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Young people’s news orientations and uses of traditional and new media for news

Abstract: This article reports on Flemish college students’ news orientations and their uses of traditional and new media for news within a public service media environment. We used five homogeneous focus groups that covered variation in news media use. The analysis of the focus groups revealed major differences in news behaviors and attitudes between participants who mainly depended on traditional media for news, and those who also went online for news. While a growing body of research reports on young people’s increasing use of online media for news, particularly among those that are most disengaged with traditional news media, our findings indicated that only the most eager news-users were motivated to gather information online. Additionally, we found that traditional media, in particular national quality papers and the Flemish public service newscast, were still the main reference points for public affairs information among our participants.

Keywords: news consumption, young people, focus groups, public service broadcasting, new media

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1 Introduction

This article sets out to understand young citizens’ interpretations of news in their everyday lives and considers the roles news media fulfill in young people’s connections with the public world. These topics of investigation have attracted renewed attention from scholars concerned with the changing boundaries of conventional citizenship orientations, particularly prevalent among younger generations (e.g., Marchi, 2012). According to the model of dutiful citizenship, people are required to follow public affairs news regularly, engage in public life through community organizations, and participate in government-centered activities, such as voting (Schudson, 1998). In contrast to these traditional notions of citizenship, there is an emerging sense that young citizens’

affiliations with traditional institutions, such as political parties, governments, and mainstream news media, are weakening; at the same time, new forms of citizenship enacted within the personal contexts of young people's everyday lives are emerging (Bennett, 2012; Michelletti and Stolle, 2012; Thorson, 2012).

Advanced economic privatization, globalization, and social fragmentation have given rise to an era in which young people are increasingly on their own and responsible for the choices they have to make in their everyday lives; personal lifestyle values, interests, and risks (e.g., economic inequality, environmental protection, human rights, gender inequality) have become the main sources for meaningful engagement with public life (Beck, 2006; Bennett, 1998; 2008; Giddens, 1991). At the same time, new personalized information and communication technologies have infiltrated the lifeworld of youth (Morimoto and Friedland, 2011). Scholars who consider the role of new media technologies in relation to shifts in the citizenship orientations of young people assert that personalized communication technologies and social media empower young citizens with new ways to express opinions, obtain and share information of personal interest, and engage in public life outside traditional institutional structures (Bennett, 2012; Bennett, Wells, and Freelon, 2011; Kim, 2012).

Against the backdrop of rapid economic, social, and technological change, this study aims to explore the ways in which changing citizenship orientations have materialized among Flemish college students. We will do so by narrowing the focus down to news orientations and the roles of traditional and new news media in young people's engagement with public life. By means of an interpretative approach using the focus-group method and qualitative analysis tools, this study aims to acquire an understanding of young citizens' subjective interpretations of and experiences with news (media) in their everyday lives.

2 Young people and news

Findings from studies that assess young people's news attitudes and news behaviors differ significantly depending on which definition of "news" is applied. Studies that draw on more conventional interpretations of news and news behaviors report significant declines in news consumption among younger demographics (Lauf, 2001; Mindich, 2005; Patterson, 2007; Peiser, 2000). For example, Peiser (2000) analyzed the frequency of newspaper reading in both the US and Germany over a span of 25 years, finding cohort replacement to be a substantial cause of the gradual decline in newspaper readership. In addition, a European cross-national analysis based on the Eurobarometer pub-

lic opinion survey indicated that age and birth cohort effects are the most powerful predictive variables between daily and non-daily reading, with each new generation reading less than the previous one, but with an increasing readership within each generation as it ages (Lauf, 2001). Other studies have reported similar decreases in television news consumption among the younger generations (Mindich, 2005; Patterson, 2007).

According to Mindich (2005) and Patterson (2007), a disinterest in public affairs information is underlying the generational shift away from news. The lack of interest in public affairs is reflected in the low political knowledge levels observed among younger demographics (Pew Research Center, 2007). These trends have caused concern about the future of news and the consequences for democracy (Barnhurst and Wartella, 1991). For example, scholars who take a more normative view on citizenship argue that the knowledge one possesses of public affairs is an indispensable competence for effective citizenship (e.g. Dahlgren, 2005). It is this knowledge people may use as a basis for opinion formation and can guide civic actions, such as joining public discussions or engaging in political activities.

