

Fake news on social media: Understanding teens' (Dis)engagement with news

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs**Florence Namasinga Selnes** 

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Abstract

This article takes a qualitative approach to examine the role of fake news in shaping adolescent's participation in news. Instead of experimental approaches that are common with similar research, the current study expands our understanding of teenagers' engagement with news on social media using focus groups, interviews in addition to reviewing research reports by the Norwegian Media Authority. The study found that fake news is positively related to teens' engagement with news. Contrary to reports that younger audiences have weak ties with news brands, this study shows that teens in Norway are led back to mainstream media to corroborate and fact-check news. This negates my initial assumption that fake news was bad because teens' perspectives show fake news as positively triggering discussions around news encountered on social media. Teens engage with fake news for verification, which drives them off social media toward conventional media. This is good for news and for journalism

Keywords

engagement with news, fake news, media literacy, news, Norway, Norwegian teens, participation in news, social media, teenagers, teens

Introduction

Unsubstantiated claims about the origin of coronavirus sparked attacks on Asian-Americans (BBC, 2021) while telecom towers got damaged, and engineers assaulted following claims that linked 5G technology to Covid-19 (Hern, 2020). A man died and his wife got hospitalized in the US, after ingesting Chloroquine following rhetoric on

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remedies for Covid-19 (Neuman, 2020). A teenager in this study contracted coronavirus thrice despite sniffing tobacco as had been (mis)informed on social media. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube are a significant part of teenagers' media repertoire and are imperative for news, but it is also where teenagers encounter fake news (Medietilsynet, 2022; Newman, 2022).

Teenagers' encounter with fake news is linked to their social media habits, which is worrisome because adolescents spend a lot of time online. Earlier research links consumption of news via social media to exposure to fake news (Marchi, 2012). Even more unsettling is evidence that younger people share fake news online and that they cannot distinguish between fake and credible news (National Literacy Trust, 2018a). Moreover, most youths who encounter fake news do not check it (Medietilsynet, 2020) and they lacked competence to determine the credibility of online content (Medietilsynet, 2021; Nygren and Guath, 2019; Wineburg et al., 2016). On a positive note, awareness of the existence of fake news and the potential risk of exposure among young people is high (Medietilsynet, 2020; Ofcom, 2019).

Apart from causing confusion (Figueira and Oliveira, 2017), fake news is connected to stress and anxiety and is "damaging to children's and adolescent's self-esteem" (National Literacy Trust, 2018b). Amid concerns of rising levels of news fatigue, news avoidance (Newman, 2023) and distrust in news media (Park et al., 2020), the effect of fake news on teens' participation in news remains unclear.

Research shows that children and young people follow local, regional, and international news genres including sports, politics, weather, and finance (Head et al., 2018; Medietilsynet, 2022), but qualitative analyses of how they engage with news on, and off social media remain rare. Yet engaging with news through sharing, liking, and commenting facilitates self-expression, and allows teens to make sense of the world through exchanging ideas (Swart, 2021). Privacy concerns plus worries about the visibility of digital footprints has been identified as deterring young people from engaging with news online (Swart, 2021). But the role of fake news as contributing to or deterring adolescents' engagement with all news genres remains undertheorized. This article, therefore, contributes to developing our understanding of how fake news shapes young people's news practices. Specifically, I examine teens' perceptions, and opinions about the influence of fake news on their engagement with news.

The next section is concerned with three distinct but interrelated literature about teenagers' news consumption habits, engagement with news, and fake news.

Teenagers and news

News consumers seek out, access, and contribute to news, thanks to social media that facilitate linking, sharing, commenting, liking, and recommending (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2015; Nielsen and Schröder, 2014). Investigations about news practices highlight growing distrust in news media (Park et al., 2020), and a disconnection with news among some news consumers (Newman, 2022). Despite decline in interest in news among young audiences (Eddy, 2022), research shows that teenagers are interested in, follow, and consume news from different sources (Medietilsynet, 2022), disseminate news through sharing and believe news is valuable (Head et al., 2018).

Social media is significant in news consumption (Newman et al., 2022; Pew, 2022), although encounter with news online is more incidental than intentional. For example, Boczowski et al. (2018) found a strong connection between pervasive use of mobile devices and incidental news consumption among young people. Others also confirm that users indeed encounter news while browsing social media for other purposes (Newman et al., 2022).

