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'If It Matters to You, Then It Can Count as News': The Personal Needs and Agency Shaping Teen News Definitions

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Abstract

This article explores the news experiences of a small group of Australian 13–17-year-olds to understand how they define the news. The focus group analysis presented here suggests the teen participants define the news using both standard journalistic newsworthiness criteria and definitions that stretch beyond journalistic conventions. Significantly, the study found that because of the sheer amount of news and myriad ways of accessing it, these teens perceive the news as 'individualised' because they not only define news in relation to themselves, but also as an extension of their own needs and agency. Among the older focus groups, the concept of news also extended to an individual potentially being part of the news process, whether by blogging or sharing news via social media. Framed through Potter's model of media literacy (2004), these insights can be used to inform the development of Australian news literacy frameworks and offer evidence that supports and feeds into wider international debates on teens, news literacy and empowered citizenship.

Keywords: news definitions, youth and news, news literacy, news consumption
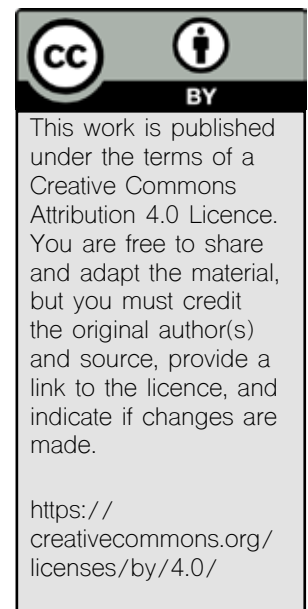
Introduction

Today's Australian teenagers are part of the first generation whose experience of journalism has always been digital, yet to date little national research has been undertaken to understand their subjectivities when it comes to perceiving or defining news. Without the lived experience of linear news delivery of the past century, contemporary Australian teens therefore present an important test case for how their generation might prioritise and legitimise news, and what this could mean more broadly for their active participation

in community life and social-change processes now and throughout their era.

In the United States, a 2016 study with 15 to 18-year-olds revealed younger people employed newsworthiness criteria 'one might find in a journalism textbook' (Craft et al., 2016, p. 151). However, the media worlds of teens have shifted on their axis since 2016 due to the avalanche of information triggered by COVID-19 and changing modes of news production, distribution and consumption. In 2020, the World Health Organisation introduced the term 'infodemic', which is a portmanteau of 'information' and 'epidemic', to conceptualise the fast and pervasive spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about COVID-19 (WHO, 2020). Its salience extends beyond the pandemic to describe the nature and impacts of information abundance, such as widespread confusion and mistrust in public institutions. At an everyday level, these conditions make it difficult for people of all ages to learn essential information about important issues due to facts, rumours, and fears mixing and dispersing.

In response to the need for updated insights and understandings on the contexts and practices of teen news consumers of the infodemic era, this article draws on focus groups with students at an Australian independent school to explore how their generation defines news. The line of inquiry of these focus groups departs from the position often taken in studies of adolescents – that they are interesting because they are in a transition from childhood to adulthood (see Wyn & Woodman, 2006). Instead, it acknowledges that the small group of teens who participated are located within the political, economic and cultural processes of the 2020s that both frame and shape their generation, including the ascent of digital platforms and ubiquity of smart devices.

In the past five years, only one major Australian study on the news perceptions of Australians, aged 8-16, has been conducted (Notley et al., 2017; 2020). The national survey, which Notley and colleagues have framed as a longitudinal study, was long overdue in tracking the news sources, behaviours and perceptions of Australian youth. However, it did not address how their participants defined the news. The significance of this research gap is compounded when one considers that almost half of Australian teens indicate they do not pay attention to the sources of news they consume (Notley et al., 2020:6), and struggle to tell fake news from real news (Notley et al., 2020, p. 20).

