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The celebrified columnist and opinion spectacle: Journalism's changing place in networked public spheres

Abstract

The professional practices of journalists have transformed. Dynamics of self-branding, celebrification and audience interactivity now govern modes of production on and beyond social media. Persona construction and performance in networked media environments increases visibility and reach, with followers, clicks, shares and likes, the markers of professional success. While British newspapers have a long tradition of high-profile columnists from across media and political spheres, the complexities of networked practices as part of globalised news and politics have transformed structure and agency. Lines are blurred between 'social media influencer', 'celebrity', 'journalist' and 'political activist' and this comparative case study uses mixed methods to analyse the work of two leading figures who embody such changes. First, it highlights how production practices intertwine the multimedia techniques of digital-first microcelebrities with the newsgathering methods and discourses of print and broadcast journalism. Second, it examines how performances negotiate displays of authenticity, authority and 'attack' to construct self-identities and political commentaries that resonate with followers/ audiences and then channel them towards action. Finally, it demonstrates that their work reflects the hallmarks of spectacle and considers commercial and political purposes and impacts on journalism's place in deliberative democracies. Keywords Celebrified columnists, journalism, microcelebrity, opinion spectacle, performance, persona, politics, production practices

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Introduction

The 'one-to-many' communicative logics of traditional journalism are broken down (Deuze, 2012). Work is increasingly individualised (Hermida, 2013) with social media practices aimed at building visibility and boundaries with different types of 'information brokers [...] blurred' (Olausson, 2018: 1). While British news media has a long tradition of high-profile commentators, their practices are transformed by networked – multiplatform and seemingly concurrent – media environments. As with other public figures, dynamics of celebrity self-branding (Hearn, 2013a, 2013b), politicised persona construction (Usher, 2016) and interplays with audiences on social media are now integral to work. This comparative case study analyses the practices of two newspaper columnists – Owen Jones (*The Independent*, 2012–2014; *The Guardian*, 2014–current) and Katie Hopkins (*The Sun*, 2013–2015; *MailOnline*, 2015–2017) – as leading examples of increased fluidity between the roles of social media influencer, columnist, celebrity and political activist. Despite significant differences in professional background and opposing political beliefs, both worked for mainstream news brands and used dynamics of self-branding as political and commercial strategy. During the heightened period of political activity between the 2015 and surprise 2017 UK General Election 'short campaigns'

– which included Jeremy Corbyn’s election as Labour leader, the Brexit Referendum, the beginning of Theresa May’s premiership and the US presidential election – they significantly increased their visibility across media and shaped public spheres around self-performance as opinion spectacle.

Mapping their practices highlights significant shifts in global and digital public spheres, where persona construction transforms political and social commentary into a performance of self-as-brand and as journalist. To understand this shift, it is necessary to draw together methodological and theoretical frameworks from media, sociology, journalism and celebrity studies and this article does so to argue three interrelated ways we might rethink structure and agency of newspaper columnists, using these leading examples to highlight broader trends. First, it evidences how production practices of journalism intertwine with those of digital-first ‘microcelebrities’ or ‘social media influencers’ where content is constantly negotiated in relation to audience reception of it. Second, it considers how journalistic discourse and self-performances balance authority, authenticity and ‘attack’ in order to encourage the demonstration of agreement through comments, retweets, shares, and likes. The final point reflects on the political, personal and commercial purposes of opinion spectacle as part of journalism’s ‘exacting’ role in deliberative democracies as the traditional means through which ‘citizens access political discussions’ (Strömbäck, 2005: 38). But first, let us consider how dynamics of microcelebrity and spectacle have transformed this area of journalistic work.

Understanding microcelebrity and celebrified columnists and journalists

As with other public figures, ‘intercommunications’ between ‘representational’ news media and ‘presentational’ social media (Marshall, 2014: 164) have transformed journalistic practice. Famous columnists act as epicentres around which ‘micropublics’ (p. 162) – audiences who gather around the social media profiles of public figures – articulate and debate points of view. Like other celebrities, they can act as ‘totems’ (Rojek, 2012: 130) and establish ‘lines of demarcation that allows one group of people to separate themselves emotionally, politically, psychologically and culturally’.

Olausson’s (2018) study of a popular Swedish journalist provides a useful overview of research into journalistic relationships with Twitter and highlights the use of discursive behaviours and patterns similar to those of celebrities (see also Molyneux and Holton, 2015). She identifies potentials for journalistic self-promotion and considers relationships and transformations in the gathering, production and dissemination of news (Hermida, 2013). Hedman (2015) and Molyneux (2015) also discuss how promotion of self is now more significant than news brand across different European journalistic spheres. While the columnists examined here are not, at least primarily, newsgatherers, they too linked ‘self-branding’ techniques of celebrities to their journalistic authority. They were ‘celebrified’ by both themselves and employers as part of commercial and political editorial strategies that encouraged audience participation and debate.

