



## SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

### Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

Registration number, Östersjöstiftelsen: 60/18d

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Project title: What is news? News perceptions and practices among young adults in times of transition

#### **1. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them**

Examining how young adults in Estonia, Russia and Sweden perceive and practice news, the project has aimed at understanding contemporary news consumption as embedded in everyday life, and as interlinked with a range of mundane practices and settings. Being informed by phenomenological theory and methodology, the project's empirical insights are based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with a total of 179 participants aged 18-26, where the researchers, in line with the phenomenological perspective, strived to allow the young participants to themselves define what they see as news, rather than starting from a pre-set concept.

A key result of the project, firstly, is the insight provided into a broadening, 'bottom-up', notion of news as understood by young people, involving altered conceptual understandings of news related to shifting patterns of news consumption. The study found that the young adults, although accessing elements of conventional news journalism in their daily, highly digitized, media use, tended to include a range of information provided by other formats and sources – such as social media influencers, podcasts, websites by government agencies, memes and other kinds of social media content – in their understandings of news, with news journalism, furthermore, often playing a relatively minor role within the mediated information encountered on a daily basis. The project has underlined how shifting definitions can entail new tempo-spatialities of news perceptions, relating to the perceived timelines of news, and where it is understood to come from. While 'news' on social media, on the one hand, is accessed within a hyper-fast cycle of information, on the other hand it was possible for the young adults to apply a flexible time frame in their perceptions and definitions – with 'newness' defined in relation to what was new to the individual – and to orient their news interests alongside diverse geographical and socio-spatial communities considered relevant to their identities and sense of self.

Secondly, the project has shed light on key news practices in contemporary digital media environments. With the smartphone a central technology for news use, a continuous 'scrolling' and checking for news and information, often alongside other kinds of social media content, had for many of the young adults become an integral feature of everyday life, just as the habit of starting and ending the day with routine checks for updates and communication in one's online networks had become a way to structure the day. Three key uses of news, defined in a broader sense, were identified as particularly prominent when accessing news on social media: interval, synchronal and ritual news practices, where the first refers to news consumption taking place in 'gaps' in time, while the second underlines news as parallel to other daily activities and media use, and the third was shown to be a more systematic and transformative activity, exemplified by the morning and evening news



rituals linked to the smartphone. As such, the research has emphasised active as well as routinised and unaware dimensions of digital news use, underlining, furthermore, how processes of automation, push notifications, and an algorithmic selection of content in search engines and on social media were notable aspects of the young adults' experiences.

These findings interlink with a third, and overarching, result of the project, concerning how social media, as a main framework for young people's news consumption, change what news *is* from a young audience perspective. The project has showed how the boundaries between news journalism and other types of content presented within the individualised social media 'feeds' can be experienced as highly porous on a day-to-day level; blurring the lines between different media genres and introducing hybrid 'news' forms, such as the social media influencer, which can be related to as a key source of news and information about society.

It is important not to overstate discontinuities with previous forms of news consumption, yet a conclusion that can be drawn from these results is that social media provide new means of learning about the world for young people, whilst contributing to de-contextualise the experience of news journalism. In a more fleeting, hybrid news environment, it becomes harder to specify where and how news is accessed, and where it comes from, at the same time as the responsibility for creating a coherent totality of information is shifted towards the individual – with the young adults often encountering news journalism as simply brief snippets of information, while turning to other sources to create meaningful narratives. Another overall conclusion is that this process to a notable degree becomes shaped by individualised online networks providing a relational context for news understandings, which, on a theoretical level, means that the 'public connection' often discussed in relation to the role of news in the public sphere can be contrasted with a 'networked connection', with a basis in social media.

## **2. The project's contribution to the international research frontline**

During the duration of the research there has been a surge in international, qualitative, studies of news audiences, with the project adding to this expansive field by providing a nuanced empirical study of the situatedness of news, culturally as well as experientially, as well as opening up for a further re-examination of news as a category in the lives of young people. Taking inspiration from a long-standing tradition of scholarship that sees news as meaningful beyond its political function, whilst recognising how it can form the basis for experiences and identities that interlink with civic engagement, the phenomenological approach guiding the project offers an openness to alternative understandings of news, fully grounded in audience accounts. Doing so, it makes a contribution to conceptual discussions about news and its role in society and democracy, adding to discussions about the role of digital news in the public sphere by introducing the notion of a networked connection as key to the provision of news and information for young people, and opening up questions about the wider implications of this for democracy and society. Lastly, the project draws attention to how media genres often regarded as entertainment, including social media genres such as memes and influencers, can be significant to young people's ways of learning about themselves and the world around them, pointing to the need for the further study of such categories as hybrid sources of news.



