

FULL PAPER

News softening as a strategy for adapting to platform logics. Introducing the concept of social news softening

News Softening als eine Strategie zur Anpassung an die Plattformlogiken. Einführung des Social News Softening-Konzepts

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Abstract: News softening describes a journalistic strategy to attract maximum attention with the help of certain content (soft news) or a soft style – a goal also included in the (algorithm-based) logics of social platforms. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the extent to which adapting news media to social media logic is accompanied by news softening, particularly due to the lack of a conceptual basis. The traditional softening concept (Reinemann et al., 2012), developed based on mass media logic and not considering social media-specific softening aspects, cannot be applied to social platforms without running the risk of underestimating the actual degree of news softening. For this reason, this paper develops the concept of “social news softening” based on the conceptualization of social media logic by Hermida and Mellado (2020), from which it derives adaptation strategies. The new concept includes five dimensions – emotionality, subjectivity, individualization framing, sensational framing, and audience orientation – and can be understood as a conceptual extension of the traditional concept, supplementing its dimensions and characteristics (many of which are still relevant to social media) with social media-specific ones. In addition, this paper provides considerations on how platform-specific affordances impact social news softening on distinct platforms. Thus, this paper is an important starting point for urgently needed empirical studies on news softening in the context of platformization processes and the adaptation of news media to the logics of social media. Therefore, this paper links softening research with current issues in journalism and media performance research.

Keywords: Social news softening, news softening, social media logic, news media, platformization

Zusammenfassung: News Softening beschreibt eine journalistische Strategie, um mithilfe bestimmter Inhalte (Soft News) oder einer soften Aufbereitung von Nachrichteninhalten maximale Aufmerksamkeit zu erlangen – dies ist auch ein Ziel der (algorithmusbasierten) Logiken sozialer Plattformen. Jedoch fehlt es weitgehend an empirischen Belegen, inwiefern eine Anpassung der Nachrichtenmedien an die Social Media-Logik auch mit News Softening einhergeht. Dies liegt insbesondere an einer fehlenden konzeptionellen Basis. Das traditionelle Softening-Konzept (Reinemann et al., 2012), das auf Basis der massenmedialen Logik entwickelt wurde, lässt sich aufgrund der daraus resultierenden Nicht-Beachtung von Social Media-spezifischen Softening-Aspekten nicht auf soziale Plattformen anwenden, ohne Gefahr zu laufen, den tatsächlichen Grad an News Softening zu unterschätzen. Aus diesem Grund entwickelt die vorliegende Arbeit, basierend auf der Konzeptualisierung der Social Media-Logik von Hermida und Mellado (2020) und daraus abgeleiteten Anpassungen,

sungsstrategien, das Konzept „Social News Softening“. Dieses beinhaltet fünf Dimensionen – emotionality, subjectivity, individualization framing, sensational framing, audience orientation – und lässt sich als eine Weiterentwicklung des traditionellen Konzepts verstehen, indem es dessen Dimensionen und Merkmale (von denen viele auch für soziale Medien relevant sind) um Social Media-spezifische Dimensionen und Merkmale ergänzt. Zudem stellt die Arbeit Überlegungen an bezüglich der konkreten Ausgestaltung des Social News Softening-Konzepts im Hinblick auf Plattform-spezifische Affordances. Damit ist die Arbeit ein wichtiger Ausgangspunkt für dringend benötigte empirische Studien zur Erforschung von News Softening im Kontext von Plattformisierungsprozessen und zur Anpassung von Nachrichtenmedien an die Logiken sozialer Medien – und verknüpft dabei die Softening-Forschung mit aktuellen Fragen der Journalismus- und Qualitätsforschung.

Schlagwörter: Social News Softening, News Softening, Social Media-Logik, Nachrichtenmedien, Plattformisierung

1. Introduction

News softening, a journalistic strategy aimed at maximizing audience attention, is considered a key concept in political communication and news production. This is due to its significance for public opinion formation (Otto et al., 2017; Reinemann et al., 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2017). News softening is often considered a negative phenomenon, as it is regarded as being at odds with media performance and journalistic standards (Esser, 1999; Otto et al., 2017). Other researchers emphasize that it may encourage news avoiders to engage with news (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014; Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004). According to its traditional meaning, news softening denotes the adaptation of journalistic standards to the logic of commercial mass media regarding the selection and presentation of news (Esser, 1999; Magin, 2019; Reinemann et al., 2012; Sparks, 2000). While commercialization, namely the rise of tabloids and commercial television, and digitalization have long been the main drivers of news softening (Esser, 1999; Magin, 2019), platformization processes are now amplifying the orientation towards audience preferences and social media logic, thereby potentially exacerbating softening (Klein et al., 2025; Lamot, 2022; Steiner, 2020).

