

## Shedding light on the dark social

The connective role of news and journalism in social media communities

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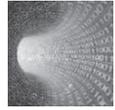
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# Shedding light on the dark social: The connective role of news and journalism in social media communities

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## Abstract

Messaging apps and Facebook groups are increasingly significant in everyday life, shaping not only interpersonal communication but also how people orient themselves to public life. These “dark social media” are important spaces for “public connection,” a means for bridging people’s private worlds and everything beyond. This article analyzes how people perceive news on such platforms, focusing on the different roles it plays in key social networks that rely on dark social media for communication. Arguing that the use of these platforms is foremost a social practice, the study employs focus groups with local, work, and leisure-related communities to investigate questions of inclusiveness, engagement, relevance, and constructiveness associated with sharing and discussing news. We find the perceived value of news on dark social media hinges on the control and privacy it provides. Community type was less significant than communicative aims of the group for shaping the uptake of news and journalism.

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**Introduction**

The rise of mobile technology, growing supply of available information, and increased number of available social media platforms have created a media landscape in which users can choose to connect to public life however and wherever they prefer. Social media have become closely embedded in the routines of millions of users, blurring formerly distinct boundaries between private and public information and between producers and consumers (Chadwick, 2017; Ekström and Shehata, 2018). Not only do such platforms open up possibilities for users to inform themselves about what is happening, they also provide avenues to engage with such information within their social networks, for instance through commenting, liking, or sharing. This way, social media can act as spaces for “public connection,” providing users with shared frames of reference that enable them to engage and participate within their cultural, social, civic, and political networks in everyday life (Couldry et al., 2010).

This article explores the various ways in which social media, messaging apps, and Facebook groups, in particular, facilitate people’s public connection within groups, focusing on the significance of news and journalism. Traditionally, news has been considered one of the primary tools to create shared frames of reference to public life, fostering community between individuals and facilitating social integration within groups (Berelson, 1949; Couldry et al., 2010; Hess and Gutsche, 2018; Jensen, 1990). The emergence of social media platforms and their connective potentialities give rise to questions of how this relationship is impacted (Hermida, 2014). Although Facebook remains the most frequently used social network worldwide and thus attracts most scholarly attention (Stoycheff et al., 2017), studies such as the 2017 Reuters Digital News Report show that people are increasingly using messaging apps for news (Newman et al., 2017). Covering 36 countries, it notes that while the uptake of WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger varies significantly between regions, overall, 23% of respondents indicated they find, share, or discuss news through messaging platforms; the trend is toward people moving from relatively open (i.e. Twitter, public Facebook timeline) to more closed (i.e. messaging apps) social media. While undoubtedly informative, the individualized, survey-based limitations of such studies mean we still know very little about the experiences and rationales underlying people’s engagement with news in those spaces. A complicating factor is that messaging apps are what Madrigal (2012) describes as “dark social media”: sites that handle user traffic without adding referral data when a user clicks a link. This makes it difficult to track what type of news content is shared on them, much less how it is discussed.

This study therefore employs focus groups to gain greater insights into how and why people use news and journalism to connect in such semi-private spaces, which by their nature oftentimes involve more “active” sociability and communicative participation than open social media. Moreover, focus groups allow more explicit consideration of the

impact of community type and social norms on such practices. As Heikkilä and Ahva (2015) note, detailed studies on news practices that take social contexts into account remain scarce. This study therefore bases its focus groups on three common types of network in which people know each other both online and offline—geographic (locality), work-related, and leisure-based groups—to uncover the individual and group-based experiences of news use, the impact of social media, and how these interweave and influence one another. Capturing the significance of news and journalism for continuing to foster public connection demands considering not only what issues people connect over and the practices they engage in to do so, but also how connection is embedded in their everyday lives and the value that connecting has for them. This article accordingly focuses on four analytical angles to the concept of public connection (inclusiveness, engagement, relevance, and constructiveness) to emphasize these lived experiences, allowing us to capture if and how news *becomes meaningful* rather than starting from normative presuppositions on why it should be (see Swart et al., 2016).

