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**Repositioning news and public connection in everyday life:  
A user-oriented perspective on inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and  
constructiveness**

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## Repositioning news and public connection in everyday life

### A user-oriented perspective on inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness

**Abstract:** *News has traditionally served as a common ground, enabling people to connect to others and engage with the public issues they encounter in everyday life. This paper revisits these theoretical debates about mediated public connection within the context of a digitalized news media landscape. While academic discussions surrounding these shifts are often explored in terms of normative ideals ascribed to political systems or civic cultures, we propose to reposition the debate by departing from the practices and preferences of the news user instead. Therefore, we deconstruct and translate the concept of public connection into four dimensions that emphasize people's lived experiences: inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness. Situating these in an everyday life framework, this paper advances a user-based perspective that considers the role of news for people in digital societies. Accordingly, it offers a conceptual framework that aims to encapsulate how news becomes meaningful, rather than why it should be.*

**KEYWORDS:** constructiveness, digitalization, engagement, everyday life, inclusiveness, news use, public connection, relevance

### Introduction

Long before the invention of journalism, people exchanged information to make use of each other's knowledge and overcome the problems resulting from humans' limited capabilities to know everything that might impact them. Sharing what was happening helped foster security, community and sociability, and supported everyday decision-making. Yet as mass media became increasingly entrenched in contemporary Western societies, it was journalism that established itself as the primary 'sense making' institution for communicating the issues of the day (Hartley, 1996). News organizations wove themselves into the fabric of everyday life as a bridge between collective entities – communities, governments, cultures, nations – and individuals with 'the news' serving as a common ground, enabling people to connect to others and engage in society. In recent years this taken-for-granted status, especially as it pertains to professional journalism, has been challenged. The amount of data available to us has exploded, as have the means to access and share all this information. The average internet user now can experience more of the world than anyone just a few decades ago could have possibly imagined. However, although the tools to communicate and possibilities are very different, the desire to connect to others and find out what is happening remains (Hermida, 2014).

This paper revisits these theoretical debates about mediated public connection, given that digitalization is affecting how people may use news as a tool to connect. In theoretical debates and empirical research alike, such shifts have typically been explored from the normative expectations ascribed to a certain political or cultural system, emphasizing the potentialities afforded by and drawbacks associated with connective media technologies (e.g. Dahlgren, 2000; Ekström et al., 2014; Strömbäck, 2005). This paper aims to offer a conceptual framework that departs from the everyday practices and preferences of the news user instead, an approach that bears closer affinity to people's lived experiences. Rather than consider *why* people *should* engage in public life, and the necessity of 'good' journalism in this regard, our principle interest is in *how* news *becomes* meaningful, valuable and worthwhile. How might we reconceptualize the roles news actually has in terms of the ways people connect to each other and to broader society? By starting

from such a user-based perspective, the boundaries of seemingly fixed concepts such as ‘the news’ or ‘the public’ quickly start to blur, opening up many pressing questions (Bird, 2011). What exactly does it mean for people to connect socially? What do they understand as the public spaces news links us to? What is ‘the news’ to people anyway? Such a bottom-up approach does not attempt to deny the enduring influence of societal institutions, structures and discourses related to news and journalism to substitute a sovereign individualism emerging in the digital age. Instead, such a user-oriented standpoint helps us to critically interrogate longstanding assumptions about the role, relevance and functions of journalism, allowing us to gain greater analytical purchase on what connecting through news now entails amidst a transforming media landscape (Peters and Broersma, 2016).

We ground this theoretical exploration by reassessing the conceptual lens of ‘public connection’ (see Couldry et al., 2007), particularly as it pertains to consuming and engaging with news. Conducted in 2005, this study found that people’s patterns of connecting through news were strongly influenced by work schedules and domestic routines (see also Larsen, 2000; Martin, 2008). Therefore, we argue that paying attention to the way news is embedded within people’s everyday lives and the familiar, taken-for-granted contexts surrounding its use is crucial to comprehend its meaning and societal significance. We often risk neglecting this, precisely because this commonness makes it such that users hardly register the interrelated nature of these practices. Instead, they blend in as a given (Neal and Murji, 2015). This paradox has inspired a growing number of ‘non-media centric’ media studies, de-centering media in scholarly investigations by taking the broader perspective of everyday life (Krajina et al., 2014). For instance, anthropological studies have devoted considerable attention to the influence of personal media devices for people’s connection, identity-formation and sociability (e.g. Baym, 2010; Ito et al., 2009; Madianou 2014). Yet, comparable work about connecting through *news* from an everyday life perspective is scarce (Bird 2003, 2011; Madianou, 2009).

