15. To share or not to share?

News practices in the media life of Swedish youths

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During the last decade both news consumption and private communication have undergone dramatic change. With the advent of digital social media, news is omnipresent and may be shared and commented on by any media user. At the same time, life online and offline flow into each other, not least for children and youngsters growing up in this media-ubiquitous era. This entails a context collapse where news use and identity formation are entangled in partly new ways. This chapter discusses the context collapse in the media life of Swedish youths, with a specific focus on their notification of news and hesitation to share and comment on news.

Studying children and adolescents today inevitably means studying media use. Media are ubiquitous in the Nordic and Baltic regions (as in many other parts of the world) and those growing up in this mediatized landscape will be influenced by it. Some scholars, such as professor of psychology Jean M. Twenge, even suggest that the generation growing up between 1995 and 2012 could be named after the media devices that characterized their formative years: iGen, characterized by the iPhone.[1] Other scholars resist that kind of homogenization, pointing at both individual and structural differences between people, but still insist on the pervasiveness of media in social life, and in human existence.[2] A frequently cited thesis by Professor Mark Deuze is that our lives nowadays are "lived *in*, rather than *with*, media". We are living

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a *media life,*[3] suggesting that the world we inhabit – and are deeply immersed in – is characterized by ubiquitous media, which is why our lived reality cannot be experienced or described separate from media. This is probably particularly true for youngsters, who hardly know what it's like to live without the internet, smartphones and other digital devices since they have been there from the day they were born. Some children play *in* media, do their homework, organize their social relations, explore and develop their own identities, and encounter the world in digital media.[4] Among homework, friends, etc. online they will also encounter news.[5]

As media have become omnipresent, so have news and journalism. Along with the development of web 2.0[6] the flows of information have fundamentally changed from an era of broadcast mass media to an era of non-linear, interactive and networked media where the production, dissemination and consumption of news and information are in the hands of the many. News and journalism can be found on multiple platforms, in multiple formats – they are ambient.[7] This development started more than a decade ago but it has been reinforced by the advent of portable digital media devices, e.g. smartphones, to such an extent that a study by Pew Internet claims that people's relationship with news has been transformed into "portable, personalized and participatory", and that news has become "a shared social experience".[8] Of course, news has always been portable, personalized and participatory: one could easily carry around a newspaper, choose what newspaper and articles to read, and discuss it with friends and fellow citizens. So this transformation is rather a difference in degree, but by dint of digital devices news has become spreadable and social in partly new ways.[9] News has become part of media life.[10] The question here is: What does it mean that news has become ambient, spreadable and social in the media life of Swedish young people? It might entail a lot, but the focus for the discussion here is on the consequences, firstly, for their notification of news and, secondly, for their sharing and commenting on news.

This chapter is based on a qualitative case study carried out in Sweden in 2017–2018. The investigation shows that some Swedish youths hesitate to share news online, and it will be argued that one reason for this is that digital news-sharing simultaneously shares information

about yourself, your relationship with others and your social position. The question about sharing a news item or not is therefore also a question about what one wants to communicate about oneself, and if it's worth taking the risk to be misunderstood or misinterpreted. It will then be suggested that research, media politics and industry with an interest in news, children and youngsters should consider these precarious aspects of news practices if we want to fully understand what hinders or promotes digital civic engagement among young people in an era where life is lived *in* media.

Methods and material

The empirical material in this study consists of focus group interviews and news diaries written by Swedish teenagers. In June 2017, the Swedish Media Council (*Statens medieråd*) contacted several primary schools and upper secondary schools across the country with an invitation to take part in a study about the use of news among seventh graders and students in the second or third year in upper secondary school. In total, four classes in the seventh grade and five in upper secondary school volunteered for the study and accomplished it during the winter of 2017–2018. The schools are located in central Stockholm and Malmö, in Visby (isle of Gotland) and in a borough a few kilometres outside Örebro. There are substantial social differences between some of the schools, as well as between students on programmes that prepare them for higher education, and students on vocational programmes. This means that there are also many differences in their news media use – between groups and between individuals – that cannot be accounted for in this article, which should be borne in mind while reading. As it is a qualitative case study, the results are obviously not generalizable. It should also be noted that Sweden, in comparative studies, has been described as a media welfare state because of a generally high media access in the population, and the absence of significant class differences in terms of media habits.[11] Sweden has a strong public service broadcasting sector and a long tradition of local newspapers with a high reach among the population. Thus, news during the pre-digital era was quite evenly distributed. This is changing now as the reach of news provided by public services and the local press is diminishing, especially among adolescents and young adults, and some scholars

suggest that we have now entered an era where news consumption in Sweden is distinguished by class.[12]

