

Does Journalism Still Matter? The Role of Journalistic and non-Journalistic Sources in Young Peoples' News Related Practices

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Abstract

In today's hybrid media environment new content creators challenge the status of professionally produced journalism and blur the lines between professional and non-professional content. Growing up in this information landscape, younger generations have developed news-related practices and attitudes that lie in stark contrast to those of previous generations. In addition, discrepancies exist between news definitions and the use practices of young people. We conducted focus groups with German adolescents (15–17 years), young adults (18–24 years) and adults (40–53 years) in August 2020 to uncover young peoples' orientation toward news and journalism. Our study indicates that the boundaries of what journalism is and what it is not are becoming increasingly indistinct. However, distinctions do emerge between the journalistic and non-journalistic sources that adolescents and young adults use and the functions they associate with them according to their information needs. Differences between the age groups become apparent in their motivations to stay informed which highlights the important role non-journalistic sources play in information behaviour and opinion formation. For teenage participants especially, Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are relevant within these processes, which are linked to a perceived social duty-to-keep-informed. Moreover, findings from the focus groups highlight cohort-specific differences regarding the understanding of journalism and,

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consequently, differences in the assessment of trust and reliability as well as the verification strategies that are applied. In sum, for young participants journalism is a reliable source of information, especially in the case of current events and for crosschecking online information, while non-journalistic sources fulfil social needs.

Keywords

adolescents, journalism, news literacy, news use, young people, social media influencer

Introduction

With the advent of social media, new content producers such as Social Media Influencers (SMIs) challenge pre-existing definitions of journalism and blur the lines between professional and non-professional content (Loosen 2015). Growing up in today's media environment, younger generations have developed news-related practices that lie in stark contrast to those of older generations. Young people tend to consume less news (Hölig and Hasebrink 2020) and in more passive ways (Antunovic et al. 2018; Tamboer et al. 2020), mostly through online media and social networking platforms (Craft et al. 2016; Gottfried and Shearer 2017). Through these platforms, users engage with a juxtaposition of entertaining, personal, and informative content from both professional journalists and non-professional content producers (Domingo and Le Cam 2014). These properties of the "hybrid media system" (Chadwick 2017: 4) not only influence their understanding of news and journalism (Edgerly and Vraga 2020) they also create new challenges for young users' news-related competence. Besides, an increase in market orientation among journalists and other content creators on social media platforms enhance lower perceptions of credibility and a shift in audiences' expectations of these actors (Banjac and Hanusch 2020). However, SMIs have the potential to shape attitudes (Freberg et al. 2011) and influence users' opinion-forming processes (Duckwitz 2019).

The type of source and platform affect how young people use and experience news (Meijer 2007; Swart 2021). Recent studies exploring young adults' information repertoires (Peters et al. 2021: 1) point toward a tension between where news is accessed (platform) and how news is conceptualised (traditional journalism). Discrepancies exist between news definitions and the use practices of teenagers and young adults (Craft et al. 2016: 14; Kümpel 2020: 25). Yet, previous work has paid only marginal attention to the role of different sources within young peoples' information behaviour and opinion formation. This paper explores the use and evaluation of (non-) journalistic sources focusing upon the practices within a group of teenagers (15–17 years) and young adults (18–24 years). Since particular information needs are related to a person's biography, teenagers and young adults differ in terms of information behaviour from one another and from older generations (Hasebrink 2017). Against this background, the two young subgroups were additionally contrasted with a group of older users (40–53 years). However, this paper focuses on

findings from the focus groups with young people and findings on the older generation are used to illustrate specific differences between the age groups.

The aim is to shed light on the specific role(s) journalism plays in teenagers' and young adults' information behaviour and opinion formation by focusing on (non-) journalistic actors that young people follow on different social media platforms. The comparison between the three age groups, especially the 15 to 17 and 18 to 24-year-olds, demonstrates differences in the participants' perceived duty to keep informed with an emphasis placed on the desire for different sources for their opinion formation, their understanding of journalism, and their assessment of reliability and trust. These different patterns can be attributed to both the influences of cohort-specific media socialisation and age-related developmental processes. Nevertheless, differences in media use cannot be exclusively traced back to age; the use of journalism is not an "either/or" situation. The attribution of relevance to journalism for fulfilling certain information needs shifts with age but motivations for its use act as a second layer. Overall, our findings help us understand more clearly the discrepancies between young peoples' definitions of news and their own use practices as well as the differences that exist concerning information behaviour and attitudes between generations.

