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# SHARING AND DISCUSSING NEWS IN PRIVATE SOCIAL MEDIA GROUPS

## The social function of news and current affairs in location-based, work-oriented and leisure-focused communities

Joëlle Swart , Chris Peters  and Marcel Broersma 

*Social media platforms are an increasingly dominant medium through which people encounter news in everyday life. Yet while we know more-and-more about frequency of use and sharing, content preferences and network configurations around news use on social media, the social experiences associated with such practices remain relatively unexplored. This paper addresses this gap to consider if and how news facilitates conversations in everyday contexts where social media play a communicative role. It investigates how people engage with current affairs collectively in different social formations and their associated following, sharing and discussion practices. Specifically, it studies the role of news in six focus groups consisting of people who know each other offline and simultaneously communicate regularly through private Facebook or WhatsApp groups, and who interact primarily in relation to their membership in a particular (1) location-based (2) work-related or (3) leisure-oriented community. It finds that communication within social media communities whose members consider their ties as weak generally tended to be more news-centred. Even more significant was perceived control over privacy and presence of clear norms and community boundaries, which alongside the communicative aims of the group proved important considerations when it came to deciding whether to share news within the community.*

**KEYWORDS** Audience studies; community; everyday life; focus groups; news use; public connection; social context; social media

### Introduction

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

news users across 36 countries, over half of the respondents said they had used social media for news in the past week (Newman et al. 2017).

The growing popularity of social media as avenues for news has fostered a range of mostly quantitative studies examining such patterns of behaviour, analyzing for instance which combinations of platforms are employed by different generations, genders and socio-economic segments (Gottfried and Shearer 2016; Van der Veer, Sibál, and van der Meer 2016), the motives and gratifications behind different forms of social media news use (Hermida et al. 2012; Lee and Ma 2012), and the topics of the news stories that social media users distribute (Bastos 2015; Berger and Milkman 2012; Bright 2016). The specific everyday life contexts in which news on social media is used, however, and the ways in which such novel practices become relevant to people in their daily lives, have received significantly less scholarly attention.

Considering the settings in which news use takes place is important, because it is exactly these taken-for-granted contexts of everyday life where news obtains its societal meaning and significance. As Dahlgren (2009) argues, without any link to people's daily experiences, it does not make sense for citizens to engage in regular patterns of news use to bridge their private and public worlds (see also Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2007; Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017). When considering scholarship that focuses specifically on how news becomes embedded in everyday life, one dominant line of work centres around the temporal aspects of media use and how news becomes part of people's daily rhythms (e.g. Dimmick, Feaster, and Hoplamazian 2011; Picone 2016; Wennekers, van Troost, and Wiegman 2016). Another increasingly popular field of inquiry has explored the spatial dimensions of news, looking at how the dynamics of different places and spaces structure people's news habits (e.g. Goggin, Martin, and Dwyer 2015; Peters 2012, 2015). This paper builds on these research strands to focus on a third interrelated aspect of everyday life, namely the relational structures in which people's news habits are embedded.<sup>1</sup>

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

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

daily communications, updating earlier insights in how news facilitates “public connection” (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2007) within digital societies.

### The Social Contexts of News Use

The idea that news has more than just an informational function and can also foster sociability and community dates back many decades. Already in 1949, Berelson concluded that newspapers could provide a sense of connection beyond their content and support daily conversation and interaction, a finding that since then has been reproduced many times (e.g. Bentley 2001; Bogart 1989). Likewise, the television has inspired much work on the social uses of media, as the medium traditionally was often consumed together with others within a domestic setting (e.g. Jensen 1990; Lull 1980; Silverstone 1994). Such studies underline how news can play an integrative role in social situations and acts as “an integral part of daily life” (Bogart 1989, 169). Recent studies note that this is no different in the digital era: even though technological developments such as personalization techniques may have made the delivery and reception of news more individualized (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2007, 221), people continue to make sense of and interpret news within specific social contexts (Bird 2011; Broersma and Peters 2017; McCollough, Crowell, and Napoli 2017; Schröder 2015). Thus, by now, as Livingstone (2006) notes, the importance of people’s social networks for the use of news has become “a starting point, rather than a discovery” (243).

