

FUTURE OF NEWSMEDIA - TRENDS APPLIED ON A BELGIAN CASE STUDY

RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

By Julien De Wit – Youth Representative at the BIC

INTRODUCTION

The feeling that young people often get negative coverage in the news is common. This is evident not only from my own survey, but also, for example, from the findings of the Flemish Children's Rights Coalition, which published a paper back in 2009 containing suggestions on how to safely involve young people in the media and eliminate the one-sided negative perception. A lot of questions come to our mind. Are children and young people underrepresented in the media? Is there room for improvement? And suppose it is true that young people are underrepresented in the media, is that a problem, or is it normal since few young people hold visible positions in public life? Is there perhaps a disinterest of the media in youth?

Whichever way you look at it, the media have a quasi-monopoly when it comes to setting the general public's agenda. Although social media now also play an important role, it still happens more often that people go on Twitter and Facebook to talk about what's in the newspaper, rather than using social media to set the agenda of the various Flemish media. Media make or crack a story. They decide what is covered and what is not. They do so in as objective way as possible and extensively argued, but in the end, it is on the editorial staff and only on the editorial staff that they decide what is 'newsworthy' and what is not.

In this paper we analyze the influence of the media in youngsters' lives and vice versa.

CHANGING JOURNALISTS, CHANGING YOUTH

Journalism has changed

In recent years, the media landscape has undergone many evolutions. In his book *From Our Reporter on the Spot*, retired Belgian journalist Patrick Van Gompel aptly describes how 'the media' and 'the news' have changed over the years. Throughout the book, a number of more obvious evolutions are noticeable. For instance, news stories have to be delivered much faster today than, say, twenty years ago. Especially news stories that are breaking in a matter of minutes or even seconds on newsrooms. The way journalists work also changed considerably. Today, for instance, a journalist can easily shoot images with his smartphone or dial in live from anywhere in the world. No more lugging heavy equipment (or at least less), no hassle looking for a phone box. Some of the evolutions Van Gompel describes are also less obvious. Although it is not named in so many words, the former VTM journalist talks, for instance, about the ever-increasing "proceduralist" of society that complicates journalistic work. Think of the increased importance of the press card, the film permissions of all kinds that are unavoidable in journalism today and the like. So, the journalist's playing field is bigger and wider than ever before, but whether journalism has it easier today than before is hard to say. That it requires different skills, on the other hand, is clear. More on that later in this chapter. Moreover, the fact that the playing field has become bigger and wider does not automatically mean that young people are getting more coverage in the media. This is somewhat strange. After all, one would expect that young people would be much more present in the media right now since they find their way around social media and the web so well. Journalists have never had such wide access to young people, yet young people and the media do not seem to have found each other yet.

NEWS CONSUMPTION AMONGST YOUNGSTERS IN BELGIUM

First and foremost, let us look at how young people today consume news and thus how they are informed about what is happening in the world. Every year, the so-called Apenstaartjaren survey is published in which researchers examine how young people experience the news. Note that these scientists use a rather narrow definition of 'youth' in their survey. After all, they limit themselves to the age group six to eighteen.

According to the survey, young people - not surprisingly - get their mustard on social media. Three quarters of young people read news articles online every week. More than half even read one or more news articles on social media every day. Television and radio also remain strong holders in young people's weekly time allocation, although the interviewees did indicate that, as they grew older, they wanted to interact less and less with news stories. Some find them too negative; others say they are already sufficiently inundated with information in daily life. The mental bandwidth they have left to follow current affairs is rather limited. Only one in four young people get their news directly from the various news websites.

Interestingly too, the survey also gauges how young people feel about the news. This is not insignificant. During the covid crisis, for instance, several motivational psychologists questioned how coverage of the Covid-19 virus development impacted young people's mental well-being.

A 30 per cent of young people feel overwhelmed by the mass of news information available. About six students for every average class of 20. The news also sometimes confuses young people. For instance, they question the quality of news and information, which leaves them feeling alienated. Sometimes news media also saddles young people with a lot of questions and feelings they don't know what to do with. 14-year-old Aya testified in the study, 'When I watch news, it all depends on it. If it's about dramatic news - like attacks, murder, suicide - then I look for it and I do want to talk about it. I then find myself with a lot of questions and feelings that I can't place.'

In general, by the way, young people do feel that they are skilled enough to capture, absorb and understand news.

