



‘We are a neeeew generation’: Early adolescents’ views on news and news literacy

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Abstract

To function as well-informed citizens in democracy, early adolescents (12–16 years old) should become news literate news consumers. In this time of fragmented media use and evolving conceptions of (the importance and relevance of) news, this is not easy. Therefore, this focus group study investigated news consumption and news literacy through the eyes of early adolescents. Results showed that early adolescents have broad definitions of news. Their news consumption is predominantly passive, possibly due to a lack of intrinsic motivation. They see news as important, but often as boring, repetitive and negative, and disconnected from youth. Participants had knowledge of news content and effects, and stressed the importance of reliable news. However, for the majority, this did not translate into critical evaluation of news. For early adolescents, the key factor in becoming more news literate news consumers is motivation. Moving forward, motivation should be better incorporated in both research and practice.

Keywords

Disinformation, early adolescents, fake news, focus groups, news consumption, news literacy

Nowadays, an immense number of sources create an overwhelming flow of information, which makes it hard to find reliable, accurate, and relevant news (cf. Patterson, 2013). Young people often overestimate their abilities in navigating (online) information (Leung and Lee, 2012). Moreover, there is a growing decrease in their news consumption, at least through traditional news media (Drok et al., 2018). This might lead to youth being

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less well-informed about world events and less able to form opinions and to be active citizens, threatening democracy (McCombs et al., 2011). Insights are thus needed into how to empower youth to become news literate news consumers, that is – among other things – being able to access, critically evaluate, and analyze news (Ashley et al., 2013; Aufderheide, 1993).

News literacy has gained increasing interest from journalists, scholars, and educators, not in the least as a solution to ‘fake news’ or disinformation (Amazeen and Bucy, 2019). However, research on news literacy is still limited and what has been done is hard to compare (Ashley et al., 2013). There is a great variation in definitions and approaches to news literacy and the term ‘youth’ has been used quite broadly in past research (Maksl et al., 2015). Studies often focus on 18–34-year-olds, while youth below the age of 18 remain understudied (Marchi, 2012).

The focus on older youth is striking because the need to become news literate news consumers is of particular importance for younger youth. They are at the threshold of developing enduring news habits, political views, and habits of political participation (Buckingham, 2000; Marchi, 2012). News consumption before the age of 18 is a positive predictor of news consumption 7 years later and interest in politics develops during adolescence and stabilizes already by the age of 20 (Russo and Stattin, 2017; York and Scholl, 2015). Before adolescents are 15 years old, they are most susceptible to increasing their political and societal interest (Russo and Stattin, 2017). This group also stands out in their news consumption, such as in their great use of social media to consume news (Craft et al., 2016). To address this gap in the literature, this study will focus on the news consumption and news literacy of 12–16-year-olds, (i.e. early adolescents).

In order to effectively empower early adolescents to become more news literate, insight is needed into the status quo: what are early adolescents’ definitions of news, their motives in news consumption, and the critical evaluation of news, and to what extent do they already consume and critically evaluate news? This study aims to create an overview of early adolescents’ views on news and news consumption, by conducting qualitative focus groups. Hereby, it can contribute to both research and education in the domain of news and news literacy.

News literacy among early adolescents

News media literacy

News literacy is a type of media literacy, which broadly aims to empower individuals to better understand and assess mediated information (Potter, 2019). Although there is a great variation in theoretical views on news literacy (Ashley et al., 2013; Kleemans and Eggink, 2016), most definitions include acquiring knowledge about the production, content, and effects of news, and the skills to apply this knowledge (Ashley et al., 2013). Going beyond only knowledge, news literacy is seen as the application of critical-thinking skills while consuming news (Craft et al., 2016). An often-cited media literacy model is Potter’s (2004, 2019) cognitive model. This information-processing model describes the following three building blocks of media literacy: (1) seven skills, (2) knowledge structures in five areas, and (3) a strong personal locus.

Potter (2019) differentiates seven specific skills that can be seen as the toolbox to dig through information and to fit observations into existing knowledge structures or to build new structures: analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstracting. The skill ‘analysis’, for instance, entails being able to break down news articles into the five w’s (who, what, when, where, and why) and h (how), to determine whether a story is complete. In addition, Potter (2019) differentiates five areas of organized information that offer context to the processing of messages. These entail knowledge on media effects, media content, media industries, real world, and the self. However, having acquired the skills and knowledge, a person does not per definition critically evaluate news. This depends on the personal locus. To successfully process information, there should be a clear awareness of the goals and a strong drive for information seeking. With these three combined, people should be better able to make decisions about seeking out information and constructing meaning that will be useful to serve their own goals (Potter, 2019).