Journalism, Young People, and News use in a Hybrid media System

In today's hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017), the logics of social media platforms and the actors that engage with them are shaping professional journalism and its practice (Mellado and Hermida 2021). This includes the "arrival of new journalistic actors" (Banjac and Hanusch 2020: 2) who challenge existing definitions of the field (Loosen 2015). Academic research into boundary blurring tends to use terms like "strangers" (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018) or "interloper media" (Eldridge 2018) to describe these non-traditional actors. To define them, a common approach is to consider "traditional journalistic standards as forming part of the core, and then using these traditional standards that have dominated journalism to evaluate non-traditional actors" (Tandoc 2019: 140). Journalists often use traditional values such as objectivity, transparency, and independence (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014) as "ideal-typical standards" to assert boundaries and benchmark their practices (Deuze and Witschge 2018: 167). By contrast, some will assert that non-journalistic actors "did not belong in journalism from the beginning" (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018: 72), but merely act as an influence on the process of journalism (Ferrucci and Vos 2017).

While a growing body of studies focuses on journalism in relation to actors and the logics of social media platforms (Broersma and Eldridge 2019), research on journalism's specific role within news-related practices and the competences of young audiences is still limited. However, blurred boundaries between professional and non-professional sources has several implications for young peoples' news-related practices. First, it affects young peoples' understanding of news and journalism (Edgerly and Vraga 2020; Peters et al. 2021). Depending on the type of source, users have different expectations (Banjac and Hanusch 2020) and assess the quality and trustworthiness of news differently (Swart 2021). In this context, Vraga et al.

(2020: 2) argue that it is no longer clear “who is a ‘journalist,’ what is ‘news’ and where to place one’s trust,” which goes some way to explain the ways in which journalism’s role is changing in light of the emergence of digital and social media platforms. Second, the type of source affects young peoples’ practices in evaluating and engaging with news since they no longer expect online information to be reliable, objective, and fact-checked (Knight Foundation 2018: 8) and apply skills and knowledge to judge the reliability of information on their own which is an “increasingly complex task” (Swart and Broersma 2021: 2). Yet, previous studies mostly describe young peoples’ news consumption at the platform level and do not take into account different communicators and the sources they follow or subscribe to for information.

News use and the Understanding of News

In the context of news use, big differences exist between generations: “[...] older generations consume news through traditional news channels to a greater extent, whereas younger generations, specifically Millennials and Generation Z, receive political information increasingly through social media channels” (Andersen et al. 2020: 138). However, these young subgroups differ from one another concerning the ways they use news. Growing up in the digital world, young adults (18–24-year-olds) have adapted to social media (Dimock 2019). Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook represent the most important news sources for the majority of 18 to 24-year-olds (Hölig and Hasebrink 2020). For adolescents (15–17-year-olds) who are considered to be “the first fully digital-native generation” (Andersen et al. 2020: 136) social media platforms are an important source of news as well (Hasebrink et al. 2020). Nevertheless, due to teenagers’ social environment, particularly because they tend to live with their parents and go to school, they access news slightly differently. For example, the most preferred news source for teenagers is television and they often use older members of their family and teachers as a conduit for current affairs information (Notley et al. 2017). The use of social media platforms leads to rather passive and incidental news behaviour (Kümpel 2020) while providing both generations access to a variety of content from different actors: “information from news media, political actors, and friends and followers blend to create a unique political information diet” (Andersen et al. 2020: 138). However, little is known about the relationship between incidental exposure and targeted searches for information in the context of social media platforms.

Moreover, the establishment of social media as a news source has led to a blurring of the definition of news (Vraga et al. 2020). Studies among teenagers and young adults point to a change in the understanding of journalism as a *professional* news source. Qualitative work suggests that teenagers have broad definitions referring to important and relevant topics (Tamboer et al. 2020) whereas young adults’ idea of news is characterised by traditional genre conventions (Kümpel 2020). Besides, discrepancies between news definitions and the use practices of young people persist (Craft et al. 2016). New platforms enhance this diverging understanding of news; as Sveningsson (2015: 9) found, young people do not see the news they receive through social media as “real news”. Contradictory findings in regard to news definitions and practices among teenagers and young adults tend to emerge as well as a great

“variety in responses” (Tamboer et al. 2020: 13) when evaluating news which suggests that there is a need for further research into these two age groups.

