What feels like news? Young people's perceptions of news on Instagram

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Abstract

What do young people consider "news"? Now that news is dislocated from dedicated outlets of news organizations, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish from other cultural forms, including entertainment, advertising and misinformation. Especially on visual social media, where many different forms, topics and tones circulate, so-called "news feeds" offer blends of content that only partially match traditional journalistic conceptualizations. This paper advances current conceptual debates around news(-ness), by going beyond what is culturally accepted and cognitively *recognized* as news. We make an argument for the importance of capturing young people's affective and tacit under-standings of news, by analyzing what *feels* like news to them on Instagram. These judgments matter because what users understand as news or non-news also affects their assessments of trustworthiness and reliability. Drawing upon a three-wave study (2020-2022) employing in-depth interviews with and walk-throughs of the Instagram feeds of N = 111 Dutch smartphone users (aged 16-25), we find that while young people are strongly aware of societal norms around what news is or should be, these cognitive understandings do not necessarily align with what they *experience* as news(-like) within their everyday practices. Although some users do employ traditional journalistic con-ceptualizations of news, others negotiate or challenge such definitions through processes of compartmentalization, homogenization or reconceptualization, to mitigate tensions between what they cognitively recognize versus what they affectively perceive as news. Consequently, we argue that more inclusive epistemological approaches are needed to comprehend young people's shifting experiences of news and conceptualize news from an audience perspective.

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Introduction

A photo collection from the local fire brigade. A post from art collective *Now You See Me Moria*, showcasing refugees' circumstances in the notorious camp on Lesbos. An update from Dutch news satire website *De Speld*, giving a humorous spin on current affairs. When Jim (24M) scrolls through his Instagram feed, he encounters a cacophony of content that informs him about current affairs. However, which of these posts are news is a complicated question, for users and journalism scholarship alike. Acting as new intermediaries for news, social platforms like Instagram combine content from a range of sources and span many previously separated media genres. Moreover, news and related information genres are no longer tied to the context of specific platforms, devices, actors or titles, but travel across these boundaries. This shift towards media hybridity makes news and journalism increasingly difficult to discern from other types of information. It raises questions about how audiences define what constitutes news and what genre distinctions they use to make sense of and navigate the current abundance of media content (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020a). This paper explores how young people make sense of this growing hybridization of news. This age group is particularly relevant because people under the age of 25 are relatively heavy users of (visual) social media, where boundaries between different types of content tend to be more murky (Kalogeropoulos, 2019). Moreover, young people also interpret news values differently than older news consumers or journalism professionals. They have different ideas about the notion of objectivity (Marchi, 2012) and the role of journalists and news organizations (Eddy, 2022). Such variations in age groups' news use and attitudes towards news and journalism might lead to different understandings of what news is. We focus on Instagram because it is the most important social media platform for young adults globally (Newman et al., 2023). Moreover, its diversity in content (Al-Rawi et al., 2021) and unique characteristics of the platform (Anter and Kümpel, 2023) make it a compelling context to study young people's contemporary perceptions of news. Its reliance on visuals with limited text creates a hybrid space that makes it challenging to conceptualize news and assess what could be considered as such. First, posts come from a large variety of sources, whether they are journalists, friends and family, politicians or influencers and celebrities (Newman et al., 2023). Second, news values media producers employ for Instagram news content differ from those applied on traditional news platforms (Hendrickx, 2023; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019). Finally, Instagram's visual nature may make the manipulation of content and distribution of disinformation more difficult to discern (Mena et al., 2020).

Prior studies have primarily focused on users' cognitive assessments of what content they recognize as matching classic conceptualization of news as a cultural form (Craft et al., 2016; Klopfenstein Frei et al., 2022). In this context, Edgerly and Vraga (2020a) proposed the concept of 'news-ness' – the extent to which audiences perceive specific

media content as news – to do justice to the gradual nature of how people determine the degree to which they consider specific content news-like. This paper advances these debates by empirically and conceptually focusing on the so-far underexplored affective conceptualizations of news. We do so by drawing upon walk-through exercises, think-aloud protocols and in-depth interviews with Dutch Instagram users between the age of 16 and 25 to analyze what *feels* like news to young people on the platform.

