Article

Confusing Content, Platforms, and Data: Young Adults and Trust in News Media

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Abstract
News media trust, and the lack thereof, has been a prominent topic of discussion among journalism scholars in recent years. In this article, we study young adults' trust in news media from the perspectives of platformisation and datafication. For the empirical study, we collected interview data from 23 Finnish 19–25-year-old young adults and analysed it inductively with applied thematic analysis. Our analysis reveals that trust negotiation is relational and entails not accepted, but forced vulnerability in relation to news media and the platforms on which they operate. Unclarity about the agency of news media on social media platforms causes young adults to experience powerlessness and anxiety in the face of data collection, which in practice translates into indifference toward their data being used by both news media and social media platforms. We show that young adults face a variety of challenges when navigating the online (news) media environment, which as we identify, can result in three trust-diminishing confusions about content, platforms, and data. This may have profound effects on how journalism is viewed as a cornerstone of a democratic society.

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1. Introduction

Young adults worldwide are withdrawing from direct brand-based news consumption to news consumption on social media platforms (Newman et al., 2022). These datafied platforms affect how journalistic content is shaped; therefore, the difference between journalistic content and other media content is often blurred (Valaskivi, 2022). Further, for young adults, news consumption is often a by-product of spending time on social media, i.e., they consume news incidentally (Mitchelstein et al., 2020). Incidental news consumption is linked to young adults' dependence on personalised news sources, meaning that algorithms increasingly define how they understand the world around them (Swart, 2021). Hence, this article examines young adults' news media trust, which is inevitably shift-

ing due to the rapid changes in the current datafied media landscape.

In many Western countries, news media trust, i.e., the degree to which audiences trust news outlets as credible sources of information, is declining (Newman et al., 2023). Proposed reasons for this include decreasing interest in news, news avoidance (Villi et al., 2022), and exposure to fake news (Ognyanova et al., 2020). Additionally, recent crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have raised, in an unprecedented way, the question of the veracity of journalistic or seemingly journalistic content in the online environment. From an audience perspective, a key issue in the changing news environment is negotiating trust, both in relation to news content and its sources. However, it is not only a question of individuals' willingness or ability to trust the content distributed on platforms, because in

the data-driven environment, the agency of both journalistic content and content producers is largely constructed on terms dictated by the platforms themselves (van Dijck et al., 2018).

In this article, we examine how young adults negotiate trust in the platformed and datafied news media environment. In doing so, we contribute to an understanding of the role of digital intermediaries in the trust relationship between young audiences and news organisations. We go beyond merely looking at whether news media trust exists to examining how relationships to data and platforms are negotiated and affect trust in news media. Our empirical study context is in Finland, which, by international comparison, stands out as a country with particularly high levels of news reach and trust (Newman et al., 2023). Finland is characterised as a media welfare state in that the whole population has access to news that is diverse in content and enjoys editorial independence (Syvertsen et al., 2014). In addition, almost half of the Finnish population trusts news media in handling their personal data (Newman et al., 2023). Finland thus provides an interesting context for trust research because high trust in news media also seems to include trust in news organisations' use and handling of audience data.

We focus on young adults between the ages of 19–25, often referred to as "social media natives," because they grew up surrounded by social media and their news consumption habits differ from those of previous generations (Newman et al., 2022). We exemplify how young adults' platformed news consumption causes them to experience content and platform confusion, i.e., what counts as news and who is the original producer of the news is not always clear when news is encountered in a stream of social media content. Additionally, we show that in the data-driven news media environment, young adults experience data confusion. This relates to how, for the studied young adults, it was often difficult to distinguish who collects their data, and in particular, what the specific role of news media as data collectors is when contrasted with platform companies. Whereas content and platform confusions have previously been identified by other scholars (e.g., Ross Arguedas et al., 2022; Valaskivi, 2022), data confusion and the related concept of forced vulnerability are novel outcomes of our empirical analysis. These concepts emerged from our adopted perspective to study audience perceptions of news organisations' data collection, which to our best knowledge, is not previously considered in literature in contrast to the growing literature on journalists' perceptions and use of audience data (e.g., Lamot & Paulussen, 2020; Salonen et al., 2023; Tenor, 2023). Our study thus contributes to the understanding of the platformed and datafied news environment, where young adults navigate and negotiate their trust and relationship to data and news media.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. News Media Trust and Young Adults