News-Related Attitudes and Opinion Formation

SMLs, who “gain their prominence due to their work on social media platforms only” (Sundermann and Raabe 2019: 279), can be described as “digital opinion leaders” (de Veirman et al. 2017: 801). These content producers are “regarded as being more approachable and relatable than celebrities by consumers” (Sundermann and Raabe 2019: 279) and have the potential to “shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg et al. 2011: 90). Aside from the influence of (social) media, studies show that conversations with family and friends have an equally significant impact on the formation of political opinions (Kotler-Berkowitz 2005; Stoker and Jennings 2005; Verba et al. 2005). Interpersonal discussions as well as the personal relevance of an issue can be influential for opinion forming (Metag 2016). Especially for young people, face-to-face communication and interaction provide additional information about topics (Peters et al. 2021: 16). Besides, interpersonal exchange is linked to certain information needs. Due to different developmental tasks (Havighurst 1972), which people are confronted with in different stages of their life, adolescents, young adults, and adults differ in terms of their information needs (Hasebrink 2017). Adults, who find themselves in a relatively stable position in different social contexts, tend to have undirected information needs and are interested in topics that are also considered societally relevant. While young adults are in a phase of academic qualification and developing thematic interests that they focus on, for teenagers, the focus is on identity work and finding their position within their peer groups since they are in a process of developing news habits (Marchi 2012). In this context, social media enhance the opportunities for communication practices that serve group-related needs and SMLs have the potential to act as role models in young peoples’ stage of identity development (Kroger et al. 2010). However, the role of SMLs in the opinion forming processes of young people compared to traditional journalism is hitherto unexplored. Here, we are focusing on young peoples’ information behaviour and the process of opinion formation in relation to journalistic and non-journalistic sources and actors¹ by addressing the following research questions:

RQ1: What role do journalistic and non-journalistic sources play as part of adolescents and young adults’ information behaviour?

RQ2: What role do journalistic and non-journalistic sources play as part of adolescents and young adults’ process of opinion formation and use motivations?

Method and Data

To answer the research questions, eight focus groups were conducted with adolescents (15 to 17 years), young adults (18 to 24 years) and older adults (40 to 53 years). We

decided on the focus group method both because “its efficiency in gaining insights from a number of participants” (Craft et al. 2016: 6) and their potential to identify what is common to a certain group. It aims less toward capturing individual behaviours and more toward mapping news-related acts, attitudes, and interactions within the group of adolescents and the group of young adults. While news use in standardised surveys is usually determined by recipients’ self-disclosure (Scharkow 2019), focus groups offer an open approach to the research subject. On the one hand, this overcomes the challenge of understanding, more specifically, that researchers’ understanding of news does not necessarily match that of the respondents (Kümpel 2020), while on the other, a deeper insight can be gained into news-related attitudes and practices that actually occur among these age groups (Vogl 2014).

Participants

Participants were recruited in cooperation with the social science research laboratory at the University of Hamburg via the laboratory’s own panel (18 to over 60-year-olds). Due to the Covid-19 situation, which made it difficult to recruit participants and organise group discussions onsite, participants were recruited in multiple ways. The research laboratory approached young adults and adults by telephone and email. Teenage participants were recruited by a local market research institution and through cooperation with a high school. Participants were selected who met the age and educational specifications and a balanced ratio of male and female participants per group was also accounted for. With regard to age, participants had to be between 14 to 17, 18 to 24 or between 40 to 50 years old. Regarding education specifications, the formal education was defined by the criterion “Abitur” (high school diploma). In the case of adolescents still attending school, a distinction was made between those aiming for or on their way to their A-levels and attending high school and those intending to leave school after the 10th grade. One of the main aims of the study was to compare the younger age groups with older people. As outlined above, adolescents, young adults, and adults differ in terms of their information needs and media use. Against this background, we divided the groups of young people into groups of adolescents (15–17 years) and young adults (18–24 years). For comparison, we conducted two focus groups with adults aged between 40 and 53 years who grew up with traditional print and broadcast media. In total, eight group discussions ($N = 35$) were arranged: four groups with teenagers (three groups with teenagers who aim for a higher education and one group with teenagers who do not), two groups with young adults (one group with high education level and one group made up of participants with low education level), and two groups with adults (one each with high and low education). This distinction between low and high education groups aimed to generate discussions of common attitudes and practices in more detail because we assumed especially our young participants to feel more comfortable discussing in a group situation with members who share similar experiences. Table A1 (located in the Supplementary Information file) details the focus groups’ composition. The project followed guidelines suggested by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC/

ESOMAR). All interviews took place under the condition of anonymity. For all participants aged between 15 and 17 years, the written consent of their parents was also obtained.

