14. A generation divided

(Dis)engagement towards news among Danish youth

Jacob Ørmen

Public commentators often worry about the seemingly disengaged youth of today. This is also the case in Denmark, where young people are turning away from traditional sources of news. However, research indicates that the youth of today are keeping up with news – just in new ways and through different media compared to previous generations. There is a substantiated concern, nonetheless, about whether this picture covers the Danish youth as a whole or only the most interested individuals. In fact, research indicates that youngsters are especially polarized in their news habits – indications of a generation divided. In this chapter, I outline the overall trends in news consumption among young Danes with a particular focus on algorithmic media and the particularity – or generality – of the Danish case in relation to the other Nordic countries.

Before we can characterize media use patterns for the young, which is the purpose of this chapter, we have to delineate this group from older generations and establish baseline trends in their news habits. For the present purpose, the Danish youth encompasses anyone from the early teenage years up to 30 years old – the formative years of adolescence and early adulthood. Naturally, there are vast differences in how a 13-year-old and a 30-year-old use media, but in comparison to older generations they do share significant similarities.

When it comes to media use trends, the issue is more complicated. According to one extensive report, made by the media research section

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at the Danish public service broadcaster DR, about 90 per cent of people below 30 years of age consume news on a daily basis (compared to 95% for the full population).[1] About two-thirds of them get news on social media followed by news websites (60%) while TV, radio and print have less than 40 per cent each. Thus, digital media, and in particular social network sites, form the core of their news repertoires. For older generations, TV, radio and print take precedence. This suggests that online has displaced traditional media for youngsters, but also that they do keep up with news on a regular basis.

Since these statistics rely on a survey questionnaire, it is difficult to know how respondents define "news" and to what extent respondents answer accurately and reliably. In comparison, the official Danish internet tracking statistics (*Dansk Online Index*) finds that only 42 per cent of people in the age group in question visit any one of the Danish news websites on a daily basis.[2] We currently have no reliable measure of social media news use, but it is likely to be higher as services such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat play vital roles in the media diet for the Danish youth. Thus, we are left somewhat in the dark in terms of patterns of usage of online services, and social network sites are hard to pin down in surveys or tracking data.

Measurement issues aside, these figures hide a noteworthy development: youngsters are divided in their news repertoire. A recent study shows that Danish 18- to 30-year-olds are split almost perfectly between those that consume a high degree of news (from new as well as legacy media) and those that only get news through social encounters (on social media or in physical conversations) or rarely pay attention to news at all.[3] This split roughly follows educational background (those with lower education being more likely to encounter news solely in social circumstances). In contrast, older generations tend to be highly dependent on one or a few media, TV in particular, which constitute the core of their news repertoire. Thus, the dominant trend in the news use of the young is that there is no unified trend, but instead indications of great fragmentation across socio-demographic lines.

The most evident development is the rise of incidental news exposure.[4] As many youngsters do not seek out news to the same extent as older generations, they are more reliant on their social peers and the infrastructure of social media to encounter news incidentally. A young

Dane in her early 20s epitomizes the situation: "I do not seek out news directly. If it is relevant enough, news will find me."[5] Thus, to understand the news habits of the young we need to appreciate the impact of online services on media use and social interaction.

The impact of algorithmic media

In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of algorithmic media on the internet. Media can be said to be algorithmic when computer programs play a decisive role in organizing and displaying information to users (e.g. as a news feed, search result or recommendation list).[6] Thus, in contrast to traditional media, it is not humans but computer algorithms that edit or curate the content to be presented for users. Social network sites, messaging applications, search engines and video streaming services constitute key algorithmic media. These media play decisive roles in how Danes in general, and young people in particular, access information and communicate with others on the internet.

The public discourse has centred on the algorithmic dimension of these new online services. Research has, however, shown that the impact of algorithmic media, particularly on social network sites, is just as much about the social dimension. For instance, a study of the Facebook newsfeed found that a person's social connections (their "friends") matter more in terms of what they see than the ranking algorithm; if no one share news, news is not shown on Facebook.[7] Likewise, tests reveal that the algorithms on Google Search tend to give people roughly similar results for the same search terms – in contrast to the claims of the "filter bubble" hypothesis – but that people do not search for the same things.[8] Thus, if people do not search for news-related topics, news is not shown in Google. The same phenomena arguably exist for Youtube, Twitter and other forms of algorithmically guided and socially curated media on the internet.

