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Accessing and Consuming News: How Young People Find News in a Networked Society

Final Seed Project Report

Angela Phillips, Goldsmiths, University of London, June 2014

Executive Summary

This small scale research into the news consumption behaviour of UK students, is part of a wider, three country project, including Norway and Israel. The UK research suggests that:

- Daily news consumption is unusual amongst this student population in spite of relatively high levels of political engagement.
- One third of students are politically engaged and two thirds are interested or very interested in national politics, though a significant minority (16-18%) have little or no interest at all.
- Social media use is high, 74% of students use social media daily or more regularly.
- Levels of trust in media and in institutions is low.

The research indicates that these students still use traditional news sources, but they do so in addition to social media. They do not substitute for each other they augment one another. Indeed a very low 7.5% said that they read things that are passed on by friends whereas 60% said that they accessed the online sites of mainstream national newspapers on a fairly regular basis and 92% consider newspaper websites to be 'useful or very useful'. However, when they were asked about an actual news event, 56% said they had found out via Social Media. The research interviews will provide an opportunity to explore in more depth the relationship between social media as a means of finding news and traditional media as a means of exploring it further.

Although students typically use a wide range of media they have relatively low levels of trust in either media or public institutions and even lower levels of trust in non-mainstream media and social media connections. This is also a finding that we will be following up across the three countries and in more depth via interviews, because it suggests that students are constructing their own media ecology from a mix of sources taking in both traditional and mainstream media but with a heavy reliance on traditional news sources.

Aims and Objectives

This comparative research investigates digital transformations in the access to and use of news, in student communities in a small sample of university students in London. It is part of a broader research project in partnership with academics from Israel and Norway. This quantitative study looks at the role of mobile technologies in news consumption. It seeks also to find out, not only how young people access news, but what information they consider to be 'news' and the source of that news content. It also seeks to establish whether the growing reliance on mobile technology and social networking sites, as platforms for news content, results in a significant tendency for users to narrow engagement to events recommended to them by peer networks, or whether mobile access leads to broader engagement. It will look also at the ways in which broader socio-political circumstances influence news consumption habits, the construction of individual identity and community building.

The Sample

The UK sample comprises 256 students from two London universities. Participants were accessed, via a mixture of on-line and paper based questionnaires, from a mix of different disciplines. Of the sample, 72% were female, 60% were second year students and 27% were first year students. 82% of the total sample were between the ages of 18 and 25, 15% were between 25-30 and 1% over 30. 70% were UK students and in some instances the UK and non UK students have been analysed separately for comparative purposes. The UK sample will be compared with those from Norway and Israel in a later paper.

The interviews are underway. They are constructed around semi-open questions. Ten students have been interviewed and more will be added in the Autumn term. They reflect the subjective aspects of

the questionnaire for the purpose of gaining insight into students' tastes, dispositions, motivations and perceptions, and their civic & political engagement within the new digital media environments. Interviews will be recorded by the researchers in each college and then analysed qualitatively.

Research shows that the relationship between new media usage and social capital is dynamic and highly contextual, in particular among younger age demographics (Shaw et al, 2001). In addition, a small number of studies have also suggested that media environments can affect how citizens learn, choose, and express opinions (Arnold, 2004; Campbell, Alford, & Henry, 1984; Levy & Squire, 2000). Therefore, the proposed comparative methodology is designed so as to address the contextual factors affecting each group of students and influencing their news exposure.

Key Findings

1 Daily news consumption is unusual whereas 74% of students use Social Media daily or more regularly.

The students were asked how often they visit a range of websites, TV stations and newspapers. The most regular news consumption among the UK students is television news: 47% watch the BBC daily, or often, with smaller percentages for other TV stations. Newspapers are read daily by 30% of students (which is high compared to other surveys of the age group). This compares with 74% who use Social Media daily or more often. The regularity of news consumption has to be read in conjunction with the findings below in which students were asked where they usually update themselves with news. The discrepancy between the two answers is interesting and seems to suggest that, for quite a large number of students, news consumption is an irregular activity with the majority updating via online news sites. This is a finding that requires more consideration particularly in view of the fact that, in their family homes, 76% of those questioned had access to newspapers and 90% to TV news bulletins.

