

[Title]

Navigating the news:
How Young adults perform News Curation Practices on Instagram and
TikTok

Using social media data donations and in-depth interviews

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[Abstract]

As news use among young adults (aged 18-24) is shifting towards social media, they increasingly rely on algorithmically curated news provided by an eclectic variety of sources ranging from social media influencers to traditional journalists. Within this algorithmic-driven cacophonous news landscape, young adults are developing small personal curation practices (e.g. liking, blocking, following) to organise their own daily 'newspaper'. Following that both journalists and alternative voices provide news on social media, scholarship has questioned how and when young adults rely on alternative or legacy sources when it comes to encountering news. Therefore, this study explores how young adults curate their news and information flows on social media platforms Instagram and TikTok. Relying on an analysis of Data Download Packages from social media with in-depth interviews, what we refer to as data-mirroring, the study investigates individual curation practices and the role that both journalistic and non-journalistic actors play in these processes. Our findings identify three curation dynamics young adults adopt to engage with news-related content on social media, clustering around motivations of resistance, connection and horizon-broadening.

[Introduction and Research issue]

News use today is shifting toward a social media ecology where users increasingly access algorithmically curated news (Broersma & Eldridge, 2019; Newman et al., 2024). Particularly younger news audiences (aged 18-24) navigate across media through a sea of ‘cacophonous’ information in which often journalistic and non-journalistic content, as well as entertainment and even misinformation, are blended (Cotter & Thorson, 2022; Newman et al., 2024; Picone, 2017). Coping with an overload of eclectic information genres, social media users learned to adopt personal curation practices, such as liking, commenting, blocking, or sharing content, in order to compose their own daily ‘newspaper’ (Davis, 2017; Merten, 2021; Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Given the current social media news environment, scholars already emphasized that users increasingly distinguish between, on the one hand, what is considered ‘news’ (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020; Swart & Broersma, 2023) and on the other, who they perceive as a reliable news provider. As social media platforms also offer a stage for non-journalistic actors to produce and interpret the news, the long-established authority of institutionalized news providers has been questioned (Carlson, 2017). Therefore, not only the traditional distinction between journalistic and non-journalistic news sources (Wunderlich et al., 2022) but also the audiences’ expectations regarding the roles of (new forms of) journalists (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022; Truyens & Picone, 2024) seem to be in flux. The blurring of these journalistic boundaries raises questions on how and when social media users still rely on journalistic sources and professional expertise when curating their hand-picked news selection.

Moreover, in an era of information overload where journalistic guidance would be expected to be valued, news users increasingly seem to avoid traditional news (Skovsgaard, 2020; Vandenplas et al., 2021). This specifically seems to be the case for young adults (aged 18-24) for whom news avoidance increasingly resonates in a decline in both trust and interest in journalism (Newman et al., 2024). When it comes to the Flemish news context in particular, 35% of 18 to 24-year-olds are explicitly not interested in journalistic news whereas 34% even express their distrust towards news (Nieuwsgebruik, 2024).

Not only have social media reshaped users' perception of news, but it also created a more participatory environment with increasing audience engagement (Jenkins et al., 2015). Adopting everyday productive practices in the form of Small Acts of Engagement (SAOE) news users can like, share or comment to news-related content as a subtle form of resistance (Picone et al., 2019). Simultaneously, audiences' 'do-it-yourself-expertise' and their ability to choose become increasingly significant within a participatory news environment (Davis, 2017; Merten, 2021; Thorson & Wells, 2016). In this sense, news users thus become "active architects of their own media worlds" (Thorson & Battocchio, 2023, p. 18) tailoring information flows on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok.

However, the ability to self-curate content out of the entanglement of different information genres also leads to questions on the reliability and the (commercial or political) intention of the handpicked news selection they consume. Moreover, facing an era where news audiences increasingly rely on algorithmically curated content and simultaneously avoid the news, raises questions on the awareness (Swart, 2021),

reflections (Mathieu & Pruulmann, 2020), and (inequalities in) media literacy (bron) of news users towards their own selected 'news' sources.