Driessens (2013: 643) describes celebrification as when ‘ordinary people or public figures are transformed into celebrities’ and celebritisation as transformations at institutional, social or cultural levels, such as, in this case, changing journalistic practices. Similarities with the social media practices of ‘digital-first’ celebrity content producers, evidences transformations in journalism at individual and institutional levels. While Theresa Senft (2008, 2013) initially coined the term ‘microcelebrity’ to describe ordinary members of the public who used social media and digital technology to build fame, Marwick (2015) clarifies that it can ‘be further

understood as a mind-set and set of practices' (p. 347). In this, 'authenticity' and 'everydayness' is key to performance and 'clicks, shares and likes [are] synonymous with success'. Therefore, just as the term, 'celebrity' describes not only an individual but also a process, so too 'microcelebrity' encompasses how and why someone becomes famous.

Processes of self-celebrification through digital display now govern professional practices of columnists, who primarily sell themselves as a brand across different media platforms to draw attention to their journalism. Debates as to whether the authentic or authoritative voice leads such performances are reconciled if we consider authenticity as 'not a property of, but something . . . ascribe [d] to a performance' (Rubidge, 1996: 219, original italics). Performances are not fixed, but changeable according to purpose, which for columnists, might be the development of political authority, audience acceptance of authenticity, or both. This also clarifies Marwick's (2013) discussion of authenticity in microcelebrity performances as 'never absolute and always positioned in distinction to something else' (p. 11). Columnists form constructive and instructive patterns through which audiences are encouraged to share, comment and debate. The next section extends this theoretical framework to highlight how dynamics of self-branding and persona construction enable such celebrified columnists to act as epicentres for opinion spectacle.

Opinion spectacle: Self-branding, social media performance and the audience

Like celebrities and politicians, columnists use 'rhetorically persuasive packaging' and their 'own promotional skin[s]' (Hearn, 2013a: 27) to develop self-as-brand. They attempt to 'colonize the lived experience' of audiences, but link 'stylized self-construction' to opinions rather than the promotion of consumer goods (Hearn, 2013b: 165).

Debord's (1967) *Society of the Spectacle* considered how symbolism, entertainment and promotion came to govern media discourses. He built from Boorstin's (1961) discussion of 'pseudo-events' (created by media, for media) to argue that image-based logics had transformed society. Kellner (2010: 117) argues that this is 'the era of media sensationalism, infotainment and political scandal and contestation' and such columnists play an important role in reshaped political and journalistic spheres. As Edelman (1988) identified, political spectacles rely on individuals acting as 'symbols to other observers: they stand for ideologies, values or moral stances and [. . .] become role models, benchmarks, or symbols of threat and evil' (p. 2). He also highlighted how authority is maintained through 'spectacle construction' and 'dissemination of news' in order to create 'anxieties and aspirations, insecurities and reassurances, that fuel a search for legitimating symbols' (Edelman, 1988: 123). Celebrified columnists create spectacles of opinion and encourage participation from 'micropublics' (Marshall, 2014), which in turn sustains visibility of self and work.

Such processes 'further destabilize conventional . . . discourses that build on the professional ideal of detachment' for journalists (Olausson, 2018: 13). Celebrified columnists position themselves in relation to 'others, as particular kinds of people' (Bucholtz and Hall, 1995: 259), in both political and 'emotional public spheres' where personal experience shapes public debate (Richards, 2012: 312). This not only relies on the demonstration of agreement from other public figures but also opposition from those who disagree. Richards (2012: 312) argues that 'attack journalism' directs personal abuse at those with different political opinions and can alienate audiences and voters, which threatens the value of emotional public spheres. However, 'contestatation' is also a useful tool for the extension of visibility and argument (Kellner, 2010:

107) and arguing against political opinions of others is a long-established facet of newspaper columns. In this case, such discussion is key to both the formation of public spheres and self-as-brand.

