**The interaction of content, context, and user practices in everyday experiences with news**

**Abstract**

This paper explores how the interaction between content, context and user practices matters for how people experience news in everyday life. Following the audience turn in journalism, much attention has been paid to understanding people's news use, both within journalism studies and by news professionals. A general tendency has been to focus individually on how journalistic content is received and made sense of, what user practices people rely on and what they imply, or study the contexts in which news is consumed. Rather than approaching these dimensions as separate explanations, this paper demonstrates the interrelation of content, context, and user practices in everyday life, highlighting context as a key factor in understanding people's experiences with news. Methodologically, the study demonstrates how a combination of recurring interviews, media diaries, and video ethnography with Norwegian news users yields a deeper understanding of experiences with news. Conceptually, the paper bridges theories of content, context, and user practices, providing a structure of XXX, empirically grounded in everyday experiences with news.

**Keywords:** News use; news consumption; audience studies; news content; situatedness; user practice; media experience

**Introduction**

*My boyfriend likes to solve crossword puzzles in A-magasinet [weekend print magazine in national Norwegian newspaper] and I enjoy reading it. I read news at other times too, it’s just that I don’t spend that much time on it, but then [during weekends] you often have more time to sit down with it, maybe relax and read a bit, for instance if you’ve been out skiing in the mountains and then you come back to the cabin, sit down with the newspaper and look through it. […] I love longreads about stuff that… Well, it really doesn’t have to be happy stories either, but stories that go in-depth. I think that’s nice. And especially during the weekends. A couple of weekends back I remember reading about human trafficking in A-magasinet and I thought that was really interesting.*

– Therese (30)

Following the audience turn in journalism research, much attention has been paid to understanding the complexities of people’s news use. Also from an industrial perspective, challenges of declining revenues have forced news organizations to become more audience responsive to understand why people (do not) invest time, money and attention in news, and what these practices mean from an audience perspective. Consequently, scholars have set out to examine how and why people engage with news and different types of content (e.g.,Bengtsson, 2023; Goyanes, 2014, 2015; Goyanes et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2021; Schrøder, 2015; Toff & Nielsen, 2022), what their user practices may imply (e.g., Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2021), or study how the situatedness of particular contexts matters for news and media consumption (e.g., Broersma & Swart, 2022; Peters, 2012; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021).

Yet, these valuable contributions often tend to focus separately on individual platforms or news formats (Boczkowski et al., 2020; Fletcher & Kleis Nielsen, 2018; Fortunati et al., 2015), particular user practices or habits (Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2018, 2019, 2020; Searles & Feezell, 2023), or the context or situatedness surrounding people’s news use (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012; Peters, 2012, 2015). We know less about how the different dimensions of content, context and user practices interact in the setting of everyday life. Thus, a critical next step in advancing a deeper understanding of people’s news use lies in the integration of these diverse perspectives through a holistic approach to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics shaping individuals’ experiences with news.

On this note, the informant quote above illustrates how Therese’s experience with the newspaper cannot be solely explained by the journalistic content or the materiality of the newspaper itself. It is also the context, her expectations, and associations with the particular setting that give her experience meaning: The situatedness of being in her cabin in the mountains, having time off, enjoying a moment to herself, learning something new and getting in-depth insights about other parts of the world. Moreover, the materiality of the newspaper invites a certain interaction with the news, which also entails an experience of togetherness as a ritualistic habit with her boyfriend, where he solves crossword puzzle while she reads feature stories.

In her media diary, Therese further described how she during a Saturday breakfast had read about a priest who was molested in his childhood and later had become a drug addict and now had turned his life around and helped others. Despite reading about such a serious topic, Therese wrote that she enjoyed reading this piece because it said something about «the bigger picture», summing up how she still experienced this moment as «cozy». In that sense, reading the print newspaper in the weekends was not only meaningful in terms of the format, the journalistic content, or the context surrounding it – it was the combination of all these dimensions that made this weekly routine valuable and meaningful to her.

This article seeks to bridge dimensions of news content, user practices, and contexts in which people interact with news by asking: *How does the interaction between content, context and news user practices matter for media experiences in everyday life?* Drawing on a three-step data collection, collecting multiple data points grounded in people’s media experiences (N=14X2), the study demonstrates the interrelations and ambivalences of content, contexts, and user practices in everyday life. The paper relativizes assumptions found within newsrooms and journalism studies about what roles news can serve in terms of 1) content (e.g., when hard and soft news are being used and why), 2) contexts (how situatedness plays a role in news use), and 3) user practices (e.g., assumed preferences of spending less time on news through easily available formats). As such, the study is addressing a fundamental challenge within journalism studies and the industry, where the dominating tendency is to approach content, contexts, or practices separately.

