“It’s Only a Pastime, Really”: Young People’s Experiences of Social Media as a Source of News about Public Affairs

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Abstract
Western democracies have seen a decreased participation in activities traditionally associated with political participation. One aspect of participating politically is to keep up-to-date with what happens in society, for example, by following the news. Here, youth have been found to be less active than older generations. The decline in young people’s consumption of news media does not necessarily mean that they are disinterested in news or politics; they may get their information from other sources, for example, social media. Using a qualitative multi-method approach, this article investigates how young people who are interested in civic and political issues, and who regularly access news from various sources, experience and understand, specifically, Facebook and Twitter as sources of news about public affairs. The participants appreciated the immediateness of social media news, and felt that it could provide insights into new perspectives and make news stories feel more relevant. However, it was also experienced as one-sided, fragmented, and subjective, giving a biased, or even false, image of what happens in society. The consumption of news was strongly related to the idea of being a “good” citizen. However, since the participants did not regard social media news as “real news,” their image of themselves as citizens suffered. If young people in general resemble our participants in this respect, research that asks about their news consumption runs a risk of getting answers that underestimate it, thus reinforcing the idea that young people are less interested and informed about public affairs than is actually the case.

Keywords
youth, social media, news, political participation, citizenship

Introduction
Most Western democracies have seen a decreased participation in activities traditionally associated with political participation (Bennett, 2008; Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Dalton, 2008; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Norris, 2003; Putnam, 2000), where young people are especially singled out as a problematic group (Barry, 2005; Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009; Coleman, 2006, 2010; Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010; Smith, Lister, Middleton, & Cox, 2005). One aspect of participating politically is to keep up-to-date with what happens in society, for example, by following the news. Here, too, youth have been found to be less active than older generations (Kohut, 2013). Studies from several countries have shown that young people are less interested in news (particularly political news) and less well-informed than their counterparts in earlier decades (Buckingham, 2000). The decreased interest in news journalism is seen as resulting in a decline in “informed citizenship,” as observed in an “increasing ignorance of basic political and geographic information” (Buckingham, 2000: 2).

The decline in young people’s news consumption does not necessarily mean that they are disinterested in news or politics. Rather, according to Marchi (2012), it means that they get their information from other sources, such as trusted adults, entertainment, and social media. Research on news consumption through social media has, above all, focused on distribution (see, for example, Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012; Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010). Questions have been asked about who, and how many young people consume news through social media, what they engage with, and what they share. While these studies provide knowledge on the area as a whole, they need to be complemented with more
detailed insights into how young people actually understand and experience social media as a source of news.

When qualitative studies on news consumption and social media are conducted, they, too, often target a wide spectrum of participants, aiming to investigate the habits and attitudes of young people as a whole. In contrast, the study at hand focuses on a more homogeneous group. The development of the media landscape has brought with it the opportunity to choose between various media in order to gain information about public affairs. I have, therefore, chosen to focus on a group of young people who are relatively interested in civic and political issues, and who regularly access news from various sources. The aim of this article is to provide qualitative insights into how these young people experience and understand, specifically, Facebook and Twitter as sources of news about public affairs.

The first section of the article discusses the problem of declining news consumption, news consumption through social media, and news consumption as related to citizenship ideals. Methodological procedures and considerations are then discussed. The results section opens with a description of the participants’ news consumption habits, and the analysis then focuses on how they understand news consumption through social media, specifically. Finally, the discussion brings out a number of factors that can explain the participants’ ambivalence toward news consumption through social media.

**Literature Overview**

**The Problem of Declining News Consumption**

News consumption is seen as crucial for political socialization as it has been found to have a positive impact on the development of political understanding and interest. Although media consumption, in general, contributes to public connection and political participation, different media contribute in different ways. According to Coudry, Livingstone, and Markham (2007: 170), citizens who are engaged with the news are more likely to vote and to be interested in politics. Ekström, Olsson, and Shehata (2014) also demonstrate how young people’s involvement in online news spaces has positive longitudinal effects on their public orientation (as measured by self-transcendent values, political interest, and public-oriented peer talk). It seems to be the case that those who engage with news are, or become, more interested in politics and public matters.

There are several explanations as to why people opt out of the news. In his book on young people’s relation to televised news, Buckingham (2000) states that although viewers do see television news as a significant source of information about the world, and trust it above other sources, they have difficulty in remembering what they saw, and in understanding it. Another explanation is provided by Coleman, Morrison, and Anthony (2011) who found that the news failed to explain the world as their participants recognized it, “often leaving them feeling like outsiders looking on at a drama that even the leading performers did not expect them to understand” (p. 39). In other words, many people either do not understand the news, or experience it as irrelevant.