News media trust, and the lack thereof, has been a prominent topic of discussion among journalism scholars in recent years (e.g., Fisher et al., 2021; Park et al., 2020). Comparative studies (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2023) have pointed towards a decline in trust in legacy media and professional news journalism in many Western countries. At the same time, there is a lot of variation in the level of trust between countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). News media trust can also vary between different time periods in one country, depending on the developments of the country's political and media spheres (Brosius et al., 2022).

The concept of trust entails accepted vulnerability in relation to the trusted party (Baier, 1986). News media trust can thus be understood through the lens of audience vulnerability to news media's choice of what the audience should know and how this knowledge is delivered (Grosser et al., 2016). In the news media context, we understand vulnerability as a value-free (not particularly negative) affective relationship. Trust is also future-oriented and connected to the journalistic expectations that people have towards news media (Vanacker & Belmas, 2009). Taking expectations and vulnerability into account, in this article we rely on Hanitzsch et al.'s (2018, p. 5) definition of news media trust as "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner."

Trust in news media is often linked with trust in a functioning democracy (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). Polarisation of the political climate is theorised to cause a decline in trust, driving people to alternative sources of news (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). It has been suggested that the high level of news media trust in our empirical context, Finland, can at least partly be explained by a non-polarised media landscape (Newman et al., 2022). Finns broadly trust national news media and they place their trust particularly in individual media brands (Matikainen et al., 2020).

On an individual level, high news media trust is often associated with high political trust (Brosius et al., 2022), high interest in news, and low levels of active news avoidance (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Newman et al., 2022). In the past five years, news avoidance among young adults has risen globally, which can be linked to the fact that those under 35 trust news less than older generations (Newman et al., 2022). A decline in trust, especially in this age group, has also been observed in the Finnish context (Ojala & Matikainen, 2022). A recent qualitative study conducted among Finnish young adults (aged 18–29) showed that trust in news media is eroded by the news media's overt market orientation, experienced information overload, and a lack of diverse views and opinions (Hasala et al., 2023). At the same time,

Hasala et al. (2023) emphasise that trust negotiation in relation to news media is a complex, nuanced process that is anchored on individuals' values, habits, and social environment.

2.2. Trust in a Platformed and Datafied News Environment

The context for consuming news is increasingly digital, platformed, and datafied for most audiences, and especially so for younger generations. Platformisation can be defined as "the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). In short, platforms are becoming the dominant online infrastructures, and they are infiltrating and converging with the institutions and practices of different social sectors (such as journalism) through which democratic societies are organised (van Dijck et al., 2018). Van Dijck et al. (2018) suggested that as platforms have gained increasing power over people's everyday lives, platforms have come to form a "platform ecosystem," which is fuelled by the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetisation of user data. This process is known as datafication, which, more broadly, refers to a societal transformation where different data streams are used to collect and produce information about people, which is then used as a basis for business (Kennedy, 2018). In the news media context specifically, datafication is manifested in "journalism's transformation towards a more and more data-based, algorithmicised, metrics-driven or even automated practice" (Loosen, 2021, p. 361). Research shows that audience data increasingly shapes journalistic decision-making in news organisations, for example, in the selection of news headlines and the formulation process of news stories (Lamot & Paulussen, 2020; Salonen et al., 2023). However, some journalists are ambivalent towards data use and highlight the professional values of news selection (Salonen et al., 2023; Tenor, 2023).

The trinity of platformisation, datafication, and algorithmisation (Latzer, 2021) has led to a situation where much of the news consumption on platforms takes place incidentally, i.e., news consumption is a by-product of consuming other content online (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Incidental news consumption has been theorised to lead (young) audiences to disassociate between the sources of information from their journalistic origin (Hasala et al., 2023; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022), and cause difficulties in identifying different content genres, and the motives behind producing them (Valaskivi, 2022). Empirical studies on audiences (e.g., Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Swart et al., 2017) confirm that the boundaries people draw between news and other content on social media platforms are blurred and shifting. Furthermore, research shows that when audiences are incidentally exposed to news on social media

platforms, they are less likely to remember the source of the news (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019).

