Chapter 7
Trust in news and information

While different forms of storytelling provided important resources to draw upon for the young adults, helping to make sense of the world and their position in it, their engagement with various media forms also foregrounds questions of trust, which will be the focus of this chapter. We have, so far in this book, discussed how a range of novel genres, often native to social media, were used as forms of hybrid news sources – and indeed as providers of meaningful stories – but the multitude of available media outlets, seen from another perspective, equally makes sound assessments of what is trustworthy more difficult. As noted in the introductory chapter, the spread of mis- and disinformation online has become a worldwide problem, affecting young as well as older media users, and further complicating discussions about trust in news and media in a multi-platform environment (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). Some scholars have, moreover, pointed to a perceived link between digitisation and blurring lines between 'expert' knowledge, shaped by professional and institutional actors, and more popular forms of knowledge, related to popular sensibilities potentially encouraged by alternative sources of news and information (Cmiel & Durham Peters, 2020).

In the chapter, we examine how young people talk about trust in relation to news and information that they encounter in their everyday lives, both concerning 'the news', as established news media, and 'news', conceptualised in broader ways. Rather than approaching trust as something fixed, or easily measurable, we focus on the way that they articulate and describe their experiences of trust (or distrust), examining what kinds of news and information the young adults say that they trust, and how they come to determine what to trust in their digitised everyday lives. We start by briefly overviewing theories and some current research on media trust, and then outline the young adults' own understandings of what sources of news and information they feel they can trust, and why. The second part of the analysis focuses on how they evaluate and compare different kinds of news and information, including that obtained on social media, while grappling with uncertainties and challenges when making decisions about where to place their trust. The last part of the analysis, finally, discusses how young audiences can meet these challenges partly by developing a range of micro-practices to evaluate different kinds of news and information, more based on personal experience and relationships. Overall, the chapter emphasises the intricacy of the subject; showing how young people may, on the one hand, have clear ideas about what types of news and information they should trust, but, on the other hand, may use a rather different set of evaluative practices when determining where to place their trust. Such

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tensions were also brought up in relation to established ideals about the value of being a certain kind of critical media user, which were often developed at school, and the difficulties of applying such ideals in practice.

Media trust and trust in news

The notion of trust is central to a great deal of scholarship on news and journalism. Social trust between people, as well as trust in institutions, can provide a ground for stability, democracy and cooperation, without which it would be difficult to build stable communities (Misztal, 1996). A certain degree of public trust, likewise, is normally thought of as key for the media to be able to function in their role as a 'fourth estate', keeping a check on those in power and providing information about important issues. Without a basic level of trust among citizens, getting such information across could potentially be made very difficult and from this perspective it is imperative for news audiences to hold a degree of trust, and to be able to do so on solid grounds. Yet, there is a great deal of concern about eroding trust in the news media, with a report from the Reuters Institute for Journalism, for example, starting from the idea of an erosion of this as a global challenge (Toff et al., 2020), which has also been related to a wider 'crisis of information' (Haider & Sundin, 2022), with information abundance and 'high choice' media environments creating new challenges for evaluating information. At the same time, trust in news media is contingent upon geo-political and cultural contexts, with somewhat opposing trends in different countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). It is also a complex subject to operationalise in research, partly as it has no agreed upon definitions.

Trust, overall, has been defined as an assumption about the future and as taking a risk without knowing the outcome (Luhmann, 2017), and, similarly, as "a bet about the future contingent actions of others" (Sztompka, 1999, p. 25), involving both beliefs, such as of reciprocity and benign conduct, and commitment through actions, such as making a choice based on those beliefs. Russell Hardin (2002) describes trust as "encapsulated interest": the expectation that the trusted party will have an interest in fulfilling the trust of the other. Discussing the subject from a sociological perspective, Piotr Sztompka, on the other hand, sees trust as a three-pronged category, involving a relational dimension, as a quality of a relationship; as well as a personality trait, a 'trusting impulse'; and finally a cultural dimension, meaning that the pre-existing cultural context has a bearing on decisions to trust or distrust (1999, pp. 60–68).