Procedures

Six focus groups, each lasting 60–90 min, were carried out in person in a suitable laboratory room for group discussion at the University. Two additional discussions with teenagers were arranged online using the Microsoft Teams platform. The interviews were conducted between August 10 and September 3, 2020. All interviews took place under the condition of anonymity and were recorded and transcribed. A corresponding interview guide (located in the Supplementary Information file) was used to structure the discussions. This essentially comprised the following points: a) news-related attitudes and practices b) knowledge of current affairs, c) processes of opinion forming, and d) understanding of and knowledge relating to journalism. In the discussions, we addressed different topics (e.g. Black Lives Matter demonstrations) to gain an impression of what the participants knew about these issues. Recent studies point to a “discrepancy between news definitions and own usage practices” (Kümpel 2020: 25) among young adults. To examine this contradiction more closely, the concept of news was not communicated in advance and the term ‘news’ was omitted in the group discussions. Instead, paraphrases such as “keeping up to date with what is happening in Germany and the world” were used.

Analysis

The following presentation of results is based on a total of approximately eleven hours of audio material, which was pseudonymised, transcribed, and analysed using MAXQDA software adopting a thematic analysis approach. As a method, thematic analysis works to reveal which patterns in collected data can be identified and analysed (Clarke and Braun 2013). As an initial code system, key aspects of information behaviour including news use and practices, processes of opinion formation and information gathering, and knowledge of news and journalism were used. Based on the material, the existing categories were inductively filled with concrete subcategories. At the same time, new codes were created and categories were combined with potential themes in the evaluation process. For each participant, a pseudonym was created to be used in the transcripts as well as in the findings below.

Findings

Information Behaviour and Understandings of News and Journalism (RQ1)

Repertoires of sources according to thematic interests and information needs. General information behaviour confirms the domination of social media but differences between the two young age groups become apparent in the ways in which they

decide which source to follow or subscribe to in order to fulfil particular needs. Participants from both young age groups reported that they encounter news mainly through social media and intentionally modify their information environment (Merten 2020) by following a variety of sources: Regarding journalistic-editorial sources, most of our participants stressed that they follow *Tagesschau* (PBS news). Relating to their thematic interest in particular topics, young adults from the focus groups mentioned their use of international news media including *CNN* or the *BBC* as well as German media outlets such as *Die Welt*. In addition, they reported following public figures such as artists, musicians, actors (Leonardo Di Caprio), and climate activists (Greta Thunberg) which reflected their interest in particular topics (Hasebrink 2017). On YouTube, they primarily subscribed to comedy channels or followed news outlets. Our youngest participants in particular subscribed to official or political protagonists on Instagram, demonstrating user-practices that are specifically intended to bridge the media as a gatekeeper (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). For example, Nils (17) reported that he followed the local fire and police departments on Twitter in order ‘to get information from official sources directly’. Another teenager has two accounts on Instagram; a private one, where he follows his friends and gets information that fulfil group-related information needs, and another where he follows economic and political representatives for his undirected information needs: ‘I have this second account to get these [...] news items that you have in the newspaper or all this information that you get, directly from the people when they take a stand on it’ (Jonathan-15).

Incidental exposure versus targeted search for information. Consistent with contemporary findings on young peoples’ news habits, participants from the focus groups made up of young adults in particular reported their engagement with ‘breaking news’ as being *incidental* (Kümpel 2020) or that they kept informed indirectly through information from friends and family:

- Lars-21 Well, I think that, in principle, you should not have to [keep up to date], but if you are on Instagram anyway and subscribe to certain pages or just get a little information here and there, that’s enough. Because you also get a lot from friends and stuff like that. [...].
- Mandy-21 I think what’s so acute, what’s important, you get to know anyway.
- Serina-18 So I only inform myself when I have an interest. Well, I do not feel obliged to do so [...].

