Introduction to the Special Issue

Anything Goes? Youth, News, and Democratic Engagement in the Roaring 2020s

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In the modern world, every person will come of age in a future that is hard to foresee. However, the way citizens born today will navigate their future world will be affected by the context and the institutions that structure the world of their young life (Sigel 1965). Maybe more importantly than ever, the technologies and the information environment they grow up with shape the ways in which today's youngsters are socialised into the political world (Ohme and De Vreese 2020). Youth is a reference point that can reveal two important things: the past years of a cohort's development and an outlook into the future. Every generation is specifically shaped by their formative years which in turn will influence the society in which they come of age, once they enter the job market and end up in positions of responsibility and decision-making power.

This is why this special issue focuses on *Youth, News, and Democratic Engagement.* We want to understand the formation of media habits and democratic engagement practices of today's young citizens, where they are now, and to develop an idea of where they are heading. This special issue builds and expands on the 'Communication and Public Engagement' research project (2013–2019) that studied generational gaps in political media use and civic engagement (see Andersen et al. 2021). *Youth, News, and Democratic Engagement* takes the temperature of how young citizens navigate today's digital news media environments, which forms of engagement they prefer or reject, and how these two sets of phenomena are connected. This can help us understand whether and how youngsters today will become politically

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engaged in the future. The research included in this special issue is based on data from almost 20 different countries, employs a variety of scientific methods and designs, and spans contexts as diverse as the young generations themselves. The process for the development of this special issue started with a two-day online workshop in November 2020 that featured presentations of twelve research papers, followed by an open call for contributions. A total of twenty-six manuscripts were submitted and fifteen were sent out for anonymous peer review as per the journal's standard procedures. Of these, ten were accepted after various rounds of revisions. We thank all the authors who participated in this process and the reviewers who helped improve the quality of the manuscripts with their constructive comments.

While the studies presented here cannot provide a comprehensive overview of current political youth and media studies, the questions they pose and the answers they offer are indicative of the state in which many young citizens find themselves when navigating a media environment characterised by a mix of genres, on-the-go usage, and a snacking culture when 'sampling from the ever growing buffet' of political activities to engage in (see Thorson 2015). Beyond their specific findings, these studies give us the opportunity to discuss general trends and provide some observations regarding research in this field.

Is There no 'Youth'?

This special issue calls attention to *intra-generational differences and heterogeneity* within young generations. Previous research has used different approaches to study youth and political socialisation: Studies have focused on single cohorts or groups of young people (e.g., Bakker and de Vreese 2011), compared different cohorts or age groups (e.g., Quintelier 2007), or compared behaviour within a cohort (e.g., Edgerly et al. 2018). A *combined examination of intra- and inter-generational differences* in a single study is extremely rare. This special issue, however, indicates how such an approach may help understand boundary conditions in political media use and engagement between and within generations.

Research comparing political news exposure and engagement across generations is still relatively sparse and has usually found that generational gaps do exist (Andersen et al. 2021). Overall, younger generations acquire information via other news sources, mostly digital outlets and social media, than those employed by older generations, and become politically active in different ways than, for example, their parents (e.g., Ohme 2019). Research on online news use, however, suggests that generational differences are often overstated since generations like Baby Boomers (born 1945–1964) and Millennials (born 1980–1994) do not strongly differ, at least as far the frequency and repertoires of their news website usage are concerned (see Mangold et al. 2021; Taneja et al. 2018). Studies in this special issue present evidence of the presence as well as the absence of generational gaps. Brosius and colleagues do not find younger generations in ten European countries to trust news media less than older generations; however, Millennials and Generation Z (born 1995 and later) are unique in that their perceptions of journalistic accuracy and bias are comparatively weaker

predictors of media trust, thus highlighting cohort differences. Such differences also become visible in the research presented by Boulianne and Shehata, who find strikingly similar patterns in online news use and online political expressions *across* young generations but notable differences *between* generations in France, the UK, and the US.

