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JUVENTUDE(S) MOVIMENTOS GLOBAIS E DESAFIOS FUTUROS

Organização

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ÍNDICE

- 17 **Young people as “glocal” citizens of the world. News media representations of youth in mainstream and digital native media**
Pina Lalli | Claudia Capelli
- 53 **Conhecer e antecipar competências digitais de jovens. Primeiros contributos do projeto ySKILLS com foco em Portugal**
Cristina Ponte | Lidia Marôpo | Teresa Sofia Castro
- 75 **O que sabemos e como medimos competências digitais dos jovens portugueses? Reflexões em torno de resultados de projetos de investigação**
Susana Batista | Cristina Ponte | Eva Gonçalves
- 99 **Culturas digitais juvenis e os influenciadores na era da plataformização da internet**
Lidia Marôpo | Maria do Rosário Rodrigues | Catarina Delgado | João Torres | Patrícia Dias | Eduarda Ferreira
- 121 **Juventude, política e género na argentina (2015-2020): como a mobilização das mulheres reconfigurou a juventude dos partidos políticos**
Alejandro Cozachcow
- 145 **Occuper les lieux ou être habitées par eux: dynamiques spatiales d’Occupons Montréal**
Carminda Mac Lorin
- 175 **O sistema mundial e o pensamento alternativo da juventude**
Paulo Vitorino Fontes
- 197 **Gender and politics: Reviewing the naked body in public space**
Maria Kalfa
- 203 **Notas Biográficas**

YOUNG PEOPLE AS “GLOCAL” CITIZENS OF THE WORLD. NEWS MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF YOUTH IN MAINSTREAM AND DIGITAL NATIVE MEDIA

Pina Lalli, Claudia Capelli**

Introduction

A broad scholarly consensus maintains that citizen participation represents the very foundation of democratic life, and that news journalism is one of the pillars that support democracy's continued and healthy existence, by guaranteeing the sustenance of an informed citizenry who identifies with the core principles of civic participation. In this context, young people are usually viewed as one of the key actors, without whose active contribution democratic societies are destined to a future of disintegration, apathy, and rampant individualism. Consequently, young people are also one of the primary targets when it comes to lay the blame for the decline of active citizenship and the rise of disenfranchisement, which is identified with low information levels and lack of news attentiveness (Buckingham 2000; Putnam 2000). In fact, research has suggested, in Europe and elsewhere, that younger generations have for a long time been growing less and less interested in traditional news content and more disconnected from mainstream news media, even to a greater extent than their counterparts in earlier decades (Lauf 2001; Blekesaune, Elvestad and Aalberg 2012).

At the same time, however, several studies have demonstrated that representations of youth in mainstream news media tend to reinforce the stereotype of an apathetic and individualistic collective actor, almost triggering a «self-fulfilling prophecy» (Merton 1948) which implies that predictions or expectations on what young people would wish and do eventually influence their behaviour. This common-sense representation of the disenfranchised younger generations who are only interested

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in «fun» further complicates the relationship between news journalism and young people (Griffin 2004; Wayne *et al.* 2010). It is not surprising, then, that such prejudice tends to translate into youth's migration from traditional news media to new digital news sources, that are explicitly designed for younger audiences (Newman *et al.* 2020; AgCom 2020) and can often provide young citizens with new opportunities in terms of repertoires of representations and tools for self-representation (Loader 2007).

The mutual distrust between traditional news media and youth that emerges from studies on media consumption has highlighted the need for further research on those sources of information that are growing ever more popular among younger audiences. If news consumption can still be considered one of the crucial elements of civic participation, it is important to investigate young people's experiences of news and the main representations of the public sphere that they recognize as meaningful and legitimate. We refer here in particular to two kinds of youth-oriented news media, which have emerged in the last two decades:

1) hybrid digital native journalism – positioned at the intersection of information, entertainment, youth culture and advertising – which explicitly represents itself in opposition to the mainstream media and offers news content that is specifically designed to appeal to younger audiences;

2) algorithm-driven sources, which include social network sites (SNS), news aggregators, and news outlets that are native to social media, that have progressively appeared after 2006 with the diffusion of connected mobile devices and the growth of technology companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter.

In order to examine the differences between these two forms of digital news media and retrace the processes that brought from one to the other we will address two case-studies, even though they refer to two different periods and contexts. Notwithstanding their distinct methodological frame and framework, we propose that the two sets of data can be discussed together and can provide useful insights to understand some of youth's orientations towards information, also in the context of the most recent changes in the news media landscape. Therefore, we will discuss:

(a) parts of a large set of comparative international data obtained during an European research in 2016¹: from this research we have specifically selected data

1 EU-funded Constructing Active Citizenship with European Youth (CATCH-EyoU, 2015–2018) project across seven EU countries, and directed by Elvira Cicognani at the University of Bologna: Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom, Portugal, Sweden. In this research we collected data on the media landscape in all countries, except Greece. Moreover, the analysis of the case of Vice did not include Estonia, where Vice had not established a national website at the time. See also note 2

regarding the case of *Vice*, a transnational digital news source focused on youth culture, that was originally born as a print magazine and grew into one of the most successful and innovative media companies of the early 2000s;

(b) an analysis based on data collected in ongoing research on the case of *Will*, an Italian digital news start-up born in 2020 that is part of a new generation of social-media native sources that distribute news exclusively through their Instagram profiles.

Additionally, to provide a background to our discussion of youth-oriented digital news media and discuss the role of mainstream news media in shaping public perceptions of youth, the first segment of our contribution will summarize the results emerged out of our participation in the European project mentioned above, by discussing part of the media landscape traced across seven EU countries².

We move from two main research questions: are youth a relevant actor within the discourse on the EU in news mainstream media, and what are the main issues most frequently connected to them? Conversely, what are the main issues covered in youth-oriented news media, and how are the processes of agenda setting and framing influenced by the specific forms taken by digital native news sources?

Mainstream news media and young people: a difficult relationship

The main aim of this segment of our research was to provide a framework on the European media environment, with the goal of observing how and through which actors, topics, and events young people and youth active citizenship in Europe are represented in the news media of 7 European countries (Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Estonia, and United Kingdom). We have conducted a comprehensive analysis of different media outlets. Our research questions were built on the general assumption that traditional news media constitute one of the socio-cultural landscapes surrounding and forming young people's approach to the EU and their political and civic participation, since they contribute to set up topical and

2 In addition to the authors, contributors to the collection of data for this part of the project include: Peter Noack, Monique Landberg, Katharina Eckstein, Regina Wessel (Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena); Jakub Macek, Peter Macek, Johana Kotišová, Zuzana Scott, Jan Šerek (Masaryk University); Shakuntala Banaji, Samuel Mejias (London School of Economics and Political Science); Erik Amnå, Viktor Dahl, Sofia Sohl (Örebro University); Isabel Menezes, Andreja Caetano, Pedro Ferreira, Filipe Piedade, Norberto Ribeiro (University of Porto); Veronika Kalmus, Ragne Kõuts-Klemm (University of Tartu).

thematic agendas in the public debate (Blumer 1971; Downs 1972; Entman 1993; Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Iyengar 1991; McCombs *et al.* 2014), and provide collective frameworks of interpretation (Hall 1972; Graber 1984; Goffman 1974; Lalli 2005; Moscovici 1984; Tuchman 1978).

We focused on the production of news and information rather than on practices of reception. The results of this research, conducted between 2014 and 2016, can serve as background for the analysis of the new forms of youth-oriented news media that have emerged in the last 15 years, to better understand the processes behind the migration of young people from traditional news media to digital and social media native sources. In fact, our findings point to the contradictory relationship between mainstream media and young people: while these media do not include youth as a relevant collective actor, or alternatively constrain them within specific recurring frames, younger audiences show low trust in the dominant representations proposed.

We chose to concentrate on online news portals rather than the written press, since the use of Internet as a primary source of news has been steadily increasing since 2005 and online news media are currently listed, along with television, as the most important sources used to search for information on national and European matters by European audiences and especially by the youngest cohorts (Newman *et al.* 2020; AgCom 2020). These different outlets were monitored through a search by keywords over four two-week periods in 2014 and in 2015 (May 7-21 and September 16-30)³. Each news story was then coded by issue, frame, and most relevant collective and individual actors.

Results confirmed some of our expectations based on prior literature: young people rarely appear as relevant actors and we could observe hardly any trace of an ongoing, and independent discourse regarding youth in European mainstream news media. Only in 123 out of 1848 stories from online newspapers could we find explicit mention of young people – a mere 6,7% of the total. A look at the distribution of these stories by country shows how, in some cases, the national coverage of European issues tends to ignore the role of youth. Stories that name or quote young people as individuals are even less frequent. In our 5-country subset there are only 37 items where at least one person identified as “young” is named, while the number slightly increases in the 2-country subset: a total of 20 news stories out of 121, 17 of which, however, are to be found in the Estonian sample alone.

