New rituals for public connection

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Abstract: This chapter explores how digitalization facilitates new patterns of using news to connect to larger social, cultural, civic and political frameworks. Employing in-depth interviews and Q-methodology with Dutch news users of mixed age, gender and educational level in three regions, it finds that news still provides a major frame of reference to public issues in users' everyday communications. Rather than a complete 'de-ritualization' of news practices, wherein no common trajectories for connecting to public life can be discerned anymore, we argue digitalization facilitates a 're-ritualization' of public connection in which traditional and new media logics interact. While the news still facilitates community, self-presentation and security, the forms of public engagement people employ to satisfy these needs are increasingly centered around individuals, inextricably embedded in other activities, and more diverse in terms of content. Finally, we find that while news still remains central to people's public connection, journalism not necessarily is.

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, challenging 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 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 2015), meaning 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 2015). 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 and 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 and Shehata 2014, Strömbäck 2005). However, rather than relying on such notions, we 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. 190-191), suggesting 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 our empirical findings, however, we 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.

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 and Ahva 2010, Kaun 2012, Ong and 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 and Ross 2010). Such a public space 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). We 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 Swart, Peters, & Broersma 2016a).

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.[1] 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 2010, Bennett Bennett, Wells and Freelon 2011, Boulianne 2009, Shah, Kwak and 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 and Heikkilä 2015, Couldry and Markham 2008, Ekström et al. 2014, Ong en 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 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 and Mitchelstein 2013, Couldry et al. 2007). Especially 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

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

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, Kunelius and Ahva 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 [2013] 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 engagement. For example, the 'checking cycle' as a currently dominant mode of mobile news use (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2014) 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 and Buckingham 2013, Banaji and 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 our 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 and Goggin 2005, Banaji and Buckingham 2013, Ekman and 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.

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.[2]

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 and Vladica 2012, Watts and 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 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, we 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, we 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 an earlier study (see Swart, Peters & Broersma 2016b). 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.

4. Results

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 our study owned at least one mobile device and had access to a wide range of digital news outlets: from interactive television

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[2] 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). Our sample existed of 18 males and 18 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.

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)[3] 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 our 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 and 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 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, our 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

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[3] Participants are mentioned by pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

news has become an almost continuous activity so immersed in everyday life patterns, it can hardly be recognized as 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 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 and 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 we will turn to next.

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 and 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 our 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, Wells and Freelon 2011, Banaji and 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 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. "That if we would meet each other in the train for example, that you just know what is going on." Regular news use, according to our 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 and 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.

4.3 The importance of social networks

Up to this point, our analysis has been mainly focused on news in the context of journalism. However, our data clearly demonstrate another source for connecting to public life through news: interpersonal communication (see also Heikkilä and Ahva 2015, McCollough, Crowell and Napoli 2016). 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 our 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 our 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 setup 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 setup 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 no offer a Whatsapp sharing button, meaning it requires relatively much manual labor compared to alternative social platforms, specifically the younger participants in our 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 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. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored users' habits and rituals of using news to connect to public life in a digitalized media landscape. Our 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. 2016). 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 our 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, we 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 and Ahva 2015).

More importantly, we 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, our 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 and preventing potential disconnection and maintaining journalism's societal value.

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