HOW DO CHILDREN ENGAGE WITH NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

RESEARCH PAPER

social

media

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MEDIAMONITORING AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

The media plays a critical role in shaping how children[1] understand the world around them. It also serves to protect and promote children's rights to freedom of expression, participation, association, and access to information. With the advent of social media, children's access to news and information is no longer limited to the ownership of or access to household televisions and radios or access to hard copies of newspapers. News and information are increasingly available directly to children through access to a range of devices from mobile phones to tablets, via social media, search platforms and on demand streaming services. At the click of a button, they have access to a wealth of information and can get news and updates ranging from the state of the country and community focused stories to the latest celebrity trends.

This merging of news and entertainment on social media and the blurring of news and opinion makes it difficult for children to understand the importance of accessing hard news. When children are faced with an overwhelming number of social media applications (apps) that present images and videos of celebrities they can follow and even send direct messages to, hard news stories become seen as unappealing and 'boring', despite the impact they have on children's growth and development. In addition, the algorithms of the various social media platforms powerfully and quickly create an echo chamber[2]based on content similar to the kind the user has previously accessed, so that the less journalism/hard news and the more celebrity content children consume, the less journalism and more entertainment content they will see when they access the platform.

Previous work by Media Monitoring Africa (MMA)[3] shows that when children engage with news, whether through traditional media channels or on social media, they become part of an informed and more participatory citizenry who are empowered to question the media, engage on a real and tangible level with what they read as media consumers, and are better placed to hold the media and the powerful to account. However, the issue of how children engage with news on social media is complex because it involves factors that are both internal to the child (e.g., attitudes towards news, levels of literacy, levels of digital literacy and skills such as knowing where to look and how to verify information) and external (e.g., access to a smart device, internet or data; age restrictions on platforms). There is also limited research on this issue in the South African context, making it difficult for programming to be guided by evidence.

[1] In South Africa, children are defined as persons under the age of 18 years.
[2]https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/social-media-and-democracy/social-media-echo-chambers-and-political-polarization/333A5B4DE1B67EFF7876261118CCFE19#
[3] https://mma-ecm.co.za/children-monitoring-project-2/

This research paper aims to understand how teens (aged 13 to 17 years) in two provinces in South Africa engage with news on social media. This small-scale qualitative study draws on an existing partnership between MMA and UNICEF South Africa, with the objective of gaining insight into how children engage with news specifically on social media platforms (if at all), and how high-quality news can be made more engaging for this audience. MMA hopes to use the findings to inform future media and digital (news) literacy programming and its work with media and journalists and on policy formation, while UNICEF South Africa aims to use the findings to inform its own engagement with both news outlets and children online.

A. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHILDREN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS?

In recent years, researchers have explored questions of children's news literacy and the use of social media. A 2017 study in the United States[4] examined the news engagement practices of young people and found that family was the most frequent source of news for both children (10–12 years) and teenagers (13–18 years), ahead of online media, although teenagers were far more likely than children to get news via social media, websites, or apps. The study found that while young people trust their families and teachers for news more than any source, they prefer to get their news from social media. Only 44% of teens in this context felt that they could tell 'fake news' or mis/disinformation stories from credible and accurate ones.

A 2020 update[5] to this study found that 77% of teens got their news and headlines from social media, with 39% 'often' getting news from personalities, influencers, and celebrities on social media and YouTube. However, many did not see these sources as particularly trustworthy. The study identified YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat as growing as top news sources for these teens.

Similarly, a 2022 report[6] from the United Kingdom's communication regulator found that despite almost six in ten teenagers saying they used social media for news, it was the least trusted or accurate news source. Teenagers aged 12 – 15 years preferred to trust their family (68%) or the television (65%) for news. Among all types of online platforms, YouTube was the most widely used by children in the United Kingdom. While the majority of 12 – 17-year-olds were confident that they could tell what is real and fake online, only 11% correctly selected, in an interactive survey question showing a social media post, the components of the post which reflected that it was genuine.

[4] Robb, MB. (2017). News and America's kids: How young people perceive and are impacted by the news. San Francisco, United States: Common Sense.
[5] Robb, M B. (2020). Teens and the news: The influencers, celebrities, and platforms they say matter most, 2020. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.
[6] Ofcom (2022). Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report 2022.

In South Africa, various studies continue to reveal the increasing integration of the internet in children's lives by exploring children's internet usage. The 2022 Disrupting Harm study[7] looked at online child sexual exploitation and abuse in several countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia. The study found that of the 1,639 internet-using children (9 – 17-year-olds) who participated in the study and represented South Africa, 951 (or 58%) reported using the internet at least once a day. The survey further explored what children were accessing while online and found that social media was among the most popular online activities. A large proportion of children also watched video clips and used instant messaging at least once a week.

Another study in 2016 on children's use of the internet and online activities in South Africa[8] found that most of the children interviewed in three provinces (Gauteng, Eastern Cape and Western Cape; 86%) had an account on a social networking site, with the most popular sites being WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. Asked about how often they had carried out certain activities online in the previous month, just over a third of children (9 – 17-year-olds) reported that they had looked for news online.

These and other studies provide insights into young people's use of social media as a source for news, but to date limited research has been conducted on how children engage with news on social media in South Africa.

[7] ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). Disrupting Harm in South Africa: Evidence on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. Global Partnership to End Violence against Children.
[8] Burton, P, Leoschut, L. & Phyfer, J. (2016). South African Kids Online: A glimpse into children's internet use and online activities. Cape Town: The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.

B. KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the limited literature available on this issue, MMA conceptualised this qualitative study to explore children's engagement with news on social media in the South African context.