Addressing the abovementioned tension and Swart et al. (2022)'s call for a more radical audience turn in journalism studies, we attempt to step away from theoretical assumptions of what news use should be. By taking up a user-centric and non-news perspective, the study aims to understand young adults' social media experience of what they perceive as 'news' and how they use agentic curation practices, such as liking, (un)following, or blocking, to manage their information flows. Therefore, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: In which ways do social media news users actively curate their news and information flows (Agentic news curation practices)?

RQ2: How do these curational practices relate to (1) the role they assign to both journalistic and non-journalistic actors, on the one hand, and (2) their attitude towards journalism, on the other?

RQ3: how do users perceive the results of their own news curational practices? Do they feel that their social media data accurately reflect their engagement?

To both capture curation practices as well as understand how people experience these, the study applies a user-centric **data mirroring method** (Jurg et al., forthcoming) where analyses of Data Download Packages (DDPs) from social media were combined with in-depth interviews (n=20).

In order to visualize participants' news curation practices as "digital footprints" (Mathieu & Pruulmann, 2022), we first used a 'data donations' method (Boeschoten, et al., 2020), where we invited 20 social media news users (aged 18-24) to request their personal data from social media platforms Instagram and TikTok, after which the data was visualised using the 'Rankflow' module within the 4CAT: Capture and Analysis Toolkit (Peeters & Hagen, 2022). This social media data encompasses personal preferences, including browsed, favourited, liked, and followed accounts. The visualization of participants' DDP aims to depict the flow of social media engagement over time, thereby illustrating the dynamic interplay between algorithmic-driven content and individual curation practices.

Media companies, such as TikTok and Instagram, are required by article 15 of the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) to provide all 'data subjects' to access their own data upon request (Boeschoten et al., 2020; GDPR, 2016). Therefore, social media platforms now offer Data Download Packages (DDP) containing users' social media data as received by advertising and other commercial third parties. Using the advantages from article 15 of the GDPR, participants can 'donate' their data for research purposes as well. Using this visual as an elicitation technique for each interview, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted in order to understand how these young adults experience and manage their information flows, and what role journalists might play in here. Using the data

mirroring method, social media data of the participants not only works as a **prompt** but also **reflects** the participant's media use.

[Literature Review]

Personal versus algorithmic news curation

OUTLINE LITERATURE REVIEW:

The first chapter of the literature review will be built around the concept of **choice** (Graham) in a news landscape, and will be divided into two sub-chapters, which can be summarized as:

(1) **Choice** *leads to the development of personal curation practices*

In the first chapter having ‘choice’ is seen as an empowerment for news users. Compared to earlier times where news media were more institutionalized and ‘one-way channels’, news use in a social media landscape reshaped people’s engagement with news and elevated their ‘do-it-yourself’-expertise (Cotter & Thorson, 2022), which leads to media users becoming “active architects of their own media worlds” (Thorson & Battocchio, 2023, p. 18), constantly organizing and altering their (news) algorithm.

Other concepts to be discussed:

- ‘Agentic consumptive curational practices’ (Davis, 2016)
- ‘Curational Labour’ (Davis and Thorson)

Bringing this into the Flemish news context: The Digital News Report 2023 survey in Flanders revealed that almost half of the news users in Flanders actively ‘train’ their news algorithm by (un)following, muting, or blocking accounts.

*(2) (The illusion) of **choice** in an algorithmically curated news landscape*

The second sub-chapter will discuss the downside of choice in a hyper-choice environment where it would be interpreted as an illusion since (1) both the algorithm and social media platforms are commercially driven, and (2) the ability of choice also depends on **media and data literacy** (which implies inequalities).

