

Emerging Scholar Projects for 2022

Grants were awarded to two Emerging Scholar projects for 2022. Each Emerging Scholar project was eligible for a grant of up to \$3,500.

Project #1

Desirée Schmuck, School for Mass Communication Research at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium



“Modern Political Educators or Sources of Fake News? Influencers’ (Mis-)Information About Political Topics on Social Media”

Abstract: So-called social media influencers, defined as digital opinion leaders who have a large network of followers on platforms like Instagram or YouTube, are highly popular among adolescents. Although originally known for lifestyle content and commercial advertising, they increasingly cover political issues in their communication. Due to their large follower base, influencers act as new mass-communicators of political topics with the potential of functioning as role models and political educators for youth. This political content may have a crucial impact on adolescents, as their political identity is not yet fully developed and social media influencers are perceived as idols.

As such, their political communication may be engaging for adolescents, but also puts them at risk for misinformation if influencers spread false information or conspiracy theories. However, existing research has neglected to investigate (1) what kind of political (mis-)information by influencers adolescents are exposed to, (2) the frequency and type of influencers’ political (mis-)information, and (3) how influencers’ political (mis-)information performs in terms of user engagement. To fill these crucial research gaps, this project proposes an innovative research design, which combines a quota-based youth survey and a semi-automated content analysis assessing content-related (e.g., topic, frequency) and engagement-related (e.g., likes, shares, views) aspects of influencers’ political (mis-)information on YouTube.

Overall, this project’s findings will build the basis for further research investigating the consequences of SMI’s political (mis-)information and informs important stakeholders such as governmental institutions, schools and NGOs about previously unknown sources and types of political (mis-)information on social media.

Project #2

Jieun Shin, University of Florida



“Evaluating the Quality of News and User Engagement on Social Media”

Abstract: This project investigates how high-quality news content performs on social media sites (i.e., Facebook and Twitter) in terms of user engagement. It has been argued that the current social media space is not designed to promote high-quality news but rather, to maximize user interest and engagement. At the same time, there is a contradicting view that high-quality information rises to the top through competition. Accurately understanding the current state of social media systems is a first step to discussing effective solutions, if needed at all.

Drawing on the literature on normative theories of journalism which focuses on civic and democratic components, the project seeks to measure news quality at the individual content level and examine how such quality differences relate to audience engagement on social media. The project plans to recruit 700 survey participants using *Lucid*, an online recruiting system. Each participant will rate the quality of news based on sub-categories that constitute high-quality journalism. Each participant will be asked to rate three news articles randomly drawn from 500 news articles after source cues are removed. Then, the study will examine the relationships between these quality ratings and social media engagement metrics of these articles (the number of likes, shares, comments), retrieved from Facebook’s CrowdTangle and Twitter’s API.

This study contributes to the literature by filling a gap in existing research on news quality and social media. Despite the importance of the topic, there is surprisingly little research on measuring news quality and comparing its normative standards with actual news consumption in a digital platform. This is due to the difficulty of defining news quality and eliminating source effects. For this reason, previous research has employed a minimal threshold for news quality, focusing on detecting false content that is explicitly harmful to the public. This study goes beyond false news and investigates how journalistic quality is related to the level of social media engagement. Additionally, this study focuses on the individual content level rather than the source level, thereby complementing previous research which contained the source effects. That is, with the presence of cues indicating a news brand, perceived quality can be confounded with other factors. Findings from this study can provide guidance for developing public interest-minded information systems.