What Journalists Share: A Comparative Study of the National Press Corps in Australia and Germany

Axel Bruns
Digital Media Research Centre
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Australia
a.bruns@qut.edu.au

Christian Nuernbergk
Department of Media Studies
Trier University
Trier, Germany
nuernbergk@uni-trier.de

Aljosha Karim Schapals
Digital Media Research Centre
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Australia
aljosha.schapals@qut.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Social media such as Twitter are now widely used by professional journalists in their day-to-day practice. Active use of such platforms for reporting the news and engaging with audiences requires a range of choices about the kind of public persona journalists wish to present; one key choice is what links to their own and other sources' news stories they are prepared to share. This work-in-progress paper presents a comparative analysis of the news sharing choices of members of the Australian and German national press corps, showing considerably different selection patterns.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Information systems → World Wide Web → Web applications** → Social networks

KEYWORDS

Journalism, Twitter, social media, news curation

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, social media have gradually become accepted as part of the communicative toolkit used by professional journalists [1, 2]. Much of the focus has been on

Twitter, ahead of the more widely used Facebook, as Twitter's more public nature, and its focus on non-reciprocal weak-tie connections, appear more suited to the journalistic task of covering and disseminating news throughout society than the latter's predominantly private or at least semi-private spaces that are sustained by strong-tie networks [3].

Professional journalists' attitudes towards Twitter, however, have ranged from reluctant adoption to enthusiastic embrace: for some, Twitter (and social media in general) appeared simply as yet another distraction from the core business of reporting the news, while others saw it as a new tool both for covering breaking news events more rapidly and for engaging more directly with news audiences [4, 2]. At a time of considerable economic uncertainty in a news industry that continues to transform and adapt to new publication forms and audience needs, some journalists have also seen social media as an opportunity for the development of a strong personal brand independent of the news outlets for which they worked, potentially increasing their chances of securing continued employment in a precarious market [5, 6]. Younger journalists, in particular, are therefore now advised to pay considerable attention to developing their social media profiles as a matter of course [7].

This increased focus of journalists on direct service to and engagement with their social media audiences may also place them in conflict with the interests of their employers, however: news outlets may require their staff to promote only in-house content [8], but journalists who use social media mainly to promote the news stories published by their own outlets (thus following the gatekeeping choices of their editors) could appear less attractive to potential social media followers than journalists who use their social media feeds to curate a stream of relevant news regardless of which outlet such stories first appeared in (thus engaging in gatewatching rather than gatekeeping [9]). Such choices are likely to be particularly acute in breaking news situations: should the journalist share a key story even if it originates from a rival outlet, or wait until their own outlet has published its own story? [10] Additionally, independent of their own institutional allegiances, journalists may also feel a professional solidarity with their colleagues at rival outlets, and acknowledge their good work by sharing it in their own feeds. Finally, senior journalists may feel more empowered to break the social media rules set by their em-

ployers than junior cadets still fighting to establish a foot-hold in the industry, and journalists at struggling commercial outlets may feel more pressure to support their own institution than staff at well-established or non-profit outlets (for instance, at leading public service broadcasters).

While a considerable amount of research has already investigated the overall progress in the adoption of social media by professional journalists [11, 12], and a series of studies have conducted surveys and interviews with journalists to surface the professional dilemmas outlined above [8], there remains a comparative absence of empirical studies that observe at scale how journalists confront these choices on a day-to-day basis. The present research project, presented here as work in progress, addresses this gap in the literature by conducting a longitudinal study of the social media activity patterns of professional journalists across a number of national contexts. Through this work, we examine both how these journalists utilise social media in their day-to-day work, and how their social media audiences engage with them as a result. The present paper focusses on the first of these questions, by investigating what content these journalists share on Twitter.

2 DATASET

2.1 Data Collection

Our dataset tracks the Twitter activities of members of two national press corps: the Australian Federal Press Gallery at Parliament House in Canberra, and the German Bundespressekonferenz in Berlin. Both corps constitute clearly defined populations of political journalists representing each country's major news organisations (as well as a small number of specialty outlets and freelancers), and in each case there is a likelihood that these journalists will also regard themselves as a distinct community of peers, in addition to their professional institutional allegiances.