Studies that adopt a broader definition of news and engage with young people's viewpoints paint a more nuanced picture. Young people do consider it important to keep up with current events; however, they find the news presented by traditional media irrelevant to the concerns and realities of their everyday lives (Barnhurst, 1998; Barnhurst and Wartella, 1991; 1998; Beekhoven and Van Wel, 1998; Buckingham, 1999; Costera Meijer, 2007; Huang, 2009; Inthorn, Street and Scott, 2012; Marchi, 2012; Raeymaeckers, 2003). For them, news is not an end in itself, but a means for experiencing the world around them: that is, they may use the news to monitor their environment, give meaning to their lives, identify personal values for truth, get a sense of belonging, for conversation, and inspiration (Costera Meijer, 2007; Huang, 2009). Rather than being disinterested in public matters, young people find it difficult to connect the news with the areas of civic activity they encounter in their personal lives (Buckingham, 1999). For example, news stories that do capture their attention include stories that reflect personal lifestyle concerns (Bennett et al., 2011) or stories that report on their local environment or community (Buckingham, 1999; Zerba, 2011). In addition, Buckingham (1999) noted that underlying young people's disengagement with television news are feelings of cynicism about politicians and conventional political activities. Young citizens feel powerless with regard to traditional politics; they feel their voices are not being heard by politicians, nor do they see opportunities for effective participation in the political decision-making process.

Information and communication networks facilitated by new media provide new means for empowerment. Young adults' enthusiasm about the Internet as a medium for news as compared to traditional media is explained by a combination of personal control (Hargittai, Neuman, and Curry, 2012; Marchi, 2012; Zerba, 2011), new ways for individual expression (Barnhurst, 1998; Bennett et al., 2011; Bennett, 2012), and opportunities for sharing news (Bennett et al., 2011; Marchi, 2012). Rather than depending on one-way authoritative media for news, young people take advantage of technologies that facilitate the expression of personal opinions and enable them to go beyond traditional news agendas by selecting news of personal interest. Sharing news and opinions through social network sites and blogs allows them to have their ideas recognized by peers and to develop opinions through interaction with others (Marchi, 2012). The findings are typical of the young citizenry for whom the expression of opinions centered on lifestyle concerns and personal values constitutes the essence of political life (Barnhurst, 1998; Bennett et al., 2012).

Another important explanation for young people's withdrawal from traditional news audiences is their rejection of the normative standard of objectivity associated with conventional news outlets. As Barnhurst (2000, p. 51) points out: "Reporting that consistently covers events from two opposing sides puts journalists in the role of neutral arbiter and leaves citizens out of the decision-making loop, as mere spectators." In addition, young people perceive traditional news media as part of the political establishment and, therefore, as unreliable as "watchdogs" of society (Marchi, 2012). Instead, opinionated and sarcastic journalism typical of online blogs and entertainment news shows are favored among the young. They explain their views saying that blogs and humorous current event shows are more effective in uncovering news stories, interrogating political actors, and contextualizing news events (Marchi, 2012). Furthermore, they are very aware of the bias that results from news gatekeeping and audio-visual editing in conventional television newscasts (Buckingham, 1999). Young adults have more trust in the web as a source for news, while, at the same time, are cautious of the accuracy and credibility of some online information (Hargittai et al., 2012). By combining diverse perspectives and viewpoints selected from different online news sites and blogs and searching for background information that helps to put news stories in context, they gather the information necessary to form a balanced opinion (Hargittai et al., 2012; Marchi, 2012; Zerba, 2011).

The present study aims to examine whether changing news attitudes and behaviors observed among young citizens in the US (e.g., Barnhurst and Wartella, 1991; 1998; Hargittai et al., 2012; Marchi, 2012; Zerba, 2011) and the UK (e.g., Buckingham, 2009; Inthorn et al., 2012) can also be seen among college

students in Flanders. Cross-national differences in the organization of media may have significant influences on the amount and prominence of news on public television, and may therefore foster different levels of news consumption and political knowledge among citizens (Curran, Iyengar, Lund, and Salovaara-Moring, 2009). Comparing three different media systems in four countries – public service (Denmark and Finland), a ‘dual’ model (UK) and the market model (US) – Curran and colleagues (2009) found that the public service model of broadcasting devotes more attention to public affairs and international news and makes news more accessible on leading channels than the US market model. As in Denmark and Finland, the media system in Flanders is typical of the public service model, with a strong public broadcaster funded by public subsidies. The two main public channels had a 41 % share of viewing time in 2011, compared to a 25 % share for the main commercial television channel (Flemish Media Regulator, 2012). One of the core objectives of the public broadcaster is the provision of public affairs information through news and current events programming (Flemish Public Radio and Television Broadcaster & The Flemish Community, 2012). The same requirement holds for the main commercial television broadcaster. Both the leading public and commercial television channels provide a daily evening newscast during prime time, supplemented with various current events programs. Among Flemish young people (15–34 years old), television news is still the prime source for public affairs information, closely followed by the Internet (Van Cauwenberge, d’Haenens and Beentjes, 2010; 2011). Given that most scholarly attention has been paid to young people’s news experiences in a market-driven media environment, the focus of the present study on Flemish students may shed some light on the news orientations of young citizens in a public service media environment.