A number of studies of celebrities on social media argue the theoretical and methodological usefulness of Goffman's (1956) *Presentation of the Self in Every Day Life*. Certainly, as Mackey (2016) identifies, Goffmanian language easily translates to goal driven digital persona construction. Goffman (1956: 13) considered a performance as 'a period marked by . . . continuous presence before a particular set of observers', which aims to influence them in some way. The place where it occurs is the 'front' (e.g. a social media platform) and if a performance is replicated, then a pattern or routine forms. For this analysis, this might include the patterns of social media optimisation for journalistic work or promotion of wider political opinions. Goffman (1956: 10) argued that the construction of persona can either be sincere, where the performer believes 'the impression of reality which he stages is the reality' or cynical and only aimed at influencing observers. Performances are 'moulded to fit into the understanding and expectations of society' and will tend to 'exemplify the officially accredited values of the society' (Goffman, 1956: 23–24), such as here, the place of journalism in deliberative democracies.

Audience participation in this, according to Mathiesen (1997), shifts power towards 'viewer societies', where 'the many to see and contemplate the few' (Mathiesen, 1997: 219). Audiences move beyond the role of observers and become participants by demonstration of support or disagreement which makes them synoptic and critical (micro) publics. They give feedback – express their opinion or emotional responses – in 'real time' and this forms fluid and interactive political communications. Simultaneously, columnists (or politicians, or celebrities) use dynamics of panopticism, defined by Foucault (1975) as a mechanism whereby individuals or institutions of governance monitor the views and actions of 'the many' and may modify messages, policy or behaviours. Social media offers synopticism and panopticism 'fusion with each other' (Mathiesen, 1997: 223) and agreement, disagreement and debate all aid persona construction. Social media sites are therefore 'fronts' for performances of self that encourage audiences to both observe and participate. They amplify spectacles of opinion as they unfold.

Celebrified columnists, therefore, both create and are pseudo-events. They highlight and reframe news and act as central points for audiences to share experiences, which through them become mediated and mutual. As Giddens (1991: 24) argued, societal experience is 'inseparable from its own media' and 're-organise time and space' in a way which makes physically remote events and people part of life. Experiences which might be 'rare in day-to-day life . . . are encountered routinely' through media representations of them. Networked self-performances and synoptic/panoptic interplays of celebrified columnists reflect new facets of celebritisation, which makes politics, journalism and activism part of the 'lived' experiences of audiences on social media. The next section outlines how research site and method developed to identify key points in production performance, purpose and potential democratic implications of celebrified columnists as networked opinion spectacles.

Research site and method

From an initial sample that considered columnists from a range of newspapers and then mapped their practices across social media, Owen Jones and Katie Hopkins emerged as pertinent examples of columnists who are also identified as celebrities, social media influencers and

activists. Examination of their place within public spheres as opposing figures of ‘left’ and ‘(alt) right’ offers important insights into personal and professional performances in networked media environments and their political impacts. Neither are trained journalists, but were employed by newspapers because of popularity in other media spheres. The *Independent* offered Jones a column following the success of his book discussing working-class representation – *Chavs: The Demonisation of the Working Class* (2012) – and subsequent promotional TV appearances. He later moved to rival *The Guardian* where he worked for the rest of the research period. Hopkins was a combative reality television contestant (*The Apprentice*, 2006; *I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here*, 2007; *Celebrity Big Brother*, 2015), who attracted the attention of editors who saw commercial potential of her controversial opinions as ‘click-bait’. Initially employed by *The Sun*, she joined *MailOnline* after the 2015 General Election and therefore worked for both newspapers during this period.

A wide range of interrelated content informs this comparative case study, which visually maps, contextualises and then analyses the practices of celebrified columnists. Twitonomy analytics – which offer statistical analysis of rhythm, levels and interactivity – facilitated examination of 16,000 tweets from 1 April 2015 to 8 June 2017 in order to establish patterns in social media performance. Content and discourse analysis of 1100 tweets – the last 50 of each month excluding retweets – clarified main themes, context and tone. Thematic content analysis of posts from Facebook (152 posts),³ columns and other pieces of journalism on their news publications’ websites (354 pieces)⁴ established how journalistic construction processes, key facets of audience interactivity and dynamics of self-branding influenced practice. Critical Discourse Analysis of content, including television appearances and YouTube (viewed 121; cited 20) identified how production patterns of both microcelebrity and journalism intertwined as part of professional practice. Together with examination of other pieces of journalism written about both pundits (viewed 38; cited 11), this highlighted new dynamics for the celebritisation of public and political journalistic spheres. The Twitter profiles of 1000 most recent social media followers for each columnist (June 2018) were also considered to determine how they ‘displayed’ agreement, for example, through dissemination of content or use of politically symbolic emoji. Agreement/contestation and the ontology of political messages allowed emoji to add meaning and context to audience debates within public spheres.