2 Students still use traditional news sources when they access news but they use them in addition to social media, or via social media. These platforms do not substitute for each other they augment one another.

We asked the students “Where do you usually update yourself with news”. Analysing the UK students only, we found that websites of newspapers were the most popular site for accessing news (male 60.5%, female 58.2%) with Facebook not far behind but more popular (52%) with women than (42%) with men. Women were also more likely than men to cite TV news (50.5%). 34% of men and 30 % of women used Twitter.

There was a surprisingly high newspaper readership at 35%. In the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2014, there was less than half this number of newspaper readers in the 18-24 year old group. When asked about what kind of newspaper they read, those who do read regularly selected: The Guardian, Times, Independent or Telegraph, rather than the mid market or popular titles. The Metro (though freely available for those commuting) was not a popular choice, 66% said that they ‘never’ read tabloid newspapers and just under 60% ‘never’ read the Mail or Express. The discrepancy is probably due to demographic factors. This is a university sample and 60% of their parents are also university educated.

Fig 1. Where do you usually update yourself with news?

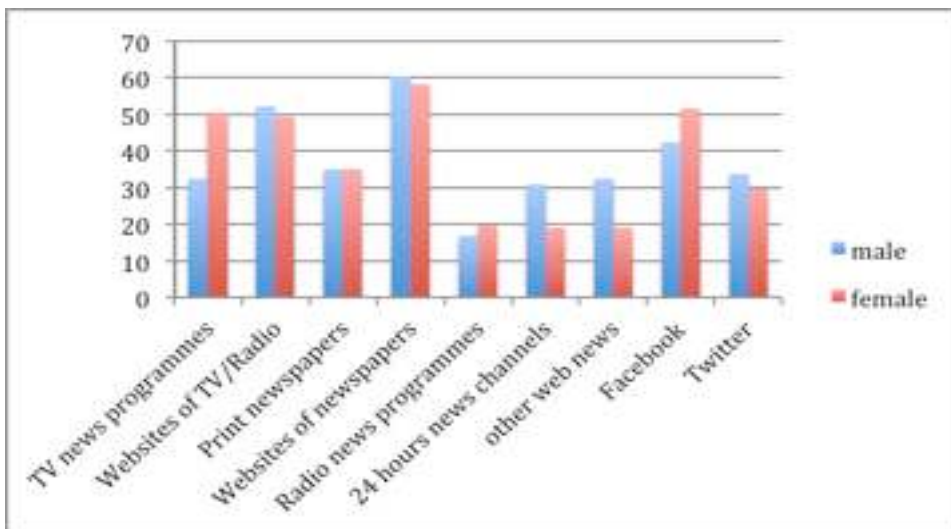
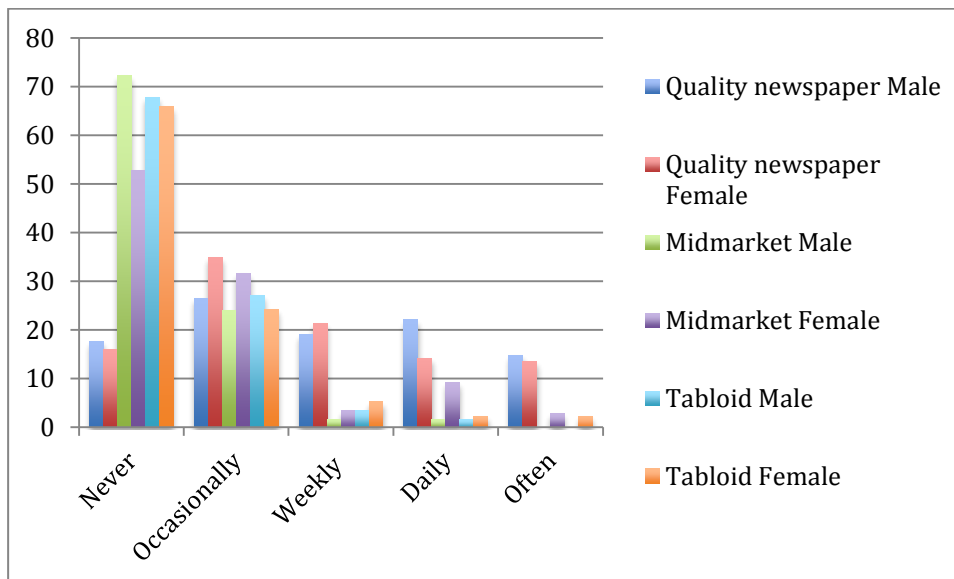


Fig 2. What type of newspaper to you usually read on or off line?



