Chapter 2
The 'media day': A phenomenological approach

As discussed in the introductory chapter, technological developments have changed the format, distribution and consumption of news, creating methodological challenges for researching news and calling for innovative ways of studying its audiences. In this chapter we discuss how it is possible to study news use if we have to leave behind agreed-upon understandings and definitions, to better understand young people's viewpoints. Such an endeavour, however, requires careful consideration of methodological obstacles and potential ways of overcoming these. How do we study something when its terminologies seem to be shifting? How is it possible to 'bracket' the way that news has been defined for decades, even centuries, in order to explore other potential outlooks for what it can be? To meet these challenges, we have developed a methodological approach to news in a state of 'flux' building on phenomenological theory. In this chapter we will develop this approach and describe the material and methods used for our empirical analysis.

Our aim with this book is to understand the perceptions and practices of news from an audience perspective, anchored in its mundane everyday contexts. Some scholars have recently argued for a 'radical user perspective' to come to terms with the contemporary struggles of capturing the meanings of news in a hybrid, multiplatform media landscape (Picone et al., 2015; Swart et al., 2022). Taking such a position, however, means that scholars have to be willing to study news as comprehended beyond news journalism, which, if taken seriously, poses an epistemological dilemma, where defining what news is today is part of the analytical process, which includes tackling the paradox that comes with leaving a prefixed definition of news.

In the chapter, we outline how some of the philosophical and theoretical thinking developed within phenomenology can be drawn on as an analytical resource for meeting this challenge, with phenomenology identified as a way to approach the world and the phenomena within it with 'wonder', creating "an openness to the world and a wondering attentiveness" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 36), which we have considered a useful starting point when exploring news from an audience point of view. Such a perspective means 'bracketing' our already learnt understanding of the world and the phenomena within it, and attempting to approach them in a new, clear way. In practice, this means leaving behind the preconceived notion of news as a commodity solely produced and packaged within organised journalistic institutions, including a fixed understanding of its core dimensions; newness, truth-claim, tone, values and specific actors determining what is newsworthy. The chapter describes, first, how the idea of a 'media day' can be used

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111340654-003

as a methodological entry point for doing so, to, secondly, discuss some of the key phenomenological concepts guiding the research for this book, including the notions of 'life-world' and 'Dasein', which, when applied to the empirical research, mean paying attention to temporal, spatial and sociocultural dimensions of news use, as well as to experiences of news as part of understandings of oneself and the surrounding world. Finally, in the last part of the chapter the design of the empirical study is explained and reflected upon.

Understanding the 'media day'

When attempting to get insights into ordinary and habitual media use, one means of doing so is to use the 'media day' approach. This is a methodological approach in qualitative audience studies, which we have used in several projects before this (see Bengtsson, 2006, 2007, 2012, 2018). It builds on the notion of the media as developed in the chapter 'The Media Day', by phenomenologist Henry Lefebvre, in his book *Rythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (1992/2013). Here he argues that "the media enter into the everyday: even more: they *contribute to producing it*" (Lefebvre 1992/2004, p. 48, our italics). Leaning also on John Dewey's influential notion that "*society exists in communication*" (Dewey 1916/1923, p. 5), this double constructivist perspective means that it is not possible to understand the everyday without understanding the media, but neither to understand media, including news, stripped from its everyday framework. The 'media day' approach therefore means understanding media as inherently integrated, interwoven and *co-producing* everyday life. The method has similarities with the 'day in the life' approach (Gillen et al., 2007), as it takes the ordinary day as a starting point for analysis, but there are also some essential differences, particularly that whereas 'day in the life' methodology uses the ordinary day as a context for understanding media (use), the 'media day' approach places media practices, media experiences and meaning-making around media at the centre of the analysis, and explores how it is integrated in, yet producing and produced by, everyday life. This means it, in relation to news use, would focus not only on how everyday life contributes to how news is perceived and experienced, but also how news use co-constructs the experience of everyday life, taking notice of the structure–actor dynamic (Giddens, 1984), or what Couldry and Hepp have discussed as a materialist approach to phenomenology (Couldry & Hepp, 2016).