However, the study tries to go “beyond the rise and fall narrative” (Mathieu, 2023 in Datapublics) of the algorithm and acknowledges the “forced relationship” of audiences and their news algorithm (Bucher, 2016), but also argues for a user-perspective in order to gain a deeper understanding of how people live with and experience algorithms (Swart et al.). Other concepts will be discussed, e.g. Algorithmic resistance (Velkova & Kaun, 2021).

What do news users expect from journalists in a an algorithmically curated news landscape?

OUTLINE LITERATURE REVIEW

The second main chapter of the literature review evaluates **the role of journalists** and their ‘opponents’ (e.g. social media influencers and peers) in a social media news landscape. Scholars already highlighted how (young) news users are decreasingly distinguishing journalistic and non-journalistic content online (Wunderlich et al., 2022): “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” (Swart & Broersma, 2023).

Thus, questions arise on **how journalists can still cater to audiences’ needs in an algorithmically curated news environment**. In doing so, we follow Swart et al. (2022) in their call to take a radical audience turn, by focusing on non-news and employing a non-media centric approach (looking beyond a news industries perspective), and attempt to analyse (first theoretically) what audiences still expect from journalists and non-journalists:

From journalists: audiences expect established and normative journalistic values (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022), expect personal effort (Berthelsen & Hameleers, 2021), Younger audiences expect journalists to act less as explainers (Truyens & Picone, 2024). From alternative voices: Audiences expect transparency and authenticity, engagement, quality and slow content (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022)

[Methodology]

This section describes our methodology to study the personal curation tactics of young social media users. To render visible the participants' news curation practices as both "digital footprints" and reflective practices (Mathieu & Pruulmann, 2022), we relied on a mixed-methods approach that we like to refer to as 'data mirroring.' Media companies, such as TikTok and Instagram, are required by article 15 of the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) to provide all 'data subjects' to access their own data upon request (Boesschoten et al., 2020; GDPR, 2016). Therefore, social media platforms now offer Data Download Packages (DDP) containing users' social media data as received by advertising and other commercial third parties. Using the advantages from article 15 of the GDPR, participants can 'donate' their data for research purposes as well.

We then used this data to interview participants about the media use and curation tactics. This 'data mirror' approach draws inspiration from the rich audience tradition that has sought to integrate data during interview research (Dubois & Ford, 2015; Kaufmann, 2018). We specifically draw on what Pierce-Grove (2020) has termed 'data-prompted interviewing' in which engagement data on digital platforms, such as Netflix, can help in interviews as prompts. In what follows, we first describe our sample and subsequently how we integrated DDPs within the interviews.

Sample

The 20 young adults (aged 18-24) were selected using a purposeful theoretical sample. To understand the underlying dynamics of news use in a social media context specifically, we purposefully recruited participants who self-reported their social media

as high and are using TikTok and/ or Instagram on a daily basis. For each participant the data of their most used social media platform (TikTok or Instagram) was collected to generate the ‘data mirror’. 11 participants donated personal Instagram data whereas 9 participants gave access to their TikTok data. The participants were anonymized using pseudonyms (see below).

Participants

	Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Platform used as data mirror
1	Hannah	21	v	TikTok
2	Mauro	20	m	TikTok
3	Nina	20	v	TikTok
4	Sofie	19	v	TikTok
5	Jonas	20	m	TikTok
6	Mona	20	v	TikTok
7	Yousra	21	v	TikTok
8	Anna	20	v	TikTok
9	Jill	20	v	TikTok
10	Laura	20	v	Instagram
11	Louis	20	m	Instagram
12	Maite	20	v	Instagram
13	Michael	20	m	Instagram
14	Marcel	20	m	Instagram
15	Rosalie	23	v	Instagram
16	Dan	20	m	Instagram
17	Danielle	22	v	Instagram
18	Aurélie	22	v	Instagram
19	Cedric	19	m	Instagram
20	Caro	22	v	Instagram