Thus, it is not necessarily the case that the young are actively avoiding news (purposeful disengagement) but rather that they tend to be left out due to social circumstances (incidental disengagement). It is likely that the more individualistic forms of media use lead to greater information inequality within the group of youngsters currently reaching adulthood. As they are not necessarily socialized into news as part of family life in the same manner as previous generations – sharing

the newspaper at breakfast or watching the evening news broadcast at dinnertime – they are more dependent on their family, friends and teachers to introduce them to news directly. This means that youngsters coming from poorer socio-economic backgrounds with similar peers are less likely to encounter news incidentally. Research has shown that it is crucial to form good habits in terms of following news in younger years if people are going to keep these habits up later in life.[9] Thus, the social stratification of the young plays a critical role in understanding both whether people seek out news on their own and whether they get news through social encounters offline as well as online.

Initiatives to engage the young

There have been some initiatives in Denmark targeting this youngest generation. Two of the national newspapers, *Weekendavisen* and *Politiken*, publish a separate section for children and teenagers. As newspaper subscription is heavily skewed toward the more educated, it is unlikely that these initiatives will reach the underserved parts of the young population particularly well. The most promising initiative is a news programme (Ultra News, DR) directed at primary school children. It is distributed both as broadcast (on TV, until 2020) and on demand (on DR's website, app and Youtube channel). The programme relies on a reporting style that mimics social media and blogging practices, integrating graphics and language, and producing features that many youngsters are familiar with from their everyday media habits. The reporters also seek to engage their users on Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook, often using the commentary tracks to sample opinions on subjects and crowdsource ideas for stories to cover. On the Youtube channel, the news programme is presented in a flow of content – mimicking elements from the traditional TV flow structure[10] – that can serve to guide users to encounter news when browsing around on Youtube or scrolling through their social media feeds. Although the attempt is impressive and extensive, there are currently little data on how well DR Ultra manages to reach the less engaged.

From Denmark to the Nordic countries

The tendencies observed for Denmark largely prevail for the other Nordic countries. A large-scale study of generational trends from

Sweden confirms the exceptional heterogeneity of young news users compared with previous generations.[11] Likewise, a Norwegian study notices the split between highly engaged and disengaged news users as a key differentiator among young adults.[12] One area where news use in Denmark diverges from the other Nordic countries is in the willingness to pay for news. While Norwegians, Swedes and Finns are among the most willing to pay for news in the world, Danes are much more reluctant.[13] It is unclear what the picture is like for the youngest parts of the population in all of these countries, but it is likely that the difference remains. Whether this is the result of different payment models, news supply or cultural norms is not clear at the moment. Yet, all in all, the differences between the Nordic countries are dwarfed by the similarities. Compared to most other places, young people in the Nordic countries tend to be well informed and interested in issues in the news.[14] The question is, then, whether this Nordic exceptionalism will remain or be subsumed by global trends in young people's media consumption.

Concluding discussion

In contrast to the often lamented view, there is little basis to say that the young generation is avoiding news and disengaging with society at large. In contrast, many youngsters keep up through both old and new media. What is concerning, however, is the apparent divide between these "news seekers" and the significant share of young people that rarely seek out news on their own. The key to understanding how young people today engage with, or disengage from, news is to appreciate the fundamental shift in media they use in daily life compared with their parents – and grandparents. While earlier generations got news from human-curated print or broadcast media ("mass media"), the young rely heavily on algorithmically curated media on the internet. This will likely have two major consequences for news use among the young. First of all, algorithmic media exacerbate social differences as only those with social connections that share and comment on news will encounter news in this way. Secondly, the technological infrastructure of these media is dependent on automated steps rather than editorial decision-making. This marks a significant shift in the gatekeeping power traditionally held by the press. Far from being neutral innovations, the

algorithms underpinning search engines and social network services are encoded with preconceived notions about relevance, importance and topicality. These preconceptions lead to some issues, notably of race and ethnicity, being represented poorly,[15] and others achieving a high level of visibility as they are circulated rapidly on the internet.[16] If large parts of the population, young and old, start to get news primarily from algorithmically curated media, then the information landscape will depend heavily on the haphazard decisions of computer programmers located in the US or Asia. Thus, both social and technological issues related to algorithmic media will likely increase the gap between those that keep up and those that are left behind. It is currently uncertain whether the current news options for young people in Denmark (and abroad) will enable the disenfranchised youngsters to catch up.

Notes

1. DR Medieforskning (2018).
2. Calculations done by the author in Instar Analytics (based on May 2018).
3. Ørmen (2016).
4. Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Matassi (2017).
5. Interview transcript, Ørmen (2016).
6. Napoli (2014).
7. Bakshy, Messing & Adamic (2015).
8. Pariser (2012); Dutton et al. (2017).
9. Shehata (2016).
10. Williams (1974).
11. Westlund & Bjur (2014).
12. Hovden & Moe (2017).
13. Newman et al. (2018).
14. Curran et al. (2009).
15. Umoja Noble (2018).
16. Ørmen (2015).

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