Interestingly, when zooming from the aggregate to the individual level, generations do not appear to be particularly coherent, as differences are also pronounced within younger cohorts. Based on qualitative interviews with youth in Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan, and the US, Kligler-Vilenchik and colleagues identify five different types of young people according to how they deal with an increasingly toxic online environment for political talk, ranging from 'the uninterested' to 'the steadfast expressers'. This typology may be very useful to scholars seeking to map and understand differences within a generation beyond political talk. Yet, interview-based studies with teenagers and young adults from Germany (Wunderlich and colleagues) and Switzerland (Schwaiger and colleagues) show that even these categories may not fully represent within-generation differences. Hence, young citizens showcase a heterogeneity in their news use and political behaviour that is difficult to capture on an aggregate level or with specific labels or categories. The EPIG model (Engagement-Participation-Information-Generation) focuses on generational differences in news media use and their role for political mobilization (Andersen et al. 2021). This model suggests that *inter-generational* differences in opportunities, choices, and motivations to follow political information and to engage with society exist on an aggregate level. Research featured in this special issue highlights that these differences also exist as *intra-generational* differences within a specific cohort and reminds us that research on youth, media and politics must be sensitive to these nuances. Such intra-generational differences are easily lost in inter-generational comparisons.

Studying idols and leaders admired and followed by young people provides another avenue for understanding this generation's approach to media and politics. The youth-led Fridays-for-Future movement is a prime example of how a generation previously believed to be politically apathetic surprised the world and partly themselves (Boulianne and Ohme 2021). Molder and colleagues study the Instagram posts of the movement's initiator and now international icon, Greta Thunberg, and find that her messages are defined by *hope*, *opportunity*, and *morality*. Given their vast number of young social media followers around the globe, studying icons like Thunberg can help us understand what communicative strategies resonate among younger generations. These strategies, in turn, may become integral parts of their own ways of communicating politically. Influencers themselves may also help to simplify the communication of political issues to their followers, which can lead to higher political interest and political cynicism, as Schmuck and colleagues suggest.

Is a singular, monolithic youth an illusion? Political youth and media studies in this special issue and beyond draw a picture of a generation that is smart, has a more global understanding of problems than previous generations, and can be very strategic in choosing means to reach its goals, at the same time as it knows and expresses its personal boundaries and uncertainties. It may be tempting to rely on an all-encompassing

image of this generation. Yet, we may see political youth and media studies enter an era of greater nuance, as scholars become less prone to firmly squeezing young people into a definitional box that fails to sufficiently account for their diversity and complexity. As important as it is to acknowledge such heterogeneity, research must also not lose sight of the explanatory power that generational patterns have for the study of media and politics. Currently, as also shown by the contributions in this special issue, the means of studying nuances mainly lie in the richness of small-scale qualitative approaches. This follows a recent trend where "small" is the new "big" when it comes to studying inaccessible communication patterns (de Vreese 2022). Large-scale qualitative studies like the one by Kligler-Vilenchik and colleagues in this special issue, or the study of individual-level differences with quantitative methods (Beyens et al. 2021) provide ideas for how to dedicate greater attention to diversity with a generation with broader empirical foundations.

Is News "News" to Youth?

Common understandings of what is and should be considered as news have been challenged over the last decade due to, for instance, digitalization (Chadwick 2013), platformization (Poell et al. 2019), and the rise of disinformation (Bennett and Livingston 2018; see also Van Aelst et al. 2017). When reading the articles in this special issue that discuss what news is to the first digital native generation, one may get the impression that the very genre of 'news' has come to an end. We are no longer in an era where news is provided by few suppliers and most people have a common understanding of what news is. It also seems outdated to ask whether or not young people follow the news. The increase in access points via mobile devices (Van Damme et al. 2020), inadvertent exposure to news on social media platforms (Kahne and Bowyer 2018), chat groups (Vermeer et al. 2020), or on-demand formats like podcasts or YouTube (Saunders and colleagues) seem to have led to a situation where most young people do get news – whether they seek it or not. As Thorson (2020) puts it, we may be entering a time when young people's individual profiles determine how much and what kind of news they attract, but where total news avoidance increasingly becomes unlikely (Edgerly et al. 2018; Toff and Nielsen 2018). This situation gives rise to a set of challenges for both young people and society, since getting news does not automatically mean trusting it, learning from it, and being able to distinguish facts from disinformation.