In addition, this study takes the variation in young audience’s exposure to a combination of different news media into account. More precisely, the study is based on previous survey research among 1,200 young people (15–34 years old) in the Low Countries (Van Cauwenberge et al., 2011) that identified five different types of Flemish news-users depending on their time spent on news on several offline and online platforms and their attachment to these. The *dabblers* (26 % of our sample) spent little time on news, except for television news. For the *e-news-users* (25 %), online news sites were the most prominent news platforms, supplemented with a range of traditional news media: television news, print newspapers, and radio news. The *sound and vision*-group (21 %) was characterized by the use of television news and radio news, complemented with online news sites. The *traditionalists* (20 %) mainly used offline news platforms: television news, print newspapers, and radio news. And finally, the *all-rounders* (8 %) relied on a diverse set of online and offline news sources without

having a preference for any medium in particular: that is, television news, online news sites, free-sheets, and news via mobile devices.

By differentiating between various types of young news-users we are able to explore diversity in young people's interpretations of news(media) and also examine how changing news attitudes and behaviors have materialized among different types of news-users. To this end, the study is guided by the following research question:

What are the news orientations of young people in Flanders, and how do young Flemish use traditional and new media to connect with public life?

3 The focus group method

This study uses the focus group method to understand how young people give meaning to news (media) in their everyday lives. Focus groups are particularly valuable for exploring the ways in which people construct meanings and understand a specific issue (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). Specifically, our interests lie in examining how meanings are constructed and negotiated in young people's conversation about news. Everyday forms of conversation, such as discussion, anecdotes, jokes, gossip, and loose word associations, are all central processes through which meanings are produced and reproduced in daily life (Kitzinger, 1994; Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). We follow the argument put forward by Lunt and Livingstone (1996, p. 85), among others, that "focus groups can be understood as a simulation of these routine but relatively inaccessible communicative contexts that can help us discover the processes by which meaning is socially constructed through everyday talk." For example, using the focus group as a forum for debate on news and the group participants as audience for one another, we are particularly curious about how young people develop ideas and arguments through interaction, explain the reasoning behind their thinking, share common experiences and personal anecdotes, or challenge each other's points of view. The dynamics of focus groups may reveal a rich tapestry of viewpoints and understandings among group participants, while at the same time uncover group norms and consensus (Kitzinger, 1994). This depth, range, and qualitative detail provided by focus groups remain largely unattainable by quantitative methods of data collection.

Following our fivefold typology of Flemish news-users, we used five homogeneous focus groups with 4 to 12 people in a comparative setting that covered

variation in news media use.¹ Four focus groups took place on weeknight evenings at the University of Leuven campus in December 2009 and one in April 2011. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling among third-year communication students at the University of Leuven. Those who showed interest in participating in the focus groups had to fill out a short questionnaire asking about their time spent with offline (print newspaper, free newspaper, television news, radio news) and online news media (news sites, news blogs and forums, niche sites on news topics, and news via mobile devices), and whether or not they would miss these media for news if they were no longer available. Based on these answers, participants were assigned to one of the five focus groups. A total of 43 informants (of which 18 were males), between 17 and 31 years of age, participated in the focus groups. Our sample consisted predominantly of college students ($n = 38$); there were also two high school students and three recent graduates in the workforce. The sessions lasted on average 1.5 hours. Focus group members received 20 euro for their participation.

Upon arrival at the focus group site, participants were welcomed by the moderator and asked to take a seat at the table. Beverages and snacks were provided. The focus group discussions were moderated by the first author as part of her PhD research and attended by two third-year communication students who took notes. All focus group sessions were recorded on video to be transcribed afterwards. At the beginning of each session, participants were asked to introduce themselves, an opening question to encourage people to talk. Afterwards, in order to focus the attention of the participants, the moderator continued by asking the participants to write down some words that popped up when thinking about 'news.' The moderator used semi-structured questions to guide the discussions, clustered around four core themes: (a) What is considered 'news' and what are the necessary components news ideally should consist of; (b) which meanings do young people attribute to news in their daily lives; (c) what do young people expect from news in terms of content and platforms; and (d) what should an 'ideal news medium' look like?