3 In 2014: the first period coincided with the two weeks before the beginning of the European Parliamentary election.

News stories that include the presence of youth are framed quite homogeneously in both the subsets. In particular, the "social" frame (which includes issues concerning health, education, solidarity and similar) is predominant in all 7 national coverage and accounts for close to one third of all the stories that mention young people. This is an association that, as we will see, emerges from the analysis of youth-oriented media as well. The political frame - mostly connected to national politics - rarely includes youth as collective actor, except for their depiction as a group that is particularly "at risk" of being attracted by the far right and populist movements, especially around the time of electoral events.

On the other hand, there is no significant trace of a discourse framing young people as activists or involved in forms of civic participation, except for some soft mentions of a few volunteering activities. Overall, the concept of active citizenship in relation to youth is almost absent from the mainstream media corpus: even the most traditional forms of political participation, like voting, are only rarely discussed in reference to young people in Europe, despite the high intensity of the coverage of the 2014 European parliamentary election campaign.

Other topics associated with youth include labour, which tends to be evoked with a negative connotation in connection to the 2008 economic crisis, and issues such as unemployment, as well as education, which, on the contrary, is often linked to a pro-European perspective and represented as one of the most successful areas of intervention of European institutions. This theme includes coverage of European programs like Erasmus+, which is widely considered to be the most successful initiative for young people offered in the EU.

Overall, then, European mainstream seems to be excluding young people from the construction of a discourse regarding European politics and society, but whenever youth is discussed, it usually falls into one of these three representations:

(a) A *vulnerable collective actor*: the main victim of the aftermath of the economic crisis, prone to having problems with unemployment, housing, lifestyle, and crime. Even when they are - rarely - evoked as voters, young people are considered to be under the influence of extreme populism. Therefore, we can observe how some degree of moral panic seems to persist in the cross-EU media representation of youth (see Cohen 2002): young people are depicted as relatively resilient bearers of the anti-social consequences of general economic unease.

(b) The *main beneficiaries of the most successful EU programs*, such as Erasmus+ and Youth Guarantee. The EU basis of education is valued positively especially in the Italian and Czech media, which argue that the programs are significantly helpful with regards to the job market, and that cooperation of the European educational system

leads to improved integration and lower radicalization. Moreover, students-as-tourists are constructed as beneficial to national economies.

(c) *Non-active and politically apathetic*, except for isolated cases. In fact, the concept of active citizenship in relation to youth, even as an underlying issue, is virtually absent from the whole corpus: even the most traditional forms of political participation, like voting, are only rarely discussed in reference to young people in Europe, despite the high intensity of the coverage of the 2014 EP election campaign in almost every national sample.

The media representation of young people seems here to be limited to a series of highly normative frames that implicitly suggest what should be expected and accepted from “good” young European citizens. It also constrains them in a dualistic vision, where they can only be either passive victims of larger economic and social processes, who have been left in need of assistance, or a problem to be addressed by the institutions: as Buckingham has argued, young people «are ceaselessly urged to be “mature” and constantly reminded that they are not» (Buckingham, 2000, p. 202). In either case, within these representations young people are inevitably devoid of voice and agency. As we will see, this is completely reversed in the narratives offered by youth-oriented digital news media, like *Vice* - which will be at the centre of the second segment of our research - that seek to construct news content that is explicitly tailored on their interests and consumption habits and have become the preferred destination for those young people who have been turning away from traditional news journalism.

«Inspiring a new global generation»: The case of Vice

Vice was originally founded in Montreal in 1994 as a free print magazine centred on youth culture, countercultures, arts, and news, with the idea of creating «an outlet for young people who found mainstream culture lame» (Wiedeman 2018). The first version of the magazine was funded through a government welfare program, but, over the course of the following thirty years, what was once a small local enterprise progressively expanded into Vice Media Group, a global digital media and broadcasting company that was valued \$5.6 bn in 2017 (Nicolaou & Fontanella-Kahn 2021) and now owns, amongst other properties, a network of websites (all variously connected to *Vice.com*), a film production studio, a record label and a publishing house. Past investors include The Walt Disney Company, 21st Century Fox and Hearst Corporation (Bødker 2016).

This extraordinary success was based on a series of innovations for which *Vice* is still credited and that have paved the way for a new generation of media companies. For example, while heavily investing in its internet presence since the early 2000s, *Vice* gave birth to Virtue, an advertising agency where content creators who already worked for the web magazine could be deployed on behalf of brands looking to expand their reach towards the younger generations. Then in 2007, it was one of the first digital media outlets to begin an intensive production of online video content, managing to combine the revenue coming from higher advertising rates linked to videos, compared to online written content, with the fact that young people, and especially teenagers, were rapidly becoming the main consumers of audio-visual content on the web.

Finally, in the spring of 2010, the company landed a collaboration with Intel that would constitute a small revolution in the way in which young people think about and read the news. Intel was interested in generating additional publicity for Pentium processors, and eventually invested \$25 million in the launch of a multimedia series on art and technology, linked to *Vice.com*, that ushered in the era of «branded content» (Wiedeman 2018). This type of hybrid content, which combined news, entertainment, and advertising, was to become *Vice's* trademark and the reason for both financial success and controversies (Bødker 2016). The idea of openly merging commercial and editorial content, beyond the traditional forms of “native advertising”, was soon adopted by many outlets, including legacy newspapers, and further expanded in several other forms and practices, as we will see, with the era of social media (Ferrer-Conill & Karlsson 2019).

Another key element to understand the general framing of the content – and especially the news content – offered by *Vice*, is its specific generational perspective. Soon after *Vice* became a digital outlet, it also began marketing its product to one age group whose tastes, consumption habits, and spending power were attracting the attention of market researchers from all sectors: the so-called Millennials. This generational cohort has been generally delimited by two specific birth years – 1981 and 1996 (Dimock 2019) – and was progressively constructed by the media and the marketing discourse as a transnational social group characterized by an array of specific traits, interests, and lifestyle choices (Strauss & Howe 2000): mainly white, suburban, with access to higher education, high-speed internet connections, last-generation mobile devices, hyperconnected, with an intensive social media and web presence, a penchant for nostalgia and “retromania”, entrepreneurial but self-absorbed, and so on. Significantly, surveys have shown that “Millennials” are also the age group that is less likely to identify with their generational label, further confirming the marketing origins of this definition (Pew Research Center 2015).

However, *Vice* explicitly targeted this group as primary readers and consumers of content, promoting itself as “representative” of «a whole generation of young people – influencing what they see, hear, wear, think, put in their mouths, dream about, and flush shamefully down the toilet when no one’s looking». Its goal, *Vice* claimed, was to inspire «a new global generation» (Vice 2013). This choice, and, more generally the ability of *Vice*’s founders to connect their platform to the zeitgeist of the early 21st century, with all its contradictions, constituted one of the main reasons behind the success of the media group.

Our research on *Vice* was conducted in 2016, when *Vice* Media was still growing and investing on digital news as one of its main enterprises. For our purposes, the case of *Vice* as a youth-oriented news platform was, and remains, particularly interesting for two main reasons. Firstly, because of its transnational character, which allows for a comparative analysis of content: at the time of the research it counted 29 national bureau on 4 different continents, and 25 national versions of *Vice*. Secondly, because it can give us useful insight into the process of radical transformation that digital journalism and news platforms have undergone in the last twenty years, especially regarding young people’s news consumption. In 2016, *Vice* News still represented one of the most important divisions of the company, and, in late 2015, it had increased the number of local newsrooms from 2 (based in the US and the UK) to 9 (in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Australia, Brazil and Mexico), demonstrating a new focus on Europe. In 2016, *Vice*’s monthly audience consisted of 25/26 million unique visitors in the US alone, where it was ranked by Alexa.com as the 93rd most visited website, but its digital reach was impressive in all the 6 countries involved in our research.

The sample retrieved from *Vice.com* includes all the articles published over a week, May 2-8, 2016, on six national websites (Czechia, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, UK)⁴. Each national *Vice* website functioned, and still functions, as an aggregator of stories that are either written originally for the website or come from a network of *Vice* verticals (or thematic websites called “channels”), along with additional stories that are translated and re-published from one or more of the 25 national websites. The result is that each national website shows different stories, although the same story can be published on more than one of them at the same time. *Vice* websites publish both long-form stories and articles of traditional length, often including large-format photographs and videos. The news coverage presented by *Vice* is a mix of hard and soft news, daily and in-depth reporting. To have a more

4 See note 2 for contributors. As of September 2021 the Czech and Portuguese sites are no longer active, while other languages have been introduced by *Vice* over the years.

precise idea of the framing and categorization of the stories, we considered the same list of frames and issues used in the coding of the mainstream news media, adding issues where necessary.