## Public connection, news, and social media

Traditionally, news has functioned as an important avenue for public connection (Couldry et al., 2010; Kaun, 2012; McCollough et al., 2017) with news organizations presenting themselves as almost obligatory points of passage to find out what is happening outside people's private worlds. Social media are not that different, in that respect. However, on social network sites, the patterns of news use sustaining public connection are less predictable. News use in the era of mass media witnessed many people connecting through the same product, distributed at relatively the same time, raising awareness and sparking conversation through people's relatively shared patterns of exposure to news content (Couldry, 2003). On social media, however, people co-create individualized timelines by following specific accounts and adjusting personal settings, and the distribution of information is subject to greater variance. That exposes them to a composition of content that—at least theoretically—can be unique for every user. Such shifts take on greater significance when considering how people engage with public affairs. Previous research suggests that people tend to make sense of public issues within their personal networks (Barnhurst, 1998; Ekström, 2016). The way people communicate using digital technologies potentially changes those dynamics of public connection.

The concept of public connection starts from the assumption that people do not navigate through everyday life as atomized individuals, but are part of larger networks. For example, they may share a language (cultural frameworks), vote for the same party (political), volunteer at the same organization (civic), or enjoy leisure activities together (social). Public connection is about the general orientation that individuals share toward one or multiple of those public frameworks, which oftentimes overlap (Kaun, 2012; Ong and Cabañes, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Previous literature on public connection has highlighted such shared frames of reference as necessary starting points for public engagement and participation (Couldry et al., 2010; Dahlgren, 2000). While the idea of public connection is employed beyond the field of communication and media studies, a significant body of work focuses on the role of (news) media as tools to connect individuals to public life (see Swart et al., 2016 for an overview).<sup>2</sup>

While such connection through news can happen individually, studies show that many mediated public connection practices take place within social groups (Barnhurst, 1998; Heikkilä and Ahva, 2015). A long tradition of scholarly work has addressed those social contexts in which news is used (Peters, 2012), the connective potentialities it may have (Couldry et al., 2010), and the dynamics between journalism and the communities it serves (Reader, 2012). Early examples are Berelson's (1949) *What Missing the Newspaper Means*, which concluded that newspapers are not only important to readers because of their content but also the daily sense of connection to the world they provide, and Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) *Personal Influence*, which stressed the critical function of interpersonal communication and social networks for issue awareness. Such considerations still hold sway in the digital era: recent studies confirm that people continue to make sense of news within specific social contexts that are essential to their public connection (e.g. McCollough et al., 2017; Schröder, 2015). The use of news as a tool for public connection, in other words, dates back far before the launch of MySpace or Twitter.

Likewise, while the rise of social media has highlighted the potentialities of news to create a sense of community within social groups, the idea that mediated news practices can facilitate social connections between individuals is far from new (Hess and Gutsche, 2018). For instance, the integrative role that television has traditionally played within domestic settings, supporting the relational structure of the family, has been widely discussed (e.g. Jensen, 1990; Lull, 1980; Silverstone, 1994). Similarly, newspapers have been found to serve as "a catalyst for conversation and human contact" (Bogart, 1989: 169) within social groups, particularly in local communities (see Hoffman and Eveland, 2010 for an overview). However, the digitalization of the news media landscape and the rise of social media alter these connective potentialities of news.

This article builds upon and applies a conceptual framework we developed to study recent shifts in mediated public connection (Swart et al., 2016). We specifically consider four key aspects which transform through the ways digital technologies allow people to bridge their private and public worlds. The first is the notion of *inclusiveness*: what issues do citizens connect over within their communities and who is part of such connection? Earlier research has found that people frequently discuss and make sense of national and international news, local affairs and economic issues with others, within a variety of social settings (Wyatt et al., 2000). Social media allow such discussions to occur continuously, regardless of physical co-presence, and can demarcate spaces for mediated public connection, for example through closed Facebook and WhatsApp groups. This potentially affects the news' socially integrative function, although it is important to recognize that participating in news discussions is not always affirmative (Couldry, 2003); discussing public affairs can serve to challenge social norms within groups or be perceived as something that potentially precipitates social disharmony (Ekström, 2016; Thorson, 2014).

