

11. News consumption among young people in Norway

The relevance of smartphones and social media

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News consumption among young people is now widely debated. The emergence of the Internet, social media and personal smartphones has been accompanied by a decline in the consumption of news through traditional channels. At the same time, digital media has made news continuously available “everywhere”. It is difficult, but paramount in this new landscape, to build knowledge on how news is accessed, consumed and interpreted and how it affects young people in their daily lives. By portraying news-related practices among today’s youth in Norway, based on a nationwide survey with a particular focus on smartphones and social media, this chapter offers one such contribution.

Digitalization is increasingly permeating the social fabric of our lives. This has not least affected the news media market in terms of production, distribution and consumption.¹ A gradual move from print to digital media, along with a “blurring” of boundaries between news and other more personal or commercial formats, has made it difficult for policymakers, the media industry and others to understand how young people engage with news. Although there has been a decline in the use of traditional media,² personal media access tools, such as smartphones, have made news omnipresent, reaching people wherever they are. This pervasiveness of news tends to generally *increase* the amount of news consumed.³

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Public discourse about youth media consumption (including news media) tends to be problem-oriented. Attention is given to the fact that young people consume less news, that news consumption is superficial and entertainment-motivated, that young people are not critical enough in terms of sources/origins of news, and that they tend to be less engaged in public discussions on topics relevant to society.⁴ The fear is that the younger generations grow up to be news-avoiding, uncritical, uninformed and disengaged citizens, gradually undermining the democratic foundations of the Nordic societies. Another challenge is the potential for a generation gap, as different generations (through different means of news access) tend to “consume different public spheres and representations of reality”.⁵

In this chapter we offer a more nuanced look at this development by discussing core findings from a Norwegian study⁶ that looks at news interest and ways of consuming news among youths, in particular via social media and smartphones, and the social and contextual conditions that play a role in news-related consumption practices. The study was conducted in late 2015 as a nationwide representative web survey among 805 youths in the 16 to 25 age group.⁷

News interest and news consumption patterns

As the boundaries between sources, genres, channels and contexts are blurred, measuring news consumption is becoming increasingly difficult. However, the study reveals that more than half of Norwegian youths (16 to 25 years old) say they are interested or very interested in news in general, with more boys than girls claiming to be *very interested* in news.⁸ This general interest level concurs with the alleged consumption of news: As many as nine out of ten say they read, watch or check the news at least once a day. More boys than girls claim to follow news *continuously* during the day.⁹

The study shows that news consumption is part of both private and social practices. Close to eight out of ten read, watch or check news when they are alone at home. However, seven out of ten often discuss news face to face with others, indicating that news is a natural part of daily conversations. Peers and family also influence news consumption patterns. Half of the respondents are occupied with news that their friends care about, and four out of ten engage with news that their

families find important. On the other hand, only in ten often discuss news in various online forums.

A defining feature, in Norway as in the other Nordic countries, is the high level of *digital access* to media among young people. In our study, 99 per cent of youths had access to a PC/Mac, 97 per cent to a smartphone and 72 per cent to a tablet. The *preferred platform* for consuming news was the smartphone (75%) and this was more popular in the older group (21 to 25 years old) than in the younger group (16 to 20 years old). PCs were the second most popular platform for news consumption (70%), while traditional platforms were overall less popular, such as TV (21%), radio (19%) and newspapers (14%).

