News Consumption and Trust in Online and Social Media:
An In-depth Qualitative Study of Young Adults in Austria

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Current surveys such as the Reuters Digital News Report 2018 show that trust in the media is at an all-time low in Austria. Among those between 18 and 24 years of age, more people distrust news than trust it. The aim of this study is to analyze young adults' news consumption and trust in media in Austria through personal semistructured qualitative interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of their news consumption and trust in media channels, sources, and content. The 35 interviews with young adults aged 18–25 years reveal that traditional media channels are the most trusted. Despite widespread consensus that more dubious content is circulated on social media, the content from these channels is generally not considered problematic. Journalists, as identifiable sources of news, are largely irrelevant in orienting the information behaviors of this user group, with peers being more important influencers and providers of (links to) news. These findings highlight a lack of critical engagement and raise questions about the efficacy of current education on media literacy.

Keywords: trust in (news) media, mass media, social media, young adults, news consumption, semistructured interviews

In the European Union, people's trust in the media as a whole is at an all-time low (Eurobarometer, 2017, 2018), and the emergence of online media and social media has contributed to this (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018). While the public's trust in traditional media such as broadcast and print media is actually increasing, trust in online media and social media continues to fall, eroded by misinformation and disinformation ("fake news"; Eurobarometer, 2018; Newman et al., 2018). When it comes to media use, trust is important, because it is "one driver for people to consume news media" (Fisher, 2016, p. 451). It has been widely argued that trust in (news) media plays an important role for citizens' trust in democracy because it influences their perceptions of the democratic system and drives their engagement with it (e.g., voting; political participation; see, for example, Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris, Eisenegger, 2019; Spurgeon, Ferrier, Gunders, & Graham, 2012; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Trust in the (news) media is therefore considered an important basis for an informed democratic citizenship (Fisher, 2016) and hence "a foundation for social cohesion" (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 231).

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Under the growing lack of trust in the media in general, and online and social media in particular, the goal of this study is to analyze young adults' news consumption and trust in (online and social) media in Austria. Austria does not perform well in this domain, according to the Reuters Digital News Report 2019, ranking 27th of the 38 countries surveyed; just 39% of respondents said that they generally trust the news media (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019). Eurobarometer (2017) found similar, though slightly more promising, results, recording trust in media among about 52% of Austrians.

We are interested in young adults (in our study, defined as those 18–25 years of age) because they have grown up with the Internet, and most of them are comfortable using online and social media, having accessed them from a young age. In fact, online and social media are young adults' primary news sources (see, for example, Newman et al., 2018). To a greater extent than previous generations, they have experienced the rapid convergence of media, which not only shapes media content, "but also seems to be tied to people's perceptions of media as well" (Kiousis, 2001, p. 397). Born into an increasingly fragmented news media landscape, young adults generally "have exhibited decreasing levels of news usage but increased consumption of news via social media" (Carr & Bard, 2017, p. 3) when compared with older cohorts. The Reuters Digital News Report for Austria highlights that in 2018, for the first time, more people under 18–24 years of age did not trust the news in general than trust it. The majority of this social-media-savvy generation also lacks trust in social media news (58.1%; Gardinger, Holzinger, Sparviero, Trappel, & Nening, 2018).

Against this background, this qualitative study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of young people's trust in (online and social) media in Austria—we are interested in the how and why. The article begins with a discussion of trust, given that past and current research shows that there is no widely accepted definition of trust or recognition of a reliable and valid operationalization to measure trust (e.g., Fisher, 2016; Kiousis, 2001; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). The article then describes the setting of the study, the data, and the methodology before presenting the results of interviews with 35 young adults. The final section includes a discussion of the principal findings and their significance.

Literature Review on Trust in the (News) Media

Meanings and definitions of trust often vary considerably (e.g., Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Nannestad, 2008). Even in research, the term is often used side by side or even interchangeably with other terms such as *credibility* (e.g., Fisher, 2016; Otto & Köhler, 2018). Bentele (2008) describes credibility as a relational characteristic that is perceived by people with respect to their interactions with human beings, institutions, or the communicative products they propagate. Credibility is questioned based on four primary criteria: legitimation, completeness (relevance), transparency, and verifiability (Bentele, 2008). Credibility is a part of trust (Bentele, 2008). The concept of trust describes the relationship between a trustor, who places trust, and the trustee, who is being trusted, which should lead to gains for the trustor (Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

Trust in the Medium, the Message, and the Source

In relation to media, trust "informs us how individuals perceive and evaluate news media" (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 231). Trust reduces complexity for media consumers; it replaces knowledge, and,

thereby, the media fulfils its role in providing a need for orientation (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). With the process of digitalization and the spread of various information, the media are particularly challenged to promote confidence in its information and orientation functions.