The issue of relevance is interesting because it raises questions about how the news is designed and for whom. According to Coleman et al. (2011: 41), news constitutes a certain type of discourse—one of sobriety, that possesses instrumental power to describe or even alter the world. Buckingham (2000) connects news to Habermasian views on the public sphere and to enlightenment ideals, characterized by a belief in objective truth, scientific rationality and knowledge as an unmediated representation of the world. However, there is no such thing as objectivity—that what is presented as objective truth is always seen from one perspective or another, whether intended or not. In an article on the politics of information, Fiske (1992) applies a class perspective, stating that conventional news reflects the interests and perspectives of the ruling classes. According to Fiske, popular news is closer to ordinary people’s everyday life experiences, hence its popularity. Ultimately, the perceived lack of relevance in the news may be a matter of identification. It is not a coincidence, says Fiske, that the majority of those who consume “serious” news are White men. Marchi (2012) voices similar thoughts when explaining youths’ alienation from news as the cultural, generational, and often racial disconnect between young people and the faces, news priorities, and reporting styles of mainstream journalists.

**Consuming News through Social Media**

Previous research has been criticized for its unilateral focus on conventional news media as a measure of young people’s interest in civic and political issues, and for the idea that news is the only source of political information. According to Jones (2006), this view leads to the “dismissals of other, more popular sources of political information and content as illegitimate” (p. 367). Jones points out that citizens access many different media genres, and they acquire knowledge from them of all sorts of subject matters, including political ones. While conventional news stories are just one type of narrative, entertainment media can tell stories in other ways, and may actually be better at explaining complex issues. Jones, therefore, states that there is a need to look to other locations beyond news media for citizens’ engagement with mediated politics. When social media are discussed as an outlet of news, they are often placed in the same box as entertainment. While news on social network sites does seem to be perceived as more entertaining than conventional news (Marchi, 2012), this does not mean that social media news and entertainment are the same. What, then, characterizes social media as a news outlet, and how is news disseminated and consumed?

The sharing of news on social media can be understood as happening on three levels. First, private individuals can post comments on current news matters in their own social media
circles. Second, we find comments from public individuals who have many followers who read their posts and, perhaps, share them with their own networks. The third, and most public, level consists of posts from established news organizations.

Most news distribution occurs at the first and second levels, when users (both private and public people) share, recommend, or like articles and video clips, thereby passing them forward to their networks. Hermida et al. (2012) also found that their respondents were twice as likely to prefer news links and recommendations on Facebook and Twitter that came from friends and family, as compared to those posted by journalists or news organizations. The opportunity to add comments to the news link is another aspect that adds value. While Marchi’s (2012) informants experienced conventional news as boring, repetitive, and irrelevant to their daily lives, “the personal connections with friends and family in social networks served as news ‘filters’, bringing various stories to the teens’ attention and helping them understand their relevance via posted commentaries” (p. 252).

**Dutiful and Actualizing Citizens and Their Choice of News Media**

If people do not understand conventional news or find it irrelevant, why do they bother to watch and read it? Buckingham (2000) believes it is because news gives people the illusion of being informed. It also connects to the ideal of the “good” citizen.

Researchers have noticed a shift in the way people perceive the “good” citizen. Bennett (2008) suggests the terms “dutiful” and “actualizing” to describe two types of citizenship (Bennett et al., 2009). Dutiful citizens experience an obligation to participate in government centered activities, see voting as the core democratic act, become informed about issues and government by following mass media, join civil society organizations, and/or express their interests through parties that typically employ one-way communication to mobilize supporters. The older generation, in particular, tend to experience citizenship in terms of duty. Younger generations, on the other hand, are more likely to prefer the actualizing type of citizenship. Actualizing citizens have a more individualistic approach to politics and citizenship. They experience a diminished sense of government obligation and a higher sense of individual purpose. They often experience the traditional elements of politics as inauthentic and as lacking relevance for them. They see voting as less meaningful than other, more personally defined acts, such as consumerism, community volunteering, or transnational activism. They often mistrust media and politicians and, instead, favor loose networks of community action. These networks are often established or sustained through friendships and peer relations, or by interactive information technologies (Bennett, 2008; Bennett et al., 2009).

These two citizen types typically have different preferences in media use. Building on Bennett’s model, Wells (2014) found that while dutiful citizens display more passive media consumption styles, actualizing citizens expect to take part in the production and sharing of information. Following this line of argument, if young people lean toward the actualizing citizen style, they should also be more likely to prefer accessing news through social media. Some researchers have found this to be the case (see, for example, Marchi, 2012). However, as the results of the study will show, for our participants the issue is more complex.