Regarding trust, research shows that the context in which news is consumed is integral for the experience of trust, i.e., consuming news through social media platforms shapes audience perceptions of trust toward news, often in a negative fashion (Park et al., 2020). For example, people find news less credible when they are exposed to it through Facebook as opposed to a news media's website (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023). At the same time, studies show that people are more likely to trust news content on social media platforms when the sharer of news is an opinion leader (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Turcotte et al., 2015). Additionally, research indicates that social endorsements of news not only increases people's trust in news content online, but also the likelihood that they will seek out more information from the endorsed news sources in the future (Turcotte et al., 2015).

Consequently, negotiating trust in a platformed, datafied environment is a complex process that relates to people's understanding, perceptions, feelings, and experiences about the system and the drivers behind it (Steedman et al., 2020). This means, for example, that people may trust the news institution but not the broader data ecosystem that guides news media's data-related practices (Steedman et al., 2020). Similar results have been found in the Finnish context: In Finland, there is no evidence that the emergence of social media platforms as mediators of news would have caused a decline in trust in individual news brands, but surveys indicate a general scepticism towards social media as news platforms (Matikainen et al., 2020; Reunanen, 2020).

Recent research has indicated that the ways individuals navigate amidst datafied media environments are often rather messy, arousing feelings of anxiety, creepiness, and irritation (Pink et al., 2018; Ruckenstein & Granroth, 2020). Despite the challenges associated with data-driven environments, possibilities for opting out are limited. As a result, the pressure to trust datafied media is becoming increasingly ingrained in people's daily media consumption habits (Pink et al., 2018). Consequently, individuals adopt various improvisatory actions to cope in these settings (Pink et al., 2018) and build trust in datafied environments. These include, for example, withdrawing from interaction on social media platforms or deleting apps altogether (Talvitie-Lamberg et al., 2022). Research on young adults, specifically, shows that they have developed a variety of tactics and strategies to mitigate inconveniences and discomfort that data collection causes, including limiting information disclosure or avoiding interaction with targeted advertisements (Holvoet et al., 2022).

Uncertainty about how social media platforms operate and make use of data not only causes individual feelings of powerlessness and distrust (Draper & Turow, 2019), but also distrust in journalistic content disseminated on the platforms, and the organisations that

operate on them (Steedman et al., 2020). Ultimately, it is a question of (lack of) trust in journalism as an institution, and thus, in the preconditions for democracy to function. Weakening trust can drive young audiences away from journalistic content, toward alternative sources of information (Ojala & Matikainen, 2022), and thus towards different and polarised social realities.

Overall, the platformisation and datafication of news consumption highlights a situation where the perceived trustworthiness and legitimacy of news media lies not only in the hands of journalists nor traditional media institutions, but rather in a much more decentralised network of audiences, platform companies, legislators, and their interaction (Seuri et al., 2022). As recent research on datafied news environments and their increasingly algorithmic news design has shown, decisions on news content have partly moved into the hands of data scientists, developers, and ultimately algorithmic models (Schjøtt Hansen & Møller Hartley, 2021). User data is naturally what matters behind these models and suggests to us that the relationships users build with the data (trust as one possibility) are becoming a critical point in the current media landscape. However, surprisingly there seems to be a lack of research on users' trust in data, particularly in news environments. Against this background, we examine what qualities Finnish young adults associate with trustworthy media, and how they define and build trust in news content and the media in the platformed, datafied media environment. To that aim, we pose the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do young adults perceive (dis)trust toward news media on social media platforms?

RQ2: How do young adults perceive (dis)trust toward data collection by news media?