Based on a review of interdisciplinary literature published over the past 80 years, Fisher (2016) concludes that

> what is found is a diversity of conceptions of trust that have evolved alongside changes in media technology and will yield different responses depending on which aspect of trust is being measured: the message, the medium, or the source or all three at once. (p. 459)

In the current study, trust in the media is conceptualized as including all three layers: trust in the channel or the medium used to disseminate the message, trust in the content's source or journalist, and trust in the message or media content itself (e.g., Fisher, 2016; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Otto & Köhler, 2018). Each layer influences people's assessment of trust in the other layers (Kiousis, 2001), and the three layers can be seen as overlapping—particularly in relation to online and social (news) media (Fisher, 2016).

Trust in media channels refers to perceptions of the different channels—such as radio, television, press, Internet, and social media—through which content is delivered (Kiousis, 2001). Trust in traditional media is generally higher than trust in online and social media. For instance, in their cross-country comparison across 44 countries, Tsfati and Ariely (2014) found that exposure to television news and newspapers is positively associated with trust in media, whereas both exposure to online news and education levels were found to be negatively correlated with trust.[1] For Europe, the Eurobarometer (2018) shows that trust in radio (59%) today is higher among Europeans than trust in television (51%), followed by trust in the written press (47%). Over time, trust in radio has remained stable, and trust in television and the written press has increased slightly since 2009. Trust in newer media channels and institutions is lower than that in traditional media and institutions. About a third of Europeans (34%) trust the Internet, although this has decreased slightly since 2009 (37%). Only one fifth of Europeans (20%) trust social media, and this has remained stable since it was measured in 2014. Examining the relationship between different types of news use and trust in news across 35 countries, among them Austria (using data from the 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report survey), Kalogeropoulos and colleagues (2019) confirmed that "using social media as a main source of news is associated with lower levels of trust in news" (p. 3673). In contrast, people who use traditional news sources such as TV, radio, and their respective websites, as well as nonmainstream news sources such as digital-born news websites, trust the news media to a greater extent.

In Austria, people have more trust in traditional as well as new media and institutions than the average European does (Eurobarometer, 2018). Currently, 68% of Austrians trust radio, 64% trust

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[1] Fisher (2016) notes that the problem with Tsfati and Ariely's (2014) findings is that the authors did not ask participants about "trust," but instead about their level of "confidence" in civic and commercial organizations such as "the press" and "television." Based on this operationalization of trust, these findings might apply to the press and television as media channels or to the content they provide.

television, and 61% trust the written press. A total of 43% of Austria's population trust the Internet, and 29% said they trust online social networks. The historically early emergence of mass-circulation press in Austria, the high newspaper circulation, and the strong public broadcast service (see also Jackob et al., 2019) can partly explain the higher levels of trust—particularly in traditional media—in Austria (see the Setting section of the article for more details). In democratic systems such as Austria, public service media are perceived "more as bodies independent from political elites, serving the public as a fourth estate and thus increasing trust in media" (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019, p. 3678). A longitudinal analysis for Germany shows that public broadcasting is still at the forefront of the various media genres when it comes to trust in media, followed by regional newspapers. The Internet, together with private television and the tabloid press, ranks the lowest. Online presence of newspapers and radio is regarded as part of their respective brands (Jackob et al., 2019; because of the similar media system, the findings on Germany can be applied to Austria). Recently it has also been found that people have lower levels of trust in the news media when perceiving them as being disproportionately influenced by either political or business interests (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019).

Journalists, as providers of information, actively shape the media landscape by selecting certain content (Fisher, 2016; Otto & Köhler, 2018). Kohring and Matthes (2007) demonstrate that perceptions of trust in news media are based on people's trust in specific selection processes applied by journalists. This journalistic selectivity is assessed across four dimensions: "trust in the selectivity of topics," "trust in the selectivity of facts," "trust in the accuracy of depictions," and "trust in journalistic assessment" (p. 238). To ensure the high quality of reporting in Austria, journalistic norms such as balance and diversity of opinions are part of the self-imposed guidelines of Austrian quality newspapers, the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF; ORF-Gesetz, 2019) and, partly, the Private Radio Act (Privatradiogesetz, 2019). Despite this, people take on a certain risk when trusting the media because journalists select some information over other information. People therefore have to trust that journalists will follow professional standards such as objectivity, fairness, and balance, or tell the whole story (e.g., accuracy; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). A recent study shows that the qualifications and expertise of journalists, as well as their position, are also central determinants of trust in a source (Otto & Köhler, 2018); each of these is positively associated with people's perceptions of journalists as competent communicators. People have to trust in journalists' specific selections on issues, events, and so on (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). By gaining their trust,