Second, social media have opened up new forms of *engagement* with news. People can choose from a large array of platforms that support following others and exchanging public information to foster sociability within one's social groups. Those platforms, in turn, facilitate a myriad of emergent news practices (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2014; Picone, 2016), from acts such as creating a neighborhood Facebook group

resembling community journalism (cf. Reader, 2012) to sharing news articles with colleagues on WhatsApp as conversation starters (Van Damme et al., 2015).

Third, because social media involve novel patterns of engaging with and consuming news, it obtains a different place within the flow of daily life, changing the *relevance* of connecting publicly. Earlier studies show that people engage in news talk to support various relational structures, from the family to groups of friends and colleagues (Boczkowski, 2010). Social media facilitate such connection, continuously and anywhere. Also, through mobile technology groups can use social media to constantly monitor the issues that may affect those in their community (cf. Schudson, 1998; Zaller, 2003). That may foster a sense of security, similar to the rituals of daily newspaper reading observed by Berelson (1949). Moreover, social media allow people to easily share such concerns and quickly reach everyone within their networks (Hermida, 2014).

Finally, new opportunities for engagement and the increase in publicly available information may affect the *constructiveness* of public connection, changing what interests connecting through news may help people advance within various social groups (Couldry et al., 2010). For instance, private Facebook groups centered around common interests or other shared characteristics such as location can serve as tailored news feeds that automatically filter the news for information that is most useful for people in that social group (Hess and Gutsche, 2018). Such spaces for “news curation” can help users to avoid news overload and minimize the user activity required to reach articles of interest (Lavie et al., 2010).

These transformations encourage renewed attention to the ways that people perceive the efficacy of social media to connect to public life, and the role that news and journalism play in this regard. A vast body of literature discusses how media in general (Deuze, 2012; Hanitzsch and Vos, 2018; Hepp et al., 2015) and social media in particular have become closely and inextricably embedded in everyday life (e.g. Baym, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2013; Lu and Hampton, 2017). Of course, news is only part of the information that is spread on social media. That said, Reuters’ Digital News survey found that 54% of respondents report using social media for news every week (Newman et al., 2017). Previous work has extensively analyzed the importance of social media relative to other news sources and the extent to which people use them to find news (Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela, 2011; Nielsen and Schröder, 2014). Until now, however, limited attention has been paid to the communicative and social *meanings* of news *within* people’s everyday networks and the influence of social media in that respect.

## Methodology

Six focus groups were conducted in three different cities across The Netherlands, from September to November 2016. Focus groups help uncover how people construct and negotiate meanings collectively within groups about a certain topic by simulating everyday forms of conversation and generating both points of consensus and difference (Kitzinger, 1994; Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). In this case, our research interest was in how news on social media may or may not be valuable for groups as a tool for public connection. The Netherlands is an interesting context to study mediated public connection on dark social media platforms, as it is one of the countries where SMS and MMS

were expensive for a long time. Therefore, the use of messaging apps to share information quickly became widespread with their emergence as a cheap alternative (Van der Veer et al., 2016). For accessing news in particular, The Netherlands ranks in the middle category below countries such as Malaysia, Brazil, and Spain, but far above the United Kingdom and the United States (Newman et al., 2017).

Every group consisted of participants who knew each other personally and communicated through social media at least twice a week. We selected a variety of groups, including both territorial/geographical and relational/interest-based communities (Gusfield, 1975), and incorporating both groups that were formed by members themselves and groups created in a top-down manner. Two were work-related (high school teachers, IT customer support department), two were organized around leisure activities (football [soccer] team, a student association) and two were location-based (local volunteers, group of neighbors).<sup>3</sup> Five groups used WhatsApp as their major social network to communicate, the neighbors used Facebook, and some groups relied on other media to complement their communication (i.e. Google Hangouts, Slack, and email).

In total, 40 people participated, equally divided in terms of gender. The youngest respondent was 18 years old, the oldest was 66. People with higher vocational or university-level education were overrepresented in the sample. The first and fourth focus group consisted of six participants, the second, third, and fifth had eight, and the final had four. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Heckathorn, 2011), focusing on recruiting individuals who were then asked to encourage their colleagues, friends, neighbors, or acquaintances to participate. The focus groups took place at locations that were most convenient for the group (e.g. participants' homes, offices, and club house). On average, the sessions lasted 100 minutes. Snacks and soft drinks were provided. In return for their participation, each participant received a €20 gift card.

