

# Info-slide education and ‘Trojan journalism’ Encouraging young people's political participation on social media

Gabriel Malli<sup>1</sup>, Robert Gutounig<sup>1</sup>, Eva Goldgruber<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Journalism and Digital Media, FH JOANNEUM - University of Applied Sciences, Graz, Austria

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**Abstract.** In conceptions of deliberative democracy, journalism is considered to play a crucial role in facilitating political participation. As social media platforms have become a preferred space for young people to inform and express themselves politically, journalistic actors are forced to use these spaces to reach young audiences and encourage participation. This study examines two journalistic social media accounts—*die\_chefredaktion* on Instagram and *wien.stabil* on TikTok—that are dedicated to political reporting for young audiences. Through qualitative content analysis, recurring formats, topics and mediation styles were identified that target younger audiences beyond traditional media channels. The analysis reveals two mediation models used by these accounts, influenced by the conventions of the platforms. *Die\_chefredaktion* makes young people's subjective concerns about current political issues the starting point for critical debates. ‘Info-slides’ and explanatory videos are intended to enable the audience to identify with and show solidarity with those affected by social problems. Special attention is given to the problems of (post-)migrant youth, which is also reflected in the diversity of the reporters. Instead, *wien.stabil* adopts a more indirect ‘Trojan journalism’ approach by embedding short journalistic videos within entertaining content, subtly encouraging political participation. An analysis of their formats and styles shows how they use different approaches to raise political awareness among their audiences.

## 1 Introduction

‘The editorial teams are white, autochthonous, and educated bourgeois. [...] The young, diverse target group is hardly reached [...] because nothing changes in the structures.’ (*die\_chefredaktion*, 2021b) With these words, the Viennese journalist Melisa Erkurt opened the media project *die\_chefredaktion* in an Instagram story in 2021. The ambitious project wants nothing less than to create new structures in the media industry by involving young people and addressing their interests and problems. It is thus part of a small but growing field of journalistic social media projects that build on the participation of young

people. They seek to provide their recipients with knowledge that can later become the basis for political practice. However, unlike forms of journalism run by untrained 'citizen journalists' (Clark and Marchi, 2017), these new channels are initiated and accompanied by experienced players in the media industry.

This paper takes a closer look at the hitherto under-researched phenomenon of participatory, yet professionalised social media journalism that targets at young audiences (see Mellado, 2022, for an overview on social media journalism): Based on a comparative content analysis of the posts of two Austrian channels - the aforementioned *die\_chefredaktion* and the TikTok format *wien.stabil* - we reconstruct the journalistic strategies that emerge in the productions of this field. To this end, the following questions will be answered for each of the two channels:

1. Who are the protagonists of the contributions?
2. What are the thematic emphases?
3. Which platform-specific genre conventions are taken up?
4. Which aesthetic, rhetorical or affective styles of mediation are employed?

On the basis of these questions, we will show that two types of journalistic mediation in social media can be identified in the material, namely 'info-slide education' and 'Trojan journalism'. Starting with a discussion of ideals and problematisations in the context of youth political and journalistic participation in section (2), the case selection and methodological approach are elaborated in section (3). Finally, section (4) presents the case studies on the selected channels, while section (5) concludes with a comparison of the results.

## **2 Context: Political participation, journalism, and young people**

While political participation is originally an analytical concept that encompasses various forms of involvement in processes of political will formation and decision-making (Geißel and Penrose, 2003, p. 3), normative political theories regard it as an ideal: in conceptions of deliberative democracy, political participation represents a central value that offers citizens opportunities for development and self-realisation (van Deth, 2009, p. 141). Journalism plays a key role in such theories: As a 'regulator and moderator of public discourse' (Hermida *et al.*, 2012, p. 816), truthful information should be made available to citizens as a basis for participatory practices and rational political decision-making (Welker, 2016, pp. 391–392).

Thus, journalism should constitute a public sphere in which citizens are encouraged to participate and discursive conflict resolution becomes possible (Habermas, 2004). Against the backdrop of a crisis of representative democracies and the decline of

traditional parties and interest groups in contemporary post-industrial societies (cf. Amlinger, 2022, pp. 95–130), the demand for political participation gains further relevance. Individual citizens are increasingly invoked as participating subjects who should feel responsible for shaping their social and institutional environment (Junge, 2008, p. 209). For the case of Austria this is evidenced by detailed public guidelines for civic participation (*Partizipation. Gemeinsam einsetzen und gestalten*, 2023) as well as research on the question of how participation can be fostered (Bischoff *et al.*, 2016).