> news media enables their public to fulfill their need for orientation to their social environment and to adjust their expectations regarding other social actors (e.g., politicians). Trust in news media is therefore a necessary condition for trust in other social actors. (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 238)

The perceived trust in a source is positively associated with evaluations of trust in the content it provides (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; the authors actually evaluated source credibility). Hence, trust in a source influences the selection of news to which individuals are exposed and the way they evaluate that content. Once content is perceived as trustworthy, people seem to orient themselves toward the same content across media channels, "triggering parallel opinions of credibility" (Kiousis, 2001, p. 398). Similar findings are reported by a recent eye-tracking study examining source credibility of news posts on social media, where

users were found to use the source of the news post as an information criterion in the decision of whether to read the post or skip it: "Findings revealed that users spend more time looking at news posts from sources with high credibility compared with sources with low credibility" (Sülflow, Schäfer, & Winter, 2018, p. 184). It must be kept in mind, however, that the source of a news post in a news feed is typically a media channel rather than a journalist identifiable to the reader as a person.

Relationship Between Media Trust and Media Use

Previous research has investigated the relationship between media use and media trust by primarily focusing on two effects: the selection effect (Kiousis, 2001; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003) and the media effect (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). In this study, we follow the observation by Hopmann, Shehata, and Strömbäck (2015) that the correlation between media use and media trust is influenced by both effects. People need to trust a particular media outlet or type to select it in the first place, and the use of a particular media outlet or media type over time increases the trust in it (Hopmann et al., 2015). Trust grows from the experience of not being disappointed, whereby different individual (e.g., background, attitudes, behavior), media (e.g., media content, format, type), and contextual (e.g., macro-level political and economic factors [Tsfati & Ariely, 2014], social context) factors predict generalized media trust (Ognyanova, 2019). In this qualitative study with young adults in Austria, among the different individual factors of interest are people's personal experience with media and habitual media use, as well as age and education. Findings of previous studies are inconsistent concerning the role played by age and education as predictors of trust in media (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). For instance, in the studies by Gronke and Cooke (2007) and Tsfati and Ariely (2014), education was a negative predictor of trust, whereas in the study by Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, and Bennett (1999), education was a positive predictor of trust. Concerning media factors, we follow Ognyanova (2019) in emphasizing news content characteristics, the medium (print, broadcast, or digital), and organizational characteristics. In terms of their impact, Tsfati and Cappella (2003) note, "trust in journalism is based on our belief in the professionalism of journalistic practices" (p. 506). Considering the long history of public service media, normative approaches, and legal regulations (see, for example, ORF-Gesetz, 2019, and Privatradiogesetz, 2019), news media in Austria should follow high quality standards such as objectivity, accuracy, and fairness. Among contextual factors of interest is the social context, which has so far received less attention, but was highlighted in a recent study by Ognyanova (2019; the study was published after the interviews of this study were conducted). Using longitudinal network data from 13 residential student communities, Ognyanova (2019) found that our social contacts, both offline and online, function to promote or suppress our confidence in various media and to serve as benchmarks (see also Media Insight Project [MIP], 2015). Social contacts include our parents and grandparents (media socialization) as well as our peers online.

Young Adults and Trust in Media

Studies on young adults and trust in media are scarce. A recent study demonstrates that traditional news sources continue to have great value and weight among young adults (Carr & Bard, 2017). However, studies also find differences between young adults' media use and that of older cohorts. Young adults generally "have exhibited decreasing levels of news usage but increased consumption of news via social media" (Carr & Bard, 2017, p. 3). The Media Insight Project found in a representative study that American

millennials 18–34 years of age have a very nuanced news consumption (MIP, 2015). Many of them (60%) explain that news comes as part of a social flow, such that they encounter news incidentally as they engage with their online networks or community of friends. Just 39% say that news is something they actively seek out on their own. Young adults are often drawn into news by recommendations from their peers in their social networks, as well as through group texts and instant messaging. This is supported by a study of 102 young adults showing that online information seeking and evaluation are influenced by others in one's online network (as well as the search context and search routines; Hargittai, Fullerton, Menchen-Trevino, & Yates Thomas, 2010). Recommendations by peers also boost trust in content; young adults actively follow word-of-mouth direction toward good stories (MIP, 2015). Regarding the notion that social media creates polarizing filter bubbles, "70 percent of Millennials say that their social media feeds are composed of a relatively even mix of similar and different opinions to their own" (MIP, 2015, p. 28). Just 12% of millennials say that opinions and viewpoints they see in social media are mostly similar to their own and 16% of them say they are different than their own. Spurgeon and colleagues (2012) found that young adults in Australia "turn off media that are perceived as irrelevant or negative" (p. 912)—a trend that is fostered by niche media, new media, and proliferating entertainment choices.