Although a recent systematic literature review (Anter, 2024) concluded that adaptation to social media logic only slightly increases softening, there is a paucity of empirical evidence to support this stance. This is largely because the theoretical contextualization of many papers is inappropriate for the question raised here. Most studies in this field refer to news value or framing theory (Anter, 2024), yet they rarely address news softening (for exceptions, see Klein et al., 2025; Lamot, 2022; Steiner, 2020; see also Lamot et al., 2022), which is still strongly rooted in traditional media, such as print or TV (e.g., Arbaoui et al., 2020; Lefkowitz, 2018; Magin, 2019), and has so far only been applied occasionally to online media (e.g., Karlsson, 2016). This inadequate theoretical foundation is further compounded by the fact that many studies have only examined isolated indicators of news softening, such as subjective language (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019) or clickbait phrasing (Lischka & Garz, 2023). Thus, the existing research fails to provide a holistic picture. The few studies (Lamot, 2022;

Steiner, 2020) that have examined platforms and are theoretically grounded in news softening, have referred to its traditional concept (Reinemann et al., 2012; for an exception, see Klein et al., 2025). However, it is questionable to what extent this concept, developed based on commercial mass media logic, can validly capture news softening on social media. This concept may underestimate the degree of news softening because it does not consider social media-specific characteristics, such as emoticons or ways of interaction with the audience. Another salient shortcoming pertains to the platforms analyzed (Anter, 2024); a preponderance of studies have exclusively relied on Facebook (Haim et al., 2021; Lamot, 2022; Lischka, 2021), with some recent ones analyzing Instagram (Hase et al., 2023; Hendrickx, 2023; Sehl et al., 2022) and TikTok (Negreira-Rey et al., 2022; Newman, 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). These three platforms differ in terms of their affordances.

A holistic and valid approach is needed to conceptualize news softening as an adaptation to social media platforms. This paper is an important first step in this regard. Building on the dimensions of social media logic proposed by Hermida and Mellado (2020), the paper develops the concept of social news softening. This adds conceptual value to both softening and platformization research. Additionally, it suggests ways in which social softening can be specified in light of exemplary affordances. While this is not a methodological paper, these considerations are a good starting point for investigating social softening on different platforms amid dynamic platformization processes.

2. Platformization of the news environment: Adapting news to social media logic

Recently, in a process called “platformization,” (social media) platforms have gained increasing influence over news media and news consumption. In this process, platforms (and their infrastructures, affordances, and communicative logics) are increasingly intruding into various spheres of our lives (Poell et al., 2019, pp. 5–6). Thus, platform or social media logic, referring to “the strategies, mechanisms, and economics underpinning these platforms’ dynamics” (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 3), has a considerable impact on news media. News media are becoming increasingly dependent on (social media) platforms for both traffic and financial resources (Bell, 2021; Poell et al., 2023; Simon, 2022). This is primarily because (social media) platforms have become critical news sources (Newman et al., 2025; Vermeer et al., 2020; Wojcieszak et al., 2022). Accordingly, journalists distribute their content on these platforms to reach their audiences (Klein et al., 2025; Steiner, 2020). In doing so, they adapt, at least slightly and potentially, to the logic of the respective platform in terms of topic selection and news presentation (Anter, 2024), even though this sometimes conflicts with their professional standards (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018; Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020; Walters, 2022).

To understand the concrete impact of these adaptations on news content, it is necessary to consider what social media logic entails and which aspects are rele-

vant to news production. While many papers refer to Van Dijck and Poell (2013) to describe the factors of social media logic, Hermida and Mellado (2020) focus more on its content- and style-related impact. The authors examine individual journalists' use of Instagram and Twitter. Meanwhile, Hendrickx and Vázquez-Herrero (2024) applied their framework to analyze how news media from different countries adhere to social media logic. Building on this, the present paper examines which dimensions of social media logic are associated with which content adjustments in terms of news softening (Figure 1).

