

# Intergenerational Analysis of Social Media Usage as News Outlets: Case Study of Yemen's Humanitarian Crisis

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## List of Abbreviations

AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
ERW	Explosive Remnants of War
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIS	Geographic Information System
GPC	General People’s Congress
GWI	Global Web Index
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NDC	National Dialogue Conference
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NSP	News-sharing Platform
NTIA	National Telecommunication and Information Association
SNS	Social Networking Service
UGC	User-generated Content
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WFP	World Food Program
WHO	World Health Organization
YSP	Yemeni Socialist Party

# INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last decade, the propagation and development of social media have boomed at an incredibly rapid pace, entering nearly every aspect of our life (Shah, 2021). Today, social media platforms have become an almost indispensable tool to feel connected to others, enabling us to communicate with anybody at any time, and always keep track of what our acquaintances are up to, hence the name ‘social’ (Whiting & Williams, 2013). This kind of media allows for infinite possibilities to build networks and always be aware of what is going on around the world in real-time, not merely to be up to date with pop culture, but also in terms of international news and events.

While initially conceived to facilitate connection between friends by chatting and sharing snippets of our daily life, nowadays, leading social media platforms like Facebook, X (previously called ‘Twitter’), Instagram, and Tiktok take on the role of news sharing platforms (which I will refer to as *NSP*'s) (Khuntia et al., 2016). The rapid increase of social media users, which quadrupled over the last 10 years (Dixon, 2023), significantly contributed to the evolution of these platforms into an alternative source of information vis-à-vis mainstream media like television news channels and newspapers, forever changing the character of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (Alakklouk & Gülnar, 2023). Thanks to them, users can now find out about ongoing events simultaneously as they are taking place, and receive real-time updates, thus playing a pivotal role in revolutionizing contemporary informational landscapes. Although according to the Global Web Index (GWI) the majority of social media users prefers to utilize these platforms merely for their primitive functions of virtual entertainment and communication amongst users (2023), the undeniable establishment of these services as widely acknowledged news outlets is surely a topic that deserves further investigation.

The captivating character of this topic does not simply relate to the astonishing speed at which social media transformed their purpose, but additionally to the way this change gave rise to a multitude of consequent phenomena that contribute to making news consumption via social media a controversial matter. In fact, depending on which aspects associated with the adoption of social media as news outlets one takes into consideration, people hold very different opinions regarding whether or not this transformation is actually positive. To provide an example, the development of *citizen journalism* that started taking place thanks to the advancement of Social Networking Services (SNS's) is perceived by many as a positive revolution brought about by these platforms, as this phenomenon gave a voice to the average citizen thus fostering a process of ‘democratization’ in the field of news media (Alakklouk & Gülnar, 2023; Albostangy, 2020; Allan, 2013). On the other hand though, the increase of news consumption on social media has certainly triggered a considerable degree of concern amongst experts

and scholars, who particularly worry about the threat of algorithms, echo-chambers and filter bubbles in fostering political polarization (Kim, 2023). This thesis will delve deeper into each of these themes throughout the *Social Media* sub-chapters.

Growing up during the boom of social media, younger generations, like Gen Z's (born between 1997-2012), are supposedly the most adept at utilizing social media, also known as Social Networking Services/Sites (SNS's), being able to effortlessly navigate from one platform to another. For a vast majority of people aged 27 and under (Reinikainen, 2020), SNS's represent a fixed aspect of their existence, a tool ingrained in their lifestyle which they utilize for the most disparate purposes, including news consumption (Casero-Ripollés, 2012; GWI, 2023). However, although young adults constitute the greatest amount of social media news consumers and are presumably more skillful in working these services, they are not the only age cohort who makes extensive use of these services. On the contrary, a constituent percentage of older adults in the 44 to 59 age range (Gen X) are reportedly also using them on a daily basis (Dixon, 2023). Having approached social media only in a later stage of their life, members of this age group and older, such as Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1964), have been slower in learning how to master these platforms (Lewis & Ariyachandra, 2011). Nevertheless, over time they have adapted well to the advancement of the *Web 2.0*, a term that refers to the transition of the Internet from static web pages to the dynamic online environment of User-Generated Content (UGC) and social media platforms that we know today (Murugesan, 2009).

In their own way, every generational cohort started making use of SNS's over the last decade (Aichner et al., 2021), but their usage fashions might differ under several aspects. Every individual is a product of their time, the contextual background they grew up in influences their convictions, attitudes and perceptions, dictating how they think and behave in life (Reis et al., 2000). Therefore, also in their use of social media platforms, different age groups tend to display different approaches (cfr. Cotten et al., 2011; Forest & Wood, 2012; Tsai et al., 2016; Orr et al., 2009; Smith, 2014; Vandebosch and Eggermont 2002). For instance, divergent age-related habits predict differences in social media use in terms of duration, preferred platform, and purpose (GWI, 2023), with Gen Z's and Millennials (born between 1996-1981) largely embracing SNS's as one of their primary news outlets (Stockdale & Coyne, 2020). On the other hand, being more accustomed to more conventional news media, older adults presumably rely more on information sources such as local and cable TV, radio, or newspapers (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017).