A foundational standpoint in phenomenology is that the construction of reality is, fundamentally, based upon lived experience, with phenomenologists such as Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) underlining that our reality, including the materialities

around us, is socially constructed and therefore perceived and experienced differently due to previous experiences, interests and how they have been introduced to us. In the broader field of media and communication studies, there is a rich tradition of scholars who have used such thinking to understand media as phenomena, for example Paddy Scannell's analyses of the phenomenology of television (1995, 1996, 2014; see also Nelson, 1986, 1990; Hutchinson, 2020) and Shaun Moores's studies of satellites (1988, 1993, 2011, 2012). But there are also those who have used phenomenology for audience approaches, to understand how *others* – media users – perceive and make sense of varied forms of media, such as the radio (Larsen, 2002), the emerging internet (Bakardjieva, 2005), the media in general as part of everyday life (Bengtsson, 2007) but also of news journalism (Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2019, Meijer & Kormelink, 2020). As already mentioned, in an attempt to update Berger and Luckmann's canonical work on the social construction of reality (1966), Couldry and Hepp (2016) likewise recently called for a 'materialist phenomenology' aiming to capture the materially structured experiences of living in a world increasingly saturated by media.

In a recent scholarly debate about the use of phenomenology for empirically understanding human experience, scholar in philosophy Dan Zahavi has, however, argued that it is not enough to "consider the first-person perspective of the agent/patient/client to make the approach in question phenomenological" (2019, p. 900). Seeking support in classic philosophers, Zahavi claims that even though phenomenologists may very well be interested in the phenomenality of experience, phenomenological studies should be about "returning to the things themselves", as originally formulated by Edmund Husserl (1900–1901/2001, p. 168), and that "seeking fine-grained descriptions of the qualitative character of different experiences" (Zahavi, 2019, p. 901) is not what phenomenology is about. At the same time, both the rich tradition of phenomenological media audience studies, and the profound transformations of the media landscape due to digitisation and datafication, require us to question Zahavi's claim. "Returning to the things themselves" is increasingly difficult in relation to contemporary media, as many genres, including news, are undergoing wide-ranging transformations and media use is increasingly individualised. In terms of news, technological developments, intensified during the last decades, have, first, transformed news as a 'thing': altering its temporality, mobility, format and mode of address, dimensions that are essential for how we experience news and construct meaning around it, and including a process of 'immaterialisation' similar to other media objects. An example is how newspapers have transformed from physical objects to 'immaterial' things, merged in the materiality of the mobile phone together with a range of other kinds of content, at the same time turning into a more ephemeral and liquid object that may reach its audiences de-contextualised and individually framed (Papacharissi, 2015). Secondly, following from the above, news use has

become more individualised, to the extent that the *meaning* of news may largely differ between users: news today is, for example, provided and made meaningful in different media and in very different ways by a young girl and her grandmother. Thirdly, we also know from phenomenological theory that the world, and the phenomena in it, are experienced differently depending on when and where you live, where you are heading, and what experiences you carry with you, with previous news research having shown that news is not perceived and valued in the same way by people that come from different backgrounds, gender, and life-experiences and -expectancies (Banjac, 2022).

This means that it is relevant to attempt to see news through the eyes of others in order to grasp the full complexity of its meaning, which we can attempt to understand through a plethora of eyes (and other senses), against the backdrop of varied contexts and with a variety of experiences as frames for interpretation. In this we follow Max van Manen (2019), when referring to Langeveld (1972), who means that phenomenology must be understood as both a philosophy and a method, where method means "a style of thinking and an attitude of reflective attentiveness (...) to what it is that makes life intelligible and meaningful to us' (Van Manen, 2019, p. 911). We are, similarly, inspired by Van Manen's account that *wonder*, as a fundamental attunement in empirical research, is the most central disposition of phenomenology, when aiming at understanding the world (Van Manen, 2019, p. 914).