We choose Australia and Germany for the purposes of this analysis in part because similar press corps in the U.S. and U.K. are comparatively overresearched, yet not necessarily representative for journalistic communities elsewhere in the world. More importantly, however, Australia and Germany also present two very different national news environments: first, Australia's news audiences, as well as many of its journalists, have been relatively enthusiastic adopters of social media [13], while the private and professional use of social media in Germany has continued to lag behind international trends [4]. Second, the Australian media landscape has long been highly concentrated around a small number of dominant outlets which are nonetheless facing increasing financial hardships following audience transitions to online and social news consumption; it has only recently seen the arrival of a number of international, online-only outlets (*The Guardian*, *Huffington Post*, *Buzzfeed*) into the domestic market [14]. By contrast, German news audiences continue to support a diverse and still

relatively profitable market mix in which conventional channels like print and broadcast remain prominent, where public service media maintain a very strong market share, and where news consumption via social media is less popular [15]. These divergent environmental settings should also affect how social media are embraced by journalists.

In each country, then, we drew on the published accreditation or membership lists for the respective press corps, and searched for the Twitter accounts of all members. Through this process, we identified 171 accounts for Australia's 303 members of the Press Gallery (56%), and 523 accounts for Germany's 825 members of the Bundespressekonferenz (63%); Twitter sign-on rates are therefore broadly comparable across both groups. Using the *Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolkit* [16], we have tracked all tweets (including @mentions and retweets) posted by these accounts since April 2016; we also identified any URLs included in these tweets, and resolved the *t.co* short URLs in tweets to their final targets. For the purposes of analysing the URL sharing patterns employed by different journalists, we further discarded any URLs pointing back to *twitter.com* content itself: these predominantly represent embedded images or videos, or references to previous tweets (using Twitter's 'quote tweet' function). For the preliminary analysis of overall sharing patterns that we present in this paper, we also reduced all URLs to their most meaningful distinct domain (e.g. *zeit.de*, but not *blog.zeit.de*).

We note for clarity here that our population of accounts does not include any institutional and automated news outlet accounts, as we expect these to behave significantly differently from the journalists' personal accounts.

2.2 Data Selection

For the purposes of this work-in-progress study, we further concentrate our analysis on the second quarter of 2017; we do so to avoid possible changes to activity patterns in the context of the German federal election (in September 2017) or the Australian postal survey on marriage equality (in September and November 2017). Though these topics may not be entirely absent from the Q2/2017 dataset, they are unlikely to result in a substantial departure from everyday tweeting patterns during this early time. The total volume of tweets remaining after applying these filters was 67,710 tweets from Australia's 171 accounts, and 54,205 from Germany's 343 accounts. This already points to a considerably more active use of Twitter by Australian political journalists, compared to their German colleagues.