International studies have found that the current generation of youth defines the news along a spectrum, ranging from conventional news values to definitions that are broad and amorphous (Brites & Kõuts-Klemm, 2018; Craft et al., 2016; Madden et al., 2017). This

conclusion has prompted the research question we address here: How do members of the current generation of Australian teens define the news? It also raises broader questions about the definitions and benchmarks currently applied to gauge Australian youth news consumption.

The sections that follow investigate the research question through the news definitions offered by 13–17-year-olds who took part in focus groups held at their school. Through Potter's Theory of Media Literacy (2004), which offers a useful framework for gauging and measuring news literacy, the focus group analysis reveals that these Australian teens define the news using standard journalistic newsworthiness criteria as well as definitions that fall outside of journalistic conventions. In doing so, this study complements emerging Australian research on the development of youth news-literacy frameworks (Nettlefold, 2018; Nettlefold & Williams, 2018; Dezuanni et al., 2020) and offers some evidence that supports and feeds into the wider international debates on news literacy (see Tully et al., 2022). Significantly, the study has found that because of the sheer amount of news and myriad ways of accessing it, these teens perceive the news as 'individualised' – in that, it is the individual who defines and legitimises which information is news. Ultimately, we suggest this raises questions about what this means for the development of 'empowered citizens' (Malik et al., 2013).

The changing nature of news

Since early last century, news has generally been defined in relation to its role in democracy and citizenship; offering an independent and objective view of political and societal mechanisms, deemed essential for informed understanding and participation in the civic life of communities (Fiske, 2011, p. 283). In recent times, news literacy initiatives designed for children and adolescents have adhered to these norms through a routine focus on building analytic skills and making an 'explicit link between the ability to find and consume quality news and engaged citizenship' (Craft et al, 2016, p.144). These logics have dominated the research on younger people and news literacy where youth news consumption has been seen as a predictor of future adult news consumption (Sternberg, 1998, p.86) and therefore civic engagement.

Last century, in the dominant media era of TV, radio and newspapers, news was arguably more easily categorised and defined (Fiske, 2011, p. 284) than it is now. Galtung and Ruge (1965) developed the benchmark for defining news in their landmark study that named and categorised news values, initiating a rich body of research on the notion of news values and gatekeeping practices (Joye et al., 2016). However, since the Millennium, the swift reshaping of media has widened the scope for how news could

be defined (Gillmor, 2006; Malik et al., 2013). The blurring of news and entertainment (Edgerly et al., 2019), and the arrival of social media, blogging, citizen journalism and eyewitness testimony, all fall outside of last century's codified model of professional journalism (Malik et al., 2013:3). We are in an era where 'news' can now mean a viral meme of Bernie Sanders swaddled in mittens and bulky windcheater at the US presidential inauguration of Joe Biden (2021); a tweet announcing the royal engagement of Prince William and Catherine Middleton (2010); or on a more serious note, the New Zealand mosque shooter livestreaming his destruction and terror over Facebook (2019).

Harcup and O'Neill (2001 and 2017) added their own take on news values when they 'revisited' Galtung and Ruge's research (1965), with the aim of updating news values for the current news environment. Not surprisingly, their latest study includes news values embedded in the social-media domain: 'shareability' – stories that will generate sharing and commenting; and 'audio-visuals' – stories that have arresting multimedia and/or infographics (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017, p. 1482). However, Edgerly and Vraga (2020, p. 417) argue that while these studies are important, audience perspectives on what news is today needs further research.