Engagement with news

Engaging in discourse through commenting on news content is central to civic engagement. There has, therefore, been efforts to analyze the relationship between interest in news and online engagement. For example, Erentaitė et al. (2012) investigated the effects of interest in and discussions about news media on adolescents' civic engagement while Lee (2015) observed that frequent Internet use stimulates online news users' civic engagement.

Engaging with news means participating in or contributing to news. It entails commenting on and sharing as a way in which users engage in news interpretation (Hermida, 2011 in Fletcher and Park, 2017: 1285). In this study, engaging with news is understood as contributing to news by correcting, evaluating, completing, marking, and commenting on it (Picone, 2011). It relates to how people react to news through clicking on "share" and "like" for sharing and liking, commenting on and recommending content. Engaging with news also means "interactions connected to news production, consumption and interpretation" (Fletcher and Park, 2017: 1282) and "active participation in news through sharing, commenting and liking" (Hoelig, 2016: 394). News engagement also comprises talking to friends and colleagues offline, sharing emails, commenting on websites, posting a link to a news story on social media; tagging news content and contributing own content (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2015; Nielsen and Schröder, 2014; Tenenboim, 2022).

Other scholars shade light on motivations to participate in news (Kang et al., 2013; Stroud et al., 2016); individual traits linked to online news engagement (Bobkowski Piotr, 2015; Lee and Ma, 2012) and the types of news that attract engagement (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015). For example, Stroud et al. (2016) observed that people participate in news to express opinion or emotion, to debate, to educate others, and for fact-checking. Desire to exchange information, vent, interact and influence others are also reasons for engaging in news (Fletcher and Park, 2017: 1285). News sharing is common among opinion leaders (Bobkowski Piotr, 2015), news consumers who wish to boost their social status (Kang et al., 2013), and people interested in socializing (Lee and Ma, 2012). Political, social, and contentious news elicit more engagement than other types of news (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015).

Despite anticipation that social media would democratize media, some research shows that the platforms do not necessarily lead to participation in news (Nielsen and Schröder, 2014). Instead, users consume news passively and prefer engaging with it through offline conversations (Nielsen and Schröder, 2014). Others also found that linking, sharing, liking, commenting and the like, have not become "as central to news consumption as often assumed" (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2015; Hermida et al., 2012).

Social media undeniably influence news engagement habits, but they are also associated with growing distrust in news (Park et al., 2020) in addition to problems such as hate speech, harassment, and misogyny (Lewis and Molyneux, 2018). Even fake news is attributed to social media (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018) and literature concerning the phenomena includes understanding fake news (Tandoc et al., 2018), its negative impacts such as misleading (Barthel et al., 2016), potentially influencing elections (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017) and contributing to deteriorating trust in news, news media and journalism (Hofseth, 2017; Quintanilha et al., 2019: 22). At the back of these observations are concerns of deterioration in youth's news consumption (Curran et al., 2014), earlier attributed to diminishing interest in social engagement (Skoric and Poor, 2013) and growing distrust in public institutions (Spannring et al., 2008). This is coupled with youngsters' lack of confidence to spot fake news, yet social media, which harbor misinformation, are teens' preferred sources of news (Medietilsynet, 2022; Newman, 2022; Nygren and Guath, 2019).

Concerns about fake news have, and with good reason, stirred scholarly interrogation, often regarding youth as vulnerable to fake news (McGrew et al., 2018; Notley and Dezuanni, 2019; Nygren and Guath 2022). As such, attention is paid to testing their literacy skills and civic online reasoning (McGrew et al., 2018; Nygren and Guath, 2022). Nygren and Guath (2022) investigated Swedish students' abilities to evaluate the credibility of online news. The duo concluded that young people struggle to determine a) the credibility of information online, b) sources to trust, and c) struggle to find and verify relevant information (Nygren and Guath, 2022). But as Metzger et al. (2015: 329) argue, assessment based on "online credibility evaluation" of content and source reliability, often carried out in schools, can be counterproductive. Interest in research about fake news and engagement with news is emerging with focus on literacy in relation to strategies that young people employ to access and evaluate news (Swart, 2021) and teens' interaction with news and fake news online (Mercenier et al., 2021). These, in addition to research that gauges adolescents' abilities to assess online content, are significant considering the gravity of the fake news problem. Equally important is understanding the relationship between the prevalence of fake news on social media and teens' engagement with news. This article examines how the perceived pervasiveness of fake news shapes adolescents' engagement with news on and off social media. I am interested in adolescents' perspectives on whether fake news on social media shapes how they engage in participatory forms of news use including liking, sharing, and commenting. The study is guided by this research question: How does actual and perceived prevalence of fake news on social media shape teenagers' engagement with news on and off the platforms?

