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INDEPENDENCE AND INTERDEPENDENCE: MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF FINNISH YOUTH'S EXPERIENCES OF TRUST IN NEWS

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Introduction

Finland provides an interesting case study on young people's news consumption. In the Finnish "digital welfare state" (Ala-Fossi et al. 2019) the news is an inseparable part of the mechanism producing social trust. Finland features the highest level of media freedom and literacy in Europe (Lessenski 2019). Finns are also way below the European average in terms of trust in social media (e.g., Horowitz et al. 2021).

This abstract features some of the results of a multi-method study of the University of Helsinki (2019-2021) that examines how Finnish audiences view the nature and power of news, and how the online environment impacts their consumption of news.

Multi-method Framework to Analyze Multidimensionality

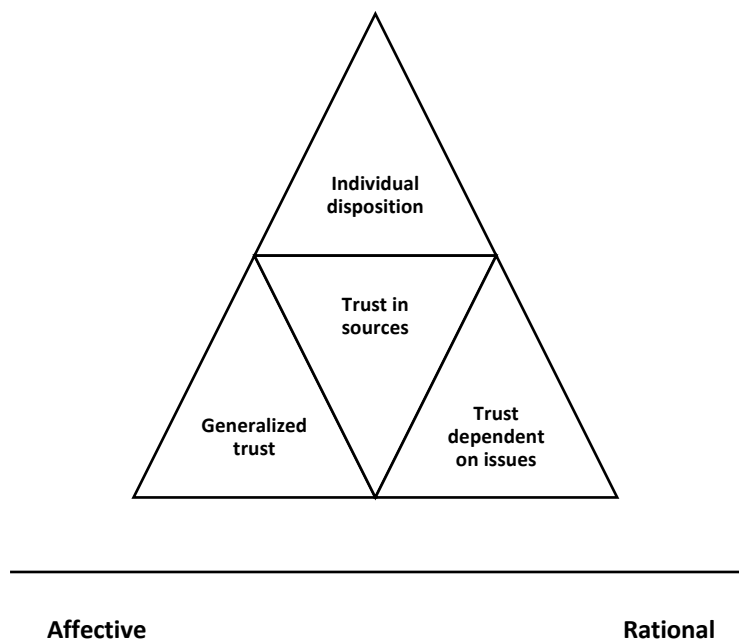
This paper is based on the results of two general surveys in Spring 2019 (n=1053) and Spring 2020 (n=1354), a survey focused on young people (18-29-year-olds, n=300), three focus group interviews of different age groups, as well as a three-day online discussion of 30 young people in Fall 2020. In all surveys, the data are weighted by gender, age and residence.

A classic understanding distinguishes *rational* and *affective* aspects of the experience of trust. Adding on specific dimensions of trust in news and journalism, the project views experiences of trust via a four-dimensional framework (Figure 1, see also e.g., Fisher 2016, Horowitz et al. 2021, Strömbäck et al. 2020):

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1. *Trust determined by one's individual disposition*, such as demographic variables, or own's own experiences. This dimension is studied both in the surveys as well as via the qualitative focus groups and online chat.
2. *Generalized trust in the media*. Especially the first, comprehensive survey in 2019, has included numerous questions that are intended to detect aspects of generalized trust in news media and journalism, and generalized trust has been addressed in qualitative segments as well.
3. *Trust in specific sources*. This has been studied in each survey as well as addressed in qualitative segments.
4. *Trust in terms of specific issues*. Drawing from a survey on young people and news in Europe (PEW 2018), the survey of Fall 2020 has focused on news themes and issues.