As much as Potter’s (2019) knowledge structures provide the context when making sense of media messages, more contextual information is needed on early adolescents’ relation to news to be able to stimulate their news literacy. This study seeks to elaborate on previous work among older adolescents (Craft et al., 2016). By looking at definitions and evaluations of news, motives to consume news, and actual critical news consumption, it focuses on news knowledge structures and personal locus, and the application of skills to critically evaluate news.

Defining, evaluating, and motives for consuming news

Not much is known about how early adolescents define news. However, research among older age groups showed that students and adults have difficulties with the difference between news and other media content due to dissolved lines between all kinds of information and news (Edgerly and Vraga, 2019; Head et al., 2018). Regarding the evaluation of news, it is known from older adolescents that they generally evaluate news as boring, repetitive, negative, and sensationalistic (Costera Meijer, 2007; Craft et al., 2016; Marchi, 2012). To contextualize early adolescents’ news consumption and to get an indication of their knowledge of news content and news industries, more insight is needed into how they define and evaluate news. The evaluation of news as negative, for example, indicates knowledge on news content, news media industries, news effects, the real world, and the self (Craft et al., 2016).

Knowledge alone is not enough to lead to the critical evaluation of news. People need a strong drive to critically evaluate news (Potter, 2019). The uses and gratifications tradition explains why individuals consume certain media, based on the gratifications they expect to gain from media (e.g. Ruggiero, 2000). In line with Potter’s (2019) personal locus, this tradition states that people make active and goal directed decisions between media. Among older adolescents and young adults, the need to get informed about the world is often the strongest predictor of news consumption, followed by diversion needs (Van Cauwenberge et al., 2010). However, this strong goal for information might mostly be something for the future for adolescents, for whom being informed might feel less relevant right now (Craft et al., 2016).

Youth's relation with news remains ambiguous. On the one hand, young people are often depicted as uninterested in (traditional) news (Drok et al., 2018; Mindich, 2005). This seems to be a cohort effect, with younger generations' lack of interest in the news continuing as they become older (Buckingham, 2000). On the other hand, research shows that youth do often consume news to become well-informed citizens (Craft et al., 2016), or at least feel a regular urge to keep up with the news (Costera Meijer, 2007; Marchi, 2012). To become critical news consumers, early adolescents should indeed value news literacy and be motivated to become informed (cf. Potter, 2019). To determine early adolescents' personal locus for news, a more present-day overview of the need to be fulfilled by consuming news is warranted.

To summarize, we investigate,

RQ1: How do early adolescents define and evaluate news?

RQ2: What are early adolescents' motives to consume news and to critically evaluate news content?

Consuming and applying critical evaluation skills

Consuming news is a corequisite for news literacy. News literate news consumers should also be active news consumers, because higher levels of news literacy go together with more intrinsic motivation for news consumption (Maksl et al., 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2019). Young people's news consumption is, however, rather passive and incidental (cf. Marchi, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2019). When consuming news, youth often take a multi-modal approach: they consume news through various channels, such as discussions with peers, social media platforms, and online newspaper sites (Van Cauwenberge et al., 2010). They feel overwhelmed by the amount of news, but often do develop strategies to keep up with it (Head et al., 2018). News consumption does thus remain an integral part of young people's lives, although they are not necessarily searching for hard news (Valenzuela et al., 2019).

Today's youth may deviate from older cohorts – who for a large extent only had traditional media – in their rather passive news consumption, but this change may also be due to changing forms of consuming news. Previous research has shown that adults nowadays are also rather passive in their news consumption and often engage in news consumption behaviors such as 'snacking' news (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2018; Molyneux, 2018). Nevertheless, the studies that have been done on youth's news consumption included 15–34-year-olds. Therefore, no conclusions can yet be made about early adolescents.

When zooming in on the extent to which youth apply critical evaluation skills, research draws a rather disappointing picture. Although youth are often seen as 'digital natives', they can easily be deceived (McGrew et al., 2018; Wineburg et al., 2016). Earlier studies have shown that teens sometimes check social media or personal communication against traditional sources (Craft et al., 2016; Marchi, 2012). However, in an empirical study, students lacked the ability to distinguish between facts and non-facts, to assess reliability of sources, and were unaware or unconcerned about political bias in news (McGrew et al., 2018; Wineburg et al., 2016).

Among older populations there seems to be more recognition of the need to critically evaluate news. Studying college students, around 60 percent stated to at least check how current information is, to read or view the entire news story, or to check the URL to see where the news was from before sharing it with others (Head et al., 2018). However, around half of them reported to lack the confidence to recognize ‘fake news’. Adults recognized bias in news, but there remains a lack of recognition of their own biases when evaluating news (Tully et al., 2020). To be able to stimulate critical news consumption, we should first have a more complete view of early adolescents’ news consumption and news literacy:

RQ3: To what extent do early adolescents consume and critically evaluate news?