Society and culture represent the primary focus of *Vice* and frame 73% of the total sample (figure 1). Besides the absolute predominance of these categories, a few other observations can be made: the economic frame, for example, is virtually absent, while the international nature of *Vice* is apparent in the equal space dedicated to world events (political or otherwise) and national affairs, while events in other EU countries – considered in their national context – or regarding the sphere of EU politics only cover a small percentage of the sample. We also noticed a more frequent coverage of national political affairs in the three countries that have a national *Vice* newsroom compared to the others.

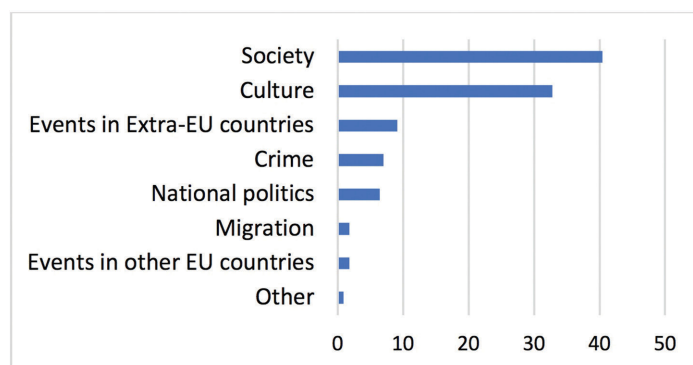


Figure 1. Percentage of stories identified by each frame in *Vice* 2-8 May 2016 (Czechia, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, UK) (N=342).

We then identified two main issues for each item, shown in Figure 2. Our analysis confirms the overall prevalence of social issues – with a specific focus on certain inequalities (i.e. race and racism, gender equality, the conditions of prisons in different countries), and health (public and personal) – and youth culture, with many stories on music, photography, and cinema, as well as entertainment (celebrities, television, videogames, etc.), sex, and drugs. Drugs and sex are mentioned in 25% of the sample, and they are treated from a variety of perspectives. Sex is looked at in the context of love relationships, the consumption of pornography, health, and gender equality. The discourse on drugs (and, to a lesser extent, alcohol) involves a political dimension (in stories that cover European and extra-European countries' regulations of use and selling of illegal drugs), but especially a cultural perspective:

drugs are represented as a constant in the lives of young people and many *Vice* stories cover the different sides of their use – from addiction to the role of drugs in youth subcultures.

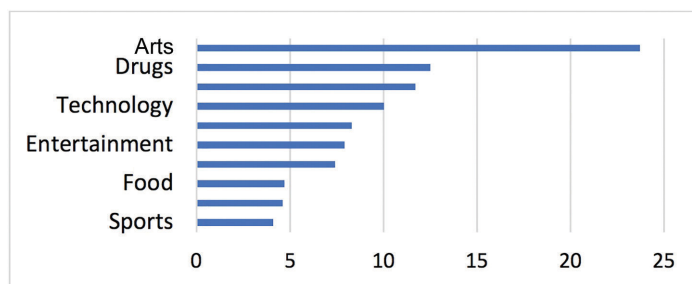


Figure 2. Percentage of the 10 main issues covered in 342 stories: *Vice* 2-8 May 2016 (Czechia, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, UK).

There are only a handful of stories that deal with institutional politics, and they often look at the topics they cover with a critical tone, as in the case of the stories on the 2016 US Presidential election (all of which focus on Donald Trump, who was then the Republican candidate), or when discussing, as we mentioned above, drug legislation or police brutality. Furthermore, issues related to the European context are extremely rare. Politics, however, frequently surface in the reporting of non-institutionalized forms of political participation and dissent events, such as the demonstrations for May Day in Germany, or the clashes between activists and the police at the border of Austria and Italy. Other forms of participation, such as volunteering or voting, are rarely covered: there is, for example, only one story covering the UK 2016 local elections, even though they fell within the period we considered.

However, one of the most interesting results of the analysis is that a comparison of the issues covered by the six national websites revealed no significant difference between the samples: despite the establishment of local-language newsrooms and the national focus that *Vice* had been increasingly pursuing, themes and topics in the news content did not seem to vary significantly across the national websites⁵. This suggests that the model of news production proposed by *Vice* has always been inherently transnational, even while covering national contexts and using local languages; in other words, audiences are identified primarily by their age group, rather than as national communities. To further explore this dimension, stories were coded for

⁵ Only the three national websites that have a national newsroom (Germany, Italy, UK) show a more frequent coverage of local political events.

geographical perspective and divided into national, EU, extra-European, and stories that did not adopt any specific or recognizable point of view. This categorization provided a general indication regarding the degree to which – despite the homogeneity of themes and topics – the information offered by *Vice* was effectively translated into the national contexts of each country.

The prevalence of a globalized perspective is once again confirmed when we compare this dominant cosmopolitan identity with the hypothesis of a shared sense of European citizenship: a truly “European” perspective was only found in a small, non-significant number of stories, even if include in this category all the stories that reported on events from other EU countries. Results also showed that the stories that employ a European perspective are still a minority within each national sample, and in two cases – the Czech and Portuguese websites – they are completely absent. The vast majority of the items report either on extra-European issues and events or have no geographic determination.

Therefore, overall, the sample shows a transnational interest in stories, much more than in mainstream media; in fact, the only frame that presents a relevant distribution in a territorial perspective – which is Crime – mainly covers news from extra-EU contexts than national or European ones, while both the frames Society and Culture are almost equally divided into stories that have no specific geographic perspective. However, it is interesting to note that photo essays account for most stories that employ a local perspective, similarly to what happens in the professional journalistic routines⁶.

Finally, a discussion of the types of stories published on *Vice* will help us understand some of its most important specificities (figure 3). So far we have identified *Vice* articles with the generic definition of “stories”. A “story” is usually considered as a descriptive text, which contains an account of facts and events – probably the most common format in journalism. *Vice* stories, however, differ under many aspects from the news stories that can be read on daily newspapers, even in their online versions, and from more traditional web information magazines. All the websites of the *Vice* galaxy, *Vice News* included, often employ long-form reporting and give ample space to short video essays and large-format photographs, which are embedded in the stories and often occupy ample portions of the screen. Secondly, one of the most distinctive features of the information offered by *Vice* is the extensive use of the first-person narrative. Essays present titles like *I Was a High School Bully*, or

6 We will not delve here into the deeper significance of this practice in journalism, which deserves further research and analysis, for example regarding identity recognition connected to the visual dimension of news.

What I Learned Having Sex as a Young Woman in Pakistan, and report on personal experiences that are sometimes connected to larger arguments regarding social and cultural themes. The style of these pieces is reminiscent of *gonzo* journalism⁷, but, at the same time, owes much to blogging and to the first-person perspective that is usually to be found in social media postings.

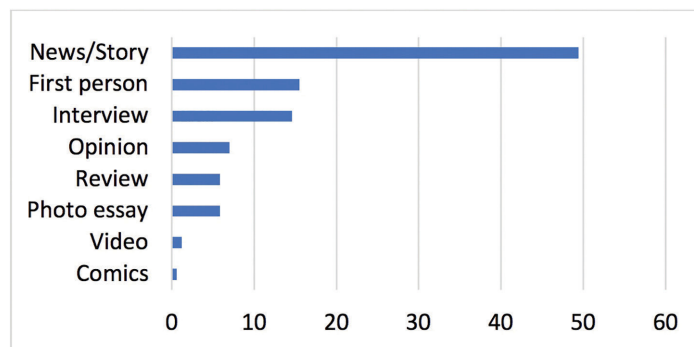


Figure 3. Percentage of stories of each type in the total sample (N=342): Vice 2-8 May 2016 (Czechia, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, UK).

Only a portion of the stories included in our sample can be strictly defined as first-person narratives. However, the presence of a personal perspective goes well beyond this specific journalistic form: interviews, opinion pieces, reviews and photo essays are all characterized by a predominance of an individual point of view on the different topics and issues they discuss. For example, an opinion piece titled *How Come My Generation Is So Bored With Life?*, which appeared on the British, Italian, Swedish and Portuguese websites, discusses the stereotypes that are usually attributed to the “Millennial” generation by comparing them to the author’s own personality and experiences as a typical millennial. Many stories, moreover, touch on specific issues by collecting short interviews with multiple people who act as direct witnesses on a particular experience (*Un po’ di stranieri spiegano cosa li ha scioccati di più dell’Italia / A bunch of foreigners explain what shocked them about Italian culture and customs*).

