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# Platform journalism on YouTube: A democratic functions approach to analysing journalism on digital platforms

## ABSTRACT

*Independent youtubers who create content on political, social and economic issues attract very large audiences and are increasingly the object of study for journalism scholars. This article contributes to the literature by conducting a detailed analysis of the Australian YouTube channel friendlyjordies. Rather than comparing the channel to the journalistic field, this article assesses whether friendlyjordies produces journalism by applying definitions based on journalism's democratic functions. With the democratic functions approach the critical question is not, who is a journalist? but who is performing the democratic functions of journalism? This question guides the research that combines the analysis of three friendlyjordies videos with data from an interview with a producer of the channel. From this analysis, this article argues that friendlyjordies produces platform journalism, an emerging form of journalism that applies the norms and affordances of a specific platform, in this case YouTube. Moreover, when a democratic functions approach is applied to friendlyjordies, it becomes evident that the channel engages in public interest platform journalism.*

## KEYWORDS

public interest  
youtuber  
news media  
journalist  
social media  
friendlyjordies

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## INTRODUCTION

Globally, people are using YouTube for news more than ever (Newman et al. 2024: 11). For news, YouTube is second only to Facebook, on which news consumption is in decline (Newman et al. 2024: 11). In Australia, studies suggest 62 per cent of people use YouTube, of these people 41 per cent use it for news (Park et al. 2024: 95). Importantly, less than half of those who use YouTube for news go there for mainstream news brands or journalists (Park et al. 2024: 99). For their news on YouTube, many Australians say they ‘generally pay most attention to’ sources such as ‘alternative news sources’, ‘political activists’, ‘online personalities’ and ‘ordinary people’ (Park et al. 2024: 99).

With so many people receiving their news from non-mainstream news sources on YouTube, it is important to understand the nature of what content creators are providing to news audiences. This article investigates one such creator, friendlyjordies. Based on an analysis of three friendlyjordies videos, and an interview with the channel’s producer, this article argues that the channel produces an emerging form of journalism: platform journalism. Platform journalism is created with a specific social media platform in mind, and it presents journalism using the norms and affordances of the chosen platform.

To assess whether friendlyjordies produces journalism, a clear understanding of journalism needs to be articulated. Therefore, this article introduces three journalism-related definitions to guide the analysis. Definitions are given for *journalism*, *public interest journalism* and *investigative public interest journalism*. The definition of journalism is broad and inclusive, while the definition of public interest journalism is more restrictive. This is because the public interest journalism definition is based on journalism’s democratic functions (Hampton 2010: 5). Investigative public interest journalism raises the bar higher, adding original and exclusive or agenda-setting, investigations to public interest journalism.

With a democratic functions approach to understanding journalism, this article moves beyond the dichotomy of real journalists vs. peripheral journalistic actors. A democratic functions approach has less focus on *who a journalist is* and more on *who is performing the democratic functions of journalism*. By applying definitions of journalism that are based on the democratic functions of journalism this article argues that the videos analysed in this article are examples of investigative public interest platform journalism.

## INVESTIGATING CONTENT CREATORS

Friendlyjordies is an Australian example of a global trend of independent serious youtubers who are arguably becoming more journalistic (Hurcombe 2024: 4). In this study, a *serious youtuber* is a content creator that speaks face to camera and regularly publishes pre-recorded and edited videos for YouTube about *serious* topics such as political, social or economic issues. The use of the word serious here is in reference to the topics discussed not the approach or presentation style taken. This is a broad category within which platform journalism creators are most likely to be found. Serious youtubers stand in contrast other types of YouTube creators such as streamers, product unboxers, those who publish tutorials and news organizations that republish from television broadcasts.

Overseas examples include Belgium-based Money & Macro, who has been invited to events such as press conferences for the European Central Bank. Also, US-based Ryan McBeth is a youtuber who has built a large following creating videos on newsworthy topics, interviewing high-profile individuals, attending press events and speaking at professional conferences. Other serious youtubers include Coffeezilla, Tom Nicholas and münecat.

Scholarship in this area has often been focused on legacy news media organizations and their activities on digital platforms (see Djerf-Pierre et al. 2019; Hermida 2018). However, there is a growing body of literature investigating non-legacy YouTube content creators related to news and journalism. YouTube creators in such studies are generally found not to be journalists and their content not journalism, though in many cases they are found to contain elements of journalism (Lewis 2020; Lichtenstein et al. 2021; Roslyng and Blaagaard 2023). Research focusing on independent digital content creators generally ascribe them a status that is less than journalism, conceptualized as either outsiders, activists, interlopers or on the periphery of the journalism field (Glazunova and Schapals 2024; Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018; Lichtenstein et al. 2021).

Research that engages deeply with platform content that is potentially journalism includes the exploratory research by Lichtenstein et al. who investigated what they call ‘journalistic YouTubers’ who they say, ‘produce and distribute content that can be described as news’ (2021: 1104). The language here assesses the youtubers as not quite journalism producers. The use of ‘can be described’ leaves some ambiguity into what it is. In addition, the suffix *-ic* used in ‘journalistic YouTuber’ signals that the youtubers covered by the term are not journalists, but rather they resemble, or relate to, the idea of journalism.

