"Seeing but not Believing": Undergraduate Students' Media Uses and News Trust

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Young people often encounter the news on social media while engaging in social and entertainment practices. Despite relying on social media for news, youth see online information with suspicion and as less trustworthy than traditional news media. While many factors contribute to the widespread decline in news trust, the relationship between youth news media uses and their trust in the news remains unclear. This article seeks to understand how Portuguese undergraduate students describe their news trust, and how these perceptions relate to their media uses. We draw on a mixed-methods study using a survey (*N* = 562) and focus groups (*N* = 45) with students from diverse disciplines, between 2016 and 2017. The findings reveal a paradoxical relationship between students' media uses and news trust. Students mistrust online news but stay informed through social media. This is explained by emotional needs as well as perceptions of the news combining *optimistic* and *critical* stances. This study suggests further research on what news trust means for young people on social media.

Keywords: young people, media uses, news trust, information, social media

The media play an important role in youth cultures, changing the way young people socialize with peers and constructing their identities and lifestyles (Buckingham, 2008). Youngsters may not visit bookstores or stop to buy newspapers, but they read and write in nontraditional ways, catching a glimpse of the news on their mobiles while interacting with friends and family on social media (Sampaio, 2018). In this convergent media environment, young people combine news access with social and entertainment practices in continuous, incidental, and nuanced ways (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2017; The Media Insight Project, 2015). Before the Internet, news used to structure everyday life, giving meaning to daily rituals, such as watching TV at dinnertime, reading newspapers at breakfast, or listening to the radio on the

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way to work. But as society witnesses a "de-ritualization" of news uses (Peters & Broersma, 2013), crossing the limits of time and space, news extends to anytime, anywhere, wanted or unwanted.

Despite the amount of information available today on the Internet, trust in the news has been declining over the years (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Simge, & Nielsen, 2020). Previous studies reveal that despite distrusting online news, people are still getting the news on the Internet, pointing to an uncertain relationship between news uses and news trust (Russmann & Hess, 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2020). This raises questions about what news trust looks like, particularly on social media, where entertainment, information, and social interaction concur in one space. In this "ambient journalism" (Hermida, 2010), the implications of young people's media uses for their news trust remain unclear. Understanding this relationship is crucial for democracy since news trust is essential for an informed and engaged citizenship (Dahlgren, 2011). On the one hand, there remain claims about an unengaged, cynical, and apathetic youth (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Mindich, 2005). On the other hand, young people rely on social media to get the news while viewing it with suspicion because of disinformation (Russmann & Hess, 2020). Past research has found that while youth demand quality information, they get news that is below their standards (Costera Meijer, 2007). In other words, there is a paradox in what young people believe to be trustworthy and their news media uses.

Given this complex relationship and the scarcity of comprehensive studies on this topic, our research objective is to understand how young people get news, including their frequency of news use, and how their news use is related to their news trust. To that end, we draw on a mixed-methods study, using a survey and focus groups with Portuguese undergraduate students. This study contributes to mapping the relationship between young people's media uses and news trust, suggesting that news consumption might not be necessarily related to news trust.

Young People, Social Media, and the News

The growing importance of the online in young people's media uses and news access has been reported by institutions worldwide. Over the years, several studies have stated that young people mostly get news on the Internet, particularly on social media (Gonçalves, 2015; Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017). In the United States, young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 are far more likely to regularly get news on both Snapchat and TikTok than other age groups (Pew Research Center, 2021a).

Social media play an important role in how young people get informed. In their study *How Millennials get News*, The Media Insight Project (2015) revealed that 85% of Americans between ages 18 and 34 said they "get at least some enjoyment from keeping up with the news" (p. 5), even though they do not follow the news in conventional ways. Instead, they are mostly informed on Facebook in a continuous flow, which often combines news uses with social connections, problem-solving, and entertainment (The Media Insight Project, 2015). Though Facebook might now be losing its central role to other platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, or WhatsApp (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2021b), young people's news access on social media is claimed to be "incidental and passive, and that news is just one of many random elements in a social feed" (The Media Insight Project, 2015, p. 1).

As social media combine news with entertainment and social connections, creating "ambient journalism" (Hermida, 2010), young people's motivation to actively search for news might be compromised.

In an article for the *NiemanLab* foundation, writer Joshua Benton (2018) wonders if news information were not to be streamed at all on social media, people might not even notice the difference since "for a majority of people, friends and family content is a perfectly-acceptable-to-excellent substitute for traditional news" (para. 16). From this perspective, most young people would therefore be described as "passive news absorbers,"[2] as they rather remain informed through online and offline fluid experiences instead of seeking news information in specific sources (Galan, Osserman, Parker, & Taylor, 2019, p. 36).

In Portugal, most people use Facebook to get news, the platform being the most popular news source for Portuguese youngsters in the last few years (Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social, 2016; Gonçalves, 2015; Grupo Marktest, 2021; Newman, 2017). A qualitative study using focus groups with media studies undergraduates concluded that television and social media, in particular Facebook, are the main sources of information for Portuguese students (Silveira & Amaral, 2018). However, for these students, news on Facebook was perceived as "repetitive, boring, superficial, and lacking contextualization" (Silveira & Amaral, 2018, p. 279), often being classified by them as "fake news." While Facebook is losing its popularity to Instagram, which is currently used by 73% of youngsters between the ages of 15 and 24 (Grupo Marktest, 2021), getting the news on social media overall raises questions about how these youngsters trust online information. A study about levels of media and information literacy revealed that Portuguese high-school students use television and Facebook to get news but lack criticality when assessing informative content (Pereira, Pinto, & Moura, 2015). Furthermore, family plays a central role in how Portuguese youngsters are informed beyond social media. In a qualitative study, Brites (2017) highlighted the relevance of the father figure, particularly in less-informed profiles of youngsters, since they enabled discussions about the news.

While these studies make important contributions, there is little research about the media uses of Portuguese undergraduates from diverse disciplines, using mixed methods. Therefore, this article first seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ1:   *How do Portuguese undergraduate students stay informed about current events including (a) their frequency of news consumption and (b) their sources of news information?*

By mapping young people's news media uses, we can better understand the role of social media as an aggregator of news and entertainment, and what this means to young people's news trust.