   In their interview-based study, Wunderlich and colleagues ask young and older German citizens: 'Does journalism still matter?' The answer is affirmative, but journalism is definitely not young citizens' only news source. Pervasive communication on social media platforms, which is "characterised by a collapse of context" (Kligler-Vilenchik and colleagues), leads to a diversification of young citizens' understanding of what news is: A friend's political opinion in a chat can be news to them, so can political advertising, Greta Thunberg's Instagram posts while crossing the Atlantic on a boat (Molder and colleagues), influencers' posts on green living (Schmuck and colleagues), and Russia Today's 'ICYMI' YouTube channel which

provides a mixture of propaganda, public diplomacy, and '(geo)political culture jamming' (Saunders and colleagues). Cotter and Thorson's image of an 'information cacophony' very well describes the way many young citizens feel about their news media environment.

One may ask: How do they manage this? Many young people seem to navigate the digital news environments with multiple compasses. Coming of age in a digital media environment may provide them with less strict heuristics and schemata on sources and topics than previous generations (Wunderlich and colleagues). As Cotter and Thorson put it: "The majority of our participants approached information without a pre-defined epistemic hierarchy". Many young citizens still consider it a duty to follow the news and to be informed (Ohme 2019), but their sense-making when it comes to news is challenged.

Growing up with public debates on mis- and disinformation has made trust in news a crucial topic for today's youth. On the one hand, young people struggle with deciding which news to trust, thus generally meeting news with suspicion. As Cotter and Thorson write: "Most of our [U.S.] participants exhibited mistrust of mainstream news sources, […] treating the credibility of all content as contextual". On the other hand, they seem to develop new verification strategies that rely on their social network and personally selected 'experts' rather than assigning credibility to a specific source or media personality. This can mean two things: Either younger generations develop a healthy criticism, not believing a message just because it comes from a known source. Or, they develop strategies different from the 'epistemic hierarchies' held by previous generations. Rather than being based on systematic critical assessments of the evidence, however, these strategies entail 'cobbled together D.I.Y. replacements' based on 'social network temperature' and emotions. "Obviously every news channel tries not to be biased but they all are", says one participant in Cotter and Thorson's study. What sounds like a critical stance is put in perspective by Brosius and colleagues' study, which finds that European Millennials still trust news media although they perceive it to be biased, while for Generation Z, relative to other generations, accuracy is a less important prerequisite for trusting news media.

Apparently, the mix of genres, the snacking culture, and on-the-go usage that characterize news consumption among young citizens has blurred both the meaning and credibility of news. When news can be anything, it makes sense to question every piece of information and try to verify it. Yet, since constant verification is exhausting and potentially leads to *no* verification, it seems crucial to create a knowledge base and a set of skills for young people to act on. As Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017, 135) state: "there is no such thing as a digital native who is information-skilled simply because (s)he has never known a world that was not digital". While handling digital devices and technology seems easy to many young citizens, skilfully dealing with information from digital channels and platforms poses greater challenges – at least if information is to be treated according to the standards defined by previous generations. Maybe young people's new schemata and sense-making practises – such as genuine scepticism, social verification practises, and the acknowledgement of biases – are spot-on in a digital information environment that the youngest cohorts intuitively understand better than non-digital natives do. We may once again be surprised.

What Engagement?

A participatory democracy thrives when citizens engage with topics important to society. Since ways of engaging change over time, it is important to monitor to what extent young citizens keep up with, fall behind, or even outperform the political engagement of preceding generations. Previous research has described how political participation has become diversified, how participation 'appetizers' may be picked from a 'civic buffet', and how online communication now enables many people to participate in the political process (Bakker and de Vreese 2011; Quintelier 2007; Sloam and Henn 2019; Thorson 2015). However, the shift in the ways in which people participate may change how participation contributes to and secures a well-functioning political system. van Deth's (2014) seminal conceptual map of political participation points to four pillars of the democratic house: Political participation (1) takes place in the political sphere (PP I, e.g., voting), (2) is targeted at the political sphere (PP II, e.g., protesting), (3) is targeted at community issues (PP III, e.g., neighbourhood initiatives), and (4) is a non-political but politically motivated activity (PP IV, e.g., boycotting products).