The rise of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, further highlights the connective potentialities of news and draws attention to news users’ interpersonal communication practices (Heikkilä and Ahva 2015). First, social media platforms facilitate the exchange of information by enabling users to create their own online communities and allowing them to share news with their networks with just one click. Thus, as technologies simplify the dissemination of news, audiences can now influence the distribution of news themselves (Picone, De Wolf, and Robijt 2016). Second, social media offer new modes of engagement with news content. Next to sharing and discussing news, there are opportunities to, for instance, “like” news, recommend stories to others or tag fellow users. Finally, unlike most mass media technologies, digital and social media can be used regardless of temporal or spatial context, meaning communities can potentially connect over news anywhere and anytime (Dimmick, Feaster, and Hoplamazian 2011).

Despite these insights, little is known about what these changes mean for the way in which news facilitates users’ connection to their everyday networks and the public world at large. While, for example, boyd (2008) and Baym (2010) have paid attention to the way people embed social media in everyday life to manage relationships with others in their networks, such studies usually do not focus on the role that news and journalism specifically play (see for an exception Goh et al. 2017). Work that does centre around news, on the other hand, tends to direct its analysis to the informative value of news (e.g. Nielsen and Schröder 2014) or how social media news use supports people’s political engagement and participation (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012). This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring how the relational structures in which social media use is embedded affect people’s connective practices around news and journalism.

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

Earlier, Goh et al. (2017) found that the way individuals share news on messaging apps is a purposeful decision, underpinned by deliberate and strategic choices. While some users in their study for instance exclusively shared high impact news that required action, others focused on news that was valuable only symbolically, with the goal of maintaining social relations. Depending on the purpose of the social media community, thus, practices may vary. Second, social media users' behaviour is affected by social norms, which shape how they present themselves. Crawford (2009) points out such norms not only pertain to more active forms of engagement such as posting or sharing, but also affect the more passive practices of listening, for example how often to check for messages and who to follow. A third factor potentially influencing people's social media practices is (perceived) tie strength. Granovetter (1973) made a distinction between strong and weak ties, which are classified according to the level of emotional intensity, intimacy, reciprocity and time spent that such connections represent. Previous work has found that tie strength affects online and offline news talk: for example, Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela (2011) note that because weak ties exist beyond one's immediate inner circle, they are more likely to provide new or contrasting information, thus stimulating civic debate.

Traditionally, much research on the social contexts of news use has focused on the family, which is unsurprising given the fact that much news use in the mass media era used to take place in people's homes (Jensen 1990; Lull 1980; Silverstone 1994). Even after the digitalization of the media landscape, Lee and Delli Carpini (2010) found that patterns of news use are still influenced most by the media environment that a person grew up in. Within families, young people are confronted with the news use practices of their parents, which can make them develop an interest in news as they mature (Gauntlett and Hill 1999, 67–72). Both Marchi (2012) and Costera Meijer (2007) note how teenagers rely on the adults in their families to tell them about what is going on: parents and other trusted adults serve as a filter, pointing out public issues they think are important for them to know and explaining their relevance in youngsters' everyday life. Of course, news is also used in everyday life contexts outside the home, such as work (e.g. Boczkowski 2010). This paper focuses on three types of such non-familial, everyday contexts—local groups, work-based networks and leisure-related communities—as examples of how social networks may shape social media users' news practices.

Thus, this study centres on the question if and how news becomes embedded within people's networks in everyday life. Understanding the everyday significance of

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

## Methodology

For the research, we composed six focus groups of people who interacted mainly in relation to their membership in a particular community and who communicated with each other through social media at least twice a week. Because our primary research interest was to explore how various social contexts—and the associated uses of social media therein—potentially shape people's experiences of news in everyday life, we selected three community types in which the governing logic of the social formation clearly differed: two groups of colleagues (IT customer service workers, secondary school teachers), two groups related to leisure activities (a women's football [soccer] team, a fraternity) and two that were organized geographically (neighbours, local volunteers).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the sample contained a mixture of groups that were formed by the members themselves and others that emerged from pre-existing social structures such as the workplace or place of residence.