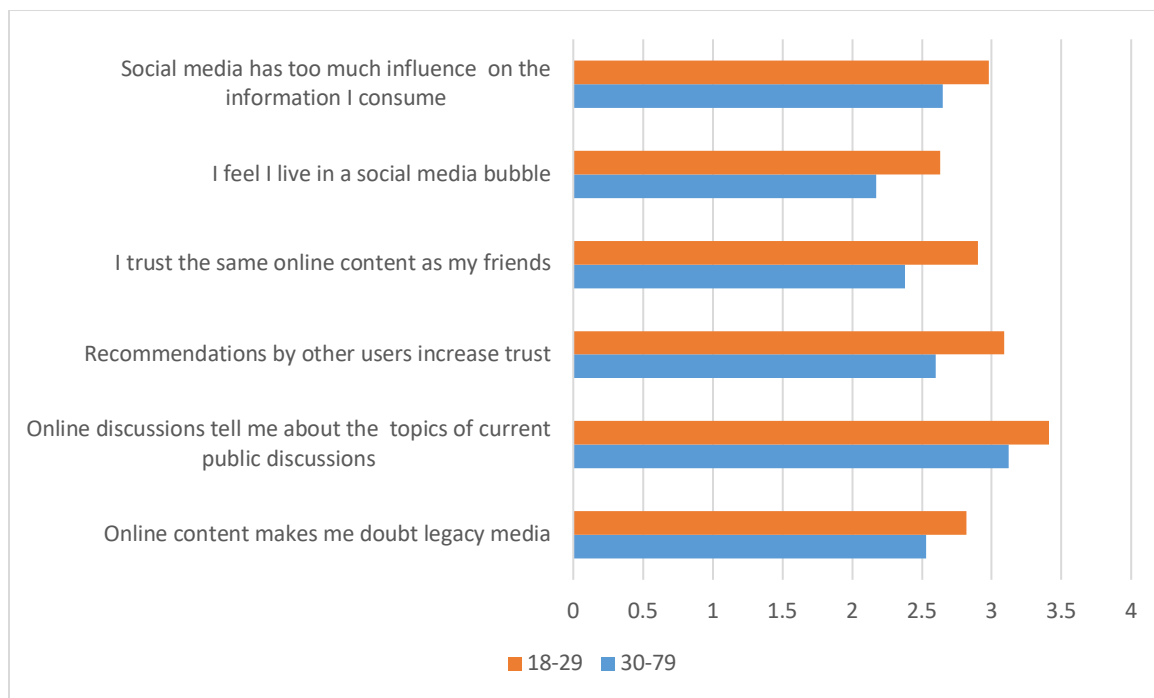
Figure 1. Analytical Framework: Experiences of Trust in News



Findings: Independence and Interdependence

Our research confirms that young people are a distinct segment of news consumers. On one hand, our survey of 2019 shows the clear differences between age groups in terms of perceptions of news and social media. The sense of living in a social media bubble and excessive social media influence in terms of exposure to information is more widely shared by younger respondents than by those of and over 30-years-olds.

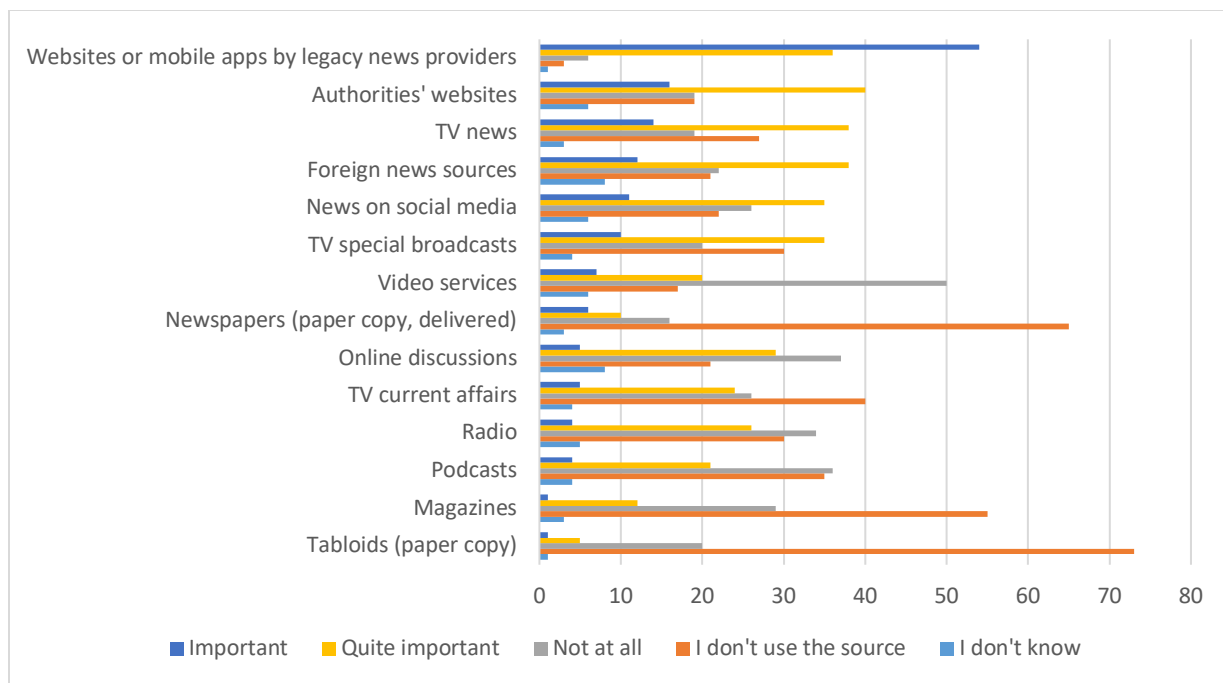
Figure 2. Selected Statements about News, Online and Social Media, by Age (scale 1=do not agree, 5=fully agree, n=1053)



