1. Youth and news in a digital media environment

Nordic-Baltic perspectives

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Considering that the ongoing digitization of the past couple of decades has fundamentally transformed the entire media landscape, it might be a truism to claim that the domain of news also has undergone significant change. Not least the blurring of previously sharp distinctions between production, distribution and consumption have challenged the established news industry and brought into question long-held assumptions of what journalism is or should be, who is a journalist and what authority this third (or fourth) estate has in the early 21st century – and in the future.

When news dissemination moves online, it has several crucial consequences. It is detached from the needs of large distribution networks for printing, distribution to subscribers and resellers, broadcasting frequencies, etc. Therefore, it is much cheaper than the distribution of traditional mass media. It might be instant: News production has always been a "stop-watch-culture" but online news distribution increases the pace even more.[1] The distribution of news online is, potentially, worldwide. News also becomes subject to further dissemination by news users through sharing, liking, re-tweeting etc. in various social media channels. Traditional distinctions between production and consumption of news are no longer viable when people are, with Axel Bruns' terminology, *produsing* (producing and using) news.[2] With the advent of digital media technology and social media networks, the

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former users (or audiences) might as well produce and distribute their own content, "user-generated content", and contribute with important journalistic work. This phenomenon has been studied and discussed among media scholars as citizen journalism, participatory journalism, grassroot journalism or connective journalism, indicating that the very notion of journalism is under consideration or scrutinization.[3]

In other words, the technological changes have large-scale consequences for the mode of news production. News production has become increasingly decentralised, and a plethora of new, "alternative" news sources have appeared. The vast amount of free news in social media, ad-funded-news aggregator sites, agenda-driven "news" sites etc. have, in addition to dwindling advertising in legacy media, led to a deep crisis for the traditional news media business model. It is still too early to tell if attempts to combat the loss of revenue by introducing pay-walls or cutting costs by downsizing staff may prove successful or contribute to the downward spiral of legacy news media. We can be quite certain, however, that the days of traditional news media as we know it are counted.

Because of this development, the notion of news itself – as well as the notion of journalism – have been problematised. The news media industry of the 20th century used to produce a rather easily identified product – news – with a distinct format, distributed through designated channels, almost a genre in itself. Today, news can appear in any form, in any context, anywhere. The growth of native advertising, where it, although admittedly sometimes (inadequately) labelled as "paid content," is presented as objective news reporting is one example. The continuous flow of information in social media, where personal messages, advertising and news items are intermingled is another. The push notice function in digital devices is a third; you don't even have to look for news – the news comes looking for you. The reported rise of "fake news", made-up or manipulated information camouflaged as news items for commercial or ideological reasons, is a fourth. So, how do we define news? Is it possible that young people define "news" differently than those who are older?

These recent developments have given rise to several contradictory statements about the state of the news consumer, and most concern is expressed over news use among children and youth. On the one hand, they are portrayed as naive and gullible; on the other, as tech-savvy

early adopters. On the one hand, they are fact-resistant dopes; on the other, highly competent source-critics. On the one hand, they are news avoiders; on the other, hyper-informed news junkies.

This anthology is an attempt to gather and update knowledge on young people and news in the late 2010s in the Nordic and Baltic area. It is focused around three areas: youth as producers of news, news produced for youth and youth as news users.

Outline of the book

The first part of the anthology concerns youth participating in news and information production; it consists of three chapters.

Thomas Nygren and Fredrik Brounéus describe the construction and first trials of a digital tool for investigating how youth evaluate news items they encounter in their newsfeeds: the News Evaluator mass experiment. Almost 6,000 Swedish teenagers in primary and secondary school have been engaged in the experiment so far but the aim is to further develop the tool and launch a final version in 2019. Nygren and Brounéus present some results but also problems and challenges that must be addressed.

Vedat Sevincer, Heidi Biseth and Robert W. Vaagan describe the Faktuell project, a Norwegian project launched in 2013. *Faktuell*, an online publication produced by and for young people, has the ambition of offering youngsters practical media training as journalists, improving their digital competencies, and, ultimately, contributing to civic engagement among youngsters.