7 Gonzo journalism is a style of journalism that is written without claims of objectivity, often including the reporter as part of the story via a first-person narrative. The word “gonzo” is believed to have been first used in 1970 to describe an article by Hunter S. Thompson (Thompson 2003), who later popularized the style.

In conclusion, Vice.com has proved to be a particularly interesting case of youth-oriented news content. It represents in many ways a *hybrid object*:

Geographically, it operates at once on a global and local scale; the content offered is the result of a strategy that combines new trends in web journalism with marketing (Hamilton 2016);

- It is positioned at the intersection of information, entertainment, youth culture and advertising; the style of its authors is a mix of genres, which borrows techniques from older generations of journalists and, at the same time, mirrors the language of social media users;
- It represents itself in opposition to the mainstream media, offering an "insider" perspective into youth cultures and lifestyles, imagining a global community with common interests (Bødker 2016).

Furthermore, as a media company, it proved innovative – and extremely successful – in its aggressive pursuit of profit opportunities through non-standard advertising, while owing much of its past value to mainstream investors such as Disney and 21st Century Fox. All of these characteristics set it apart from traditional news sources and made it, as Rupert Murdoch once famously tweeted, a «Wild, interesting effort to interest millennials who don't read or watch established media» (Widdicombe 2013). They also made it a unique case for the purposes of this research, especially if we consider its global reach and the presence of local-language websites for most EU countries, which provide a unique opportunity to observe an example of a transnational, youth-oriented media environment in a comparative perspective.

Within our sample, politics tend to constitute a minor issue. This is true especially for mainstream, traditional politics, which is evoked only in connection to issues that receive more attention on *Vice*, as in the case of the multiple stories regarding drug legislation in various states across the globe. Institutions and governments, moreover, are often the object of criticism: episodes of police brutality are covered in two cases, while stories on various aspects of the dire conditions of prisons and inmates recur throughout the sample. This relative absence of an extensive coverage of political events, in favour of a predominance of content regarding youth culture, entertainment and arts, would seem to suggest that, in its pursuit of younger audiences, *Vice* has reflected the disenfranchisement from mainstream electoral politics that has been growing in recent years among young people in Europe (Sloam 2013). Significantly, the only story that covers an electoral event – the 2016 UK local elections on May 5 – bears the title, *Local Election Results 2016: Sorry, What Does Any Of This Mean?* This attitude may be confirmed by the presence, on the other

hand, of a series of articles that cover episodes of protest and dissent events, such as the demonstrations for May Day in Germany (“Merkel ins KZ!” *Der 1. Mai in Sachsen / “Merkel in a concentration camp!” May Day in Saxony*) or examples of non-institutional youth activism, like the profile of London housing activist group “Take Back the City” (*Meet the Radical Group Trying to Make London Less Shit for Non-Rich People*). Therefore, while political and civic participation remain, in our sample, secondary issues, they do emerge, especially in the coverage of alternative forms of protest politics and activism: this preference seems to mirror the documented trend of declining youth participation in electoral and conventional politics issues (Loader, Vromen and Xenos 2014).

These examples clearly show how *Vice’s* brand of journalism, its identity, and a significant part of its success, have always been intricately connected to a single age group, usually labelled as “Millennials”. However, this radical choice might also explain its more recent decline. In the course of the last few years, *Vice* has started experiencing different kinds of setbacks: first the *New York Times* published a story detailing episodes of sexual misconduct at the company, where its «boundary-pushing culture created a workplace that was degrading and uncomfortable for women» (Steele 2017); then Disney wrote down a large part of its \$400 million investment in *Vice Media*, a warning sign that pointed to the difficulties brought about by the new media landscape, where most digital advertising sales have been absorbed by Facebook and Google (Nicolaou 2019); finally, in 2020 it was reported that in the middle of the Covid19 pandemic the *Vice News* division had been forced to lay off 155 employees (Spangler 2020). It would seem, then, that even the business model proposed by *Vice* is beginning to lose traction in the ever-changing field of digital journalism.

From websites to algorithm-driven news sources

What, then, could cause such a prominent player in the field of youth-oriented digital media to start its potential decline towards obsolescence? Part of the reasons could be linked to *Vice’s* preferred audience – those hip Millennials who are now getting closer to 40 and whose consumption habits are naturally changing with age. As we will see, marketing strategies have already identified new labels such as Y or Z Generation to refer to younger people and have observed the spreading of new interests and values. The language and themes that used to define the version of youth culture celebrated by *Vice* – the «bad boy brand» with a countercultural spin – are also getting old, as the public condemnation that followed the recent cases

of sexual misconduct uncovered by *The New York Times* seems to be indicating. However, we should also consider the wider context at play, which has brought fundamental transformation in the current digital landscape as well as in the field of journalism. First, the global diffusion of connected mobile and wearable devices has opened revolutionary possibilities in terms of production, distribution, and consumption of news content. Secondly, the introduction and rapid global growth of new online platforms for public communication known as social networking sites (SNS) has forever changed the way that «the people formerly known as the audience» (Rosen 2006) encounter, access and engage with the news. In particular, the sharing of information among networked publics through social recommendation in algorithm-driven environments has raised serious issues for a media industry that was traditionally based on a hierarchical model of communications (Hermida *et al.* 2012; van Dijck & Poell 2013).

Within this rapidly changing context, market researchers have started turning their attention towards a new, younger generational cohort, immediately labelled as "Generation Z" (Williams 2015). This new group of consumers includes, according to the dominant media representation, young people born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock 2019), who have spent their teenage years in a world where mobile devices, social media, on-demand entertainment, and constant connectivity constitute a taken-for-granted feature of everyday life. The so-called Gen-Zers could in fact be defined as true digital natives – or even «social natives» (Oster 2014) – as opposed to Millennials, who are mere «digital migrants» who have had the opportunity of living in a world that was still partially non-digital (Galan *et al.* 2019).

According to Forbes, as early as 2015 Generation Z's spending power had already been valued «at close to \$200 billion annually when you factor in their influence on parental or household purchases» (Heller 2015), while, according to a report commissioned by Google, «Gen Z believe and rely on brands to shape their world» (Google 2017). Other generation-defining characteristics identified over the years include the intensive consumption of visual and ephemeral online content, shorter attention spans, the use of social media as a research tool, a strong entrepreneurial sense, but especially a deep interest in social issues such as civil rights, equality, and environmentalism, which have dominated the public and media discourse during the last decade. Milestones such as the legalization of gay marriage in many Western countries, the increase of multiracial families, the appearance in the public arena of new social movements calling for racial and gender equality, and the growing concern with climate change have defined not only the world in which these young people grew up, but also their political sensitivities and their preferred forms of civic participation.

Data presented by a 2021 report from Pew Research Center shows, in fact, how younger Americans, and especially “Gen Zers” are more likely than other age groups to consider global climate change as a “top concern”, as well as to get personally involved with activities such as volunteering and attending rallies and protests (Pew Research Center 2021b). Also, and more importantly for our scopes, social media users aged 18 to 24 are more likely to have encountered some kind of online content addressing climate change or advocating in favour of issues such as racial justice and to have actively engaged with these posts by commenting or sharing them. These interactions, the report reveals, often trigger «emotional reactions [...] ranging from feeling motivated and confident about addressing climate change to feeling anxious for the future and angry that more isn’t being done now» (*ivi*, p. 21).

It would seem, then, that younger generations in the US draw part of their motivation for mobilization in support of a cause such as climate activism from exposure to content found on algorithm-driven sources, like social media platforms. This conclusion becomes particularly relevant if linked to recent data regarding young people’s news consumption on social media, since it points in the direction of one of the most significant changes that are defining the current historical phase: the presence of large technology companies like Facebook, Google, Apple, and Twitter, which «have taken on most of the functions of news organizations, becoming key players in the news ecosystem» (Bell & Owen 2016, p. 14). From a more radical perspective, some researches highlight the new role of “*infomediation*” played by Big Tech, which influences both the processes of production and the use of information (Smyrnaiois 2015; Lalli 2015).

Figures 4 e 5, which focus on the case of Italy, clearly show how deeply this transformation has affected the news consumption habits of younger generations: not only is the internet the news medium of choice for young people – with around one third of teenagers between 14 and 17 years of age consuming news *only* online (AgCom 2020) – but they also overwhelmingly favour algorithm-driven sources, like social media and news aggregators, over more traditional sources like online newspapers, web tv and radio or even digital-native news outlets like *Vice*.