Method

To answer the research questions, focus groups with 55 Dutch early adolescents were conducted. Data gathering was iterative and alternated with data-analysis. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Radboud University (ECSSW-2017-033R1).

Participants

Participants were recruited through 2 secondary schools in the Netherlands. They were between 12 and 16 years old ($M=14.04$, $SD=1.47$), with a variety of educational levels.¹ After permission from the schools, classes were visited to inform pupils about the study. A total number of 241 pupils indicated to be interested. A total of 99 were randomly selected. These pupils and their parents were contacted and informed through e-mail. A total of 57 pupils replied and could participate at the set timeslots. Their parents gave active consent. There was one no-show and one pupil was ill. We got together 8 groups, with a total of 55 participants (54.5% female, 94.5% Dutch).

To get a general idea of their news consumption, participants filled out a questionnaire after the session. As summarized in Table 1, participants on average followed news more through online media than through traditional media. These patterns of consumption affirm that early adolescents consume news through other media than is often being studied (cf. Marchi, 2012).

Procedure

Focus groups took place between January and March 2018 in schools. Each discussion lasted around 2 hours, including a short break. Sessions began with general information about the session and filling out the active consent form. Then the actual session started. To provide consistency, one moderator conducted all sessions. Discussions were structured based on a topic guide (see Supplemental Appendix A). Afterwards, a practical assignment on news literacy interventions was performed (beyond the scope of this article). Participants received a 10-euro gift card.

Internal validity and reliability were secured by *peer debriefing*: constantly reflecting on the focus groups and discussing with other researchers (Patton, 2002). Internal

Table 1. Demographic information and news consumption of participants per focus group.

Focus group	Demographics		News consumption (from 0 = never to 7 = 7 days a week)					
	Gender	Mean age ^a	Level of education	TV news ^a	Radio news ^a	Newspaper ^a	App/website news organization ^a	Social media news ^a
1.	5f, 3m	12.00 (0.00)	medium-high	1.57 (1.99)	1.00 (1.69)	0.50 (1.41)	3.00 (1.77)	3.25 (2.05)
2.	3f, 4m	13.43 (0.54)	low-medium	1.17 (0.98)	3.17 (2.93)	0.00 (0.00)	1.67 (2.73)	4.43 (2.94)
3.	3f, 4m	14.57 (0.54)	low	5.00 (2.00)	2.43 (2.64)	0.00 (0.00)	3.57 (2.15)	3.71 (2.14)
4.	5f, 3m	12.25 (0.46)	low-medium	2.63 (2.26)	2.75 (2.82)	1.13 (1.36)	2.63 (2.39)	3.13 (2.85)
5.	2f, 4m	15.83 (0.41)	high	2.83 (1.17)	0.67 (1.63)	1.33 (2.16)	2.33 (1.37)	6.33 (1.33)
6.	4f, 2m	15.17 (0.75)	high	2.50 (1.76)	1.50 (2.51)	0.67 (0.82)	4.00 (1.79)	5.83 (2.86)
7.	4f, 3m	15.00 (0.58)	high	2.57 (2.30)	0.86 (1.22)	1.14 (2.27)	2.71 (2.14)	3.57 (2.51)
8.	4f, 2m	15.17 (0.41)	high	3.33 (1.97)	4.00 (1.90)	1.67 (0.82)	4.83 (1.47)	2.17 (1.60)
Total	30f, 25m	14.04 (1.47)		2.72 (2.08)	2.02 (2.38)	0.78 (1.40)	3.07 (2.10)	3.98 (2.57)

^aMean and Standard Deviation.

validity was also secured by *member checks*: the moderator tested the responses by provoking critical response from participants (Patton, 2002). This was, for example, done by summarizing the information and asking participants whether this was correct and by testing if comments and/or opinions from earlier sessions were shared in the other groups. By doing this, the validity, fairness, and accuracy of the data were strengthened.

Analysis procedure

Sessions were recorded (audio and video) and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analyzed using MAXQDA software (VERBI, n.d.) with thematic analysis, a method with which patterns in data can be discerned and analyzed (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Themes and subthemes were ordered in a thematic map (Figure 1(a) to (d), with frequency counts in parentheses) to answer the research questions.