By contrast to their “news-finds-me perception” (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017: 107), these young adults paid active attention to news and looked for information themselves in the case of current events such as the explosion in Beirut which happened only a few days before group discussions took place. For example, most respondents reported that they incidentally heard about the explosion on social media and used editorial sources for news ‘when more information became available’ (Murad-19). Within this targeted search for information, Google plays a large role as participants mentioned that it is

their ‘initial reflex’ (Lara-20) to find information there if they want to find out about a specific topic or in the case of breaking events:

It was on Instagram and that’s how I heard everything about it. [...] I entered it directly into Google, just “Explosion Beirut” or something. Several pages popped up right away. It was always *N24*, *n-tv*, and all the other news channels. Then I read the reports and watched a few videos online (Lars-21).

On the other hand, almost all adult participants reported that they learned of the explosion from the evening news on television. Another adult said she was unaware of the event ‘until the next morning, because I was reading a book that evening and I didn’t watch the *Tagesthemen* [PBS news].’ (Anita-45) This is a telling example of our older participants’ news habits including the domination of legacy media in their repertoires and intentional news consumption.

Trust in news and the reliability of online information. Besides the importance of Google, which connects to previous observations on news sense-making practices (Toff and Nielsen 2018: 11), the targeted search for news information revealed that both young cohorts ‘don’t attach trust anywhere’ (Justin-18) but look for a certain ‘information consistency’ by comparing different sources:

- Jasmin-23 I do my research on Google first. I wait until all media have published this important news. After that, you can say, okay, this is the right information you can trust.
- Diana-20 I just type any query into Google Search and there are four or five websites and I compare the information on each one. After that, I have a general picture and then I can trust either all or none.
- Murad-19 For me, it is also the case that I usually find out about a news item from the *Tagesschau* and then I check it again by myself and form my own opinion on the subject. [...] I Google it and then click on what is suggested to me first.

Teenage participants also discussed the verification of online content found through Google, with one participant saying that they ‘check the byline and see who has written an article’ (Lena-16). Others reported that they used “content-specific strategies” (Tamboer et al. 2020: 12) which includes checking sources or links as well as the writing style of a news item. In general, the young people from the focus groups placed importance on a range of features when determining which content is reliable, most of which relates to the strategies identified by Swart and Broersma (2021: 9). For example, in terms of the design, format, and tonality, ‘the writing style plays a large role’ said one (Jonas-17). Others were more specific, saying that whether or not the style is ‘objective’ (Serina-18) and the content is ‘detailed, well formulated and plausible’ (Chelsea-15) has an effect on their perceptions of the content’s reliability. Many participants referred to the familiarity and popularity of the news brand. Several from

the teenage groups remarked on a general difficulty in determining reliable content and developed strategies to assess whether a piece of information is correct or not:

Especially on Instagram, there is often news that does not indicate a source. With this kind of stuff, I always get an impression in the comments, because quite often [...] when there are already many people who have read about it, the comments will be full of people saying “Oh what are you posting here? Everybody knows that’s not true!” and stuff like that. Sure, that is not reliable. But if that’s true, you can usually tell from the comments [...] (Ramona-16)

Similar to Ramona, other teenagers focus on social cues, saying the ‘size of the reach on a social media platform’ (Jonathan-15) is an important indicator for reliability. Simon (15) explained: ‘For example, the *Tagesschau*, which I think has a few million subscribers, is already extremely large. For me, that automatically means that it is a somewhat more reliable source.’ By contrast, participants from the oldest cohort automatically linked established news sources, especially public service media (PSM) and quality newspapers, with the reliability of information, describing them as ‘a benchmark for quality journalism’ (Peter-53) and ‘trustful news’ (Ronny-52). Consequently, they referred to journalistic values such as ‘neutrality’ (Herbert-52) and ‘credibility, integrity, and clear investigation’ (Ronny-53) in order to discern information as reliable.

Boundaries between professional journalists and non-professional actors. Concerning the construction of boundaries, the exchange among young people from the focus groups revealed similarities between the 15 to 17 and 18 to 24-year-olds. As stated by Lars (21), influencers ‘report what they think, but they do not have the same skills as someone who does this every day’, teenage participants also discerned professional journalists from other content creators in terms of their qualification and intention:

Freddy-15 I think most of the influencers, for example, Rezo or Montana Black, they don’t care what important people, people who really know a lot, say. They only want to promote their own opinion and try to convince others, whereas journalists generally try to be neutral and only inform others.

[...]

Anna-15 So, I would rather trust journalists than influencers because I think that journalists are trained to inform and also to be neutral and objective. [...] Most journalists, they are only employed if they have a good education and are good at informing and not at convincing other people with their opinion.