**Method**

This article presents findings from a project that studies the way in which Swedish youth use the media to orientate themselves and to integrate and interact in civic matters in their everyday lives. The project uses a qualitative multimethod approach that includes media diaries, classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups with 26 Swedish high school students who were 17–18 years old at the time.

The project was set in a Swedish medium-sized city as a follow up to a larger quantitative study (Amnå, Ekström, Kerr, & Stattin, 2009). It focuses on “ordinary” young people, that is, what Harris et al. (2010) call the large group of young people who are “neither apathetic, nor activists,” but somewhere in between. The informants were, therefore, sought, not through political organizations or activities, but through their schools. To reach young people from varying backgrounds, two high schools were targeted: one with a focus on theoretical programs, and one on technical and aesthetic programs. However, to allow us to observe how the participants worked with civic and political issues at school, one criterion for selection was that their program should include social studies. Given that participation required a commitment over time, the sample was achieved through self-selection. We informed about the project in five classes and 55 individuals volunteered to participate. Information about gender, political interest, and news consumption, together with line of education, was used to form a group of 26 participants. A total of 18 participants studied in three branches of the social science program and 8 in two different technical programs (construction and building services installations). Informed consent was attained through the signing of a form. All names of participants have been changed to ensure anonymity.

The participants were not representative of all young Swedes. When recruited, they were asked how often they took part of news, and they were also asked to rate their interest in politics and civic issues. Judging from their own estimations, the participants’ consumption of news was higher than that of the average Swedish 17- to 18-year-old (The Swedish Media Council, 2013). They were also more interested in civic issues than the average. Six participants said they were very interested, 15, rather interested, and 4, not at all interested in politics and civic issues. According to the quantitative study mentioned above (Amnå et al., 2009), 25%
of the young people were very or rather interested in politics, 29%, not particularly interested, and 45%, not at all interested in politics. Most participants in our project, thus, represented those who were very or rather interested in politics.

The material gathered through the various methods is used to different extent in the projects’ publications, depending on what aspects are focused. The participants’ views and experiences of taking part of news through social media were covered above all in the interviews and focus groups, although media diaries were also used as they provided information about the participants’ actual news consumption. The methods are connected and data gathering occurred in steps, where the media diaries were the first to be collected. Media diaries can look different, depending on their purpose. In this case, during 2 weeks, the participants filled in a form, giving brief information about each medium they took part of, where and when, type of content, with whom, side activities, and whether they discussed the content with others. Thus, the diaries gave a descriptive overview but not much of reflection from the participants. In the second step, individual interviews were conducted. Here, the diaries were taken as a point of departure and questions were asked about the participants’ media activities, especially in relation to political and civic issues. Finally, after initial analyses had been made, focus groups were conducted, to complement the material and follow up interesting questions that were evoked during the first analyses. This material contained more of reflections and discussion among the participants. The focus groups covered five areas where the participants were asked about their thoughts and experiences of (1) politics and political participation, (2) possibilities to influence society, (3) getting information about public affairs, (4) getting organized, and (5) discussing politics and civic issues with others. The first part of the results section draws on material from the media diaries and interviews, while the second part uses interviews and focus groups.

All data are in Swedish, thus the quotes have been translated into English. The interviews and focus group discussions were subjected to thematic analysis, a method inspired by grounded theory, although for this analysis, without its explicit aim at developing theory (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Rather than working with hypotheses and pre-existing coding frames, I have leaned toward an inductive, or data-driven, way of analyzing the material that aims at identifying recurring themes in the data set.

The results section begins with a description of how the participants received news about civic and political matters. The analysis then specifically focuses on how they perceived social media as a way of acquiring such news. Six themes were identified: immediateness, one-sidedness, fragmentation, subjectivity, uncertainty, and triviality.

**Results**

According to Coleman et al. (2011), most people consider “news” to be a specific type of source that has a certain form—it should be hard news in serious and solemn forms in order to count as news. To avoid a unilateral focus on conventional news we asked the focus groups about their news consumption in a different way: how do they get to know about what happens in society? Most participants expressed an eagerness to keep up-to-date with what happens in society, and they named several different sources: television, newspapers, news apps, Facebook, and Twitter.