This article therefore uses multi-method approach, which includes ‘contemporaneous and retrospective interrogation of web and associated news media objects [and . . .] exploration of relationships between producers and users’ (Foot and Schneider, 2006: 211). Drawing together a broad range of material from multiple, interrelated platforms allowed for visualisation of the complex communication ecosystem and networked self-performance of each columnist (Figure 1). These acted as both ‘site[s] and surface[s]’ for communicative action (Taylor and Van Every, 2000) and what Erving Goffman (1956) might have described as ‘fronts’ for the strategic presentation of self.

Microcelebrity, self-brand or journalist? The networked production practices of celebrified columnists

Hopkins and Jones primarily worked as part of mainstream news publications editorial teams, which enabled ‘journalistic authority’ within political spheres. Praise and accolades in media and political spheres reflected this understanding of their professional place. For example, Jones won Journalist of the Year at the Diversity Awards in recognition of his LGBTQ+

activism (30 September 2015), and President (then elect) Trump described Hopkins as a ‘respected columnist’, who told the truth about Islamic extremism in the United Kingdom (*The Independent*, 10 December 2015: online). Their work often used established journalistic working patterns. Columns addressed news and political events using processes of gatekeeping and ‘gatewatching’ trending hashtags and stories (Bruns, 2010: 250). For example, the week before the 2015 election, each addressed resurgent English nationalism, demands for a devolved Parliament and ‘putting personality into politics’ (Owen Jones, *The Guardian*, 6 May 2015: 30; Katie Hopkins, *The Sun*, Friday, 1 May 2015: 11). These were key topics in speeches that week by Nigel Farage – then leader of the UK Independence Party – and comments beneath each piece as posted on Twitter, discussed both him and these issues, which in turn contributed to #nigelfarage becoming a trending hashtag.

<insert figure one here>

Other traditions of journalism formed part of working routines, such as interviews with sources and use of the structures of broadcast and print news. Social media profiles and news websites worked together as ‘decision points where political and other . . . information’ (Shoemaker and Riccio, 2016: 1) was shared and debated. Such work reflected newsgathering, production and dissemination practices of the ‘celebrified journalist’ (Olausson, 2018), particularly in relation to how the promotion of self is placed above the promotion of news brands. However, it also developed complex interplays between journalistic authority and authentic self (as brand), whereby the two are almost impossible to separate. There was a ‘temporality of permanent updating, of immediacy, and of instantaneity’ (Jerslev, 2016: 3), influenced by performances associated with celebrities and social media influencers. This in turn influenced audiences’ ‘collective behaviour [and] process[es] of identification’ (Marshall, 1997: 24). As social media users joined in ‘social construction[s] of identity and public display’ (Marshall, 2014: 163), the columnists became ‘totems’ (Rojek, 2012: 130) for left- and right-wing ideologies, around which spectacles of opinion formed and were amplified.

Twitter was the primary social media platform for dissemination of editorial content and self-display and as identified by several scholars in relation to global journalistic work, it was a significant part of working routine (Deuze, 2012; Olausson, 2018). Jones was by far the more prolific and interactive ‘tweeter’. In total, 35 per cent of his posts retweeted comments from other users and 46 per cent were replies to direct approaches from his audience. The platform was a collaborative tool, with interactions as much part of his working practices as for consumer-driven social media influencers or microcelebrities (Jerslev, 2016), only here channelled specifically towards facilitation of public debate. Hopkins tweeted far less – on average six times a day – and was less interactive (20% retweets; 6% replies). She adopted the one-to-many approach associated with journalists (Olausson, 2018) as a means to maintain her authority. She also often copied other people’s tweets below her own and then commented on them, rather than simply retweeting. This ensured dominance of her voice. Her primary focus on both platforms was herself and she structured moments of interaction, shaped by established dynamics of mainstream celebrity social media promotion. For example, #Askkatie sessions (e.g. 2 February 2016; 29 November 2015) used ‘working patterns of the [celebrity] interview’ to structure the exchange and direct audiences to join specific, hierarchal and governed conversations (Usher, 2015).

Facebook was the only other social media platform used by both, although Jones' personal account and Hopkins' 'fan page' had different coded capabilities. This governed self-performance and content publication, which at least in part explains disparity in levels of posts. On Jones' page, 'friends' could upload too and did so daily, including birthday messages, links to pieces of journalism he might find interesting, promotion of activist and trade union events and videos from protests. This 'familiar mode of cyberself presentation' (Turner, 2013: 14) offered audiences 'fraternisation' (Rojek, 2012: 131–134) or 'affiliation' (Marwick and Boyd, 2011: 147), perpetuated by private moments and professional work appearing in timelines alongside similar posts from 'real-life' friends and family. Castells (2009) argues that social media networks construct new political forms and meanings by encouraging casual links between private lives and public discourses. Here, the personality of the producer continuously linked into the authority of political commentary. This supported audience acceptance of both elements of self-performance.