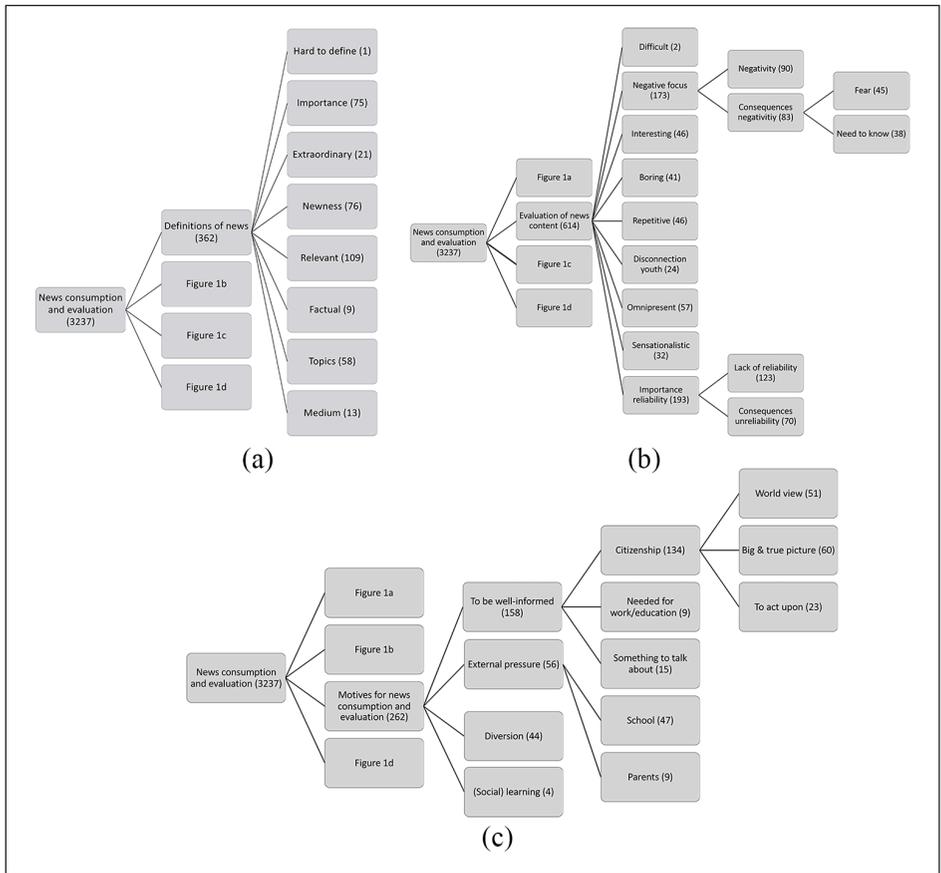


Figure 1. (Continued)

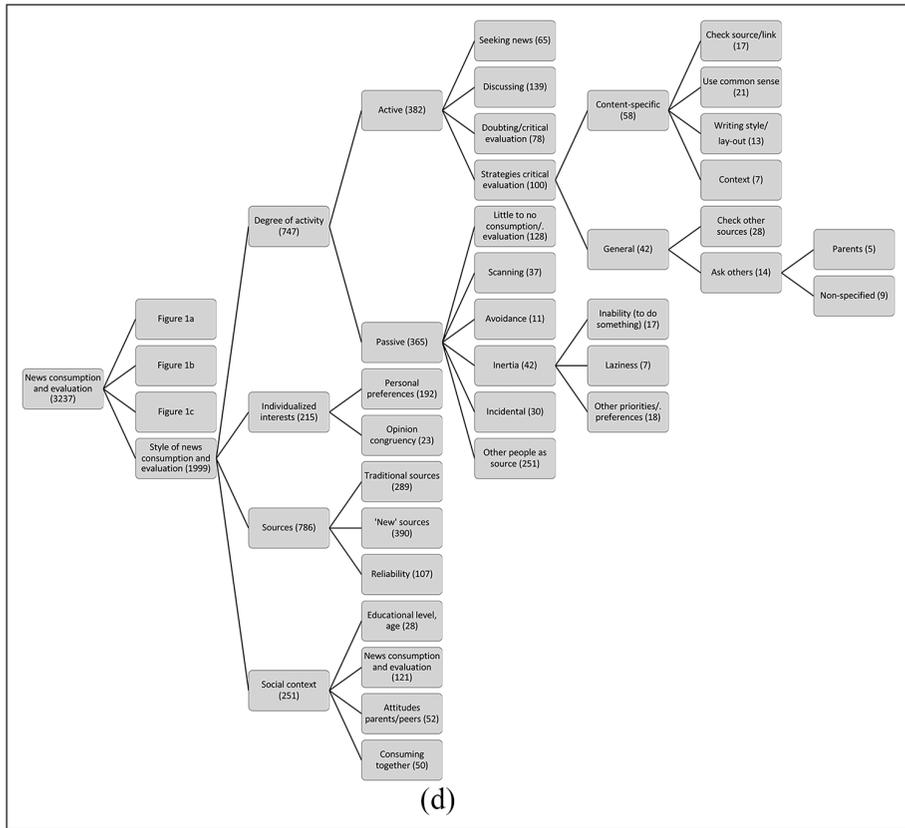


Figure 1. Thematic map of (a) definitions of news, (b) evaluations of news content, (c) motives for news consumption and evaluation, and (d) style of news consumption and evaluation.

