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# Haven't you heard?

Connecting through news and journalism in everyday life

**Joëlle Swart**

**rijksuniversiteit groningen**

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Connecting through news and journalism in everyday life

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# Table of contents

**7. News conversations in the everyday. The connective role of current affairs in location-based, work-oriented and leisure-focused social media communities 115**

## List of tables and figures

# 1. Introduction[1]

## 1.1    Changing news use, changing connectedness?

From Facebook and Snapchat to news apps, public screens and smartwatches: never in history have people had so many opportunities and avenues for attending to the news. The average news user can choose from an unprecedented array of platforms, sources and technologies to find out what is going on, within an almost unlimited number of spatiotemporal contexts. This not only affects how people are informing themselves on current affairs, but also influences the way news acts as common frames of reference on a social level. All the updates that news users are confronted with in conjunction provide a general frame of reference for public life. Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) call this our "public connection", defined as people's collective orientations to "a space where, in principle, problems about shared resources are or should be resolved" (p. 7). Because news is used by a large number of people, these frames of reference are not only helpful for news users individually to gain a basic understanding of public affairs, but also constitute a common ground between people. In other words, the ubiquity of news makes it a form of social glue in people's everyday communications. For example, people's mutual knowledge about current affairs makes for an easy conversation starter around the coffee machine at work, in the pub, or when meeting someone new.

Traditionally, mass media institutions have been of major importance for facilitating this socially integrative function of news. Packaging current affairs information in newspapers and broadcasts, journalism established itself as the key entry point for finding out the issues of the day throughout the 20th century (Couldry, 2003), what Hartley (1996, p. 32) called "the primary sense-making vehicle of modernity." With its growing reach and accessibility, these news consumers started to recognize themselves as part of larger collectives or "imagined

communities" (Anderson, 1991). Thus, it facilitated a sense of belonging to fellow readers, viewers and citizens (Madianou, 2009). Through establishing shared frames of reference, mass media have long supported the various ways in which people engage and participate within different social contexts, from the neighborhood to the workplace. A long tradition of scholarly work describes how, in this respect, journalism has operated as tools for daily living (Berelson, 1949; Bentley, 2001; Heikkilä, Kunelius, & Ahva, 2010).

However, recent shifts in the media landscape challenge this monopoly of legacy news media institutions. With the rise of many digital alternatives for users to find out what is going on, the daily routines that used to sustain professional journalism as a common ground are becoming less self-evident. While traditional journalism brands and news outlets still remain popular (Newman et al., 2017), legacy news media are facing increasing competition from novel players such as online-only news outlets, social media, blogs, fora and news aggregation sites, all hunting for news users' attention. Users can navigate all these access points on their own terms. Moreover, mobile technology has widened the range of spatiotemporal contexts for news use. Smartphones and tablets allow people to check news on the go when- and wherever they prefer, no longer being hindered by specific broadcasting times or physical places for news use (Dimmick, Feaster, & Hoplamazian, 2011; Van Damme et al., 2015). This enlarged media choice means that news audiences may become increasingly fragmented. This scenario has provoked fears about a potential decrease in overlap in the content that users consume, and thus, news as a common frame of reference. Second, new technologies have not only expanded people's opportunities for consuming news, but have also broadened the productive activities that news users can engage in, such as sharing, liking, commenting, recommending or even creating news (Picone, 2016). Although such activities have always been part of news use – from cutting out print articles in the newspaper for a friend to talking about the latest gossip with the neighbors – through social media tools, news can now be shared with one simple click that sends it to a potentially very large audience (Hermida, 2014; cf. Gauntlett, 2011). News sharing therefore no longer pertains to people in the direct vicinity of the news user, but has become a public act. This has opened up the possibility for users themselves to influence the distribution of journalism and to add issues to the news agenda, forming alternative frames of reference (Picone, De Wolf, & Robijt, 2016).

This brings us to the three central research questions that this doctoral thesis explores. *First, how do people perceive and experience news as a tool that facilitates shared frames of reference towards public life in a digitalized news media landscape? Second, how do different news use practices and emerging media platforms shape people's public connection? And third, how can we conceptualize the notion of public connection in a manner that accounts for people's shifting perceptions and practices of connecting through news within different social contexts?* These questions matter because they relate to broader discussions in media and

communication studies about journalism's societal legitimacy, both economically and culturally. Traditionally, the public relevance of news media for its audiences was anchored to its function of filling the gaps between people's private worlds and everything that was going on beyond these spheres. Thus, it helped audiences recognize the issues that may affect their everyday life and provided the information necessary for engagement (Heikkilä et al., 2010). While journalism has never had a monopoly in this sense, and the common ground it conveyed was far from neutral, in the past news media have been highly successful fulfilling this function, with widespread habits of news consumption sustaining it.

The current developments in the news media landscape, however, challenge this idea. Newspapers and broadcasters are facing increasing competition from alternative providers of news. If users can also get an overview of the issues of the day by scrolling through their Facebook timeline and looking at the news highlighted by their family and friends, why would they still turn on the television to watch the eight o'clock bulletin or subscribe to a newspaper? Previous public connection research (Couldry et al., 2007; Vidali, 2010) found that news users tied their practices of connecting to public life through news to the value of dutiful citizenship. These views echo normative ideals about the regular consumption of news and journalism as expected forms of democratic engagement (Schudson, 1998). However, Bennett et al. (2011) suggest that this perceived obligation to consume news is increasingly eroding. They describe a shift from dutiful to self-actualizing forms of citizenship, in which the idea of "being a good citizen" becomes disconnected from institutional participation, including paying regular attention to news media institutions. Instead, citizenship is enacted in many different individualized and expressive ways. The question then becomes which "self-transcendent values" (Ekström, Olsson, & Shehata, 2014) and social imaginaries (Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015) may replace this notion of civic duty. What is it now that sustains the connective role of news? After all, as Heikkilä et al. (2010) argue, for digitally-mediated habits of public connection to function, as for traditional rituals of connective news use, they too are likely to need "a certain shared, but perhaps vaguely articulated, ontological ritualistic dimension" (p. 279–280).

Remaining relevant and attracting audiences becomes pressing especially for commercial news companies, which increasingly face financial issues. Because online advertising revenues are far lower than the profits that were made with print and broadcasting ads, many traditional news media companies have been obliged to rethink their business models (Kaye & Quinn, 2010). In The Netherlands, paid newspaper circulations have dropped 45% since the year 2000. Because this decline is not sufficiently offset by the increase in digital sales, this has resulted in severe budget cuts (Bakker, 2017). While in the broadcasting industry the situation is less dire, ratings do show that the time that Dutch people spend watching television continues to decrease (Stichting Kijkonderzoek, 2017). At the same time, 79% of Dutch news users are now employing online media such as

news sites, apps and social media for news on a weekly basis (Newman et al., 2017). These changes have inspired growing attention amongst Dutch academics into news audience research in recent decades, in particular around what the changing media landscape means for what people do with news and why they engage in such practices. Noteworthy here is the work of Costera Meijer, who since the publication of "De toekomst van het nieuws" [The future of the news] in 2006, has been advocating strongly for a user-centric perspective to journalism studies scholarship that highlights what people are currently experiencing as valuable journalism or "quality news" (Costera Meijer, 2006; 2007; 2013). A range of subsequent studies have provided much insight in news use in The Netherlands and what a changing media landscape means for what people do with news and why they engage in such practices. For example, they show that while digital innovations such as smartphones and news apps have lowered the threshold to using news and while patterns such as the "checking cycle" to stay on top of news have become fixed parts of users' routines, other previously predicted developments such as an increase in the use of personalized news and a shift from passive news consumption to participatory news to which users actively contribute have not become reality (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015; Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2014). What still remains largely unanswered however, is the question what these shifts in news use mean for the connective role of news amongst Dutch users, and to what extent news is still functioning as an avenue for forms of public connection within people's different communities.

This thesis thus investigates how people are experiencing and shaping the connective role of news in a digitalized media landscape, and how the notion of public connection can be reconceptualized accordingly. While there has been previous work within journalism studies exploring these shifts, many of these studies employ an etic approach. These scholars depart from existing political or cultural notions such as deliberative democracy, public engagement, civic cultures, and so forth, to analyze the democratic and civic potential and limitations of novel, digital technologies (e.g. Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Boulianne, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009; Ekström et al., 2014). In other words, these works study mediated public connection in a top-down manner and aim to test and verify preconceived theories about the way news is used and engaged with, in order to advance current theoretical models about the societally integrative function of news in digital societies. This thesis in contrast employs an emic and inductive perspective to people's behavior (see Jensen, 2010; Hanitzsch, 2007; Pike, 1967). It argues that in order to understand what public connection through news amidst a rapidly developing news media landscape entails, it is more fruitful to depart from the practices and preferences of the *news user* instead. Thus, it explores how news becomes valuable to people for bridging the gaps between their private and public worlds from the bottom-up, emphasizing their own perceptions and experiences.

Starting from the point-of-view of the news user and employing a bottom-up approach contributes to existing public connection research in three different ways. First, while previous work on public connection offers much in the way of theoretical inspiration, there are still relatively few empirical accounts of how news users understand their links to public life and how they orient themselves to it. Moreover, the rapidly evolving media landscape means that such user-centric studies quickly become outdated. Couldry et al.'s (2007) classic study on news and public connection, for instance, was conducted in 2005, and thus predates the rise of Twitter, Facebook, and the widespread adoption of the smartphone. While their work over the past years has inspired a handful public connection studies in other countries (Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015; Kaun, 2012; Ong & Cabañes, 2011), the number of recent user-centric studies on the connective role of news remains low. Second, while acknowledging that "politics" is a broad concept that stretches beyond electoral politics and formal democratic contexts, previous work usually limits its empirical analyses of the connective role of news to the ways in which news becomes valuable for people's identity as democratic citizens (e.g. Couldry et al., 2007; Ekström et al., 2014; Hovden & Moe, 2017). However, news may also resonate as a tool to connect on a cultural level, for example within the workplace, the neighborhood or the family. Letting news users define which spheres of everyday life are relevant for public connection and using a bottom-up approach opens up the investigation and gives the opportunity to explore such fields of everyday life where news plays a connective role, even unexpected ones. Third, the approach taken in this thesis reconceptualizes public connection as a dynamic process. Thus, it does not treat public connection as an ideal state that needs to be achieved or constantly upheld, but acknowledges that people's practices and preferences regarding the connective role of news may fluctuate over time and between different contexts. An emic perspective encourages a research approach that attempts to capture these variations.

To summarize, this thesis thus aims to deepen, update and expand existing knowledge about to what extent news facilitates public connection in a digitalized media landscape from the perspective of the news user. Building upon recent debates in journalism studies about the changing nature of news audiences, it sets out to reconceptualize the notion of public connection accordingly. To this end, incorporating insights from social theory and political communication around the role of news and information in democratic societies, the thesis deconstructs the concept of public connection into four analytical prisms. This way, it offers four lenses that can be employed empirically to understand what connecting publicly in the current news media landscape is and what this means to users (see Chapter 2 for a full discussion). First, the thesis proposes the dimension of inclusiveness to explore what issues people connect over and who shares such frames of reference. Now that the notion of news talk around the coffee machine is also increasingly taking place on platforms such as Twitter and WhatsApp, for whom does news hold a societally integrative function?

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In a digitalized media landscape, what becomes the conversational news that appeals to our desire to establish social relationships? Second, the angle of engagement considers the various practices that mediated public connection can take. New platforms and technologies permit people to consume and engage with news in novel ways. Does this mean that people now construct their shared frames of reference differently than before? What is the public value of these new digital news practices and what counts as being engaged? The third dimension, relevance, addresses how and why public connection becomes integrated in people's everyday life. When and in which contexts is news considered relevant as a means for social integration? Finally, the dimension of constructiveness relates to the consequences of connecting through news and the interests that public connection can advance. Does digitalization alter the constructiveness of news for connecting to public life? To address questions like these, the thesis makes use of four conceptual lenses.

## 1.2    Main concepts and lenses

### 1.2.1    Public connection

To explore how the digitalization of the news media landscape affects people's understandings of news as shared frames of reference to public life, the thesis makes use of Couldry et al.'s (2007) notion of "public connection". This concept starts from the premise that people do not go through daily life as atomized individuals, but are part of one or multiple larger networks, from small-scale communities to their country and the world at large. To be able to connect to and engage in these spaces, people need to orient themselves beyond their private life-worlds and acquire a basic understanding of what public life entails. Couldry et al. use the term "public connection" to refer to these shared orientations that people can use to engage and participate within public life. News is one of the tools that can provide such frames of reference. While the term "public connection" itself may be relatively recent (Couldry & Langer, 2003), the idea of individuals having a shared orientation to public life is implicit in many concepts used in communication and media studies. This ranges from scholarly work about participatory forms of democracy, civic engagement and social capital to studies on cultural citizenship, social cohesion and community (Bakardjieva, 2003; Barnhurst, 2003; Baym, 2015; Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Boulianne, 2009; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001) (see Chapter 2). The past decade, studies have started to use the notion of public connection more explicitly as a means to empirically investigate "the preconditions of action" (Kaun, 2012, p. 16). A recurring finding in these studies, first, is that people indeed do understand themselves as linked to a wider, public space (Heikkilä et al., 2010; Ong & Cabañes, 2011). Second, previous work has found that while there are many means to construct and obtain shared frames of reference to public life, for many, news media and journalism continue to function as avenues that facilitate

their public connection in the digital era (Ekström et al., 2014; Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015; Vidali, 2010).

Public connection serves as a helpful lens to understand how people are experiencing the public and societal relevance of news. Even though, as mentioned above, it has not always been applied in this manner, the concept itself is relatively neutral and generic. It only assumes that individuals have links that bridge their private and public worlds. It does not require that they will always pay attention to public issues or make use of their public orientation. Nor does it prescribe what forms connecting publicly should take or suggest that media or journalism is the only or most important entrance point to society (Kaun, 2012; Hovden & Moe, 2017). The aim of this thesis is to explore the connective value of news from the point-of-view of the news user, focusing on how people actually perceive and understand the importance of news for establishing common frames of reference to public life. The relative openness of the concept makes public connection a suitable lens for such explorative and inductive research, as befits the rapidly changing news media landscape.

In the thesis, public connection has been conceptualized accordingly. Whereas Couldry et al.'s (2007) original study on public connection has used the concept to explain how news becomes valuable within people's identity as democratic citizens, this thesis argues the concept can be applied more broadly to what people perceive as shared concerns in many areas of everyday life. As Schrøder and Larsen (2010) note, news may serve as a common ground and foster connection in many other roles that people have in daily life, such as being a neighbor, colleague or family member. Moreover, the boundaries between these identities are fluid (Kotilainen and Rantala, 2009). Because the aim of this thesis is to understand how changing digital patterns of news use affect the connective potentialities of news in everyday life as a whole, it follows this broader conceptualization of public connection (see Schrøder, 2015). Accordingly, it defines public connection as *the various shared frames of reference that enable individuals to engage and participate within their cultural, social, civic and political networks in everyday life*, to be able to capture the different contexts in which news may be of connective value (see Chapter 2).

## 1.2.2   Everyday life

Second, this thesis grounds the explorations of the current connective role of news within the realm of everyday life. While the commonness of everyday life tends to make it blend in as a given, and thus, these settings are easy to overlook (Neal & Murji, 2015), previous public connection research suggests that paying attention to the taken-for-granted contexts in which news is used is crucial to understand its meaning and significance.  For instance, Couldry et al. (2007) found that people's practices of connecting through news depended most strongly on other daily rhythms and those of the people close to them, for example the domestic routines in their family, the recurring leisure activities they do with friends, or

their schedules at work. Similarly, Heikkilä et al. (2010) note that the more or less unreflective routines that people engage through are one of the main analytical features to understand what people are perceiving as the public relevance of news. In itself, this is unsurprising: news consumption in general tends to be predicted most strongly by habit strength (Diddi & LaRose, 2010; Martin, 2008). Yet, while an everyday life perspective is common in for instance anthropological studies on media use (e.g. Baym, 2015; Madianou, 2014; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013; Silverstone, 1994), scholarly work on *the connective role of news* that uses this approach and pays attention to the everyday life contexts in which mediated public connection is embedded remains relatively scarce (Bird, 2011). One possible explanation for this gap is that because news is now ubiquitous, its use has become so interwoven with other activities that users no longer recognize forms of connecting through news as separate acts (Deuze, 2012; Jensen, 2010), and thus, measuring the interrelation between such practices becomes increasingly challenging (see also Chapter 3).

This thesis therefore aims to contribute to existing public connection research by repositioning current debates in journalism studies about the connective role of news within the framework of everyday life. In this sense, this thesis is inspired by relatively recent calls for what has been termed "non-media centric media studies" (Krajina, Moores, & Morley, 2014) that propose to decenter media and use the wide lens of everyday life to capture the wider significance of media practices. For studies on mediated public connection specifically, the advantage of using an everyday life approach is that it avoids presupposing the importance of news for the way people orient themselves to public life. After all, many other things from sports (King, 2000) to popular and expressive culture (Jenkins, 2006; Hovden & Moe, 2017) may also help to produce common ground between people. Decentering news in this regard not only acknowledges that there are various tools that people can employ to shape their links to public life; it may also help to gain an understanding of current practices and perceptions of mediated public connection that is more holistic, for instance encapsulating how public connection through news and through other avenues interrelate. Therefore, when operationalizing how to study current practices and perceptions of the connective role of news, this thesis starts broadly by analyzing people's daily routines, before moving on to their uses of news in general terms. Only then, at a later stage in the research inquiry, is this contextual data used to focus on how people are employing news as shared frames of reference to public life.

### 1.2.3    Inductive approach

Third, as noted above, the thesis aims to explore what the digitalization of the news media landscape means for people's perceptions and practices of public connection *from the point-of-view of the news user*. To this end, the thesis employs a inductive, bottom-up approach that aligns with such a user-centric perspective. In terms of Pike's (1967) emic

versus etic distinction, the research in this thesis tends towards the former. While this differentiation originally stems from linguistics, it has also been commonly used in the field of anthropology (e.g. Harris, 1964; Olive, 2014; Xia, 2010). Etic approaches argue that cultures should be understood by taking an outsider perspective. Scholars that employ this type of approach make use of pre-existing hypotheses or constructs, to see if these can be applied to the culture in question. Etic perspectives thus emphasize the universal, trying to establish theories and concepts that can be applied across cultures. Emic approaches instead study human behavior by approaching the viewpoints of those inside the culture as closely as possible. Thus, they develop conceptualizations in and from a specific cultural context. Here, the focus is on the perceptions and beliefs of the members of the culture themselves (Harris, 1964; Hanitzsch, 2007; Olive, 2014). In audience and reception studies, the emic-etic distinction can for instance clearly be observed in cross-national and comparative media research. While emic approaches here start from the particularities of media use in specific countries, etic perspectives focus on testing whether preconceived claims regarding what is assumed to be a universal phenomenon can indeed be supported within the context of other nation states (Jensen, 1998; Livingstone, 2003). Emic scholarship has been critiqued for its lack of explanatory power across cultural contexts (Hanitzsch, 2007; Murphy, 2005). Scholars supporting the emic position however argue that for theory to be grounded in everyday reality, emic knowledge is indispensable. They state that applying too rigidly standardized forms of analysis risks ignoring the specificities of individual cases or contexts. Therefore, etic approaches may sacrifice the validity of the research results (Livingstone, 2003; Olive, 2014). As Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook (2007) note, both perspectives complement each other. Phenomena that are not yet well understood are often approached first from an emic point-of-view. Then, after more knowledge on the topic has been generated, etic perspectives are used to build theoretical structures (p. 43–44).

As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, the majority of previous work that considers the connective potentialities of news aligns with the etic perspective. Such studies often focus on the potential of novel connective media technologies in the light of existing political and cultural models, such as participatory democracy, deliberative theory, or certain civic cultures. Their aim is to see whether users' behavior supports the assumptions and models they have about people's modes of information-seeking, civic engagement, and so forth (e.g. Dahlgren, 2000; Ekström et al., 2014; Strömbäck, 2005). Etic approaches are thus testing hypotheses about how and why public connection should take place. While such perspectives can offer valuable insights, this thesis instead employs an exploratory, emic approach. It's objective is not to verify whether theoretical assumptions about the importance of news for people hold up in practice, but to comprehend how news *becomes* meaningful for people to connect to public life from the point-of-view of the

users themselves: how do *they* understand and experience the connective role of news in a fluctuating and digitalized media environment?

Such a user-oriented and inductive perspective to public connection not only dovetails with the nature of the current media landscape in which users are increasingly empowered to navigate the news when-, where- and however they prefer. A bottom-up approach also has multiple analytical advantages. First, this thesis sees public connection as a dynamic process – connecting publicly – rather than an ideal state that needs to be achieved or constantly upheld. Thus, it acknowledges that the forms that public connection takes may fluctuate over time. Emic approaches are helpful to capture such a moving target (see also Jensen, 2011). Second, audience-centric public connection studies generate data on how news as a means for public connection is currently being experienced by users themselves. Therefore, it can help to advance existing theories on the connective roles of news in a way that aligns with people's everyday realities, strengthening their validity (Livingstone, 2003; Peters & Witschge, 2015). Accordingly, the thesis makes use of mainly qualitative methods that allow for doing such inductive research, employing a grounded theory-inspired approach. Chapter 3 discusses this in more detail.

## 1.2.4   News media repertoires

Finally, the thesis employs the notion of news media repertoires. Repertoire studies emphasize that when deciding whether to select or ignore a medium, people do not only assess it based on its individual characteristics and qualities, but also evaluate its affordances in relation to their experiences with the news brands, genres and products that they already use (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006; see also Madianou & Miller, 2012). In other words, the set of news media that users compose out of the range of the outlets that are available to them, their news media repertoire, is a meaningful one. Therefore, in order to map and understand people's current patterns of news use, news media should be studied relationally instead of discretely (Helles et al., 2015; Yuan, 2011). Accordingly, this thesis employs such a holistic approach to news use, focusing on how users are currently experiencing the value of news in general terms rather than limiting the analysis to specific media platforms or outlets.

A number of recent media repertoire studies have mapped what relatively fixed combinations of news media are currently used in various countries (Edgerly, 2015; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013; Van Cauwenberge, d'Haenens, & Beentjes, 2011). For instance, the value of people's news media repertoires has been linked to people's preferences for media devices (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012), the political ideology underlying the subset of media outlets (Edgerly, 2015) and the topics addressed (Yuan, 2011). This thesis aims to map current patterns of news use within the context of The Netherlands and to understand why users are perceiving these patterns as meaningful. Thus, it explicitly uses a broad conceptualization of value, in order to encapsulate the wide range of factors that may

underlie the meaning of people's news media repertoires. The repertoires found and the value of news that these patterns represent together establish the background context of the thesis of how news becomes valuable for people in everyday life in general. As Chapter 4 will show, some of these motivations for news use are strongly related to its connective role; for people with other repertoires, this is less important. From the overall value of news, the thesis zooms in on the use of people's news media repertoires for connecting to public life specifically.

## 1.3    Structure of the thesis

This thesis is composed of four sub-studies that each have a different theme. The studies are presented as academic articles, with a separate literature review, method section and conclusion. After laying out its theoretical framework, the thesis moves from a broad (patterns of news use) to a narrow (patterns of connecting through news) to an even narrower focus (use of social media for mediated public connection). Each study progressively draws upon the findings from the previous chapters.

Chapter 2 discusses "mediated public connection" as a theoretical concept, revisiting previous academic debates about public connection within the context of the digitalized news media landscape. It argues that rather than exploring shifts in mediated public connection in a top-down manner, we should start from people's own practices and preferences for connecting through news instead. Such an approach can help to gain an understanding of public connection that is more closely aligned with people's everyday lived realities. It then deconstructs and translates the concept of "mediated public connection" into the components of inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness. Each of these four prisms provide a different analytical dimension to the question what connecting through news in a changing media landscape is and means to users. Doing so, it offers four analytical prisms that reposition public connection research within an everyday life framework, aiming to encapsulate how news becomes meaningful to people in digital societies rather than why it should be.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological set-up of the thesis and discusses the rationales and implications of the research design. The thesis employs a mixed-methods approach, drawing upon four mainly qualitative methods: day-in-the-life interviews, Q methodology including concurrent think-aloud protocols, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. After addressing the Dutch context in which the research is situated, the chapter considers the process of data collection, the advantages and disadvantages of specific methods used, and finally, the procedure of data analysis.

Before exploring people's perceptions and practices of news as a tool for public connection empirically, Chapter 4 first establishes the background context of this thesis,

namely the current existing news media repertoires in the Dutch media landscape. It maps current patterns of news use and the ways in which news becomes valuable in a changing, digitalized news environment. Through day-in-the-life interviews, Q methodology and think-aloud protocols, it analyzes the value that different platforms, genres and practices hold for people in everyday life. Considering how people decide which subset of news media to select or ignore and what makes these compositions meaningful, it distinguishes five distinct news media repertoires within The Netherlands: regionally-oriented, background-oriented, digital, laid-back and nationally-oriented news use. The chapter then discusses the complex relationship between the use, appreciation and value of news, and the continuing user negotiations over what constitutes or should be "the news", problematizing academic conceptualizations of news use.

Chapter 5 then concentrates upon the question to what extent these current fluctuations in the news media landscape - as described in the previous chapter - have fostered novel practices and rituals of mediated public connection. Using in-depth interviews, it finds that news continues to provide a major frame of reference to public issues in people's everyday communications. It discusses how rather than a complete de-ritualization in which collective trajectories for connecting to public life can no longer be distinguished, digitalization in fact facilitates a re-ritualization in which traditional and new media logics interact to adjust patterns of public connection to the changing media environment. It finds that while people still employ news to seek togetherness, self-presentation and security, the practices they engage in to do so have become more diverse, less distinct and more utilitarian. The results of this study stress the importance of people's interpersonal communication for connecting through news: the chapter notes how people frequently make use of their offline and online social networks to link to and make sense of public issues.

Chapter 6 explores this finding further, focusing on processes of mediated public connection on social media platforms specifically. It sets out to examine social media users' understandings of public connection through news, using the four analytical angles presented in Chapter 2: inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness. More specifically, it explores the role that news media and journalism play on these platforms in bridging the gaps between people's private and public worlds. Employing focus groups with local, professional and leisure-related groups of social media users, it considers how people perceive social media as spaces for public connection within different communities. Furthermore, it examines how various platforms shape these interactions about news, including both relatively open (Twitter, Facebook timelines) and more closed (WhatsApp, private Facebook groups) social media. The chapter then continues to discuss the civic potential of these novel practices of public connection.

Chapter 7 takes the everyday social contexts of news use as point of departure to study how people are employing social media for public connection through news. It argues that to fully comprehend how novel practices of news use are becoming part of people's everyday life, we should not only consider when and where news is being consumed, but also *with whom*. Therefore, it discusses how different social media communities shape the specific practices by which people interact with news and current affairs, and what the type of group means for the content that its members share. To this end, it explores practices of public connection within three types of social media communities: location-based, work-oriented and leisure-focused groups. The results stress the significance of group characteristics, dynamics, perceived tie strength and communicative group norms for understanding users' forms and experiences of news engagement on social media platforms.

The final chapter ties results from the previous chapters together to discuss the thesis' major findings about how changing patterns of news use foster and inhibit novel perceptions and practices of public connection. It addresses the broader implications these fluctuating patterns and perceptions have for journalism practice: how may journalism adapt to these changes? Finally, the conclusion to the thesis discusses what these findings mean for future public connection research.

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## 2. Repositioning news and public connection in  everyday life. A user-oriented perspective on inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness[2]

### 2.1    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 chapter 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, Olsson, & Shehata, 2014; Strömbäck, 2005). This chapter aims

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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, my 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 (Broersma & Peters, 2016).

I ground this theoretical exploration by reassessing the conceptual lens of "public connection" (see Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 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, I 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 & 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, Moores, & Morley, 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, 2015; 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, 2015a). 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. My focus, therefore, is specifically on news as a tool for connecting to public life.

This chapter 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 prisms: 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 I keep these four lenses separate in this chapter 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, I 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.

## 2.2    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, they have influenced 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 & Domeyer, 2012; see also Chapter 4) 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 & 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 & 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 & Harju, 2011).[3] 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 people connect through news may become different, challenging journalism's symbolic and social significance (Broersma & 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 if 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, 2015; Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Boulianne, 2009; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). A much smaller body of work focuses on connecting through news specifically and the relation between journalism and public connection (e.g. Couldry & Markham, 2008; Heikkilä, Ahva, & Kunelius, 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

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

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, I 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.*[4] 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 & 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 & 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 & Cabañes, 2011).[5] 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

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4. While beyond this chapter'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, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2015).

5. 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.

*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, I identify two predominant research strands which, when broken down and further translated into four analytical prisms, 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 & 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 chapter, I demonstrate how these four lenses – 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.

## 2.3    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 & Ross, 2010). Public information is not just helpful for people for navigating everyday life

**Table 1.** Four analytical prisms that study public connection from a news-user emphasis

| Public Connection as … | Inclusiveness | Engagement | Relevance | Constructiveness |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Primary focus | Informational content, coverage, and audiences | Means of accessing and interacting | Contexts of consumption and usage | Consequences from news-related practices |
| Impact of digitalization | 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. |
| User-based considerations in everyday life | 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? |
| Ideal-typical value of "the news" | 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 |

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and supporting participation in society; having a common access point to the world also creates a sense of belonging (Schrøder, 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.[6] People express such belonging through feelings of connection, similar to how fans emotionally invest in the objects of their fandom (Barnes, 2014), 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 & 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 & Ross 2010; Lewis, 2014). These trends continue to blur the boundaries between publicness and privateness, which by now have become hybrid concepts (Chadwick, 2017).

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6.  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.

The changing boundaries between what is perceived as being public or private redefine what is generally understood as "the news" (see Chapter 4). 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.[7] 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.

## 2.4    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., 2010). 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 discrepencies 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

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7.  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.

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 (2014) 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 (Schrøder & Kobbernagel, 2010; Trilling & 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.

## 2.5    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 (2015) 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 Schrøder (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.

## 2.6    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 often, 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 (Schrøder 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 set-up takes too much effort, they might miss important information, or because they prefer journalists to select news for them (Groot Kormelink & 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.

## 2.7    Conclusion

Building upon previous theoretical debates, this chapter 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 lenses of mediated public connection, I argued how these can be used to fruitfully analyze public connection within the context of everyday life. I 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, I 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? My proposed analytical prisms 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 (cf. Broersma & Peters, 2016).

A combined analysis of inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness from the user-oriented point of view advanced in this chapter 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 lenses 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 I 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.

2

# 3. Research design and methodological approach

## 3.1    Introduction

The previous chapters outlined the central focus of this thesis, which sets out to explore how people are understanding and employing news as a tool for public connection in a digitalized media landscape. Starting from the point-of-view of the news user, it considers how news becomes valuable for bridging the gaps between people's private and public worlds within different social contexts. Aiming to map news users' shifting perceptions and practices with regard to the connective role of news, the thesis follows a long history of audience research, which has studied the reception of news since the beginning of the 20th century.

However, studying audiences' changing preferences and behavior in the digital age brings a number of methodological challenges of its own. First, as Livingstone (2004) notes, any attempt to grasp current news audiences involves capturing a moving target. The rapid changes in the news media landscape continue to transform how people are finding, using, and distributing news, turning the news user into a fluctuating research subject. Second, users can now navigate an ever-expanding array of news sources on their own terms. This means that news use increasingly takes place across multiple platforms, devices, and media outlets (Picone, Courtois, & Paulussen, 2014). Thus, audience researchers need to take such cross-media news use into account and consider media use relationally rather than discretely. Finally, the increase in media choice and possibility for users to use these outlets when-, where-, and however they prefer has created patterns of news use that are more diversified and individualized, calling for methods that can measure and explain such variations (Vincente-Mariño, 2014). In other words, studying news users in a digitalized media landscape requires rethinking research designs.

Audience scholars have aimed to address people's changing patterns of news use and shifting perceptions of news in various ways. One strand of research has focused on measuring current news use through quantitative methods. For example, both market researchers at news media companies and academics analyze web metrics provided by tools such as Google Analytics or Chartbeat to track people's clicking and browsing behavior (e.g. Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013; Napoli, 2011). Another popular tool is the use of surveys,

3

which have been used to monitor people's behavior and preferences across time and to compare perceived news use across different countries (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2017). Such quantitative tools are helpful for establishing overall patterns of what people do with news and fostering results that are generalizable to the total population. Because the research can easily be replicated over time, such methods are well-suited to distinguish trends, which is useful with regard to the volatility of the research topic. However, audience studies in the quantitative tradition generally do not explain why such patterns exist, nor do they typically investigate the everyday life contexts from which news derives its meaning and significance. Moreover, they tend to focus on people's common behavior and perceptions instead of exploring the diversity in viewpoints of individual news users, whose practices of news use now may become increasingly fragmented.

A second line of inquiry therefore approaches the topic of news use qualitatively, aiming to not simply measure people's consumption, but also to understand and explain why they are using news in a particular manner (Vincente-Mariño, 2014). Unlike the positivist epistemology that underlies much work in the quantitative tradition, most qualitative research emphasizes people's interpretations and perceptions. While results from qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, diaries or ethnographies can typically not automatically be inferred to the total population, they can be used to find distinct patterns of thought and behavior. Moreover, they produce data that are rich in depth and detail and give insights in the individual everyday contexts in which news is used. Finally, qualitative studies make it possible to approach the consumption of news from the point-of-view of the user(s), emphasizing audiences as active individuals who can navigate the media landscape on their own terms (Picone, 2016). Such an approach is fruitful in the light of the growing diversification and individualization of news use practices, making it possible to map and understand these broadening patterns of behavior.

Both these lines can be valuable approaches to study the fluctuating practices and preferences of the digital news user. However, the central question in this thesis focuses on exploring people's shifting perceptions of news as a tool that facilitates shared frames of reference to public life, considering how news users are now experiencing and shaping their public connection in a digitalized news media landscape. Thus, it employs a bottom-up, emic approach, as its objectives are to explore and comprehend people's own changing understandings of the connective role of news. A qualitative research design is thus more suitable for such a user-centric investigation that aims to capture people's shifting perceptions of the connective role of news. Moreover, the thesis specifically grounds these explorations within news users' everyday life, considering the daily contexts in which news becomes meaningful to them.

This chapter presents the research design of this thesis in detail. It discusses the rationales behind the study's set up and its methodological implications. Below, the chapter

will touch upon the study's mixed methods approach, the national research context, the process of data collection, the specific methods used, and finally, the analysis of the data.

## 3.2    Mixed methods approach and triangulation

To research how digitalization facilitates novel practices and perceptions of the news as a tool to connect to public life, this thesis employs a mixed-method research design. In total, it draws upon four (mainly) qualitative methods: day-in-the-life interviews (Chapter 4 and 5), Q methodology including concurrent think-aloud protocols (Chapter 4 and 5), semi-structured interviews (Chapter 5), and focus groups (Chapter 6 and 7). The advantages and drawbacks of these methods are discussed in further detail below. This section explains why the combination of these different methodological instruments is beneficial for the topic at hand.