At the same time, authors describe a ‘crisis of journalism’ in Western liberal democracies (Schneider, 2012). This refers primarily to the loss of audiences and monetisation opportunities of historically grown, professionalised print and TV journalism due to increasing competition from internet-based media. At the same time, actors without journalistic training are taking over services on the Internet that were traditionally considered to be the task of journalism. They disseminate information, initiate debates and contribute to the formation of political will. While such trends were discussed in terms of their democratic potential in the early days of the internet age (Lindgren, 2017, p. 150), concerns about the dangers they pose to democracies have begun to grow, as the debates on fake news, filter bubbles and ‘alternative facts’ suggest (Tucker *et al.*, 2018).

In short, a growing demand for participation contrasts with a loss of relevance of old journalism and a fragmentation of spaces for dialogue. This is particularly true for young people: Legacy media are struggling to reach younger audiences (Galan *et al.*, 2019) while new forms of non-professionalised journalism are emerging on the social web (Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020). For example, researchers describe a web-based, non-institutionalised ‘connective journalism’ (Marchi and Clark, 2021), in which young people report on political issues from the bottom up, based on their own affectedness. At the same time, ‘para-journalistic’ actors such as influencers are gaining in influence and reach (Hanusch and Löhmann, 2022). These trends are also evident in the case of Austria, where a growing importance of social media for political information among young people is reported, accompanied by a fragmentation of media publics (Ajanović, Fritsch and Zahorka, 2021).

These changed conditions force classical journalistic actors and media companies to adapt their offerings to interests and usage habits of a young audience (Hase, Boczek and Scharrow, 2022). The normative claim to create a public sphere and provide a basis for political participation no longer seems feasible within traditional channels. Not least, economic success depends on the extent to which young people can be addressed through new formats and integrated into the media business. Thus, professional journalists are moving into a field of ‘non-conventional’ journalism, adopting, adapting and institutionalising its genres, formats, and themes (Hermida and Mellado, 2020; Hendrickx, 2021).

## 3 Cases and method

### 3.1 Case selection

Our analysis follows on from this and reconstructs mediation modes of two Austrian journalistic social media formats that are dedicated to political reporting for a young audience. We selected two channels from Austria, *die\_chefredaktion* and *wien.stabil*, both of which use TikTok and Instagram. According to their creators, both were founded with the aim of redesigning political journalism for a young audience, involving ‘young people’ in the content creation. Based on the findings that traditional media formats are ‘too far from the everyday lives of young people’ (*die\_chefredaktion*, 2021a) and that journalistic communication of political content needs a ‘contemporary form’ (‘Digitalverlag “hashtag”’: Stefan Apfl stellt neue journalistische TikTok-Show vor’, 2022), they provide young actors with publicity, resources, and know-how to communicate political content to their audiences. This participatory approach makes them pioneers in Austria and sets them apart from older online offerings from legacy media.

At the same time, both channels are supported by experienced players from the Austrian media scene: Stefan Apfl, the founder of *wien.stabil*, was previously editor-in-chief of an Austrian investigative magazine. Melisa Erkurt, the founder of *die\_chefredaktion*, wrote highly regarded reports for a Viennese migrant magazine and appeared as a public expert on migrant youth. The formats are also integrated into a network of Austrian media companies. Both can draw on journalistic know-how and professional technical resources. There are also links to people and organisations close to the Austrian social democratic movement. The cooperative *Bloomedia*, which provides services for journalists and is supported by pro-union actors, owns 50% of the media publisher *hashtag.jetzt*, which produces *wien.stabil* (Mark, 2021). The productions of *die\_chefredaktion*, on the other hand, include numerous cooperations with the Chamber of Labour, a social democrat-dominated interest group representing employees (*die\_chefredaktion*, 2022a). In this respect, at least individual productions can also be read as ‘vehicles’ of the social democratic movement to place political messages in a youth target group.

