

Chapter 3

Encountering news in ambient media environments

When exploring how news becomes meaningful to young people in everyday contexts, one starting point is to consider how it is accessed and made sense of as part of their wider media use. As discussed in both previous chapters, we can assume that news consumption in a highly digitised and media-saturated context can be characterised as a relatively fluid and less easily delineated endeavour, compared with more distinct activities such as ‘reading a newspaper’ or ‘watching the news on telly’, and that this shift has a particular bearing on young people. Yet, when browsing social media, listening to podcasts, watching video-logs or finding out about the latest online gossip, they, clearly, come across a variety of information, of which some can be obtained from established news media whereas some will be gleaned from sources and formats that may, potentially, be considered to be news, while unrelated to news journalism. To understand how young adults view and engage with news, we therefore begin by looking at how it fits into a broader media context.

This chapter provides an introductory overview of how the young adults in our study come across news, and how they perceive different kinds of news and information that they encounter as part of their everyday involvement with a variety of different media formats and content. In the chapter, we discuss the ways in which news is accessed and incorporated into these daily media habits, paying particular attention to news use as interlinked with social media, and highlighting blurring boundaries between news and social media from a young audience perspective. How do the young adults encounter news, as they see it? What kinds of media formats and content do they understand as covered by the notion of news? And how do they experience novel forms of ‘news’ stemming from social media platforms, including hybrid categories such as influencers and memes, as part of their wider media use?

By paying attention to the media practices and experiences of young adults, the chapter provides some initial answers to these questions, to be developed more fully in subsequent chapters. It begins by outlining some recent research on how audiences find and relate to news in a digital media landscape, sketching some of the central themes of analysis within this field of study, including the concept of ‘repertoire’ and different ways of conceptualising changing news practices. Introducing the interviews and focus groups, the analysis is then divided into three parts, with the first part discussing the research participants’ descriptions of their

‘media day’. The second part charts what types of news – as defined by the young adults – they encounter in their everyday life, ranging from occasionally watching TV news in the family home to continuous updates within a personalised ‘flow’ of information in social media. The third part of the analysis focuses on dimensions of social media as platforms for news, further considering how these impact on the young adults’ ideas of what news is, and highlighting how media genres ‘native’ to social media, including categories such as influencers and memes, can sometimes be experienced as important sources of ‘news’, with an equal standing to more official sources of information about society in the young adults’ eyes.

News repertoires, ‘news-ness’ and new pathways to news

Paying attention to what is ‘new’ in current news use is a common starting point in research within the so-called ‘audience turn’ in studies of news and journalism (see Vulpius et al., 2023), as we have discussed in Chapter 1. The focus on novel and transformative dimensions of contemporary news use partly relates to technological shifts, paving the way for different forms of cross-platform (Schröder, 2015; Swart et al., 2016) and mobile news use (see Jansson & Lindell, 2015; Picone et al., 2015), as well as to new routines and practices, including ‘checking’, ‘sharing’, ‘clicking’, ‘linking’ and ‘scrolling’ (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015, 2020; Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2019), with the habit of ‘snacking’, as brief repeated news encounters, especially associated with accessing news via mobile phones (cf. Molyneux, 2017).

One way of identifying how news audiences find and evaluate news in digital contexts is the study of everyday ‘repertoires’, which can be used to understand how and why people find and combine a range of news sources, while potentially rejecting others (e.g., Edgerly et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2022; Peters & Schröder, 2018; Schröder, 2015; Swart et al., 2016; Vulpius et al., 2023). News or information repertoires relate to regular uses of a variety of media, which are not viewed as discrete choices but rather as relational and contextually based, including orientations towards, for instance, a range of platforms, brands or genres, or specific regions or modes of consumption. News repertoires, thus, are not envisioned as synonymous with individual selections, nor do they necessarily overlap with news appreciation (Swart et al., 2016, pp. 1352–1354).

The notion of repertoires directs attention to how contemporary news consumption is formed within broad communicative environments, highlighting how people ‘meaningfully fulfil their needs for information and diversion’ (Peters et al., 2022, p. 64). It may, however, provide less room for analysis of other meaning-making processes, such as everyday social interaction and construction of narra-

tives around news (cf. Bird, 2010, p. 14; Clark & Marchi, 2017; Hill, 2007), while emphasising, in some sense, rational – if routinised and contextually located – forms of use. Social and mobile news consumption, however, has increasingly been associated with haphazard and unintentional news encounters (see Park & Kaye, 2020; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Srinivasan, 2022), and some scholars have emphasised how social media use interlinks with ‘news will find me’ perceptions among certain individuals, who feel that exposure to news happen irrespective of their choices or actions (De Zúñiga et al., 2017; De Zúñiga et al., 2020; Strauß et al., 2021). Based on a qualitative study of American college students, Dunja Antunovic et al. (2018) make the case for how ‘incidental consumption’, nevertheless, is to be seen as an expected part of young people’s digital news consumption, identified as a key ‘stage’ in this, alongside ‘routine surveillance’ and ‘directed consumption’. Such research mirrors other studies that have underlined how social media use, overall, is likely to interlink with unintended news consumption (Boczkowski et al. 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018), which can be seen as more common in the news experience of the young (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018).

