

## Beyond the informed citizen? – Narratives of news engagement and civic experiences among Danish news users

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MedieKultur 2019, 66, 55-74

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | [www.smid.dk](http://www.smid.dk)

The online version of this text can be found open access at <https://tidsskrift.dk/mediekultur>

### **Abstract**

*This article presents an in-depth analysis of the narratives of everyday news engagement, and examines what news users perceive as the ideals, values and normative expectations surrounding their orientation to the “public world”. While many studies have examined this orientation related to media consumption in the broad sense, fewer have investigated how public connection and civic experiences are related to a news users’ normative ideals of news engagement. Through such a focus, this study shows the multiple and complex ways in which subjective experiences of news are related to civic experiences, here understood as how audiences articulate and understand their role as citizens in democratic societies. Based on an analysis of semi-structured interviews with, and in-depth media diaries by, 17 Danish news users between the ages of 21 and 65, we find that the often-implied ideal of the informed citizen in democratic theory is very strong among the participants. This is expressed through a narrative of news engagement as a moral obligation to be informed, resulting in what we label dutiful public connection. Secondly, we see a narrative of news consumption as socially expected, which is related to civic experiences such as taking a stand and debating societal issues with other people. In this narrative, the public connection is interpretative. Lastly, the study identifies a narrative of news engagement as genuine interest in news content and a wish to critically evaluate the news and its consequences, resulting in what we have termed a self-actualising public connection.*

**Keywords**

*news engagement, public connection, civic experiences, media diaries, Danish news users, the informed citizen*

**Introduction**

The production, distribution and consumption of news has changed profoundly within a few decades, and notions such as “crisis of journalism” (Alexander, Breese, & Luengo, 2016; Curran, 2019), “crisis of audiences” (Peters & Schrøder, 2018), “audience transformations” (Carpentier, Schrøder, & Hallett, 2014) and “disrupted public spheres” (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018) have emerged to explain – and sometimes warn against – the consequences of these changes for the workings of democracy and contemporary societies. A great body of research literature from several disciplines has shown that people consume and engage with media and news in fundamentally different ways than they did just a few years ago (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015; Jansson & Lindell, 2015; Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014). The changes in media and news consumption have been addressed theoretically, both as a fundamental challenge to traditional forms of citizenship due to segmenting people (Turow, 1997), and thus undermining social engagement (Putnam, 2000), and as new possibilities for engaging with news, thus contributing to new forms of citizenship and civic connection (Hanke, 2014; Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003; Schudson, 1998; Van Dijk, 2012).

These new ways of engaging are perhaps best understood in relation to changing definitions of citizenship. As Bennett (2008) has argued, the participation in citizenship activities by younger generations today is based on a desire for self-actualization, self-fulfilment and personal expression, rather than merely on a sense of duty. This is a form of participation, which Hartley (2010), for instance, has described as “silly citizenship”. Similarly, Clark and Marchi (2017) argue that the “dutiful citizen” and “informed citizen” models have failed not because people are no longer motivated or don’t care, but because people find other ways of engaging instead, such as sharing news, protesting and presenting personal expression on social media.

While the examination of these transformations of media use and democracy has also prompted the so-called “audience turn” in journalism studies, which “posits the necessity of going beyond highly informative, but essentially descriptive, quantitative foci on changing patterns of use [...] to consider novel meanings and experiences people associate with journalism” (Peters & Broersma, 2016, p. 195), the empirical tendency has been “toward looking at what is watched, read, and listened to; how often and for how long; over what outlets and platforms; and people’s valuation of these experiences” (Peters & Schrøder, 2018, p. 1081). As Peters and Schrøder (2018) have pointed out, this has resulted in a focus on the “here and now of news”, but it also means that we need to pay closer empirical attention to the simple but always fundamental question of *why* people follow the news and how it relates to their (changing) perceptions of citizenship.

One significant theoretical contribution to addressing this question at the intersection of political science and media studies has centred around the notion of “public connection”, which was established in Couldry, Livingstone and Markham’s (2010) seminal UK study of media consumption and public engagement. This study concluded that people generally connect (via the media) to “public issues beyond purely private concerns” in many different ways (Couldry et al., 2010, p. 180), but also stressed that there are “crucial missing links between mediated public connection and any opportunities for effective deliberation or public action” (Couldry et al., 2010, p. 188). They found that although the social context and social expectations were important in sustaining news engagement, UK citizens have had little access to communities of practice where they could act together in the public world, thereby potentially making it more difficult to build plausible narratives of the self that link citizenship to the rest of everyday life (Couldry et al., 2010, p. 188). Revisiting these findings in the light of subsequent research and media developments, Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (2018) recently stated that if they were to repeat their study in the UK today, they might draw very similar conclusions all over again, and that the last decade had not changed their mind about the importance of the question of the media’s role in public connection.