To some extent, this is unsurprising: news use is only one avenue for public connection. Many other forms of public communication, from press releases to popular culture, may also engender common sentiments (e.g. Jenkins, 2006). What makes the news worthwhile for conceptual exploration is that as cultural form it is unrestricted to specific periods in life, places, or organizations. As a communicative flow that helps facilitate social life, it interweaves with multiple spheres of enquiry, from intimate spaces such as the family and peer groups to abstract institutional entities such as the government or multinational corporations. In addition, its position within Western societies is not a residue of a pre-digital past, but continues to exert a potent discursive influence amongst the public when it comes to arguing for the sociocultural value of journalism (Peters, 2015). Even at a time when newspaper subscriptions and broadcast ratings decline, news still forms a part of daily routines for millions of people. Moreover, as a form of public information, news is typically envisioned as something meant to connect them. This reach, accessibility, and status have made it traditionally important. Our focus, therefore, is specifically on news as a tool for connecting to public life.

This paper not only addresses these thematic gaps and repositions debates about public connection through news in an everyday life framework, it also contributes by deconstructing and translating the concept into four analytical dimensions: inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness. Inclusiveness relates to questions around what issues people connect over and who they are connecting with. Engagement considers the different avenues for connection and the practices news users take part in. Relevance reflects the way news functions within people’s everyday lives and why connecting through news is embedded in their daily customs. Finally, constructiveness concerns the possible outcomes from connecting publicly through news, how this might be valuable to people, and what interests it may advance. It is important to note that

while we keep these four dimensions separate in this paper for reasons of analytic clarity, they should be considered relationally to clarify how news use potentially facilitates forms of both everyday (sociocultural) and civic (political) connection in a digital era. Before turning to this framework, we first elaborate on its theoretical backdrop: the changing nature of information in public life and scholars' traditional conceptualizations of the connective and engaging potentialities of news.

### **Connecting through the news**

Public information has always been part of the social fabric of everyday life. Sharing knowledge enables one to engage in society and act based on such collective information. By packaging news into newspapers and broadcasts, journalistic institutions have set the public agenda for decades, acting as people's major access point to society and influencing many parts of social life, from topics of conversation to doing business to the performance of politics. Recent shifts in the media landscape have eroded that monopoly. Anyone with internet access and basic digital skills can now broadcast 'news', broadly defined, and with the rise of social media, the threshold for sharing and publishing has significantly lowered. Moreover, audiences can follow and redistribute news when- and wherever they want, allowing them to bypass the journalistic institutions that traditionally provided news and rely on other sources of public information instead. This has resulted in novel news media repertoires (Hasebrink and Dörmeyer 2012, Swart et al. 2016) in which users navigate between a multitude of information outlets.

These changes in how news is produced, used and distributed potentially affect how people connect to each other. First, it may expand the boundaries of what is perceived as public. Even though the advent of digital media does not automatically mean that people read, consider or respond to supplied content (Dreher, 2009; Macnamara, 2015), they have drastically simplified the process of voicing one's concerns, sharing them with a large audience and forming collectives around these issues. This means that, at least in theory, people have opportunities to shape the social agenda and to become part of it as 'affective publics' (Papacharissi and Fatima Oliveira, 2012), impacting what is defined as 'the news'. Second, it broadens the possible ways in which people can engage with news or public issues in general. Civic engagement is usually a collective endeavor and digitalization offers new ways to find, connect, and form socially-mediated publics (Baym and boyd, 2012). Forms of engagement have become increasingly diverse, from homemade websites to hosting webinars (Gauntlett, 2011), and many new, often interest-based communicative spaces may be more 'political' than they appear at first glance (Graham and Harju, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Third, the transforming habits of news use also impact associated rituals: consuming news may become relevant or irrelevant in different ways than before. Now that news use becomes less centered around fixed places, times, and patterns of everyday life, the overarching reasons for why we connect through news may become different, challenging journalism's symbolic and social significance (Broersma and Peters, 2013). Finally, connecting through the news may allow people to achieve certain goals through its content. While digitalization offers new avenues to engage with news, these are of minor use when they are not perceived as constructive by users for navigating everyday life or addressing and solving 'matters of common concern' (Couldry et al., 2007).