In his conceptual article, Hurcombe introduces the term ‘newsfluencer’, which he defines as ‘platformatised creators who operate according to the economic and cultural logics of online influencers to produce news content for participatory audiences’ (2024: 2). The idea of newsfluencer is designed to address ‘definitional uncertainty and enable a more systematic study of individual news producers working across content and platforms’ (2024: 2). In this definition, ‘news content is broadly defined as content that reports or comments on current events and topics, but which is not necessarily professional journalism’ (2024: 2). Professional journalism is left undefined and as such some definitional uncertainty remains.

This article seeks to reduce definitional uncertainty and expand on the existing body of literature by setting a high bar for the definition of public interest journalism. As such, it addresses an important issue raised by Hurcombe when he asked, ‘how can “good” newsfluencers be separated from malicious actors who claim to be “journalists” for political or financial reasons?’ (2024: 10).

## THE THEORETICAL ANARCHY OF JOURNALISM STUDIES

Before analysing whether independent youtubers are producing journalism of any form, the meaning of journalism needs to be made clear. This is not a straightforward task. Journalism studies has been described as ‘theoretical anarchy’ (Ahva and Steensen 2020: 50). It has no dominant theories, understandings or set of definitions and this is ‘despite an enormous body of

literature dealing with the values, practices, and impact of journalism' (Zelizer 2009: 34).

A large-scale longitudinal analysis of research published between 2000 and 2013 in two leading journalism journals found 'more than 100 different theories guiding the research' (Steensen and Ahva 2015: 13). Digital has only increased the anarchy. With the spread of the internet and digital platforms, digital journalism emerged as a distinct area of study. A study of 140 abstracts from the journal *Digital Journalism* by Steensen et al. (2019: 330) showed that the 'theoretical richness' of journalism studies continues into the digital realm and '59 different theories' were found in their sample.

This theoretical richness is due to the inter-disciplinary nature of journalism studies where theoretical perspectives come not only from sociology and political science but also from cultural studies, language studies, history and increasingly business, economics, law, technology and philosophy (Ahva and Steensen 2020: 49; Steensen and Westlund 2021: 9; Zelizer 2004: 8). Each theoretical perspective brings its own assumptions about what journalism is. This lack of agreement over what journalism is presents a problem for the assessment of the journalistic merits of independent content creators on digital social media platforms.

In the literature, terms such as journalism and journalist are often left undefined and 'used as generalized labels' for activities and people involved in news making (Zelizer 2004: 21). Additionally, terms such as the press, news media and media are often used as synonyms for broad ideas of journalism (Zelizer 2004: 26). In some cases, the lack of definition is acknowledged and given a justification, such as when Deuze and Witschge write, 'rather than defining journalism, here we tell stories by those who consider themselves journalists and/or are defined as such by others' (2020: 24).

When definitions are given, many are about process. Schudson opens his highly cited book with: 'Journalism is the business or practice of regularly producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of public interest and importance' (2011: 3). Stephens writes that, 'journalism is the activity of collecting, presenting, interpreting, or commenting upon the news for some portion of the public' (2014: xiii). He adds that for journalism, 'information that can be verified *be* verified – checked and confirmed as thoroughly as possible' (Stephens 2014: 129, original emphasis). Process-based definitions are sometimes worded to centre the journalist. For example, Koliska et al. write: 'Journalists gather, filter and select information to offer their audiences a sense of orientation in an increasingly complex world' (2023: 3).

Malik and Shapiro offer a process-based definition that includes the element of independence, as well as opinion and commentary: 'journalism comprises the activities involved in an independent pursuit of, or commentary upon, accurate information about current or recent events and its original presentation for public edification' (2017: 16). Zelizer supports the element of independence by writing that the main purpose of journalism comes from its 'ability to independently cull and develop new and original information' (2019: 349).

## **JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY**

Political science perspectives of journalism focus on concepts such as democracy, publics and citizens (Steensen and Westlund 2021: 64). Within these

perspectives, journalism is an institution concerned with ‘the defense of democracy’ (Christians et al. 2009: 19) and it works to ‘establish or sustain’ democracy (Schudson 2008: 12). Journalism matters for democracy irrespective of the specific theory of democracy that may be adopted (Couldry 2017: 26). Normative conceptualizations of journalism hold that it supports democracy by performing several societal functions, also called roles (Schudson 2008; Schultz 1998). The exact number is not agreed upon. This is demonstrated by Schudson’s ‘six or seven’ democratic functions (2008: 11–12, emphasis added). Despite this, there are central functions that have significant agreement.