*** Quality newspaper: The Guardian, Times, The Independent and The Telegraph. Midmarket newspapers: Daily Mail and Express. Tabloid: The Sun and the Mirror**

The use of online news sites, on the other hand, was the same as Reuters Institute findings for a similar age group (59%). However we asked specifically about the websites of newspapers, rather than ‘websites’ in general because we were interested in the source of the news as well as the platform. So according to our findings, nearly 60% of students use the online sites of mainstream newspapers and 92% of our sample said that online versions of newspapers were either ‘very useful’ or ‘quite useful’, higher than any other news source, including TV news. Our findings are particularly significant because they seem to confirm suggestions from other research that a high proportion of online reading is from traditional sources. It also suggests that students in this sample are more engaged with traditional news sources than the national average. This finding needs to be explored in more depth and will be taken up in the qualitative survey for more consideration.

The proportion using TV as a main news source (fig 1) was also higher than might be expected from other surveys of young people. The Reuters report has a figure of 35% for 18-25 year olds, which is similar to the TV news watching habits of the men in our sample, but the women were more interested in TV, with fifty per cent ‘usually using TV for news updates’. However we found

a difference in levels of TV watching amongst those 'living at home' as opposed to other students. Those who were not living at home were somewhat more likely to say that they 'never' watch TV and rather less likely to say that they watch TV 'daily'. When asked how they found a specific recent news story, 62% of those living 'at home' mentioned TV compared to only 36% not 'at home'. The difference was not made up by TV watching on line, which was mentioned by 19% of those 'not at home'.

Social Media use is high (fig 1), considerably higher than in the Reuters Institute sample, and particularly high when the students were asked specific questions about where they found news. We asked two linked questions. In the first question they were asked to write down two specific and recent news stories and then select the platforms through which they had found them. 70% of male and 47% of female students mentioned social media as the source (average 56.35%), higher than any other news platform. The respondents were able to nominate more than one answer to this question and "newspaper online or mobile sites" was selected by 49% of those questioned which is lower than the percentage asked the general question about news use, but still higher than any other specific source of information.

We then asked them: "If there had been an explosion in the centre of London how would you find out"? Over 80% of the sample selected social media for this question. The next highest number was 59% for 'online news source'. The specificity of these two questions was designed to elicit a specific and considered response. The intention was that students would consider an actual event and re-construct their behaviour rather than relying on assumptions about the 'correct' answer. This could explain the discrepancies between our findings and the Reuters Institute findings.

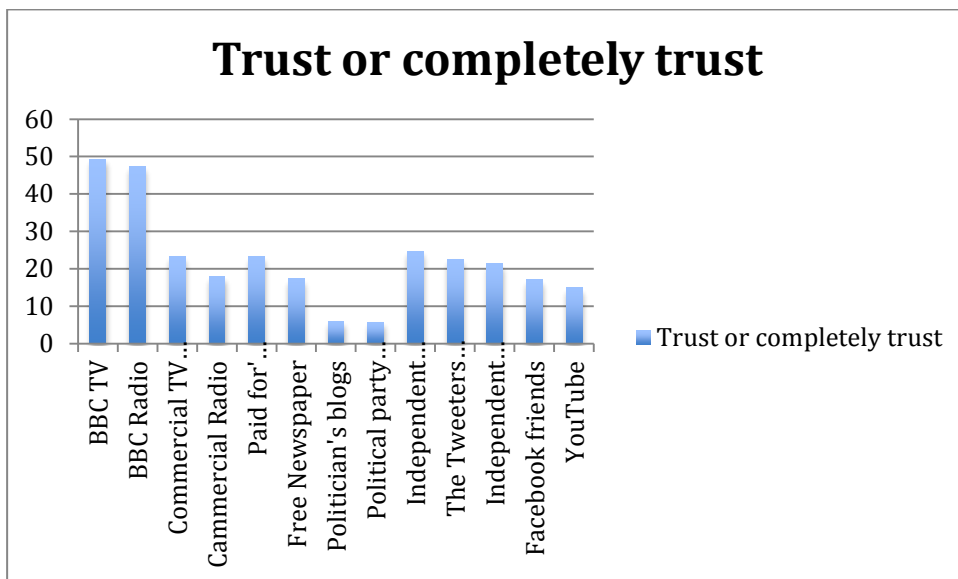
In spite of the reliance on social media, when asked: "How do you usually read the news", only 7.5% say that they read things that are passed on by friends. The vast majority (70%) say that, "usually if the headline (or tweet) is interesting I find the full article". This seems either to misunderstand the social function of social media (which is unlikely) or to suggest that the majority are using social media to follow organisations other than 'friends' and that social media is being successfully used as a 'billboard' to attract readers to access the longer text. This is something we will explore further in the interviews