In total, 40 participants took part in the focus groups. An equal number of males and females were sampled; they were aged between 18 and 66 years old. Three of the focus groups had eight members, two were composed of six participants, and one contained four. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling: individuals who agreed to participate were asked to encourage others in their group to join the focus group. The people joining the focus group were always a selection of the total group: for example, the eight IT workers represented a much larger department. Given the nature of these social groups, participants with a higher level of education (higher vocational or university-level) were overrepresented. We realize that besides community other prominent social distinctions such as class and the cultural capital attached to it, influence news practices (Lindell and Sartoretto 2017). Nevertheless, the patterns and mechanisms in and across groups that we found reveal relational structures that are decisive for news use on social media.

The focus groups were held from September to November 2016 in three different cities across The Netherlands, in locations that were most convenient for the participants, such as one of the respondents' homes, the club house or the office where they worked. On average, the sessions lasted approximately 100 minutes. During each session, snacks and soft drinks were provided. The first author moderated all the focus groups, using a semi-structured questionnaire to guide the discussion. This ensured the comparability of the group conversations. At the start of each session, after explaining the research procedure, participants were asked to introduce themselves and explain



how they had become part of the group, to break the ice and to get the participants talking.

In each focus group, four themes were addressed. First, the group described its patterns of social media use. Second, the participants discussed the role of social media platforms in facilitating their connection to the community and to public life in general. Third, the discussion moved to the topic of the content the group discussed on social media and why they felt such information was important and relevant to the others in the community. Finally, the conversation centred around the role of news and journalism for facilitating public connection through the avenues of social media. At the end of every focus group, all participants received a gift certificate worth €20. It is important to note that only in the latter half of the focus group sessions, was the discussion moved towards focusing on news and journalism. This reduced the risk of presupposing the centrality of news in people's social media group discussions (Couldry 2003). Moreover, we carefully avoided defining "news" during the focus groups, to give participants the opportunity to construct and negotiate the concept themselves.

All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author and a research assistant. The transcripts were then uploaded to qualitative data analysis program ATLAS.ti and coded in three rounds. During the first round, the transcripts were simply coded line-by-line, describing the topical contents. This resulted in hundreds of initial codes. This list was used during the second round of coding to develop focused codes, identifying central themes, overarching ideas and topics of debate. Finally, these focused codes were again read against the entire data-set, to form and test theoretical codes describing the central concepts put forward by the data. While this process of data analysis yielded several themes, from the various affordances of the different social media platforms to the relationship between the groups' online and offline modes of social connection, this paper will specifically focus on the way social media become embedded within the social contexts of people's everyday life as spaces for news. To protect the participants' privacy, all names have been substituted by pseudonyms.

## Results

### *News in Location-based Social Media Communities*

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

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

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

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

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

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

In contrast to the Facebook community of the neighbours, where all content was strongly related to where its members lived, in the group of the volunteers, locality was surprisingly absent. Even though they were very much involved in the local community through work, sports and other activities, local news was hardly significant in their WhatsApp group, nor consumed in general. Whereas the neighbours were only loosely related, the volunteers repeatedly stressed the strong bond they experienced with the others in the group. The contents in their WhatsApp group reflected this, its primary purpose being to maintain a sense of community. While part of the messages revolved around the practical organization of charity events, discussing the division of tasks among volunteers and related matters, group talk could often be characterized as phatic communication (Miller 2008). The frequent social chatter and the many photos of their meetings and events they shared were usually not about exchanging meaningful information, but rather intended as a means to stress a common experience. This aligns with previous findings that online and offline groups with strong ties are likely to generate less civic activity than more loose and distant networks (Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela 2011).