News in everyday life and life-world

When developing our methodological approach, based on the arguments outlined above, we have leant on 'bracketing' (or *epoché*) as a common tenet of phenomenological understanding, meaning that we aimed at putting brackets around the well known and taken for granted regarding what news is, in order to fully grasp how news is perceived and practised by young audiences today. Bracketing is part of what Husserl called "phenomenological reduction" (Husserl, 1931, pp. 44–49), which is when a philosopher brackets her natural belief of the world and her common-sense assumptions (Van Manen, 2016, p. 27). Bracketing is an epistemological approach to getting beyond the 'natural attitude' in the natural (realist) sciences, and to not simply take "our natural realist assumptions for granted" (Zahavi, 2019, p. 903). For qualitative research then, Zahavi means, its most important aspects are its criticism of scientism, its recognition of the *life-world*, its developing of an open-minded and non-biased attitude, as well as a careful analysis of human existence, understanding the subject as an embodied and socially and culturally embedded being-in-the-world (Zahavi & Martiny, 2019, p. 161; cf. Zahavi, 2019,

p. 905). Qualitative phenomenological research should hence be theoretically and epistemologically informed by core phenomenological concepts such as the life-world, intentionality, experience, horizon, and so on (Zahavi, 2019, p. 905).

The most essential concepts initially guiding our work have been *Dasein* and life-world. Martin Heidegger's notion of 'Dasein' (1996), or 'being in the world', is based on an understanding of human existence as *co-existent* with the surrounding world and *intentional*. This means it is situated in the social and cultural situation at hand, including its background, experiences, and material and cultural circumstances. Dasein is neither fundamentally free, nor essentially determined by its context, but relates dialectically to the world and its own existence in it. Dasein is interlinked with life-world; the subjective world of an individual, as it is perceived through his or her senses. The life-world embraces the interconnected totality of worlds, or realities, that a human being relates to, and can thus be separated into several parallel, and subjectively constructed, realities. Examples of such realities are dreams, fantasies, scientific contemplation and everyday life. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 25) everyday life can only be experienced when a person is awake, which excludes for example dreams during sleep from what we understand as the everyday. Everyday life from a phenomenological perspective thus constitutes a symbolically significant category compared with other parts of the life-world, and works as a reference point for other dimensions of it, as everyday life, in contrast to other life-world categories, is socially constructed and hence may be shared with others (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 23). This makes everyday life intersubjective, but also subjectively organised (my 'here' will, after all, always be your 'there'). Everyday life also differs from other dimensions of the life-world as it is *material* and thus constitutes an ontological reference point of a qualitatively different nature. We have aimed to embed the young adults' experiences and thoughts about news in these intersubjective, and material, conditions and dimensions of the life-world, although the Covid-19 pandemic brought along some unexpected methodological difficulties, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Despite this, everyday life should not be understood as static or fixed. Schutz meant that everyday life consists of several, succeeding, social situations. A situation is a demarcated project with a special temporal, spatial and social organisation. In each situation, such as when we come across a piece of news in social media, we decide what is relevant to us and thus sort out the sensory impressions and aspects of events that, in the moment, seem unimportant. This situated structure of relevance can for example explain how memories can differ between two people who were in the same place and at the same time. The individual situation in combination with the subject's current life situation and individual history (i. e., it's autobiography) define what is experienced as relevant in different situations. This determines and delimits what we perceive as self-evident and fixed, or fluid

and negotiable, and each situation must be understood from its own context-dependent horizon. An individual's *horizon*, Schutz means, is primarily dependent on his or her social and cultural history, the temporal and spatial dimensions of the situation and the project in which s/he is currently involved. This means, for example, that we perceive a trial, and the court room in which it takes place, differently depending on whether we are there as a journalist, reporting about the event for a local newspaper, if we are there as the accused, as the victim of a crime, or as a concerned citizen witnessing what we see as a deteriorating society. Understanding everyday life as projects hence means that both material and social aspects of reality are experienced differently depending on the project, as well as the socially and historically dependent, interpretive horizon from which it is viewed. Another important aspect of our construction of relevance is the overall structural conditions in everyday life that we have learned to regard as natural, such as legal and other 'laws' of social behaviour.