Public distrust in news media, as mentioned in the introduction, is often identified as a challenge for democracy, which is particularly prominent in some parts

of the world, including in the US, where distrust in the news media has been related to factors such as polarised politics and a widespread belief that the news media have a political bias (e.g., Jones, 2004; Lee, 2010; Ognyanova, 2019). At the same time, 'blind' trust, accompanied by the inability to properly critique or understand the requirements of different news genres and formats, can be equally problematic (see Burroughs et al., 2009; Mihalidis, 2012). Distrust may also in some situations be a rational response, for example in authoritarian societies.[1] Some researchers, moreover, point to the difficulty in comparing studies of media trust, related to challenges in conceptually pin-pointing and operationalising the concept, as well as to the complexity of audience understandings, questioning its very usefulness in research (Fisher, 2016; Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023).

As noted by Jesper Strömbäck et al. (2020, p. 140), 'media trust' and 'news media trust' are often used interchangeably. 'News media trust' may be a more precise term for examining audience approaches to news journalism specifically, usually referring to traditional news media such as newspapers, TV news and radio news – but this, too, carries a range of interpretations regarding both what is meant by trust and by news media. Providing a comprehensive review of literature on the subject, Strömbäck et al., however, find that much of this literature shares some basic assumptions:

> [A]t the broadest conceptual level, there is significant consensus that news media trust refers to the relationship between citizens (the trustors) and the news media (the trustees) where citizens, however tacit or habitual, in situations of uncertainty expect that interactions with the news media will lead to gains rather than losses.
>
> (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 141)

Starting from such an outlook, many recent studies about trust in news have examined trust in different forms of news journalism and news media (e.g., Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Stubenvoll et al., 2021), looking at, for instance, levels of trust and distrust in digital news, as well as fake news detection in digital media (e.g., Blöbaum, 2016; Dabbous et al., 2021; Fletcher & Park, 2017; Livio & Cohen, 2018). Largely based on survey studies, certain overall findings appear to be corroborated across studies and countries, in that low levels of trust in public institutions and political systems seem to relate to low trust in the news

1 Sztompka provides an account of how democratic systems, by 'institutionalising distrust' in requiring justification of power through democratic checks and controls (such as periodical elections, divisions of power and open communication) paradoxically can produce spontaneous cultures of trust, whereas autocratic regimes institutionalise trust by formally demanding unconditional support for the rulers, with power based on arbitrary principle, and thereby producing a pervasive culture of distrust (1999, pp. 139–150).

media (Jones, 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Kiousis, 2001), whereas interpersonal trust as well as exposure to television news and newspapers positively correlate with media trust (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), while the consumption of alternative news media can interlink with distrust in mainstream media (Jackob, 2010). However, as highlighted by Thomas Hanitzsch et al. (2018) in a comparative, longitudinal analysis of trust in the press in different countries, there appears to be little evidence of a unified worldwide trend towards a decline in public trust in news media.

A smaller number of recent studies have used qualitative methods to explore audience perspectives on trust in news and digital information more broadly and in relation to everyday practices and discourses. Erik Knudsen et al. (2021) investigate how the public describe news media trust in their own words, pointing, among other things, to the differences in worldviews and ideology among journalists and audience members, as well as underlining how a citizen perspective on news media trust is rarely explicated in existing research. Likewise, a multimethod study in Finland (Horowitz et al., 2021) stresses the notion of 'critical trust', meaning an awareness of the 'systemic' consequences of digitisation, especially the dangers of social media bubbles, disinformation and market-driven imperatives of journalism, as a prominent aspect of audience accounts, underlining a continual balancing between scepticism and trust in contemporary news consumption. Mapping such intricacies more specifically in relation to young people, Swart and Broersma (2022), based on a study of youth in the Netherlands, develop a taxonomy of young people's tactics when assessing the reliability of news (cf. Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). The authors underline that young media users often employ pragmatic shortcuts to approximate the trustworthiness of news, including affective and intuitive tactics rooted in tacit knowledge.

Finally, Caroline Fisher (2016) makes an important point about how the long-held ideal of trust in news as a prerequisite for a well-functioning modern democracy has come to clash somewhat with the requirements of social media, while survey research from Norway (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018) has indicated that young people tend to trust political figures more when they appear on social media platforms than in traditional news media, also highlighting how trust in different media in this study related to the types of media that citizens were most used to, with younger people having higher levels of trust in content on social media compared with older generations. David Sterrett et al. (2019), furthermore, underline how opinions of news on social media are shaped not only by the content and credibility of the news but by the trustworthiness of the person who shares a story (cf. Ognyanova, 2019; Turcotte et al., 2015). Social media, then, seem to introduce new interpretive frames for determining whether or not to trust news and information, requiring extended critical capacities for doing so.