Nevertheless, Anna remarked that ‘many people are more unconsciously trusting toward influencers than they are toward journalists’. In fact, one teenager explained that he considers influencers that he has followed for several years to be ‘reliable

sources of information' because he can 'identify with them' and feels 'a personal connection' (Simon-15). Relating to important aspects of a para-social relationship that is created by interactions between influencers and their audiences (von Rotz and Tokarski 2020), another teenager explains why he perceives influencers as more authentic than journalists:

I find influencers more approachable and prefer their content. Because there I have more [...] I can more clearly see spontaneous reactions [...]. I can better understand an opinion expressed by an influencer because I have a much closer connection with them than I do with any journalist who sits in front of a camera. (Jonathan-15)

These blurred lines are likewise reflected in assessing the credibility of news among the participants from the teenage groups. While in one group, participants reported their tendency to focus on content-related factors, for participants from another group the information source is more important when characterising specific content as news (Edgerly and Vraga 2020):

Jonas-17 It doesn't make a big difference if I see it [news] on Instagram from *Tagesschau* or if I see it two posts later from, I don't know, Dwayne Johnson. That is relatively irrelevant to me, as long as I think it is credible [...].

David-16 For me, that doesn't make much difference either. The main thing is that the content is correct, what matters is how it is written, and pictures or videos are often very important for me.

For participants from another group, however, it mattered more which individual or news organisation is the source behind a news item. The role of source becomes particularly relevant in hybrid media environments where journalistic boundaries are blurred:

Susan-15 When I watch the news on television, *Tagesschau*, it is already relatively clear to me that these are serious people who are publishing it. But when I am on the internet, for example, and then I'm on a website, I look at it and I ask myself: What are the sources and above all, who wrote this? Is it just a commentary from some reality star or did a real journalist write it or is it a politician who published it?

Tim-15 So I have to say that I don't really look at who wrote it [...] I tend to look at which medium or which news program distributes this comment or this report. So when the Bild newspaper distributes something, I tend to believe it less than when the *Tagesschau* broadcasts it.

Overall, these differences regarding the importance of content versus source were not dependent on the group composition in terms of education but rather occurred across groups of teenagers.

Motivations for use and the Role of SMIs in Opinion Formation (RQ2)

Social versus civic duty-to-keep-informed. Findings from the focus groups show pronounced differences between all age groups regarding their motivations for keeping informed and the importance they subsequently place on non-journalistic sources for opinion formation. Despite the fact that participants from all groups stressed the general importance of a diversity of opinion and the perils of ‘just trusting one’s own opinion’ (Helena-20), teenagers expressed a social duty to keep informed while (young) adults referred to a civic and work-related duty to stay abreast of current affairs. For example, Diana (20) stated that ‘it is important to know the news because work or school is related to politics’. Nevertheless, the consumption of news as a means to have something to discuss with others (Meijer 2007) helps adolescents to integrate into their social environment. The exchange of experiences within our groups of teenagers revealed that news fulfils this communicative and integrative function:

- Anna-15: I think it’s important to know what’s happening in other countries around the world so that, as Simon said, I can have a say with my friends.
- Jonathan-15: I would like to add very briefly, to what Anna just said, that she wanted to have a say, in any case, she is right. If you have an issue at school and can’t have a say at all, or with your friends, then you’re totally left out.

At the same time, this reflects the way in which news use is related to the fulfilment of adolescents’ group-related needs (Hasebrink 2017). Finding their position within their peer groups and creating a feeling of belonging is important for identity formation: ‘It is extremely important to me that I can talk about it [the news] with other people [...] and I think that if you can’t talk about it then you can’t really integrate with the group’ (Susan-15). These interpersonal discussions among friends and within the family are an important part of opinion formation. However, this is not necessarily always the case; teenagers in another focus group mentioned that they were simply not interested in politics and do not follow the news or talk about it with friends:

- Pablo-16: Depending on how important a piece of information is for me, I can also get this from my parents. Otherwise, it would simply pass me by. In that case, it doesn’t matter at all if it’s not important for me. [...]
- Jaqueline-16: No, I for my part would not claim [a need to inform myself] because I am generally not that interested in Germany. [...]
- Emica-16: I have no interest in politics at all.