In this study, we wish to address this central question of the role of news in public connection in a Danish context. We examine the role of news engagement for those (challenged) narratives of self, which, despite Couldry et al.’s (2010) findings, remain under-investigated within the public connection literature in a Nordic context. Denmark is chosen both because of the high rate of internet-connected citizens (94% of adults are online every day) (Danmarks Statistik, 2019b) and the high rates of participation in official politics (84% voted in the last election) (Danmark Statistik, 2019a). The use of Denmark as a case study thus provides important insight into how news engagement is experienced in the context of a Nordic welfare state with a high level of support for the press, and a much more egalitarian society than the UK.

Following a narrative approach (Ricoeur, 1980), we analyse the subjective experiences that citizens have of news engagement in an attempt to move beyond, and further qualify, what Couldry et al. (2010, p. 183) called the principal value for shaping mediated public connection: the value of “keeping up with the news” (which they found across genders and all ages). This is done by answering the research question: How are narratives of news engagement related to the civic experiences in the everyday lives of Danish news users?

The methodology will be elaborated below after a brief introduction to the literature on news engagement and public connection. The final sections present the three-part analysis, followed by a discussion of the results in the light of previous studies.

## The literature on news engagement and theoretical backdrop

Newer studies of news audiences in the digital era are a combination of an investigation of the use of news (both as an ingrained part of media consumption and as use more generally) and a focus on what this practice means for the audiences and their engagement in society and democracy (public engagement), as exemplified by the abovementioned seminal study by Couldry et al. (2010). In the Public Connection Project, they note that news engagement is located at the interface of the regularity of following the news and attitudes towards the news (Livingstone & Markham, 2008). In this way, news engagement is seen as a “cognitive, social and motivational” means of relating to news in daily life (Livingstone & Markham, 2008, p. 368).

Several studies have revisited the concept of mediated public connection within the context of a digitalised news media landscape, and some have focused on news engagement more specifically. For instance, Swart, Peters and Broersma (2017a, 2017b, 2017c) have examined how digitalisation affects the way that news users connect to society, navigate cross-media news use and create new rituals for public connection. They argue, much in accordance with Couldry et al. (2018), that people’s need for public connection has not declined in the digitalised media landscape, that news is still central in this regard, and that “through social media news sharing, the continuous availability of news through smartphones and interpersonal conversations about current affairs in a wide range of places, participants may be more connected than ever before” (Swart et al., 2017b).

In Norway, Ytre-Arne et al. (2017) have examined articulated ideals of news consumption and conclude that public connection through the news media can be limited by both the media and the users, since many people experience a decay in traditional news media and change their habits as a result, while some people also experience an “information overload”. Nonetheless, the authors point out that some news stories reach all their participants in spite of a fragmented, mediated public sphere.

With an overall focus on media use, rather than news use in particular, Kaun (2012) studied young people in Estonia and explored how *civic experiences*, understood as involving both orientation (public connection) and action (civic participation or political direct action), are related to everyday media use (Kaun, 2012, p. 37). With an empirical emphasis on public connection, which she refocuses “from a presupposed commonality to a process of negotiating and struggling to establish issues as shared concerns” (p. 161), she shows how the young participants expressed civic experiences in the forms of “critical media connection” (media criticism as either “critical media connectors” or “critical media disconnectors”), “playful public connection” (non-dutiful engagement with public issues) as well as “historical public connection” (reflections on conflictual, context-specific Estonian historical narratives). Kaun concluded that although the young participants rarely engaged with “traditional politics” or mentioned this in their stories of public connection, they were “definitely political in the sense of being oriented to – and participating in –

the negotiation of conflictual societal issues” (p. 163), and that these experiences were only sometimes mediated. In this article, we draw on Kaun’s analytical framework of civic experiences, but with a specific focus on news engagement.

We further wish to supplement both the increasing amount number of quantitative reports on Danish media and news usage (e.g., DR Medieforskning, 2018; Schrøder, Blach-Ørsten, & Eberholst, 2018; Slots- og Kulturstyrelsen, 2018) and recent Danish audience research that has drawn theoretically and/or methodologically on Couldry et al.’s (2010) Public Connection Project and the concept of public connection (e.g., Jørgensen, 2016; Schrøder, 2007, 2010, 2011; Schrøder & Kobbervagel, 2010; Schrøder & Larsen, 2010; Ørmen, 2015). While these studies, in broad terms, first and foremost address the question of how people attend to and value different kinds of news and media (i.e., media repertoires), we ask in this study why they do so with regard to the normative ideals and expectations the news media users hold for themselves and others. The aim is not a typology of media users, but instead to provide an in-depth analysis of how civic experiences are expressed in relation to everyday engagement with news, and, more specifically, how Danish news users understand the value of news in relation to their role as citizens in democratic societies. This study thus contributes to the literature of public connection by illustrating what people themselves consider the ideal ways in which to be oriented towards issues of shared concern, and concludes that their public connection (through news engagement in particular) might be characterised as dutiful, interpretive or self-actualising, depending on their subjective narratives of news engagement.

