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## What They say and What They do ... Young Swedish Citizens' Strategies for Finding News

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### ABSTRACT

This article delves into the news consumption strategies of young Swedish citizens aged 18–25, focusing on how they interact with and interpret news in today's digital landscape. Utilizing a mixed-method approach that combines semi-structured interviews and an observational study enhanced by eye-tracking technology, this research uncovers the nuanced ways in which young people engage with news media. The study identifies a variety of personal strategies for finding news, ranging from active search to passive reception via algorithms on digital platforms. Young Swedes exhibit a preference for digital news sources, utilizing a blend of traditional news outlets and social media to access information. The findings reveal a complex picture of news consumption that is both selective and diversified. While traditional news outlets remain important for their credibility, social media platforms are heavily utilized for their accessibility and real-time updates. By analyzing the interaction patterns and preferences of young Swedes, this study contributes to our understanding of the evolving dynamics of news consumption among young adults in the digital era. It provides valuable insights for media practitioners and scholars interested in the changing patterns of news engagement and the future of news dissemination in the age of digital media.

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Young citizens; news consumption; observation; eye-tracking; strategies; news literacy; hybrid media

## Introduction

In a world where digital platforms dominate the dissemination of news and information, understanding how audiences, especially young citizens, find, interact with and process news becomes increasingly crucial (Newman et al. 2023). As the digital era evolves, so too does the news consumption behavior of our younger generations (Ohme et al. 2022). This article aims to delve deeper into the news consumption strategies of young Swedish citizens aged between 18 and 25, a group that is on the brink of adulthood and actively shaping their understanding of the world. News consumption is no longer

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a passive act of merely accepting information broadcast on television or radio or printed in newspapers. The Internet and the advancement in technology changed the news consumption habits of the audience. Media organizations' monopoly on news production is over and the audience are consuming news via a "side door" not necessarily directly from the news organizations platforms (Jukes and Fowler-Watt 2020, 14). Social media is becoming one of the main source of information and news distribution (Lischka 2021) for young citizens, and their interest in traditional media is declining which make the news media organizations publish on different platforms targeting the young users who are active on social media (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García 2022). In this digital era, it's an interactive process, a two-way street where consumers have the power to select and engage with content that suits their preferences and worldview. It is an era where news literacy—the ability to critically analyze and evaluate news—is as essential as ever. Yet, while the increased accessibility and democratization of news that the digital era has ushered in is often celebrated, we must also contend with its challenges. News platforms in the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017) are not merely passive channels of information. They are intertwined in dynamic systems that can guide, shape, nudge and affect users' news consumption behavior. This gives rise to a pressing need to understand how young citizens navigate these complex digital landscapes, how they interact with news content, and what strategies they employ to find news that matters to them.

While there has been a substantial amount of recent research into young citizens and their news use (Anter and Kümpel, 2023; Ohme et al. 2022; Berthelsen and Hameleers 2021), our investigation integrates an innovative observation study using eye-tracking with a semi-structured interview approach. This observation study provides a novel way to glimpse into the strategies, visual attention and interaction patterns of young citizens while using smartphones—a primary tool for accessing news in the digital age (Ohlsson 2023). By doing so, we contribute to the evolving field of news use, drawing attention to the shifting patterns of news consumption among the younger generation and their implications for news organizations and media literacy initiatives (Carlsson 2018).

### ***The Changing Landscape of News Consumption in the Digital Era***

Investigating how young citizens discover, absorb, and engage with news content often unveils a narrative of "slacktivism", a perceived dip in political awareness and civic involvement (Boulianne and Theocharis 2020). This research backdrop also points out the uphill battle faced by traditional news outlets to convert young citizens into subscribers, bringing into sharp focus the influence of socioeconomic background and class on these interactions (Lindell and Sartoretto 2017). A growing reality is the formation of news diets shaped by the dictates of algorithms and social media networks, highlighting an urgent necessity for effective media literacy education (Mason, Krutka, and Stoddard 2018). These findings continue the trend identified in previous research that explored the media's role in socializing young citizens into public discourse within democratic systems (Buckingham 2008; Edgerly 2016; Holt et al. 2013). Furthermore, recent studies extend this narrative, acknowledging the growing impact of personalized news delivery platforms and their role in shaping the political awareness of the youth (Van Aelst et al. 2017). Thus,

the study of how young citizens find and interact with news content is not only a matter of academic interest but also holds societal implications for the evolution of democratic discourse.

### ***Factors Influencing Young Citizen's News Selection and Engagement***

Recent research suggests that young citizens tend to use social media as their primary source of news and have developed news-related practices and attitudes that differ from those of previous generations. They still consider journalistic news relevant and appreciate quality standards of professional journalism such as actuality and veracity (Schweiger and Ziegele 2021). Young people's tactics for accessing, evaluating, and engaging with news on social media are influenced by their news literacy levels (Swart 2021). While young people use both journalistic and non-journalistic sources for news, they associate different functions with each source according to their information needs (Wunderlich, Hölig, and Hasebrink 2022). Social media influencers have de facto become relevant sources of news for teenagers, who perceive a social duty to stay informed. Furthermore, young people often employ pragmatic shortcuts to approximate the trustworthiness of news, including affective and intuitive tactics rooted in tacit knowledge (Swart 2021).