Specifically, the research aimed to understand five key research questions:

1 What does the social media diet of children (aged 13 – 17 years) look like?

2 To what extent does news feature in their social media diets?

3 If it does feature, what is the quality of the news they are consuming?

4 To what extent do children possess the required skills to identify misinformation and disinformation in news on social media?

5 How can social media platforms positively influence children's engagement with news?

METHODOLOGY

A. STUDY APPROACH AND ACTIVITIES

To better understand the complexities of children's engagement with news on social media, this study adopted a qualitative approach, consisting of (a) working with learners in a site in Johannesburg, Gauteng, and another in Rustenburg, North West, to complete a diary entry exercise in which they recorded their social media use and engagement with news every day over a period of six days; and (b) a subsequent series of group discussions with small groups of learners in both sites to reflect on the diaries and explore the research questions further.

A qualitative approach was adopted because the study aimed to answer questions such as 'how' and 'why' learners engage with news on social media, rather than to establish 'how many'. The activities that the team undertook are outlined below.

1) SITE SELECTION AND RECRUITMENT OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

The first step in the process was to select participants for the diary entry exercise. Two schools were initially selected – one in Johannesburg, Gauteng, and one in Polokwane, Limpopo. The intention was to include a more urban site (Gauteng) and a rural site (Limpopo), to allow for potential differences in children's experiences in these locations to emerge.

However, while some children in the Limpopo site were able to engage in the diary exercise online, challenges were encountered at this site with very limited internet access and a lack of familiarity with online meeting platforms which severely hampered the small group discussions. As a result, a peri-urban site in Rustenburg, North West, was chosen instead as the second site for the focus groups (and learners were included in the diary exercise). These logistical challenges reflect the very real challenges with internet connection that many young people in South Africa still face.

A total of **48 students** took part in the small group discussions, with 24 learners from a school in Rustenburg, North West, and 24 learners from a school in Johannesburg, Gauteng. Learners were 13 to 17 years old across both components of the study, as 13 years is the minimum age for accessing several social media sites.

The school in Johannesburg is a quintile 4[9], well-resourced Independent Catholic School in the township (Immaculata Secondary School), while the school in Rustenburg is a quintile 1, less well-resourced school in a semi-rural area (Johane Mokolobetsi Secondary School). As defined by the Department of Basic Education, quintile 1 to 3 schools are 'no fee' schools that do not charge fees because they are in low-income areas, and therefore they receive a larger allocation of funding from the Provincial Education Department. Quintiles 4 and 5 are fee paying schools, located in communities with a higher socio-economic status. These schools receive the least financial support per learner from the Provincial Education Department.[10] The two schools therefore represented communities with differing levels of socio-economic status.

[9]https://www.schoolguide.co.za/for-parents/school-review-guidelines/1036-education-guide/10975-school-fees-quintiles.html#:~:text=Schools%20receive%20money%20from%20government,money%20the%20school %20will%20receive.
[10] Alley, N & McLaren, D. (2016). 'Fees are an issue at school too, not just university'. Retrieved on 28 February 2023. https://www.groundup.org.za/article/fees-are-issue-school-too-not-just-university/

The reason for this is that the digital divide along socio-economic lines in South Africa remains a significant challenge, especially for children. It is therefore important to explore how their lived experiences may impact on how they engage with news on social media.

In each site, the learners were recruited for one of four groups, made up of 6 learners per group:

1. **Girls only between the ages of 13 and 14 years old**
2. **Girls only between the ages of 15 and 17 years old**
3. **Boys only between the ages of 13 and 14 years old**
4. **Boys only between the ages of 15 and 17 years old**

2) DIARY ENTRY EXERCISE

All participants were invited to take part in a six-day diary entry exercise (Friday to Wednesday) using an online template in Google Forms. Each day, learners were provided with the shared link to the day's template and with data to connect to complete their diary entry. The diary entry activity allowed for learners to capture their daily social media activities without encountering questions that would prompt them to change their daily use of social media. There was also an open-ended question at the end of the template asking them to report on their engagement with news on social media each day.

3) GROUP INTERVIEWS

As explained above, eight small group discussions were also conducted, according to the split detailed earlier. The questions focused on getting a sense of what social media platforms children in these age groups access, how often, where they are most likely to access their news, which news sources they trust and how they consume or manage mis/disinformation, among others.

4) ANALYSIS OF NEWS CONTENT REPORTED BY PARTICIPANTS

In accordance with their right to privacy, learners were not asked to share links to the actual news articles they engaged with, but rather to describe the kinds of news they engaged with. This formed part of the analysis of the news content to better understand what kinds of news is of interest to the different groups of learners. This is useful because it can be used as a guide that influences projects related to children and news.

B.   ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered to standard principles of ethical research, which is particularly important when engaging in research with children, as follows:

- Informed written consent/assent was sought from both parents or guardians and the recruited learners. Despite the written forms being in English, the content was explained, and full context was provided to African first language speakers.

- The diary entries were anonymous. No names or identifying information was captured, except for age, gender, and school.

- The notes from the small group discussions were anonymised. No names or identifying information was captured, except for age, gender, and school.

- The small group interviews were recorded for purposes of reporting (after obtaining verbal consent from the participants) and the recordings were destroyed once the notes had been checked.

C.   STUDY LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

- **Limited research on this topic:** As noted, the issue of children, social media and news is a complex topic because children's engagement with news is influenced by both internal and external factors. Tackling this as a research study is made even more complex by the limited availability of previous research in the South African context, thus making it difficult to be guided by evidence.