While using a mixed-methods approach can have many motives, for this thesis, combining different instruments for data collection was beneficial for three major reasons. First, multiple methods may be employed to measure the same concept so that findings can be triangulated, increasing the reliability and validity of the research (Bryman, 2006; Kelle, 2001). Although each of the studies in the thesis had its own specific research questions and an increasingly narrow topical focus, because of the multi-method set-up, I was able to test and confirm findings that emerged in the individual in-depth interviews in the first phase of the research by discussing similar topics in the focus groups during the second phase of data collection. Another example pertains to the day-in-the-life interviews, in which participants were asked to recall their news use of the previous day. Since news use is very much habitual (Diddi & LaRose, 2010; Martin, 2008) and takes place within the taken-for-granted contexts of everyday life, part of it may take place almost unconsciously. However, this stage was immediately followed by a sorting exercise where participants had to sort a card set containing a wide range of potential news outlets, prompting memories of moments of news consumption that participants might have failed to mention in the day-in-the-life interview. Second, a mixed methods approach can offset the respective strengths and weakness of individual methods (Bryman, 2012; Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). For instance, during concurrent think-aloud protocols, participants need to carry out a task while simultaneously commenting on their thought processes. This is a rather demanding combination and thus, some participants may have trouble verbalizing all their considerations. However, because this stage was followed by an in-depth interview, respondents had the opportunity to comment on and refer back to the sorting exercise after completing the task. Finally, methods can be combined to approach the topic from different angles, making it possible to answer different research questions (Greene et al., 2001; Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). This way, a mixed-methods approach can help generate more

3

complete answers. Whereas the in-depth interviews for instance allowed me to collect detailed information on people's individual perceptions of the use of news to connect to public life, the focus groups provided insights in the way group dynamics influence practices and perceptions of public connection. While the Q-methodology stage helped to distinguish distinct news media repertoires, the day-in-the-life interviews provided the everyday life context in which these repertoires became meaningful to users. Thus, this way, parts of the research question that could not be addressed by one instrument, could be researched by another.

## 3.3    The context of The Netherlands

The empirical research in this thesis is situated in The Netherlands, a country that is a front-runner when it comes to the adoption of new information and communication technologies. With an internet penetration rate of 95.5% (Internet World Stats, 2017) and widespread ownership of smartphones (73%) and tablets (58%) (Central Bureau for Statistics, 2016), it is a commercially interesting context for both established and new media players to invest in a strong online presence and digital innovation. The most frequently visited online news brands are online-born NU.nl, the popular newspaper websites of *De Telegraaf* and *Algemeen Dagblad*, and the website of public broadcaster NOS (Newman et al., 2017). Noteworthy recent online initiatives are investigative journalism platform *De Correspondent* and pay-per-article news aggregator Blendle. The most popular social network service in The Netherlands is WhatsApp (7.8 million daily users), followed by Facebook (7.5 million daily) (Van der Veer, Boekee, & Peters, 2016). At the same time, the country offers a wide range of non-digital news sources. Despite its small population of 17 million inhabitants, The Netherlands has ten national newspapers, three public and three commercial national TV broadcasters, six national public radio stations, and a large number of regional newspapers and broadcasters that are all bringing news and current affairs. Thus, the Dutch media market provides many different avenues for mediated public connection, both in terms of available access points for news, as well as in terms of the various news practices that users can employ to engage with current affairs on these platforms (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015). Because Dutch news users are by international comparison relatively early adopters of novel media technologies (Swart & Broersma, 2016), The Netherlands makes for an interesting context to examine what digitalization means for news users' practices and perceptions of public connection.

## 3.4     Data collection

The data for this thesis was collected in two separate phases. In the first, the connective role of news was explored from the perspective of the individual news user; the second examined how group dynamics influence how people are experiencing and shaping their links to public life. Because the results of the first phase were analyzed before starting the second phase of data collection, the different studies inform each other.

### 3.4.1     Phase I

The first phase of data collection took place from October to December 2014. Each data gathering session here on average lasted approximately 90 minutes and consisted of three sub-parts, each involving different methods. Unless it was not possible for practical reasons, participants were interviewed in their own homes or at their offices. This not only made participating in the research more convenient for them and thus made it easier to sample participants, but it also meant that the place for data gathering generally resembled one of the most important spaces where they used news, providing additional contextual information. After introducing the procedure, first, a day-in-the life interview was held. Here, the participants were asked to recall their previous work day and to go through it step-by-step, from the moment they woke up until they went to bed. They were then asked to mention all moments where they had encountered news, in order to gain an overview of their daily news habits and map their everyday contexts for news use. These moments with news could relate to media, but could also take place in a non-media related setting, for instance when talking about news face-to-face. Moreover, such moments could pertain to both informational uses of news and moments were news was used for sociocultural reasons, for example as an easy topic of conversation. For every moment of news use, the participant was asked to explain why he or she had chosen to use news in that particular way and at that moment. This appeared to be a relatively easy question to answer for the participants and therefore was a good conversation starter. Moreover, it immediately focused the talk on people's patterns of news use. This first phase lasted about 15 minutes. Second, participants received a card deck of 36 cards, each containing one category of news media (such as "news on Facebook" or "regional print newspaper") with multiple illustrative examples in that category (see Appendix A for the full list). They were then asked to sort these cards on a normatively distributed grid with 36 spots, ranging from "does not play a role in my daily life" to "does play a large role in my daily life", while thinking aloud about their decision-making process. The card set was designed to contain all possible outlets for news within the Dutch news landscape, while at the same time remaining sufficiently small in order not to make the sorting task too overwhelming or time-intensive. After the task, to ensure no options were left out, participants were asked if they felt any news media

they used were missing from the card deck. The final stage involved a semi-structured, in-depth interview which served two goals. First, participants were asked to reflect on their choices during the card sorting, giving me the opportunity to follow up on responses from the previous stages. Then, the questions focused more specifically on the topic of using news for the purpose of public connection, asking participants to reflect on themes such as the value of news for maintaining social relations, sense of belonging to society, news talk, opinion formation, civic engagement, normative pressures to use news and reasons for disconnection (see Appendix C). This set-up ensured presupposing that importance of public connection for news use. The entire procedure was tested beforehand in a small-scale pilot (N=5) in September 2014 to ensure the comprehensibility of the questions, the completeness of the card deck, and the ease of the sorting task, and did not lead to any significant adjustments.

The participants for this research phase – both for the pilot and the actual research – were recruited through online marketing panels. For the Groningen area, this was panel RegioNoord; to recruit participants in Amsterdam, I used the panel of publishing house De Persgroep (which contained a mix of newspaper subscribers and non-subscribers). In both cases, panel members were sent a call to participate in the research via email, including a short description of the research and its objectives. The online marketing panels collected the responses and provided an Excel file with the gender, age, educational level, place of residence, and the contact details of the panel members that agreed to participate in the research. For the first phase, I used quota sampling, assembling a balanced sample of participants in terms of gender, age, educational level, and region. Quota sampling was chosen to increase the likelihood of a level of diversity in participants' habits of news use. Thus, the participants were not sampled randomly, which runs the risk of sampling bias. It should be noted however that the demographic characteristics of the participants were solely used as contextualizing information in the data analysis: it was not my aim to explain variations in public connection practices and preferences through these demographic variables. I selected eighteen males and eighteen females, twelve participants in each age group (18-35 years old, 35-60 years old, and 61 years old or above), twelve participants within each educational group (primary and/or secondary education, vocational education, university education), and twelve participants within each region (Amsterdam, the regional city of Groningen, and the rural parts of The Netherlands). From the Excel list with participants provided by the marketing panels, I selected participants that met these demographic criteria, until all quota were filled.

### Day-in-the-life interviews

The first research phase started with a day-in-the-life interview, in order to map the participants' daily news habits and the value of the particular news media that were part

of these routines. Because the way in which people are using news is strongly linked to their everyday routines (Martin, 2008; Madianou, 2009), day-in-the-life interviews do not just give an overview of a participants' news consumption on one particular day, but instead can point towards more long-lasting patterns of behavior. Furthermore, day-in-the-life interviews allow participants to describe how the various news media they use complement each other. Thus, the method can show both how news sources are used discretely and the interplay between them within a participant's news media repertoire. Finally, the method also enables participants to discuss other routines that may influence news use while going through their day, such as people's working hours or domestic routines, giving a broader perspective on how news use gets embedded in everyday life (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007; Krajina, Moores, & Morley, 2014; Larsen, 2000).

One inevitable disadvantage of day-in-the-life interviews is that, like all types of interviewing, they only measure people's perceptions and viewpoints, not their actual behavior (Kvale, 2007). Another limitation is that participants simply may forget to mention certain activities related to news, as they have to recall their behavior rather than comment on it concurrently. As Deuze (2012) notes, media have become so ubiquitous that media use may no longer be registered by people as a conscious activity, as it has become strongly interwoven with other tasks and routines in everyday life. However, the day-in-the-life interviews were followed by a card-sorting exercise (see below) which provided many prompts about possible relevant avenues for news. During and after the sorting, participants had the opportunity to complement their answers from the day-in-the-life stage, minimizing the risk of such retention bias. Moreover, with only a few exceptions where this wasn't possible for practical reasons, the interviews were held in the places in which people normally would also consume news, i.e. their homes or offices. This proved useful multiple times: for instance, one participant forgot to mention a radio news channel even though it was on in the background during the interview, allowing me to ask about it. In other interviews, being at home meant participants could show their most used news apps on their tablet, or point out a noteworthy article in the newspaper that was still laying on the kitchen table. Yet, now that media can be consulted anywhere and anytime and people are increasingly employing mobile media to check news in the small interstices in their schedules (Dimmick, Feaster, & Hoplamazian, 2011; Picone, 2016), recalling all moments where news was encountered may become increasingly difficult.

### *Q methodology: card sorting and think-aloud protocols*
In the second stage of this research phase, the thesis employed Q methodology in order to, first, distinguish the news media repertoires that are present amongst Dutch news users, and second, to understand why and how these specific subsets of news media are valuable to people within their everyday life (see Chapter 4). Digitalization has increased the

3

opportunities for users to choose their own trajectories across the news media landscape, creating an ever-growing range of possibilities to find and engage with news. Although, in theory, this could make consumption patterns so varied and fragmented that it would no longer be possible to distinguish any collective patterns of news use, research shows that even in a digitalized media landscape, it is still possible to identify distinct common news media repertoires (Edgerly, 2015; Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012; Van Cauwenberge, d'Haenens, & Beentjes, 2011).

In Q methodology, participants are asked to express their viewpoints by ranking a fixed set of items on a pre-defined and normally distributed grid. This grid represents a subjective dimension, for instance "I totally agree" to "I totally disagree" (Michelle, Davis, & Vladica, 2012; Van Exel & De Graaf, 2005). The items or the "Q set" generally takes the form of a deck of cards containing statements about a certain issue. The respondents are asked to think aloud while sorting the cards, providing information about their decision-making process (i.e. concurrent think-aloud protocols). After all participants have ranked the items on the grid, their individual distributions are compared and contrasted through a principal component analysis (PCA). Similar sortings are thus seen as similar viewpoints, preferences or attitudes. The transcripts of the think-aloud phase are then combined with and compared against the results of the PCA to identify which shared orientations to the research topic exist (Brown, 1993; Davis & Michelle, 2011; Watts & Stenner, 2012). The results of the PCA here serve as a lens or analytical framework that helps the researcher to interpret the qualitative data in a structured manner (Courtois, Schrøder, & Kobbernagel, 2015). Although Q methodology thus involves some use of quantitative techniques, it is first and foremost a qualitative method (Kobbernagel & Schrøder, 2016).

In this case, following Schrøder and Larsen (2010), Q methodology was employed to discover news media repertoires and to identify what makes these combinations of different news media platforms and genres valuable in news users' everyday life. Therefore, participants were asked to sort a stack of 36 cards, each containing one category of news media, on a grid ranging from "plays a large role in my daily life" to "does not play a role in my daily life". During the card sorting task, participants were encouraged to think aloud about why a certain type of media did or did not play a role, i.e. their value in everyday life. The card sorting exercise and think-aloud stage were preceded by a day-in-the-life interview where the participants were asked to recall their daily news use without any prompts. In line with other media repertoire studies (e.g. Hasebrink & Popp, 2006; Helles et al., 2015; Yuan, 2011) this study looked at news consumption holistically, arguing that users assess news media not only based on the qualities of the individual medium itself, but also on how it complements or overlaps with what other media can do for them. Q methodology is explicitly designed to produce such holistic data: it asks participants to assess every card (category of news media) in relation to all the other cards (all available

news media). Moreover, the combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques inherent in Q methodology means that using the method allows for both a systematic comparison of participants' news media repertoires and apprehending the complexity of what these constellations mean to users and why they are composed in this way. Thus, the method is well-suited to answer these research questions.

Q methodology has been criticized, first, for the lack of generalizability of the patterns that are found (Brown, Danielson, & Van Exel, 2014; Kobbernagel & Schrøder, 2016). However, as mentioned above, Q methodology does not attempt to infer from a sample of people to the overall population of people, but tries to explore common opinions, values or preferences on topics by translating an extensive range of possible viewpoints on the research theme to a set of objects that can be ranked by participants (Brown, 1993; Van Exel, 2005). The goal of this study was to explore which news media repertoires exist and what the value of news is in people's everyday life supporting these repertoires, not to make any statements about the frequency of such patterns. To do so would require additional quantitative research, such as large-scale survey or audience measurement research. Second, a criticism can be levelled at the grid used in the study, which resembles a normal distribution. In other words, the grid assumes that there are few types of news media that play either a very large or a very small role in daily life, and that there are many categories of news media that are of some middling importance. While this enables the comparison of participants' sortings, depending on their news use patterns, there is a possibility that people's actual distribution may have skewed towards the right or left if participants could have freely designed the grid (Shemmings & Ellingsen, 2012). Therefore, after each sorting session, participants were asked what they perceived as the middle of their distribution, to ensure correct interpretation of their card sort. A final limitation concerns the fact that people's opinions are not stable over time, and thus, if the same procedure were to be repeated, people may sort the same deck of cards differently. That said, all cross-sectional methods are prone to time-sensitivity, a limitation not confined to Q methodology alone (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

In the study, concurrent instead of retrospective think-aloud protocols were used to be able to capture participants' thoughts immediately rather than having to rely on people's recall, which may produce biased or incomplete accounts (Van den Haak, De Jong, & Schellens, 2003). One risk of concurrent think-aloud protocols is that the thinking aloud process may interfere with the task that participants need to perform and thus prove too distracting. To ensure that the combination of card sorting and thinking aloud was not too complex or time-demanding, the procedure was first tested in a small-scale pilot. This did not yield any cause for adjustment. A second limitation involves the question to what extent people's thought processes can be captured by asking them to talk aloud. Nielsen, Clemmensen and Yssing (2002) for instance argue that human cognitive processes

3

are too vast to be able to be concurrently verbalized. Therefore, participants were given the opportunity to complement and reflect upon their answers from the talk-aloud phase during the in-depth interview, before moving on to more specific questions about the use of news for public connection.

### In-depth interviews

After investigating patterns of news use in The Netherlands and the value of news in people's everyday life in general (Chapter 4), the thesis used in-depth interviews to zoom in on the use of news as a tool to bridge people's private worlds with everything beyond (Chapter 5). Although the Q methodology exercise on the value of news media repertoires in general and the day-in-the-life interviews in some cases already included insights into the use of news for public connection, the majority of data for this study originated from the semi-structured, in-depth interviews that were held after each card sorting exercise.

Interviews are directed and purposeful conversations that allow researchers to explore people's opinions, values and experiences with regard to a certain topic (Charmaz, 2006). As a method based upon epistemological orientations that consider reality to be socially constructed, qualitative interviewing aims to obtain the perceptions that arise from participants' talk rather than trying to establish objective facts (Warren, 2002). Because of this focus on respondents as active meaning-makers, the method has proven fruitful to gain insight in how information becomes meaningful in people's life (Brennen, 2012). The two studies in the thesis similarly used interviews to discover what people perceive as the transcendent value of particular ways of connecting to public life through news. While this could also have been retrieved using structured, survey-type questionnaires or by doing unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews were chosen. These offer a middle ground between strictly following a list with pre-defined questions, without any opportunities to probe or deviate from the topic in case of unexpected responses (in this case, for instance, to go back and relate answers to participants' earlier comments during the card sorting), and a completely unstructured interview, that makes the comparison of participants' viewpoints difficult (Warren, 2002). Employing semi-structured interviews made it possible to find common transcendent values attached to novel habits of mediated public connection, while still maintaining interviewing flexibility.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviewing thus is particularly useful for explorative research aiming to establish common perceptions between different respondents. However, this simultaneously forms the method's major drawback: interviews ask people to describe what they feel, think and experience around news and media and thus rely on participants' self-reports. Although, in this case, the guiding research questions were exactly about people's perceptions (as the study aimed to explore the subjective ways in which perceive the value of news for connecting to public life) the subjectivity of these accounts

can be problematic. For instance, participants may be inclined to give socially-desirable responses due to the lack of anonymity (Picone, 2016) or participants could withhold answers that they perceive the interviewer may respond negatively to (Charmaz, 2006). Before every interview therefore, it was stressed that there were no correct or incorrect answers to the questions asked.

### 3.4.2   Phase II

Contrary to the previous phase, the second wave of data collection only involved one method: focus groups. The research objective in this case was also more specific. The first research phase stressed, among other findings, the importance of people's interpersonal networks for their public connection. The increased use of social media platforms further emphasized such social forms of connecting to public life through news, making people's everyday conversations about news publicly accessible (see Chapter 5). Participants not only mentioned relatively open social media platforms such as Facebook as important sources for news, but also said to frequently receive news from friends and colleagues through more closed messaging applications like WhatsApp. The second research phase explored these findings in more detail. Thus, in this phase, I concentrated upon the questions of first, how open and closed social media platforms may facilitate public connection within groups and analyzing the role that news and journalism play in this (Chapter 6), and second, how social contexts shape the practices through which people engage with news and current affairs within social media communities and the content that they share (Chapter 7). This phase took place from September to November 2016. In total, six focus groups were conducted in three different cities in The Netherlands. The data collection sessions were held in places where the people in the group would normally also meet and thus were most convenient for the participants, such as one of the members' homes, the club house, or the office. Each focus group lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. In return for participating in the focus group, each respondent received a €20 gift card. Also, snacks and soft drinks were provided.

Before the start of each focus group, the research procedure was briefly introduced, after which participants signed a form to give their informed consent. Then, they filled in a short questionnaire asking their age, gender, city of residence, level of education and the social media platforms that they used individually. Each focus group started by a short introduction round in which the participants introduced themselves and explained how they had come to know the other members of the group and how the group had formed. This served as an ice-breaker and was also informative regarding the group's dynamics. Then, using a semi-structured list of discussion questions (see Appendix D), four themes were addressed. First, the groups discussed the use of social media platforms by the group in general. Second, they were asked to reflect on the role of social media for facilitating public connection. Third, the members talked about the content they shared on social

3

media with each other. Finally, the discussion moved to the topic of the role of news and journalism for facilitating public connection on social media. In other words, only in the second half of the focus group did the discussion focus on news, to avoid presupposing that news played a role for the group's everyday public connection. The focus groups were moderated by me and, with the permission of the participants, audio-recorded.

For the focus group, groups of participants were recruited who knew each other personally (online and offline) and communicated through social media platforms at least twice a week. Using snowball sampling, I focused on recruiting individuals who were then asked to encourage the other members of the group to participate. Snowball sampling was a useful sampling method in this case, as the aim was to collect existing groups. Its disadvantage, however, is that representativeness of the participants is not guaranteed. Therefore, I aimed to create a level of diversity between the groups so that they would reflect the various ways in which social media may or may not become valuable as tools for mediated public connection, by collecting three types of groups. Two focus groups were work-related (high school teachers and an IT customer support department), two were leisure-based (a soccer team, a fraternity) and two were location-dependent (neighbors and a group of local volunteers). This way, the sample included both groups that were created in a top-down manner (work) and groups that were formed by participants themselves (leisure). Moreover, it contained both what Gusfield (1975) distinguishes as territorial communities (local groups) and relational or interest-based communities (the leisure-related groups). In total, 40 people participated in the focus groups. In terms of the demographic composition of the sample, similar to the first research phase, I recruited a balanced sample with regards to gender and age, with participants ranging from 18 to 66 years old and an equal number of males and females. However, again, such demographic information was only used to ensure a balanced sample, not to generate any results about how such variables influence people's patterns and experiences of mediated public connection.

### *Focus groups*

A popular tool in communication research since the 1940s, the focus group method is particularly helpful to reveal the way in which people (co-)construct and negotiate meanings about a certain topic through everyday talk (Kitzinger, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Group discussions are organized to simulate the social contexts and group dynamics in which these processes occur, allowing people to discuss and respond to each other's ideas. The data that arises from these interactions is then used to uncover common understandings and points of difference within and between groups (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Peacock & Levitt, 2016).

In this case, the research purpose was to examine how news and journalism on social media platforms facilitate public connection within the context of communities, when

group dynamics are at play. Focus groups were therefore well-suited for this study, as their advantage over other qualitative methods such as interviews is precisely their ability to create a setting that helps capture people's interactions and to understand the influence of social norms (Kitzinger, 1994; Smithson, 2000; McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2017). Not only did the focus group method make it possible here to gain insight in the overlap and discrepancies between participants' viewpoints about the connective role of news and journalism on social media, the group conversations also simulated and thus helped to analyze the social context in which such "conversational news" (Picone, De Wolf, & Robijt, 2016) is discussed. The focus groups in this study were composed of pre-existing groups of people that already knew each other instead of selecting random participants, to fully exploit this benefit. For instance, when describing the group's collective news practices within their WhatsApp or private Facebook groups, participants could build upon each other's answers, thus giving a richer data-set than might have emerged through individual discussion (Stewart et al., 2007). Other advantages of focus groups include the user-friendliness of the method, which participants tend to find stimulating and enjoyable (Brennen, 2012), and the efficiency of data collection compared to individual interviews, while maintaining interviewing flexibility.

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The focus group method has been critiqued for its lack of confidentiality. As topics are discussed within a group setting, individual participants may be reluctant to share experiences that deviate from the social norm within a group (Green & Thorogood, 2004; Hennink, 2014). Noteworthy here is that I constructed focus groups with members that already knew each other well. Such a set-up was interesting given the topic of the research, as the group dynamics displayed throughout the focus group when talking about news in this case may actually be informative for the way the group discusses public information on social media. Moreover, several studies have found that people tend to feel less threatened to express differences of opinion about public issues with intimate others in comparison to looser acquaintances (Ekström, 2016; Eliasoph, 1998; Morey, Eveland, & Hutchens, 2012). This suggests that creating focus groups with participants who are close could reduce the risk that participants withhold their opinions (see Bloor et al., 2001). However, depending on the dynamics in the group, existing group norms may also prevent members from speaking up, or generate lots of head-nodding when the participants are too similar (Brennen, 2012). Thus, the effectiveness of homogeneous versus heterogeneous focus groups still remains a topic of debate. Second, there is a risk in focus groups that one or two participants start to dominate the conversation and therefore reduce group interaction. Conversely, more introverted participants may find it difficult to speak up, similarly biasing the research's results and resulting in a lack of depth (Smithson, 2000). Careful planning and effective moderation of the focus groups can minimize this risk. For instance, at the start of the focus groups, it was explained that the purpose of the focus group was to uncover the range of

views and opinions that exist on the research topic, not to reach consensus. To start the conversation and get all members talking, the focus group started with an introduction round. Likewise, non-verbal cues as nodding and maintaining eye contact with all members of the group can encourage participants to speak up (Brennen, 2012). Choosing groups of people who were familiar with each other and comfortable in each other's company appeared to motivate all in the group to participate. Lastly, while the method is useful for exploring the "collective narratives" (Hennink, 2014, p. 3) that exist about a certain topic, focus group results typically cannot be projected to the entire population. Accordingly, the purpose of the focus group studies was to explore the various ways in which social media facilitate mediated public connection within different types of communities, rather than defining the frequency of such patterns and perspectives.

## 3.5    Data analysis

### 3.5.1    Grounded theory

This thesis aims to explore what the digitalization of the news media landscape means for the connective role of news, starting from the experiences and perceptions of the news user. Thus, it studies mediated public connection from the bottom-up, considering how news becomes valuable for people to bridge the gap between their private and public worlds in everyday life. This inductive approach was inspired by grounded theory. Proposed first by Glaser and Strauss, grounded theorists argue that theoretical models or concepts should be constructed from ("grounded") data acquired through empirical research. Thus, data are used as the starting point for developing theory, rather than aiming to verify a theoretical model by testing hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 1977, p. 2-3). This perspective can be used both to guide the gathering of data as well as the process of data-analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Regarding data collection, Glaser and Holton (2004) argue that grounded theorists should start right off with sampling data in a certain field with an open mind and should not let themselves be blocked by rigid research questions or extensive literature reviews, but instead let interesting themes in the field emerge from the data-set. At the same time, no matter how inductive a research set-up, the mind of a researcher is unlikely to be a tabula rasa: he or she is not without any knowledge of the field, and in practice, research is generally guided by at least a basic empirical interest (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 16-17). Although this thesis employs an inductive approach, it does employ multiple sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969), as have been described in paragraph 1.2. Sensitizing concepts in this sense form a middle ground between employing definitive concepts, which have relatively clearly demarcated meanings but simultaneously can limit possibilities for theoretical discovery, and doing research without any entry points directing it at all, which may make it more difficult to decide on a line of inquiry during data collection when phrasing questions or to

interpret the data (Bowen, 2006). Thus, taking a less radical perspective on grounded theory, the thesis mainly employs grounded theory as an approach for data analysis, to examine the qualitative material found through the day-in-the-life interviews, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and the focus groups.

The data of the day-in-the-life and in-depth interviews from the first research phase and the results from the focus groups from the second phase have been analyzed separately. This way, the different studies were able to inform each other as the research progressed. Whereas for the interviews, the analysis was focused on comparing and contrasting the perceptions of individual participants, when examining the results of the focus groups, I specifically paid close attention to the dynamics between the members of the groups and how group opinions and individual viewpoints influenced each other. However, the procedure to make sense of these qualitative data-sets in both cases was very much similar. In both case, the data analysis phase contained three rounds of coding. Both the interviews and the focus groups were audio-recorded and then fully transcribed (the majority by myself, partly by a student assistant for timing reasons). These transcripts were then uploaded in software program ATLAS.ti, which can be used for the analysis of large bodies of qualitative data. With the help of this tool, both the interview transcripts and the focus group records were coded line-by-line, to generate a list of initial codes. During this first stage of coding, I identified the themes and topics addressed in the material, which in both cases resulted in a list of hundreds of codes. This process allowed me to uncover common themes and distinguish areas of consensus, or reversely, inconsistencies and differences of opinion. In the second round of coding, I again went through the entire data-set using this list of initial codes to develop a smaller set of focused codes, describing overarching categories and ideas. During this process, multiple initial codes were combined into a single focused code by using ATLAS.ti's merging functionalities. Sometimes codes were renamed or new codes were added. This drastically reduced the number of codes and gave insight in the codes' frequencies. In the final round, the list of focused codes was again compared with the data, to form and test theoretical codes reflecting the central concepts arising from the data. The results of these processes of data analysis can be found in the following chapters.

### 3.5.2 Principal component analysis

The card sorting exercise in Phase I not only yielded qualitative material, stemming from the think-aloud protocols, but also a set of quantitative data. During the interview, participants were asked to sort a deck of 36 cards on a pre-defined grid, resembling which news media they felt were important to them in their daily life and which were not important at all. These sortings of the different participants were then compared and contrasted with each other to find common news media repertoires, using principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation to calculate the correlations between the "Q Sorts".

First, for every card sorting, the position of each card was translated to a numeric value, ranging from 4 for the news media that participants indicated played the largest role in their daily life, to -4 for the cards representing media that did not play a role in their daily life at all. News media that were sorted in the middle column, playing neither a large nor a small role in daily life, received a numerical score of 0. These numeric values were then entered into SPSS for every participant. After the data-set was complete, the second step of data analysis was to perform a principal component analysis in SPSS. Here, as recommended by Watts and Stenner (2002), I aimed for a mathematical solution that would explain the highest amount of Q Sorts with the smallest number of factors, while at the same time having at least three positive significant loading Q Sorts in every factor. Because the card deck contained 36 cards, in this case, factor loadings of ±0.43 were significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (Brown, 1980, p. 222-223). These criteria resulted in a solution that contained five factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, in total explaining 58% of the variance. Appendix B shows the exact factor loadings. Third, I took the normalized factor scores for each factor from SPSS to create so-called factor arrays. A factor array represents the viewpoints of participants in a particular factor (in this case, people with a certain news media repertoire) in a single Q Sort. The five factor arrays for this research are displayed in Appendix A. These factor arrays could then be used to interpret a particular factor, and understand what the participants sharing a certain news media repertoire exactly had in common. Finally, the results of the factor analysis were read alongside the transcripts of the day-in-the-life interviews, think-aloud protocols and the semi-structured in-depth interview, to interpret the quantitative data and gain an understanding of the five Dutch news media repertoires that were found. Thus, the results of the PCA functioned as a lens that could be used to view the interview data, supporting the qualitative analysis.

## 3.6    Limitations

The methodological set-up described above allows for a broad investigation of the connective role of news in everyday life, emphasizing the perceptions of the news user and paying attention to both individual- and group-related aspects of public connection. However, as all research designs, it also knows several limitations. First, the use of news has been found to be a strongly habitual act that is anchored in everyday life (Diddi & LaRose, 2010; Larsen, 2000; Lee & Delli Carpini, 2010). Therefore, the data for this thesis was collected as much as possible in places that normally would also feature prominently in participants' daily news routines, such as their homes or their offices. For the same reason, the focus groups were organized with groups of participants that knew each other well and were used to having group discussions, often on a daily basis. Thus, the process of data collection tried to approach people's familiar contexts surrounding news use and

mediated public connection as closely as self-reporting methods allow. However, the fact that news use and thus mediated public connection is mostly habitual also means there is a risk that patterns of connecting publicly through news are so routine-like that they go unnoticed by participants, therefore distorting the data. An alternative methodological approach for this thesis, therefore, could have been a set-up that relied more strongly on ethnographic methods and participant observation. An ethnographic route to studying mediated public connection would help stress behavior rather than perception and could thus uncover taken-for-granted habits and practices whose commonness otherwise makes them blend in as a given (Neal and Murji, 2015). Another benefit of such an approach would be that it makes it easy to de-center media, opening up the investigation to the broader perspective of everyday life and showing how exactly news and media as means to connect to public life are embedded (Krajina, Moores, & Morley, 2014). That said, ethnographic public connection research could also have several drawbacks. While depending on the exact method chosen, ethnographic research can be intrusive to participants, affecting the research results. Moreover, the complexity and diversity of the material may also make it more difficult to compare participants, in order to find patterns of people's perceptions of connecting publicly through news as was the aim of this thesis.

Second, the purpose of this thesis is to provide a general exploration of the connective role of news in a digitalized media landscape. Therefore, a demographically diverse set of participants was sampled, ensuring a large variety in age, gender and region. However, people with a migrant background were relatively underrepresented and participants in the focus groups were relatively highly educated. That said, as this thesis is based on qualitative research methods, the demographic characteristics of the respondents in the studies have only been used as contextualizing information. Because the number of participants in the studies is relatively small, the demographic characteristics of the respondents in these studies, thus, have not been used draw links between certain demographic variables and particular forms of connecting through news.

A final potential limitation also pertains to the sampling of the participants. As mentioned above, the respondents in this thesis were not selected randomly. In the studies using Q methodology and interviews, quota sampling was used: a call for participants was sent out via two research panels who could then respond and sign up for the research. From this sample, a fixed number of respondents was picked to fulfill the quota for all four demographic variables (age, gender, region and educational level). Because the call sent to the participants in this case mentioned that the study focused on news, the people who agreed to participate in the research could have had a higher than average interest in current affairs and journalism. Therefore, news may have been more important for them to connect to public life than could be the case overall. This was not the case for the study using focus groups: when participants were approached and asked to recruit others in the

group, the topic of the research was described as the use of social media platforms for public connection. News was not mentioned until the latter half of the focus groups, to avoid presupposing its importance to participants' social media use.

## 3.7    Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research design that the thesis uses to explore how people are currently perceiving news as a tool for facilitating shared frames of reference towards public life, and through which practices they are shaping their public connection. Employing a mixed-method approach that makes use of four mainly qualitative methods – day-in-the-life-interviews, Q methodology, semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups – it explicitly considers the connective role of news from the perspective of the user, emphasizing people's experiences and understandings. Such a user-centric and emic set-up to study (digital) news audiences is helpful on three levels. First, it addresses the methodological challenge of the rapidly developing media landscape, and thus, the volatility of the patterns of news use that facilitate people's public connection. Departing from the users themselves instead of starting from theoretical models or hypotheses makes it easier to approach people's lived experiences at a time when these are evolving quickly. Second, the research design considers the total subset of media that people are using for news, rather than only assessing the value of specific outlets or platforms in isolation. Through a combination of Q methodology and interviews, the thesis explores users' distinct media repertoires (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006; see also paragraph 1.2.4) and the reasons why these particular combinations are valuable in the everyday life of the news user. This way, the thesis accounts for novel patterns of news use that are increasingly spanning various media platforms, outlets, and devices. Even during the focus groups, discussing specifically how people are perceiving and employing social media as spaces for public connection, participants were asked to explain how such practices related to their overall experiences with news media to be able to contextualize the results. Finally, centering on the perspective of the news user is a helpful approach to research news audiences as it allows to capture patterns of news use, even if these become increasingly diverse and individualized. Therefore, the research design includes methods that emphasize the viewpoints of individual participants and small communities to be able to capture this diversity.

# 4. Navigating cross-media news use. Media repertoires and the value of news in everyday life[89]

## 4.1    Introduction

The current news media landscape is characterized by an abundance of information. Not only has digitalization resulted in a proliferation of available news sources, people now have more power to navigate the news content they want to use, when, where and how. Therefore, news users increasingly choose their own trajectories across the media landscape and follow the news on multiple media platforms (Picone, Courtois, & Paulussen, 2014). Previous studies have tried to map these changes in several ways. One possible avenue measures actual news use, employing quantitative measures such as web metrics analyses to track news users clicking behavior (e.g. Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013) and surveys to map self-declared usage rates (e.g. Mitchell, Holcomb, & Page, 2013; Newman, Levy, & Nielsen, 2015; Yuan, 2011). Such studies address questions about which news outlets are most frequently used or on what stories users spend the most time. A second strand of research considers shifting user preferences, typically employing qualitative methods including interviews and focus groups to uncover the importance of news in users' everyday lives (e.g. Van Cauwenberge, d'Haenens, & Beentjes, 2013; Zerba, 2011).

Both lines of research then try to establish claims about what current news consumption looks like. However, by focusing on either patterns of perceived news media use *or* the perceived importance of platforms and outlets, one might not be able to grasp the complexity of news use. For instance, Chyi and Lee (2013) found that online newspaper users might actually prefer the print rather than digital newspaper format. Similarly, Chyi and Chadha (2012) noted that despite lowering circulation numbers, users still rated print newspapers as more enjoyable for news than smartphones, e-readers, desktops and laptops. Also although 68 percent of smartphone owners use their phones to follow breaking news,

it leads to mixed experiences: users feel productive and happy, but also report distraction, frustration and anger when using the device (Smith, 2015). In short, device use does not necessarily bear close affinity to preference.