Data mirroring

The data mirroring process is threefold and involves a laborious and complex process of (1) explaining to participants how to request their social media data and what this data might contain, (2) selecting and transferring relevant data in safe and secure ways, and (3) transforming that data into meaningful data for reflection. The process of working with data from social media companies is tricky given that it is not always clear what various social media companies keep. Even requesting one's own data often does not prepare oneself given that certain features of social media might not have been used, thus not providing any data while this might be the case for others. We eventually drew on the methodological reflections on data donation research by Boeschoten, et al., 2020 and their elaborated methodological workflow (Boeschoten, et al., 2022),

Data Collection: Collecting DDPs

In the first step, participants were invited to request their personal data from social media platforms Instagram and TikTok.

Given the delicateness of donating personal data, the participants were briefed in detail, both written (using an informed consent) and oral (during the first meeting), on the sort of data they were donating and for what purposes. Participants were given the option to opt-out during any stage of the research process. Our participants were informed that the only data that will be used in the research is the data that reflects the types of accounts they engaged with and thus no other possibly sensitive data might be used for alternative purposes. The data collection was done in two stages, and ethical clearance for each stage was provided by the ethics committee of the researchers' university.

Generating the 'Data Mirror' using 4CAT

Following the donation of social media data, the account engagement data of each participant (11 on Instagram and 9 on TikTok) was converted and uploaded into the 4CAT: Capture and analysis toolkit. On TikTok this data contained the videos 'watched' and on Instagram this could include 'saved_posts', 'liked_posts', 'posts_viewed,' 'suggested_accounts_viewed,' 'videos_watched,' depending on the type of data that was available for the specific research subject. For Instagram, we relied simply on the data that was provided by the platform, which included the account names. For TikTok, which only provides the date and url of the videos that are watched, we collected metadata on those URLs using 4CAT, which provided us with much more data such as account, hashtags, song_template, and other information.

This data was then analysed using a simple count module that calculates the top 15 most engaged with accounts, which can include saves, likes, browsing, etc., and further anonymized to prevent any identification via the engaged with accounts. Fig. 1 below shows the result of such an analysis and visualization.

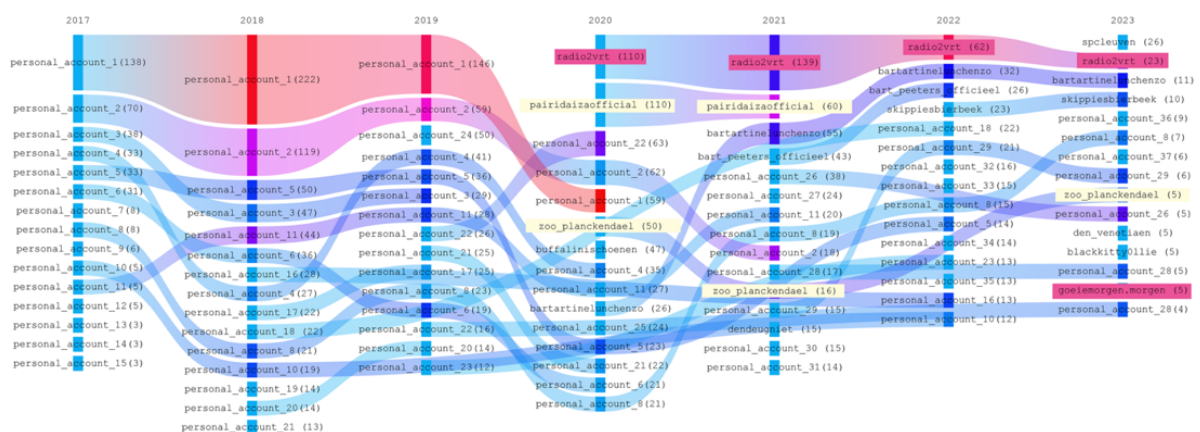


Fig.1 4CAT Visualisation of Instagram accounts with which the participant engaged the most.