While there is no current Australian research directly addressing how teens define the news, a small number of international studies have emerged in the past decade, though with somewhat contradictory findings. For example, two US research projects found American teens largely define the news with conventional news values (Craft et al., 2016; Tamboer et al., 2020). Yet a third US study observed teens' definitions of news were broad and amorphous, stretching beyond journalistic conventions (Madden et al., 2017, p. 8). Mellado and colleagues (2017, p. 948) state that 'contradictory combinations' such as these reflect the altering dimensions of the understandings of news. Seeking to move beyond these contra-dictions, Edgerly and Vraga (2019) proposed and applied a model of 'news-ness' to assess how audiences define something as news from an 'ambiguous' media environment in order to examine the extent to which definitions of news have fundamentally changed. In their US study exploring how adult audiences make genre assessments when engaging with content that blends news and entertainment, they found that audiences see news as both a 'special genre' and in 'shades of grey' (Edgerly & Vraga, 2019, p. 822). This conclusion is arguably a by-product of a changing world. However, the rise of so-called 'fake news' in the past 20 years has added a challenging and concerning layer to news definitions: 'news' that proffers misleading or false content, deceptively cloaked in news values (Tandoc et al., 2021). In reaction, a growing body of global research has highlighted concerns around audiences' capacity for discerning

mis- and disinformation, particularly among younger people, and identified media literacy initiatives as a key response in the interests of democracy (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Hobbs, 2017; Zimmer et al., 2019). In Australia, Notley et al. (2020) found that 55 per cent of the Australian teens surveyed said they could either not tell fake news from real news (31%) or they did not know how to tell (24%), and argued this result points to an urgent need for governments to invest in school news literacy education.

All these findings lend weight to the notion that audience concepts of news are changing and invite questions about what this might mean for the role of news in civic engagement, and particularly for young people. Further, there is a need for research into how younger people are defining the news so that policymakers and educators have this baseline knowledge for the design and development of news literacy strategies and programs.

News literacy for the digital age

The critical analysis of news content has had crossovers in media, information, digital and civic literacy since at least the 1950s, but news literacy has only arisen as a distinct field of inquiry as the media landscape has transformed since the early 2000s (Maksl et al., 2017, p. 229). While Ashley and colleagues (2017, p. 81) define news literacy as the knowledge, skills and attitudes an individual brings to consuming news and to their understanding of news-media structures, Malik et al. (2013) argue news literacy should be defined in terms of what it is meant to achieve. They say if 'empowered citizens' is the aim, then a news-literacy definition should comprise: 1) distinct knowledge about the role of news in society; 2) motivation or reason to seek news; 3) an ability to find and identify news; 4) the ability to critically evaluate news; and 5) the ability to create news (Malik et al., 2013, pp. 8-9). The educational interventions addressing these aims have been found to have beneficial effects and outcomes for individuals, such as media knowledge, criticism, perceived realism, influence, behavioural beliefs, attitudes and self-efficacy (Jeong et al., 2012, p.1). While some European countries and the US have reached a stage of embedding news-literacy programs in schools and universities (see: Fleming, 2014; Kleemans & Eggink, 2016; Maksl et al., 2017), Australia is still largely in a developmental phase of seeking to adapt and embed dedicated and more uniform news literacy education in schools (Dezuanni et al., 2020). Highlighting this need, just one in five young Australians, both children and teens, recall being taught in school about critiquing the news during 2019 (Notley et al., 2020).

A framework for investigating news literacy

One of the most prominent attempts to unify the conceptualisation and measurement of news literacy has been through the co-opting

of Potter's Theory of Media Literacy (2004) (see: Maksl et al., 2015; Craft et al., 2016; McWhorter, 2019; Tamboer et al., 2020). Potter's model (2004), developed for the broader field of media literacy, comprises four categories or concepts, which are interrelated and build on each other: knowledge structures; personal locus; competencies and skills; and information processing. Knowledge structures relates to an individual's knowledge of the media industry, its content and impacts, and knowledge about him- or herself and the world. The personal locus is the motivations and aims an individual possesses. Competencies and skills are those that an individual has acquired and uses to engage with media and access information. And information processing is the filtering and sense-making that an individual undergoes in this process (Potter, 2004). Efforts to measure news-media literacy using Potter's model (Ashley et al., 2013; Maksl et al., 2015; Craft et al., 2016, 2017) have been able to gauge differing levels of news literacy, finding that, for instance, highly news-literate teens were more sceptical of news media, more driven to consume news and knew more about recent news events than teens who were found to be less news literate (Maksl et al., 2015, p. 38).