Since young citizens differ from older generations in media use (Boczkowski, Mitchellstein, and Matassi 2018), it is important to understand the perspective of this age group in the age of a high choice hybrid media environment (Van Aelst et al. 2017), since the so-called "news-finds-me" perception among young media consumers is becoming more common (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017). They also tend to distinguish between news and "the news". The latter being the traditional news from legacy media and the former being grasped as pretty much everything they meet in their flow of social media (Eddy 2020). When citizens have more control over their news consumption online, they are more likely to "selectively scan" news. As a consequence, they tend to only select news stories they find interesting, relevant, and important (Kruikemeier, Lecheler, and Boyer 2018).

### ***Selective Exposure***

Current research suggests that social media users do not depend on a single news website or platform to access news, but rather selectively get news from a variety of sources recommended or posted by friends or other internet users (Messing and Westwood 2014). According to the selective exposure theory, rooted in the cognitive dissonance theory introduced by Festinger in 1957, people choose specific areas of information to consume in the media (D'Alessio and Allen 2002). Hence, the individual's media consumption that goes in line with their views and preferences and at the same time avoidance of news that they don't align themselves with is known as selective exposure (Spohr 2017). Within the current digital era and the increase in the online information consumption there is a growth in how algorithms control what we receive on our screens. According to Klug and Strang (2019) major companies like Amazon, Meta, and Google gather the consumption data of their users and analyze their individual choices and thus be able to customize the information or ads in accordance to their user history and preferences. Therefore, algorithms risk facilitating "filter bubbles" to users

with individualized and personalized choices (Chis 2016; Klug and Strang 2019). This offers the consumers only information that the algorithm finds of interest to consumers based on their online behavior, actions, patterns of use and consumption but at the same time removes other data that the algorithm considers does not fall within the consumers' interest (Klug and Strang 2019; Seargeant and Tagg 2019). From one side, this can be helpful for consumers to avoid excessive unnecessary data, but from another side, consumers risk being limited to what the algorithm decides on for them (Klug and Strang 2019). Although the existence and impact of filter-bubbles has been somewhat over-emphasized (see Bruns 2019; Dahlgren 2021), the overall tendency implied by this phraseology, is especially relevant in relation to young citizens (Arguedas et al. 2022). Klug and Strang (2019) examined the effects of filter-bubbles in the Facebook newsfeed on 120 Facebook consumers. The results show that most of the respondents were "alerted" by the filtering and according to the study this can be seen as a mistrust in the algorithm. However, the study shows that there is a relation between the level of education and the level of awareness of these filtering effects (Klug and Strang 2019). This highlights the importance of strategies developed and employed in practice by news consumers, especially the young. In our study, we therefore look specifically at how young citizens deal with this complex terrain, and shed light on how their strategies for finding and interacting with news looks in light of this.

### ***Strategies for Finding News - In Theory and Practice***

In a focus-group based study, Antunovic, Parsons, and Cooke (2016) showed that news consumers in the digital landscape can be described constructively using the following three-stage model for consuming news: "routine surveillance, incidental consumption, and directed consumption" (635). They argue that the steps are built on each other and also overlap, creating a complex process that young citizens develop over time for news consumption. *Routine surveillance* is an established simple system that the users adapt to consume the news daily in a "habitual" way using a limited number of sources, often shaped by socialization during upbringing. This can be done for example when young consumers set certain apps to alert them of the news of their interest. *Incidental consumption* is tied to the unintended news consumption when news crosses the consumer by chance. For example when coming across news by chance while looking for a certain story. In the *directed consumption* the consumer deliberately looks for a certain item or story or to seek additional information about a story of interest (Antunovic, Parsons, and Cooke 2016). While providing a useful framework for understanding different approaches to finding and interacting with news, that will be used in our study as what young citizens report in interviews, focus-groups and surveys, is not necessarily the whole picture. We argue that adding a layer of observational data to what can be learned from such studies, has the potential of allowing for comparisons between what young citizens say about their strategies for finding and interacting with news on the one hand, and what they actually do. Thus, we combine data from semi-structured interviews with data from an ethnographic observation study, where we biometrically observe what young citizens actually do when they are looking for news on their smartphones. Furthermore, since the concept of news is not necessarily clear cut or absolute, especially for young citizens (Ohme et al. 2022), we argue that it is necessary

to first let our participants define news in their own words, before we can start making sense of the strategies they employ to find it. In our study, we will do this in two ways: Firstly, by letting the participants show us, in practice, what they mean by news through what they look for, and secondly by asking them to define news using their own words.

### **Research Objective and Research Questions**

Our overarching research question is focused on identifying different strategies that are used by young citizens in order to find news while using their smartphones. This question will mainly be answered through an ethnographic observation study (explained further below). In order to understand the observed patterns from our observations, however, it is necessary to first qualify the notion of news according to our respondents own definitions (RQ1), in comparison to what they actually look for when given the task of looking for news on their smartphones (RQ2). Furthermore, we also need to distinguish between how our respondents describe their strategies for finding news in their own words (RQ3) on the one hand, and how they actually behave when given the task of looking for news (RQ4), on the other hand. Therefore, overarching research question will be answered in steps going through the four RQ's in the following way:

RQ1: How do young citizens define news?

