

'Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda': Young Swiss audiences' attitudes, expectations and evaluations of audiovisual news and information content and the implications for public service television

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Ulla Autenrieth 

University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons, Switzerland

Matthias Künzler

Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

Fiona Fehlmann

University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons, Switzerland

Abstract

Public service media (PSM) are still seen in most European countries as a core means of informing citizens of all ages. Nevertheless, PSM struggle to reach young audiences, who are often characterised as news-avoidant or news-deprived. This article asks what meaning the news and information offered by PSM have for young people. The qualitative study describes young people's attitudes and expectations regarding audiovisual news and information content through observation of their media usage habits in an experimental setting. It provides insights regarding how young people find and select news in

Corresponding author:

Ulla Autenrieth, Institute for Multimedia Production, University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons, Pulvermühlestrasse 57, 7000 Chur, Switzerland.

Email: Ulla.Autenrieth@fhgr.ch

today's digital media environment and highlights opportunities for PSM providers to reach and engage with young audiences more effectively.

Keywords

Audiovisual media usage, news avoidance, young audiences, information access, public service media, news consumption

Introduction

Public service media (PSM)'s mission is 'to contribute to [the] democratic, cultural and social objectives of society' (Donders, 2019: 1011) by informing citizens. New consumer habits brought about by the popularity and spread of the Internet have called this mission into question. Linear television remains at the core of most PSM institutions and, as a result, audiences – especially young audiences – are losing interest in PSM (Schulz et al., 2019). 2019 was a turning point for PSM and all legacy media offering audiovisual content; that year, 14- to 29-year-olds in Germany were found to prefer streaming services over linear television for the first time (Frees et al., 2019). Furthermore, recent research has shown that young people use social media and mobile online communication to a much greater extent than their older counterparts (see Lebo and Cole, 2018; Newman et al., 2018; Schneider and Eisenegger, 2019).

These shifts in media usage preferences and the form and accessibility of media content make it difficult for public service and private legacy media to reach young audiences (Carlsson, 2014; Fernández Quijada et al., 2015; Reiter et al., 2018). Attending to these shifts is crucial for democracies, since citizens of democratic countries rely on trustworthy, high-quality news when deliberating matters of public interest (Habermas, 2006). However, even young people who emphasise the importance and quality of PSM news use these as a small, limited part of their daily media diet. This, in turn, reduces their willingness to pay licensing fees and access PSM content (van den Bulck et al., 2017: 18). As a result, some media researchers have concluded that young audiences in particular are news-avoidant (Newman et al., 2017) or news-deprived (Schneider and Eisenegger, 2019). Others have typified young audiences as 'heritage news consumers', 'dedicated news devotees', 'proactive news lovers', or 'passive news absorbers' based on their news consumption habits (Galan et al., 2019: 15). These researchers generally see these audiences' lack of engagement with legacy news media and intense preference for social media as problematic, given the proliferation of misinformation on social media.

Most of the studies are based on quantitative surveys that focus on respondents' access to media equipment and overall media usage. They do not deal with respondents' concrete usage patterns and evaluation of online audiovisual media content (Reiter et al., 2018). Indeed, little research has been devoted to the ways in which young people search for, find, and select audiovisual content – including PSM content. Instead, most studies tend to portray teenagers and young adults as politically disinterested (Stadler, 2019). This perspective has led the literature to adopt a strongly normative stance regarding

what is relevant/correct news, through which channels such news must be broadcast or consumed, and which citizens must be interested in which topics at what time. In particular, it has led the scholarly community to insist that young people should be more interested in traditional, journalistic news items than in the entertainment content that they consume on social media (Schneider and Eisenegger, 2019). However, this perspective assumes that information and entertainment can be clearly distinguished from one another. Indeed, it subscribes to a set of traditional definitions, in which entertainment entails fictional characters staging an action with the intention of having that action be received pleasurably by an audience (Siegert et al., 2018: 226) and information entails non-fictional content with a certain social value (Lünenborg, 2013: 213). This dichotomy sees hard, political news as the core of information-oriented journalism and views soft news – newsy content dedicated to topics such as celebrities, lifestyle, pop culture, and sports – as a part of entertainment, to be consumed and preferred by women and young adults (Newman et al., 2016). This distinction between news and entertainment has practical implications for media policy and production; indeed, PSM usually have separate information and entertainment divisions. In Switzerland, the legal framework for the Swiss PSM Schweizerische Radio- und Fernsehgesellschaft (SRG) follows this distinction; the SRG is obliged by its license to invest half of its income in information programming (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2018: 5).