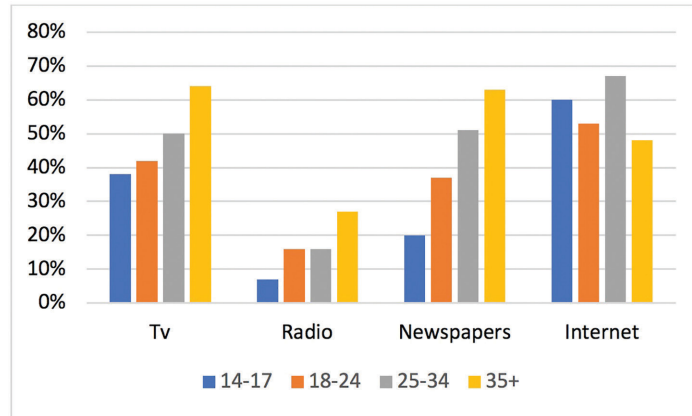


Figure 4. Use of each medium for news consumption in each age group in Italy (% out of the total population) (AgCom 2020).

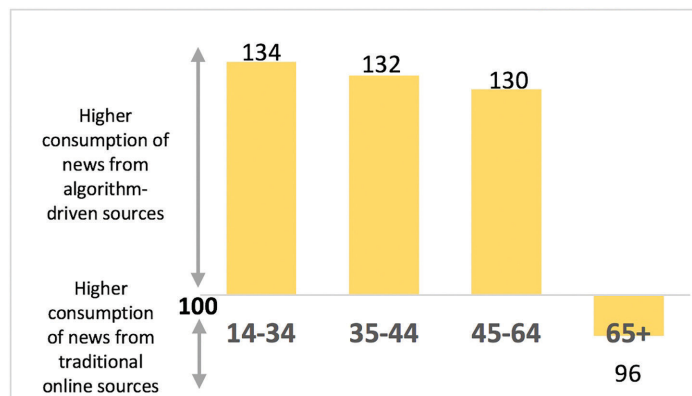


Figure 5. News consumption index for algorithm-driven sources and traditional online sources in each age group in Italy (AgCom 2018).⁸

These figures, which are similar to many others coming from countries all around the globe (see Pew Research Center 2021a; Newman *et al.* 2020), raise several questions regarding the access that young people have to news content and their practices of news consumption, since, as we have seen, the control of pathways to audiences no longer lies with the organizations which publish news but with the

8 The index score is higher than 100 when there is higher news consumption from algorithm-driven sources, lower than 100 when there is higher news consumption from traditional online sources, and equal to 100 in case of equally distributed news consumption between the two.

platforms that carry it. Moreover, social media platforms have started making editorial decisions on the content that is made available to their users. They decide what is legitimate and what should instead be labelled as inappropriate or misleading and therefore be banned, or what should appear more frequently on the users' news feed and what should be hidden, while relying on algorithms to be able to work at a scale and target each user with more precision. Some authors observe that these automated decisions tend to replicate the system of control that characterized traditional media, even though they are far more opaque to the public (Diakopoulos 2015; Marres 2018). Furthermore, some studies suggest that «personal significance» of content is the core principle behind the process of algorithmic curation on SNS (DeVito 2017).

Social media users' exposure to news, therefore, tends to be heavily dependent on factors such as system-driven recommendations based on the tracking of presumed interests shown in the personal web surfing, and the interconnected but not always visible actions of those "friends" with whom they interact more frequently. These elements also call into question the notion of «incidental news exposure», which, according to a rich literature, is one of the defining characteristics of news consumption practices on SNS and can have a positive impact on the diversity of viewpoints that individuals usually encounter (Fletcher & Nielsen 2018). However, social media are fundamentally based on the idea of customization, then it is necessary to consider the possibility that the process of distribution of content among users leaves truly little room for "accidents" and is inherently unequal (Kümpel 2020). If we add that Mark Zuckerberg announced in 2018 that Facebook would start showing its users «less public content like posts from businesses, brands, and media» unless it could «encourage meaningful interactions between people»⁹, the competition for visibility on SNS for traditional publishers has become increasingly fierce.

In fact, by offering incentives to news organizations for specific types of content or by influencing publisher activity through the imposition of design standards, social platforms are shaping journalism itself (Lewis & Molyneaux 2018). Over the years, research has tackled different dimensions of this process, for example by examining the interaction between social media and established journalistic norms and practices (Lasorsa *et al.* 2012), or the ongoing negotiation of boundaries between audiences and journalists (Carlson & Lewis 2015). Our focus here will be on the most recent forms of social-media native journalism, which have mostly been constructed

9 The complete statement, posted on January 12, 2018, is available at <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10104413015393571> (Last accessed 12/06/2021).

as youth-oriented news outlets. We will concentrate on Instagram – a social media platform whose relevance as a channel for news distribution is constantly increasing, especially among younger audiences – to examine the effects that this platform’s own affordances, aesthetics and modes of interaction can have in terms of agenda and thematization of issues.

«How to impress people at dinner»: the news on Instagram

Instagram was launched in 2010 as a social networking site dedicated to visual content, and especially filter-manipulated photographs with short captions. Since then it has introduced several additional features, which allow users to post videos of different lengths, live stream, sell goods, and, most notably, share ephemeral content in the form of “stories”, vertical photos or videos that remain visible for 24 hours and are not automatically stored on users’ profiles. Acquired by Facebook in 2012 for \$1 bn, it surpassed 1bn monthly active users in 2018 and is currently one of the most popular global SNS (Dhillon 2018). As fig. 6 shows, as of January 2021 more than 70% of Instagram users worldwide were aged 34 and under, making it one of the most successful social platforms among the younger generations, and especially those Gen-Zers coveted by market researchers.

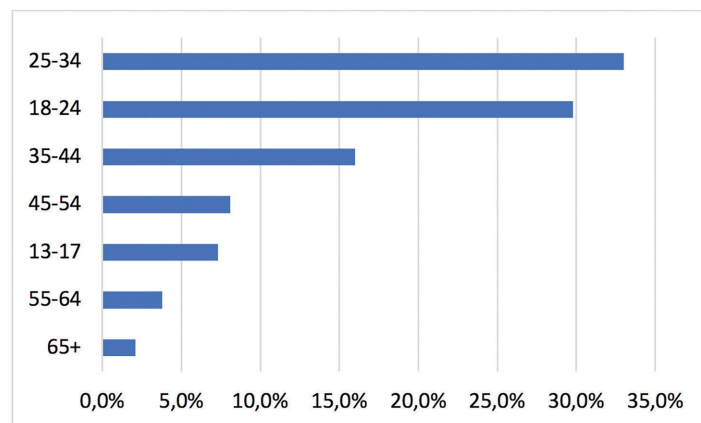


Figure 6. Distribution of Instagram users worldwide as of January 2021, by age group (source: Statista.com – last accessed 10/6/2021).

Figures also show how Instagram has progressively established itself and is still growing as a popular source for news (Newman *et al.* 2020). As a social media space,

it offers specific affordances in terms of interaction with audiences, sharing audio-visual content, and immediacy that make it attractive for the news media, who are still adapting their practices of news production and distribution to be able to fit in. This is certainly true in the case of both legacy and digital native outlets based on websites. For example, the whole social media strategy of a legacy newspaper like *The Guardian* is built around its Instagram profile, which now counts 4.4 million followers; *The New York Times* has over 14 million followers and offers short versions of news stories as captions for Instagram posts; *Vice* (4 million followers) has translated the visual style of its website into its gallery images, full of capitalized titles and flash photography.

However, all these outlets, *Vice* included, still present business models – be it in form of paywalls or advertising – that are highly dependent on the traffic that their websites can attract (Bell & Owen 2017). Therefore, a large majority of the content they share on Instagram is not designed to be consumed natively, but to drive audiences back to their websites through links that are embedded either in stories or on the news outlet's profile through third-party services – since Instagram does not allow multiple hyperlinks (Vázquez-Herrero *et al.* 2019). This is the case for most publishers and outlets that are not social-media native, and which therefore run the risk of dispersing part of the younger news consumers, who represent, as we have seen, one of those «elusive audiences» (Hermida 2016, p. 85) that are not likely to be easily attracted to online spaces located outside of social media platforms. Moreover, young people's dependence on algorithm-driven sources for news consumption makes them more susceptible to what has been called the «news-finds-me» perception – the belief that relevant news content will simply reach them through social connection and peers, without having to actively seeking it out (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.* 2017). As research on news consumption suggests, for younger audiences «the experience of news should feel as easy and accessible as Facebook and Netflix. This is partly about how the content is presented, but also about how it is surfaced» (Galan *et al.* 2019, p. 5).