Method¹

Data were collected through document review, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews with teenagers between 13 and 18 years. Respondents were recruited from secondary schools and youth club(s) in South Trøndelag and Oslo in Norway². Eighteen focus groups were conducted between February and June 2022. Seven in-school focus groups comprised 13- to 15-year-olds while eight comprised 16- to 18-years-olds. One out-of-school focus group comprised 14- and 15-year-olds while the other consisted of

18-year-olds. Six semi-structured interviews comprising two boys (aged 18) and four girls (14 to 18 years) were conducted with teens who wished to participate but could not do so in groups.

Relevant material was also obtained through reviewing of reports from studies conducted by the Norwegian Media Authority (Medietilsynet, 2020, 2021, 2022). The reports are accessible online. *Medietilsynet* regulates and supports media in addition to protecting children regarding audiovisual media content³. The body also conducts studies about children and the media, and critical media literacy, among others, which are relevant to the author's research interests.

The media landscape in Norway is diverse consisting of regional and national print and electronic outlets. *Norsk rikskringkasting* (NRK) is Norway's public service corporation, comprising online and offline radio and television. It is the largest and most trusted media organization for news (Moe, 2022). *Verdens Gang* (VG) is the leading digital and non-digital private media owned by Schibsted while TV2 is Norway's commercial public service broadcaster.⁵

Consent

Consent was obtained from the teens and their parents. Teenagers between 13 and 15 who expressed interest in the study got information letters and consent forms for parent's approval while older teens signed their own consent forms. Participants were guaranteed anonymity such that their responses cannot be traced back to them and participation was voluntary in line with national research guidelines (NESH, 2022). Material was obtained from focus groups (45 girls, 40 boys) and six interviews, making a sample of 91 respondents ($N=91$). The focus groups and interviews were conducted in Norwegian and lasted 45–60 minutes and between 15 and 25 minutes respectively. They were audio-recorded and stored safely (*Tjenester for Sensitive Data*⁴) as per data safety requirements. The analysis is based on adolescents' own understanding and interpretation of fake news and engagement with news.

Analysis

I used inductive thematic analysis similar to Strauss and Corbin's (1994) grounded theory. While I acknowledge the role of factors such as gender, ethnic and socio-cultural background in shaping media consumption, the purpose of analysis in the present article was to identify nuances from all teenagers' perspectives about fake news on social media and its effect on how they engage with new. I transcribed and read the transcripts, developed themes and categories, and then compared them for relevance to the research objective.

Findings

This study sought to understand how perceived and actual pervasiveness of fake news on social media influences Norwegian teenagers' engagement with news. I analyzed teens' responses to the question, "does fake news on social media affect how you engage with

news?” for evidence of consuming, sharing, recommending, liking, commenting, or discussing news they encounter on social media. Instead of asking them whether teenagers consume news, I was interested in nuances drawn from examples of their experiences with news and fake news. Accordingly, teenagers regard engaging with news as comprising consuming it and reacting to it through liking, sharing, commenting, and discussing. The findings show that teens engage with (fake) news they are interested in but are careful with acting on it as I subsequently elaborate.

News consumption on social media

As indicated in an earlier survey (Medietilsynet, 2022), I found that Norwegian teens are interested in news and significantly follow it via social media. They follow a variety of local and international news in addition to current affairs. Interest in diverse issues was highlighted in their reference to news about the abortion law in the US, the court case involving celebrities Johnny Depp and Amber Heard, climate issues, elections in and out of Norway, COVID-19 and vaccines, and the war in Ukraine.

Teens reported following news on diverse platforms including Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and to a lesser extent, Facebook, and Twitter. A closer analysis revealed that news consumption via social media is both deliberate and incidental, but I emphasized the intentional part. I found that young Norwegians follow by liking and subscribing to diverse established local and national media including VG, public broadcaster NRK, TV2, and *Adresseavisen* in addition to international channels such as BBC and CNN. In doing so, teens consciously select news from producers of their choice, and tailor it to their personal preferences, which is informed by perceived reputation of news sources and social media. Preference to follow news on platforms was associated with “fun,” “easy access,” and “the experience” teens derive as summarized thus: “Snapchat is more accessible [. . .] easier to access a news story via Snapchat than directly on a media channel’s website or a newspaper, in a way” (Interview1, Heim 02.02.2022); “We use social media because of easy access [. . .] the experience. It is fun to watch VG on Snapchat because they make it personal” (FGD1, Oslo 04.02.2022).