A thematic analysis, using the cut-and-paste approach, was adopted to examine the transcripts from the focus group discussions (Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook, 2007). First, going through the transcripts line by line, central themes relevant to our research question were identified and coded. Based on this initial reading, we developed a classification system for major themes (cat-

¹ The *sound and vision*-group consisted of 11 participants, the *dabblers*-group of 9 participants, the *traditionalists*-group of 4 participants, the *e-news-users*-group of 12 participants, and the *allrounders*-group of 7 participants.

egories). This was done systematically for each focus group separately for comparison purposes. Next, reading and rereading the data, ideas, thoughts, explanations, processes, motivations, attitudes, and descriptions on a specific theme were marked off with regard to the respective category. As our categories of themes evolved during the reading process, subcategories were constructed to capture variation in the data, such as with regard to differences in interpretation between the five focus groups. After finalizing the coding phase, the coded material was cut out and placed in the respective categories and subcategories. We analyzed how different categories and subcategories related to each other by identifying linkages between the different themes and topics. By doing so, we tried to get a more global understanding of what was going on in our data, and how processes and meanings were connected to each other (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Finally, we compared the categories and subcategories for the five focus groups.

To protect their privacy, fictional names were given to the participants. The news-user group to which the quoted person was a member has been made explicit.

4 Results

The moderator started each focus group session by asking participants to write down some words that popped up when thinking about ‘news.’ These words served as the basis for discussion in the groups. Although with different nuances, the same words came up in all five news groups, namely: ‘relevance’, ‘objectivity’, and ‘accessibility.’ According to most participants, these were the components news ideally should comprise. During the sessions, the words turned out to be recurring core themes and vital concepts for understanding how news was experienced and why specific platforms were preferred over others, with significant differences in interpretation between participants who primarily depended on traditional news media and those who went online for news.

4.1 The meaning of ‘relevance’

With an abundance of different sorts of news contents, ranging from entertainment to hard news, young people made a clear distinction with regard to what they considered ‘relevant news’ and what not. This attitude was reflected in how news media were perceived and used, as Tim (e-news-users) explained:

“When I want to read something for fun I go to the site of *Het Laatste Nieuws* (Flemish popular newspaper) and when I want information on a serious matter it will be *De Standaard* (Flemish quality newspaper) or news from the VRT (Flemish public broadcaster). You have to keep the two separated.” Most participants expressed similar attitudes toward public service and quality news media, on the one hand, and the more entertainment-oriented news media on the other. We found that young people were very aware of the different objectives underlying the workings of these media. Previous research indeed indicates that young people have developed “a set of critical competencies” which they apply to their readings of different news content and presentations (Buckingham, 1999: 181). Although some made extensive use of online sources for news, all of our participants indicated that traditional news media, such as quality newspapers and public service newscasts, were the first sources they turned to for important news stories. For them, relevant news dealt with major events that affect a lot of people: “When something happens in politics, or ... well, it doesn't really have to be politics, I don't know, something very big” (Liv, traditionalists). Most participants across the different sessions supported this view, although a minority also referred to personally relevant and local news.

When it came to the reasons why young people wanted to be provided with relevant news, major differences were found between our news groups. For the *e-news-users* and *allrounders*, the groups that made most extensive use of both offline and online news platforms, relevant national and international news enabled them to construct a worldview. For them, this was one of the most prominent functions of news, as pointed out by Tine (allrounders): “What happens in the world has an enormous impact on what will happen in the future, and you do want to know where you'll end up later ... where you stand in this world.” This statement reflects how young people today see themselves as individuals in a globalized world. Being increasingly responsible for the trajectories of their own lives, news empowers young people with knowledge that enables them to make choices in everyday life. For the participants in the *allrounders* and *e-news-users* groups, news was crucial for citizenship because, more than just getting a worldview, it provided them with the knowledge, and therefore power, to act as citizens. Hence, news constituted a core-value in their lives, as illustrated by the following discussion:

Julie: For example, on New Year's Eve, we (friends) were talking about Elio di Rupo (Belgian politician) and she (a friend) didn't know who he was, and we really couldn't believe that. I mean, she's a college student and she doesn't follow any news!

Laura: But for you that (news) is a core-value.

- Julie: But when you live in Belgium and you don't know who Elio di Rupo is, then I think there's really something wrong with you.
- Laura: I think for her that's just not a core-value, or something basic. For us this is of vital importance.
[Allrounders]

The importance of being up-to-date with news headlines was acknowledged in the other news groups as well, but for more functional purposes: to use as background knowledge in numerous occasions and for different purposes. In contrast to the *e-news-users* and *allrounders* who displayed an active, interest-driven news behavior, the participants in the other groups consumed news more passively. Particularly in the event of breaking news, they felt an urge and social obligation to follow the news instantly in order to know "what's going on," as noted by Joyce: "Well, you have to know that! I mean, when someone says that a plane has crashed into the WTC Towers, and you have to say, 'what happened?' (some people laugh). You know, that's just to stay up-to-date." In those cases, the national television newscast (most people referred to the Flemish public broadcaster) served as the central provider for news. During the sessions, participants often referred to the public service broadcaster as a reliable guide in the news landscape for pointing out to them the main news stories of the day.