Nevertheless, it is difficult to distinguish between hard news and entertainment in this way. This distinction assumes that viewers have a strong entertainment orientation, and that hard news and serious information must be delivered to them in a targeted and laborious manner. As Jennifer L Grimm (2018) points out, however, television users appear to be well entertained precisely when they are informed in a pleasant way. The distinction between information and entertainment is not based on criteria of what is defined as information and what is not. In the perception of what is regarded as information, the thematic frame of reference is particularly relevant, depending on whether the content relates to political or everyday topics (Grimm, 2018: 206). This dichotomy also neglects media users' subjective attribution of meaning, or how they can perceive the same content as both informative and entertaining (Beck, 2013: 122f.). Furthermore, usage studies show that young people often use social media platforms and the Internet for entertainment and information purposes alike (see Suter et al., 2018: 37ff.). Thus, the distinction some scholars draw between entertainment and information media is hardly viable. Indeed, it is more helpful to differentiate between a primary usage intention in contrast to a somewhat downstream secondary benefit of a medium (Suter et al., 2018: 41) and acknowledge that the relationship between a medium's primary usage and secondary benefit changes over time. This might explain why television stations' online content is relatively neglected by 14- to 29-year-olds, irrespective of intention of use – only 30% of young people in Switzerland visit TV stations' websites for entertainment, and 21% visit them for information purposes (Suter et al., 2018: 42).

This study analyses young Swiss media users' usage of PSM content and the meaning they attribute to such content. The Swiss media system is characterised by a strong PSM – the SRG – which is divided into four enterprise units. Each of these units – SRF (Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen), RTS (Radio Télévision Suisse), RSI

(Radiotelevisione Svizzera) and RTR (Radiotelevision Svizra Rumantscha) – represents a different language region within Switzerland. The SRG is the largest Swiss broadcasting company and provides a variety of television, radio and online content, with some of it targeting young audiences. All of the SRG's content is, by law, dedicated to informing and entertaining audiences in a way that contributes to social cohesion – agreeing to this condition is a must if they wish to retain their broadcasting license (Künzler, 2013).

In return for this comprehensive PSM remit, the SRG receives large subscription fees from Swiss households. These expensive fees make up approximately 75% of the SRG's revenues and have been the subject of some controversy. For example, a referendum was held in March 2018 regarding the abolition of these fees and, by extension, the SRG. After much debate, 71.6% voted to keep the fees and retain the SRG operational. Of these voters, as shown by data of the Swiss PSM, about 80% of 18- to 39-year-olds voted in favour of the SRG (SRF, 2018).

Despite the impressive youth turnout during the referendum, it is clear that Swiss youth's use of linear TV is in stark and continuous decline. In 2012, 80% of Swiss young people still stated that they watched TV several times a week, by 2018 only 69% of young people did so (Suter et al., 2018: 31). By contrast, 85% of young people were found to use streaming services regularly (Suter et al., 2018: 28). This might be explained by the rapid and remarkable increase in the availability of streaming subscriptions in Swiss households. In 2016, only 38% of Swiss youth had access to these services; by 2018, this figure had risen to 56% (Suter et al., 2018: 23). This change is also reflected in Swiss youth's content preferences. In one study, 8 of the 10 most popular TV series among Swiss youth were available on Netflix, and 3 of the 5 most popular TV series among 12- to 19-year-olds in Switzerland were Netflix original productions (Suter et al., 2018: 32).

This study compares Swiss audiences' use of the SRG's content to their use of content from traditional private broadcasters and new, online platforms such as YouTube, Netflix and Instagram. Given the above, the article intends to contribute to the literature by showing that the distinction between information and entertainment is impracticable, as well as giving some empirical data on Swiss youth's media usage and the meaning they attribute to the media content consumed. It will discuss Swiss youth's expectations and attitudes regarding news and information, the reasons behind their relatively low level of news consumption and the implications of these findings for PSM.

