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CYNICISM AND INTERNALIZED RESPONSIBILITY FOR DIGITAL WELL-BEING AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN SLOVENIA

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Introduction

This paper situates the shifts in contemporary media environment within the broader theme of ruptures, conceptualizing them as both discontinuities in media consumption and broader epistemological breaks in young people's relationship with (digital) media, trust, and platform power. We focus on how the attitudes toward news credibility, the ethical responsibilities of media organizations, and the increasing individualization of responsibility – the notion that users themselves are solely accountable for navigating opaque and exploitative digital ecosystems.

Building on scholarship in media studies, digital sociology, and critical platform studies (Carrigan & Fatsis, 2021; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018), we argue that the erosion of institutional trust and the rise of platform-mediated epistemologies constitute a rupture in how young people conceptualize media credibility, power, and agency. These ruptures manifest as (1) cynicism toward digital media and social platforms, (2) heightened but paradoxical expectations for legacy media, and (3) individualization of responsibility (internalized responsibility) for digital well-being.

Methodology

Our study draws on qualitative insights from the research project Digital maturity of youth: social needs and informal education of youth in the digital age, in which 41 young people (aged 16-24) were interviewed to explore their media practices and needs in the heterogeneous field of digital activities. We also observed the deficits that might

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discourage young people from sovereignly facing the challenges of changing digital media landscape.

We have employed inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023) of 15 remote semi-structured group interviews, conducted in 2024, with a demographically diverse sample, including high school and university students, employed and unemployed young people who have already left formal education. The sample was designed to ensure variation across gender, geographic location (urban, suburban, rural), and levels of education. We followed the principles of research ethics in the process of recruitment (informed consent, in case of minors also parental consent) and during data-gathering, management and analysis of the data (pseudonymization and anonymization).

Findings

As our results show, young people evaluate the (digital) media based on how trustworthy they are. We identified four interrelated criteria that are shaping perceptions on media credibility:

1. **Newsworthiness, non-sensationalism and regulation:** Young people associate newsworthiness with substance or meaningful content rather than clickbait and often link quality journalism to the presence of regulation and professional editorial control.
2. **Independence from capital or politics:** Especially university students and young people with tertiary education seem to appreciate the independence of the media. University students also express more criticism against the digital private sector that owns the platform infrastructure.
3. **Editorial approach, relevance of content:** Young people also distinguish media based on their filiation or genesis (legacy or digital media) that is also related to editorial approaches (news desk selection or algorithmically assorting content).
4. **Accuracy and benefits/harms:** Do the media pursue the idea of producing content with accurate information that young people can trust and benefit from, or are they seen as a harmful factor on personal or social level.

One of the most striking ruptures we observed is the distrust and cynicism young people express toward digital media. Participants described online platforms as the least reliable sources of news and information, perceiving them as sensationalistic, misleading, unreliable, highly personalized, and controlled by financial interests. This aligns with existing critiques of platformized news consumption (Schaetz et al., 2025; Willig, 2022) and the role of digital platforms in enabling disinformation economies (Martens et al., 2018; Diaz Ruiz, 2023).

Often participants held higher expectations of legacy media, particularly public service broadcasters, to provide fact-checked, high-quality information. However, this expectation was accompanied by skepticism, especially among older or less-educated youth, who saw legacy news outlets as deeply influenced by political and financial interests. These findings suggest that while young people are skeptical toward digital media as untrustworthy, they do not fully embrace traditional media as neutral arbiters of truth, creating an unresolved rupture in their epistemic environment.

A second rupture emerges in perceptions of platform governance and control. Participants voiced frustration at the perceived omnipotence of digital platforms in determining what content is seen, shared, or removed. They were particularly critical of data collection and monetization practices, expressing a sense of powerlessness in the face of opaque terms and conditions, mandatory data tracking, and algorithmic curation. The influence and control of these platforms is, in their view, primarily in the hands of the companies that develop and operate them, not in the hands of governments or users. Platforms can actively manipulate the user's experience, for example by forcing users to accept new terms and conditions or by removing content at their discretion, demonstrating their power over individuals.

Echoing critical work on data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), our findings highlight the growing tension between young people's dependence on digital platforms and their lack of agency over their own data. While some respondents advocated for stronger regulatory interventions, most saw self-regulation as the only viable strategy, reinforcing an individualized approach to digital responsibility. This aligns with broader neoliberal trends in digital governance, where platforms externalize risks onto users while evading structural accountability (Andrejevic, 2004).

The final rupture therefore concerns how young people internalize responsibility for their digital well-being. Many participants stated that users should read and understand platforms' terms of service; yet in practice, most admitted to not doing so. This contradiction underscores the ambiguity, where users recognize the importance of informed engagement but feel overwhelmed by platform complexity.

This rupture aligns with scholarship on "responsibilization" (Lupton, 2016), where systemic digital inequalities are framed as matters of personal responsibility rather than structural injustice. Instead of demanding greater accountability from platforms, young people often default to self-discipline or personal security measures as coping strategies. This emphasis on individual responsibility, however, risks normalizing an environment where platforms continue to profit from asymmetrical power relations while users bear the burden of navigating them.

Our findings therefore illustrate how digital disruptions are changing traditional relationships between young people, media, trust, and responsibility. The fracture in media trust, platform governance, and individual responsibility reveals a broader crisis of epistemic agency, where young people remain skeptical of media institutions but struggle to assert power over their own datafied existence. Overall, it could be said that there is an emphasis on personal judgement and self-regulation of individual users in their online activities, even though some participants also believe that platform providers need to be put in place with appropriate safeguards and policies; this is consistent with some results from Slovenia in a comparative international study of online privacy and datafication of young people (Farthing et al., 2024).

Our study contributes to critical internet studies by mapping how young people conceptualize media credibility and agency in an era of deep platform power asymmetries. Our analysis underscores the urgent need to rethink media education,

digital policy, and platform regulation in ways that move beyond individualized responsabilization toward more collective, rights-based approaches to digital citizenship.

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