The sessions were moderated by the first author, using semi-structured questions to guide the discussion. As an ice breaker, participants were all asked to introduce themselves and describe how they knew each other and formed the group. Then, four main themes were addressed: (a) patterns of social media use by the group, (b) the role of social media in facilitating public connection, (c) the content shared on those platforms they felt was relevant and important to others in the group, and finally (d) the role of news and journalism for facilitating public connection on social media. Thus, only in the second half of the session was the discussion focused on news and journalism, to avoid presupposing its centrality for people's everyday public connection (Couldry, 2003). Also, the concept of news was not defined beforehand, to allow participants to construct and negotiate their own interpretation.

All sessions were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and then coded line-by-line using Atlas.ti to identify central themes. Second, focused codes were developed by testing the most frequent of these initial codes against the entire data set. Finally, rereading the material, theoretical codes were formed and tested. Multiple themes emerged throughout the process, for example relating to social media group dynamics, the various affordances different social media platforms have for users, and the informative uses of social media. This article specifically focuses on the role of news for facilitating connection within these groups' social networks. For privacy reasons, the names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms.

## Results

Our results show that understandings and practices of public connection vary considerably between different communities, depending on the communicative aims of the group and associated deployment of social media platform affordances. In turn, how group members experienced the four dimensions of mediated public connection we distinguished—inclusiveness, engagement, relevance, and constructiveness—also differed.

### *Inclusiveness*

The dimension of inclusiveness considers the issues people connect over and who they connect with. The groups of social media users selected for the focus groups all understood themselves as communities, displaying a sense of personal relatedness, a feeling of mattering to the group, and a belief that members shared a connection through mutual experiences, common places, and time spent together (cf. McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Although social media were only one avenue facilitating that sense of community, they were vital to the daily communication between members in all focus groups. Moreover, those digital conversations were closely interwoven with the group's social contact in non-virtual situations, mediating shared offline experiences by taking pictures and videos at get-togethers or linking back to discussions on social media in face-to-face settings.

All groups mentioned how exchanging information on social media fostered sociability. However, they showed great variation in the content sustaining that sense of belonging and what was considered “news” within their community. Sometimes, shared content was based on common interests: news in the Facebook group of the neighbors, for example, included upcoming events at the local community center, local crime, and other issues that in principle could be reported in local news media but were typically too small-scale to generate media attention. Their Facebook group was a way to stay on top of local issues and increase community attachment (cf. Hoffman and Eveland, 2010). Likewise, for the teachers, the topics discussed—for example, refugees, human rights, and environmental issues—strongly related to the content of their classes. In other groups, however, type of community and the topics of the conversations were unrelated. For the IT colleagues, discussing public issues had little to do with their job, but was simply considered an enjoyable activity part of being a team. Topics therefore could be very broad, seamlessly flowing from personal conversation to public affairs topics (cf. Wyatt et al., 2000) and ranging from science to feminism to the US elections. Similarly, the soccer team rarely discussed sports news. Their social media communities had a different purpose: arranging logistics, organizing team activities, and sharing gossip to foster sociability. The soccer team considered sharing journalism content irrelevant exactly *because* it was news: thus, everyone would already have heard about it.

While Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela (2011) suggest that large and heterogenic networks tend to generate more civic activity, our results were mixed. For the IT team, their diverse personal interests and political affiliations were a reason to discuss news in their WhatsApp group: it was generic enough that all members in the group could talk along. Moreover, others were likely to have different points-of-view and could thus provide

alternative perspectives. The soccer team, however, thought that in a large group with diverse interests, news was unlikely to interest everyone. Thus, they would rather forward stories to specific group members instead of posting it in their WhatsApp community.