To examine the usage patterns of journalists who are consistently active on social media, we also limit our analysis to the most actively tweeting members of the press corps in each country. To do so, we implement a threshold requiring journalists to have sent an average of two tweets per day over the course of Q2/2017 – i.e. a minimum of 182 tweets during the April to June period. 71 Australian
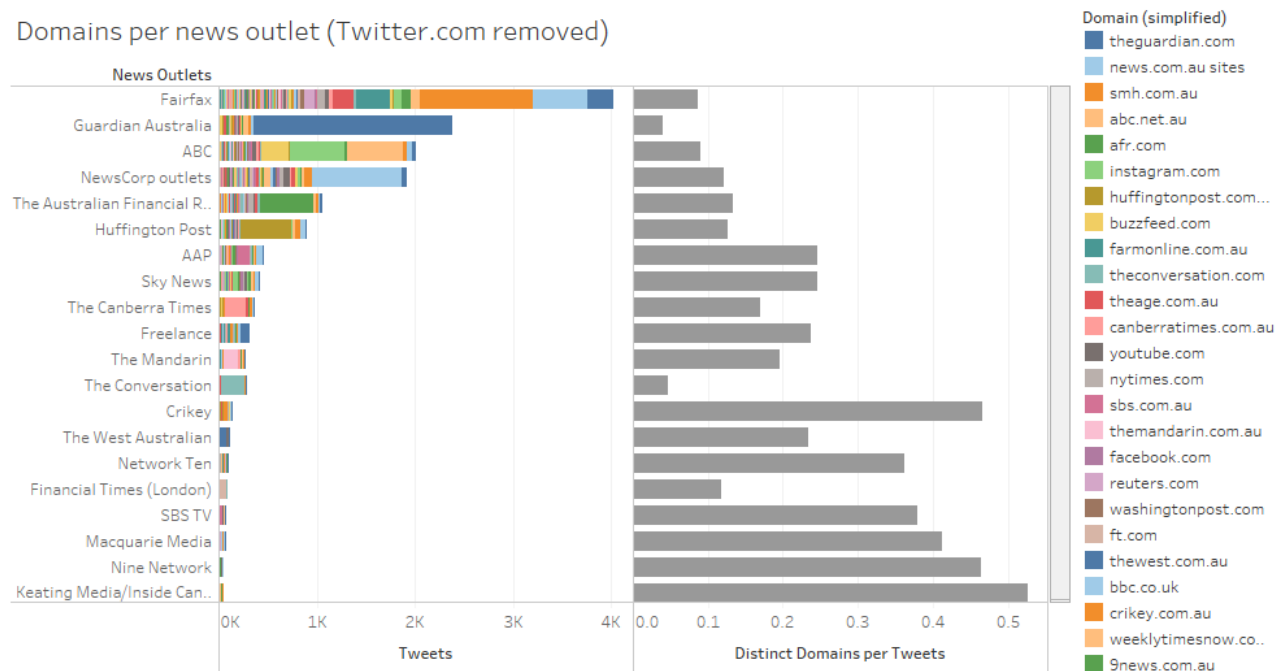
Fig. 1: URLs shared by the most active Australian Press Gallery journalists, aggregated by outlet affiliation, in Q2/2017

and 57 German journalists in our dataset met this criterion; they are responsible for 61,342 and 42,219 tweets, respectively, or 91% and 78% of the total number of tweets by press corps journalists for each country.

3 PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

3.1 Australia

The Australian Press Gallery journalists most actively sharing external URLs on Twitter represent a diverse group that includes both well-established Australian news organisations and recent entrants into the domestic media market (Fig. 1). The 15 journalists working for Fairfax Media, publisher of the major broadsheet newspapers *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, are the most active group, followed by the five reporters for the online-only Australian edition of *The Guardian*, the national public broadcaster ABC's 11 staff, the 10 journalists representing the various outlets operated by Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp (which we treat as a single outlet here, due to the substantial internal content sharing across its publications), four journalists for the specialty newspaper *Australian Financial Review*, and the two reporters for the Australian edition of *Huffington Post*.

On the left side of Fig. 1, we break down the total volume of URLs shared on Twitter by the journalists at each news outlet across the specific domains to which those URLs point (indicated by different colours). This shows a strong in-house focus for most of the leading outlets: of the 4,019 URLs posted in tweets by Fairfax journalists, for example, 1,366 (34%) point to *smh.com.au* or *theage.com.au*; at 2,019 of 2,377 URLs (85%), that proportion is even greater for tweets by *Guardian Australia* staff.

On the right of Fig. 1, we measure the diversity of URLs being shared by journalists from each outlet by calculating the ratio between the number of distinct domains shared by an outlet's staff during Q2/2018, and the total number of tweets they posted. In theory, this ratio can range between near zero (across n tweets, all URLs point to the same domain, resulting in a ratio of $1/n$) and one (each URL points to a different domain, yielding $n/n = 1$). On this measure, journalists for *Guardian Australia* (0.04) and *The Conversation* (0.05) are especially loyal to their employers, and indeed across all of the outlets with the most active journalists the ratio remains below 0.15; by contrast, specialty outlets such as 24-hour political news channel *Sky News* (0.25) or progressive commentary site *Crikey* (0.47) engage in somewhat more promiscuous URL sharing. While we lack the space to discuss them in detail here, these patterns largely hold for the individual journalists working for each outlet as well; for the most part, then, Australian journalists appear to focus on promoting their own outlets' news content through their tweeting activities.