Within this highly competitive context, a new generation of digital start-ups is beginning to invest on the offer of pure social-media native news content, especially through Instagram, a SNS that, as we have seen, presents an array of features that are particularly adequate to news distribution and is popular with young people. The most significant difference from the previous wave of online news start-ups, that included now established players such as *BuzzFeed*, *Vox*, *The Huffington Post*, and, of course, *Vice*, lies precisely in the medium that is chosen for news distribution, which in turn has a crucial influence on the way that news is constructed and presented to the audience (Carlson & Usher 2016), since Instagram allows only for microformats

designed specifically for mobile consumption. On the other hand, they often share the position of recipients of significant investments from venture capital to build for-profit companies from scratch (Usher 2017), although in the case of this younger generation of start-ups, further research is needed to explore the full range of business models that they rely on.

We are going to focus here on the case of Italy, one of the countries included in the research on *Vice*, where teenagers and young adults, as figures 7 and 8 show, are well above the global average use of Instagram for news consumption needs in their age group. As a response to this increasing demand, several Instagram native news start-ups have emerged as recently as the past two years. Among these, the profile that has thus far been able to achieve the most impressive results in terms of following and engagement is *Will*, a start-up born in 2020 from founders Imen Boulahrajane¹⁰, 27, and Alessandro Tommasi, 34, who had the idea of providing financial news for younger audiences through «lighter, up-to-date communication» (Caporale 2020). In just one year, however, *Will* has grown out of the financial niche and is now producing news content on a wide range of issues for its almost one million followers¹¹. As the “bio” description reports on its Instagram profile, *Will* is now a «space for people that are curious about the world. To understand the things that surround us (and impress people at dinner)».

While Boulahrajane was already known to Italian Instagram audiences as @imenjane – an “influencer” with a following of hundreds of thousands who would provide a fresh take on economics and finance for non-experts – Tommasi comes from the corporate world: his LinkedIn profile lists former positions at Airbnb and as founder of a consulting firm. As anticipated, we will not be delving into the specificities of the business model adopted by *Will*, although it has been reported that, after only three months of activity, it was able to raise €1.2 million from venture-backed funding (Bini 2020), while also relying on revenue from branded content (Caporale 2020). Our goal here will be to analyse *Will*'s news content offer in terms of framing and issue selection, to obtain relevant data to contribute to a wider discussion of the relation between the process of agenda setting and the role of these new digital entrants in the news media field.

10 Boulahrajane left her position at *Will* in 2020 after it was revealed that she had lied about obtaining her economics degree.

11 *Will*'s profile on Instagram - @will_ita - counted 995.000 followers around the end of September 2021.

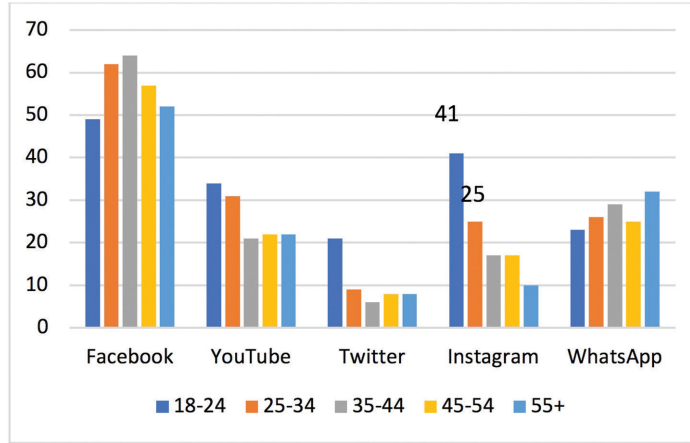


Figure 7. Percentage of regular news consumers in each age group for each SNS in Italy (Newman et al. 2020).

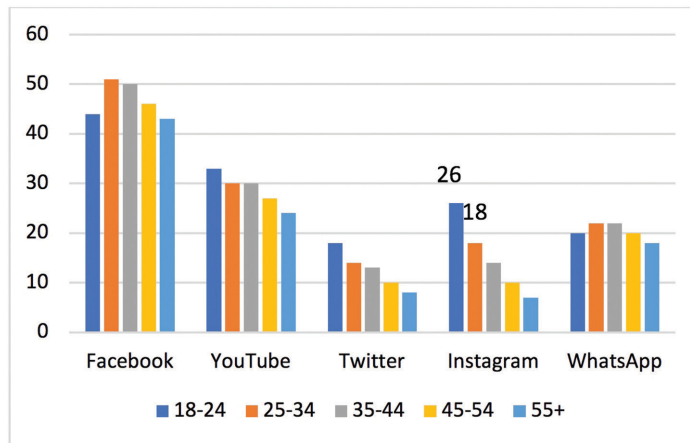


Figure 8. Percentage of regular news consumers in each age group for each SNS in 55 countries (Newman et al. 2020).

Instagram’s profiles are composed of two main spaces for visual content sharing: the feed, where users store their permanent posts, which can be photos, slideshows or videos with a short caption, and Stories, launched in 2016, which are ephemeral segments containing videos or images that last up to 15 seconds, remain visible for 24 hours and are not automatically stored. In 2017 Instagram also introduced Story Highlight, a function that allows users to save selected stories in a dedicated section of their feed to make them permanently visible to their followers. Other more

recent features include IGTV, a standalone application that is also available within the Instagram app and allows for video uploads of up to 15 minutes, and Reels – considered by many an attempt at attracting users from the Chinese competitor TikTok – a way to record video clips of 15 to 30 seconds set to music or other kinds of audio content.

Table 1. Purpose of feed posts on Will's Instagram profile (8-21 February and 1-5 April 2021).

Purpose	Format
Simply Inform	One image + caption
Inform and address	Slideshow + caption
Inform and expand	Video + link to other content on the profile (IGTV, Reels)
Inform and call to interaction	Video with comment on followers' comments
Humor	Meme + non-informative caption
Promote	Self-referential post to promote own content

We have monitored *Will's* Instagram profile over two periods of two weeks each (February 8-21 and April 1-15, 2021), considering every feed posting for a total of 100 posts. We also monitored *Will's* published Stories daily for the first of the two periods, collecting 62 items: in this case, each item consists of a series of consecutive slides addressing the same issue (we never encountered items composed of a single slide).

Table 2. Purpose of Stories on Will's Instagram profile (8-21 February and 1-5 April 2021).

Purpose	Format
Simply Inform	One or more slides (images) without link
Inform and address	One or more slides (video) + link to other content on the profile (IGTV, Reels)
Inform and expand	One or more slides (video) with comment from journalist
Inform and call to interaction	One or more slides (video or images) + quiz/survey or comment on followers' comments
Promote	Self-referential post to promote own content

First, we have classified feed posts and stories by format and purpose (see tab. 1 and 2), elaborating on the classification proposed by Vázquez-Herrero *et al.* (2019). The results, summarized in fig. 9 and 10, highlight some of the main differences between ephemeral and permanent content. For example, stories, in virtue of the

wider range of technical possibilities they offer, such as interactive quizzes and surveys, are used to communicate with and engage the audience by posing questions and asking for opinions on selected news stories. Higher user engagement on algorithm-driven platforms is usually rewarded with higher visibility, which explains the significant percentage of stories devoted to this purpose. Examples of this type of content include a quiz on the Italian Constitution, a survey on video games (*Do you ever play e-sports?*) and several screenshots of direct messages sent by followers that include answers to questions and doubts. Stories are also more likely to be used as a vehicle for promotion: in the period we examined, followers were reminded of the release of podcasts, newsletters, and of a series of lectures sponsored by automobile manufacturer Audi. The only self-promoting post published in the news feed regarded the launch of a new podcast called “Globally”, dedicated to geopolitical issues.

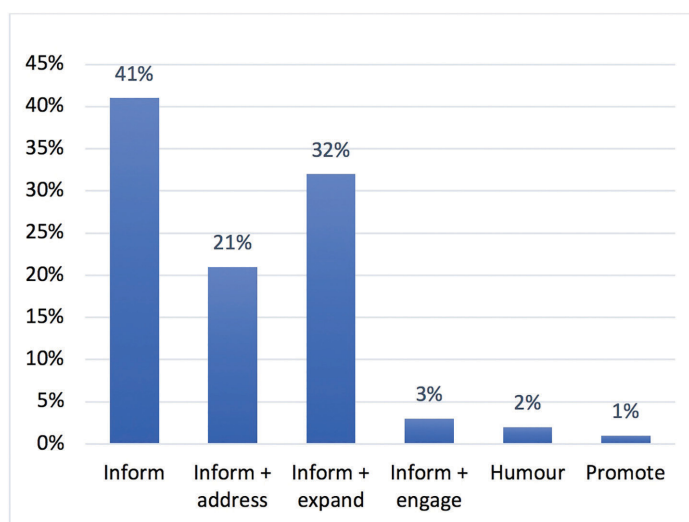


Figure 9. Percentage of feed posts by purpose (N=100).