### 3.2 Empirical approach

Alongside these similarities, there are also differences in the forms of mediation. The analysis starts here and, by contrasting the cases, works out how the channels use platform conventions and media practices in different ways to create attractive products for young people and to stimulate political participation. In each case, the focus was on the main medium of the two channels: the Instagram account of *die\_chefredaktion* and

the TikTok account of *wien.stabil*. We created a corpus of material that includes all permanent postings of the pages published between 20 September 2022 (the launch of *wien.stabil*) and 31 January 2023. The restriction of the research period reflects the synchronic conception of our analysis: the aim is not to trace temporal changes in content and modes of mediation, but to reconstruct these aspects comparatively in a limited period of time in order to gain insights into their systematicity (Diaz-Bone, 2010, p. 193). A total of 115 contributions were published during this period, 46 by *die\_chefredaktion* and 69 by *wien.stabil*.

Based on the research questions, we defined three dimensions of analysis, which can be roughly described as the *who*, the *what* and the *how* of the productions. Firstly, we looked at who the presenters or authors of each contribution were. Secondly, we looked at the formats used, and the topics covered in the programmes. Thirdly, we looked at how the topics were presented stylistically and aesthetically to the audience. These three aspects acted as the main categories and comparative dimensions that made visible the differences between the productions, while also considering the platform logics reflected in the productions.

We began by writing focused summaries of each production, noting information about speaker positions, genre conventions, content, and audiovisual design. We then coded the material according to the main categories, based on concepts of qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018). Subsequently, inductive subcategories were developed, taking into account different classes of formats, speakers, contents and mediation styles. The categories were constantly compared with each other to draw attention to similarities and differences. Finally, the characteristics of the channels were condensed into two types, each specifying a mode of political journalism and activation in the context of social media (Kelle and Kluge, 2010).

## **4 Case Studies**

### **4.1 *Die\_chefredaktion* (Instagram)**

*die\_chefredaktion*, an editorially independent offshoot of the Viennese migrant magazine *der Biber*, has over 32,000 subscribers on Instagram and operates a TikTok channel as well as a paid newsletter. By offering workshops and scholarships, the project itself explicitly aims to provide young people without a professional background with resources for the journalistic preparation of political content. The project's emphasis on diversity is striking. Reporters, presenters and interviewees often come from a migrant background; the majority of presenters during the research period were women. This creates a further

potential for promoting participation. By presenting young and diverse people as politically active subjects, 'role models' are offered to the audience. In their performances, the producers present an ideal of self-confident and critical migrant youth that can become a basis for the recipients' political self-understanding. It thus fits into a growing field of initiatives that aim to make young people with a migration background visible in the media industry. Further examples from the German context are the network *Neue Deutsche Medienmacher\*innen* (New German Media Makers), which offers mentoring for young journalists with an 'international history' (*Guter Journalismus ist vielfältig*, 2023), or the YouTube channel *datteltäter*, which deals with the problems of young German Muslims from a satirical perspective (*Datteltäter*, 2023).

#### 4.1.1 Formats

Our analysis identified four key formats in the sample:

Documentaries: Journalistic documentaries of about five minutes on a specific topic are central to the channel's content. Beginning with a short introduction, young people affected by the topic, but also scientific, journalistic or activist experts are given the opportunity to speak. In most cases, the reporters also examine the political context and provide critical analysis.

Explanatory reels: Lasting no more than one minute, these shorter videos take up current issues, summarise them and discuss them critically, with the speakers appearing in the picture and additional text and image material being superimposed. While the documentaries aim for a more comprehensive presentation, this format can be interpreted as an attempt to put news into a form that can be easily integrated into social media use processes.

Info posts: So-called 'info posts' are another format typical of Instagram: In contrast to the video formats discussed so far, they are a series of text-heavy individual slides that users can navigate independently ('swipe') and in which information on a topic is shared. Info posts can also take the form of 'testimonials', in which authors provide personal references to issues.

Street interviews: Finally, the contributions also include recordings of street interviews with passers-by or participants in demonstrations, which is a typical format of digital social journalism.