An important fact for the present study is that 2018 was the first year in which more Austrians 18–24 years of age were found to distrust the news (in general) than trust it (Gardinger et al., 2018). A lack of trust in the media indicates uncertainty regarding whether journalists actually follow their professional standards or tell the whole story. Tsfati and Cappella (2003) found that media skepticism decreases the use of mainstream media (traditional media such as television, radio, and print news). People who mistrust or are skeptical toward the mainstream media will be more likely go online to seek alternative information sources (non–mainstream media) and hence have a more diverse media diet (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). However, Tsfati and Cappella (2003) highlight that "even the most skeptical audience members watch the national and local news on television and read the daily newspaper" (p. 518). With the media habits of young adults focusing on online and social media, this might be set to change in the future. Tsfati (2010) notes that a result of online, nonmainstream news exposure might be that people become more aware of the manipulative power of news and thus more skeptical toward mainstream news. Because "non-mainstream sources tend to present more point-counterpoint argument and discussion and stronger challenges to prevalent interpretations than is characteristic of mainstream news, their audiences might learn that the same event can be presented, framed, and slanted differently" (Tsfati, 2010, p. 39).

By interviewing young adults in Austria, this study sheds more detailed light on how and why 18- to 25-year-old digital natives in Austria trust or mistrust (news) media.

The Study

The Setting

Studies (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) show that the structure and content of media systems influence a population's trust in the news media. Austria is counted among the democratic corporatist media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), characterized by an early emergence of mass-circulation press, high newspaper circulation, and strong public service broadcasting. Austria is a so-called newspaper-

centric society (Norris, 2000), meaning that newspapers are the main source of information in Austria. Television is (still) the key electronic medium in Austria (Plasser & Lengauer, 2009).

The competition in the print, radio, and television sectors has grown considerably in Austria over the past 20 years through the admission of private radio and television in the late 1990s, the ongoing process of digitalization, and the proliferation of hybrid and free newspapers (Bakker & Seethaler, 2009; Ortner, Paus-Hasebrink, & Pluschkowitz, 2009). The ORF has lost its monopoly position, yet retains to this day the greatest market shares in TV and radio in Austria. As a public service media outlet, its output is designed to offer high-quality information and to educate all audiences; this should generate trust, according to Tsfati and Ariely (2014), who note that "media will be trusted when they offer a higher quality product" (p. 766). The role of public versus private ownership of (news) media in a society therefore influences people's perception of the media.

Data and Method

To gain an in-depth understanding of young people's news consumption and trust in (online and social) media, we conducted personal semistructured qualitative interviews with young people 18–25 years of age. Qualitative research allows us to investigate and discover (new) processes and changes of communication. Qualitative interviews help us answer the how and why questions that must be addressed to advance our understanding of young people's media use (Karpf, Kreiss, Nielson, & Powers, 2015).

A total of 35 interviews were conducted with young people in Austria during November and December 2018 (see Table 1). Of these interviewees, 20 were female and 15 were male. We expected 12 of the 35 interviewees to have greater knowledge of the media landscape than the others because these 12 were journalism students or media/communication science students, and a few of them also worked in the field. Communications education teaches students about the media, how it works, and its role in the information-seeking process. They are "encouraged to engage critically with the media and information they are consuming" (Fisher, 2016, p. 460). Specifically concerning online news media, they are "encouraged to be more media literate, to be sceptical, and not blindly trust what they find online" (Fisher, 2016, p. 460). These participants with a connection to the media/communication studies/industry were recruited from among students at the FHWien der WKW University of Applied Sciences for Management & Communication (the authors' department) and the Department of Communication of the University of Vienna. The other 23 interviewees were either still in high school, engaged in vocational training, or working outside the media/communication industry. It was assumed from the outset that they would be less educated about the (news) media in general and perhaps more trusting of, and less critical toward, the (news) media (see, for example, Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). To recruit interviewees with no relation to the media/communication studies/industry, we asked students at the FHWien der WKW University of Applied Sciences for Management & Communication and the participants with a relation to media/communication studies/industry for possible contacts. We asked one screening question to ensure suitability of participants, which was: Do you read/watch/listen to the news? Those who answered in the affirmative were invited to participate in the semistructured interviews. We granted anonymity to our interviewees as part of the research terms of engagement.

