

10. Young people do consume news in social media

– with a little help from their friends!

Maria Jervelycke Belfrage

Nine out of ten young Swedes use social media every day, and when it comes to news consumption, eight out of ten come across news on social media platforms.¹ Consuming news online and in social media flows, and having an almost unlimited access to a wide variety of different sources, does, however, require some life experience as well as knowledge and specific skills in source criticism. It could be that certain persons in young people's social media flows have an important role to play in helping them find their way in a changing media landscape. This article, based on an interview study with Swedish high school students, describes how the news use among youths is both planned and incidental, and to some extent informed by important others. Lastly, it is argued that news organizations should consider these findings to reach the young population.

Society is moving from a traditional news cycle dominated by journalism professionals to a more complex information cycle that incorporates news consumers within the process.² Social media networks are central in this development, in the way they affect how people communicate and relate to each other. This is a consequence of several changes, with the emergence of the internet of course being the most obvious, but the development of digital technology in general, and smartphones in particular, also plays an important role in this process. These changes have affected the media and news industries in several

Maria Jervelycke Belfrage is a lecturer at the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication (JMG) at the University of Gothenburg.

ways, with a variety of convergences over the years, concerning production as well as distribution. Since both the audience and advertisers have shown less and less interest in traditional media platforms, the industry's presence on social media, such as Facebook, has become necessary in order to reach out to the audience.

Research has shown that young people generally do not take part in news as much as the adult population, and some not at all, or very little.³ But there are also studies that show that many young people are indeed interested in news, that they believe it is important to keep up with what is happening in the world, but that traditional scheduled/linear newscasts or subscribed morning newspapers aren't perceived as relevant. Perhaps, it is speculated, since the traditional media forms and formats do not fit into one's lifestyle, for practical, temporal, geographical or economic reasons, they are not considered an option – or at least, it seems, they are deemed more difficult to make use of.⁴

This article is based on an interview study with young Swedes, conducted in the spring and autumn of 2016. Knowing that younger people, in general, consume news to a lesser degree than adults, we wanted to find out whether the presence of news in social media networks actually reaches a young audience, and, if so, how the young reflect on this presence.

The method used was semi-structured focus group interviews with a total of 44 informants, all attending high school in the Gothenburg region, aged 17 to 19, with a slight predominance of male participants. The interviews were conducted in smaller groups of four to six participants and lasted for about one hour each. This chapter starts with an overview of previous research on news consumption among young people; it is then followed by some of the study's results, and ends with a summary and conclusion.

Young people's news consumption in a new media landscape

Although research shows that young people seem to have an interest as well as an ambition to actually keep updated on the news, it seems that many consume news in an *incidental* manner – as a side effect of other reasons to use the internet. Studies have shown that young people do indeed take an active interest in news, that to a great extent this takes place online and through social media and that it is often carried out

in an incidental way.⁵ The consumption can therefore be seen as a by-product of other activities, something that comes with the habitual use of a certain medium, channel or content.⁶ The phenomenon is not new, but given the increased opportunities to consume news, through mobile devices, in a social media flow, where socially oriented updates are irregularly but continuously being mixed up with news stories, the coincidental exposure to news becomes more significant. Social media networks differ from traditional news distribution in that news distribution also includes media consumers, and in fact gives them a quite prominent role.

Changes in consumption behaviour

As a consequence of the fast development of digital technology and the emergence of social media networks, research has shown how news consumption behaviour has clearly undergone a change: from consumers having followed a *traditional news cycle*, with scheduled/linear broadcasts and subscribed newspapers, dominated and controlled by professional journalists, the consumption is now moving in the direction of a more complex *information cycle*, which runs constantly, online and in a vast variety of social media flows.⁷

The main reasons for people to use social media networks are to keep in touch with friends and to maintain relationships already established offline. The most common ways to use social media are writing about yourself, chatting and commenting on other people's comments and postings, and uploading pictures of yourself or your family.⁸ However, a large proportion of users say they also get news in their social media feeds from people they follow or are friends with. They also "like", comment and recommend news to their friends and acquaintances,⁹ which means news consumption through social media to a large extent has become a significant social and shared experience.¹⁰