Methodology

This study relied on the qualitative approach described by grounded theory (cf. Gehrau, 2017; Pentzold et al., 2018). Interviews were conducted with study participants, and interviews combined participatory observation, thinking aloud and focused questions. To provide the basis for a theoretical sample, we interviewed 40 young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 between May and August 2019. We took care to ensure that the participants represented different educational backgrounds and professional contexts. They all consented to participate in the study and were assured that personal data would

remain anonymous. All 40 interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then coded and analysed in a topic-centred way using MAXQDA software. The quotations which appear in this article were translated from German into English by the authors, and the participants' names replaced with pseudonyms.

Interviews and experiments were conducted in a student-furnished apartment to replicate the environment in which most study participants consume media. Participants were split into two groups (each $n = 20$): the first focused on entertainment content and the second information content. Both groups went through two stages of observation. In the first stage, the participants were accompanied through open usage scenarios. In the second stage, they were confronted with specific audiovisual content which were selected from available SRG programming according to theoretical criteria. Participants were repeatedly asked to describe their impressions during the observations and asked questions from an interview guideline. Ultimately, the experiment hoped to reveal participants' search and selection strategies and determine their expectations and evaluations of audiovisual content received.

Expectations, approaches and perspectives on audiovisual news and information use from the viewpoint of young audiences

In presenting the study results, we will first describe participants' expectations and attitudes towards news services, then describe their explanations for why they consume less news than older peers and then discuss their preferred approaches and behaviour regarding use of information.

Expectations and attitudes regarding news services

Most respondents give a traditional description of what they consider serious news – that is, one which associates news with reading newspapers. This quote is typical of many of our respondents' views.

David (age 24): Somehow, I think I still have the image in my head that news is reading and not watching.

This finding corresponds to the findings of Antonis Kalogeropoulos (2019) and Anna Sophie Kümpel (2020), who showed that even younger audiences think about news as being tied to reading text published by established media institutions. In addition, interviewees consistently demonstrated a high awareness of the quality of news outlets. For example, they consistently identified the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) as a trustworthy source of news and identified media brands such as Watson, Blick, or 20 Minuten as less trustworthy.

Sabrina (30): I wouldn't click on Watson. I have the feeling that this is not such a good format, I would rather use the NZZ.

Participants were also able to differentiate between well-founded, trustworthy news offerings and those more journalistically suspect. This finding is corroborated by other studies (see for example Schneider and Eisenegger, 2019). In this context, one of our interviewees identified the SRF as a reliable source with a good reputation.

Sophie (20): That wouldn't be bad, actually. SRF, yes. It's kind of a more reliable source or something. I know, *20 Minuten* doesn't have such a good reputation.

We can see from Sophie and other interviewees' comments that the SRG has a very positive reputation among young audiences. This is because they trust its content and desire good, high-quality news media.

Martin (29): And if I want to inform myself, then I want to see something reliable.

However, young audiences' desire for good and serious news and their positive appraisal of PSM and legacy news providers exist in contrast to their media usage. When asked about current use of news media, many interviewees stated that they engage with media that they themselves classified as being of inferior quality.

Interviewer: Why do you still have the 20 Minuten app installed?

Sophie (20): Actually well, that I do get a little bit of information, because before I installed it, I once thought: 'Hey, everything that somehow happens in Basel or in the world, I only get to know about it somehow much later. [...] I have to do something about it'. And yes, just now I have at least a bit more of an overview of what's going on.

From the interviews it is clear that young audiences display a rather weak interest in in-depth coverage of daily news items, especially in the field of politics. Instead, our interviewees stated that they tend to read headlines for a cursory overview of a news item in order to keep up with current affairs and engage in small talk.

Sarah (20): No, but I am also not someone who needs so much information about a topic. Unless it's really something and then I look it up. [...] I am not someone who is looking for news or who watches news.

Mario (20): No. I have to be honest, I haven't been watching much news lately.

Indeed, our interviewees indicated that they engage with news at a deep level when there is an important event (such as an election) approaching in which they need to participate or make a well-founded decision.

Patrick (19): Political topics, if anything is now relevant – especially with any political initiatives. Or whatever. Then I look at things for that reason, just to get a bit of a sense of the discussions. Because it is somehow important to make an informed decision.