Results

Early adolescents' definitions and evaluations of news (RQ1)

Definitions. Although one participant explicitly noted that it was *hard to define*, the definitions of news were to some extent in line with conventional definitions based on newsworthiness criteria (see Figure 1(a)). The kind of news discussed ranged from newscasts, news websites, news apps, general social media and accounts by news organizations, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, opinionated news on television, in papers and online, and satire. Most participants defined news as 'what is going on now', 'important', 'things you do not encounter in everyday life; something extraordinary', and 'relevant'. News is *important, extraordinary* information, it has to be 'different from what is normal' (ID51, male, 15 years).

Participants also mentioned that news has to be '*new*'. Even though some participants expressed that it should also be *important* to be news, examples of what conventionally would not be called news – such as vlogs, chain letters, and advertisements including

'news' – were discussed. With this definition, a very broad range of information can be qualified as news, but within this myriad of information, participants did often rank news. Important news topics, such as politics, were regarded as more 'real news' than news about celebrities or sports.

Another, often discussed, characteristic of the news is its *relevance*. Participants had different ideas on what is relevant, particularly discussing the relevance of domestic and international news and the effects of proximity on news coverage. A news characteristic that is very relevant nowadays, is the extent to which news is *factual*. According to the participants, news should be truthful, accurate, and not convey an opinion: 'Some websites are really right wing or really left wing, I think that news should not have anything to do with politics, it should just be general' (ID43, female, 16 years). This is of particular importance in times where you cannot trust all information. Politicians and disasters are *topics* that were often mentioned in their definitions of news. In addition, news *media* were discussed. Some participants attributed the power to define news to news media themselves, stating that 'something is news when it is featured in the news' (ID16, male, 13 years).

Evaluations. Evaluations of news content included news being difficult and boring, but sometimes also interesting (see Figure 1(b)).

News content can be quite *difficult*, using terms and requiring background information that early adolescents do not always have. This makes it sometimes hard to understand news content. Another bigger theme is the *negativity* of news. According to a lot of participants, news is very negative, possibly leading to fear, the normalization of certain problems or negative events, to distorted ideas of reality, or as one participant stated, 'I always get a little bit depressed when watching the news' (ID44, female, 14 years). They discussed that a more positive approach would be desirable, because it would reduce the fear and increase enjoyment of the news. At the same time, most participants expressed a need to (be in the) know and discussed that, although the news sometimes frightens them, negative news is news and, therefore, important.

Participants' evaluations ranged from *interesting* to *boring* and *repetitive*. According to some participants, consuming news is something inherently interesting, while most stressed a lack of importance of news right now: 'When you are older and you can actually do something with it [news] then I think it is more important. For us it is more that it is interesting I think, than that it is important' (ID56, female, 15 years). They have individualized interests, leading to evaluations of specific content (e.g. sports) as more interesting than others (e.g. economics).

In general, participants felt a *disconnection* between youth and news. Efforts taken by news organizations to close the gap with early adolescents, for example by discussing topics that are relevant for them and by using newer media such as YouTube, are, however, often considered a laughing stock. One exception to this is the Instagram channel by the Dutch public news broadcasting organization about which most participants were very positive.

Evaluations of news implied thoughts about the current abundance of news and its possible consequences. News was considered *omnipresent*. On the one hand, this was evaluated as a good thing, making it easier to consume news. On the other hand,

participants mentioned that it leads to extremity, a decrease in quality, irritation, and even the avoidance of news. Because of its omnipresence, people now have the possibility to seek news that fits their interests/opinion (for more on this, see the ‘individual differences’ part), which can lead to the news becoming more extreme. Besides, some participants pointed out the increased competition for audiences’ attention, which they said can lead to more *sensationalism*, polarization, and a decrease of quality.

While it did not immediately come to mind for most participants, the *importance* – and lack – of *reliability* was discussed in all groups. Evaluations of reliability varied greatly, with some participants stating that ‘It is the news, so I believe it is true’ (ID12, female, 14 years) and that news almost always is right, while others stated, ‘The news can also be fake’ (ID31, female, 13 years). The abundance of news and social media makes it easier to disseminate incorrect information, which might even lead to more traditional, and often more trusted, sources reporting this information as ‘news’.

Some believed that incorrect information is often only present in less important news (sources), while another participant mentioned the (presumed) dissemination of incorrect information by Russia. Some participants brought up possible commercial motives for disseminating incorrect news, stating for example, ‘Sometimes they do it to get more views’ (ID6, female, 14 years) and ‘It is stupid that making money matters more than actually just disseminating the news’ (ID43, female, 16 years).