3 Although students typically use a wide range of media, they have relatively low levels of trust in either media or public institutions. However, levels of trust in non-mainstream media are even lower than levels of trust in the traditional media.

Looking at TV news viewing, the BBC is by a large measure the most popular brand 47% see BBC TV news ‘daily’ or ‘often’. Fewer than 10% never see BBC news. When asked which news organisations they trust, once again the BBC is, by a significant margin, the most trusted source (both UK and non UK students). Paid for newspapers trail with only 24% trusting, or completely trusting them. Non UK students are even less trusting of paid for newspapers than are UK students (fig 5). Interestingly the level of trust in independent websites is even lower (21%) and only 22% of the respondents even trust the ‘Tweeters You Follow’.

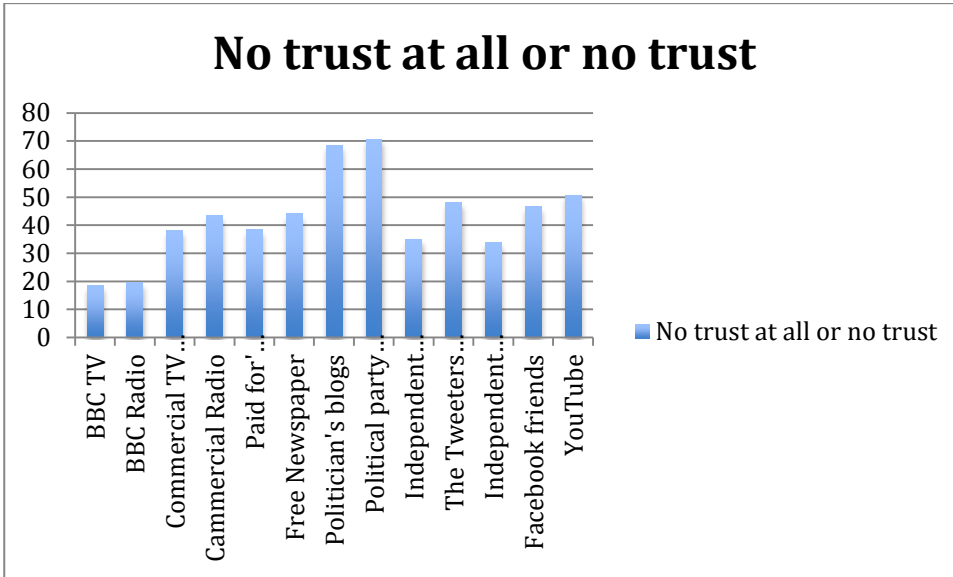
The BBC (fig 3) may be the most trusted news source but fewer than 50% would commit themselves to saying that they ‘trust’ or ‘completely trust’ the organisation. On questions of trust the responses were almost uniformly pessimistic, 48% of those using Twitter say that they don’t trust the people they follow and 47% don’t trust their Facebook friends. (fig 4)

Fig 3, How much do you personally trust the news distributed by the sources listed below



BBCTV, BBC Radio, Commercial TV Commercial Radio, Paid for Newspapers, Free Newspapers, Politicians Blogs,

Fig 4, How much do you personally trust the news distributed by the sources listed below



Key: BBCTV, BBC Radio, Commercial TV Commercial Radio, Paid for Newspapers, Free Newspapers, Politicians Blogs, Political Party Blogs, Independent Bloggers, The Tweeters You Follow, Independent Websites, Facebook Friends, You Tube

Non UK students (Fig 5) are even less trusting of British newspapers than UK students but they are more trusting of the BBC than UK students. This may relate to coverage of the ‘phone hacking enquiry’ in their home news media. We have not been able to test this hypothesis.