- **Logistical challenges:** Participants experienced challenges with internet connections, which made the online diary entries and online discussions difficult. We also assumed that, once teens were provided with data, they would easily be able to make use of the Zoom platform to participate in online small group discussions. But in practice this was not feasible because they were unfamiliar with Zoom or similar platforms. This challenged our assumptions about the extent to which children are digitally savvy, despite the emphasis on online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Lack of full participation:** Another challenge was ensuring continued participation across the six-day diary entry exercise. Participation dropped on the Saturday evening, increased again on the Sunday evening, and then tailed off over the six days, despite providing sufficient data and daily reminder text messages to all learners.

- **Language barrier:** The medium of communication for this small study was English (all written communication, consent forms, diary entry forms and interview questions were in English), but the younger boys' and girls' groups in the North West struggled to respond and express themselves in English and often moved to Setswana in an effort to answer the questions. The teacher was able to translate but language became a barrier to capturing their full experiences and responses.

- **Qualitative research is not intended to be representative:** This qualitative study is intended to provide insight into children's use of social media but is not statistically representative of South African children or even the schools involved. Therefore, the findings should be read as providing initial insights into the behaviours and news consumption of children who are part of the target group for future media literacy programmes developed by MMA and UNICEF South Africa.

STUDY FINDINGS

A. WHAT DOES THE SOCIAL MEDIA DIET OF CHILDREN (AGED 13 -17 YEARS) IN THIS STUDY LOOK LIKE?

In the same way that a person's daily food consumption over time makes up their diet, children's daily engagement with the various social media platforms also provides important insight into their online habits and possible intervention points should their social media diet not contribute positively towards their broader development and growth as children. While there is no ideal diet in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 17, children have the right to access diverse material and to be protected from material that may harm them. Accordingly, it is critical that children's social media diet is diverse and not harmful.

Which social media platforms did the children report using?

Both the diary entry findings and the small group discussions showed that YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Facebook were among the most popular social media platforms used by the participating learners.

Of the social media platforms that were asked about in the diary entry exercise, YouTube and TikTok received the most mentions across the six days, followed closely by Instagram and Facebook. The graph below provides an indication of the number of times each day each platform was mentioned across the six-day diary entry exercise. Snapchat and Twitter were not as regularly used among these learners.
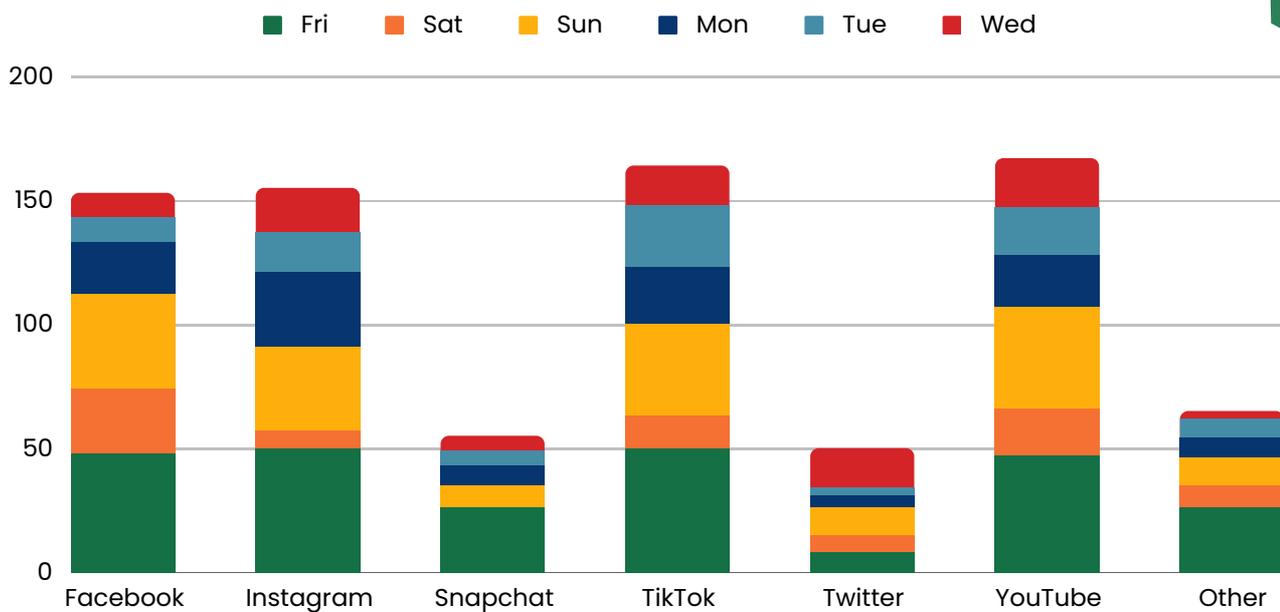
Learners were also asked to record other platforms they used that were not listed in the diary template. Almost all 'other' responses referred to WhatsApp, with a few mentions of other apps such as Wattpad, Spotify or sports apps, and specific websites that the learners had visited.

Learners were asked in both the diary entries and the small groups discussions about what they used the different social media platforms for. In the diary entries, learners were asked each day to record what they had done on the different platforms they had used. Taking the four most mentioned platforms, the graphs below show the most mentioned uses for each.

What did they use the different social media platforms for?

Learners taking part in the diary entry exercise reported the most varied uses for YouTube. Uses for TikTok also varied, but most common was watching posts by celebrities, followed by watching videos, posts by friends and music. On the other hand, Facebook was used primarily to follow posts by friends, while the visual app Instagram was used primarily to follow posts by celebrities and friends.