Given the variance of information provided by different sources, the dissimilar ways in which these two generations consume news both on and offline, might lead to contrasting opinions on the same topic (Burggraaff & Tilling, 2020; Fengler et al., 2020). This is notably relevant for controversial political matters around which opposite narratives are built, leading people to adopt divergent stances and

progressively lean towards polarization, such as Brexit. When the UK was undergoing the European Union Membership Referendum in 2016, votes varied greatly amongst different generational cohorts. In fact, while 73% of people aged 18-24 wished to stay in the EU, 60% of 65+ individuals wanted to leave (Wolkenstein, 2022). Each group was pointing fingers against the other, with young adults claiming the older generations were ruining a future they would not even be a part of (BBC, 2016). While this divergence in viewpoints is not surprising, the question of which factors contributing to driving this polarization cannot be answered straightforwardly, as a multitude of elements play a role in shaping people's opinions aside from age. These include ethnicity, economic status, gender, educational level and approach to news consumption (meaning from which news platforms people gain information and what kind of information they are exposed to), as Earle and Hodson (2022) found that news media exposure impacts the consumers' political views. In the case of Brexit, just like for several other major international events, the display and contextualization of the topic diverged greatly across different news media, with some partisan outlets contributing to further polarize the already existing divide (Brändle et al., 2022; Gaber & Fischer, 2022). Given that people of different ages tend to have different news consumption habits (Pew Research Center, 2018), and that news sources have an effect on people's beliefs (Glogger et al., 2023), the possibility that these different approaches could lead to inter-generational gaps in opinions on contemporary topics should not be disregarded.

Amongst the prevailing current news that have been the central focus of heated debates in recent times are ongoing conflicts and humanitarian or environmental crises. Throughout the past year, chances are each one of us has at some point run into news reports about disasters such as the 2023 earthquake in Turkey, the Congo displacement crisis, the migrant boat disasters in the Mediterranean Sea, the Russian-Ukrainian war, and the catastrophic situation of the Gaza Strip, resulting from the protracted conflict between Israel and Hamas. All these instances have received a great amount of media attention, both from SNS's and traditional media streams, thus raising awareness on the unfoldings of each event and collecting international attention from every part of the globe. However, there are multitude of other cases of contemporary conflicts and disasters that are just as severe, or more, and also require immediate attention, except no forms of media provides it to them.

While it is clearly impossible to really be informed about every single thing happening around the world, news media have the tendency to direct their coverage unevenly, extensively reporting on certain events while completely neglecting others, which consequently end up being wholly unknown to the vast majority of news consumers (Nicholas, 2022). This is the case of Yemen, where an internal conflict has been striking the country for over a decade, bringing the Yemeni population to its feet with one of the most long-lasting and severe humanitarian crises to ever take place (UN, 2023). As of 2024, nearly three

quarters of the Yemeni population are in need of humanitarian assistance, 5 million of these being children under the age of 5, and 80% of people are living under the poverty line (OCHA, 2024). Furthermore, with over 4.5 million internally displaced people, Yemen's case has been referred to as one of the worst displacement crises to ever take place (Karabulut, 2022). Despite the severeness of the situation, however, Yemen's humanitarian disaster does not seem to appear on social media often or traditional media (Al Jazeera, 2022). The fact that an instance so severe in terms of humanitarian damage receives so little attention is truly astonishing, and it is precisely for this reason that Yemen's situation and the media's scarcity of coverage on it is worth investigating, in order to pinpoint which factors contribute to determining whether or not an event is going to be covered by the media, and which news consumption strategies prove to be more effective in gaining a wide-ranging awareness of current affairs.

With the purpose of examining the motives as to why this case is not frequently talked about, it could be compelling to embark on a study which aims at recognizing different online news consumption habits and identifying which of them is the most effective in finding information about widely undiscussed topics, such as Yemen. This study thus aims at researching the different ways in which people make use of social media as news outlets as compared to traditional media, and which of these distinct approaches proves to be more effective in finding out truthful information about otherwise undiscussed news topics. And since, there are reasons to believe that different generational cohorts employ social media in dissimilar fashions (Fietkiewicz et al., 2016; Omeragić, 2021), the age factor should be included in the analysis to further its relevance.

Considering everything that has been mentioned so far, this thesis wishes to assess whether there are, in fact, differences between the ways in which two distinct generations make use of social media to gain information about ongoing events and issues. Specifically, people's awareness of Yemen's displacement crisis will be examined. Should said differences exist, I additionally aim at finding out what they actually entail, and coming to a final understanding in order to determine which method is most efficient in gathering information about otherwise not talked about contemporary matters.