This study therefore combines the study of cross-media news use with an analysis of the perceived importance of news media, using a media repertoire approach (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006). Previous studies tend to approach repertoires in a somewhat delimited manner, distinguishing based on users' media device preferences (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012), ideologies (Edgerly, 2015), topics (Yuan, 2011), or genres, brands or frequencies of use (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). While all productive entry points, this study instead employs a broader notion of *value* to encapsulate a wide range of potential factors. It identifies a complex interplay of influences and multifaceted dynamics and thus evaluates the meanings of news repertoires for users in two ways. First, using Q methodology with think-aloud protocols, I distinguish five distinct news media repertoires and discuss why users construct these specific combinations. Second, employing day-in-the-life and in-depth interviews, I augment this data with a cross-repertoire analysis, investigating the value that news and information have in users' everyday lives. The results from both avenues are then combined to further conceptualize the complex relationships between the use and appreciation of journalism in the digital age.

## 4.2    Studying news use

Traditionally, news companies have focused on measuring exposure to media products to analyze audience behavior, tracking viewing rates or clicks (Napoli, 2011). Even with recent rhetoric about news users as productive and generative entities, news institutions have – under the influence of datafication (Lewis, 2014) – often reduced audiences to quantifiable aggregates, which have become easy to track online with detailed traffic metrics at news producers' disposal (Anderson, 2011). The rapid proliferation of news media outlets and content in combination with users' limited attention span has resulted in an increasing interest in exposure studies: simply put, finding "hard data" on what audiences do and do not use (Webster, 2011).

Media choice studies finding their origins in the uses and gratifications approach (see Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) have tried to map the successfulness of different media amidst the heavy struggle for audience attention, by asking users to estimate the frequency or time investment of their news media use in absolute numbers (Yuan, 2011). However, Prior (2009) demonstrated that measuring news media use via such surveys is problematic, because users tend to overestimate their own use up to eight times as high as their actual use. Therefore, to investigate perceived news use in a way that might be closer to people's actual use patterns, it is more fruitful to let users *rank* different news media *in relation to*

*each other*, to measure perceived news use more accurately and, quite crucially, relationally. This underlies Q methodology research designs, which operationalize choices between possibilities relative to one another (see Watts & Stenner, 2012).

In their work on the concept of polymedia, Madianou and Miller (2012) found that users tend to perceive media devices as a communicative environment of affordances. Users assess what different media can do for them in a given situation, how they complement each other and what social and emotional consequences their media choices have in different contexts. In a similar fashion, one might expect news media to be analyzed in relation to each other instead of individually. Much user research (e.g. Chyi & Lee, 2013) tends to concentrate on the use of only a few news media, rather than the entire media landscape, and then only discretely rather than relationally (Helles et al., 2015; Yuan, 2011). I argue that in order to fully understand how audiences experience news use, we should look at news consumption holistically. In this study, I therefore conceptualize media use in terms of the entire, meaningfully structured composition of media a person regularly uses. I apply a media repertoires approach (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006; Hasebrink & Domeyer 2012), analyzing how people combine different media technologies, brands, genres and products to structure their everyday life and fulfill their needs for information, entertainment, opinion formation, sociability and engagement. In other words, I ask which distinctive news media repertoires news users compose out of the media outlets that are available to them.

The question then becomes: what makes news repertoires valuable enough in news users' everyday lives to select these combinations of news media and to ignore others? Partly, the perceived importance of news media comes from its immediate relevance and usefulness to users, supporting both collective and individual interests (Picard, 2010). News for example allows users to monitor current affairs so they can take action if events threaten to affect them (Schudson, 1998) and different outlets can be more effective than others in fostering civic engagement, social interaction, and a sense of belonging (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007). In addition, as Costera Meijer (2013) notes, users also want to enjoy journalism; some media outlets are undoubtedly preferred because they provide individuals with a   more desirable emotional experience of involvement when they are consumed (Peters, 2011). Topic can also play a role: scandal news, for instance, often draws people to an outlet because it provides moral dilemmas they can connect to their own experiences (Bird, 2003), while local news has long been privileged by audiences for its immediate topical affinity, although the strength of this relationship is increasingly questioned (Nielsen, 2015). Furthermore, news not only helps people to understand what is happening and their position in the world, it can have value in ways unrelated to its actual content. The act of consuming news helps structure and provide meaning within the flow of everyday life, and the rise of digital technologies creates new communicative spaces and patterns of engagement (Peters, 2015b).

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Schrøder's (2015) notion of "perceived worthwhileness" attempts to capture the complex interrelationship of these factors underlying news media repertoires, focusing on time spent, situational fit, normative pressures, public connection possibilities, price, participatory potential, and technological appeal. In this chapter, I use a similarly broad conceptualization to investigate what makes news media valuable within individuals' repertoires and what role these configurations play in their daily lives. To understand the value of news requires to consider the meaning of user patterns and the motivations underlying the appreciation of news in concert.

## 4.3    Methodology

Q methodology was used to discover patterns of opinions about the everyday value of news. In this method, participants provide their viewpoints by ranking a set of items according to a subjective dimension, such as agree–disagree or important–unimportant, while thinking aloud. All "Q Sorts" are then compared and contrasted through factor analysis, to identify participants' shared orientations to the topic (Michelle, Davis, & Vladica, 2012; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Using quota sampling, I recruited 36 participants of mixed gender, age and educational level in three different regions.[10] Data were collected from October to December 2014, in three phases. First, in a 10–15-minute day-in-the-life interview, I asked participants to recall the previous work day and describe their news use from the moment they got up until they went to bed. This stage served to map participants' recall of daily news use without any prompts and prepared them to talk about their news values and experiences in the succeeding phases of the interview. Second, the respondents sorted a deck of 36 cards on a normally distributed grid while thinking aloud about their decision-making criteria. The grid, displayed in Figure 1, ranged from "does not play a role in my daily life" to "plays a large role in my daily life". I deliberately chose this rather open operationalization of value, enabling participants to define the concept in their own way. Each card contained one category of news media such as "Text TV" or "print regional daily newspapers" (see Appendix A), with several illustrative examples. Finally, participants reflected on their choices in an in-depth, semi-structured interview, meant to follow up on responses from the previous phases. All stages were audio recorded and then transcribed.

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10.  I selected twelve participants within each age group (18-35, 35-60, 61+), twelve participants within each educational subgroup (primary and/or secondary education, vocational education, university education) and twelve participants within each region (Amsterdam, the regional city of Groningen, and rural parts of The Netherlands), with an equal number of males and females. Participants in Amsterdam were recruited through the online marketing panel of publishing house De Persgroep; participants in the Groningen area were sampled through online marketing panel RegioNoord.

Q methodology is a mainly qualitative method that does not attempt to infer from a sample of people to the overall population of people, but instead selects a set of statements to represent a larger population of all possible opinions on a certain topic (Van Exel & De Graaf, 2005). In this case, the set of 36 news media cards was designed to represent the entire media landscape. I carefully ensured that the Q set contained all possibly relevant news media in two ways: before data collection, the card desk was first tested in a small-scale pilot (n=5). Consequently, during data collection, participants were asked after each Q sorting whether any news media were missing from the card deck. Both procedures did not produce cause for adjustment.
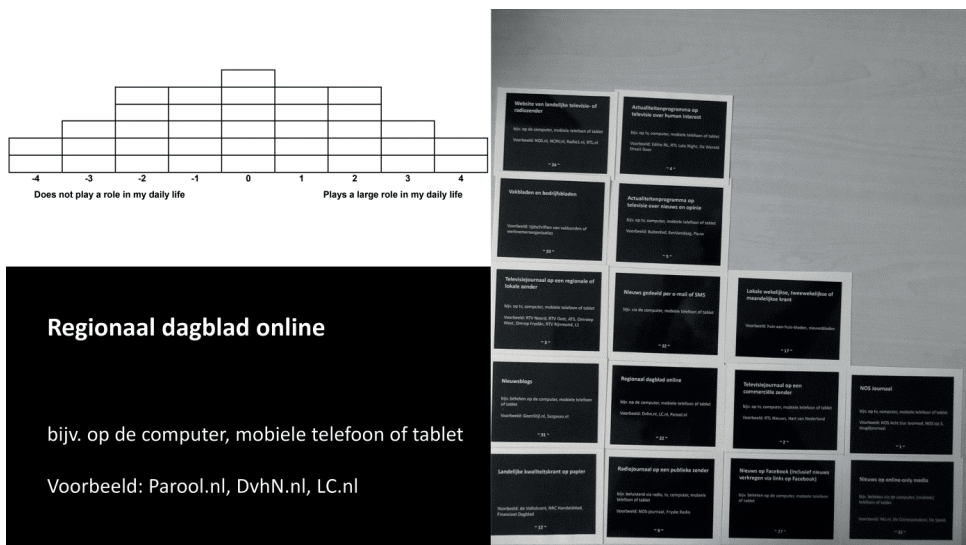


**Figure 1.** Q Sort experiment. Grid used for calculation (top-left), card from session (bottom-left), section of the actual experiment grid (right).

Data analysis consisted of two parts. First, I calculated correlations between the 36 Q Sorts by performing a factor analysis in SPSS on the quantitative data of the card-sorting exercise using principal component analysis and varimax rotation, resulting in a typology of five different news media repertoires (see Appendix B).[11] The results of the factor analysis were

11. The factor analysis yielded five factors, accounting for 58% of the variance. This solution explained the highest amount of Q Sorts with the smallest number of factors, while having at least three positive significant loading Q Sorts in each factor. Because the Q set contained 36 cards, factor loadings of ±0.43 or higher were significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (see Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 107-109). Ten out of 36 respondents loaded significantly on factor 1, four on factor 2, five on factor 3, four on factor 4 and four on factor 5. Eight participants were confounded: their

then read alongside transcripts of the day-in-the-life-interview, think-aloud stage and semi-structured in-depth interview, to interpret these repertoires. Thus, these news repertoires are grounded in both the qualitative interviews *and* the quantitative card-sorting data. Second, the day-in-the-life interview and semi-structured in-depth interview were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), allowing us to discover patterns in perceived importance of news across different media repertoires. Each interview was coded line-by-line in Atlas.TI to generate a list of initial codes, of which the most frequent were then tested against the total set of interviews to develop focused codes. From these focused codes, theoretical codes were formed and tested. This process resulted in three key insights. Below, I first address the media repertoires that were found. Then, I continue to discuss the overall conclusions that can be drawn from the qualitative data-set.

## 4.4     Media repertoires

With the help of the factor analysis, I distinguished five different news media repertoires: regionally oriented news use, background-oriented news use, digital news use, laid-back news use and nationally oriented news use. The repertoires and their characteristics are displayed below in Table 1. Appendix A lists the Q Sort values for each card for each news media repertoire.

### 1.     Regionally oriented news use

Respondents with the regionally oriented news use repertoire scored relatively high on the perceived importance of regional newspapers and regional television, along with text TV and national TV and radio broadcasts on public channels. Lowest ranked all three social media cards, the websites of news magazines and  online quality newspapers.

Analyzing the day-in-the-life interviews, regionally oriented participants appeared to have strikingly habitual ways of using news. When asked to describe yesterday's news use, they naturally transitioned into describing a typical daily use pattern instead. Radio and TV programs were mentioned by broadcasting time rather than by name. Even though participants with this media repertoire owned interactive TV, tablets and smartphones, they rarely utilized these platforms: instead of watching on demand, they rather sat down for the 8 o'clock news every evening. Despite their sometimes decades-long traditions of media use, these participants found their news media choices difficult to explain.

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Q Sort loaded significantly on more than one media repertoire. Finally, one Q sort didn't load significantly on any of the factors. See Appendix II.

**Table 2.** Media repertoires and key thematic characteristics

| News repertoire Characteristics | Regionally oriented | Background-oriented | Digital | Laid-back | Nationally oriented |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Most important news media** | Regional dailies, regional or local TV, text TV, radio broadcast on public channels, TV broadcast on public channels | Quality newspapers print and online, news magazines print and online, TV broadcast on public channels | Online-born news media, websites of broadcasters, quality newspaper online, international news websites | Facebook, free local print newspapers, professional magazines, TV broadcast on public channels | Light TV current affairs programs, TV broadcast on commercial channels, Facebook, quality print newspaper |
| **Least important news media** | Twitter, Facebook, other social media, news magazines online, quality newspapers online, light TV current affairs programs | Text TV, Facebook, free print newspaper, news via email or text messaging, other social media excluding Twitter and Facebook | Facebook, popular and quality print newspapers, free newspaper online, radio broadcast commercial channels | News via news aggregators and personalized news services, free newspaper online, international news websites | TV broadcast on 24-hour news channels, text TV, local newspapers print and online, international TV broadcast |
| **Geographic focus** | Regional | National and international | National and international | Regional and national | National |
| **Motivation to use news** | Civic duty | Education and social connection (active) | Compulsion and opinion formation | Monitoring and social connection (as side-effect) | Entertainment and social connection (integrative) |
| **Value of news use** | Structure everyday life | Knowledge and understanding | Awareness and engagement | Basic personal awareness and security | Relaxation |
| **Likelihood to pay for news** | Average to high | High to very high | Average to high | Very low to low | Average to high |
| **Mode of news use** | Lean-back | Lean-forward | Lean-forward | Lean-back | Lean-back |
| **Demographics** | Age 35+, lower educated | Age 35+, lower educated | Age 35-, male, higher educated | Age 35-, regional city | Female, capital city |

René (63) for instance explained his 40-year subscription to regional daily *Dagblad van het Noorden* for example by saying: "That's just part of it. That's just part of your experience of the day."[12]

Participants with this repertoire considered regional news providers important because the events these report were perceived to have a higher impact on their everyday life. Ivo (51), living in an area that endures frequent earthquakes due to the onshore gas drillings that provide a substantial source of income for the Dutch government, said: "The last earthquake happened just two, three kilometers away. The news, what's happening in these surroundings, it affects you. Something happening abroad, that can be awful or important too, but it doesn't affect you that much." These participants also felt it was easier to relate to news happening close by, because regional news was more likely to feature people and places that they knew and recognized. Karen (55) felt the free local newspapers, delivered door-to-door, were essential for her to keep up: "When you live in a village, there's more to find in a local than a regular newspaper, because its focus is more regional. Regular newspapers focus on Groningen or Delfzijl or whatever, so when you live in a village, you really need that local newspaper."

## 2.    Background-oriented news use

Participants with the background-oriented news media repertoire showed a preference for quality newspapers, weekly news magazines and serious current affairs TV programs. Notably, international news broadcasts and international news organization websites were ranked higher than in all other groups. Of perceived little importance were text TV, Facebook, free print newspapers and other social media.

Background-oriented participants easily drew connections between what was happening in the world and their own lives, naming both regional (earthquake damage), national (increase in burglaries) and international issues (oil prices). Following the news allowed participants to make sense of what they perceived as an increasingly complex society, where issues in different parts of the world become increasingly entwined. Participants with this repertoire enjoyed learning something new. For them, news was not so much about hearing about breaking events, but more about gaining knowledge about the world and connecting to public issues in general. Such issues were frequently discussed with others, both face-to-face and online.

These news users preferred to consume news in a lean-forward rather than lean-back mode. Vincent (71) and Frans (49) for example said they disliked services such as push messages or RSS feeds: they would rather visit websites to check for news themselves,

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12.  To protect their privacy, participants are mentioned by pseudonyms. Age and the media repertoire of the participant however have been made explicit.

because they felt an urge to be in control of their news use to deal with the abundance of available information. Edwin (37) did not follow any news organizations on Facebook and didn't subscribe to WhatsApp news services for the same reason: "I choose not to, because I keep myself up-to-date about news and information proactively. I don't need to be reminded about it, because I do it anyway." He perceived smartphone notifications as intrusive: "In the middle of a meeting, in the middle of a conversation, a business call, then it fails to achieve its goal. Then it doesn't pull me in, but pushes me away. I look at it when I want to."

## 3.      Digital news use

The distinguishing medium for the digital news use repertoire was news from online-born media. Websites of national and local broadcasters, online quality newspapers and websites of international news organizations also ranked high. Commercial radio broadcasts, print popular and quality newspapers, free online newspapers and Facebook scored lowest.

Participants with this repertoire noted that news felt like an addiction: its negativity gives you a bad feeling, yet it is extremely difficult to break away from. Participants in this group in the day-in-the-life interviews said to frequently visit a fixed number of three to five websites and apps in a fixed order. These "checking cycles" (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015) contained relatively many online-born news media - i.e. media without a traditional print or broadcast counterpart - the distinctive news medium within this repertoire. Contrary to participants with other media repertoires, digital news users showed little attachment to legacy news media brands. Traditional and online-born news sources, national and international, were mixed and then compared to get a full picture of world events.

Users with this repertoire had a very critical attitude towards the news and questioned the objectivity of the news media they used, both traditional and new. However, perceived subjectivity was not a reason to avoid news media: in their opinion, such news media were still valuable because it allowed them to understand the viewpoint of the other. Daniël (33): "I think it's funny to see how certain news events and items are being addressed differently. That's just interesting. The whole Syria thing, making Assad looking bad… When you read news from another spectrum everything is totally turned upside down. Then it is interesting: what's true and what isn't?"

For digital news users, using the news was an individual practice. Lars (28): "For me, it's absolutely not the social component. […] That people watch news to discuss it with others the next day, then I think: really? […] I really can't imagine that." Although participants with this repertoire were very much politically engaged – albeit in a "micropolitical" rather than traditional fashion (see Banaji & Buckingham, 2013) – most of them hardly discussed the news with others, distinguishing them from those in other repertoires.

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## 4.    Laid-back news use

The laid-back news media repertoire was characterized by media that allow the news to come to you, , such as Facebook, free local newspapers and professional magazines at work. Regionally oriented media were ranked relatively high. Sorted lowest were news aggregators, personalized news services and news portals, which take some effort to set up and require active choices.

Participants in this group had relatively little interest in news. Kevin (30) for instance felt the topics portrayed in the news had little relevance to his own life: "You can't change a thing of what has happened. You don't do anything with it. It doesn't affect what I do myself." Because of their low interest in news, these users did not want to spend too much effort on it, and if they used news media, these had to be very easy to use. Although news websites and apps might be perceived as low-effort news media by journalist professionals, these users experienced this differently. Kevin: "Online might sounds easier, but it's not comfortable to read. You have to search for news, instead of it being presented to you. I don't like that."

Users with the laid-back news media repertoire were typical monitorial citizens (Schudson, 1998): they monitored the news so that they would be alerted in case an event would happen that required them to take action. Nadine (29) for instance said she followed the news to know "what is about to go wrong. What they expect will happen." Knowing that nothing bad had happened in areas affecting their life-worlds was comforting and provided a sense of security.

For these users, following the news is very much a social experience. Costera Meijer (2006) describes how young people see news as an important basic service, which they hardly use because if it is really important, they will hear about it from others. These participants had a similar way of consuming news, but ten years later with the rise of social media, such news sharing had become far more mediated. For example Evert (26) was not very interested in news and did not visit many news websites himself. However, he regularly encountered news on Facebook in his timeline, because his friends shared news stories. Reading the headlines of these stories and occasionally clicking one or two was sufficient to keep up to date about big news events happening, without having to actively search for news. Similarly, WhatsApp was found to be an increasingly important means to receive, share and discuss news with friends, colleagues and family in a more private setting.

## 5.    Nationally oriented news use

Participants with the nationally oriented media repertoire ranked highest on quality print newspapers, TV news broadcasts on commercial channels, light current affairs TV programs and Facebook. Websites of popular newspapers and radio broadcasts on commercial

channels also ranked relatively high compared to other news media repertoires. Local newspapers and 24-hours news broadcasts ranked lowest.

For participants in this group, the news was a way to relax, at home or as a break in between difficult tasks at work. Light news media were perceived to meet these needs for relaxation and diversion best. Marina (41) for instance enjoyed checking the website of popular newspaper *De Telegraaf*: "It's popular and so I read it. It's very easy to read. When I'm at work, I rather read *De Telegraaf* than *de Volkskrant*, because otherwise you have to think about it and you only have five minutes."

The relatively high ranking of popular and light news media does not mean that these participants were uninterested in hard news topics such as politics or economics. Many of them engaged in political activities: they just used other sources to do so than the background-oriented and digital news users. A mix of serious and light news media was also helpful in establishing everyday connections. Nina (30) mentioned reading the newspaper gave her confidence: "Let's say we meet each other on the train, that you just know what is going on. For work, it's extra, there I certainly cannot be running behind." To be able to talk along with others at the hairdresser, at work or elsewhere, respondents combined popular and quality newspapers, serious and light TV current affairs shows, and gossip news and more traditional news genres into one very diverse media repertoire.

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## 4.5     Cross-repertoires analysis

### News media use is not equal to news media appreciation

Next to analyzing each individual media repertoire, I also performed a qualitative analysis of the data-set as a whole, to draw conclusions about the value of news that ran across repertoires. Firstly, a comparison of the results of the day-in-the-life interview with the card-sorting exercise and think-aloud protocol highlighted an interesting discrepancy: participants' perceived importance of news media (i.e. media they ranked as playing the largest role in their daily life) did not fully match their perceived news consumption (i.e. media they said to use the most). Even though most participants used news media in a very habitual manner, they did not always *enjoy* the news media in these routines. On the contrary: participants frequently accused news media they used of being unreliable, out of touch with their own political views, too negative, too boring, too expensive, too complicated to understand or delivered infrequently. Yet, despite these complaints, they continued to use them.

In practice, it appeared to be very difficult to break with news habits, because these are so closely embedded in news users' everyday lives. This effect was strengthened by the fact that news use, except for participants with the digital news repertoire, was a social activity. Couples listened to the radio news bulletin together while waking up and shared

newspapers with family and neighbors. Bart (62): "I'm not too fond of *Dagblad van het Noorden* when it comes to news. […] We've been talking about ending our subscription, because we can read it online too. […] But on Saturdays, it's relaxing to have a newspaper on your doorstep in the morning, reading during breakfast." Apparently, continued situational fit, availability and accessibility of a news medium can prolong a news habit for a long time, even when news preferences change.

Therefore, I analyzed users' motives for use and importance separately, to unpack this apparent paradox. In the in-depth interviews, participants emphasized six main reasons to decide to use a news medium or to use a news medium more frequently than others. First, one must be *familiar* with the specific news medium. This might seem obvious, but as Ronald (76) mentioned, the proliferation of available news outlets is so rapid that for news users, it is almost impossible to keep up with all the new websites and apps published every day. Second, there must be a *relative advantage* for the user: the benefits should outweigh the costs. Not only should a news medium be economically affordable and should one have time available for news use, a news medium must also be worth that price, whether it's money, time, effort or supplying personal data. Third, as Schrøder and Kobbernagel (2010) also note, the decision to use a news medium has a spatial dimension: there should be a *situational fit* with the daily routines and lifestyle of its users. For instance Carlo (29) chose to receive his newspaper in a digital format, so he could read it on his tablet on the train on his commute. Fourth, *accessibility* influences users' decision to use a news medium. Froukje (75) hardly listened to the radio because of her hearing impairment and which print newspapers Frans (49) read depended on which of his colleagues brought theirs to work to flick through during lunch. Fifth, the use of a news medium is dependent on the other news media that are consumed. For instance, Nathalie (27) said that since she checked her NU.nl app in the morning, she felt less pressured to watch the evening TV news broadcast, for it often repeated the things she already knew. Thus, a medium should *fit within the news media repertoire*. Finally, *normative pressures* influence news media use. Dominique (24) for example used Facebook to not miss out on "things people talk about at parties" and Elise (32) did not use Twitter, because none of her friends did. Surprisingly, while Schrøder (2015) found that a news medium's participatory potential increased frequency of news use, participants in the interviews showed no desire to participate in the news-making process: although the issues in the news should be linked to their everyday lives, many news users seem rather to consume the news than to contribute to it. Similarly, contrary to studies by Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel and Olmstead (2010) and Hermida, Fletcher, Korell and Logan (2012), describing options to personalize news homepages and share news through social media as frequently used features, such technological affordances only appealed to a minority of the participants in this study.

Although perceived news use and perceived importance of news media mostly overlapped, the rationales why a news medium was considered important were quite different from the above-mentioned reasons for use. First, news media were considered important when the news they reported was perceived to have a *high impact* on users' everyday life. Yet these high impact news media were not necessarily used more frequently: for example international TV news was consumed infrequently, but found very valuable in case of global news events. Carlo (29): "When the MH17 crashed, CNN constantly reported the same news, but with updates every time. They're there and they'll stay there. You don't see that in The Netherlands that much." Second, when a news medium *strengthened participants' identity*, it was perceived as more important. When they had a subscription to a news medium, its card was usually sorted as playing a large role in daily life, even when respondents did not consume it frequently. Subscriptions are not only a sign of support for a certain news medium, they also indicate a sense of community, stemming from Dutch press history characterized by pillarization. Froukje (75), talking about her subscription to quality newspaper *Trouw,* said: "I was raised a Protestant. We always thought *Trouw* was a very nice newspaper. […] It belongs to my roots." Third, the more the content of a news medium *fit the participants' personal interests and opinions*, the more they considered it as important. For example Nina (30) and Floor (28), both working in public relations, read popular newspaper *De Telegraaf* almost daily to scan the news on certain topics for their customers, but ranked these relatively low because they preferred other brands. Thus, their sorting on the importance of news media did not fully reflect frequency of use. Finally, when news media were perceived to *serve the public interest*, they were also considered important by the participants. What exactly constituted that public interest, or what was generally seen as news that everyone in the public should know, was influenced by shifting sociocultural norms. The next sections discuss these shifts in more detail.

## What is considered news is changing

The Q card sample contained a broad range of different news media, in order to capture the entire media landscape and to ensure I would obtain a full picture of participant's news repertoires. Similarly, I encouraged participants to talk about what they themselves considered to be news, instead of requiring them to follow any definition. Interestingly, in the interviews, participants drew different distinctions between what media did or did not count as "news media". They generally found it difficult to express what was or was not "news". Some participants held onto traditional genre conventions, such as Nina (30): "[It's] politics, culture, national news, international news, but not a nice picture of a celebrity, or a story about giving birth that I saw today." Others however felt that in the rapidly changing media ecology, these classic definitions of 'news' might no longer match the content that media provide. Elise (32): "[It's] everything that happens in the world. But outside of your

private circle. When a friend of mine is moving, then I think it's 'little news', or whatever, you have to figure out a word for that. It's not news, but it is nice to know."

As Elise points out, news users, and researchers with them, lack a vocabulary to describe these new kinds of information. Be it interpersonal social media updates, hyperlocal citizen blogs or traditional news coverage, in everyday language, these are all classified by the one word "news". Even though all these types of "news" potentially offer new information, users experienced them as fundamentally different. Thus, what participants experience in their everyday life by consuming news and the long-existing institutional settings and sociocultural norms about what news is or should be, no longer seem to match. At the same time, new standards that do justice to the current fragmented, digitalized media landscape are still being negotiated.

Despite these inchoate norms around re-classifying news, nonetheless many participants perceived social media in conservative terms vis-à-vis its journalistic status. Traditionally, news has been something that addresses public issues. Therefore, media that mostly supply interpersonal news such as Facebook, or very local newspapers, were often described by participants as "not really news" (Froukje, 75) or "disseminators of entertainment" (Edwin, 37). Yet, there was no other word to describe this than the general "news". Second, participants mentioned that news is characterized by its focus on negative developments. Yet the architecture of many "new media" platforms lacks, or at least discourages, negative news. On Facebook, for instance, stories can only be liked, never disliked. For Daniël (33), therefore, it was not a true news medium: "The disadvantage of Facebook is that is can only be about good news and the fun and nice things. When you put a political statement out there, you'll be trapped into a corner pretty quickly. Facebook isn't really the medium for that, it seems."

This is not to say social media cannot be valuable for following the news. The ability to share news that has been published on other platforms transforms Facebook and Twitter into user-friendly news feeds. Social media can be interesting for news because they enable you to view your friends' patterns of news use, leading you to stumble upon stories you might otherwise never have encountered. For Floor (28) for example, who had a network of friends with similar news interests, Facebook had become her main gateway to news: "One will post a piece from *Vice* about drugs, the other from *3 voor 12*, and then another from *de Volkskrant*. […] NU.nl, but also *de Volkskrant*, international media: I follow these all through Facebook." For participants like Lars (28) however, whose friends hardly consumed nor shared any news from other platforms, Facebook was not a place to find news at all.

## Paying for news is considered a form of civic engagement

Studies attempting to establish direct links between news consumption and civic engagement have generally found only very marginal relationships between the two

(e.g. Couldry et al., 2007; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010). Although using the news can potentially lead to civic or political action, in practice, this rarely happens, often leading scholars to write pessimistic conclusions about the state of democratic societies (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013). The participants correspondingly showed few signs of civic engagement resulting from news use. However, the results also show that in a world characterized by an abundance of free news sources, consuming paid news media is now considered an act of civic engagement in itself.

During the in-depth interviews, some participants noted that they felt the need to "support" certain news media (Vincent, 71). Nathalie (27) mentioned she watched the local TV news because she found it important that such local broadcasters would keep running. Bianca (40) chose to get a subscription to Amsterdam's local daily even though she would rather read a different newspaper: "I have *Het Parool* as a replacement for *de Volkskrant*. I don't think the quality is great, but I think Amsterdam deserves its own newspaper. It's more an act of sponsoring that made me get a subscription, than–I'd rather have *de Volkskrant*." Financial support to a news medium thus does not always mean users appreciate it, or vice versa. Regionally oriented participants paid for news out of a strongly felt civic duty, rather than enjoyment – although for non-digital news products only. Participants with the digital news use repertoire were also relatively willing to pay for news, even though they felt following the news increased their feelings of pessimism about the state of the world and a lack of agency.

Supporting news media financially was perceived as a civic obligation, even though, and maybe precisely because, at the same time participants felt everyone should have unguarded access to the news. Bregje (62) for instance argued news should partially be free, because it is a public good: "A story about the earthquakes: that's something everyone is entitled to read, right? Everyone in The Netherlands should be allowed to read that. But they block it." When confronted with a paywall, Bregje would keep googling until she found the same information somewhere else for free: "I refuse to pay, because what I pay for today, is old news tomorrow." While previous research limits such opinions about news as a public good to younger generations (American Press Institute 2015), the results suggest that this might be the case across all age groups.

This tension of viewing news as both a civic obligation and a civic right was reflected in participants' intent to pay for news. Participants who did not spend any money on news expressed uneasiness when talking about not paying. Elise (32): "I think it's something that you do even though you know it is wrong. It makes you think: yes, I should some time." Yet although they thought news was valuable, they did not want to pay for it in the near future. Similarly, those that did pay out of civic duty sometimes did so only reluctantly. Bart (62): "It's quite expensive, a newspaper subscription. Two newspapers… Then I'm thinking – can we quit these things?"

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## 4.6    Conclusion

This study looked at the various motivations underlying the construction of users' news media repertoires, by analyzing the everyday value of news. The results show that users do not organize their news media repertoires solely around devices (see Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012), but base their selection of combinations on a much wider range of considerations. The news repertoires found in this study are organized around four types of news media attributes. First, the regionally oriented and nationally oriented repertoires are based on *geographical focus*, in line with topic-related repertoires found in other countries (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). Second, the background-oriented repertoire relates to the *genre* or form in which news is presented. Third, the laid-back repertoire refers to the mode of use and users' *behavior* driving repertoire choice. Lastly, the Q Sort yielded only one *platform*-based repertoire, which was unsurprisingly organized around digital news use, reflecting current shifts in news exposure. Thus, it seems that as Edgerly (2015) notes, "the complexities of the new media landscape yield equally complex media repertoires" (p. 16).

This concept of value provided a broad and inclusive framework to try to capture this complexity and avoid the limited meanings that terminology such as relevance or (frequency of) use tend to evoke. By letting users define the ways in which news media could play a role in their everyday lives themselves, this lens enabled us to include a wide range of possible ways the increasingly diverse supply of news media has become meaningful, adding to existing research in three ways. First, I demonstrated how considering both motives for use and importance of news media but separating these analytically allows us to solve a long-existing paradox: news users do not always use what they prefer, nor always prefer what they use. News media use and appreciation appear to be supported by different motivations, which presents significant challenges for news companies trying to create meaningful value propositions (cf. Picard, 2010). Second, contrary to previous research (Schrøder & Larsen, 2010; Purcell et al., 2010; Hermida et al., 2012), I found that participatory affordances seem to have a limited influence. Most of the participants, across age and educational groups, preferred to consume news without actively engaging with it. Third, the study found changing understandings of "the news" and "civic engagement", though not equally in all repertoires. Whereas most regional news users conceptualized these terms fairly traditionally, participants with digital and laid-back use were more likely to expand them to include, for instance, infotainment websites (as being news) or the act of consuming paid news (as being civic engagement).

Central to this study's findings is the complex relationship between the use, appreciation and value of news. Aiming to understand how users nowadays navigate the high-choice media environment means taking into account both changing user behavior *and* shifting user preferences simultaneously to better understand the value of news. Conceptualizing news consumption is further problematized by continuing negotiations

over what constitutes or should be "the news" and what it means or should mean to engage through such information. Thus, research would benefit from greater attention to these fluctuating definitions, as the everyday value of news for its users is bound to change with them.

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# 5. New rituals for public connection. Audiences' everyday experiences of digital journalism, civic engagement and social life[13]

## 5.1 Introduction

News media have long been bridging the gaps between individuals and everything that lies beyond their private spheres, from local communities to the country and international public spaces. Providing packages of neatly organized information on current affairs that could affect its audiences, journalism established itself as a major access point to society. For decades, practices of consuming newspapers and broadcasts have been strongly interwoven with people's other daily routines, such as having breakfast while reading the headlines or listening to the radio news bulletin while driving to work. However, the digitalization of the news media landscape may cause a process of "de-ritualization" (Broersma & Peters, 2013) of such news practices. Users can now navigate an almost unlimited range of news sources on their own terms, available at any moment, in any place, on multiple devices and in various forms. These opportunities create novel and increasingly diverse patterns of news use. Moreover, anyone with the right equipment and basic digital literacy can now publish and redistribute public information to potentially large audiences through blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other social media tools, without having to depend on news media organizations. This means that the newspapers and broadcasters that traditionally provided audiences with the current information needed to navigate everyday life face increasing competition from alternative sources. This challenges the idea of journalistic institutions as major societal access points for finding out about and making sense of the issues of the day.