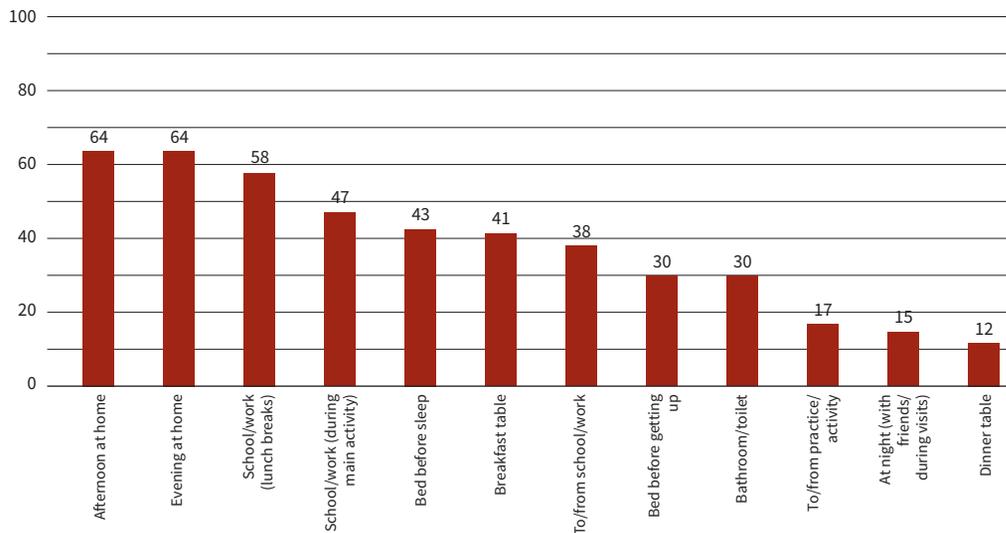
News consumption on smartphones

The smartphone has thus become the most important device for accessing news among young people. It enables constant engagement with – and “unlimited” opportunities for – new genres, formats and business models related to news presentation, distribution and consumption. It is not merely a multi-purpose “task-oriented artefact”¹⁰ but has become a “lifestyle artefact” for today’s youth.¹¹ This also implies that time is not allocated to news consumption specifically. Rather, the smartphone enables news to be consumed as part of, or in between, other daily practices.¹² The data show that youths consume news both in typically private and social settings, and in a wide range of daily contexts. There is a clear indication that the older group (21–25 years old) engage more with news than the younger group (16–20 years old) in all the given contexts. The only significant gender difference is that boys are slightly more prone to consume news when they wake up in the morning and when they are in the bathroom. The various contexts for news consumption mediated by smartphones can be seen in the figure on the next page.

Consuming news via social media on smartphones

As almost all Norwegian youths now possess a smartphone and engage with one or more social media platforms, checking news via social media on smartphones is becoming popular. We see that three out of four prefer to access social media from their smartphones, with a higher proportion among girls than boys. A slight majority of Norwegian

Figure 1 Situations in which Norwegian youths (16–25 years old) use their smartphone to check news, 2015 (daily usage in per cent)



Comment: The figure shows the percentage of Norwegian youths (aged 16–25 years) who own a smartphone that use their smartphone to check news in different situations during a typical day. N=783.

Source: Slettemeås & Kjørstad, 2016.

youths still claim that they never use social media to check news first. However, four out of ten often consult social media first when they are looking for news. Boys and older youths tend to check news first through *other media channels* than social media.

If we look at young social media users, more than half claim to follow, like or “friend” news sites in social media. In addition, they follow other news-related providers or individuals, such as bloggers and politicians,¹³ and one in ten follow journalists. Still, entertainment providers (“soft” news sites or individuals) are the most popular ones, such as celebrities, sports stars and entertainment sites. Girls tend to favour these entertainment sites/individuals more than boys.

Among the plethora of social media alternatives, Facebook remains the most important one for Norwegian young people, including in terms of news consumption. Among social media users, 93 per cent use Facebook on a daily basis, followed by 78 per cent for Snapchat and 58 per cent for Instagram, while Twitter, for example, has low daily usage (11%). Among Facebook users, as many as 62 per cent claim that they

like, follow or subscribe to news services. Furthermore, 59 per cent say that news features liked or shared by friends appear in their newsfeed. For Snapchat, news engagement is considerably lower.

Engagement with and attitude towards social media-generated news

How Norwegian youths engage with social media-generated news varies. A slight majority say they *often* find news as they scroll down the newsfeed, while a third find it *occasionally*. Very few *rarely or never* find news in their social media feeds. Many also *click* on news links from the feed. Quite a few actively *promote* news by liking, sharing or retweeting news articles, and one in three claim to do this often or occasionally. However, a majority *never comment on or discuss* news-related stuff in social media. Most young people support the idea that it is OK to share and discuss news on *some* social media platforms but not all, and they prefer more closed conversations.

Algorithms embedded in social media enable news items to be *indirectly promoted to others* just by liking or following news posts. Many of the youths were unaware of this. Advanced algorithms based on profiles, previous searches, likes or friends' activities can reproduce and narrow down what is shown in the newsfeed, creating so-called "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles".¹⁴ When informed about this in the survey, many disclosed a negative attitude to the lack of "control" over what news was presented to them. Quite a few were positive, though, toward algorithms facilitating *relevance* (content) and *convenience* (time-saving). However, since social media may provide other news than what is actively searched for by the user, this can potentially moderate the echo chamber effect.¹⁵

Recently, so-called *news aggregators* have become popular news mediators. News aggregators typically filter and recycle/repackage content from other news sources, making short stories and promoting these through catchy titles and images/videos (click baits). They depend on viral peer distribution through social media. These new actors contribute to the dissolving of boundaries between edited and non-edited content, between soft and hard news, and between traditional journalism and marketing. The Norwegian survey shows that a third of young people occasionally read, watch or check news from news aggregators (e.g.