In short, our study participants demonstrated an ability to differentiate between news sources' content and adequately perceive journalistic quality. However, this does not explain their own patterns of media use. Indeed, it creates a sort of paradox insofar as the SRG's news content meets study participants' demands for high-quality news, but our study participants choose not to use the SRG's services.

Reasons behind Swiss youth's relatively low rates of news consumption

There is a normative dilemma here. On the one hand, youth are aware of the expectation that they should be responsible and well-informed citizens and how their own behaviour is insufficient in this regard. On the other hand, these expectations do not align with their own interests and preferences. Accordingly, they made many subjunctive ('I should . . .', 'I would . . .', 'I could . . .') statements about their media usage behaviour.

Mario (20): But I must honestly say I don't watch enough news. It bugs me a bit. And I am aware of that and it really, really troubles me. [. . .] I use too little, unfortunately. I honestly admit that.

Patrick (19): I also always think that I should actually inform myself more. But it's just really – well, I don't know. [. . .] I always think, ah yes, I should read the newspaper more often. So I have the possibilities, I should do it more often. But then I just don't do it because – I don't know. [. . .] I feel so uneducated somehow.

However, Swiss youth's lack of interest is not the only reason for their relatively low rates of news consumption. Study participants do not seem to have developed a general routine of traditional news reception like their older peers have: for example, reading a daily newspaper in the morning or watching the news in the evening. This may be explained by the radically changed media environment of the 21st century; youth can access content wherever, whenever, they so wish. In this environment, some participants stated that they perpetually postpone engaging with news content because it is so readily and constantly available.

Patrick (19): Yes, that's a bit like that. There is a lack of time – these are simply priorities that are set somewhere else. [. . .] Yes, I could take my time in that sense, but – I mean, you can actually take your time for everything, but I didn't really manage to – hmm so the routine or daily things.

In general, our study participants did not seem interested in daily news; rather, they seemed to have specific, personalised needs for information on certain topics. For many of our participants, these topics were broad subjects (such as climate change or identity politics) which are highly political but not covered intensively in daily news formats.

Alina (19): I'm searching on the web. I type in 'SRF Doc' [a documentary format] and then I look, ah, I'm interested. I can take a look at that. Yes. What

interests me most right now is a little bit of women's rights, the women's movement. And yes, a little bit of climate change, the climate strikes.

Tina (22): I should actually inform myself a bit more. But I – it's much easier for me to ignore that and think, I'm just doing my thing and I stand up for the political things that I think are important and – and want to deal with them and the rest is rather poorly covered.

Our interviews also revealed that our study participants perceive the news as stressful. Some respondents stated that they can hardly process the constant flow of news and perceive it as overwhelming, especially because so little of it pertains to their actual lives.

Tina (22): But it is an abundance of information, where I think okay, important, but I don't look at it because I have the feeling that I am actually easily informed about climate change by now.

Others indicated that because news coverage is predominantly negative, they choose not to engage with it to protect themselves from depression, even if they know that they should not do this but remain well-informed.

Sabrina (30): I stopped watching the news. Or reading 20-minute newspapers, I find that a questionable format anyway, because it often only depressed me. I had the feeling that when something important happens, I get it. And then I know OK, you have to inform yourself about that. But I don't have to read all the time where there is war everywhere and where children have been murdered. You can't filter that. At some point it happened that I stopped consuming the news. I question that too, my own behaviour.

Furthermore, some study participants adopt a critical perspective regarding how journalists and news outlets select, cover and package stories for publication. These participants felt that this selection process was arbitrary and not trustworthy, and adopted a fatalistic outlook on the news in general.

Sabrina (30): Then I am also always so suspicious. I always think that some people choose which news is at the top of the list. I wonder why that is relevant and not something completely different? This is also a topic in other news media again and again. Which catastrophe is highlighted and which is not? And then I think that if I don't consume any of it, it really doesn't matter. The drama with *Nôtre Dame*. I think: whatever. In other places there are civil wars and genocides, but you don't hear anything about that. Nobody cares. I find that very problematic. I think that's why I stay away from such curated news sites telling you what's important and what must interest you.