While there has been considerable attention for what audiences consider to be valuable or worthwhile information (Swart et al., 2017a; Costera Meijer, 2022) and their norms, values and expectations of what news should be (Banjac and Hanusch, 2022; Coleman et al., 2009; Mast and Temmerman, 2021), relatively little is known about what feels like news to them in the practice of their everyday use. However, such affective experiences and the way these may diverge from existing cultural genre conventions, we argue, are crucial for understanding audiences' changing definitions of news. This paper aims to address this gap within the context of Instagram as a news platform for young users. In an environment where 'news' might be anything (Eddy, 2022), how do young news users distinguish between news and other types of information? Is the label of 'news' even still considered to be relevant at all, and if so, what does it mean?

Departing from the social media content that young people are actually using on their smartphones, we show how they use various ways to mitigate what we find is a tension between what they affectively experience as news within their everyday practices of social media use versus their knowledge about what is traditionally recognized as news as a cultural form. Consequently, we argue for more inclusive epistemological approaches for capturing this, to fully understand how to conceptualize news from an audience perspective.

News use on Instagram

Despite the increasing adoption of Instagram by newsrooms for disseminating news (Hendrickx, 2023; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019), researchers have only recently begun to explore users' news practices and preferences on the platform (see Anter and Kümpel, 2023 for an overview). One explanation is that Instagram is typically viewed as a space for entertainment, self-presentation and social connection (Alhabash and Ma, 2017; Boczkowski et al., 2018), rather than a medium for finding and sharing information (Anter and Kümpel, 2023). Yet, survey research shows that young people are increasingly employing Instagram for news (Newman et al., 2023; Pew Research Center, 2020), in particular for breaking, positive and human interest news stories (Al-Rawi et al., 2021; Goyanes and Demeter, 2022). The characteristics and affordances of Instagram shape young people's news behaviors and information flows on the platform (Anter and Kümpel, 2023; Thorson and Wells, 2017). First, young people tend to receive news mostly incidentally here, partially via social recommendations in their Stories but mainly through Instagram's heavy *algorithmic curation* of its timeline and Explore page. These feature a personalized array of posts by accounts that users do not (yet) follow, based on trending content and prior browsing behavior (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Goyanes and Demeter, 2022). Second, Instagram's *visual nature*, with limited space for captions and

hyperlinks, encourages the presentation and consumption of news in novel formats, such as memes, infographics or short explainer videos (Klopfenstein Frei et al., 2022; Vázquez-Herrero, 2019). Finally, Instagram makes no hierarchical distinctions between different sources or genres, but blends diverse information environments into one information stream (Swart et al., 2017b; Anter and Kümpel, 2023). This *non-exclusivity* makes it difficult for journalists to attract users' attention amongst the many non-traditional news providers that offer informative content on Instagram, such as influencers, celebrities, activists and politicians (Newman et al., 2023). Consequently, distinguishing between news and other genres of information in such a hybrid environment is complex.

Media hybridity and perceptions of news

Platforms such as Instagram challenge existing conventions about the meaning and the boundaries of news as a concept, raising questions about audiences' perceptions of 'news' (Mast and Temmerman, 2021). Even though users might not necessarily consider what they recognize as news or journalism to be democratically or socially valuable (Costera Meijer, 2022), audiences' definitions of news are important because they tell us something about people's normative assumptions and their expectations of particular types of information (Banjac and Hanusch, 2022).

   What is experienced as news merits particular attention. As Edgerly and Vraga (2020a) note, 'news' is not just a genre label that separates different types of content, but also has a unique position for its assumed importance for democracy. News is treated differently by users. For instance, it tends to be associated with high levels of trustworthiness and reliability (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020b; Woodstock, 2014). Studies also show that when content is classified as news, stronger political learning effects are likely to occur (Feldman, 2013) and that users become less likely to verify content (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020b). Moreover, news presents one of the major defining characteristics of journalism as an institution (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020a; Mast and Temmerman, 2021). The legitimacy of news organizations rests on their ability to bring authoritative, dependable and accurate information that supports citizens' sense-making and decision-making, and on presenting a common ground for public connection by communicating the issues of the day (Swart, 2018). Consequently, complementing and challenging the extensive body of news production-oriented research and news values (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017), journalism studies has slowly begun to address the question what constitutes news from an audience perspective (e.g. Edgerly and Vraga, 2020a, 2020b; Robertson, 2023). Reversely, persistent issues around disinformation have led scholars to examine what is *not* seen as news, including questions about how users conceptualize 'fake news' and how this informs their subsequent engagement with news media (Kyriakidou et al., 2022; Nielsen and Graves, 2017).