An interesting observation when reading the monkey-tail survey is that there is little mention of printed newspaper. For many young people Flemish newspapers such as De Standaard, De Tijd, De Morgen and Het Laatste Nieuws seem to be websites, rather than a physical printed newspaper. And yet: it is strange how the end of the printed newspaper has been preached so many times and yet the thing still exists today. There are some voices on some editorial boards calling for abandoning the idea of printed newspaper and publishing only digitally, but so far with little success. The mere fact that the newspaper as we know it today continues to exist is already noteworthy.

IS JOURNALISM DEAD?

The job of journalist will gain importance in the future. That is what just about every journalist I speak to in the context of this paper argues. It is sometimes said that artificial intelligence will be perfectly capable of performing all the tasks of a journalist in the future: writing texts, conducting interviews and things like that. Those who postulate that ignore the journalist's most important job: curating news. The careful and manual selection of sources and stories to bring out. That press releases in the future will be written autonomously by artificial intelligence is beyond doubt. Indeed, in some Asian countries, newsrooms are rapidly becoming automated rather than digitized. In China, the first virtual newsreader even made an appearance. The Chinese state news agency introduced an AI newsreader in a bid to report more efficiently. But systems with artificial intelligence are also conquering newsrooms closer to home. Somehow logical, as AI can deliver more quality news at a lower cost. After all, they workday and night, without holidays, expensive employer' contributions and the like. This is precisely why these applications are so interesting for publishers. That 'robot journalists' are being employed, or at least their employability is being explored, is nothing new under the sun. Back in 2016, US newspaper The Washinton Post was assisted by a 'robot journalist' for its coverage of the Rio Olympics.

In turn, The LA Times' robot journalist makes newspaper reports on local earthquakes. Dutch radio station NH Radio experimented in 2020 with a robot newsreader reading out the nightly news. Terrifying for a journalist, isn't it? Opinions are divided.

Chris Van den Abeele, who regularly reads in radio news bulletins at night for VRT, told his colleagues on the Radio 1 programme De Wereld Vandaag that he did not feel immediately threatened. "A robot doesn't fall asleep, but that's about the only advantage of it," he explained. "People just like to listen to humans. The imperfection of a human bulletin is also partly its charm". Marie Servaes, a communication scientist, writes in her thesis examining automated journalism, that in addition to the scalability and economic benefits offered by an AI newsmaker, other arguments can be found pro in the debate. For instance, there are voices in the debate on the implementation of robot newsreaders who say that widely implementing AI on newsrooms increases public trust in a news report. After all: a machine has to be neutral. After all, the algorithms that produce the articles cannot do anything but follow the set of rules that humans programmed.

Indeed, at Associated Press (AP), a major news agency that sends out hundreds of presses releases every day and gathers masses of news, automated journalism

leads to smaller margins of error. Fantastic, those algorithms, one quickly thinks. Well, opposite the believers are also quite a few critics as far as those neutral algorithms are concerned. For instance, the computer programmes that will soon write your and my newspapers are not necessarily neutral.

After all, the quality of what such an algorithm produces depends very much on the data it is fed. Moreover, an algorithm can also contain biases. Consciously or unconsciously. Indeed, how the computer programme writes an article depends on the set of rules it is taught. Following those rules is done neutrally. But what is not necessarily neutral is the set of rules.

Besides, news today is already increasingly offered to the user in a tailor-made way. If you browse to a news website today, you might get to see the articles relevant to you more often. It then filters by interest and the stories you like to read according to the algorithm. If algorithms soon start writing customised articles as well, there is a risk of confirmation bias, namely that the articles you get to see are written in such a way that they "fit your stall".

You then end up in an information bubble. People could have their news adjusted. For instance, if you are rooting for an opposition party, news about decisions by ruling parties could be brought more sharply and flaws by the opposition more mildly.

Furthermore, you could also ask whether people actually notice when they read an article written by a robot. Well, many people do not look at the name below or above the article. Research by Ghent University showed that 30 per cent of readers do not notice who is the author of the article they are reading. But does a robot produce texts that we perceive as reliable and pleasant to read? UGent conducted research on that too. It showed that according to the Flemish digital native, the flesh-and-blood journalist need not fear for his job just yet. After all, readers experience an automatically generated article as less credible and less readable. One explanation for this is that algorithms are very strong in describing events and facts, but much harder to make connections, explain newer phenomena or see causality.

So, the journalist as we know him or her today has not necessarily been written off. Although his or her job may well change. Above, we already talked about the journalist as curator of news. Someone who carefully selects your reading material. Someone you trust. That trust will be even more crucial in the future.