Based on phenomenological theory, we can thus conclude that everyday life surrounds us during our waking hours and is experienced as routine and concrete, while the experience of it is context-dependent and socially constructed. The above provides a theoretical understanding of everyday life which is crucial for our ability to interpret what news, from an everyday life perspective, is and means to young people. Therefore, this study leans on a definition of everyday life originating from phenomenologist Henri Lefebvre. He constructs his definition of everyday life in the mundane, as deriving from:

> what is humble and solid, what is taken for granted and that of which all the parts follow each other in such a regular, unvarying succession that those concerned have no call to question their sequence; thus it is undated and (apparently) insignificant; although it occupies and preoccupies it is practically untellable, and it is the ethics underlying routine and the aesthetics of familiar settings. At this point it encounters the modern.
>
> (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 24)

This definition of everyday life is multidimensional, yet distinguishes everyday life from what it is not. Lefebvre highlights everyday life as a flow of activities, limited and constructed in relation to its temporal and spatial context. This means that everyday life is not limited to certain special activities (e.g., leisure activities), or special times or places (e.g., evening time at home), but is a space we reside in, framing our experiences. This definition also emphasises the importance of the subjective experience of everyday life (everyday life as the invisible, self-evident, that which we do not reflect on) and thus offers a phenomenologically oriented view. It provides a temporally and spatially inclusive concept of everyday life, emphasising it as a flow and focusing on what is experienced as self-evident in existence. Everyday life is also considered a combination of materiality and symbolic

dimensions, where both the spatiality and other boundaries of existence, as well as the ethics and aesthetics of it, are taken into account. This broad, but limited, perspective is a guide for this study, and the perceptions and practices of news in everyday life have been approached in this way.

As outlined above, phenomenology takes human existence as its vantage point and explores how human subjects exist and create meaning in their everyday lives in relation to basic categories such as time, space and sociocultural relevance. As mentioned, Heidegger's (1927/2010) theoretical notion of 'Dasein', 'being in the world', relies on on the understanding of human existence as coexistent with the surrounding world and intentional. This intentionality makes the being of humans temporal in its futurity, meaning it is directed to the projects and goals towards which it strives. News perceptions and practices are integrated in this intentionality, as news users use and value news depending on what they find relevant (cf. Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014). We also know, however, that digital media have started a process of *desynchronisation* (Lash & Urry, 1994; Kaun, 2017) of news, in *timeless time* (Castells, 2000). But news is not only temporally organised, and nor is humans' broader existence in the world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) enriched Heidegger's predominantly temporal phenomenology by arguing that our existence is also spatially relational, as a "form of perception" (p. 281ff.) and approached the embodied dimensions of human existence. This led him to suggest that our notions of time and space should be understood in relation to our bodily consciousness, as part of human practice. We know that digital media have profoundly altered how humans experience space, both from a general perspective (cf. Scannell, 1996, 2014; Larsen, 2000; Bakardjieva, 2005; Pink, 2011; Moores, 2012; Bengtsson, 2006, 2007; Tudor, 2018, etc.) and in relation to news (cf. Peters, 2012; Van Damme et al., 2015). To understand how media users perceive news, we must therefore anchor our understanding in their temporal and spatial directedness, their intentionality, grounded in their everyday life practices and the specific cultural and material context of news consumption, obviously shifting both between and within individuals, cultures and media environments. As phenomenological research has sometimes been accused of lacking a critical perspective acknowledging the "many and often highly charged political, social and discursive forces that contribute to life in particular settings" (Desjarlais & Throop, 2011, p. 93), we aim at conducting a 'critical phenomenology' underscoring the "political and socioeconomic determinants of life and people's living conditions" (2018, p. 95), in line also with Couldry's and Hepp's (2016) call for a 'materialist phenomenology', adding to the phenomenological inside-perspective a critical sensitivity to the social and material conditions that shape it.