## **2. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe**

The research has yielded valuable insights into how young adults in three different countries in the Baltic Sea Region relate to news and information in a digital context. Most of the young adults in the three sub-samples were avid users of social media, while also using elements of conventional news media for gaining information about society, with the majority, at the time of our research, prioritising a range of different kinds of content as part of their daily media use, including music, TV series, social media etc., with conventional news items often not immediately mentioned when explaining their media use on a regular day. As such, they shared elements of lifestyles and interests characteristic of a specific life stage as young adults. At the same time, the findings illustrated how global technologies are adapted in specific cultural settings, with questions around levels of trust and distrust in different sources of news and information emerging as a particularly significant issue when contrasting the sub-samples, with participants in Estonia and Sweden generally expressing trust in their discussions about established news media, whereas the Russian participants perceived social media as a more trustworthy source of news, while also expressing a greater degree of scepticism to all news sources. However, the young adults described similar challenges when evaluating trustworthiness of news and information in social media, and had, in fact, developed similar everyday ‘tactics’ for dealing with these, which partly involved relying on different kinds of epistemic evidence, including personal experiences and relationships, to determine if news and information could be trusted. As an example, such epistemic evidence was used to construct trust in relation to a foreign event such as the Black Lives Matter movement in the US in 2021, where the young adults meant that they received trustworthy information in social media as it built on individual citizens’ own experiences, openly visible in photos and videos. The Russian participants also used their own and others’ experiences, and their relationships to these others, as epistemic evidence for the trustworthiness of information from anonymous, unknown news sources, as many Russian information providers in digital media avoided to be openly identified – illustrating, too, how the young adults adapted their way of constructing trust to the different news and media landscapes that they navigated in their everyday lives.

## **4. New research questions that the project has led to**

The project has led to new research questions concerning the implications of the findings on a wider social and public level, as well as in relation to current media developments. These involve queries about how the news practices and perceptions identified may advance, or hinder, young people’s development as citizens in different cultural contexts; questions that are relevant, not least, in relation to a fragmented public sphere, where secure information is increasingly challenged. One of the most urgent questions, likewise, regards the tempo-spatialities of news provided by social media, and their implications for the synchronising features of news in the construction of different forms of publics and ‘imagined communities’. Some of the findings identified in the project, finally, have gained renewed consequence in conjunction with fast-moving technological developments such as AI and ChatGPT, making questions about the increasing role of automation and algorithmic personalization of news use particularly pertinent.



## 5. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

The project has resulted in one internationally published book (de Gruyter, forthcoming), five articles in prestigious international peer review journals, one handbook chapter in a main international anthology on media audiences (forthcoming), one chapter in an anthology about the development of the media landscape in Estonia (forthcoming), and several conference papers.

The project has also resulted in the organisation of two large international conferences, each attracting many of the top international scholars in the field of news and young people, and each with an emphasis on the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe. The first conference, titled “Young People and News in the Digital World: Local and Global Perspectives” took place in Paris in May 2022, as a pre-conference to the annual International Communication Association (ICA) conference. This pre-conference was organised by Bengtsson and Johansson together with Lynn Schofield Clark at the University of Denver, a leading scholar in the field, with the help of additional funding from the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES). It involved presentations from all four project researchers, with two of the keynote speakers (Maria Bakardjieva and Natalia Roudakova) particularly addressing questions of news and young people in Eastern Europe. The second conference, titled “Young People and News: Breaking Boundaries Across Europe”, organised by Bengtsson, Johansson and Schofield Clark together with three European colleagues (Maria José Brites, Teresa Castro and Tanja Oblak Črnič), with funding from ÖSS, is taking place in Ljubljana in September 2024 as a pre-conference to the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) conference. It represents an advancement of research themes highlighted in the first event, gathering news scholars from different parts of Europe and beyond.

Opermann, Bengtsson and Johansson have continuously presented their findings at several research conferences, which have included leading international conferences in media and communication research, such as ICA and ECREA, as well as key conferences within a local scholarly context, including NordMedia and the Association for Swedish Media and Communication Research (FSMK). Other contexts for research dialogue have included invitations to higher seminars and speaking engagements at conferences. Examples include Johansson presenting the project in her docent lecture at Södertörn University in March 2021, and Johansson and Bengtsson presenting outlines of the work at the Higher Seminar at the Department of Journalism at Södertörn University in October 2021, as well as at an international workshop funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond at Lund University in May 2023. Bengtsson was invited as a keynote speaker at the conference *Alternatives in Communication Theory & Education*, arranged by the ECREA temporary working group *Journalism and Communication Education* at Yasar University in Izmir, in May 2022, as well as presenting the research during a period as visiting professor at the University of Helsinki in 2021-2022, and at the University of Bergen in December 2023. The forthcoming book by Bengtsson and Johansson, likewise, has been presented at Linneaus University in March 2023 and at Jönköping University in April 2023.