These teenagers explain their lack of interest either by saying that they ‘don’t know much about politics’ (Emica-16) or that they ‘have no interest in political events in

Germany' (Jaqueline-16). Another teenager remarked, 'I don't have to find out now that every prime minister somewhere in some country has been replaced.' (Lara-16) Their disinterest seems to refer to traditional elements of politics that they perceive as distant and irrelevant. This was not a general attitude across the focus groups but rather occurred within the groups of participants with low education. These individual participants demonstrated similarities with what Bennet and colleagues call the "actualizing citizen" (2009: 106) since they also reported that they do not follow the news, feel no duty to keep informed or participate, but manage to stay informed through family and friends. In this regard, differences to the older generation are particularly obvious, since adult participants reported that political participation is the most important reason for being informed:

- Anita-45: I have to go and vote at some point [...] I want to participate; I need to know what happens beforehand and be able to form an opinion.
- Herbert-52: That is exactly my opinion. Elections are a good point. I want to know what I'm voting for, and I don't always do that just a few days before the election or during the election campaign, but beforehand.

Their motivations match the type of "the dutiful citizen" (Bennett et al. 2009: 106) since participants experience a strong sense of duty to participate, see voting as the principal democratic act, and are informed on issues by following legacy media.

Social Media Influencers as identification figures. According to the differences between adolescents and young adults' information needs and motivations to keep informed, the importance of (non-) journalistic sources for opinion formation also differs between age groups. Young adults stated that they formed an opinion on the Black Lives Matter protests from videos that were shared on Instagram because 'they illustrated the topic and helped in forming an opinion' (Murad-19). However, they stressed the fact that personal contacts (parents who know a lot about politics, friends who live abroad, siblings who study a specific topic) are most important in forming their opinions. Meanwhile, teenage participants place a great deal of importance on journalistic personalities both with and without editorial affiliations. Personalities such as *Felix von der Laden* and *MrWissen2go* (journalists who cooperate with PSB) as well as *Rezo* (German Social Media Influencer) and *Leeroy Matata* (German video producer) function as important sources for opinion forming on current issues. According to the participants, they follow these YouTubers because 'they correspond to my ideals and represent my own opinions' (Jonathan-15) and teenagers can 'identify with them' (Simon-15), referring to important characteristics of SMIs such as authenticity and identification (von Rotz and Tokarski 2020). Additionally, some influencers on YouTube fulfil important aspects of journalistic work such as giving minorities a voice: 'He [Leeroy] talks to many people about very different topics. Rather with fringe groups, with people who perhaps don't get the attention they should.' (Jonathan-15).

Nevertheless, within the same group of teenagers, participants expressed a critical view of ‘Instagrammers’ as a biased source of news, stressing that influencers are essentially ‘subjective’, only presenting things ‘from their point of view’ (Jonathan-15) and that they ‘usually only pass on information to a broad mass who support their own opinion’ (Anna-15). Moreover, they reported that influencers tend to approach a topic by often trying to persuade viewers that their opinion was correct:

For example, when *Rezo* says that no one should vote for AfD [a German right-wing political party], he is only really expressing his personal opinion. However, really serious sources would refer to other opinions and try to understand the other side of the story, so it is important which sources you use. (Freddy-15)

In addition, within this group, teenagers remarked on a general difficulty in forming their own opinions on current affairs, mainly because they feel that they are inadvertently influenced by social media content. They stated that they are susceptible to its influence because ‘one is bombarded by the social media world with the same opinion from all sides’ (Simon-15). The same teenager reported:

If you look for an objective source and read something and then read something on the next post directly on Instagram that presents the whole situation subjectively, i.e. biased, it is difficult to form your own opinion. I always try to base my opinion on the original source, the source I consider as the most reliable. Nevertheless, I do sometimes find myself forming my opinions based on what influencers say.

Even though teenagers are aware of the extent to which information distributed by SMIs is subjective, and criticise their one-sidedness, these actors provide relevant information and define some teenagers’ understanding of news.

Discussion

In today’s hybrid information environment, the boundaries between what constitutes journalism and what does not are blurred, yet, demarcations emerge along the lines of how (young) people use and understand journalistic and non-journalistic sources (RQ1) and the functions associated with them (RQ2). Overall, our findings suggest that these differences can be attributed to both the influence of cohort-specific media socialisation and age-related developmental processes.