Fig 5 The mean value of trust in the different media: UK and non-UK students

UK_student	q0028_00	q0028_00	q0028_00	q0028_00	q0028_00	q0028_00	q0028_00	q0028_00
Are you a UK student?	01 Trust: BBC TV	02 Trust: BBC radio	03 Trust: Commercial TV (Sky, ITV)	04 Trust: Commercial radio	05 Trust: "Paid for" newspapers	06 Trust: Free newspapers	07 Trust: Politician's blogs	08 Trust: Political party blogs
NO	Mean	3,6282	3,5769	2,7179	2,5769	2,9221	2,5256	2,1795
N	N	78	78	78	78	77	78	78

UK	Std. Deviation	,88434	,89034	,91022	,87563	1,06086	,84859	,94996	,99817
UK	Mean	3,3012	3,2606	2,8667	2,7195	2,7152	2,7134	2,0364	1,9818
	N	166	165	165	164	165	164	165	165
	Std. Deviation	1,05296	1,04705	1,02727	,99415	1,04067	1,01984	,90991	,87981
Total	Mean	3,4057	3,3621	2,8189	2,6736	2,7810	2,6529	2,0823	2,0288
al	N	244	243	243	242	242	242	243	243
	Std. Deviation	1,01193	1,00850	,99177	,95806	1,04939	,97018	,92342	,91993

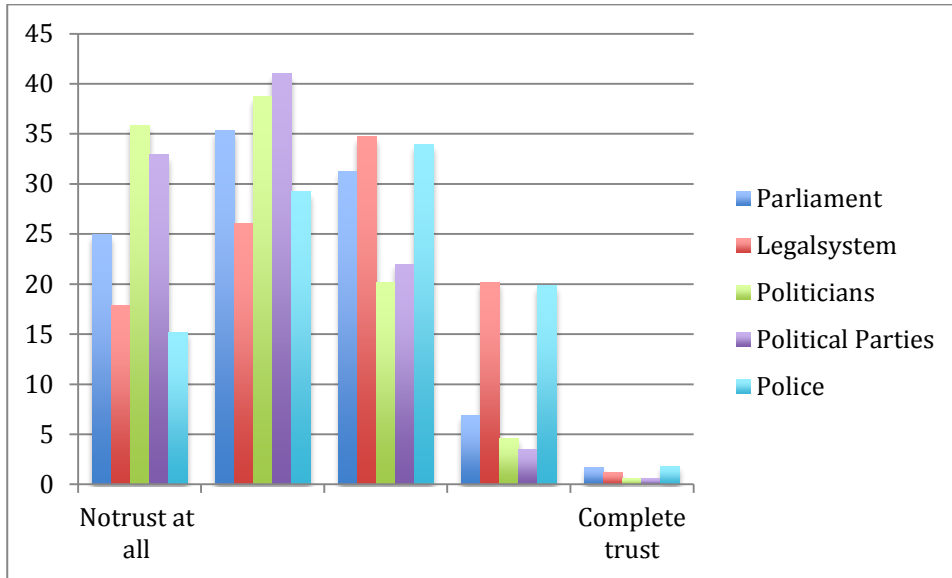
These low levels of trust in news organisations are matched by low levels of trust in any institutions (figs 6 & 7) a finding that we will be interested in comparing across the three countries. For this question we looked both at UK students and non UK students to see whether there were significant differences and found that UK students are significantly less trusting of their institutions than are non UK students. We have tested (by using Pearsons r) the correlation between the trust-variables for the UK sample and the Non-UK sample.