Of course, journalism has never been the only tool to connect people to public life. However, to experience parts of the world beyond their own communities, audiences have traditionally depended strongly on newspapers and broadcasters to make such

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information accessible and available. Digitalization and its consequences for how news is produced, used and distributed erode this privileged position of journalism. First, declining subscription and viewing rates show that attention to the public information spread by legacy news media institutions can no longer be assumed (Markham, 2016). This means that newspapers and broadcasters may become less valuable as shared frames of reference within society. Second, the affordances of new platforms, devices and technologies allow for many novel forms of engaging with news outside of journalism institutions, ranging from liking Instagram photos to forming discussion groups on WhatsApp. Users are no longer dependent on news media institutions to voice their concerns or to find like-minded others to form collectives with, lowering the threshold for civic participation (Gauntlett, 2011). Third, news use is becoming less centered around fixed times, places or patterns of everyday life, which alters what news "is" and "does" for us (Peters, 2015b). Such changes in news circulation transform "the very ground beneath our feet: ambient flows of news re-situate how we understand where we are, who we are connected with, what our 'present' moment actually is" (Sheller, 2015, p. 24). Finally, digitalization has resulted in an expansion of available information and novel tools that help users to shift through, make sense of and engage with such data (Hoelig, 2016). Such news can give people new opportunities to become motivated, form objectives and act to advance such interests.

This study aims to make sense of these shifts in what has been termed 'mediated public connection' (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007), by exploring how news media are functioning as tools for their users to connect to public life in a digitalized media landscape. It employs in-depth interviews and Q-methodology among a group of Dutch news users of mixed gender, age and educational level in three different regions, to find patterns of how people are using different news media – digital and non-digital – to orient to and engage in larger social, cultural, civic and political frameworks. In previous literature, such transformations and the possibilities afforded by new media have typically been explored in light of the values and expectations that members of a certain political system or culture may aspire towards, for example through notions of deliberative or participatory democracy, information-seeking, civic engagement, and so-forth (e.g. Dahlgren, 2000; Ekström, Olsson, & Shehata, 2014; Strömbäck, 2005). However, rather than relying on such notions, I propose that a framework grounded in everyday life practices and preferences may paint a more accurate picture of such "rituals of public connection" amidst a rapidly developing news media landscape. Such an approach emphasizes public connection as a process, rather than an ideal that needs to be achieved, invites public connection researchers to critically interrogate to what extent their theoretical assertions align with people's lived experiences, and incorporates both political and cultural facets of connection, including their interrelation.

Thus, this chapter discusses whether or not digitalization facilitates new patterns of using news media for connecting to public life, and if so how, starting from the practices and preferences of the news user. Previous work on public connection has stressed that with increasing choice, the "constellation of news media on which one individual draws may be quite different than another's" (Couldry et al., 2007, p. 190). This suggests that we may expect a radical diversification of how people come to encounter, process and apply public information. This study instead finds that current patterns of mediated public connection might more accurately be described as a "re-ritualization" of public connection, in which existing and novel practices become intertwined. Rather than completely reinventing, it alters the ways people engage with/through news, whom and what this connects them to, and thus, how, when, where and why news becomes incorporated in the flow of their everyday lives. Before discussing the empirical findings, however, I will first elaborate on the study's theoretical background: previous conceptualizations of public connection and the changing rituals of using news and public information for navigating everyday life.

## 5.2 Ritualization, de-ritualization, re-ritualization?

Academic interest in the societal integrative function of the news has a long history, dating decades back to Berelson's classic study in 1949 of "what missing the newspaper means". Researching the effect of a 1945 newspaper strike on its audience, Berelson concluded that being deprived of your newspaper creates an emotional loss that goes beyond missing certain information. He found the strike interrupted participants' daily structure and their sense of being connected to public life. Over the past decades, numerous studies have confirmed these findings, stating that following the news and exchanging public information with others creates community and sociability and thus exceeds informational purposes (e.g. Carey, 1989; Bentley, 2001; Yamamoto, 2011). The concept of "public connection" builds upon this understanding, starting from the premise that as individuals, we require some commonality or overlap to link up to others and to engage and participate in society. People seek this connection as political citizens, neighbors, colleagues, friends and in the many other roles they play within everyday life (Heikkilä, Kunelius, & Ahva, 2010; Kaun, 2012; Ong & Cabañes, 2012; Schrøder, 2015). The news is one form of such social glue and traditionally has played a major role in binding people together. Even before the invention of journalism, people exchanged information about what was going on to foster togetherness. Thus, the concept of "mediated public connection" (Couldry et al., 2007) is about the generic and relatively neutral orientation the news offers towards a public space, that can, but does not automatically, result in forms of engagement and participation (Dahlgren, 2009). News allows people to experience publicness: the accessible, the visible, and ideally, the universal and the collective (Coleman & Ross, 2010). Such a public space

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can be political (citizens of a nation state) or civic (volunteers for a charity), but also of a social (a sports team) or cultural nature (speakers of a certain language). I thus define public connection here as *the shared frames of reference that enable individuals to engage and participate in cultural, social, civic and political networks in everyday life* (see also Chapter 2).

This is not to say that the news is uniquely suited to this task. Numerous other avenues – from schools and universities to the workplace and from religious institutions to non-governmental organizations – can also facilitate forms of public connection.[14] This is reflected in the fact that public connection is inherent to many other scholarly concepts that are not necessarily invoked in direct relation to news or journalism, from cultural citizenship, social cohesion and community to civic participation, social capital and models of democracy (see Bakardjieva, 2003; Barnhurst, 2003; Baym, 2015; Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Boulianne, 2009; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). However, unlike many other alternative means for public connection, news is not bound to any specific period in life, nor is it dependent on any place or form. News can also travel in everyday conversations while waiting for the bus or picking up your child from school. Moreover, rather than focusing on a clearly delineated target audience, the news typically aims to reach a heterogeneous and large public, as mirrored in the mass media's one-size-fits-all news products. This genericness enabled newspapers and broadcasters to establish themselves as the main bridges between people's public and private spaces throughout the previous century. Even nowadays at a time when traditional journalistic institutions struggle to retain their audiences, large numbers of people still engage in daily rituals of attending to news for public information.

Recent technological developments, in theory, may make news media even more prevailing for public connection. After all, in a media-saturated world where digital technologies allow us to retrieve updates everywhere at any time, with a lower threshold to share information with others than ever before, news media and their content have become almost impossible to escape. This ubiquity makes the news a major opportunity for individuals to connect to one another. Yet, most work on public connection does not focus on news as a tool to connect to public life, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Ahva & Heikkilä, 2015; Couldry & Markham, 2008; Ekström et al., 2014; Ong & Cabañes, 2011; Vidali, 2010). This study therefore addresses public connection through *news media* specifically.

At the same time, there may be reason to believe that news media are becoming less important sources for people's public connection in the current media landscape. While digitalization has vastly increased the volume of news and enables people to consume news on a multitude of platforms, everywhere and all the time, the resulting high choice media environment also allows users to choose their own individual trajectories across the wealth of available content. Instead of engaging with news in relatively predictable patterns, they have obtained more power to simply ignore information that is not to their taste. People's

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14. Similarly, news use can be motivated by many incentives, one of them being public connection.

ways of consuming and using news therefore may have become so varied that attention to journalistic outlets  – previously strongly embedded in daily patterns, such as the evening news bulletin – or even to news and public affairs information in general can no longer be presumed, leading to scholarly concerns about journalism's societal integrative function, the extent to which it still functions as a collective frame of reference, and its legitimacy (see for example Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013; Couldry et al., 2007). Especially when it comes to conceptualizations of public connection that have a strong focus on the role of news for citizens to fulfill their political duties within democracies, such a de-ritualization of news use (Broersma & Peters, 2013) would be problematic if it continues unabated, because it starts from the normative expectation that such fixed rituals of regular news consumption facilitate citizens' attention to public issues. This then in turn equips citizens with the necessary tools and information for engagement and participation in the political system or the civic culture (e.g. Dahlgren, 2000; Ekström et al., 2014; Strömbäck, 2005). If news media indeed no longer provide public connection, in this model, that means it will also no longer foster the civic participation democracy derives its legitimacy from.

Another more culturally-oriented tradition in public connection research, which perceives the topic from the perspective of everyday life, offers a third option. This perspective does not attempt to analyze mediated public connection from the collective framework of a political or civic structure, studying how people *should* use news media for public connection, but considers it from the actual daily practices and experiences of the news user instead. Thus, it explores how news media *are being used* to connect to the different networks people are part of in everyday life. Rather than viewing public connection as a political ideal, it pays attention to the process by which people are applying journalism as a tool to navigate within all the public realms they engage in (e.g. Heikkilä et al., 2010; Schrøder 2015). In other words, instead of testing whether news media are successful in generating public engagement in the digital age, it starts with the question what, in terms of public connection, the societal value and relevance of news media (still) is to people. In the context of a rapidly changing news media landscape that can quickly render top-down created communication models outdated, such a perspective has the advantage of enabling a more user-centric and bottom-up view on public connection, thus staying close to people's everyday experiences. Possibly, current mediated public connection practices cannot be characterized in terms of long-existing rituals that are being prolonged to a digitalized news landscape, nor as a fully completed de-ritualization in which patterns of public connection can no longer be distinguished, but rather, a *re-ritualization* in which the interaction between old and new media logics leads users to adapt habits of connecting to public life (for related notions on broader processes of media change and adaptation see Chadwick [2017] on the idea of hybrid media or Bolter and Grusin [2000] on remediation). Earlier studies have already hinted towards such adapted rituals of connection and

5

engagement. For example, the "checking cycle" as a currently dominant mode of mobile news use (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015) was preceded by longstanding efforts to have "live news" and "breaking news". Similarly, predecessors of "micropolitics" and "self-actualizing citizenship" (Bennett et al., 2011; Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Banaji & Cammaerts, 2015) can be found in practices such as news talk and other long-standing non-institutional forms of civic participation.

Several conceptual angles can be employed to study news users' practices and rituals of mediated public connection. This study focuses on two that are especially pertinent to help contextualize its findings: engagement and relevance. Engagement relates to the specific ways and means by which people connect through news. Users can choose from a wide array of sources to connect to public life, from traditional news media to countless digital alternatives. Moreover, there are many different practices through which they can engage with these outlets. A large body of research has debated which of these should or should not be defined as being forms of public engagement: for example, whether it is limited to a behavioral dimension or also includes civic awareness, whether such engagement is political, non-political, or can be both, and whether it solely includes collective or also individual activities (e.g. Adler & Goggin, 2005; Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Ekman & Amnå, 2012). However, what many of these studies neglect is what engaging or disengaging actually means to users. Why are some news use practices and news outlets more meaningful for connecting publicly than others? The second dimension in this study, relevance, considers the underlying reasons why people seek to connect to society through the news and how their practices of mediated public connection are embedded in their everyday lives. Put differently, what makes mediated public connection more than just repetitions of behavior, and gives it the overarching meaning and symbolic power that turns it from a simple habit into a complex ritual (Couldry, 2003)? Both of these questions cannot be addressed in detail without a user-oriented perspective.

## 5.3    Methodology

To analyze how news users are using news media as a tool to experience and shape their public connection, this study employed 36 in-depth, semi-structure interviews including a Q methodology card-sorting exercise with concurrent think-aloud protocol. Participants were selected using quota sampling, collecting respondents of mixed gender, age and educational level in three different regions to ensure a demographically-varied sample.[15]

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15. Twelve participants were selected within each age group (18-35, 35-60, 61+), twelve participants within each educational subgroup (primary and/or secondary education, vocational education, university education) and twelve participants within each region (Amsterdam, the regional city of Groningen, and rural parts of The Netherlands). The sample existed of 18 males and 18 females. Participants in Amsterdam were recruited through

Each interview, held from October to December 2014, was composed of three successive stages. In the first phase, the day-in-the-life-interview, participants were asked to describe their previous workday and to recall their news use from the moment they awoke until they went to bed. This stage served to map the everyday life context of participants' patterns of news use, focusing on their recall without giving any prompts. Moreover, it prepared interviewees to talk about their news values and experiences in the succeeding phases of the interview. In the second stage, participants were asked to perform a card-sorting exercise based on Q methodology (see Michelle, Davis, & Vladica, 2012; Watts & Stenner, 2012), to measure the importance of different news media within participants' daily life. They received a deck of 36 cards, each containing one category of news media such as "news blogs" or "print news magazines", with multiple examples within that category. This set was carefully designed to represent the entire Dutch news media landscape and, together with the interview guide, previously tested in a small-scale pilot (N=5). While thinking aloud about their decision-making criteria, interviewees then sorted all cards on a normally distributed grid, ranging from "does not play a role in my daily life" to "plays a large role in my daily life". This fairly open operationalization of "value" allowed participants to define the concept themselves, avoiding presupposing that the importance of news media is always dependent on similar considerations, such as its usefulness for public connection. The third and final part of the interview focused more closely on the topic of public connection, using a semi-structured, in-depth interview. In this part, participants reflected on themes such as the value of news in maintaining social connections, news talk, sense of belonging to society, non-mediated sources for public connection, opinion formation, civic engagement, normative pressures and disconnection. All interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed.

For the analysis of the transcripts, I used a grounded theory-inspired approach (Charmaz, 2006). First, every interview was coded line-by-line in software program Atlas.ti to generate a list of initial codes. Second, I developed a list of focused codes by testing the most frequent initial codes against the total data-set. Finally, from the results of the focused coding, theoretical codes were formed and tested. Results relating to the participants' composition of news media repertoires and the value of news in general have been reported in Chapter 4. This chapter instead focuses on how news media are being used as tools for the purpose of public connection specifically, and thus relies more heavily on the final stage of the interview.

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the online marketing panel of publishing house De Persgroep. Participants in the Groningen area were sampled through online marketing panel RegioNoord.

## 5.4    Results

### 5.4.1    New media, new routines?

The current news landscape is characterized by an abundance of media choice. Thus, one would expect a strong shift and diversification of how people are using media to keep up with public affairs. In practice, however, participants' news routines appeared relatively stable. Participants in this study owned at least one mobile device and had access to a wide range of digital news outlets: from interactive television services with possibilities to watch hundreds of channels from all over the globe, to login codes shared by friends or neighbors to be able to read newspapers online, to subscriptions to investigative long-form journalism outlet *De Correspondent* and credit for pay-per-newspaper-article service Blendle, amongst others. However, while this increase in media choice was appreciated, it did not always translate into actual use. For example, Ivo (51)[16] enthusiastically spoke about the opportunity to now watch programs on demand, but during the same interview described his television use as a fixed routine of live watching, heavily centered around set broadcasting times. Especially among the participants in this study aged over 35, practices such as tuning into the eight o'clock news or listening to the radio while driving the car persisted. Moreover, when digitalization had created novel habits of mediated public connection, these were typically complementary rather than replacing existing routines. And even for respondents whose news media repertoire (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012) was exclusively composed of online public information outlets, their patterns of digital news use were strongly influenced by earlier media habits.

The continuing influence of old news use routines was reflected most clearly in how interviewees talked about media trust. When searching for information on a public issue, Lars (28) would select websites that he already knew, to ensure it would be "quality news". Similarly, legacy news brands played a major role in verifying news from non-institutional sources on social media during breaking news events. Emma (53) said she refrained from sharing news on Twitter until "official" channels would confirm it: "For me, that's the NOS [Dutch public broadcaster], and those kind of things." Although these news users could access many news sources, the news brands consumed before and after their adoption of digital devices showed a great similarity. Carlo (29) and Floor (30) switched their print newspaper subscriptions for digital editions to be able to read them on their commute, Paul (55) only installed apps of broadcasters on his smartphone he already knew from watching television in the past, and Karel (68) and Felicia (59) had subscribed to email newsletters and Facebook status updates of newspapers and magazines which they had consumed in print for years. Here, digital news media were simply another means to collect content

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16.  Participants are mentioned by pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

of the same brands in a manner that provided a better situational fit (easier reading on a crowded train) or offered a greater relative advantage (not having to pay, but still obtaining an overview of the major headlines). Because in this case the brands consumed did not change and journalistic institutions distribute similar content across channels, the public issues encountered also remained more or less the same.

At the same time, the data showed multiple news routines that are new to the digitalized media landscape. First, digital mediated public connection does not center exclusively around news brands, but around individuals as well. While as before, journalistic institutions still bring most news, other individuals have become increasingly important for guiding people's attention to it in an overload of available content. As Elise (32) remarked, one of the advantages of following news on social media platforms is that it makes you aware of the news that your friends and other connections consume: "Lots of my friends are on *De Correspondent* nowadays, and Blendle, and they share that on Facebook. So you'll see the news use of your friends." This sharing and re-sharing of news articles regularly led her to news websites that she normally would not visit herself. Some respondents followed journalists, artists, politicians and other public figures on Twitter, offering them a different route towards current affairs. Floor (28): "It gives me an extra layer of how you can continue with news. After something has been published, what the world does with it." Following these people helped her understand what exactly news stories meant and what consequences news events might have. Ad hoc updates by tweeting journalists and other public figures that give an insight in their everyday lives may thus for some provide a more engaging perspective on news and public affairs. For example, Evert (26) usually ignored content from news institutions, considering what he named "the socially responsible components" of the news fairly boring, but was very interested in how other people were leading their lives.

Second, for participants that regularly make use of their smartphones or tablets, checking the news has become an almost continuous activity so immersed in everyday life patterns, it can hardly be recognized as a distinct action anymore (see also Deuze, 2012). Similar to newspaper subscribers reading the headlines at the kitchen table over breakfast with a coffee in hand or the late night news for television viewers, checking your two to four favorite news apps signaled the beginning and the end of the day. In between, this was repeated throughout the day during commute, while at work, during lunch break, after work on the couch in front of the TV, right up until switching off the lights and going to sleep. Sometimes the same checking habits even persisted across platforms. Edwin (37) started the day with by checking the app of newspaper *de Volkskrant* on his phone in the morning and then continued to check the website of the same paper on his laptop during work, even though this meant he would view a lot of information twice. He explained: "[First], I check, scan, what I find interesting and I'll register it for later that day [to

5

consume] through the full websites, because I find it pleasurable to view it on a big screen. I can click through there and delve into things that really interest me." Many participants mentioned they had come to follow the news more closely and more extensively because of their mobile devices, and that their time spent with news had increased for this was complementing rather than replacing previous news habits. For instance, holidays that used to be spent without any news at all, completely disconnecting from home, now involved starting the day with digital papers on a tablet. Even participants who did not use their mobile devices frequently mentioned having a better sense of the news than they did two or three years prior, now that others had access to it everywhere and anytime and would tell others around them when they received an important notification. This was not necessarily considered a positive development, as news becomes very difficult to escape and inextricably linked to many other activities, invoking feelings of news overload. Bart (62) complained that his colleagues would no longer have a chat with him during lunch breaks, but instead spent their downtime with media, causing him to pick up the newspaper too. "It's not about the newspaper, it's just flipping through. Spending time during the break. That's how everyone does it. They're all apping, on their phones you know, awful. Or they get the newspaper. That's it. That's having a break nowadays." Some participants dealt with this by using apps to save news for later, such as Pocket, or by placing it in tabs in their web browser. Yet, these tactics meant news was still on in the background all the time, making it an easy distraction when faced with difficult tasks at work.

Finally, the information participants kept up with daily through apps and social media was much more diverse than the traditional delineations of the genre of news would suggest. Next to the following of interesting individuals and friends sharing articles from news media organizations as described above, timelines were filled with many interpersonal updates, posts of interest groups and NGOs, fake news, funny videos, inspiring quotes, announcements of political organizations, updates from celebrity news sites, and so forth. Of course, people have always kept up with multiple types of information, but these genres tended to be more or less separate and were consumed in different places. Now, social media blend all of these into one constant stream of updates in which journalists' news coverage is placed between cat pictures and cake recipes, broadening people's perceptions of what exactly it means to "follow the news" or be up to date. From an article about the production of synthetic meat and YouTube videos on novel printing techniques to the review of a theater show and the latest plastic surgery of Angelina Jolie, a wide selection of updates were all classified by participants as "news", even though these did not always tick the boxes of traditional news values such as conflict, timeliness or impact (see Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). That said, participants were very aware of the strong association of the term "news" with traditional contents of journalism institutions, which remains powerful in everyday speech. For instance, Nadine (29) described Facebook as a place where you "don't

receive the real, national news. That doesn't always pass by on Facebook and that's why I find it very useful to have the radio on in the car." Yet, at the same time, she ranked the platform as the news medium playing the largest role in her everyday life, as the medium was crucial for her to connect with her social and professional network. Thus, although not always labeled as "news" to acknowledge the difference with traditional journalistic content, participants' perceptions of what information was needed to keep up with to stay connected were broadening.

In other words, while news media still constitute a major source for people's mediated public connection, these three shifts in what current news use entails together create a variety of possibilities to access and engage with public information: from the use of messaging apps for news to having Twitter feeds as a wallpaper at work. Therefore, they expand our understandings of what engaging or disengaging in a digitalized media landscape is and means. However, to argue that digitalization causes a re-ritualization of mediated public connection, an additional element is necessary: these novel patterns need to carry a symbolic power, which I will turn to next.

## 5.4.2   New habits, new rituals?

For repeated action to be more than merely a habit and become a ritual, it needs to embody some sort of transcendent value sustaining the routine (Couldry, 2003). Many studies have discussed such rituals in the context of media use and journalism (e.g. Carey, 1989; Dayan & Katz, 1994; Silverstone, 1994). The most apparent example is the traditional connection between regular news use routines and supporting citizenship or democracy (Schudson, 1998). A few of the participants still echoed this sentiment, such as Floris (33). "Without media, problems are not being exposed, injustice is not addressed, there is no transparency about the people who decide things for you. […] I think we should take care that the quality of the news is maintained and that we stay interested in topics that matter. Not the life of a Dutch celebrity." However, the link between news use and citizenship becomes less straight-forward now that citizenship can be enacted in many different ways, moving from normatively "forced", dutiful behavior centered around formal rights and duties to self-actualizing, more individualized forms of civic engagement and participation that do not necessarily have anything to do with journalism (Bennett et al., 2011; Banaji & Cammaerts, 2015; Miller, 2007). If the idea of dutiful consumption of traditional journalism outlets loses power, what values do current practices of news use for public connection represent? In other words, can we view novel practices of mediated public connection as rituals, and if so, what sustains them?

First, as mentioned above, the news can invoke a sense of belonging and "togetherness" in certain groups (Bakardjieva, 2003). Because media are present in so many everyday situations, news use and other recurring practices are likely to become linked. Therefore, our

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mundane news use routines (i.e. listening to the radio in the morning) can come to act as means to become integrated in social situations (sharing an experience as a family) (Larsen, 2000). Whereas in Bakardjieva's study on messaging boards, "virtual togetherness" was still limited to certain places and specific publics, being a conscious and separate activity, for current news users such connection is continuous and closely interwoven with people's offline social networks and daily routines. For Nathalie (27), for instance, news on Facebook was an important tool to maintain her friendships with friends living abroad: "I see them twice, three times a year at most. Then we can catch up, but the rest of the time it's like: have you read this? Here's an article you might find interesting. I found this, what do you think?" Push notifications and social media apps constantly invite users to transcend their "narrowly private existence and navigate the social world" (Bakardjieva, 2003, p. 294) and consume and share news with others, highlighting its connective potentialities. Exchanging information increases your value in social relationships, strengthens existing bonds and shows that you care about others (see also Hermida, 2014). Bianca (40) for instance described texting friends about breaking news as a favor, one that they were likely to return later.

Closely related to the value of social connection is connecting through news as a form of self-presentation and professionalism. Consuming and sharing news does not only help forming bonds with others, but also creates the image that one is knowledgeable, engaged in society and interested in others. For instance, Nina (30) said being well-informed about current affairs gave her "confidence" in her conversations with others, because it meant she always had a shared frame of reference she could rely on, no matter who she was meeting. Regular news use, according to the participants, makes you feel good about yourself for adhering to existing social norms. Most frequently, this importance of keeping up with news and public affairs was linked to the context of being a professional employee. While following the news typically was not an official part of their roles, for many participants, keeping up with changes in their industries made their jobs easier by enhancing communication with others in the company or providing information relevant for their daily tasks. Moreover, they felt their clients and colleagues expected them to stay up-to-date on developments in their industry. In other social contexts too, it was perceived as desirable to appear up-to-date on current affairs and as engaged in society. Participants frequently stressed they found it important that people had regard for and aimed to understand others outside of their own circles, saying their news use was a part of how they personally demonstrated this quality. While civic engagement thus remains publicly valued, this was no longer necessarily tied to reading the newspaper, or similarly, other institution-related practices such as party membership or union involvement. Instead, engaging with issues encountered through news took shape in a wide variety of small-scale, issue-based and utilitarian forms not only offering public engagement, but also some individual gain. For example, Daniël (33) started growing his own vegetables out of concern about the workings of the food industry after

seeing a critical documentary – saving money at the same time – and Carlo (29) swapped his print for digital subscriptions out of environmental concerns – but also for practical reasons. Some participants even considered the act of paying for news, instead of relying on one of the many freely available alternatives, as a form of civic engagement, feeling obliged to financially support media.

Third, respondents linked their practices of mediated public connection to the feelings of control and security. Many participants expressed their desire to be on top of things, which due to the increased speed of the news cycle may cost more effort than before. Instead of informing oneself at a fixed time, being up-to-date now requires continuously checking the news throughout the day. While being on top of things partially relates back to the previously discussed issue of self-presentation and normative expectations of others, most importantly, participants linked their practices of mediated public connection to having control over public issues that might affect you, remarking that "not always, but often, there are news items related to you" (Dominique, 24). Monitoring the news closely (see Schudson, 1998) gave them the confidence they would know when any public issue would affect them and required a response.

While sometimes the link between the issues presented in the news and participants' personal lives was self-evident – news about your neighborhood, your profession – for much news, connections were not so easy to understand. After all, many news events do not concern you directly and are extraordinary instances, rather than examples of slow, societal change. The fact that news traditionally is about the new, rare and unexpected (see Harcup & O'Neill, 2001) means that almost by definition it ignores the mundane, the familiar and the well-known that enables users to identify with and recognize themselves in the content of news media. This is why many participants complained about the "superficial" (Lars, 28) character of the news. Louise (64) argued the news should contain less one-time events such as accidents: "Those [are] news stories where all you can do is think: 'oh'." Rather, Louise would hear a story about ongoing issues, because "you can still do something about that". When asked how the news could facilitate people's sense of agency more effectively, Edwin (37) described the website of a commercial broadcaster that, after many news items, referred to a page where users could find out more about how such information affected their personal situation. "They do that in a fairly simple way, how they present it textually, but they offer you the kind of information that you normally would Google yourself and search somewhere else." Thus, even small tools may already enhance the perceived relevance and constructiveness of news.

### 5.4.3   The importance of social networks

Up to this point, the analysis has been mainly focused on news in the context of journalism. However, the data clearly demonstrate another source for connecting to public life through

news: interpersonal communication (see also Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015; McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2017). Whether it was while working out at the gym, having a beer in the pub or getting coffee at work, "just talking to people" (Paul, 55) served as a significant source for public information, even when participants they were not actively searching for news. Interpersonal mediated public connection has the advantage of being much more targeted towards one's personal interests and concerns than journalistic reporting, addressing a heterogeneous audience, can be. Moreover, it gives people the opportunity to immediately connect news to other fragmented public events and their everyday lives, and thus make sense of the issues discussed. Especially for hyperlocal issues, face-to-face conversations often proved more useful than consuming news media to find out what was going on, for mainstream news coverage was usually not as detailed. For René (63), the customers in his restaurant were also a quicker source for local news: "News in the neighborhood, I'd sometimes know that before the municipality did. You are approachable, people come to you often with news in the neighborhood. That can be a drugs raid, but also a neighbor who broke her leg." Bianca (40) even named a specific person as a news source: her father. She explained she frequently heard about changes in the neighborhood because he volunteered for local civic organizations. "That's someone I regularly talk to. For example during the elections, we will call each other to discuss what we think and why. Then you have some additional information." This shows that while much of the public information discussed may of course have originated from journalism, news also has the potential to facilitate public connection outside of journalism.

Social media have made part of these everyday conversations about news publicly accessible, allowing users to discuss issues in the news with a much wider public than would be possible offline. Moreover, they are both a place for news consumption and news discussion, making them convenient sources for public connection. Most social media users in the sample had at least one friend that was interested in public issues and likely to share breaking news with them if they learned an event had happened. For Kevin (30), this worked so efficiently that he no longer consumed any journalism directly at all, instead relying on his connections telling him about important events on WhatsApp. "My biggest news source at the moment are my friends and colleagues. That's not an official news source, and it's all second-hand, but it is my biggest source of information. I also don't need more." Thus, after journalism, social networks become a second filter on public information.

Few participants in the sample shared news on social media themselves. Especially on more open social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, they refrained from commenting or posting content. Privacy concerns played a major role here, as the set-up of these platforms makes it difficult for users to know their exact audience beforehand. Typically, participants would only accept followers or friends that they also knew in non-virtual life. As Felicia (59) put it, she would add someone on Facebook only if it would be

someone she'd say hi to when crossing him or her on the street. Being a teacher, she even had purposefully created two profiles, one for personal and one for professional use, so her students wouldn't be able to see her private information. In some cases, social media were a useful tool to stay in touch with others across large geographical distances, but generally, participants preferred sharing information face-to-face as it was more closed off and could easily be integrated with other social activities. Floor (30), for example, quit commenting on Facebook on news stories because of negative responses in her social circles: "I try to keep myself from commenting now. I haven't done it in a long time. But a few weeks ago, I can't even remember what the discussion was about, I replied to someone and all my friends saw that in their timelines. I received texts, even from friends in Groningen: what the hell are you doing on Facebook?" Because of the public nature of Facebook or Twitter, people apparently are expected to refrain from discussing sensitive or negative issues on these platforms. Rather, participants would talk about public issues within a more closed setting, discussing them face-to-face, on the phone or through private messaging services such as WhatsApp. This app was popular among interviewees for exchanging news, because its set-up of one-on-one conversations and small group chats offered users very fine-grained control over who could view shared content. Even though most websites do not offer a WhatsApp sharing button, meaning it requires relatively more manual labor compared to alternative social platforms, specifically the younger participants in the sample regularly received news updates this way.

News media content was regularly used as a reference point in daily conversation whenever considered relevant for the other person. As Ivo (51) explained when discussing recent earthquakes near his town: "There are a few people who are close to it, who've experienced it, or who are involved because of their jobs. Then I'll talk about it with them. That's in my social circles, news that concerns you here. I'm not going to ask them about events far away." However, participants' personal conversations and the news they encountered in the media tended to center around different type of concerns: interpersonal issues stem from specific worries about the wellbeing of friends and family, whereas journalistic news by nature is more universal. Nadine (27) for instance noted that relying solely on discussions on Facebook for public information would "give you a bit odd view of the world" and listening to the radio was therefore an essential addition to her mediated public connection. Interesting were cases when respondents noted a topic that was prevalent in their everyday conversations should be included by journalistic institutions, but felt it was left out or should be addressed differently or more frequently. For example, when the late husband of Bregje (62) fell ill, he was unable to receive sufficient medical care due to a lack of staff in the local hospital. She wrote letters about this to newspapers and politicians to voice these issues, but felt her concerns were not being recognized or understood. Floris (33) in his job experienced some concerning effects of a new policy

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moving the major political responsibility for health care from the governmental level to that of the municipality, but noticed the local newspaper hardly covered the issue. An interesting follow-up question for news organizations here would be how they can effectively tap into these kind of public discussions, of which a large majority still appears to take place offline.

## 5.5    Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored users' habits and rituals of using news to connect to public life in a digitalized media landscape. The interviews confirm that, despite declining newspaper circulations and broadcaster viewing rates suggesting otherwise, people's need for public connection has not declined (Couldry et al., 2007; Eliasoph, 1998; McCollough et al., 2017). On the contrary: 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. The news, as some of the less publicly interested respondents lamented, has become almost impossible to escape. While the current news landscape provides opportunities for users to circumvent journalism with individual-to-individual news sharing, I found news media institutions still serve as major platforms for public connection. Rather than a complete "de-ritualization" of mediated public connection practices, wherein no common trajectories for connecting to public life and thus no shared frames of reference can be discerned anymore, digitalization facilitates a "re-ritualization" of public connection through news. While news users still seek togetherness, self-presentation and control through news, as demonstrated above, the interaction between traditional and new media logics forms many novel patterns of engagement to fulfill these needs that are more diverse, less distinct, more utilitarian, and increasingly facilitated through people's social networks.

Most notably, these new habits of engaging with and based upon news show that public connection through news no longer necessary equals public connection through journalism. Even though participants felt the abundance in news media choice meant there was always something suiting their personal preferences, there are many more non-journalistic alternatives available than before. Such connection through social networks rather than journalism has three advantages. First, it may provide a better link between audiences' particular concerns and the news, as content spread by journalistic institutions tends to be less tailored and more generic. Second, it makes it easier to situate news in users' contexts of everyday life and connect to long-term developments, for it allows for consuming and making sense of news at the same time. Third, news from social networks may prove a better match with what users perceive as public issues requiring discussion and solutions than journalistic news does. After all, while digitalization has allowed people to voice their concerns more easily, listening and responding to such topics in everyday

conversations is still proving a challenging task for journalistic institutions (see also Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015).

More importantly, I have aimed to show how a focus on the news user is crucial to understand mediated public connection in a rapidly changing news media landscape. Rather than starting from normative points of view on how mediated public connection is supposed to take place, the analysis has started from people's experiences, asking when exactly news media are and are not perceived as engaging or relevant for connecting to public life. At a time where users are moving away from traditional news media and increasingly use other means to find out about public life, such insights in how news media become meaningful as avenues for public connection may become key to understanding potential causes for disconnection and maintaining journalism's societal value.

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# 6. Shedding light on the dark social. The connective role of news and journalism in social media communities[17]

## 6.1　Introduction

The rise of mobile technology, growing supply of available information and increased number of available social media platforms have created a media landscape in which users can choose to connect to public life how- and wherever they prefer. Social media have become closely embedded in the routines of millions of users, blurring formerly distinct boundaries between private and public information and between producers and consumers (Chadwick, 2017; Ekström & Shehata, 2018). Not only do such platforms open up possibilities for users to inform themselves about what is happening, they also provide avenues to engage with such information within their social networks, for instance through commenting, liking or sharing. This way, social media can act as spaces for "public connection", providing users with shared frames of reference that enable them to engage and participate within their cultural, social, civic and political networks in everyday life (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007).

　　This chapter explores the various ways in which social media, messaging apps and Facebook groups in particular, facilitate people's public connection within groups, focusing on the significance of news and journalism. Traditionally, news has been considered one of the primary tools to create shared frames of reference to public life, fostering community between individuals and facilitating social integration within groups (Berelson, 1949; Couldry et al., 2007; Hess & Gutsche Jr., 2018; Jensen, 1990). The emergence of social media platforms and their connective potentialities give rise to questions of how this relationship is impacted (Hermida, 2014). Although Facebook remains the most frequently used social network worldwide and thus attracts most scholarly attention (Stoycheff et al., 2017), studies such as the 2017 Reuters Digital News Report show that people are increasingly using messaging apps for news (Newman et al., 2017). Covering 36 countries, it notes that while

6

the uptake of WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger varies significantly between regions, overall, 23% of respondents indicated they find, share or discuss news through messaging platforms; the trend is toward people moving from relatively open (i.e. Twitter, public Facebook timeline) to more closed (i.e. messaging apps) social media. While undoubtedly informative, the individualized, survey-based limitations of such studies mean we still know very little about the experiences and rationales underlying people's engagement with news in those spaces. A complicating factor is that messaging apps are what Madrigal (2012) describes as "dark social media": sites that handle user traffic without adding referral data when a user clicks a link. This makes it difficult to track what type of news content is shared on them, much less how it is discussed (Benton, 2014).