For this purpose, the following research question has been developed:

*To what extent does the use of social media as news sources by Gen Z and Gen X at Tilburg University influence their understanding of Yemen's conflict and humanitarian crisis?*

Firstly, an historical overview of Yemen's civil conflict and humanitarian crisis will be laid out in order to frame and explain the country's current situation. The lack of coverage on this topic both on social as well as traditional media will be additionally assessed. Then, the thesis will delve in a review of existing

literature about all aspects related to news consumption on social media, such as the rise of SNS's as news outlets, the concept of citizen journalism, the risks involved with algorithms, echo-chambers, and filter bubbles, the strengths and weakness of social media in disaster information, and the impact of these platforms on political polarization.

Different perspectives on each of these factors will be compared and contrasted. Finally, the focus will shift to the differences in social media usage and news consumption habits amongst cohorts of different ages, assessing what academics of different schools of thought have to say about this topic. The methodological section of the thesis will later follow.

## **Academic and Societal Relevance**

The societal relevance of this work stems from the fact that by grasping which approach to using social media as NSP's provides the most efficient and objective access to the widest amount of information, awareness could potentially be raised about how to properly use these platforms. Research on this topic can help readers to understand how to use SNS's in a more effective way by educating them about algorithms and misinformation being spread online, thus providing them with the tools to navigate the Web more safely. Once users become more mindful of how to properly consume news on social media, they could leverage the strengths of these platforms by researching a much wider variety of topics, including those who do not receive nearly enough media attention, such as Yemen's ongoing conflict and displacement crisis. Increased news coverage for Yemen would not only mean more overall awareness of the unfolding of events, but additional humanitarian and monetary aid that comes with greater media broadcasting, thus providing help to the millions of people who faultlessly fell victim to this tragic conflict. While Yemen is merely one singular example, many other undiscussed contemporary matters could benefit from more online attention, and the findings of this research could therefore prove to be useful for society as a whole.

As for the academic relevance, conducting an in-depth research on the use of social media as news outlets adds onto the body of extant literature by investigating the interplay of multifaceted factors that, to the best of my knowledge, had not been taken into consideration before in this order. This contributes to raising awareness amongst academics and can prove to be a solid basis for future research to further analyze how all these dynamics relate to other topics. Furthermore, adopting the instance of Yemen as the main case study additionally contributes to shedding light on what is going on in and around the country, both on a political, military, societal, and humanitarian level. This can be effective in raising interest surrounding this matter in the world of academia and driving the scholars' concern as to why it is not

discussed more, possibly leading them to conduct supplementary studies on Yemen's situation and thereby allowing an increased amount of people to learn about it. And just as mentioned above, the more individuals find out about what has been going on there for the past ten years, the more they will be interested in updates regarding this plight, which again, increases the international relevance of Yemen's conflict and crisis.

# 1. YEMEN

## 1.1 Historical Context of the Conflict in Yemen

Historically, the country of Yemen has for a long time been subject to internal tensions due to the original division of the North and the South throughout the Cold War. While North Yemen, also known as Yemen Arab Republic, was established in 1962 and was characterized by a military dictatorship, the Southern "Democratic Republic of Yemen" was a communist state (Cordesman, 2017).

The deep differences between the two contributed to making the country's unification in 1990 particularly hard, with constant opposition by several minority groups and a lack of strong central authority (Karakir, 2018).

Throughout his 34 years in power, up until his forced resignation in 2012, Ali Abdullah Saleh has been a key character in the historical and political development of Yemen. After becoming president of North Yemen in 1978, he oversaw the unification of the country in 1990, which did not however proceed smoothly, as the South felt embittered and neglected by the North's stronger hold over the government (Hamid Al-Watary, 2018). These tensions resulted in the 1994 Civil War, when South Yemen attempted at re-separating from the North following a multi-party election in which the voting between the two diverged greatly. On the one hand, Northern Yemenis supported Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) and the Islamist Islah Party, while Southern Yemenis favored the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) (Arimatsu & Choudhury, 2014). This conflict of interests led to a clash, with the South wishing to be once again independent from its counterpart, but eventually failing after being crushed by the North's military and put back in its place (Karakir, 2018).

Saleh's ruling ways were harsh, and, as the UN Security Council later found out, extremely corrupt, leading to the creation of strong discontent amongst the Yemeni population throughout his whole political career (UNSC, 2015). Nonetheless, he still surprisingly managed to dominate the political scene for over

three decades, both through the use of force and by continuously juggling alliances and fighting off insurgencies (Hamid Al-Watary, 2018). His success can be additionally attributed to his convenient manipulation of external actors and of Yemen's tribal and religious communities, which he referred to as 'dancing on the head of snakes' (Niarchos, 2018). Needless to say that although this violent ruling philosophy guaranteed him a long-lasting power position, it increasingly built up anger amongst the population, which had a growing desire for fairer political and economic reforms (Durac, 2011).