In summary, we can speak of 'hybrid' products: There is a basic orientation towards journalistic genres, but they are flexibly adapted to the conventions and possibilities of Instagram (Hermida and Mellado, 2020). This can be read as a strategy to adapt to the expectations and consumption habits of a potential audience to remain competitive in the 'attention economy' of social media.

#### 4.1.2 Thematic areas

The following thematic emphases emerged in the analysed postings of *die\_chefredaktion*:

Migration and integration: Many productions focus on migration and integration. On the one hand, there are productions about refugees. A documentary from January 2023, for example, deals with the situation in a refugee camp in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a critical political contextualisation that emphasises the responsibility of the Austrian government. On the other hand, the living conditions of people with a (post-)migrant background in Austria will be addressed. In addition to reports on migrant support organisations and interviews with migration researchers, *die\_chefredaktion* publishes contributions on racism and forms of discrimination in everyday and institutional contexts. Many posts also deal with the identity formation of people with (post-)migration biographies.

Socio-economic problems: Another thematic complex deals with socio-economic problems, such as the current inflation, gentrification, labour disputes in the health sector and distributional inequalities. It is often emphasized that migrant people and women are particularly affected by these problems. One documentary, for example, reports on the difficulties of precarious migrant persons to break into academia and the arts.

Mental health is a recurring theme. In one documentary, young people describe the psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; in another post, offers of help are presented. In addition, the (critical) examination of body norms is a frequent topic, especially in 'info slides'. The patriarchal constitution of such norms is highlighted, which underlines the feminist claim of the productions.

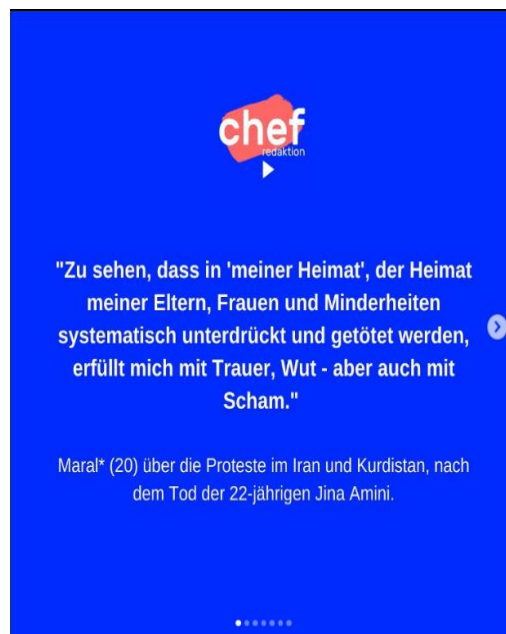
Pop and web cultural phenomena are also frequently discussed in the productions, with the producers taking a critical stance. For example, there is an 'info post' contribution in which the publications of TikToker and animal rights activist 'Die Militante Veganerin' (The Militant Vegan), which went viral at the time, are criticised for their discriminatory subtext. Finally, international political developments are discussed, with the Iranian uprising being a central theme during the research period. Figure 1 provides an overview of the content subcategories developed from the material.



**Figure 1:** Content-related subcategories of case study 1 by frequency: *die\_chefredaktion*

#### 4.1.3 Modes of Mediation

Regarding the overarching mediation styles of *die\_chefredaktion*, we identified a break with norms of journalistic objectivity. While in a traditional understanding the abstraction of the journalist from the story and a ‘balanced reporting’ are seen as ideals (Blaagaard, 2013), many contributions focus on subjective concerns and emotionalisations of those reporting. This can be seen in Figure 2 where an author with Iranian roots describes her feelings about the Iranian uprising in 2022.



**Figure 2:** ‘Seeing that in “my homeland”, the homeland of my parents, women and minorities are systematically oppressed and killed fills me with sadness, anger - but also shame.’ - First info slide on a post on the Iran uprising, written by an author with Iranian roots (*die\_chefredaktion*, 2022b).



Similarly, it is BPoCs who report on the hurtful nature of racism, those affected by health restrictions who describe their suffering, or participants in demonstrations who explain their motives. With Clark and Marchi (2017), we can speak here of a professionalised variant of ‘connective journalism’ that puts personal emotions and narrations at the centre. This also marks a break with ideals of emotional detachment and sometimes even takes the form of ‘confessional journalism’ in which own weaknesses and fears are addressed in a self-exposing way (Coward, 2013).