This paper makes several contributions to the fields of journalism and audience studies. Empirically, the study demonstrates the significance of linking multiple dimensions of news use to capture the multidimensionality of people’s media experiences. Methodologically, the article illustrates how a data collection combining different data points grounded in people’s everyday life can yield deeper understanding of experiences with news. Conceptually, the paper bridges theories of content, context, and user practices and provides a *structure of XXX (not sure it will result in a structure or model at this point, see comments below)*

**Literature review:**

(will be fleshed out, these are mostly ideas and keywords I have included to give an idea of the structure)

Over the past decades, the rise of new media platforms and digital devices have dramatically changed the ways in which people consume and engage with news. Making sense of changing news use has thus become crucial for the survival of journalism. As people tend to be more reluctant to pay for journalistic content (Newman et al, 2023; Borchgrevink-Brækhus & Moe, 2023; Goyanes et al., 2020; Olsen & Solvoll, 2018), rely on new formats, platforms or incidental exposure for information (De ZúñIga et al., 2020, REF), and spend less time on news despite its increased accessibility (Molyneux, 2018; Schiro, 2022), concerns have also been raised for future public engagement with fears of a less informed citizenry (e.g., Benson, 2019). [Flesh out]

On this basis, researchers have set out to understand how and why people engage with news. Findings can be distilled to how content, user practices and contextual aspects of space and time matters for news use.

**How content matters**

* Analysis of studies focusing on capturing news relevance, newsworthiness, newsness and payment in relation to content as explanations of news use – and avoidance (Bengtsson, 2023, Schrøder, 2015; Peters et al, 2021, Edgerly & Vraga; Goyanes 2015; 2019; Toff & Nielsen, 2022 etc.)
* From an experiential perspective: Studies focusing on valuable journalism (Costera Meijer, 2022) and how journalistic content is experienced by the audience: Not necessarily just about the content itself, but how journalism counts as important and worthwhile in people’s lifeworlds.
* Content, materiality and interaction: How people engage with different types of content also seems to be linked to the materiality of the news, which can invite certain types of interaction 🡪 transition to how user practices matter.

**How user practices matter**

Whereas research focusing on journalistic content often takes a media-centric approach, the audience turn in journalism has led other scholars to put user practices to the center of attention to gain ethnographical insights into how and why people engage with news. As user practices premises action-based interaction with news, much attention has been drawn to what people do or do not do with news.

* **How different types of content invite/ motivate different user practices and different levels of engagement with news:** E.g., different types of content and formats such aslong-reads versus quick updates, checking the news on your phone or sitting down in front of the tv results in different user practices – scanning, checking, snacking, reading, understanding, learning etc. (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2021; Searles & Feezell) 2023; Borchgrevink-Brækhus, forthcoming).
* **Materiality and user practices:** How the materiality of the news adds to the experiential dimension of news use (e.g. holding a physical newspaper in your hands vs. scrolling on your phone). E.g., Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2021; Fortunati et al., 2015; Boczkowski et al., 2019.
* **How user practices are related to the everyday life context and ritualistic dimensions:** Boczkowski et al., 2019, Berelson, 1945; de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, Peters, 2012; 2015). 🡪 (worthwhileness: dimensions of price, technological appeal, situated fit)

***How context matters: Space and time***

* Context should here be understood as an umbrella term for space and time.
* **Time:** Two levels: micro and macro level: The macro levels typically refers to big societal events (covid, crisis situations, elections: Broersma & Swart, 2022; Peters, 2012; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021) which invites a certain type of interaction or normative and social expectations to follow the news, (e.g., Couldry et al.2010; Schudson, 2008; Schrøder 2019; Hartley & Pedersen 2019). The micro level refers to a more personal and proximate level, such as having more time during the weekends to sit down with news, or how the busy everyday life allows for different user practices and interactions (e.g., Peters, 2015; Borchgrevink-Brækhus, forthcoming).
* **Space:** Two levels: private and public space and how different spaces invite different types of interactions with news 🡪 also linked to the materiality of the news (Fortunati et al., 2015).

Summing up, much of the existing literature describes valuable contributions on the fragmented multilayeredness of everyday news experiences. However, fewer studies seem to bridge the interaction of the three dimensions of content, context, and user practices.

[Flesh out my contribution and the aim of the paper].

**Methods**

Responding to the challenges discussed above, the study employs a methodological approach suited to capture complex experiences of everyday news use. [Flesh out the concept of media experience as a methodological approach]. The research question is: *How do the interrelation between content, context and news user practices matter for how people use news in everyday life?* To answer this question, I draw on a multifaceted three-step data collection, combining different data points grounded in people’s everyday life, including recurring interviews, video ethnography and media diaries.