   These – mainly US-centric – explorations show three key findings. First, they emphasize that what is experienced as 'news' or 'non-news' is not a binary, but a continuum (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020a). Rather than drawing sharp boundaries, users tend to classify information as more or less news-like, similar to how people tend to assess content as

more or less true or fake, and more or less reliable (Swart and Broersma, 2022; Nielsen and Graves, 2017). Second, definitions of news may vary between individuals and contexts (Peters et al., 2022; Vraga and Edgerly, 2023). For instance, scholars have found differences in what younger and older demographics (Eddy, 2022; Wunderlich et al., 2022) and users of traditional versus digital platforms (Robertson, 2023) experience as news. Finally, contrary to journalistic perceptions, from an audience perspective conceptualizations of 'news' are not intrinsically tied to the institution of journalism (Örnebring and Hellekant Rowe, 2022; Robertson, 2023). Technological innovations (e.g., social media, messaging apps) and new hybrid media formats (e.g., infotainment, news satire) mean that the genre of news may now be produced by many actors. Norms around what such 'news' should be, however, do differ between contexts: for example, users hold content creators to different standards than traditional journalists (Banjac and Hanusch, 2022). Most existing studies on audiences' conceptualizations of news have been conducted in experimental settings, exposing participants to pre-defined conditions that differ in, for instance, source cues, tone or political orientation (e.g., Edgerly and Vraga, 2020b). This paper instead approximates young people's news use in situ, using their encounters with content on Instagram to explore audience perceptions of news from their everyday experiences.

Young people's affective experiences of 'news'

Despite the recent emotional turn in journalism studies (Wahl-Jorgensen and Pantti, 2021), young people's perceptions of news have been primarily discussed in cognitive terms. For example, studies around news literacy and news socialization have explored young people's ability to recognize journalism (Craft et al., 2016) and how social norms around news as a cultural form are being replicated across generations (Edgerly et al., 2018; York and Scholl, 2015). However, making judgments of what is and is not news (-like) is not just a cognitive, but also an affective sense-making process. Navigating a hybrid news environment requires negotiating between one's emotional responses to news and the feeling rules that govern the normatively-laden practice of news use and informed citizenship (Lehaff, 2022; Hochschild, 1979). Prior work has pointed to discrepancies between the social norms that young people internalize about what is generally seen as news and the content that they are actually encountering in their everyday media use (Costera Meijer, 2007; Peters et al., 2022). Such emotional and intuitive experiences of news and information are important, because when content *feels* like news, it is also treated as such (Lehaff, 2022), affecting users' decisions around what to trust (Swart and Broersma, 2022) and use. Consequently, our study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What do Dutch young people aged 16-25 consider "news" or "news-like" content on Instagram and why?

RQ2: How do they reconcile cultural norms of what is traditionally defined as "news" or "news-like" and their affective experiences of "news" or "news-like" content on Instagram?

Method

This study is part of a larger, longitudinal research project on news use on their smartphones of young people between 16 and 25 year old (*N*=215), conducted in three waves in March-April 2020, 2021 and 2022. It employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews containing think-aloud protocols and a walk-through exercise of the three apps on their phone which they considered most important for news. 111 interviewees said Instagram was among these apps and thus walked through their Instagram feed with us during the interview (*N* = 29 in 2020; *N* = 47 in 2021; *N* = 35 in 2022). Surprisingly, conceptualizations of news remained consistent for these 3 years: although the use of Instagram for news steadily increased over time, participants' perceptions of news(-ness) did not.