News Trust and Other Paradoxes

Building trust in news is essential for active citizenship (Buckingham, 2000; Coleman, Anthony, & Morrison, 2009; Dahlgren, 2011; Peters & Broersma, 2013). While Portugal ranks second after Finland as the top European countries that trust the most in news (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, & Eisenegger, 2019; Watson, 2021), levels of news trust worldwide have been declining over the decades. Using data from 18 countries, the Reuters Institute report states that levels of trust in the news media have fallen by an average of 5 percentage points from 2015 to 2019 (Newman et al., 2020). In Portugal, this decline was twice the average (from 71% to 61%;

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[2] In a study using qualitative data of young adults aged under 35, Galan and colleagues (2019) identified four different profiles regarding news consumption: The "passive news absorber," the "heritage news consumer," the "dedicated news devotee," and the "proactive news lover."

Cardoso, Paisana, & Pinto-Marinho, 2019). Research on this topic suggests several factors that explain news trust, such as political interest, news media uses, family background, education, interpersonal trust, and expectations about the news (Brites, 2015; Newman et al., 2019; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Critical to the decline in news trust is the relationship with trust in politics. Particularly in a "post-truth" era, "if the political situation becomes more polarized, even the best news coverage can come to be seen as biased by large sections of the population" (Newman et al., 2020, p. 31). News trust is also related to how people perceive the news in meeting "widely accepted goals" (Newman et al., 2020, p. 32), such as being newsworthy, accountable, delivered in a timely manner, and helpful in understanding the world around them. An earlier study by the Reuters Institute using focus groups concluded that people trust the news when they perceive it as meeting their expectations of being reliable and providing "useful information that supports them in their personal and civic lives" (Coleman et al., 2009, p. 39). However, the authors argue that reliable information is becoming a rare commodity as people tend to "piece together vernacular explanations" (Coleman et al., 2009, p. 40) they find on the Internet, causing problems of trust. But, if society is witnessing a decline in news trust, and young people increasingly get their news on social media, what does it tell us about the relationship between news media uses and news trust?

Previous quantitative research suggests that social media news use is correlated with lower levels of news trust, while traditional news use (print newspapers and television) is correlated with higher levels of news trust (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). A study involving 35 countries, including Portugal, found that both traditional and online news use is related to high levels of news trust, however, when social media are the main news source, they are correlated with lower levels of news trust (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). In 2019, only 27% of Portuguese people used to trust social media news (Cardoso et al., 2019). Despite distrusting online news, people are still getting their news online, which points to a relationship between news trust and media uses that remains unclear (Russmann & Hess, 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2020). For Tsfati and Cappella (2003), "media skeptics" get much of their current affairs information from the media sources they mistrust because "when it comes to audience relationship with news media, seeing is not necessarily believing, and believing and trusting are only moderately correlated with seeing" (p. 518).

In a study of young adults, Russmann and Hess (2020) found that trust in online and social media content is strongly determined by their perceptions of being reliable and objective, such as presenting fact-checked information and holding different opinions. However, despite getting their news mostly online, young people trust traditional media more (Russmann & Hess, 2020). Similarly, a study of Spanish university students revealed that most students mistrust online information despite using the Internet as their main source of information (García-García, Gértrudix-Barrio, & Gértrudix-Barrio, 2014). One explanation is the online spread of fake news. Young people's general consensus is that there is more dubious content being circulated on social media than on traditional media despite getting news on Facebook (Russmann & Hess, 2020).

Even though youngsters recognize that social media can be unreliable, they tend to trust online information when it is shared by family, friends, or other trusted figures, such as influencers and celebrities (Clark & Marchi, 2017). Using in-depth interviews with American high-school students, Clark and Marchi (2017) found that youngsters share what feels important to them, placing more emphasis on the emotional dimension, resulting in a form of "connective journalism" aiming at building a collective and individual identity as opposed to building an accurate story.

Another explanation for the paradox "seeing but not believing" lies in the uses and gratifications theory since news trust becomes less relevant when other motivations are at play: For instance, getting news to discuss it with others or because it is fun and interesting (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Therefore, social and entertainment needs override the pursuit of information from perceived trustworthy news sources. For Costera Meijer (2007), this paradox is explained by the fact that young people are aware of the social and civic importance of the news, idealizing it or regarding it as having a certain "sacrosanctity," but exclude themselves as an audience of the high-quality standards they hold. So, while young people demand high-quality information (objective and serious news), they would rather be informed in light and entertaining ways (Costera Meijer, 2007). How young people perceive and trust the news needs to be expanded beyond the normative ideals of the informed citizen to reflect young people's practices on social media (Fisher, 2016).

Drawing on a mixed-methods study to account for the complexity of the relationship between news trust and media uses (Fisher, 2016; Russmann & Hess, 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2020), we seek to answer the following research question:

RQ2:   How do Portuguese undergraduate students describe their trust in news, and how is this related with their news media uses?

Data and Methodology

This study first aims to understand how Portuguese undergraduate students are being informed about current events (RQ1), and then how their news media uses are related to their trust in the news (RQ2). To address our research questions, we draw on a mixed-methods study using a survey (*N* = 562) with undergraduates from diverse disciplines of two Portuguese universities, followed up by focus groups with a sample of the same respondents (*N* = 45). This work derives from a doctoral study about the role of media and information in young people's civic and political lives (Melro, 2018).

Using the explanatory "follow-up" model (Creswell & Clark, 2006) displayed in Figure 1, the qualitative method was used to explain the quantitative results of the survey. Data were first analyzed separately after each collection and then combined for joint interpretation.
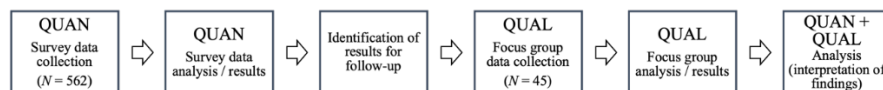

Figure 1. Explanatory model of the mixed-methods design used (adapted from Creswell & Clark, 2006).

The survey comprised 40 questions (25 closed questions and 15 open-ended questions) that were designed to map student media practices as well as to understand perceptions about the news and the role of information in their civic lives. The nine questions used in this article are fully described in the Appendix. After a pretest was conducted,[3] the survey was made available online on LimeSurvey between February and

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[3] The survey was previously validated through a pretest using a smaller sample of the population (N = 30).