Young citizens' democratic engagement tends to be more topic- and cause-driven, often spontaneous, and lacks long-term engagement in communities or political organizations (e.g., Xenos et al. 2014). Nevertheless, research indicates that young citizens find political participation important (e.g., Thorson 2015). However, engaging in activities not directly related with established political institutions, with low thresholds and lower risks and often driven by digital means of communication, seems to fit young people's lifestyle (Andersen et al. 2021). Belotti and colleagues' study of the FridaysForFuture-Rome activist group indicates how intertwined political activity and digital communication are. Combining observations from group assemblies with digital ethnography, the study offers detailed insights into today's youth political activism: It is issue-specific, highly dedicated, and strategic in its choices. These young activists understand their political fight against climate change mainly as their generation's task. Generational identity, we learn from this study, can be a distinguishing and motivating factor when young people feel that other generations do not pay sufficient and serious attention to a political issue. Moreover, when deciding where to post mobilizing content, the group studied by Belotti and colleagues astutely differentiates between generations "based on leading social media platforms, whereby TikTok is mostly used by children and teenagers, Instagram by teenagers and young adults, and Facebook by adults and only residually by young people." Thus, not only do researchers describe generational fault lines in political participation; younger generations themselves draw these lines and accordingly formulate an us-vs-them set-up.

When inspecting studies on youth engagement, both in this special issue and beyond, it becomes clear that for many young citizens participation means (digital) communication. Acts of communication and political activity increasingly become inseparable. Using WhatsApp-groups to organise assemblies, tweeting from protests, liking Greta Thunberg's posts on Instagram, expressing oneself politically online: The (political) cause pursued and the (digital) means to address it often merge into

each other. Digital communication is regularly used to document participation (Oser and Boulianne 2020); but participation can also be a means to have something to document – for example, organizing political events to produce content for social media platforms. The line formerly drawn between 'offline' and 'digitally-networked' acts of participation (Bakker and de Vreese 2011; Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Theocharis 2015) is long gone for younger generations.

What motivates political acts among younger citizens? Boulianne and Shehata's study finds that online news consumption is more strongly related to online political expression for younger citizens. Moreover, highly politically interested young citizens are more likely to turn to online news than older citizens with the same levels of interest. This finding reveals an important divergence with the results from Belotti and colleagues' study: Once politically engaged, acts of politics and communication blur and may best be described as a nexus in which participation and communication are mutually dependent. Still, disparities exist within younger generations. For those low in news use and political interest, even low-cost acts of political expression remain a challenge. How such disparities can be addressed and what other motivating factors for youth political engagement exist receive relatively little attention in this special issue. Dedicated campaigns, interventions, and civic education may be one way to increase political involvement among young people (Ohme et al. 2020, Pontes et al., 2019), but exploring new approaches to political engagement that relate more strongly to the lifeworld of the youth, such as identity-driven participation, should be given priority in this field as well.

Although this special issue does not cover the full breadth of youth engagement, our studies on youth political talk, political expression online, and participation in the youth climate movement reflect that youth engagement seems to address the political sphere directly only to a limited degree. The studies help us better understand these loosely connected and more global types of participation. Other activities, such as turnout in elections (Moeller et al. 2018), engaging in community initiatives (Literat et al. 2018), protest marching (Boulianne and Ohme 2021), or party membership (Weber 2020) remain unaddressed. It is important and fascinating to understand why young people engage in certain activities, but we should not forget to constantly ask why they do *not* engage in other activities. Some reasons seem obvious: Shielding oneself from the discomfort of political engagement in toxic online environments (Kligler-Vilenchik and colleagues), over-engaging up to exhaustion (Beilmann 2020), experiencing disappointment from the lack of interest among peers, and perceiving low responsiveness by the political system (Belotti and colleagues) are reasons why even the politically interested are put off. Research constantly needs to ask what barriers exit for young people to engage, especially barriers less known to older generations. If the current patterns of young peoples' political participation remain the same when they grow older, we may foresee severe cracks in other pillars of the democratic house.

What is Next for Political Youth and Media Studies?