The expansion of social media, clearly, warrants further consideration of their role in everyday news experiences, where different kinds of social media platforms, on a user level, are subject to distinct processes of meaning-making (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2023), but equally contribute to information ‘abundance’ (Boczkowski, 2021) that creates new challenges and opportunities for news audiences. As also noted in the introductory chapter, it can, likewise, be argued that the interconnected system of (social) media platforms (Van Dijck et al., 2018; cf. Van Dijck, 2013) impacts on news consumption far beyond multiplying the points of access; an argument developed by Clark and Marchi (2017) in their study of how teenagers partly circumvent established news organisations by using social media for accessing and creating their own news, with information-sharing and other communicative practices central. Their work correlates with theoretical analyses underlining how ‘the new networked spaces of storytelling afforded via online platforms’, apart from inviting communication and sharing, can be characterised as *hybrid*, in blurring boundaries between information, news and entertainment, and as *ambient* (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 29; cf. Hermida, 2010) – signalling a more fluid character that can be compared with the idea of ‘news-ness’ for capturing audience perspectives (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020a, 2020b), as discussed in the introductory chapter. Such analysis, no doubt, will serve as an important backdrop as we, in the following, move on to discuss the empirical study.

News as embedded in the media day

As explained in the previous chapter, we started our empirical work by posing a ‘media day’ question, asking the young adults to freely talk about how they would use media on an ordinary day, and from there proceeded to discussions about their uses of news and information. This initial question often yielded elaborate answers, detailing how different kinds of – primarily digital – media played a continual, often crucial, part of daily routines. As in the introductory example of this book, a common description was how they would start the day by checking social media on their smartphones, while still in bed, and from then on use a range of mainly digital media to accompany everyday activities in an ongoing manner.¹ Striking to us was the overall richness of their media use, in terms of the range of media formats and content engaged with but also how it was continuous and simultaneous, encompassing a great deal of the ‘life-world’, sometimes making it difficult for the participants to fully explain. A media day could include, for example, watching YouTube videos over breakfast, listening to music on Spotify in headphones while browsing social media or news apps on the bus on the way to school or work, continuing to check one’s mobile throughout the day to keep connected to friends and public issues, playing a computer game or watching a TV series on a streaming site to relax back at home, listening to a podcast while cooking, watching a film or a series later in the evening – and ending the day by scrolling social media, in bed. Given that we did not observe their actual media practices, it is not possible for us to have a clear picture of how they, for instance, navigated on social media, although many were generous in attempting to provide relatively detailed accounts when asked about this.

These accounts, which may be seen as indicative of ‘media life’ (Deuze, 2012), or ‘deep mediatisation’ (Couldry & Hepp, 2016; Hepp, 2020), as characteristics of contemporary life, likewise provided a picture of daily media use at once highly individualised and social, in that it largely revolved around personal and individualised streams of information, with the smartphone a central technology, but

1 While most of the participants provided detailed accounts of their daily media involving different media, we should of course be aware that the accounts they gave us should not be regarded as complete, and that there may be aspects of their media use that they would not be comfortable telling researchers or other people about. Examples of media use that might be considered more private could be the use of pornography, which was not mentioned in any of the interviews or focus groups, online gambling, or the use of certain games or dating apps. The latter was discussed in one focus group, in relation to how a group of female friends would look at dating apps on their phones in a humorous way together, but in general, these types of media were not mentioned.

equally incorporated ongoing networking and communication on social media. As explained in Chapter 2, most of the young people who participated in the study did not describe themselves as particularly active in sharing and producing content (although a few did), yet it appeared common to sometimes communicate with others in smaller chat groups, on platforms such as Messenger, Snapchat and WhatsApp, which they found more enjoyable and experienced as less risky than the sharing in more public spaces. It was also obvious, particularly from the focus groups, that these chats could be the basis for ‘offline’ social interaction throughout the day, too. For example, in one group with male friends, who were interviewed on Zoom, the participants in fact kept using ‘their’ chat group during the discussion, occasionally joking and laughing with one another about the content in the chat. At the same time, the social dimension, as well as the overall media day, differed depending on the participants’ living situation, which varied from living alone, to living with a partner, flatmates, or family or children. For those still living with their parents, watching regular TV together with a parent or other family members could, for example, be described as part of the media day, including watching morning or evening news programmes together. In these instances, the young adults had not themselves chosen what to watch but appreciated the opportunity to connect to their families and to be able to comment on various news items together.