From the early 2000s on, protests against Saleh's regime started turning into violent conflicts, the most relevant being the uprising of the Zaydi Shi'a Houthis, a Muslim minority from Northern Yemen who claimed to have been marginalized for years from the rest of the population, and who put up a fight with the government for over six years, from 2004 to 2010 (Karakir, 2018). Eventually, just as it will occur in many later instances, Saudi Arabia came into play and took charge of the situation, launching a series of air strikes targeting the Houthis, which led to the death and displacement of tens of thousands of people (Arimatsu & Choudhury, 2014).

This move clearly did nothing but increase people's overall resentment, causing violent protests to begin again in 2011, a crucial year in which the tensions reached a peak. Inspired by the 'Arab Spring' pro-democracy movements that were taking place all over the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, the demonstrators demanded better services, improved living conditions, more employment opportunities, and condemned Saleh for his corrupted governance and lack of accountability (Cordesman, 2017; Durac, 2011; Rough, 2015).

By March of 2011, Saleh decided to make the most out of the loyalty he had in the tribal populations, and organized deadly counter-demonstrations in Sana'a, opening fire on the crowds and injuring hundreds of people. This intensified the Houthis' rage and the conflict climaxed over the summer (Karakir, 2018). By this point, the humanitarian damage was catastrophic, and eventually Saleh saw himself forced to reach an agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an intergovernmental economic and political coalition led by Saudi Arabia comprising a total of six Arab countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE. According to the deal, Saleh would withdraw from the presidency and hand over the power to former vice-president Abdal Rab Mansour al-Hadi (Rugh, 2015), and all Yemeni parties would come together for a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in order to draw a new constitution (Juneau, 2016; Rugh, 2015). This plan did not however prove to be very successful, as goals for new laws failed and Saleh's control over the government was still much stronger than Hadi's, even two years after his resignation (Arraf, 2017; Sharp, 2018).

Disappointed by Hadi's broken promises and lack of authorities, the Houthi rebels once again decided to take action, and, driven by the principle 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', this time found an ally in the pro-Saleh groups who were just as discontented with the new president. Together, they marched into

the capital and took control of the Presidential Palace, holding Hadi under house arrest and forcing him to resign (Karakir, 2018). But Hadi did not give in, and rather demanded the GCC to intervene and protect the country from the Houthis. On March 26th, 2015, the Saudi-led coalition launched the so-called ‘Operation Decisive Storm’, targeting the rebels with airstrikes and naval blockades (Abdo & Grinstead 2014; Broder, 2017).

With the blockade, Saudi Arabia aimed at limiting the weapon supply that the Houthis were receiving from Iran, a powerful nation that swore loyalty to the Houthi faction due to their religious affinity. In fact, more than being merely a political matter, the whole civil conflict eventually poured into an international religious feud involving domestic and global actors of different caliber (Jenkins, 2020). On the one hand, being predominantly Sunni Muslim nations, Saudi Arabia and the UAE stood with Hadi’s government, representing Yemen’s majoritarian Sunni population. On the other hand, the almost entirely Shi’a demographics of Iran placed it on the opposing side, backing the Houthis through military aid in the shape of armament transfers, as well as training and intelligence support (Robinson, 2024). By officially justifying their involvement in the war with their moral duty to help restore the rightful Yemeni government, the Saudi-led coalition was simultaneously attempting at preventing Iran from gaining a significant foothold in the Arabian Peninsula, as that would have implied an extension of the Shi’a influence over the region (Jenkins, 2020).

Following the launch of the operation, which US officials and the UNSC announced their support for, a resolution was adopted in April of 2015 stating the legitimacy of Hadi’s presidency (Arraf, 2017). Despite this verdict, the Western region of the country was still under control of the Houthi-Saleh forces, while the South and the East were in the hands of AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), one of the most active branches of the Al-Qaeda extremist organization which managed to gain power following the revolution of 2011 (Karakir, 2018). Thus, the GCC saw no option but to launch a second operation, referred to as ‘Operation Golden Arrow’, with which they were able to take back the city of Mukalla from AQAP’s control (Arraf, 2017). The operation also contributed to crumbling the alliance between the Houthis and Saleh loyalists, who went back to fighting each other over the control of Sana’a, and eventually resulted in the Saleh’s death by the hand of Houthi forces on December 4, 2017 (Karakir, 2018).