Teenager’s news habits are tied to their social media experiences because the platforms give them control over what news they receive in their feeds, when and where they receive it based on the apps and media they follow. Teenagers’ engagement with news is tied to their social media habits and the value they ascribe to different media. This study established that social media are secondary conduits of news for adolescents. As others show (Medietilsynet, 2022; Newman, 2022), social media shape youths’ news habits. Thus, the prevalence of fake news does not deter Norwegian teens from following news on social media.

Engaging with (fake) news

The findings suggest that young people understand “engagement with news” as comprising actions and inactions they take when they encounter content they suspect to be fake. Adolescents reported “searching,” “checking and double-checking,” and “investigating” when they come across suspicious news on social media. Such actions are taken

to corroborate and fact-check news with online and offline sources including Google, websites of trusted news media, other social media in addition to consulting with friends and parents as illustrated in these quotes:

We search with multiple sources, checking to ensure that what we read is real. I usually read credible sources. You become very much aware of which sites to trust and not to trust. Our trust levels vary from website to website. More attention is given while navigating social media [. . .] I do not use all (social media) channels at the same level. When I see news on Facebook or Instagram, I go to NRK or VG to check if they reported the same thing (Interview2, Trondheim 28.02.2022).

If it is on Snapchat, I check on Instagram or ask I others. (FGD2, Heim 15.03.2022)

[. . .] I check, google [. . .] I can disconnect from social media and check elsewhere (FGD2, Trondheim 09.03.2022).

I check the matter myself to ascertain that it is true, and i do not spread further what I suspect to be false (FGD3, Heim 15.03.2022).

One teenager shared her encounter with news about someone she and the country care deeply about and what ensued thereafter thus:

I once read an article that the king was dead. [. . .] I was shocked. I believed it. But I was relieved to find out that it was a mistake. I think I told my mom that the king is dead. Then mom got upset [. . .]. It did not take long for it to be corrected. But I checked with different sources, for example, VG (FGD1, Trondheim 09.03.2022).

The ensuing exchange ensued between four teens in one focus group (FGD2, Oslo 04.02.2022) about an encounter with news whose authenticity participants doubted: A. "There was once a story that the princess was pregnant [. . .]". B. "Yes [. . .] that she smokes cocaine [. . .] on Snapchat." C. "[. . .] It was a big topic on Snapchat [. . .]." D. "But I checked with the main news channels (and found nothing about it) [. . .]."

These quotes suggest that youths take time to cross-check with news sources they deem trustworthy if they are interested in a news item. This means that engaging with doubtful news content depends on the issue at hand. As in the example of content announcing the king's death, teens go to great length to investigate, investing time to check several sources, and sometimes consult people if the story is of interest to them. This is illustrated in these subsequent excerpts: "If I come across a news item that i am interested in, I check whether other media outlets have reported it and to see what is reported about it [. . .]" (FGD1, Heim 15.03.2022).

I become more critical of what I read and watch. It must seem very plausible. It is about who has written it. Is it a journalist or researcher? I take time to investigate whether something is correct or not. It must be relevant to me (FGD2, Trondheim 09.03.2022).

Further engaging with news also means being critical of the sources of news. As illustrated in a dialogue below drawn from one focus group (FGD4, Heim 15.03.2022),

source criticism featured prominently in teenagers' discussions about how fake news shapes their participation in news. A. "We must check (other) sources [. . .] multiple sources [. . .]," B. "[. . .] and also make sure that the sources are credible" (FGD4, Heim 15.03.2022), C. "Spend more critical time on what one reads [. . .] critically check several media outlets to establish if it is true" (FGD4, Heim 15.03.2022).

Other teens shared how their experiences with fake content resulted into participating in news through critiquing what they encounter on social media as opposed to taking everything on surface value, thus: "I have encountered a lot of fake news on TikTok, but I have become more critical over time. It is good to be more critical [. . .] and not believe everything I read and see" (Interview5, Orkland 28.03.2022); "I have found a lot that I thought was real but turned out to be fake on social media. Now I am more critical [. . .] I check if others say the same" (FGD1, Trondheim 09.03.2022).