However, descriptions of subjective consternations are never presented in an individualised way, but placed in political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts. This is evident, for example, in a video in which BPoCs describe experiences of structural racism in their everyday lives. Acts such as touching their hair or constant questions about their origin are problematised, while the recipients are explicitly asked to reflect on their behaviour. The goal here is to raise critical awareness of racism and solidarity with victims among bystanders. Other info posts exhibit similar patterns of social critique grounded in subjective experiences of racism, classism, ableism, sexism, or queer hostility.

In doing so, the productions unfold an (implicit) pedagogy that we call, in reference to one of the dominant formats, ‘info-slide education’. On the one hand, they can offer a potential of identification for similarly affected recipients and open up critical horizons: they place subjectively painful experiences in a broad socio-political context and thus make it possible to develop a critical awareness of one’s own social situation. On the other hand, they can give viewers who are not directly affected an impression of various problems, and the resulting suffering. Authentic reports can make problems tangible and give them a face, which in turn contributes to the emotional plausibility of their criticism. Through the representation of subjective concerns, recipients are informed about the political and social conditions of a problem that is to become the object of criticism. In this way, a political (self-)awareness can be promoted, which can become the starting point for further participatory practices.

#### **4.2 *wien.stabil* (TikTok)**

With around 27,000 followers and 441,000 likes (February 2023) on the TikTok platform, the channel *wien.stabil*, founded in September 2022, has quickly achieved a high reach. They also have an Instagram account with a lower reach. According to the self-description, the channel is a ‘journalistic entertainment show’. Its content mainly consists of street interviews and short reports by young reporters, often addressing current political debates, but also offering a significant amount of pure ‘entertainment’. It is part of a wider network of channels on various social media platforms run by the media publisher *hashtag.jetzt*. Similar to *die\_chefredaktion*, *wien.stabil* is inspired by the ‘funk’

network of the German public broadcasters ARD and ZDF and, as its initiator Stefan Apfl describes it, strives for 'Trojan journalism' (Plaikner, 2022). The publishing house is dedicated to developing 'journalistic digital formats with ambition' for young target groups. Cooperations with partners from the public and private sector are to secure the financing. *Wien.stabil* has a fixed team of presenters, most of whom are young, with a roughly equal number of male and female presenters. However, there is little evidence of a strong emphasis on diversity, either in the team or in the selection of interviewees. In summary, the term "Trojan journalism", as described by its initiator Stefan Apfl, can indeed be applied, in the sense that pure entertainment formats are mixed with the dissemination of knowledge and political or civic issues.

#### 4.2.1 Formats

The formats chosen are strongly influenced by the characteristics of the platform. Videos are often short, under one minute, with rapid cuts and often enhanced with effects. In our analysis, we identified the following key formats in the sample.

Explanatory videos: Contributions on topical, often political issues or economic terms (e.g., 'inflation'), usually presented by a dedicated host for this format.

Series formats: Are also often used, e.g., to introduce political candidates for the presidential election in Austria in 2022. Over the course of just over a month, videos of similar structure were uploaded, each introducing a candidate, inviting people to vote, or providing further analysis.

Street interviews: This is a common journalistic tool, probably because it is easy to do with limited resources. Interviews are usually about current political issues or current events with people on the street in an urban context.

Expert interviews: Traditional interviews with experts, such as a lawyer discussing civil rights, are also included, typically edited into short answer snippets that follow media and platform conventions.

District tours or call-in-sessions: These are often produced as a live stream, then later published as edited posts.

Sketches, challenges & pranks: These include prank calls as well as challenges that prioritize the playful aspect.

In summary, these products can also be described as 'hybrid'. A basic tendency towards journalistic genres is flexibly adapted to the conventions and functionalities of TikTok. This can be interpreted as a tactic to adapt to the expectations and browsing habits of a potential audience on this specific platform.

#### 4.2.2 Thematic areas

The range of topics is broad, with a focus on topical issues (see Figure 3).

Political issues: These have received considerable attention, with a particular focus on the Austrian presidential election that took place during the research period.

Contributions related to the COVID-19: Due to the observation period, topics related to the pandemic are predominant. However, this topic is approached with levity, such as through prank calls.

