

# Young people and the news

## AN OVERVIEW OF SELECTED RESEARCH RESULTS

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**The article summarises international research findings on children’s and adolescents’ news behaviour, potential effects of exposure to news and young audiences’ expectations from the news.**

Journalists, politicians and academics alike argue that children’s engagement with news is important. News not only inform citizens of all ages about important events but also contribute to democratic practices such as civic participation. Consequently, news media are considered central agents in the advancement of children’s well-being in democratic societies (Carter, 2014). Research findings also suggest that news contribute to the socialisation of children into critical and active citizens (van Deth et al., 2011). Furthermore, the reception of children’s news can encourage their prosocial behaviour and engagement (de Leeuw et al., 2015). Yet news are crucial not only for young people’s sense of belonging to society

as citizens, but also for children’s innate curiosity about the world. The importance of freedom of opinion and freedom of information for young people is reflected in the United Nations “Convention on the Rights of the Child”: “The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.”<sup>1</sup>

These days, young people’s news services exist in a hypercompetitive media environment (van’t Riet & Kleemans, 2021). Therefore, understanding how children and adolescents use the news, how news can affect young people, and what young audiences expect from news is crucial knowledge for TV editors and producers. This article provides an overview of international research findings related to these questions.

Carter, Cynthia (2014). *News media and child well-being*. In Asher Ben-Arieh et al. (eds.), *Handbook of child well-being* (pp. 1979-2011). Dordrecht: Springer.

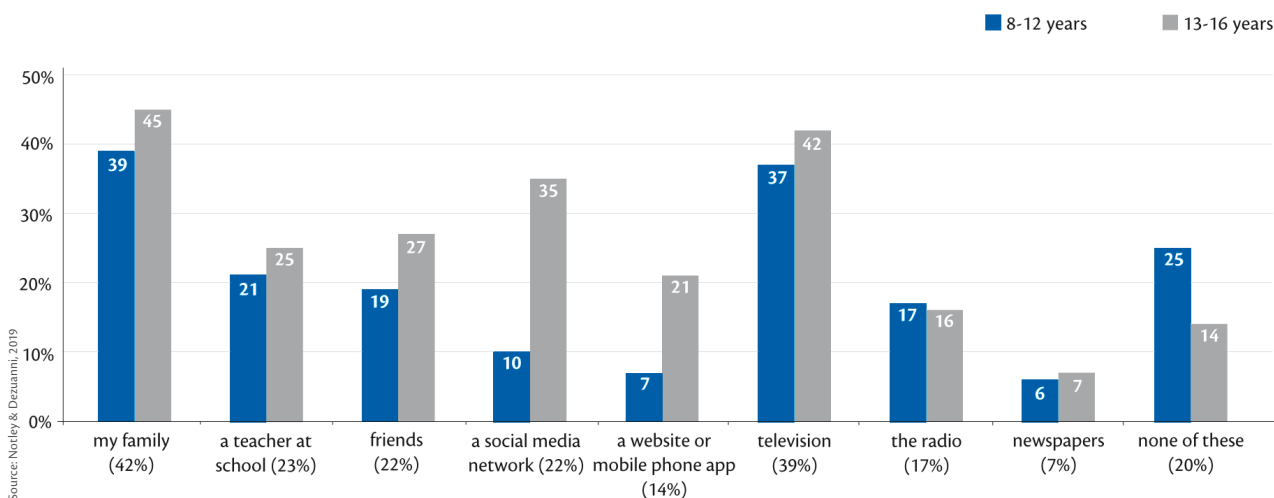
van Deth, Jan, Abendschön, Simone & Vollmar, Meike (2011). *Children and politics: An empirical reassessment of early political socialization*. *Political Psychology*, 32(1), 147-174.

de Leeuw, Rebecca et al. (2015). *The impact of prosocial television news on children’s prosocial behavior: An experimental study in the Netherlands*. *Journal of Children and Media*, 9(4), 419-434.

van’t Riet, Jonathan & Kleemans, Mariska (in press). *What drives selection of online children’s news articles?* *Journalism*, published online April 16, 2021.