The content connected over also varied between social media platforms, depending on their degree of openness. The privateness of WhatsApp made it suitable for socializing and discussing interpersonal news and stories about shared personal interests without fear of embarrassment, fostering togetherness within the group. To connect beyond the group's boundaries, however, participants employed more open platforms such as Twitter, the public Facebook timeline, or LinkedIn, both actively by posting information about charity events (soccer team), promoting their businesses (volunteers) or sharing vacancies (teachers), and more passively, scrolling through their feeds to monitor news (Schudson, 1998; Zaller, 2003). Regarding the latter, the teachers and IT team discussed how on Facebook content does not necessarily stem from one's own connections and liked pages, but can originate from outsiders too. Although they worried Facebook's filter bubble may shield them from alternative political information, they also noted the platform made them stumble on "surprise content" (Kim et al., 2013) they might not have normally discovered. The private Facebook group of the neighbors was a compromise, enabling them to limit membership to people in the area making members feel safe to post, while still creating a diverse community that would bring in different types of information.

The extent to which news and journalism were included in everyday communications on social media thus varied per group and platform. Yet, even in communities where "news" was close to traditional journalistic conceptualizations, only a selection of stories would be included:

- Stephanie: When I open my NOS [public broadcaster] app now, there are five things that make me think: it's interesting, but I'd never post it in the group, because it [...] may be news within The Netherlands, but it's not news for us. [...]
- Charlotte: Just like these two cops and the chokehold, then I think: I know about this, but I won't share it, because it's already on the news, I'd say. I think that's it, because the articles we share aren't on the news or the news bulletin.
- Marloes (approvingly): Uh-huh.
- Nicole: Those don't have news value, because they're too silent. (Teachers)

Preferably, stories would address long-term developments and allow members to explore multiple perspectives or aspects of a certain problem. The IT team, for instance, discussed a news story about the Dutch parliament voting for a bill making all adults organ and tissue donors unless they explicitly opt out, exploring not only its political, but also ethical and legal dimensions:

- Lisa: I think it's logical that everyone wants to become a donor. But when within my own group people already say: I have a different opinion, that's much more interesting, because I didn't expect that. I understand that people are against, but-

Niels: But the fun thing about our group is that you can just say that. Like I said, there were people who thought their right of self-determination got compromised, with a whole story behind it. There's a principle underlying that. They aren't necessarily against people becoming a donor, or whatever, there's a principle behind it I think everyone of us can relate to. (IT team)

Rather than considering separate news reports, participants made sense of public affairs by connecting several news events and weaving them into one coherent story. One-time incidents that did not invite any further engagement were seen as less appealing. What news becomes included in communities' shared frames of reference thus depends both on group considerations—what news it considers to be of collective interest, and norms about what news should be consumed collectively or individually—and content characteristics.

### *Engagement*

The dimension of engagement pertains to the question of which forms of accessing and interacting with news people perceive as “engaging” or “disengaging.” The group of the neighbors considered reading and liking each other's contributions in the Facebook group to be ways of being engaged within their local community. Likewise, the IT staff used their WhatsApp debates about public issues as a means to become integrated in the team and get to know each other better through “playful connection” (Kaun, 2012). For the fraternity and soccer team groups, however, engaging with news or public information was perceived as an individual practice completely detached from their groups' main communicative purpose for using social media. That did not mean they had less interest in current affairs: most of them were frequent news consumers, just not in that particular social context. Conversely, many teachers considered the news boring, yet they would frequently share public issues on social media. Thus, as other studies have found (Andersen and Kristensen, 2006; Swart et al., 2016), interest in public issues and news use did not necessarily relate. Moreover, group dynamics evidently shaped the perceived appropriateness of engaging with news in those contexts.

Beyond context and group dynamics, differences in technological affordances of the used social media platforms also contributed to distinct patterns of engagement. Most groups employed specific social platforms for a designated purpose: the teachers, for instance, used Google Hangouts to ask quick work-related questions, but would discuss long-term tasks via email. Similarly, Slack helped the IT team to retrace and archive job-related conversations, and the leisure-oriented groups employed private Facebook groups for organizing group activities so they could tag members to assign tasks. Interestingly, groups would sometimes interpret the same technical affordances of platforms differently. For example, WhatsApp groups present users with a single stream of messages in which posts easily get buried under the hundreds of other daily messages. For the student association, this lack of hierarchy made the medium unfitting for discussing public issues, as they could only reply to all group members instead of tagging specific people. For the IT team, however, it supported the explorative nature in which they would discuss news. For them, discussing news events was typically part of a longer-lasting conversation: topics of interest, such as the US elections, would come into the dialogue

when relevant news would appear, move out again, to be referred back to during a next event. WhatsApp supported that form of public connection.