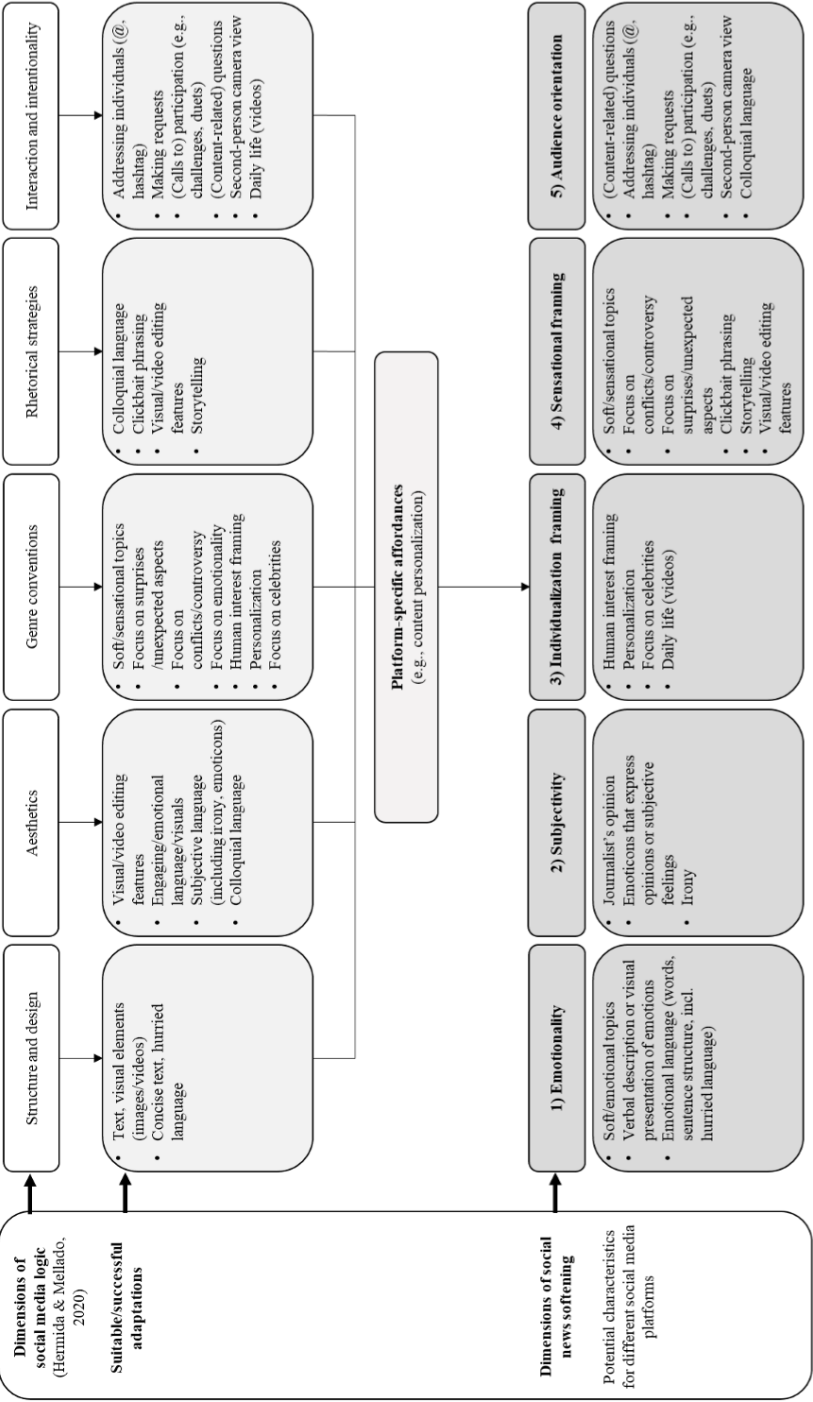
3. Dimensions of social media logic

The first dimension refers to *structure and design* (Hermida & Mellado, 2020) and focuses on technological features and their effect on content creation. The distinction between a text- or visual-based focus is particularly important. While Facebook is (still) comparably text-heavy, both Instagram and TikTok have been purely visual platforms since their inception (Hase et al., 2023; Kaye et al., 2022; Leaver et al., 2020). This brings visual indicators to the fore. Furthermore, pre-defined elements or formats – such as status messages, link previews (Facebook), text captions (TikTok), and Instagram stories – specify how content is structured. Another relevant aspect, particularly for TikTok (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022), is character or time limits (Hermida & Mellado, 2020). These limits might restrict the scope of the content and result in a more concise presentation of key facts (Hermida & Mellado, 2020) or a hurried language style.

The second dimension considers the *aesthetics* of the platform, that is, its verbal or visual style or language (Hermida & Mellado, 2020). According to Tenenboim (2020), this is “a key dimension of media production logics for social networking sites” (p. 91) (see also Negreira-Rey et al., 2022). Apart from platform-specific visual features (filters, transitions, etc.), engaging and emotional language or visuals (Hålgvar, 2019; Tenenboim, 2020, 2023) may be a central strategy for reaching audiences. Furthermore, subjectivity can be helpful because it allows users to express their opinions by sharing their viewpoints. This benefits their personal relationships and identity management (Eisenegger, 2021; Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). On social media, subjective language is also expressed through irony (Meier-Vieracker, 2025) and through emoticons, while the latter bring the language closer to everyday/colloquial language (Hålgvar, 2019; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019), making it both more “conversational” and more “playful” (Tenenboim, 2023, p. 1262).