June 2016. The survey was conducted in the classroom on a convenience sample of 562 first-year undergraduates from 18 different fields of study within social sciences and humanities, health and sports Sciences, and engineering and physical Sciences, in two universities: University of Minho (UMinho), in Braga, and University of Beira Interior (UBI), in Covilhã, located on the coastline and in the interior of the mainland, respectively. The sample of the survey is composed of 332 (59%) females and 230 (41%) males, with an average age of 20 years ($N = 562$, $SD = 3.4$). Most of these students (86.7%) depend on the family as the main source of income, mainly composed of the mother (94.8%) and the father (82.7%), and in some cases, siblings (66.9%). Both parents' level of education is between primary (39.2%) and secondary education (38.1%), with a minority holding a higher-education degree (22.7%).

After gathering and analyzing the survey data, we conducted the focus groups between March and April the following year, in 2017. Focus groups were organized by course and university except for Groups A and F, which did not gather enough students to create single course-based groups. Students were recruited in the classroom to attend upcoming sessions at a given time and location. In total, there were 45 participants from both universities, distributed in eight groups, up to 10 members each (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Participants of Focus Groups by Course and University.

Focus Group	University	Course	*n*
A	UMinho	Communications; Economics; Education	4
B	UMinho	Biochemistry	4
C	UMinho	Architecture	3
D	UBI	Sports	6
E	UBI	Aeronautics Engineering	3
F	UBI	Communications; Film Studies	7
G	UBI	Sociology	10
H	UBI	Architecture	8
Total			45

The sessions lasted an average of 64 minutes each and were organized in two phases around the following topics: (1) News trust and perceptions about the news media and (2) the role of the news for civic and political participation. In this article, we focus only on the first phase, which consisted of an activity-oriented discussion guided by semi-structured questions after the reading of a news article.[4] Activity-oriented focus groups, particularly with young people, provide an engaging environment conducive for idea generation and candid answers (Bourne & Winstone, 2021), which allows the uncovering of opinions and ideas that would have otherwise remained hidden (Colucci, 2007).

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[4] Students had to discuss the credibility of a fake news article about the U.S. presidential election in 2016: "Obama Signs Executive Order Declaring Investigation into Election Results; Revote Planned for Dec. 19th," under the false authorship of J. Rustling, which was published on December 16, 2016, on a Colombian website (www.abcnews.com.co) impersonating the American broadcaster ABC News.

Since the study followed an explanatory mixed-methods design, focus group questions were based on survey results. For the purpose of this article, we drew on three semi-structured focus group questions and nine survey questions, as summarized in Figure 2. All questions were translated from Portuguese and are fully described in the Appendix. To answer RQ1, we first started to characterize student media uses in their everyday life by using survey responses to questions Q1–Q5. To answer RQ2, we characterized student trust in the news media and their perceptions about the news, using survey questions Q6–Q9, and focus group questions Q6a–Q8a. Lastly, to understand the relationship between news media uses and news trust, we combined the findings of both methods.
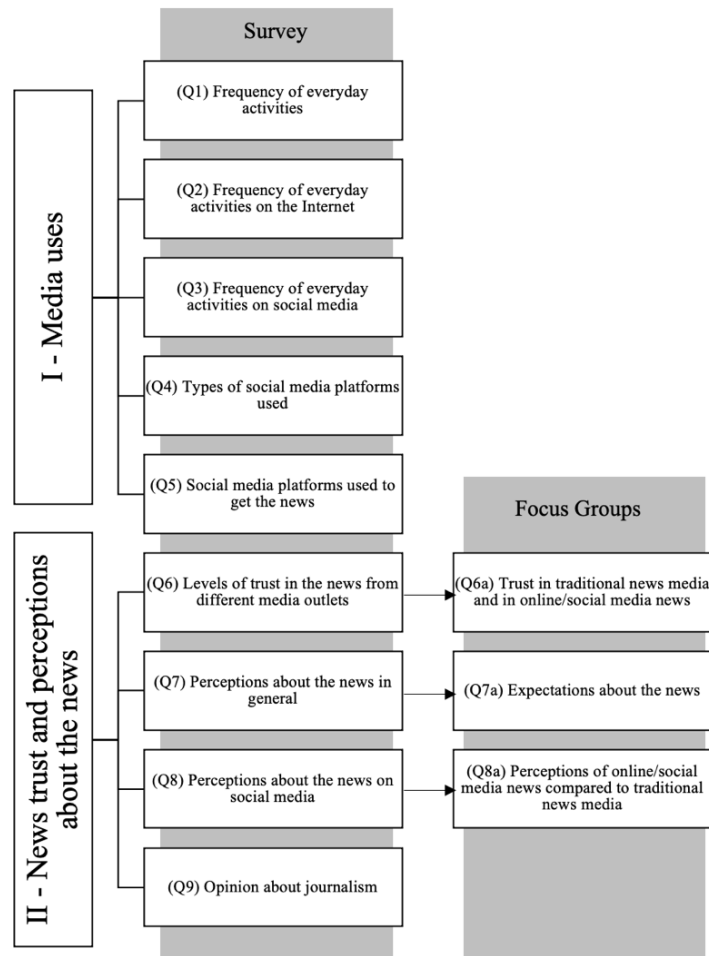

Figure 2. Summary of the questions used in both research tools.

Analysis Strategy

After importing the data sets from LimeSurvey to IBM-SPSS, the quantitative data were put through several stages of cleaning and refinement. In this process, 5-point scales were collapsed into 3-point scales to populate extreme positions (1–2 and 4–5) to gain a clearer overview of student responses. In this article, we collapsed the scales of the survey questions: Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q6, Q7, and Q8. In Q1, we also grouped the 13 variables or activities into seven major categories: Written press (reading newspapers and magazines); audiovisual media (watching television and listening to the radio); new media (using the Internet, computer, tablet, and mobile); entertainment (listening to music and playing videogames); work and study (reading books and studying); social (chatting with friends and family); and sports (practicing sports).

The quantitative analysis of the survey's close-ended questions comprised descriptive and inferential statistics using nonparametric tests. For associations between dichotomic/ordinal variables, we used the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test with a 95% confidence interval. For nominal/ordinal associations, we used the lambda (λ), in which associations higher than $\lambda = .7$ are very strong in intensity and lower than $\lambda = .09$ are very weak. For ordinal/ordinal correlations, we used Spearman's rho (r_s) coefficient, in which weak associations are lower than $r_s = .25$, moderate associations are between $r_s = .25$ and .5, and strong associations are higher than $r_s = .5$.