Political youth and media studies are no longer a young field of research. Coming of age entails taking on new challenges, developing new certainties, and at the same

time staying flexible enough to keep up with current developments. In this special issue and beyond, we see that the field is entering an era of nuance. However, an era of nuances may produce conceptual fog as old certainties vanish while new systematic knowledge is not yet in sight. To navigate through this fog, we need to hold on to long-standing and still important questions (such as "what is news?" and "what mobilizes political participation?"), while constantly moving forward in search for a clearer understanding of youth, news, and democratic engagement in a digital age. Here, we provide four modest proposals for future research on these topics.

First, we suggest continuing to study the *nuanced differences within young generations*. Studying cohorts essentially means finding common patterns in attitudes and behaviours that distinguish a cohort from those born before them. In light of some of the surprising patterns highlighted in the contributions presented in this special issue, studying nuances within a generation *before* making claims about overall generational patterns seems advisable. Such nuances often provide insights into the multiple directions that members of the youth cohort will take in the future and allow us to detect those in a cohort with special needs or marginalized experiences. Only after these nuances have been adequately explored and accounted for does it seem advisable to label and investigate generational patterns.

Second, to develop new navigation schemes for a digital media environment we suggest *learning from youth and their understanding of news*. Young citizens may appear to lack suitable schemata and sense-making practises to navigate the 'information cacophony'. However, older generations, holding on to earlier established schemes, may find it equally, if not more, difficult to make sense of digital news environments. Calls for media literacy interventions are omni-present and often suggest teaching twentieth century legacy knowledge and verification practises for twenty-first century media systems. We consider young citizens' experiences a perfect starting point to study what actually *makes sense* about their sense-making practice in the digital media environment. Taking their life experience as starting point, in combination with well-established knowledge, may help us develop an updated approach to media literacy, one suitable not only for the young.

Third, we suggest *considering more closely whether political engagement and participation acts are beneficial or detrimental to society*. While they address both positive and negative effects of young people's information exposure, current political youth studies seem to often start from the normative (and often correct) assumption that (any) participation among young citizens is desirable and will have positive democratic outcomes. However, digital political participation can create toxic environments, lead to 'participatory burnouts' (see Beilman, 2020), or evolve towards the weakening or even destruction of existing political structures (e.g., the January 6, 2021 attacks on the Capitol in Washington D.C. or anti-vaccination protest marches in Germany, Canada, or the Netherlands). Yet, we know very little about 'dark participation' (see Lutz and Hoffmann 2017) among young citizens. Integrating anti-democratic acts of participations into existing conceptualizations of participation seems warranted. Political youth studies can be a front-runner and shape conceptual refinements with long-lasting impact on political participation research.

Fourth, we suggest *using digital methods to untangle the ever-tighter nexus of communication and participation* among young citizens. Digital methods based on longitudinal, high frequency measurements (e.g., Beyens et al. 2021), data donations (e.g., Baumgartner et al. 2022), or digital trace data (Mangold et al. 2021) may offer great starting points to understand young generations' norms, attitudes, and behaviour. Yet, such methods are mostly used in fields other than political youth studies, such as entertainment or well-being. Digital approaches can help better understand the causal nexus between information exposure and political action, as both acts move closer together in a digital environment. By providing new granular measures of media usage and political participation in large-scale studies, digital methods allow political youth studies to develop the kind of nuanced understanding that was previously only possible in rich, small-scale studies. Digital methods can thereby complement the important insights gained from qualitative and ethnographic work that political youth studies currently rely on. If news use and democratic engagement occur to a greater extent through digital means, digital methods seem to be a logical choice when trying to understand trends in the cohort that uses digital media the most.

In sum, the maturing of political youth and media studies has provided a solid basis of knowledge that helps understand new developments mostly spurred by the digital turn. All studies in this special issue focus on questions and challenges resulting from digitalization. While for a long time the comparison between digital and non-digital news use and democratic participation has defined the field, this special issue shows that digitalization is a process around which many, if not most, concerns about the press and politics are centred. To understand the digital turn, its challenges, promises, and opportunities, it seems warranted to specifically focus on the segment of the population that does not understand new digital trends as disruption, but simply live through them. That is: the youth.

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