When we, in the initial phase of the project, asked how often they consumed news, 11 participants answered, “four times or more a week,” 8 people, “two or three times a week,” 3 people, “once a week,” and 3 people, “never.” Most participants thus belonged to the group of young Swedes who engage with the news most frequently (The Swedish Media Council, 2013). Even so, judging from the media diaries, the participants seemed to underestimate their news consumption. For example, they did not seem to count times when they watched news on television with family members, or, above all, when they checked news apps on their smartphones during the day. This consumption often occurs as a side activity or in between other activities; this may account for why it is not seen as news consumption.

The participants who read printed newspapers were, above all, those whose families had subscriptions. These participants said they might read the newspaper if it was on the breakfast table, most likely during weekends. Sometimes, their reading was initiated by a parent calling their attention to a specific article. Similar to the respondents in Costera Meijer’s (2007) study, television news was not something that the participants would seek out intentionally, but they might watch it in between other programs or if they happened to come across news while “zapping.” Some of the participants also watched television news as a way of spending time with their parents.

The participants’ narratives, from both interviews and focus groups discussions, showed that their social networks were very important sources of information about public affairs. They often gleaned such information from family and friends, in face-to-face or mediated conversations. To some extent, the reports of these participants coincide with previous research, although they consumed news from conventional sources more often than the participants of Marchi (2012) and Coleman et al. (2011). When it comes to other news sources, the picture is very similar, with social media identified as one of the most important sources. In the following sections, we will proceed to look at how participants understand social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, as a source of news.

**Immediateness**

One important theme in the data is the participants’ way of talking about news as ever-present. Media was integrated into their everyday lives, either as a center of activity or in the background of other activities. They felt that it was easy
to keep up-to-date and said that they got information on news matters very fast—they just had to glance at their mobile phones. About half of the participants had smartphones, most of them with apps from news media, which were checked throughout the day. However, social media, especially Twitter, is held as a very important source of news because of its immediateness:

Isabell: I was thinking about news, you know that’s something that Twitter’s really good at. Like, first you get, like, just a few words and then you go on reading if you don’t understand what they mean. So from there on, because you update it all the time, or more often than they do at the DN^4 app anyway, so you get the news quite fast that way.

Interviewer: So do you often get your information from Twitter?

Emma: Well . . .

Interviewer: If it’s about current news matters.

Lina: Yes.

Emma: You might have read something in the morning, like, skimmed through an article, and then it comes up again.

Lina: But things that happen right now, that’s where Twitter is just great.

Emma: Yeah, it’s absolutely . . .

Lina: Like if . . .

Emma: Now, Margaret Thatcher has died. You got to know that right away.

Lina: Yeah, exactly.

According to Coleman et al. (2011), the idea of news as ubiquitously available and accessible in many different forms is tightly related to media convergence—a term that describes the integration of media platforms and content. The participants compared their own practices with the media consumption of previous generations, saying that in those days they would not have heard the news until they got home at night and turned on the television. The participants did appreciate the opportunities that social media gave them to keep updated, and they talked positively about both Twitter and Facebook as sources of news. However, they also discussed what they perceived to be shortcomings.

**One-Sidedness**

Whereas previous generations, basically, received the same news content from similar media channels, today’s audiences can customize the news flow. The same principle applies to social media where users’ feeds look different dependent upon which individuals or organizations they follow. The participants felt that as a result, news flow may become quite specialized or even narrow:

Isabell: I’d imagine that . . . you know, you choose what you want to read about, so you get very little perspective on different things.

Emma: Yeah, absolutely.

Isabell: You know, you get . . . I mean if you follow . . .

Emma: If you follow just your closest friends, then you get very much just that side of it.

Isabell: Yeah exactly, and if you follow . . . There are lots of people on Twitter who write about equality and if you follow many of them then you’ll get that side, and when they answer each other and agree with each other, or when they argue about the same thing, or for the same thing. But you seldom get—unless something is retweeted—you seldom see anybody who argues against it.

Emma: Like, you don’t follow any Sweden democrats. ^5

Isabell: No, exactly.

Emma: You don’t see anything from that side.

The phenomenon of selective exposure has been divided into two types: active and passive (Mutz & Young, 2011). Active selection is made when individuals actively choose between news and information depending on their personal preferences. These choices often support and confirm the political views that individuals already have. Passive selection, on the other hand, occurs when factors other than active choice lead to a similar pattern of selective exposure. One example is individuals’ social networks, which tend to be homogeneous with regard to political views. In the excerpt above, the participants discussed both types of selective exposure. First, they said that because customized news offers the opportunity to choose what to read, people get a very limited perspective on things. Here, it can be argued that people also choose what they read in regular newspapers. The difference is that in regular newspapers they get to see the articles they skip, and so become aware of the perspectives they opt out of. The participants then proceeded to talk about their exposure to passive selection and the kind of discussions and opinions they get to see through their social media networks. Some of the participants perceived Twitter to be a very political medium, but added that this was probably because they followed people who were politically interested and/or engaged, while users who follow other types of people would probably perceive Twitter differently than themselves. It is, thus, not only the content that turns out to be different, but, in fact, the medium as a whole is perceived differently depending on one’s own interests and orientations.