## Methodology

In order to analyse the way that varying media and news engagement practices relate to normative ideals from the perspective of the media users, we draw on the analytical framework of civic experiences, as put forward by Kaun (2012). Kaun employs narrative theory (Ricoeur, 1983) and research in mediated citizenship (Jones, 2006) to identify civic experiences, which she defines as “individual understandings of one’s position in relation to others within the structures of democratic society” (Kaun, 2012, p. 35). Like Kaun (2012, p. 36), we will distinguish between public connection as an *orientation* towards a public or several publics, and public connection as (physical) action-based participation. These civic experiences can be private but must involve thoughts and reflections of media users related to broader issues in society at large. According to Ricoeur (1980, p. 177), in the recounting of such events of lived experience, the autobiographical triptych becomes harmonised through the process of “making present” the narrative’s temporal features to the audience, with the end point of the narrative providing the wholeness from which overall meaning can emerge. Ricoeur’s theory of interpretation focuses on glimpses of the universal aspects of the everyday, “the spiral movement that, through anecdotes and episodes, brings us back to the almost motionless constellations of potentialities that the

narrative retrieves” (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 188). Analysing narratives thus enables sense-making of experiences, and we ask how the participants are constructing an understanding of citizenship in their narrations.

Because we were interested in the participants’ articulations of civic experiences and their normative views and ideals in relation to – and in the context of – their *own* news engagement, we combined media diaries and interviews in a triangulated methodology, as diaries are useful to “capture life as it is narrated” (Kaun, 2010, p. 133). Our diary- and interview design was to a large degree inspired by a number of studies (including studies of Danish news users), which have explored news engagement and public connection through various forms of diaries (Couldry et al., 2010; Kaun, 2012; Ørmen 2015; Jørgensen, 2016; Hartley, 2018).

Using quota sampling, we sampled a “strategic selection” (Troost, 1996, p. 78) consisting of three variables (gender, education and age), recruiting participants via Facebook posts that were distributed manually in open groups and on pages for local communities and residential areas. We succeeded in recruiting nine women and eight men (17 in total). They were between 21 and 65 years old and had a variety of different educations, ranging from upper secondary education (including youth education programmes and vocational education) to higher education (including professional BA programmes (e.g., nurses or school teachers) as well as BA and MA programmes). All of the participants, however, had an educational level higher than primary and lower secondary education. This sample was for contextualising use only, guided by our wish to analyse dominant narratives rather than developing typologies of users linked to specific demographic characteristics.

Prior to the diary process, the participants answered a questionnaire on their media habits and attitudes towards public engagement, politics and democracy, and for five weeks, beginning 7 October, 2016, the participants wrote a weekly online diary.<sup>1</sup> The diaries were presented together with an introduction explaining that “media” was to be understood in the broadest sense of the word and that the participants could write and arrange the diary in any way they wanted.

Some diarists did not manage to make entries each week, so in order to ensure that we had at least four entries from each diarist we extended the period for the diarists who lacked a week or two. Thus, in all, we collected diaries over a nine-week period. In this period, the big news stories were the 2016 American election and the so-called “Meld scandal”, which revealed that the Danish People’s party had used EU funds for non-legitimate purposes. The data could only be accessed by the participants and the research team, and the participants were given pseudonyms in this article (see appendix 1).

After the diary process, we conducted semi-structured research interviews of about one hour with each participant, addressing topics and experiences noted in their diaries, and asked questions about their everyday media and news usage, their opinions and attitudes towards news media and politics, media use in their childhood homes, and their public engagement and personal interests in general.

We first coded the qualitative data material (diaries and interviews) in NVivo according to the various themes of the semi-structured interviews (e.g., attitudes towards politics and media, everyday media use, etc.). This, together with the quantitative questionnaires, gave an initial overview of the participants' media habits, media repertoires and varieties of public connections. In conversation with the theoretical framework of civic experiences (Kaun, 2012), we then grouped similar utterances, expressions and opinions among the participants and synthesised three distinctive narratives of news engagement. These three emic narratives stemming from the data material provide the structure for the analysis below.

## Analysis

The following analysis is divided into three sections that correspond with the three dominant narratives of news engagement which we identified in the material. These are presented in Table 1 below and each section in the analysis is dedicated to a different narrative. The three narratives are not mutually exclusive, as most of our participants drew on all the overall narratives to a certain extent. Table 1 mainly presents how the narratives are attached to distinctions made by the participants between orientation-based and action-based civic experiences, and lastly how these narratives result in varying forms of public connection (understood as "orientation to a public world, where matters of shared concern are, or at least should be, addressed" (Couldry et al., 2010, p. 3)).