Instagram

Posts by friends	
Posts by celebrities	
News articles	
Sports news	
Music	
Videos/TV	
Games	
Other	

0   10   20   30   40   50   60

■ Fri ■ Sat ■ Sun ■ Mon ■ Tue ■ Wed

Facebook

Posts by friends	
Posts by celebrities	
News articles	
Sports news	
Music	
Videos/TV	
Games	
Other	

0   5   10   15   20   25   30   35   40   45   50

■ Fri ■ Sat ■ Sun ■ Mon ■ Tue ■ Wed
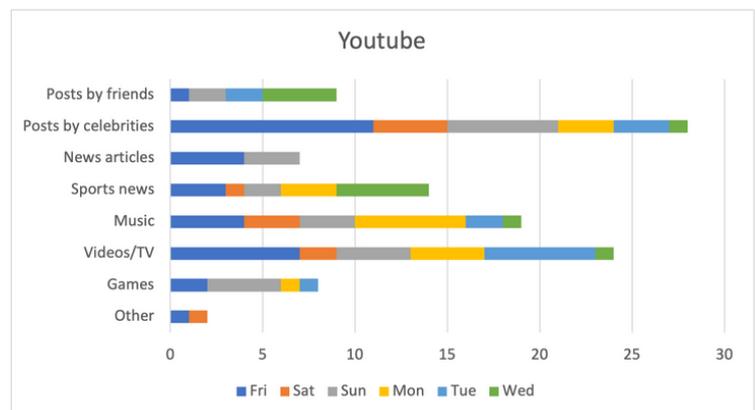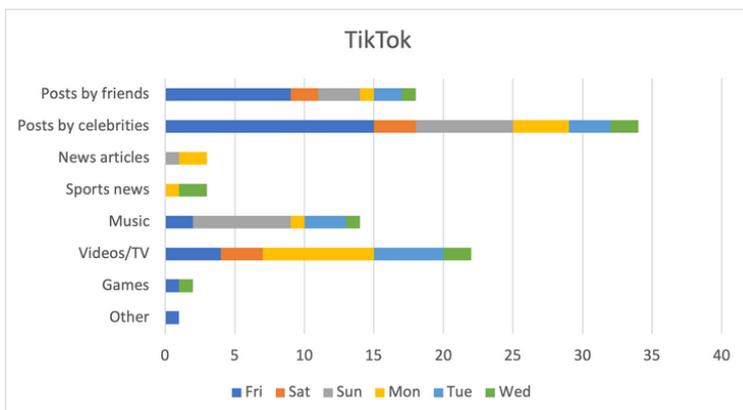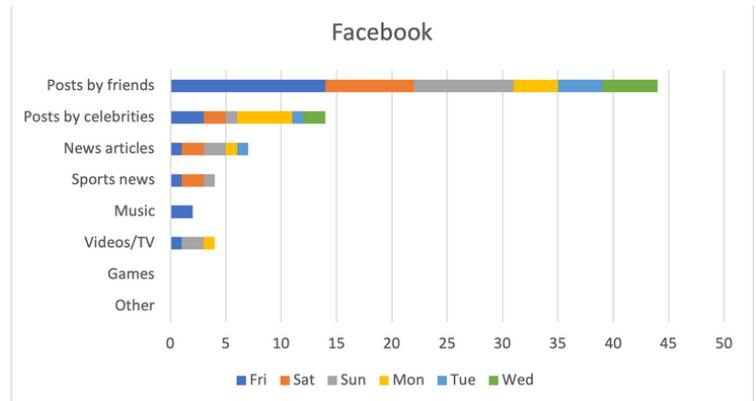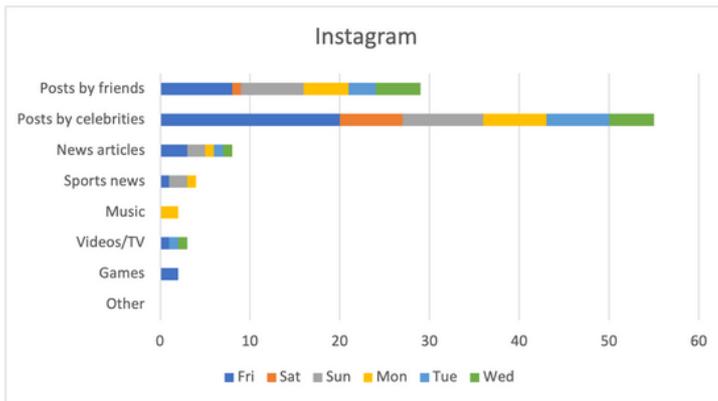
This question was also intended to give an indication of which social media platforms, if any, learners use to access news/journalism content. Although there were some mentions of using social media to access news articles in the diary entries, this use tended to be lower than other uses across the different social media platforms. For this particular use, Twitter was a commonly mentioned platform, although overall the use of Twitter was low.

It is worth noting that 'posts by friends' and 'posts by celebrities' does not exclude news items as these posts could be images, comments, or videos related to news stories or current affairs. The important point to mention is that learners did not deliberately go looking for news but preferred to view posts that were shared by friends and celebrities, which may or may not include news items.

In the small group discussions, learners were asked to expand on the kinds of content they engage with while on these platforms. Most groups (regardless of sex, age, and location) mentioned that they use both YouTube and TikTok to watch celebrity and influencer videos and follow up on the latest trends, lifestyle and fashion. An exception to this was the younger boys (13-14 years old) from Johannesburg, who used these platforms to access fun videos and entertainment but said they did not engage with celebrity-related content.