Our phenomenological perspective, further, brings attention to how the basic dimensions of the life-world coincide with the basic dimensions of not only news consumption, but also of news values; time, space and (sociocultural) relevance (Van Damme et al., 2015; see also Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015; Dimmick et al., 2011). In relation to space, Peters (2012, p. 701) has argued that "space matters for how we experience journalism" and that "how we experience journalism shapes our social spaces" (see also Schrøder, 2015, p. 74), relevant not least for the increasingly mobile spatialities of digital news. Additionally, Emily Keightley and John Downey's (2018) analysis of the temporal dimensions of news consumption is worth highlighting, showing that the interplay between mediated and socially constructed time in news consumption demonstrates a natural embrace of the multiple temporalities in everyday experience, and that 'zones of intermediacy' in news consumption not only emphasise speed, but also the various constellations of time in which individuals connect with social, cultural, historical and technological temporalities. Peters and Schrøder have, finally, argued that the complex news consumption patterns following from the shifting media repertoires of digital cultures demand "a more dynamic starting point around how temporality is conceived" (2018, p. 1086). Such attempts to address the temporality and spatiality of digital news consumption, then, point towards their relevance in a phenomenological approach to news, underlining the importance of anchoring our understanding of media users' perceptions and practices of news in their temporal and spatial directedness, and its relevance in everyday practice.

News in the 'media day': A post-phenomenological approach

In this study, we have adhered to what Don Idhe calls a "post-phenomenological" approach (Idhe, 2003, also 1993) and Van Manen conceptualises as "practical life-world studies" (2016, p. 23), directing the phenomenological analysis towards practices and perception of others. One overarching challenge with this approach has been to use bracketing purposefully so that we not do predefine what news is through our project design, to let news in the interview situation remain broader than just news journalism, while also constructing it as specific enough to grasp a widened conceptualisation and experience of *news*, and not just end up with discussions about anything that young people find interesting to follow in the media.

While taking our departure from Dasein, or 'being in the world', we aimed at acknowledging the anchoring of the participants' news perceptions and practices in the world they inhabited, also affecting how young adults relate to news in digital culture. As mentioned earlier, we know that Dasein has an inherent intentionality; an agency to decide in what direction it wants to go. This relates to the indi-

vidual's possibility, in today's multifaceted media landscape, to choose what media to pay attention to, what sources of information to turn to, which topics to engage in, and so on, according to the direction the subject is heading in, and their interests. We started all our interviews with broad and existential questions about where the young adults placed themselves in the world, where they dwell today, where they were coming from, what they dreamed about, and where they were heading. The answers to such questions obviously differ a lot according to general sociological variables such as gender, class and education, and relate to more than mere interest in news, as the questions aim at capturing one's hopes, wishes and ideas of what is meaningful in the world. With such a broad approach we have also aimed at exploring the respondents' life-world and how it relates to news; how our participants perceive the everyday world around them, its content and limitations, how it relates to their previous experiences and expectations – also aiming at understanding the *structure of relevance* that steers their intentionality.

After our introductory questions we focused on our respondents' digital media practices, starting out with the initial 'media day' question: "Can you tell me about your media use on an ordinary day?" This broad introduction was followed by relevant (but sometimes different) questions about specific practices and their importance and meaning to the young people, including how and where their media use took place; why they acted as they did (and what they thought about it); what content they chose to take part in and why, and the purposes it filled for them; how different media technologies were used for news consumption in comparison to each other; and how news was experienced and valued in relation to other media content, as well as its wider social and cultural meanings.

Being involved and engaged in news practices, and perceiving news in a digital media landscape is also part of our intentionality, and we know from previous research that users use and value news depending on what they find relevant (cf. Pentida & Tarafdar, 2014; Schrøder, 2019; Bengtsson, 2023). To understand how our participants perceived news, we therefore aimed at understanding their temporal and spatial directedness, and how they experienced the frames of news production and distribution, algorithmic curation of news and technological gatekeeping, that frame everyday news practices but also challenge intentionality and agency among news audiences in today's algorithmically organised culture.