The problem with this kind of (fake) news is that ‘young people are highly influenced by the news’ (ID7, female, 12 years), or just in general that people are influenced by (incorrect) news, because some people believe incorrect information disseminated in the media. Others believe that it is not that problematic. They believe that they do not do anything with news (besides consuming it), because it is not about them or because they think people do not believe this kind of information. Nevertheless, a couple of participants brought up to never have thought about the possibility of fake news.

Motives for news consumption and critical evaluation (RQ2)

In all groups, participants stressed that news consumption is critical *to be well-informed*, for citizenship, professional, and social goals (see Figure 1(c)): ‘You want to know what is going on in the world’ (ID14, female, 14 years). Being well-informed can prevent you from believing incorrect information, thus acting as a prerequisite of critical evaluation. People who are not well-informed might, without hesitation, believe incorrect information, as one participant expressed, ‘Because well, they do not know what the news is at the moment, so they might easily believe that Trump is a woman now or whatever’ (ID48, male, 15 years).

Some participants aim to learn something from the news and to gain a (more complete) worldview. In about half of the groups, participants showed their knowledge on the lack of neutrality of news outlets and the risk of filter bubbles. For a few participants, this also motivates them to critically evaluate news and to aim to keep an open view, leading to consuming news that is either ‘neutral’ or to consume news from multiple political viewpoints. Besides these citizenship-oriented goals, participants expressed that news consumption is needed for work or education. However, others doubted the utility of news or stated that its utility varies per person. For many participants, these motives are

mainly something for the future. According to them, their interest in news (and news consumption) will grow when they age, because of growing intrinsic interest or extrinsic motivations, for example when it is needed for work.

At this moment, if they consume news, this is often because of *external pressure*: they are forced by parents and school to consume news. Although some participants mentioned to rely on their parents to inform them about important news, others believe that their parents are being patronizing: 'We already understand so much, we know so much by ourselves' (ID6, female, 14 years). However, these outside pressures are not always considered as condescending, but also as normal: 'It is expected of you'. (Moderator: 'What do you think about that?') 'It is good, I think' (ID35, male, 16 years). Sometimes critically evaluating content might be more important, especially when they have to do something with the information, such as for a school assignment.

More intrinsic motives that were discussed include for *diversion*: to pass time, as a habit, for enjoyment, for *social learning*, and to have something to talk about. News that aligns with their interests is used as distraction and diversion: 'I don't know why, but then you aren't busy with school' (ID18, male, 15 years). About consuming news for a social goal, as conversational topics, there was no consensus among participants. While some expressed to (only) consume news to have something to discuss with others, others stated that news was not something to talk about.

Consuming and critically evaluating news (RQ3)

The discussions of participants' style of news consumption and evaluation revealed a variety of news consumption and evaluation styles, ranging from passive to active (see Figure 1(d)). The extent to which participants used each style seemed to depend on their evaluation of news content, for instance consuming news more passively because of its negativity.

Style of news consumption. Regarding their news consumption, participants vary in the degree of activity. A general trend seems to be that they do not consume news in its entirety. Participants state that they usually 'scan' news content and only follow what interests them. Their consumption is often incidental, for example while watching other YouTube videos. In contrast to participants who actively seek news, by watching television news or actually seeking news on the Internet, most participants feel like they do not have to actively seek it. They trust other people to tell them what is going on and what is correct: 'If something important has happened, my parents will tell me' (ID14, female, 14 years). Besides, they do not actively consume news because they cannot change anything based on it, because they are still young.

Other reasons to not actively consume news are that they have other priorities and preferences. Critically consuming news often takes too much effort, or as they say, 'because we are lazy' (ID27, male, 12 years). Some participants even stated they avoid news altogether, because of its repetition and/or obtrusiveness: 'then you really have to try to avoid the news, because it tries to come to you from eeeverywhere' (ID5, male, 12 years).

Nevertheless, participants also sometimes actively seek news. This is often (only) news that personally interests them and/or what is in line with their own opinion. This is

often not really the ‘important’ news, such as political or economic news. Another, more active, part of news consumption was discussing news with others. In general, participants varied between not really and quite active discussants of news, but this was mostly depended on whether the specific news topic interests them. Besides, news stories that are more proximate (and thereby, relevant), very big (important), funny and/or positive are more likely to be discussed.

Regarding the sources early adolescents consult, one participant stated, ‘We are a neeew generation’ (ID10, male, 13 years). There seems to be a shift away from traditional sources and toward newer sources, such as social media. Consuming news through these kinds of sources is in line with their relatively passive consumption style, which prefers convenience and flexibility. Nevertheless, they do prefer more traditional sources over, for example, social media when discussing reliability. Participants are aware that it is easy and quick to just share something on the Internet, while they have great faith in television news and newspapers. Regardless of online or offline, news brought by professional news organizations is often deemed most reliable.