Across all focus groups, the relative publicness of the Facebook timeline made participants cautious when engaging with content. Replicating previous studies (Ekström, 2016; Marwick and boyd, 2014), our respondents perceived posting on public Facebook timelines as expressing one's unconditional opinion, forever retraceable for potentially anyone:

- Kim: I'm only inclined to share something when I feel really certain about it. [...] Sometimes people think I'm making a statement, while [I'm not]. Then I'm sort of entering into a debate, and then it seems you're the one with the statement. And then I think: that's not what I meant. [...]
- Michelle: Sometimes I haven't fully read an article. Then I'd like to discuss it with someone, but I don't want to come across as—
- Kim: A know-it-all.
- Michelle: Yes.
- Iris: Or someone who doesn't fully understand it. (Soccer team)

Even liking posts was perceived a considerable endorsement, as liked content also shows up on others timelines and affects one's online image. Tagging, presenting stories as completely detached from oneself, was more common. Contrary to the definitive statements on Facebook, discussions on WhatsApp were more explorative in nature. Sharing a news story here did not automatically equate to approval, but could simply be a conversation starter:

- Jelle: In our group, when something is shared, it's shared because someone wants to discuss it.
- Lisa: Yes, by someone who holds a strong opinion.
- Mark: More to talk about it than to share it, I think.
- Niels: That's what I like: something is shared that practically everyone already knows in our app group, but the nice thing is that people will discuss it and you can see what others think. (IT team)

Participants rarely shared news on WhatsApp to be the first to report breaking events; they were more likely to hear first through Facebook or other platforms. Rather, WhatsApp provided a safe space to make sense of news (Chambers, 2017), discover the everyday impact of stories and discuss potential solutions. While being engaged in the IT team community thus required frequent posting and responding, for the neighbors, reading and liking others' contributions already constituted active engagement.

## Relevance

The dimension of relevance addresses how and why news becomes embedded within the flow of everyday life. In some social media groups, such as the teachers', the relevance of shared news was closely tied to the group's identity. Not being able to talk along with

other staff, parents, or students made them feel unprofessional. Since they had joined social network sites, they felt better informed about public issues and more confident and engaged. This knowledge benefit arose from passive scanning and observing (Schudson, 1998; Zaller, 2003) rather than from active uses that expressly deploy the communicative capabilities of social media platforms to create informational networks, such as in the neighbors' community. For them, actively sharing information about local affairs was a way to be a considerate neighbor (cf. Hoffman and Eveland, 2010; Reader, 2012), a favor to others that was expected to be returned. For the soccer team and volunteers, conversations were not so much linked to the group's goals, but instead centered around fostering a sense of community:

- Jacob: You share experiences more frequently. When you're not here tonight, you will receive a few messages via your phone that we are there and having fun. So when you're not there, you still feel connected to the group. [...]
- Pieter: We're immediately informing everyone in the entire club. [...]
- Albert: We're getting everyone involved. Everyone becomes part. That's a huge advantage. (Volunteers)

The soccer team and student association likewise used WhatsApp to mediate shared experiences and activities, foster friendship, and involve group members.

The platform most closely embedded in everyday life was WhatsApp. The soccer players and IT team would exchange hundreds of messages per day, nurturing almost continuous online socialization with colleagues and peers next to frequent offline encounters. For the teachers and volunteers too, conversations originating on WhatsApp would regularly extend into offline talk or vice versa, blurring boundaries between online and offline togetherness (Bakardjieva, 2003). While facilitating sociability, this practice also sometimes caused feelings of information overload, and a feeling that constant participation was expected. Group communication on Facebook, compared to WhatsApp, was much less frequent and more formal. Finally, the public parts of Facebook were used to connect individually to people outside participants' communities, by monitoring timelines passively. For instance, most teachers checked Facebook daily to stay on top of the news, but posted a screenshot or link on WhatsApp to share a story.