As would be expected given the participants’ age and geo-cultural location, social media played a critical part in their daily media use. Using one’s smartphone to scroll through and briefly ‘check’ a range of social media platforms throughout the day was described as a recurring habit, providing opportunities to keep up to date with friends and the extended social network as well as keeping abreast with what was going on in society and the world beyond the immediate surroundings. Samuel, a 23-year-old personal assistant who lived by himself in a university town, explained how his day was initiated in this way, with social media accompanying other activities, too:

Samuel: When I wake up I check the phone for a bit, and then there might have dropped in some memes in group chats, or whatever. I usually start with some scrolling, for example both Instagram and Facebook, I check all messages and might write something myself. Then it just continues, so I sit down in front of the computer (...). A lot of TV and streaming. I rarely post on social media. I’ve just downloaded that bloody app, TikTok, too, which the lads recommended, and yesterday I was in the bath for two and a half hours, just scrolling through TikTok.

(Samuel, 23, personal assistant, university town)

As emphasised by Samuel, the checking and scrolling of social media platforms could thus frame and punctuate the day, although it was far from always described as an active choice. This more habitual, or even compulsive, aspect was also exem-

plified by Ingrid and Tilda, two 22-year-olds living in a mid-size town in central Sweden, working at a school and in a shop, when discussing their motivation for repeatedly checking Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat throughout their day:

Ingrid: As soon as you're waiting for the bus or go somewhere you check Instagram, and Twitter, and Snapchat, all the time. Because that's where we talk, or whatever. (...)

Tilda: I completely agree! You do it because you're bored and have nothing else to do.

(Focus group, 22, mid-size town)

It can be noted, thus, that the young adults' uses of social media were partly experienced as something distinct from active social networking or a determined search for news or other information. The continual scrolling and 'checking' correspond to the cyclical and brief 'scanning' that has been observed for contemporary news consumption (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015, 2020; Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2019), but when thinking about how encounters with news may interweave with young adults' everyday uses of social media, it is clearly necessary to acknowledge its routinised and more unaware dimensions.

In line with national statistics at the time,² the most frequently used social media platforms were Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, which almost all the respondents used every day, followed by Youtube, Twitter (currently X) and TikTok, which many used regularly. Some discussed less commonly used platforms, such as WhatsApp, Reddit, Pinterest and Twitch. Although the participants' social media habits, then, appeared to follow user patterns for the specific age group in Sweden, they equally mirrored international research on young adults' social media use, in that different platforms appeared to play distinct roles in their lives (see Boczkowski et al., 2018). For instance, while Facebook was often described as a more 'official' platform, used, for example, for taking part in interest groups and finding information about work opportunities and social events, Instagram was seen as suited for following lifestyle trends, influencers and information about what was happening in society, whereas Snapchat appeared particularly valued for communicating with and keeping up to date with friends. Similarly, YouTube was often described as a platform that could help deepen knowledge about specific subjects or interests, with Twitter as offering interesting opinions, and TikTok generally described as a source of light-hearted entertainment at the time of the interviews. Such nuances, which will be developed further in the next chapter, are important to recognise as they necessitate a holistic perspective to understand how social media interplay in the lives of young people, as well as providing a backdrop to

2 https://svenskarnaochinternet.se/rapporter/svenskarna-och-internet-2020/sociala-medier/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMItPL-weW-7wIVQaOyCh0gdAEQEAAAYASABEGITR_D_BwE.

the enquiry into how news was encountered within the participants' overall media use.

News was not commonly mentioned in the first response to our question about the media day, perhaps reflecting how conventional news is not always prioritised by people in this age group (see Peters et al., 2022, pp. 65–66), and serving as a reminder of how news journalism, when approached as part of a *totality* of different media, is not necessarily considered a particularly prominent feature by young people. As will be discussed below, there were several participants who said that they would read an online newspaper or check a news aggregator app on a, more or less, daily basis, and some of the 'older' participants in this sample mentioned 'quality' morning papers, read online, in their immediate descriptions of their regular media habits, as well as radio news, whereas others explained straight away that they had a strong interest in news. Yet, these immediate connections to news were not common, and, in the initial phase of the discussions, news did generally not appear as a key feature within their daily media use.