Style of news evaluation. Regarding the evaluation of news, a fair share of participants state that they do not (really) critically evaluate what they consume. Others do doubt news content, but do not actively do something with this doubt: ‘Well I didn’t really do anything with it, but I do think “is it real or not”’ (ID1, male, 12 years). The extent to which they actually critically evaluate a news item depends on a couple of factors. These included whether it was something that actually interested them, whether it was in line with their opinion, whether it would not be much effort, and why they consumed the news in the first place. Finally, quite some participants believed that the critical evaluation of news is only important for ‘important’ topics and that there is not much of a need to critically evaluate the kind of news early adolescents (actively) consume: ‘I don’t know if young people watch really important news which needs to be correct. (Moderator: What do you mean?) Eh, well more political stuff and things like that’ (ID58, male, 15 years).

Some participants expressed to actually do something to reduce their doubt. Strategies for critical evaluation could be divided into content-specific strategies, which are employed when facing a specific news item, and general strategies, which can be used regardless of an actual item and more as a next step of verifying. Content-specific strategies included checking the source or link, to use common sense, check the writing style and/or lay-out, and to look at the context of the news item. Participants often mentioned that you can see whether something is right or not or exaggerated: ‘You just have to use your common sense’ (ID27, male, 12 years). In addition, they reveal that they look at specific content related features that tell them if something is true:

I often have that I see a heading that is really screaming with capitals and exclamation marks and that the message underneath is really shocking like ‘wow, this is world news’. Then I am like ‘wait’, that makes it a lot less trustworthy and then I am less likely to believe it. (ID50, male, 16 years)

Furthermore, if the sense creeps up on them that it might be untrue, they do put an effort into checking the veracity of the news: ‘[. . .] we then looked it up and it turned out to be an opinion column’ (ID44, female, 14 years).

Regarding the more general strategies, participants distinguished asking others (e.g. parents or friends) and checking other sources. Specifically, parents are trusted to know what is right or wrong: ‘[I ask] my parents mostly, they know a lot’ (ID22, male, 15 years). Another option is to check other sources: ‘When you see something of which you think “is this real or fake”, then you specifically search for that thing, if you can find other, bigger, news sites and stuff that reported it’ (ID7, female, 12 years).

Discussion

This study aimed to gain insight into early adolescents’ views on news consumption and literacy, by conducting qualitative focus groups. Outcomes revealed that participants’ definitions of news are relatively broad, and that although some regard news as interesting, it is often regarded as boring, repetitive, and negative, and lacking connection with early adolescents. Participants evaluate news as omnipresent and stress the importance – and lack – of reliability (RQ1). Although participants understand and sometimes feel the need to consume and/or critically evaluate news, there is a lack of intrinsic motives at this stage in their lives (RQ2). For most participants, this translates into a relatively passive style of news consumption and, one step further, a lack of critical evaluation (RQ3).

When reviewing these conclusions in the light of Potter’s (2019) media literacy model, participants’ news definitions and evaluations show that they have knowledge on media content, industries, and effects. Participants were knowledgeable on topics such as news worthiness criteria, news bias, and what it means when people believe and/or act upon news. Their motives show a weak personal locus at this moment, and their news consumption and critical evaluation of news show that they have some level of analysis, evaluation, and deduction. However, although participants discussed actions that indicate these skills, they mentioned to rarely use these.

In line with college students’ definitions of news (Head et al., 2018), early adolescents’ definitions were slightly broader than conventional definitions, including ‘everything new’. That means that everything that is new for someone can be regarded as news, broadening the adult application of ‘news-ness’ (cf. Edgerly and Vraga, 2019). However, traditional newsworthiness criteria were also often mentioned, creating a hierarchy of news. Participants’ evaluations of news content are largely in line with previous research among older youth, supporting that young people evaluate (conventional) news as boring, repetitive, negative, disconnected from youth, and sensationalistic (Costera Meijer, 2007; Craft et al., 2016; Marchi, 2012). Paradoxically, but as has been found before (cf. Buckingham, 2000), participants often rebuked the idea of making the news more entertaining. Regarding their evaluations, there was some variety in responses and a fair share of participants also qualified news as interesting. We cannot expect youth to care about the same things as adults, but these varying definitions and evaluations of news might lead to selective news exposure, and thereby, be at the origins of the great variety in news literacy levels, as has been found in previous research (Maksl et al., 2015).