Table 1. Overview of Interviewees.

ID	Relation to media/communication studies/industry (yes/no)	Age	Gender	Education
1	no	18	female	vocational training/education
2	no	19	female	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
3	no	19	female	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
4	no	19	female	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
5	no	19	female	vocational training/education
6	no	20	female	university
7	no	20	female	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
8	no	21	female	university
9	no	21	female	vocational training/education
10	no	23	female	vocational training/education
11	no	24	female	university
12	no	24	female	vocational training/education
13	no	22	male	university
14	no	22	male	university
15	no	22	male	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
16	no	22	male	vocational training/education
17	no	22	male	vocational training/education
18	no	23	male	university
19	no	23	male	vocational training/education
20	no	24	male	university
21	no	25	male	university
22	no	25	male	vocational training/education
23	no	25	male	vocational training/education
24	yes	18	female	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
25	yes	20	female	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
26	yes	21	female	vocational training/education
27	yes	23	female	university
28	yes	23	female	university
29	yes	23	female	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
30	yes	24	female	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
31	yes	25	female	university
32	yes	20	male	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
33	yes	22	male	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
34	yes	22	male	upper secondary school-leaving certificate
35	yes	25	male	university

Note. Interviewees with a university degree already have a degree not related to media and communication or are graduate students (master's students) with a bachelor's degree.

The semistructured interview guide developed by the authors started by asking interviewees to describe the media consumption of their parents and grandparents in the home they shared as a child/teenager, before focusing on their personal information behavior and media diet today (the full interview guide is available from the authors on request). This was followed by a discussion of their perceived trust in media channels, media sources, and media content. The questions on media channels probed which media channels they (more or less) trusted and asked them to explain what distinguished them from other media; each time, we asked them to provide us with examples. Given Austria's long history of public service media, we investigated whether young adults distinguished between public and private media channels, and we were interested in their perceptions of the information provided by each, as well as their expectations about truth in reporting. The purpose of questions about trust in media sources was to find out which journalists the interviewees trusted and why, and whether it was important for them to know which journalist provided the news they consumed and why (not). In addition, the interviewees were asked about the cases (and examples) in which it was acceptable to them that journalists made evaluations rather than purely presenting facts and how journalists should deal with politicians accused of disseminating "fake news." The block of questions on trust in media content also asked the young adults to describe information/messages that they perceived as credible and to share experiences they might have had with fake news. Finally, we asked the interviewees to discuss how they defined or understood trust in media. Past and current research shows that the meanings and definitions of trust often vary significantly (e.g., Fisher, 2016; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Nannestad, 2008). Accordingly, it is important to note that we did not introduce a specific definition of trust to the interviewed young people because we were interested in their personal perceptions and evaluations of their everyday news consumption.

The authors and 10 undergraduate students conducted the interviews. (The findings do not show any differences concerning whether interviews were conducted by students who were the same age as the interviewees or by the authors of this study.) Interviews lasted between 20 and approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed in full, anonymized, and qualitatively analyzed using NVivo software. Qualitative content analysis allows categories to emerge inductively—these categories are the heart and centerpiece of qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014). We followed Mayring's (1991) approach to qualitative content analysis, which is a structured, systematic, category-oriented, and intersubjective way to identify and conceptualize relevant content by reducing, summarizing, and organizing text. The authors translated all the quotes presented in the following sections from German into English.

Results

First, we have to report that the data did not display any noteworthy differences in participants' descriptions of media use and media trust across the range of participant ages and education levels (and gender). Our interviewees were of very similar age—the range being 7 years—and these small age differences did not account for variances in media use and media trust. When it comes to trust in the media, the Reuters Digital News Report for Austria for 2018 even fails to show differences between people 18–24 years of age (40.8%) and people 25–34 years of age (40.6%; Gardinger et al., 2018; unfortunately the report does not include data on education and trust in media). As discussed in the preceding literature review, previous findings on education are inconsistent, with some studies revealing education as a positive predictor of trust in media and others as a negative one. Contrary to our expectation that those young adults

dealing with the media in their studies or work (i.e., those studying journalism and/or media/communication science or already working in the field: a third of our sample) would engage more "critically with the media and information they are consuming" (Fisher, 2019, p. 460) than those with no direct connections to this field through their studies or work, we found no differences between these two groups worth discussing. We assumed such a critical approach in regard to online news media for the first group, because in their studies of or daily work with media and communication, these young adults are "being encouraged to be more media literate, to be sceptical, and not blindly trust what they find online" (Fisher, 2019, p. 460). This might be due to young adults' having grown up in a digital age in which online and social media platforms play a central role in defining the ways people interact with information, and these were never something "new" that had to be integrated into an existing media mix. Apart from these findings, the interviews provide interesting insights into young adults' news consumption and trust in media channels, sources, and content.