Narratives of news engagement	Civic experiences as orientation	Civic experiences as action-based	Public connection
<b>1: News engagement as a moral obligation</b>	Engaging with news to be informed; engaging because it is unavoidable	Engaging with news as a prerequisite for voting, party membership	Dutiful
<b>2: News engagement as socially expected</b>	"Surroundings expect me to know about the news"; deliberation and conversations; fear of being excluded	Engaging in public debates, news engagement as a part of social life	Interpretative
<b>3: News engagement as genuine interest and a wish to understand</b>	Critical media connection; media literacy; news as a political resource	Other forms of action or involvement: activism, consumerism, etc.	Self-actualising

Table 1. Dimensions of News Engagement

### *Oriented and obliged – news engagement as a moral obligation*

First and foremost, the participants were all aligned with the first of the "bottom line" assumptions regarding public connection – that we share an orientation towards a public world where matters of shared concern are, or should be, addressed (Couldry et al., 2010). They varied in their descriptions of the role that (news) media plays – or should play – in

this regard, and whether they thought they themselves succeeded in sustaining such an orientation. Nonetheless, they all felt an obligation to orient themselves towards a public world and, especially, the objects that Kaun (2012, p. 49) has broadly described as “the political, politics or citizenship”. Even those participants who said they did not care about or did not like politics believed that a minimal orientation is needed or unavoidable. Ingrid, a 65-year-old who had a clerical work background but is now retired, stated:

[How I stay informed] is probably a little bit more superficial now. For instance, I mentioned politics; I really have given up following that. Well, now we just had a new government of course, and I’m obviously following that and who has become ministers, right? You know, I’m certainly keeping up with stuff like that.

It is worth noting the contrast between Ingrid’s apathy in relation to following politics and the obviousness she assumes in terms of paying attention to certain general political developments and events. As mentioned, the participants differed in their descriptions of the role news media plays or should play for this (minimal) orientation, but none of our participants can be characterised as “news avoiders” (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010), as news engagement is a central component in their civic experiences (Kaun, 2012). In both diaries and interviews our participants most often referred to media as *news* media, and news as *political* news. All participants, no matter their level of political interest or consumption of (political) news, expressed some degree of dissatisfaction with politicians and the political debate (in the media), which was generally considered untrustworthy, indecent or overly technical and tactical (boring and valueless). Only a few participants said in their initial questionnaires that they trusted politicians to tell the truth.<sup>2</sup>

When asked about their thoughts on politics in general, several participants also mentioned, and positioned themselves in relation to, an implicitly assumed public discourse, which was broadly referred to as “the disillusionment with politicians” (*politikervelede* in Danish). The idea that one should have – or cannot avoid – a minimal orientation towards a public world (often understood as politics by the participants) was therefore in many cases in spite of attitudes and political interest, which can be exemplified by the two diary excerpts below, from 33-year-old Karen and 45-year-old Susan respectively, who both expressed low political interest and said in their interviews that they did not feel they succeeded in staying informed about society.<sup>3</sup> Here, nevertheless, they both write about the 2016 American presidential election, which was one of the major news agendas during the diary period.

*Karen: I guess the thing that has caught my attention the last week has probably been the election in the US. I didn’t feel like staying up all night to watch it. To be honest, I don’t care that much. But I will gladly thank all the other people who could then update me when I woke up and – as the first thing – grabbed my phone and checked various news and posts*



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*from people. Because you can count on one thing: If something special is happening, you can't avoid keeping track of it, even being all unconscious and without desire and interest.*

*Susan: The media is full of the American election. I haven't been following it so much! Except from what's in the news. Everywhere, actually. You really have to try, if you want to avoid it, but I'm looking forward to seeing who wins that election and what happens afterwards. It's a little frightening.*

In these excerpts we see a similar – and somehow paradoxical – tension between disinterest (or perhaps a feeling of insufficiency) and interest, and both participants concluded that information about the election could not be avoided despite their low level of interest. They were actually satisfied or even glad this was the case, as they seemed to want to know at least the overall status and development. These examples can be related to the idea of a minimal orientation and to the fact that both Karen and Susan, like almost all the participants, expressed the opinion that it is important to stay informed about society, even though they did not necessarily feel that they have actually managed to stay informed themselves. We can thus identify a narrative of a *moral obligation* to stay informed (via the news). It resembles the traditional ideal of the “informed citizen” or what has been called “dutiful citizenship” (e.g., Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011), which also corresponds with earlier studies on public connection (Couldry et al., 2010; Ytre-Arne et al., 2017). When this “duty” is carried out, it is primarily via news engagement, but many participants did not actually see it this way. Instead, the overall ideal was accompanied by a sense of “bad conscience” when it came to their view of their *own* media use and news engagement. With a few exceptions, the participants explained how they try to stay informed about society themselves, but most of them downplayed their answers by using words or expressions such as “superficially”, “one-sided”, “not always”, “the big picture”, “to some degree” and “not as much as I used to”. This was exemplified by Kurt, a 65-year-old retired teacher, when answering the question about whether he stays informed.

Yes, but not enough. Like everyone else I have an everlasting guilty conscience. There are things you feel you should get acquainted with all the time. But I think I keep up just fine. And considering those people from where I came from – you know, both Sussie [wife] and I are the first students/undergraduates in our families and so on – and in relation to our families, we are extremely well informed. But, then again, if I look at my friends, we are the lukewarm average.