Hopkins appeared keenly aware of such dynamics, as evidenced in the launch of fan and news brand Hopkins World (2018–2019) after she left *MailOnline* in 2017. Her Twitter biography changed from 'social commentator, speaker and TV personality' to 'Telling the truths not being told, my supporters lead the way', which placed both journalistic authority ('Telling truth') and audience interaction ('supporters') at the forefront of her professional and personal identities. On YouTube, videos appear under the Hopkins World section of Far-Right news site Rebel Media and there she uses microcelebrity practices, such as vlogs shot at home. Jones used such microcelebrity production practices on Owen Jones Talks (2015–current) – a personalised YouTube channel, which had more than 10 million audience views during the research period. Videos used the 'everydayness' of microcelebrity (Marwick, 2015), such as fast paced 'me to you' conversations. Phrases such as 'Y'alright? I'm Owen Jones' (Owen Jones Speaks Launch Video: 1 April 2016), appearances with his cat (named Keir Hardie for the first Labour MP) and glimpses into his home office, with piles of books, newspapers and his bicycle hanging on the wall, all worked as frames for authenticity. This might appear spontaneous, but it carefully mixed 'ordinariness' and 'expertise' in a similar way to described by Bonner (2003) in relation to celebrities and in Jerslev's (2016) discussion of social media influencers. Broadcast-style news packages, also published on *The Guardian* website and with their brand, appeared alongside personalised vlog posts. Video performance therefore relied on both 'representational' and 'presentational' media production patterns (Marshall, 2014: 161) which effectively welded together journalistic authority and personal authenticity.

Authenticity, authority and attack: The formation of opinion spectacles As with popular bloggers and other microcelebrities, the self-performances of celebrified columnists straddle lines between authority and authenticity. Arnould et al.'s (2003) examination of bloggers argued that while threads weave together, fundamentally, the authoritative voice is paramount. For Goffman (1956), no person is ever truly authentic in public, but always governed by rules of performance. The professional visibility of celebrified columnists relies on patterns of microcelebrity to appear authentic and journalism to establish authority. Interplays between the two create opinion spectacles through the involvement of 'micropublics' who inform performance, argue merit and disseminate content. For Hopkins and Jones, agreement from other famous people during both real and social mediated interactions extended opinion spectacle (Figure 1, arrows 3 and 4). Such affiliations – both digital and physical connections

– helped maintain visibility. This dynamic, developed from the early days of Twitter, lies at the heart of its success as a platform of self-performance (Papacharissi, 2012).

For example, news outlets reported and social media followers debated support between Hopkins, Nigel Farage and Donald Trump (e.g. Katie Hopkins, *MailOnline*, 15 November 2016 and Daily Politics, 11 December 2015; Nigel Farage, *MailOnline*, 1 January 2015; @realdonaldtrump, 10 December 2015). Owen Jones uploaded videos and pictures with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn (e.g. Twitter, 10 August 2015) and Emily Thornberry MP (e.g. @realowenjones and @EmilyThornberry, 8 May 2017). Other visible allies included like-minded journalists and journalistic microcelebrities, such as Hopkins' interactions with Far-Right American YouTuber and 'shock-jock' Alex Jones (@TheRealAlexJones) and Jones' tweets with left-wing journalist and activist Paul Mason, then working at Channel 4 News in the United Kingdom. Interactions also often related to mutual moments of political activism. For example, social media followers shared pictures of Hopkins marching alongside far-right agitator Tommy Robinson (e.g. @missshealy59, 21 June 2017) and Jones as he campaigned with Labour Party grassroots activism group Momentum (@peoplesmomentum, 21 April 2017). Complexities of connectivity demonstrate the potentials of columnists to facilitate political message making, the visibility of political causes and as breathing embodiments of the sentiments of news publications for which they work.

Disagreement with others also provided focal points and amplifications. If we look at their own 'celebrity catfight' as a potent example, Hopkins described them as 'sworn enemies' and undermined Jones' authenticity – highlighting his Oxford education, describing his 'faux Northern accent' – to paint his socialist agenda as hypocritical (*MailOnline*, 14 June 2016). She then extended this doubt towards his journalistic authority and encouraged audiences to question his true motivations. Jones primarily attacked Hopkins' authority as an example of the risks of totalitarian right-wing agendas. He accepted her statements as authentic and set to cast them as beyond the pale, such as during his successful campaign for dismissal from LBC Radio after she called for a 'final solution' for Muslims (@KTHopkins, 23 May 2017).