Third, the dimension of *genre conventions* is evident in how norms, user expectations, and relevance are associated with the respective platform (Hermida & Mellado, 2020), which affects news selection. According to Tenenboim (2023), selecting news items that attract attention or increase engagement is a promising way to adapt to social media logic. News media can either choose softer or sensational news (Tenenboim, 2020, 2023) or emphasize those elements arousing interest and constituting “that nugget in a story” (Tenenboim, 2023, p. 1258). These considerations pertain to the concept of *newsworthiness*, or *shareworthiness* on social media (Trilling et al., 2017). Various studies have attempted to identify

Figure 1. Concept of social news softening



those content or stylistic aspects that increase audience interaction. These studies have identified factors such as emotionality (Tenenboim, 2020; see also Salgado & Bobba, 2019) and human interest framing (García-Perdomo et al., 2018; Trilling et al., 2017). The latter is defined as focusing on the people involved or putting a “human face” on the news (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95).¹ Recent research also suggests an increased use of personalization (Klein et al., 2025; Steiner, 2020), which can mean emphasizing individuals over parties or institutions (individualization) or referring to individuals (e.g., politicians) in their private rather than professional roles (privatization) (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Additionally, social media tends to feature celebrities (Tenenboim, 2020; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Focusing on conflicts (or controversy) and surprising (or unexpected) aspects seems to have become increasingly important on social media as well (García-Perdomo et al., 2018; Hendrickx, 2023; Lischka, 2021; Tenenboim, 2020).

The fourth dimension of the framework for analyzing social media logic refers to *rhetorical strategies*. This includes the methods by which one addresses audiences in specific situations, as well as the stylistic aspects of social media communication (Hermida & Mellado, 2020; see also Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024), partially paralleling the dimension of *aesthetics*. Various rhetorical strategies can help generate attention. Apart from using more playful and conversational language as a suitable *expression style* (Tenenboim, 2023), one can attract attention by including clickbait phrasing, which involves sensationalizing content by creating a “curiosity gap” (Scott, 2021; see also Loewenstein, 1994) through forward referencing (Blom & Hansen, 2015), or attention-generating video editing (also cliffhangers: Anter, 2025). However, several studies (Klein et al., 2025; Lischka & Garz, 2023) suggest that news media use clickbait phrasing only to a moderate extent, presumably also due to algorithmic modifications (Lischka & Garz, 2023). Furthermore, visual editing features are becoming increasingly important on social media platforms (Anter, 2025; Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). In this respect, storytelling, a narrative approach that makes content more immersive (Godulla & Wolf, 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen & Schmidt, 2019), is an example of combining multimedia levels.

The last dimension, *interaction and intentionality*, refers to how news media interact with their audiences (Hermida & Mellado, 2020). News media may address individuals using the @ symbol or hashtags (Hermida & Mellado, 2020). They may also ask (content-related) questions or make requests (Hågvær, 2019; Haim et al., 2021), or, particularly on TikTok, call for challenges or duets (Kaye et al., 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021). News media can also use a second-person camera view to make the audience feel addressed directly (Cheng & Li, 2024) or show people in their daily lives (Negreira-Rey et al., 2022).

The adaptations described above essentially serve to increase audience attention. Since news softening is also a strategy for attracting attention, it makes sense

1 It should be noted here that although the aforementioned authors include emotionality and personal feelings to a certain extent in their definition or measurement, this paper purposefully refrains from doing so due to the need for conceptual clarity.

to examine the adaptations to social media logic from the perspective of softening.

4. Social news softening as a means to adapt to social media logic

The previous chapter addressed how concrete characteristics are derived from the dimensions of social media logic (Hermida & Mellado, 2020) regarding content and style adaptations. It has become apparent that different dimensions of social media logic differ in importance for certain journalistic adaptations and are linked to them to varying degrees. Therefore, depending on the platform, journalistic adaptations will vary. Platform-specific affordances particularly contribute to this differentiation. Before examining these differences in more detail, this chapter provides a basis for analyzing journalistic adaptations to social media logic from a softening perspective. That is, this chapter aims to derive the concept of social news softening from the dimensions of social media logic. To do so, the aforementioned journalistic adaptations are summarized into dimensions of social news softening (Figure 1). This allows for a conceptual comparison of softening from the perspectives of mass media logic and social media logic. To make this comparison, the paper uses the traditional news softening concept developed by Reinemann et al. (2012) based on mass media logic as a point of reference. On the one hand, this reveals whether there are similarities despite both concepts being derived from different media logics. On the other hand, it shows where there are differences, pointing to the conceptual added value of social news softening.