We see how Kurt answered yes to the question with some restraint (like most participants), despite having quite an extensive media repertoire. He uses the phrase “all the time”, indicating the typical, but rather indefinite, explanation among the participants for their assumed insufficiency: a lack of time. Significantly, Kurt also stated that this was true for everybody. The implication seems to be that no matter their actual media use, or orientation more broadly, the informed citizen remains an ever-present, yet unachievable, ideal, and therefore the news users remain more or less conscience-stricken. One explana-

tion might be that in general the participants do not necessarily feel they are doing something “civic” by following the news, thereby stressing “informed” over “citizen” in terms of the traditional ideal. The form of public connection we see here is nonetheless a dutiful one, which primarily manifests itself as a duty to stay informed as an orientation-based civic experience, whereas action-based civic experiences are manifested in relation to voting and taking part in elections. Expressions of the latter appeared only occasionally in the material, even though the right and responsibility to vote was also an ideal to which all our participants strongly adhered.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Involved and included – news engagement as socially expected***

In the second dominating narrative of news engagement, following the (news) media was seen as a prerequisite for participating in conversations with family, friends and colleagues: a narrative of news engagement as *socially expected*. In accordance with Ytre-Arne et al.’s (2017) study in Norway, we also noted that work/profession/studies played a major role in their patterns of media use and ideals of public connection. The main accompanying argument was that staying informed about specific topics, but also in general, would enable participation in conversations, which is exemplified by the case of the 21-year-old public high school student Kristoffer:

*Kristoffer: You should be updated. I mean, it’s something that can affect you. If you all of a sudden don’t know... If a reform is made, it can also affect you. Then you kind of need to be updated.*

*Interviewer: What can you use it for, being updated?*

*Kristoffer: You may use it in your own life. That’s probably the short answer. It’s just important that you are updated in life – at the same time as your social circle. There you have to be updated and know what’s going on.*

In this quote by Kristoffer, who is also a member of a political youth party, we clearly recognise the narrative of a moral obligation to stay informed and the implied idea that it is about politics that you have to be informed. Nonetheless, he does not relate this need to be updated with, for instance, political action or activity. Instead, he considers it a purpose in itself, which should be used in one’s “own life” and which is related to one’s “social circle”, where you “have to be updated”.

This ideal is also sometimes articulated in the empirical material through a fear of being excluded. A good example is Mikkel, a 27-year-old university employee, who follows several online news media on a daily basis. Here, he describes how it would feel if he was not informed.

*It’s like feeling that you are excluded or that you are not a part of the conversation. So, I think it would be the feeling of being derailed or the feeling of being isolated from whatever happens. If, for instance, I read Femina [a weekly lifestyle magazine, primarily target-*

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ing women] a lot, I would be part of the conversation about what kind of hair colour you should have, which can also be seen as important, but right now, I'm talking more about the overall media like MetroXpress. It's a nationwide media, a newspaper or what you'd call it (...) So, I would feel like I was all alone in the world.

Even though he is talking about the private conversations he has in his everyday life, we see here how “the conversation” from which Mikkel does not want to be excluded has a national or public orientation. He recognises that different conversations might be informed by different media, but he thinks there is certain “news” (which he stressed in the word “newspaper”)<sup>5</sup> from “overall media” that you have to get in order not to be isolated. Actually, Mikkel considers the daily freesheet *MetroXpress*, which he mentions here, to be irritating, but easily available on his way to work, and in his diaries it is evident that his daily use of online newspapers is also more brief and habitual than other examples of his media use, which are more pleasure-driven (such as the popular reality and television shows he watches and discusses with friends, lifestyle magazines from retail companies and the sports-related Facebook groups he moderates). He finds it important to follow political news and the overall development of politics and society (especially educational politics related to his work), but he also stated in both diaries and his interview that he is not really interested in politics and gets tired of the news. He therefore stays informed about society in order not to feel excluded, which includes spending quite some time on online news media. However, when he is not just skimming the headlines and actually invests time in specific articles, these are mostly not within the news genre, and when he engages in private conversations, these are often informed or initiated by his more pleasure-driven (or sometimes work-related) media use, even though the conversations he mentions in his diaries actually often circulate around topics that could be characterised as “matters of shared concern”, such as whether one should be part of a union, the refugee crisis in Europe and gender perceptions.

Although this idea that other people expect you to be up-to-date and informed (whether self-imposed or not) was generally present and mentioned by participants of different ages and educational backgrounds, the fear of exclusion was more significant among participants with a higher education. For instance, it was only (though not all) participants with BA or MA degrees who responded in their initial questionnaires that they “strongly agreed” that either friends or colleagues would expect them to know what is going on in society. As mentioned, the participants in general felt they should stay informed about society (moral obligation), and many felt this way because they thought others expected them to do so (social expectations).