In social media, people are exposed to the content that others in their network decide to share and, given the typical overlap, people within each network will hear the same thing many times, thus giving the impression that the opinion or perspective reflected in that post is more widespread than it really is (boyd, 2008). The metaphor of an “echo chamber” has been used to describe this phenomenon where individuals are exposed only to views that match their own (for a discussion of the concept, see Garrett, 2013).
It has been argued that exposure to passive selection in social media limits the breadth of information that people receive. However, some researchers have come to different conclusions. For example, Hermida et al. (2012) found that social media users consumed a wider variety of news media than nonusers and, while retaining their regular new sources, they were also more likely to access websites from nontraditional and/or international news outlets. The majority of their respondents also felt that their social media circles provided them with a broader range of news and information than if they relied solely on conventional media.

Our participants, on the other hand, expressed a more pessimistic view and the metaphor of the echo chamber can be seen in their perceptions of social media as providing a one-sided flow of news. One can wonder why the two respective groups perceive news in social media so differently. One possible reason lies in their age—being younger, our participants may not yet have accessed so many different environments and contexts. In other words, their social media networks might be more homogeneous. A further aspect relates to the level of diversity they talked about. Hermida et al.’s respondents talked about having access to a wide range of channels, which some of our participants also mentioned. However, our participants placed more emphasis on the number of perspectives they get to see through the media. Simply having access to a large number of news outlets does not necessarily mean acquiring more diverse perspectives.

**Fragmentation**

The participants gave the impression that the news they received via apps and social media was fragmented, showing only tiny slices of reality. This is partly due to the format—on Twitter, posts are limited to 140 characters and although Facebook statuses may be up to 63,206 characters, only about 400 characters will show before the text is truncated, requiring the user to click on the post in order to read the rest. The participants compensated for the perceived fragmentation by using several different sources, piecing fragments together in a bricolage or puzzle of stories. One of the focus groups described the typical process:

**Interviewer:** Yes, do tell me about that, Margaret Thatcher, how did you get to know about that and what did you do?

**Lina:** I was sitting with a friend who had some—I don’t know if it was CNN. Like, she gets—when there’s some—it’s like news flashes that come up. And it was just like, “Hey, Margaret Thatcher has died,” and just . . . Well, you started to talk about it and then all at once it was all over Twitter, and a lot of people who are very left wing just, “Yes, finally!,” and wrote a lot about it. That’s what it’s like for me when a news story comes up. And then you see it on Twitter and you may not really understand it, and then it’s just like, “well, I go check it up on DN,” and then everything just clicks into place.

According to Costera Meijer (2007), young people like to get a “bite” of a variety of programs, and she uses the term “snacking” to describe this behavior. She further states that young people are eager to keep updated, not out of duty, as were previous generations, but for social reasons—to be able to take part in conversations. Using similar metaphors, Marchi (2012) refers to the way in which young people gather news as an “a la carte” model, stating that “youth tend to know a little bit about a lot of subjects, researching topics of special interest in more detail” (p. 248). Both the “snacking” and the “a la carte” model were observed in our participants’ descriptions of their news consumption. By skimming headlines and leads in newspapers at the breakfast table, in news apps, and on Twitter, they “snack” information on a wide range of subjects. Stories on the “menu” that evoke their interest are then followed up in more detail.

The participants’ accounts differed somewhat from previous research which has ascribed social media with the potential for adding context to news stories (Marchi, 2012). By contrast, our participants felt that they did not receive sufficient context when news was mediated through social media. It appears like the respective groups of young people talk about context in different ways. For Marchi’s participants, context seems to be understood as an external sphere of the article, where added personal comments and explanations provide an environment that can facilitate understanding. Our participants, however, talked about the internal context of news articles and the opportunities to make sense of the news story from within the article itself. These differences in outlook may also depend on which social media are being discussed. Facebook, for example, allows for longer comments and explanations, but also shows more of the original news story. It would, thus, provide more of both internal and external context as compared with Twitter.