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

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

Some participants in the focus group used Twitter as an additional news source. They found it helpful to quickly get the gist of a story and to keep up with specific niches related to their fields of work, such as agriculture or finance. While they would sometimes retweet or even post work-related news here, these tweets were targeted at their network of colleagues, competitors and customers. However, in relation to their group of volunteers, which they clearly perceived as a network of friends where online talk should not focus on too serious matters, they never made use of Twitter or other relatively open social network sites, and news hardly played a connective role.

### *News in Work-related Social Media Communities*

Two work-related focus groups were organized. The members of the first group taught classes for a small foundation organizing short-term educational projects on a

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

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

Charlotte: "I do have an opinion, but I just keep it to myself. I don't feel like starting an entire debate on the internet."

Stephanie: "I do feel inclined to share articles though."

Charlotte: "Yes, indeed. But then without a comment."

Esther: "But actually, you're already giving an opinion then."

Stephanie: "But for just reading..."

Nicole: "Yeah, I really enjoyed how recently a former classmate [on Facebook] had an extreme, a very strong opinion about the Ugandan elections and an Ugandan responded. So I could follow, practically live, how they responded to each other, until someone said: please do this in a private conversation, this is escalating and everyone can view this."

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

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

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

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

- Niels: "Those debates, we primarily do that on WhatsApp. We don't share that on Slack."
- Emma: "Like the organ donation bill that just was approved by Parliament."
- Rik: "Or terrorist attacks..."
- Emma: "It's like- everyone can throw a statement in. That's not a rule, but that's how it goes."
- Jelle: "Do we have rules at all?"
- Emma: "No, it's not a rule, but it feels like- today it's quiet, and then someone starts, and then- it explodes." (*laughs*) [...]
- Jelle: "You've got topics, such as debates about feminism or Donald Trump, that attract a select group of people. And for other issues, there's another group of people." [...]
- Lisa: "Everyone has an extreme opinion and then the battle starts. Although I sometimes wonder whether people really have that opinion."
- Niels: "But sometimes, it's quite serious too." (IT team)

Whereas Boczkowski (2010) found that news talk at work tends to avoid sensitive political and economic topics, the IT team in this study explicitly sought news stories that would generate lots of debate and allowed for multiple viewpoints they could explore. They did not consider it image-threatening to talk about politics in the group, but considered it a playful activity. Unlike the news talk of the teachers, the stories that the IT team shared therefore rarely related to their jobs, but could be about any public issue they found salient.

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

### *News in Leisure-based Social Media Communities*

Finally, we explored leisure-oriented communities as social contexts for social media news use. The first focus group was composed of members of a women's soccer team. The main platforms for communication for these 21 players were Facebook (used for organizing social get-togethers) and WhatsApp (for daily social talk). The second group involved students of a relatively small (approx. 100 members) religion-inspired

fraternity. They too described Facebook as a more formal means to communicate with the entire group and announce social activities, whereas WhatsApp was considered a continuous stream of more intimate, everyday conversation.

Participants in both leisure-based groups rarely exchanged any information they would classify as news within their community, neither on WhatsApp nor through their private Facebook groups. In the soccer team, frequent communication on social media was a means to create a sphere of intimacy. Therefore, their WhatsApp chat mainly revolved around interpersonal updates and gossip. The group would only touch upon news stories if they had a direct relevance to the soccer players, for example a story on a fire in the canteen of a neighbouring soccer club. This was somewhat surprising, as individually, the soccer players were generally quite interested in news and public affairs. Yet, news was not part of their process of fostering sociability within the team, not even when such stories focused on their shared interest of soccer. Some participants noted they felt WhatsApp was not a suitable medium to discuss news with large groups like their sports team, as such debates were likely to result in an overload of messages. However, they rarely discussed news with each other via other means either. In this regard, the soccer team saw a clear difference with how their family members employed news as an avenue for social connection (see Costera Meijer 2013; Marchi 2012):

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

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

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

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

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

The fraternity’s social media talk was similar to the conversations of the soccer team, centring around interpersonal news. Although the students described themselves as being closely connected, seriously discussing public affairs on WhatsApp or in their Facebook community did not match the group’s purpose of fostering sociability. While they did enjoy following news on social media to form opinions about public issues and help them to review news more critically, they preferred to do so passively by reading replies of friends that did comment on Facebook. Participating in these debates themselves was perceived as too risky, as such comments could be visible to potentially anyone (Ekström 2016; Thorson 2014).