Making sense of these shifts involves looking into a long tradition of scholarly work. The idea of public connection is inherent to many different concepts employed within media studies and related fields, from civic participation, social capital and participatory democracy to cultural citizenship, social cohesion and community (see Bakardjieva, 2003; Barnhurst, 2003; Baym, 2010; Bennett et al., 2011; Boulianne, 2009; Shah et al., 2001). A much smaller body of work focuses on connecting through news specifically and the relation between journalism and public connection

(e.g. Couldry and Markham, 2008; Heikkilä et al., 2010; Ekström et al., 2014; Vidali, 2010). Most of these works analyze mediated public connection from the viewpoint of a political model or a civic culture (e.g. Dahlgren, 2000; Ekström et al., 2014; Strömbäck, 2005). For instance, the civic actions that public connection can potentially elicit are considered central in many models of democracy, from representative to participatory and deliberative theories (Couldry et al., 2007). The underlying idea is that participation of citizens legitimizes the democratic system: if citizens do not vote, politicians cannot claim to represent them (Dahlgren, 2009). These and other accounts emphasize how public connection *should* take place in a functional democratic system and, if these normative expectations uphold in practice, considering what role journalism has to play and what impact digitalization may be having.

While such a normative framework makes us aware of the potential implications of public (dis)connection, we argue that to fully understand how people actually *use* such a shared frame of reference, the concept could be more explicitly repositioned from the perspective of the news user, specifically in terms of their *shaping and experiencing of publicness within everyday life*.<sup>2</sup> Herein lies a number of advantages. First, from a theoretical point of view, it conceptualizes public connection as a dynamic process rather than an ideal state to be achieved, offering a better parallel to the volatility of the current media ecology. Second, from the standpoint of validity, such an audience-centred perspective on the role of news in fostering public connection is crucial for theory that is not only internally-consistent, but also testable against people's lived experiences (Peters and Witschge, 2015). Finally, in an attempt to embrace interdisciplinary insights, it expands our understanding of the ways people may use news to connect in a digitalized world by encompassing both political and cultural facets of connection, as well as their interrelation.

Previous literature on (mediated) public connection has fruitfully explored and clarified the concept and its potential theoretical purchase and typically departs from four assumptions. First, it highlights that public connection is a general *orientation* towards what lies beyond individuals' private worlds (Couldry and Markham, 2008). Thus, the concept is relatively neutral and generic, in contrast to viewpoints that privilege notions such as political affiliation. Second, the concept assumes that individuals are part of a *larger framework*, be it a political (members of a political party), civic (participants in an online group), social (a sports club) or cultural one (people sharing the same lifestyle), sustained by a certain commonality or overlap (Kaun, 2012). Public connection is about the orientation to one or several of these (Ong and Cabañes, 2011).<sup>3</sup> Third, public connection is viewed as a starting point and a *prerequisite*: it has, at least theoretically, the potential to foster engagement and participation (Dahlgren, 2009). Finally, although scholars differ in the importance they attach to different facilitators for sustaining people's public connection, they do agree that *news media* play an important role because news has become ubiquitous in society (Deuze, 2012). In other words, we can define public connection as *the various shared frames of reference that enable individuals to engage and participate in cultural, social, civic and political networks in everyday life*.