News Consumption (Behaviors)

First, it is important to note that when the interviewed young adults talked about their news consumption, they directly related it to online and social media. Asked whether they were consuming media offline as well, they answered that "of course" their news consumption happens online ("only"). Young adults consumed information offered via social media, news portals, WhatsApp, and other apps. A young man studying communication science described media use typical of many interview subjects: "News finds me on social media. I click on them if they interest me and end up on different pages. I read no particular page. News finds me." The data show that social media was a main source of news for the interviewed young adults, with many expressing that they felt well informed via Facebook in particular. One interviewee used the preinstalled news service on his smartphone: "On the iPhone, I swipe to the left and get the latest news from various media. That works well these days." Online presence of traditional media is generally used via push notifications, with interviewees frequently using the apps of the Austrian quality media outlets *Der Standard* and *Die Presse* (two of Austria's three quality newspapers), as well as the public service broadcaster ORF.

Second, the interviewed young adults were aware of their differing media use as compared with their parents (older cohorts). A young man with no connection to media/communication studies/industry put into words the sentiments of many subjects: "When you get older, you follow your own interests when consuming media." Most interviewees stated that they had changed their media diet once they moved out of their parents' home. A young woman studying to become a journalist said, "If I had stayed at home, I would probably read the *Kleine Zeitung*, because it was always on the table."

In sum, the interviewed young adults had a more nuanced media consumption than their parents and grandparents, but they did not really show a general media behavior. Only one respondent (male with no connection to media/communication studies/industry) explained that he read the online version of *Der Standard* on the subway in the morning and watched the news on the public broadcaster ORF in the evening.

When talking about trust in (online and social) media, the young adults interviewed referred to only two of the three layers that define trust in media according to the theoretical discussion; they mentioned media channels and media content, but not the source.

Trust in Media Channels

Highly relevant for the interviewed young adults' trust in a media channel is the duration of the relationship. "Trust is when I've already had good experiences over many years [with a media channel], and I think that what they write is correct," said a male interviewee with no connection to media/communication studies/industry.

Despite young people's heavy online and social media use, the media channels that young adults trust (the most) are traditional media channels. Interviewees most often named ORF, the Austrian public service broadcaster, and the quality newspaper *Der Standard*, which has the highest online coverage among Austrian newspapers (ÖWA, 2018). "Why should there be a difference between content of online and print editions? They won't be writing two articles and doing more work," as one interviewee put it. The interviewed young adults in Austria considered the online presences of traditional media as trustworthy because of the positive public discourse about them and their personal experience. For instance, a young man studying communication science said, "At home, my parents and grandparents read the *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten* [main newspaper in Upper Austria], we watched ORF [TV], and listened to ORF [radio] as well." Another young woman with no connection to media/communication studies/industry commented that "young adults often consume the online channel of the media their parents are using in traditional ways." Regarding audio-visual media, television continues to be of high importance to young adults, but they primarily stream news (as well as other content). Again, most often they turn to the public broadcaster ORF.

Public Service Media Versus Private Media

Comparing trust in public broadcasting and private media channels, the data show that the interviewed young adults in Austria perceive public broadcasting channels as more trustworthy than private media channels. They ascribed a certain quality and reliability to them. "Objective and independent journalism in Austria, for me the number one is ORF [Austrian Broadcasting Corporation]," said a young man with relations to media/communication studies/industries. Another young man with no connection to media/communication studies/industries commented that "ORF is financed by the public and does not have to deal with economic problems . . . it can focus on other priorities. I trust ORF journalism." He also shared ORF news on Facebook because he perceived it as "well-researched" stories. The data revealed that young adults' trust in ORF and its content was influenced by its enduring presence since their childhood. Again, this illustrates the importance of long-term relationships with media channels. "I prefer ORF for news because it has been around for a long time," said a young man with relations to media/communication studies/industry. In addition, multiple interviewees indicated that their trust in ORF as media channel and in the content it delivers across its various platforms was associated with ORF's public mandate: "ORF is subject to a mandate and thus sets quality standards." Interviewees also highlighted the independence of ORF from other institutions and private businesses: "ORF is trustworthy, because it is independent of any institutions." (However, in practice, no public broadcaster is entirely independent from other institutions and private businesses.) Conversely, that private media channels lack independence from private businesses decreases young adults' trust in privately owned channels and their content—private media are "sponsored," "focusing on economic outcome," and "it is not clear who is financing them." In addition, private media are often associated with lower levels of quality. A young man with no connection to media/communication