The findings further point to the importance of being critical and critiquing sources while consuming news on social media, which involves checking multiple and trustworthy sources as reflected here: "Fake news makes young people to check more [. . .] we become more critical of (news) sources [. . .] we are skeptical about everything. It is difficult to trust the content we come across [. . .]" (FGD2, Oslo 04.02.2022); "We must learn to critic sources. Fake news makes us skeptical of news" (FGD1, Oslo 04.02.2022); "I think twice before believing in a news story [. . .] but what the story is about matters" (FGD1, Orkland 01.06.2022); "I am critical of what I read [. . .] I take it with a grain of salt" (FGD3, Heim 15.03.2022).

While some of the responses above suggest that social media can be consulted for fact-checking purposes – pointing to varying trust levels attached to different platforms, teenagers do not entirely treat the platforms as sources of credible news. This is further exemplified in one respondent's view: "I disconnect from social media and check elsewhere [. . .]" (FGD1, Trondheim 09.03.2022). Also, the quotes demonstrate the importance teens attach to mainstream news channels as trustworthy news providers and using them for reference. This is a positive sign for traditional media, in three ways. One, teens regard mainstream media as reliable news providers. Two, social media do not adulterate traditional news media's role. And three, conventional news channels can play a significant role in strengthening young people's engagement with news and in combating fake news. Unlike surveys that focus on young people's news consumption on social media (Medietilsynet, 2022), this study demonstrates that some teens do not intentionally appropriate the platforms for news. Rather, news engagement on social media is an additional act – and sometimes a by the way. While first encounter (may) starts on social media, active engagement with news occurs across multiple online platforms and sometimes off social media.

Young people regard engaging with news on social media and exposure to fake news as critical in learning about news and fake news. In other words, engaging with news is an opportunity to learn and improve their awareness about fake news as demonstrated thus: "You become more aware [. . .] you learn to be more critical, critical of sources, skeptical [. . .] check several sources credible sources" (FGD1, Oslo 04.02.2022).

I am more aware of what is true and what is fake [. . .]. When you are exposed to a lot of fake news, you get more competence to distinguish between credible and fake news. You become resilient [. . .] and get more expertise (Interview3, Trondheim 18.03.2022)

One becomes very conscious [. . .] when reading an article, one pays more attention [. . .] searches a little more [. . .] checks facts [. . .] (Interview2, Trondheim 28.02.2022).

Yes, you get to know about it and learn to check whether what you read is correct (FGD3, Heim 15.03.2022).

A discussion among secondary school teens below (FGD4, Heim 23.05.2022) further illustrates the importance of engagement with news in learning about fake news thus: A. “You must know that it is false to understand it [. . .],” B. “You see the difference between fake and real news if you are engaged with (and interested in news) [. . .]” C. “You can (easily) distinguish between fake and actual news if you follow news often [. . .].” While the findings indicate apprehension and mistrust toward news on social media, the apprehension and mistrust trigger engagement with practices of sharing and discussing news as two youths explain in the following excerpts: “It can be a discussion with friends [. . .] repeated understanding [. . .] If a friend has seen/read/heard something they believe to be true, then I can talk with them a bit about being critical of sources” (Interview2, Trondheim 28.02.2022).

I actually share news items with my girlfriend. But I mainly send such when I am unsure about something [. . .] for us to discuss it together. It is a form of spreading (fake news) but in a way, I am doing it to get an additional source. She can look at another source and we assess (together) whether it is credible or not (FGD3, Heim 23.05.2022).

From these sentiments, I discern several issues that bring to bear how fake news shape young people’s news engagement patterns. One, teens usually discuss news with people close to them. Two, they share and talk about news a) when in doubt and wish to ascertain its veracity and b) when they are correcting fake news with fellow teens. It is also discernible that teenagers consider sharing potentially fake news with friends to verify it in group(s), which makes engagement with news a collective ‘effort’ as opposed to a solitary activity.

The findings suggest that Norwegian teens talk about suspicious news in face-to-face settings and/or in private online spaces as opposed to public communication spheres as expressed in a focus group (FGD1, Trondheim 09.03.2022) thus: A. “I talk about it with people. I speak up if something is incorrect [. . .] discuss if something is correct or incorrect [. . .],” B. “If i see something false spreading among people I know, I speak up,” C. “If people like my dad come to me with such news, I ask questions like, where did this come from? If they say Facebook, I just ignore.”

