going to TikTok until the pandemic.” While the pandemic aided the turn to social media for many, it also sparked multiple political events, including the trucker Freedom Convoy 2022 across Canada which saw truck drivers protesting the Canadian government's response to the pandemic (Public Safety Canada, 2022). While Frank had been on TikTok prior to this moment, “eventually, during the Freedom Convoy, [he] started talking about the news and [he] was reporting on stuff that the mainstream media wouldn't report on.”

Tucker is also a singer and had an active social media presence prior to creating news-related content, but she “always felt that [she] should be speaking out about certain things.”

Tucker had a similar start to Domenic, although it was the Black Lives Matter movement that prompted her to post.

George Floyd had been killed that year and Breonna Taylor—and the election was happening, then the pandemic... You know, 2020 was 2020. So I was like, I cannot just sit on my hands any longer, I have to start speaking. And so I slowly began to dip my toe in late 2020, doing some little satirical stuff. And then early 2021 was when I really started to do more informational type-stuff, to talk about race and culture because I just felt like there was a need—a real need—for education in those areas.

Her posts caught the attention of those at Stevie Wonder’s radio station in Los Angeles, which led to Tucker being contacted to do a show, evolving into her current segment called “The Front Page.”

Comparably, while Boots had posted (with considerable audience reach) about Canadian politics on Facebook in prior years, the pandemic kickstarted his platform. “Then COVID happened and I became quite active on Twitter. During COVID, as a teacher, ...it was a lot of downtime... so I started tweeting a lot... and that sort of took off.” Shortly after, Boots created a TikTok account and started posting videos about—what he called “niche”—Canadian political events, including when the Head of the Saskatchewan Health Authority resigned. That first video “did 70,000 views” and he gained 5,000 followers his first day. As a result, Boots said: “It was like, ‘oh God, this is the thing I do now,’ and I refined my presentation... but after a month, I started to kind of find a rhythm of what I liked, and it’s really just been a steady evolution since then.”

Like Boots, Lee has been posting for a number of years and started prior to the pandemic. Though the pandemic resulted in a reliance upon social media that could have increased audience traffic, influencer marketing, and interest in political content, Lee’s motivation was more

personal (Neely, et al., 2021; Neogi, et al., 2024). As a Black man from the south of Texas and first-generation college student, Lee faced marginalization and several obstacles prior to entering academia.

Education has uniquely been able to elevate me in different ways and give me access to different spaces and places. My content is about giving access to individuals that don't have access to doing the SAT, ACT, [and] the admissions process.

His content is intended to leave audiences “educated and empowered... and a little bit more informed.”

Chatman and Bennett started well after the pandemic. Chatman first posted in November of 2025 after the U.S. federal election. “I’ve just been going to the library and reading a lot, and I was like, ‘I should probably stop ranting around the house’ and started posting on TikTok.” He had one video “blow up” and, due to the potential TikTok ban (Maheshwari & Holpuch, 2025), started posting his content on Instagram around the end of December where another video performed well. “Over the course of a month or so, suddenly I had 15-16 thousand followers, and I guess I should keep doing this. I’ve just been kind of using it as an outlet... I was just kind of frustrated with the state of the world.” His Instagram video about the murder of Brian Thompson, the CEO of UnitedHealthcare, and subsequent arrest of Luigi Mangione as a suspect (Halpert & Wendling, 2025), got over 100,000 likes. While the video on Instagram was a breaking news story that was “being covered a lot by major media, whereas on TikTok, [I posted] more of an opinion video... I was thinking a lot about the downfall of the middle class and the civil rights movement.” This became another inciting political event that contributed to Chatman’s content and newsletter.

Seeing everybody else’s response to that was really inspiring. People are, I think, open to new ideas now in a way that they weren’t even when the election happened. Those two things, I think, were really big for me to be like, ‘aright, there’s an opening to talk about United States history, class solidarity, the labor movement, all of these things, and then

breaking news kind of took over that because it's been a month and a half of update after update.

Chatman also wanted to join the conversation post-election to “give my perspective... I think one thing specifically is that I don't see a lot of young, left-leaning Black men have a platform necessarily or talk about issues... I feel like there should be more voices... It's like, yeah, guess I can add mine to the mix.” While Bennett had serious TikTok accounts that had been somewhat successful, he also started posting news content in December of 2025 in lieu of the U.S. federal election. “[Donald] Trump... had just been elected and a lot of the 51st state comments started.”