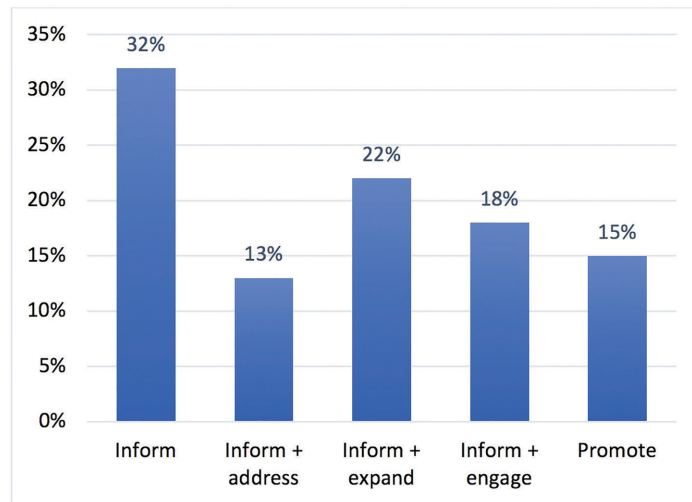


Figure 10. Percentage of stories by purpose (N=62).

Secondly, we have categorized each item by type (figures 11 and 12) to be able to compare our sample to more traditional news sources, including Vice. Although Instagram feed posts and stories have a quite different format than traditional newspaper articles or website/blog posts, we have attempted at finding similarities between the two by defining the main function of each post. Short news stories are, predictably, one of the most frequent types of posts published by *Will* since they are more easily adaptable to the immediacy of the image+caption or slide microformats that are typical of the platform. However, slideshows, longer video formats such as IGTV videos, and even 30-second Reels are used as substitutes for more developed stories or in-depth analysis of specific events, as well as for opinion pieces. It is interesting to notice how the first-person narratives that were one of Vice's trademarks are in this case almost completely absent, replaced by more traditional editorial pieces or comments on specific issues by foreign correspondents, as in the case of one journalist based in Shanghai, who periodically reports on China. Another interesting absence is represented by interviews: our sample contained only one interview with former skier Kristian Ghedina as part of a series of stories on sports and the environment sponsored by Audi. Short, factual stories, easy to be consumed at a glance or while in motion, or videos, that still represent one of the most popular types of content among younger social media users, constitute the preferred formats for *Will's* news stories, which show a tendency of Instagram native journalism to adapt to the medium's specific features rather than trying at using them creatively.

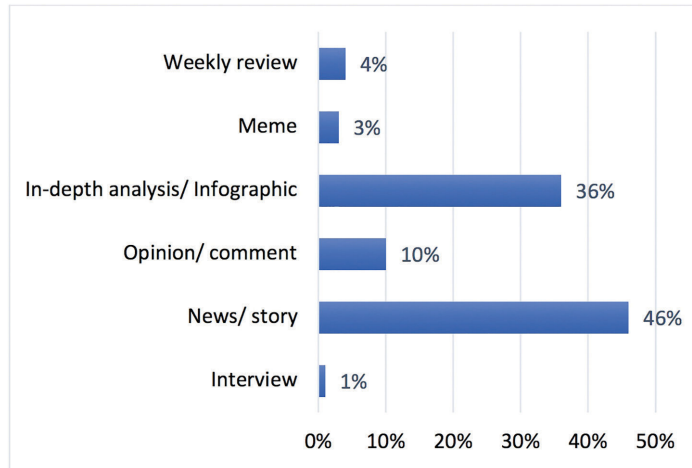


Figure 11. Percentage of feed posts by type of news story (N=100).

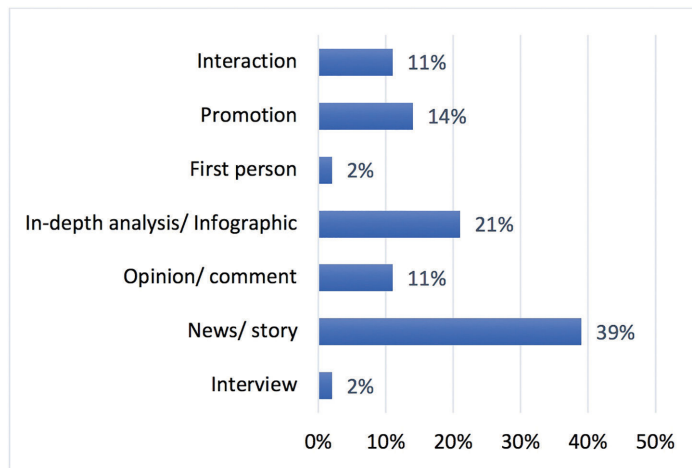


Figure 12. Percentage of stories by type of news story (N=62).

The analysis of frames suggests the presence of themes that at first glance are closer to mainstream news media than to youth-oriented digital news outlets like *BuzzFeed* or *Vice*¹². Feed posts from our sample (fig. 13) tend to be equally distributed across different frames, which include economics, national politics, and

12 For the analysis of frames and issues we have considered only feed posts, since our sample for stories covers only one of the two periods and is therefore difficult to proceed with a comparison between the two.

international affairs – themes that were underrepresented in Vice stories. There is, however, a clear selection of issues that indicates a different agenda's effect on what is newsworthy and deserves a young audience's attention. A few elements point to specific and conscious choices in terms of framing, like the overarching presence of the frame "Environment", which covers 17% of the feed posts and indicates a continued effort to present stories in a way that can expand on the theme of environmentalism and contribute to the current debate on climate change and sustainability. Environmentalism is evoked in the coverage of the formation of a new government in Italy, in opinion pieces on marketing, as well as in more traditional stories that present data on the excessive consumption of plastic or the endangerment of whales, and in branded content sponsored by Levi's or Audi. Society and culture also occupy a sizable portion of the sample, although they are not as dominant as in the case of *Vice*. Overall, however, we are in the presence of a news outlet that is constructed around current youth culture and interests, not to mention partially guided by the need to remain visible on a system-customized platform, which tends to reward content that users are more likely to engage with and appreciate.

While the Covid19 pandemic predictably occupies a large part of *Will's* total coverage, it should be noted that the significant presence of stories regarding national politics has certainly been influenced by the Italian Parliament's vote of confidence to Mario Draghi's new government, which dominates the first two-week period included in our sample. However, international news is still a relevant presence, except for the European dimension, which seems to fall into the background and is rarely evoked as an explicit frame for news stories. Coding the stories for geographical perspective further substantiated this observation: stories with a national or international (extra-European) perspective occupy respectively 49% and 46% of the sample, while stories on the European context are limited to the remaining 5%.

This could confirm the tendency, observed during our 2016 research on European mainstream news media, to focus primarily on the national context while keeping EU politics as an implicit background, a taken-for-granted element in the social and political life of the country, whose importance is recognized but rarely thematized or discussed. *Will*, too, seems to follow in this direction: relevant EU political actors, such as Ursula Von Der Leyen or Margrethe Vestager, are not only mentioned, but also given space and voice, while the EU never emerges as a frame for the discussion of relevant or even urgent transnational issues such as the consequences of the Covid19 pandemic or the environmental emergency. Once again, this points to a representation of young people, who constitute *Will's* primary audience that is at once solidly based in the national territory, but also looks to the global landscape.

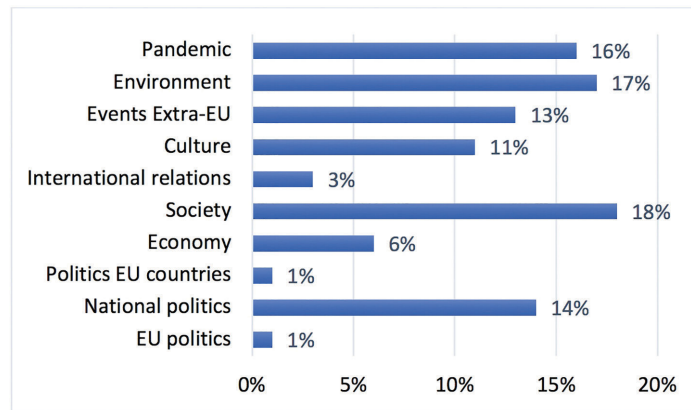


Figure 13. Percentage of feed posts identified by each frame (N=96).

