

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

About amateurs and professionals: Types of political influencer communication on YouTube

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1. Introduction

Political social media influencers (PSMI), understood as personal brands, who regularly disseminate self-produced political content on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, have the potential to influence political opinions and behaviors of their users (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Knupfer et al., 2023; Peter & Muth, 2023). Adolescents and young adults are particularly likely to perceive PSMI as credible and helpful sources of information (e.g. Zimmermann et al., 2022). Established media companies, ministries, the European Parliament, and educational institutions take advantage of PSMI's potential influence on young audiences by cooperating with them.

Parts of society and politics already recognize PSMI as relevant and influential public actors. From a communication studies perspective, this raises questions about the quality of PSMI content and its value for the political public (Duckwitz, 2023; Riedl et al., 2021). However, corresponding empirical analyses that shed light on the content side rather than the user side are still rare. To draw a differentiated picture of PSMI communication and its contribution to the political public sphere, this paper presents a typology of PSMI communication on YouTube.

2. Political social media influencers as public and media actors

How PSMI can be conceptualized scientifically is controversial (Duckwitz, 2023; Lichtenstein et al., 2021; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023). Despite all their differences, it is true for all PSMI that they are *public and media actors* whose activities depend on digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Bause, 2021). In their selection, preparation, and dissemination of topics, media actors follow both normative and economic principles (Landerer, 2013; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Taking deliberative quality criteria (*normative orientation*) – rationality, constructiveness, reciprocity, respect – and professionalism characteristics (*market orientation*) – creative features and ways of monetarization – into account, this paper will answer the following research question: Which types of PSMI communication can be distinguished from each other on YouTube?

3. Method

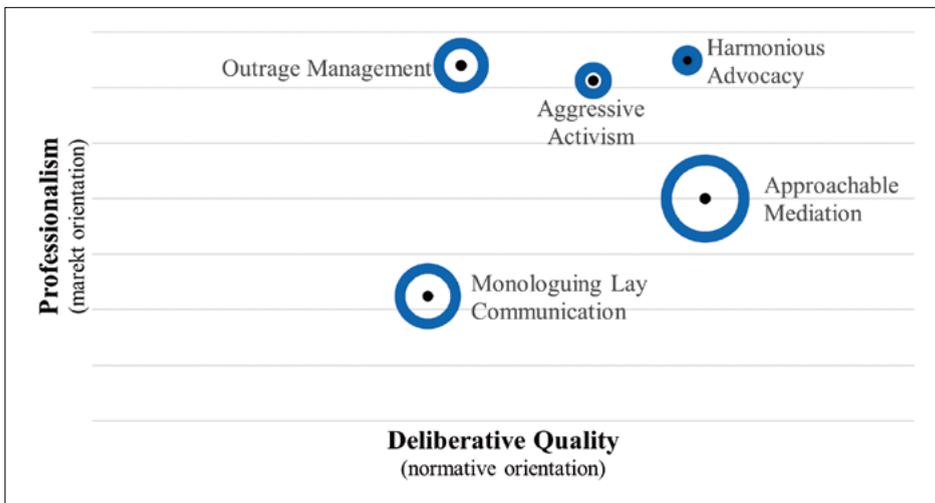
To answer the research question, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of 896 political topics from 724 YouTube videos published by 32 German PSMIs. The coding was conducted by three coders. After three rounds of testing, 50 videos randomly selected from the material were used for the final reliability test. The reliability is on a good level (α between 0.8 and 1). To typify PSMI communications, an exploratory hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted at the level of

coded policy topics ($N = 896$). Due to the quasi-metric indices, the Euclidean squared distance was chosen as the proximity measure. The agglomerative Ward method served as the fusion algorithm, with the aim of forming clusters that were as homogeneous as possible. Five clusters were formed.

4. Results

Drawing on actor roles described in the theory of the public sphere (Neidhardt, 1994; Imhof, 2011), I call the five identified types of PSMI communication “monologuing lay communication,” “approachable mediation,” “harmonious advocacy,” “aggressive activism,” and “outrage management.”

Figure 1. Professionalism and deliberative quality of different types of PSMI communication



Note. The size of the points corresponds to the proportion of types in the total number of cases ($N = 896$).

The “*monologuing lay communication*” cluster (24.8% of cases) embodies the amateur culture that YouTube originally stood for. The type is described as monologuing because it makes the least reference to its audience of all clusters.

“*Outrage management*” (19.8% of cases) is characterized by a similarly low deliberative quality. The difference, however, lies in the high level of professionalism. The cluster can be characterized as a business model, with which PSMI address political and social problems for financial purposes, raising attention through negativism and scandalization.

The “*aggressive activism*” cluster (11.6 % of cases) contains a comparably high level of information, and is the most constructive of all clusters, because it calls for political participation most frequently. However, there is a lack of res-

pectful communication. This is not surprising because exaggerated slogans are a characteristic of activist communication.

The cluster “*harmonious advocacy*” (9% of cases) is highly professionalized and comparable with political public relations. The videos are most often created in cooperation with companies and organizations, which means that the corresponding PSMI act as spokespersons for these partners. Of all the clusters, this one is the most respectful and has a comparably high degree of rationality.

Lastly, the largest cluster of “*approachable mediation*” (34.8 % of cases) is characterized by the comparatively highest deliberative quality. Many PSMI that cooperate with public broadcasting services in Germany fall into this cluster. This finding is consistent with an interview study in which PSMIs report having to adhere to quality standards within such collaborations (Lichtenstein et al., 2021).

5. Discussion

Keeping the limits of this study in mind – such as the focus on German YouTube offerings – this study provides insights into different forms of PSMI communication on YouTube. The identified five types of PSMI communication confirm and order the heterogeneity of this new way of political communication as indicated in the state of research. PSMI communication ranges from unprofessional lay communication to various forms of monetized professional communication. Depending on the emphasis on normative or market-oriented principles, the offerings’ deliberative value varies. This allows cautious interpretations about the extent to which the different types may or may not contribute to deliberative political discourse. While for example the largest cluster may be able to promote the political interest of its audience and stimulate low-threshold discussions on politics, the negativism of the “outrage management” communication could fuel political disenchantment rather than motivate people to think about different positions. Potential effects should be examined through impact and survey studies on the audience side. The typology presented provides a helpful starting point. It could make future research results more comparable and differentiate media and political discussions on the value of PSMI communication in democracies.

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