The small group discussions also revealed that the type of videos viewed by the learners differed. Some explained that on YouTube, they enjoyed watching educational videos like scientific experiments, subject specific tutorial videos and general educational content that empowered them to gain new skills online. As one older boy explained:

> "I learn many skills on YouTube tutorials and get more explanation for subjects I don't understand. Like this year, I started learning about Computer Sciences."
>
> (Boy, 15-17 years, North West)
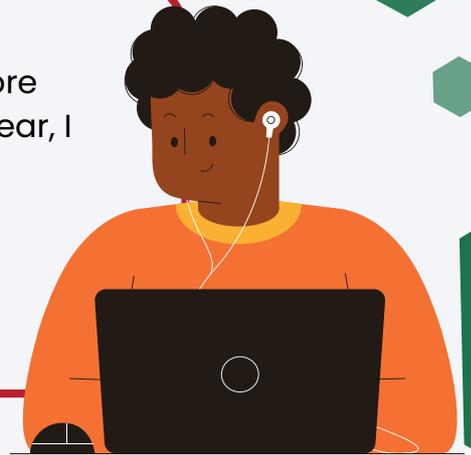
On TikTok, learners tended to prefer watching music and dance videos which were more relaxing and entertaining. Instagram and Facebook were also mentioned as social media sites that learners liked to visit to follow celebrities and lifestyle news, post pictures and chat with friends.

Lastly, WhatsApp was mentioned by the younger boys and girls (13–14-year-old), and older boys (15-17 years old) from the North West, who stated that it was their favourite app because they used it to chat to friends and family members.

When asked if they noticed anything surprising about their social media usage during the diary entry exercise, the younger boys (13-14 years old) in North West stated that they did not notice anything and carried on as usual. All the other groups reported noticing that they spent a lot of their time on social media, which they felt impacted on their other responsibilities like household chores and schoolwork:

> "I realised that I can't go a day without these apps – TikTok and Instagram."
>
> (Boy, 15-17 years, North West)

> "Once you get onto the app (TikTok), it's hard to get out of it."
>
> (Girl, 15-17 years, Johannesburg)

This feedback from the learners is consistent with their diary entries, as TikTok had the highest number of learners who spent more than 2 hours of their day on the platform.

As an older boy in the North West observed:

> "Doing the diary entry made me aware that we spend a lot of time on social media, so I want to change it to a healthier social media lifestyle."
>
> (Boy, 15-17 years old, North West)

This was echoed in the findings of the diary entry exercise. Learners were asked to estimate how long they had spent on each social media platform per day. On most of the days, learners mostly reported spending 30 minutes or up to an hour per platform, but each day there were several learners that reported spending two or more hours on at least one platform.

B. WHAT DOES THE SOCIAL MEDIA DIET OF CHILDREN (AGED 13 -17 YEARS) IN THIS STUDY LOOK LIKE?

In this study, news has been understood to be information about current events, whether local or from around the world, in line with traditional journalism. Traditional media was defined as news that is produced and distributed on radio, newspaper, and television. News shared on new media was defined as news that is produced and shared online.

To gauge the level of understanding among the learners of the concept of news, they were asked to share word/s that came to mind when they heard the term 'news'.

Five common themes that came up during the small group discussions were:

1. **New information** – news is new information that they did not know before.
2. **Things that are happening around the world** – things that affect their lives and communities, with special reference to the economy.
3. **Drama** – this refers to celebrity gossip.
4. **Events** – this included important events, both local and international.
5. **Daily update**s – related to important topics like COVID-19 and load shedding of electricity that affect their daily lives.

Participants in the small groups were then asked if they follow the news and all the groups except the younger girls (13-14 years old) from both the North West and Johannesburg stated that they do regularly follow the news.

> " It's important to understand what's happening around you"
> (Girl, 14-17 years, Gauteng)

Some of the reasons given by the younger girls (13- 14 years) for not following the news regularly was that news includes too many things and tends to be confusing, while others said that the news is just not important to them. As one of the younger girls stated:

> "I have no feelings about the news because it's not important for me."
> (Girl, 13-14 years, Gauteng)

When asked which source of media they trusted more when looking for news, there were mixed reactions, with many of the learners in the small discussion groups stating that they trusted traditional media more than social media. The primary reason for this was that they believed that traditional media was more reliable as a news source because the news production and reporting process ensures that the news is truthful and accurate. As one younger boy explained:

> "[There is] too much fake news on social media. On traditional platforms, not everyone can publish and broadcast news, so it is more trustworthy."
>
> (Boy,13-14 years old, North West)
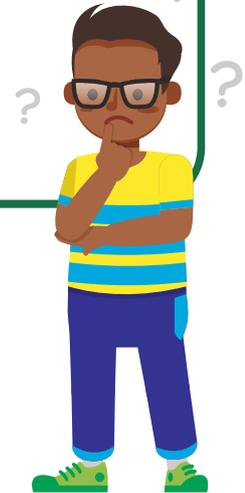
These learners also believed that traditional media channels, even with these limitations of a set production time, were sometimes more accessible because they have televisions and radios at home which do not require data to connect to access news. However, some felt that social media had the advantage of immediacy, being able to provide a more 'real time' access to news:

> "I get home and it's there; visuals and audio make following the news easy."
>
> (Boy, 13-14 years old, North West)

However, those that trusted social media more stated that even though social media tends to have more 'fake' news, they are able to verify the information they receive and the diverse sources of information ensures that accurate information reaches them. They also mentioned that social media was more accessible, despite the high data costs:

> "Social media is more accessible because your phone is always with you and for radio and TV, you need to be at home or at a place where they have it."
>
> (Boy, 15-17 years, Johannesburg)

Despite the mixed reactions about the trustworthiness of traditional media and social media as news sources, an overwhelming majority of learners said they preferred engaging with news on social media. Even some of the learners that stated that traditional media was more reliable and accessible, preferred to engage with news on social media.