A total of 14 informants were recruited. To identify potential characteristics or coherences across different generations and user practices, the sample included informants aged 30-65 and consisted of six women and eight men. All informants were employed, of which eleven had higher education and three had vocational education.

Despite a relatively small sample, data saturation was considered to be reached within the first 12 interviews. Moreover, the multi-layered design of the study produced vast amounts of data, including 94 diary entries and 455 pages of interview transcriptions. As participation required quite a commitment from informants, some were expected to withdraw between interviews. Yet, apart from a couple of female informants who withdrew during the recruitment phase, all 14 informants completed all three steps of the data collection. After the final interview, informants were compensated with €40 gift cards. Informants were recruited through snowballing, starting from the network of the interviewer. They had to meet the criteria of using digital news on a weekly basis and live in or near urban areas on the West coast of Norway due to the logistics of the data collection.

**Figure 1**: Outline of the three sequences in the data collection.

Figure 1 outlines the research design. Data were collected during the spring of 2023. The first interview round focused on mapping news habits and aspects of when and how informants engaged in news, both offline and online, and how these practices potentially related to meaningful experiences with news in everyday life. During the interviews, informants were also filmed while sitting alone using their preferred news sites on their own devices (video ethnography, cf. Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2020) to gain detailed insights into *how* they engaged with news, in addition to temporal aspects and strategies for accessing information. Immediately afterward, the videos were watched and made sense with each participant, enabling the interviewer to reflect on the gathered data together with the informants. The interviews lasted between 50-95 minutes. Most interviews took place in the informants’ homes or other places of their preference to observe informants’ practices in their "natural settings" (Gentikow, 2005, p. 42), where they usually would occur.

In between interviews, informants were encouraged to fill out media diaries every other day for two weeks to reflect on their news use, as well as spatiotemporal aspects of when and where they typically read news. Diaries have previously proved to provide informants with more freedom of expression as they are anchored in everyday encounters with news (Kaun, 2010), compared to interview situations that might increase chances of recall bias (Bolger et al., 2003). Informants received a total of eight links to a digital diary adaptable to smartphones (SurveyXact). Finally, all informants were interviewed again based on their entries in the diaries (and data donations). Questions were also designed to revisit topics and findings from the first interview.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized together with the media diaries. Informed consent was obtained from all informants, and the study was registered with the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT). The transcribed interviews and diary notes were analyzed thematically through an inductive approach, according to how they navigated when reading news online and experiences of why they engaged in quick user practices. After labeling the data, similar labels were grouped into categories, and subcategories were further refined (Thomas, 2006).

(Context of Norway – if space and relevant)

* Represents a mature media market in which digital media and newspapers hold strong market positions.
* Historically a quite unique customer base, characterized by stable and high news consumption.
* Despite an overall high interest and news consumption, there is comparable value in studying the Norwegian context: the focus of the study moves beyond technical, economical, and cultural conditions, and puts experiences in the center of attention. As such, the results may be transferable across other cultures and countries.

**Analysis**

By exploring the multidimensionality of everyday news use, particularly four experiences appeared to matter for how informants engaged and interacted with news. First, news could serve a central role for providing *reassurance and control*. Second, the experience of *connection* appeared crucial for whether and how informants interacted with news. Third, informants described how news use could be experienced as a *negative constant creating stress.* Fourth, connecting to the world through news could also mean to disconnect oneself from one’s immediate surroundings, wherenews could serve a role of *diversion or relaxation* in everyday life. As the following analysis now will demonstrate, these experiences were not grounded in the content, context, or the user practices alone, but resulted from the holistic experiential combination/ambivalence of all three dimensions.

***Four key experiences: Reassurance, connection, relaxation, and stress***

*(Further explanation of the four key experiences guiding the interaction of content, context, and user practices will be fleshed out):*

* **Reassurance and control**: This experience appears in two different modes: 1) A general, casual everyday setting, where the purpose is to get an overview of what is happening or simply make sure “nothing has happened”, or 2) in relation to specific, societal or macro contexts with higher levels of information needs (e.g., ) wars, pandemic, threatening situations. Often motivated/ driven by internal feelings or needs to be reassured.
* **Connection:** The way informants talked about news in relation to connection was often motivated as a social phenomenon. For informants who regularly discussed news with friends, family or colleagues, news functioned as a social tool, which enabled them to participate and feel included (also politically). As such, news use resulting from an experience of connection was very much motivated and driven by others/ external factors.
* **News as relaxation** **and diversion.** Even ritualistic habits such as going through the news when informants have but their kids to bed at night can be experienced as “me-time”, having a moment to themselves, and disconnecting from their immediate surroundings. This also includes practices such as scrolling, scanning, snacking, and checking cycles, which also entails hard and breaking news 🡪 As such, even “time *on*” news, where they are connecting to the world and society through news could also be experienced as “time *off*”, disconnecting and getting their mind off their immediate surroundings and chores. Often driven by internal feelings or needs for relaxation or diversion (“I deserve a break”).
* **News as a negative constant, creating** **stress:** Refers to negative experiences with news, often leading people to limit or avoid news from time to time or shield themselves from certain types of content. Should be seen in relation to the constant news stream and availability that digital platforms and devices provide. Often described in relation to the format in which the news is consumed and in periods of massive media coverage of certain topics. As such, the experience results from by both internal and external factors.