In the third chapter, Kadri Ugur and Eleri Lõhmus discuss a non-formal media education project in a peripheral county in Estonia. Because the *Meediasüst* ("Media injection") project is in the geographical and cultural periphery, it makes a valuable case for thinking about the specific challenges for hyper-local journalism where personal relationships may influence the journalistic duty, or where these relations are overturned, for youngsters taking on new roles. Together these three cases elucidate both possibilities and potential problems when youth participate in news and information production.

The second part of the anthology consists of four chapters dealing with news production, aimed at children and youth, by media organisations in Sweden, Norway and Finland.

First out is Lowe Östberg, project leader at the Swedish public service news program for children; *Lilla Aktuellt*. Research indicates that children leave traditional media platforms earlier than ever before, and *Lilla Aktuellt* is facing extensive problems when trying to reach its target group from the age of 11. Children from that age prefer digital, social platforms, and Östberg delineates a case – the terror attack on Drottninggatan, Stockholm in 2017 – when *Lilla Aktuellt* improvised its news reporting and communication with kids through its Instagram account and the Children´s Channel's portal, with an overwhelming response. Since then, *Lilla Aktuellt* has created a new app for children age 9 to 12 that might solve its problems trying to reach this audience.

Marita Bjaaland Skjuve and Petter Bae Brandtzæg have a rather different angle, focusing on chatbots as a new user interface for health information directed towards young people. Getting important information across is a difficult task in a digital media landscape with a constantly increasing supply of media entertainment and information. SocialHealthBots is a research project in Norway, initiated in 2017, that investigates the potential and limitations of using chatbots to provide health information. Because of the findings so far, Skjuve and Brandtzæg raise the question of whether chatbots might become a new way to deliver news to young people because they seem to be perceived as more engaging and have the potential to help youths orientate in the vast media landscape.

Maarit Jaakkola provides an example of "media influencing", a form of youth participation and engagement, through the Finnish Youth Voice News Centre (YVNC). The intention of the project, started in 2006, is to engage young people in news production and thereby make them, and their perspectives on news, visible in mainstream media content. The distinguishing feature of the project's pedagogy is to offer the young content providers a "third space", a physical and cultural place that respects their autonomy and integrity, and cross boundaries between different age groups. This is a practice that could be applied to other neglected or vulnerable groups, Jaakkola argues.

The last chapter in part two is written by Catharina Bucht, and it presents three recent Scandinavian examples of news production for children. The distinguishing feature for these news outlets is that they are printed in an era when most printed newspapers struggle

with decreasing readership and financial problems. In the chapter, the editors-in-chief for the news outlets reflect on the possibilities and advantages that printed news for children may have.

Taken together, part two offers four rather different strategies to reach young people with news and information in these media-saturated times.

The third part of the anthology consists of seven chapters, dealing with news use among youth in Estonia, Sweden, Denmark and Norway. A common theme is that they notice, and sometimes discuss, differences between groups of people or individuals, making it difficult to characterise "news use among youth" in the Nordic and Baltic countries because there are differences – as well as similarities – both between and within countries.

Signe Opermann provides an overview of how young people in Estonia use news, how they define news and newsworthiness, and what motivations for news consumption they have. Although she concludes that their news involvement is quite strong, it is also highly selective, interest-driven and far from homogenous.

Maria Jervelycke Belfrage highlights that the selection of news and sources requires knowledge and skills, and that young people today, largely taking part of news in social media, tend to rely on "opinion leaders", that is, important others, for their news use. Thus, the heterogeneity of news consumption patterns among youth to some extent may depend on differences in personal social connections and, as Jervelycke Belfrage points out, the incidental nature of news consumption.

The importance of social media for youth news use is also highlighted by Dag Slettemeås and Ardis Storm-Mathisen. In their chapter about news consumption among youth in Norway, they demonstrate that the smartphone has become the most important device for accessing news among youth and that news is mixed with other content in social media feeds, blurring the boundaries between genres, between public and private, and between news practices and other daily practices, making it increasingly more difficult to grasp news use among youth.

Stine Liv Johansen discusses this from a somewhat different angle, highlighting the importance of peer culture and play practices for children's news consumption and definition of news in Denmark. She remarks that adults usually think about and discuss news in relation to

citizenship and the democratic process, neglecting that children may define and use news in relation to what is important for them in their everyday life with peers and play.

Both Johan Lindell and Jacob Ørmen direct our attention to the importance of class and socio-demographic aspects for the news use among youth.