Bennett always followed politics closely, but:

The reason I started posting is [because] I sometimes think that the mainstream media doesn't give certain things the urgency that they deserve or... I call it sounding the alarm bells, that things could get bad really quickly. That's kind of why I started posting, just to educate people and to make people think that what could be happening could be bad, almost like a warning.

5.4.2 Cultural Production: Unpaid Labour

Following discussions of content creation and audience interactions, the themes of labour and creator well-being emerged. Though this had not been a major focus prior to the start of my interviews, it quickly became crucial to build rapport. Brooke E. Duffy, Poell, and David B. Nieborg (2019) argue that platformization “has transformed traditional work regimes across the news, information, and entertainment sectors” and “given rise to new categories of creative laborers—including social media entertainers, influencers, and... unpaid digital laborers” (p. 4). Digital labour is the (often unpaid) work of internet users that produce profits for platform corporations (Scholz, 2013). Considering influencer work as a form of digital labour that can be monetized, I turn to Christian Fuchs (2014) who argues that users' digital labour on social media is a form of exploitation. As workers in both news and entertainment sectors, newsfluencers'

labour is cultural production; yet they are at the whim of “platform governance frameworks” and algorithms to make a profit (Duffy, et al., 2019, p. 4).

Earlier in this section, I outlined how participants earned money online: none of them said that social media readily gave them a stable income in exchange for their content. Instead, participants became overwhelmed by the amount of work required to be successful on social media in exchange for monetization. In regard to their labour, well-being, stress, and burnout became subjects of conversation. Burnout is “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment” and a metaphor that refers to a person being a fire that cannot continue unless it is being replenished (Timbol, 2022, p. 12). Social media burnout, a phenomenon that impacts SMIs, “occurs when individuals become overwhelmed with too many sites, the amount of content, all their contacts, and having to keep up with those connections” as well as information overload, low motivation, and inefficient workflow as SMIs do not have a rest period (Timbol, 2022, p. 21; Kwon, et al., 2020).

Along with social media burnout, participants described several negative interactions with users that contributed to their perception of their work. Online ‘hate’ is “generalized racist, sexist, religious, anti-immigrant, gender, and sexual orientation-related insults, and verbal attacks based on ethnicity, political orientation, or other categorical characteristics”, as well as harassment such as trolling “(persistent pestering and goading)” and doxxing “(publicly documenting someone’s personal offline information)” (Walther, 2022, p. 2). Each participant had negative and positive experiences to share, even those who have been posting online for less than a year.

Creator Well-being

Chatman shared that he felt “pressure to keep the algorithm going” and to update his audience. In the beginning of his account, he would think “I should post, I should post, I should post”, but

over time “it's more like people being like, ‘I haven't seen you in a while, what's going on?’ And me being like, ‘I should post to keep people updated.’” He eventually re-subscribed to newsletters that “I had paused because I was like, ‘I need a break.’” I made a point to ask participants about their well-being not only as content creators, but specifically under the context of dealing with news and political information on a 24-hour basis. Chatman stated that “I'm reading the news more and more, which is good in some ways, but it is draining... I'm done reading the news and I'm like, ‘I have to talk about it now...’ And I have to synthesize it before something else crazy happens tomorrow.”

Bennett replied that he has a “terrible balance” of his time between work and content creation. “I used to go to the gym, like, five or six days a week. I don't think I've been to the gym since February, since I really started getting into the news content. It's really time-consuming.”

Last year, Tucker dealt “with a little bit of overwhelm and burnout. I was being reached out to from every corner to make videos about this and that, and election stuff. I got a little bogged down with all of that.” Similar to Chatman, she found that “political stuff can be just downright depressing sometimes. So once we got to the end of political season, I was really... I was glad. I was glad to get to the point where, like, ‘OK, I don't have to talk about that every day.’” After this time, she either took a break from distributing content or put less time into its creation, opting for her phone instead of a digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera and other equipment.

I asked Lee for any final comments and he responded that there are “a lot of complexities to being an influencer because there's millions of people that are consuming your content and that's millions of different perspectives... And sometimes thinking about it all is a little bit

overwhelming, over-stimulating.” He also experienced burnout (which led to depression) for the first time this year, dealing with stress and anxiety. With more users starting to produce content globally, he thinks “that the conversation about creator burnout would be much more of a conversation moving forward.”