In another focus group, a teen explains circumstances in which they engage in discussions about news and with who, thus:

It is not often that i discuss whether a news story is fake or real in the comments section. But I can discuss it with my mom, for example. But in reality, I mostly do it when people ask. It is much easier to just say it is true or not true face to face. (FGD1, Heim 15.03.2022).

Additionally, teens’ engagement with news through discussing it and correcting it with classmates, and parents contributes to mitigating fake news. Doing so, as one teenager opines, “helps to reduce the spread [. . .]” (FGD3, Heim 15.03.2022).

Furthermore, the appeal linked to potentially fake news drives sharing of such content among teenagers. I found that youths share with each other dubious news because of its entertaining value as reflected in this view: “If a celebrity rumor comes up, for example, I talk about it with my gang [. . .] It would be exciting to believe in such news [. . .] not because you are not source critical” (FGD2, Heim 15.03.2022).

Other teens echoed similar sentiments thus: “It is really fun to know what others are doing, who they are with. It is funny [. . .] despite the possibility that it can be false [. . .]” (FGD1, Trondheim 09.03.2022). “It is funny [. . .] but it is mostly about entertainment content [. . .] celebrity rumors” (FGD2, Oslo 04.02.2022).

Like research that links sharing news among young people to enjoyment (Galan et al., 2019), teens’ perspectives above indicate that sharing is content specific as respondents identified celebrity news and pop culture, which is linked to the entertainment value of that kind of content. Although this kind of sharing is potentially dangerous, it is a form of engagement with news, nevertheless. Moreover, the teens draw a distinction between what they conceptualized as “small” and “big” issues as illustrated in an exchange in a focus group (FGD2, Oslo 04.02.2022): “It is fun to send (share) it forward [. . .] It is common among adolescents.” Another teen interjected to confirm what the colleague had said: “But we do it with (content about) small issues, not big news. [. . .] We do not do that with big things, for example things that could cause death. We do not mess with family.”

As summed up in the excerpt below, interviewees confirmed engagement with potentially fake news for fun, but they seem to draw this distinction between serious and unserious topics. “Celebrity news can be played with and shared with each other. But not big issues such as war or elections. You cannot start talking about such issues without evidence. You must have credible information” (FGD1, Trondheim 09.03.2022).

I discerned that young people are careful about sharing news on social media. Thus, the type of news and who they share it with plays a significant role. Their responses show that social media is crucial in the discovery of news, but conversations around news, sharing and verifying it takes place in more private online and offline forums. While other factors may be at play, I associate preference for engaging with news in private spaces to the uncertainty about the accuracy of news on social media. It could also be that teens do not just share news on social media as Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink (2015) assert.

It seems that the prevalence of fake news on social media means being careful, raises ambivalence and sometimes sparks fear and distrust among some teens as demonstrated here: “I am becoming a little more careful, and double-check (news) stories” (FGD1, Orkland 28.03.2022); “I have to watch out a lot. I have trust issues [. . .] it is difficult to trust information no matter where it comes from” (FGD2, Oslo 04.02.2022); “I don’t trust information [. . .] if I am in doubt” (FGD1, Heim 15.03.2022).

These responses highlight the downside of fake news, including the loss of trust in news reflected in views about skepticism toward news, and doubt, which impede engagement with news as reflected in such sentiments, “I feel more insecure [. . .] I think twice about whether that (content) can be correct [. . .]” (FGD4, Heim 15.03.2022); “The first thing that comes to mind is skepticism [. . .]” (FGD1, Orkland 01.06.2022); “I choose not to believe whatever I read on social media” (FGD2, Trondheim 09.03.2022); “I don’t believe in news if I have doubts” (FGD1, Heim 15.03.2022).

As a result of skepticism, some teens reported a) avoiding news on certain social media platforms, b) not acting on news on the platforms, and c) generally being passive because of the uncertainty. This is reflected thus: “Yes, I don’t bother following news if there is a lot of fake news [. . .] don’t usually engage with news (because of fake news)” (FGD2, Heim 23.05.2022); “I feel unsafe because there are a lot of weird things there [. . .]” (FGD3, Heim 23.05.2022); “I don’t use social media for news [. . .] I don’t watch news on social media” (FGD1, Heim 15.03.2022); “I use social media for other things than news” (FGD1, Heim 15.03.2022).

Some youths also reported becoming passive news consumers and inactive social media users due to fear of exposure to fake news: “I use Facebook less because of fake news [. . .] It is everywhere on Facebook” (Interview3, Trondheim 18.03.2022). Another also noted: “I kind of become passive in a way because i don’t know what I can trust” (Interview2, Trondheim 28.02.2022). Moreover, youth do not usually like, recommend or comment news publicly on social media, something that I associate with a lack of confidence in detecting fake news. They prefer interpersonal conversations about news for fear of getting it wrong.