Building upon these previous literatures, we identify two predominant research strands which, when broken down and further translated into four analytical dimensions, comprise our proposed conceptual framework. The first research strand sees public connection as a tool for political citizens to fulfill their roles within democratic states. The news here identifies problems of common concern within the political framework and thus helps set the political agenda (Coleman and Ross, 2010). Moreover, the news aids citizens' decision-making in elections by showing how the actions of political officials relate to such collective problems (Strömbäck, 2005), and supports their sense of agency needed to participate in and engage with politics. The emphasis here thus lies on *inclusiveness* (who connects about what?) and *constructiveness* (to what end do people connect?). The second research strand considers citizens as part of a shared civic

culture: they speak the same language, hold similar values, etcetera. Because the focus here is on how citizenship is enacted, both people’s actions as political citizens and within the culture of everyday life are seen as valid and meaningful expressions of citizenship (Dahlgren, 2009). This means that the issues that citizens connect about, and are therefore likely to appear in the news, are not just restricted to the scope of politics but may include any issue that might be relevant in people’s daily social interactions (Heikkilä et al., 2010). The value of news, therefore, lies in its ability to help people navigate within personal, professional, cultural and political networks and in showing how individuals’ everyday life is related to those of others. These studies focus on *engagement* (how do people connect?) and *relevance* (why connect?). In the remainder of this paper, we demonstrate how these four dimensions – considered in concert – help to delineate our conceptual understandings of what connecting through the news means and looks like for users (see Table 1), to understand how people connect to public life in the digital age.

<i>Public Connection as ...</i>	<i>Inclusiveness</i>	<i>Engagement</i>	<i>Relevance</i>	<i>Constructiveness</i>
<b>Primary focus</b>	Informational content, coverage, and audiences	Means of accessing and interacting	Contexts of consumption and usage	Consequences from news-related practices
<b>Impact of digitalization</b>	Users can navigate news, add issues to the agenda and form collectives around subjects on their own terms. This fragments audiences, weakening the mass communication idea of ‘the news’.	Affordances of new technologies allow diverse forms of engagement, lower thresholds for participation, and facilitate finding others to engage with.	New patterns of news use form, changing the transcendent values associated with such habits.	More widely available and controllable data in personalizable news environments gives new opportunities for users to become motivated, form goals and act upon these.
<b>User-based considerations in everyday life</b>	To what extent, if any, do users’ news interests intersect with journalistic news agendas and who is affected?	What does it mean to engage or disengage and how does this happen?	When and why in the flow of daily life and across the lifespan does news become relevant ?	How and under what circumstances does news help people achieve something?
<b>Ideal-typical value of ‘the news’</b>	Promotes issue awareness and helps forms common frames of reference	Facilitates deliberation, reflection, participation.	Gives meaning and structures that link people to broader frameworks	Enables informed civic and political action

**Table 1:** Four dimensions of public connection from a news-user emphasis

## Inclusiveness

The first dimension, inclusiveness, considers what issues people connect over and who they are connecting with. Traditionally, news media have functioned as one of the major bridges between public and private. They allow people to experience what is happening outside their own communities and who is involved in such public issues: it is about what is accessible, visible, and preferably about issues that are universal and collective (Coleman and Ross, 2010). Public information is not just helpful for people for navigating everyday life and supporting participation in society; having a common access point to the world also creates a sense of belonging (Schröder, 2015). Anderson (1991) describes how the rise of print media served as a catalyst for the emergence of the modern nation as ‘imagined community’ (p.46). Because people in the country began to read the same newspapers at approximately the same time, they began to recognize themselves as part of something larger, transcending the borders of their towns. Similarly, in the early days of television with limited channel choice, TV news became a point of reference among audiences not just because the same content was consumed simultaneously, but also because watching the news became attached to other daily routines in the household such as dinner times (Madianou, 2009). In other words, historically the mere act of reading, listening to, or watching the news in private settings has nonetheless made people feel part of larger collectives.<sup>4</sup> People express such belonging through feelings of connection, similar to how fans emotionally invest in the objects of their fandom (Barnes, 2013), or more actively through forms of engagement and participation.