Ambient news use

Media, especially digital media, permeate modern societies and make news and journalism available at any time and any place. Research has shown that young people today mostly follow news on the internet, especially via their smartphones and social media such as Facebook, and on television.[13] The students in our investigation are no different. The mobile phone is the primary device in their lives and therefore key for their news consumption. Several informants describe "checking cycles"[14] where they go through their favourite apps – Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, *Aftonbladet* (Swedish daily newspaper), etc. – to stay updated on what's going on in the world and in their personal life. For some of our informants these digital checking cycles are supplemented with news programmes on the television, or newspapers. The key factor for these extended checking cycles seems to be the parents' news habits and influence. In particular, family habits, such as watching television news while having breakfast or dinner, or listening to the radio in the car, are mentioned by some students as being important for their news consumption. Thus, socialization matters.[15]

As digital devices today, e.g. the smartphone, promote individual use and personalized modes of application, news consumption on the internet is probably less informed by parents' news habits and influenced more by algorithms and friends' sharing of news on social media.[16] Research has described this new encounter with news on social media as incidental, in contrast to a deliberate, established news practice.[17] Traditionally, news consumption has been somewhat habitual, but with the advent of digital social media one might bump into news while checking a friend's update on Facebook, searching for a celebrity on Instagram, etc. News consumption today may therefore be understood as both deliberate and incidental.[18] But this omnipresence and unpredictability of news might also imply that news passes by unnoticed, or unheeded; news is there but one does not necessarily notice it or reflect on it. In our interviews some students told us that they found it difficult to diarize their news use (as we had asked them to do) as much passes by unrecognized in the constant flow of information:

> It was quite difficult to describe … you know, to remember, because you get a lot of information unconsciously, stuff you don't recognize like "okay, here is a new news item". (Girl, 17)

> It was difficult to rattle off "here is my news sources" because one hardly thinks about it, but if someone mentions a news item I remember that I've heard about it, but I don't remember where I have heard it. (Boy, 13)

There is probably a lot of news consumption that goes under the radar, so to speak. News is unavoidable, as it is ambient, but we don't know how much "unnoticed", or unconscious, news consumption it contributes to, or what impact it has on users' knowledge. From a media literacy perspective, this may be a challenge: to be observant about something that passes by unnoticed is a contradiction in terms.

To share and comment …

Social network sites have been theorized as networked public spheres, spaces where the audience may share, discuss and contribute to the news media landscape in qualitatively new ways.[19] An investigation by the Pew Research Center in 2010 showed that 37 per cent of American internet users had contributed to the creation of news, commented about it or disseminated it via social media sites.[20] Other studies have shown that personal recommendations on social media could increase the audience reach of news sources, or suggested that adolescents prefer news recommended and commented on by friends, stressing the importance of the personal, social aspects of news consumption.[21] Against this background we expected that sharing news with friends via social media sites, e.g. Facebook or Instagram, would be a quite common news practice among our informants, but we were proved wrong. They do understand and describe news use as a social activity, but not necessarily as a social activity *online*. Instead, they emphasize the social context and the sociability of news *offline*:

> *Interviewer:* So, when, or how, would you say that news appears in your everyday life?

> Well, I would say in social settings.

> *Interviewer:* How come? Do you mean when you talk to people or …?

> Yes. And in the evening, when you come together with your family and so on. (Girl, 17)

When asked about sharing news many students spontaneously described verbal sharing of news; in other words, talking to someone – parents, teachers or friends – about something that has happened in the world. As mentioned above, many of our informants recount parents' news habits as important for their own news consumption – not least family gatherings for dinner in front of the TV, or breakfast with the radio turned on, and that's where some "sharing" takes place. Another kind of sharing between friends (or relatives) is when they are together, and one shows their telephone to their mates to share a post with them, i.e. a kind of visual sharing or analogue sharing of digital content. "Sharing", according to our informants, thus might be understood as digital or verbal spreading, or as visually displaying. When it comes to the digital spreading of news, most students told us that they never, or seldom, do that. And if they do, the post is mostly sent exclusively to one person, or a group of close friends, either because the item is of highly personal relevance to the recipients or it's something that will give them a good laugh:

> Well … Sometimes I talk to my parents, such as: "Have you heard about this!" You know, and … sometimes I add a link and post it as a personal message on Instagram, but then it's mostly fail videos or other funny things. Not hard news. (Boy, 13)

> You can use news to make a joke. If you are updated on the latest news and know what's appropriate in the context … Well, then you can make a smart joke. And those who appreciate it may think that you are clever and witty. (Boy, 17)

… or not share and comment?