RQ2: What do they look for when given the task of finding news on their smartphones?

RQ3: How do young citizens describe their strategies for finding news?

RQ4: What strategies can be found by observing them looking for news?

RQ1 and RQ3 will be answered by semi-structured interviews, where young citizens are asked to define news in their own words and to describe how they typically go about finding news. RQ2 and RQ4 will be answered through an observation study, using Tobii-glasses to record news searching sessions.

### **Method**

We employed a combination of test methods where we not only ask users about their subjective experiences regarding news, but also measure objective biometrical data about their psychophysiological reactions to news content. This gives us additional soft data for deeper understanding of certain behaviors and reactions to news. The data for this article was gathered as a part of a larger project, where we use six different methods in total with the overall intent to compare and evaluate (triangulate) different results, thus strengthening and validating the outcome of the study (Song and Lin 2012). In the larger study, experimental components were combined with other methods in the following way:

Step 1 - Ethnographic observational study enhanced by eye-tracking.

Step 2 - Semi structured interview.

Step 3 - Eye-tracking session enhanced by GSR (galvanic skin response)

Step 4 - Stimulated recall interview.

Step 5 - Questionnaire.

Each respondent participated individually, and the procedure took approximately 1 hour per respondent. For this article, data from step 1 and 2 will be analyzed as described above, to answer our research question. The data gathering took place in our lab, Visualix, allowing us to record the observational study and the semi-structured interview and to validate findings from the observational study using eye-tracker data.

The respondents were recruited through advertising (online, flyers, posters), street interception and snowball sampling. All respondents were within the age span of 18–25 years and had a spread over the background variables age and gender. Additionally, we strategically recruited individuals from different ethnicities, education levels and occupations to ensure such diversity within the sample. All respondents were living in southeast Sweden at the time of the study. The number of respondents was not predetermined. We added respondents to the study until we reached a level of theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 2017; Rowlands, Waddell, and McKenna 2015), resulting in a total of 43 respondents, 56% female and 44% male. The data was collected during October - December 2022.

### ***Step 1 - Ethnographic Observational Study Enhanced by Eye-tracking***

This part of the study is a laboratory-based non-participant observational study (Corbetta 2003; Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013; Shin and Miller 2022) in which the respondents were observed while looking for news using their own smartphones. When recruited to the study, the respondents were asked to bring their smartphones to the research location, but not informed of the details regarding how it would be used. On arrival, they were asked to sit down behind a desk; they were informed about the study and were asked to fill in an informed consent form. Then, eye tracking glasses were fitted on the head of the respondent. In the next step, the glasses were calibrated to the configuration of the respondents eyes, in order to secure the accuracy of the eye-tracking data collected. The respondents were then asked to pick up their smartphone and its position, the level of light emitted from its screen and its audio volume was optimized to give good recording conditions for the video recorder built-into in the glasses. The respondent was then instructed to look for news for five minutes. No instructions were given as to what constitutes news, what mobile apps to use or what websites or similar to visit. The respondent was then left alone in the room while completing the task. After 5 minutes, the activity was concluded. This ended this part of the study, and the respondents were asked to participate in the next part of the data gathering process. All respondents were given time before commencement of the recording, to clear their phones from possible private open tabs or apps.

In this study, eye-tracking was primarily used for purposes of validating findings from the news browsing sessions by measuring and visualizing eye-fixations. A pair of Tobii Glasses 2 eye-trackers looks like regular glasses, but contains a video camera that records the field of view of the wearer and a microphone that records ambient sound. It also has two sets of infrared cameras mounted on the inner side of the glasses to record the gaze location of the respondent in the form of ETM (eye tracking measurements, fixation hot spots and lengths). In the study the analysis were conducted

through Tobii Pro Lab, a software for conducting studies with eye tracking and GSR. It shows the ETM-values visualized as circles on the video indicating the wearer's gaze (Holmqvist et al. 2011) and the GSR-levels as a timed curve. This software was also used to store the biometric data (ETM as well as GSR-levels) and when analyzing the data.

When analyzing the video data from the observation study the whole research team sat down in silence looking at the video material, taking individual notes. After this, all members shared their individual interpretations and reflections, and discussed these until the team as a whole came to a consensus regarding how to interpret each respondent's interaction and what behavioral patterns and strategies it pointed towards. Similarities and differences between respondents were noted and used as data when creating the resulting set of news strategies. After the team had agreed on what strategies existed in the material, all videos were reanalysed with the purpose of assigning one or more strategies to each respondent, thus also making sure that no behavioral patterns or strategies were lost during the creation of the consensus mentioned above. Finally, all videos were also analyzed by documenting what apps or what sites were used by each respondent during their session, and the time spent using each app/site. This data served to validate the quantifiable part of the strategies mentioned above.