The agreement centres around ‘classic and enduring functions and values of journalism’ (Djerf-Pierre et al. 2019: 236). These classic functions, or core democratic functions of journalism, include informing citizens about public interest issues (see Couldry 2017: 27; Schudson 2008: 13), holding power to account (see Gearing 2021: 25; Schudson 2008: 14; Schultz 1998: 22) and providing a space for public deliberation and expression of public opinion (see Habermas 1992; Schudson 2008: 20). When journalism is discussed in terms of democratic functions, it is often simply referred to as journalism, though it is often called public interest journalism. This is another example of the confusing state of journalism-related terms that this article addresses.

Democracy needs the three core journalism functions to be performed. However, this is not to say that each individual journalist or media organizations needs to fulfil all these functions. Rather, if journalism as a whole, within a specific media environment, fulfils them, then democratic societies benefit and are strengthened (McChesney 2012: 682). These core normative functions of journalism are a useful starting point from which to develop a way to assess independent youtubers as to whether their work qualifies as journalism.

The three core democratic functions are also evident in government attempts to regulate journalism. The report by the Australian Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism stated that ‘there are certain behaviours, institutions and principles that have been commonly cited when discussing its [journalism] role and importance in healthy democracies’ (2018: 2). These include facilitating public discussion, informing the public and playing a ‘watchdog on those in power’ (Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism 2018: 2).

An understanding of journalism in terms of its democratic functions does not stipulate the exact format or medium of media texts. It does not require the functions be performed by a specific occupational group with a particular socialization. What is important is that media creators, and the media texts they create, perform one or more of the democratic functions. The democratic functions approach has been chosen because it goes to the heart of journalism’s purpose.

## **JOURNALISM DEFINED BY ITS DEMOCRATIC FUNCTIONS**

This article builds on the above literature to propose definitions of *journalism*, *public interest journalism* and *investigative public interest journalism* to analyse youtubers. The definition of *journalism* in this article is broad, and it is related to news production that does not perform any of the core democratic functions. The definitions of *public interest journalism* and *investigative public interest journalism* raise a higher bar for analysis by including the core democratic functions of informing the public about public interest issues, facilitating public sphere deliberations and investigating as ‘watchdog’.

The public interest-related definitions given in this article combine elements from process-based journalism definitions with the three core democratic functions of journalism. However, first a more general definition is needed. One that encompasses journalism-related activities that are not in the public interest. Process-based definitions in the literature vary in minor ways; however, there are several useful elements commonly associated with the process of creating journalism content. These elements include reporting or commenting on news (Malik et al. 2017: 16), editorial independence (Zelizer 2019: 349) and publishing for public consumption (Elvestad and Phillips 2018: 50; Stephens 2014: xiii). As a low bar for assessing the journalistic nature of friendlyjournals, this article adopts the following process-based definition of journalism: *Journalism* is the editorially independent activity of collecting and interpreting newsworthy information and publishing media content that reports or comments on information for some portion of the public.

In this definition, *editorially independent* means that the people engaged in journalism activities, and their employer, have no direct personal interest, financial or otherwise, in the matters being reported on. When media producers have such an interest, irrespective of the facts presented, they are generally producing advertising, public relations or propaganda.

*Newsworthy information* is new information that contains one or more of the news values developed by Harcup and O'Neill (2017). News values were developed from news media content analysis of 'lead stories published on news pages, excluding sport, finance, features and comment pages' (Harcup and O'Neill 2017: 1476). Harcup and O'Neill 'found that potential news stories must generally satisfy one and preferably more' of their fifteen news values which include 'bad news', 'conflict', 'the power elite' and 'relevant' (2017: 1482).

The definition this article adopts for *public interest journalism* develops elements of the above journalism definition and includes the core democratic functions of informing on public interest issues and facilitating public sphere deliberation. This definition raises the bar in terms of analysing youtubers. *Public interest journalism* is the editorially independent activity of collecting, and honestly interpreting, verifiable information on public interest issues and publishing media content that reports on or analyses information for some portion of the public so that the public may better engage in political decision making or public sphere deliberation.

This definition introduces the idea of quality in journalism via the requirement for information to be verifiable. The inclusion of verifiable information is significant. For the democratic function of informing the public to *actually* inform people, the information they receive needs to be factual, it needs to be accurate to the greatest extent possible. The more that information is based on verifiable facts the better it is at informing the public and facilitating deliberation. The inclusion of *honestly* means that public interest journalism needs to be done in good faith and with relevant facts presented with context so that the audience has the best chance of understanding the situation accurately.

*Investigative public interest journalism* builds further on these definitions and incorporates key elements from the works of Carson (2020) and Hunter et al. (2011), and the conceptualizations of investigative journalism that they provide. These key elements include exclusivity and evidence of original proactive research (Carson 2020: 238; Hunter et al. 2011: 8). *Investigative public interest journalism* is original and exclusive, or agenda setting, public interest

journalism activities that expose matters of public interest that are deliberately concealed, or that are obscured due to the complex nature of the topic.