The qualitative analysis comprised content analysis of the survey's open-ended question, Q9, and focus group questions (Q6a, Q7a, and Q8a). In the latter, student discourses were transcribed, and the names of the participants remained fictitious. Focus group responses and survey question Q9 were analyzed separately on QSR NVivo, using deductive content analysis, in which the categories emerged from the data (McQuail, 2003). Quantitative and qualitative analyses were jointly interpreted afterward by discussing the results obtained from each analysis. The next section presents the main findings drawing on the results of the questions used in this article. For the survey answers, we use the following notation: "Gender, course, university"; and for the focus group speeches, "fictitious name, FG-(A–H)."

Findings

Media Uses: Bringing Together Social, Entertainment, and Information

The first survey question (Q1, $N = 558$) is about undergraduates' everyday activities in general, related to media or otherwise. Of all the listed activities, those related to new media are the most frequently undertaken by students, on a daily basis, as observed in Figure 3. Within the new media group, we found that almost all the students access the Internet (95.5%) and use mobile phones (94.2%) and computers or tablets (81.2%) more than once a day.
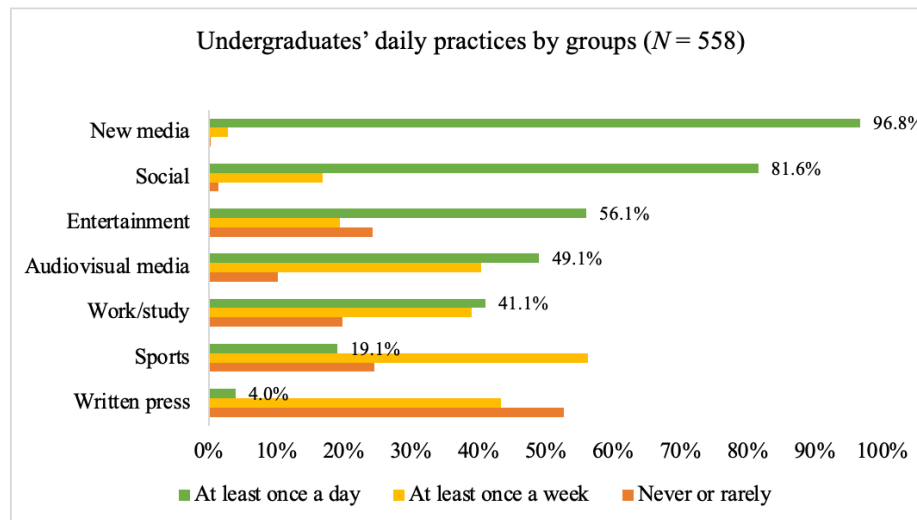
Undergraduates' daily practices by groups (*N* = 558)

New media — 96.8%
Social — 81.6%
Entertainment — 56.1%
Audiovisual media — 49.1%
Work/study — 41.1%
Sports — 19.1%
Written press — 4.0%

■ At least once a day   ■ At least once a week   ■ Never or rarely

Figure 3. Q1—Frequency of everyday activities performed by students.

Also highly relevant in the daily lives of these students is socializing with friends and family (81.6%), which is associated with mobile phone use (r_S = .15, p = .00, n = 551). Within the entertainment group, listening to music is a daily activity conducted by a majority of the students (71.9%). At the other end, more than half the students (52.7%) "never or rarely" read written press (newspapers and magazines). Ungrouped frequencies show that only 4% of the students read print newspapers daily. As for audiovisual media uses, the ungrouped frequencies of Q1 show that a minority of students watches television daily (37.6%) and listens to the radio "at least once a week" (31.7%). These two activities are likely undertaken by the same group of students as they are statistically significantly related (r_S = .43, p = .00, n = 552). Lastly, reading books is more of a weekly basis activity (43.2%), as well as practicing sports (56.3%), while studying is a daily practice undertaken by most students (60.2%).

Except for the written press, all media-related activities play a significant role in the everyday life of students, especially online media since students go online many times a day. What students do on the Internet is therefore answered by responses to Q2 (*N* = 558), which reveals that almost all students go online to use social media, "least once a day" (93.7%), as observed in Table 2. As also stated in Q1 responses, online social and entertainment practices, such as socializing with friends and family (86.1%) and listening to music (81.5%), are highly relevant in the everyday life of the students in our sample. Watching movies or series online is mostly divided between weekly (44%) and daily (47.5%) frequencies.

Table 2. Q2—Frequency of Undergraduate Student Everyday Activities on the Internet.

(Q2) Frequency of Everyday Activities on the Internet (*N* = 558)		Never or Rarely	At Least Once a Week	At Least Once a Day
Get the news	*n*	49	214	295
	%	8.8	38.4	52.9
Search for information	*n*	6	183	368
	%	1.1	32.8	66.1
Study or work	*n*	12	214	329
	%	2.2	38.6	59.2
Read books/articles	*n*	98	238	220
	%	17.6	42.8	39.5
View e-mails	*n*	19	162	376
	%	3.4	29.1	67.5
Comment on information	*n*	277	184	88
	%	50.5	33.5	16.0
Read blogs	*n*	212	212	128
	%	38.4	38.4	23.2
Engage in forum discussions	*n*	416	93	43
	%	75.4	16.9	7.8
Visit virtual worlds	*n*	373	108	59
	%	69.1	20.0	11.0
Play games	*n*	264	152	136
	%	47.8	27.5	24.6
Use social media	*n*	6	29	521
	%	1.1	5.2	93.7
Chat with friends and family	*n*	12	65	478
	%	2.2	11.7	86.1
Watch TV series or movies	*n*	47	245	264
	%	8.5	44.0	47.5
Listen to music	*n*	12	91	454
	%	2.2	16.3	81.5

Informational activities on the Internet also play an important role. Descriptive statistics of the responses to Q2 reveal that more than half the students usually get online news (52.9%) and search for information (66.1%) on a daily basis. Activities that entail active online participation are the least performed by the students, especially reading blogs or commenting on information. We also found significant differences between males and females: For instance, the Mann-Whitney test and adjusted residuals of Q2 indicate significant associations regarding getting online news and gender (λ = .07, *p* = .03, *N* = 558), which is more of a daily activity for male students (63.5%, *n* = 227) compared with females.