### ***Step 2 - Semi Structured Interview***

After completing the first step, the test-leader re-entered the room and started the second step, the semi-structured interview. The interview was recorded with a video camera, connected to Zoom, and operated by team members in the adjacent room. The respondents were asked a number of questions, following our interview guide. The interview-guide was designed to start out with a question about how the respondent define "news", freely in their own words. From that question, the interview moved on to questions about where they typically find news, how often they look for news, what devices they use for this purpose and finally if and how friends and influencers on social media affected their perspective on news and what they chose to read.

The semi-structured interviews were thus conducted individually, allowing participants to express their unique perspectives and elaborate on their answers. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate data capture and subsequent analysis, and transcribed. The data was analyzed thematically to identify common themes, patterns, and variations in participants' definitions of news and their news-seeking behaviors. The thematic content analysis of transcribed interviews was performed by systematically reviewing the transcripts to identify recurring themes pertinent to the research inquiries. This involved immersion in the data, identifying patterns, and organizing them into meaningful thematic categories aligned with the research objectives (Squires 2023). Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly adhered to throughout the study to protect the participants' rights and ensure the integrity of the research (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018).

## **Results and Analysis**

In the following, the results from our semi-structured interviews (what they say) will be presented first, followed by the results from our observation study (what they do) in

order to answer each of our four RQs. This will be followed by an analysis pointing out differences and overlaps between the findings from the interviews and the findings from the observations. Firstly, let us turn to how our respondents defined the concept of “news” in their own words.

### ***The Ontological Status of News***

A clear pattern among our respondents is that “news”, when they described it with their own words, is not necessarily a concept that refers to a specific type of media product in the way that media scholars, or journalism practitioners usually define “the news”. Among our respondents there is an identifiable division into those who describe news mostly in relation to journalism, as something that is provided specifically by journalist or journalistic institutions (only four participants in our study defined news in this way) and those who define it more broadly, as something that is happening in the world, and that carries some kind of importance for society or individuals.

#### ***“News” as a Journalistic Media Product***

The few who talked about news in terms of it being connected to a specifically journalistic form of practice highlighted various aspects. News was defined as “Information from those who are responsible for conveying information to ordinary people” (Int. 6) or as “... a way for journalists to share stories.” (Int 36). This group of participants also defined news in connection to source validation and brand identification, so it was described as news with “safe and reliable sources.” (Int. 10) highlighting that the “news source is important” (Int. 22). The participants further explicitly emphasized the importance of originality and trust in sources: “I don’t like stories with second hand source” (Int. 6); “trustworthiness is an important criteria” (Int. 36). Other participants specified that news is the “reliable source in the social media feed” (Int 10), or as information that you can find in Swedish newspapers like *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, *Dagens Nyheter*, referring specifically to established news outlets’ presence on social media platforms. A qualifying aspect of this, is that the information provided to the public should be “independent and free” (Int 27). This way of defining news would seem to have clear implications for how strategies for finding news are developed. If news is clearly defined as a type of media product, delivered by established journalistic organizations, it implies that this is also where they would look for news in the first place. However, this position was only stated by a small minority of respondents.

#### ***“Things that happen in the world”***

The other type of broader initial definition of what news is, was, in contrast, expressed by a vast majority of all respondents (in total 39). According to this view, news is, as one respondent put it, simply “things that happen in the world” (Int 52). In relation to this, however, there were some clear qualifiers expressed. In this category, the determining factors mentioned by our participants varied along the following themes: Novelty, societal relevance and individual relevance. *Novelty/uniqueness* refers to ongoing developments, for example in relation to things that were on the agenda around the time of the interviews: Russia’s war against Ukraine, protests in Iran against the regime, energy prices but could also include new launches of commercial products. On the other hand, while

novelty is stated as a factor, some respondents complained that the news was “just the same things over and over again” (Int 54), pointing out that while there are new things happening, that clearly qualify as news according to the respondent, it is the same type of things over and over again, often with negative connotations.

When it comes to *societal relevance* our respondents pointed to mainly political or geopolitical events with a potential to have a wider impact on society, containing elements with a potential for affecting societal life, such as elections or financial crises. As described by a respondent “it should include facts and also be relevant to the society” (Int. 26). Similarly, another respondent stressed the relevance to society and questioned the relevance of some recent news stories: “Nothing affects me and I don’t think people will be affected by that.” (Int.21). According to the respondents who think of news as things that happen in the world, it is also clear that the events do not have to always be of a nature that impacts on the societal level, it can include events, as one respondent put it “both high and low” (Int. 43) in nature. Therefore, also things of a more personally relevant nature can qualify as news. Thus, in terms of *individual relevance*, news was described as events that were of particular interest or significance to the person as an individual. Examples of this included things related to their own special interests/hobbies or their local community. One respondent gave the example of new products available for shopping (Int. 24).

In sum, our respondents can be categorized in two groups: The first is a very small group who identify “news” as a specifically journalistic type of media product, with attached expectations of impartiality, openness, brand-identification and facticity. The other group defines news in a more open way, as things that happen in the world, high and low, with societal or individual relevance.