The authors acknowledge that there have been other conceptual frameworks developed specifically for measuring news literacy after Potter's (see Tully et al., 2022), however, this model still offers a useful prism through which to develop themes and questions to take up with participants. While measuring the news literacy of participants is beyond the scope of this study, it is positioned within the context of news literacy by framing discussion through two of Potter's components, knowledge structures and personal locus, to investigate teen perceptions and definitions of news.

Focus group approach to investigating how teens understand and define news

This article draws on a wider study that used the focus-group method to generate insights into the news habits of Australian teens (see Blakston & Waller, 2022). Adopting a generic qualitative approach (Bryman, 2008), the study focuses on the representative case of students at Covenant College, an independent school in Geelong, Victoria. The school has more than 700 students from Kindergarten to Year 12 and was selected as the representative case because it caters to students within the target age range of 13 to 17 years; one of the author's children go to the school and the school gave in-principle agreement to conduct the research.

Before recruitment began, the school was provided with a list of students with whom one of the authors had familial or social ties and they were deemed ineligible for the research. The school then created a list of eligible students, aged 13 to 17, and participants were

recruited via an email invitation. The 34 participants and at least one parent/guardian were required to sign and return the consent form to the school to ensure inclusion in the research in line with the approved scholarly research ethics through Deakin University.

Five focus groups were set up according to age (13, 14, 15, 16, 17), and each included between three and 10 participants. The number of participants per group was large enough so that recurring themes could be identified but small enough to effectively manage groups during interviewing (Weerakkody, 2015, p. 216). Of the 34 teens who participated, 18 were male and 16 were female. Grouping by age was important because the teenage years are a time of rapid development and maturation. A 13-year-old would be presumed to have a different maturity and, therefore, perspective than a 17-year-old. Grouping participants by their respective ages also aimed to create a greater sense of homogeneity and, in theory, minimise discomfort for participants, especially younger ones, than if different ages were grouped together (Gibson, 2007, p. 475).

The 50 to 60-minute focus group sessions were audio recorded, then transcribed so a thematic analysis could be conducted to identify and organise patterns of shared meaning and experiences in and across groups (Wilkinson, 2004). While the aim was to have between five and 10 participants in each focus group, some students who had agreed to take part were absent from school on the designated day. While the 13- and 14-year-old groups each had 10 participants, and the 15-year-old group had eight participants, the older groups, 16 and 17 years, only had three in each group. While these participants offered strong insight into the questions posed, the dynamic and insight of these older teens may have been enhanced with larger numbers in each group.

As Covenant College is a fee-paying Christian independent school, it likely attracts parents who can afford or choose to pay school fees, so participants may fit a perceived middle-class demographic. The school also ascribes to specific moral and spiritual values and teachings, so participants might have a narrower or more specific worldview. While this research does offer valuable insight into teens' news definitions, these findings cannot be generalised to a broader teen demographic. The relationship of one of the authors should also be counted as a limitation. Lastly, the focus groups were conducted in late 2019, and this fact, coupled with the impact of periods of COVID-19 lockdowns during 2020-21, may have altered teen news perceptions. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to understand the impact of these changes.

Only one notable difference in the findings was apparent between the focus groups. This came out of the oldest focus groups (ages 15

to 17) and is outlined in the following section. Apart from this, there were no other notable differences found across gender or ages for the specific themes being reported here so the findings are mainly outlined as a whole, with differences in gender and ages investigated and set aside. Participant names have been changed to protect their identities.