This critique goes hand-in-hand with participants' desire for positive, constructive news. In many cases, they fill this need by turning to content focused on lifestyle, culture, sports and other topics more closely connected to their own personal interests but not strongly related to politics.

- Alice (25): See here [showing a news example] probably a little bit about the topic. This is so positive. A little bit of those that reflect what I feel or – not the negative ones, because I always see them on Watson or *20 Minuten*, but a little bit more like them [. . .]. But mostly it's really a little bit of this positive – let's see if I find something positive at all.
- Vicky (22): So I usually go to Instagram and look at all the stories or people I know. Especially bloggers. [. . .] Things like that, more lifestyle stuff. I look at the feed less than I do at the stories. Then I pass into the news. And then I usually go to *20 Minuten*. There I just look through what topics I am interested in at the moment.

These statements reveal how many Swiss youth acknowledge that, on the one hand, they should aspire to be informed citizens, and, on the other hand, their own preferences and usage patterns do not make them informed citizens in the traditional sense (see also Kümpel, 2020). They also reveal how routinised news consumption may be a significant factor in individuals' news consumption, and how these routines have eroded over time. They also suggest how the volume and content of news puts negative burdens on consumers, leading them to prefer positive or emotionally non-binding content. This does not indicate that our study participants are disinterested consumers. On the contrary, our respondents showed a deep personal interest in certain political topics and pursued information on these subjects in formats besides established news providers.

How the Swiss youth approach and acquire news

Most of our study participants stated that Internet search engines and sites like Wikipedia are their starting point for research on topics of personal interest. Although this approach gives them a sufficient range of information to read and access, the original websites ultimately play a subordinate role in the users' perception. This simply means, users do not realise the media brand, which they access via the search engine: the actual origin of the information often remains in the background and is not perceived.

- Alina (19): But just now, when something like this happens, I look at different sources. So then I simply enter the topic on Google on the internet and then I look, read through the various articles. It could be that I already landed on Watson. But just subconsciously.

In addition, our interviewees indicated that they use social media platforms as a primary source of news, especially news on lifestyle topics.

Chiara (25): I also do a lot of research before I go on a journey – or I don't know, go somewhere. Then I also do a lot on Netflix or YouTube or something, just type in the name.

Sandra (24): Because I think that's the main information thing for me now. So right now it's more about this in a weird way. More Instagram than anything else.

They also indicated that these platforms' algorithmically controlled suggestions resonated with them, in part because these suggestions allow them to branch out into like-minded interests and communities.

Chiara (25): I have to be honest, I rarely inform myself specifically. Just like on Netflix I just entered documentaries and then I saw *Taco* and watched that. [...] And I just do a lot of random stuff, just put in documentaries [on Netflix] and see what happens.

Patrick (19): Suggestions on YouTube. Because I look at stuff like that from time to time.

Indeed, our interviewees indicated that these algorithm-driven recommendations are a key item in their media repertoires.

Sophie (20): I often look for inspiration on Netflix or on Insta or something like that. All these new shows coming up or something. I get notifications from Netflix, but mostly I've seen them somewhere in social media before.

In addition, many respondents expressed strong preference for recommendations from friends or peers on social media. It seems as though the personal relationship that they share with the people who send these recommendations makes them more likely to engage with the content.

Alina (19): Often my father or my godfather [...] send some links with articles. And then I go and read them.

Sabrina (30): Yes, now an acquaintance mentioned that he watches it every morning. And now I am perhaps also a little older and can perhaps rather assess what I want to believe and what I want to watch. To question all this more critically. I don't know . . . I don't intend to do it blindly. So the habits of others. But now I'm starting to worry about it again.

Our study participants also indicated that other users' appraisal of social media channels and pages – the number of likes, comments, etc. on a given channel – help them evaluate content and decide whether or not to engage with it. The more likes and comments a page or channel have, the more likely they are to engage with it. This is

particularly important for lesser-known or newer content providers who have yet to establish a positive and well-respected brand. In addition, our participants indicated that if their peers like or comment on a channel or page, they are more likely to engage with that channel's content because they deem it personally relevant (and vice versa).