The media landscape that is available to today’s youth is very different from that of previous generations. As media forms converge, content can be acquired through various mobile platforms and technologies. As a consequence, citizens’ relation to the news has changed. For example, on a typical day, 92% of Americans use multiple platforms to access news, as opposed to only 7% who use one single source (Purcell et al., 2010). One question to be asked is, what effect does this bricolage behavior have on people’s experiences and understandings of news stories? If the flash of headlines and snippets of news make people feel that, to be able to understand them they need to look for information in other places, would it not be easier to read the whole story in one place, as was the case before social media? The activity of putting pieces together does not really make the information less fragmented as it still consists of many small pieces from different sources, and it may be difficult to get a coherent picture. On the other hand, the picture is more complex and may allow readers to see several perspectives on the news issue.
Subjectivity

The participants perceived the flow of social media news as highly subjective. They were well aware that what they saw was second-hand information, consisting of others’ opinions and reactions to what had happened, rather than the event per se. However, they did not appear to consider this a problem. Young people have been found to prefer opinionated rather than objective news, this being a reason why they appreciate social media as a news source (Marchi, 2012). Jones (2006) argues, similarly, that Fox News, which is known to openly declare opinions, is enormously popular. This, says Jones (2006), suggests that “at least some of them want or desire more from political communication than just ‘information’” (p. 369). Our participants said that they liked finding out about others’ opinions and seeing issues from several perspectives. Therefore, they enjoyed it when their Facebook friends turned out to have a different political orientation from themselves, or when news stories were shared that provided them with new ways of seeing things.

While social media is perceived as giving a one-sided view of the world, the participants acknowledged that it can also provide perspectives that are different from those offered in conventional news media. This is in accordance with previous research—for example, Coleman et al. (2011: 49) found that social media could work as an expanded space, exposing people to more sources, opportunities to discuss, and pathways to explore aspects of the news.

One of our focus groups discussed the value of personal and subjective perspectives in relation to one of the most important social media events that occurred in Sweden in 2013. Swedish author and playwright, Jonas Khemiri, wrote an open letter to the Minister for Justice, Beatrice Ask, regarding the Rättsäkert och effektivt verkställighetsarbete (REVA) project, and Khemiri’s experiences of how the Swedish police treat immigrants and fugitives. The letter was first published in the cultural pages of the newspaper, Dagens Nyheter, but made its way into social media where it became one of the most shared Swedish articles ever (Karlsten, 2013):

Olivia: Well, they talked about it in Filip and Fredrik’s podcast, it had been some—I don’t remember the exact background of it—but some politician had made a statement on this REVA. What is it called, is it called REVA?

Interviewer: Yes.

Olivia: Like, the police get to . . . what was it? They can demand identification, well, papers from people who look suspect, and she just: “I don’t understand the problem” or something like that. And then someone, I don’t remember his name, but someone who was really good at writing, had written a really long article and, like, just, “this is easy for you to say, but it’s not that simple when you . . .” and tells his story because he’s an immigrant,7 you know. And he tells a lot of examples and he has done a lot for society and still he’s met by, you know . . .

Erika: Hostility.

Olivia: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: It must have been Jonas—what’s his name? Khemiri?

Olivia: Yes it was, that’s it.

Interviewer: That letter got a lot of attention. “Dear Beatrice Ask.”

Olivia: Yeah, Beatrice Ask.

Interviewer: Yes.

Olivia: Well, that’s what it was like, and I read it and I was really touched, and you know. But what they talked about in Filip and Fredrik’s podcast was that those who’d really need to read this, they don’t. Because it’s that kind of a letter, it really should get even more attention, because you need to be able to see things from different perspectives, and he really managed to show that perspective.

We can see here how different genres, channels, and layers of communication are mixed. Khemiri is a public person, but not an expert or professional journalist. When the article was published in Sweden’s largest and most prestigious newspaper it reached one type of audience, but when it was shared on social media, and commented upon in the podcast of two popular media figures, it reached other audiences. The article was shaped as a personal letter that, from the beginning, revealed a good deal of emotion and personal experience. However, by being shared and commented upon in users’ personal networks, the article, most probably, created an even greater personal touch.

According to Costera Meijer (2007), young people want to be able to identify with views and lifestyles in other cultures or countries, and to imagine what it is like to be someone else. Therefore, for most young adults, information has more impact when it is couched in terms of personal experience. This is clearly the case in the situation described above. Through Khemiri’s letter, the participants gained an insight into a perspective that they seldom saw elsewhere. By telling the story in a subjective personal letter, written in the first-person, it offered an opportunity to enter into the situation of immigrants, and managed to make the abstract political issue come closer and be perceived as more relevant.