3. Materials and Methods

Our data consists of semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in May–June 2022. The interviewees were Finnish 19–25-year-old young adults. Of the 23 interviewees, 15 identified as female and 8 as male. At the time of the interviews, all interviewees were enrolled university students in communication, economics, social, or educational sciences. The interview sample was convenience-based: An invitation to participate in the interviews was circulated on student mailing lists with the compensation of a €25 reward voucher. All participants were interviewed online via Zoom by the first author. The interviews lasted on average 50 minutes (ranging from 30 to 80 minutes).

In the interviews, we asked the young adults about their perceptions and experiences relating to news consumption, news media trust, and personal data collection. As a supplementary data-gathering method, we used news repertoire mapping (Merten, 2020). Using an online collaborative platform, the interviewees were first asked to freely name their sources of news on digital post-its and to place these sources in the order of importance as news sources on an ego-centric map consisting of five concentric circles. Following this, the interviewees were asked to indicate on the map how often they encountered news from each source and whether they received news from each source intentionally or incidentally.

Figure 1 shows an average of the 23 interviewees' repertoire maps. The aggregated map contains the three innermost circles and those news sources that more than a third of respondents placed on their individual maps. The public service broadcaster, Yleisradio (YLE), and the leading daily newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS), were the most important and the most often followed news sources for our respondents. The two national
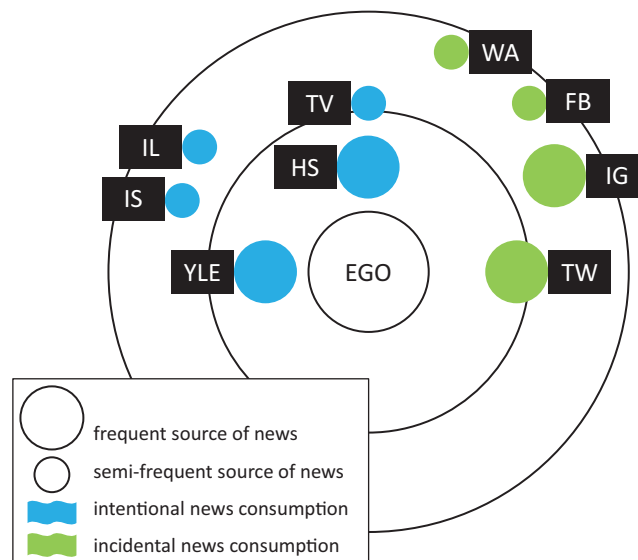

Figure 1. Aggregated news repertoire map.

evening tabloids, *Iltasanomat* (IS) and *Iltalehti* (IL), were also considered as somewhat important and were semi-frequently followed by our interviewees. The interviewees reported that they mainly consumed news via news organisations' websites and applications, but they only used the free versions of these services, i.e., they did not pay for subscriptions. Additionally, they watched public service and commercial television news (TV) semi-regularly and considered them to be somewhat important sources for them.

In addition to consuming news directly and intentionally from news media's own platforms, young adults in our study consumed news incidentally via social media platforms. More than a third of respondents mentioned Twitter (TW), Instagram (IG), Facebook (FB), and WhatsApp (WA) as news sources. Additionally, some interviewees mentioned TikTok, LinkedIn, YouTube, Snapchat, or Google as news sources. Of all social media platforms, Twitter and Instagram were considered the most important sources of news. The repertoire maps confirmed that young adults in our sample have a news media diet that mirrors studies conducted on larger populations of Finnish youth (Matikainen et al., 2020; Sormanen et al., 2022). The completed maps were used as a starting point for further discussion on news consumption and news media trust.

We analysed the interview data inductively using the method of applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012). First, we divided the transcribed interview material into three topical modules that were (a) news consumption, (b) news media trust, and (c) personal data collection. Some parts of the material overlapped between different modules. For each topical module, we had a separate analytical question that guided the coding process. The respective analytical questions were (a) How do the interviewees relate to news content on social media platforms?, (b) What aspects do the interviewees highlight when talking about trust in the news media?, and (c) How do the interviewees perceive and experience personal data collection by news media? The coding was completed solely by the first author, after which the joint authors gathered to discuss the themes that emerged from the data. The final stage of the analysis process was focused on examining the interrelationships between the coding categories and between the three topical modules. In Section 4, we describe these interrelationships in detail.