Vicky (22): I look at the picture first and then at likes. When I see there are only 49 [likes] then . . . The most important thing is that people influence people and if somebody tells you that this is good, you are more likely to believe that than if you look at it and then make up your own mind. So I think a like number is like a review. Wow, 2,000 people like that. That means there's a good chance I'm gonna like it. If only 49 people like it, then I think that's not good enough [. . .] If it's the NZZ and they don't have a lot of likes, that's something else.

Furthermore, most interviewees did not seem to desire or support a strict distinction between information and entertainment. They seemed instead to prefer formats and narrative forms which combine or highlight both information and entertainment aspects of a given piece of content. They emphasised the importance of good storytelling and exciting and/or humorous packaging of informative content, especially political content.

Chiara (25): Oh, yeah, that [Netflix documentary on the history of the taco] sounds wonderful. And it's also informative. I love that stuff too. I do. I love it in general. I like to watch stories. And when you give me something mega politically packaged and give me something mega, um, somehow, I don't know how to say it. A bit unspectacularly packaged like this, then I get bored.

In short, the interview data shows that the Swiss youth appear to have developed alternative information consumption routines, ones which are not primarily oriented towards legacy media, but instead take advantage of search engines, online encyclopaedias and social media platforms. The interviews also revealed that users both perceive and prefer that algorithms control the content to which they are exposed and that they weigh direct personal recommendations and quantitative feedback in the form of likes and comments on social media pages when deciding what to engage with.

Discussion – Opportunities and challenges for public service media from the perspective of young audiences

Here, we will use our findings to identify and discuss some opportunities and challenges for PSM hoping to engage young audiences in Switzerland. Our findings are encouraging for public broadcasters. They indicate that the Swiss youth view PSM positively; they see the SRG as producing reliable, high-quality content. However, this positive image of PSM does not translate to regular usage among Swiss youth. Instead, these young people have relatively low interest in traditional news or legacy media. Most interviewees indicated that they are satisfied with cursory engagement with these forms of media, and

when they do engage with news in detail, they prefer to do so with socially important topics of personal interest (such as climate change, women's rights, etc.).

Our findings also revealed that documentary formats are very popular with young audiences and they often access this sort of content via social media. Our participants stated that they prefer the documentary format because it blends information and entertainment to give users an engaging, yet in-depth experience. They are, in short, an ideal combination of different motifs.

Chiara (25): So I generally watch a lot of documentaries. [...] For example, where a man simply tells stories from his time as a heroin addict. And that's just so indirectly informative, so it's interesting to see how they survived it.

Alice (25): So now I would enter for example *Leaving Neverland*, because that's what the documentary was called. And then you can go here for example to 'news'. And then there's a little bit of information about it. Um, you can of course also look up Wikipedia about the documentary itself and so on.

These findings illuminate a huge opportunity for PSM because PSM possesses the funding, resources, staff and equipment to produce high-quality documentaries of public interest.

Our findings also reveal that young audiences rarely know about, search for or find content which is specifically produced for them. This is in part because young people search more or less randomly among a sea of digital content and find it more difficult to locate this kind of content than if they had a more reliable media consumption routine in a less open media environment. To answer this challenge PSM has to enhance the visibility and discoverability of its content specifically tailored to young audiences, by ensuring that it shows up on YouTube or by releasing content on popular non-commercial platforms that will appear in Google searches. At present, it is not always easy for users to find this content.

Bettina (26): *2 am Morge* [two in the morning – a SRF morning show for young audiences] is the name? Two in the morning – there are mainly hashtags. But I can't find anything [on the SRF platform]. Do I have to write out the '2'? Here I have it. I've written '2' like a 2.

Initial attempts by German PSM to make their programming more visible and discoverable online are encouraging (Dobusch, 2019).

Our findings also reveal that young people acknowledge and enjoy the role played by algorithms in their media diet and make use of recommendations from their friends and peers. This indicates that PSM need to deepen online engagement, especially in terms of their social media presence. They could, for example, emphasise marketing strategies which target youth on social media and produce youth-tailored content more visible and discoverable. It seems important to optimise the discoverability of PSM's content on

search engines because few respondents seemed to use the SRG's media library provided on its website, instead preferring to use Google.

Patrick (19): On the Internet. So, I just search on Google and then you just come – is it there. Well, I don't know – but I think on the SRF page

Interviewer: So, you don't go straight to SRF and type it in.