These democratic function-based definitions of journalism allow for a comprehensive understanding of journalism and can provide several benefits. These include communicating the overall point of journalism and its place in society; guiding the training of journalists; and assessing the motivations, actions and media output of journalism producers. More specifically for this article, these definitions will be used to guide the assessment of friendlyjordies.

## METHOD

This article takes the YouTube channel friendlyjordies as a case study to test the democratic functions approach to analysing the journalistic nature of youtubers. A qualitative analysis of three videos was combined with data from a semi-structured interview with the channel's producer, Kristo Langker. Friendlyjordies consists of a small team that includes editors and camera operators. Jordan Shanks-Markovina is the main presenter. Langker is a producer and an occasional presenter. The channel produces a variety of content that includes comedy skits, pop-culture reviews and videos about serious topics that include politics, the environment and statutory law.

Friendlyjordies is polarizing and controversial at times. This was highlighted on 6 June 2022 when Justice Rares of the Federal Court of Australia issued a judgement in the defamation case *Barilaro v. Google LLC*. At the centre of the case were two friendlyjordies videos, *bruz* and *Secret Dictatorship*. The videos included reporting and commentary on the NSW Deputy Premier. The videos at issue were found to contain defamatory matter. Google offered no defence, was found to be co-publisher of the material and was ordered to pay damages of \$715,000.

In his judgement, Rares J commented on the lack of journalistic standards in the videos, which included unverified or inaccurate claims, an absence of a right of reply and an absence of a public interest in the continued publication of the *bruz* video. His Honour was most scathing when he wrote that YouTube was being used by Shanks-Markovina to 'disseminate his poison' (*Barilaro v. Google LLC* 2022: 115). Though it was not made explicit, the strong implication was that Shanks-Markovina was not a journalist and that his work was not journalism.

Many people vehemently disagree. Far from being poison, friendlyjordies is often regarded as a source of trustworthy journalism. Beneath many friendlyjordies videos, top comments invariably praise the content as good journalism:

- 'weird that a youtuber is doing more hard hitting journalism on this than any major Australian media outlet – great job guys' (Jopson 2023: n.pag.).
- 'it sounds like the first time in years that we are watching a real investigation journalist doing an amazing job' (@Tahia213 2021).
- 'You and your team are phenomenal for carrying out this investigative journalism' (@jellybean\_91 2020).

It is not just audience members referring to friendlyjordies as journalism. NSW politicians have referred to friendlyjordies team members as journalists, and the channel's activities have led to official lines of inquiry by politicians (NSW Parliament 2021a, 2021b). An example is the official questioning of a NSW Police Commissioner on matters of alleged police misconduct

(NSW Parliament 2022). The matters were raised in Budget Estimate sessions after friendlyjordies broke the story on the issue with the video called *fixated* (friendlyjordies 2022a). Even Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has called for friendlyjordies to be treated ‘as a serious journalist’ (Koziol 2020: n.pag.). Importantly, Shanks-Markovina rejects the label journalist for himself, instead preferring the label youtuber, and he goes as far as saying ‘I’m sick of being called an investigative journalist, I shudder every time I hear the word journalist’ (Shanks-Markovina 2025: n.pag.).

Meanwhile, reporting on friendlyjordies has been inconsistent. The channel’s team members are seldom described as journalists. In news articles, Shanks-Markovina has been variously referred to as a ‘controversial youtuber’ (Sibthorpe 2023), ‘YouTube star’ (Cam and McCarthy 2023: n.pag.), ‘satirist’ (McClymont 2024b) and ‘political commentator’ (Cormack and Hunter 2020: n.pag.). Only rarely has Shanks-Markovina been referred to in news as a journalist (Tanner 2021). Rarer still have other team members, such as Langker, been referred to as journalists (McClymont 2024a).

As this overview shows, the YouTube channel friendlyjordies is polarizing. Its supporters say it publishes exemplary journalism, but its detractors say it publishes not journalism but commentary or poison. This channel was chosen for this study because of this publicly debated status, as well as for its clear impact on politics in NSW which was made explicit when Deputy Premier Barliaro singled out friendlyjordies as ‘a big reason’ for his resignation from politics (ABC News [Australia] 2021).

Kristo Langker was interviewed on 25 August 2023, and he was sent direct quotes taken from the interview on 7 November 2024 to give him the opportunity to clarify or update his comments. Langker is a long-term, and central, team member of friendlyjordies, having started there in 2016. His title was adopted ‘because it was easy to use’ (Langker 2023). When asked about his role he said, ‘I just look for stories and write them and research them, and then edit them with Jordan’ (Langker 2023). Shanks-Markovina had not agreed to be interviewed at the time of writing.

The friendlyjordies videos included in this study are ‘The baddest MP: Dutton’ (friendlyjordies 2022c) (the expression used in a car ad in which he willingly appeared), ‘friendlyjordies attacks labor’ (friendlyjordies 2022b) and ‘Paradise bombed’ (friendlyjordies 2023). The videos were analysed by applying a close reading, which is ‘the detailed observation of a work, based on immersion into the piece sustained over repeated viewing, supplemented by the systematic notation of relevant details, leading to an explication and higher order analysis of the work’ (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012: 395). It is by combining data from the video analysis and interview that a deep understanding of the channel can be had and a thorough assessment be made.