There was, however, a widespread notion among most of the young adults of news as being *important* – a media genre of value to society (c.f. Casero Ripollés, 2012). Yet, when describing their own media consumption practices, it appeared less prominent, at least initially in the discussions. This slight discrepancy, which can be seen as something of a paradox also found in previous studies of young news audiences (Costera Meijer, 2007), is exemplified in the following explanation by Michelle, an unemployed 19-year-old living in the countryside, who emphasised how she felt it was imperative to follow news media, such as the popular tabloid *Aftonbladet*, at the same time as recognising that this was something that she aspired to, rather than actively practised in her daily life:

Michelle: I think it's important that both myself and others follow the news media, like *Aftonbladet* or something, so you have an idea of what's happening in the world. I definitely feel like I should get better at that, because it's so important to keep updated. So that feels important to me.

(Michelle, 19, unemployed, countryside)

Keeping up to date with the news, then, was regarded as an ideal and something to strive for, but on an everyday level it was not always prioritised among the range of available media content. This mirrored a previous Swedish study of how youth view social media as sources of public affairs news, which in a similar way found a strong belief in the value of taking part in news journalism and feelings of shame for privately preferring to instead follow more 'frivolous' social media content (Sveningsson, 2015).

Finding news

However, despite the tension between the perception of engaged news consumption as an ideal, and the actual day-to-day routines adhered to, as our interviews progressed it became clear that both news journalism and other kinds of information that the participants regarded as ‘news’ were still in different ways present within their overall media habits. As mentioned, TV news programmes were regularly watched by some of the participants, who explained how morning or evening newscasts from the public service broadcaster (SVT) or from TV4, a popular commercial TV channel, formed part of their routines. Here, *Nyhetsmorgon*, a morning news show on TV4 mixing ‘serious’ and more light-hearted news, seemed especially appreciated for being entertaining as well as informative. Likewise, some read free local newspapers every now and again, and many claimed to at least occasionally read an online newspaper, with *Aftonbladet*’s free app mentioned as a source of news in many of the discussions, alongside the SVT news app, and Omni, a free Swedish news aggregator app that was particularly appreciated for allowing brief round-ups of the main news headlines; a type of quick overview that many, in fact, seemed to prefer when accessing news journalism online. Furthermore, possibly reflecting how news consumption is intimately linked with social class (see Lindell, 2018; Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023), some of the participants from a middle-class background, whose parents had gone to university or who were themselves university students, also mentioned the two ‘quality’ Swedish newspapers *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* as key to their regular news consumption. Others, however, regarded these types of news sources as inaccessible, possibly because of the more demanding content but also due to the price required to get behind the paywall for content. As exemplified by a 23-year-old shop assistant from a metropolitan area, the price of news could, in fact, be a key concern when choosing a news source, and reading a newspaper online was not necessarily something considered worth paying for:

Tuva: The ones [news sources] that I’m mostly drawn to are the evening tabloids *Expressen* or *Aftonbladet*. A lot of young people my age have these apps, but mainly for pleasure and shock value than for actual news. If something interesting turns up I’ll check it there. Often it’s for free as well – much more often than in *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter*, which you have to pay for.

(Tuva, 23, shop assistant, metropolitan area)

When the participants elaborated on which types of news journalism they were interested in and would meet in their everyday life, then, the emphasis, as in this example, was often on news sources that were entertaining or provided a quick, easily accessible overview, but also were available for free. The latter can

be compared to Danish research showing how young audiences may view news as a ‘free’ resource (Kammer et al., 2015) but is also a reminder of how the price of news journalism can be important for some parts of the audience.

Thus, many of the young adults would at least in some capacity actively turn to different forms of news journalism, including the news apps that some had downloaded on their phones. News journalism could also be accessed as embedded in their social media feeds, where they, likewise, regularly encountered a range of other types of information about society from a variety of other sources, including influencers, video-logs on YouTube, Instagram Stories, memes, social media postings of friends and family, and websites from organisations and government agencies. It, likewise, became clear that for many, this kind of wider information but also some news journalism encountered in social media could be of a transnational character, with several participants for example being aware of and spontaneously mentioning some main English-language news sites, including the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun*, *Fox News* and *CNN*. In some of the interviews and focus groups there were also accounts of what Antunovic et al. (2018) call ‘directed consumption’, exemplified by how the participants explained they would turn to and actively seek out information from established news sources when a major event or something out of the ordinary appeared, for example in relation to Covid-19.