The recent changes in the news media landscape alter this function of news media as societal integrators. Digitalization broadens the issues people can connect about through news and with whom they can do so. The almost unlimited media choice to some extent causes people to move to different combinations of news outlets (see Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2010 for an overview). Therefore, it may diminish the overlap in content consumed, decreasing people’s common experience and diversifying their rituals and habits. Thus, while online users with similar interests become more visible, for example through sharing news on social media, at the same time, the collectivity of news that makes it a possible ground for social connection may diminish. Moreover, audiences not only have the possibility to go anywhere for news, meaning that attention to legacy platforms can no longer be assumed, but by posting, sharing and commenting people can now also add to ‘the news’ whatever issue interests them, setting different social agendas in different places. The costs and efforts of voicing one’s concerns have decreased dramatically, meaning that – at least theoretically – people have gained greater possibilities to voice and form collectives around what they perceive as publicly relevant information (Gauntlett, 2011). Therefore, the socially integrative force of news media becomes more dispersed.

News media, usually tailored to a heterogeneous audience, aim to connect their audiences to specific, publicly relevant features of society. Therefore, they have to distinguish between public and private issues. These boundaries, however, are contested and under continuous renegotiation. Kaun (2012) therefore argues that the public is not just a space where common issues are discussed: it is where the struggle about what constitutes public affairs takes place. What people understand as public information is likely to expand now that more and more information previously restricted to people’s personal spaces becomes accessible. An increasing numbers of online services encourage people to make private affairs, information and assets public, from sharing emotions and personal information on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, to contributing to general knowledge on Wikipedia, and sharing rooms, tools and cars on AirBnB, Peerby and UberPOP (John, 2013). Surveillance cameras, government databases and social networks increasingly track our everyday movements, leading to a datafication of society



(Coleman and Ross 2010; Lewis, 2014). These trends continue to blur the boundaries between publicness and privateness, which by now have become hybrid concepts (Chadwick, 2013).

The changing boundaries between what is perceived as being public or private redefine what is generally understood as ‘the news’ (Swart, Peters and Broersma, 2016). Whereas the term used to be reserved for a specific genre following specific guidelines, the concept is now used to cover many different kinds of information, from breaking news to investigative longreads to Facebook feeds.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, ‘news’ is no longer something exclusively made by journalists: they have to share that role with bloggers, activists and social media users. This raises the question how news can still be distinguished from other types of information and what is the ‘news’ that journalism is supposed to bring. Little is known about what *news users* now have come to see as news and how that relates to journalists’ ideas of publicly relevant matters. Therefore, faced with massive competition for audiences’ attention, these understandings of ‘public issues’ may become crucial for news media trying to maintain their audiences and societal relevance.

## Engagement

The engagement dimension of public connection speaks to how having something in common enables news users to participate in society. Traditionally, public engagement was strongly institutionalized and structured by mass media, unions and political parties. However, the past decades have shown decreased public interaction with such institutions. Fewer people vote in elections, go to church or unite themselves in interest groups (Heikkilä et al., 2011). The declining audiences of newspapers and broadcasters and the rise of social and digital news media fit within this broader trend where traditional institutions are losing influence in people’s everyday lives. Combined with declining trust in press and politics and worries about the lack of non-verbal cues in digital communication replacing old venues of public life, this has led to concerns about a possible decline in civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). However, recent studies have noted that there is no decline, but that civic engagement with news and public issues simply takes a different shape by becoming detached from the ‘macropolitics’ of political institutions, shifting towards single-issue campaigning and do-it-yourself politics (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013).