4. Findings

In accordance with previous studies (Hasala et al., 2023; Matikainen et al., 2020; Ojala & Matikainen, 2022), young adults in our study showed high levels of trust towards Finnish news media and journalism as an institution. The majority of participants named the public service broadcaster, YLE, as the most trustworthy media because, as argued by IW18, "they have the expertise, and they are non-commercial." The interviewees negoti-

ated trust in news media through former positive experiences and mental images, which is highlighted in the statements of IW7: She trusted "big and recognised media houses" that "people generally consider reliable."

Young Finns distinguished national news media from international media. Some of them recognised that high trust in national media stemmed broadly from trust in Finnish society and its democratic system. IW5 reflected that the trust in media comes early from childhood since "in school they taught us that [legacy media] are reliable." Learned and accumulated experience of reliable news media maintained interviewees' trust towards it. IW13 reflected:

> If you think about these kinds of foreign [news] sites, I don't dare to read them, because I have the feeling that from some sites like the *Daily Mail*, I don't have 23 years of data on what kind of information is available there. Somehow the whole trust building should start from scratch.

High levels of trust in national news media often led to confidence that news media would also handle audience data ethically and within legal boundaries. IW1 described how her trust in news media as data collectors is based on how "they make good journalism, good news." IW8 elaborated further:

> I don't know to what extent data goes back and forth in practice, but on the level of feeling, it's more pleasant to hand over [data] to a Finnish [media outlet], or if not Finnish, then European. Or, if not European, then to anyone other than companies collecting and selling data.

At the same time, the interviewees were active users of international commercial social media platforms, which also formed a visibly present part of their news repertoires. In the following subsections, we first analyse how trust is perceived in such a platformed news environment and then analyse what dimensions datafication brings to trust negotiation. We highlight that consuming news via social media platforms causes young adults to experience not only content confusion (what counts as news) and platform confusion (what is the journalistic origin of the news), but also, what we call data confusion. By that we mean that the participants in our study could not easily distinguish news media's data collection practices in isolation, but saw them as a continuum to other data collected and used online.

4.1. Trust Negotiation and Content–Platform Confusion

News media visibility on social media platforms increased young adults' awareness and knowledge of news brands, and thus made news media more trustworthy. If news media were not visible on social media platforms, it would, as expressed by IW5, "probably be much

harder for them to get their news out to the public," and then, as stated by IW21, "to what extent would people really get the news from reliable sources?" IW10 elaborated how the presence of news media on social media platforms is especially important "for those who don't necessarily read newspapers or otherwise pay attention" because it "creates a lower threshold for them to get information on current affairs."

Young adults' attitudes towards incidental exposure to news, amidst other social media content, were largely positive. Through social media platforms, they become informed fast and in an entertaining format. Interestingly, at the same time, they were concerned about news content overlapping with commercial and entertainment content on social media platforms. IW14 evaluated Twitter as a news source:

> It's kind of the fastest, but also the most confusing. You see Sanna Marin [at the time the incumbent prime minister] in Butcha [Ukraine], and a funny dog video, and return on equity figures right after one another. There's no logic, no internal structure, it's kind of chaotic. Maybe that's part of the charm. But as a sole source of news, it doesn't make sense to me. The news should be more organised, a pre-chewed entity, like a newspaper article.

IW3 further elaborated on the discrepancy between wanting news content in an entertaining format and being wary of the consequences:

> There is nothing entertaining in the news, or maybe not entertaining, but something that motivates me to read them. So then when [news] is [on social media] among everything else, I find they are more interesting. You don't necessarily go and get them, but they come to you. But then when the news content gets mixed up with the other content, and when the other content is sometimes so unreliable you don't really know what to believe anymore.

Distrust toward news content on social media platforms resulted both from content and platform confusion. When news content, produced to cohere with social media design and affordances, converged with the aesthetics of other social media content, young adults faced difficulties distinguishing what counts as news and who is the original producer of the news. Platformed news consumption thus seemed to obscure not only news media organisations' agency on social media platforms, but also trust towards particular organisations.