Views on trustworthy news

As we have discussed in previous chapters, the young people who participated in the study used a wide range of sources to obtain information about society, which often included some element of news journalism, although we have also seen how traditional news media were not necessarily central as providers of information about society and current events, as the young adults equally relied on influencers, video-logs on YouTube, content on Twitter/X, Instagram Stories, memes, podcasts, and postings of friends, family and others in their online networks, among many other sources. For some of the participants, social media, moreover, seemed to be crucial for finding out the goings-on in their near surroundings, as well as in the wider world. While the young adults were living in Sweden, their media habits, hence, in many ways reflected global trends in young people's news and media consumption (Newman et al., 2023, pp. 10–13).

When talking about what types of news and information they *trusted*, however, it was evident that there were certain sources the young adults generally considered especially trustworthy. In line with surveys and other research showing high levels of trust in public service media (radio, TV and websites) in Sweden (see Neuman, 2023; Stiernstedt, 2021), answers commonly highlighted public service media as particularly trustworthy and possible to turn to for reliable information about society or if something unexpected happened, with the public service television broadcaster, SVT, and Swedish Radio, SR, as well as SVT's news website, described as sources that most of the young people felt they could trust. "That's where you feel safe", as one 24-year-old media and journalism student living in a metropolitan area jokingly expressed it when talking about SVT and SR, whereas others described how they considered SVT especially trustworthy because of its perceived objectivity and balance, the journalists' integrity and for not advancing a particular political view. A group of male friends between 23 and 25, who lived in a university town in northern Sweden while studying music production and social science and working part-time in a shop and as a personal assistant, similarly described how they thought of "public service overall", including SVT and SR, as something that they trusted over other sources of news:

> Erik: I trust SVT a lot, if anything comes from them.
>
> Samuel: Swedish Radio.
>
> Erik: Yes, Swedish Radio. Well, public service overall.
>
> Alvar: I agree with you. I'm a bit more sceptical towards *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* [tabloid newspapers] because I know several times when celebrities or, you know, half-known celebrities have spoken out about an article that was written and it wasn't true or it was written in

> a way that was biased or distorted. Even if those newspapers are main papers and reliable for getting facts, in any case, I'm always a bit more alert there. But like you say, Patrik, I agree that *DN* [morning newspaper] and *SVT* … those, I'm often less sceptical of, and normally I just simply trust what they say.
>
> (Focus group, 23–25, university town)

As exemplified here, public service media were often compared to newspapers or to the TV channel TV4, which, alongside 'quality' newspapers such as *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, was also generally considered a trustworthy news source, whereas the tabloids *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* were sometimes, as in this extract, discussed as more sensationalist and therefore less credible. However, as Alvar in this extract points out when saying that these newspapers are "main papers and reliable for getting facts", they could still, as established news brands, be trusted to turn to for fact-checking, or for reliable coverage of other areas, such as politics or world events. In some ways, then, it appeared that news media trust could relate to both the perceived integrity or intention of the source, as illustrated in views on public service, and to the established nature of the news media brand. Some of the participants likewise made a distinction between different journalistic genres and types of content when it came to what they trusted, with, for example, a Swedish online news site with a younger profile and a heavy proportion of celebrity news thought of as less trustworthy, with celebrity news an example of a genre which they generally would trust less. At the same time, certain less reliable sources or journalistic genres could be used for information that was interesting on an individual level but considered of less societal importance, and therefore enjoyed irrespective of its perceived truth-claim, as "it doesn't really *matter* if it's true or not", as Alicia, a 24-year-old previous business student living in a metropolitan area described it, referring to an example of a story about Beyoncés's engagement ring – illustrating how trust in news can be multifaceted and difficult to fully grasp in research.