The narrative of news engagement as socially expected relates not only to ideals of following the news, but also which news and news sites one is expected to follow. An example of this is when the 24-year-old master's student Lisa, who finds it a “natural thing” to stay informed, comments on her uncle's use of tabloid news.

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Lisa: *Those tabloids... Is that how you say it? Something like BT or Ekstra Bladet. I would never dream of reading them. I get angry when I see someone do it, actually.*

Interviewer: *Why?*

Lisa: *Well, I'm just like: It's crap, it's untrue. There must be so much shit in them, and they get things twisted and manipulate those people they write about. So, just because it's more entertainment than information, I think. And I know that Politiken has a certain drama rate, of course. But my uncle, he's sitting there, and the first thing he checks... I can't remember what we talked about, but then he goes to Ekstra Bladet, where I'm just: "Seriously? It's the worst place you can go to find out whether this is actually something that's going on."*

Ohlsson et al. (2017, pp. 127–128) have shown how an orientation towards what is socially recognised as “quality” news, as well as a distaste for “popular” news, can be seen as an act of cultural distinction. Similarly, Hartley (2018) has demonstrated how young Danish media users, who are rich in cultural capital, connect their use of Facebook and other social media intermediaries as sources of news access with feelings of guilt, shame and resentment, and to an awareness of how they themselves differ from other people. As we see in Lisa’s quote above (and the quote by Kurt further above), this dynamic can also be recognised among our participants. This indicates that, while engagement with news more generally is seen as a moral obligation, the type of news that one is morally expected to engage with differs among various groups.

### ***Curious and critical – news engagement as a genuine interest***

The third narrative we found among the participants was news engagement as a *genuine interest*. The participants described how staying informed – and news engagement in particular – was not only seen as morally and/or socially expected, but also as a personal desire. This is exemplified by Bent, a 65-year-old school principal with a master’s degree in leadership, explaining why he thinks that news media “open up your world”.

On the one hand, you have to find out who you are, but you also have to figure out how the world is connected and, thus, also relate to it. I think that if we want to keep our current welfare level in Denmark, we have to open up to the outside world. We can't get welfare by shutting ourselves up (...) Besides, I've always thought it [staying informed] was exciting. I mean, I'm curious, but that's something else.

In this example, Bent makes a distinction between his view of the media’s public role (that staying informed and sustaining a connection to the world around you via the news is also vital to the state of the welfare state), and the individual contemplation and excitement he gets from following the news (“that’s something else”). Along the same line, he explained how his two daily print newspapers (one local, one national) allow him to stay “oriented about what’s going on in society in general” (public connection), while his weekly print paper “makes him wiser too” (personal interest). The narrative we see here is linked to civic experiences of being able to use news content as a political resource and, in terms of actions, to put this into play in various forms of activity in everyday lives. We sug-

gest that this form of public connection is self-actualising. What we mean by self-actualising is that to read news and to feel connected to issues of common concern becomes part of one's identity, which adds an extra layer compared to the narrative of social expectations. It's not just something other people expect, it's something these participants want.

Bent is clearly what Ytre-Arne et al. (2017, p. 31) call a "news omnivore" due to his extensive media repertoire and his news consumption in particular, and while he primarily evoked the narrative of a moral obligation in his interview, he also continuously articulated the pleasure-driven aspect of his news engagement. If we relate this point to Ytre-Arne et al.'s Bourdieu-inspired notion "public sphere capital" (Ibid, p. 31), Bent shows both an ability and a *desire* to participate in public debate. We can see the importance of "desire" in this context in comparison with Mikkel (introduced above). Mikkel certainly demonstrated an ability, but not necessarily a desire, to participate in public debate. Mikkel habitually follows political news but is not really interested in politics. His pleasure-driven media use does not revolve around his news engagement, and although he showed insight into certain public issues, he rarely discussed any civic experiences or revealed his own political position (at least not in relation to his news consumption) in the diaries. Bent, on the contrary, mentioned the content of specific political news stories in his diaries, and he positioned his own knowledge and opinions in relation to orientation-based civic experiences. In his diaries, we find examples of conversations with both friends and colleagues about a local news story on corruption he was following (what Ørmen (2015) has called "public debate in private settings"). Additionally, he is involved in an NGO related to his work and used to be active in political party work (action-based civic experiences). The comparison between Bent and Mikkel serves to underline the distinctiveness of the narrative of news engagement as a genuine interest, and it highlights that action-based civic experiences beyond voting seems to require more than a moral obligation, they require interest and a self-actualising potential.