However, the discussions also provided insights into less actively sought after encounters with news. This type of news use appeared hard to pin-point, yet it was often mentioned when participants were asked about where they would find news and information about society – a question that some would struggle to answer or explain, or answer with statements such as “I don’t know, it just comes to me!” Where news ‘comes from’, then, could be a difficult question to answer, with news as ‘just appearing’ a notable aspect of the young adults’ experiences. As in the example below, when a university student in the natural sciences described her overall news routines, it could, for instance, be related to automatic ‘push notifications’ not always easy to identify:

Beatrice: Well, I think I get these ... what do you call them, push notifications, from *Dagens Nyheter*? I think? I’m not sure, I need to check. *Dagens Nyheter*, SVT, TV4-play. I think those are what I get – yes, those I get push notifications from, so then I can kind of see the headlines. (...) But I don’t think I read very much. In the morning, I scroll through social media for a little while, like Facebook and Instagram. And then I do check the SVT app. And I think those are the only things that I actively go to.

(Beatrice, 25, university student, metropolitan area)

Similarly, the experience of news as ‘just appearing’ could relate to an algorithmic selection of news and information based on earlier searches and personal interests, as explained by Wilhelm, a 20-year-old IT technician:

Interviewer: What type of news are you interested in, Wilhelm?

Wilhelm: Well, it could be everything from some gossip about ... for example, Johnny Depp, you hear a lot about him now. Or about Covid being on the increase, and how we're not prepared for the next wave, for example. Or it could be about a game, that there's a new release coming up later. So everything from entertainment to serious news, really.

Interviewer: We talked about gaming before, is it from YouTube you get information there, or?

Wilhelm: It depends, it can vary from YouTube to Google. If you open up your news feed on your mobile phone, you get a lot of news there. It comes from the searches you've done on YouTube and Google, which I guess depends on what you've been searching for, what they decide to show you.

Interviewer: So you mean that you don't consciously go in and look for that type of news...?

Wilhelm: No, exactly.

(Wilhelm, 20, IT technician, countryside)

The experiences described by Beatrice and Wilhelm are, arguably, not possible to fully capture using the notion of news repertoires, as these require some sort of active selection of platforms and sources, whereas the accounts of Beatrice and Wilhelm concern automated encounters with news that seemed difficult for the participants themselves to pin-point or identify. Instead, these kinds of descriptions draw attention to how exposure to news can appear as part of an ongoing 'flow' of content on social and mobile media, as has been theorised by other scholars (Park & Kaye, 2020; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Srinivasan, 2022). To some extent, this may align with the 'news finds me' perception as previously discussed (see Strauß et al., 2021), as an individual approach stimulated by digitisation and social media. However, we would argue that the experience of news as 'just appearing', here, was not just confined to the expectations of certain individuals, but instead appeared as fundamental to the young adults' daily experiences of digital systems of news and information partly shaped by automation and algorithmic steering of news and information habits (cf. Antunovic et al., 2018).

Social media as a source of news

In some of the interviews and focus groups, there were spontaneous comparisons of what accessing news and information via social media more specifically involved, compared with traditional news media. Social media, here, were often held up as an important, yet different, source of news and information, useful for keeping up to date with smaller and larger events, and for easy access to fast-paced information considered relevant. They could thus be described as com-

plementing news in traditional media, providing alternative perspectives or giving opportunities for gaining a deeper knowledge about specific events. At the time of the research, Black Lives Matter and Covid-19 were, for instance, major, ongoing news stories, and these two examples were mentioned in several of the interviews and focus groups as something that participants had attempted to learn more about through social media, for example by turning to influencers on Instagram or video-logs on YouTube to find out about specific aspects of these events. Such descriptions align with several contemporary studies of people's information practices that show that news journalism is far from the only source of information in people's lives (see Stald, 2023) and that several different kinds of media content can be seen as news (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015, 2020; Peters et al., 2022; Örnebring & Hellekant Rowe, 2022).

Some of the participants made a distinction between news journalism and other kinds of information, such as a group of male university students, 22–23 years old, who followed two public service radio channels on social media, but yet considered social media as 'only memes, pictures of people having babies and their cats, kind of', and felt it was important to keep updated by quality newspapers and other established news sources. Others made distinctions between news in social media and news journalism, not as something radically different, but as complementary genres within the broader concept of news. As just one example of how wide-ranging the discussions could become when speaking about different sources of news and information, it is worth quoting at length a discussion with Wilhelm, the 20-year-old IT-technician, Michelle, the 19-year-old currently unemployed, and Saga, an 18-year-old gymnasium student, all living in the countryside:

Interviewer: Do you access any news and if so, what kind of news?

Saga: It's very varied, basically. I hear news from the horse world, and ... yes. That's what I find most interesting, and how Corona ... I have also followed the American election a lot.

Interviewer: Where do you get this news?

Saga: Regarding the horse world, there is this app called Ridler, Corona and the election has been mostly TV4, they updated a lot.

Interviewer: But not social media then?

Saga: Instagram, in that case.

Michelle: Yes, I would say Instagram, that's where I get most of my information, but also as Saga said, horse news I check on Hippson's webpage because there's a lot of horse stuff, kind of.