### *Where is the News Located?*

Having established the different ways in which our respondents understand what news is, we now move on to the question of its location. Our respondents underlined that they find news in both traditional media, apps or websites as well as on social media. As described by one of the respondents it is available “a little everywhere” (Int 6). For those who identify news specifically as a journalistic type of media product, it was natural to point to established journalistic news outlets as sources for news. Examples mentioned were national, local or international, like the national tabloid *Aftonbladet* (Int. 9, 13,19, 23, 24), Swedish public service TV (SVT) and Radio (SR) (Int. 9, 24), local newspapers like *Barometern*, *Sydsvenskan* and *Smålandsposten* (Int. 19, 23), or international outlets like *the Guardian* and *the New York Times* (Int. 25). However, although the participants in our study defined news somewhat differently, there was a clear overlap between the two groups identified above in terms of their answers to the question where they actually find news. While the first group more clearly identified established news sources as places where news is found, this description was also commonly found among the second group, who defined news more broadly. Furthermore, both groups point to social media as a primary source for news and all respondents referred extensively to social media, especially Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Youtube, Reddit, Snapchat and in a few cases Twitter (ex. Int. 2, 5, 6, 14, 31, 38). On social media they use the Instagram and TikTok feeds from friends to get updates. Googling news in general is one way to find news for some respondents. It can be just googling news or looking for detailed

information they learnt about from another source, for example social media give “tips/teasers” and one can search more for details.

People /friends and influencers/ online activists who write about things can be a source of news, however the respondents often underlined the relevance of being source critical and validating the information coming from individuals. Being source critical is an aspect that comes across the different tests whenever the respondents bring about the relevance of validating the source of information. Thus, the results show the awareness of young consumers in relation to source validation (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and Sixto-García 2022).

In sum, according to the respondents in the study, the concept of “news” does not necessarily refer to a specific type of media product as defined by media scholars or journalism practitioners. Some participants viewed news as something provided specifically by journalists or journalistic institutions, emphasizing source validation and brand identification. However, this perspective was shared by only a small minority. The majority of respondents defined news more broadly as events happening in the world that are important for society or individuals. Factors influencing their perception of news included novelty, societal relevance, and individual relevance. News could encompass both high-profile events and personally significant topics (Jukes and Fowler-Watt 2020).

### **Observation Study: Selection of News Apps or Websites**

In this section we present the results and analysis from the observation study. Firstly, we analyzed specifically what apps were used and what websites were visited by the respondents. The results are summarized in Table 1. What becomes clear from this inventory, is that tabloid newspapers hold a strong position among the participants observed in our study.

As seen in Table 1, tabloid news was the most commonly used source. The two national Swedish tabloid newspapers *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*, were visited by more than half of the participants ( $n = 28$ ), indicating that that while news, conceptually might not necessarily be associated with journalistic outlets by young citizens –when given the task of looking for news for five minutes on their smartphones, most of the young citizens who participated in our study chose to do so, in part, through the most commonly recognized news brands (Newman et al. 2023) in Sweden.

After tabloid news, we notice that Google is, unsurprisingly, an important starting point for many of our participants - either for actively searching for news about specific topics or events, but also for suggestions about news provided by Google (we will return to this below, in the next section). Number three and four, as well as number six in Table 1. again point to more traditional established news-brands: TV-channels, such as SVT (Swedish public service TV) and legacy newspapers such as *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, as well as regional and local journalistic outlets (for example, *Barometern*, the leading local newspaper in the region where the study was carried out) all received visits from the participants to a high extent compared to the other sources with more marginal use.

When it comes to social media platforms, the primary source for news identified by the participants as the most important one in the interviews, was indeed observed as a source in our study, but perhaps surprisingly to a lesser degree than both TV and legacy newspapers. Instagram was the most commonly used social media platform, followed by Twitter (the data was collected before Twitter became X), Facebook and TikTok. The