The first dimension relates to *emotionality*. Platformization processes are geared toward spontaneous reactions (Eisenegger, 2021). Emotionality is thus fundamental to the architecture of social platforms (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). However, this turn to increased emotionality is not solely the result of platformization processes. It has long been an aspect of commercial mass media logic and is therefore also a central component of the traditional news softening concept (Reinemann et al., 2012). On social media, emotionality comprises not only the selection of emotional issues and the use of emotional language, including emotional words, emotional sentence structure such as hurried language, and verbal descriptions of emotions, but also the visual presentation of emotions.

A similar picture emerges for *subjectivity*, which “seem[s] to be an integral part of communication on social media” (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019, p. 49). Posting or sharing subjective content allows self-presentation, activates social relationships, and stimulates discourse, thus increasing its value as shareable content (for a summary, see Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). Like emotionality, subjectivity (i.e., journalists expressing their opinions) is a characteristic of the traditional news softening concept (Reinemann et al., 2012). On social media, subjectivity is expressed in additional ways, such as through emoticons (Hågvar, 2019; Haim et al., 2021) or by irony (Meier-Vieracker, 2025).

The third dimension, *individualization framing*, refers to one of the defining characteristics of social media: Social relationships and connectedness (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). News media could adapt to this by framing their news accordin-

gly. Reinemann et al. (2012) included this dimension in terms of the extent to which the focus is on individual rather than societal consequences (see also human interest framing: Otto et al., 2017). For social media, it is necessary to add the aspect of personalization (mostly individualization), meaning that individuals (e.g., politicians) are in the spotlight of (political) news coverage (Adam & Maier, 2010; Van Aelst et al., 2012). Focusing on both celebrities (Tenenboim, 2020; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022) and everyday situations (Negreira-Rey et al., 2022) is also important in this respect.

The fourth dimension, *sensational framing*, involves selecting sensational issues or highlighting dramatic or thrilling aspects of content to capture people's attention and induce excitement and curiosity (for an overview of sensationalism, see Brown et al., 2018). Clickbait phrasing – a rather extreme form of both sensationalistic headline writing and news softening (Bastos, 2016; Blom & Hansen, 2015) – is one example. Highlighting surprising/unexpected aspects or focusing on conflicts or controversy are additional characteristics that have been investigated only occasionally in the context of news softening (e.g., Berg, 2018) but appear to be gaining importance on social media (Lischka, 2021). Moreover, sensationalism may increasingly take place in visual or auditory terms, such as video editing with transitions, stickers or sound tagging (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022), or in a combination of multimedia levels (e.g., storytelling: Gruber & Radü, 2022).

The final dimension is *audience orientation*. This is a fundamental trend in journalism (Blassnig & Esser, 2022; Costera Meijer, 2020) that has become institutionalized through corresponding editorial roles integrated into the social media news production process (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). News media may use colloquial language (Newman, 2022; Tenenboim, 2023), participate in challenges or duets (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021), ask (content-related) questions, or address individuals directly, for example, by making requests or using the second-person camera view (Cheng & Li, 2024; Hågvar, 2019; Haim et al., 2021).

5. The impact of platform-specific affordances on social news softening

Although researchers often refer to *a single* social media logic, each platform has its own logic, constituted by its specific affordances (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 257; see also Hase et al., 2023). Ronzhyn et al. (2023) define social media affordances as “perceived [...] properties of social media [...] that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms” (p. 3178), thereby creating a platform-specific environment (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). This environment also impacts the conceptualization of social news softening. While the (cross-platform compatible) dimensions of social news softening can be derived from social media logic, affordances influence how these dimensions unfold on different platforms. In other words, affordances influence the importance of certain dimensions on distinct platforms, as well as the characteristics by which these dimensions appear. Thus, considering affordances can help researchers understand, conceptualize, and measure differences among platforms (see Figure 1). To illustrate, the paper discusses *content personalization* (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2024; Kaye et al., 2022) as an ex-

emplary affordance and its potential impact on several social news softening dimensions and indicators (Table 1). For this purpose, it contrasts the important news sources (Newman et al., 2025), Facebook and TikTok in particular.

Table 1. Influence of content personalization on dimensions of social news softening

Dimension of social news softening	Conceptual differences due to degree of content personalization		Possible indicators
	Low degree (e.g., Facebook)	High degree (e.g., TikTok)	
Emotionality	High importance for both low and high degrees		Verbal description and emotional language, visual presentation of emotions, different types of emotions (e.g., joy, anger)
Subjectivity	High importance of subjective expressions	More creative perspective on subjectivity (e.g., irony)	Subjective language (explicit), ironic expressions (e.g., through contradictions between different levels of analysis), emoticons
Individualization framing	Importance on all platforms due to key factor connectedness		Human interest framing, personalization, everyday/daily life videos (“behind the scenes”)
		Creation of individual content	
Sensational framing	Importance of aspects that drive interactions	Importance of aspects that generate attention and suspense	Focus on surprises, conflicts, stylistic aspects that increase suspense: verbal (e.g., clickbait phrasing) and audiovisual (e.g., video editing techniques, cliffhangers) level
Audience orientation	Direct addressing of the audience	Stylistic aspects that give users the feeling of being addressed directly	Requests, (content-related) questions, second-person camera view, colloquial/playful language