3.2 Germany

Patterns for members of the German Bundespressekonferenz vary considerably from the Australian observations (Fig. 2). First, in keeping with the more diversified German mediasphere, URL sharing activity is more broadly distributed across multiple news outlets: at 18 outlets, the respective journalistic teams shared more than 250 URLs during Q2/2017, compared to only 12 such outlets in Australia.

As in Australia, however, these leading outlets represent a diverse range of news organisations: they include the
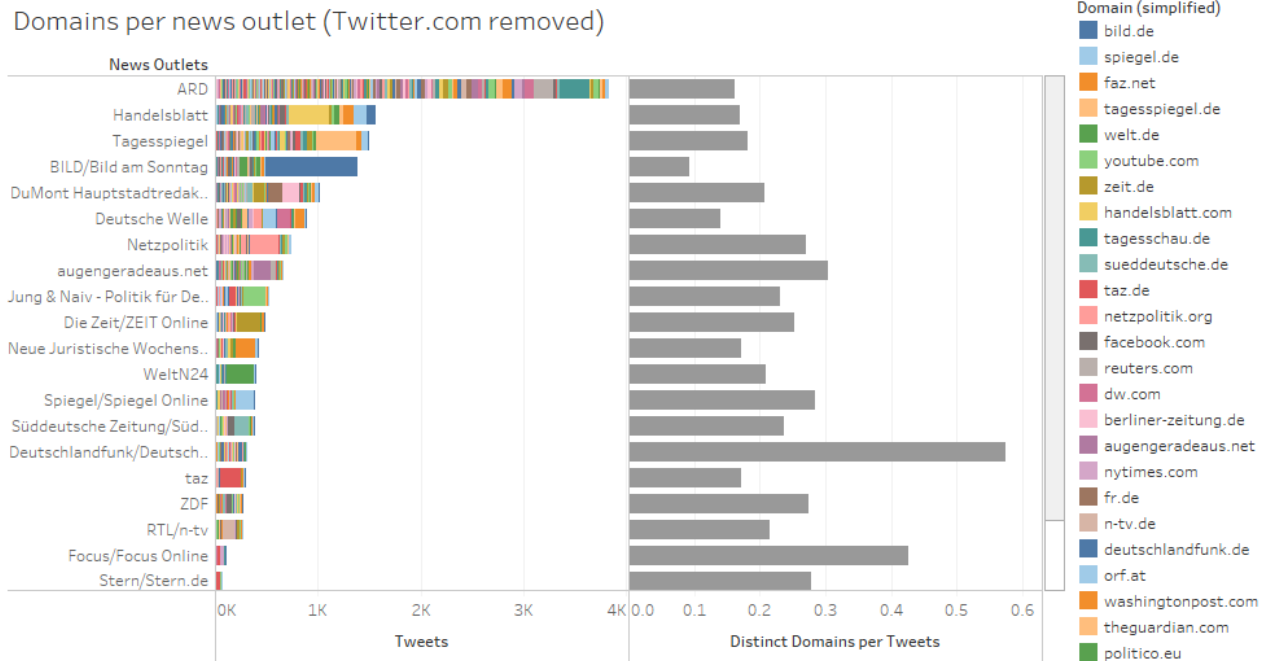
Fig. 2: URLs shared by the most active German Bundespressekonferenz journalists, aggregated by outlet affiliation, in Q2/2017

dominant public service broadcaster ARD, whose 7 journalists are considerably more active than any of their peers; specialist financial newspaper *Handelsblatt*, with one reporter; 2 journalists at Berlin daily *Tagesspiegel*; 4 at nationwide tabloid *Bild*; 5 staff for regional newspaper group DuMont; and one for Germany's international public broadcast service *Deutsche Welle*. But various other prominent German news outlets (such as *Spiegel*, *Zeit*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, or *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) rank surprisingly low on this list, indicating perhaps their comparatively limited focus on using Twitter to promote current news stories.

Further, it is immediately obvious from the visualisation on the left of Fig. 2 that across almost all outlets, journalists are sharing a significantly wider repertoire of sources than their Australian counterparts do. Of the 3,830 URLs posted by ARD journalists, for example, only 291 (8%) link to the ARD's flagship news site *tagesschau.de*; of the 1,560 URLs posted by *Handelsblatt* staff, 390 (25%) promote in-house content. The most active self-promotion is undertaken by journalists at tabloid outlet *Bild*, of whose 1,383 URLs a total of 893 links (65%) point to their own site.