Q3 (*N* = 548) concerned what students usually do on social media. Descriptive statistics of responses to this question reveal that the great majority (77.6%) use social media "a lot" or "always" to view their feed of content, send private messages (75.2%), and get the news (68.1%). Again, other activities related to more participatory social media use, such as publishing (12.1%), sharing (20.6%), and commenting on content (21.9%) were only conducted "a lot/always" by a minority. Overall, social media are mostly used for social and informational purposes, with YouTube (89%) and Facebook (88.6%) being the top two social media platforms that students use "a lot" or "always," followed by Instagram (63.1%), as described by results of Q4 (*N* = 553). Twitter, on the other hand, is "never or rarely" used by the great majority of the students (76.7%) in our sample. Responses to the multiple-choice question Q5 (*N* = 555) also confirm that most students get their news from social media (Figure 4). On the other hand, news access through newsfeeds (RSS), newsletters, and mobile applications are less common.
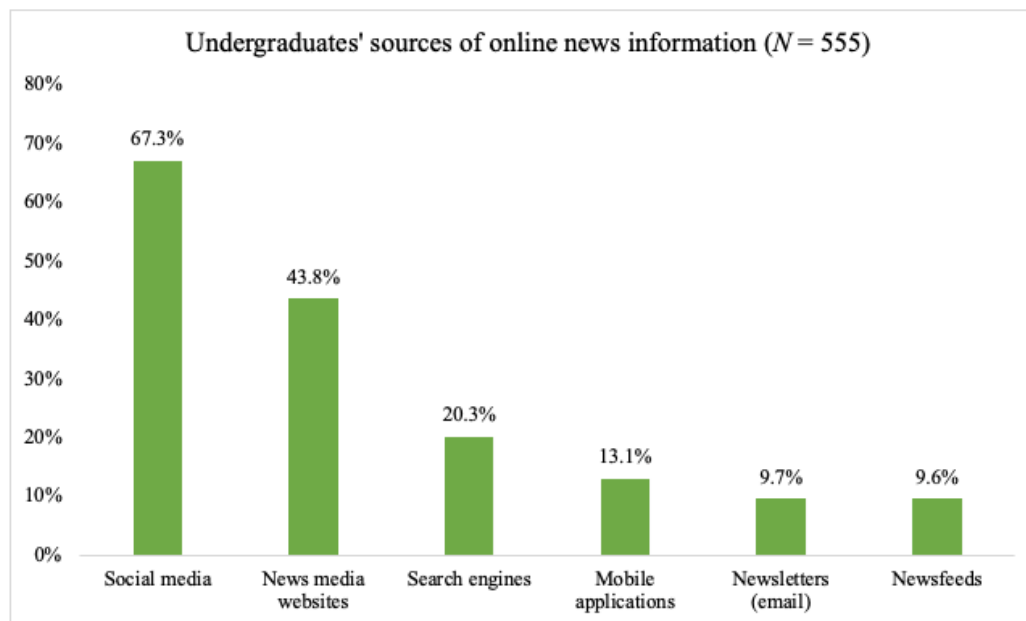

Figure 4. Q5—Main sources of news information reported by students.

Combining the results of responses to Q3 and Q4, we found moderate associations between getting social media news and using Facebook (r_S = .42, *p* = .00, *N* = 544). This correlation was higher regarding Facebook than other social media platforms, which suggests that Facebook is an important source of information for the students surveyed.

News Media Trust and Perceptions About the News

Social media, in particular Facebook, play a central role in how these students get informed. However, online information is seen as less trustworthy than traditional media. Descriptive frequencies of the responses to Q6 (*N* = 538) reveal that more than half the students (54.8%) trust newspapers "completely" or "a lot." This

is similar for radio (54.0%), while social media, for instance, are trusted that highly by just a minority (5.8%). Trust in television is mostly divided between trusting "a lot" (40.6%) and trusting "a bit" (44.7%), and print magazines are the least trustworthy traditional media source, as observed in Figure 5.
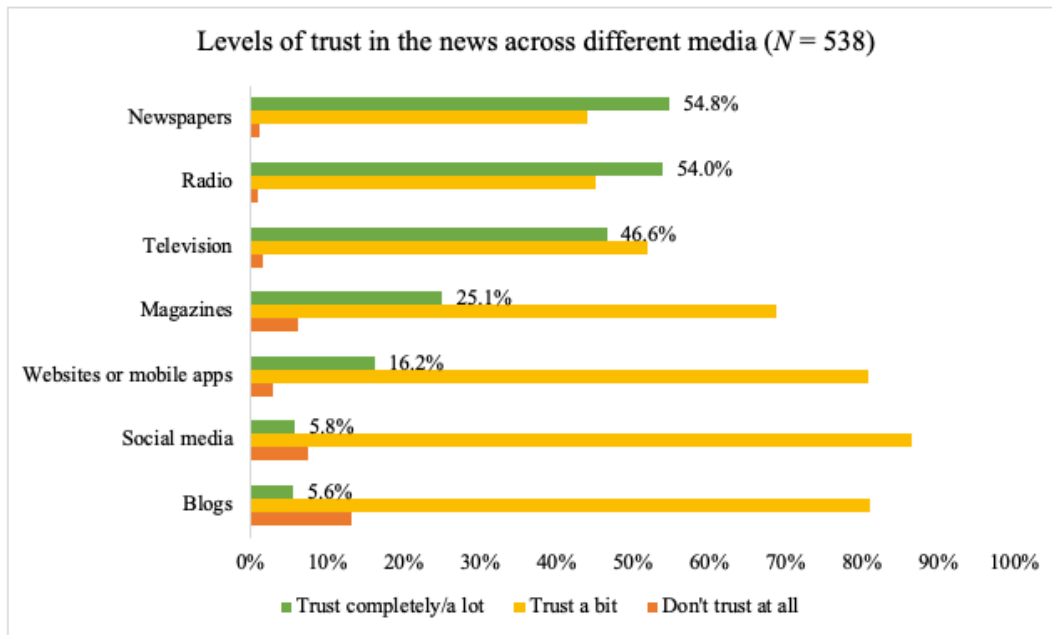

Figure 5. Q6—Undergraduate students' levels of trust in the news media.

Overall, students reveal low levels of trust across all online sources of information, and high levels of trust in traditional media outlets, especially print newspapers and the radio. However, student media uses do not match how much they trust the media. For instance, while the print newspaper is the most trustworthy news media outlet, only a small minority of the students surveyed reads newspapers daily, as shown previously. Conversely, most of our students get news on social media but reveal low levels of trust in social media news.