This study therefore employs focus groups to gain greater insights into how and why people use news and journalism to connect in such semi-private spaces, which by their nature oftentimes involve more "active" sociability and communicative participation than open social media. Moreover, focus groups allow more explicit consideration of the impact of community type and social norms on such practices. As Heikkilä and Ahva (2015) note, detailed studies on news practices that take social contexts into account remain scarce. This study therefore bases its focus groups on three common types of network in which people know each other both on- and offline – geographic (locality), work-related and leisure-based groups – to uncover the individual and group-based experiences of news use, the impact of social media, and how these interweave and influence one another. Capturing the significance of news and journalism for continuing to foster public connection demands considering not only what issues people connect over and the practices they engage in to do so, but also how connection is embedded in their everyday lives and the value that connecting has for them. This chapter accordingly focuses on four analytical angles to the concept of public connection (inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness) to emphasize these lived experiences, making it possible to capture if and how news *becomes meaningful* rather than starting from normative presuppositions on why it should be (see Chapter 2).

## 6.2 Public connection, news and social media

Traditionally, news has functioned as an important avenue for public connection (Couldry et al., 2007; Kaun, 2012; McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2017) with news organizations presenting themselves as almost obligatory points of passage to find out what is happening outside people's private worlds. Social media are not that different, in that respect. However, on social network sites, the patterns of news use sustaining public connection are less predictable. News use in the era of mass media witnessed many people connecting through the same product, distributed at relatively the same time, raising awareness and sparking

conversation through people's relatively shared patterns of exposure to news content (Couldry, 2003). On social media, however, people co-create individualized timelines by following specific accounts and adjusting personal settings, and the distribution of information is subject to greater variance. That exposes them to a composition of content that – at least theoretically – can be unique for every user. Such shifts take on greater significance when considering how people engage with public affairs. Previous research suggests that people tend to make sense of public issues within their personal networks (Barnhurst, 1998; Ekström, 2016). The way people communicate using digital technologies potentially changes those dynamics of public connection.

The concept of public connection starts from the assumption that people do not navigate through everyday life as atomized individuals, but are part of larger networks. For example, they may share a language (cultural frameworks), vote for the same party (political), volunteer at the same organization (civic) or enjoy leisure activities together (social). Public connection is about the general orientation that individuals share towards one or multiple of those public frameworks, which oftentimes overlap (Kaun, 2012; Ong & Cabañes, 2011).[18] Previous literature on public connection has highlighted such shared frames of reference as necessary starting points for public engagement and participation (Couldry et al., 2007; Dahlgren, 2000). While the idea of public connection is employed beyond the field of communication and media studies, a significant body of work focuses on the role of (news) media as tools to connect individuals to public life (see Chapter 2 for an overview).[19]

While such connection through news can happen individually, studies show that many mediated public connection practices take place within social groups (Barnhurst, 1998; Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015). A long tradition of scholarly work has addressed those social contexts in which news is used (Peters, 2012), the connective potentialities it may have (Couldry et. al, 2007), and the dynamics between journalism and the communities it serves (Reader, 2012). Early examples are Berelson's (1949) *What Missing the Newspaper Means*, which concluded that newspapers are not only important to readers because of their content but also the daily sense of connection to the world they provide, and Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) *Personal Influence*, which stressed the critical function of interpersonal communication and social networks for issue awareness. Such considerations still hold sway in the digital era: recent studies confirm that people continue to make sense of news

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18. For instance immigrants often manage multiple orientations, circulating between different sentiments regarding the homeland and host country (Ong & Cabañes, 2011). Likewise, one's gender, religion or ethnicity may traverse political, civic, social and/or cultural boundaries.
19. Although few authors explicitly use the term "public connection", the concept is employed implicitly in a wide range of scholarly work within media and journalism studies, political communication and related fields, for instance in work on civic culture, cultural citizenship, social capital, civic engagement and participatory democracy. These are discussed at length in Chapter 2).

within specific social contexts that are essential to their public connection (e.g. McCollough et al., 2017; Schrøder, 2015). The use of news as a tool for public connection, in other words, dates back far before the launch of MySpace or Twitter.

Likewise, while the rise of social media has highlighted the potentialities of news to create a sense of community within social groups, the idea that mediated news practices can facilitate social connections between individuals is far from new (Hess & Gutsche Jr., 2018). For instance, the integrative role that television has traditionally played within domestic settings, supporting the relational structure of the family, has been widely discussed (e.g. Jensen, 1990; Lull, 1980; Silverstone, 1994). Similarly, newspapers have been found to serve as "a catalyst for conversation and human contact" (Bogart, 1989, p. 169) within social groups, particularly in local communities (see Hoffman & Eveland Jr., 2010 for an overview). However, the digitalization of the news media landscape and the rise of social media alter these connective potentialities of news.

Applying the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2, I specifically consider four key aspects which transform through the ways digital technologies allow people to bridge their private and public worlds. The first is the notion of *inclusiveness*: what issues do citizens connect over within their communities and who is part of such connection? Earlier research has found that people frequently discuss and make sense of national and international news, local affairs and economic issues with others, within a variety of social settings (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000). Social media allow such discussions to occur continuously, regardless of physical co-presence, and can demarcate spaces for mediated public connection, for example through closed Facebook and WhatsApp groups. This potentially affects the news' socially integrative function, although it is important to recognize that participating in news discussions is not always affirmative (Couldry, 2003); discussing public affairs can serve to challenge social norms within groups or be perceived as something that potentially precipitates social disharmony (Ekström, 2016; Thorson, 2014).

Second, social media have opened up new forms of *engagement* with news. People can choose from a large array of platforms that support following others and exchanging public information to foster sociability within one's social groups. Those platforms, in turn, facilitate a myriad of emergent news practices (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2014; Picone, 2016), from acts such as creating a neighborhood Facebook group resembling community journalism (cf. Reader, 2012) to sharing news articles with colleagues on WhatsApp as conversation starters (Van Damme et al. 2015).

Third, because social media involve novel patterns of engaging with and consuming news, it obtains a different place within the flow of daily life, changing the *relevance* of connecting publicly. Earlier studies show that people engage in news talk to support various relational structures, from the family to groups of friends and colleagues (Boczkowski, 2010). Social media facilitate such connection, continuously and anywhere. Also, through

mobile technology groups can use social media to constantly monitor the issues that may affect those in their community (cf. Schudson, 1998; Zaller, 2003). That may foster a sense of security, similar to the rituals of daily newspaper reading observed by Berelson (1949). Moreover, social media allow people to easily share such concerns and quickly reach everyone within their networks (Hermida, 2014).

Finally, new opportunities for engagement and the increase in publicly available information may affect the *constructiveness* of public connection, changing what interests connecting through news may help people advance within various social groups (Couldry et. al, 2007). For instance, private Facebook groups centered around common interests or other shared characteristics such as location can serve as tailored news feeds that automatically filter the news for information that is most useful for people in that social group (Hess & Gutsche Jr., 2018). Such spaces for "news curation" can help users to avoid news overload and minimize the user activity required to reach articles of interest (Lavie et al., 2010).

These transformations encourage renewed attention to the ways that people perceive the efficacy of social media to connect to public life, and the role that news and journalism play in this regard. A vast body of literature discusses how media in general (Deuze, 2012; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2015) and social media in particular have become closely and inextricably embedded in everyday life (e.g. Baym, 2015; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Lu & Hampton, 2017), up to the point where users carry "mediated sociability" with them "at all times, no matter where they are or what they are doing" (Donath, 2014, p. 631). Of course, news is only part of the information that is spread on social media. That said, Reuters' Digital News survey found that 54% of respondents report using social media for news every week (Newman et al., 2017). Previous work has extensively analyzed the importance of social media relative to other news sources and the extent to which people use them to find news (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014). Until now, however, limited attention has been paid to the communicative and social *meanings* of news *within* people's everyday networks and the influence of social media in that respect.

## 6.3    Methodology

Six focus groups were conducted in three different cities across The Netherlands, from September to November 2016. Focus groups help uncover how people construct and negotiate meanings collectively within groups about a certain topic by simulating everyday forms of conversation and generating both points of consensus and difference (Kitzinger, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). In this case, our research interest was in how news on social media may or may not be valuable for groups as a tool for public connection. The Netherlands is an interesting context to study mediated public connection on dark social

media platforms, as it is one of the countries where SMS and MMS were expensive for a long time. Therefore, the use of messaging apps to share information quickly became widespread with their emergence as a cheap alternative (Van der Veer, Boekee, & Peters, 2016). For accessing news in particular, The Netherlands ranks in the middle category below countries such as Malaysia, Brazil and Spain, but far above the United Kingdom and the United States (Newman et al., 2017).

Every group consisted of participants who knew each other personally and communicated through social media at least twice a week. I selected a variety of groups, including both territorial/geographical and relational/interest-based communities (Gusfield, 1975), and incorporating both groups that were formed by members themselves and groups created in a top-down manner. Two were work-related (high school teachers, IT customer support department), two were organized around leisure activities (football [soccer] team, a student association) and two were location-based (local volunteers, group of neighbors).[20] Five groups used WhatsApp as their major social network to communicate; the neighbors used Facebook; and some groups relied on other media to complement their communication (i.e. Google Hangouts, Slack, email).

In total, 40 people participated, equally divided in terms of gender. The youngest respondent was 18 years old, the oldest 66. People with higher vocational or university-level education were overrepresented in the sample. The first and fourth focus group consisted of six participants, the second, third and fifth had eight, and the final had four. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Heckathorn, 2011), focusing on recruiting individuals who were then asked to encourage their colleagues, friends, neighbors or acquaintances to participate. The focus groups took place at locations that were most convenient for the group (e.g. participants' homes, offices, club house). On average, the sessions lasted 100 minutes. Snacks and soft drinks were provided. In return for their participation, each participant received a €20 gift card.

The sessions were moderated by the first author, using semi-structured questions to guide the discussion. As an ice breaker, participants were all asked to introduce themselves and describe how they knew each other and formed the group. Then, four main themes were addressed: a) patterns of social media use by the group; b) the role of social media in facilitating public connection; c) the content shared on those platforms they felt was relevant and important to others in the group; and finally d) the role of news and journalism for facilitating public connection on social media. Thus, only in the second half of the session was the discussion focused on news and journalism, to avoid presupposing its centrality for people's everyday public connection (Couldry, 2003). Also, the concept of

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20. While the main reasons for the groups existence, in practice, these were not hard distinctions: for instance, some colleagues would engage in leisure activities from time to time.

news was not defined beforehand, to allow participants to construct and negotiate their own interpretation.

All sessions were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and then coded line-by-line using Atlas.ti to identify central themes. Second, focused codes were developed by testing the most frequent of these initial codes against the entire dataset. Finally, rereading the material, theoretical codes were formed and tested. Multiple themes emerged throughout the process, for example relating to social media group dynamics, the various affordances different social media platforms have for users, and the informative uses of social media. This chapter specifically focuses on the role of news for facilitating connection within these groups' social networks. For privacy reasons, the names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms.

## 6.4    Results

Our results show that understandings and practices of public connection vary considerably between different communities, depending on the communicative aims of the group and associated deployment of social media platform affordances. In turn, how group members experienced the four dimensions of mediated public connection I distinguished – inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness – also differed.

### 6.4.1    Inclusiveness

The dimension of inclusiveness considers the issues people connect over and who they connect with. The groups of social media users selected for the focus groups all understood themselves as communities, displaying a sense of personal relatedness, a feeling of mattering to the group, and a belief that members shared a connection through mutual experiences, common places and time spent together (cf. McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Although social media were only one avenue facilitating that sense of community, they were vital to the daily communication between members in all focus groups. Moreover, those digital conversations were closely interwoven with the group's social contact in non-virtual situations, mediating shared offline experiences by taking pictures and videos at get-togethers or linking back to discussions on social media in face-to-face settings.

All groups mentioned how exchanging information on social media fostered sociability. However, they showed great variation in the content sustaining that sense of belonging and what was considered "news" within their community. Sometimes, shared content was based on common interests: news in the Facebook group of the neighbors, for example, included upcoming events at the local community center, local crime, and other issues that in principle could be reported in local news media but were typically too small-scale to generate media attention. Their Facebook group was a way to stay on top of

local issues and increase community attachment (cf. Hoffman & Eveland Jr., 2010). Likewise, for the teachers, the topics discussed – e.g. refugees, human rights, environmental issues – strongly related to the content of their classes. In other groups, however, type of community and the topics of the conversations were unrelated. For the IT colleagues, discussing public issues had little to do with their job, but was simply considered an enjoyable activity part of being a team. Topics therefore could be very broad, seamlessly flowing from personal conversation to public affairs topics (cf. Wyatt et al., 2000) and ranging from science to feminism to the US elections. Similarly, the soccer team rarely discussed sports news. Their social media communities had a different purpose: arranging logistics, organizing team activities and sharing gossip to foster sociability. The soccer team considered sharing journalism content irrelevant exactly *because* it was news: thus, everyone would already have heard about it.

While Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) suggest that large and heterogenic networks tend to generate more civic activity, our results were mixed. For the IT team, their diverse personal interests and political affiliations were a reason to discuss news in their WhatsApp group: it was generic enough that all members in the group could talk along. Moreover, others were likely to have different points-of-view and could thus provide alternative perspectives. The soccer team, however, thought that in a large group with diverse interests, news was unlikely to interest everyone. Thus, they would rather forward stories to specific group members instead of posting it in their WhatsApp community.

The content connected over also varied between social media platforms, depending on their degree of openness. The privateness of WhatsApp made it suitable for socializing and discussing interpersonal news and stories about shared personal interests without fear of embarrassment, fostering togetherness within the group. To connect beyond the group's boundaries however, participants employed more open platforms such as Twitter, the public Facebook timeline or LinkedIn, both actively by posting information about charity events (soccer team), promoting their businesses (volunteers) or sharing vacancies (teachers), and more passively, scrolling through their feeds to monitor news (Schudson, 1998; Zaller, 2003). Regarding the latter, the teachers and IT team discussed how on Facebook, content does not necessarily stem from one's own connections and liked pages, but can originate from outsiders too. Although they worried Facebook's filter bubble may shield them from alternative political information, they also noted the platform made them stumble on "surprise content" (Kim et al., 2013) they might not have normally discovered. The private Facebook group of the neighbors was a compromise, enabling them to limit membership to people in the area making members feel safe to post, while still creating a diverse community that would bring in different types of information.

The extent to which news and journalism were included in everyday communications on social media thus varied per group and platform. Yet, even in communities where "news"

was close to traditional journalistic conceptualizations, only a selection of stories would be included:

> Stephanie: "When I open my NOS [public broadcaster] app now, there are five things that make me think: it's interesting, but I'd never post it in the group, because it- Fourteen years jail time for murder on son in Dordrecht, then I think, it may be news within The Netherlands, but it's not news for us."
> Nicole: "[Murdering him] in a bathtub, unbelievable…"
> Charlotte: "Just like these two cops and the chokehold, then I think: I know about this, but I won't share it, because it's already on the news, I'd say. I think that's it, because the articles we share aren't on the news or the news bulletin."
> Marloes (*approvingly*): "Uh-huh."
> Nicole: "Those don't have news value, because they're too silent."
> (*Teachers*)

Preferably, stories would address long-term developments and allow members to explore multiple perspectives or aspects of a certain problem. The IT team, for instance, discussed a news story about the Dutch parliament voting for a bill making all adults organ and tissue donors unless they explicitly opt out, exploring not only its political, but also ethical and legal dimensions:

> Lisa: "I think it's logical that everyone wants to become a donor. But when within my own group people already say: I have a different opinion, that's much more interesting, because I didn't expect that. I understand that people are against, but-
> Niels: "But the fun thing about our group is that you can just say that. Like I said, there were people who thought their right of self-determination got compromised, with a whole story behind it. There's a principle underlying that. They aren't necessarily against people becoming a donor, or whatever, there's a principle behind it I think everyone of us can relate to."
> (*IT team*)

Rather than considering separate news reports, participants made sense of public affairs by connecting several news events and weaving them into one coherent story. One-time incidents that did not invite any further engagement were seen as less appealing. What news becomes included in communities' shared frames of reference thus depends both on group considerations – what news it considers to be of collective interest, and norms about what news should be consumed collectively or individually – and content characteristics.

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### 6.4.2   Engagement

The dimension of engagement pertains to the question of which forms of accessing and interacting with news people perceive as "engaging" or "disengaging". The group of the neighbors considered reading and liking each other's contributions in the Facebook group to be ways of being engaged within their local community. Likewise, the IT staff used their WhatsApp debates about public issues as a means to become integrated in the team and get to know each other better through "playful connection" (Kaun, 2012). For the fraternity and soccer team groups, however, engaging with news or public information was perceived as an individual practice completely detached from their groups' main communicative purpose for using social media. That did not mean they had less interest in current affairs: most of them were frequent news consumers, just not in that particular social context. Conversely, many teachers considered the news boring, yet they would frequently share public issues on social media. Thus, as other studies have found (Andersen & Kristensen, 2006; Chapter 5), interest in public issues and news use did not necessarily relate. Moreover, group dynamics evidently shaped the perceived appropriateness of engaging with news in those contexts.

Beyond context and group dynamics, differences in technological affordances of the used social media platforms also contributed to distinct patterns of engagement. Most groups employed specific social platforms for a designated purpose: the teachers, for instance, used Google Hangouts to ask quick work-related questions, but would discuss long-term tasks via email. Similarly, Slack helped the IT team to retrace and archive job-related conversations, and the leisure-oriented groups employed private Facebook groups for organizing group activities so they could tag members to assign tasks. Interestingly, groups would sometimes interpret the same technical affordances of platforms differently. For example, WhatsApp groups present users with a single stream of messages in which posts easily get buried under the hundreds of other daily messages. For the student association, this lack of hierarchy made the medium unfitting for discussing public issues, as they could only reply to all group members instead of tagging specific people. For the IT team however, it supported the explorative nature in which they would discuss news. For them, discussing news events was typically part of a longer-lasting conversation: topics of interest, such as the US elections, would come into the dialogue when relevant news would appear, move out again, to be referred back to during a next event. WhatsApp supported that form of public connection.

Across all focus groups, the relative publicness of the Facebook timeline made participants cautious when engaging with content. Replicating previous studies (Ekström, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2014), our respondents perceived posting on public Facebook timelines as expressing one's unconditional opinion, forever retraceable for potentially anyone:

Kim: "I'm only inclined to share something when I feel really certain about it. You sometimes feel insecure – at least I feel uncertain, to share news – because sometimes people think I am making a statement, while [I'm not]. Then I'm sort of entering into a debate, and then seems you're the one with the statement. And then I think: that's not what I meant, and I don't know that much about it. But-"

Michelle: "Sometimes I haven't fully read an article. Then I would like to discuss it with someone, but I don't want to come across as-"

Kim: "A know-it-all."

Michelle: "Yes."

Iris: "Or someone who doesn't fully understand it."

(*Soccer team*)

Even liking posts was perceived a considerable endorsement, as liked content also shows up on others timelines and affects one's online image. Tagging, presenting stories as completely detached from oneself, was more common. Contrary to the definitive statements on Facebook, discussions on WhatsApp were more explorative in nature. Sharing a news story here did not automatically equate to approval, but could simply be a conversation starter:

Jelle: "In our group, when something is shared, it's shared because someone wants to discuss it."

Lisa: "Yes, by someone who holds a strong opinion."

Mark: "More to talk about it than to share it, I think."

Niels: "That's what I like: something is shared that practically everyone already knows in our app group, but the nice thing is that people will discuss it and you can see what others think."

Rik: "And sometimes I truly learn new things. That I truly didn't know, or when I had googled it myself would've googled in such a way I may not have discovered it."

(*IT team*)

Participants rarely shared news on WhatsApp to be the first to report breaking events; they were more likely to hear first through Facebook or other platforms. Rather, WhatsApp provided a safe space to make sense of news (Chambers, 2017), discover the everyday impact of stories and discuss potential solutions. While being engaged in the IT-team community thus required frequent posting and responding, for the neighbors, reading and liking others' contributions already constituted active engagement.

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### 6.4.3  Relevance

The dimension of relevance addresses how and why news becomes embedded within the flow of everyday life. In some social media groups, such as the teachers', the relevance of shared news was closely tied to the group's identity. Not being able to talk along with other staff, parents or students made them feel unprofessional. Since they had joined social network sites, they felt better informed about public issues and more confident and engaged. This knowledge benefit arose from passive scanning and observing (Schudson, 1998; Zaller, 2003) rather than from active uses that expressly deploy the communicative capabilities of social media platforms to create informational networks, such as in the neighbors' community. For them, actively sharing information about local affairs was a way to be a considerate neighbor (cf. Hoffman & Eveland Jr., 2010; Reader, 2012), a favor to others that was expected to be returned. For the soccer team and volunteers, conversations were not so much linked to the group's goals, but instead centered around fostering a sense of community:

> Jacob: "You share experiences more frequently. When you're not here tonight, you will receive a few messages via your phone that we are there and having fun. So when you're not there, you still feel connected to the group. […] And all initiatives from the club are immediately visible. That's just nice."
> Pieter: "We're immediately informing everyone in the entire club." […]
> Albert: "We're getting everyone involved. Everyone becomes part. That's a huge advantage."
> (*Volunteers*)

The soccer team and student association likewise used WhatsApp to mediate shared experiences and activities, foster friendship and involve group members.

The platform most closely embedded in everyday life was WhatsApp. The soccer players and IT team would exchange hundreds of messages per day, nurturing almost continuous online socialization with colleagues and peers next to frequent offline encounters. For the teachers and volunteers too, conversations originating on WhatsApp would regularly extend into offline talk or vice versa, blurring boundaries between online and offline togetherness (Bakardjieva, 2003). While facilitating sociability, this practice also sometimes caused feelings of information overload, and a feeling that constant participation was expected. Group communication on Facebook, compared to WhatsApp, was much less frequent and more formal. Finally, the public parts of Facebook were used to connect individually to people outside participants' communities, by monitoring timelines passively. For instance, most teachers checked Facebook daily to stay on top of the news, but posted a screenshot or link on WhatsApp to share a story.

Consistent across groups was a shift in the relevance of social media platforms for connecting socially. Participants noticed their friends would rarely update their Facebook status anymore. Instead, their timeline had become heavily institutionalized:

> Stephanie: "I check my Facebook timeline twice a day. Nowadays there are few people who say something personally. Most often, it's articles, and of course it depends on which friends share things, but often I find them interesting."
> Marloes: "I do that too, but not through Facebook."
> Esther: "Yes, I hardly check Facebook anymore. […] I think there's such an overload, that's the main reason I no longer read or use my Facebook timeline, because there's so much coming in within a day. I'm happy that the people I know don't share articles through [Facebook], that would be just too much."
> (*Teachers*)

While still convenient for some participants' in their daily routines, for others, this perceived shift diminished Facebook's relevance, driving them away and disconnecting them from the everyday life connections it formerly helped to afford. Talk on chat apps, alternatively, having technological boundaries preventing pushed content going viral were viewed primarily and positively for their sociality. Although users shared links to news stories, WhatsApp discussions focused on participants' own opinions rather than third party content. Although such a shift to closed social media environments may knit people's interpersonal networks closer together, it simultaneously constrains possibilities for linking communities to wider spheres. "Dark platforms" might therefore limit the diversity of news sources and political opinions that users are exposed to, raising questions about the democratic value of connecting through those spaces (cf. Thorson, 2014).

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### 6.4.4   Constructiveness

Finally, social media serve as additional information sources and offer many new modes of engagement. The dimension of constructiveness addresses what ends this may help users achieve. For the teachers and neighbors, connecting through social media had direct benefits in line with the group's raison d'être. The news stories the teachers shared through WhatsApp would sometimes be used as educational material in class. The neighbors exchanged upcoming events in the area to encourage local participation, from leisure activities to more politically-oriented meetings. One participant recalled how another neighbor had informed her of a municipality meeting on new cycling routes through the neighborhood, which she had attended to voice her opinion. For the volunteers, the constructiveness of social media news was not linked to their identity as charity workers, but to many members being entrepreneurs. While news was rarely discussed within their group,

individually they employed Twitter and Facebook to follow niche sources, keep an eye on their competition, and promote their companies. For other groups, the constructiveness of connecting through news was less self-evident. The IT department considered discussing public issues and trying to understand the way news events relate to each other entertaining in itself. For the soccer players, news – although rarely shared within their group – indirectly helped to establish common grounds they could link to in conversations (cf. Boczkowski, 2010; Bogart, 1989; Couldry et al., 2007). Finally, for the student association, using news was an individual activity separate from their social engagement. They rarely discussed public affairs online or offline, nor in other social contexts, and found that news had little everyday value beyond the practicalities of weather and traffic information:

> Nick: "When you don't know what has happened, you don't need to spend any time on it. It's not like [news] makes you do or not do certain activities."
> Koen: "Often it doesn't, but for example, we were in Utrecht for the weekend and the trains weren't running. […] If I'd read it in advance, I could've taken it into account. So it's more the small, practical things that you take away from it. Whether Trump or Clinton won a debate, that doesn't matter to me."
> (*Fraternity*)

A distinction can be made between the constructiveness of platforms for connecting within one's community and connecting individually transcending the group's boundaries. The work-related groups mentioned news stories in their WhatsApp chats only occasionally, as a conversation starter or to illustrate a point. In the neighbors' Facebook group however, they were central to discussion. On the public Facebook timelines, news media were even more dominant, showing up even when participants did not actively follow or search for them. They felt Facebook had evolved into an information hub rather than a space for public engagement, making the teachers and IT team move to WhatsApp for those purposes. The soccer players perceived the increasing presence of news companies in their timelines as troublesome: Facebook for them primarily fulfilled a social function. Moreover, they criticized news media for focusing on harvesting clicks instead of providing valuable information:

> Manon: "I always feel on social media it's about the money and [media] profiting from you. They don't find you important or whether everyone knows what happened. But you need to click, so they earn money. […] It feels commercial to me."
> Chantal: "There's always an interest when something is published."
> Manon: "Yes."
> (*Soccer team*)

At the same time, across focus groups, participants mentioned their difficulty of defining the trustworthiness of news on social media, as it would frequently originate from unknown sources (cf. Tandoc Jr. et al., 2017). Moreover, several groups discussed how the acceleration of the news cycle on digital platforms increased the risk of errors. Groups like the IT team therefore regarded the presence of journalists and news media on social media to be essential: without having anyone distinguishing facts from fiction and protecting people from misinformation, they noted, news would lose its value, as there was little opportunity for users to define news stories' accuracy. To them, journalists' selection gave news a privileged position relative to other content. That position made news a common ground, constructive for everyday talk and participation both in- and outside the groups' communities.

## 6.5    Conclusion

The specific practices of news audiences on dark social media, in terms of topic selection, story preference, sharing, and so forth, are challenging to measure through conventional analytics software, meaning that research has had trouble generating meaningful comparisons with other ways that people "get the news". Moreover, our understanding of the experiential and meaning-making aspects for people encountering news on messaging apps and in Facebook groups is nearly non-existent. What research has revealed to date, tends to analyze the personal, informative uses of social media for news on the level of the (aggregated) individual through surveys (Newman et al., 2017; Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014). However, the results above emphasize the continuing importance of communities and social interaction for the way people encounter and make sense of news (Barnhurst, 1998; Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015), their public connection practices on dark social media included. Our results show that some of these communities act as safe havens or spaces of encouragement to share or discuss news, even though the collective rationales underlying these practices differ. This chapter accordingly argues that engagement with current affairs on messaging apps and Facebook groups cannot be reduced to users' individual behavior, but is foremost a social practice whose meaning needs to be considered at the level of the group.

Employing WhatsApp and Facebook groups, our participants created their own online spaces to facilitate continuous connection within their communities through the exchange of information, each with their own understanding of inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness. Although community type (geographic, work-related, leisure) played some role in shaping how members conceived of and engaged with news within the group, the uptake and the experiences of discussing journalism within these communities more strongly depended on the groups' communicative aims. For the IT team, playfully discussing current affairs was a means to social integration. The

6

fleeting nature of WhatsApp supported their explorative ways of making sense of public issues. For the neighbors, sharing local affairs was a substitute for community journalism. Facebook allowed them to connect a large, weak-tied group through neighborhood news on a platform they all already used actively as individuals. The teachers' WhatsApp group similarly acted as a news curation service, but with a stronger focus on utility, forming a highly specialized news channel with potential class content. Dark social media use by the volunteers or fraternity, however, viewed the sharing of news as a clear breach of social norms – a means to public *dis*connection.  For those group members, social media was meant to facilitate relaxed sociability, and news didn't fit these aims. Likewise, the soccer players' messaging app was primarily a logistical tool, where debates about news would distract from the pragmatic goal of organizing the team. In sum: groups specifically employ dark social media for designated purposes, which shape norms about the value of news and journalism in such communities.

While studies indicate an international trend of users moving to dark social platforms to get news (e.g. Newman et al., 2017), this study helps to specify and qualify exactly what this means in terms of experiencing and relating to public issues through such practices. Dark social media allow users to discuss news with people they trust in a private environment. Their technological affordances thus may cater to people's identities as colleagues, friends or neighbors, but their relative detachment from broader "publics" simultaneously makes them less suitable for connecting beyond community boundaries, complicating the notion of public connection itself. Similar to the face-to-face news discussions in private settings that dark social media communities supplement, classic democratic functions attached to news media, such as allowing the public to witness oneself and facilitating connection between various communities (Coleman & Ross, 2010), are less self-evident when engagement with news occurs behind closed doors. The democratic implications of the increasing popularity of dark social media for news, thus, still remain unclear.

# 7. News conversations in the everyday. The connective role of current affairs in location-based, work-oriented and leisure-focused social media communities[21]

## 7.1 Introduction

From Facebook and Snapchat to WhatsApp and Twitter: over the past years, social media have become increasingly interwoven into the fabric of people's everyday life (Baym & boyd, 2012; boyd, 2014; Hermida, 2014). One important consequence of the introduction of social network sites pertains to the ways news is produced, used, and disseminated. While social media are rarely people's only gateway to news (Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014), for many, they have become a fixed component of their daily media repertoires. For example, in Reuters' latest Digital News Report, which surveyed news users across 36 countries, over half of the respondents said they have used social media for news in the past week (Newman et al., 2017).

The growing popularity of social media as avenues for news has fostered a range of mostly quantitative studies examining such patterns of behavior in more detail. These works for instance analyze which combinations of platforms are employed by different generations, genders and socio-economic segments (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Van der Veer, Boekee, & Peters, 2016), the motives and gratifications behind different forms of social media news use (Hermida et al., 2012; Lee & Ma, 2012), the topics of the news stories that social media users distribute (Bastos, 2015; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Bright, 2016), and broader network analyses to map audience fragmentation, the flow of shared news, outlet preferences, political sentiments and similar notions (Webster & Ksiazek 2012; Fu, 2016). The specific everyday life contexts in which news on social media is used, however, and the ways in which such novel practices become relevant to people in their daily lives, have received significantly less scholarly attention.

Considering the settings in which news use takes place is important, because it is exactly these taken-for-granted contexts of everyday life where news obtains its societal meaning and significance. As Dahlgren (2009) argues, without any link to people's daily experiences, it does not make sense for citizens to engage in regular patterns of news use to bridge their private and public worlds (see also Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007). When considering scholarship that focuses specifically on how news becomes embedded in everyday life, one dominant line of work centers around the temporal aspects of media use and how news becomes part of people's daily rhythms and schedules (e.g. Dimmick, Feaster, & Hoplamazian, 2011; Picone, 2016; Wennekers, Van Troost, & Wiegman, 2016). Another increasingly popular field of inquiry has explored the spatial dimensions of news, looking at how the dynamics of different places and spaces structure people's habits of news use (e.g. Goggin, Martin, & Dwyer, 2015; Peters, 2012; 2015b). This chapter builds on these research strands to focus on a third aspect of everyday life, namely the relational structures in which people's news habits are embedded.[22]

Even before the invention of the press, people felt a need to exchange information about what was happening around them. Centuries later, "the news", now neatly packaged into professional journalism products, maintains this character. Although often consumed in isolation, studies have repeatedly found that the news still has an inherently social dimension, both directly as a shared activity or indirectly, as a frame of reference or an easy topic for conversation (Boczkowski, 2010; Hermida, 2014; Larsen, 2000; McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2017). Therefore, I argue that to fully comprehend how practices of news use are becoming part of people's everyday life, we need to not only consider *when* and *where* news is being consumed, but also *with whom* users are engaging through news.

This chapter therefore investigates what social role – within everyday contexts – the news (continues) to have, the collective practices of interacting around news, the associated use of social media platforms, and the content people tend to share and why. To this end, following Williams (1977) description of the governing ways "community" is conceptualized and practiced as a social form, it employs focus groups consisting of people who interact primarily based on their membership in three principal types of (social network) communities: location-based, work-related and leisure-oriented. The participants comprising these groups frequently communicated both within these social media communities as well as in offline settings. More broadly, the findings of this chapter relate to the changing role of news and journalism in people's daily communications, updating

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22. Although this chapter does not engage in depth with these strands of literature, its approach bears affinity to fields such as domestication research and media anthropology, which have long addressed how media technologies – including news media – become integrated into people's pre-existing everyday habits and routines (Bird, 2003; Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Morley, 2000; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013; Silverstone, 1994).

earlier insights in how news facilitates "public connection" (Couldry et al., 2007) within digital societies.

## 7.2    The social contexts of news use

The idea that news has more than just an informational function – as Carey's (1989) calls it, the transmission view of communication – and can also foster sociability and community dates back many decades. Already in 1949, Berelson concluded that newspapers could provide a sense of connection beyond their content and support daily conversation and interaction, a finding that since then has been reproduced many times (e.g. Bogart, 1989; Bentley, 2001). Likewise, the television has inspired much work on the social uses of media, as the medium traditionally was often consumed together with others within a domestic setting (e.g. Jensen, 1990; Lull, 1980; Silverstone, 1994). Such studies underline how news can play an integrative role in social situations and acts as "an integral part of daily life" (Bogart, 1989, p. 169). Recent studies note that this is no different in the digital era: even though technological developments such as personalization techniques may have made the delivery and reception of news more individualized, people continue to make sense of and interpret news within specific social contexts (Bird, 2011; McCollough et al., 2017; Schrøder, 2015; Broersma & Peters, 2017). Thus, by now, as Livingstone (2006) notes, the importance of people's social networks for the use of news has become "a starting point, rather than a discovery" (p. 243).

The rise of social network sites and applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, further highlight the connective potentialities of news and draw attention to news users' interpersonal communication practices (Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015). First, social media platforms facilitate the exchange of information by enabling users to create their own online communities and allowing them to share news with their networks with just one click. Thus, as technologies simplify the dissemination of news, audiences can now influence the distribution of news themselves (Picone, De Wolf, & Robijt, 2016). Second, social media offer new modes of engagement with news content. Next to sharing and discussing news, there are opportunities to, for instance, "like" news, recommend stories to others or tag fellow users. Finally, unlike most mass media technologies, digital and social media can be used regardless of temporal or spatial context, meaning communities can potentially connect over news anywhere and anytime (Dimmick et al., 2010).