Participants were recruited using a combination of snowball and quota sampling, aiming for a varied sample in terms of age, gender and level of education. The sample of Instagram users includes 26 participants in the 16-17 years old age bracket; 28 participants of 18-19 years old; 22 participants of 20-21 years old; 20 participants of 22-23 years old; and 15 participants of 24-25 years old. Female participants (62, vs 47 males and two non-binary/not disclosed) and higher-educated respondents (63) were overrepresented (see Supplementary materials for an overview of participants' demographics). Because of anti-COVID 19 measurements, part of the interviews in 2020 and 2021 was conducted via Skype; all other interviews were done face-to-face. Interviews lasted on average 42 min. Expectations what news should be like are so widespread in society that even those who consume very little news or are critical and distrustful of news media tend to be aware of classic journalistic values (Costera Meijer, 2022; Schwarzenegger, 2023; Woodstock, 2014). The cultural pervasiveness of such values means that directly posing the question how users would define news runs the risk of resulting in socially desirable answers that reproduce such profession-driven discourse, conveying what users *recognize* rather than what they *experience* as news (cf. Klopfenstein Frei et al., 2022). This study therefore starts from the actual content that young people use by employing the walk-through method (Light et al., 2018) to uncover conceptualizations of news. After initial day-in-the-life questions to map interviewees' everyday habits of smartphone use, we asked participants to scroll through their Instagram as they normally would and to explain what they did and why. During the walk-through, the interviewer probed about a number of topics based on the content shown, including participants' news practices, news preferences, motivations for using particular news, the deliberate or incidental nature of such usage, and to what extent they experienced which information as news. Each interview ended with questions about potential changes in their smartphone news use and its social context. The interviews were conducted by MA Journalism students of the University of Groningen, who received extensive training in doing qualitative in-depth interviews and working with think-aloud protocols and walk-through exercises. Each conducted supervised and unsupervised pilot interviews before collecting the research data. In 2020, students were involved in developing the interview guide for the research project. Because these students were part of the target demographic, their feedback ensured that the questionnaire aligned with young people's practices and experiences of smartphone use, strengthening the validity of the research. The interview protocol was then re-used in the

following 2 years, with minor adjustments to account for the outbreak of the COVID pandemic. Prior to the study, all interviewees signed a consent form that informed them about the purpose of the research and guaranteed their confidentiality and secure storage of their data, that was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Groningen (approval no. 93478773). For the 16 and 17 year old participants, parents were also asked for permission and signed on their children's behalf. All interviews were audio recorded, fully transcribed and uploaded in Atlas.ti for inductive thematic analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Starting with a round of open coding, transcripts were coded incident-by-incident by the interviewers using descriptive indicators. These indicators included codes relating to platforms, practices, media titles, spatial, temporal and social contexts, experiences, and so forth. For the second stage of focused coding, based on discussions about the codes with the students, the authors developed a number of categories that identified patterns or similarities between these indicators. For this study, all data labelled with the categories 'definitions of news' and 'Instagram' were re-analyzed in a third round of coding (see Supplementary materials for a discussion of our process for data analysis). This iterative process resulted in four themes that capture young people's responses to the hybridization of 'news': traditionalism, compartmentalization, homogenization and reconceptualization.

Results

Our interview data show how, even for young people who consumed little news from legacy media, traditional journalism remains recognizable as a cultural form (Broersma, 2019; Swart et al., 2017b). Either based on personal experience or socialized by parents, teachers or peers, interviewees were aware of what is traditionally understood as news and its characteristics (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017). However, corresponding to previous findings (Peters et al., 2022), discrepancies exists between such knowledge and young people's experiences on social media. What is labelled as news or journalism does not always *feel* as such, and reversely, what is emotionally *experienced* as news not necessarily matches traditional genre distinctions. Interviewees observed how some of the affordances that Instagram offers are at odds with classic norms about news. This caused confusion about whether Instagram could be considered a 'news' platform. Rick[1] (24M), for example, noted how traditional news values of timeliness and informativeness are challenged by the lack of chronological order in Instagram's algorithmically curated timeline and its emphasis on visual content:

> "On Insta, it [news] is always so concise. Then it won't be of much use to you. Twitter still has the advantage that it's up-to-date. But at the same time, on Instagram, it's either already old, or it's not substantive enough. So I would not call them [Instagram] a news app, or even [relevant] for my news intake."

While the formats afforded by Instagram's Stories and timeline may link up well to young people's preference for entertaining and informal content (Eddy, 2022), they were considered less suitable for news. Posts that by default require images or videos with

captions that are automatically truncated at 125 characters lead, according to Jamilla (17F), to "shorter texts with a sort of slogan or opinion, and not necessarily the context of the story. Then you need to go to another website to really know what it's about". For many respondents Instagram functioned as a gateway to other platforms to further explore news they came across.