### NEWS HABITS AND NEWS SOCIALISATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Children get their news information not only from TV, but also from the internet and social media via their smartphones. Alongside the media, however, the social environment – parents, school and friends – is an important source of news for children and adolescents (Notley & Dezuanni, 2019, Ill. 1). [Searching the internet](#) is



Ill. 1: Young Australians’ news sources and consumption on a single day

already part of children's everyday information routine. According to a study from Germany (Feierabend et al., 2021), 19% of the 6- to 13-year-olds surveyed use search engines every day or nearly every day to satisfy their information needs; another 45% use them once to several times a week. 28% search for news and current events. Children who already have experience of **digital assistants** (18%) also use these to verbally request online searches. Most use this for music, but a third of respondents had also requested news or information they were interested in personally via Alexa or Siri (ibid.).

In 2020, the year of the coronavirus, German children were asked about **news programmes on television**. 27% of respondents said that they often watched these. Their interest in and general use of news programmes rose markedly with age (6-7 years: 15%, 12-13 years: 36%). If children in Germany watch the news, this is mostly programmes offered by public service broadcasters, such as the children's news programme *logo!*, and news formats for adults such as *Tagesschau* or *heute* (ibid.). Preteens in Germany experienced a greater need for information during the pandemic, as shown by the list of the 100 most-viewed programmes. This includes 24 editions of the *Tagesschau*, an exceptionally high number. According to the authors, young people probably watched these programmes with their families around the time of the lockdowns in March and November 2020 (Feierabend & Scolari, 2021).

As young people grow older, **social media** play an important part in their information repertoire. A recent study from Germany (Hasebrink et al., 2021) found that 46% of the 14- to 17-year-olds surveyed used journalistic content in social media several times a week. All the adolescents who subscribed to news services on social media also regularly followed the news outside these platforms. According to the young

people surveyed, the most important motivation for seeking information is to be able to take part in conversations and discussions with their peers and family. In other words, young people use the news as a means of integration into their social environment. One striking finding, in the authors' view, is that adolescents who believe they can make a difference politically show much more interest in current events (ibid.).

A study from Sweden (Sjöberg, 2018) examined the information behaviour of 10- to 11-year-olds and 15- to 16-year-olds in a crisis situation (in this case the outbreak of Ebola in autumn 2014). Here it became clear that the young people's **criteria for assessing the credibility of information** were very different from those of other media generations: for example, children and adolescents saw a top ranking from Google, the number of followers, or "like counts" as signs of credibility (ibid.). But even the adolescents themselves show doubts about their ability to evaluate information content in terms of quality and plausibility, and to confidently recognise fake news (Notley & Dezuanni, 2019; Tamboer et al., 2020).

Research on children's news socialisation emphasises the role of **parental news behaviour and observational learning**. Parents are often the creators of their children's media environments. According to Nathanson (2015), children living in "news-rich" environments are more likely to develop a preference for news. These are environments where parents explicitly communicate the value of news and reinforce that value through their own media behaviour. Some studies confirm that this is still applicable in times of the rise of mobile media and shifts in the culture of media consumption (Vaala & Bleakley, 2015; Edgerly et al., 2018). Even if less visible personalised media consumption takes place, the parent-learning model continues to dominate explanations of news socialisation. Children do

not simply acquire their news habits through generalised awareness of news in their home. Research suggests that the observation of parents' device-specific news consumption is crucial for their children's news socialisation (ibid.). Further studies suggest that parents' news behaviour can have a **lasting impact on news consumption** by their children (Ill. 2). Media habits, routines, and practices observed at home still matter for adolescents' and young adults' news behaviour (York & Sholl, 2015; Shehata, 2016; Notley & Dezuanni, 2019). Parents are also often trusted as sources of news and as assistants in the critical evaluation of news content. This is also supported by existing research on the important parental influence on news consumption (Tamboer et al., 2020).

Notley, Tanya & Dezuanni, Michael (2019). *Advancing children's news media literacy: learning from the practices and experiences of young Australians*. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41(5), 689-707.

Feierabend, Sabine et al. (2021). *Kindheit, Internet, Medien: Kontinuität trotz Pandemie*. *Media Perspektiven*, (4), 202-212.

Feierabend, Sabine & Scolari, Julia (2021). *Was Kinder sehen*. *Media Perspektiven*, (4), 213-226.

Hasebrink, Uwe, Hölig, Sascha & Wunderlich, Leonie (2021). #UseTheNews. Studie zur Nachrichtenkompetenz Jugendlicher und junger Erwachsener in der digitalen Medienwelt. Hamburg: Hans-Bredow Institut.