The project has, additionally, made a clear contribution to teaching and student output. Examples include two MA students spending a semester-long course as interns in the project as part of their Master’s programme in Media and Communication Studies at Södertörn University in the autumn of 2021, with the project also functioning as a conceptual



starting point for two undergraduate dissertations on changing patterns in news consumption at Södertörn University, as well as informing a national PhD course on ethnographic methods in media studies led by Bengtsson and Johansson in spring 2023, and teaching by Bengtsson at an international doctoral spring school in Dubrovnic in April 2024. At the University of Tartu, the research topics of the project have been closely related to the objectives of the undergraduate course “Estonian Media System and Media Use” led by Opermann, where the students have been taught to analyse media consumption using various methods. Opermann has also supervised bachelor's theses on algorithmic literacy, news and information use among different age groups, and the value of news in everyday life (2022-2023), and her recruitment of research participants through schools and universities, likewise, led to fruitful discussions with teachers across Estonia.

### List of publications

#### *Monograph:*

\*Bengtsson, Stina & Johansson, Sofia (2025, forthcoming) *Navigating the News: Young People, Digital Culture and Everyday Life*, Berlin: De Gruyter.

#### *Articles in peer review journals:*

\*Bengtsson, Stina (2023) ”The Relevance of Digital News: Themes, Scales and Temporalities”, *Digital Journalism*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2150254>

\*Bengtsson, Stina & Johansson, Sofia (2022) ”The Meanings of Social Media Use in Everyday Life”, *Social Media + Society*, Vol. 8(4).  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221130292>

Bengtsson, Stina & Johansson, Sofia (2021) ”A Phenomenology of News: Understanding News in Digital Culture”, *Journalism – Theory, Practice and Criticism*, Vol. 22(11): 2873-2889. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919901194>

Bengtsson, Stina, Johansson, Sofia & Opermann, Signe (under review, forthcoming) ”Two Logics of Trust: Epistemic Evidence and Digital News and Information”.

Johansson, Sofia (under review, forthcoming,) “The Painful Friendship: Social Media Influencers as Friends, News and Foes in Young Women’s Lives”.

#### *Textbook:*

Johansson, Sofia & Bengtsson, Stina (2024, forthcoming) ”Audience Research in a Cross-National Framework: When Lofty Ideals Collide with Complicated Realities”, in Annette Hill & Peter Lunt (Eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Media Audiences*, London: Routledge.



*Research Anthology:*

\*Opermann, Signe & Kõuts-Klemm, Ragne (2024, forthcoming) “Eesti elanikkonna meediakasutuse muutumine 2005–2024” [“The Change in Media Consumption of the Estonian Population in 2005–2024”], in Ragne Kõuts-Klemm (Ed.) *Eesti meediamaastik 2005–2024* [*The Estonian Media Landscape in 2005–2024*], Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.

\* *Open access*

**Five most important conferences (organised and presented)**

- “Young People and News in the Digital World: Local and Global Perspectives”, pre-conference, International Communication Association (ICA), 26 May, 2022, Paris. Organised.
- “Young People and News: Breaking Boundaries Across Europe”, pre-conference, European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), 23 September, 2024, Ljubljana. Organised.
- International Communication Association (ICA), 72<sup>nd</sup> annual ICA conference, 26-30 May, 2022, Paris.  
Bengtsson, Stina, “The relevance of digital news: Types, themes and temporalities”.
- European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), 9<sup>th</sup> annual ECREA conference, 19-20 October, 2022, Aarhus.  
Johansson, Sofia, “The painful friendship: Social media influencers as friends and foes in young women’s lives”.  
Opermann, Signe, “Negotiating trust in the context of information and news consumption: young adults’ perceptions and practices in Estonia”.
- The fifth Nordic Challenge Conference, Nordic Neighbourhoods: Affinity and Distinction in the Baltic Sea Region and Beyond, 1 - 3 June, 2022, Södertörn University.  
Johansson, Sofia, Bengtsson, Stina & Opermann, Signe, “Constructing digital media trust in Estonia, Russia and Sweden”.