We have found inspiration in previous media studies conducted from a phenomenological perspective, such as Maria Bakardjieva's ground-breaking *Internet Society* (2005), in which she studied internet adoption among ordinary Canadians, and Larsen's (2000) study of radio users in 1990s Denmark where he, for example, theorised the distinction between 'listening to' and 'hearing' the radio (see also, e. g., Pink, 2011; Moores, 2012; Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2018; Costera Meijer, & Groot Kormelink, 2020)). These differences in intentionality among radio listen-

ers reveal the meaning of the radio in audiences' everyday life, and more specifically how it is meaningful in users' transformation from the inner (home) to the outer world (public space) and how they orient themselves in time (see also Bengtsson, 2006; Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022). Building on their, and others', work, we have approached news perceptions and practices with a phenomenological toolbox and approached them as immersed in the temporal and spatial dimensions of everyday life, constructed by the structure of relevance (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). Our study, however, differs fundamentally from the above-mentioned phenomenological studies in one way in particular – as we study a media genre 'in flux'. This meant that we could not simply ask the research participants about news, as this would have narrowed their imaginations of what the study was about, and hence led us away from what we wanted to grasp. Here, the design of the study with the initial questions around the 'media day' provided a way to be able to gain insights into media and news use without predefining what they should think of as news, a concern which also guided the interview design. We instead designed the study so that we would understand how news is practised and perceived, to, in the next step, nail down what news is and means from a phenomenological point of view.

As suggested by Zahavi (2019), we departed from some core concepts of phenomenology when designing our study. The most basic dimensions are *Dasein*, that we used as a vantage point for our approach to young media users' perceptions and practices of news, constructed through the temporal, spatial and sociocultural dimensions of it, in combination with the *life-world.* When analysing our empirical material, however, in line with our abductive epistemology and process of analysis, we introduced further theoretical perspectives meaningful for understanding the interview data. As it is important to look at, on the one hand, news *perceptions* (the audiences' ideas of what news is, what makes it meaningful) and, on the other hand, at news as part of everyday routines and *practices*, we have analysed how young audiences conceptualise news in relation to, for them, vital information (actively, as part of their intentionality), as well as the more routinised practices where news is part of an everyday flow that one can barely notice (cf. 'hear' in Steeg Larsen's analysis) or actively focus upon (cf. 'listen' in Steeg Larsen's analysis).

The phenomenological interview

According to Zahavi (2019, p. 906), conducting phenomenologically informed qualitative research is not merely a question of being open-minded and interested in first-person experience. Zahavi and Martiny (2019, p. 161) also claim phenomenol-

ogy can not only make a difference in the handling, analysis and interpretation of available data, but also in how data are obtained in the first place, for instance through special interview techniques. This means that phenomenological research is also conducted in a certain manner.

We have conducted our interviews and small focus groups in the way suggested by Zahavi and Martiny, 2019), which means adopting an open-minded and emphatic attitude in order to establish basic trust with the interviewee, engaging in a continuous self-critical assessment of our own preconceptions and biases concerning what news is, as well as engaging pro-actively with the interviewees in order to elicit relevantly detailed descriptions. This means starting our interviews and focus groups with open and general questions, yet probing the participants to provide concrete and detailed descriptions of their practices, reflections, feelings and emotions concerning news in the 'media day'.

As pointed out by James Morley (2019, p. 165) phenomenological interviews aim, as much as is reasonable, to take a 'discovery approach' to interviewing and to seek out maximally rich descriptions. As already noted, 'bracketing' can in this way be seen as both a theoretical approach and a methodology. For us, this meant trying to bracket our preconceived understanding of what news is, and hence try not to force our respondents in any particular direction in the interviews and focus groups, where the latter were designed to provide open discussion among participants. We have hence tried to understand what news means to our young participants, without implying any predefined conception of news.