The general method of close reading is not new to moving image media formats and has been applied to media as varied as cinema and video games (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012: 289). YouTube videos specifically have been analysed using close reading in numerous studies since the early years of the platform (see Desai-Stephens 2022; Manoukian 2010; Plaut 2016).

The close reading first involved scrolling through the channel’s videos while observing titles and thumbnails. Then 375 friendlyjordies videos, published between 3 September 2020 and 1 February 2024, were watched in part or in full. From this initial survey, the sample for close reading was selected. The selected videos were chosen as they were deemed likely to involve public interest issues and to contain potential journalism content.

A close reading worksheet was developed which contained sections for recording observations around key areas of interest for this study. The worksheet included a table for time-stamped observations of both journalism elements and youtuber norms from throughout the videos. Observations of journalism elements were guided by the above definitions. Youtuber norms were identified based on a dataset from a larger research project that this research is a part of.

This larger project includes interviews with twenty serious youtubers, and these interviews have revealed shared norms and responses to YouTube's affordances (Hall forthcoming 2026). These include settings, clothing and mode of address all being informal or casual in nature. Jokes, memes and pop-culture references are common. Overly exaggerated thumbnails, dramatic sound effects and video overlays are the norm, as are explicit references to demonetization issues such as suspension of YouTube ad revenue. Video length is another aspect of platform norms on YouTube where longer videos, between ten and sixty minutes, are preferred.

Each video was viewed multiple times. While viewing, the video was paused frequently to note down observations in each of the areas on the worksheet. The observations were then analysed. To double check observations, and aid in the analysis, sections of the videos were re-watched. Thumbnails, descriptions, comments and titles were also included in the close reading analysis. Timestamps are given below, for examples, of relevant video elements. The videos were analysed between May and November 2024.

## FINDINGS

### ***'The baddest MP: Dutton', published 4 March 2022***

The video is about alleged connections between private businesses and government actors as well as alleged activity involving illicit drug use. These two issues are areas of public interest, and stories on these topics are often characterized as 'hard news' when covered in news media (Ngai 2022: 61, 66). There is editorial independence, and the video contains numerous news values such as exclusivity, the power elite, as well as relevance and magnitude. This video meets the journalism definition above. However, the video goes beyond that first definition.

This video's investigation into the public interest issues is original and exclusive, which are characteristics of investigative public interest journalism. Evidence of investigation is seen in the inclusion of primary and secondary sources, which are shown on-screen and are used to tell the story. The information provided is done so in a transparent way, and it is verifiable. Primary sources include public reports (00:4:14), allegations from a confidential whistle-blower (00:11:36), leaked photos (00:13:42), leaked e-mails (00:11:17) and leaked financial accounts (00:06:28). Allegations by the confidential informant are clearly signposted as such. Facts are given in context and in conjunction with visual evidence. The story told comes from the data. This video performs the democratic functions of informing the public and holding power to account.

It is notable that the video contains observable signs of ethical considerations that align with commonly accepted journalistic ethics. These include efforts to minimize harm through the redaction of documents and blurred faces of people who are not subjects of the investigation. Also, the video includes questions being sent, and rights of reply given, to parties named in

the report (see Figure 1). Where subjects gave a reply, responses were included in the video (00:17:33). It is also clear who produced the video, and there is no indication of attempts to avoid responsibility for publishing the content.

In the interview for this study, Langker said that friendlyjordies does not have an official internal code of ethics or code of practice; however there are legal and ethical considerations that go into content production. Ethical considerations include giving people right of reply and ‘putting questions to people’, making sure every fact is ‘sourced right’ and, ‘if you’ve got a source, you always protect them’ (Langker, interview, 25 August 2023). This attitude towards source protection fits squarely within the area of journalism ethics. This was made clear by Justice Bromwich in a 2023 Federal Court judgement involving journalism source protection when he said, ‘The protection of the identity of journalists’ sources has long been known as a matter of professional ethics and integrity. This is a matter of common knowledge’ (*Al Muderis v. Nine Network Australia Pty Limited* 2023: 9).

As well as assessing the journalistic nature of videos, this analysis pays special attention to the presentation of the videos. The presentation of ‘The baddest MP: Dutton’ is dominated by elements and norms that are standard for youtubers. The report is presented using a conversational mode of address beginning with a strong hook in the first seconds of the video. Jokes (00:05:23) and pop-culture references (00:14:31) are included, and numerous calls to action are made. These calls to action include requests to contribute to the channel’s monetization platform Patreon (00:19:05), requests for audience members to share the video, to leave a comment (00:19:28) and to watch a previous video of the channel (00:04:10). Another youtuber norm present is explicit references to demonetization concerns (00:02:54).