Most participants have learned how to navigate being overwhelmed and stressed. Lee chooses when or if to engage in the comment section depending on his mood that day. “Sometimes being in the comment section can impact a content creator’s mental health in the worst ways.” This includes feeling “depressed, abandoned, [or] rejected... from being in the comment section.” As he has gotten older, Lee no longer feels the level of energy it takes to defend his posts which factors into his content creation: “If I got the energy, then at that point, do I care more about saying what I want to say? And less about having the energy to defend it.” As well, he unplugs when he needs to, speaks with a therapist, and is trying to focus on taking time to rest. “I’m getting to the point now where I used to feel like I had to force content or, I mean, to always produce content all around the clock, no matter what. Now I’m at a point where, if I feel like making content, I do. But if I don’t, I let it go.”

For Domenic, if “I’m not enjoying myself, I have to stop. So, for example, the long-form videos, I love the writing of them and I love the recording of them, but the overall impact that it has on my day-to-day life and in my personal time means that I need to stop.” He originally posted long-form videos weekly, but after five weeks, he was burnt out. On top of creating content, those five weeks consisted “of my full-time job. My two kids. Filming late at night. Spending time with my wife and spending time with my friends and still doing everything else.” The time constraint meant he was not able to produce content on TikTok and other short-form videos. Through his experience, Domenic focuses on “prioritizing what I care about, and it’s

about ensuring that at the end of the day... I'm still happy. You know? I gotta make sure that I'm not making myself miserable.” He also found it unhealthy to post five-six times a day as it was “easy to talk about too many things.” Meanwhile, Chatman answered: “I'm pretty good at taking a step back from reading the news and stressing myself out about things, if I can't do anything about it in the moment.”

Receiving 'Hate'

When asked if she had experienced any negativity, Tucker recalled:

Tons of just horribly insulting comments, trolls, Discord groups coming and crashing my posts, and DMs calling me the N-word... every kind of insult that you can imagine in the early days of creating content, especially when you're talking about race. It just invites that kind of negativity. It was a pretty constant thing up until my views were super throttled on Instagram. On TikTok [where she states that her content became deprioritized by the algorithm], it's probably for the best because I think I could have only gone on so long just dealing with that intense scrutiny and negativity. It's better now.

Lee has also received numerous racialized responses online. In his early days, he used “to get a thrill out of intellectually wiping the floor with trolls or making it where, when I got time for it, or when I felt like it, ‘oh you want to troll? Let's have a troll off.’” Now, however, he views haters as individuals who simply do not like his content or vehemently disagree with him and want to catch him making mistakes. Due to the intersectional nature of his content, he has “individuals that troll in different groups that hate me based off of whatever piece of content that they come across that they don't like.” The algorithm seemingly pushes political content to the demographics that are prejudiced or discriminatory against the group being discussed, so their hate comments critique that type of content only. However, Lee discusses a broad range of topics (including “transgender women, women empowerment, freeing Palestine, talking about disability, and about pollution”). He gave a few examples of this issue, one being that “the white people that say I'm only talking about race. It's the content they get from me.”

Chatman has received “a lot of comments from people, mostly trolls.” Fortunately, he does not experience daily harassment and only interacts with responses that he feels are in good faith. “You can definitely tell when someone's just being snarky or they're just being rude, but even then, sometimes those inspire good videos where you're, like, you think you have a gotcha moment right now, but it's actually really easy to debunk it.” He has taken notice of the right-leaning podcasting space and social media accounts that normalize trolling and racist comments to young men. Through his content, he tries to popularize leftist ideas and “make people think that being kind and caring is the cool thing to do.”

When he posted about politics in the past, Bennett got a lot of hate. “Doesn't matter what side of the aisle you're on. Somebody's always going to not like what you have to say.” He delved deeper into the type of hate he has received:

You do get the odd message from somebody and they can go anywhere from ‘You're a terrible person,’ to ‘I'm gonna kill you’ sort of thing. It can go off the radar. And I have, in one instance, had to... I thought one was serious enough that I should contact the RCMP, so that can give you an idea of how serious some people can be. And, you know, a lot of them are keyboard warriors, though, so you never really have to worry about anything.

