

#SMSociety'22 Paper Template (Extended Abstract)

Length: 1000(min) - 1500(max) words, excluding references

Title:

Trusting information and your sources: Young Danes, social media, and questions of trust

Authors: [Removed for blind review]

Background:

I hugely distrust Facebook. I hate Facebook. If I could I had removed myself from it, I would have, but it is just too difficult because there are so many groups, and Messenger, and birthdays ... I believe that you can be most safe with like big media, like flow tv and tv news. But at the present I do not feel that I am informed well enough through their media, I feel that I get more information via Instagram. But then again. That's not the most nuanced information, but then when something really catches my attention I can deep into it myself and find good sources etcetera. (Woman, 19 years)

This paper focuses on young Danes' trust or distrust in mediated information, with a focus on the role of social media. The profound changes in information and debate practices are important. Societal reference points are increasingly missing and young people develop their own information and debate practices by using available digital, mainly social media, while still including traditional media and f2f encounters in their information and debate repertoire.

Denmark is a digital society by law and most Danes use digital media extensively, yet, we have not developed profound innovative strategies for information and participation. This discrepancy appears to influence public discourses about young people as uninformed and uncritical citizens, about the information fatigued youth, and the understanding of social media as providers of fragmented and un-curated information (Cammaerts et al., 2014; Amnå and Ekman, 2014). These discourses are reproduced in youth cultural contexts, despite numerous examples of youth engaging in events, movements, single case causes, and debate (Bennett, 2008; Bastedo, 2014). The normative discourses about the quality and trustworthiness of mediated information impact young people's perceptions and practices in relation to their own level of information. Changing practices affect perceptions of what information and informed citizenship is, what sources can be trusted, and how informed citizenship translates into debate, democratic literacy, and democratic participation. While this is a general finding from the study, we also find many examples of critical reflexivity towards the normative discourses as well as independent and new attitudes regarding the trustworthiness of online as well as traditional information sources. Hence, there are discrepancies between traditional normative perceptions of good information and democratic practices, and the changing patterns of young people's preferred platforms for information and participation (Thorson, 2014; Dahlgren, 2015; Mascheroni, 2017).

Objective(s):

The general objective of the paper is to present and discuss new research findings on the intersecting areas of young Danes' trust in social media and other media as sources for information, and how this impacts their trust in their own level of informed citizenship.

An underlying objective regards the academic ambition to shed light on the discrepancies between the changes in information patterns and practices and the much slower pace of changing logics and normative perceptions of information sources, informed citizenship, and the impact of this on young people's civic self-efficacy.

Method:

The paper draws on 16 interviews with 15-24-year-old Danes and a questionnaire with 256 respondents in the same age group. Informants in both parts of the study were selected strategically, hence, the result from the questionnaire is not representative. Both were conducted during spring 2021 in relation to the project *Youth, Trust, Information, and Democracy*. These findings are supported by results from three representative surveys from 2015, 2016, and 2017, conducted among Danes from 15 years and up (*Democracy & Citizenship in Digital Society / DECIDIS*). In the 2021 study, we ask some of the same questions as we did in the DECIDIS studies but with a particular focus on issues of trust and perceptions of information and democratic literacy, including consequences of the Covid-19 lockdown.

Results:

Young Danes get their information about small and big issues in society from a large variety of sources. Some of our informants have turned (back) to traditional media, mostly the national broadcasting companies, during the Covid-19 lockdown, or to podcasts or radio. But they continue to get the prominent part of information about society, politics/politicians, current issues etcetera via social media, mostly in a casual, non-strategic way. 67% say that they 'always', 'often', or 'sometimes' get their news via Facebook, which matches findings from the interviews. Interestingly, 70% say that they 'always', 'often', or 'sometimes' get their news via tv. But of these only 7% are 'always' compared to Facebook's 27%. Other media like Instagram and paper respectively paper versions of newspapers range lower.

The casual approach towards getting news via social media shows in the findings from the questionnaire: 61% say that they happen to see news in connection to other online activities, 35% say they search actively for news while 4% do not know what applies. We found the same pattern in the three DECIDIS surveys. The finding is important because it is related to the finding that almost all our informants have a casual and bricolage palette of news inputs – even if to a large degree accessed via social media they do come from different sources with different levels of trustworthiness and the obvious editorial gatekeeper is missing. Hence it is up to the young individuals to sort, and critically evaluate the bits of information, to connect the dots and potentially decide to pursue other sources of information or wait until the next bit of information flows by. The following quotes demonstrate some of the reflections from our young informants:

You must consider critical source evaluation often. I think that if you are on Facebook and you get a lot of your information from Facebook you really must be aware of the sources you read or what kind of people those who are sharing are. (Boy, 22 years)

As the quotes below and the one on top of the abstract demonstrates, young Danes present a critical approach to Facebook as a trustworthy source of information. But we also encounter other aspects of reflexivity. One of

the informants in the interviews say that she actually finds that online news is probably more trustworthy than traditional media as

I actually think that exactly because it is online – if you made a mistake or got a piece of misinformation, it is easier to make that (edited) bracket and then insert the new version. (Girl, 18 years)

This is an interesting but singular observation and reflection. Our informants generally trust traditional news media more.

I believe that all the rights things are on TV2 and DR (national broadcasting companies). Then people like influencers and whatever else we have, little news agencies and so on – they can write whatever they want. But ever so often they just let out a lot of nonsense. So, you trust TV2 and DR a bit more. (Girl, 24 years)

But they miss the important point, which is evident from the study, that they often subscribe to online news media (by 'like') and that they estimate that 59% of the news they access via social media originate from established news media. Interestingly several of our informants in the interviews point to journalists as important gatekeepers of trustworthiness, the ones that they seem to miss on social media:

Whether it is 'Engineering' (journal for engineers) or Billed-Bladet (gossip weekly) – if journalists wrote it, I trust that it is the truth. Because I don't think they would lie about it because it would not pay out. I think they know that. (Boy, 17 years)

Observations that counter this also appear, however, as the following quote shows. Importantly, the girl connects media strategies to attract the attention of youth to a failed idea about how to communicate to young people and of what young people find relevant and important:

I think that I lost a lot of trust in very much journalism, because I just thought everything became so focused on clickbait. That is also where I as a young person probably feel mega misunderstood. (Girl, 19 years)

Future Work:

The findings and analysis that are briefly presented in this paper are part of a larger research project on young Danes, information, social media, and democratic literacy. Other aspects of the overall topic are presented in conference papers and journal articles on e.g., public and youth discourses about young people, information, and democratic literacy; The role of changing media logics in young people's civic self-efficacy; Young citizens, information, and sustainable democracy; Young people and trust in information sources (in a wider context than social media).

Questions about young citizens, informed citizenship, and democracy is not a new focus in research or in public and political debate. It is however, an ongoingly vital and important challenge to investigate, analyse, and explain the complex relations between changing logics and practices respectively perceptions of informed citizenship and democratic literacy in the young generations, and the normative perceptions of these conditions. Informed citizenship continues to establish a vital element in the foundation of sustainable democracy (Bennett 2008); sustainable democracy depends on the collective ability to allow new forms of information and informed citizenship, and to support young generation to develop democratic self-efficacy (Cortesei et al, 2020).