Respondents also questioned the reliability of news on Instagram which they contrasted with gatekeeping processes at legacy media. For example Frank (25M) argued that this allows "Instagram accounts with news-things" to "post anything there, so that everyone thinks that it's news". While such assessments decreased trust and hindered satisfactory news experiences, this did not lower young people's news use on Instagram. For example, while Frank said to strongly doubt the accuracy of news on Instagram, he also admitted that when he came across "a big headline that is news, I often do check it, although I never know whether that is real or not". Young people thus realized that information on Instagram and the characteristics of the platform did not always align with what they had been taught to recognize as news, journalism or news media. However, more or less news-like content was still part of their everyday Instagram experiences, providing an entry point for reflections about what does and does not feel as news. While some of these align with traditional distinctions between news and what-is-not-news, confirming research in the US (Robertson, 2023), we found three other ways through which young people make sense of the hybridization of news and other genres.

Traditionalism

The first response of 'traditionalism' applies to news users who outright dismissed their experiences of Instagram content as news, labelling any information on the platform as 'not news'. Although some of them did note that some information on Instagram might overlap with news produced by legacy media in terms of topics being addressed, they considered this as "not real news" (Amanda, 25F). For them, the concept of news was strongly tied to traditional news brands and platforms. For example, Femke (20F) argued that "news is just everything that you also see on television, NOS [*Dutch public broadcaster*], and so forth" and Kim (24F) said she understood as news "what's in the evening news broadcast and what's in the newspaper". Some participants, such as Amanda (25F), even used the term "the news" to refer to particular media, such as TV news bulletins, showing a very narrow conceptualization that leaves little room for new or alternative journalistic actors. Interestingly, these traditionalists did not necessarily use such traditional forms of journalism themselves, confirming earlier findings (Edgerly, 2017). This group of respondents also emphasized classic journalistic values, such as objectivity, neutrality and factuality. Participants like Scott (24M) and Sophie (17F) considered public relevance of information as a requirement for information to be news. News, they argued, by definition needs to have considerable impact, either in terms of intensity or the number of citizens that it relates to. Myrthe (16F) for this reason disqualified her Instagram Stories as news: "Maybe it's news to those who find it interesting, but I think news is something that has a larger influence, that let's say is important for all of The Netherlands [...] or regionally."

Finally, echoing recent studies of news avoiders (De Bruin et al., 2021), negativity was perceived as a distinctive characteristic of news. For Myrthe (16F), Instagram was "more for fun […] If I really want something about news, I certainly won't go to Instagram or Facebook". Gijs (19M) explained how he did not consider the positive news accounts he followed as news, because "if you compare it with things that I do see as news, like the [COVID-19] press conference or what is happening in American politics or with Meghan and Harry, those things, then this is more a summary of fun stories". While Gijs recognized the page had news-like characteristics in terms of form and style, he argued it could be more accurately characterized as "positivity, *presented* as a kind of news". Prior audience-centric work on Dutch people's news values has found that professionality serves as an important category that distinguishes journalism, which encompasses several underlying norms and values including fair reporting and verifying information (Costera Meijer et al., 2022). We indeed find that the recognizability of traditional journalistic practices act as distinctive characteristics of 'news'. Daantje (24F) referred to a recent story about firefighters by public broadcaster NOS to explain how by increasing transparency, such as reporting edits to online news stories due to changes during events or rectifying mistakes in reporting, media can strengthen perceptions of news-ness:

> "At some point, they had shared a video of a forest fire. That appeared to probably not be the same [correct] image and then they mentioned that in the article. That made me think: you do check whether it's true, rather than just putting it in an article and then pretending it is."

Participants here also mentioned practices such as referring to sources the journalist had used or explaining how research for a story had been conducted. Finally, interviewees associated uncovering new information and providing new insights on news topics as a typical journalistic practice that strengthened perceptions of news-ness on the medium level. As Lucas (21M) explained: "I think especially for NRC [Dutch quality newspaper], they've already done research, and then it makes me think: okay, I think this is really news. This puts a case in a new light".