These patterns are also reflected in the ratio of distinct domains to total tweets for each outlet. At 0.09, *Bild* remains the only major outlet below 0.1 on this measure; the scores for other highly Twitter-active outlets range from 0.14 (*Deutsche Welle*) to 0.21 (DuMont group). That these scores still remain considerably below 1 reflects the fact that in spite of their greater diversity of URL sources, the journalists for these outlets still predominantly turn to a handful of key publications: rather than sharing content from a random set of other news sites, for instance, ARD

journalists predominantly turn to Reuters, *Deutsche Welle*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and other major international publications; *Tagesspiegel* journalists share material from *Spiegel*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *mdr*, *Zeit*, *tageszeitung*, and other key German outlets.

However, further investigation reveals that, much more so than in the Australian case, these patterns result from the tweeting preferences of the individual journalists at each outlet. As we have already noted, while in Australia each of the leading outlets was represented by several very actively tweeting Press Gallery members, the number of staff with active Twitter accounts for each outlet represented in the Bundespressekonferenz is a great deal lower, showing most likely the lesser importance German journalists and news outlets ascribe to actively using Twitter (and social media in general). The URL sharing patterns we observe for each outlet in our German dataset more directly reflect the individual choices made by their journalists, therefore, rather than the aggregate of such choices across a larger team.

4 DISCUSSION AND FURTHER OUTLOOK

The more comprehensive take-up of Twitter by Press Gallery journalists and news organisations in Australia leads us to speculate, therefore, that the patterns we observe in that country indicate a greater amount of top-down guidance and control by the major news organisations over what content their journalists share on Twitter; this would explain the considerably stronger in-house focus in the URLs shared during Q2/2017. Recent entrants to the Australian market, such as *Guardian Australia* or the Australian edition of *Huffington Post*, appear particularly concerned to

have their journalists promote their own content; more established news organisations also still remain focussed on their own products, however. This may also reflect the limited diversity in the Australian news market, where a small number of dominant organisations (NewsCorp, Fairfax, ABC), each controlling multiple outlets that syndicate news content within their network, are locked in intense competition for market dominance. The URL sharing choices made by Australian journalists in their Twitter feeds therefore perpetuate the gatekeeping decisions of their employers, to the relative exclusion of alternative content.

By contrast, the considerably more diverse range of sources shared on Twitter by the leading journalists in the German Bundespressekonferenz appears to point to a greater level of independence for journalists as they select content for their Twitter feeds. We interpret this in part as a result of the rather lower degree of attention paid to Twitter by German news outlets; in the absence of firm institutional guidelines about what links journalists should share here, perhaps they feel emboldened to look beyond their own outlets more often. The far more diverse media landscape in Germany, and less aggressive competition between outlets, may also lead to a greater willingness to acknowledge the work of other journalists by sharing it on Twitter.

Finally, as Twitter remains more of a niche and elite medium in Germany than it is in Australia, journalists here may also see themselves as speaking to a more demanding audience [17]; in combination, all of these factors would logically combine into a preference for more inclusive gatewatching and news curation [9] approaches in German journalists' Twitter use, compared to the more exclusive gatekeeping practiced by their Australian colleagues.

In our further work, we intend to investigate these patterns in more detail at the level of individual journalists' choices, as opposed to the aggregate patterns per news organisation that the current paper presents. A more extensive longitudinal analysis will also reveal whether they remain stable beyond the three-month period observed here, or are affected by contextual factors – for instance, whether during breaking news events journalists are more prepared to share links to external sources than during their ordinary, day-to-day work. Additionally, we will also examine the audience responses to these journalists' Twitter accounts, focussing especially on whether different tweeting styles result in different forms and levels of engagement. Finally, through in-depth interviews with many of the journalists in each press corps, we intend to contrast journalists' self-perception of their social media usage with their observable practices; this will also enable us to test the interpretations of activity patterns that we have presented here.

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