We introduced our project as being about how young adults use media and information in their everyday lives, which described the focus of the research project and aligned with the interview questions, yet allowed us to circumvent taken-for-granted assumptions about news, as we were careful to not steer their definitions and understandings of this. Therefore, we did not explicitly mention 'news' as a term initially in the interviews but circled around the concept in the themes guiding the interviews and focus groups. Towards the middle-end of these, if 'news' had not been brought up spontaneously (which it often had), we gently introduced the topic to the participants, relating it to what they had already told us about their information habits, media practices and interests. This is obviously not without its problems, as such a mode of conduct may encompass a risk of just ending up with empirical material that contains information about anything that young adults find interesting in digital (and analogue) media, yet it was a way to allow for an open approach to how they would talk about news and information.

In this sense we are in line with Amadeo Giorgi's suggestion that conducting a phenomenological interview (2006, pp. 71–73; 2009, pp. 128–137) means that the interviewer should refrain from steering the interviewee in the interview situa-

tion, but not with Barbro Giorgi (2006, p. 81), who suggests that the phenomenological interviewer should not ask any questions at all (see Zahavi and Martiny, 2019, pp. 155–162). In our interviews, we tried to be as open to the respondents' own experiences and constructions of reality and everyday life as possible, but we did use themes to guide the interviews towards our prime interest: the perceptions and practices of that which is news to young adults. We started our interviews asking about detailed descriptions of the young adults' ordinary 'media day', and circled around the participants' *experience of* news perceptions and practices, which meant what kind of media content the respondents routinely paid attention to, found important, would find it difficult to live without and miss out on, wanted to stay updated about, and what this meant to them, later moving the discussion towards other themes such as trust in different kinds of media and sources of information, and their ideas about traditional news journalism. By starting out with the young adults' media practices – detailed descriptions of what the participants 'did' with the media in everyday life – we asked them to further elaborate on why they turned to this or that digital platform in a specific situation, why they were interested in this or that content, or would click on this or that link. This way of asking the respondents to, in detail, specify and reflect on their routinised media habits is not only a way to gain deep knowledge about what they do and why, but also a way to try to gain understanding of the process of *navigating*, as described in the introductory chapter. There are of course limitations to what an interview can give in this respect, but the respondents often burst out at the end of the interviews: 'This was fun! I'd never thought about how I do things, and why!'

Important to note again is that we, in the interview situations, did not equate news with journalism, nor normatively constructed news journalism as more relevant than other kinds of media content, and although we did ask our participants about how they perceived and constructed practices around news journalism, we did this late in the interviews (when it had often become clear anyway). Instead, we aimed at a broad understanding of the participants' general media practices, what kind of content and areas of interests they valued and found vital to be updated and informed about, and if and how news journalism fitted into that picture. This somewhat reversed way of addressing news turned out to be successful as a way to broaden our understanding of why and how young adults think of, navigate, appreciate, turn to or away from, news in everyday life.

Participants and the research process

We conducted interviews with 67 18–26-year-olds in Sweden between June 2019 and January 2021, interviewing 20 individually and the rest (47) in 15 groups of 2–5 participants. The individual interviews provided more in-depth personal details and the small focus groups illustrated common discourses and the social interplay in the discussions around different platforms. The respondents were recruited with the aid of student assistants using varied methods, including advertising in social media groups (e.g., local groups for inhabitants in certain areas), specific targeting, "snowball sampling" (May, 2001, p. 132), with contacts of contacts acting as "gate-keepers" (see Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 9) facilitating access to a wide range of geographical locations and social settings, as well as providing acceptance of us as researchers. Thirty-eight of our respondents were female, and 29 were male, and the group interviews consisted of people familiar to each other, such as groups of friends or flatmates, as contexts in which people might normally discuss various aspects of the media.