The 2017 study in the United States mentioned above also found that young people in that study preferred accessing news on social media, despite trusting their families and teachers for news more than any source.

C. WHAT KIND OF NEWS ARE THEY CONSUMING, IF AT ALL?

From both the diary entry and focus groups, the most popular types of news that learners consumed were celebrity news, political news, sports news, and current events. Those completing the diaries were asked to describe their engagement with news each day, and approximately 20% to 30% of participants each day reported that they did not engage with news at all. 'Formal' news stories relating to current affairs were often mentioned (for example, the challenges with electricity load-shedding, or the removal of a local mayor), but many participants also referred to stories about influencers or specific celebrities or sports personalities. The word cloud below gives some insight into the kinds of headlines and topics mentioned by participants over the diary period.

In the diary entries, learners reported 'traditional' news articles (political and economic news, current events) most frequently, but this could have been because they were specifically asked to record their engagement with news. This was closely followed by entertainment news and sports news.

In the small group discussion, learners regularly mentioned seeking out entertainment or celebrity news, stating that it made them feel encouraged, provided role models, and built excitement because of celebrity gossip.

"Celebrity news makes me excited because of the drama we see and hear."
(Girl, 15–17 years, Johannesburg)

Some examples of the news articles on celebrity news and entertainment that learners reported engaging with through the diary entries included:

- "Kanye West introduced his daughter North to his new wife during a dinner date."
- "On Twitter Elon Musk changed his username to "Mr. Tweet"."
- "Cassper Nyovest was celebrating his 1st year anniversary of the Billato brand alcohol."

Political news also came up during the discussions as learners felt that it was important to stay abreast of current affairs. However, there were mixed emotions associated with this kind of news, with some saying it made them feel encouraged and informed while others felt sad and angry because of corruption and crime. One younger boy explained:

> "News sometimes makes me feel emotional and angry, especially when they cover events and topics they don't share enough information [on]."
> (Boy, 13-14 years, North West)

In the small group discussions, it was the boys' groups that mentioned sports news, stating that it made them feel motivated and excited because it is a source of entertainment. Examples of sports news mentioned in the diary entries included:

- "I clicked on a sports article about WWE Raw."
- "Messi's incredible reaction to Mbappe at PSG's training."

However, even though the learners engage with these four different types of news, the discussions in the small groups suggest that most of the news content that the learners seek out is not diverse and is:

- **Dominated by celebrity news** i.e., fashion, lifestyle and music
- **Dominated by trending topics** i.e., Eskom, President Ramaphosa, ANC etc.
- **Often linked to events and not issue based** i.e., a story about a woman who raped her son,[11] which learners mentioned viewing on Twitter.

[11] https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/graphic-content-officer-who-raped-her-son-expected-in-court/

It is also worth noting that when specifically asked about the news articles they accessed during their six-day diary entry, the explanations or descriptions revealed that some of the learners engaged with content online on the assumption that it falls under the category of news, but which did not meet the study's definition of news. For example:

> "I was watching educational videos like I explained, since I had found my current mathematics topic hard, but I saw some old motivational speech by the late Chadwick Boseman. Here is the quote by him...."

> "I watched some debate competition videos since I wanted to try and boost my confidence by representing my school at the debate competition. I want to be an epitome and explore."

D. TO WHAT EXTENT DO CHILDREN IN THIS STUDY POSSESS THE SKILLS TO IDENTIFY MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

Misinformation and disinformation are prevalent online and are a part of children's experience as they engage with social media. For this study misinformation is understood to be information that is false or inaccurate, while disinformation is false information that is deliberately intended to mislead or deceive. The rapid spread of mis/disinformation online has been identified as a pressing public issue with real and potentially harmful consequences, and children may be particularly vulnerable because their maturity and cognitive capacities are still developing.[12]

In the group discussions, children were asked if they felt they could spot 'fake' news when they come across it, and how they could tell when news or a story is fake.

[12] UNICEF (2021) Rapid analysis: Digital misinformation/disinformation and children. UNICEF Office of Global Insight and Policy.

Across the groups, the children felt that they were able to spot fake news, but there was some uncertainty and the strategies they described using to identify mis/disinformation were limited. Some of the older girls (aged 14 to 17 years) in Gauteng suggested that they simply had a 'natural feeling, sixth sense' about fake news, but the group also described using the more practical strategy of checking the source of a story – if there is no source reported or if only one individual or site has the story and no evidence is provided, then that suggests that it is mis/disinformation.

The other groups described similar strategies of using more than one source for verifying the reliability of news stories. For example:

> "We look at the same story and check if it has the same information on different platforms. If it all reports the same info, then it must be true; but if it's different, then we know there is a possibility of fake news. So, we check different sources and platforms."
> (Boy, 13-14 years, North West)

> "I first see it on TV, then verify on social media."
> (Girl, 13-14 years, Gauteng)

The older boys (15 to 17 years) in the North West were unable to share the criteria they would use, and none of the groups elaborated on other potential strategies. This points to the need for **digital literacy training** to empower children with further strategies to identify mis/disinformation as they engage with news on social media.