Patrick: No, it's simpler this way.

Lisa (20): I then really google topics and if something from SRF flashes up, I do watch it on SRF. But I don't think so, except I'm so bored that I scroll through the whole media library.

Given the popularity of YouTube and streaming services such as Netflix with young audiences, PSM should consider releasing content on these platforms to raise their visibility and discoverability on search engines.

Conclusions

This study demonstrated that young adults in Switzerland tend to have little interest in traditional daily news reports offered by legacy media. They are inclined, instead, to adopt a rather more pragmatic and piecemeal approach to gathering news, preferring to skim headlines instead of engaging with reports in detail (see also Kalogeropoulos, 2019: 55). It also found that the Swiss youth have a tendency to share the normative assumption that well-informed citizens are the foundation of a functioning democracy and they themselves should be discerning consumers of high-quality media. However, they consume news in a media environment which is characterised by free, low-quality content generated by private media providers. The resulting ambivalence gives way to a belief among young people that high-quality PSM are important for society as a whole, but not terribly relevant to their own everyday media use.

Importantly, this study found that although our participants use daily news media to a very limited extent, they are relatively well-informed about and interested in politics: they simply choose not to engage with legacy media for a variety of reasons (a lack of routine, the overwhelming and depressing nature of world news, shortage of news that is personally relevant to them, etc.). This finding reveals that young audiences' information needs are strongly anchored in their everyday lives; they are more interested in learning more about and engaging with items of personal interest and overarching social relevance than day-to-day news items. Because of their detailed and personal nature, these information needs are not met by legacy media; therefore, young people turn to the Internet to acquire and exchange information that matters to them. In short, this study found that the youth enjoy how social media platforms blend information and entertainment content but still have a deep need for reliable information. Indeed, it suggests that young people are by no means fundamentally information averse, as some scholars have claimed; instead, they do not adhere to the traditional information-entertainment binary.

To close the gap between Swiss youths' perceptions and use of PSM, this study suggests that it is paramount that PSM make content more visible, searchable and discoverable online. In particular, it recommends that existing content – especially produced for or tailored to this demographic – be made more detectible so it can be recommended within peer groups. This demands that PSM providers be more active on social media platforms, especially those that do not have the kind of information or research mandate that Wikipedia has, such as Instagram and TikTok.

The combination of different qualitative methods (participatory observation, thinking aloud and focused questions) made it possible to identify in more detail why and why not young people use certain audiovisual content. As the results show, in an appropriate environment young people can explicitly state the reasons for their choice but also non-choice of media. This preliminary approach provides important conclusions on how public service broadcasters can organise their offerings to attract young people to socially relevant content. It also reveals that the market research departments of public media companies should increasingly supplement their well-established quantitative methods with qualitative approaches in order to gather feedback from their audience and rely it back into their organisation. Although our sample consisted of only 40 people, which is not statistically representative, similar statements were repeatedly made towards the end of the interviews, so that we can speak of an approximate empirical saturation in the sense of qualitative research. In order to further substantiate these exploratory results, however, a review in a quantitative research design would be of interest.


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ORCID iD

Ulla Autenrieth  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6961-6637>

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Author biographies

Ulla Autenrieth has worked as a research assistant at the Seminar for Media Studies at the University of Basel since 2012. Since October 2017, she has also been in charge of the operational management of the SNSF project ‘Public Service Media: Audience Acceptance and Future Opportunities’ at the University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons (Switzerland) (www.zukunftservicepublic.ch).

Matthias Künzler is Professor of Communication Policy/Media Economics in the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin (FU Berlin). Prior to joining the FU Berlin he was head of research at the Institute of Multimedia Production (IMP), University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons (Switzerland). He received his PhD at the University of Zurich by conducting a comparative study about the liberalisation of broadcasting in small countries. His research interests include public service broadcasting, media convergence and media systems in a comparative perspective.

Fiona Fehlmann is a PhD candidate at the Seminar for Media Studies, University of Basel, and the Institute of Multimedia Production at the University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons. After completing her master’s degree at the University of Zurich, she started her doctoral thesis in 2018 in the SNSF project ‘Public Service Media: Audience Acceptance and Future Opportunities’ (www.zukunftservicepublic.ch).