The respondents of our qualitative segments illustrate a significant difference between attitudes toward legacy journalism and news via non-traditional sources. When the focus group interviewees and the online study discussants speak of journalism, they refer to legacy news sources and almost unanimously condemn their power in society and their declining credibility. The market-driven imperatives of mainstream news are clear to them. And while the young people in the qualitative discussions doubt whether older generations are media literate enough to navigate the online world, they themselves stress the importance of peer-to-peer news dissemination, source criticism, and one’s own research. *Generalized trust* in the legacy media as an institution is not high and *source trust* is often referred to in relation to one’s close social circles or “interesting individuals”.

On the other hand, all our three surveys indicate that Finnish young are avid consumers of content by conventional, institutional news organizations (i.e., legacy news media), especially via their mobile applications. They, as well as all other age groups, express very little distrust in *specific Finnish legacy news sources*, and the pandemic underlines this tendency:

Figure 3. Importance of Selected News Sources for Young People During the Pandemic (% , n=300)



Young people are just as likely as older groups to express concern about the spread of fake news and misinformation online. In qualitative discussions young people express appreciation for public service broadcasting in particular and note the importance of journalistic codes.

Finally, an experimental factor analysis of the survey of Fall 2020 resulted in two key issue clusters of young people's news consumption: *informational and societal motives* and *entertainment and routines*. Unsurprisingly, entertainment and routines prevail. Both motives are slightly more important for women and higher education correlates with higher motivation. Even so, both motives are relatively high despite of demographic variables.

Our results indicate that young people are both independent of, and dependent on, legacy new media. Their *generalized trust* in legacy media is low, and mainstream journalism is criticized expertly using conventional quality criteria and awareness of market-driven imperatives. *Trust in specific outlets and sources*, in contrast, is strong. In terms of *specific issues*, young people generally consider news comprehensive and their motivation for news consumption is based both rational and affective (entertainment) needs. Young people are also relatively satisfied with how the news covers most topics, with the exception of news that address topics specific to young people. This, and the signs of "the pandemic news fatigue" are not surprising nor typical for Finnish youth only (e.g., Deutsche Welle 2021).

The relative homogeneity of the Finnish society and the long history of institutionalized media literacy policies may emphasize the critical views of mainstream media. A darker interpretation could be the erosion of trust in expertise and the reliance in one's affective sense of trust, that is, the significant skepticism as a sign of an epistemic crisis of a

post-truth era (e.g., McNair 2018). At the same time, the findings do not confirm the worst fears of moral panic about growing distrust and news avoidance by young people. Rather, young news consumers are willing to “do their research” with legacy and alternative news sources online, as well as a sliding scale of rational and affective experiences of trust in news.

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