Putting emphasis on Facebook’s algorithms, youths expressed fear of propagating fake news through liking and sharing news in the platform(s). This is evident in this excerpt: “[. . .] You get a lot of content similar to what you like (on Facebook) [. . .]” (Interview2, Trondheim 28.02.2022). Thus, what could be seen as inaction comprising not clicking, not sharing, or not liking, does not necessarily equate to a lack of interest in engaging with news but a fear of getting similar content in their feeds and a fear to contribute to spreading potentially false news.

Conclusion

Interest in news has been linked to participation in news (Fletcher and Park, 2017; Hoelig 2016) and as observed before (Medietilsynet, 2022; Newman, 2022), this study confirms that Norwegian adolescents are interested in and follow a range of news – mostly on social media. Whether that interest in news translates into active engagement with it is beyond the scope of this article. Although adolescents’ perspectives show that engagement with news begins on social media, participatory practices of sharing, and discussing news occur in diverse social, non-social media and in offline spaces. Additionally, the findings suggest that teens are careful to “like” or “favorite” news items on social media because they regard such practices as increasing risks of exposure to fake news. Though refraining from actions such as “liking” on, for example, Facebook has implications for self-expression, young news consumers regard it as a positive approach to reducing the generation of fake news on social media. As other research shows (Powers 2017 in Mercenier et al., 2021; Swart, 2021), teenagers’ reflections on social media “like” and “favorite” functions illustrate some level of knowledge about how algorithms impact news selection. But as Swart (2021) observes, teens in this study seem to be concerned about Facebook algorithms, and not Snapchat or Instagram as this excerpt illustrates: “I don’t use Facebook very much because of fake news. Information spreads very quickly than on Instagram” (Interview3, Trondheim 28.03.2022).

Overall, the analysis shows that fake news presents positive and negative implications for adolescents' engagement with news.

The prevalence of fake news does not prevent teens from following and consuming news, but it arouses skepticism, uncertainty and sometimes cynicism toward news on social media. Fake news positively triggers engagement with news as teens search, investigate, share, and discuss news to ascertain its credibility, which echoes sentiments that skepticism encourages participation as audiences question media content (Vraga and Tully, 2021). Moreover, skepticism leads to cross-verification and source criticism, which encourages participation and reduces risks linked to fake news. Some views show that skepticism breeds distrust and cynicism toward news, leading to a reluctance to consume or engage with news, as reflected here: "It is hard to engage with news [. . .] I am passive because I don't know what to trust" (Interview2, 28.02.2022). Some responses demonstrate cynicism and uncertainty toward news, which upon close examination is attributable to fake news as illustrated thus: "I become very unsure about everything that I see on social media" (FGD2, Orkland 01.06.2022); "I lost trust in most of the news [. . .] lots of lies" (FGD3, Heim 15.03.2022).

This study brings to the fore a) the significance of mainstream media in facilitating teenagers' engagement with reliable news and b) the role of legacy media in combating fake news. Just like Fletcher and Park (2017) and Hoelig (2016) who link low levels of active participation in news to high trust in conventional media, teens' reference to legacy media as their go-to verification tools, indicates the confidence they have in established news media. I, therefore, argue, affirming sentiments that fake news is an opportunity for journalism (RISJ, 2017) to assert its role, because as adolescents' views show, young audiences leave social media in search for reliable news in conventional media. Contrary to the view that younger audiences have weaker ties with news brands (Newman, 2022) and reports of decline in interest in news among young audiences (Eddy, 2022), this study demonstrates that teens look for legacy media such as the state broadcaster NRK, and commercial ones including VG and TV2, for corroboration and fact-checking. As a Medietilsynet report (2022: 7) shows, the current study also established that teenagers rely on the same media, which illustrates the confidence adolescents have in the same news outlets. This suggests that young Norwegian news consumers have strong ties with established media, which is in tandem with the levels of trust in media and news in the country. Trust in news is generally high in Norway with NRK news, TV2 news and VG ranking as the most trusted news brands (Moe, 2022). While the findings presented in this article are drawn from a small sample, youth's confidence in established media exemplifies a culture of trust in Norway, which is rooted in the country's core values such as openness, integrity and fairness.