Sjöberg, Ulrika (2018). *It is not about facts – It is about framing. The app generation's information-seeking tactics: Proactive online crisis communication*. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 26(1), 127-137.

Tamboer, Sanne, Kleemans, Mariska & Daalman, Serena (2020, online first). 'We are a neeeew generation': Early adolescents' views on news and news literacy. *Journalism*, published online May 29.

Nathanson, Amy (2015). *Media and the family: Reflections and future directions*. *Journal of Children and Media*, 9(1), 133-139.

Vaala, Sarah & Bleakley, Amy (2015). *Monitoring, mediating, and modeling: Parental influence on adolescent computer and internet use in the United States*. *Journal of Children and Media*, 9(1), 40-57.

Edgerly, Stephanie et al. (2018). *Do parents still model news consumption? Socializing news use among adolescents in a multi-device world*. *New Media & Society*, 20(4), 1263-1281.

York, Chance & Scholl, Rosanne (2015). *Youth antecedents to news media consumption: Parent and youth newspaper use, news discussion, and long-term news behavior*. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 92(3), 681-699.

Shehata, Adam (2016). *News habits among adolescents: The influence of family communication on adolescents' news media use — Evidence from a three-wave panel study*. *Mass Communication and Society*, 19(6), 758-781.



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Ill. 2: Studies suggest that parents' news behaviour can have a lasting impact on news consumption by their children

increasing age they show more interest in real-world phenomena and are able to empathise with others (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017).

**Active parental mediation** (co-viewing of TV news by parents and children along with discussions about the news seen) does not always have a positive effect on reducing children's fear or sadness (De Cock, 2012). Even coping strategies like online **chat conversations with peers** about disturbing TV content do not have a promising effect on

## NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AND COPING STRATEGIES

An important line of research has been investigating the effects exposure to news may have on children. Research findings suggest that negative or disturbing news content could lead to both **short-term and long-term negative emotional responses** in children (Riddle, 2012; Kleemans et al., 2017a). Studies show that children display increased negative emotions (such as fear and sadness) and decreased positive emotions, and that they have nightmares, stomach aches, or show anxiety-related behaviours after news exposure (Ebbinkhuijsen et al., 2021). Many of these studies focus on responses to specific news events and major crises, such as terrorist attacks, war, and high-profile crimes (Riddle et al., 2012).

The vast majority of existing research focuses on relatively short-term effects of exposure. But studies investigating long-term memories for childhood exposure to disturbing TV news re-

ports suggest that even young adults remember news stories in their childhood, most likely about terrorist attacks, murders and kidnapping. The vast majority of participants in a study (Riddle, 2012) reported being exposed to stressful news co-viewing with their parents. But whereas 50% of the participants (n=328, 17- to 27-year-olds) remember a frightening news story seen in childhood, this percentage is smaller than findings of prior studies on fictional media, in which more than 90% of surveyed adults could remember frightening fictional media content in the past (ibid.). Another study shows that even young children show fear responses to everyday exposure to the news, even in the absence of a major crisis or event, and that some of the children surveyed have vivid memories of disturbing TV news content (Riddle et al., 2012).

According to research findings, children are very **aware of the seriousness of news**. From the age of 8 years and above they are cognitively mature enough to follow the news (Ebbinkhuijsen et al., 2021). With

children and preteens (Ebbinkhuijsen et al., 2021). One study showed that **real-life conversations with peers** can help pre-adolescents cope with negative emotions (Kleemans et al., 2017b). These research results are a challenge for children's news editors and producers. On the one hand, they do not wish to upset children with their programmes. On the other hand, they want to cover relevant news based on news value, which includes reporting about war, crime, natural disasters and violence. The existing research findings on TV news content and its potential effects on children show that there is a strong need for children's news that is tailored to young people's emotional needs.

Offering **constructive news** to children might be a promising way to adapt news content to children's sensitivities and information needs. In an experimental study (Kleemans et al., 2017a), 8- to 13-year-olds (n=332) read a news story containing either constructive elements (solution-based narratives including positive emotions) or non-constructive news (negative

and problem-based narratives). The findings show that children and pre-teens who read a constructive news story reported a smaller increase in negative emotions (such as sadness or fear) than young people who had read a non-constructive story. The authors therefore support the theoretical notion that positive emotions within negative news content can improve the emotional responses of young people. Furthermore, the children in the study who read a constructive news story showed more interest in personal involvement and came up with more ideas about how to improve the situation (ibid.).