Wilhelm: I use mostly Facebook I would say, because there I get everything from *Expressen* [a tabloid newspaper] to what a friend shares from their everyday life. I get everything I want, from news to entertainment.

Interviewer: What kind of news is it that you see on Instagram, Michelle?

Michelle: There's also a lot of horse stuff, because I follow several horse accounts and keep updated about horse competitions, especially now during Corona. So, I'm very much keeping track of the horse world.

Interviewer: Facebook is an important news media for you Wilhelm?

Wilhelm: Yes, when comparing Instagram and Facebook, I get more from Facebook. Instagram is more fun stuff, fun memes for example.

Michelle: It also depends a lot on what you follow on Instagram, I have actively chosen to follow several accounts that post a lot about horses, while Wilhelm maybe follows more entertaining accounts, and of course we end up with very different things then.

(...)

Interviewer: Are there any areas or countries or so that you are particularly interested in getting news about?

Michelle: I like Swedish news because I follow a lot of horse-news, to keep track of competitions, if they will go through with them or not. What will happen with Falsterbo Horse Show, and the Swedish Championship and so on.

Saga: I keep very much updated about the horse world in Sweden as well as internationally, I find it really interesting to hear others' points of view about Corona at the moment, and then also generally about new horse methods and stuff.

Wilhelm: For me, it's mostly [information about] job opportunities or apartments. Also news from around, but also entertainment. Both in Sweden and internationally. If you're looking for a job, it's in Sweden, but entertainment you check internationally.

Interviewer: Do you read international news in Swedish news media?

Wilhelm: It depends, but mostly English [media] I think. I don't know if it's USA's own sites, but it's different. I get different [sites/suggestions] in my news feed, it can be about Johnny Depp or other news, but it's in my feed.

Interviewer: What kind of English-language can it be?

Wilhelm: There are some vlogs, or news sites, that not only contain one thing, but a mixture of things.

(Focus group, 18–20, countryside)

This discussion clearly exemplifies the porous borders between news and other media content in the minds of these young people, and illustrates how social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook could play a major role as providers of news and information. And even though there were of course differences among respondents, based on age as well as social class and other factors shaping news consumption, this way of seeing all kinds of content in social media as news was, in fact, common among the entire group of participants, with the two ways of understanding news, as journalism and news media, and as a much wider range of

content and formats, often co-existing in the discussions. Although the young Swedes in general were familiar with the basic differences between news journalism and other mediated information integrated in their information repertoires and overall media use, such as journalists' intention, work process and ethos, these insights did not affect how they shaped their daily information practices or conceptualised news. Alongside the notion of 'news-ness' as a way to think about how news can be understood on an audience level, we could therefore also use the categories suggested in a report by the Reuters Institute of Journalism on young people and news, which, based on a qualitative study of young adults in three different countries (Brazil, the UK and US) makes a distinction between 'the news' and 'news', as a help for thinking about news from a broader perspective, where the latter entails a plethora of information that young people consider to be new, in a range of different areas (Collao, 2022, p. 15).

When describing social media as sites for news, some, furthermore, underlined how social media platforms could be valued precisely because they differed from news journalism, not least due to the availability of user-generated stories and more personal perspectives. Such accounts illustrated in our material correlate with a recent study of young Dutch smartphone users by Joëlle Swart and Marcel Broersma (2023), which points to how we might think of a difference between young people's awareness of what news is, traditionally, and their experiences of what news 'feels like', on platforms such as Instagram. One participant, who explained how she used Instagram to learn about the situation for Uyghurs in China, also emphasised how she perceived a difference in the focus of news on social media versus traditional news media, where social media, as she experienced it, could provide more attention to specific issues:

News on social media, for me, are things that happen that aren't given so much attention in, like, *Aftonbladet* – like demonstrations. Or like the rainforest in Amazonas or fires in Australia, that wasn't written about so much in *Aftonbladet*, but it was more on Instagram.

(Lovisa, 21, university student, metropolitan area)

One participant in a group of 18-year-old gymnasium students, who lived in a less affluent suburb in a metropolitan area and claimed to almost solely access news and information about society on social media, developed a similar view that social media platforms could extend knowledge about topics and perspectives that traditional news media did not cover:

Interviewer: Which types of news do you find most interesting to get updated on?

Absalon: I like to take part of news that affects me. The kind of news that I mainly see online (on social media) is to do with injustices. That's because injustices aren't shown in the same

way in traditional media, it won't get the same amount of viewings. ... About a month ago, there was news about police brutality in Nigeria. I wouldn't have known about it if I hadn't seen it online, it was only there that I could see it. It wasn't covered anywhere on, like, SVT or *Aftonbladet*.