Although all social media platforms use algorithms to personalize content to engage users for as long as possible, the degree and way of personalization vary. On platforms such as Facebook, network association significantly influences newsfeed curation (Thorson & Wells, 2016). The content displayed in the newsfeed is largely based on what friends in one’s network share, like, or comment on. In contrast, the interpersonal network is less important for TikTok’s *ForYou* algorithm (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). It is primarily aimed at adapting the displayed content as precisely as possible to each user’s interests and facets of identity (Lee et al., 2022; Schellewald, 2023; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Thus, the degree of algorithmic curation and personalization is higher on TikTok than on other platforms (Anter, 2025; Schellewald, 2023). From this, it can be concluded that TikTok users are less connected to a fixed community. They probably use the platform less to maintain existing social ties and more to be entertained and to satisfy esca-

pist motives (Schellewald, 2023). Therefore, at least in terms of TikTok, a high level of personalization may be associated with successful entertaining content – and possibly with successful (social) softening content. Altogether, the degree of personalization may affect the overall level of softening and which softening dimensions are salient on which platforms, as well as which indicators they are based on. The following paragraphs will therefore outline the potential influence of the degree of personalization on each dimension. It will also suggest which indicators could be suitable for measurement. It should be noted that, while these theoretical considerations are partially supported by initial empirical results, further research is needed to determine which softening strategies are specific to certain platforms.

The first dimension to be discussed is emotionality. Since greater personalization involves a stronger focus on entertaining content, it likely involves a stronger focus on emotional content. Wirz et al. (2023) provided a corresponding indication, showing that various Swiss news media have a higher proportion of emotional content on TikTok than on their websites or Instagram. But emotionalization also appears to be important for less personalized platforms, such as Facebook (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). On these platforms, emotional content can increase social interactions such as shares and likes (Tenenboim, 2020). Thus, it can be assumed that emotionality is a very important strategy, regardless of the degree of personalization (Hågvar, 2019; Lischka, 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Nevertheless, studies suggest different types of emotions are of varying importance for certain platforms. For instance, negative emotions tend to be more significant on Facebook (De León & Trilling, 2021; Tenenboim, 2020; but see Trilling et al., 2017). While the overall picture remains unclear, these studies highlight the importance of incorporating different emotions into the operationalization. In addition, according to platform-specific characteristics, emotions should be measured verbally and visually.

A greater difference can be expected for the subjectivity dimension. On platforms based on individual networks, such as Facebook, subjectivity plays an important role in strengthening and activating existing relationships (Eisenegger, 2021; Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). Studies show that subjectivity is a key factor on Facebook (Hågvar, 2019; Lischka, 2021). Since the described type of relationship management is less relevant on TikTok (see above), strong opinions in this regard are probably less effective on this platform. Without the benefit of social recommendations on TikTok, attracting attention is more important for each post. The high level of personalization on TikTok enables this by fostering *ad hoc* communities centered around issues, trending aesthetics, or sounds (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). This phenomenon encourages creative engagement with people who share one's individual interests (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). One way to do so is by using irony (Meier-Vieracker, 2025), which is an implicit form of sharing one's own opinion. Thus, different degrees of personalization may lead to different forms of subjectivity. Measuring the dimension must encompass both explicit and implicit expressions of opinion, such as irony, and should also include emoticons. However, the valid measurement of irony is particularly challenging. On platforms such as TikTok, this is further complicated by the need to consider various

levels (e.g., text, image, and sound) to detect irony, often expressed through contradictions between these levels (Meier-Vieracker, 2025).

Third, the degree of personalization may affect the dimension of individualization framing. On highly personalized platforms like TikTok, shared interests within ad hoc communities can motivate users to create videos fitting a particular topic or style. This allows them to become an important part of the community, increasing their reach (see Zulli & Zulli, 2022). This phenomenon could explain the high number of everyday videos on TikTok (Negreira-Rey et al., 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Newsrooms can adopt this strategy by creating “behind the scenes” videos (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022; Newman, 2022). Any operationalization of the individualization framing dimension should consider these new indicators. However, connectivity is key to all social media platforms (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Assumably, individualization framing is important for content on all these platforms. According to recent studies, traditional indicators, such as human interest framing and personalized coverage – framing individuals in their private roles or focusing on individuals visually – are still used for Facebook (Klein et al., 2025; Lamot, 2022; Steiner, 2020; Trilling et al., 2017) but are also used as a strategy to increase viewer engagement of videos (Anter, 2025), like on TikTok.