## Concluding remarks – beyond the informed citizen?

When reviewing the findings of the Public Connection Project, and the diaries of its participants in particular, Couldry et al. (2010, pp. 180–181) pointed out that there is no single ideal type of mediated public connection, "no single way in which people use media to orient themselves to a world of public issues beyond purely private concerns". In our study, the participants also differed in terms of the "what, when and where" of their media use/usage, and we concur with Ytre-Arne et al.'s (2017, p. 32) observation from their study of public connection in Norway that media patterns are "so composite they are difficult to describe" (our translation). However, while media patterns and their role for public connection might be complex and composite, Couldry et al. (2010, p. 183) located a principal value shaping mediated public connection for most people: the value of "keeping up with the news". In this study, we have sought to move beyond and further

qualify this principal value and its implication for people's civic experiences and especially their public connection (Kaun, 2012) by examining its manifestation as narratives of news engagement. We have specifically addressed the ideals, values and normative expectations they hold for themselves and others. We have identified three such narratives: News engagement as a moral obligation (to be informed), as socially expected (to participate, take a stand, discuss) and as a genuine interest and a wish to understand (to critically evaluate). Although we have also stressed the interconnectedness and intertwining of these narratives, we argue that they are distinctive ways of understanding news engagement, which are related to somewhat different civic experiences and thus different forms of public connection and imaginaries of the news user's role as citizen.

Most dominant among the identified narratives was news engagement as a moral obligation, resulting in what we have called a dutiful public connection. While we have strongly adhered to a user-oriented perspective by "departing from the practices and preferences of the news user" (Swart, Peters, & Broersma, 2017c, p. 902), and appreciated the methodological and theoretical flexibility in studying public connection (which is granted by Kaun's (2012, p. 36) argument that "it is not necessarily news that mediates political issues, the model citizen is not necessarily the 'informed citizen' (...) and physical activity is not essential"), it is noteworthy that our participants in general actually *do* equate news and politics, articulating a fairly identical moral obligation regarding (news) media use. The moral obligation resembles the ideal of the informed citizen, and the participants interpret civic or public engagement as primarily action-based. Despite this, they often view their *own* news engagement as insufficient or irrelevant, which transfers into a bad conscience that has also continuously been observed in public connection studies (compare Couldry et al., 2010; Ytre-Arne et al., 2017). We do not suggest that this re-actualises the role of the informed citizen model for studying the intersection of media and civic engagement, but it might indicate that this well-known ideal, stemming from the so-called progressive era (Putnam, 2000; Schudson, 1998), is still as dominant with media users as it is within the civic research agenda in communication and political science (Friedland & Wells, 2018). In other words, the principal value of the media-specific practice of "keeping up with the news" might find its overarching ideal in the idea of the informed citizen. Like Couldry et al. (2010, p. 62), we found it difficult to recruit participants from the manual working classes, which could have added nuances to this observation. Even though our participants cannot, for instance, be defined as news avoiders (Ksiazek et al., 2010), they could aptly be characterised as people "in the middle" (Couldry et al., 2010, p. 195) when it comes to public and civic engagement, that is, people "who sense they have a social responsibility to engage, yet are gradually losing trust in political institutions and, especially, losing faith that their contributions to issues they themselves consider require public resolution will be adequately taken into account by governments" (Couldry et al., 2010, p. 195).

Our findings thus support previous empirical evidence that, when it comes to news engagement, "the fear of disengagement is largely unfounded in a Danish context"

(Ørmen, 2015, p. 204), but we also agree with Couldry et al. (2018) that elite media and governments are right to worry about the decrease in *political* engagement. This is not least, as we have pointed out, because citizens might not feel they are doing anything “civic”, and certainly not “political”, when they consider their *own* engagement with news, in spite of the fact that their narrative of the dutiful public connection (which they strive to achieve) is oriented towards the objects of civic experiences, i.e., “the political, politics or citizenship” (Kaun, 2012, p. 49). This clearly underlines the importance of Couldry et al.’s (2010, p. 188) argument that people might be struggling to build plausible narratives of the self that link citizenship to the rest of everyday life. However, while Couldry et al. mainly ascribe this to a lack of “communities of practice”, it is implied in the narrative of news engagement as a moral obligation that potentially living up to the idealised news engagement could be interpreted as civic engagement by the media users themselves (i.e., the informed *citizen*). This suggests that “the struggle” is just as much about how to point out what it actually means to fulfil the moral obligation. This would explain why some participants with rather extensive news consumption also speak about the conscience-stricken aspects of the narrative. The underlying concern, then, is not only connected with dissatisfaction with political and media institutions and a lack of opportunities to act, but also seems to be a question of how and when you are “sufficiently informed” in today’s “polymedia” (Madianou & Miller, 2013) environment or “media manifold” (Couldry & Hepp, 2016).

This adds a new dimension to Kaun’s (2012, pp. 39–40) objections that the original definition of public connection wrongly assumes that there is already a consensus about what is of common concern and that public connection is sustained by a convergence in the media people consume. For Kaun, establishing what is of shared concern is a process of negotiating and struggling, but we might add that this is perhaps also a process of confusion and a lack of overview, also stressing how – even dutiful – mediated public connection is vulnerable to “information overload” (compare Couldry et al., 2010, p. 181; Ytre-Arne et al., 2017, p. 24). Some of the participants in our study definitely showed signs of feeling excluded, as they distance themselves from politics, although the diaries also show that they are by no means disengaged. The analysis of the narratives thus shows ideals of connection alongside narratives of disconnection, which was also the case in the Public Connection Project (Couldry et al., 2010).