The way in which young adults seemed to overcome platform and content confusion and the distrust it caused was that they negotiated trust in news content in relation to other users and their views. Young adults talked about the role of family, friends, public figures, and influencers as news producers, distributors, and commentators. They agreed that the news item sharer often has the strongest influence on framing the news. IW13 summarised how "the comment of the person who shared the story has an impact on the kind of glasses you wear when you read the whole news story." IW21 further elaborated on how the way influencers frame news based on their subjective viewpoint and experiences is related to trust:

> Influencers often have a view, or a particular perspective, on the news because it affects them in a particular way. When their followers continue to share those experiences that reiterate the point of a news story, when dozens of people share it, it creates concreteness. It creates a sense of trust or humanity around something, but at the same time, you have to keep in mind that this is just one perspective.

The interviewees noted how such particular, and oftentimes personal, perspectives on news items could either reinforce or question the trustworthiness of the original news item. For example, IW16 explained how she re-evaluated news on the impact of food choices on climate change after she saw an influencer commenting on it:

> An influencer on Instagram could explain how this news was made. I know that this person is really familiar with these things and has a track record of being an expert on them. Then I would believe in the expertise of someone else instead of a journalist.

Trust in influencers sharing news was also largely dependent on the particular news aesthetics they used for backing up their arguments. IW3 talked about the use of background videos (i.e., the green screen effect) on TikTok:

> [Influencers] often talk over it, they are half in the picture and in the background is the source they are talking about. You can read it yourself from the background. Usually, they have highlighted the part of it that they want to talk about. That's the so-called confirmation.

Furthermore, news shared by a trustworthy circle of people could easily be trusted. IW22 said that he is not interested when "random people comment on news," but likes when his friends share or comment on news because he "can assess their understanding and influencing factors" that may affect how the news is framed. Other interviewees felt differently. IW20 said he "consider[s] friends and family trustworthy in many things, but that doesn't mean that they are trustworthy as experts in a certain field." Additionally, and in contrast to the qualitative assessment of a news sharer, IW3 highlighted the quantity of user information in assessing the reliability of news:

If there are thousands of people who agree on the same thing and the comments are similar, you'll believe it. It creates a lot of trust. But if there are more opposing opinions, than not. And if there is a mix of both, in such cases the original news item seems to be based on an opinion.

In summary, the findings suggest that young adults experienced platform and content confusion in that they had difficulties recognising journalistic content and its origin in the stream of social media content. From a news organisation's viewpoint, this would suggest that news organisations do not have a clear role in relation to audiences when news is consumed on platforms. Our interviewees indicated that direct contact between audiences and news organisations is weakened by those in between: the platforms, their aesthetics, and the news content disseminated by peers on platforms. A solution for young adults amidst this confusion is to navigate relying on peer relations: Trust in content is based on what the trustworthy peers trust, or on public opinion about a news item.

4.2. Trust Negotiation and Data Confusion

The interviewees experienced a sense of ignorance, powerlessness, and anxiety in the face of data collection by news organisations and social media companies, which in practice translated into indifference toward their data use. The participants described data collection in general as "annoying," "worrying," "scary," "nasty but not terrible," or as a "necessary evil." In the news media context, IW1 told us how she usually does not "have the energy to read all the cookie stuff, because it's such a long list." She continued explaining how she views news media data collection practices: "I've just got used to the idea that, 'Yes, accept, accept, accept,' let me read the news, please.''

Young adults did not easily recognise news media as data collectors, and they had a varied understanding of what kind of data news media have access to. In other words, they experienced what we call data confusion. When IW13 was asked about her perceptions of data collection, specifically in the news media context, she, like many of her peers, circled back to general data collection:

I think they probably collect roughly my age, my gender, my location, they probably collect what kind of things I've googled, what kind of websites I've browsed, whether I've looked at any products. Then, I'm sure, the phone records conversations, and then uses them to target me with ads the next time I open Instagram.