studies/industry said, "Misinformation is more likely to be published in free newspapers like *Österreich* and *Heute* [two tabloid papers], because they are careless and lack conscientiousness." However, less trust in private media channels and their content does not mean that they are not trusted at all. For instance, a young man with relations to media/communication studies/industry said, "In Austria, due to the freedom of the press, it doesn't make much difference whether news is consumed through ORF or private broadcasters."

Besides the issue of independence (from the private sector), trust in a media channel increases when it is considered a critical media channel by other media channels and when users are able to comment on it in public forums. Despite this, none of the 35 interviewees talked about commenting on news in public forums.

Media Source and New Approaches

For the interviewed young adults, journalists as information providers are a negligible factor in the process of generating trust in the news. Only the name of the news anchor of the Austrian public broadcaster ORF, Armin Wolf, was mentioned a few times. The interviewed young adults expressed that they "don't pay attention to specific journalists," they often "don't know any journalist by name" or "the name of a journalist usually does not tell me much." Not even the interviewed young adults with connections to the field highlighted the importance of journalists for trust in news. "I think, I have never paid attention to who wrote an article," said a young man. Another interviewee commented, "It does not matter to me which journalist provides the information; I trust the media, like *The New York Times*, ORF or the Tagesschau [German public broadcasting main evening news]."

Instead, the findings of this research show that young adults in Austria have trust in the news that their peers spread via social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook. The peers provide links to news and in this sense have become important influencers of trust in news.

Trust in Media Content

Trust in (online and social) media is to a high degree determined through user assessments of the published content. To trust content means that it is perceived as reliable and objective. A young man with no connection to media/communication studies/industry said it is important that "journalism is described from different sides . . . journalists are objective in their reporting and look at topics from several sides." Highly relevant for perceiving news as trustworthy is the presentation of two or more (differing) voices (positions; factor balance), such as on "theBuzzard.org," and the presentation of "some" facts and figures, because this allows the young adults interviewed to achieve a feeling of "being more independent" in forming their own opinions. It is important for the interviewees that they can rely on the content, meaning that the presented information has been questioned and fact checked. As a young woman studying communication science put it, "The content must be well researched and must not contain fake news. Curiosity is important when it comes to journalists. . . . In order to trust journalists, they should question and examine facts." A young man with a relation to media/communication science/industry mentioned that he needs to be sure that what he reads is correct.

The interviewed young adults generally do not consider content in social media as problematic. Nevertheless, in sum, the data reveal a certain media skepticism among young adults, and there is a widespread consensus that a higher proportion of content circulated on social media is dubious "because people just write something and nobody really checks it." The following two quotes from interviewees put into words the sentiments of many subjects: "There is no medium where I am sure that everything is true"; "I basically do not trust any medium 100% and use Google to find other media contributions on a topic." The young adults interviewed often turn to Google to verify information. "Well, if Google has the same information on one thing, you can be pretty sure that it is true. If not, journalists would write about this [i.e., the different information on one topic]."

Conclusions and Discussion

By interviewing young adults in Austria, this study sheds more detailed light on how 18- to 25-year-old digital natives (millennials) trust the news that citizens encounter through the mass media and in their online environments. As with all studies, our analysis has its limitations. The major shortcoming of the present exploration is that the sample is not representative. Rather than laying a basis for broad generalization, our study asked for the how and why.

However, findings regarding the interviewed young adults' engagement with news in traditional as well as online and social media are similar to those of representative surveys. In line with the findings of the Reuters Digital News Report for Austria (Newman et al., 2018), digital and social media are the most popular news sources for the interviewed young adults. When online, they use a variety of paths to news (e.g., see MIP, 2015). They tend to mix the online versions of traditional news media with social media, news portals, and WhatsApp. These results from our study are similar to Fisher's (2016) findings that the line between traditional news media and news via social media and online platforms is blurring. This, and the fact that many of the interviewed young adults do not attend to a specific news outlet, cultivates a more nuanced news consumption (when compared with their parents' and grandparents' generations). In addition, many of the young adults expressed that the news finds them, and then they read, watch, and/or listen to what interests them (e.g., see MIP, 2015), rather than seeking out news themselves. This is consistent with the observation by Fisher (2016) that "online and mobile users don't necessarily seek news, they simply bump into it or encounter and interact with news as they wander through their media-saturated lives" (p. 459). News also finds the young Austrian adults interviewed via the push notifications of traditional news outlets, particularly ORF and quality papers such as *Der Standard* and *Die Presse*.