Fig 6 Trust in Institutions UK and non UK

UK_student Are you a UK student?		q0027_0001 Trust: Parliament	q0027_0002 Trust: Legal system	q0027_0003 Trust: Politicians	q0027_0004 Trust: The political parties	q0027_0005 Trust: The police
NON-UK	Mean	2,5000	2,7792	2,1410	2,2436	2,8831
	N	78	77	78	78	77
	Std. Deviation	1,07812	1,13118	,98988	1,08336	1,07574
UK	Mean	2,2455	2,5868	1,9641	1,9820	2,6303
	N	167	167	167	167	165
	Std. Deviation	,97231	1,04273	,89774	,86758	1,03726
Total	Mean	2,3265	2,6475	2,0204	2,0653	2,7107
	N	245	244	245	245	242

Std. Deviation	1,01197	1,07284	,92970	,94729	1,05404
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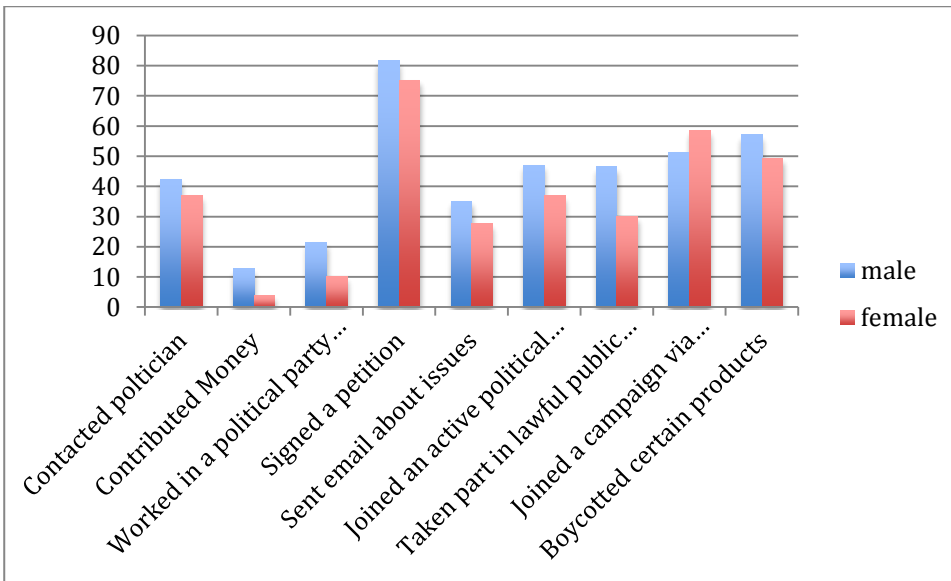
Fig 7, how much do you trust each of the following institutions (UK students only)



4 One third of students are politically engaged and two thirds are interested or very interested in national politics but a significant minority (16-18%) have little or no interest at all.

We asked questions about the level of interest in politics in the news and also the level of interest in political activity. Certainly there seemed to be evidence of polarisation. Nearly 40% have joined an active social protest, 35% have taken part in a lawful public demonstration and 39% have contacted a politician, government or local government official (fig 8). This is somewhat higher than the levels mentioned in the 2013 Hansard Audit of Political Engagement. On the other hand 23% have never even signed an online petition, which is probably the lowest level of engagement mentioned. We are interested in whether there are particular constellations of behaviour around political engagement, news and social media use and trust and will be investigating this further.

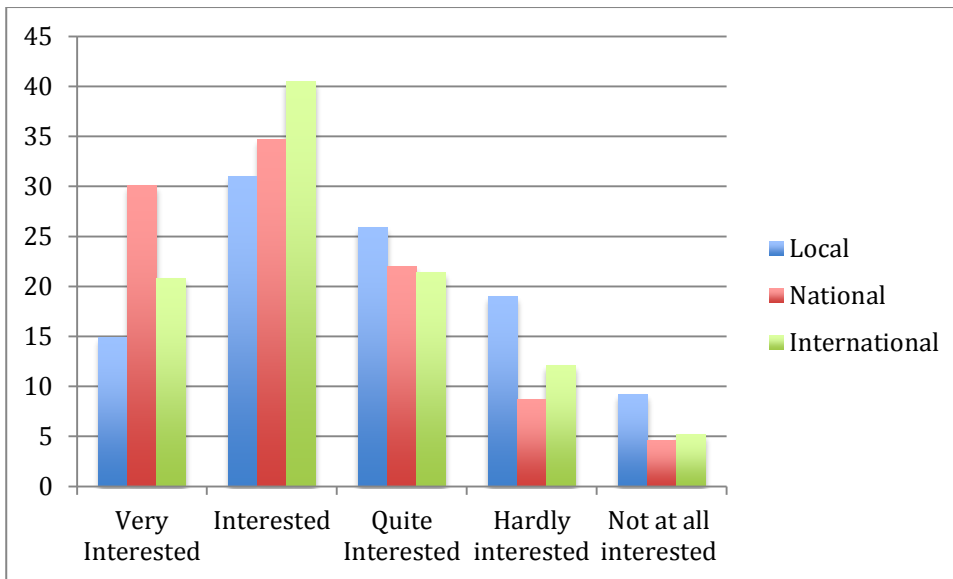
Fig 8: Political Activity (We asked have you ever.....)