In a similar manner, IW23 hesitated over the boundaries of data collection:

I don't know if that's the case, but if Facebook collects information when I'm using the YLE app, I wouldn't

like it, but it probably doesn't. It probably can't. I don't know. Maybe they can. Google at least is capable of everything.

Young adults often referred to social media platforms' data collection practices in a negative sense, but they did not reflect on the fact that news media may also collect data through social media. When asked about the difference in preference for handing personal data over to news media versus to social media platforms, IW2 made a comparison:

My first thought would be that I don't mind as much giving my data to a news organisation as I do to TikTok, but then in the end I don't know how big the difference is, whether it's just a misconception in my mind that *Helsingin Sanomat* uses my data smarter.

IW15 further justified in what sense news organisations' data collection practices could be seen as more morally justifiable compared to social media platforms:

Instagram is trying to hook you and make money through it. Between the two, I'd rather give the data to the news media. After all, they can use it more for good. It's more important for them [to gather data] so that the important news can then be recommended to me.

The interviews also showed some unclarity about the business logic of commercial media. IW19 told us that targeted content "helps [her] find more information on a topic of interest," and that, according to IW11, "makes browsing so much easier." Later, both interviewees expressed that they disliked consumer profiling. Similarly, IW4 said that for him it is "a big problem" if he starts "seeing ads on news sites whose content mirrors [his] page history." IW1 elaborated further how "it just feels too extreme when I get ads for things I've been thinking about, things I haven't even talked to anyone about." Shortly after she noted that "it's part of this age of the internet and social media that we pay for the services with our data."

Overall, young adults' concerns about news media's agency as data collectors and users were ambiguous and fleeting, and hence, reflect the data confusion that they experienced. Their practical solution to data confusion, and the uneasiness it caused, was to give up. However, as our analysis reveals, under the seemingly shallow feelings of indifference, there were much deeper experiences of powerlessness and anxiety that eroded overall trust in social media platforms, and simultaneously in the news organisations present on them.

Consequently, our findings show that trust negotiation in the datafied news environment entails, not accepted, but forced vulnerability in relation to news media and the platforms on which they operate. Whereas accepted vulnerability "refers to an active

decision to depend or rely on a trustee" (Fawzi et al., 2021, p. 155), in our research context, young adults feel that there are no alternatives to giving up their personal data if they want to read news digitally or follow current affairs on social media platforms; they are forced to be vulnerable.

This sense of powerlessness was palpable when the interviewees talked about the future. IW15 commented that regarding data collection his "generation just happens to fall through the net in this time period." Unclarity about news media's data collection practices forced young adults to lean more firmly on Finnish society and democratic institutions, and legislation as a visible guarantee of it. As IW22 elaborated:

> I think the EU has started to intervene in some of those issues quite well. It may not necessarily help me anymore, but it might help future generations. When things were new, we didn't know so much before and nobody's rights were considered. So, it may be a matter for future generations that they will be able to protect their own data better in some way.

In the current situation, young adults felt compelled to trust that news media would collect and handle their personal data in a responsible manner. In the face of data confusion, they were forced to draw on their trust in Finnish society and its democracy rather than place trust squarely upon news media as collectors of data. Relatively stable trust in societal institutions, such as journalism, led to an expectation that Finnish news media were worthy of this trust, also in regards to personal data collection.

5. Discussion

This study examined young adults' perceptions of news media trust in the platformed and datafied media landscape. Our analysis shows that young adults experience uncertainty and confusion in relation to data collection and online news content, but that they have learned to cope with these inconveniences and discomforts by using various strategies. Below, we elaborate on the three types of confusions (platforms, content, and data), their related coping strategies, and the outcomes for news media trust.

Platform confusion arose from the blurred boundaries of news media's own sites and social media platforms. Oftentimes this led to unclarity about the origin of news, and thus obscured news organisations' agency on social media platforms. We found that young people generally enjoyed being exposed to news through social media. This was part of their daily media repertoire, in which news content was mixed with other social media content (Sormanen et al., 2022; Swart et al., 2017). At the same time, young adults expressed their concerns over content confusion. They noted that news items were often mixed aesthetically with other (social) media con-

tent on the platforms. This, in turn, caused hesitation over the trustworthiness of news items. The practical solution to platform and content confusion was to evaluate news content in relation to peers' actions and reactions. In this sense, our findings align with those of previous research that has highlighted the role of opinion leaders, as well as close ones in influencing the trustworthiness of news on social media (e.g., Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023).