Whether it be growing older or more mature, “none of that bothers me anymore. So I just kept posting and I just don't look at the comments. So you know, it just allowed me to kind of keep going.” Alongside the negativity comes “good feedback as well.” For Bennett, “the good outweighs the bad” and he has developed methods of avoiding hate. “I've also just gotten really good at message requests... I just don't open them or I can block people.” He does not delete negative comments, nor does he reply. “I just let people comment. I think a lot of times, though, they want you to respond. That's what they're looking for. And so I find if I don't respond, sometimes that's just better.”

Newsfluencers' Aspirational Labour

Aspirational labour is “the highly gender forward-looking orientation of unpaid work in hope of a future potential ‘pay-off,’ however unlikely” (Wood, 2025, p. 3; Duffy, 2017). Described in her book *(Not) Getting Paid to Do what You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, Duffy (2017) uses a feminist lens to detail how female content creators believe that their “(mostly) unpaid work” will lead to a career, though only a few ever see “significant material rewards” (p. 15). Two of my participants describe aspirational labour as a key motivating factor for their work.

As discussed earlier in this section, Chatman hopes to further develop his newsletter and achieve a speaking career from his content. Bennett is pursuing social media as “some sort of career... I don't know if that's where I'll end up, but I'm hoping it'll be a pathway into potentially something else.” He has debated going into politics:

I'm not sure if I would really want to be a politician. A lot of people have asked me, like, ‘do you want to get into politics?’ I'm not sure that I actually want to be in politics, but that may change. My opinion on that is kind of back and forth, but I think if you can get access to policymakers, you can make real differences then. And platform and visibility is the name of the game these days. Everybody wants visibility, so if you can offer that to people, then they want to meet you and they want to talk to you, right? And that is how you can make real changes by getting in front of the people that are, you know, sitting in the House of Commons voting on change. That's the reality of it.

While his content may be news now, he hopes that his TikTok, Instagram, or Substack “can filter into meeting with the right people and really shaping policy, progressive policy going forward.”

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this thesis, I examined how U.S. and Canadian newsfluencers use social media platforms to build and engage their audiences, establish themselves as trustworthy news sources, and identify themselves as actors both inside and outside of the journalistic field. Returning to Hurcombe's (2024) suggestion that newsfluencers "encourage researchers to investigate and reassess the boundaries of journalistic practice and the norms that guide it" (p. 12), this thesis used Thomas F. Gieryn's boundary work (1983, 1999) and Carlson and Lewis' (2019) journalism boundaries, as well as Pierre Bourdieu's (1971, 1972/2008) field theory to depict the entry, competition, and practices of non-affiliated newsfluencers beyond the borders of journalism. The research focused on non-affiliated newsfluencers as they do not possess journalistic capital or formal training, yet utilize their experiences and relevant knowledge to gain massive followings and access opportunities usually reserved for professionals (e.g., interviewing major political figures). Each of the six participants offered unique insights into a relatively new categorization of non-traditional actors during the interviews. Their perspectives reflected the interdisciplinary potential of journalism to move beyond professionalism and embrace the venture into social media as a distribution medium with the potential to form relationships with the audience and produce content that suits their democratic needs. This thesis shows that non-affiliated newsfluencers are crucial to understanding contemporary journalism, from how audiences want to consume news to the necessities of media literacy.

6.1 FINDINGS

My objective with this research was to contribute to a significant gap in newsfluencer research, specifically regarding Canadian actors. Based on my analysis, I will now answer the three research questions introduced in Chapter 1 and outline the major findings of my work.

1. What unique social media influencer practices and platform affordances are these creators utilizing to gain their audiences?

In Chapter 5.1, I discussed the practices and affordances that the participants employed to gain followers across their platforms. These methods included self-branding, portraying authenticity, offering subscriptions, connecting with the audience, understanding the algorithm(s), and filming and editing quality content. Although platforms dictate their reach, these influencer strategies have been rewarded—however, newsfluencers do experience demonetization and deprioritization based on the context of their posts, which often targets marginalized individuals. By cultivating economic capital, symbolic capital, and influencer habitus, newsfluencers are able to compete in the journalistic field and introduce new rules. If journalists and/or news organizations aim to garner an audience on social media, non-affiliated newsfluencers have readily adapted to platformization and have invaluable insight to contribute to establishing receptive news audiences online.