In more recent years, tensions between the Houthi faction and the Gulf coalition have relatively subsided, partially due to a UN-brokered truce, which was firstly announced in April of 2022 and then renewed later on for another couple of months. While it was officially supposed to last only until October 2022, the terms of the truce continued to hold up for a fourteen-months-long period after the expiration date, without an official agreement amongst the conflicting factions (ACLED, 2024). This represented a

milestone in the conflict's development, as it was the first instance in which the forces at war agreed to a ceasefire since the unsuccessful Kuwait peace talks held in April 2016 (Trends, 2022). Throughout the first two months of the agreement, war casualties showed a sharp decline by about 85%, and no cross-border drones and missiles were launched by either of the two parties (European Commission, 2023). Moreover, the number of newly internally displaced people also diminished greatly, falling by 76%. Nonetheless, although there was a decrease of around 50% in civilian fatalities, innocent civilians still suffered immoderately from the post-conflict scenarios, with a significant amount of people dying from landmines and other explosive remnants of war (ERW) in former battlefields which they earned access to thanks to the truce (Trends, 2022).

The maritime situation also appears to be critical, as naval attacks in the Red sea by the hand of the Houthis targeting commercial vessels have escalated in recent months (ACLEED, 2024). This neutralizes the partial progress made during the truce, when the seaport of al-Hudaydah was lifted of the naval blockade, allowing for the free movement of ships, and the flow of commercial flights restarted in Sana'a Airport (Human Rights Watch, 2023), which partly contributed to easing the dire humanitarian crisis of the country. In response to the attacks in the Red Sea, the US have led 44 airstrikes on Houthi military targets during the first two months of 2024 (ACLEED, 2024), signaling a possible end of the informal ceasefire which leaves uncertainty for the future of Yemen and its people (UNHCR, 2023).

## 1.2 Humanitarian Situation in Yemen

In February of 2019, the United Nations referred to Yemen's plight as 'the worst man-made humanitarian crisis of our time', a statement that was reiterated by other organizations such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Food Program (WFP) (Niarchos, 2018). Back then, nearly 24 million people (around 80% of the population) needed urgent assistance and protection, the highest figure since WWII (Elayah & Fentiman, 2021), and despite having slightly improved, up to this day the country's situation continues to be tragic, still representing one of the most severe crises to ever take place.

The interplay of global forces both directly and indirectly involved in the conflict has for years utilized Yemeni soil as a combat ring, with Iran and Saudi Arabia imposing their bigger economic and power interests on an otherwise domestic conflict (Jenkins, 2020), while completely disregarding the value of the lives of that territory's residents.

Last year's World Risk Report (2023) placed Yemen in the list of top ten most vulnerable countries worldwide, in addition to scoring amongst the highest also in the *susceptibility* and *lack of coping capacities* categories. This means that not only is the country highly exposed to financial and natural risks related to climate change - environmental shocks like flash-flooding, droughts, and heavy rains have also significantly contributed to a drastic rise in internal displacement, for instance (UN, 2024) - but it also lacks the resources to efficiently bounce back from these setbacks.

The extremely vulnerable character of this nation dates back to before the beginning of the war, when Yemen was already considered the poorest Middle Eastern state (Jenkins, 2020; UNHCR, 2024). In fact, a great part of Yemen's predisposition to a humanitarian crisis can be attributed to the country's almost full reliance on imports to feed its population (Niarchos, 2018).

Staple cereals imports make up 90% of the country's annual domestic consumption needs, and merely 25% of the overall food availability is locally produced (The World Bank, 2017), making the country incredibly prone to famine danger in case of restrictions on imported goods. While last year, military forces of the Saudi-led coalition officially lifted the 8-year-long cutback on imports, which used to reach Yemen mainly through the seaports of Hudaydah and Salif, in the Houthi-dominated Western region (Al Jazeera, 2023), the risk of an imports limitation is still very high.

Due to the unfolding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Houthi movement has for a few months now started hijacking commercial ships linked to Israel and the US in the Red Sea, setting off what has been referred to as the 'Red Sea Crisis' (Notteboom et al., 2024). According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the crisis' disruption of the movement of goods might lead to food shortages and further aggravate the already appalling levels of malnourishment in the country (2024), which counts around 17.3 million people being acutely food insecure, as well as 6 million of them being on the brink of starvation (UNHCR, 2024).

Additionally, scarcity in food supply will result in an increase in prices, which will consequently boost poverty rates, a very scary thought considering that a vast majority of the Yemeni population is already living below the poverty line (OCHA, 2024).

As of today, with Yemen officially entering its 10th year of conflict, the current estimated amount of people in dire need of humanitarian aid and protection support still reaches a staggering 21.6 million, meaning almost three quarters of the total population. 4.5 million people are at present internally displaced, constituting around 14% of all Yemenis, many of which have been displaced several times since 2015, making Yemen the sixth biggest displacement crisis in the world (UNHCR, 2024). 80% of internally displaced people (IDP) are women and children, the two cohorts who have been most affected by the crisis (UNHCR, 2024). Out of all displaced families, as many as 93% of them have at least one

‘vulnerable’ member, meaning an injured individual, elderly person, pregnant woman, or child engaged in labor, UN reports claim (2023).