The young adults lived in varied geographical areas across Sweden, from the north to the south, in larger and smaller cities – including Stockholm and Gothenburg as large metropolises, and a wide range of smaller and mid-sized urban environments – but were also recruited from villages and mere countryside. Some lived with their parents, others in dorms, some in their own apartments and some shared housing with friends or partners. The participants further comprised a broad mix in terms of class, occupation, social and ethnic background, livelihood, interests, and lifestyles, with 8 students at a gymnasium level, 21 at university or other post-gymnasium education, 6 being unemployed and the rest employed part- or full-time at the time of the interviews. A small minority were politically active, but the majority were not, some used (social) media as work arena, but the majority did not. All in all, the empirical material grasped a large variety of young Swedish adults' media practices and preferences but must not of course be seen as representative of the nation's youth as a whole. Most of our interviewees can be described primarily as media *consumers*, as most of them used the media mainly to follow individuals and organisations and for interpersonal communication with close friends and small groups, something which is also in line with national statistics of media use in this age group.[1]

As such, the sample is relatively heterogeneous, allowing insights into varied settings and avoiding a tendency in social research to over-represent university students as a demographic category. Yet, it should be noted that this diversity

1 https://svenskarnaochinternet.se/rapporter/svenskarna-och-internet-2023/english/.

and the relatively broad age range within the narrower group that young people make up could provide a challenge in analysing the results as, for example, TikTok or Instagram are likely to be approached differently by an 18-year-old and a 26-year-old. However, while we make no claims at generalising the findings to a specific population, we view our participants as speaking from a certain life stage, characterised by a degree of flexibility in terms of life choices and the organisation of everyday life. In the analysis, we have acknowledged the variety of uses, experiences and understandings of news across the sample, while being alert to details concerning participating individuals and groups.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic during the time of the project, most of our interviews were conducted via video link on Zoom, although initially conducted in face-to-face situations. As young people in Sweden in general are heavily tech-savvy and used to communicating and socialising via digital media, this did not cause us as severe problems as we had feared. We soon realised that individual interviews worked almost as well as they would in a face-to-face situation (although we only got glimpses of the material and social environments inhabited by the participants as background of their Zoom room); however, the group interviews did not end up in the desired open discussions where the interviewer mainly works as a listener, adding some comments here and there to deepen certain aspects, but turned out as rounds where participants answered questions one by one, often in the order of the Zoom room (cf. Bolin et al., 2023). We used the time we gained from not being able to travel across the country to conduct the interviews on site as planned, to instead enlarge the number of individual and group interviews, as well as limiting the number of participants in the group interviews to a maximum of four, from the initially intended five or six. Despite the mishap of the Covid-19 pandemic and due to these changes, Zoom offered satisfactory conditions for the interviews, something also found by earlier research (cf. Archibald et al., 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). The pandemic still obstructed our initial ambitions to include 'think aloud' methodology (but some interviewees took and sent us screenshots of their media content after the interviews), which is why the analysis leans heavily on the interviewees' verbal constructions of their media preferences and practices. Our methodological approach yet provided us with close and detailed descriptions of what, how and for what purposes our young participants used (a broad range of) media in their everyday lives. Our interviews lasted between 1–2 hours and were recorded and fully transcribed. Transcriptions were coded and discussed according to an abductive approach, highlighting the moving back and forth between theory and data which was adopted for the analysis, emphasising the openness of the researcher to the perspectives of the participants (Seale, 1999, pp. 91–105). In this process, new theoretical perspectives and concepts were introduced in the analyses, beyond those guiding the data-gathering process

as discussed earlier. All names were pseudonymised and details removed so that none of the respondents can be identified. In order to further regard the ethical aspects of qualitative research and secure our participants' anonymity we have also chosen not to mention the specific geographical place where our participants live, but conceptualise the geographical areas in which they live in five categories: *metropolitan areas* (including the three larger cities in Sweden), *mid-size towns* (including a wide range of smaller and mid-sized towns in the southern and northern part of the country), *university towns* (including the cities mainly dominated by their larger universities), *smaller communities* and *countryside.*