2. Since social media platforms are subjective digital spaces with little content regulation, what aspects of traditional journalistic practices (if any) do these creators utilize to maintain a credible relationship with their audiences?

In Chapter 5.2, I delved into the traditional journalistic practices used by non-affiliated newsfluencers to obtain and sustain credibility with their audiences. I found that the participants incorporate traditional news values as well as specific social media practices into their content

creation. Their methods include being transparent, crediting their sources, backing up their claims, taking accountability for mistakes or misinformation, limiting the potential for harm, being well-researched, and acknowledging or limiting their personal bias. The major findings were: 1) transparency, as most of the participants described needing to be fully open with their followers (who connect with them on a personal level) in order to establish trust, and 2) sources, since their credibility relied upon being able to provide facts and statistics to mitigate misinformation.

3. How do these creators identify themselves, especially inside/outside the field of journalism?

In Chapter 5.3, I presented the ways in which each participant identified and viewed themselves inside or outside of the journalistic field. First, most of the participants preferred being called “educators” or “commentators” which reflects the intentions of their content (e.g., to educate their followers or provide commentary on pressing issues). While some do not mind the term ‘newsfluencer,’ they specifically dislike being called an ‘influencer’ as it refers to internet personalities who promote or advertise the sale of products. Second, the participants largely place themselves outside of the field, making distinct separations between their work and the work of journalists. While they acknowledge the negative and positive contributions of traditional media, they also affirm the benefits of their position to the overall media landscape. As Boots described it, he aims to be complementary to journalists and—like many of the other participants—offer ideological tools to audiences so that they may become news and politically literate.

6.2 AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

Breaking news: research on newsfluencers has only just begun. In this section, I will outline potential areas of future research, including expanding the sample size, introducing mixed methods, exploring intersectional identities, examining creator burnout, classifying ‘strangers,’ and adding more Canadian perspectives.

- 1. Canadian Content Creators:** Much of the existing research on newsfluencers is based on U.S. statistics and creators. While this work includes three Canadian newsfluencers, more research on these figures is needed to contribute to our understanding of the Canadian media ecosystem.
- 2. Research Methods and Expanding the Sample:** The method of this work—semi-structured interviews—presented some limitations to data collection. For future work, interviews with larger participant pools may provide more generalizable output. This should also include interviews with a larger range of participants/ perspectives, including more right-leaning creators, women or gender non-conforming creators, and POC. As well, content analysis of creator’s posts, biographies, captions, and even comment sections can contribute to our understanding of newsfluencer’s actual content and audience relationship.
- 3. Creator Well-being Practices:** A recurring theme throughout the interviews was about well-being. A major factor of being a newsfluencer is that they are an independent worker, but it is difficult for one individual to keep up with the 24-hour news cycle and almost every participant mentioned burnout. This is an emerging area of study for SMIs and should be applied to the demands of being both a content creator and a political commentator.

4. **Classification:** None of the participants chose to identify with the term ‘newsfluencer’ or ‘news influencer.’ It can be argued that anyone with a large following holds influence over their followers, yet I urge that the classification of non-traditional journalistic actors should be a mutual decision that takes their burgeoning field position into account. The Knight Center (2024) resolves that content creators and journalists should share knowledge in order to establish a democratic news process that meets audiences where they are: social media. Delegitimizing classifications may exacerbate tensions between both groups.

6.3 FINAL THOUGHTS

Through the perspectives and lived experiences of six content creators, I have shed light on the platform, SMI, and journalistic practices that make newsfluencers popular online sources of information for users. As well, I discussed their identity and journalistic relations amidst ongoing literature that relegates them to an outsider status. Newsfluencers mark an important transformation for the journalistic field and highlight areas of improvement for traditional media. Yet questions of their legitimacy may prevent future relationships between academics, industry professionals, and newsfluencers. Patrick Walters (2021b) discussed the issue of journalists’ and news organizations’ gatekeeping authority: while some have ceded the distribution of news to platforms, “they continue to see themselves as guardians of journalistic values” (p. 1494). While courses like the Knight Center’s offered training to journalists and untrained individuals alike (Mioli, 2024), some non-traditional actors (and audiences) see institutions as sources of harm, misinformation, or distrust. Additionally, many actors critique the dangers of platforms as digital intermediaries for information.