Compartmentalization

A second group of interviewees managed the discrepancies between their cognitive understandings of the genre of news and their affective experiences by compartmentalizing, a tactic that has also been found in Scandinavian research (Lehaff, 2022; Sveningsson, 2015). Compartmentalization refers to users creating different categories of information that are more or less news-like. Despite the lack of vocabulary to describe such differences (in particular within the Dutch language, that knows few synonyms for the word 'news') (Swart et al., 2017a), interviewees attempted to make – sometimes binary, sometimes more gradual – distinctions between 'what used to be news' and 'what some might count as news'. They consequently used terms such as "news-news" (Richard, 25M), "current news" (David, 20M) or "pressing news" (Chris, 23M) to describe traditional journalistic content, as opposed to other types of information that were also labeled as news yet experienced differently. As Chris explained: "I think there is a division

between something that's really important and something that's also news, with scare quotes, but not essential that you know it's going on".

Although this group thus set broader boundaries for news than legacy media content, participants did not define all content that they encountered on Instagram as news. David (20M), for example, distinguished between updates within his social network and news from journalistic sources. He classified both as forms of news, but drew the line at political advertising:

> "You have *social* news of course, that's more about what people are going to do or what is happening in your circle of friends and family. And you've got *current* news that you'll look up via NOS and so forth. And then, via Instagram etcetera, you can come across political campaigns, that is current too, but that's more an advertisement then, being pushed in view."

For information to be defined as news, according to this group, requires a certain level of publicness and relevance. Moreover, although conceptualizations of news and judgments of reliability do not necessarily align (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020a), users did see them as linked. Ella (23F), for instance, defined the posts of online local news platform Sikkom as "news, but not real news […] it's kind of *debatable* news".

Although Ella's doubts about the title's reliability and her experience that its content felt "very subjective" made her perceive it as having a lower level of news-ness, unlike the traditionalist participants, she still described it as 'news'. This practice helps young people to decrease dissonance between the classic social discourse around news that is part of their news media knowledge and their everyday experiences. Thus, labelling various types of information as 'news' yet at the same time making distinctions in level of news-ness according to values of trustworthiness, urgency and relevance, allows these users to maintain their media habits (see also Lehaff, 2022), even when those do not conform to traditional societal norms around what news should be.

Homogenization

A third group of interviewees completely let go of former boundaries between genres. Strongly basing their definitions of news on their affective experiences of content, these participants essentially discarded all boundary markers that the previous two groups employed, except the association of news with novelty. This leads to an understanding of a media environment in which, in principle, any recent information could be news:

> "News can be anything, actually. News is not just what is going on nationally, but also on the local level. […] When the neighbor has the new cat, actually, I think that's news too. We do have a bit too much news sometimes, but I do think things are news quite quickly. If something is new, then it's news already." (Bert, 23M)

In contrast to the 'traditionalists', these participants argue that personal updates of friends and family simply felt like news for making them aware of new information.

This group also broadened definitions of news to content produced by content creators. Ilya (17, non-binary) for instance gave the example of Instagram account @cestmocro, which among other topics covered news about the pandemic in a quickly digestible format: "I find that super chill. […] He always makes a full summary of these [government] press conferences, so you won't have to spend an hour in front of your TV to listen to it, but can just read it here later". Ilya noted that posts were "funny" and "also had stupid things", showing understanding of the misalignment of such content with traditional qualifiers of news. However, being the first to know about information before their parents ("that they say: huh, how do you know that?") strengthened their perception that @cestmocro could be classified as news. In addition to influencer's original content, some interviewees even conflated "news" with sponsored posts and native advertising, such as Sophie (20F):

> "News can also be brought by influencers. That's news too, when they test new things from the supermarket or buy new clothes. At some point, Vinted was a complete hype, I believe, that was news to me too. That I thought, what's this? But news is also what the NOS etcetera are writing."