**Table 1.** Observed smartphone usage.

Type of usage:	App / Website:	Visits	Visitors
Tabloid Newspaper	<i>Aftonbladet</i> (26 total, 9 via app) <i>Expressen</i> (8 total, 0 via app)	34	28
Search Engine	Google (20 total, 6 via app)	20	20
TV-channels	<b>National:</b> <i>SVT</i> (14 total, 5 via app), <i>TV4</i> , (3 total, 2 via app) <b>International:</b> BBC News (1 total, 0 via app)	18	16
Legacy Newspapers	<b>National:</b> <i>Dagens Nyheter</i> (10 total, 1 via app) <i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> (1 total, 0 via app) <b>International:</b> <i>New York Times</i> (1 total, 0 via app)	12	11
Social Media	<i>Instagram</i> (7 total, 7 via app), <i>TikTok</i> (1 total, 1 via app), <i>Twitter</i> (3 total, 3 via app), <i>Facebook</i> (2 total, 2 via app)	13	10
Regional/Local Press	<i>Sydsvenskan</i> (1 total, 1 via app), <i>GP</i> (1 total, 0 via app), <i>Barometern</i> (2 total, 0 via app), <i>SmP</i> (1 total, 1 via app), <i>Dagens Kalmar</i> (1 total, 0 via app), <i>KalmarPosten</i> (1 total, 0 via app), <i>Lidingö Nyheter</i> (1 total, 0 via app)	8	8
Magazine	<i>Ny Teknik</i> (1 total, 0 via app), <i>Vagabond</i> (1 total, 0 via app), <i>Godare</i> (1 total, 0 via app), <i>Mama</i> (1 total, 0 via app), <i>Hänt</i> (1 total, 1 via app)	5	5
Radio Channels	<b>National:</b> <i>Sveriges Radio</i> , (2 total 1 via app) <b>International:</b> <i>DK Nyheder</i> , (1 total, 1 via app)	3	3
News Aggregator	<i>Omni</i> (1 total, 1 via app), <i>Upday</i> (1 total, 1 via app), <i>DagensPS</i> (1 total, 0 via app)	3	3
Swedish authorities	Swedish Police (1 total, 0 via app), <i>Brottsplatskartan</i> (crime scene maps), (1 total, 0 via app), <i>Krisinformation</i> (Crisis information) (1 total, 1 via app)	3	2
Financial Newspaper	<i>Dagens Industri</i> (2 total, 0 via app), <i>Privata Affärer</i> (1 total, 0 via app)	3	2
Thematic webpage	<i>ScienceAlert</i> (1 total, 1 via app), <i>TechPowerup</i> (1 total, 1 via app), <i>Topgear</i> (1 total, 0 via app)	3	3
Online Newspaper	<i>Nyheter24</i> (2 total, 0 via app)	2	2
Online forum	<i>Reddit</i> (1 total, 1 via app), <i>Alkompis</i> (1 total, 1 via app)	2	2
Audio Streaming Service	<i>Spotify</i> (1 total, 1 via app)	1	1
Other	<i>Global Good News</i> (1 total, 0 via app)	1	1

Table 1 displays all observed types of smartphone usage (apps or websites) accessed by our informants during the observation, along with number of visits and visitors. Please note that “visits” indicate total number of visits observed, while “visitors” indicate number of individual participants who accessed each type, sometimes resulting in a lower count, because the same individual might have multiple uses during the session. In this table we do not distinguish between different purposes for the usage. It is a raw description of what apps or webpages our respondents used/visited while completing the task of finding news.

latter, identified in many previous studies as one of the most important platforms for young citizens (Karimi and Fox 2023; Ohme et al. 2022; Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García 2022), was only used by one participant in our study.

Other, more marginal, but still interesting sources found in our observations are content from magazines (Lifestyle, technology), radio (although no participant actively used local radio), news aggregators, for example the most popular one in Sweden, *Omni*, was actively accessed by one participant and the digital-only online tabloid *Nyheter24* was also only used by one participant.

All in all, our observations point to a prevalent tendency to turn to established and well recognized news-brands, combined with search engine queries and recommended articles, as well as social media feeds. But this only gives us part of the picture, and we will now turn to a more in-depth analysis of our participants’ behavior in order to identify personal strategies for finding and interacting with news.

### Observation Study: Personal Strategies for Finding and Interacting with News

Our analysis of the respondents’ activities while given the task of looking for news on their smartphones resulted in the identification of five separate patterns that were mutually

**Table 2.** Personal strategies for finding and interacting with news.

Observed patterns	Description	Apps / Web pages	Strategy
Trapper	Has clearly identifiable predetermined “go-to” places for finding news.	Installed apps for news (Aftonbladet, Expressen, Omni) or bookmarks specifically for news in the browser.	Active
Scroller	Scrolls through a number of diverse sources, mainly looking at the headlines (not spending much time reading/watching/listening).	Diversity of sources for news consumption including national, local news outlets and social media sources.	Active
Specialist	Looks for information related to a specific area of interest, for example technology, environment, sports etc.	Several platforms, forums or websites related to the topic in question.	Active
Feed Surfer	Exclusively scrolls social media feeds and clicks on what pops up.	Social Media apps (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok)	Passive
Algorithm follower	Relies on built in algorithm based functionality to find news items.	Google’s proposed news	Passive

Note: Table 2 summarizes the patterns visible while the respondents were looking for news on their smartphones.

exclusive and constitute an exhaustive list, meaning that each of our observations could be sorted under only one of the identified patterns. As summed up in Table 2, the patterns varied firstly in the sense that we could see a difference between the level of active engagement in our respondents personal strategies. While some patterns displayed a high level of activity in terms of active measures by the respondents to find what they were looking for, others were more prone to let news come to them through existing and available channels. Secondly, we identified differences between the participants regarding what they seemed to be looking for. For some, it was quite clear that they targeted specific types of sources, while others appeared more to be scanning a variety of sources, but with an unclear goal.

The first pattern, the “Trapper”, signifies the display of a demonstrable history of news consumption that is to some extent routinized and pre-planned. This is visible when our respondents for example have news-apps installed on their smartphones, which they use in order to find content. Another example of this type of strategic pattern is when it is clear that the respondent used pre-existing bookmarks, or already open tags when they were looking for news. Characteristic of this pattern is that once an app or a specific page has been opened, the participant tends to stay there and actively take part of the content that is available there. This signals an active strategy, developed over time for finding and interacting with specific news-content from trusted outlets.