Differences between the younger and older generations regarding their experience with, and understanding of, journalism lead to different assessments of trust and reliability as well as a range of verification strategies. These persistent patterns find their roots in different media socialisation contexts. Participants from the two young cohorts, who grew up in hybrid media environments, neither developed routine information habits, nor did they connect to a specific news brand or outlet. Consequently, they lacked orientation, showed high levels of distrust in online information in general, and subsequently employed various verification strategies, such as comparing different

sources, before deciding what information to trust. Young participants' understanding of journalism was constructed in distinction to non-professional actors even though they expressed a broad sense of quality journalism's characteristics. For participants from the oldest cohort, who developed print- and PSM-dominated news habits, traditional news outlets' inherent journalistic quality led these participants to generally look to these sources as trustworthy. Considering these differences between generations can help create a more complete picture of young audiences' concept of "news-ness" (Edgerly and Vraga 2020) on social media platforms.

While the journalism's role is perceived differently, this differentiation and compilation of (non-) journalistic sources is paralleled by personal and social motivations and their relevance to everyday life. Teenagers' group-related needs determine their orientation towards SMIs as identity figures as well as their understanding of entertaining content as useful news. When growing older, informational needs for work and civic life become more apparent in the shaping of (young) adults' duty to access news. These patterns are consistent within each age group and between them, too. In this respect, findings suggest that the differences are due to age-related developmental processes and information needs present in respective developmental phases (Hasebrink 2017). This helps us to understand both differences in the definitions of news (Kümpel 2020) between teenagers and young adults and discrepancies in the definition (for example that news has to be relevant and objective) and the actual consumption of news (Craft et al. 2016). Even though teenagers criticise SMIs for their bias, these actors are perceived as an influential information source when forming an opinion because they provide teenagers with relevant topics, fulfilling their needs for group identification and integration. However, the contradictory views toward non-professional actors the teenagers expressed – denouncing SMIs for presenting information as essentially 'subjective' and persuasive while also saying that these actors are the most important source for opinion forming on current issues – require further exploration in future studies, especially in regard to political information behaviour. This particularly applies in light of the fact that teenagers' awareness of the SMIs' subjective positions translated into their use practices and reliance on journalism in similar ways to those that resorted to traditional sources when aiming for a more informed opinion. In addition, for future studies it seems useful to demarcate young peoples' reasons for accessing news between being informed and actually forming an opinion.

We would argue in stronger terms that the identification of persistent patterns between generations regarding the understanding of news and journalism presents implications for journalistic practitioners and educators. News literacy interventions should focus on the transfer of knowledge, focusing attention on the role journalism plays in democratic societies as well as awareness and experience of the skills required to recognise trusted sources. Practitioners, who struggle to reach young audiences, could focus on communicating the benefits they offer in terms of providing reliable and fact-checked information. In addition, journalistic actors should maintain their journalistic values such as diversity of opinions and neutrality that are clearly valued by young people.

This study is not without its limitations, however. First, the recruitment of participants and the realisation of the focus groups were restricted during the COVID-19

pandemic, leading to a sample that largely consisted of teenagers with a high level of education, and only from German schools. There already exist school initiatives that set out to increase students' news literacy with a special focus on the identification of "fake news" (Allensbach 2020: 39). This might explain why most teenage participants were critical of information from social media platforms. Overall, news interest in the sample was diverse, but participants from the youngest age groups with a high education level had a slightly greater interest in keeping up to date and reported to create more diverse news repertoire. Moreover, due to the qualitative research design as well as the small number of group discussions with young adults compared to the discussions with teenagers, the identified similarities and differences cannot be generalised to young people alone. Statements referring to the distribution of source repertoires are not possible. At this point, further quantitative research is necessary to investigate the distribution of sources within age groups in relation to education and attitudes towards journalism. In addition, the process of opinion forming is a complex one and is difficult to map in focus group sessions alone. Therefore, a more quantitatively orientated study design could be used to take a closer look at the interplay between the use of (non-)journalistic sources, attributed relevance for opinion formation, and subjective as well as objective informedness. Nonetheless, the present study provides initial explanations for different patterns in the information behaviour of younger and older generations highlighting the need to systematically distinguish between different peer groups among young people when examining the news-related behaviour of young users.


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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. We also apply terms such as professional or journalistic sources and/or actors to full time journalists and/or media organizations who feel bound to, and act by, core professional values such as objectivity, truth, transparency, and independence (Kovach and Rosenstiel

2014). We first distinguished between professional news organisations (public or private print and broadcast providers) and individual actors or content creators. We divided the latter into journalistic personalities with or without editorial affiliation and non-journalistic personalities such as politicians, actors or other Social Media Influencers whose thematic focus is actually on topics such as sports, beauty or food (Freberg et al. 2011).

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