Economic issues were also addressed. This is highlighted by topics such as inflation.

Sports-related content was observed during the observation period. This was dominated by the Football World Cup which took place at the same time and was critically assessed. This topic is dealt with in the form of a series on the economic background of the World Cup.

Historical contributions often have a political connection (e.g., explanatory video on the true background of the National Day of Celebration in Austria.).

Family and relationships: Personal issues were also addressed. For example, represented by a video featuring a call-in viewer tells the story of how she was motivated to find her biological father after watching a previous caller on wien.stabil.



**Figure 3:** Thematic codes of case study 2 by frequency: *wien.stabil*

#### 4.2.3 Modes of Mediation

The *wien.stabil* channel is more in line with TikTok-specific viewing habits. Explanatory videos are frequently employed, typically accompanied by decorative infographics that offer little explanation. Original audio clips, mostly taken out of context (e.g. from politicians), are used. The accusation often levelled at television images that they arbitrarily string together images from different contexts (and thus take them out of context) is taken to the extreme here.

Production conditions are likely to drive other format decisions: Street interviews are easy to conduct and, combined with the deliberate selection of audio clips, can quickly generate laughter. The best way to combine journalistic standards with platform-specific entertainment is through well-researched but quickly edited montage videos, such as a series on the Austrian presidential election. This shows the consistent 'internet logic' of the content, with each segment starting with a web search, followed by a rapid succession of audio and video snippets and images, often sarcastically commented on with internet memes (see Figure 4). What does not seem to have been abandoned here is a critical and investigative approach to journalism, evident in the critical questioning of each candidate's campaign priorities. In addition, comedy or sketch formats are typical of the platform, where even serious topics such as COVID-19 are treated as pranks.



**Figure 4:** Screenshot of contributions regarding the presidential elections in Austria on *wien.stabil* (*wien.stabil*, 2022; *person made unrecognisable afterwards*)

## 5 Conclusion and outlook

Although both channels are committed to participatory social media journalism for young people and are embedded in the structures of media companies, the comparison reveals significant differences: First, there are differences in terms of the actors and topics. The focus on diversity and migration issues clearly distinguishes *die\_chefredaktion* from *wien.stabil*. This is already inherent in the concept of *die\_chefredaktion*, which wants to reach out to a special target group of young people. This focus and the underlying understanding of journalism result not least from the biographical dispositions of the founder: Melisa Erkurt herself has Bosnian roots and worked as a teacher in Vienna before embarking on a career in journalism. Secondly, there are differences in the formats of the posts, which not least reflect the divergent platform logics of Instagram and TikTok. In the case of *wien.stabil*, the complete absence of text-heavy posts is striking.

Thirdly, the two case studies represent different approaches to how journalistic content can be mediated in social media against the backdrop of changing communication conditions. 'Info-slide education' (case study 1) is a form of journalism on social media that appeals to young people through the self-representation of peers who are affected by current political issues. Reminiscent of more recent forms of 'connective journalism', the subjective starting point of the reporting is made transparent, and affectedness is revealed. In doing so, the productions unfold an implicit pedagogy that may foster processes of identification and solidarization among the audience.

In the case of 'Trojan journalism', producers are trying to reach a young audience with political or economic issues through various entertainment formats. Although the journalistic presentations are based on classic journalistic approaches such as topicality or investigative research, they are always embedded in an entertainment programme that does not shy away from 'shallow' content. While the educational approach is clear in case study 1, it is more hidden in case study 2. Serious political-journalistic offerings thus represent, in a sense, the Trojans that hide in a horse of platform-typical, apolitical contributions and subsequently infiltrate the feeds of potential users. This reflects a pedagogical principle that assumes that political education and activation can be more successful if it is 'dressed up' in apolitical entertainment. Corresponding to these differences is a divergence in affective styles: 'info-slide education' shows a certain level of seriousness or consternation, while 'Trojan journalism' presents itself with a degree of playfulness.

Whether the accounts are actually able to generate political awareness and encourage participation cannot be assessed conclusively at this point. Both accounts have a remarkable reach, and a look at the comment sections suggests that their content is perceived and taken seriously by the target audience. However, a detailed study of reception practices remains a desideratum for future research.

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