The chaos that springs from a situation of prolonged conflict and mass displacement builds favorable grounds for forced labor amongst youth, with children dropping out of school to become beggars in an attempt to financially help their families. Likewise, many young girls are being forced into early marriage in order to lift an economic weight off their parents. The overall hindrance of Yemeni women’s livelihood is a serious source of concern, as the country presents amongst the highest global rates of malnourished breastfeeding women, namely 1.3 million, and risks of gender-based violence and exploitation are also rampant and worrisome (UNHCR, 2024).

Around 2.4 million children under the age of five, almost half of them, currently suffer from moderate to severe stunting, WHO reported, while also being particularly vulnerable to multiple diseases such as diphtheria, pertussis, measles and polio, which could clearly be prevented with vaccinations if the findings were sufficient (2024). What is more, safe water continues to be a very persistent problem, as most water and sanitation infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed by the coalition’s airstrikes (Jenkins, 2020). In 2017, inaccessibility to safe water has resulted in the worst cholera outbreak in global history, resulting in 1.2 million sick people and over 2500 deaths (Carey et al., 2018). Notwithstanding all these commonly diffused diseases amongst the Yemeni population, health facilities are unable to welcome and treat patients because of lack of resources, funds, or staff (UNICEF, 2018), thus aggravating the already appalling situation.

All these statistics lead to the conclusion that immediate interventions are imperative, but these interventions are quite costly, and, unfortunately, the available funding is often not sufficient.

In fact, the WHO’s funds have registered a significant decline in the past 5 years, with monetary availability decreasing by 45% (UN, 2024). An estimated \$77 million are urgently needed in order for the WHO to provide crucial healthcare assistance (WHO, 2024), but as of right now, this kind of money is nowhere to be seen.

The Yemeni population had to learn the hard way what it means to be internationally ignored. Apart from the lack of funding, the whole conflict and subsequent humanitarian crisis do not seem to receive much news coverage (Al Jazeera, 2022), or at least not nearly as much as other contemporary matters. The media’s silence on this topic indicates an almost collective decision to neglect the immense prolonged struggle of Yemen, and to think that since the beginning of the conflict almost 380,000 people have died (Action Against Hunger, 2024), both because of direct and indirect causes, the lack of international attention is truly reprehensible.

## 1.3 Yemen in the Media

Despite constituting one of the most long-lasting proxy wars of recent years, little seems to be known about the unfolding of events in Yemen by the general public. Although main institutions such as the United Nations, World Health Organization, UNICEF, World Food Program, and European Union are engaged with the conflict and have reported on it for many years, this coverage has never been substantially adequate (Al Jazeera, 2022). The regular release of news regarding the humanitarian damage and updates on political tensions due to involvement of different nations through the UN news portal have not sufficed to reach a wide audience, and the vast majority of the global population remains almost fully unaware of what is, and has been, going on in Yemen (Al Jazeera, 2022). Very little attention has been paid to this topic by mainstream media channels, especially Western ones, which barely provided any information around the time of the conflict's outbreak in 2014, and never cover the matter now (Jenkins, 2020). However, what appears to be even more surprising, is that even on social media it is quite hard to encounter information about Yemen's plight. While for several other current matters SNS's can provide an alternative source of information to traditional media by offering a wider variety of news than, for instance, tv news channels, with regards to Yemen, these web-based platforms are also lacking reporting, thus fostering people's ignorance on the topic.

Several other current matters of equal or lesser severity than Yemen's crisis and conflict receive much more international attention, regularly appearing on international news sources. As previously mentioned, it would be fair to assume that most people have at least heard about the conflict between Israel and Hamas, and the resulting humanitarian crisis in Gaza, or possibly even know a great deal about it. As one of the latest hot topics of discussion in current affairs, this instance has been on everyone's lips in the last couple of months, and a considerable amount of this attention can be attributed to the extensive work of citizen journalists via social media coverage (Al-Hilu, 2014). In fact, chances are any regular social media user runs into informational content about Palestine on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

Another example of international event that received large-scale media attention is the Russian-Ukrainian war (Syvakivskyi & Krupsky, 2023). Since the spur of the conflict in February 2022, Western media have provided boundless coverage on Russian war crimes as well as the mass displacement of the Ukrainian population all over Europe. Up to this day, tv news channels, international newspapers, and social media news outlets keep people informed about the current developments of the tensions between the two countries with updates and reminders, so that, as we continue on in our daily lives, we can still have in the back of our mind the awareness that there are many individuals still suffering from the repercussions of the tensions, and that the conflict is far from over (Tong, 2024).