Going beyond evaluations concerning the news’ negativity, there were some critical thoughts about the omnipresence of news and the importance of reliability. It did not immediately come to mind and some participants believed news to always be correct, but some expressed knowledge in several areas Potter (2019) differentiated. Participants discussed

media content, industries and effects, delineating the possibilities of mis- and disinformation, its precursors (such as commercial motives), and its consequences (people believing and acting upon mis- or disinformation). Furthermore, participants discussed the problems of filter bubbles and news with a political orientation or goal. In line with Marchi (2012), participants valued truth and, going beyond Craft et al. (2016), some participants showed to have knowledge of the effects of news content. These thoughts were, however, not completely widespread, as a large group of participants believed that doubting and critically evaluating news are not that important for them, at least for now. Research in adults has shown that people who have a greater understanding of how news media operate are more adept in the identification of fabricated news and native advertising compared to those without this expertise (Amazeen and Bucy, 2019). Therefore, the finding that early adolescents do to some extent understand how news media operate is promising.

Future-oriented motives prevailed, both for news consumption and for the critical evaluation of news. Right now, participants did not show a strong personal locus (Potter, 2019) to process news. Although they acknowledged the need to be well-informed, they stated, in line with research on a broader range of teens (Marchi, 2012; Van Cauwenberge et al., 2010), that consuming and being interested in news is mostly something for when they can actually make a change in society based or when it is needed for their work. Their news consumption now frequently results from pressure by their parents and/or school. Parents are often trusted as sources of and as assistants in the critical evaluation of the news, which supports previous research on parental influence on news consumption (Marchi, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2019).

When participants did consume news, this was, in line with previous research (e.g. Craft et al., 2016; Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2018; Molyneux, 2018), mostly incidental and online. On the one hand, participants' passive news consumption is no direct reason for worry, because even incidental consumption correlates with increased civic engagement (Kim et al., 2013) and participants stated to believe that it is important to keep up with news. On the other hand, their 'news will find me attitude', also found in studies on older adolescents (15–18 years old, Craft et al., 2016), might lead to less knowledge and/or the enhancement of existing knowledge gaps between those who do and those who do not actively seek news (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Mirroring the relatively passive consumption of news, a lot of participants did not truly feel the need to critically evaluate news. This is regardless of their knowledge structures and awareness of possible consequences of, among others, disinformation. For the ones that did – at least – think about critically evaluating news, multiple strategies could be distinguished. These strategies are mostly in line with previous descriptions of what adults sometimes do (Head et al., 2018; Tully et al., 2020). They include forms of analysis, evaluation, and deduction (Potter, 2019): checking the source or link, using common sense, checking the writing style or lay-out, looking at the context of the item, asking others, and checking other sources. However, only a relatively small group of participants mentioned to actually employ these skills.

Based on our findings, we would argue that news literacy based on news media knowledge only is insufficient for early adolescents. Research and practice should focus on a broader definition of what it means to be news literate. This study has shown that being knowledgeable on news media does not automatically cause early adolescents to be critical news consumers. If being news literate means critically consuming news,

which we would argue, this study shows that early adolescents are still too passive. Therefore, besides the important tasks of building contextual knowledge and tools for critical news consumption (Craft et al., 2016), we argue that motivating critical news consumption is of the utmost importance for early adolescents.

Thus far, media literacy education and interventions tend to have greater effects on knowledge and awareness than on behavior (Jeong et al., 2012). To effectuate change in youth's critical news evaluation, future interventions and curricula should focus more on the personal locus: show early adolescents why critically consuming both 'softer' and 'hard' news is achievable and relevant for them right now. Furthermore, interventions should take the influential role of parents into account and be tailored to youths' preferences, for example by starting to practice with critically evaluating the kind of news that youth like and already consume. Future research should further disentangle and test what the ultimate news literacy intervention that integrates a focus on the personal locus should look like.

To our knowledge, this study is the first to offer a more complete overview of early adolescents' views on news and news literacy. This study is not without limitations. Recruitment was restricted to schools accessible to the researchers, leading to a sample that for the bigger part has a high level of education, from two secondary schools in the Netherlands only. The Netherlands are characterized by a high level of trust in news and government initiatives to increase citizens' media literacy have just started to emerge (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2019). This might further explain why participants did know about the importance of news literacy, but did not have a sense of immediacy to do something with it. Regardless of this, the groups yielded rich data and included a variety of educational levels, gender, and age, which have been shown to be important determinants in news consumption and literacy (e.g. Kleemans and Eggink, 2016).

As Clark and Marchi (2017) mention, 'young people are not completely uninterested in what adults would define as "politics", but they engage in different ways today' (p. 10). This is, to most extent, the same with news. We should not be too pessimistic, and take the knowledge and skills they already have to help them take the second step: to empower them to become active critical news consumers. As stated by themselves, they are a new generation, which requires new approaches to news.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. In the Dutch school system, learning processes are adapted to the needs of individuals by dividing pupils into different streams, based on their achievement levels at the end of primary education (around the age of 12). Ordered from lowest to highest achievement, pupils go to pre-vocational secondary education (called VMBO), higher general secondary education (called HAVO), or pre-university level (called VWO). For this study these are considered low, medium, and high levels of education.

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