Differences about the indicators can also be assumed for the dimension of sensational framing. On platforms such as Facebook, where relevance is particularly based on what friends like, share, and comment on, aspects that generate these interactions are important. These include focus on conflicts, surprises, and clickbait phrasing (Lischka & Garz, 2023; Tenenboim, 2020; Trilling et al., 2017). On TikTok, viewing rates are important. Since videos start automatically, the first few seconds serve to appeal to users and arouse their interest (Anter, 2025). Funny and surprising content, as well as video editing techniques and cliffhangers increasing suspense can be helpful here (Anter, 2025; Newman, 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Measuring this dimension should consider framing (e.g., a focus on conflicts and surprises) and stylistic aspects. The latter should be measured at both verbal (e.g., clickbait) and audiovisual (e.g., video editing effects, cliffhangers) levels.

The degree of personalization presumably affects how the audience is addressed. Successful or frequently used strategies on Facebook appear to include requests or asking (content-related) questions (Hågvar, 2019; Haim et al., 2021). These aspects potentially lead to a higher interaction rate within one’s individual network (e.g., shares, likes, comments), which may increase the reach of the Facebook post. On highly personalized platforms such as TikTok, it is important that each individual feels addressed, regardless of other people’s interactions. Techniques enhancing this feeling include certain camera angles, such as the second-person camera view (Cheng & Li, 2024), which has been used frequently in conjunction with young female protagonists by several news outlets, according to a recent study (Hendrickx, 2025). Fun and playful language (Newman, 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022) is also helpful for directly addressing users. Since addressing the audience is a social media-specific dimension of softening, all of the aforementioned aspects should be examined closely.

Besides personalization, other affordances influence the production of journalistic content, like interactivity, hypertextuality, and visuality (Anter, 2025). *Inter-*

activity can reinforce attention-oriented editing (Anter, 2025), which may also increase (social) news softening. However, the type of interactivity is important. On TikTok, the focus is on creative interactions such as duets or lip-sync videos (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022) rather than interactions like comments or likes, as seen on Facebook.

Hypertextuality refers to the ability to link to content outside the platform, one's own (news) website (Hase et al., 2023), and can impact the journalistic presentation of the posts (see Anter, 2025). On platforms with high hypertextuality, such as Facebook, readers should be enticed to visit the news outlet's website, which is why posts often may not contain the complete story (Anter, 2025). This makes using clickbait more likely, for example. On platforms with low hypertextuality, such as TikTok, posts are often produced as native content for the platform (Anter, 2025). In this case, it can be assumed that journalists are more oriented toward platform-specific affordances and social media logic. If we consider the platform evolution from Facebook to Instagram to TikTok as representing a shift from high to low hypertextuality (see also Hase et al., 2023), it is crucial for forthcoming studies to incorporate these social media-specific softening dimensions (e.g., audience orientation) and indicators (e.g., emoticons) (Klein et al., 2025).

Platforms differ greatly in terms of *visuality*. The importance of visual affordances is reflected in the differences in structure and design (see Chapter 3), regarding the overall degree of visuality (Hase et al., 2023; Kaye et al., 2022; Leaver et al., 2020; lower on Facebook, higher on Instagram and TikTok), as well as how it is presented. For instance, TikTok's emphasis on short videos and its focus on music (Kaye et al., 2022) contribute to the increased use of visual effects and creative multimedia elements such as sound tagging and lip-syncing (Kaye et al., 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). The measurement of social softening should particularly include visual indicators. This would represent a significant advancement in softening research, which still relies heavily on text-based measurement.

Although there is still a lack of empirical evidence (Anter, 2024), exemplary insights into affordances have shown that they all contribute to platform-specific differences in social news softening. While this paper is not a finalized codebook, it strengthens conceptual clarity and provides guidance for future research on measuring social news softening.

6. Discussion and outlook

This paper aimed to adapt softening research to social media logic, which has become increasingly important in recent years. Developing the social news softening concept by deriving it from the dimensions of social media logic (Hermida & Mellado, 2020) provides a valuable basis for validly measuring softening in news posts on social media. This paper compares social news softening with the traditional news softening concept (Reinemann et al., 2012), the latter of which is based on (commercial) mass media logic. This comparison reveals that traditional and social media-specific softening are not entirely distinct, just as platform and mass media logics are not entirely distinct. Both logics partially align with economic principles (see “commercial aspects” within “news-media logic”: Esser,

2013) and share the goal of attracting audience attention (Keyling, 2017). Accordingly, the social news softening concept does not contrast with the traditional concept, but rather extends it in two ways: First, it adds new dimensions and aspects that are either social media-specific (e.g., audience orientation) or have become more prevalent on social media (e.g., surprise or clickbait phrasing). Second, it interprets traditional dimensions more broadly (e.g., including emoticons in the dimension of subjectivity) to adapt them to social media logic.