Students in the focus groups reinforce the survey findings regarding traditional media being more trustworthy than online news media. This is revealed by answers given to Q6a, where students expressed concerns about online news, as this student commented: "I happen to believe more in television news and in print newspapers than websites, which . . . I end up doubting" (Pavarotti, FG-H). Students argued that their mistrust of online news, especially on social media, is related to disinformation, particularly given the idea that fake news can be easily spread online. While trust in television news seems to divide student opinions, according to their background and family routines, trust in online news was commonly viewed with suspicion. As these two students explained,

> I really prefer to give more importance to [television] news. I happen to prefer something that, even at home, has never been lost, which is watching TV news while having dinner. I still prefer that than getting the news on Facebook, where nowadays it's very easy to be fake. For example, just yesterday I saw a news story that Soraia Chaves had died, and it's not true. Thus, it's very easy to get fake news on the Internet. (Margarida, FG-G)

> For me, radio is the medium I trust the most . . . Older people still listen to the news a lot on the radio, and I think there is more credibility in the radio, than in television news, and even less on the Internet. On the Internet, it's very easy to get fake news, as we've already seen. While television news is always trying to capture people's attention, the radio instead is more about meeting people's needs and giving people what they want. (Daniela M., FG-D)

In some cases, trust in traditional media is therefore related to student perceptions of how older generations or people in the past used to get and trust the news, sometimes reproducing family habits, such as watching TV at dinnertime or listening to the radio. Therefore, media trust seems to be intertwined with media past and family background. One student further articulated that newspapers are more reliable because they have been delivering print information over the centuries, and therefore print news cannot be erased:

> I think it is, maybe, because we are also a bit attached to the past and knowing that in the past the news was aimed to deliver the news . . . Whereas now, it's a different business, and so we still have that image that in the past people maybe took their jobs more seriously and that's why the news was real . . . like newspapers are [physically] real. (Lee, FG-C)

Print newspapers were also seen as more "serious" than immediate media as they go through several editing stages before going public. Even though students are aware of traditional news sources on social media they still trust traditional media outlets the most (especially radio and print newspapers). How much the students trust certain news media outlets seems to depend on how they perceive news information to be "serious" and trustworthy. Therefore, understanding student expectations about news in general is crucial to determine how much they value news trust in their media uses.

From Optimistic to Being Critical: Student Perceptions About the News

Students recognize that news contributes to knowledge building while maintaining a critical stance. In Q7 (*N* = 516) of the survey (Figure 6), we found that most students agree that news is essential to build knowledge (73.9%) and foster critical thinking (68.6%). However, students also agree that news is influenced by politics and economics (73.7%) and that it builds on sensationalism (52.9%).
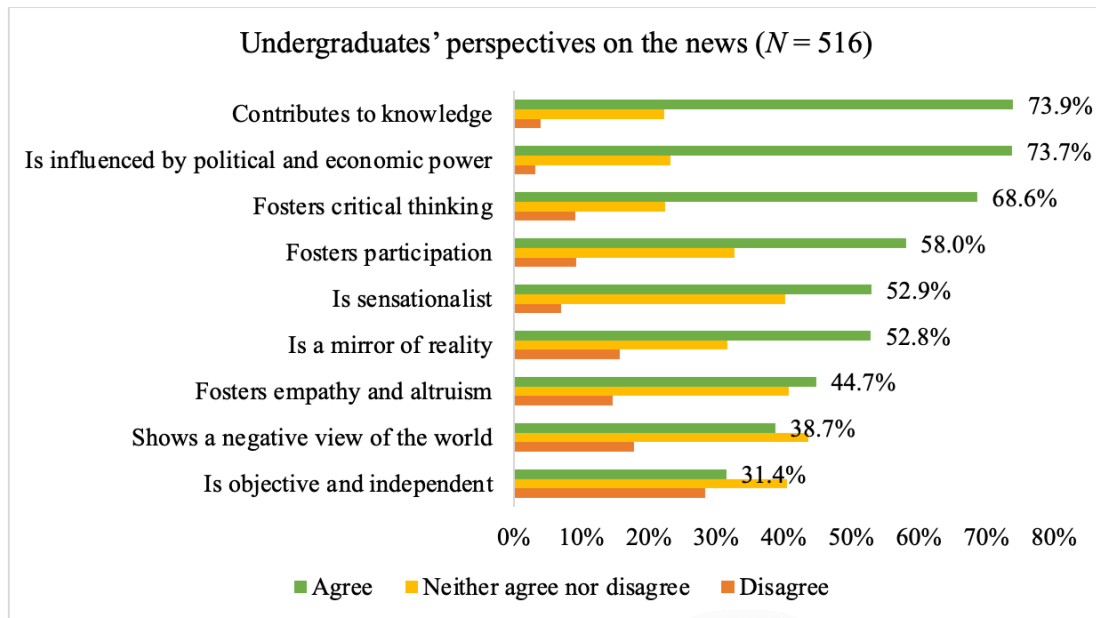
Undergraduates' perspectives on the news ($N = 516$)

	Agree
Contributes to knowledge	73.9%
Is influenced by political and economic power	73.7%
Fosters critical thinking	68.6%
Fosters participation	58.0%
Is sensationalist	52.9%
Is a mirror of reality	52.8%
Fosters empathy and altruism	44.7%
Shows a negative view of the world	38.7%
Is objective and independent	31.4%

■ Agree　■ Neither agree nor disagree　■ Disagree

Figure 6. Q7—Level of agreement on statements about news.

Descriptive findings of responses to Q7 also reveal that more than half of the students (52.8%) believe that news is a "mirror of reality." Following up on these findings in the focus groups (Q7a), students were questioned about how much they expect news to reflect reality. Here, some students explained that sensationalism and drama are also aspects of our society that are reflected in the news: "People like to exaggerate . . . if there's a hoax, people like to know and the more scandalous it is, the more they want to talk about. That is why it mirrors reality" (Bruno C., FG-D). Alternatively, news is expected to show what happens in fact, which is tied to an understanding of the news as being objective and acting as a watchdog, as one student stated, "Supposedly, it is what [the news] should be, a mirror of reality because it is supposed to convey two sides of the same coin" (Alice, FG-F). Contrary to considering it a "mirror of reality," most students who answered this question in the focus groups (nine in 14) said instead that news is a social construction of reality, built from an individual point of view. This happened to be a shared perspective across communication students, for instance,

> I think the news never mirrors reality because it is produced by a specific person who is going to write under certain principles, values, knowledge, and previous experiences . . . In addition, there are editorial guidelines that shape and determine what is going to be covered and how. (Maria M., FG-A)

Regarding student perceptions about social media news, responses to Q8 ($N= 554$) of the survey reveal that the great majority (80.7%) agrees "social media is a useful way to keep up to date about current events" and that "news on social media is a good incentive to search for information elsewhere" (71.3%). However, news on social media is seen as less trustworthy than traditional news, as already described.