Contestation or 'attack' was also part of journalistic practice, but this too worked differently in relation to authentic/authoritative interplays. While Jones used personalised language to frame political commentary – such as describing British Prime Minister Theresa May as 'patently dishonest' – it was predominantly in relation to political decision-making and its impacts (*The Guardian*, 18 April 2017). By contrast, Hopkins was a 'professional troll' (*The Guardian*, 3 April 2015) who targeted individual Muslim families, other celebrities, including left-leaning football pundit Gary Lineker (13 January 2016) and rapper Kanye West (16 February 2016) and even victims of crime, such as the parents of missing toddler Madeline McCann (*MailOnline*, 21 February 2016). Such 'attacks' acted as focal points for the synoptic behaviours of Twitter followers, with thousands of people circulating and commenting on social media posts and articles. Doyle (2011: 290) argues that one of the limitations of Mathiesen's discussion of synopticism is that it does not allow for examination of how 'patterns of resistance' affects audience relationships with public figures. Here, criticism became part of the spectacle and aided the 'production and reception' (Doyle, 2011) of message. Van Krieken's (2012: 73) discussions of the 'complex and multi-layered . . . power relations between celebrities and their audiences' which 'move in a number of directions at the same time' clarifies how such contestation can extend promotional or political message. Hopkins described the 'bucket load' of criticism, the 'joy of [her job]' (*The Independent*, 12 August

2015) – indicating her understanding of the value of its visibility. Jones, on the other hand, who largely maintained civility in exchange, briefly quit social media in 2017 citing inability to distance himself from abuse (Press Gazette, 13 March 2017: online).

As demonstrated in Figure 2, politics, professional work and private lives were principal themes of journalism and social media posts. For Jones, the political was top of the agenda (50% Twitter; 52% Facebook; 63% columns), whereas Hopkins shifted focus between self-and-brand on social media (28% Twitter; 23% Facebook), to politics (36%); celebrities and reality TV contestants (22%); and immigrants and Muslims (20%) on *MailOnline*. She often framed social dissemination of columns with ‘jokes’, such as, ‘Right your royal popey-ness are you ready for my latest column @mailonline @dailymail’ (Twitter, 19 February 2016); ‘Islam’s answer to Colin Firth, Bugger me Mutfi, you’re a dream boat’ (Twitter, 18 February 2016) or ‘ISIS recruitment. “Where do you see yourself after 5years?” *Looks up* “You’re hired”’ (Facebook, 11 February 2016). This aimed to soften the blow of racist or religious bigotry within the body of the journalistic piece. While Jones adopted a more serious tone, particularly when discussing events such as terrorism, impacts of austerity (13% columns, 7% Twitter post 4% Facebook posts) or LGBTQ+ rights (7.5% columns, 6% Twitter, 6% Facebook), he also used humour to describe events at political protests, activism and in response to criticism or personal abuse. Mixing satire with comment highlights such content is ‘without journalistic objectivity’, but this could also contribute to audiences’ inability to distinguish differences between fact and comment (see Marchi, 2012: 253). However, interactions with audiences also suggest humour encouraged greater engagement with journalistic argument and clicks on links. This highlights the balances between commercial and political potentials of celebrified columnists and opinion spectacles.

Synoptic and panoptic interplays: The active audience and the political and commercial purposes of celebrified columnist as opinion spectacles The ways social media users and professional optimisers extend visibility of message has been analysed in various contexts. Professional social media optimisation as a promotional tool transformed microcelebrity practice (Usher, 2018), political campaigning (Kreiss and Jasinski, 2016), film marketing (Kaplan, 2013) and journalism (Newman, 2011). Analyses of such activity often focus on whether social media users are voluntary, professional and/ or organised and, more recently, whether accounts are ‘real’ or ‘bots’, short for robotically automated accounts (Stern and Berger, 2015). As Foucault (1975) argued in relation to panopticism in pre-digital social environments, opinion leaders govern audience response and modify self-performances to attain a certain state of visibility and credibility. At the end of the research timeframe, the vast majority of Jones’ (83%) and Hopkins’ followers (96%) were categorised as ‘real users’ by Twitter analytical tools, which consider a range of factors including participation, profile biography and image and location. This suggests their performances meaningfully resonate with audiences.