Youtuber norms are also observable in the editing, with multiple instances of dramatic sound effects (00:01:07), background music, ken burns effect

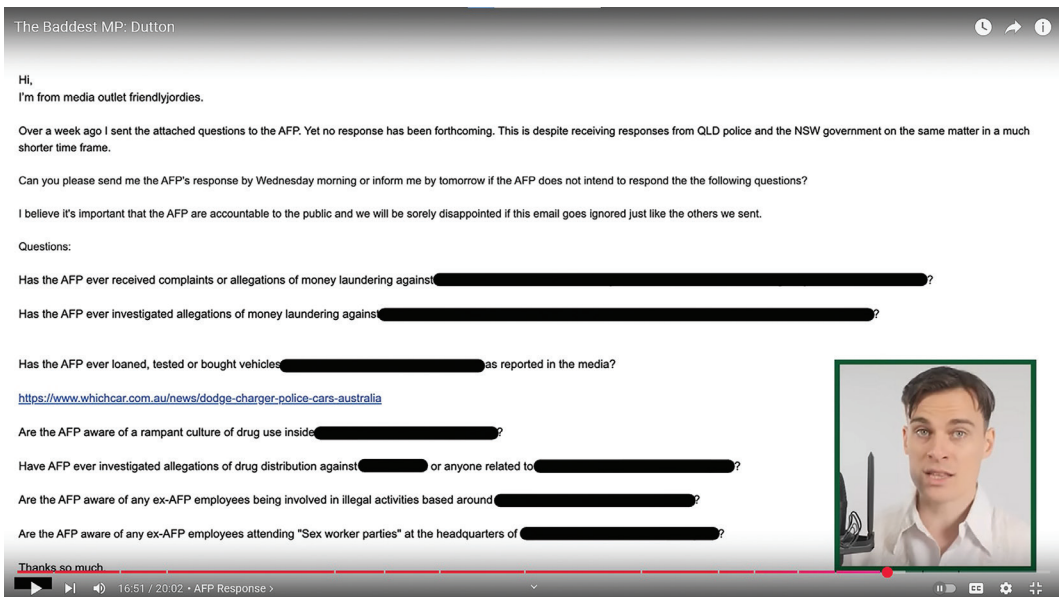


Figure 1: Right of reply. ‘The baddest MP: Dutton’, (friendlyjordies 2022c).

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(00:00:34), crop cuts (00:00:30), audio manipulation to avoid demonetization (00:02:54), title and end sequences (00:00:39; 00:19:28) and use of YouTube end screen template (00:19:33). Youtuber norms are also present in the video's description. In the description section, the youtuber norms include links to Patreon, merchandise, past videos and other friendlyjordies social media accounts. This video is platform journalism, and it meets the definition of investigative public interest journalism. As of 9 November 2024, this video had 658,100 views.

### ***friendlyjordies attacks labour, published 17 Jan 2022***

The second video in this study reports on a politician at a local council in Sydney and his alleged connections to property developers. The public interest issue is political integrity, and the video performs the democratic functions of informing the public and holding power to account. However, no direct accusations of wrongdoing are made regarding any of the subjects in the video. The presenter explicitly says he is 'not imputing anything' (00:05:56; 00:09:26). Rather, facts are presented from which a narrative of questionable behaviour and relationships emerges. This is done through the presentation of primary sources (see Figure 2) combined with information derived from previously published news articles from major news organizations (00:02:42). Primary documents used as part of the report include the Australian Labor Party (NSW Branch) Rules 2020 (00:01:43), a report from the NSW Independent Commission against Corruption (00:02:32), council development proposal applications (00:04:30), council meeting minutes (00:05:14), caveat documents (00:04:36) and building plans (00:06:48).

The reporting in this video is done in a youtuber style, using youtuber norms. The presenter uses a conversational mode of address. An outlandishly exaggerated thumbnail is used, and the description includes links to