The second pattern is called the “Scroller”. This pattern is based on the observation that many of the participants went through a diversity of sources (social media, news outlets and search engines), mostly scrolling for content, but rarely engaging with content in terms of reading/watching/listening. While this is clearly an active strategy, where the respondent is engaged in a pursuit of news, what they are specifically looking for is not clearly identifiable in the same way as for the trapper-pattern. This pattern allows for a greater diversity and broader scope, but tends to lower engagement with content. This pattern was the most commonly observed in our study.

The “Specialist”, on the other hand, refers to a tendency of searching very specifically for information about quite narrow topics of interest that appear to be mostly of a personal nature for the respondent. This involves a variety of websites with specialized information, and focused attention to the content, when the respondent has found what he/

**Table 3.** Actively selected and read/watched/listened items.

Type of content	Total number - actively read/watched/listened	Number of participants observed
Article (text + image)	165	38
Video	12	7
Audio clip	8	1

Notes: Table 3 illustrates the total number of articles/videos/audio-clips that were actively selected and consumed by participants during our observation study and the number of participants who actively selected and consumed the different types of content. Each pattern is distinct from the other patterns. Each participant in our study could be placed in only one of the identified patterns.

she is looking for. While not very common among our respondents, it is an active strategy, with the individual and personalized interest in focus.

Moving to the more passive patterns, the “feed surfer” denotes a group among the participants who tended to simply open their preferred social media apps, and haphazardly scroll through what happened to be there, occasionally clicking on things that caught their interest. While this has similarities with the “trapper”-pattern, it is different in the sense that it more clearly outsources the task of determining relevance of news, and type of suggested content, to the algorithm and what happens to be popular among peers on social media than the “trapper”-pattern. The last pattern we observed is a mixture of the “feed surfer” and the “trapper”, which is the most passive and effortless pattern we found. This is the “Algorithm follower” who is more explicitly based on algorithm suggestions than the feed-surfer, and involves simply opening a browser, and looking at the suggested news there - or just googling “news” in the browser and then skimming through the search results. An algorithm follower outsources the need and interest for news and other things happening around them outside of their own personal sphere of attention to dominating algorithms in social media. They are accordingly not that interested in or even aware of traditional news in mainstream media. It should be noted that only one participant in our study was classified in this category.

### *Engagement with Content*

Our final analysis of the observation data highlights the more interactive aspect of how our respondents approached and interacted with content while they were looking for news. While analyzing the recorded five minute news searching sessions of our informants, we wanted to see what content our respondents actually engaged with actively. Our eye-tracker allowed us to confirm visual attention while the respondents were reading a text or looking at a video that they actively clicked on and engaged with. The results are presented in Table 3.

A total of 185 pieces of content were actively selected by our respondents for closer examination and engagement, meaning that they spent time and attention either reading, watching or listening to audio. Of these, the bulk (165) were articles, consisting of text (often with images/photos). Only 12 videos and 8 audio-clips were actively selected and watched by participants. When broken down on individual level, almost all (38) of our respondents actively selected and interacted with text-based articles, while only seven were observed to click on and watch a video, and only one listened to audio-clips (this individual accounted for all the eight observed cases of selected audio-clips).

## Discussion

Our overall aim was to study what personal strategies young citizens employ in order to find news. This was broken down into four research questions (RQ1-4), asking how they define news (RQ1), what they look for when given the task of finding news on their smartphones (RQ2), How they describe their personal strategies for finding news (RQ3) and finally what strategies could found by observing them looking for news (RQ4). Our aim was to be able to compare the results from the semi-structured interview with the findings from the ethnographic observation study.

The comparison of the interview and observational study findings reveals a complex picture of how young citizens perceive, locate, and engage with news. The interview findings suggest a dichotomy in the perception of news, with one group viewing it as a journalistic product and another as events happening in the world. However, in the interviews both groups acknowledged the use of social media as an important place for connecting with news, indicating the pervasive influence of these platforms in shaping news consumption habits. The observational study partly substantiates this, showing that while established news brands and search engines are more frequently used, social media platforms also play a significant role in news discovery. Interestingly, the usage of TikTok was limited, suggesting that despite its popularity, it may not be a primary source of news for young citizens. This could be due to the nature of content on TikTok, which is often more entertainment-focused (Nath and Badra 2021; Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García 2022).

The identified personal strategies for finding and interacting with news - ("Trapper," "Scroller," "Specialist," "Feed surfer," and "Algorithm follower") - highlight the blend of active and passive strategies employed by young citizens. This suggests a nuanced approach to news consumption, where users actively seek out news from trusted sources but also passively receive news through algorithmic suggestions and social media feeds. The engagement with different formats of content, with a preference for text-based articles, indicates that despite the rise of multimedia content, traditional text-based news remains a preferred format. This could be due to the perceived credibility and depth of information that text-based articles offer. In sum, the findings suggest that young citizens' news consumption habits are shaped by a combination of traditional news values, the influence of social media, and personal strategies for finding and interacting with news. While they value the credibility of established news brands, they also leverage the convenience and immediacy of social media and search engines.