Consistent across groups was a shift in the relevance of social media platforms for connecting socially. Participants noticed their friends would rarely update their Facebook status anymore. Instead, their timeline had become heavily institutionalized:

- Stephanie: I check my Facebook timeline twice a day. Nowadays there are few people who say something personal. Most often, it's articles, and of course it depends on which friends share things, but often I find them interesting.
- Marloes: I do that too, but not through Facebook.
- Esther: Yes, I hardly check Facebook anymore. [...] There's so much coming in within a day. I'm happy that the people I know don't share articles through [Facebook], that'd be just too much. (Teachers)

While still convenient for some participants' in their daily routines, for others, this perceived shift diminished Facebook's relevance, driving them away and disconnecting them from the everyday life connections it formerly helped to afford. Talk on chat apps, alternatively, having technological boundaries preventing pushed content going viral were viewed primarily and positively for their sociality. Although users shared links to news stories, WhatsApp discussions focused on participants' own opinions rather than third-party content. Although such a shift to closed social media environments may knit people's interpersonal networks closer together, it simultaneously constrains possibilities for linking communities to wider spheres. "Dark platforms" might therefore limit the diversity of news sources and political opinions that users are exposed to, raising questions about the democratic value of connecting through those spaces (cf. Thorson, 2014).

### *Constructiveness*

Finally, social media serve as additional information sources and offer many new modes of engagement. The dimension of constructiveness addresses what ends this may help users achieve. For the teachers and neighbors, connecting through social media had direct benefits in line with the group's *raison d'être*. The news stories the teachers shared through WhatsApp would sometimes be used as educational material in class. The neighbors exchanged upcoming events in the area to encourage local participation, from leisure activities to more politically oriented meetings. One participant recalled how another neighbor had informed her of a municipality meeting on new cycling routes through the neighborhood, which she had attended to voice her opinion. For the volunteers, the constructiveness of social media news was not linked to their identity as charity workers, but to many members being entrepreneurs. While news was rarely discussed within their group, individually they employed Twitter and Facebook to follow niche sources, keep an eye on their competition, and promote their companies. For other groups, the constructiveness of connecting through news was less self-evident. The IT department considered discussing public issues and trying to understand the way news events relate to each other entertaining in itself. For the soccer players, news—although rarely shared within their group—indirectly helped to establish common grounds they could link to in conversations (cf. Boczkowski, 2010; Bogart, 1989; Couldry et al., 2010). Finally, for the student association, using news was an individual activity separate from their social engagement. They rarely discussed public affairs online or offline, nor in other social contexts, and found that news had little everyday value beyond the practicalities of weather and traffic information:

- Nick: When you don't know what has happened, you don't need to spend any time on it. It's not like [news] makes you do or not do certain activities.
- Koen: Often it doesn't, but for example, we were in Utrecht for the weekend and the trains weren't running. [...] If I'd read it in advance, I could've taken it into account. So it's more the small, practical things that you take away from it. Whether Trump or Clinton won a debate, that doesn't matter to me. (Fraternity)

A distinction can be made between the constructiveness of platforms for connecting within one's community and connecting individually transcending the group's

boundaries. The work-related groups mentioned news stories in their WhatsApp chats only occasionally, as a conversation starter or to illustrate a point. In the neighbors' Facebook group however, they were central to discussion. On the public Facebook timelines, news media were even more dominant, showing up even when participants did not actively follow or search for them. They felt Facebook had evolved into an information hub rather than a space for public engagement, making the teachers and IT team move to WhatsApp for those purposes. The soccer players perceived the increasing presence of news companies in their timelines as troublesome: Facebook for them primarily fulfilled a social function. Moreover, they criticized news media for focusing on harvesting clicks instead of providing valuable information.

