

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

On the relationship between journalism and activism: Boundary work as navigating between complementarity and hybridization.

A case study on feminist actors in digital public spheres

Zum Verhältnis von Journalismus und Aktivismus: *Boundary work* als Navigieren zwischen Komplementarität und Hybridisierung.

Eine Fallstudie zu feministischen Akteur:innen in digitalen Öffentlichkeiten

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1. Introduction

Discursive self-empowerment, the visibility of political attitudes, and efforts toward societal transformation are vernacular practices on social media. This applies to journalists who advocate for equality and social justice alongside or within their professional activities (Hanusch & Löhrmann, 2022; Laws & Chojnicka, 2020). Activist journalists take a stance, develop expertise on specific topics, and hold an interventionist approach to their work, both professionally and personally (Brügemann et al., 2021; Ginosar & Reich, 2022).

In our case study, we explore feminist journalism and activism as intersecting fields in the struggle for social justice. Digital feminist activism has gained relevance both nationally and internationally (Clark-Parsons, 2022; Jackson et al., 2020; Sorce & Thomas, 2025), fueling controversies about traditional journalistic ideals such as independence, impartiality, detachment, and objectivity (Møller Hartley & Askanian, 2021).

Our qualitative research sheds light on feminist actors between journalism and activism in Germany, conceptualizing them as ‘pioneer journalists’ (Hepp & Looßen, 2021). The case studies trace the nuances of self-positioning, practices, and legitimation of selected actors within the liminal space between journalism and activism. Guided by the *boundary work approach* (Carlson, 2015), which explores the discursive negotiation of professional journalism’s vis-à-vis other types of communicative actors’ borders, our analysis addresses the following research questions:

- *How do actors situate themselves between journalism, activism, and feminism? What boundaries do they draw, what connections do they establish?*

- *What demands do journalists and activists make on their own media work and that of other groups?*
- *What reasons and justifications do they offer to legitimize their practices?*
- *How does discursive boundary work (role orientation) relate to factual positioning and media practice (role performance)?*

2. Project background and methodic approach

This study is part of a mixed-methods project investigating “performative publics” (Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2018). The broader approach integrates social network analysis (hashtag and keyword-based datasets), standardized profile and posting analysis, and in-depth qualitative case studies, with this paper focusing on the latter.

Eight media-ethnographic case studies form the empirical basis, analyzing women engaged in feminist activism or professional journalism. Thematically, the data revolves around gender justice debates during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the value of professional and private care work, the re-traditionalization of gender roles, and gender-based violence as consequences of the pandemic measures.

Case selection was based on network data and standardized analysis results (for details Reißmann et al., 2022). The eight actors included were central nodes in the digital networks, identified as primarily activist (A1–A4) or journalists (J1–J4) according to their Twitter profiles (the primary self-ascribed affiliation), and contributed own content to the debates (i.e., not owe their relevance in the networks solely due to high indegrees). With these basic requirements in mind, the study deliberately focuses on actors operating at the intersection of journalism and activism.

Data collection included at least one in-depth, semi-structured interview (1–2.5 hours) per actor, network analysis data (ego networks), and/or selected postings as elicitation material. Interviews covered the actors’ self-positioning in the fields of journalism, activism, and feminism. Where feasible, participatory (online) observation complemented the data collection, though this was more easily realized with activists than journalists due to time constraints. Additionally, a comprehensive dataset of tweets and cross-platform materials enabled the reconstruction of media practices.

For the analysis of boundary work, we expanded the focus beyond normative legitimation (role orientation) to include factual practice (role performance). This allowed us to examine how self-positioning and discursive boundary work align with actual media practices and professional conditions, responding to calls for more research on ‘role performance’ (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017) and emphasizing a practice-theory-oriented perspective beyond the (self)rationalizations of actors.

3. Results

Comparing activists and journalists reveals contrasting patterns of boundary work: While feminist activists discursively advocate for a clear separation between activism and journalism as two separated social worlds each characterized by unique norms and orientations – placing activism at “the other side of the desk from journalism”

(quote A3) – feminist journalists actively claim to blur these boundaries within their work, justifying the hybridization of activism and journalism as a condition to counteract deficits in public communication.

Activists engage in boundary work and claim autonomy for their activities, much like journalists. They see themselves as relevant and independent contributors to public discourse, criticizing traditional media's shortcomings while upholding journalism's authority as an independent field and thus acting as critical corrective. Their arguments often invoke ideals of neutrality and balance, legitimizing their own interest-driven communication through transparency. Despite professionalized media practices, activists reinforce exclusionary boundaries and a traditional division of labor between journalism and activism, claiming the protection of autonomy. We interpret this as a strategic doxa, a sense of usefulness: Perpetuating the myth of objective reporting in journalism helps activists to not only gain visibility, but get messages discursively validated as legitimate demands.

Journalists, in contrast, adopt a hybrid role, often sharing the activists' criticism of institutionalized journalism. While they, too, reference ideal journalistic standards, they identify blind spots in traditional journalism's reporting on gender issues which reproduce exclusion and hierarchies and argue for engaged interventions, advocating for a type of journalism whose boundaries with activism are porous and deliberately open, a journalism that embraces advocacy as a necessary corrective. Their self-conception challenges traditional boundaries but is not the end of journalistic norms and ideals. Quite the contrary, the actors carefully outline a new framework for journalistic action, promoting a hybridized form of journalism legitimized by a (new) norm of *transparent, evidence-based partisanship*. This is linked to the idea of community-oriented journalism, emphasizing a high degree of personal approachability and engagement.

On the level of practical performance, activists display formal and stylistic overlaps with journalistic practices, contrasting their verbal demarcation, whereas some journalists enact the hybridity they claim by making extensive use of social media to comment, take a stand, and intervene discursively in the interests of their concerns. However, the extent of activist practice in journalism very much depends on the media organization involved; feminist online magazines allow more flexibility than national daily newspaper or online news portals.

4. Conclusion

Methodologically, this study makes the concept of boundary work fruitful for praxeological analysis of ongoing negotiation of boundaries between professional journalism and other forms of public communication and intervention in digital media environments. Its relational approach moves beyond dichotomous distinctions (journalism vs non-journalism), offering a more dynamic perspective on boundary shifts and communicative roles. By linking discursive boundary work with actual media practices, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of ongoing normative discourses on journalistic and activist self-perception within their respective heterogeneous working conditions and institutional constraints.

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