Our study's findings resonate with the changing landscape of news consumption in the digital era. As Newman et al. (2023) and Ohme et al. (2022) have noted, news consumption is no longer a passive act but an interactive process. This is evident in our study, where young citizens actively sought out news from trusted sources, but also passively received news through algorithmic suggestions and social media feeds. This dual approach to news consumption aligns with the concept of a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017), where traditional news outlets and digital platforms coexist and influence each other. The strategies employed by young citizens in our study reflect the factors influencing their news selection and engagement. Consistent with the findings of Swart (2021) and Wunderlich, Hölig, and Hasebrink (2022), our participants valued source validation and transparency, and they associated different functions with each

source according to their information needs. This suggests that young citizens are not merely passive consumers of news but active participants in their news consumption process.

Although both groups in the study use social media as a shared feature in their personal probing for what they see as news, there is obviously some crucial differences between social media as a certain platform and exactly what kind of content users are watching there (Goyanes 2020). Users may therefore also incidentally find more traditional news brands on separate social networking services they mainly tend to use. Thus, our findings also shed light on the concept of selective exposure. While our participants did use social media as a primary source of news, they also showed a preference for established news brands, indicating a selective approach to news consumption. This aligns with the findings of Van Aelst et al. (2017), who noted the growing impact of personalized news delivery platforms on shaping political awareness among the youth.

### ***Implications***

Based on the findings in this study, some possible implications for news organizations can be pointed out: Firstly, despite the importance of social media platforms for young citizens, our study showed a prevailing tendency to look specifically for news from trusted sources, identified as established news providers, nationally, locally and to some extent internationally. Therefore, leveraging established news brands and their reputation and credibility to attract and retain young audiences in the hybrid media environment seem to resonate among a substantial portion of the young citizens. Furthermore, the interview findings showed that young citizens value source validation and transparency, a testament that media literacy efforts earlier in school might have had some effect for this generation. Providing accessible information that allows users to verify the reliability of the news, therefore seems to be of importance for young citizens. Lastly, the observational study found that text-based articles were the most actively consumed format. While videos and audio clips are also important, this raises questions about the emphasis on more audiovisually oriented content production for social media networks. At the very least, our study suggests that it is not self-evident that moving images and sound are always the most desired attributes when young citizens are looking for news.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

This study provides valuable insights into the news consumption habits of young Swedish citizens in the digital era. Our findings underscore the dynamic interplay between active and passive strategies in news consumption, with a clear preference for established news brands and social media platforms. The study also highlights the importance of source validation and the continued relevance of text-based articles, suggesting that traditional news values still hold sway in the digital age. The identified strategies reflect the varied and nuanced ways young citizens navigate the digital news landscape, and adds new nuances in relation to previous research (Antunovic, Parsons, and Cooke 2016). These findings emphasize the need for news organizations to adapt and innovate to engage

effectively with young audiences. In conclusion, our research contributes to the evolving field of news consumption studies, offering a nuanced understanding of young citizens' news consumption habits. It also underscores the societal implications of these habits, particularly for the evolution of democratic discourse and the future of news organizations. As the digital era continues to evolve, so too must our understanding of news consumption patterns and strategies.

### ***Limitations***

While this study provides valuable insights into the news consumption habits of young citizens, it is not without limitations. First, the study's sample is geographically limited to southeast Sweden, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or countries. Cultural, social, and political contexts can significantly influence news consumption habits, and these factors may vary widely across different regions or countries. Second, the age range of the participants was restricted to 18–25 years. While this group is of particular interest given their digital nativity and their transition into adulthood, the findings may not be applicable to younger or older age groups who may have different news consumption habits. Third, the study relied on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Participants might have overemphasized their critical engagement with news or underreported their reliance on certain sources due to perceived social expectations. Fourth, while the use of Tobii Pro Glasses in the observational study provided unique insights into participants' visual attention and interaction patterns, it is important to note that these patterns might be influenced by the artificial setting of the study. Participants might behave differently when they are aware of being observed and when they are in their natural environment.

Lastly, the study focused primarily on the platforms and strategies used by participants to access news, but it did not delve deeply into the content of the news consumed. Future research could explore how the content and format of news influence young citizens' engagement and interpretation of news.

### ***Potential Directions for Future Research***

This study opens several avenues for future research. First, similar studies could be conducted in different geographical, cultural, or socio-political contexts to compare news consumption habits across diverse populations. This would enhance our understanding of the universality or specificity of the patterns observed in this study. Furthermore, future research could explore news consumption habits among different age groups, including younger adolescents and older adults. This would provide a more comprehensive picture of news consumption across the lifespan. Additionally, longitudinal studies could be conducted to track changes in news consumption habits over time, particularly in response to technological advancements and changes in the media landscape. This would provide insights into the dynamic nature of news consumption habits. These future research directions would not only extend the findings of this study but also contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of news consumption in the digital age.

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