Despite these insights, little is known about what these changes mean for the way in which news facilitates users' connection to their everyday networks and the public world at large. While, for example, boyd (2008) and Baym (2015) have paid attention to the way people embed social media in everyday life to manage relationships with others in their networks, such studies do not focus on the role that news and journalism specifically

7

play. Work that does center around news, on the other hand, tends to direct its analysis to the informative value of news (e.g. Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014) or how social media news use supports people's political engagement and participation (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012), rather than considering its connective role within users' everyday communities. This chapter aims to fill this gap by exploring how the relational structures in which social media use is embedded affect people's connective practices around news and journalism.

One may argue that the study of the everyday social contexts of news use is less relevant in the case of social media, because they act as singular open spaces in which several previously separated social contexts collapse upon one another (see boyd, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2011). However, earlier studies also show that the difficulty to separate social contexts – family, friends, colleagues, and so forth – on social media is perceived by users as problematic, making them alter their practices (Ekström, 2016; Thorson, 2014). International survey data indeed show that while the growth of relatively open social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in many countries has stagnated, the use of social media platforms that give users more control over who can see the content they share, such as WhatsApp, continues to rise (Newman et al., 2017). This suggests that the relational structures of social media news use are important to understand people's practices on social network sites.

For example, such behavior may be affected by the difference in communicative norms between various social media communities. As boyd (2008) notes, social media use is affected by the way in which people read and define contextual cues. Through assessing fellow users' responses to their and others' online performance, they learn what is appropriate behavior on specific platforms. Such norms shape how they present themselves to manage their image, while simultaneously keeping a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy (Ito et al., 2009; cf. Goffman, 1959). Crawford (2009) points out norms not only pertain to more active forms of engagement such as posting or sharing, but also affect more passive practices of listening, for example how often to check for messages and who to follow. Another group characteristic that may influence people's social media practices is (perceived) tie strength between members of the group. Granovetter (1973) made a distinction between strong and weak ties, which are classified according to the level of emotional intensity, intimacy, reciprocity and time spent that such connections represent. Previous work has found that tie strength affects online and offline news talk: for example, Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela (2011) note that because weak ties exist beyond one's immediate inner circle, they are more likely to provide new or contrasting information, thus stimulating civic debate.

Traditionally, much research on the social contexts of news use has focused on the family, which is unsurprising given the fact that a large portion of news media use in the mass media era used to take place in people's homes (Jensen, 1990; Lull, 1980; Silverstone,

1994). Even after the digitalization of the news media landscape, Lee and Delli Carpini (2010) found that patterns of news use are still influenced most by the media environment that a person grew up in. Within families, young people are confronted with the news use practices of their parents, which can make them develop an interest in news as they mature (Gauntlett & Hill, 1999, p. 67–72). Both Marchi (2012) and Costera Meijer (2007) note how teenagers rely on the adults in their families to tell them about what is going on: parents and other trusted adults serve as a filter, pointing out public issues they think are important for them to know and explaining their relevance in youngsters' everyday life. However, news is increasingly used in everyday life contexts outside the home, such as work (e.g. Boczkowksi, 2010). This chapter focuses on three of the leading types of such non-familial, everyday contexts – local groups, work-based networks and leisure-related communities – as examples of how social networks may shape social media users' news practices.

Thus, this study centers on the question if and how news becomes embedded within people's networks in everyday life. Understanding the everyday significance of news is especially of interest now that newspaper subscriptions, and to a lesser extent the viewing rates of news broadcasts, are declining. These trends raise pressing questions about the connective role that news and journalism traditionally aimed to fulfil, in terms of linking people's private spheres to the public realms of everyday life. Do people engage with news in private social media communities – such as bounded Facebook groups and WhatsApp groups – representing their everyday networks, and if so, how? This chapter addresses these and related questions, starting from the perceptions and practices of the news user. To this end, it employs focus groups based on existing online and offline communities.

## 7.3    Methodology

For the research, I composed six focus groups of people who knew each other personally and communicated with each other through social media at least twice a week. Because my primary research interest was to explore how the various social contexts – and the associated uses of social media therein –  potentially shape people's experiences of news in everyday life, I selected three different types of groups in which the governing logic of the social formation clearly differed: two groups of colleagues (one working in IT customer service, a group of secondary school teachers), two groups related to leisure activities (a women's football [soccer] team, a fraternity) and two that were organized geographically (neighbors, local volunteers).[23] Thus, the sample contained a mixture of groups that were formed by the members themselves and communities that emerged from pre-existing structures such as

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23. These are primary drivers for the group's formation, rather than hard distinctions: for example, sports teams are also local groups and the colleagues would sometimes also enjoy leisure activities together.

work and locality. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling: individuals who agreed to participate were asked to encourage others in their group to join the focus group. The people joining the focus group were always a selection of the total group: for example, the eight IT workers represented a much larger department.  The focus groups were held from September to November 2016 in three different cities across The Netherlands, in locations that were most convenient for the participants, such as one of the respondents' homes, the club house or the office where they worked. In total, 40 participants took part in the focus groups. The total sample was composed of people aged between 18 and 66 years old, with an equal number of males and females, but an overrepresentation of participants with a higher level of education (higher vocational or university-level). Three of the focus groups had eight members, two were composed of six participants, and one contained four participants. On average, the sessions lasted approximately 100 minutes. During each session, snacks and soft drinks were provided.

The first author moderated all the focus groups, using a semi-structured questionnaire to guide the discussion. This ensured the comparability of the group conversations. At the start of each session, after explaining the research procedure, participants were asked to introduce themselves and explain how they had become part of the group, to break the ice and to get the participants talking. In each focus group, four themes were addressed. First, the group described its patterns of social media use. Second, the participants discussed the role of social media platforms in facilitating their connection to the community and to public life in general. Third, the discussion moved to the topic of the content the group discussed on social media and why they felt such information was important and relevant to the others in the community. Finally, the conversation centered around the role of news and journalism for facilitating public connection through the avenues of social media. At the end of every focus group, all participants received a gift certificate worth €20. It is important to note that only in the latter half of the focus group sessions was the discussion moved towards focusing on news and journalism. This reduced the risk of presupposing the centrality of news in people's social media group discussions (Couldry, 2003). Moreover, I carefully avoided defining "news" during the focus groups, to give participants the opportunity to construct and negotiate the concept themselves.

All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author and a research assistant. The transcripts were then uploaded to qualitative data analysis program ATLAS.ti and coded in three rounds. During the first round, the transcripts were simply coded line-by-line, describing the topical contents. This resulted in hundreds of initial codes. This list was used during the second round of coding to develop focused codes, identifying central themes, overarching ideas and topics of debate. Finally, these focused codes were again read against the entire dataset, to form and test theoretical codes describing the central concepts put forward by the data. While this process of data analysis

yielded several themes, from the various affordances of the different social media platforms to the relationship between the groups' online and offline modes of social connection, this chapter will specifically focus on the way social media become embedded within the social contexts of people's everyday life as spaces for news. To protect the participants' privacy, when describing the research results, all names have been substituted by pseudonyms.

## 7.4    Results

### News in location-based social media communities

While the group of neighbors and the group of volunteers interviewed for this study were both centered around locality, the two communities were very different, both in terms of the content discussed as well as concerning the practices the groups employed. The neighbors who took part in the focus group were members a local Facebook community that in total had over two hundred users, all living in the same area (approx. 8000 inhabitants) in a major regional city (total population: 200,000). Two years prior, one of the participants had founded the online group in order to strengthen a "sense of community" (see McMillan & Chavis, 1986) in the neighborhood and to exchange local news and events. She had deliberately set the Facebook group on private to ensure a safe space for discussion. The respondents described themselves as having relatively weak ties to the others in the Facebook group, not knowing them well, but regularly running into them in the local supermarket or on the street.

Of all the focus groups, the content shared in the social media community of the neighbors was closest to traditional journalistic conceptualizations of news. Being a large and demographically diverse group that perceived itself as having few other commonalities beyond the place where they lived, the community focused on sharing general affairs topics that would be relevant to a large group of people. Many of these stories centered around common concerns that were likely to also affect others in the area, from warnings about local crime to the opening of a new bicycle lane improving connections between the neighborhood and the city center. Some posts concerned direct experiences of neighbors themselves; others were composed of information originating from the municipality, the local police or stories reported in regional news media. Another major category of content was information about local events, such as the leisure activities organized by the neighborhood's community center, which some of the focus group members regularly attended as a way to meet face-to-face. Interestingly, while most of the participants in the focus group frequently posted and shared news within the Facebook community, such posts rarely generated online debate. Reading others' posts regularly so they could be referred to in face-to-face conversations or liking neighbors' contributions by means of support however were regular modes of engagement within the group.

7

Similar to the local online communities studied by Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou (2015) and Chen et al. (2012), the neighbors in this study experienced a lack of coverage of their area by local news media. During the focus group, the members discussed how their Facebook community over time had become a substitute for traditional community journalism, due to their practices of news sharing and the platform's technological affordances:

> Monique: Well, we've got *Nummer 1* [free monthly community news magazine], right?
> Yvonne: But it's such a shame their news is always running a bit behind. […] That's why I'm not reading it.
> Karin: Yes. So how do you then get your news? Through others, people who are posting things on the [Facebook group] site.
> Monique: I think that's the future.
> Karin: Journalism can only go somewhere after the fact and then they make a story about it. Only then it's there, but they need to know about it first.
> Monique: While you can immediately put it online.
> (*Neighbors*)

However, even though some of the neighbors estimated that up to half of the news they received about the neighbourhood originated from their Facebook group, meeting informational needs was only a secondary motivation for being involved in the online community. Unlike in earlier work on forms of online news communities (Chen et al., 2012; Dickens et al., 2015), the neighbors did not have any explicit intentions to fill gaps in journalistic reporting by their news sharing. First and foremost, the Facebook group was a space that helped them to integrate in the local community by stimulating interaction. Sharing news with neighbors to activate these mostly "latent ties" (Haythornthwaite, 2002) provided a common frame of reference for offline conversations and notified them of neighbourhood events they could attend. Thus, they did not so much post local affairs information with the intention of drawing public attention to them fulfilling a watchdog role, or even to resolve the issue at hand, but mainly to foster and maintain their social connections and to show consideration and care for others in their community (see also Heider, McCombs, & Poindexter, 2005).

The second location-based focus group was composed of a group of volunteers, living in or around a small town in a rural area (approx. 30,000 inhabitants). The local branch of the organization they volunteered for had about 40 members who organized fund raisers and other charity events and normally would meet face-to-face every Wednesday. In between, next to their more long-standing use of email, they communicated daily through a WhatsApp group.

In contrast to the Facebook group of the neighbors, where all content was strongly related to the place where its members lived, in the group of the volunteers, locality was surprisingly absent. Even though they were very much involved in the local community through work, sports, and other activities, local news was hardly significant in their WhatsApp group, nor consumed in general. Whereas the neighbors were only loosely related, the volunteers repeatedly stressed the strong bond they experienced with the others in the group. The contents in their WhatsApp group reflected this, its primary purpose being to maintain a sense of community. While part of the messages revolved around the practical organization of charity events, discussing the division of tasks among volunteers and related matters, the majority of the group talk could be characterized as phatic communication (Miller, 2008). The frequent social chatter and the many photos of their meetings and events they shared were usually not about exchanging meaningful information, but rather intended as a means to stress a common experience. This aligns with previous findings that online and offline groups with strong ties are likely to generate less civic activity than more loose and distant networks (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012).

While the volunteers were regular news users, news was missing from the group's communications. Neither in their community nor in other WhatsApp groups, they used the platform to share and post news:

> Albert: "To form opinions about society, for information about what's happening every day, [WhatsApp] doesn't appeal to me." […]
> Jacob: "You don't share knowledge, on WhatsApp. At least, I never experienced that." […]
> Ronald: "No, I'll read the papers, read the news online, watch the news bulletin…"
> Jacob: "Yeah, like the Nu.nl [online-only news medium] app."
> Ronald: "Yes, I check the papers and NU.nl, and at eight o'clock I watch [the news], but other than that, no."
> Willem: "Me neither, I'll check Twitter on my phone, and I have the *Telegraaf* app to get the headlines in the evening, or in the morning."
> (*Volunteers*)

7

Some participants in the focus group used Twitter as an additional news source. They found it helpful to quickly get the gist of a story and to keep up with specific niches related to their fields of work, such as agriculture or finance. While they would sometimes retweet or even post work-related news here, these tweets were targeted at their network of colleagues, competitors and customers. However, in relation to their group of volunteers, which they clearly perceived as a network of friends where online talk should not focus on too serious

matters, they never made use of Twitter or other relatively-open social network sites, and news hardly played a connective role.

## News in work-related social media communities

Two work-related focus groups were organized. The members of the first group all taught classes for a small foundation organizing short-term educational projects on a range of global public affairs – from international trade to human rights and climate change – at Dutch high schools and schools for lower vocational education. The second group of colleagues worked at the IT customer service department of a university, and were thus part of a much larger company (5000+ staff members). Both groups used separate platforms for job-related communication (telephone, email, for the teachers Google Chat, in the IT team Slack) and more leisurely uses (WhatsApp, Facebook). Among the teachers as well as in the IT team, it was custom to occasionally have drinks or go out for dinner after work; thus, the connections within the groups were not exclusively of a professional nature.

The teachers frequently shared news stories on WhatsApp, next to more general social talk. Such news originated from a variety of journalism sources, from websites of legacy news media to novel online-only media such as *De Correspondent*. Whenever they would come across a story that referred to the contents of the classes they taught, they would post a link or screenshot in the WhatsApp group. Thus, their group chat was a way to inform and educate each other on work-related topics. Although much of the shared news was of a political nature and in this sense provided a lot of opportunities for debate, the teachers hardly discussed news on WhatsApp. They did expect each other to read the stories they exchanged and would occasionally discuss them face-to-face over lunch, but did not feel compelled to voice their opinions in their WhatsApp group. In other settings, such as with their families, some teachers did discuss news stories. However, within the context of work, their engagement on WhatsApp was relatively passive, their community acting as a news curation service rather than a space for lively debate:

> Charlotte: "I do have an opinion, but I just keep it to myself. I don't feel like starting an entire debate on the internet."
> Stephanie: "I do feel inclined to share articles though."
> Charlotte: "Yes, indeed. But then without a comment."
> Esther: "But actually, you're already giving an opinion then."
> Stephanie: "But for just reading…"
> Nicole: "Yeah, I really enjoyed how recently a former classmate [on Facebook] had an extreme, a very strong opinion about the Ugandan elections and an Ugandan responded. So I could follow, practically live, how they responded to each other, until

someone said: please do this in a private conversation, this is escalating and everyone can view this."

Charlotte: "No, it's funny, we all hardly do that." […]

Stephanie: "But with my parents I sometimes discuss – let's talk about Brexit. Brexit was a big topic at home, and then there was an article on *De Correspondent* and a TED talk that I shared. And they discuss that. So it adds to the debates we're already having."

(*Teachers*)

For the teachers, news was work rather than it being a leisure activity (see also Boczkowski, 2010). Even though the stories they shared often pertained to their personal interests, reading WhatsApp news at home for several participants felt as violating the boundaries they tried to maintain between work and their free time.

In contrast, in the WhatsApp group of the IT team, not the news stories themselves but the colleagues' discussions about the news were central. While sharing and talking about news could be informative, the content was only of secondary importance: debating current affairs on WhatsApp was perceived as a game and social practice that that helped the colleagues to strengthen social relationships with others in the team:

Niels: "Those debates, we primarily do that on WhatsApp. We don't share that on Slack."

Emma: "Like the organ donation bill that just was approved by Parliament."

Rik: "Or terrorist attacks…"

Emma: "It's like- everyone can throw a statement in. That's not a rule, but that's how it goes."

Jelle: "Do we have rules at all?"

Emma: "No, it's not a rule, but it feels like- today it's quiet, and then someone starts, and then- it explodes." (*laughs*) […]

Jelle: "You've got topics, such as debates about feminism or Donald Trump, that attract a select group of people. And for other issues, there's another group of people." […]

Lisa: "Everyone has an extreme opinion and then the battle starts. Although I sometimes wonder whether people really have that opinion."

Niels: "But sometimes, it's quite serious too."

(IT team)

Whereas Boczkowski (2010) found that news talk at work tends to avoid sensitive political and economic topics, the IT team in this study explicitly sought news stories that would generate lots of debate and allowed for multiple viewpoints they could explore. They did

7

not consider it image-threatening to talk about politics in the group, but considered it a playful activity. Unlike the news talk of the teachers, the stories that the IT team shared therefore rarely related to their jobs, but could be about any public issue they found salient.

One of the tactics of the group to make sense of public issues was to relate them to their personal experiences (see also Van Zoonen, 2012). The IT workers noted that these sometimes diverged from the way issues were presented on Facebook and in mainstream media. An example was journalism reports on a recent hazing scandal at a fraternity, which they considered incomplete based on the information they received from acquaintances affiliated with the student organization. Another strategy to understand current affairs was to seek continuity and closure: issues were usually not just posted and discussed once in the group, but over the course of several weeks co-workers would continue to bring it up as the news story would develop, adding succeeding reports or sources to integrate several news events or incidents into one consistent story line. According to the IT team, current affairs were an easy topic of conversation to connect members of a group that had such varied personal interests, because everyone would know a bit about it (see Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Compared to the teachers, news talk of the IT team was much more frequent, with sometimes hundreds of WhatsApp messages being exchanged every day. Yet, the members did not experience this as overload or troublesome, as members did not feel pressured to keep up with or read all content shared. Instead, they welcomed it as a continuous form of connecting to the group.

## News in leisure-based social media communities

Finally, I explored leisure-oriented communities as social contexts for social media news use. The first focus group was composed of members of a women's soccer team. In total, 21 women were active players in the team, whose main platforms for communication were Facebook (used for organizing team weekends and other social events) and WhatsApp (for daily social talk). The second group involved students of a relatively small (approx. 100 members) religion-inspired fraternity. They too described Facebook as a more formal means to communicate with the entire group and announce social activities, whereas WhatsApp was considered a continuous stream of more intimate, everyday conversation.

Participants in both leisure-based groups rarely exchanged any information they would classify as news within their community, neither on WhatsApp nor through their private Facebook groups. In the soccer team, frequent communication on social media was a means to create a sphere of intimacy and togetherness. The players' WhatsApp chat therefore mainly revolved around interpersonal updates and gossip. The only time when the group would touch upon news stories was when they had a direct relevance to the soccer players, for example a story on a fire in the canteen of a neighboring soccer club. This was somewhat surprising, as individually, most soccer players were quite interested in news

and public affairs. Yet, news was not part of their process of fostering sociability within the team through social media, not even when such stories focused on their shared interest of soccer. Some participants noted they felt WhatsApp was not a suitable medium to discuss news with large groups like their sports team, as such debates were likely to result in an overload of messages and notifications. However, they rarely discussed news face-to-face or on other platforms with members of the group either. In this regard, some participants saw a clear difference with how their family members employed news as an avenue for social connection (see Costera Meijer, 2013; Marchi, 2012):

> Kim: "For example, I didn't even know that you read the newspaper. […] Actually, you don't share news at all."
> Manon: "If you want to know everything about major or minor news, you google it. I wouldn't discuss it with someone."
> Michelle: "Except for the more personal news which really appeals to you. Then it's different."
> Kim: "You don't know, about the others, what [news] they are viewing." […]
> Iris: "But I do have to say that in my family, for example, we do that a lot, discussing news. When I'm at my parents, we'll talk about it often. […] And for example when my parents are with their friends, it's always about what has happened at- the bank or wherever. They're more into that than our generation is, I guess."
> Chantal: "Yes, my grandma does that too."
> Iris: "About politics, those issues." […]
> Kelly: "But the bigger news, everyone reads that. My mother is the kind of person who shares a lot. She'll see something and then she'll tell me on WhatsApp: this happened. And then I'm thinking: I already viewed that on Facebook."
> (*Soccer team*)

For the purpose of fostering sociability in the soccer team however, sharing mainstream news was regarded as irrelevant as everyone would already know about it anyway.

The members of the student association hardly discussed anything they would define as news either. If a story was shared through their WhatsApp or Facebook group, the participants noted, it was usually news from a satirical website. While satire can act as an entry point for news talk (Marchi, 2012), in the students' group, it rarely led to debates. Another exception, as for the soccer players, was the sharing of news that directly related to their own personal experiences and everyday life. One participant recalled how he had been about to board a train in Rotterdam when the police had shut down the entire train station due to a terrorism threat. He had then sent the others in the group a photo to show them how the military was rushing in. However, they had hardly discussed the incident,

7

because as the participant himself remarked, "everyone has Nu.nl or NOS [large Dutch news organizations]", and could look up more information when interested. Even with a clear personal connection, sharing news was rare:

> David: "We don't really talk about political issues on WhatsApp and Facebook. You can do that over drinks, for example, but that's face-to-face that we'll talk, not on social media." […]
> Maarten: "It's the things that are close to us that we share. That are linked to us."
> David: "[The news] is not a topic for conversation, for example."
> Nick & Maarten: "No."
> David: "This morning for instance, I was considering to app, because Koen and Dennis study medicine, whether you are involved in that medical interns [protest], that day to raise attention. […] And I thought: should I add a discussion about that in our [group] app? I deliberately didn't."
> (*Fraternity*)

The social media talk of the fraternity was similar to the conversations of the soccer team, centering around interpersonal news. Although the students described themselves as being closely connected to the others in the fraternity, group norms prevented them from seriously discussing public affairs on WhatsApp or in their Facebook community. While they did enjoy following news on social media to form opinions about public issues and help them to review news more critically, they rather did so passively by reading comments of friends that did comment on Facebook. Participating in these debates themselves, however, was perceived as too risky, as such comments could be visible to potentially anyone (Ekström, 2016; Thorson, 2014).

## 7.5    Discussion

These focus group discussions help us to understand today's connective role of news and current affairs in people's everyday communications within location-based, work-oriented and leisure-focused social media communities. Regarding the context of location, the results add to a long history of work that stresses how the place where one lives, works and spends time represents not just a spatial context where practices of news use take place, but also a relational structure (e.g. Janowitz, 1967; Hoffman & Eveland Jr., 2010; Yamamoto, 2011). While there have been concerns that the adoption of digital technologies is reducing contemporary community life as they make individuals engage in less face-to-face interpersonal contact (e.g. Turkle, 2011), I found that people's local networks continue to serve as connecting hubs of information. The Facebook group of the neighbors here is

a classic example of how citizens establish their own online spaces for news to encourage social integration within the local community and to active latent ties, similar to the integrative role of local weekly newspapers throughout the 20$^{th}$ century (see Janowitz, 1967). McCollough et al. (2017) note that especially local social networks depend on such interpersonal exchanges of news, as journalism coverage in many areas is limited and sporadic due to the economic challenges that many local journalism companies currently face. Indeed, previous studies have described local news communities engaging in what Picone (2016) names "productive news activities" as a form of protest, to fill a perceived lack of local news reporting (Chen et al., 2012; Dickens et al., 2015). However, in this study, for both locality-based groups, the exchange of news was primarily motivated by their desire to foster and maintain their sense of community, rather than aiming to overcome informational gaps or replace journalism.

The second everyday relational structure discussed in this chapter is the context of work. While news mainly used to be consumed in people's homes in the morning and the evening, it is now increasingly accessed from the office, with statistics of news sites peaking between 9AM and 5PM (Boczkowski, 2010). Indeed, a survey by Auxier (2008) found that seven in ten people who are online during the day for work are using news in the meantime, even if their job description does not require them to do so. The increased importance of work as an everyday context for news consumption cannot just be observed through shifting spatial and temporal markers, but also in the importance of colleagues as a relational structure which news use helps facilitate and maintain. Both work-related focus groups frequently shared news stories within their WhatsApp communities, in- and outside working hours. Unlike Boczkowski (2010), whose interviewees indicated that their office news talk was less weighty, less personal and less sensitive compared to news talk with their friends and family, the colleagues in this study explicitly focused on political stories. For the teachers, such news was most relevant to their classes; in the IT-team, discussing controversial issues matched the social norm of presenting oneself as witty, well-versed and engaged. News was perceived as an easy topic for conversation, despite the fact that the ties within these work groups were described as weak, and personal interests relatively diverse. This supports earlier findings that news users are more inclined to discuss current affairs with looser acquaintances (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015).

Finally, the chapter has discussed the connective role of news within leisure-based social media communities, or more accurately, the lack of using current affairs information as a means to connect within these groups. Again, we can observe a link between perceived tie strength and the content discussed within the social media communities. Both the sports team and the fraternity described their ties as strong. As Ekström (2016) has noted, whether people talk about public affairs within such tight-knit groups strongly depends on particular

7

social relationships and the social norms that exist within these peer groups. Talking or not talking about public issues is part of the way they are constructing their identities and how they present themselves within specific social settings (cf. Goffman, 1959; boyd, 2008). In this case, the social norm in both leisure-oriented groups was to keep conversation in their social media communities positive and non-controversial, strengthening the group's sense of community. Again, this dovetails with the differences in news use Heikkilä and Ahva (2015) found between strongly and weakly tied communities. One possible explanation is that while the response from close friends is more predictable, and thus, sharing and discussing news has a lower perceived risk (Morey, Eveland Jr., & Hutchens, 2012; Thorson, 2014), they are also more likely to have other shared interests that can replace news as a topic that facilitates connection within the community.

## 7.6    Conclusion

This chapter explored various social contexts for social media news use, in order to examine how these everyday relational structures affect people's practices of mediated public connection within social media communities. It has showed that the communicative aims and characteristics of the relational structures that news use gets embedded in are crucial to understand the different ways in which social media users are engaging with current affairs. Even though the six communities examined in this study largely made use of the same communicative tools – WhatsApp and Facebook – how these platforms were appropriated varied considerably, depending on the purpose of the group. For example, the playful debating practices of the IT colleagues, aiming to actively persuade others of their political opinions, would likely have been considered inappropriate within the community of the teachers who saw their WhatsApp group as a tool for news curation rather than socialization. Likewise, whereas sharing concerns about local issues was a means to facilitate community in the Facebook group of the neighbors, phatic communication norms in the WhatsApp group chat of the volunteers dictated that such conversations should be kept light and casual. Whether news is perceived as a safe topic for conversation, whether group members are expected to discuss news stories or read them passively, and whether social media and face-to-face news talk are separate or interwoven all depend on the designated purposes of the social media community and the norms and dynamics resulting from those communicative aims, rather than community type.

Moreover, I found the same individual likely follows different modes of engagement within the various WhatsApp group chats and private Facebook communities that social media users are typically part of. In the focus groups where news was of minor importance, participants for example referred to their family WhatsApp groups as relational structures where news was discussed, or noted their social media practices were more public affairs-

oriented with specific peer groups or individual friends (cf. Ekström, 2016; Marchi, 2012). More large-scale research could identify to what extent the aims and patterns found in these location-based, work-oriented and leisure-related communities are representative for users' behavior in closed-off social media communities overall.

More broadly, the results stress the significance of users' ability to control the visibility of the content they share on bounded social media platforms. Previous studies have found that users are more likely to talk about news and public affairs with their strong ties, such as family and close friends, as they feel more secure to express disagreement with people they know well (Eliasoph, 1998; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Morey et al., 2012). However, this study suggests that such considerations are different on bounded social media platforms. The focus groups show that even when participants perceived their ties as weak, they felt sufficiently secure to discuss news and public affairs. For example, the IT team described itself as only loosely connected, yet did not refrain from talking about controversial political topics, even with newly appointed staff. Thus, the mere ability to set clear community boundaries may already be sufficient for users to decide to engage in more vulnerable forms of news engagement.

7

# 8. Conclusion

## 8.1    Introduction

The current digitalized media landscape offers news users an increasing ability to navigate the ever-expanding news media landscape on their own terms, when-, where- and however they prefer. News can be checked, read, watched and listened to in a myriad of forms. Stories may be liked, recommended to others, or commented upon. People can just read the headlines, decide to skip a story, or choose to completely ignore the news as a whole. The chapters in this thesis have investigated how this paradigmatic shift, in which the power to select news moves from producer to user, affects one of the major societal functions of news: its purpose of bridging people's private and public worlds by facilitating shared frames of reference that allow users to engage and participate in their social, cultural, civic and political networks in everyday life. Starting from the point-of-view of the news user, this thesis explored how the digitalization of the news media landscape facilitates such forms of public connection. Its objectives were threefold. First, the thesis aimed to map people's current practices of mediated public connection and understand why and how news users perceive these practices as valuable. The second goal was to uncover how these novel practices affect people's perceptions of news as a tool for public connection in their everyday life. Finally, the thesis aimed to conceptualize public connection in a manner that accounts for these shifting practices and perceptions.

This thesis has situated these explorations of public connection within the contexts of everyday life. Drawing on Pike's (1967) distinction between emic and etic modes of understanding human behavior (see also Jensen, 1998; Livingstone, 2003), it has employed an emic and inductive perspective toward mediated public connection. Thus, rather than aiming to understand the connective role of news from theoretical models of democracy – deliberative, participatory, representative, and so forth – it has taken the news users themselves as entry points, arguing that in order to fully comprehend the societal and connective significance of news, we should start from the practices and preferences of those who use it. Such a user-based and inductive approach emphasizes how public connection is currently being lived out and perceived. Thus, it helps to advance existing theories on

8

the connective roles of news in a rapidly changing media environment in a way that does justice to people's actual lived experiences (Peters & Witschge, 2015). Therefore, the thesis has treated public connection as a process rather than an ideal state to be achieved in a particular manner. Moreover, it has paid attention to both democratic and cultural facets of connection (cf. Schrøder, 2015). It presented four analytical angles to guide user-driven research on public connection: the lenses of inclusiveness (in simplified terms: who connects about what?), engagement (how do people connect?), relevance (why connect?) and constructiveness (to what end do people connect?). Together, these four analytical prisms formed a conceptual lens in the thesis that was used to deepen, update and expand existing knowledge about how people employ and perceive news as a means for public connection.

The previous chapters have presented how the digitalization of the news media landscape has created novel forms of news use, how this creates new habits and rituals for connecting to public life, and what this means for people's understandings and perceptions of news – and consequently, journalism – as a common ground. What immediately becomes clear from these accounts is that people are still expressing interest in understanding what is going on in the public world around them (see also Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007; Eliasoph, 1998; Heikkilä, Kunelius, & Ahva, 2010). Whereas some work has voiced concerns about declining interest in public affairs, pointing towards for example falling voter turnouts and clicking behavior that favors entertainment stories (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012; Putnam, 2000), the findings in this thesis point towards the opposite. For many, in what is perceived as an increasingly complex society, news may become even more important as an avenue for public connection. How these collective windows are shaped and experienced, however, is influenced by fluctuating and novel patterns of news use, and thus takes place in more diverse forms than pre-digitalization.

This concluding chapter ties the findings in the previous chapters about news users' changing perceptions and practices of public connection together to address their broader implications. After outlining its key results, it explores what the current fluctuations in how news users perceive the connective role of news mean for journalism practice. In other words, how might news media organizations utilize these findings when aiming to cater to users' connective practices and preferences? Then, the chapter continues to discuss what these findings mean on a theoretical level, outlining potential follow-up questions as well as areas for future research in the field of mediated public connection.

## 8.2    News and public connection: changing practices and perceptions

At a time when the audiences of classic journalism institutions such as newspapers and broadcasters seem to decline and patterns of news use diversify, does news still offer shared

frames of reference within society? The findings in this thesis not only indicate that it does, but also that digitalization seems to have strengthened rather than weakened the spread and outreach of news. With mobile media further detaching news consumption from fixed spatiotemporal contexts, social media blending news and current affairs information with people's online daily conversations, and an increasing number of available platforms through which news can be found and engaged with, people are likely to be confronted with more instead of less news. Even when participants had little interest in news themselves, it had become so ubiquitous in everyday life that it had become almost impossible not to stumble upon, for instance in daily conversations with others or when scrolling through one's social media feed. Not to be exposed to any general-interest news at all, thus, is uncommon. Second, the thesis found that many of people's previous habits of news use either have continued to exist, or have been reconfigured into novel routines that are strongly influenced by their earlier patterns of use. Even though people have the possibility now to actively try to avoid news content online, judging from the results of this thesis, only few seem to do so. Almost all participants expressed a continuing desire to understand what was going on around them and acted in accordance with those interests, either passively or more actively. Previous concerns about a major disconnection from the news (Prior, 2007; Putnam, 2000), thus, were not supported. Third, even with an increased amount of media choice, there still seems to be some overlap in the news that people consult, especially when it comes to journalism sources. In Chapter 4, five news media repertoires were distinguished among the sample of Dutch news users, each containing quite different subsets of news media. However, in the perception of the research participants, there appeared to be a great deal of thematic overlap between the news that different outlets provided. Even when they were using different news media than their friends, family, and other close ties, they did not experience any knowledge gaps within everyday conversations that they found difficult to overcome, because in their view, most news outlets seemed to bring similar major news stories and used more or less the same discourse. Of course, such perceptions could deviate from the actual differences in content that different news users consume: people may surround themselves with likeminded others who share their views about what news is considered important and therefore not experience a sense of fragmentation, or limit their news talk with others to major and general current affairs topics that tend to be covered across outlets, and therefore perceive the available news supply as more homogenous. Yet, such experiences dovetail with results from earlier work indicating that in terms of news sources, patterns of news use are not as diverse as the recent increase in available news outlets would suggest (Trilling, 2013).

In this thesis, people with all five news media repertoires considered news from the public service broadcaster, NOS, one of the six most important sources, either in the form of the television bulletin or through the news app, website or Facebook page. This reflects

8

earlier findings (Bos, Kruikemeier, & De Vreese, 2014; Newman et al., 2017) that news from NOS is consulted by a large group of users, regardless of their level of education, general frequency of news use, or political affiliation. Whereas the increasing reliance of certain user groups on Facebook for news has been associated with the risk of "filter bubbles", the results from this thesis suggest that mainstream news spreads on social media regardless of people's topical preferences or interest in news and public affairs. Therefore, social network sites tend to broaden rather than fragment their frames of reference, at least in terms of general and major news stories (see also Masip, Suau-Martínez, & Ruiz-Caballero, 2017). In other words, while the time spent on news, the topical diversity in news stories and the level of detail consumed, and the specific platforms used may vary between individuals, news continues to provide a common ground between people by supplying them with at least some basic knowledge about public affairs.