While this thesis has situated the newsfluencer phenomenon in the literature and expanded upon existing conceptualizations, further research is necessary. Each content creator has unique methods that draw their audiences in and, as a whole, they have proven to be notable influences and changemakers in the journalistic field during a period of uncertainty. As a result, it is essential to better understand who is telling the news to the public, not only to identify potential harm but (in the words of Bennett and Boots) “to meet people where they are.”

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

A copy of the interview guide I used to direct conversations with my participants.

Reminder of informed consent:

Hi Participant! Before we start I wanted to ask if you had any questions for me.

Okay, and is it alright to record this Zoom? It won't be shared anywhere and is only so I can do transcriptions and get accurate quotes.

Okay, thanks!

I'm going to start the audio recording now. Thank you again for agreeing to this interview. I'm interested in getting to know more about you and your experiences as a creator of news content, so I'm aiming for an informal interview today, although I do have some prepared questions to guide the interview.

Before we start, I wanted to remind you that if there's anything you're not comfortable talking about, or you don't want to continue with the interview, please let me know and we can stop the discussion and/or come back to it later.

Semi-structure Question Prompts:

- First, let's start off with your 'origin story.' Could you tell me more about your motivations to create your account and any specific accounts or events that inspired you?
- Why did you decide to post on social media and why did you choose these (X, Y, Z) platforms?
 - How does your usage of such different platforms differ/or does it differ at all (e.g., difference between long-form content versus short-form, live streaming, etc.)? Do you use any others? How has engagement differed across platforms?
- To clarify: do you have any prior experience with specifically journalism or news production? Or is social media your first venture into that kind of content creation?
- For the sake of my research, I've foundationally termed creators based on existing literature, which is "newsfluencers." However, I've been asking all participants how they identify. Is there a term you would describe yourself with/identify more with? How would you identify or label your content?
- Do you consider yourself a type of influencer? Do you want to become an influencer/influencer adjacent?
 - What do you do outside of posting on social media?
 - Do you receive any compensation for your content? Even further, do you want to make this a full-time career?
- How do you go about establishing trust with your audience? And with that, does your audience help to guide your content?
- How do you interact with your audience or do you interact at all?
 - Do you reply to comments often/how do you deal with negativity?

- How personal do you allow your social media to be? Do you think it's important to have this kind of relationship with your audience?
- What are the statistics of your audience? Do you have a certain demographic that makes up your followers?
- How do you choose what news stories you want to post? Where do you get your information from?
- Journalists operate from a specific code of conduct. How do you navigate between having a social media career in news/political content creation and your own personal code of ethics?
- From looking at your account(s), a lot of your delivery style comes from _____. How intentional is your content style? What posting style has worked for you in terms of engagement, or how have you been able to post and find your desired audience? How did you create a posting style? Could you walk me through your filming and editing process?
- Where do you think you fit inside/outside of the field of journalism? Do you want to be associated with or compared to traditional journalism or other forms of the field?
- What is your intention with your account? What do you aim to provide to your audience that they don't/won't get from legacy/traditional media?
- Lastly, are there any comments you'd like to make that we haven't covered?

Thank you again for your time today! I will end the audio recording now. I'll send an email shortly with your compensation: is Google Play Store or Apple better?

Also, I was wondering if you have any other colleagues you think may be interested in speaking with me?

Thanks again and, if you're interested, I'd be happy to share the final thesis with you in a few months!

Appendix B: Ethics Materials

The ethics materials required to conduct interviews with human participants, including: 1) a copy of the Informed Consent Form that was sent to my participants, 2) a copy of the ethics approval I received from the York University REB, and 3) a copy of the Tri-Council Policy Statement research ethics certification I completed.

