

‘#RIP JK Rowling’ - Understanding the Emotionalization of the Controversy around J.K. Rowling

*Siglinde Peetz, Institute of Sociology, University of Bern, Switzerland
Siglinde.peetz@unibe.ch*

Abstract

Scandals and controversies evolving around digital data such as tweets are often explained by media dynamics, social media platforms and their infrastructure of both enhancing emotional mobilization and incentivizing emotional responses. These approaches catch important characteristics of digital communication such as its instant accessibility, “participatory” structure, and polarizing effects. However, they lack sociological explanation for the roots of emotionalization and mobilization, i.e. why people access, participate and escalate emotionally in the first place. I argue for an approach beyond a mere media analysis by highlighting the role of “emotional energies” (Collins 1981) and their embedding in “relevance structures” (Schutz 1964). Emotional energies can be understood as the dynamic and influential force generated by emotional interactions. They are rooted in relevance structures – frameworks of shared meanings and interpretations – that individuals use to make sense of the world and react to it. Accordingly, the (emotional) reaction to a tweet and thus, for example, the participation in a controversy depends on whether the content of the tweet, its discussion, or the course of the controversy resonates with already existing emotional energies and can activate them.

With an analysis of the controversy surrounding J.K. Rowling and some of her tweets by reconstructing the relevance structures of those involved (supporters, critics), I will try to demonstrate the productivity of this approach. We will see an entanglement of different emotional energies and relevance structures on both sides, which leads to the formation of a strong emotional and moral evaluation and position causing the controversy. This entanglement could explain the strong emotionalization of the controversy surrounding J.K. Rowling.

I thereby provide a theoretical perspective on the role of emotions in social mobilization, illustrated by the case of the controversy surrounding JK Rowling, by which

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media dynamics themselves become analytically secondary. This, in turn, contributes to a media analysis interested in emotionalization, because it does not deny the emotionalization potential of traditional and social media and their respective logics and infrastructures. Rather, it allows us to understand their contribution to emotionalization even more precisely.

Collins, Randall (1981) On the micro-foundations of macro-sociology. *American Journal of Sociology* 86: 984-1014.

Schutz, Alfred (1964) *Collected Papers II. Studies in social theory*. Nijhoff, The Hague

Keywords

emotional energies, controversy, relevance structures, J.K. Rowling

Bio

I am currently doing my PhD in Sociology at the University of Bern, Switzerland. In my PhD I analyze the emergence and dynamics of scandals and controversies in public communication under digital conditions using case studies. My expertise therefore includes sociological theory, media, digital communication, qualitative methods and morality. At the moment, I am in the process of publishing my first paper.

ORCID-ID/Websites

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Siglinde-Peetz>