### Inclusiveness

This brings us to the question of what exactly then is "the news" or developments regarding "issues of common concern" that serve as a common ground in the everyday conversations of people (Couldry et al., 2007)? Here, the findings give a somewhat ambiguous picture. On the one hand, traditional conceptualizations of news, in line with the professional norms that have been used in journalism practice for decades since the rise of mass media, are still influential. Even though mass media are now facing competition from a multitude of online-only news outlets, what is seen as "news" by legacy news brands continues to exert a strong influence on what public issues are perceived as important and what becomes part of the talk of the day. Moreover, while people can now potentially publish and distribute their own news, the thesis found that most people rarely engage in any form of news production, or even more limited forms of participation (see also Bakker, 2013). Only a few participants interviewed for this thesis had commented on news sites, written a blog post on current affairs or published news on Twitter with the goal of making others aware of what they perceived as important public issues. Even then, such publications were likely to be on topics that already had been put forward by mainstream journalism. Thus, such activities did not yield a radically different news agenda. At the same time, because the content that people view in their "news feed" on social media platforms and what is presented as news by digital competitors such as blogs and online magazines or by other individuals does not always adhere to these classic norms, the participants in the research started to question the boundaries of what constitutes "the news". Grey areas that challenge the boundaries between news and other types of information range from satirical news websites to niche blogs or online magazines and Facebook updates from NGOs and commercial organizations. Moreover, because updates from people's connections online become public information presented in one timeline with news from journalism and other

institutions, the lines between "mediated sociability" (Donath, 2012) and current affairs become increasingly difficult to draw. The participants interviewed for this research project had trouble defining what they saw as news and frequently disagreed with each other. As noted in Chapter 4, new standards about what is and should be news are clearly still being (re)negotiated and a common vocabulary that can be used to classify what are perceived as different kinds of information thus far is lacking.

### *Engagement*

This thesis has given numerous examples of the various news practices that people are engaging in to shape their shared frames of reference to public life. Chapter 5, for instance, described three shifts. First, news routines are increasingly centered around individuals as opposed to news brands: while news institutions still bring most news, friends and family become increasingly important in guiding users' attention to it. Second, checking news now becomes so immersed in everyday life patterns that it tends to blend in rather than being recognized as a separate activity. Finally, users now engage with a broad range of content (satire news, lifestyle news, messages of political parties, and so forth), that no longer necessarily matches traditional delineations of the genre of news. Together, these shifts create a variety of forms that mediated public connection can take. However, far from all these possibilities have become frequent practices. While Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrated that quickly checking three to five apps on the smartphone in a circular manner and scrolling through social media timelines are now common modes of engagement, more active and public acts such as sharing news stories on open social media platforms, posting one's opinion on their Facebook timeline, and commenting on a news website were rare. Because these practices are so visible and retraceable, participants considered these activities risky or even undesirable. Even liking a news story on Facebook was done very consciously, because this was perceived as an endorsement of the content that shaped one's online image. Instead, as was presented in Chapter 6, some people prefer to engage with news on relatively closed social media platforms such as WhatsApp, where they can safely share and discuss stories within a small group and control who can view their opinions. That said, as was noted in Chapter 7, the importance of news as a topic and what counts as engaging with news within these group conversations much depends upon of the group context and dynamics. Chapters 6 and 7 here offer more insights into the user considerations behind the increasing use of messaging apps for finding news (Newman et al., 2017) and the specific practices by which they do so within different types of communities. Thus, we can conclude that users' digital practices of what they perceive as engaging with news can also be of a more individual and private character. This contrasts with current definitions of civic engagement that see such acts as inherently collective and public. Of help here may be Adler and Goggin's (2005) work. They argue that civic engagement includes all activities

8

that are geared towards a collective benefit. Thus, it is not so much about the collectivity and universality of the acts of engagement themselves, but about the publicness of the goals that these practice aims to achieve. In this sense, the playful debating news and public affairs on WhatsApp (see Chapter 7) can be a form of engagement, even if such action is undertaken in spaces that are only open to a selective group of individuals. This does not mean that shifts of engagement practices to such relatively-closed platforms are without problems. For instance, people's increasing use of "dark social platforms" to engage with news means that journalism's traditional democratic role of allowing various communities to witness each other and to establish a common ground between them becomes more difficult to fulfill. However, it is important to note that such platforms are typically only one component of a broader set of news sources that a person uses.

### *Relevance*

Previously, people's practices of mediated public connection and the role of news as shared frames of reference were in part sustained by a perceived duty to be a good citizen. Following the news through newspapers and broadcasters on a regular basis was seen as an obligation, and often a must for people wanting to connect to current events happening in places outside one's own communities and networks. Now, however, individuals can distribute news themselves without having to depend on journalists, and people are increasingly enacting citizenship outside of formal institutions (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Banaji & Cammaerts, 2015; Miller, 2007). Yet, as mentioned above, news still acts as shared frames of reference. What is the relevance of news as a tool for public connection when the idea of dutiful consumption loses power? First, the results of this thesis confirm that news routines are typically habitual acts rather than carefully and consciously considered behavior. The mere availability and accessibility of news, combined with a seamless situational fit, can prolong regular habits of news use even when the appreciation for such news is low, thus maintaining public connection. Second, while the link between news use and citizenship has become less straightforward, people's need for security hasn't changed. This thesis found that following and monitoring the news alerted news users to the public issues that may potentially affect them, from relatively minor nuisances such as traffic jams on the road to work to larger threats such as earth-quakes and terrorism attacks. Third, most participants enjoyed the feeling of being connected to a larger collective. Although the extent to which news use was considered an individual or social practice varied between participants, for many, exchanging news and public information was a way to be considerate towards others and to strengthen social relationships. Moreover, several participants noted that because news use had turned into an almost continuous activity, it frequently intertwined with their other activities, including social ones. Finally, the thesis found that self-presentation continues to motivate regular news use. Just as was already the

case in Berelson's classic study about the value of news (1949), being up-to-date on what in your social networks are considered public affairs creates a socially desirable image of being knowledgeable, interested and engaged. In other words, while patterns of connecting to public life have become more varied, the values that connecting publicly sustains have remained surprisingly similar compared to the situation before the digitalization of the media landscape.

### *Constructiveness*

Finally, the thesis has discussed to what extent digitalization changes people's perceptions regarding the constructiveness of news as a tool for public connection, showing that the specific goals that news helps users achieve can be quite diverse. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 have presented numerous examples: news can for instance be informative for local participation, be used at work to be able to perform certain job tasks more effectively, help make decisions about which route to take when travelling, or function as a conversation starter. Participants noted that one of the advantages of digitalization is that more information becomes public and searchable. On social media, for instance, other people's patterns of news use become visible, including people's responses to news events. This shows how people can engage with and respond to news. At the same time, as Chapter 6 demonstrates, the presence of journalism content on social network sites can be experienced as problematic. People are using social media first and foremost to connect to others in their networks. While news can facilitate such connection and add depth to people's discussions on these platforms, it is only one type of information that facilitates this. The findings show there is a fine line between enough and too much news. The amount of likes and shares that news stories generate caused participants' timelines to fill up quickly with journalism stories, which can easily invoke feelings of news overload, reducing user activity on the platform and leading to disengagement. With regard to the question to what extent digital news enables citizens' informed political action, the thesis confirmed findings from earlier public connection studies: while news can be useful to navigate everyday life, people perceive that there are few opportunities to act upon the problems presented in the news in their identity as citizens (Couldry et al., 2007; Kaun, 2012). While digitalization potentially creates novel opportunities for users to find information about and engage with public issues, and to encounter and contact likeminded others, most participants did not perceive these as constructive in the political realm. Thus, despite the development of new technologies, the feelings of helplessness that news can generate persisted. At a time when major news events spread through Facebook timelines regardless of the pages people have liked, such emotions may become even more difficult to avoid.

8

## 8.3    Theoretical implications

The idea of news as a common ground, as was discussed in Chapter 2, has been embedded by media scholars intuitively in a wide range of work on the workings of journalism, its relations to politics and culture, and adjacent fields. Yet, the theoretical notion of public connection is relatively recent (Couldry et al., 2007). The British public connection project, conducted in 2005, has since then inspired a handful of studies that focus on how news provides shared frames of reference for connecting to public life in various countries (e.g. Heikkilä et al., 2010; Kaun, 2012; Ong & Cabañes, 2011). In most of these studies however, fieldwork was conducted in or before 2010, predating the widespread adoption of the smartphone and the proliferation of social media platforms. Since then, the amount of sources that users can employ to find out what is going on around them has risen drastically. Instead of consulting newspapers, broadcasters and news websites, people can now also simply scroll through their Facebook feed and rely on their friends to give them an overview of current affairs and to connect them to public life. In other words, the habits of regular news attending that used to sustain the societal legitimacy of journalism have become far from self-evident. This thesis has argued these developments force us to rethink the public relevance of journalism, that traditionally has – at least partially – derived from its unique position in connecting audiences' private and public worlds. Therefore, it has proposed to reconceptualize the notion of public connection in four ways. First, it adds an analytical framework that enables us to operationalize the notion of public connection and perform empirical research. Second, it grounds explorations of public connection within the settings of everyday life to explain the significance of news for connective practices. Third, it employs an emic approach that emphasizes the perspective of the news user on the connective role of news. And finally, it analyzes public connection as a process that is variable between individuals, between contexts, and can change over time. This section describes these contributions and their implications in more detail.

First, while the notion of public connection as defined by Couldry et al. (2007) can and has been used in a wide range of scholarly work, in itself, the concept is a relatively minimal assumption. It simply states that individuals may share news as a commonality that helps them to connect beyond their private life spheres. This may be one of the reasons why until now, public connection has mostly been studied implicitly as part of broader concepts such as civic engagement, political participation or cultural citizenship, rather than being investigated separately. Therefore, as a theoretical concept, the notion of public connection has remained relatively underdeveloped. Moreover, while some empirical accounts of how news acts as shared frames of reference to public life exist, these tend to offer few guidelines on how exactly the concept of public connection could be operationalized. Therefore, the thesis has deconstructed the concept of public connection into four analytical prisms that can

be used in empirical research: inclusiveness, engagement, relevance and constructiveness. These four analytical prisms have been addressed extensively in Chapter 2. One of the additional benefits of the framework is that it helps to bridge the interdisciplinary divide between more politics-oriented (questions about inclusion or exclusion, fragmentation, agency, etcetera) and more culturally-oriented perspectives (questions of belonging, relevance, everyday life contexts, and so forth) lines of inquiry regarding news as a connective tool. The different user studies in this thesis (Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7) are examples of how the four analytical prisms may be applied empirically to deepen, update and expand current knowledge about the connective role of news in the current digitalized media landscape. With regard to the dimension inclusiveness, the thesis for example has stressed the need to reconceptualize what is the "news" that people connect over, as new technologies and outlets are affecting users' perceptions of what it means to be up to date. It shows that while not all that is named news is experienced as equal types of information, users are lacking a vocabulary to address these differences. Concerning the dimension of engagement, the results underline that what news users perceive as civic engagement can be very individual acts, as long as these are eventually geared towards some collective benefit. Examples in this thesis range from paying for a newspaper subscription to support journalism to sharing articles with colleagues on WhatsApp to raise attention for what are perceived important public issues. With regard to the dimension of relevance, the thesis found that while the idea of news use as part of dutiful, democratic citizenship is losing power, the overarching values of community, security and self-presentation continue to sustain rituals of news use, even now those are becoming increasingly diverse. Finally, this thesis has broadened debates on the constructiveness of connecting through news. While such constructiveness has been previously analyzed in terms of how news may provide action contexts for people to achieve political goals, the thesis found there are many other areas of everyday life in which news may become constructive for users, from performing one's job to financially managing the household.

A second contribution concerns the extension of the concept of public connection beyond democratic connection to the framework of everyday life, following earlier arguments of Schrøder (2015) and applying such a broader conceptualization empirically. The thesis does so for three reasons. Firstly, as Schrøder rightfully notes, orienting to and engaging in public life is not limited to people's identities as citizens, but can span multiple areas, from the workplace to the neighborhood to the local sports club. Secondly, people's roles in daily life in practice often tend to overlap (Kotilainen & Rantala, 2009). And finally, now that news can be used regardless of temporal or spatial contexts, people's practices of news use and other everyday activities are becoming increasingly interwoven. This is not meant to argue that people's orientation to politics is unimportant or to downplay the necessity of civic participation for sustaining models of democracy (Strömbäck, 2005). Rather, the point

8

of the approach used in this thesis was to explore the connective role of news in an open and holistic way, to be able to uncover what news users themselves perceive as spheres of everyday life where news resonates as a tool to connect, without favoring any particular modes or types of orientation activities. Indeed, the thesis found that news users do not just understand the connective role of news in terms of enabling them to fulfill their duties as political citizens, but consider the societal value of news more broadly. Following the news helps them to talk along with others, feel part of society, present themselves as interested in the wellbeing of others, and to navigate through everyday life in general. This stresses the need to conceptualize public connection accordingly. Moreover, as Chapter 5 discussed, news users engage with what they perceive as publicly relevant information in a variety of interpersonal networks. Depending upon the communicative aims, group dynamics and characteristics of the social context such engagement takes place in, users may actively debate public issues, engage with them more passively, or decide to ignore the news (see Chapter 7). Opening up the study of mediated public connection to the way news supports not just people's democratic, but also everyday forms of connection, allows for capturing these practices.

Thirdly, this thesis has not employed an etic perspective, but has explored the connective role of the news openly from the bottom-up, starting from the point of view of the news users themselves. Such an emic and inductive approach has multiple advantages. First, as mentioned above, in a rapidly developing media landscape, existing models on public connection through news easily tend to become outdated. Most previous empirical public connection studies for instance have not yet been able to capture the growing presence of news media companies on Facebook and Twitter, or the increase in mobile media use due to the widespread adoption of smartphones and tablets. Both of these developments, as this thesis has shown, are now crucial to many users' public connection practices. By employing an emic approach, this thesis has updated existing knowledge on how people are shaping and understanding their public connection through their daily patterns of news use. Second, an emic approach allows for gathering data on people's actual everyday lived experiences. Thus, it provides knowledge that helps to sharpen theoretical models on the connective role of news, increasing their validity. For example, there have been concerns that the increased use of algorithm-based platforms like Facebook for news may fragment the news audience and thus make news less worthwhile for connection purposes, as it no longer constitutes shared frames of reference. However, the results in this thesis suggest this is not the case. One reason is that few news users solely rely on Facebook for news: the social medium is typically only one part of users' media repertoires. Moreover, as was discussed in Chapter 6, mainstream news tends to spread across social media platforms even if a user does not indicate to be interested in current affairs and does not actively try to find news. More generally, the thesis found the ubiquity of news

and people's patterns of cross-media use seem to sustain the connective value of news, even though practices of public connection are diverging. Another example pertains to the variety of available modes for engaging with news on digital platforms. Even though users in theory have the possibility to actively add their own issues to the news agenda, influence the dissemination of news, and to form collectives around public issues, in practice, they hardly use these opportunities. Because of the difficulty for participants to define which activities will be visible to whom, most of the interactive features on news websites, in apps and on social media are rarely employed. Additionally, more individual and private forms of public connection, such as sharing news stories on WhatsApp, are seen as forms of public connection as well. Here again, emic data force us to reconsider existing theories on how users are connecting to public life in digital societies.

A final contribution pertains to reconceptualizing public connection as a dynamic and variable process. Instead of considering people's practices and preferences regarding the connective role of news as a constant, the thesis acknowledges these can vary between individuals, may change over time, and may vary between different contexts. For example, the results from Chapter 7 underline the importance of considering everyday social contexts to understand people's practices of mediated public connection, as communicative aims, group characteristics, dynamics, tie strength and norms greatly influence if and how users are interacting with news and current affairs. Understanding public connection as a process is especially important in a constantly developing news media landscape, where new technologies and media outlets constantly invite users to reconsider the composition of their news media repertoires. Starting from the perspective of the news user makes it possible to capture these variations, and opens up the notion of public connection for new potential practices of public connection that may arise in the future.

## 8.4    Practical implications

While news has always been part of people's everyday communications, the rise of social media platforms and the availability of interactive forms of engaging with news online emphasize the character of news as a social and connective tool. From the findings of this thesis, we can conclude that the use of the participatory affordances of such platforms and engagement through practices such as commenting, sharing and even liking posts on social media is relatively rare compared to more passive modes of news use like checking and monitoring (cf. Bakker, 2013). Yet, paradoxically, the people that the participants in this thesis were connected to did seem to engage with news articles on social media: participants noted it was almost impossible to avoid news and journalism content on their individual timelines, even if they did not actively search for news themselves. In other words, apparently, people are sharing and liking news content frequently enough to

8

influence social media platforms' algorithms, making news pop up in their friends' timelines regardless of their connections' personal settings. This way, user preferences are becoming influential for the way news is distributed on social media platforms. This raises questions about how news organizations may respond to this shift. When bringing "conversational news" (Picone et al., 2016) becomes more crucial for news media, not only because of the economic incentive of increasing traffic to their websites and growing the number of returning visitors but more importantly, to raise attention for issues that they believe are of public importance and to be of societal value, how can they produce such news? How can they report or frame news in such a way that it becomes valuable to people's online and offline conversations and fits with news users' connective preferences?

Before turning towards suggestions for specific strategies, as a more general remark, most importantly this involves taking the connective role of news seriously. It requires a way of journalistic thinking that not only considers how news may be told in a way that is most informative, most entertaining, or which headline would generate the most clicks, but also aims to bring news in a manner that matches with people's everyday talk and the way they relate to and make sense of public issues. Although clickbait-type stories may generate much user attention and clicks at first, news media that fail to connect users to the world around them are likely to create dissatisfaction in the long run. Bringing connective news goes beyond presenting news in attractive storytelling formats: it is about tapping into people's shared frames of reference and producing a news discourse that resonates with how they experience public issues within their everyday networks. What stories are currently circulating within people's communities? What are news users' main concerns right now? How does a particular news event fit within users' collective frames of reference? This does not mean that news should be limited to the talk of the day; after all, one of the attractions of journalism for its users is that the news brings previously unknown issues to the forefront. Rather, it is about reporting news in a manner that enables users to understand, make sense of, and engage with public issues in everyday life. This nature of this research was rather explorative, discussing how digitalization affects the connective role of news in general terms. Nevertheless, some of the thesis' findings may be translated into a number of practical suggestions.

First, the results suggest that the news that people are connecting through typically offers a high level of context and coherence. In a high-speed news environment, as some of the participants in the research noted, there is a tendency for news producers to fragment current affairs and turn them into easily digestible updates. Whilst the sum of these stories of course does constitute a framework through which public issues can be viewed, individually, they do not reflect the broad view that users have of public issues. When talking about news, the participants in this thesis preferred stories that supported readers being able to explore the news from multiple angles and which had several dimensions to

them. To understand news and what makes it relevant, they aimed to situate a particular story within a wide range of other news events, seeking a coherent view on current affairs in which the individual pieces of news they encountered were connected. News users did this for various reasons: from a desire to learn and fully grasp the scope of public issues, because they felt they were required to act upon the news and thus be prepared for further engagement, or simply out of the more self-centered motivation of monitoring current affairs for news with potentially harmful consequences for themselves and their immediate friends and family. However, several participants admitted to seeing the public world as complex and, for them, the relationships between different events or the further implications of news were not directly clear. Thus, one suggestion for journalism practice would be to develop ways of presenting news that help users make these connections. Digital forms of storytelling could be useful in this regard, as the hypertextuality of online platforms makes it easy for journalists to link various news stories. They are no longer required to report news in a linear manner, but can create timelines, maps, or other structures that help to present a particular topic in an understandable way. The trick here would be to link different news productions in a way that fits the associational linkages that users make when thinking about and engaging with a public issue. For instance, when one of the focus groups in Chapter 6 discussed a new bill on organ donation law, the group did not only debate the ethical and medical dimension of the issue, but also connected the news to broader topics like human rights and the workings of the political system. Such associations, when helpful to understand a news event, may be facilitated through innovative storytelling forms.

A second, related recommendation pertains to the fact that news users compare the news with their personal experiences, both past and present. When consuming information about current affairs, one of the main answers that users are looking for is why the news is personally relevant: what do the developments in question mean for them? This explains, for example, the popularity of regional news and local newspapers among the participants from Chapter 4: news on local issues is likely to be recognizable and thus, it is easy to relate to it. This is a different type of personalization than is often argued for when discussing the opportunities of digital technologies to create individual-focused news environments through algorithms favoring content that suits people's topical preferences. Facilitating more links between news and people's everyday life in this sense involves predicting what type of personal consequences certain issues might have for different people and what sort of questions the news might raise for users. As one of the participants put it: what would the average user, after seeing the news, put into the Google search bar when searching for more tailored information? Some data journalism initiatives, such as data productions from Nu.nl for instance, allow users to look up their area on a map to view to what extent a particular nation-wide problem - such as burglaries or bicycle theft - is affecting their town or neighborhood. Other media such as commercial broadcaster RTL Nieuws develop

8

tools where users can calculate what new proposals by the Dutch government, for instance plans to increase VAT, will mean for how much they spend on monthly groceries. While these are time-intensive to produce , such projects may help users understand how the public issues reported on the news are linked to them personally.

Third, the findings indicate that news users enjoy being part of a larger collective. Some of the appreciation for newspapers for the news consumers in Chapter 4, for instance, lay in the fact that subscriptions represented their membership in a wider community. This did not require any actual involvement in the newspaper: most of the participants in this thesis had little interest in engaging in news production themselves. Yet, there was a sense of attachment between them and other readers – for the older participants, in no doubt strengthened by Dutch newspapers' "pillarization" history of focusing on specific segments of society such as the catholics, protestants or socialists before the 1960s. Digital initiatives such as *De Correspondent* try to build a similar bond, explicitly describing their subscribers as "members" instead of users or visitors. Thinking about what the use of a news product makes people part of – and conversely, who it excludes – may thus be helpful for journalists and news makers starting novel news outlets and aiming to establish fixed consumption routines. According to the thesis' findings, paying news contributes to the attachment between users and news brand, as it limits the news' availability and makes it more exclusive. Therefore, it gives the impression that such news products have higher value than freely accessible alternatives.

Fourth, previous studies on mediated public connection have drawn attention to problems regarding the constructiveness of news (Couldry et al., 2007; Kaun, 2012) that also inspired the public journalism movement in the 1990s (Glasser, 1999), and more recently, the idea of constructive journalism (Gyldensted, 2011). The constructive role of journalism in such work is interpreted as fostering civic engagement and political participation. In this regard, the thesis indeed confirmed that following the news may generate feelings of helplessness, because of a lack of available action contexts. Efforts to decrease the unconstructiveness of news so far have had only moderate success, for multiple reasons. First, some ideas of the constructive journalism movement, such as focusing more strongly on potential solutions to the problems portrayed in news reports, have received critical response from journalism professionals. This is because if such practices are overdone, they can be at odds with journalists' professional norms of autonomy (McDevitt, 2003). Thus, implementing public or constructive journalism practices involves walking a fine line, with journalists looking to create stories that engage audiences while at the same time maintaining their neutrality and independence. However, the thesis has also mentioned ways of presenting news that may decrease users' sense of unconstructiveness that align perfectly with the classic norms of journalism practices. An example is reporting news within the context of broader, ongoing developments, instead of focusing on one-time

events. This not only helps users to understand and make sense of the public world, but also leaves more room for potential engagement and action. Second, as for instance Dahlgren (2009) notes, the problem of unconstructive news goes beyond media themselves. If politics fails to be responsive to citizens' concerns in a manner that makes them feel they are heard and listened to, it becomes difficult for journalists to counter such emotions. That said, from the point-of-view of the user, news as a common ground is not only constructive in the political sense, but also for comprehending and navigating everyday life in general. Efforts focusing on fostering such everyday constructiveness may thus be more successful. Again, this involves a journalistic manner of thought that considers the everyday implications of particular news stories for news users, the questions they might have about the consequences that events have for them personally, and how they may respond to the news.

As a final remark, when aiming to facilitate processes of mediated public connection, news media companies should be aware that while news websites and apps offer many functionalities that allow people to engage with news, much of the engagement with their products is likely to happen outside these open spaces. Among the research participants, posting a comment or sharing a news article on a public timeline were relatively rare practices. Most people preferred to engage with news and journalism in relatively closed spaces instead. Chapter 4, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 have for instance discussed the use of WhatsApp to share and engage with news, with its group conversations acting as a safe, grey space where users to explore different thoughts and form opinions at their own pace, as opposed to Facebook where opinions tend to be perceived as black and white. Even more frequently, news was discussed in offline settings, with friends in a bar, between neighbors or at work. For the participants, these were valuable opportunities for mediated public connection. Yet, for news companies these moments would have been difficult to measure. Thus, a low frequency of retweets, Facebook likes or other online engagement statistics do not necessarily indicate that users perceive news stories as less engaging. A continuing challenge for news organizations, thus, is to understand how people connect through and engage with news and what exactly the social impact is that stories have within audiences' communities.

8

## 8.5    Moving forward

What the future holds for the societally connective function of news is difficult to predict. Especially the role of journalism in this equation remains uncertain, with an increasing number of alternative suppliers of connective news arising. Some of these digital platforms remain close to traditional journalistic conceptualizations offering similar news-oriented content. Other novel players, such as Facebook, are based on very different logics and can

be seen as substituting or displacing journalism. However, all of these are competing for the limited supply of user attention, giving users an unprecedented array of news sources to choose from. This presents challenges for both traditional commercial journalism companies that see their economic foundation eroding, and government-funded broadcasters aiming to fulfill their public mission. Yet, the findings of this thesis suggest that stable habits of using news and journalism have far from disappeared. While patterns of mediated public connection do increasingly center around individuals instead of institutions, legacy news media still exert considerable influence on how people are bridging the gap between private and public life. This is not only reflected in the large number of news consumers that still attend to newspapers, broadcasters and their online counterparts on a daily basis, but also in the strong position that their content holds in novel spaces for news. Especially on semi-open social media platforms such as Facebook, their stories have become almost impossible to ignore. Thus, although the power to select news has shifted to the user, and while digitalization has facilitated increasing competition from other producers of news, journalism still plays a vital role in constructing shared frames of reference that help their users to experience and make sense of public life. In fact, the connective role of journalism may only be strengthened by the digitalization of the media landscape: the amplified production of news makes the need for guidance through all of that information – and misinformation – even more pressing.

However, as the news avoiders interviewed in this thesis show, this does not mean that the societal legitimacy of journalism is completely self-evident, or that people were without any criticism about the connective role it played. For example, throughout the interviews and focus groups, journalism was criticized for focusing on topics with too little relevance for people's everyday life, not covering the area where they lived, or failing to address the public issues they were concerned about. In this sense, a helpful question for follow-up research might be to consider how the perceptions of news producers about the connective role of news are translated into specific journalism practices and journalistic products, and to what extent their ideas about public connection match with the perceptions of their audiences. After all, news media have aimed to bridge people's private and public worlds for many years, building a variety of journalism concepts, brands, and products to fulfill this societal function. How do journalists view the role of news media for bringing news that is inclusive, engaging, relevant and constructive, and what consequences does this have for the way that news is produced? Does this match with the way that people are employing news for public connection, and if not, how could such discrepancies be minimized to ensure journalism remains valuable to users on a societal level? Such studies could yield more concrete recommendations for journalism practice on how to facilitate people's connection to public life.

This thesis has shown that retaining relevance as a news medium in the digital age is not simply a question of catering towards people's preferences regarding the topics news should address or the formats in which it should be reported. To produce news that becomes useful for supporting people's connections to public life also requires thinking about what makes journalism people part of, what engages them socially, and how such content is relevant and constructive in everyday life. Moreover, to be added to people's everyday routines, the mere appreciation of news is insufficient: it should be offered in a manner that seamlessly fits within people's general daily life habits and is easily available and accessible. Most importantly, this thesis has argued that if news media companies aim to comprehend and facilitate the connective role of news, the value of news as a means for public connection needs to be understood from the point-of-view of the people who are using it in everyday life. Only then, we can fully understand journalism's public significance.

8

# Appendices

## Appendix A. Typal factor arrays

**Table 3.** Factor arrays with Q Sort values for each repertoire

| Card | Regionally oriented | Background-oriented | Digital | Laid-back | Nationally oriented |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NOS Journaal (TV news bulletin on a public service channel) | 3 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| TV news bulletin on a commercial channel | 2 | -1 | 0 | -2 | 3 |
| TV news bulletin on a regional or local channel | 3 | 1 | 1 | -1 | -1 |
| Light current affairs TV programs | 0 | 0 | -2 | -3 | 4 |
| Serious current affairs TV programs | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| TV news bulletin and/or current affairs on 24-hour news channels | -1 | 2 | 0 | -1 | -4 |
| TV news bulletin and/or current affairs on a foreign/international channel | 0 | 2 | -1 | 0 | -3 |
| Text-TV | 4 | -3 | 0 | 0 | -4 |
| Radio news as part of a general public service radio channel | 3 | -2 | -1 | 0 | 2 |
| Radio news as part of a general commercial radio channel | -2 | -1 | -3 | 3 | 1 |
| Radio current affairs programs | 2 | 1 | -1 | -1 | 0 |
| Daily quality newspaper, print | 0 | 4 | -3 | 2 | 4 |
| Daily popular newspaper, print | 2 | 0 | -4 | -2 | 0 |
| Metro (free daily newspaper, print) | 0 | -4 | -2 | -2 | 1 |
| News magazines, print | -2 | 4 | -2 | 0 | 0 |
| Print regional daily newspaper | 4 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 0 |
| Print local weekly/bi-weekly/monthly news publications | 1 | 0 | -2 | 4 | -3 |
| Quality newspaper online | -3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 3 |

| Card | Regionally oriented | Background-oriented | Digital | Laid-back | Nationally oriented |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Popular newspaper online | 1 | -1 | 1 | -3 | 2 |
| Metronieuws.nl (free daily newspaper online) | -1 | -1 | -3 | -4 | -1 |
| News magazines online | -4 | 3 | -1 | 0 | -2 |
| Regional daily newspaper online | 2 | 1 | 2 | -2 | 0 |
| Local weekly/bi-weekly/monthly news publications online | -2 | 1 | -2 | 2 | -3 |
| National broadcaster's online news | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 1 |
| Regional broadcaster's online news | 1 | 0 | 3 | 1 | -2 |
| International news providers' online news | -2 | 2 | 3 | -3 | -1 |
| News on Facebook, including news via links on Facebook | -3 | -4 | -4 | 4 | 3 |
| News on Twitter, including news via links on Twitter | -4 | 0 | 2 | -1 | 1 |
| News on social media, excluding Facebook and Twitter | -3 | -3 | 1 | 1 | -1 |
| News on online video sharing media | 0 | -2 | 2 | -1 | -2 |
| News blogs | -2 | -2 | 0 | -2 | -2 |
| News received by email or text messaging services | 1 | -3 | 2 | 2 | -1 |
| Professional and party-political magazines (trade union or professional associations' magazines) | -1 | -2 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| News via news aggregators, personalized news services, or news portals | 1 | -1 | -1 | -4 | 0 |
| News from online-only news media | -1 | -2 | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| National, regional or international news online, not provided by media | -1 | 1 | -1 | 0 | -2 |

## Appendix B:   Factor loadings

**Table 4.** Rotated factor loadings for Q Sorts

| Q Sort | Regionally oriented news use | Background- oriented news use | Digital news use | Laid-back news use | Nationally oriented news use |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 31 | 0.792* | | | | |
| 08 | 0.773* | | | | |
| 17 | 0.711* | | | | |
| 10 | 0.697* | | | | |
| 05 | 0.691* | | | | |
| 06 | 0.686 | | | 0.543 | |
| 12 | 0.608* | | | | |
| 15 | 0.582* | | | | |
| 01 | 0.526 | 0.470 | | | |
| 18 | 0.530* | | | | |
| 33 | 0.463* | | | | |
| 19 | 0.446 | 0.464 | | | |
| 09 | 0.446* | | | | |
| 04 | | 0.580 | 0.640 | | |
| 34 | | -0.614 | | 0.459 | |
| 28 | | 0.616* | | | |
| 29 | | 0.557* | | | |
| 24 | | 0.556 | 0.592 | | |
| 13 | | 0.645 | | 0.468 | |
| 11 | | 0.466* | | | |
| 16 | | 0.453* | | | |
| 27 | | | 0,741* | | |
| 02 | | | 0.733* | | |
| 03 | | | 0.603* | | |
| 20 | | | 0.532* | | |
| 30 | | | 0.456* | | |
| 22 | | | | 0.764* | |
| 21 | | | | 0.655* | |
| 07 | | | | 0.614* | |
| 35 | | | | 0.474* | |
| 25 | | | | | 0.777* |
| 23 | | | | | 0.706* |

| Q Sort | Regionally oriented news use | Background-oriented news use | Digital news use | Laid-back news use | Nationally oriented news use |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14 | | | | | 0.575* |
| 36 | | | | | 0.611* |
| 26 | | | 0.479 | | 0.547 |
| | | | | | |
| **Eigenvalues** | 8.856 | 4.000 | 3.413 | 2.472 | 2.085 |
| **% of variance** | 24.559 | 11.112 | 9.482 | 6.866 | 5.793 |

Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 16 iterations. Factor loadings <0.43 are not reported.

## Appendix C:   Interview guide

**1. Introduction of the research**

This research is about the use and the appreciation of news. We would like to know how people are using news to stay on top of what is happening in the world and what role news is playing in their daily life. The research consists of a puzzle you are asked to do while thinking aloud, and we'll have a short talk before and afterwards. In total, it will last about one and a half hours.

I'd like to record the conversation with this voice recorder. The audio files will only be used to transcribe the conversations later and will not be shared with others outside the research group. If there is anything that is unclear, or if you have any questions, please just ask.

When we are talking about news media, we mean those news media that you are using to stay informed about what goes on in society around you, both close by and far away. These media may include TV and radio, newspapers, the internet, the mobile phone, etcetera.

We would very much like to know what is news for *you*. Maybe that's traditional news topics such as politics or economics, but it can also be what happens in sports, showbizz, technology, personal news from friends and acquaintances, and so on. In this research, it's what about what news is important and relevant for you in your daily life.

**2. Day-in-the-life: news use**

To begin, we would like to ask you to think about yesterday and tell what you did that day, from the moment you got up until you went to bed (*if that was a weekend day, ask about the last work day*). For example: you got up, had breakfast, cycled to work, had lunch with colleagues, etcetera.

Were there any moments during the day when news played a role? That could be because you used news media, but it may also be that you encountered news in a conversation with someone, or because you did something differently because of the news.

*About the news media mentioned:*
-     Could you tell me more about why you were using that news medium?
-     Could you tell me more about why you found it important to follow the news?
-     Was the day you described a regular one? Do you normally use more, less, or no news media?

- Does your news use differ during the weekends?
- Do you feel you are having a particular routine with regards to using news media? If so, how would you describe it?
- Did your routine change since one, two, three years ago? If so, how? When do you add new news media and when do news media disappear from your routine?
- Are there any news media around that you do not use, but would in a way like to, given the time and the money?

## 3. Puzzle news use

The second part of the research involves a puzzle, which deals with the news media you have just told me about. I have here a pile of 36 cards, each of them with a news medium written on it, with some examples of that news medium. Some cards mention news media you already mentioned yourself, some cards may mention news media you didn't mention – maybe because you don't use them, or maybe just because you forgot.

The aim of the puzzle is that you sort all the cards and place them on this grid, so that eventually you'll end up having a card in each of the 36 slots. At one end of the grid you place the news media that play a large role for you in your daily life. At the other end you place the news media that do not or hardly play a role in your daily life. In the middle, you can place the news media that sometimes play a role and sometimes do not.

A medium can play a large role because you are spending a lot of time on it or because you use it frequently, but it might also be a medium that you do not use that often, but that you still regard as very important for you for a different reason. When you do never use news media and do not find them important at all, sort them on the left.