The development of digital technology, such as mobile devices, has also most likely contributed to the changed consumption behaviour, for instance when and where people consume media and news content. A survey from 2017 shows that nearly everyone in Sweden aged 16 to 25 owns a smartphone.¹¹ The study confirms international comparative studies, where for example the Reuters Digital News Report 2017 showed that news consumption via smartphones had superseded

consumption via computers. News consumption via social media has so far been continuously and steadily increasing.¹²

The importance of others

Furthermore, research shows that in many users' social media networks, there are certain individuals who are of particular importance for the spread of news, so-called "opinion leaders".¹³ They are nodes, centrally located in larger networks, which, among other things, means they usually have a lot of friends on Facebook and many followers on Twitter, Instagram and/or Youtube. It is typical of these opinion leaders that they are often engaged in a variety of social and civic issues, that they thoroughly follow the news and actively pay attention to societal matters.

The theory of *Two-step flow of communication* is based on studies conducted in the 1950s by the two researchers Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld and their teams. The theory is considered to be an important contribution to the development of media and communications research and highlights two aspects. One is that every individual makes their own choices when it comes to media consumption – you can choose to read the text, or not read at all. The second aspect was the introduction of the concept *opinion leaders*, described as influential persons in our direct vicinity (Katz and Lazarsfeld use the term *primary groups*), within the family, in our circle of friends or at our workplace, who "interpret" news for us and also affect what news we take part in. Opinion leaders tend to personify certain values (who one is), to have more familiarity with certain issues (what one knows) and to be positioned at the centre of social networks (whom one knows).¹⁴ When it comes to social media, this is of extra interest since research shows that we prefer shared and/or commented news,¹⁵ and when it comes to opinion leaders' influence, the emergence of social media and the rapid spread of digital devices are believed to provide it with far greater reach.¹⁶

It does, however, seem that young people combine and make use of a variety of sources in their news consumption, largely depending on the subject and the nature of the news. In an American survey from 2015, "Where Millennials Get the News", the researchers used a questionnaire that allowed respondents to categorize their pathways to news and information. They were given the ability to choose between three different ways, depending on what kind of news they were looking for.

This was because the researchers noted that the young people seemed to have made this kind of division themselves, consciously or not, and that they would use the paths they perceive to be most reasonable.

These three paths were described as follows:

1. *A social path*: social media networks where the news comes in an incidental way, shared by friends/opinion leaders, groups and networks one belongs to.
2. *A curated path*: semi-professional blogs/podcasts/websites powered by more or less professional/skilled actors/players and brings up/is about specific subject areas.
3. *A reportorial path*: professional newsrooms online, accessed via apps and links or traditional media platforms, television, radio, newspaper, where everything is produced by journalists.

When the respondents in the survey chose paths concerning news about the economy, crime, domestic policy, foreign affairs, medicine/health or environment/climate, the professional path was significantly preferred to social and semi-professional paths. On the other hand, in regard to news focusing on abortion, race, religion or HBQT rights, the social path was more popular. Subjects relating to religion showed an especially big difference, with 81 per cent choosing the social path, and 51 per cent choosing the professional path. When it came to local news, both the social and professional paths ended up at the same level, as 77 per cent would have chosen this. The more severe, or otherwise important, a news piece was considered, the greater the impact it had on the society and citizens, and the greater the probability that they would rely both on the social path, i.e. opinion leaders, and on traditional media, i.e. professionals.

Young people's news consumption in social media – both planned and incidental

Young people in Sweden today have, in general, always had access to computers. They have also had access to the internet all their lives, and gradually also to a variety of mobile devices, the latest in line being smartphones. They are undoubtedly what Marc Prensky labelled in his 2001 article¹⁷ *digital natives*; they are used to organizing their lives with the help of the internet and use their smartphones in such a manner

that they have practically become an extension of their actual beings.