At the same time, across focus groups, participants mentioned their difficulty of defining the trustworthiness of news on social media, as it would frequently originate from unknown sources (cf. Tandoc Jr. et al., 2017). Moreover, several groups discussed how the acceleration of the news cycle on digital platforms increased the risk of errors. Groups like the IT team therefore regarded the presence of journalists and news media on social media to be essential: without having anyone distinguishing facts from fiction and protecting people from misinformation, they noted, news would lose its value, as there was little opportunity for users to define news stories' accuracy. To them, journalists' selection gave news a privileged position relative to other content. That position made news a common ground, constructive for everyday talk and participation both inside and outside the groups' communities.

## Conclusion

The specific practices of news audiences on dark social media, in terms of topic selection, story preference, sharing, and so forth, are challenging to measure through conventional analytics software, meaning that research has had trouble generating meaningful comparisons with other ways that people "get the news." Moreover, our understanding of the experiential and meaning-making aspects for people encountering news on messaging apps and in Facebook groups is nearly non-existent. What research has revealed to date tends to analyze the personal, informative uses of social media for news on the level of the (aggregated) individual through surveys (Newman et al., 2017; Nielsen and Schröder, 2014). However, the results above emphasize the continuing importance of communities and social interaction for the way people encounter and make sense of news (Barnhurst, 1998; Heikkilä and Ahva, 2015), their public connection practices on dark social media included. Our results show that some of these communities act as safe havens or spaces of encouragement to share or discuss news, even though the collective rationales underlying these practices differ. This article accordingly argues that engagement with current affairs on messaging apps and Facebook groups cannot be reduced to users' individual behavior, but is foremost a social practice whose meaning needs to be considered at the level of the group.

Employing WhatsApp and Facebook groups, our participants created their own online spaces to facilitate continuous connection within their communities through the exchange of information, each with their own understanding of inclusiveness, engagement, relevance, and constructiveness. Although community type (geographic, work-related, and leisure) played some role in shaping how members conceived of and engaged with news

within the group, the uptake and the experiences of discussing journalism within these communities more strongly depended on the groups' communicative aims. For the IT team, playfully discussing current affairs was a means to social integration. The fleeting nature of WhatsApp supported their explorative ways of making sense of public issues. For the neighbors, sharing local affairs was a substitute for community journalism. Facebook allowed them to connect a large, weak-tied group through neighborhood news on a platform they all already used actively as individuals. The teachers' WhatsApp group similarly acted as a news curation service, but with a stronger focus on utility, forming a highly specialized news channel with potential class content. Dark social media use by the volunteers or fraternity, however, viewed the sharing of news as a clear breach of social norms—a means to public *disconnection*. For those group members, social media was meant to facilitate relaxed sociability, and news didn't fit these aims. Likewise, the soccer players' messaging app was primarily a logistical tool, where debates about news would distract from the pragmatic goal of organizing the team. In sum, groups specifically employ dark social media for designated purposes, which shape norms about the value of news and journalism in such communities.

While studies indicate an international trend of users moving to dark social platforms to get news (e.g. Newman et al., 2017), this study helps to specify and qualify exactly what this means in terms of experiencing and relating to public issues through such practices. Dark social media allow users to discuss news with people they trust in a private environment. Their technological affordances thus may cater to people's identities as colleagues, friends, or neighbors, but their relative detachment from broader "publics" simultaneously makes them less suitable for connecting beyond community boundaries, complicating the notion of public connection itself. Similar to the face-to-face news discussions in private settings that dark social media communities supplement, classic democratic functions attached to news media, such as allowing the public to witness oneself and facilitating connection between various communities (Coleman and Ross, 2010), are less self-evident when engagement with news occurs behind closed doors. The democratic implications of the increasing popularity of dark social media for news, thus, still remain unclear.

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## Notes

1. For instance immigrants often manage multiple orientations, circulating between different sentiments regarding the homeland and host country (Ong and Cabañes, 2011). Likewise, one's gender, religion or ethnicity may traverse political, civic, social, and/or cultural boundaries.
2. Although few authors explicitly use the term "public connection," the concept is employed implicitly in a wide range of scholarly work within media and journalism studies, political communication and related fields, for instance in work on civic culture, cultural citizenship,

social capital, civic engagement, and participatory democracy. These are discussed at length in Swart et al. (2016).

3. While the main reasons for the groups' existence, in practice, these were not hard distinctions: for instance, some colleagues would engage in leisure activities from time to time.

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