Uncertainty

The uncertainty as to who is the original sender behind messages on social media makes it easy to be lured into believing a story, sharing false information, or taking part in dubious actions. The participants expressed concern about the difficulties of sorting out true from false information, and, at some point, all focus groups talked about social media as
unreliable and deceitful. Several groups, for example, discussed the film *Kony 2012*, which many of the participants had shared on Facebook before questioning who had created the film and why:

Louise: I never shared it.
Iris: I don’t know, it was something that a lot of people did. It was a half-hour long video, a YouTube clip.
Lisbet: What was it about?
Iris: Like, the power and how children . . .
Louise: It was an American who had . . .
Iris: Yeah, who’d been there for a long time, and you know, first when I saw the film, I just went “God, this is touching, and I just like . . .”
Louise: When I saw the film I thought it felt like propaganda so I never shared it.
Iris: But it was. I shared it, but then I started to reflect on it, you know I just clicked “share” first, because I thought it was so well done, it had a message, something that doesn’t get so much attention otherwise and I thought it was a good thing. But then, afterwards, I started to reflect on it, and we discussed it at school as well, like, how . . . Maybe it was propaganda, but what did they want? You know . . .
Louise: Yeah, like, who’s behind this video?

As the excerpt above shows, social media news and campaigns require quite a bit of media literacy and critical thinking. Many of our participants, especially those from the social science program, came from middle-class families with parents who were white-collar workers, teachers, or even journalists. These participants often discussed civic issues and news with their families at home, and they were relatively savvy media consumers who knew that everything they read or watch has senders who may have hidden agendas. However, the participants from the technical programs also discussed the importance of being critical of the sources, and all groups referred to discussions they had had about the issue at school.

Even though initiatives have begun that scrutinize social media stories, it is still easy to lose one’s head and believe in, and share fake or flawed news and hoaxes. It can be argued that the uncertainty of senders’ identities and hidden agendas should not be a problem as long as one sticks to news production by established media organizations. But here, also, there are plenty of examples showing how they, too, are sometimes fooled. Given that there is an over-representation of fun and/or spectacular stories in social media, a further aspect to consider is what news finds its way into social media. Even if the stories, per se, may be true, their selection results in a skewed image of reality.

**Triviality**

As the previous themes have shown, social media as a source of news is perceived to be quite flawed. Interestingly, this does not seem to be perceived as a problem. One explanation is that the participants did not regard social media as news media, or as a place to get updated about public affairs, but, rather, merely as a trivial pleasure and pastime;

Nora: That’s what it’s like for me. Twitter is just for fun. Because I get everything—You know I study a branch that’s called “The human in the world,” and that’s a lot of politics, politics and then other related subjects, so I get my share from there, so to speak, so I don’t feel I need . . .
Interviewer: You mean at school?
Nora: Yes, exactly. I get my share from school and that’s why, you know, social media for me is just for fun, like a pastime. It’s not a place where I go to—No, it’s only a pastime, really.

The participants’ narratives were ambivalent. They experienced social media as flawed; to get a more accurate picture one needs to follow up stories in neutral and “serious” news media, preferably in several. Yet, simultaneously, a number of participants admitted that they sometimes opted out of “serious” news because they experienced it as boring, or because they felt that the news did not concern them.

A common distinction is made between “real,” serious news, and entertainment, pastime, and trivia. Coleman et al. (2011) state that the dichotomy between “real” and “popular news” is based on a moral perspective, according to which, “news only becomes News when it is spoken about in certain ways, connected to remote and formidable institutions and entitled to command the attention of the otherwise disinterested” (p. 41). Costera Meijer voices similar thoughts. In her study of how young people experience and reflect on news, she found what she describes as an irresolvable paradox:

> when news is presented in a serious and sound way, it is perceived as the real thing but, apart from natural or man-made disasters, usually considered too boring to watch. When news is made more appealing and accessible, ratings are higher, but it is no longer perceived as news. (Costera Meijer, 2007: 106)

The same paradox was observed in the interviews and discussions with our participants.

Previous research has found tensions between civic obligations and affective dispositions, where participants feel they have to apologize for choosing popular news (Coleman et al., 2011). Our participants did not go so far as to apologize for their consumption of news in social media. However, their stance that social media is not news, “it’s just a pastime, really,” and the insistence that they consume “real news” as well, can be interpreted as precisely that. By taking this position, they demonstrate that although they do engage with news via social media, they do not have any illusions as to its quality and accuracy. On several occasions they reported that they felt they “should be better at” reading the newspaper,
following televised debates, and engaging with serious news. The consumption of news is here very much related to the idea of being a “good” citizen, and, since news mediated through social media does not count as real news, their image of themselves as citizens suffers.