Buzzfeed) and girls favour these types of sites/news more than boys. The main reason for consuming aggregated news is that they appear *automatically* in the newsfeed.¹⁶ The mix of entertainment news and serious news in mash-ups also motivates consumption, along with the fact that the *user experience* is better and more fun. Still, Norwegian youths exhibit some sense of source critical attitude as one-third say that they often or very often *check the origin of the content* presented by news aggregators.

Overall, young people perceive news delivered through social media as positive for their societal engagement. Almost half of young social media users, and in particular the girls and the younger age group, say that social media makes them *more interested in news* because it enables them to engage with news on a regular basis. Many also state that they *come closer to the world* as social media-mediated news is more tailored to their own and their friends' preferences. A third feel a *sense of participation* as they can comment on news, although a majority claim they never do this.

Concluding reflections

In this chapter we have presented data that offers some nuances to critical perspectives on young people's news media consumption. The data indicate that Norwegian youths have a relatively high interest in news and a regular and varied engagement with "digital" news consumed in both social and private settings. In addition, news topics are discussed "analogously" with friends and family in daily conversations,¹⁷ while online public discussions are mostly avoided. This indicates that digital news consumption should not be studied in isolation. It is interwoven in daily practices.

The smartphone and social media have become central platforms for accessing news among young people. While a recent Norwegian study found that 55 per cent of youths (16–25 years old) read one or more newspapers online daily,¹⁸ our study shows that social media accessed from smartphones has become a key "mediator" of news. Smartphones and social media play an important role in making news constantly available to young people, even though short, image-rich and elusive news formats seem to dominate. Still, this may trigger an interest in news topics that would otherwise be absent, or may keep the news

interest warm over time through constant exposure.

How “deep” this news involvement is, and how critical and reflected news consumption practices are among young people, we know less about. The study finds that there is some critical thinking in terms of the origin of news sources and of algorithmic filtering, but there is arguably a large knowledge gap concerning, for instance, how algorithms filter and affect content and user perspectives. Overall, however, these findings moderate the idea of “news-avoiding”, “unengaged” and “un-critical” youths. News is now available everywhere in a blur of formats, genres, channels and consumption contexts, with digital and analogue engagements closely intertwined.

This new reality makes it increasingly more difficult to understand how youths engage with, conceptualize and perceive news, and how this shapes their future democratic contribution. In the era of “fake news”, and global social media and aggregator platforms, local and national media will probably benefit from playing the roles of “trusted” and relevant news contributors. They need to understand how young people engage with news in their everyday life (without resorting to aggressive personal data gathering) and identify what triggers their news interests. The research community can support this endeavour. What seems clear in terms of policy is that a comprehensive and more integrated framework for critical media competence should be introduced at an early age, in order to equip young people with the tools to deal with present and future risks and opportunities in this field.

Notes

1. NOU (2017).
2. SSB (2018).
3. Pew (2012).
4. Elgesem & Olsen (2013); Strömbäck (2015); Moe & Kleiven (2016).
5. Newman & Levy (2014).
6. Slettebø & Kjørstad (2016).
7. The project was financed by *Rådet for anvendt medieforskning* (RAM). The online survey was conducted by Norstat in November/December 2015. We would like to thank Ingrid Kjørstad for her contribution to the study.
8. There was no specification or definition in the questionnaire of “news” so the answers are based on a subjective definition by the respondents. We also see that many news genres are blurred as soft and hard news are mixed in mash-ups, while social media mixes personal, soft and hard news from a range of sources.
9. This implies going constantly *in and out* of news, without allocating a specific time for news consumption set apart from other practices or contexts.

10. Barkhuus & Polichar (2011).
11. Carroll et al. (2002), (2003); Slette-meås & Kjørstad (2016).
12. These new opportunities complicate the identification and measuring of frequencies, spaces and types of news consumption in surveys.
13. cf. also Enjolras et al. (2013).
14. Pariser (2011).
15. Elvestad (2015).
16. Users stating that they agree with this statement “to a large extent”.
17. Elvestad (2015); Huang et al. (2016).
18. SSB (2017).

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