Amidst all Western media, it is particularly interesting to analyze the reports of US media on this subject, given this country's influential power and involvement in most global, political dynamics, and compare it to coverage of other affairs of equal relevance. A very insightful research study conducted by Bachman and Brito Ruiz (2024) is helpful in facilitating this analysis. The focus point of their paper was that of contrasting and understanding the differences in coverage of the war in Ukraine and in Yemen by US media, and their findings suggest that geopolitical dynamics play a key role in determining whether or not an event will receive media attention. The analysis shows that American media sources provided significantly more information about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in the past two years than they did about Yemen in the past ten years (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024). For each of these events, the position of the United States in relation to the nations involved was the driving force of the attention, or lack thereof, that the media were paying, and consequently, the general public.

In the case of Ukraine, there are two main elements that determine extensive American coverage, the first one being that the appointed aggressor is Russia. Historically, the two countries have never seen eye to eye, but scholars believe that relations between US and Russia are currently the most fragmented they have been since the end of the Cold War (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024). Clearly, when a nation towards which the US feels so much hostility is involved in such a huge conflict, Americans will waste no time in channeling all their media attention towards Putin's guiltiness. Secondly, the US has for years been funding military aid initiatives worth tens of billions of dollars for Ukraine, so, evidently, they have every interest in framing Ukraine as the victim and Russia as the aggressor with very biased media narratives (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024).

As for Yemen, the story takes a very different turn. In fact, while in the aforementioned example the US were financially supporting the oppressed, in the context of Yemen they actually contribute to the aggression by being aligned with the Saudis. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2014, but even before it due to previous political alliances, the US, and secondarily also the UK, have been the primary provider of weaponry to the coalition (Butcher, 2023; Karakir, 2018). The military and economic ties to Saudi Arabia, particularly due to the Americans' dependence on its natural resources, together with the mutual aversion shared with Iran, made it an automatic choice for the US to support the former. But in doing so, they chose to stand with the faction that throughout the whole conflict caused the biggest amount of overall damage and human suffering. This is not to say that the US should have sided with Iran, as it, too, contributed to a great deal of casualties, but merely that it should come as obvious why they would have very little interest in shedding light on what has been happening in Yemen, as they were part of the reason why the humanitarian crisis came about in the first place. As Isa Bumi (2021, p.991) puts it: "by all accounts, those committing hundreds of billions of dollars to a war on Yemenis would prefer little to no attention be spent on its atrocities. Corporate media have been happy to oblige". The few times that

American media discuss Yemen, the coalition is usually framed as the ‘good guy’, trying to protect civilians from the Houthis’ evil, and the coverage tends to be episodic rather than exhaustive, providing little to no contextual information about the historical, political, religious, and economic factors that play a role in the conflict. As a result, this media strategy can give the audience the impression that all civilian casualties have been almost accidental, thus sweeping the coalition’s systematic pattern of violence under the rug (Bachman & Brito Ruiz, 2024). On the contrary, news reports on Ukraine have always been thorough in providing background information about the factors leading to the war, specifically focusing the long-lasting Russian threat on Ukraine. In their analysis about biases in New York Times headlines, Bachman and Brito Ruiz (2024) found that news titles regarding Russia and Ukraine were much more partisan and emotionally charged (against Russia, naturally) than the ones regarding Yemen, which instead tended to be very neutral and to use language that suggested that the Saudi-led coalition deserved the benefit of the doubt. As the Saudis were benefitting from the evasive tone of US news media, so, too, in turn were the Americans.

Aside from the United States, literature has shown that the involvement of the West is, in general, highly determinant of the amount of coverage that an event receives, meaning its *newsworthiness*, particularly with regards to foreign disasters (Joye, 2009). Said involvement is usually driven by deep-rooted geopolitical factors, such as historical, financial, colonial, or collaborative ties, and research has shown that events occurring in nations that are somehow associated with the West by one of the abovementioned linkages, tend to receive a considerably higher number of reports than events taking place in Third World countries (Adams, 1986; Cottle, 2013; Joye, 2009). However, scholars have additionally identified other crucial indicators in determining the amount of media attention paid to an event, specifically in the sphere of environmental and humanitarian disasters, the most commonly recognized being death toll. Several studies (Gans, 1979; Jeong & Lee, 2019; Joye, 2010b; Simon, 1997) reported that the higher the death count resulting from a disaster is, the greater the amount of news coverage on it will be. Moreover, high financial damage, as well as low GDP per capita and limited political rights of the country impacted were also found to be contributing factors to this equation (Jeong & Lee, 2019). But then, if these findings are, in fact, true, shouldn’t the crisis and conflict in Yemen also have been exhaustively covered by international media? In theory, the context ticks all the boxes: the nation’s economy is on its feet due to the 10-year-long conflict and imports blockade (Jenkins, 2020; UNHCR, 2024), political freedom is extremely limited (OCHA, 2023), the death toll reaches almost 400,000 people (Action Against Hunger, 2024). What more does the world need to open its eyes about Yemen’s atrocious reality? Well, parallel to a lack of Western media attention regarding this matter, there is also a lack of extensive literature on why the media has been neglecting it, but there are a few assumptions that one could personally make.