<Insert Figure 2 here>

However, professional social media networks supported their practices too. For example, Jones regularly included the Twitter handles of the Labour Party, Momentum and his employer *The Guardian*, which encouraged those operating these accounts to retweet content. After several Fox News appearances where she discussed the ‘Islamification’ of the United Kingdom and supported Trump’s immigration policies, Hopkins attracted a large number of US followers

and key optimisers from #Trumptrain and #maga hashtags. While these at first appear ‘real people’, closer examination reveals they also reflect hallmarks of organisational structures of political campaigning, highlighted in Kreiss and Jasinski’s (2016) analysis of staffers’ during presidential campaigns. For example, shares of her posts and comments were almost instantaneous and ‘followers’ worked within a range of trending hashtags and social media spheres. Hopkins, like Jones, added other Twitter handles to encourage retweets or engagement, including different news and media brands for which she worked and right-wing politicians from Europe, Israel and America. She had a number of regular interactors or ‘fans’ who reposted or commented underneath most social media posts and whom she interacted with directly. As such, both relied on professional and political networks and ordinary social media users to disseminate content. Lines between audience/public, optimiser/professional and fan/foe were fluid and each extended opinion spectacle.

Emoji emerged as a means by which social media users highlighted and identified affiliations or contestation with other users, whether in panoptic (journalists, celebrities, politicians) or synoptic (micropublic, audience, follower) positions of authority. Around 14 per cent of Jones’ last 1000 followers at the end of the analysis period used one or more emoji in their Twitter handles or bios, including European Union (EU) flags (6%), LGBTQ rainbow flags (4%) and the Labour Party red rose (9%). More of Hopkins’ followers used such symbolic identifications (20%) including Union Jacks (9%), Stars and Stripes (8%) and ‘Trump Trains’ (5%). Followers also regularly used snowflake (4% Jones) and frog (12% Hopkins) emoji to self-symbolise and these have complex origins and meanings. Pepe the Frog is often used in Alt-Right memes to make messages appear less confrontational (Caiani and Parenti, 2013: 123) and was widely discussed after Hillary Clinton referred to ‘Pepe’ and the ‘Basket of Deplorables’ (11 September 2016). Use of ‘snowflake’ emoji also stems from Alt-Right discourse as an insult denoting the emotional frailty of liberals and the left (*The Guardian*, 28 November 2016). After Trump referred to Democrats as ‘snowflakes’ during the 2016 Presidential campaign, many left-leaning Twitter users added snowflakes emoji to biographies as a symbolic self-identity display which worked in binary to right-wing ‘frogs’. Deacon’s (2007: 195) analysis of images argues three lenses: index, symbol and icon. Index shows the relationship between the signifier (the symbol) and the signified (the ideology; the public figure), while the objects themselves are ‘symbols’ which allow it to represent something larger than itself. These symbols communicated political ideologies quickly, within scrolling actions of smart phone and tablet screens.

Jones and Hopkins used them to make broader political points. Jones, for example, turned ‘snowflake’ on individuals from the political right, to illustrate their ‘melt-downs’ (@OwenJones84, 19 November 2016) and Hopkins declared herself ‘Happy to sit in the basket of deplorables’ (@KTHopkins, 21 November, 2016). Such text and symbols, therefore, had panoptic and synoptic functions. They organised crowds of like-minded and opposing political groups and were part of opinion spectacle and political commentary in their own right. Symbolism and entertainment worked together as part of professional practice. Elements of ‘sensationalism, infotainment and political scandal and contestation’ (Kellner, 2010: 117) were part of ‘being’ a columnist. The term ‘opinion spectacle’ highlights the complex landscape of networked political communications. Hopkins and Jones were both breathing embodiments of the ideologies of the publications for which they worked and significant figureheads for opposing political beliefs. Opinion spectacles flourish when there are such synergies between

political and commercial agendas of news brands and journalists, who work effectively across representational and presentational media.

Simons (2003) argues that dismissing celebritised political news as trivial misses its potentials to engage audiences. The complexity of networked production practices and known associations across media and political spheres reflects how visibility and celebrification can facilitate political debate, self-as-brand or both. Thematic and interactive consistency reflects such work and how columnists understand it. Jones describes himself as an ‘activist who writes opinions’, rather than an ‘impartial journalist’ (@owenjones84, 31 August 2015). By contrast, Hopkins was often disparaging of ‘activism’, describing it essentially as being ‘unemployed’ (Facebook, 25 February 2015). Brand names for TV and digital shows/channels reflect this difference in the purposes of their practice. Katie Hopkins talks about her ‘world’ (Hopkins World 2016–current), whereas Owen Jones speaks (2015–current) to develop dialogue and effect change. This was one of the key differences which enabled Jones to maintain his place as a mainstream columnist and contributor on talk television and news, while LBC Radio and *MailOnline* ‘parted ways’ with Hopkins. She was trapped by a self-brand that relied on courting controversy and this had personal as well as professional costs, which included the sale of her home following two costly libel cases (DevonLive, 7 February 2018). Working for Canadian far-right propaganda site Rebel Media (2015–2019) is quite the come down from *MailOnline*, which in terms of monthly unique users was the most popular news website in the world. Ultimately, her ‘trolling’ was so successful, it made her self-brand too toxic for mainstream news and she had few other places to go.