Several interviewees, such as Lisa (18F) and Michael (19M), also included memes in their conceptualizations of news, a form of infotainment that according to them also provided timely information and "many updates about the news" (Lisa, 18F). Lastly, content on Instagram can blur the boundaries between news and issue advocacy. Definitions of news, for this group, also covered instances of everyday political talk. For Rashid (19M), such content was news because it shows what "is resonating with people. You also saw that with Ukraine. I find that interesting to see. That way you can feel what's concerning people". Jamilla (17F) explained how Instagram's Stories function was frequently used to talk about pubic issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of schools. "Sometimes on Instagram, I see complete political debates going around. That many people are posting the same messages and are making screenshots of them". Sandra (19F) reflected that "if you're on Instagram, for example, unintentionally, you do learn about things, such as with Black Lives Matter in America. There was such a fuss then, that you just learn about it, despite that you're not following any news sites or so at all". Talk on Instagram about public issues here may also lead to the consumption of news on other platforms, for instance by searching via search engines. As Mimi (22F) explains: "I saw that via the hashtag #StopAsianHate, with massive attention on Instagram and such. I'm very curious then what it's about. Or #PrayForAtlanta, then you start googling right away."

Reconceptualization

A final group of interviewees dealt with the hybridization of media genres on Instagram by reconceptualizing the notion of news. The 'traditionalists' and 'compartmentalists' typically held on close to classic news values such as impartiality, independence and objectivity in their conceptualizations of news, and interpreted them in similar manners as

in professional journalistic discourse. In contrast, young people who reconceptualized news did also not fully dismiss classic news values, but typically understood them in a different way or combined them with other, more audience-centric values to make distinctions between more and less news-like content. For example, while relevance has been identified as a criterion for news selection by journalists for many decades (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017), this is generally linked to public relevance (a news event perceived to be appealing to a broad audience or to be of high magnitude). These participants, in contrast, framed the relevance that set news apart for them in much more individual and utilitarian terms (what's in it for me?). As Arjen (25M) elaborated:

> "When a seal has died in Pieterburen [*seal shelter*], I find that really sad, but I don't think it's news. Or when a child has fallen into a well in Morocco, it's borderline. […] Because it's not of much use to me. [News] is more about […] what might affect me."

As a consequence, this group emphasized the subjectivity of defining what is news, making distinctions between issues that were news to them and those that "might really be news for some people" (Nathalie, 19F). A similar reasoning took place for the journalistic value of proximity. Rather than closeness in a geographical sense (cf. Shoemaker et al., 2007), participants argued that news needed to "be close emotionally" (Rosa, 18F). Instead of classifying news based on recency, news was perceived as information that focuses on the long-lasting impact of a development. As Rob (22M) mentioned: "If it's still important in a month, it's really news, in my perception." Thus, not only did users value news that explains the context of events and is less fleeting (Swart, 2018), they also saw such content as ranking higher in news-ness. Lars (17M) explained:

> "If there's a government that people have been fighting against for a long time that's suddenly overthrown, you'd hear it in the mainstream news. But I think the development in between, and how a conflict comes about, and who is important in that, I certainly find that news, too."

Lastly, young people in this cluster understood the journalistic norm of objectivity in a different way. While some participants referred to objectivity when discussing what was and was not news, they did not link this news marker to factual, neutral or detached reporting or the absence of opinion. Rather, for interviewees like Alex (20M), news should be objective because news should leave room for users' agency in relation to public issues: "that you can decide yourself what you'll do with it. That you take it in, and then make a decision yourself."

While objectivity was appreciated for this reason, contrary to participants in the first cluster, interviewees did not consider subjectivity problematic (Marchi, 2012; Sveningsson, 2015). Rather, subjectivity was viewed as a given (Broersma, 2019; Costera Meijer et al., 2022). As Denise (25F) explained: "News is always collected by journalists. These are also informed well. But those are just humans too. They see everything from their point-of-view". Moreover, some participants also considered such subjectivity a helpful trait of news reporting. It can help young people to gain a more complete understanding of issues by showing what is at stake (Marchi, 2012). For Rick (24M), this is

the main attraction of Instagram as a news source and exemplary of how social media can aid opinion formation: "I think you're using Instagram to get an update of not just more objective opinions, but also what *people* are uploading."