Fig 1. presents an example of the engagement of one participant on Instagram from 2017 till 2023, in which we can see the changing engagement with particular accounts over time. For instance, this ‘data mirror’ reflects how one of the participants engaged almost exclusively with personal accounts from 2017 till 2019. The year 2020 then presents a clear break in which the Flemish public radio ‘radio2vrt’ becomes the most prominent. As a result, the data donation visualizations allow us to see personal evolutions of interest on social media platforms over time, e.g. when a participant started to follow or got more interest in journalistic content (see fig. 1). each illustration was used as **conversation starters in in-depth interviews** on how these young adults experience their social media news use, and their perception towards journalists in here.

In-depth Interviews: prompting with the ‘data mirror’

Following the quantitative data mapping, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with young adults (aged 18-24). To understand the social context behind media practices, in-depth interviews with a semi-structured topic list were provided. This approach allows flexibility to deviate from the question protocol, facilitating the inductive gathering of externally interesting data (Mortelmans, 2007, p. 226). The interviews were conducted in real life as well as online (via Teams). All interviews are audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded using MAXQDA2022.

Data Analysis

To conduct the analysis, we adopted Bryman (2021) and Mortelmans (2007) approach to coding, transitioning from open to selective coding. The analysis was iterative, involving repeated cycles of examining initial interview data and collecting additional data through subsequent interview rounds, which is crucial for theoretical sampling (Humphreys, 2021, p. 82).

[Findings] – preliminary

This section presents our findings in terms of (1) the ways in which social media news users actively curate their news and information flows, and (2) how these curation practices relate to the role they assign to both journalistic and non-journalistic actors, on the one hand, and their attitude towards journalism on the other. Finally, (3) we address how users perceive and reflect on their curational practices.

Cross-navigating social media news: different platforms, different expectations

Our interviewees were initially recruited for their relatively high use of TikTok and/ or Instagram in general, and it turned out that they also rely on these platforms when it comes to news use specifically, which follows the overall trend as stated by the Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2024). However, whereas almost all participants are active on both TikTok and Instagram, they assign different functions to these two platforms when encountering news.

TikTok clearly serves as an ‘entry point’ to discover new topics and to observe what is happening in the world through the eyes of other peers. Given the traditional peer-to-peer and visually pleasing format of TikTok videos, some participants express a feeling of **proximity** and therefore feel closely connected to the videos.

Participants typically start and end their day with TikTok. Not only does TikTok serve as a starting point in their daily media use, but some participants also use it as a **search engine**, as Hannah (21) witnesses: “I use the app as a sort of Google. I seek everything in there. when I need more information”. However, this information-seeking behavior also comes with a downside: “Sometimes I just try to search information on TikTok, and then

I forget why I was there.. and all of the sudden it's 30 minutes later and I am still scrolling” (Louis, 20). This quote also illustrates the **love-hate relationship** participants often express when using TikTok as a source of news. While they find and discover a lot of information there, they also often feel as if they are falling into a black hole where time disappears: “Time really flies in there [on TikTok].. because you don't realize.. how many videos you watch” (Nina, 20). Heavy TikTok users among the participants claim to have a screen time of up to 8 hours and instantly express a feeling of being ashamed about it [Cognitive dissonance].

Whereas TikTok seems to be primarily used as an entry point and conversation starter, the interviews revealed how some participants perceive **Instagram** as a more suitable place to get reliable **news source**: “When I encounter news, it is.. I would say 9 out of 10 times, on Instagram” (Nina, 20). Some participants even switch to Instagram **to verify** information found on TikTok. However, when encountering news on Instagram, they rather jump to official news website or apps to verify or to more find detailed information.