Comparing student perceptions about the news, of both traditional and online media (Q8a), some focus group students reinforced the belief that traditional news media are seen as more "serious," and that the Internet has changed how news information is produced: "Perhaps, in traditional media, it was more difficult, for example, to give false information because it was something more serious" (Debora, FG-F). While nowadays with the Internet, "everything is about the money, the profit they will gain" (Tiny, FG-H). Therefore, "it is a competition; it is about whoever gets to be the first to release information and there is no time to check" (Maria M., FG-A).

In exploring student perceptions about the news, the open-ended survey question Q9 (*N* = 422) gives a comprehensive overview of what students answered in Q7[5] (*Please indicate your level of agreement on the following statements about the news*). In the content analysis of Q9, we identified two main, but not exclusive, dimensions[6]: Optimistic and critical. In the first dimension or *optimistic* approach (41%), students mostly perceived news information to be essential for both critical thinking and knowing what is going on around them so they could be informed citizens. For example, one student said, "[The news] is useful and essential for critical development and personal knowledge, not only for young people but for society in general" (male, sociology, UBI). Since answers in the optimistic dimension did not reveal enough granularity and were somewhat consistent, we were unable to identify discrete subcategories.

While referring to positive aspects, students were also critical about information quality. These comments were categorized in the second dimension or *critical* approach (59%), in which most students questioned or signposted problematic issues about the news. These issues were organized in more granular subcategories, as described in Table 3.

Table 3. Q9—Frequency of Categories Within the Critical Dimension of Student Perceptions About News.

Subcategories of the Critical Approach	*n* (references)	%
News bias and framing	138	37.9
Sensationalism	80	22.0
Agenda-setting and gatekeeping	73	20.1
Credibility/news trust	47	12.9
Profit-driven market	22	6.0
Adult-centrism	4	1.1
Total	364	100

In the first subcategory, we gathered references that were generally about students criticizing the forces at play leading to news media bias, especially political and economic powers undermining quality information. As this student puts it, "The news helps us to be informed about the reality of our country and the world, but not always in an unbiased way. Through opinion makers, it tends to give a distorted view of

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[5] See Appendix for the statements used.

[6] One answer could be categorized in both dimensions.

reality due to political party interests" (male, architecture, UMinho). Another student commented on news bias, particularly on television:

> I would say that journalism is very biased, manipulated by some economic and personal interests of powerful people. And I would add that television journalism is degrading; during one hour of TV newscast, they are not able to talk about a truly informative and independent subject. Once, I even heard a television news anchor promoting the ignition of wildfires by saying: "Still only 600 hectares have burned." (male, biochemistry, UMinho)

In the subcategory of sensationalism, students for instance highlighted the dramatization, gossip, and spectacles involving news, since "they increasingly make sensationalized headlines for content without relevant information" (female, psychology, UMinho). This goes along with a sense that "some news is published in such a brief way that it does not always contain all the information we want to know" (female, communications, UMinho). Some commented on the way certain topics are selected in the media agenda while others are ignored: For instance, when giving much attention to celebrities instead of delivering public interest information (male, film studies, UBI) or when disregarding other sports beyond soccer (female, sociology, UMinho). Also, students did not seem to relate to an agenda dictated by negative events, such as crime or tragedies, showing "a world in disgrace, a world full of crime, poverty, and hunger" (female, law, UMinho). Instead, they valued getting "positive" news, as this student explained: "The media focuses more on the negative happenings of the world than on providing a positive view of reality" (female, communications, UMinho). Still in the subcategory of agenda-setting/gatekeeping is the idea that the media tend to overcover certain topics, since "when they don't have any updates, they repeat the same subject several times a day" (female, medicine, UBI).

Students believed that online news trust is being compromised due to an increasing loss of quality, mostly because of disinformation and a sense of immediacy on social media. As this student stated, "[The news] should be as objective as possible and it is losing its credibility because of social media" (female, communications, UMinho). This idea is also linked to a profit-driven understanding of the media industry in which the intention is set on "selling the story to gain more views" (female, communications, UMinho). Lastly, students perceived news as being made by adults for adults, referring to the fewer times when young people had a leading role in the news on current events. This adult-centric view about news is captured in the following response:

> It is very important for us to stay informed about what is happening around us, in our country and in the world. Many young people, and even adults, don't value the news, but I think it is often not produced in a way that captures their attention. Maybe the news nowadays is made for adults, they forget about the young people who at first have some curiosity about certain subjects, but in the end, they kind of lose interest. (female, industrial design, UBI)

Overall, student perceptions about the news combine both optimistic and critical views. These however can be circumstantial depending on the news media source, reputation of journalists, and type of news content being delivered, as observed in 29 answers to Q9.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we focus on understanding how Portuguese undergraduate students trust the news and how this relates to their media uses. To answer RQ1, we first drew on student news and media uses, having found that most students mostly get news on the Internet, at least once a day, especially on social media and mainly on Facebook. We also found that Facebook and YouTube are the most used social media platforms by students in our sample despite recent studies pointing to Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok being increasingly common among young adults (Pew Research Center, 2021b). Still, social media are the source from which youngsters usually get the news.

Getting the news from traditional media sources, however, proved to be less popular and mostly confined to television and radio. Using traditional news media widely depends on other aspects, such as family habits (e.g., watching television at dinnertime), or individual preferences, with only a minority getting news from print newspapers and magazines. Following the typology of Galan and colleagues (2019), such minorities would therefore be described as "heritage news consumers" and "dedicated" or "proactive news lovers," respectively. But overall, most of our students would fit as "passive news absorbers." That is, instead of proactively seeking the news, students encounter current events in blurred and nuanced ways, as they often get informed while using social media for social, entertainment, and informational purposes, as also observed in other studies (Costera Meijer, 2007; The Media Insight Project, 2015).