In interviews with Swedish youth, Lindell has found distinct differences between those with a middle-class background and those with a working-class background. The amount of news they consume, which news genres they prefer and whether they find news interesting and relevant for them and their everyday lives differ, suggesting that "journalism and news have become markers of social status and distinction".

Ørmen's reasoning is very much along the same line, but his focus is on "incidental" news consumption among Danish youth. Data indicate that they are divided in their news repertoire, as some (with higher education) consume a high degree of news while some (with less education) avoid news or only consume it through social encounters. The problem with relying on incidental news, however, is that the news one gets is dependent on algorithms and social circumstances, what Ørmen labels "incidental disengagement". With a social network of news-savvy friends and family, the probability for running into high quality news in the social media feed is higher. Thus, the class and socialization structures that Lindell discusses also seem to matter when it comes to incidental news consumption.

Finally, to make things even more complicated, Yvonne Andersson directs the attention to how news use and identity formation among youth are entangled in partly new ways. Youth today do not use media, they *live* in media, and whatever they share, comment, upload etc. simultaneously shares information about the sender; who you are, who you want to be, how you want to be perceived – and that makes news-sharing and commenting a rather risky business. Interviews with Swedish youth display how these precarious aspects of the news practice sometimes hinder them from digital civic engagement.

So, there are differences between youth within the Nordic and Baltic countries, depending on class, socialization, identity formation and, of course, the vast supply of news, information and entertainment to choose from when composing one's own media diet. There's no single

definition of "news", no universal motive for news consumption, no common path to news. What can we learn from this? Contemporary news organizations that want to reach young people must consider the diversity and probably develop multiple channels and interfaces to meet different requirements. Some suggestions in this anthology stress the importance of using the latest technology, such as chatbots and apps, to provide news and information in appealing ways at occasions preferred by the young audience. Other suggest that old formats, such as printed newspapers, still might be valuable for some children. There is no single way to reach the youth, and there's probably only a couple of things that news organizations can be certain of: children growing up today will never adjust themselves to news organizations' air time or the like. News and information must be available when youth need them, not the other way around.

The heyday of the omnibus newspaper is definitely in the past. Given the individualization of media habits among youth and the ambient news media landscape there is no reason to believe that a single outlet can offer all the news and information one needs. As noted above, young people use different paths to different information depending on where they think they will find the expertise (and therefore, the best information), who they trust and maybe even follow as an "opinion leader". A narrow, but trustworthy, scope might be a fruitful approach for a news provider.

A second insight is that we are confronting a major challenge when it comes to digital media literacy or digital civic literacy. Only the first part of the anthology deals explicitly with this theme, and we learn from it that there are difficulties with developing tools in this area. Multiple concepts are used, and there are no standardised definitions of the notions that may be operationalised in the development of tools for education or evidence-based examination of digital media/civic literacy. As news and information are sought after, encountered or delved into in multiple ways – and the information technology used is in a state of flux – the terms, notions and possible definitions are likely to be temporary, or "works in progress". How do we apply tools for source criticism on, for example, Snapchat where the information disappears after a few seconds? Which are the most important skills when information is encountered in newsfeeds that are replenished

constantly with new items from a manifold of sources, at a pace that makes it impossible to register even half of it? Is it possible to develop evidence-based tools for assessing skills in digital media literacy when the technology and the skills needed are moderated constantly, which circumscribe the possibilities for longitudinal studies? This anthology does not answer any of these questions, but it might provide a basis for reflecting on them.

A final note

Although there are plenty of studies on youth and news around on an international level, we hope this anthology can be an important contribution to the field. Admittedly, the digitization process has included a fair deal of globalisation and trans-nationalization of the media landscape. Nevertheless, national differences when it comes to culture, the rights of children and youth, and – most importantly – the structure of national media remain obstacles when it comes to generalising studies from one national context to another. The rapidly changing nature of contemporary media and news dissemination also should be considered. We do hope, however, that this anthology can function as a modest update of the knowledge on youth and news in the Nordic and Baltic countries, a snapshot frozen in time, in an ever-changing world.

Notes

1. See e.g. Reich & Godler (2014).
2. See Bruns (2008).
3. e.g. Allan & Thorsen (2009); Singer, Jane B. et al. (2011); Schofield Clark & Marchi (2017).

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