While the narrative of moral obligation was the most dominant, the narratives of news engagement as socially expected and as a genuine interest were more closely related to people’s actual patterns of news engagement. As for social expectations, broad studies within the public connection literature have again and again underlined the importance of people’s occupation and primary social relations for media consumption (Couldry et al., 2010; Ytre-Arne et al., 2017; Ørmen, 2015), just as previous user-anchored studies of Danish news users have pointed out that one of the factors that makes news media *worthwhile* to users is exactly the possibility of establishing a public connection (Schrøder,

2010; Schröder & Kobbarnagel, 2010; Schröder & Larsen, 2010). In this context, the public connection factor “has to do with a medium’s ability to satisfy an individual’s need to both equip himself for the role of citizen-member of the democratic order, and for the role of belonging as a community member in the broadest possible sense” (Schröder & Larsen, 2010, p. 4), which Schröder and colleagues call “civic public connection” and “everyday public connection”, respectively. The narratives of moral obligation and social expectations can be seen as the normative foundations of these distinctive abilities; the civic public connection is a dutiful one in our terminology, whereas we would call the everyday public connection an interpretive one. This helps illustrate different imaginaries of what it means to be a good citizen. For some it is (trying) to stay informed and voting, while for others it means equipping yourself to take part in conversations, and perhaps debates, in everyday life.

We might add that the idea of worthwhileness could have a slight tendency to put too much emphasis on individual preferences when it comes to news engagement, although another one of Schröder and colleagues’ factors for news consumption is “normative constraints” from significant others (Schröder & Larsen, 2010, p. 4). Based on our analysis, however, we see (imagined) normative expectations more as a fundamental factor shaping public connection, rather than a parallel one. As Couldry et al. (2010, p. 181) pointed out in the original Public Connection Project, public connections that were largely independent of media consumption practices were rare (although present). In relation to this, again from the normative viewpoint of the participants, we saw that both the narrative of social expectations and the narrative of genuine interest would most often be combined with the narrative of moral obligation.

Finally, it was also in relation to these two concomitant narratives that we saw indications of differences between participants relating to socio-cultural characteristics and public sphere capital (Ytre-Arne et al., 2017), which future studies of narratives of news engagement could advantageously take into consideration.

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## Appendix 1: Overview of participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Region
Mikkel	M	27	Master's programme	External Lecturer	Capital Region
Lisa	F	24	Bachelor's programme	MA Student	Capital Region
Alice	F	54	Vocational	Supermarket Worker	Region Zealand
Karina	F	54	Academy profession programme	Shop Owner	Region Zealand
Kirsten	F	57	Professional bachelor's programme	Nurse	Region Zealand
Andreas	M	25	General upper secondary	BA Student	Capital Region
Jannick	M	23	General upper secondary	Prof. BA Student	North Denmark
John	M	38	Academy profession programme	IT Consultant	Region Zealand
Elisabeth	F	43	Master's programme	Project Coordinator	Capital Region
Lars	M	59	Vocational	Farmer	Region Zealand
Kurt	M	62	Professional bachelor's programme	Retired Teacher	Capital Region
Ida	F	25	Bachelor's programme	MA Student	Central Denmark
Bent	M	65	Master's programme	School Principal	Central Denmark
Karen	F	33	Academy profession programme	Unemployed	Capital Region
Susan	F	45	Academy profession programme	Technical Assistant	North Denmark
Ingrid	F	65	Vocational	Early retired office clerk	North Denmark
Kristoffer	M	21	General upper secondary	Folk School Student	Central Denmark

## Notes

1. In their diaries, participants addressed the same two questions each week: a) What have you been up to in the last 24 hours? Have you, for example, engaged in any significant conversations, debates or discussions, either via the internet or physically with acquaintances, colleagues or family, within organisations or similar? b) Which media have you spent time on and for what purpose?
2. Thirteen participants said they disagreed or strongly disagreed that they trusted politicians to tell the truth.
3. All participants were asked during their interview whether they stay informed (about society). The direct, but inadequate, translation from the Danish question sketched out in the interview guide (*Vil du sige, at du følger du med i, hvad der foregår?*) would be "Would you say that you follow/keep up with what's going on?"
4. All participants "agreed" or "strongly agreed" in the initial questionnaire that they would always vote in elections. This once again corresponds with the findings in Ytre-Arne et al.'s (2017: 20) report on public connection in Norway, where there was "a unison agreement" among their informants that the right and responsibility to vote was important, even among those who had a minimal connection to the public and did not express a strong political engagement.

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5. The Danish word for newspaper, *avis*, does not include or mean the word “news”, but Mikkel actually adds the Danish word for news, *nyheder*, as a prefix and stresses it: “Nyhedsavis”, which might also be translated *news*-newspaper.

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