***The interaction of content, context and user practice in everyday life***

*(This section will entail an analysis and discussion of how the three dimensions (content, context, user practices) relate in terms of the four different experiences of news use with emphasis on the ambivalences between the different dimensions and how they not necessarily “pull in the same direction”).*

* **Reassurance and control** – Regarding the general, everyday mode, content was not necessarily so important, but the context and the user practices seemed to matter more to provide this feeling 🡪 it is more about providing an overview of what is happening, and getting an update through “checking”, rather than reading about particular topics that provides this experience. Regarding specific societal or macro contexts, however, (pandemic, war, elections, accidents, terror) the content becomes crucial to feel reassured and in control.
* **Connection** – journalistic content and social context matters to a great extent; however, user practices are more instrumental in relation to this experience. It does not necessarily matter *how* you get to know it (user practices), the important thing is *to know it* (knowledge and content awareness) to be able to participate and feel included.
* **News as relaxation** – For this experience, context and user practices (e.g., format, time and space) are very important, while content does not seem to matter (hard vs. soft news less important, e.g., Therese’s example from the introduction where she describes an experience of relaxation while reading about human trafficking and abuse). 🡪 As such, this finding challenge previous assumptions about primarily soft news functioning as relaxation.
* **News as a negative constant, creating stress** – content (particularly breaking news) and practices (often time related, quick user practices) are important factors that create stress, while the impact of the context/situatedness appears to vary depending on time and space.

*Below, I have suggested two models to illustrate the interaction of content, context, and user practices based on the four experiences with news. I’m unsure if such a table/ model appears too “strict." I am interested in comments on whether they make sense and, if so, which one seems most intuitive. Another option can be to illustrate it differently or describe the interaction through text and quotes alone and leave out the model altogether. Any feedback is helpful!*

Suggestion 1:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Content** | **Context**  | **Practices** |
| **Experiences with news** | **Reassurance and control**(“me-driven”) | Regarding *general* topics and *staying on top of things*: content less important.Regarding *specific* contexts (war in Ukraine, Covid): content is essential. | (Outside/societal) context matters for whether you feel the need to get reassured/in control.  | User practices matters to provide reassurance or control (typically quick user practices, but could also be in-depth through YouTube) |
| **Connection**(driven by others) | Content matters to be able to participate, feel included and avoid feeling stupid. | (Social) context matter for the motivation to engage with news | User practices less important. The user practices are more instrumental, where using news in general, regardless of the practice, is the goal itself. |
| **Relaxation and diversion**(“me-driven”) | Content less important, could result from both hard and soft news. | Context matters: crucial to facilitate a relaxing atmosphere/ experience. | Practice matters: Particularly in relation to format and the practices are closely related to time. |
| **Negative constant creating stress**(both caused by others and self) | Content matters, particularly breaking news | In general, context less important (in terms of situatedness), but outside contexts (Ukraine, Covid) could matter. Stress could be experienced everywhere, not necessarily determined by the situatedness.  | Practices important. Often experienced in relation to little time, or automated habits. |

Suggestion 2:

**Content**

Reassurance and control (of specific topics, e.g., war, pandemic)

Stress

Connection

Reassurance and control

(staying on top of things more generally)

Relaxation and diversion

**Context**

**User practices**

**Figure 1 outlines experiences with news**
**For the experience of reassurance and control**, context and user practices are important, while the content appears to be less important in an everyday setting where the purpose is to get an overview of what is happening. Regarding specific or macro contexts such as wars or pandemics, content is more essential to provide reassurance and control, while user practices appear to be less influential.
**For the experience of connection,** context and content are essential to participate and motivate connection, while the practices of how you learn about the news are less important.
**For the experience of relaxation and diversion**, context and user practices are essential, while the content appears to be less important.
**For the experience of stress**, particularly content such as breaking news and time-related user practices are influential, while the importance of context appears to depend on potential societal/macro dimensions.

**Discussion and conclusion**

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