Among the young adults that we talked to, there were also those who described themselves as having low trust in traditional news media. For example, one politically active 19-year-old, leaning towards right-wing politics, perceived Swedish news media overall as too "left-liberal" and generally not reflecting his viewpoints, whereas he felt that information found in social media, podcasts, international online media and Swedish right-wing alternative news sites offered him a broader perspective. The format itself did not matter in terms of trust, as it could be "an article, a video or a tweet", but such content outside of the mainstream media was considered "a complement" which he felt was otherwise missing. Another 18-year-old gymnasium student from a metropolitan area, who primarily used social media for news and information and said that he would

"almost never" watch the news on TV, read a newspaper or go to a news site, expressed instead a general position of distrust regarding the news media as well as information found on social media, in stating that "you can't trust anything, really". He represented a sceptical stance that recurred in some of the interviews and focus groups and which, in relation to Sztompka's (1999, pp. 60 – 68) categorisation of the dimensions of trust, can be seen as relating both to 'a trusting impulse' as a personality trait and as involving social and cultural dimensions, where the social media context may be seen to potentially invite sceptical approaches. However, stances of general distrust or scepticism were also often nuanced within the discussions, as in this case when the same gymnasium student later reflected upon how he saw news journalism, after all, as "based on research" and therefore to some extent possible to trust, compared with information in social media, which he understood as more reliant on opinions and "feelings".

The young adults also referred to the integrity of the source when discussing the trustworthiness of other kinds of institutions and organisations, such as local and national government, ministries, tax authorities, state agencies and research institutions. Information provided directly by these organisations – such as health statistics during the pandemic – was often described as the most independent and trustworthy, and it could, in some cases, be regarded as a form of non-journalistic news. It also meant that some participants said that they at times preferred to sidestep news journalism and go directly to 'the sources' for information, as they trusted other information providers, for example NGOs or state organisations. As several of the interviews and focus groups were carried out during Covid-19, the website of the Swedish public health agency, Folkhälsomyndigheten, was repeatedly mentioned as a source that the young adults particularly trusted and would sometimes go to for updates on the pandemic. Yet, as illustrated by a group of friends aged 24 – 25 from a metropolitan area, of which one was a current university student and two had just finished their university studies in business and journalism, other government agencies, too, were highly trusted:

> Interviewer: What do you trust the most?
>
> Maja: The websites of government agencies. I mean, just Swedish government agencies, because I don't know about foreign government sites, if they're correct or not. But when it comes to this [Swedish government agencies], I feel that I can trust everything.
>
> (...)
>
> Elin: But, what I trust most is, of course ... the government agencies. Like, if I check the websites of [Swedish Tax Agency] or [Swedish Board for Student Finance]. Then I don't hesitate for a second [in believing them].

Later on in this discussion, Maja reflected further on how she felt that it was much more difficult to determine the trustworthiness of the websites of foreign government agencies, "to know whether it's correct or fake". Although some well-known international actors of a particular standing at the time of the interviews, including the World Health Organization, could be included in the non-journalistic institutions and organisations considered useful for 'news' updates and information, there was thus a distinction made between local and international sources of information in terms of trustworthiness. This was equally evident in other interviews and focus groups in relation to news media, where the young adults would often perceive Swedish news media as more trustworthy than international news sources that also appeared in their social media feeds.

While the discussions with the young adults made clear that there were some news sources that, by and large, were considered especially reliable and trustworthy, and that their perspectives in this way seemed to reflect their wider cultural context, it can be noted that these were not necessarily the news sources that they themselves used the most frequently, and sometimes not at all. For some, there thus appeared to be a certain discrepancy between *ideas* about what it was possible to trust and actual media practices; a dilemma that will be explored further in the next section.

"How do I know what to trust?" The challenge of evaluating sources

Even though some organisations and sources of news and information were viewed as more possible to trust than others, the participants equally explained how they, on an everyday basis, would often struggle with coming to terms with what was trustworthy among the flow of information that they would encounter. When using social media, they were not always aware of where different kinds of news and information would come from – as we have seen in Chapter 3 in relation to automation – or able to discern if a variety of user-generated content was credible or not. Many referred to the concept of 'source criticism' that almost all explained they had learnt at school, especially at gymnasium but also at university for those who were or had been students, as a valued tool to help them critically assess sources of information. "Since school, source criticism is part of my bone marrow", stressed 23-year-old Samuel from the group of friends in northern Sweden cited earlier, underlining how he felt it had become part of his identity as a media user and citizen, but also reflecting a national drive to incorporate media

literacy in the national curriculum.[2] However, to apply this principle and critically evaluate sources could be challenging in practice:

> Interviewer: How do you determine what kind of sources are trustworthy and good sources of information, in your view?
>
> August: I think it depends on where the news comes from. If it's by a special person, a big celebrity, sort of, and that person posts it themselves, well then, you believe it. (...) But, then – I don't know if this is right – but the biggest news sites, like *DN*, that kind of thing, well I don't know about *Aftonbladet* but I guess I would trust it too. But if it's a site I've never seen before I really don't trust it. Then I google to see if someone else has written about it. Well, that's the kind of thing you really get to learn at school, this source evaluation, which comes up all the time.
>
> Lily: That's it, and when I went to university, we talked a lot about that, and it's not the easiest thing to do. But I guess the main thing is that, if you're not sure, to look at sources from a lot of different places and compare to see if they give a similar picture, to make sure that the news is true.
>
> Interviewer: OK ...
>
> Lily: Well, it's ...
>
> Interviewer: Perhaps difficult?
>
> Lily: Yes, it's time-consuming!
>
> (Focus group, 18–24, mid-size town)

As exemplified by this conversation from a focus group consisting of three siblings and the partner of one of them, living in a mid-size town in southern Sweden, academic knowledge about how to evaluate sources may not always be easily transferable to daily situations. However, these accounts interlink with the research of Wagner and Boczkowski (2019) and Swart and Broersma (2022) in underlining ongoing practices of 'trust-making' employed by young people in high-choice media environments, where, for our participants, media literacy skills learnt at school could be complemented with a range of other means of figuring out what to trust, and what not to trust.

Looking further into these instances of 'trust-making' in relation to the young adults' decisions on what to trust, it is important to point out, too, that there were discrepancies and inconsistencies in the material, where some participants used entirely opposing ideas and practices for coming to grips with what to trust from others. The following extract from a group of university students studying dif-

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2 Jutta Haider and Olof Sundin (2022) provide an overview of how media and information literacy is incorporated in education in different countries, showing how the concept of 'source criticism' has an important role in Swedish schools.

ferent programmes in a metropolitan area, discussing how they feel about influencers and traditional news media from the perspective of trust, provides a pertinent illustration of the varied ways of thinking about trust:

> Interviewer: What about the rest of you, do you feel like there are sources that you trust?
>
> (...)
>
> Erika: I feel like I need to read more articles to be able to answer that question. I read stuff with a bias from the right, as well as from the left ...
>
> Interviewer: Could you exemplify what you read ...?
>
> Erika: Well, it's *Dagens Nyheter* the most, and then *Aftonbladet*. Then I sometimes check *Nya Tider* [a right-wing, populist website]. (...) I actually think that everything is biased, and that there isn't anything that can be fully trusted. I mean, it's my opinion, and how I feel about what to trust. But if there's new stuff coming out I may read about it, and change my mind ...
>
> Interviewer: (...) OK. Earlier we talked about influencers and people that you follow in your social media 'feeds'. Do you trust what you follow in social media?
>
> Alina: Not at all.
>
> (...)
>
> Erika: No, but I mean ...Sometimes it feels like they're just over the top. And that can be good and bad. I do like it when influencers talk about, like, women's rights and things like that, I like that a lot, but then it can also become too much sometimes, I feel. (...)
>
> Alina: Yes, and I feel like, with the internet, most people use their platform to be able to reach their followers with their views about things, their agenda, which is good. But some will do it just for the sake of marketing – they do get paid for this information, and irrespective of whether it's paid for or it's their own views, it's necessary to be critical and sceptical about what it is that they're saying. Because ... just because they have lots of followers and, like, do something that people look up to or are interested in doesn't mean that what they're saying are the facts and not worth checking. So, yes, I think that you should always be critical, to almost everything. Even if you know that the sources come from something credible and someone has a good intention with giving the information. ... So I think you should be critical to most things, actually.
>
> Interviewer: But does that mean that you don't think there are sources that you feel like 'this source I always trust', or 'this is believable'?
>
> Carl: I think, if I see the news, where they talk, what is it again – TV4? I think that I almost always trust them, or, actually, always. Because there's so much at stake when they're standing there, human to human, looking into the camera and telling their story. Then it's of course the case that there isn't a huge selection of news that they can have when they talk into the camera, which means that they really need to cover things that they know that 'this is correct'. I mean, articles that are published in, like, *Aftonbladet* or *DN* or *Expressen*, it can be thousands of articles, and there are some ... what are they called again, those people who write articles? That's right, there are some journalists who publish their articles there who