There are no right or wrong answers. This is a way to learn more about the value that news media have for you. You are free to move the cards around any time, as long as when you are finished, you end up with a distribution that you are satisfied with and that gives a good representation of the news media that play a role in your daily life.

I'll give you some cards to start with, so you can see what kind of research this is. How do you think you might place them on the grid? You don't need to pick a slot right away, but would you for example place it on the left, on the right, or in the middle? Why?

(*Continue by letting the participant sort all the cards*)

*At the end:*
- Do you now think that the way the cards are placed gives a good picture of what news media are important in your daily life, and their relationship to each other?

*About at least the three columns on the far right end:*
- Why does this medium play a large role in your daily life? Are there specific media or subparts within this category that are valuable to you?
- When do you use this medium? Where? By yourself, or with others? How much time do you spend on it? How frequently do you use it?

*About at least the three columns on the far left end:*
- Why do these news media not play a role in your daily life, or a minor one? Could it play a bigger role at some point in the future?

Where would you draw the line between the news media that you do not find important at all, and the news media that are sometimes or often important to you?

## 4. Interview news use

- Were any news media missing in the card set? If so, which ones?
- Are there media that you would like to use, but which never make it into your life for some reason?
- Do you have children? Are you using some media because they do? Do you live together with someone? Are you using some media because they do?

## 5. Interview public (dis)connection

This puzzle was about the role of news in general. The next questions are about the social role of news media for connecting people to each other and the world. For example, news can be a conversation starter at work with your coworkers or at a birthday party.

- When I had not asked you to sort the cards with regard to their role in daily life in general, but depending on to what extent they connect you to society, would you have sorted them differently? If so, how? Why or why not?
- Let's say there is a big news event where everyone around you is suddenly talking about. For example the plane crash in Ukraine, or the queen who abdicated the throne, or a large fire or earthquake close to where you live. Which news media are important

then? Are these the news media on the right side of your distribution? Why or why not?

- When you hear, see or read something in the news that you'd like to know more about and search for more information, do you first go to the news media on the right side of the distribution? Why or why not?
- (*About normative pressure*) Are there news media that you are using because you feel others expect you to do so? Do you for example follow certain news media because of your job? Why?
- (*About situational fit*) Are there news media that you are only using in specific situations, for example in a specific place or at a specific time? Which ones? Why?
- (*About trust*) Are there news media that you are not using because you don't trust them? Which ones? Why? To what extent does trustworthiness a role in the news media you select?
- (*About news overload*) Are there news media that you are not using because you feel you are overloaded with information? Which ones? Why?
- (*About perceived negativity and lack of agency*) Are there news media that you are not using because you think their contents are too negative? Or because you feel you can't change anything about what they report? Which ones? Why?
- (*About other forms of public connection*) Next to news media, are you using other sources to get information about what is happening in the world? For example particular clubs, groups, organizations, schools, religious institutions?
- (*About civic action*) Can you give an example of a time when you took action because of something you saw or heard on the news? Why did you do that? Does this happen more often?
- (*About opinion formation*) To what extent does the news influence your opinions on current affairs, you think? Can you name an example? Does the news make you think differently about for example Dutch politics, about Europe, or about minorities?
- (*Wrap-up*) Finally, if you could change one thing about the news and how it is offered in The Netherlands right now, what would it be? Do you have any further comments on news media, news use, or the appreciation of news?

# Appendix D: Focus group guide

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**1: WELCOME (5-10 min)**

- Set up the room with drinks and snacks
- Welcome all participants & introduce myself
- Explain the theme of the research and the procedure of the focus group: conversation starter, then four different themes. The focus group takes 1,5-2 hours. Gift card as a reward for participation.
- There are no wrong answers; participants stay anonymous; the focus group is about the group discussion, not about the moderator's opinion.
- Audio recording: the audio recording will not be shared with anyone outside of the resarch group and just serves to transcribe the results. Ask to not talk at the same time.
- Is anything unclear? Do you feel I'm forgetting something? Is something wrong? Please ask!

- Explain the informed consent form and ask participants to sign it.
- Ask to fill in demographic information: gender, place of residence, highest level of education, social media platforms used.

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**2: INTRODUCTION (5-10 min)**

- Introduction round of the participants, one-by-one: name and how you got to know the rest of the group. Clearly state names and say a few sentences for the audio recording. *Draw map of the room with names for transcription.*
- About the group: how did you meet? How did your social media group come to exist? *Draw map of the group and related groups, such as other departments, teams, etcetera.*

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**3: USE OF DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA BY THE GROUP (20 min)**

1. Which digital and social media are being used in your group to share and exchange information you feel is important for the others to know? [*write along on flipover*]
2. How do these different platforms that you are using relate to each other? Which platform are you using for what purpose?
3. To what extent are social media important for your connection with the group? If social media didn't exist, could you (*the group*) live without?
4. *Roundtable question*: are you using social media in a different way in the other groups that you are a member of (*family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, volunteers, etc.*)? How does it differ?

**4: SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC CONNECTION (15 min)**

*Connection*
1. To what extent are social media important for you to connect to the group?
2. To what extent are social media important for you to connect to society in general? What does it mean to feel connected to public life?
3. Does it make a difference in your everyday life whether you keep up with social media or not? How and why? Have social media become more important in your everyday life in the past years? Why or why not?

**5: SOCIAL MEDIA AND SHARING INFORMATION (15 min)**

*[Explain that we are looking for information you find important or relevant for the entire group, and maybe also for people outside the group, which you therefore share with each other. Name example of news that may be relevant for the group and people outside the group.*

*Information*
1. How important are social media for you as sources for information and to be up to date?
2. Can you give examples of what you are talking about in your social media groups? [Ask to show examples from the social media feeds.] Why do you feel this is important or relevant to share with each other? What do you see others sharing that you would never share yourself?
3. *If not addressed yet:* What information would you also share with others outside the group? Why?

**6A: SOCIAL MEDIA, NEWS AND JOURNALISM (30-35 min)**

*News in the group*
1. Do you think that what you are sharing in your group is news? Why or why not?
2. Do you follow journalism on social media? If not, are you following journalistic news through other platforms (news app, website, tv, radio, newspaper)? If so, how exactly? Do you share news articles on social media? Do you see such news in this group? Do you see such news in other groups? 3. How does the news within the group differ with the journalism news that you are using?

*Relevance of news*
4. Does it make a difference in your everyday life whether you are following journalism or not? How and why? Do you feel connected to society through the news?
5. If there would be a social media feed that would report public information that is important to your group and would perfectly address the topics you discuss in your group, what news stories would it feature? (*Ask for examples*).

**6B: SOCIAL MEDIA, NEWS MEDIA, AND PUBLIC CONNECTION (15 MIN)**

1. Are there public issues that you find important, but you feel are neglected by journalism? Or the other way around? Can social media help to fill gaps between journalism and its audiences?
2. Do you think your social networks could replace journalism as a source for news? Why? Do you think this will change in the future?
3. How could journalism improve the fit between their news products and the topics that you and those around you think are important?

**7: WRAPPING UP (5 min)**

1. Do you have any other remarks about news, connection, and social media?

- Explain what will happen with the data.
- Thank all the participants and hand out gift cards.

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# Nederlandse samenvatting

Van Facebook tot nieuwsapps en van uitgesteld kijken tot notificaties op smartwatches: nog nooit had de gemiddelde Nederlandse nieuwsgebruiker de keuze uit zo'n groot media-aanbod. De talloze nieuwsberichten waarmee gebruikers in aanraking komen bieden gezamenlijk een referentiekader. Dat referentiekader informeert hen niet alleen, maar heeft ook een sociaal-maatschappelijke functie. Nieuws heeft van oudsher een groot bereik, waardoor het functioneert als een gemeenschappelijke oriëntatie op de publieke wereld buiten de persoonlijke levenssfeer van individuele nieuwsgebruikers. Daarmee helpt het mensen om deel te nemen in het openbare leven: het vormt bijvoorbeeld een eenvoudig gespreksonderwerp tussen mensen op verjaardagen, borrels of bij de koffieautomaat op het werk. Het faciliteren van zo'n "publieke connectie" door het aanbieden van nieuws en actualiteiten wordt traditioneel beschouwd als één van de belangrijkste maatschappelijke functies van de journalistiek (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham, 2007).

De digitalisering van het medialandschap zorgt echter voor een verschuiving van de nieuwsgewoonten, -behoeften en -voorkeuren van het publiek. Ten eerste hebben gebruikers in het huidige digitale medialandschap de keuze uit talloze nieuwsbronnen, -genres en -platformen. Door de ontwikkeling van mobiele technologieën kan het publiek deze bovendien veelal raadplegen ongeacht tijdstip of locatie. Hierdoor zijn gebruikers niet meer per se afhankelijk van traditionele nieuwsmedia voor het volgen van nieuws en actualiteiten; dagbladen en radio- en televisieomroepen ondervinden in toenemende mate concurrentie van exclusief digitale platformen en nieuwsbronnen op social media. De aandacht van nieuwsgebruikers voor de publieke referentiekaders die massamedia bieden is dus allesbehalve vanzelfsprekend. Ten tweede ondersteunen digitale platformen nieuwe praktijken van nieuwsgebruik, zoals het checken, delen of liken van nieuws. Hoewel gebruikers altijd al nieuws met elkaar hebben uitgewisseld, maken social media het mogelijk om met slechts één muisklik nieuws te verspreiden onder een veel groter publiek dan voorheen. Gebruikers hebben dus geen journalisten meer nodig om nieuws grootschalig bij anderen onder de aandacht te brengen, maar kunnen de nieuwsdistributie zelf beïnvloeden.

Deze ontwikkelingen roepen de vraag op of de sociaal-verbindende functie die het nieuws en de journalistiek traditioneel worden toegedicht nog wel zo vanzelfsprekend is in het huidige, gedigitaliseerde medialandschap. Dit proefschrift onderzocht wat veranderend

nieuwsgebruik betekent voor de verbindende rol van nieuws in de samenleving, aan de hand van drie onderzoeksvragen. Ten eerste: *hoe beschouwen en ervaren gebruikers nieuws als gemeenschappelijk referentiekader op het publieke leven in een gedigitaliseerd medialandschap*? Ten tweede: *van welke praktijken en opkomende mediaplatformen maken zij gebruik om hun publieke connectie vorm te geven*? En ten derde: *hoe kunnen we het idee van "public connection" conceptualiseren op een manier die recht doet aan deze veranderende percepties en praktijken binnen verschillende sociale verbanden?* Deze vragen zijn relevant omdat ze raken aan de maatschappelijke legitimiteit van de journalistiek als nieuwsproducent. Als gebruikers bijvoorbeeld ook via hun connecties op social media zich kunnen oriënteren op wat buiten hun privésfeer gebeurt, waarom zouden ze dan nog het achtuurjournaal kijken of een krantenabonnement nemen? Kennis over de sociale relevantie van nieuws is met name van belang nu de traditionele journalistiek financieel onder druk komt te staan. Afnemende aantallen abonnees en kijkcijfers zorgen voor minder advertentie-inkomsten, een daling die (nog) niet voldoende worden gecompenseerd door de groei van het aantal digitale abonnees. Ook voor de publieke omroep is deze maatschappelijke rol van journalistiek van belang, vanuit hun missie om verschillende groepen in de samenleving met elkaar te verbinden. Nu nieuwsgebruik plaatsvindt op een steeds groter aantal platformen, rijst de vraag in hoeverre nieuws en journalistiek nog een verbindende rol spelen. Met andere woorden: in hoeverre veranderen nieuwe patronen van nieuwsgebruik de betekenis die het nieuws heeft voor gebruikers als middel voor *public connection*?

Centraal in het proefschrift staat de rol van nieuws in het faciliteren van 'publieke connectie' (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007). Het concept van *public connection* is gebaseerd op de vaststelling dat mensen in het dagelijks leven onderdeel zijn van één of meerdere netwerken, van kleinschalige groepen als collega's in bedrijf waar ze werken of de buurt waar ze wonen tot grotere verbanden als de cultuur of het land waarvan ze deel uitmaken. Om actief deel te kunnen nemen binnen deze verbanden oriënteren mensen zich op de wereld buiten hun persoonlijke levenssfeer. Nieuws is één van de manieren om zulke gemeenschappelijk referentiekaders op het publieke leven te verkrijgen. Deze gedeelde referentiekaders – *public connection* – maken het mogelijk voor gebruikers om betrokken te raken bij en deel te nemen binnen hun culturele, sociale en/of politieke netwerk(en) in het dagelijks leven. *Public connection* is een relatief neutraal concept: het stelt alleen dat er een link bestaat tussen de privésfeer en de publieke wereld van individuen, maar schrijft niet voor dat zij aandacht schenken aan het openbare leven, op welke manier mensen hun publieke connectie vorm geven, of dat nieuws en journalistiek voor gebruikers van belang zijn voor *public connection*. Juist omdat het concept dus vrij minimalistisch en open is, is het bruikbaar voor verkennend en inductief onderzoek in een continu veranderend medialandschap.

## Theoretisch kader

Om de veranderende sociaal verbindende functie van nieuws te begrijpen vertrekt dit proefschrift nadrukkelijk vanuit het perspectief van de nieuwsgebruiker en zijn of haar dagelijks leven. Eerdere studies over dit onderwerp benaderden *public connection* vooral vanuit het standpunt van bestaande politieke en cultureel-wetenschappelijke theorieën en concepten, bijvoorbeeld deliberatieve democratie, publiek engagement, *civic cultures*, enzovoort. Pike (1967) noemt dit een etische (*etic*) benadering: vanuit een vooraf bedacht model worden hypotheses opgesteld die dan aan de hand van empirische waarnemingen worden bevestigd of verworpen. Dit proefschrift stelt dat in een snel veranderend medialandschap het nuttiger is om voor een emische (*emic*) benadering te kiezen om veranderende patronen en betekenissen van nieuws als middel voor *public connection* te begrijpen. In plaats van bestaande concepten als uitgangspunt te gebruiken, begint dit proefschrift bij de huidige praktijken, percepties en voorkeuren van de nieuwsgebruiker zelf. Op basis daarvan worden vervolgens theorieën over de huidige praktijken en betekenissen van nieuwsgebruik en publieke connectie geformuleerd. Zo'n emische aanpak, waarbij *public connection* vanuit de nieuwsgebruiker wordt onderzocht, heeft een drietal voordelen. Ten eerste kunnen door de nieuwsgebruiker als vertrekpunt te nemen theorieën worden ontwikkeld die aansluiten op de dagelijkse ervaringen van het publiek. Ten tweede maakt een benadering waarin de gebruiker centraal staat het mogelijk om verschillende facetten van *public connection* te belichten, van politieke tot culturele aspecten, zolang deze maar van belang zijn in het dagelijks leven van de nieuwsgebruiker. Ten derde benadrukt het *public connection* als een dynamisch proces: een gedeeld referentiekader is niet een vaststaand ideaal dat moet worden nagestreefd en onderhouden, maar de praktijken en voorkeuren van mensen wat betreft de verbindende rol van nieuws kunnen veranderen met de tijd en kunnen verschillen afhankelijk van de context van het nieuwsgebruik. Een emische aanpak maakt het mogelijk om die variatie te bestuderen.

     Specifiek bestudeert dit proefschrift wat de digitalisering van het medialandschap betekent voor *public connection* vanuit vier verschillende theoretische invalshoeken, die uitgebreid worden besproken in hoofdstuk 2. De eerste is de dimensie van *inclusiviteit:* welk nieuws wordt nu onderdeel van de gemeenschappelijke referentiekaders van mensen? Wat beschouwen mensen nu als "het nieuws"? De tweede dimensie, *engagement*, richt zich op de verschillende vormen en praktijken van publieke connectie. Digitale mediatechnologieën maken het mogelijk om op andere manieren om betrokken te raken en te engageren met het nieuws, bijvoorbeeld door nieuwsverhalen op social media te posten, te delen, te liken of te becommentariëren. Hoe vormen gebruikers nu een gemeenschappelijk referentiekader door middel van nieuws? En welke praktijken van nieuwsgebruik gelden als vormen van engagement? De derde dimensie in het proefschrift is *relevantie:* wanneer en hoe is nieuws relevant in het dagelijks leven van nieuwsgebruiker? Patronen van nieuwsgebruik kunnen

op zichzelf waardevol zijn, maar kunnen ook een overstijgend doel dienen: bijvoorbeeld samen het sportnieuws kijken als onderdeel van vriendschap, of dagelijks 's ochtends radio luisteren bij het ontbijt als ritueel dat het gezin samenbrengt. Wat zijn de huidige rituele waarden van nieuwsgebruik? Tenslotte bespreekt het proefschrift als vierde dimensie de *constructiviteit* van nieuws. Deze invalshoek besteedt aandacht aan de vraag hoe en wanneer het nieuws als gedeeld referentiekader voor gebruikers van nut is. Wanneer is nieuws voor gebruikers waardevol en helpt het hen om iets te bereiken? De empirische hoofdstukken in dit proefschrift maken ieder gebruik van één of meerdere van deze vier invalshoeken.

## Methode

Om de vraag te beantwoorden wat de digitalisering van het medialandschap betekent voor de praktijken en percepties van nieuws als middel voor publieke connectie maakt dit proefschrift gebruik van vier (voornamelijk) kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden: *day-in-the-life-interviews,* Q methodologie, diepte-interviews en focusgroepen. In de eerste dataverzamelingsfase werd de sociaal-verbindende rol van nieuws verkend vanuit het oogpunt van de individuele nieuwsgebruiker. Deze fase begon met een kort day-in-the-life interview, om zo een beeld te verkrijgen van de dagelijkse nieuwsgewoonten van de deelnemers en de waarde die verschillende nieuwsmedia hebben binnen die routines voor de gebruiker. Vervolgens werd iedere deelnemer gevraagd een set met 36 kaarten, met op elke kaart een verschillend type nieuwsmedium, te sorteren naar gelang de waarde die deze media hadden binnen hun dagelijks leven. Deze opdracht, gebaseerd op Q methodologie, diende om verschillende nieuwsrepertoires te onderscheiden en te achterhalen waarom deze specifieke combinaties van nieuwsmedia waardevol zijn voor de gebruiker. Tot slot eindigde de eerste onderzoeksfase met een diepte-interview, waarin specifiek werd ingegaan op het gebruik van nieuws voor publieke connectie. Uit de eerste dataverzamelingsfase bleek onder meer het belang van interpersoonlijke netwerken voor de publieke connectie van en tussen gebruikers. In de tweede dataverzamelingsfase werden daarom focusgroepen gehouden om te onderzoeken hoe gebruikers binnen verschillende groepen hun publieke connectie door middel van nieuws vormgeven en ervaren. Specifiek werd gekeken naar de praktijken en percepties van groepen social media-gebruikers omtrent de verbindende rol van nieuws en hoe de kenmerken van en dynamiek in de groep deze beïnvloeden. Deze onderzoeksopzet wordt in detail besproken in hoofdstuk 3.

## Resultaten

### Waarde van nieuws in het dagelijks leven

Voordat wordt ingegaan op veranderde vormen en betekenissen van nieuws als middel voor publieke connectie onderzoekt hoofdstuk 4 eerst welke overkoepelende patronen van nieuwsgebruik kunnen worden onderscheiden in het huidige, gedigitaliseerde medialandschap. Deze deelstudie bekijkt op basis van welke waarden nieuwsgebruikers besluiten om aandacht te geven aan nieuwsmedia en op welke manier hun totale selectie aan nieuwsmedia – hun nieuwsrepertoire (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006) – betekenisvol voor hen wordt. Op basis van Q methodologie en *day-in-the-life*-interviews vindt deze studie onder de deelnemers vijf verschillende nieuwsrepertoires: regionaal-georiënteerd, op achtergrond georiënteerd, digitaal, *laid-back* en landelijk-georiënteerd nieuwsgebruik. Aan elk van deze repertoires liggen verschillende waarden van nieuwsgebruik ten grondslag (zie Tabel 2).

De diepte-interviews brachten drie conclusies aan het licht die van toepassing zijn op deelnemers met elk van deze vijf nieuwsrepertoires. Ten eerste concludeert de studie dat de opkomst van digitale en sociale nieuwsmedia veranderen wat gebruikers definiëren als nieuws. Een foto die een kennis deelt op Facebook wordt beschouwd als een ander type nieuws dan een item in het NOS Journaal, maar gebruikers missen het vocabulaire om deze verschillen onder woorden te brengen. Ten tweede blijkt dat de redenen om een nieuwsmedium te gebruiken verschillen met de redenen waarom gebruikers nieuwsmedia waarderen. Nieuwsmedia worden gebruikt als zij 1) bekend zijn 2) de beoogde baten van gebruik hoger zijn dan de kosten 3) in de situationele context passen 4) toegankelijk zijn 5) het repertoire aanvullen en/of 6) er sprake is van sociale druk. Ze worden echter gewaardeerd wanneer nieuwsmedia 1) een hoge impact hebben op het dagelijks leven, 2) bijdragen aan identiteitsvorming 3) gaan over de persoonlijke interesses en 4) een publiek belang dienen. Daardoor lopen nieuwsgebruik en nieuwswaardering regelmatig uiteen. Tot slot wordt het betalen voor nieuws aan de ene kant gezien als vorm van maatschappelijk engagement, maar leeft anderzijds de verwachting dat belangrijk nieuws gratis verkrijgbaar zou moeten zijn voor iedere Nederlandse burger vanwege het publieke belang ervan. Deze twee opvattingen staan op gespannen voet met elkaar en leiden per individu tot verschillende uitkomsten: schoorvoetend betalen of met schuldgevoel niet betalen.

### Patronen van public connection

Hoofdstuk 5 zoomt vervolgens in op het gebruik van nieuws ten behoeve van *public connection*. In hoeverre verandert digitalisering de praktijken van "publieke connectie" - met betrekking tot nieuws - waarmee nieuwsgebruikers een referentiekader op de publieke wereld zoeken? En welke rituele betekenis hebben nieuws en journalistiek

anno nu voor het verbinden van de persoonlijke en publieke leefwereld van mensen? Om deze vragen te beantwoorden werden diepte-interviews afgenomen met 36 nieuwsgebruikers uit verschillende leeftijdscategorieën en regio's, en van verschillend geslacht en opleidingsniveau. Uit de resultaten blijkt dat digitalisering niet leidt tot het compleet verdwijnen van vaste nieuwsgewoonten en –rituelen. Er is nog steeds sprake van terugkerende patronen en rituelen van nieuwsgebruik, maar deze worden aangepast aan het digitale medialandschap. Ten eerste centreert nieuwsgebruik zich steeds minder rondom instituties en steeds meer rondom individuen, van journalisten en politici tot vrienden en familie. Ten tweede wordt nieuws checken voor gebruikers een continue activiteit die nauwelijks meer onderscheiden kan worden van andere bezigheden. Ten derde omvat "op de hoogte blijven" een breder spectrum aan informatie dan voorheen. Hoewel gebruikspatronen ten behoeve van publieke connectie dus sterk aan verandering onderhevig zijn, stoelen zulke moderne nieuwsgewoonten op vergelijkbare overstijgende, rituele waarden. Net als vroeger faciliteert een gedeeld referentiekader op de publieke wereld verbondenheid tussen nieuwsgebruikers. Dankzij social media kan zulke verbondenheid echter continu benut worden en raken het oriënteren op maatschappelijke thema's en het onderhouden van persoonlijke relaties met elkaar verweven. Ten tweede helpt het volgen van nieuws gebruikers om zich in het openbaar te presenteren als geïnformeerd en maatschappelijk betrokken. Dit is voor gebruikers met name van belang binnen de context van werk. Dergelijke maatschappelijke betrokkenheid werd door de geïnterviewden niet zozeer gelinkt aan participatie binnen instituties, maar juist op diverse kleinschalige en utilitaire manieren geuit: van het vervangen van papieren door digitale abonnementen uit milieuoverwegingen tot het zelf kweken van groente uit protest tegen de grootschalige voedselindustrie. Ten derde geeft het hebben van een publiek referentiekader nieuwsgebruikers een gevoel van controle en veiligheid. De geïnterviewden bleven graag op de hoogte van het nieuws, voor het geval zich gebeurtenissen zouden voordoen die hun dagelijks leven zouden kunnen beïnvloeden. Vanwege de toegenomen snelheid van het nieuws in het digitale tijdperk kostte dat meer moeite dan voorheen. Daarom vertrouwden de respondenten in toenemende mate op hun netwerk om hen te attenderen op nieuws dat voor hen belangrijk zou kunnen zijn, via face-to-face contact of via social media-platformen.

## Social media en public connection

Hoofdstuk 6 bespreekt het belang van social media voor het faciliteren van publieke connectie en de rol die nieuws en journalistiek daarin spelen. Een groeiend aantal nieuwsconsumenten maakt gebruik van besloten social media als WhatsApp of besloten Facebookgroepen voor het vinden, delen en bediscussiëren van nieuws en publieke informatie. Omdat zulke gesprekken in tegenstelling tot conversaties op bijvoorbeeld Twitter niet openbaar zijn,

is het gedrag van gebruikers op zulke "dark social media" moeilijk te meten. Door middel van focusgroepen werd daarom het belang van nieuws en journalistiek in de dagelijkse communicatie van groepen social-mediagebruikers onderzocht.

Als actieve social-mediagebruikers waren de frequente conversaties op deze platformen van groot belang voor het creëren van sociale verbondenheid tussen leden van de groep. Het belang van nieuws en journalistiek in deze gesprekken en wat gezien werd als belangrijk nieuws om te delen verschilde echter sterk per groep. In een aantal appgroepen was journalistiek nieuws niet of nauwelijks onderwerp van gesprek, omdat zij veronderstelden dat, juist omdat zulk nieuws door nieuwsmedia opgepakt was, de informatie al bekend zou zijn bij de anderen in de groep. Daarnaast zagen zij nieuws niet als een gezamenlijke interesse. Voor andere groepen functioneerde journalistiek juist als gespreksonderwerp omdat nieuwsmedia onderwerpen boden waar iedereen in de groep over mee kon praten. Deelnemen aan zulke gesprekken was voor hen een manier om onderdeel te worden van de groep en sociale relaties te verstevigen.

Uit de resultaten blijkt dat gebruikers over het algemeen de voorkeur geven aan WhatsApp het gaat om het praten over nieuws, vanwege de beslotenheid en de vluchtigheid van het platform. Gebruikers weten op WhatsApp, in tegenstelling tot bij hun Facebooktijdlijn, precies wie er toegang heeft tot hun berichten. Bovendien wordt een berichten op WhatsApp in de praktijk snel overladen door de grote stroom andere berichten die de groepsleden dagelijks versturen en kunnen individuele berichten lastig gearchiveerd en teruggevonden worden. Terwijl op Facebook het geven van een mening over nieuws op de publieke tijdlijn wordt gezien als een definitief statement dat altijd zichtbaar blijft, zijn gesprekken over nieuws op WhatsApp zijn daardoor meer exploratief van aard. Bij het delen van nieuws op WhatsApp gaat het meestal om achtergronden bij nieuws dat al bij de groepsleden bekend was via andere nieuwsplatformen, bijvoorbeeld nieuwsverhalen die het mogelijk maken het onderwerp vanuit meerdere perspectieven te benaderen of die verschillende aspecten van een probleem duiden. Zulke nieuwsverhalen helpen gebruikers om verbanden tussen verschillende nieuwsgebeurtenissen te leggen en meningen te vormen. Gebruikers geven de voorkeur aan nieuws van bekende merken, omdat deze worden gezien als meer betrouwbaar. Hoewel op WhatsApp regelmatig nieuws voorbij komt in groepsgesprekken, heeft de app primair nadrukkelijk een sociale functie. Facebook daarentegen functioneert voor de meeste participanten als verzamelplaats van verschillende informatiebronnen. Mainstream nieuws valt hier, zelfs wanneer het niet actief wordt gevolgd of geliket, nauwelijks te ontwijken.

Hoofdstuk 7 beschrijft het belang van sociale context voor publieke connectie door nieuws op social media. Deze deelstudie onderzoekt in hoeverre de praktijken van publieke connectie door nieuws en de nieuwsinhouden die onderling worden gedeeld verschillen afhankelijk van de sociale context van de groep. Hiertoe werden focusgroepen

gehouden met drie typen *communities*: geografische groepen (buren, lokale vrijwilligers), werkgerelateerde groepen (docenten, ICT-medewerkers) en groepen gevormd rondom vrijetijdsactiviteiten (voetbalteam, leden van een studentenvereniging). De verschillende focusgroepen tonen aan dat er grote diversiteit bestaat in praktijken van publieke connectie door nieuws binnen *social media communities*. Drie overkoepelende gebruikspatronen werden onderscheiden. Het eerst patroon betreft het gebruik van besloten social media als platform voor nieuwscuratie. De buren en docenten gebruikten hun groepen als zeer gespecialiseerde bron voor nieuws omtrent gezamenlijke interesses, waarbij nieuws wel trouw werd gelezen en soms geliket, maar meestal niet tot discussie leiden. Een tweede patroon is de praktijk van speelse discussie rondom het nieuws. In de groep van de ICT-medewerkers stond niet zozeer de inhoud van het nieuws centraal, maar de praktijk van het praten over nieuwsonderwerpen, als manier om onderdeel te worden van het team en opinies te vormen. Een derde patroon is het gebruik van besloten social media als omgeving voor *phatic communication* (Miller, 2008). Hierbij wordt niet gecommuniceerd om bepaalde inhoud over te brengen, maar om puur om sociale redenen, zoals het bevestigen van elkaars aanwezigheid en het versterken van de onderlinge banden in de groep. In de WhatsAppgroepen van de lokale vrijwilligers, het voetbalteam en de studentenvereniging kwam journalistiek zelden aan bod, tenzij het nieuws een directe persoonlijke relevantie had voor het dagelijks leven één van de groepsleden. Hoe meer de *communities* zichzelf zagen als een groep met zwakke banden en met weinig gemeenschappelijke interesses, des te belangrijker waren nieuws en actualiteiten voor het faciliteren van sociale verbondenheid binnen de groep.

## Conclusies

Het laatste hoofdstuk bevat de conclusies van dit proefschrift. Wat betekent veranderend nieuwsgebruik voor de verbindende rol van nieuws in de samenleving? Een eerste conclusie betreft de constatering dat gebruikers nog steeds geïnteresseerd zijn in de publieke wereld om hen heen. Juist in wat zij beschouwen als een steeds complexere samenleving is nieuws van belang als duidend en verklarend referentiekader. Dankzij het gebruik van mobiele technologieën waardoor nieuwsgebruik niet meer gebonden is aan specifieke plaatsen of tijdstippen, de groei van social media die dagelijkse communicatie tussen gebruikers onderdeel maken van de publieke ruimte, en de toename van het aantal platformen waarop gebruikers kunnen engageren met nieuws komen mensen veel vaker dan vroeger in aanraking met nieuws en journalistiek. Bestaande nieuwsrituelen zijn niet compleet verdwenen, maar worden aangepast aan het digitale medialandschap. Zelfs als er geen sprake is van doelbewuste nieuwsgewoonten, blijkt algemeen nieuws in de praktijk

nauwelijks te ontwijken. Nieuws functioneert daarom nog altijd als gemeenschappelijk referentiekader.

De manier waarop mensen dat referentiekader construeren en ervaren wordt echter beïnvloed door veranderende vormen van nieuwsgebruik en vindt plaats door middel van een grotere diversiteit aan  praktijken van publieke connectie dan voorheen. Het checken van drie tot vijf vaste apps op de smartphone voor nieuws en het vluchtig scrollen door social media feeds zijn voorbeelden van zulke nieuwe, frequentie vormen van publieke connectie. Daarentegen worden interactieve functionaliteiten op nieuwssites, in nieuwsapps en op social media, zoals mogelijkheid om online nieuwsberichten te delen met connecties of te reageren op nieuws, slechts door een beperkte groep gebruikers benut. Deze activiteiten zijn publiekelijk zichtbaar en herleidbaar naar de gebruiker. Daarom worden deze nieuwe praktijken van publieke connectie door gebruikers gezien als riskant of zelfs onwenselijk. Liever engageren gebruikers met nieuws in besloten omgevingen, zoals face-to-face of op besloten social media-platformen. Een tweede verandering betreft wat gebruikers definiëren als nieuws. Enerzijds zijn traditionele journalistieke conceptualiseringen nog steeds van grote invloed. Anderzijds zien gebruikers in hun news feeds op social media, op blogs en andere digitale platformen inhoud voorbijkomen die als nieuws wordt aangeduid, maar niet exact aan deze standaarden voldoen, waardoor hun perceptie van "nieuws" verandert. Tot slot gebruikt de huidige nieuwsgebruiker het nieuws vooral vanuit het perspectief van sociaal burgerschap: gebruikers willen mee kunnen praten met anderen, zich onderdeel voelen van de samenleving, en zichzelf presenteren als een persoon die geïnteresseerd is in het welzijn van anderen. Daarnaast wordt nieuwsgebruik gestimuleerd door een behoefte aan veiligheid en structuur. Klassieke normen en waarden omtrent het uitoefenen van politiek burgerschap door frequent nieuwsgebruik en democratische participatie zijn hierbij nog maar zelden van belang.

In hoeverre de journalistiek in de toekomst nog steeds een sociaal-verbindende rol zal vervullen is moeilijk te voorspellen. Enerzijds heeft de journalistiek nog altijd een centrale rol in de manier waarop mensen een referentiekader op het publieke leven construeren dat hen helpt de wereld om hen heen te begrijpen en te ervaren. Dat blijkt niet alleen uit het grote aantal gebruikers dat nog dagelijks traditionele nieuwsmerken raadpleegt, maar ook uit het bereik van hun content op nieuwe nieuwsplatformen. Dat betekent echter niet dat de maatschappelijke legitimiteit van de journalistiek of de economische steun van gebruikers vanzelfsprekend zijn. De publieke relevantie van de journalistiek blijft afhankelijk van in hoeverre deze in staat is gebruikers een bruikbaar referentiekader te geven dat hen in staat stelt betrokken te raken bij en deel te nemen in het publiek leven. Dit proefschrift heeft betoogd dat deze sociaal-verbindende waarde van nieuws moet worden begrepen vanuit het perspectief van de nieuwsgebruiker zelf. Waar maakt het nieuws de gebruiker onderdeel van? Waardoor raken gebruikers maatschappelijk betrokken bij het nieuws? Hoe

is nieuws van nut voor gebruikers en hoe raakt het aan hun dagelijks leven? Alleen met een dergelijke gebruikercentrische benadering kan de publieke relevantie van journalistiek daadwerkelijk begrepen worden.

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# Curriculum vitae

Joëlle Swart (1988) obtained a B.A. degree in International Relations and a M.A. degree in Journalism (cum laude) from the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. After working in journalism and e-learning for several years, she started as a PhD candidate at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies of the University of Groningen in 2013. Since then, her work has been published in several international academic journals, including *Journalism Studies*, *Media, Culture & Society* and *New Media & Society*.

Her research is part of The New News Consumer, a joint project of the University of Groningen, the VU University in Amsterdam, NWO, and ten leading Dutch news organizations. This consortium aims to uncover how the digitalization of the media landscape facilitates or inhibits novel patterns of news use, in order to help journalism organizations to optimally cater their products to users' changing practices and preferences. More information on the project can be found at the project website: www.news-use.com.