Conclusion

Strömbäck (2005: 38) argues that ‘since it is through media and journalism that citizens mainly access political discussions, the deliberative model of democracy places exacting demands’ on them. However, in the fluid environment of networked political and news cultures – where direct speech on social media is a primary mode of communication – citizens are actively involved in circulation of message and processes of celebrification. Mapping the work of these two columnists as part of shifting global political and media spheres reveals how cross-platform persona construction has transformed journalism from an act of news to also a performance of self. As centralising points for content dissemination and interactivity, Hopkins and Jones reflect a new age of journalistic fluidity emerging in many deliberative democracies. Traditions of news production – interviewing, construction patterns and conventions, political commentary – converge with word-of-mouth and microcelebrity practices as stylistic and political devices. This has both commercial and political implications, with news brands searching across media platforms figures who resonate with audiences and then helping to establish their journalistic authority. Celebrified columnists draw on techniques of microcelebrity to develop acceptance of authenticity, extend and maintain journalistic and political authority and these work together to construct self-as-brand and as opinion spectacle.

Audience participation is more complex too with dynamics of ‘fan’, ‘follower’, ‘optimiser’ and ‘public’ co-opted into the performances of columnists. As centralised sites of opinion spectacle and ideological focal points, these are polarising figures and part of populist movements that fuel political and social fragmentation. They are also new reflections of how celebritisation has transformed journalistic and political spheres, with emphasis shifted from representation to self-presentation. Celebrified columnists embody not only the political and the commercial

interests of their employers but also their own professional, political and private identities and can facilitate, and conversely, stifle political engagement. As such, we must consider a central question – is this new breed of journalistic workers positive or damaging for deliberative democracies? Edelman (1988: 1–2) highlights how spectacles can ‘effectively protect and promote . . . the public interest’ by deliberately taking moral stances and emphasises how this must negotiate differences between ‘opposition’ and ‘attack’ (pp. 50–51). Therefore, perhaps, it is not production practices, self-branding or processes of celebrification, which are of primary concern, but the damage caused by cultures of attack that underpin some displays. There are significant similarities between Hopkins and Jones in terms of platform use, production practices, the ways they negotiate dynamics of authenticity and authority and displays of allegiance with other public figures and followers. As such, mapping the complexities of practice offers a framework to examine this quickly developing shift in journalism. For both, professional visibility relies on the creation of multiplatform opinion spectacles and works in constant negotiation with audiences. Attacking others increases reach and visibility as demonstrated by Hopkins, albeit, short-lived success as a mainstream journalist. However, the two columnists, broadly speaking, approached disagreement very differently and this seems to reflect differences in their purpose. Jones was more interested in activism, debate, and focused his work on the societal damage caused by conservative neoliberal political policies. The value of Hopkins for *MailOnline* was that the abuse she heaped on others, attracted audiences through ‘click-bait’, but when costs of defending defamation cases and negative publicity outweighed benefit, they parted ways. Richards (2012) argues that if journalism is to fulfil any meaningful democratic function through interactions with emotional public spheres, contestation must be civil and this may help to clarify whether celebrified columnists as sites of opinion spectacle are forces for good or ill. For many, this is subjective and depends on whether they are promoting opposing political beliefs to our own. However, objectively it may simply depend on whether their principal purpose is to facilitate meaningful debate or to increase market share of news outlets and self-as-brand, by any means.

Notes 1. The 5-week official campaigning period before voting day.

2. Katie Hopkins deleted all her tweets and Facebook between February 2016 and June 2017 and Facebook during the analysis and so only the first 11 months of the study period was included.

3. Only 76 Facebook posts exist on Hopkins’ page from this period, compared to 794 for Jones and so for equitable comparison, this study examined the first 8–9 posts from each month on Jones’ page, excluding other users’ posts.

4. For equitable analysis, the study examined columns from when Hopkins joined *MailOnline* (November 2015) until the end of the research period. This amounted to 167 articles for Hopkins and 187 for Jones.

5. For example, Jones’ ‘Where work and poverty go together’, *The Guardian*, 7 May 2015: 11; Katie Hopkins’ LBC Radio show 2015–2017.

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Figure 1: [CelebrifiedColumnistFigureOne.pdf](#)

Figure 2: [CelebrifiedColumnistfigure Two.pdf](#)