Incomplete captions: Joined an active social protest, taken part in a lawful public demonstration, joined a campaign via social media.

When directly asked about their level of political interest (Fig 9) , 62% say they are interested or very interested in national politics and 64% are similarly interested in international politics but a significant 18% are hardly interested or not interested in international politics, and 16% are not interested or hardly interested in national politics with a further 22% offering a lukewarm ‘quite interested’.

Fig 9 How Interested would you say you were in local, national or international politics?



Key Issues

This quantitative survey provides the backdrop to the qualitative phase in which we need to explore the questions raised by the data. Since we have not yet fully analysed the data it is early to make predictions of the key issues. So at this stage the questions that arise are tentative.

Television and national newspapers have long played a normative role in the formation of notions of national and cultural identity. Television news still provides a connecting collective narrative for half the students but they are less likely to watch TV when they leave the family home. Our research seems to suggest, that students are making a variety of individualised choices as to how to update themselves. The majority appear to resort to mainstream sources but do so on an irregular basis. This opens up a number of questions that need further exploration both through further data analysis and via our qualitative survey.

- In the absence of narrative clarity how are young people locating themselves politically and culturally?
- How successful are these students in making sense of the world through the various forms of news they have access to?
- Does this lack of a cohesive framework affect individual young people as they search for meaning and if so how?

- Are we seeing a greater polarisation in social understanding and democratic engagement as some students find themselves ‘unplugged’ from public debate?
- If we are developing a student body in which there is a significant group of individuals without access to, or interest in, the public sphere is this a matter of concern that requires public intervention or a matter of individual choice?

Next Steps

We are interested in further exploring and comparing across our three countries using methodologies that will allow us to compare qualitative as well as quantitative data. We will be looking in particular at:

- Attitudes to news,
- Perceived usefulness of news,
- Trust in news
- News media use in relation to students self-perception, their community attachments, political and civic engagement and living circumstances.
- The understanding of the interactions of ‘big data’ and personal choice.

We will seek also to unpack questions relating to political and civic engagement and disengagement, the dynamics of identity formation, social and cultural capital and multiple conceptions of community grounded in consumption practices, geography and interest.

The national samples may be expanded in the Autumn to increase the sample and add interviews to the ten already completed. The three surveys will then be used as part of a larger comparative study. This comparative three country survey will allow us to understand the way in which students use platforms to access news but also to consider how they combine the use of news sources and social media and what news sources they trust.

The research will also suggest effective ways of engaging students with reflexive consideration of their own news consumption behaviours in a pedagogical setting. The research feeds into a three country multi-disciplinary study, which links education, media and sociology.

Impact

This very short survey period (four months) does not allow us to test the impact of our work. It is merely the very first phase of a longer study that is expected to last for at least another eighteen months. We will be producing material as we go but have only very recently started analysis.

Dissemination

Our findings will be of value to a wide range of actors. Those teaching in higher education institutions have little idea of how students find and use the information that would normally form the cultural backdrop to their studies. A clearer understanding of how students engage with information outside the arena of study could well impact on the way in which teaching is carried out and of course young people themselves will gain valuable insight into the commercial impact of their own consumption behaviour.

Such insight is also of importance to the news industry itself, which needs to understand how a future generation of consumers is interacting with news products and finally it is of interest to democracy to know how, and indeed whether, young people in higher education are engaging with events and debates that may impact on their future. With these audiences in mind our intention is to use the findings for our own work in our universities but also to disseminate our findings via a joint, multi-disciplinary seminar, co-authored articles in 2015 and/or 2016 as well as single authored articles for the academic press of our three countries.

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