MISINFORMATION

DISINFORMATION
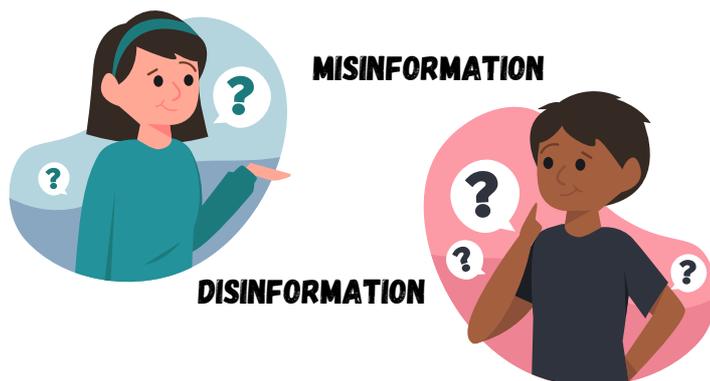
E. HOW CAN SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS POSITIVELY INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH NEWS?

As well as understanding how children in this study already engage with social media and the news, we explored how news outlets and journalists could make high quality news more accessible and appealing to teens. We asked participants in the group discussions about what suggestions or advice they would give to journalists and news outlets on how to make news articles more attractive to them and their peers. There was clear agreement around two key points regarding the way in which news is presented, namely that the articles should be short and include visuals. Several groups spoke of "less words, more pictures" or "summarising the news to attract teenagers". One group spoke of limiting the news "only to important points", while another suggested "keep[ing] it short and sweet but still us[ing] words to explain things".

Including visuals was a common theme, whether this was pictures or videos. Several groups suggested that journalists and news outlets use audio or video for articles that target teens or to encourage teens to engage with them. As one of the older girls in Gauteng put it:

> "Audio is better than reading. Videos [are] better because it's eye-catching, you hear and see everything."
> (Girl, 15 – 17 years, Gauteng)

Other suggestions included making content fun and engaging, using catchy titles and bright colours and using language that is accessible to teens (for example, "phrasing the news in a different way, explaining abbreviations" or making use of slang).

In terms of news content, several groups spoke about the relevance of news to young people and the need for journalists to "write on topics that we are interested in ". One group summarised this as: "If the news broadcaster was my age, [what would I] be interested in watching?". Some groups noted that "seeing people our age is motivating" and suggested that seeing more young people (adolescents rather than adults) reporting on news stories would be a way to engage teens. This finding mirrors MMA previous work with children who have monitored traditional news media.

There was also a lot of discussion around the type of news that would be appealing to teens, with a common suggestion being to cover a broad range of issues:

> "Go broad with news – we want to see everything from politics to celebrities."
> (Girl, 15-17 years, Gauteng)
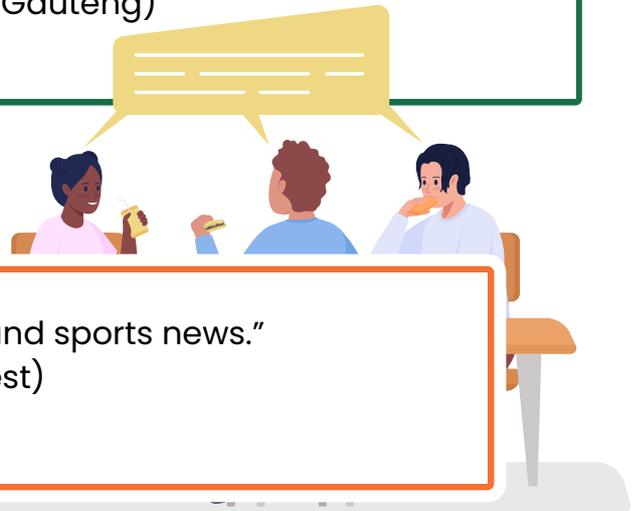
> "Write about music, celebrities, politics, and sports news."
> (Boy, 13-14 years, North West)

While one group wanted more stories on politics and business news, another group described stories about water and voting as "boring topics". A third group raised the issue of accuracy or "sticking to the hard" facts as a feature of news stories that would appeal to teens, while a fourth group suggested being "different, tell different stories". Several groups emphasised their interest in celebrity news, sports news, entertainment and sharing the latest trends. The older boys in the North West, however, cautioned that "the news mustn't only focus on what we want but also on what we need". The younger girls in the North West indicated that news stories that raise awareness of issues facing teens (e.g., drug abuse and teenage pregnancy) would be of interest to them.

A few of the groups identified the social media platforms they would prefer to use to access news stories, with YouTube and TikTok being most mentioned.

CONCLUSION

Since the media plays a vital role in shaping children's understanding of the world, access to accurate news about current events and issues that impact on children's lives enables them to become informed and active citizens.

The findings show that the social media diet of children includes spending significant parts of their day on several platforms, which reflects a clear understanding of which platforms cater for their different needs on social media. A noted concern, as expressed by many of the children themselves, was the number of hours spent on social media.

The participants' responses also showed that while the learners are regular daily users of social media, engagement with news articles was limited when compared to other online activities that learners engage in. More common was following posts by celebrities and friends on social media, which may or may not include references to news stories. Therefore, while access to social media has increased access to news for teens, engaging with hard news or journalism is not necessarily a priority for them in their online activities.

Almost all the groups (except the younger girls in both locations) said that they did follow the news regularly, but the kinds of news they mentioned included news relating to celebrities and influences, sports news and trending topics as well as hard news or journalism.

Learners spoke of traditional news sources as being more trustworthy, but most still preferred to access news on social media, because of the immediacy and ease of access (despite data access challenges). This echoed the findings from research in the United States, in which young people also preferred to access news on social media despite regarding family and friends as the most trustworthy sources of news.

This underscores the importance of exploring children's engagement with social media and understanding their levels of news and digital literacy. While most learners felt that they could identify mis/disinformation, most had difficulty sharing strategies for doing so and only mentioned checking more than one source of news to verify the information. This points to the need for increased digital literacy skills to ensure to support their safe engagement online.