## Discussion

These focus group discussions help us to understand today’s connective role of news and current affairs in people’s everyday communications within location-based, work-oriented and leisure-focused social media communities. Regarding the context of location, the results add to a long history of work that stresses how the place where one lives, works and spends time represents not just a spatial context where practices of news use take place, but also a relational structure (e.g. Hoffman and Eveland Jr. 2010; Janowitz 1967; Yamamoto 2011). While there have been concerns that the adoption of digital technologies is reducing contemporary community life as they make individuals engage in less face-to-face interpersonal contact (e.g. Turkle 2011), we found that people’s local networks continue to serve as connecting hubs of information. The Facebook group of the neighbours here is a classic example of how citizens establish their own online spaces for news to encourage social integration within the local community and to activate latent ties, similar to the integrative role of local weekly newspapers throughout the twentieth century (see Janowitz 1967). McCollough, Crowell, and Napoli (2017) note that especially local social networks depend on such interpersonal exchanges of news, as journalism coverage in many areas is limited and sporadic due to the economic challenges that many local journalism companies currently face. Indeed, previous studies have described local news communities engaging in what Picone (2016) names “productive news activities” as a form of protest, to fill a perceived lack of local news reporting (Chen et al. 2012; Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015).



However, in this study, for both locality-based groups, the exchange of news was primarily motivated by their desire to foster and maintain their sense of community, rather than aiming to overcome informational gaps or replace journalism.

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

Finally, the paper has discussed the lack of using current affairs information as a means to connect within leisure-based communities. Again, we can observe a link between perceived tie strength and the content discussed within social media communities. Both the sports team and the fraternity described their ties as strong. As Ekström (2016) has noted, whether people talk about public affairs within such tight-knit groups strongly depends on particular social relationships and the social norms that exist there. Talking or not talking about public issues is part of the way they are constructing their identities and how they present themselves within specific social settings (cf. Boyd 2008; Goffman 1959). In this case, the norm in both leisure-oriented groups was to keep conversation in their social media communities positive and non-controversial, strengthening the group's sense of community. Again, this dovetails with the differences in news use Heikkilä and Ahva (2015) found between strongly and weakly tied communities. One possible explanation is that while the response from close friends is more predictable, and thus, sharing and discussing news has a lower perceived risk (Morey, Eveland Jr., and Hutchens 2012; Thorson 2014), they are also more likely to have other shared interests that can replace news as a topic that facilitates connection within the community.

## Conclusion

This paper explored various social contexts for social media news use, in order to examine how these everyday relational structures affect people's practices of mediated public connection within social media communities. It has showed that the communica-



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

Moreover, we found the same individual likely follows different modes of engagement within the various WhatsApp group chats and private Facebook communities that social media users are typically part of. In the focus groups where news was of minor importance, participants for example referred to their family WhatsApp groups as relational structures where news was discussed, or noted their social media practices were more public affairs-oriented with specific peer groups or individual friends (cf. Ekström 2016; Marchi 2012). More large-scale research could identify to what extent the aims of and patterns found in these location-based, work-oriented and leisure-related communities are representative for users' behaviour in closed-off social media communities overall.

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

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## NOTES

1. Although this article does not engage in depth with these strands of literature, its approach bears affinity to fields such as domestication research and media anthropology, which have long addressed how media technologies—including news media—become integrated into people’s pre-existing everyday habits and routines (Bird 2003; Gauntlett and Hill 1999; Morley 2000; Pink and Leder Mackley 2013; Silverstone 1994).
2. These are primary drivers for the group’s formation, rather than hard distinctions: for example, sports teams are also local groups and the colleagues would sometimes also enjoy leisure activities together.

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