So, posts that might be important for the recipient and posts that are amusing may be spread, but otherwise our informants hesitate to share news. According to our interviews, there are at least five reasons for this hesitation. Firstly, news is not interesting enough. There's a lot going on in life when you're a teenager and sharing or commenting on the latest news is not necessarily at the top of the priority list. Secondly, some of the students are afraid of being attacked, threatened, flamed or getting into conflict with others:[22]

> Sharing and commenting may cause … disputes, and you get into a fight. (Boy, 17)

> Yes, there is a war going on in the comment sections. (Boy, 17)

> Well, if you have … You may feel a bit worried that someone will correct you, that you are wrong about something and people will correct you. Or, if you write about something and somebody has a totally different opinion and starts hating and flaming you. I cannot cope with it … And then, maybe a friend of yours finds it and starts arguing against you and then you may end up in trouble. (Girl, 13)

> No, even if I want to, I'm afraid of saying something wrong or … If you say something wrong, someone may seek you out and come to your home and say: "We have recognized what you wrote on that page and we want to talk to you about it." Or something like that. (Boy, 13)

Thirdly, some of the students think that commenting online is insignificant, a waste of time, because nobody really takes the commentary sections seriously.[23] Fourthly, some are afraid of not having enough knowledge to comment and that they will appear ignorant. Fifthly, and lastly, there seems to be a common understanding among many of our informants that those who share and comment online are rather silly – and if so, you don't want to be associated with them.

> Well, as they [classmates] have already said, I don't comment but when I'm bored I tend to read comments because it's funny. (Girl, 17)

> [Everybody laughs.]

> You read comments because it's hilarious, because most … Most of the commentators are, you might say, not the sharpest tool in the shed, you know. (Boy, 17)

> Yes, in my opinion there's a lot of stupid people commenting [everybody laughs], a lot of dickheads comment, so then if *you* comment and somebody you know finds out, then you might be regarded as a moron. If you have an opinion about something and write it on Facebook people might just "What the fuck?!" So, I think you better keep that to yourself. (Boy, 17)

> It is generally held that those who comment on news sites … An image of those who comment, and you don't want to have that public image, you might say. (Boy, 17)

For children and youngsters growing up today, offline and online flow into each other. Social relations, affiliation, affinity, belonging and identity formation are crucial for adolescents taking part in digital media. And as the quotes above demonstrate, these teens are very aware that what you post online are statements – not just statements about public issues, but about yourself. Sharing and discussing news and public issues face to face with people you trust might be seen as less risky than doing it on social media, where it might be noticed and/or spread to people other than those intended. A digital statement is a double risk in that it may lead to flaming, and conflicts with both people you know and people you don't know, but it might also risk the public persona and identity that are under construction. Commenting on and sharing a news article, or not, is a form of civic engagement but it's also personal impression management.[24] This entanglement of news consumption and identity formation has emerged quite recently with the advent of social media. There are reasons to believe that as long as news was used exclusively in offline contexts the association between news consumption and identity was less pronounced, and therefore a less relevant aspect to consider in research, and in the public debate on youth and news. Thus, when youngsters partly live their lives *in* media, news engagement – or the lack of news engagement – is not merely contingent on knowledge and skills that may be improved by education, e.g. media literacy. Maybe it's time to consider this now, along with other elements, e.g. social demographics, to enrich our understanding of civic online engagement among young people.

Noter

1. Twenge (2017).
2. Cf. Westlund & Bjur (2014); Westlund & Weibull (2013).
3. Deuze (2011, p. 138).
4. This is not to say that children have given up on life offline, or that all children use digital media in the same way (cf. Westlund & Bjur, 2014). But most children and youngsters in Sweden use digital media (see, e.g., Swedish Media Council (2017)).
5. Cf. Boczkowski et al. (2017).
6. There is no precise definition of the term "web 2.0" as it describes a combination of technical innovations and new modes of application. One decisive difference

between web 2.0 and its predecessor is the capabilities in terms of interaction and content creation. Any participant on web 2.0 may be a creator, not just a receiver or audience. Web 2.0 is strongly associated with the development of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Wikipedia (Cormode & Krishnamurthy 2008).

7. Hermida (2010).
8. Purcell et al. (2010, p. 2).
9. Jenkins, Ford & Green (2013).
10. Deuze (2011).
11. Syvertsen et al. (2014).
12. Lindell & Hovden (2017); Ohlsson, Lindell & Arkhede (2016).
13. Swedish Media Council (2017); Nordicom (2018); Wadbring, Weibull & Facht (2016); Slettemeaås & Kjørstad (2016).
14. Costera Meijer & Kormelink (2014).
15. Lozanovski & Wadbring (2013); York & Scholl (2015); Shehata (2016); Lindell & Hovden (2017).
16. Cf. Chapter 14 by Ørmen in this book.
17. Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Matissi (2017); Hermida et al. (2012); Beam et al. (2017); Williamson et al. (2012).
18. Swart, Peters & Broersma (2016); Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage (2018); Jervelycke Belfrage, Chapter 12 in this book.
19. Hermida et al. (2012).
20. Purcell et al. (2010).
21. Marchi (2012); Hermida et al. (2012); Costera Meijer (2007); Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage (2018); Madden, Lenhart & Fontaine (2017).
22. Cf. Sveningsson (2014).
23. Cf. Van Cauwenberge, d'Haensens & Beentjes (2013); Sveningsson (2015).
24. Cf. Picone (2011); Costera Meijer & Kormelink (2014).

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