While teens' reliance on social media for news is regarded as problematic (and rightly so), this study shows that teenagers engage with news on the platforms at the news discovery stage. Reaction to news through sharing and discussion takes place off social media, partly due to fake news. This perspective is pertinent to discussions about the effect of fake news on adolescents' consumption of credible news.

This investigation illustrates the view that close relations contribute to shaping teens' news consumption and engagement habits (Medietilsynet, 2022; Notley et al., 2023; Swart, 2021). Parents and friends play a key role as adolescents consult them and discuss

news. Fake news arouses suspicion, which activates sharing and discussions as teens turn to close acquaintances when in doubt. Family and friends, therefore, can facilitate youths' appreciation of and knowledge about credible news.

Adolescents reported engaging in fact-checking news that they encounter on social media, which confirms earlier research that highlight the practice as a motivation for participating in news (Stroud et al., 2016). Additionally, teenagers' views about fact-checking tactics including source criticism and triangulation of sources prove fake news as prompting teens' engagement with news. Their emphasis on source criticism demonstrates teenagers' understanding of news verification. Tactics such as source criticism not only illustrate how fake news leads to adolescents' engagement with news but also the value the youths attach to literacy as an approach to combating fake news. While teens' views are inadequate to draw conclusions about their literacy proficiency, their opinions on checking trusted digital and non-digital sources are in tandem with previous research (Medietilsynet, 2021; Swart, 2021). The findings also highlight fact-checking as increasingly becoming critical for detecting fake news as has previously been established (Medietilsynet, 2021). Adolescents' views and their reported competences reflect (and can be attributed to) Norway's policy⁶ and the primary and high school curricula that integrate media literacy and critical thinking in learning. The school curriculum also emphasizes source criticism. These skills are relevant for detecting fake news.

Teens consider engagement with news as encompassing liking, sharing, and discussing it. Because of fake news, adolescents refrain from liking news items they are suspicious of for fear of generating similar content. I regard this perspective as an indication of a) awareness of potential risks of exposure to fake news and b) a degree of algorithmic literacy among teenagers. Commenting on, sharing and discussing news takes place in private and closed settings, but rarely occurs on social media due to distrust and skepticism toward content that youth encounter on the platforms. Moreover, the motivation for sharing suspicious news is for cross-verification and fact-checking. Sharing of potentially fake news also occurs for enjoyment purposes, but youths are clear about what kind of news and who they share it with. Whereas some teens exhibited cynicism toward news due to fake news, skepticism toward news found on social media sets in motion a back-and-forth process as teenagers search, double-check, and investigate the suspicious content. That means that fake news encourages evaluation of news, thereby triggering youths' participation in news.

Overall, teenagers do not regard fake news on social media as problematic for their engagement with news. Contrary to my preconceived supposition that fake news leads to disengagement from news among young audiences, this study rather found that actual and perceived widespread of fake news on social media activates and sets in motion participation in news and drives young people toward established news media. This implies that despite the challenges associated with the phenomena, fake news presents an opportunity for journalism and society to cultivate young people's interest in reliable news, which could bolster civic participation.

Some of the findings in this article may be unique to Norway because of continued trust in national media, which is not shared in other countries. Moreover, teens' perspectives reflect the country's sustained focus on teaching critical thinking and source

criticism in schools. Factors such as ethnicity, gender and socio-cultural background (can) impact media and news consumption, but the current investigation was more concerned with how adolescents individually and collectively interact with and deal with fake news. The data were collected during the coronavirus pandemic and at the start of the war in Ukraine, a period when fake news was high. This may have influenced responses about fake news.

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Notes

1. This study is part of a larger project that investigates teens’ understanding (of) and experiences with fake news on social media and is within the framework *Understanding Youth Participation and Media literacy in Digital Dialogue Spaces*. The project interrogates how young people in Europe participate in various digital media spaces.
2. Study draws on views of teens from urban and rural settings.
3. The Norwegian Media Authority: <https://www.medietilsynet.no/english/organization/>
4. <https://www.uio.no/tjenester/it/forskning/sensitiv/> (accessed 17 June 2023).
5. <https://www.vg.no/informasjon/om-vg> and <https://info.tv2.no/info/s/om-tv-2> (accessed 12 June 2023).
6. Under scheme: *kritisk medieforståelse*: <https://www.medietilsynet.no/digitale-medier/kritisk-medieforstaelse/dette-er-kritisk-medieforstaelse/> (accessed 16 February 2023).

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