Young people rely on social media to stay informed, in an incidental way. However, students perceive social media news with suspicion. Answering our RQ2, we therefore argue that the relationship between students' media uses and their trust in the news is characterized by an inconsistency or paradox that is related to how students perceive the news. Despite getting news on social media, only a small minority of students reveals complete trust in social media news. On the other hand, print newspapers are perceived as the most trustworthy news source, but only a small minority of students actually reads newspapers daily. These findings indicate that young people believe more in information delivered by traditional media (which they use the least) than by new media (which they use the most), as also found in the works of García-García and colleagues (2014) and Russmann and Hess (2020). Articulating our findings with the literature, the paradox about "seeing but not believing" suggests a combination of factors:

1. *Emotional/motivational*: Young people's social media uses are mostly motivated by entertainment and social connections with friends and family, which Tsfati and Cappella (2003) argue override the need to seek information in sources they find trustworthy.
2. *Values/expectations*: Young people idealize the news based on conventional values, which they see as being related to traditional news media, as also stated by Costera Meijer (2007) and Newman and colleagues (2020). On the other hand, online news is seen as being prone to disinformation due to a sense of immediacy on social media.

One of the motivations to use social media is social connections, which is fundamental to young people's identity-building process. Not only do emotional and motivational needs override the search for information but also, as found in previous research, young people tend to trust information shared by friends, family, and influencers in these online communities than rely on social media to get institutionalized

news (Clark & Marchi, 2017). Social media influencers may therefore constitute valuable information sources for young people. However, students place a higher value on traditional media, which they perceive as more serious and credible compared with online media. In line with Costera Meijer's (2007) findings, these students demand high-quality information and reveal an idealized view of the social and civic status of news and the role of journalism in society. Students recognize that news is important for their knowledge building (*optimistic*) but it does not meet their expectations in terms of quality information (*critical*). They described a range of issues, such as news bias, profit-driven journalism, sensationalism, disinformation, and a negative and entertainment-driven agenda setting. Despite calling for objective and serious information, students identify themselves with news that is made for them, and that brings an entertaining and positive view of the world (as claimed by constructive journalism). As Buckingham (2000) states, young people might avoid news content that is boring, but they appreciate content that is informative and relevant to their daily concerns and not merely entertaining.

Therefore, contrary to criticisms of a dumbed-down and apathetic youth (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Nguyen, 2012), our findings show that young people perceive the news in nuanced and paradoxical ways by viewing it in positive and critical ways. This contributes to what Peters and Broersma (2013) suggest—that there is a need to rethink the role of information, particularly in young people's lives, as well as what news trust means in terms of social media. In addition, fostering media and information literacy can help raise student awareness to break down conventional values/beliefs they hold about the news and steer them toward more grounded expectations. This allows students to engage with the news and tackle the challenges of online disinformation and data-driven content in knowledgeable ways (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

One of the limitations of this study is the use of student discourses, which can reveal what is socially acceptable (Buckingham, 2000). We have minimized this risk by comparing survey responses with activity-oriented focus groups, prompting students to engage candidly in discussions. Another limitation is the age of our data. This has implications for the social media platforms students now use. Yet, our focus is beyond the type of social media students use the most and instead get an in-depth understanding of the relationship between young people's news uses and news trust. Even though we drew from an understudied Portuguese population, this study serves as a starting point for further research in other countries.

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Appendix

Survey and Focus Group Questions (Translated from Portuguese).

(Q1) *How often do you do the following activities?*	
Variables	Scale
Read print newspapers	1 Never or rarely
Read print magazines	2 Weekly
Listen to the radio	3 More than once a week
Watch TV	4 Daily
Access the Internet	5 More than once a day
Use the computer or tablet	
Use mobile phone	No answer
Play videogames	
Listen to music	
Study	
Read books	
Practice sports	
Meet with friends and family	

Figure A1. Survey question Q1.

(Q2) *How often do you do the following activities on the Internet?*	
Variables	Scale
Get the news	1 Never or rarely
Comment on information	2 Weekly
Search for information	3 More than once a week
Study or work	4 Daily
Read books/articles	5 More than once a day
View emails	
Use social media	No answer
Chat with friends and family	
Read blogs	
Engage in forum discussions	
Visit virtual worlds	
Watch TV series or movies	
Listen to music	
Play games	

Figure A2. Survey question Q2.

(Q3) *How often do you do the following activities on social media?*	
Variables	Scale
Publish content	1 Never
Send private messages	2 Rarely
Share content	3 Sometimes
Comment	4 A lot
View other profiles	5 Always
View main feed	
Get the news	No answer
Create or join events	

Figure A3. Survey question Q3.

(Q4) *How often do you use the following social media platforms?*	
Variables	Scale
Facebook	1 Never
Twitter	2 Rarely
Google+	3 Sometimes
Instagram	4 A lot
YouTube	5 Always
WhatsApp	
Snapchat	No answer
Skype	
Other (please specify)	

Figure A4. Survey question Q4.

(Q5) *Please select two of the following online platforms that you mostly use to get the news:*
Variables
Mainstream media websites
Social media
Newsletters (email)
Mobile apps
Newsfeeds (RSS)
Search engines
Other (please specify)

Figure A5. Survey question Q5.

(Q6) *How much do you trust in the news of the following media outlets:*	
Variables	Scale
Print newspapers	1 Don't trust at all
Print magazines	2 A bit
Radio	3 Some
Television	4 A lot
Websites or mobile apps	5 Trust completely
Social media	
Blogs	No answer

Figure A6. Survey question Q6.

(Q7) *Please indicate your level of agreement on the following statements about the news:*	
Variables	Scale
Is objective and independent	1 Strongly disagree
Shows a negative view of the world	2 Disagree
Fosters empathy and altruism	3 Neither agree nor disagree
Is a mirror of reality	4 Agree
Is sensationalist	5 Strongly agree
Fosters participation	
Fosters critical thinking	No answer
Is influenced by political and economic power	
Contributes to knowledge	

Figure A7. Survey question Q7.

(Q8) *Please indicate your level of agreement on the following statements about the news on social media:*	
Variables	Scale
News on social media is a good incentive to search for information elsewhere and deepen knowledge	1 Strongly disagree
	2 Disagree
	3 Neither agree nor disagree
Social media is useful to keep up with current events	4 Agree
	5 Strongly agree
Social media produces information overload	No answer

Figure A8. Survey question Q8.

(Q9) *What is your opinion about journalism?* (open-ended question)

Figure A9. Survey question Q9.

(Q6a) *How would you describe your trust in online and social media news compared to traditional news media sources?*

Figure A10. Focus group question Q6a.

(Q7a) *How do you expect the news to reflect reality?*

Figure A11. Focus group question Q7a.

(Q8a) *How do you perceive online and social media news compared to traditional news media?*

Figure A12. Focus group question Q8a.