> may not have done all the research. And then there might be, I don't know if 'shit-posting' is the right term, but ... erm ... well, a lot that isn't true, according to me. But what is said in front of a camera, then there is a team who have come to an agreement that 'you can say this without being jumped on by people'. I feel that I have a lot more faith in that.
>
> Interviewer: Is that because there is a bigger organisation behind ...?
>
> Carl: It's more that there is a lot to fit, sort of. An article, people can easily forget about it, but if someone sees the news [on TV] then they can trust it more because it's not as much 'shit-posting' on a newscast, as opposed to, what's it's called, *Aftonbladet*'s app, for example, (...)
>
> Erika: Well, for me, just to add here ... the thing is that, you know when it comes to influencers, I've felt that everything that's in front of the camera is just business, that's how I feel. And you can never know what's true or false, a lot of the stuff coming out has been false ...
>
> Interviewer: Are you now talking about influencers, or?
>
> Erika: Exactly. (...) Well, I feel like they have to fake it, to get followers.
>
> (Focus group, 20–23, metropolitan area)

In this extract, there is ongoing negotiation between different positions on what to trust and how to figure out what is trustworthy, ranging from the position that "there isn't anything that can be fully trusted" as "everything is biased", as held by Erika, to the understanding of news on TV4, a television channel, as reliable, while influencers are described as necessitating a critical approach due to their commercial nature. Carl's description of the way that he sees TV news as more trustworthy than printed news, moreover, is explained in relation to how a big TV production in front of the camera would be significantly more trustworthy than print journalism online, which, to him, appears more anonymous and more open to individual journalists to make mistakes. In this account, it also appears to be the visual aspect of the medium, a human "looking into the camera and telling their story", that contributes to the experience of credibility, aligning with a long history of film and photographic images as having a particular status as documentary evidence in Western history (see Cmiel & Durham Peters, 2020). By contrast, influencers' activities in front of the camera are, by Erika, felt to be "just business", designed solely to "get followers", illustrating, also, how the young adults often considered overtly commercial, sensationalist or attention-seeking media and content providers less trustworthy.

At the same time, commercial news media that were well established, such as *Aftonbladet*, the popular tabloid newspaper, could be perceived as somewhat trustworthy precisely because they were part of a big business, as the young adults, from this perspective, would see the commercial media system as a form of guarantee for a basic quality of journalism, as it would be in the organisations' interest to keep up a certain reputation and hold on to audiences. Here, the media system

and the wider social context overall were seen to benefit good journalistic practices as "news journalists must do their job, otherwise no one will listen to them, and they will lose their position", as a 21-year-old care assistant living in a mid-size town expressed it. This did not mean they necessarily trusted journalists as a particularly skilled and truthful profession – although some did – but rather that they knew that journalists had to conform to certain ethics, or informal rules, which made them trustworthy. This journalistic ethos promised a certain independence among news journalists which made them reliable, according to the young adults in these discussions. Interestingly, they adopted a similar way of reasoning around their social media networks, where well-known influencers and other types of social media accounts with many followers were seen to have "too much to lose" to willingly provide false information, thereby being expected to provide correct information to their audiences.

A certain level of popularity could thus be viewed as strengthening the position of the source as trustworthy in the eyes of the young people, as companies, organisations and celebrities had to act and communicate responsibly and carefully in order to sustain the audience's attention and trust. Likewise, in line with how the person sharing a story on social media may impact on its perceived credibility (Sterrett et al., 2019), the *quantity* of people sharing the same type of information was also mentioned as an important measure in the evaluation of whether it could be trusted or not. For example, a group of 18-year-old gymnasium students in a less affluent suburb in a metropolitan area reasoned that if many people in one's network had shared something, some of these people must have checked the information, which could therefore be trusted. In part, these discussions therefore highlighted not only how more formal skills and overall understandings of news and information as part of wider media systems could be utilised as part of what we can think of as 'trust-making', but also how more tacit ideas of popularity and the role of friends and a wider network of contacts could come into play in these processes.