Data confusion, in turn, seems to be an outcome of an overall attitude towards platforms and their data-related practices. Young adults were ambivalent about news media's data collection practices because they placed news media on a continuum of data collection along with global data platforms. Data was handed over to news media because young adults felt that nothing else could be done. The resulting indifference and a sense of a loss of agency over one's data is also seen in other research on datafied environments (e.g., Draper & Turow, 2019; Pink et al., 2018; Ruckenstein & Granroth, 2020).

Our analysis reveals that trust negotiation in the platformed and datafied news environment entails a forced vulnerability. By that, we mean that individuals have no other option than to involuntarily disclose their data and become exposed to the ways their data is used in practice, for example, in the form of algorithmic news recommendations. In order to gain access to journalistic content in the online environment, users are forced into a vulnerable position. In a society where trust in a functioning democratic system is strong, as in our research context in Finland, forced vulnerability may not be particularly risky. Individuals rely on how institutions are rather trustworthy, and journalism is a good example of such an institution. However, if datafied news environments are built on the idea of forced vulnerability, it is reasonable to ask whether this may be the opposite of the key societal justification for journalism. Enhancing a functioning democracy through informed and active citizenship, and granting access to information, are some of the core building blocks upon which the media welfare state is argued to be grounded (Syvertsen et al., 2014). It is thus alarming that our participants felt a loss of agency.

Remarkably, like trust negotiation for young adults reflects forced vulnerability, the dependence of media organisations on the platforms represents one as well: News media have to succumb to the commercial algorithmic logic of social media platforms if they want to operate there. They have no ultimate decision-making power over the affordances, the algorithms, or the logic by which platforms circulate their news content. This may have striking consequences, not only on the individual sense of agency on datafied platforms, but also on the sense of agency of the institutions and organisations operating on them. However, it is also to be noted that news media organisations, and journalism as an institution, benefit from being on social media platforms as they gain intangible assets: access to audiences that they

could not otherwise easily reach. Hence, in this new type of media ecology, the relationship is not as unilateral as it might first appear.

Social media's intermediating role in news dissemination has been observed to strengthen and weaken democracy concurrently (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). Our results show that young adults are keen on receiving news through social media because it lowers their threshold to become informed about the world around them (see Boczkowski et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). A recent study (Salonen et al., 2023) made the same observation from the viewpoint of news media: They see delivering news through social media as an act of democracy and equality. However, social media algorithms can also create a new kind of digital divide (Cinnamon, 2020): Due to the algorithmic logic of datafied platforms, access to accurate information is not guaranteed as it is dependent on what news each user encounters on the platform. News organisations' use of social media platforms and analytics tools, for example, increases their dependence on the platforms' operating logics (see van Dijck et al., 2018), which, in turn, may further contribute to the widening of the digital divide. This is particularly alarming given the importance of journalism as an advocate for a pluralistic social reality and a cornerstone of a democratic society.

In our study, data confusion and the resulting indifference were mitigated in the Finnish context by a strong confidence in society and a functioning democracy. As all our study participants were enrolled university students, they, however, do not reflect their whole age group in the study's national context. Our participants' media literacy skills, for example, could be assumed to be higher than their peers in non-university settings. Also, in the Finnish context, it has been found that those with lower education levels are more likely to think that news content on social media platforms can usually be trusted (Reunanen, 2020). This leads us to assume that the three types of confusions we identified in our study may also exist among others in the same age group, but that there might be some variation in the strategies used to overcome the confusions. Regarding data confusion, similar results have been found in studies dealing with data anxiety in different age groups (e.g., Pink et al., 2018), making it likely that news-related data confusion is typical not only for this age group. Instead, more research is needed on datafied environments, and on whether news-related content and platform confusion are common in different age groups, or if they only concern young people.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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