Remarkably, the importance of being provided with a range of news topics of general interest, rather than searching for news of personal interest, was made explicit in all focus group sessions, even by those participants that most frequently navigated the web for news. Television news, in particular, gave young people with less interest in public affairs the opportunity to learn about topics they normally would not pay attention to, as exemplified by the following conversation:

- Bart: I think on television they (journalists) have to bring an overview of the most important matters of the day, and if you want to know more, then you can search for it online.
- Catherine: I totally agree ... I think that they (journalists) also have to bring a little bit (news) of everything, the topics you normally don't pay attention to when reading a newspaper. They also have to bring something about those issues, you know ... then you can learn some things you otherwise wouldn't be interested in. I think that's important.
- Joyce: In that case, you also get a broader, more general knowledge, you know ... if you only search for news ... for example, if you're only interested in sports, yeah then you don't know anything else. So when you watch television news, then you just *have* to follow and you learn something.
[Dabblers]

Nonetheless, we found, in line with previous studies, indications of a decreasing interest in, and use of, traditional news media, especially television news, among our focus group participants. The *dabblers*, for example, who mainly fell back on this medium for news, had become cynical about, and disengaged with, news due to the repetitive presentation of the same news stories and their disinterest in them. For them, hard news like politics and economics was not considered relevant to their everyday lives. This feeling was shared by many participants. An example:

- John: Things are always repeated on television, for instance the crisis (meaning: the economic crisis), they bring that every day ... this company fired fifty people ... well, that's just not interesting anymore when you've already heard that five times.
- Bart: It's like when there's a war, it's always ... there are so many people dead ... OK, so what? That happens (people laugh). I mean, it sounds really harsh, but it's just like that. It's every day ... there are so many deaths ... but we've heard the same yesterday, and at a certain point it just doesn't touch you anymore ...
- [Dabblers]

Traditional media's emphasis on the same news topics, especially national politics, at the expense of other stories that are consistently left out, was also a point of discussion in other news groups, as illustrated by a quote from Benjamin (allrounders): "For example, the Middle-East, you suddenly notice that some things have just disappeared from the media agenda (meaning mass media), for example, Bahrain ... you don't hear anything about it anymore, while at the same time there are still revolts being suppressed by the government. Now, everything is focused on Syria. I think that a lot of things that are considered (by journalists) no longer relevant, in some cases *are* relevant." This statement indicates that young people are wary of traditional journalistic gatekeeping. We found several examples of young people going online to avoid or complement the national news agenda, thereby taking control of their own news selection, especially among the *e-news-users* and *allrounders*:

- Steven: What's useful with selecting news online is that you don't have the overexposure of certain news topics. For example, with the case 'Kim De Gelder' (referring to a shooting incident in a Flemish kindergarten) ... you get news about it the first day ... this has happened, so many people are dead ... and then the day after, they say they caught him ... and then the following day they say how his condition is (...) In that case, I think it's handy when you can just say, I've already seen this now, and you can choose to not select the article.
- [E-news-users]

- Benjamin: When I post something like that (meaning: news) on Facebook, it’s mostly something I find important and which I believe hasn’t been highlighted enough in the media (meaning: mass media). When, for example, Bahrain completely disappeared from the media agenda, I posted something about that. I mean, I know very few people will read it because they aren’t interested, but *I* find it important
- Laura: So actually that makes *you* an information provider!
[Allrounders]

4.2 The meaning of ‘objectivity’

In all news groups, participants mentioned the importance of getting neutral facts and different viewpoints to form a balanced opinion on a news event. However, the meaning of ‘objectivity’ differed significantly depending on the news group. For users of traditional platforms mainly (i.e., the *dabblers*, *traditionalists* and *sound and vision*-group), ‘objective news’ meant getting a complete picture of a news event, including facts, images, opinions of different people involved, and expert opinions. They wanted to be provided with all the necessary information, seen from different angles, so as to be capable of obtaining a clear and detailed picture of how something really happened. For the *dabblers*, in particular, the role of images was crucial to fully grasp a news event. Thanks to video footage and pictures, they felt more confident that they understood a news event the way it happened. More than just being provided with facts, news for them was about having an experience, in which video footage functioned as an enhancer for their involvement with the news story.