Seeking 'evidence' in experiences and relationships

Dealing with the challenge of knowing what to trust, then, could be handled in different ways, and evaluations could partly be based on the source's position in a macro-oriented media environment and the rules and mechanisms it was perceived to follow. Yet, as the discussions with the young adults progressed, more micro-oriented approaches became evident, related to seeking 'evidence' for trustworthiness in one's own experiences, relationships and feelings, or in the experiences of others. As noted, comparing sources could be one way of checking to see if

something was a 'real' news story, but such 'fact-checking' could also relate to comparing facts in a combination of sources, of which some could be more personal – for example checking to see how a local news story had been covered in discussions on social media versus a news website – or relating the information they found to their own experiences, and basing their trust on their personal relationships with the people providing the information, be it people they knew and had met before, or 'unknown' journalists or influencers. These more micro-oriented approaches or practices, then, could be seen as fundamental to how the young adults handled the complexity of their media environment, and they are important to acknowledge for a fuller picture of how and why they trust certain sources.

In part, the discussions highlighted questions about the role that different kinds of social media may play for young people in their understanding of news and information, where previous research has underlined social media as a relational context for experiences of trust (Livio & Cohen, 2018). As noted, friends and contacts in one's networks could be important for the interpretation of certain news stories, but a range of other figures, that were looked up to or admired, also had a bearing on trust in certain news and information, including different kinds of celebrities and influencers. For example, one male participant explained how he liked to watch an American YouTuber for analysis of the situation around the pandemic, and that he found this character particularly trustworthy and knowledgeable on the subject, having followed the same person over a period of time. Building an ongoing relationship with an influencer or celebrity over an extended period, likewise, was described as creating a particular bond, which could strengthen the experiences of relating to a form of authority; someone especially trusted. However, there were also instances that illustrated how the relationship between influencer and follower can transform over time, alongside certain events or personal developments. This was exemplified by a 23-year-old female university student who was highly critical of certain influencers, due to earlier experiences of having trusted them on food advice that later appeared incorrect:

> When I was younger, I followed some influencers' idea of what veganism meant, which included never to cook with any food oil, as that was considered unhealthy. It became like a truth, they kept showing how to make daily meals without oil, and I did the same, for a long time. Two years ago, I started using oil in food again – and now I feel like a complete fool!
> (Jennifer, 23, university student, metropolitan area)

Perhaps as a result of the 'unbundling'–'rebundling' process of news in social media as discussed in previous chapters (Van Dijck et al., 2018, pp. 51–52), individual journalists, as also noted in the previous chapter, were rarely spontaneously mentioned, and many participants seemed to have relatively limited knowledge about journalism as a profession. The comment by Carl in the long extract intro-

duced earlier, about "those people who write articles" is a slightly extreme example but may yet illustrate a stance towards journalists as rather distant characters in the young people's daily lives, as emphasised in the previous chapter. One exception to this was found in a statement by Yousef, a 22-year-old refugee mentioned in the previous chapter, who had lived in Sweden for a few years and was studying while being engaged in the local community, and who expressed admiration for journalists and trust in their role as providers of knowledge and social service:

> I believe that those who work at *Aftonbladet*, the journalists who write, they have this knowledge. They have legitimation as journalists. And they've made a choice to go out in society and … check what people believe, or what question is important in this society. They sit and write and publish in the newspaper because they want people to focus on what is currently happening here.
>
> (Yousef, 22, gymnasium student, metropolitan area)

Although Yousef did not have personal experience of journalists, he showed a great deal of appreciation for their work and role as providers of information and socially engaged professionals, with a potential link to the experiences of a refugee from a context with restrictions on press freedom.

One vital dimension of finding 'evidence' for the evaluation of what to trust in one's own experiences, relationships and feelings was otherwise measuring different kinds of content against one's own experiences, with participants referring to their personal perceptions of a specific event when discussing if the media coverage of this was trustworthy or not. In the group of 18-year-old gymnasium students mentioned earlier, the young adults talked about their understandings of there being "huge differences when you compare the news to what is actually going on in society", with one participant in this group explaining that "I live in the suburbs, so I know the news media's reports are wrong". In a similar way, there was an emphasis on the importance of having access to published links to original sources of information, to verify where the information was from. Even if few actually said that they clicked on links to original sources, these were considered a sign of trustworthiness that distinguished reliable information from less trustworthy sources. Although most of the young adults seemed aware of the possibilities to manipulate media content, visual media, photographs and videos were, nevertheless, recurringly emphasised as principally trustworthy, and were for example discussed in relation to events such as the Black Lives Matter movement. The immediacy of social media production, felt not to leave much time to edit, interpret or manipulate the content, could also serve as evidence of trustworthiness of social media content, again underlining how social media constitute a specific framework for the interpretation of news and information in relation to trust (Sterrett et al., 2019).