Knowledge structures: A widened scope for defining the news

When discussion turned to what news is, it quickly became clear that these teens had a wide scope for what they define as news. While they used words and descriptions that implied conventional news values, significantly, they were equally comfortable defining and describing news more broadly, untethered from traditional news values. News is what they think or say it is. Conventional journalistic definitions of news can be seen in this exchange:

> **Moderator**: 'What counts as news these days?'
> **Jack, 13**: 'Anything that captures people's attention.'
> **Hunter, 13**: 'Anything new.'
> **Evie, 13**: 'I feel like most of the time also, it's mainly famous people that get a lot of news now...'

Or here:

> **Moderator**: 'What do you think news is?'
> **Arlo, 14**: 'A way of spreading information ...'
> **Luca, 14**: '... if you find it interesting ...'
> **Izzie, 14**: 'It's generally about creepy things that have happened. It's not usually anything small ...'
> **Hazel, 14**: 'It's more things people would see as bigger news.'
> **Mason, 14**: 'Relevant and current news.'

Defining the news with conventional news values, whether knowingly or implied, would suggest these teens possess a level of awareness about what constitutes news, based on a traditional journalistic definition (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). This finding aligns with Craft et al. (2016); US teens in their focus groups were found to only define the news based on conventional definitions. However, notably departing from Craft et al. (2016), this current study found that teens also defined news more broadly, framed by what it means to them individually, as shown in this exchange:

> **Finn, 16**: 'I think that news, that everything can count as news, because it can always affect people in different ways... So, if it matters to you, then it can count as news.'
> **Max, 16**: 'If you want to hear it, then it's news, really.'

This finding resonates with the small body of international research on teen and young adult news definitions (see Brites & Kõuts-Klemm, 2018; Edgerly et al., 2020; Madden et al., 2017; Tamboer et al., 2020; Vraga et al., 2016). In addition, the definitions these Australian adolescents apply would appear to sit comfortably within Edgerly and colleagues' proposed framework of 'news-ness', which seeks to encapsulate the hybrid nature of news and assumes audience definitions are not 'straightforward and uniform' (Edgerly et al., 2020, p. 417). However, further research is needed to quantify the scope or 'ratings' (Edgerly et al., 2020) of their definitions on their 'news-ness' scale, and thereby gauge to what extent news still operates as a 'democratic concept held to certain standards essential for democratic engagement' (Edgerly et al., 2020, p. 417). The finding that the Australian teens in this study define news more broadly, framed by what it means to them individually, raises questions about whether news-literacy measurements and frameworks being applied in Australia are appropriate.

Personal locus: Defining the news centred on teens' own needs and agency

Lending support to this question is the other notable finding: that the participants often understand and define news in relation to themselves and as an extension of their own needs and agency. This 'individualistic' view of news came up numerous times both directly and indirectly in the focus groups, as shown here:

> **Moderator**: 'How do you work out what news is important and what's not important?'
> **Max, 16**: 'I guess it comes down to its impact on me. If it's important to me or it impacts on people I know and care about.'

Or in this exchange:

> **Lincoln, 17**: 'As Maya was saying, our culture is individual-istic. News is what you view as important. It's not what the world views as important, it's what you see as important. So, I don't care anything about politics, but someone else would absolutely be into everything about that. And that's their news. So, it's really based on the individual … That's their news. That's all they care about.'
> **Alex, 17**: 'It's a really narrow way of seeing things. People might not care about what's happening overseas. Or they might actually care about what's happening overseas, but they're only interested in news about the sports world.'
> **Maya, 17**: 'They have blinkers on, where they're just focused on what they see as important.'
> **Alex, 17**: 'It's tunnel vision.'

> **Lincoln, 17**: 'Yeah, agree.'