[to be continued]

News-related curation dynamics in a social media bubble

Following Swart et al. (2022)'s call, the study deviates from normative expectations of how journalists should be. Therefore, the interviewees were asked inductively about their motivations for engaging with and relying on the (non-)journalistic news providers in their social media news feed (as visualised in their 'data mirror'), and the curation practices that participants consequently adopt to compose their daily 'newspaper'. As identified in the interviews, these cluster around **three dynamics**:

(1) Curation as a form of Resistance

Some participants specifically avoid journalistic content in their social media news experience by e.g. unfollowing journalistic accounts (Instagram) or scrolling faster when it arrives on their TikTok ForYou-page. The reasons behind this journalistic news avoidance behaviour seem to cluster around two motivations.

First, we see how participants seem to align the curation of their incoming information flows based on their **mood**. Therefore, they often seem to avoid journalistic content since they explicitly link to negativity. In line with the functions they assign to both social media platforms Instagram and TikTok (as ascribed above), some interviewees specifically perceive TikTok as their 'happy place', whereas on Instagram they still consciously dedicate time to consume the news. "There are already enough bad things happening in the world, so when I go on TikTok, I want to relax." (Mona, 20)

On the other hand, according to the interviews, journalistic avoidance can also be attributed to a surprising aversion of their **objectivity** and lack of **transparency** in journalistic content (see below). *[add quotes]*

(2) Curation as a form of Connection

A central motivation behind participants' curational choices is their desire to feel **connected** and **recognized** in their selected news-related content.

Here again '**emotion**' functions as a driver to avoid journalistic sources, which seems to be a double-edged sword: On the one hand, participants avoid journalistic content to avoid negativity (see above), while others specifically **seek for emotion** in news. However, seeking for emotion in news content in turn, also divert from journalistic sources. Within this dynamic, we see how these young adults often accuse journalistic sources of being too objective while simultaneously turning to more **activistic** sources. Not only the emotional charge of the content appeals, but they also highlight how **proximity** plays an important role when encountering news: "When someone is literally filming there [at a climate protest].. it reinforces a feeling of being engaged" (Caro, 22). Given the traditional peer-to-peer and visually pleasing format of TikTok videos, some participants express a strong feeling of proximity when encountering TikTok content.

Not only the emotional charge appeals, but some participants also tend to seek for a high frequency of content **about the same topic** with the **same opinion**. In these opinion-confirming curation, there is not so much room left for journalists to function. "If it's not the same opinion as me, I'd unfollow the account" (Maite, 20) Whereas some perceive

journalistic content too diverse, it lacks the option to deep-dive, which they then do based on activist and per-to-peer-content.

(3) Curation as a form of Horizon Broadening

The last dynamic describes participants who seek to broaden their horizon which is reflected in their curation practices. Witnessing their own perceived filter bubble, some explicitly go to journalistic sources so diversify the opinions they receive. “Sometimes it’s too much [the activist filter bubble], so I try to look for other news, and look for VRT [PBS] for example” (Rosalie, 23). Some also select some journalistic content in order to **fact-check** the non-journalistic sources they used before.

***Perceptions and reflections of their personal news algorithm and curation practices
(reflexive agency)***

[to be continued]

[Empirical Conclusion]

Curation dynamics	(1) Resistance	(2) Connection	(3) Diversifying
Curation tactics	Unfollowing journalistic content	Unfollowing journalistic content, following specific hashtags, following accounts of non-journalistic news providers who are (physically) close to a specific topic (e.g. during war on Gaza)	Following / seeking for journalistic content to get out of a self-perceived filter bubble/ to fact-check
Motivations to rely on and engage with news providers	Positivity, opinionated content	Proximity, opinion-confirmation, opinionated	Journalistic or institutional background
Attitude towards journalism	Negative	Rather negative	Positive

[Discussions and Limitations]

- Methodological limitation: However, during the interviews dynamics of cross-media news were discussed, the visualization of the social media data (the rankflow) is **platform-dependent**, and does not allow to look at navigation across platforms.

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