- Lisa: When you hear something, it’s always best I think to make your own opinion about it, because they say this and that has happened, but when you ... for example, with the Tsunami (in Haiti), when you see the images, then you can really say... OK, it was like that. But when you only hear about it ...
- Catherine: Also, when you see something, it’s more credible ... then it touches you more than when you hear about it ... It doesn’t really affect you when you just hear about something, I think.
[Dabblers]

The *e-news-users* and *allrounders*, on the other hand, were very aware of the fact that there is no such thing as ‘objective news’ in terms of news framing. According to these participants, journalists were inevitably influenced by their own opinions, backgrounds, even the culture in which they live. Especially the standards that guide journalists’ selection of news contents were questioned, as pointed out in the following quote from Sarah (allrounders): “Every day they (meaning: journalists) decide what news to bring and what to leave out, and

they do so by selecting news that is ‘close to the people’ and, well ... this basically runs counter to the objectivity of news, because by doing so they highlight some things while at the same time leaving out others. I think this directs people's minds toward a certain way of thinking.” The participants in these groups explained that it is the responsibility of journalists to put news and opinions into context. For example, clarify how news stories are constructed, describe the different sides of an issue, or provide background information on the political orientations and affiliations of the news organization. Given that this kind of contextual information is seldom found in traditional news reports, some participants in the *e-news-users* and *allrounders*-groups reported going online to gather additional information that helped them to construct a balanced opinion. Among the online news sources that were mentioned for looking up further information were: Flemish newspaper sites, the online news site of the public service broadcaster, and international news sites such as CNN.com, BBC.co.uk, and NYTimes.com. Some also noted Wikipedia as a useful source for background information.

However, when asked about blogs, online discussion forums, and social network sites, it turned out that these platforms were not taken all too seriously for sharing views or debating about news, even among the most avid online-news users. This was mainly because these social media platforms were perceived by the participants as sites where people go to post extreme or irrelevant opinions, instead of sharing and debating relevant points of view with others. A similar finding was reported by Hargittai and colleagues (2012, p. 168): “While most of the respondents seemed positive toward or at least accepting of the internet as a good source of information, a much larger portion of participants disliked social network sites like Facebook and Twitter sometimes vehemently”, indicating that “participants were not put off by the amount of information on the web, but rather by the quality of what they saw – in this case, the annoying minutia of people reporting details about their personal lives.” Hence, when our participants visited social media sites, it was mostly out of entertainment and leisure motives: “I only read it to have a good laugh” (Paul, *e-news-users*).

4.3 The meaning of ‘accessibility’

The most prominent determinant of participants' uses of and preferences for specific news platforms was the perceived ‘accessibility of news’, of which the meaning differed between users of mainly traditional news media (i.e., the *dabblers*, *traditionalists*, and *sound and vision*-group) and online platforms (i.e., the *e-news-users* and *allrounders*).

For the participants in the traditional news groups, ‘accessible news’ meant news they can consume without requiring any effort. A twofold distinction was made: First, a repeatedly expressed argument in these groups was that news must be easily understandable and therefore be clearly presented to the users, as illustrated by Carol (sound and vision): “For me news must be clear. It should be obvious what it’s about and you should be able to understand it correctly without being too complicated, so you can easily understand it.” This argument was linked with the other core themes – objectivity and relevance – in that the more traditional news-users wanted to understand the relevant news topics of the day correctly without taking too much effort. This attitude toward news explains why these participants perceived the web, with its immense amount of different news contents and lack of guidance as to what news is relevant or objective, as an inaccessible platform for news, in contrast to traditional news media that point out and interpret for them the relevant news stories of the day. These attitudes toward news are, secondly, related to the fact that instead of actively reaching out for news, the participants in the *dabblers*, *traditionalists*, and *sound and vision*-groups took a more passive stance toward news by expecting news would come to them. For example, when news was passed on to them by third parties or when they accidentally stumbled upon it, as illustrated by Peter (dabblers): “For example, the *Metro* (free paper) is handy because you can simply pick it up somewhere at the station. I find it important that news is close to you, not necessarily expensive, and easy to find.” As news was not considered a priority in their lives, these news-users did not actively search for it or planned a fixed moment for news in their daily schedules. Although the opportunities of online platforms were recognized, they rather preferred a printed newspaper they accidentally come across or a television newscast they bump into, instead of going online.

During the focus groups, it became clear that these passive news behaviors were in large part driven by the underlying processes of long-term habits, automatically triggered by certain settings and contexts, for example: “I follow news because I want to be informed, but also because it’s a habit of mine. For example, in the weekend, when it’s 7 o’clock, I switch on the television for the evening newscast ... or reading the newspaper when I get up in the morning and I’m having breakfast” (Liv, traditionalists). Other frequently expressed external triggers for media habits were found in the context of being around other people who are watching television news, or in specific actions, for example, listening to news on the radio while driving the car, or reading the free newspaper on the train. The passive, sometimes inattentive way of dealing with news became especially apparent in the frequently mentioned internal triggers that encompass certain news habits: reading the newspaper or watching a tele-

vision newscast to counter boredom, to pass time, or as a form of relaxation. In this way, news platforms were perceived and used more as a means for depriving a certain feeling, rather than a tool for getting news.