FAKE NEWS AND NEUTRALITY

Can we trust the media?

Trust in the media is under pressure today. According to the 2020 Digital News Report, just over half of Flemish people, some 51 per cent, trust the media. According to the Digital News Report, this is not bad compared to other countries surveyed. However, there are a few caveats to this. Indeed, trust in the media in Flanders declined over the period 2015-'20. There are also a number of gaps. On the one hand, there is a large community gap between Flanders and Wallonia. In southern Belgium, there is clearly less trust in the news media. Only 36 per cent of Walloons trust the French-language news media. On the other hand, another gap is also emerging: the age gap. According to the same Digital News Report, only 37 per cent of Flemish young people largely trust our news media. Flemish young people are thus more critical of the news media offered to them than the Fleming in general. The most recent figures on trust in the media can be found in the Eurobarometer, which measures European citizens' trust in all kinds of institutions. According to that Eurobarometer, 24 per cent of Belgians surveyed today trust the media. So, in terms of Belgium as a whole, better than the situation in 2020, which was described in the Digital News Report. So according to the latest Eurobarometer figures, the corona crisis has done well for trust in the media. Although, of course, there are big question marks about this. After all, it is only after a crisis that citizens foot the bill. That applies to politics and to the media. The question, then, is whether the turnaround has begun. And what community differences might be hiding behind the figures. \

Another striking figure from the Eurobarometer is that Belgians consider radio and newspapers to be more reliable, while distrust of television is slightly higher.

Fake News: what's in a name

The phenomenon of fake news is interesting, by the way. It was possibly first introduced by former US president Donald J Trump, who invariably dismissed anything the press published about him that he did not like as 'fake news'. Soon the discourse was also adopted in Europe. 'Such statements naturally feed distrust,' says Samira, journalist for the Flemish newspaper De Morgen.

At the top of the Twitter profile of Isabelle Albers, director of Flemish business newspaper De Tijd, there is a beautiful quote as a banner. That quote pretty much sums it up: 'Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed. Everything else is public relations.'

Dismissing criticism as fake news may be becoming commonplace, but the fight against fake news will remain important in the years to come. A survey by the Artevelde University of Applied sciences shows that young people do not distinguish fake news in news articles. Only 3 per cent of those surveyed managed to label six news articles as false or correct. The share of fake news articles is expected to increase in the coming years.

In addition, we can ask what the reason fake news seems to thrive so well in our society. The simplest answer seems to be that we simply live in a changing, increasingly complex world. A world with a lot of information. Never before in human history have we been so inundated with information. Every day, an average person absorbs about 74 gigabytes of information. By comparison, if you downloaded about 37 films of two hours each, you would arrive at a similar number of gigabytes.

Five hundred years ago, the amount of information presented to us in one day was equal to the amount of information a highly educated person would absorb over a lifetime by reading books, listening to stories and the like. We like to hear what we want to hear, especially from like-minded people. After all, that is easier than confronting our own fallible thinking.

The more information to choose from, the harder it becomes to select information. Moreover, thanks to the internet, we have access to more information and arguments than ever before. On the other hand, this also makes it harder to take a stand. After all: for every argument you put forward, there will be a counterargument somewhere, quality-wise or not. And then counter-argument - like everything else - can be found on the internet. There is a huge number of sources today, but insurmountably so also doubts and uncertainty. This reality is new and sometimes hard to accept for some. After all, doubts and uncertainty are the only two constants in our society today. Everywhere, truths are loudly questioned. The key is to deal with that doubt and uncertainty. The journalist is a pivotal figure in this. Generation Z is a searching generation. Young people are seekers more than ever. A journalist's job then is not to deliver a bite-sized fact to the young person, but to guide them towards the truth. A young news consumer no longer sees a bulletin or news article as the destination. He does see the journalist as companion the route. As a guide. This, of course, places a great responsibility on the journalist's shoulders.

CONCLUSION

Both journalism and the current generation of young people have undergone and will undergo many changes in the (near) future. It will come down to editors responding to these trends.

More than ever, we are left with a searching generation of young people, who are looking at news media more critically than before. The case study is based on the Belgian media landscape, but the conclusions and findings can be extended to other analogous European media landscapes.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"



Author

Julien De Wit | Youth Representative at the BIC



 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 www.bic-rhr.com  info@bic-rhr.com

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel: +32 027258466