This also applies to the young people interviewed in this study. The majority of the interviewees replied that they do indeed get news via social media, however many also added that they have actively chosen to follow news sites via social media. Others stated that friends share a lot, and some even said that they get all their news on Facebook. Other platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Youtube and Twitter were also mentioned:

Yes, I get news in social media. It can be about different things, environment, celebrities, it can be completely different, depending on what others share, what your friends tag you in, [usually] on Facebook, it's most common in there. (Female, vocational programme)

The news consumption is both incidental and planned

The majority of the interviewees said they get news in an incidental way in their feeds, partly due to the fact that friends share news, partly due to news organizations having their own presence in social media. However, some interviewees said their news consumption is both incidental and planned and exemplified by recognizing incidental consumption through taking part in whatever shows up in their flows submitted by friends and families. At the same time, they also pointed out that they made clear and deliberate choices, for instance by having apps with push notifications from Swedish dailies or by following news-oriented accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube or Snapchat.

Counting on being informed when important news breaks

A few interviewees replied that their consumption is planned to a high degree and explained that they use carefully chosen digital news service applications and instant updates. As many as 26 out of 44 stated that they have different types of push notifications and alerts on their mobile phone:

My consumption is planned, so for me it is not so much a coincidence, I've chosen to follow some on Youtube, and they put up pretty much the same things, things that I know that I want. I also occasionally check out the apps, Aftonbladet and GP.¹⁸ (Male, college preparatory programme)

Over all, everyone seemed to expect, even taking it for granted, that when something “big” or important happens in Sweden or elsewhere, it will show up in their social media flows. However, some interviewees made it clear that they don’t always check the notifications, and also that it can sometimes be overwhelming with constant updates.

Some are more digitally skilled than others

Some make a point of saying that, for example, Facebook’s algorithm and news feed settings allow them to make a form of *indirect* choices, for instance by liking or commenting on someone’s post, and thereby knowingly accepting that more from that particular user will show up. Others emphasize that they have made clear and definite choices, based on their own areas of interest. Several interviewees stated that they supplement consumption in social media feeds with news consumption through traditional media, such as reading the morning newspaper, listening to the radio, or watching television news in the morning or evening.

So it seems that for a quite large proportion of the interviewed youths, the total news consumption is quite well planned, even if some of it is based on what shows up incidentally. Although the respondents in this study stress that social media lends itself especially well to keeping up with sports news, entertainment news and news about lifestyle and celebrities, it is clear that several of the interviewees are also interested in social/civic issues and politics. Some interviewees gave concrete examples of this by mentioning, for instance, climate issues, feminism, immigration and human rights. It is also apparent that they make a clear distinction of the types of news that are considered more lightweight. Most also seem aware that they should pay close attention when they come across news with questionable sources.

The importance of experienced and knowledgeable others

There is no doubt that there is a presence of opinion leaders in many of the interviewees’ social media flows and feeds. Over half of the young people interviewed stated that there are a couple or more *extra active* people, who frequently update and post news, often with links to the original source and quite often with comments. Most said they were happy with this, as it meant they got news that they otherwise would

have missed. It seems that the opinion leaders acquire respect on the basis of their expertise in specific subject areas and because they offer in-depth knowledge.

Yes, there are those, they are really important for me. Because I have many people who are interested in politics. I tend to read what they think and what they say. What their plans are and what they want, what they are doing, it's important. I learn things. (Male, vocational programme)

Conclusion

Over all, it seems that the young people in our study habitually first encounter news on social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or a Youtube channel. A clear majority said social media was the *most* common way to encounter news, but they also often turn to traditional media to double-check sources. Several use news applications with alerts and push notifications, although some admitted to having abandoned this due to feeling stressed out by the constant updates. This study also shows that the interviewees make a distinction between “major and minor” news, important and unimportant, business and pleasure. But to be able to make these distinctions it seems that they rely, to varying degrees, on having specific people available, who have knowledge and expertise – people who in this article are described as opinion leaders.

Something the media industry in general, and news organizations in particular, probably have to deal with is how to make use of the access to the audience that opinion leaders constitute – partly because these people are perceived as playing an important role when it comes to communicating and interpreting news, partly because research has shown that there are different paths to a news story.