Discussion

The aim of this article was to find out how young people who are interested in civic and political issues, experience social media as a way of acquiring news of public affairs. The participants used various channels to find out about what was happening in society; social media being one of the most important. However, they were not nearly as positive about it as participants in previous studies. They did appreciate the immediateness of it, and felt that it could provide insights into new perspectives and make news stories feel more relevant, but they also addressed what they perceived as its shortcomings. Social media news flows were experienced as one-sided, fragmented, and subjective, giving a biased, or even false, image of what happens in society. Accessing social media news flows was also framed as a trivial pastime. The participants compensated for this perceived inadequacy by following up stories in other sources that they considered to be more reliable—conventional news from respected news organizations. They liked to acquire several perspectives and, therefore, made bricolages that offered a more complex picture. We can conclude that some of the findings from previous research apply to our participants, while others do not.

In particular, the assumption that young people prefer to use social media for all purposes has to be questioned.

Buckingham (2000) discusses the perception of news as being complicated and difficult to understand. Our participants did not have any problems in understanding the content of conventional news media, but sometimes talked about the news as irrelevant and boring. According to Fiske (1992), what news is seen as important and relevant depends on class and status. As discussed above, many of our participants belonged to the middle-class and brought with them cultural baggage from their families. They had learned to decode the news and had also been socialized into hegemonic ideas as to which news stories are important and how they should be told. However, being young, they were largely excluded from the political sphere and the news, for the most part, did not mirror or relate to their situation. This is one factor that may explain their ambivalence toward conventional news.

The discrepancy between the participants’ reported news consumption, as compared with their media diaries, as well as the way in which they talked about news in social media, suggests that they do not see the news they receive through social media as real news. This is interesting considering the fact that the social media news typically comes from major news organizations. It seems to be the case that when news is transferred from the news organizations’ platforms to social media, it’s perceived status as “real news” changes. Possible explanations include the change in format (the fragmentation of news as discussed above), and the new context that surrounds the news stories, where the perceived triviality of social media content as a whole seems to rub off also on the more serious content. Another factor to consider is what news find its way into social media, where users are more likely to share spectacular and “fun” news stories, and less likely to share news that is perceived as boring but “real.”

For the reasons discussed above, when talking about their news consumption, the participants left out a large portion of the news they actually engaged with. Despite engaging with news from many different sources, several times a week, they felt that they were not “good enough” at informing themselves. The study at hand draws on qualitative data, and we do not know to what extent the results are representative for young people from other groups in society or other countries. However, if young people in general resemble our participants in this respect, research that asks young people about their news consumption runs a risk of getting answers that underestimate it. The result would then be that not only do the young people themselves have an image of themselves as lacking, but the surrounding world, too, will get the idea that young people are less interested and less informed about public affairs than is actually the case.

Judging from the participants’ narratives, engaging with news is seen as part of being a good citizen. But which type of citizenship is it they have in mind—the actualizing or the dutiful? In fact, the participants demonstrated similarities with both types. Through their interest in politics and their choice of education, participants were being socialized into the dutiful pattern, with a focus on institutionalized politics and the privileging of conventional, “serious” mass media. These ideals were also reflected when participants talked about what they “should” do. When it came to what news sources they actually did use to update themselves, however, the participants, rather, resembled the actualizing citizen type, as social media and personal social networks were very important to them.

Both citizen types (dutiful and actualizing) have valuable qualities, and so have different types of news outlets. What is obvious from our participants’ narratives is that different media complement each other. For the participants, it was never a question of choosing either conventional or social media news, but content from the different channels spills into, and leads to each other. It has been said about political participation that on- and offline participation are not mutually exclusive, but, rather, each reinforces the other (Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2011). This seems to be the case for news consumption as well.

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Notes

1. By “conventional” news media, I refer to the various outlets of established news organizations.
2. In this article, I will focus on news that relates to public affairs, rather than news that relates to the social circles of private individuals.
3. The city has 107,000 inhabitants.
4. Dagens Nyheter is Sweden’s largest morning newspaper.
5. The “Sweden democrats” is a right-wing populist party with its roots in nationalist and racist organizations.
6. In 2009, the Swedish government launched project Rättssäkert och effektivt verkställighetsarbete (REVA) which aimed at identifying people without residence permits and making them leave the country. In 2012, police procedures in pursuit of REVA were much criticized in the media and this led to an intense debate.
7. It was actually Khemiri’s father who came to Sweden as an immigrant.
8. Kony 2012 is a film produced by the organization Invisible Children about the militia leader and war criminal Joseph Kony. The Youtube clip received attention as one of the top international events of 2012.

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