With respect to trust in media, the interviews showed that specific channels and their content play an important role in the relationship between the young adults, as trustors, and the media providing content, as trustees (see Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). This might explain why our findings display a more optimistic picture than the Reuters Digital News Report 2018 (Gardinger et al., 2018). Even with the wide variety of news available in the online world, the public service broadcaster ORF and two of the three newspapers that fall into the category of quality newspapers in Austria have maintained their strong role among the interviewed young adults and thus support high-quality news consumption. The online presence of newspapers and ORF is regarded as part of their respective brands (see also Jackob et al., 2019). Hence, promoting the websites and social media accounts of public service media and traditional

quality media might be a potential solution to trust in news being at an all-time low, as shown by the 2018 Reuters Digital News Report. The findings show that the structure and content of the Austrian media system are important factors in the social-media-savvy generation's trust in media. Already, Tsfati and Ariely (2014) and Kalogeropoulos and colleagues (2019) have shown that in democratic systems, public broadcasting is positively associated with media trust. Ideally, future research will take place in different contexts, such as countries with political and media systems different from Austria's. People in Austria have more trust in traditional media than the average European (Eurobarometer, 2018). Austria was the last country in continental Europe to allow nationwide private television broadcasting, and it could be that other countries with a longer history of private media and/or lower standards for journalistic practices might increase the use of online tabloid and/or entertainment news rather than traditional sources. Even though the young Austrian adults interviewed grew up in a media system with a dual broadcasting system (i.e., a media system with public and private TV and radio channels), whereas their parents and grandparents had considerably less access to private media sources, they still perceive the news of the public broadcaster ORF as much more trustworthy than that of private media channels. The findings reveal that this is also influenced by what they "learned" at home, especially through their parents' news consumption, and by the public discourse about non-profit-oriented media channels providing content of higher quality.

The source—namely, the journalists as information providers—seems to be a negligible factor in the process of generating trust in the news. This finding seems to be associated with the young adults' media diet. They are less bound to one or two specific media (channels) when consuming news—very often, news finds them—and hence, they do not pay attention to a certain journalist and typically cannot identify journalists by name. Instead, peers are important influencers and provide orientation in the flood of information on the Internet (e.g., see MIP, 2015). In line with Ognyanova (2019), our findings show that trust is placed in what our social contacts say. Selection of news and recommendations by peers can be trusted, and in this sense, the peers assume a journalistic function. Hence, news becomes ever more part of social flow. The construct or understanding of "the source" itself is changing. Future research should investigate this supposition further, including among older generations; with the Internet, it seems that this contextual factor has increased in importance for generalized media trust. On the downside, these changes also support the development of echo chambers.

Our findings highlight a need for more media literacy education, because the young adults interviewed seem to ascribe themselves greater media competence than was revealed by the analysis of the interviews. The interviewees generally do not consider social media content as problematic, as displayed by their regular news consumption via social media. For instance, interviewees expressed that they feel well informed via Facebook, despite the widespread consensus across the sample that more dubious content (fake news) is circulated on social media than traditional media. Some of the interviewed young adults expressed confidence that they do not fall for mis-/disinformation. Many expressed that they go on Google to verify information when they are skeptical and that their media use happens largely by "news finding me" through push notifications and friends' recommendations. This shows that young adults need to be made more aware that their media behaviors foster one-sided news perspectives. The findings partly reveal a critical media behavior ("I basically do not trust any medium 100%"), but when it comes to their own (news) media consumption, such a critical approach is missing (third-person effect). Certainly, sharing news within one's network via WhatsApp and social media can have a positive effect by helping young adults become

better informed citizens. "Because citizenship only works on the basis of common knowledge and shared agreement about ways to live, citizens not only need to become informed themselves, but to trust that others around them are similarly civically informed" (Coleman, 2012, p. 36). However, this news media consumption is largely happening in filter bubbles and echo chambers. Our results thus provide documentation that reveals a need for action in the field of media literacy education.

On the other hand, and to conclude on a positive note, the study shows that young adults in Austria trust traditional media and their content. Here, it is particularly positive to note that young adults consume the content of quality journalism. This is positive because trust in the (news) media plays an important role in citizens' trust in democracy, and it can lead to political engagement (e.g., see Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Spurgeon et al., 2012; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

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