A look at the issues that are more frequently covered by *Will* confirms our observations regarding framing (fig. 14). Sustainability and climate change are the third most prominent issues in *Will*'s coverage, but the most frequent is represented by a wide thematic group that we have labelled "Civil/Human rights", which includes stories regarding inequalities in terms of race and gender, LGBTQ+ rights, but also two stories on disability. Current events do have a visible impact on the selection of news: Italy's vaccination program is the most frequently covered issue, especially in the April sample, as are the larger implications of the pandemic for the country's economy; the first period is dominated by the new Italian Prime minister's swearing in. Most of the identified issues fall however into a recognizable, coherent set of choices in terms of agenda that seems to define *Will*'s identity as a social media native news source: social issues such as battles for civil rights, arts and entertainment, the theme of sustainable consumption and consumer rights, can all be easily subsumed into the category of "news for young people". Young people also emerge as a central actor in *Will*'s news coverage, with a recurrent presence that almost becomes an additional, underlying frame.

It is also interesting to note that what had started as a niche source on finance and the economy is, after little over a year, dedicating only a minor part of its coverage to this theme, both in terms of framing and of selected issues. Among the economics-related news stories, labour is the only topic that is covered with some regularity and linked to different issues such as young people and the job market, inequality (concerning disabled people, for example), or specific decisions taken by the Italian government.

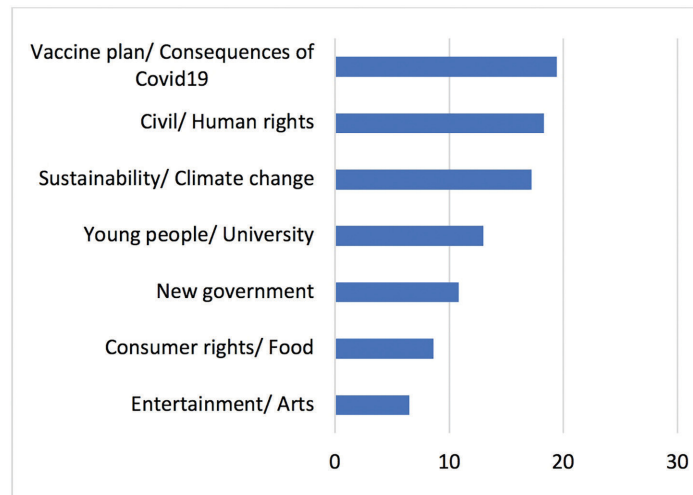


Figure 14. Percentage of stories featuring each issue (N=93).

Finally, explicit branded content represents only a small percentage of the posts in our sample:

- 5 posts (3 in the first period and 2 in the second) are disclosed as partnerships with Audi, Levi's and Italian publishing house Garzanti in the posts' headers, using Instagram native tool.
- 5 stories are also sponsored by Audi, which, as we have previously seen, collaborated with Will on a series of lectures, and interviews on sports, nature, and sustainability. (The preoccupation with the environment also frames the content of the feed post sponsored by Levi's: the caption discusses how recycling clothes reduces the fashion industry's environmental impact, while the slideshow illustrates diverse ways of using worn-out jeans to create new objects).
- An IGTV video is included in the post in partnership with Garzanti, used to promote the publication of American poet Amanda Gorman's book *The Hill We Climb* in its Italian translation. *Will* journalist Bianca Del Balzo traces a long profile of Gorman, calling her «an icon for the new generations» and focusing on her activism as well as on her ability to merge «poetry and fashion», while showing the book about to be published by Garzanti.

Similarly to the *Vice* sample, branded content is used here to create revenue, but also to reinforce *Will's* own brand equity, by framing these posts with themes that are

already familiar to its followers, and to flaunt the partners' efforts of corporate social responsibility as coherent with their interests.

As we already discussed, further research is needed to explore the details of the business model adopted by *Will* as well as by other digital news start-ups that are native to Instagram. Our analysis, however, can give us some insight into the extent to which such a model influences both *Will's* agenda and its framing of news. Moreover, the dependence of these new digital news organizations on the affordances of the platform that hosts them is still to be understood in its overall implications. However we may hypothesize that system-driven customization and the need of visibility encourage these outlets to meet their followers' expectations to attract participation, as well as to influence these expectations that are inferred from algorithms, and to reinforce the labeling process of the "young" generation.

Conclusions

Over the past two decades, we have heard frequent and dramatic proclamations of traditional journalism's certain and irreversible crisis. Undeniably, print news media continue to shrink, and the whole industry has been accumulating enormous losses in terms of circulation, revenue, and especially of perceived authority (Gitlin 2011). A steep decline of trust in journalists has been observed in different audiences across the globe, although it is the younger generations who have been the most affected by a sense of apparent "disconnectedness" from the news (Kjeldsen 2008, p. 126), «with a chimerical sense of the all-consuming complexity» (Bowman 2006, p. 166). However, while cultural studies have shown the ideology behind the blurring of such disconnectedness with market-consuming actions, with the goal of creating an illusion of subjective relativism (*ibidem*), empirical data have, on the other hand, pointed to how young people's turn away from mainstream news media has in fact resulted in their migration towards new digital sources that are designed specifically for their age group and whose forms and identity are intricately linked to the platforms they use for news distribution, such as websites and algorithm-driven media. At a time when, according to the dominant narrative, news media are inevitably destined to a grim fate, these new entrants in the field of journalism have attracted considerable investments, are creating new jobs, and experimenting with different business models. These characteristics place them - once again - halfway between the fields of marketing and journalism and have an effect of hybridization on the content they produce, which is often positioned at the intersection between news, entertainment, and advertising. A further, radical transformation in the forms

taken by these start-ups has occurred with the introduction and global diffusion of SNS, which have marked the birth of a new generation of social-media native news sources that have adapted to the algorithm-driven content curation practices that define these environments.

It might be too soon to predict if they will survive future transformations in terms of technology and communications, but their present success raises urgent questions for the public sphere that young citizens are expected to participate in, especially regarding the practices of framing and agenda setting that new digital news start-ups adopt in virtue of their hybrid identities. The first results of our research suggest that their choices in terms of issues covered and frames are influenced by several factors:

They are tailored on the consumption habits and interests of their targeted audience, which loosely coincides with what market researchers have labelled Generation Z, a cohort of young people born after 1996: in this respect they depend on platforms that act as *infomediators* but present themselves as active producers of hybrid content, combining themes more likely to be rewarded by algorithms with the ability of young communicators to engage users and stimulate their active participation.

- 1) They are negotiated with financial partners, who collaborate with social-media news sources to produce branded content, emphasizing a soft but large agenda in terms of corporate social responsibility.
- 2) They are influenced by the need to remain visible within the highly competitive environment of SNS, regulated by system-driven customization practices that are based on a core principle of personal significance of content, which once again is linked to the users' expressed preferences and prior actions, introducing another "chimerical illusion", as if they could really predict present or future values and actions.

Considering how these factors have in turn an impact on the representations of young people offered by these news sources, it could be said that young audiences and social-media native news sources interact with each other by reinforcing and perpetuating a set of representations and narratives that are the result of a circular relationship, or even of another «*self-fulfilling prophecy*» (Merton 1948), here connected both to the power exercised by algorithms and by the interactional identities they support. While Merton could not have in mind the algorithmic prediction models of the Internet, he nonetheless precisely defined the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy: «in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the original false conception come "true" [...]. They experience these beliefs, not as prejudices, not as prejudgments, but as irresistible products of their

own observation» (*ivi*, pp. 195, 196). Probably, the question does not concern, in our case, what is true or false, but what and where we can detect the social mechanisms leading both to the infomediating power of definition and the expanding frontiers of information accessibility, together with their applicability, that is their effective acknowledgement as trustful and salient (McCombs *et al.* 2014, p. 786)

Our thematic analyses have highlighted the significant difference that exists between the representations of these digital native and youth-oriented media and the ones proposed by mainstream news media, which tend to frame young people as an apathetic or problematic collective actor. However, it seems that these fresh players in the public sphere, where web marketing communication and journalism tend to go hand-in-hand, have turned away from traditional media's normative tendencies only to fall into other normative representations of what it means to be a supposedly young, «well-informed citizen» (Schutz 1946). In a political and social environment where the role of media and the issues of trust in news are at the centre of a controversial and ongoing public debate, further research on youth-oriented news sources and young people's news consumption practices is needed to address the question of agency and effective participation of younger generations in the contemporary public sphere. These complex questions go well beyond the limits of the research we presented here, which has merely considered a small sample of generalist digital native news media, and could not possibly tackle, for example, the interesting and effervescent *mare magnum* of social media practices born out of activism and social movements.

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