THE PEOPLE VERSUS THE MEDIA: THE ROLE OF EVERYDAY AUDIENCE DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN CHALLENGING THE NEWS MEDIA FOR ITS REPORTING ON MINORITIES.

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Research highlights how negative media narratives about marginalised groups such as Muslims, refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants, and trans people (Poole, 2019; Moore et al, 2018; Baker, 2014) have become increasingly amplified through the digitalisation of the news media. This paper focuses on public engagement with the mainstream news media through digital campaigns that seek to 'rupture' the negative ways that the news media represent these marginalised groups. It is based on original, empirical research that addresses a major gap in scholarship about how and why audiences as active publics challenge these narratives and what it can tell us about the media-audience nexus in the digital age.

Audiences have traditionally been viewed more as news consumers than influential actors in news production. News-sharing through social media, however, has equipped audiences with considerably more opportunities to act as the arbitrators of what stories are worthy of sharing (Swart et al, 2019). Struggling for competitive survival in a climate of declining circulations and commercial pressures, digital journalism has also enabled the mainstream news media to vastly extend its reach and outputs (Zelizer, 2019), building on a commercial model using audience metrics to attract advertisers. But what happens to this model when discontented audiences turn to digital activism to challenge narratives about minorities that promote hatred and division in the news media?

To respond to this question, my research situates the media-audience relationship as a critical, under-researched site of cultural struggle. Using a multi-phased and multimethod approach including surveys and focus groups with news media consumers, the research builds a multidimensional picture of the impact that audiences as digital

activists can have on challenging powerful media institutions that influence their own mediated socio-political worlds. In doing this, the research directly responds to a call within the discipline of audience research to disrupt our understandings of audiences by advocating a 'radical audience turn' (Swart et al, 2022:15) where audiences are investigated as active agents/publics in the digital networked age (Steensen et al, 2020).

This type of digital media activism holds the media specifically as the object to be protested against or reformed (Pickard, 2015). Despite declining public trust in the news media, today's more pragmatic and sceptical audiences continue to hold on to sometrust in the role of the news media in society (Kyriakidou et al, 2022). By unravelling how audiences as publics can enact their agency to influence the news media structures that impact their own mediated socio-political worlds, we further. increase our understanding of the potential future role for news journalism in an increasingly digital landscape.

The paper reports on the findings from a multi-method study comprised of a semi-structured online survey (n=401) of news audiences acting as everyday digital activists who have been involved in the counter-media digital campaigns. The survey provided an important demographic insight into this under-explored cohort of digital activists and enabled an empirical assessment of participants' motivations and types of digital engagement. The survey was followed up with ten focus groups (n=50), drawn from the survey sample. The focus groups delved further into their experiences as 'everyday' digital activists and captured the affective sentiments that drove their engagement with the news media (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Together with the quantitative analysis of the survey (including demographical information), the qualitative elements of the survey and the focus groups were analysed through thematic-discourse analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to provide an in-depth investigation into the concept of digital audience agency as the exercising of power from individual members of the public in their interpretations and interactions with media content and media structures (Hendrickx, 2022).

Initial analysis of the survey finds that the type of person attracted to this type of digital activism against the mainstream news media tends to be older, highly educated and media literate. They are often long-time news consumers — people who deeply value journalism but feel disillusioned by the way it represents minorities. Under their dual identity as both news audiences and digital activists, they regularly consume news both through traditional means (newspapers, TV and radio news) and across different social media platforms. At the same time, they engage through social media to challenge how the mainstream media reports on marginalised groups.

In line with research on digital activism for media reform (Li et al, 2021), this participation varies according to the roles that individuals take on and their existing network positions and reach. This ranges from more superficial (but very effective in large numbers) social media activities such as clicktivism to joining campaigns targeting the advertisers whose products are displayed next to discriminatory stories about minorities; directly critiquing news websites online by posting factual information to debunk inaccurate news stories about or encouraging other news readers to improve their own media literacy and not take the news stories at face value.

These media activists were not 'anti-media' or anti-establishment journalism but instead motivated by the idea of building a journalism that is fairer, more accurate, and more representative. They were frustrated by what they saw as the failure of existing media regulators and viewed their activism to hold the media to account and build a journalism that reported in more accurate and fairer ways on marginalised groups. These findings reflect the increasing politicisation of everyday news consumption practices in the digital age, where audiences are afforded the means through digital activism to reshape the news media for what they believe is wider public interest.

In terms of their actual activism behaviour, if we map their activities onto George and Leider's *Hierarchy of Digital Activism*, we see that most fall at the lower levels — what they call "digital spectator activities": liking, sharing, or signing petitions. Despite the 'clicktivism' critique for this type of low effort, low stakes digital activism, the findings suggest that even such low-effort acts generated visibility and legitimacy for the campaigns to challenge how minorities were portrayed in the news media. It also helped to raise to the failures of the mainstream media to live up to the ideals of responsible journalism i.e. the fair and accurate reporting on all communities.

However, this level of digital activism came with many tensions. Firstly, these audience activists relied upon using the same channels and means (i.e. social media platforms) that they were themselves critical and sceptical of. This reflects the complex processes of negotiation undertaken by digital activists when also engaging with a digital capitalism that amplifies the same inequalities that they are protesting against (Barassi, 2015). Challenging how the media reported on minorities using this level of everyday digital activism also increased their own visibility, making them targets for social media hate. Finally, as most of the media campaigns themselves were digitally native, there were little opportunities to develop strong solidarities with other audience activists. The survey highlighted how only 2% of respondents had directly communicated with other supporters or the campaign organisations themselves. A major theme of the focus group related to a sense of isolation felt by the audience activists, leading them to feel disillusioned with the effectiveness of the campaigns. These findings reflect the centrality of emotional labour and care to digital activism, even if the activists are only engaging in more low-effort activities.

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