Informed Consent Form for Interview

Date: January 25, 2025

Study Name: From 'Real' to Reel: Exploring the Non-Traditional Journalism Practices of Social News Influencers on Social Media Platforms

Researcher: Destiny Hopkins (Principal Investigator), Communication & Culture, Master of Arts, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3. Contact at dhopkin5@yorku.ca

Dr. Kelly Bergstrom (Graduate Supervisor), Department of Communication & Media Studies, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3. Contact at kmb@yorku.ca

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of this research is to learn more about social media creators who produce news content and their perspectives on their role and its position within the broader journalism industry. This research will be conducted via semi-structured, in-depth interviews and will be used as the data for the Principal Investigator's Master's thesis, as well as in material at conference presentations.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: You will be asked to participate in an interview about your experiences as a social media creator who produces news content on platforms such as Instagram and/or TikTok. The interview will be conducted using an online video conferencing software of your choice (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, social media, etc.) and only the audio will be recorded. The interview is expected to last from 30 minutes to one hour. A small honorarium is offered in the form of an electronic gift certificate. You will receive a \$20 e-gift certificate to the Apple Store or Google Play for your time.

Risks and Discomforts: I believe that there is little risk for you by participating in this research. However, since the scope of this research project is based on the public social media accounts and online careers of the participants, it is possible that social risks may be present if you choose to disclose personal information. Further, since participants will be discussing political content that may be personal/impactful, there is a risk of becoming stressed or uncomfortable. If you feel stressed or uncomfortable answering any of the questions in this interview, you can take a break, or we can skip the question. If you feel that any part of the interview may cause a social risk (such as harm to your career or social media platform), you can decide to become anonymous, and I will keep your personal information confidential. You also have the option to completely stop the interview and revisit at a later date, or to stop and fully withdraw your data

from the project. You will still receive the \$20 e-gift certificate if you choose to withdraw. I have provided a list of support and resources below:

[Crisis Services Canada](#) is a national network of suicide and distress hotlines. Call [833-456-4566](tel:833-456-4566) or call/text [9-8-8](tel:9-8-8) to receive support.

For USA participants, [Mental Health America](#) offers support services to connect you to resources. Call or text [9-8-8](tel:9-8-8) or chat 988lifeline.org, or text MHA to [741741](tel:741741).

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: Current journalism, influencer and communication literature has left a creator gap. Though academia has covered journalists-turned-influencers, streamers on sites like Twitch, and Instagram microbloggers, news creators who have had little to no prior traditional experience but have used platforms to cultivate audiences for their specific news niche are underexplored. This research aims to not only touch on this gap, but use information directly from the source to include the perspectives of creators and inform how their role is shaping digital journalism. Further, through interviews, this research aims to provide participants with the opportunity to discuss the *why* behind years of work: *why* they have a passion for news production, *why* they created their account, *why* they choose specific content, and *why* they have become a voice for their audience. Thus, not only will this research add to literature, but I intend to provide a space for creators to express their career path(s) and selves.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff, or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future. If you decide to stop participating, you may withdraw without penalty, financial or otherwise, and you will still receive the promised electronic gift certificate. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. Should you wish to withdraw after the study, you will have the option to also withdraw your data up until the analysis is complete.

Confidentiality: Unless you specifically indicate your consent and waive anonymity, your name and/or personally identifiable information (social media account name, location, etc.) will not appear in any report or publication of the research. The principal investigator will keep a link that identifies you to your coded information, but this link will be kept secure and available only to the principal investigator and/or selected members of the research team. Any information that can identify you will remain confidential. The audio from our interview will be digitally recorded using a voice recording device or the video conferencing software of your choice. Your data will be safely stored in a locked facility or on a password protected external hard drive and only the researcher will have access to this information. The data will be stored until analysis is complete and the Principal Investigator's thesis has been finished. The data will be destroyed in its entirety by January 2027. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

This study will use Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, or social media to collect data, which are externally hosted cloud-based services. When information is transmitted over the internet, privacy cannot be guaranteed. There is always a risk your responses may be intercepted by a third party (e.g., government agencies, hackers). Further, while York University researchers will not collect or use IP addresses or other information which could link your participation to your computer or electronic devices without informing you, there is a small risk with any platform such as this of data that is collected on external servers falling outside the control of the

research team. If you are concerned about this, we would be happy to make alternative arrangements (where possible) for you to participate, perhaps via telephone. Please contact Destiny for further information. Recordings (audio) will be saved in a password protected file to research team members' local computer, not the cloud-based service. Please note that it is the expectation that participants agree not to make any unauthorized recordings of the content of a meeting/data collection session.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me at dhopkin5@yorku.ca or my supervisor, Dr. Kelly Bergstrom at kmb@yorku.ca and/or 416-736-2100, extension 77849. You may also contact the Program in Communication & Culture at cmctgpa@yorku.ca and/or 416-736-2100, extension 22915.