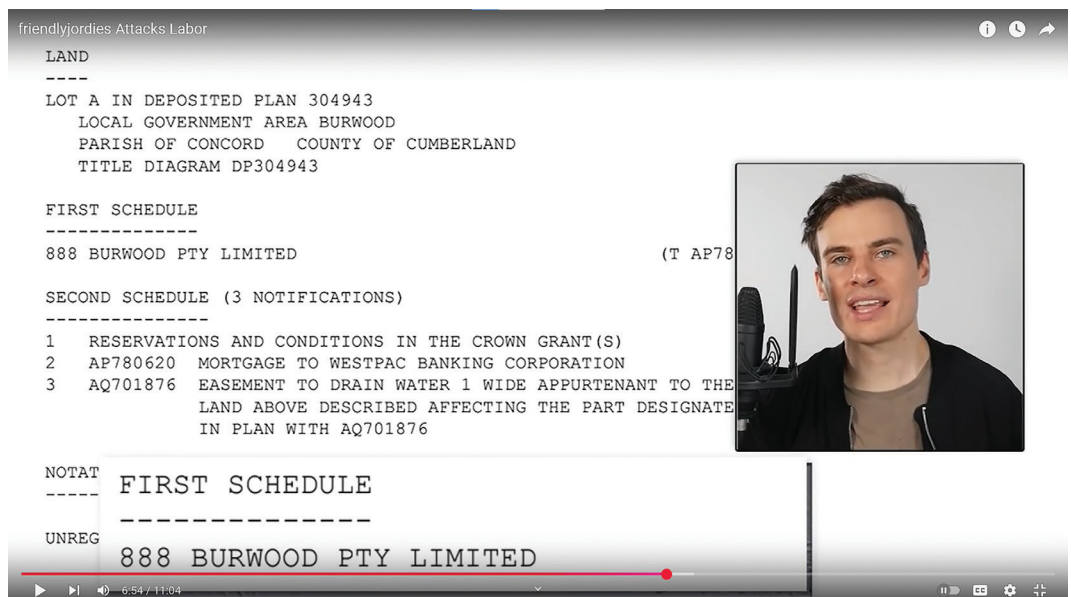


Figure 2: Primary source used in investigation. 'friendlyjordies attacks labor' (friendlyjordies 2022b).

social media, Patreon and merchandise. Throughout the video there are short comedy skits (00:00:19), background music, dramatic sound effects (00:06:19), pop-culture references (00:03:05), ken burns effects (00:02:02) and crop cuts (00:00:34). There are calls to action for such things as like, subscribe, share and comment (00:10:36). The issue of demonetization is raised (00:01:15), and a YouTube end template is used (00:10:44). As seen in the first video, this video uses youtuber norms to present verifiable facts in a report on a public interest issue. Unlike the first video, there is no explicit mention that right of reply was offered to subjects of the story. As of 9 November 2024, this video had 295,453 views.

### ***'Paradise bombed', published 4 August 2023***

This video reports on violent conflict on the island of New Guinea. It features Langker reporting on location in Papua New Guinea and Shanks-Markovina presenting from Australia. While the introduction section of the video contains jokes (00:00:40), much of the video is serious in tone and the use of over-the-top edits is minimal. However, other youtuber norms are still present, including calls to action (00:09:15) and the use of the YouTube video end screen template (00:45:45).

News values found in this video include conflict, drama and bad news. The topic is in the public interest as violent conflict on Australia's doorstep is a clear foreign affairs issue on which Australian citizens may make their preferences known to their political representatives. Ethical considerations are evident again. This is seen with the masking of the identities of several interviewees (00:20:21), the blurring of graphic imagery (00:06:19) and the inclusion of multiple viewpoints.

Data from primary and secondary sources are used to tell the story. Secondary sources (00:01:23) are used heavily to introduce the story and



Figure 3: Kristo Langker with interviewees. 'Paradise bombed' (friendlyjordies 2023).

provide context. Primary sources used in this story include international agreements (00:03:15), academic literature (00:06:28) and original audio-visual material. The video also includes numerous on-camera interviews (see Figure 3). Interviewees include refugees (00:11:41), eyewitnesses (00:18:35), a political science professor (00:32:35) and the Thales Australia Deputy Chairman (00:20:23).

This video is an example of platform journalism that meets the definition of investigative public interest journalism. It is on a topic of public interest, and it is an original investigation that amounts to a detailed foreign correspondence report. Facts presented are verifiable and there is transparency with sources. This video also gives voice to extremely marginalized people. As of 9 November 2024, this video had 2,050,477 views.

## DISCUSSION

### *The journalist label*

Motivations behind investigative videos of friendlyjordies align with the democratic functions of journalism, especially that of informing the public about public interest issues. Langker said that the channel ‘seems to have had some good effects on the country’ (Langker, interview, 25 August 2023). Specifically referring to the ‘Paradise bombed’ video, Langker says that a reason for doing the story is that ‘it’s pretty important to Australia, it should be, because it’s very, very close to Australia’ (Langker, interview, 25 August 2023).

Langker rejects the label journalist for himself. He sees the word journalist as a discursive tool that is used to legitimate some people and delegitimize others. Referring to the word journalist, Langker said, ‘it’s such a nebulous term that I think is weaponized’ and that people who label themselves journalist are ‘just self-aggrandising’ (Langker, interview, 25 August 2023). Langker’s observations align with articulations of journalism boundary work in the literature, such as the argument by Schapals that the boundaries between journalism and non-journalism ‘are based on discourse and rhetoric: through a process of constant discursive reiteration of what journalism should or shouldn’t be, journalistic actors are patrolling the boundaries of the field’ (2024: 272). Rather than labels, discourse or rhetoric, Langker believes actions should be the focus of attention and that ‘there’s a lot of weight put on occupational terms, like producer and writer. In the end they don’t really matter as much as your actions’ (Langker, interview, 25 August 2023).