When asked why they would define news this way, these teens said it had to do with the sheer amount of news they had access to and the many different and individualised ways they could access news. While most said this was a positive thing, they also expressed concern that 'more important' news gets lost in an information-laden environment, as discussed here:

> **Maya, 17**: 'I think the variety of news is a lot bigger nowadays. I feel, correct me if I'm wrong, but back in the days of older media, they focused on really important things, like major economic issues …Whereas nowadays, I think because there's so many different ways you can access your news and there's so many more options for us to go and seek out news, there's more things added that aren't as important.'
>
> **Lincoln, 17**: 'Are you trying to say this, Maya: It's the difference between news and noise? So, there's just noise, which is like that really fast information on the Internet being chucked out into the world … that really falls in (the category of) massive noise. And then you've got news, which is like important information you view as real news.'
>
> **Maya, 17**: 'But then everyone's news would be different, right?'
>
> **Lincoln, 17**: 'Yeah, everyone's news would be different.'

This individualistic view of news is significant, pointing to the coping mechanisms these teens appear to be adopting to deal with the plethora of choice that defines news ecologies. Further, to some teens, particularly those in the older focus groups, the concept of accessing only personally relevant news also extended to an individual potentially being a part of the news process, whether by blogging or sharing news, for instance, as seen here:

> **Lincoln, 17**: 'Once, there were journalists who would tell the news, but now that we have social media, anyone can write a story, which means that you have a whole lot more individual perspectives being thrown into the mix. So, what social media and our individualistic culture have encouraged as a whole is that you have to put your story out there, because everyone wants to know what you're about. It's about you. You need to tell your story, you need to do your thing, you need to share who you are to the world. That involves just ridiculous amounts of information pouring out all over the place. So, it's about individualism, but it's also about individually showing. I don't know, it's weird. And, yeah, that's the challenge; trying to sort out what's the news and what's the noise. And that's what Maya and Alex were saying about having tunnel vision

> where you see things that are important to you, and you
> ignore things that aren't important to you.'

This is the only finding that was not supported in all the groups –
only three out of the five, ages 15-17 – but it is noteworthy in that it
correlates with this widened definition of news, and the participatory
networks that this generation, even if only incidentally, engages with
daily on social and digital media.

These findings, applying an 'individualistic' definition and
imperative to news, is important because it does not appear to be
evident in the small body of current Australian research. It could
point to the degree that news choice, and one's control over this,
holds power, if only in the individual's perception. However, further
research is needed to explore this idea and what this might mean
in terms of empowered citizenship. Certainly, through Potter's
components of knowledge structures and personal locus, these
teens' definitions of news and their applications reveal a basic
understanding of the role and importance of news, particularly in its
ability to provide useful information.

Conclusion: Personalised news and empowered youth

This study has ventured behind previous Australian teen survey
responses about news (Notley et al., 2017; 2020) to access and
explore the rich and complex news worlds of a small group of
teenagers – who, on one hand, appear to have great confidence in
their abilities to seek out and consume news of relevance to them
and yet, on the other, willingly admit they struggle to discern the
accuracy and credibility of news and news sources (Blakston &
Waller, 2022). Significantly, for our participants, defining the news
is also understood as a function of agency, power and, for some,
opportunity to be part of the news-creation process via, for instance,
social media and blogs. Their individualism in relation to how news
is accessed and defined can, therefore, be understood as a strategy
for managing, assessing and engaging with the plethora of news
choice their generation must navigate as consumers, circulators and
creators of news. The focus groups revealed that while teens' news
definitions might have some grounding in conventional journalistic
definitions, their 'news' pushes out into a broad and somewhat
amorphous media field.

This small study provides a useful snapshot that accords with
international findings on how this generation of teens defines news
(Brites & Kõuts-Klemm, 2018; Craft et al., 2016; Edgerly & Vraga,
2020). It suggests the development of news literacy measurements
and frameworks in Australia could benefit from further research
on the question of news definitions to inform education policy and
curriculum. For researchers, this line of inquiry could generate

updated understandings of the relationship between news and empowered youth. Although these findings are limited in scope and not generalisable, they further offer a window into the multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory behaviours and assumptions today's teens are applying to news as they navigate their own paths to meaning in this complex and information-rich world.

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