In thinking about how to make 'hard' news more engaging for this age group, there was a clear preference for fewer words and more pictures, for audio or videos, and for highlighting topics of interest or relevant to this age group, ideally reported on by more teens themselves.

The study did not find many clear patterns by age, gender or location. Some exceptions included differences between the age groups, with only the younger boys from Johannesburg stating that they did not engage with celebrity news, and the younger girls from both locations stating that they did not regularly follow the news. In this study, children across the two provinces were very similar in their social media habits. Overall, most of the children in this study engage with news on social media in some way but are limited in the types of news they engage with and the amount of time spent on social media engaging in one type of news (entertainment news with some current affairs) needs to studied further to better understand the reasons behind these actions.

The recommendations outline important suggestions that can contribute towards further interventions to increase children's safe and active participation and engagement with news online.

EMPOWER LEARNERS WITH DIGITAL AND MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

While the schools recruited are part of the Web Rangers programme[13], the selected learners had not received any form of digital and media literacy training. They had limited understanding of what constitutes news versus general knowledge content, little knowledge on how to spot mis/disinformation online and lacked an appreciation of how engaging with news enhances their perspective and decision-making process.

Digital literacy speaks to basic child online safety to ensure that all children with access to a connected device have the necessary skills to successfully navigate the online world, can critically decipher information and to discern between credible and fake news and have the ability to take full advantage of the internet to hone talent and skills.

Media literacy speaks to an in-depth understanding of how media works and the process of news production. MMA's Children's Monitoring Project has shown that when children actively monitor and analyse the media, they are able to voice their opinions on how children should be portrayed in news and advocate for better coverage of children. This encourages children's voices and representation to be amplified in the media.

The responsibility to ensure children access digital and media literacy training lies with the government (Department of Communications and Digital Technologies and Department of Basic Education), technology companies like Google, Meta and TikTok, with the support of civil society institutions like MMA and UNICEF, as well as parents.

Participants in this study viewed social media primarily as a place for entertainment, catching up on celebrity news and connecting with friends. But social media can also be used as a tool to access up-to-date information and hard news, which children can use to make informed decisions about their lives. Critical digital and media literacy skills will not only equip children with the ability to spot mis/disinformation but it will also enable children to be more conscious of their media diet.

[13] Web Rangers is a digital literacy programme designed to allow young people to gain critical skills and knowledge around online safety that they use to create innovative campaigns that promote safe internet usage and champion their rights in the digital world.

JOURNALISTS NEED TO PRIORITISE CHILDREN AND THEIR ISSUES IN THE MEDIA

Research conducted by MMA[14] over the last decade reveals common patterns of how young people are portrayed. MMA's research shows that young people are marginalized in the news, consequently limiting their participation and ability to engage with the news.

The recommendations made by the learners in this study will be shared with MMA's media network in the hopes that they will start to see children as a priority in the media and cover their issues in a way that represents children's lived experience and promotes their rights.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS AND SCHOOLS IN STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC VALUES

When the learners were asked to recommend ways in which journalists can write news stories that they will want to read, all learners stated that they wanted news stories with less words, more videos and audio because reading takes time and gets boring.

The suggestions cannot be disputed especially in the context of South Africa's reading crisis where, according to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2016[15]78% of children in Grade 4 struggle to read for meaning when presented with content to read in any language.

It becomes important to include the role of schools and parents as they hold such power and influence over children. This power is in the modelling of participatory democracy within the home and school; by regularly reading and watching the news, talking about the things that are happening in the community and how they impact on our lives and where possible participating in community-based discussions - whether online or offline. It helps children to make links between their lived experience and what the media is showing them. This builds not only a culture of reading but also civic engagement which will ensure children become active citizens that contribute towards a strengthened democracy.

With that said, there are obvious challenges with access and connectivity that pose major obstacles to the above-mentioned recommendations.

[14] Media Monitoring Africa - Children's Report 2021. https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wordpress22/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Childrens-Report-2021.pdf
[15] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-02-07-education-business-and-policy-leaders-weigh-in-on-how-to-tackle-sas-reading-crisis/

KEY LESSONS

- The role of influencers and celebrities on children needs to be studied closely and possibly necessitates the need to share strategies on how Tech companies can protect children from exposure to this overwhelming culture of influencers and advertising.

- News needs to meet children where they are (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Facebook), without compromising the quality of news that speaks to children's issues. Integrity and trust of news among the children and young people is still largely based on news production from traditional media outlets.

- A multi stakeholder approach is needed to come up with ways to encourage and build a culture of active citizenry among children.

FURTHER QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE:

- Can influencers play a positive role in children's social media consumption?
  What role do social media platforms play in influencing children to engage in news on social media?

- How can they alter their algorithms to ensure a broader and more healthy media diet?

  What is the quality of the news that children are accessing on social media?

- What limitations/challenges do children face when accessing news on social media?

- What role does digital literacy play in encouraging children to access news on social media?

- Should news be produced for different age groups?

- What are the different languages available for children to consume content on social media and news?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT MMA

Media Monitoring Africa's vision is a responsible, quality media that enables an engaged and informed citizenry in Africa and across the world. MMA aims to promote the development of a free, fair, ethical and critical media culture in South Africa and the rest of the continent. To achieve MMA's vision, the three key areas that MMA seeks to address through a human rights-based approach are: media ethics, media quality and media freedom.

For more information about MMA, visit www.mediamonitoringafrica.org

ABOUT UNICEF

UNICEF works in some of the world's toughest places, to reach the world's most disadvantaged children. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone.

For more information, visit: https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/