Despite Langker rejecting the label journalist, he says that ‘there are certain things that obviously make us journalists in a way. We’ve got ASIC [Australian Securities and Investments Commission] passes to do journalism searches. I’ve got court documents through journalist access’ (Langker, interview, 25 August 2023). These passes are put to use in friendlyjordies investigations: ‘when we were doing stuff on councils and developers for a bit, there’d be a lot of ASIC searching’ (Langker, interview, 25 August 2023). He also said that they would do:

court searches, looking at past files and stuff like that. And then there would be sources you call up and speak to. Just kind of traditional stuff like that. Then other stories like this Papua one, there’s not much research you can do from a computer, you kind of just have to hop on a plane and go.

(Langker, interview 25 August 2023)

Shanks-Markovina, who also rejects the journalist label, has, throughout his youtuber career, made clear that he is pro-union and a supporter of the Labor party. He has also expressed his opinions where he claims the Liberal party is generally better than the National party and that he is a major critic of the Greens party and most independent politicians (Shanks-Markovina 2025). Clearly expressing political opinions in this way could raise concerns of bias and lack of impartiality if such opinions distort journalism publications. Conversely, clearly expressed political opinions could be seen as positive transparency in an age where 'there is a requirement for transparency by the audience, and if journalists find the time and learn how to be transparent, they will be rewarded with trust' (Karlsson 2021: 6).

Such transparency of political opinions is uncommon for journalists. They are often required to 'sacrifice – or at the very least limit – their individuality, opinion, voice, and privacy in service of the organization' (Molyneux and Nelson 2024: 942). While it may be unusual for a journalist to make public their political opinions, it does not automatically follow that journalistic independence is compromised for a particular story because a journalist has previously expressed political opinions. In this study, there was no indication that anyone in the friendlyjordies organization is materially connected with any of the subjects in the three videos analysed or that story subjects were treated unfairly due to Shanks-Markovina's previously expressed opinions. Through a larger content analysis, perhaps it could be shown that Shanks-Markovina is engaged in a type of advocacy journalism (Fielding et al. 2025). However, such a conclusion goes beyond the scope of this article.

### ***Investigative public interest platform journalism***

The videos analysed in this article all include key elements of investigative public interest journalism. The stories in each video are topics of public interest and Langker affirms that a motivation of the friendlyjordies organization is to inform the public and have a positive impact on Australian society. Friendlyjordies is editorially independent from the topics in each of the videos. The videos report on and analyse fact-based and verifiable information, with efforts made to show the sources of key pieces of information. The sources include both primary and secondary sources, some of which were open source and others that needed investigation to bring them to light. As such, these friendlyjordies videos are more than just content that resembles journalism, they are examples of investigative public interest journalism.

However, unlike journalism content from legacy news media corporations, the presentation of this journalism is that of a youtuber. This presentation style does not follow the long-standing norms of television news, and why should it? It is not television. The videos in this study are examples of a new form of journalism, platform journalism, where journalism is produced using the norms and affordances of a specific digital platform and which is created specifically for that platform. In this case the platform is YouTube. Arguably, it is the platform norms, which are applied to attract audiences, that may be acting as a barrier where journalism scholars may be blinded by casual presentations, brash graphics and jokes, unable to look past them to see the public interest journalism that is taking place. By focusing on the democratic functions of journalism, this article moves beyond the dichotomy of real journalists vs. peripheral journalistic actors.

The concept of platform journalism clarifies an emerging category of content creators on digital platforms and paves the way for assessment of such creators. The democratic functions approach to defining public interest journalism allows assessments of and identification of quality journalism providers on YouTube. Also, the emergence of platform journalism adds to the calls for reforms and regulatory development, such as a cross-platform standards scheme (Wilding and Molitorisz 2022).

The emergence of platform journalism is more than theoretical. It raises significant legal issues. ‘The baddest MP: Dutton’ contained leaked emails, photos, financial statements and allegations from a confidential whistleblower. While this video fits the definition of public interest journalism given in this article, this does not mean that it meets legal definitions related to journalism. For example, it is unclear whether staff at friendlyjordies, or similar creators, would be considered journalists and able to claim the journalist privilege of source protection under shield laws.

## CONCLUSION

A new form of journalism is emerging on YouTube. This is platform journalism. The emergence of platform journalism was demonstrated in this article through the close reading analysis of three friendlyjordies videos and an interview with the channel’s producer. This analysis was done by applying definitions of journalism that are based on the democratic functions of journalism. Through this analysis, it was demonstrated that friendlyjordies produces investigative public interest journalism. This is despite both Shanks-Markovina and Langker rejecting the label journalist.

Importantly, this study is limited to three videos from friendlyjordies. A wider content analysis of the channel is needed to see if these videos are representative or outliers. Future research opportunities also include applying journalism definitions based on democratic functions to other YouTube creators. Assessments of youtubers based on legal definitions are yet another important opportunity for future research.

## ETHICAL STATEMENT

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Technology Sydney. The interviewee gave his informed consent to take part in this project and be named. UTS HREC REF NO. ETH22-7480.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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