The concept presented here is intended to be inclusive and open to platform-specific affordances. This is important given the highly dynamic development of platforms. For one, new platforms are constantly introduced. For another, platforms undergo ongoing development, such as adopting each other's successful formats (e.g., the introduction of "Instagram Reels" in response to TikTok's short videos). In this environment, new platform-specific logics and affordances constantly emerge. This paper's exemplary look at affordances helps explain platform-specific differences and aids in terms of concrete operationalization in future studies. In particular, the paper addresses the impact of the degree of personalization. With a high degree of personalization, as on TikTok, it is important that users feel their interests are addressed. This can be achieved through increased emotionalization, sensational topics, or certain forms of audience orientation, such as the second-person camera view. On platforms with a low level of personalization, such as Facebook, individual networks assume a pivotal role in content curation. Therefore, factors that encourage interaction and strengthen relationships within the network are important. These factors include strong expressions of opinion and a focus on surprises or conflicts.

In addition to personalization, other affordances can influence the concept of social softening. For example, *visuality* is becoming increasingly central to social media platforms (Russmann & Svensson, 2017) and apparent in the indicators of social news softening. The latter also applies to the degree of hypertextuality and modes of interaction. The chosen examples illustrate the need to adapt measurement to each platform's specific characteristics. Nevertheless, analyses comparing platforms are also necessary. These studies should ensure that the different platform logics and indicators are considered or find equivalent indicators for all platforms based on the dimensions of social softening.

While platform-specific affordances contribute to the differentiation of the social softening concept, conceptual advancement is also evident in its dimensions. Future research should direct particular attention to the dimension of audience orientation. This is a novel dimension of social softening and a rather new direction in journalism research (Blassnig & Esser, 2022; Costera Meijer, 2020). Observations and interviews in newsrooms have shown that orientation toward audience metrics and interaction with the audience depend heavily on the strategic aims of news organizations and the role perception of journalists (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2020; see also Dvir-Gvirsman & Tsurriel, 2022). Particularly on TikTok, both factors currently seem to be in transition (Newman, 2022). Thus, social media could significantly modify journalistic routines. Through this lens, the novel concept of social news softening facilitates examination of news softening in an

altered media environment and creates a link between softening research and journalism studies that address the impact of platformization processes.

Furthermore, the concept of social news softening offers a new perspective on platformization research by incorporating the notion of (normative) media performance (see also Schneiders & Stark, 2025). This branch of research has rarely served as a theoretical foundation for platformization studies to date (Anter, 2024) and is often considered an antipole to softening. Media performance generally indicates the extent to which media fulfill their democratic function through their coverage. This coverage then forms the basis for the formation of public opinion (for a summary, see Weiß et al., 2016). Analyzing social softening in the context of media performance research can help evaluate whether and to what extent (social) softening is functional or dysfunctional to society. This question is not easy to answer. On the one hand, softening could introduce non-interested people to the news (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014; Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004). On the other hand, comprehensive opinion formation requires users to be adequately informed. The extent to which this objective can be achieved with softened news posts is unclear. Overall, the evaluation of any adaptation in terms of news softening remains ambivalent and must be further investigated by studying its effects and linking (social) softening with other media performance characteristics (e.g., framing, diversity) within content analyses (see Wirz & Zai, 2024). To do so, adapting the concept of softening to platform logic is a necessary first step.

However, the question of whether softening is beneficial or detrimental for society is particularly relevant in cases of high degree of softening. The extent of news softening depends largely on how much news media adapt to the logic of the social platform. In other words, it relates to their dependency on platforms or how much they “reclaim[...] control” (Walters, 2022; see also Rashidian et al., 2020), such as by focusing on paying audiences. Many studies have shown that most media outlets strive to balance adapting to social media logic with their professional criteria (Anter, 2024). Future studies must examine the persistence of this pattern. However, analyzing news media outlets exclusively will not suffice because platformization has altered not only journalistic standards but also driven the deinstitutionalization of journalism (Eisenegger, 2021). Influencers and public figures are now important news sources, particularly on TikTok and for young people (Newman et al., 2025; Wunderlich et al., 2022). Some news outlets now take a “creator-first approach” (Newman, 2022) or collaborate with influencers, as exemplified by *funk*, a joint project of the German public service media ARD and ZDF (Duckwitz, 2019). Thus, while this paper and current research focus on institutionalized news media, future content analyses should include high-reach influencers and public figures as functional equivalents. This approach will elucidate the extent of softening and the quality of news content to which users are exposed. Accordingly, the social news softening concept also facilitates understanding of how platformization processes affect news quality and, consequently, public opinion formation.

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