Interviewer: Where did you get the information about the police brutality...?

Absalon: First on Twitter, cause it was trending there. Then I went in there and checked and got a lot of information. The week after I saw it everywhere on Instagram and YouTube. People were sharing it on their stories, it was everywhere.

(Absalon, 18, gymnasium student, metropolitan area)

Social media, here, are seen as more suited than traditional news media in covering certain topics of particular interest, and for gaining information about specific geographical areas not in focus in the Swedish news media. It is also clear that, as social media platforms are described as the *only* place to obtain what these young participants defined as news, different social media platforms gain different roles in shaping this, as in this example when Twitter became the first place that Absalon heard about police brutality in Nigeria, as a 'trending' topic, which he, then, would learn more about through shared stories and personal interpretations on Instagram and YouTube. In these instances, our material can clearly be compared to the news use observed by Clark and Marchi (2017) in their work with American teenagers, in highlighting a simultaneous disillusionment with 'legacy' news and the formation of alternative sources of knowledge and public engagement on social media, where Clark and Marchi are drawing on Papacharissi's (2015) notion of 'affective publics' to describe how young people become part of the news story by emotive declarations online (2017, pp. 117–119).

Influencers and memes as news genres

The experiences among participants of social media as providing a particular form of *news*, with its own news values and prioritised perspectives and responses, meant that what was considered as sources of news, finally, could also be extended to new genres – of which influencers and memes were two noteworthy categories that could be referred to as key news sources in the interviews and focus groups. Influencers – a term that was rather broadly used by the participants to refer to popular individuals with a large online following – primarily seemed to have a role in areas such as lifestyle, fashion, training and beauty, but they were also, by some, considered useful for providing information on areas such as Covid-19, Black Lives Matter or feminism, or for topics relating to politics or activism, at the same time as they could be appreciated for providing an interpretive community. The latter

aspect was exemplified in the interview with Tuva, the shop assistant introduced earlier, who was particularly engaged in feminism and anti-racism, and who explained how certain influencer accounts on Instagram had become highly significant to her, as her friends were less interested in politics and she no longer had her father around to discuss these interests with:

Interviewer: So you choose not to talk about that type of political stuff with your friends?

Tuva: No, they know where I stand. But I think most of them have become bored (laughter), or aren't interested. I notice that and it's a shame, but what can I do? I used to talk a lot about it with my dad, but hardly with my mum, she's not interested. So I think that's it, to have access to someone you can communicate with about what's happening, as I don't have a lot of access to mainstream media, and before it was always dad who I could talk to.

Interviewer: So these accounts, or influencers, they fill that kind of function for you?

Tuva: Mm.

Here it is relevant to underline influencers as a hybrid source of 'news' shaped by what Zizi Papacharissi (2015, p. 29) and Alfred Hermida (2010) have referred to as an 'ambient' environment for news, with a potential impact on engagement in political issues as well as in the wider public sphere, while balancing between commercialism and authenticity (see Arriagada & Bishop, 2021).

The discussions about influencers and celebrities, likewise, would sometimes illustrate not only their role in providing information and how they could serve as interpretive communities – in some ways mirroring earlier forms of celebrity culture (c.f. Johansson, 2015) – but also how they would function as opinion-leaders, able to articulate political opinion and stimulate discussion. Maria, a 21-year-old care assistant, who followed several influencers and celebrity accounts on Instagram and YouTube, and who had explained that for her, the notion of 'news' entailed anything from updates from *Aftonbladet* to advice on Covid-19 from the public health authority and celebrity postings on social media, gave an example of such an instance from her daily social media feed:

Maria: I think it was Joel Kinnaman who had posted about Black Lives Matter, saying that we're all human and the same, irrespective of the colour of our skin. And he, sort of, made an argument for that, that no one deserves that kind of injustice, and that there should be equal justice for everyone. And I really agree with that, it's really important!

(Maria, 21, care assistant, mid-size town)

Social media postings by famous people, in this case a well-known Swedish actor voicing his opinion on a major news story, could, then, lead to wider reflections on politics and society, as well as providing support of one's own opinions.

Another genre that was repeatedly mentioned as an in some ways important source of information and commentary on news, outside of news journalism, was memes – humorous images or video clips with a witty caption or a short accompanying text. This type of digital content has been shown to play a significant role in global digital culture, often spreading very fast and being shaped by a multitude of users (Miltner, 2018; Shifman, 2014), with the potential for creative and participatory elements as well as for weaponizing political discourse (e.g. Denisova, 2019; Milner, 2018; Peters & Allan, 2021; Wiggins, 2019). Memes were, in this study, particularly appreciated for providing a humorous touch to the everyday. They were, by some, considered pure entertainment but could also be regarded as a way to gain – or share – information about different kinds of public issues, albeit in a light-hearted way. To take another example from the focus group with the gymnasium students quoted earlier, memes could be a way to comment on, and to add a humorous touch to, certain events or news stories:

Absalon: I usually send memes to people, both to groups and just friends. I belong to several groups where we send memes to each other. If you take part in a discussion you can send a relevant meme that everyone understands. Different memes suit different people, so that's why I send memes to different people, depending on if I think that they will like them or not.