For news organizations, this could mean that they should look for, reach out to and engage opinion leaders on social media; it could then become a way of reaching out to a young audience. And maybe news organizations then could manage to channel part of the audience to their own platforms. The knowledge that young people are, so to speak, screening sources by topic, and use different paths to different news, based on an idea of where the expertise is to be found, could then be used to strategically target and direct news to the appropriate social

media platform, in order to reach more people and increase the circulation. Most likely, this could give rise to entirely new functions among media company employees – perhaps even entirely new professions.

Notes

1. Nordicom (2016).
2. Chadwick (2011).
3. Sternvik (2010).
4. *ibid.*
5. Yadamsuren & Erdelez (2010).
6. Valeriani & Vaccari (2016).
7. Chadwick (2011).
8. Bergström (2010).
9. Purcell et al. (2010).
10. Costera Meijer & Kormelink (2014).
11. The Internet Foundation in Sweden (2017).
12. Reuters (2017).
13. Yadamsuren & Erdelez (2010), Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage (2018).
14. Katz (1957).
15. Meijer & Kormelink (2014).
16. Lee & Ma (2012).
17. Prensky (2001).
18. Aftonbladet is a national evening newspaper, and Sweden's most popular online news service. GP/Göteborgs-Posten is a local newspaper.

References

- Bergström, Annika (2010). Personligt och privat i sociala medier [Personal and Private in Social Media]. pp. 435-442 in Holmberg, Sören & Weibull, Lennart (eds.) *Nordiskt ljus* [Nordic light]. Gothenburg: The SOM Institute, University of Gothenburg.
- Bergström, Annika & Jervelycke Belfrage, Maria (2018). News in Social Media. Incidental Consumption and the Role of Opinion Leaders. *Digital Journalism*, 6(5): 583-598.
- Chadwick, Andrew (2011). Britain's First Live Televised Party Leaders' Debate: From the News Cycle to the Political Information Cycle. *Parliamentary Affairs* 64(1): 24-44.
- Costera Meijer, Irene & Groot Kormelink, Tim (2014). Checking, Sharing, Clicking and Linking. *Digital Journalism*, 3(5): 664-679.
- Katz, Elihu (1957). The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-To-Date Report on an Hypothesis. *Political Opinion Quarterly*, 21(1): 61-78.
- Lee, Chei Sian & Long, Ma (2012). News Sharing in Social Media: The Effect of Gratifications and Prior Experience. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(2): 331-339.
- Nordicom (2016). *Mediebarometern 2015* [Media Barometer 2015]. Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- Prensky, Marc (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1. *On the Horizon*, 9(5): 1-6.
- Purcell, Kirsten; Rainie, Lee; Mitchell, Amy; Rosenstiel, Tom & Olmstead, Kenneth (2010). Understanding the Participatory News Consumer: How Internet and Cell Phone Users have Turned News into a Social Experience. *Pew Internet & American Life Project*. Available at <<http://www.pewinternet.org/2010/03/01/understanding-the-participatory-news-consumer/>>. [Accessed 27 August, 2018].
- Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2017). Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford.

- Sternvik, Josefine. (2010). Ungas nyhetskonsumention – i en föränderlig nyhetsvärld [Young People's News Consumption – In a Changing News World]. pp. 369-379 in Holmberg, Sören & Weibull, Lennart (eds.) *Nordiskt ljus* [Nordic Light]. Gothenburg: The SOM Institute, University of Gothenburg.
- The Internet Foundation in Sweden (2017). *Svenskarna och Internet 2017*. Stockholm: The Internet Foundation in Sweden. Available at https://www.iis.se/docs/Svenskarna_och_internet_2017.pdf. [Accessed 17 October, 2018].
- Valeriani, Augusto & Vaccari, Christian (2016). Accidental Exposure to Politics on Social Media as Online Participation Equalizer in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. *New Media & Society* 18(9): 1857-1874.
- Yadamsuren, Borchuluun & Erdelez, Sanda (2010). Incidental exposure to online news, *American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 47(1): 1-8.