Another way of not causing distress among young audiences can be **consolation strategies** or protection measures in children's TV news. Kleemans & Tamboer (2021) researched such strategies in Dutch children's news between 2000 and 2016 within the framework of a content analysis. They identify 2 consolation strategies at the programme level: avoiding very negative or violent topics and the "sandwich formula" (presenting a light topic before and after the negative news content). At the item level, they consider the presentation of children as sources (in the role of the hero/heroine, victim, eyewitness or vox pops) as a consolation strategy. At the shot level, they argue that sensational images and frightening sounds should be avoided. Instead, animations or graphics should be used in children's news (ibid.).

Riddle, Karyn (2012). *Young adults' autobiographical memories of frightening news stories seen during childhood*. *Communication Research*, 39(6), 738–756.

Kleemans, Mariska et al. (2017a). *Children's responses to negative news: The effects of constructive reporting in newspaper stories for children*. *Journal of Communication*, 67(5), 781-802.

Ebbinkhuijsen, Ming et al. (in press). *Children's emotions after exposure to news: Investigating chat conversations with peers as a coping strategy*. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, published online February 20, 2021.

Riddle, Karyn et al. (2012). "People killing people on the news": *Young children's descriptions of frightening television news content*. *Communication Quarterly*, 60(2), 278-294.

Valkenburg, Patti & Piotrowski, Jessica Taylor (2017). *Plugged in: how media attract and affect youth*. *New Haven: Yale University Press*.

De Cock, Rozane (2012). *Mediating Flemish children's reactions of fear and sadness to television news and its limitations. Survey and in-depth interview results*. *Journal of Children and Media*, 6(4), 485-501.

Kleemans, Mariska, Schlindwein, Luise & Dohmen, Roos (2017b). *Preadolescents' emotional and prosocial responses to negative TV News: Investigating the beneficial effects of constructive reporting and peer discussion*. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(9), 2060-2072.

Kleemans, Mariska & Tamboer, Sanne (in press). *Consolation strategies in children's television news: A longitudinal content analysis*. *Journalism Practice*, published online March 22, 2021.

### WHAT DO YOUNG AUDIENCES EXPECT FROM THE NEWS?

When news content does not meet the information needs of young people, news avoidance behaviour can be the consequence. Some studies have asked children and adolescents what they would like to see in the news, and what they dislike about existing news formats. Research results show that children and adolescents have **broad definitions of news** and that they are aware of the narrowness of the representation of their interests (see Götz in this issue; Carter, 2014; Kaziaj & Van Bauwel, 2017). They express a strong desire for news to be more related to their realities, and they consider adult news "boring".

In a study from Israel (Alon-Tirosh & Lemish, 2014), the children and adolescents surveyed expressed their desire for **age-appropriate news programmes and content**. They think that news should both encourage viewers to engage in prosocial activities and inform them about dangers and crisis situations. Children want to see more children in the news, and they want more **humour** that can offer some sort of "comic relief". They also prefer **positive framing** and **constructive news** (ibid.).

In a recent study from the Netherlands, the 12- to 16-year-olds surveyed evaluate conventional news as boring, repetitive, negative, sensationalist,

and disconnected from young people (Tamboer et al., 2020). Consequently, there is a lack of intrinsic motivation to consume traditional news media at this stage of their lives, although they acknowledge the need to be well-informed. This ambiguous attitude of young people towards news should be food for thought for adults.

A German study also found that half of the 14- to 17-year-olds surveyed (Hasebrink et al., 2021) did not consider it important to seek information about current events, since they could not see a connection to their own everyday life. The authors therefore believe it is important for journalists to demonstrate that their content is **relevant to the everyday lives** of young people, and to identify opportunities for connections. At the same time, they need to emphasise editorial skills and distance themselves from non-journalistic actors, to highlight the **added value and quality** which only journalism can provide. ■

Kaziaj, Emiljano & Van Bauwel, Sofie (2017). *The ignored audience: A multi-method reception study on children and television news in Albania*. *Childhood*, 24(2), 230-244.

Alon-Tirosh, Michal & Lemish, Dafna (2014). "If I was making the news": *What do children want from news?* *Participations*, 11(1), 108-129.

### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> *Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 13, paragraph 1*. Available at: [https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text# \[25.5.21sa\]](https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text# [25.5.21sa])

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