Digitalization – at least in terms of its potentialities – changes how we connect to each other by bringing people together who might otherwise never have met. Online, individuals and organizations can produce vast streams of content that have the potential to reach a worldwide audience who can interact with it. Of course, significant discrepancies persist between different actors’ ability to create content and generate attention. Nonetheless, the rise of social media makes it easier to find and communicate with others. Moreover, because online content creation is not bound to specific formats, the forms that engagement through news takes have become increasingly diverse. Therefore, scholars have attempted to redefine civic engagement within the current, digitalized media landscape. Some argue that civic engagement does not just entail active forms of participation, but also awareness-type activities. For instance, Barnes (2013) criticizes work on citizen journalism for ignoring the majority of online users that are simply spectators or ‘engaged listeners’, arguing that consuming news in a passive manner may be just as valuable for formulating opinions, decision-making and everyday problem-solving. Similarly, Banaji and Buckingham (2013) argue that civic engagement goes beyond the boundaries of ‘politics’, stating that it can encompass involvement in publicness both in- or outside electoral politics. Adler and Goggin (2005) argue now that citizens are becoming increasingly disengaged from collective bodies representing them, civic engagement should include all activity meant to improve conditions for others, whether such action is taken collectively or individually.

Although these three reconceptualizations might be more closely aligned to people's actual practices of engagement, and also help to nuance concerns about disengagement, Ekman and Amnå (2012) warn for conceptual stretching: if 'civic engagement' means anything from vegetarianism to voting, it might become an ineffective concept in research. Just as importantly, while blogging, commenting and the like may mirror traditional civic engagement in potentially improving conditions for others, it remains unclear whether such actions hold equal social value to users. As Vidali (2010) notes, the core issue is not whether people's behavior is labeled as engagement or disengagement. Rather, it is about tracking when people feel connected with news stories, current events, others, or publicness as a whole: what do they perceive as engaging or disengaging? A user-based perspective could thus bring clarity to these discussions about what engaging with news and public affairs is and when civic engagement becomes meaningful.

In the same way, declining subscriptions at newspapers and viewing rates for TV news bulletins do not necessarily mean that people's interest in news has decreased. For example, teens tend to use news media less frequently than older age groups and instead rely on family members and other adults to find out what is going on (Costera Meijer, 2007; Marchi, 2012). Likewise, some might find the content that is presented on Facebook, Instagram or digital slow journalism platforms more inclusive of their own concerns, more engaging and constructive, or more relevant to their personal lives. Internationally, news media repertoire studies have found many patterns of news use in which people combine news from digital and non-digital platforms, or even neglect traditional news media as a whole (Swart et al., 2016; Schröder and Kobbarnagel, 2010; Trilling and Schoenbach, 2013). Key here is to understand why such alternatives might be more valuable for people's public connection, a question closely related to the way that news is situated in people's everyday lives.

## **Relevance**

The third dimension, relevance, addresses how and why the acts of connecting through news are embedded in people's everyday life. As mentioned above, connecting through news mostly takes place in fixed patterns: it's mainly habitual. Habits are more than mere repeated action: news use is a ritual that contains value beyond the practice itself (Peters, 2012; Larsen, 2000). For example, watching sports summaries together on Sundays is not just about the content consumed or the weekly structure it provides: it can support the notion of friendship. Likewise, reading the newspaper has repeatedly been found to back people's feeling of being a good citizen and establish social prestige, because norms dictate following the news is a part of civic duty (e.g. Berelson, 1949; Bennett et al., 2011; Couldry et al., 2007).

The ubiquitous availability of news media has resulted in a wide variety of new user patterns and habits, helping people to maintain relations with close and more distant others. Although many still sit down daily for the eight o'clock news broadcast, digitalization has also led to alternative news media repertoires that are no longer necessarily centered around fixed places and times. For example, Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink (2014) found that many smartphone users check a fixed number of apps and websites continuously during the day in a circular manner to stay on top of things; they perform these 'checking cycles' while waking up, waiting for the bus, and even during social events. Thus, news is becoming integrated in the patterns of everyday life in different ways, affecting the transcendent values attached to these new news media repertoires. Bird (2003) notes that while journalists tend to rate news media based on its success in conveying reliable and understandable information, news users judge the possibility to insert news stories in their everyday lives and to make them subjects of discussion. Mere availability of news is insufficient to attract people's attention: news has to be meaningful and perhaps enjoyable too (Costera Meijer, 2013). With so many alternatives to choose from, the relevance of the news they

provide is becoming increasingly important for people deciding which outlets and content to pay attention to. Martin (2008) found that relevance and awareness reinforce each other: people pay more attention to what is relevant, and greater awareness in turn increases the relevance of news to users.