Focusing on the *e-news-users* and *allrounders*, the picture changed completely. As discussed, news constitutes an important aspect in their lives, which was reflected in the time they spent on news via traditional and especially online platforms. In contrast to the traditional news groups, 'the accessibility of news' meant for them having access to a broad range of diverse news sources, anywhere, anytime. Characterized by a more active approach, they searched for and followed up on news around the clock, thereby transforming their news consumption into a lifestyle in which online platforms and mobile devices fit perfectly. Addressing this "instant knowledge need" in focus groups with young American adults, Zerba (2011, p. 607) noted that "whichever gratification they are seeking, the news medium of choice must be at their fingertips or in close proximity." Since mobile devices have further extended news consumption beyond boundaries of time, place, and daily routines, news consumption patterns seem to be increasingly shaped by the need to follow-up news on a more continuous basis throughout the day. Non-stop news production cycles (Karlsson and Strömbäck, 2010) have further encouraged these behaviors. All this has changed the way news is experienced, transforming news events into continuing stories that our participants wanted to follow up on to get the most recent developments, as illustrated by Benjamin (allrounders): "Recently I accidentally read something about Electrabel (an energy provider) which normally wouldn't interest me, but this time I got interested, and when later on I checked the news sites of *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* (two Flemish quality papers) I searched specifically for this topic to follow up on the story, because you do want to know how things eventually end up."

Nonetheless, even participants in the *e-news-users* and *allrounders* groups were hesitant to discuss and share news online. Although some of them posted news topics on their social network pages, as illustrated earlier, most of them used online news platforms as traditional news media: to get news for their own use instead of sharing and discussing it with others, as pointed out by Jessie (allrounders): "With Twitter you can follow politicians and, if I would want to, I could go into discussion with them, but for me that goes too far ... I would just never do that."

5 Discussion and conclusion

In this article we explored Flemish college students' news orientations and their uses of traditional and new media for news. Most importantly, findings

from our focus groups revealed major differences in news behaviors and attitudes between participants who mainly depended on traditional media for news and those who went online for news. Additionally, we found that traditional media, in particular national quality papers and the Flemish public service newscast, were still main reference points for public affairs information among our participants, which contrasted with findings from previous studies mainly conducted among American young people. Although most participants stressed the importance of being up-to-date with the main news stories of the day, the level of interest in public affairs greatly determined if and how they informed themselves. While previous studies reported on young people's enthusiasm about the web for sharing news, selecting information of personal interest, and combining diverse viewpoints (Hargittai et al., 2012; Marchi, 2012; Zerba, 2011), only the most avid news-users among our focus group participants reported doing so. For example, participants in the *e-news-users* and *allrounders* groups actively searched for and followed up on news on a daily basis. They explained their views, saying that news empowered them with knowledge that enabled them to construct a worldview and make choices in everyday life. For them, the web was a means of enriching the traditional news agenda with additional information, news topics and viewpoints, thereby meeting their standards of 'objective' and 'relevant' news more successfully. The participants in the more traditional news groups (i.e., the *dabblers*, *traditionalists*, and *sound and vision*-group), however, were less inclined to actively engage with news. Especially the *dabblers* repeatedly expressed feelings of disinterest in the "boring" and "repetitive" news coverage found on television and in newspapers. Nonetheless, given that these participants did not want to spend too much time and effort on news, traditional news media, which pointed out and interpreted for them the relevant news stories of the day, were preferred over online platforms that required active search strategies.

These findings left us puzzled. While a growing body of research reports on young people's increasing use of online media for news, particularly among those that are most disengaged with traditional news media, our findings indicated otherwise. In line with previous studies, we did find evidence of perceptions of traditional news media bias among our participants, however, only the most eager news-users were motivated to gather additional information online that helped them to form a balanced opinion on a news event or construct a more global worldview. Furthermore, the less interested news-users, who depended mainly on traditional media for news, turned out to be the most vulnerable news audiences: When confronted with "boring news" on television or in newspapers, they tuned out from the news completely. Therefore, this study urges news producers to not only focus on new media to connect with

young news audiences, but to especially pay attention to traditional news platforms for reaching out to young citizens. One way of doing so, this study suggests, is by providing variation in news coverage, rather than continuously drawing on the same news issues and events. This, we found, was one of the main reasons why young people lost interest in and ceased paying attention to traditional news coverage.