Interviewer: Where do you find the memes, then?

Absalon: People make memes as soon as anything happens, so there are always memes on Instagram, at least for me. I follow a lot of meme accounts, but there are lots of memes on general accounts too. A lot on Twitter too – those are the best ones! There aren't as many as on Instagram there, but they're more true to reality. There are a lot of videos there, so I usually download them and then pass them along.

Interviewer: By 'true to reality', do you mean that they are relatable?

Absalon: Yeah, exactly. For example, yesterday, everyone wanted to cancel Kevin Hart [an actor]. So then there were a lot of memes about Kevin Hart, that he's short and things like that, it was funny. But different memes are fun for different people.

Absalon, who took considerable care choosing suitable memes for his friends, exemplifies how, for some of the young adults, memes could form an important part of the social activities of groups and smaller communities on social media, allowing particular individuals to take on a dominant role in curating and distributing these. Although memes were generally not described as news, they could clearly be used as vehicles for information about society, politics and popular culture, with potential to engage and provide the basis for identification and experiences of belonging among members of smaller groups. Such small groups, further, may be seen as a form of 'micro-public', "permitting the circulation of information, ideas and debates in an unfettered manner" (Clark & Marchi, 2017, p. 116), while

small groups formed around messaging apps and social media, furthermore, can be seen as important spaces for maintaining ‘public connection’, as a social practice potentially orienting people towards public life (Swart et al., 2018, cf. Couldry et al., 2007a, 2007b). In the same way as influencers, or, indeed, podcasts, video-logs and many other digital media genres, can be regarded as important sources of news and information for young people, so, too, did these discussions exemplify how the uses of social media as platforms for news, as described by the participants, necessitate a continued renewed analysis not only of the concept of news, but also of what it can entail for young people.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed how young people can encounter and come into contact with news as part of their highly digitised day-to-day lives, and, crucially, within their broader media use. As shown by earlier research on the role of news in everyday life, to gain a nuanced understanding of this it is important to acknowledge how news consumption is embedded into overall media practices, which, for the young adults in this study, were primarily linked to digital media, with smartphones a key device for news and information, and social media providing a dominant framework for their engagement with different kinds of media content and information throughout the day. Although being an informed citizen was generally seen as an ideal, correlating to previous research on young news audiences, news did initially not appear to be highly prioritised as part of the range of available formats and content, with a slight discrepancy between ideas of what one *should* do, and the accounts of what a ‘media day’ would *actually* involve. Despite this, many different sources of news and information were incorporated into the young adults’ varied and fluid media use, ranging from TV news programmes to news apps and a variety of news and information in social media. While preferences for news journalism could differ, many seemed to prefer easily accessible and entertaining news content for regular news updates and for engaging content, as for instance found in a tabloid news app or on a morning news show, or to be able to get quick overviews of headlines and brief news stories, with the price also mentioned as a factor that could determine which news source to access online.

The chapter has also begun to highlight the porous boundaries between news and social media in the eyes of a young audience, illustrating how social media can be integrated into their lives as major, and sometimes the only, sources of news, experienced not just as networking platforms for the distribution of news journalism, but also as carrying other kinds of content that could, for many, relatively

seamlessly be experienced as ‘news’. Such content could be regarded as a complement to news journalism, allowing for different perspectives on news stories and more personal content, but social media platforms were also described as valued for providing radically different kinds of ‘news’ compared with traditional news media, and as operating from within a different set of news values altogether. As such, the notion of social media as providers of news directs analytical attention to novel ‘news’ categories or sources, of which user-generated content, influencers and memes came across as examples of important sources of news and information outside of news journalism, with particular consequences for the formation of ‘affective-’ and ‘micro-publics’, which we will discuss further later in this book.

Finally, this first look at our research participants’ daily encounters with news and information has emphasised not only the routinised and mundane aspects of these, but also how news and other types of information can appear, to a young audience, as part of an automated flow, with the notion of news as ‘just appearing’ underlined in the chapter. This aspect of the young adults’ news consumption, which partly relates to processes of automation and an algorithmic selection of content on social media, came across as significant as part of the overall experiences of digital systems of news and information, and, alongside many of the other initial findings that have been presented here, is something that fruitfully can be returned to for an extended analysis.