This research has received ethics review and approval by the Delegated Ethics Review Committee, which is delegated authority to review research ethics protocols by the Human Participants Review SubCommittee, York University's Ethics Review Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian TriCouncil Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics in the Office of Research Ethics, Kaneff Tower, York University (e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I, _____, consent to participate in **From 'Real' to Reel: Exploring the Non-Traditional Journalism Practices of Social News Influencers on Social Media Platforms** conducted by Destiny Hopkins. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____
Participant

Date _____

Signature _____
Principal Investigator

Date _____

Additional consent (where applicable)

1. Audio recording

I consent to the audio-recording of my interview(s).

Signature _____
Participant Name:

Date _____

2. Consent to waive anonymity

I, _____, consent to the use of my name in the publications arising from this research.

I do not consent to waive anonymity.

Signature _____

Date _____

Participant Name:

3. Pseudonym (if not consenting to anonymity)

I, _____, would like to be referred to by the following pseudonym in any future publication or presentation of this research:

_____.

I would like the researcher to assign an anonymized participant identification on my behalf.

Signature _____

Date _____

Participant Name:

4. Consent to use of quotes

I consent to the use of quotations in any final reports/publications of the research.

Signature _____

Date _____

Participant Name:



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Certificate #:	STU 2024-147
Approval Period:	01/16/25-01/16/26

ETHICS APPROVAL

To: **Destiny Hopkins**
Graduate Student of Communication & Culture
dhopkin5@yorku.ca

From: Alison M. Collins-Mrakas, Director, Research Ethics
(on behalf of Gillian Parekh, Chair, Human Participants Review Committee)

Date: Thursday, January 16, 2025

Title: **FROM 'REAL' TO REEL: EXPLORING THE NON-TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM PRACTICES OF SOCIAL NEWS INFLUENCERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS**

Risk Level: Minimal Risk More than Minimal Risk

Level of Review: Delegated Review Full Committee Review

I am writing to inform you that this research project, "**FROM 'REAL' TO REEL: EXPLORING THE NON-TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM PRACTICES OF SOCIAL NEWS INFLUENCERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS**" has received ethics review and approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

Note that approval is granted for one year. Ongoing research – research that extends beyond one year – must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process by submission of an amendment application to the HPRC prior to its implementation.

Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research ethics (ore@yorku.ca) as soon as possible.

For further information on researcher responsibilities as it pertains to this approved research ethics protocol, please refer to the attached document, "**RESEARCH ETHICS: PROCEDURES to ENSURE ONGOING COMPLIANCE**".

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at acollins@yorku.ca.

Yours sincerely,

Alison M. Collins-Mrakas M.Sc., LLM
Director, Office of Research Ethics



Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Destiny Hopkins

*successfully completed the Course on Research Ethics based on
the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research
Involving Humans (TCPS 2: CORE 2022)*

Certificate # 0001302328

15 May, 2024

Appendix C: Coding Frame

A table of the codes and subcodes used during data analysis.

Code	Subcode(s)
Newsfluencer's audience perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-building • Interactions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Negativity • Parasocial • Statistics/Demographics
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BlueSky • Comedy • Discord • Facebook • Instagram • Interactions with political figures • Live-stream • Long-form • Newsletter • Non-news content • Podcast • Reddit • Short-form • Software • Sources • SubStack • TikTok • Twitch • X • YouTube
Content production and ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credibility and trust • Reliability/authenticity/accountability
Digital labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative aspects of newsfluencer work • Well-being: Time management and balance
Educational or work background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General education or formal training • Influencer knowledge • Other types of relevant knowledge
Finances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand deals/sponsorships • Career or passion • Earning on social media

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monetization or subscriptions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Patreon
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Influencer’ identification <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Thoughts on ‘newsfluencer’ identification • Terms used to self-identify <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Education • Marginalization • Privilege
Journalism field affiliations/discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inside/outside journalism • Interacting with journalists/news organizations
Motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Origin story • Types of content
Personal experience and history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience entering this field • Professional background • Years of experience
Relationship(s) within their field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance with content creation • Friendships or collaborations • Negative peers
Relationships with/usage of social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Platform differentiation • Preferred platforms