The implications of an increasingly interactive, fragmented, and globalized media environment for the future of informed citizenship and deliberative democracy, have been a main concern and focus of attention among scholars and public officials. Debates on the consequences of the contemporary information environment have centered most prominently around two opposing scenarios: selective news exposure and the fragmentation of audiences, on the one hand, and the increasing heterogeneity of news consumption and public debates, on the other. Strengthening recent findings (Brundidge, 2010; Garrett, 2009; Hargittai et al., 2012), participants in our focus groups reported using the web to be informed on a range of diverse news topics and viewpoints, rather than pursuing specific interests or likeminded views. Moreover, the importance of being provided with general public-affairs news provided by traditional news media was made explicit in all focus group sessions. This was in part explained by the need to know “what’s going on” and what other people were talking about. Although some scholars have expressed fears that the current new-media environment may lead toward the deconstruction of national social boundaries through the erosion of shared national media experiences (see Soffer (2013) for an overview of these debates) our findings indicated that, at least in a public service media environment, national mass media continued to enhance social bonding by the creation of a common (national) news frame in which the news topics of the day are set out. Another prominent explanation for participants’ attention to traditional news media, in particular the public service news cast, was found in the persistence of long-term news media habits underlying traditional news consumption patterns (see, for example, LaRose, 2010). Several examples of news media habits, automatically triggered by both internal (e.g., watching the television news to relax or feel better) and contextual cues (e.g., reading the newspaper at breakfast, watching the 7:00 p.m. newscast on prime time television news), were brought up in the focus groups. It remains to be seen, however, how news patterns will develop in an increasingly globalized and interactive media environment, characterized by an abundance of news contents on online news sites, blogs, discussion forms, and social network sites that can be easily accessed, created, and/or shared through mobile devices, anywhere, anytime. Marchi (2012, p. 251), for example, reported on the changing news attitudes and behaviors of American teenagers, “learning

about current events from social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and blogs.” Although the young adults in our focus groups – being slightly older than the teenagers in Marchi’s study – frequently shared and discussed topics with others in offline settings, the use of social media for sharing or discussing news online was rarely mentioned. Our findings reinforce recent survey research that showed that Flemish college students’ use of advanced types of online news media and interactive features, such as sharing news on social network sites or posting reactions on a news forum, is limited (Opgenhaffen and d’Haenens, 2012). Altogether, the findings are illustrative of the rapidly changing media environment in which young people come of age, and the speed with which new media technologies penetrate the lifeworlds of the youngest generations, thereby creating new ways of connecting with public life. Future studies could benefit from differentiation between different age groups of young people so as to be more efficacious in capturing variations and developments in the news attitudes and behaviors.

Our study has some notable limitations. The specific setting of the study within the Flemish media landscape, characteristic of a strong public broadcasting tradition, is predominant in our findings. The public service model of broadcasting devotes more attention to public affairs and international news and makes news more accessible on leading channels than the US market model (Curran et al., 2009). Previous research among Flemish young people (15–34 years old) indicated that television news is still the prime source for public affairs information (Van Cauwenberge et al., 2010; 2011). For these reasons, findings from this study should be interpreted with particular reference to the Flemish media context. The use of mainly university college students in our focus groups is another limitation of this study. Our sample of higher-educated university students is not representative of other segments of the younger demography, for example, the less educated, or those who have long since exited higher education for the labor market. Given that the lifestyles, concerns, and realities of college students are completely different from those of young people outside of a university environment, and taking into account of the prominence of young people’s personal life contexts for engaging with public life (e.g., Bennett, 1998), it is plausible to assume that the news attitudes and behaviors of college students are by no means representative of other segments of the young population. Furthermore, college students are generally portrayed as savvy and highly connected online media users, a status which is not applicable to all young people (Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008). A final point of critique concerns the use of the focus group method in this study. Focus groups have been criticized for their reliance on self-reporting and lack of generalizability, due to the use of small samples within specific settings. With

regard to the first point of critique, one could indeed argue that in the presence of others and in the heat of discussion, participants in focus groups may react differently than in a one-on-one interview or when filling out a questionnaire. However, we found that most participants in our focus groups explained their viewpoints thoroughly, discussing ideas at length and providing examples and details of personal news behaviors. In case of vague or inconsistent responses, the moderator encouraged participants to clarify their statements. A second argument of critique concerns the lack of generalizability of focus group data. However, the aim of this study was to develop a rich understanding of young people's subjective news experiences by analyzing social interaction and communication, rather than examining individual attitudes that can be generalized to the population. We follow the argument put forward by Lunt and Livingstone (1996, p. 90) that "notions of reliability and validity are inextricably linked to quantitative methods and so are irrelevant to qualitative work." Moreover, we believe that the depth, range, and qualitative richness provided by focus groups remain largely unattainable by quantitative methods of data collection. Nonetheless, in light of the abovementioned critiques, we urge readers to interpret the findings in this article with some caution.

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