News can be relevant for people's public connection in various ways. Sometimes, news may have a clear overlap with people's everyday lives, when it concerns the place they live in or work, for instance. Here, there is a direct relation between connecting through news and fulfilling one's role as a neighbor or employee. However, this is only true for a minority of all the information journalists produce. Most news does not directly impact those who use it (Dobelli, 2013). Yet, in practice, millions of people use the news every day, even though the norms of using news as part of one's civic duty are becoming weaker (Bennett et al., 2011). This is because people can and do attach relevance to news, even if its content does not affect them personally. Martin (2008) found that, when framed in a specific way and told in a manner that makes the story seem credible, news that does not concern its user can still be perceived as relevant when it affirms one's orientation or supports one's identity formation. Moreover, news is not used in a social vacuum; in everyday life, individuals are part of many social circles, from families to sports clubs and nation states. As Schröder (2015) notes, the 'worthwhileness' of news for public connection is that its content supports these relationships. Thus, following the news is not just about what affects you personally, but also about what concerns those around you. More insight in such transcendent values that translate people's everyday news practices into rituals may help to understand why news might or might not be relevant to users.

### **Constructiveness**

While the relevance dimension considers the value of connecting through news in itself and when it relates to people's everyday lives, people do not just do so because it is relevant: it may also help them achieve certain ends. This final dimension of mediated public connection, constructiveness, has been widely discussed in journalism studies, especially in terms of a lack of it. While most news is good at raising awareness for problems and conflicts, journalists typically do not offer any solutions or forms of closure. Couldry et al. (2007) found this may lead to feelings of helplessness and a lack of agency, causing some audiences to tune out. The problem is that while people may learn about and become engaged with issues through news, there is little they can do about it. This lack of action-based contexts or possibilities is central to the public/civic and constructive journalism movements (Gyldensted, 2011; Glasser, 1999). In addition, connecting through news might be perceived as unconstructive if its everyday usefulness is low. News functions in various ways unrelated to politics; it might serve as a topic of conversation, help people to find a job, inform about upcoming leisure activities, and so forth. When news products fail to allow people to navigate their everyday lives more effectively, people might rate them as less worthwhile and move to different sources instead (Schröder and Kobbernagel, 2010). Thus, constructiveness can also be understood in a broader, more mundane manner.

The recent changes in the news media landscape might affect the constructiveness of news in multiple ways. First, the increased amount of information to connect with means that, in theory, there is more knowledge available for people to base their actions on. Q&A services such as Quora make use of this principle, facilitating solution-finding by connecting people with others' expertise. However, the increased availability and variety of news does not automatically make it more valuable to people crafting a solution to a problem. The volume might even make it more difficult to process and rate all information out there. Second, digitalization and the development of algorithms on news websites make it possible to personalize people's news supply. Tools can

automatically filter the news for content that is likely to be most constructive to the user. Until now, however, few people actively make use of such personalization options because their setup takes too much effort, they might miss important information, or because they prefer journalists to select news for them (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2014). Third, digitalization opens up many possible ways to engage with the news, from sharing articles with interested others to writing blogposts. This broadens what people can do with the news. Whereas reading a newspaper or visiting a news website used to be a mostly individual process, the rise of social media has reinforced news' function as a social tool that can be used to support relationships. Of course, people have always been able to discuss news with others face-to-face or cut out newspaper articles to share, but social media 'buttons' and 'feeds' make it much easier to do so. Moreover, digitalization lowers the threshold for people seeking to join communities of interest to tackle problems they cannot solve on their own. Finally, now that new user habits and rituals have formed, connecting through news becomes embedded in people's everyday lives in a different way. For example, smartphones enable people to check the news continuously throughout the day wherever they go, making it possible to alter behavior almost immediately when notified of everything from terrorist alerts to public transport delays. News is offered in other forms and often by non-journalistic organizations, enabling different forms of use.