A related way of validating information concerned the personal experiences of others, judged both by the quantity of people sharing first-hand knowledge and the quality of the experiences these others claimed to have. One female participant, who talked about the Swedish alternative internet forum *Flashback* as a particularly trustworthy source, found the amount and variety of voices present there a clue to its trustworthiness. The experience of others was also discussed in relation to events that friends had experienced, and to unknown individuals and authorities, as discussed previously. Similarly, as we know from previous research, trust in news and information is also often referred to as 'a gut feeling' (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019; Swart & Broersma, 2022) which was at times articulated by the participants here. A 24-year-old medical student reflecting on why she would trust certain sources, for instance, asked herself the basic question of "does it *feel* like they know what they're talking about?" Studying to become a doctor and consuming a lot of online content about physical training, she likewise said that she trusted influencers based on the way they moved, argued and referred to sources: "Some just do it better than others. They are just more reliable in the way they talk, and how they package their content" (Emelie, 24, student, metropolitan area).

Such quotes, then, illustrate the tension between rationality and intuition that can characterise the everyday struggles to establish what is trustworthy information in digital media, where style can be an intuitive dimension of the understanding of news and information in relation to experiences and relationships.

Conclusion

When talking about what they trusted as sources of news and information, and why, the participants in our study often gave nuanced accounts in response to such questions, and elaborated upon different ways in which they could be answered. It was clear that, for most, traditional news media, especially public service broadcasting but also more light-hearted television news on a commercial channel and the two well-established main morning newspapers, were considered to be trustworthy news sources, which the young adults generally felt that they could turn to if they needed reliable information. The two main tabloid newspapers were evaluated as somewhat more sensationalist and more eager to 'sell', but were overall also seen to be sites possible to turn to for getting 'the facts' in situations of crisis, which is in line with Strömbäck et al.'s (2020) definition of news trust cited previously. Interestingly, in these parts of the discussions, being able to get reliable 'facts' from 'the news', or knowing that it could be relied upon in times of need, could be seen as something that, in a similar way to how news media were often conceptually linked to ideas of a good society, was appre-

ciated and valued. This somewhat complicates the picture painted in the previous chapter, and shows how complex the understandings of news and news journalism can be. Similarly, a common theme that was brought up spontaneously in the interviews and focus groups was the importance of being able to critically evaluate sources, which many said that they had learnt at school. These findings correlate with statistics about trust in different news brands, and could be seen as, at least partly, contextually bound, interlinked with the particular geo-cultural setting of Sweden and the national media available.

However, it was also apparent in the discussions about what to trust as part of their broader media use and day-to-day situations that making decisions around this could, on an everyday level, be highly complex. Many experienced it as challenging to know what to trust among the range of content available to them and especially in relation to social media, where the 'learnt' ways of assessing sources of information were not always applicable on a practical level. This was a dilemma in which it was possible to develop an overall scepticism, not really trusting anything, of which we saw some examples. But when evaluating different kinds of 'news' in social media, many had instead come to adopt other approaches for their 'trust-making', as an ongoing process, which relied on more intuitive, personal and experiential understandings and micro-practices, in line with previous research on practices for trust in information on social media. As part of these processes, the young adults searched for different forms of 'evidence' which made sense to them, to navigate and provide direction in a more uncertain environment, relying partly on personal experience, as articulated by themselves or by people they knew, or on personal relationships, which involved the coming to terms with what to trust in relation to known others, who could be friends or contacts in their networks, but also 'trust-making' as shaped in relation to an influencer or social media personality. These dimensions of trust in relation to news and information on social media, while only touched upon here, open up further questions about sense-making processes around trust in digital culture, underlining the complexity of the question of trust as seen from a young audience perspective.