Conclusion

Our study of young people's conceptualizations of news on Instagram provides a more nuanced understanding of how they decide what is news in a hybrid media environment. We have identified four user responses to the increasingly blurry boundaries of news as a cultural form: reverting to traditional boundaries around news (traditionalism), distinguishing between different types of news (compartmentalization), labelling all novel information as news (homogenization), or re-interpreting classic news values and adjusting definitions of news (re-conceptualization). These processes lead to a diverse range of conceptualizations of what news on Instagram is, featuring various markers to make such genre distinctions. At the same time, our data also show clashes between what users know is generally branded as news or perceived as news by others, and what feels like news to them within their everyday news practices. This highlights the complexity of assessing what counts as 'news' in today's media landscape, for users, journalists and scholars alike. Echoing Swiss findings (Klopfenstein Frei et al., 2022), our data show how even our youngest participants had been socialized with rather traditional definitions of news, referring to journalistic news values such as objectivity, neutrality, timeliness and factuality (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017) and related notions of reliability, professionality and transparency. However, their everyday experiences of social media use, that help build news knowledge in more tacit manners, were giving young people a quite different perspective on what constitutes 'news'. Depending on the content they encounter on Instagram, categorizations may, for example, include everyday political talk, influencer content and advertorials, political campaigns, or personal updates from friends and family. While such content is cognitively recognized as different from pervasive social norms about what should be news, affectively, it may *feel* as news or news-like and is also treated as such when it is affectively experienced as relevant, informative or important. We argue that these tacit and emotional considerations are at least as important for users as their reasoned, cognitive arguments. Gaining more insight into how young people distinguish news from other media genres and how they define news, both rationally and more intuitively, is important because it is more than a semantic issue. As Edgerly and Vraga (2020b) point out, conceptualizations of news produce certain outcomes in terms of news use, such as which content to pay attention to, what news to believe and which stories to verify. Even though young people might not always trust the news they use and vice versa (Swart and Broersma, 2022), our data confirm how conceptualizations of news are closely linked to judgments about the perceived accuracy and reliability of information. Genre labels matter to young people not so much for deciding what is news, but especially for filtering out what is not (Nielsen and Graves, 2017). Indicators of news-ness here provide anchor points when looking for veracious information. This dependency opens up opportunities for journalists to strategically employ known markers of news-ness to help audiences distinguish and find their content, but might also be used by producers of

disinformation to evoke more favorable responses to their content (Kyriakidou et al., 2022), or by politicians to disqualify information as 'fake' or non-news (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020a). Moreover, as we have argued elsewhere (Swart et al., 2022), audiences' shifting perceptions of news also challenge journalism scholars' object of study. Although of course, news and journalism are no agreed-upon concepts among journalists either and such notions have been contested by interlopers (Eldridge, 2019), the varied conceptualizations of news by audiences in response to a changed media environment make the focus of journalism research even more blurry. Although calls for non-journalistic and non-news centric approaches are abundant (e.g. Swart et al., 2022; Moe and Ytre-Arne, 2022), such focal shifts also raise many practical questions about the points of departure, research methods, and objectives of such explorations. We argue that more inclusive epistemological approaches are needed to move conceptual debates around what constitutes news from an audience perspective forward. Future research could do so in four ways. First, existing work tends to highlight either users' cognitive (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020b) or affective (Lehaff, 2022) news experiences. How these dimensions interrelate within the practice of users' everyday news use, however, still remains underexplored. Second, while our findings pertain to news use on Instagram via the smartphone, prior work has shown that platform context affects people's conceptualizations of news (Edgerly and Vraga, 2023). Future research could explore how the material and sensory aspects of different news environments, including devices, play a role in users' perceptions of news. Third, our results need to be interpreted within the context of Dutch, young and mostly heavy (>2 h per day) smartphone users. Exploring definitions of news of individuals beyond the relatively well-researched group of young people in the Global North, including structurally underexplored audiences (Swart et al., 2022), may find very different conceptualizations (Robertson, 2023). Finally, our findings show the need for novel methods that allow researchers to capture people's affective news experiences. Although our approach of walking through participants' Instagram feeds as prompts, rather than asking about definitions of news directly, made it easier for interviewees to reflect on perceptions of news, think-aloud protocols and interviews still required them to verbalize such assessments. Further studies could experiment with, for instance, creative projective methods such as drawing exercises or screenshot diaries that have been used in other types of audience research to uncover tacit knowledge, which might be useful alternative approaches to overcome such limitations.

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Note

1. To protect their privacy, participants are quoted using pseudonyms.

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