A user perspective would address to what extent public connection through news is perceived as helpful and constructive by people. More news is available than ever before, but when is such content perceived as helpful? Many modes of online participation have been added to the news users' toolbox but what forms of constructiveness do these take, and under what circumstances? Statistics about commenting on news websites, for instance, suggest that many users find it more fruitful to only read through others' comments than to also craft a response (Bakker, 2013). To sum: studies about the varieties of civic and everyday value that mediated public connection holds for people are scarce. Finding out what people's expectations are when connecting through news and how news functions within their daily routines may help gain greater insight into how to facilitate constructiveness.

## **Conclusion**

Building upon previous theoretical debates, this paper has offered a conceptual framework to study how digitalization affects the ways news users connect to society amidst a changing media landscape. After teasing out four dimensions of mediated public connection, we argued how these can be used to fruitfully analyze public connection within the context of everyday life. We propose to move away from grand normative frameworks to people's own perceptions of the value of connecting through news, in order to gain an understanding of public connection that is more closely aligned with their everyday lived realities. While previous work in terms of ideal political or cultural systems may make us aware of the potential consequences of the current shifts in mediated public connection, we propose to explore the question of how *news users* understand and negotiate public connection in response to all these changes. To what extent do people perceive shifts in the media landscape as facilitating or inhibiting their connection through the news? Our proposed dimensions of inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness offer a conceptual lens that repositions public connection research to help formalize emerging lines of enquiry within a user-driven framework. The questions of what people connect about, how they connect, why connection is meaningful and what ends can be achieved through public connection are strongly interrelated, and taken in concert address different angles necessary to understand what connecting through the news in the digital age is and means.

A combined analysis of inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness from the user-oriented point of view advanced in this article could aid future public connection research in at least two areas. First, the rapid technological and journalistic innovations of the past years call for new analyses of the current practices of mediated public connection and the everyday life contexts in which these become meaningful. To what extent, for instance, does connecting through news still equal connecting through news media at a time when journalism audiences decline? If not, do people switch to other sources of connection or might they tune out from public life completely? Second, different facilitators of news have incorporated the inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness dimensions of public connection in different ways, and with different visions, yet little is known about how these translations compare to people's experiences and expectations. What does it mean to facilitate people's public connection through news? Finding answers to questions like these may help generate understandings into what exactly connection to public life in a digitalized news landscape entails.

Academic interest in how people use the news to connect does not only stem from connection, of course, but also from concerns about potential disconnections that the digitalization of the news media landscape might introduce. Previous studies have found that people's interest in what is going on around them has not decreased (Couldry et al., 2007; Eliasoph, 1998), yet print newspapers and broadcasters continue to face declining subscription numbers, viewing rates and advertisement revenue. While we do not aim to argue that people's public connection through news is journalism's panacea, understanding what drives it better could help gain indispensable insights into why some do and others do not disconnect from journalism. Such an awareness of the value that the news (continues to) have for connecting to public life does not just address the economic issues of a news industry struggling for survival. It may also give clues into how the news might become more closely connected to the issues people encounter in everyday life, which in turn could increase journalism's societal value and help confront the challenges of politics aiming to reach and engage a dispersed citizenry.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The functions these novel avenues for engagement fulfill in people's everyday life, though, may be different from that of traditional forms.

<sup>2</sup> While beyond this paper's scope, there are echoes here of debates around mediatization in terms of how new media technologies are 'moulding forces' that shape society, institutions, and culture, impacting the communication within by individuals (see Hepp et al., 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Such frameworks frequently intersect, of course. Members of ethnic and religious groups in society, for instance, often orient toward and circulate between different sentiments depending on the context. Nationality and gender similarly traverse political, civic, social and cultural trajectories.

<sup>4</sup> This echoes Durkheim's (1995) work on the ritualistic aspects of news media, stating that news use acts as a means for people to demonstrate solidarity and establish a common focus and mental state. In practice, society is not as ordered and the sense of belonging news media invoke

is highly affected by power structures. However, because news media present themselves as social integrators, such claims may still affect people's public connection if users believe them.

<sup>5</sup> This does not mean 'the news' as a normative concept has completely lost its role, but rather, that different ideas about what 'news' is and should be appear to be emerging alongside this.

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