A first possible reason that comes to mind is the lack of citizen journalism. The humanitarian damage resulting from the conflict has left three quarters of the Yemeni population with nothing, with many of them being on the brink of starvation and barely surviving (UNHCR, 2024). This implies that their priorities will likely circle around primary needs like food, water and shelter, rather than a mobile device to deliver journalistic reports on web-based platforms.

Secondly, as sad as it is to say, the protracted length of this conflict may have led people to get used to it and eventually forget about it. Several studies (Cook & Flay, 1978; Gerber et al., 2011; Petty & Wegener, 1998) show that mass media communication has a very short term impact on the audience, and unless it is consistently repeated over a long period of time, our perception of an event will go back to being neutral very quickly. The persuasive effect of the media, particularly for news regarding disasters which are often emotionally charged, might not be as powerful as we think (Hill et al., 2013). While information on Yemen has never exceeded, not even at the very beginning of the conflict (Jenkins, 2020), the extended duration of the war allowed people to gradually let it slip out of their mind.

Lastly, a third possible explanation to Yemen's lack of coverage has to do with the country's scarcity of natural resources in terms of oil, as compared to many of its neighbors. In fact, the shortage of oil within its borders has never made Yemen an attractive investment prospect for the Western powers, and the internal political corruption has additionally contributed to failing the country's financial management, leaving it much more disconnected to the global economy than any other Arab nation (Elayah & Fenttiman, 2021). As Ó Tuathail and Dalby (1998) pinpoint, in the absence of physical proximity, the strength of the geopolitical ties between one nation and other countries will influence the latter's amount of coverage, as well as scope and direction, on that nation, and should these ties be scarce or weak, so, too, will be the attention of the media.

What can be concluded from this reflection is nothing positive. Due to its tense history of corruption and conflict, its lack of oil, and the overall powerlessness of this nation as whole, Yemen has always been overlooked by the West, failing at strengthening political and financial ties which are, unfortunately, a crucial ingredient to guaranteeing media coverage. It is fair to assume that if Yemen's conflict had received nearly as much international attention as Ukraine or Gaza, significantly less people would be in need of humanitarian assistance, as the media's power to drive people's compassion towards a disaster (Chouliaraki, 2006; Cottle, 2013; Joye, 2009) would have activated increased humanitarian interest and support from relief agencies (Chouliaraki, 2006; Pantti, 2009; Van Belle, 2000). Instead, it remains widely neglected by both traditional and social media, making it the elephant in the room nobody seems to be noticing, or as Jenkins (2020) describes it "the worst humanitarian crisis, ignored".

## 2. SOCIAL MEDIA

After having provided an overview of the historical and humanitarian aspects of Yemen's ongoing conflict and displacement crisis, thoroughly underscoring the inadequate amount of attention that this topic receives, this thesis now moves onto the analysis of social media's development into ICTs, particularly focusing on their potential and fallacies as news-sharing platforms, as well as their influence on people's political beliefs and attitudes.

The following chapters thus constitute a literature review in which existing research conducted in these spheres is compared and contrasted, in order to provide the reader with a more complete idea of what academics of different schools of thought have to say about this matter, and what overall conclusions can be drawn.

### 2.1 Social Media as News-sharing Platforms

In our ever-changing world, where new international conflicts spur up constantly, politicians fight, celebrities pollute, and the planet is barely skating by, the interconnectedness of the Web 2.0 allows us to stay in tune with the latest updates regarding world politics and events. The rapidity at which authorities and individuals can spread information on these platforms can provide users with real-time information about any matter that falls within their interests, giving everyone a chance of being fully, or almost, on top of global news, and becoming an aware citizen of the world. Of course, this is a very utopian scenario, since being well-roundedly informed about contemporary affairs is not such a straightforward process, and especially not through news consumption on social media platforms. While a considerable amount of social media users mainly utilize these services for what their primitive function envisioned, a two-way communication with acquaintances and friends, it is undeniable that Social Networking Sites (SNS's) have increasingly gained a foothold in the world of news media, recording a drastic spike of users progressively adopting social media as their preferred news outlet (Bangun, 2017).

Although for the purpose of this research the terms *social media platforms* and *social networking services* are used interchangeably, it appears worth mentioning that there exists a conceptual distinction between the two. This thesis follows Kaplan and Haenlein's (2020, p.61) definition of social media, which they describe as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of *User-Generated Content*" (UGC). As for SNS's, they are considered platforms whose main function is to facilitate bilateral or multilateral

communication amongst users, thus allowing for the development of an online network, meaning a web of virtual relationships (Edosomwan et al., 2011).

Although differentiating the two definitions is important, the essence of both remains the same, namely the assistance and moderation of online communication, content generation, and information sharing. Overall, social media include SNS's (such as LinkedIn, Facebook and MySpace), microblogs (such as X), content-making-and-sharing platforms (such as Instagram, Youtube and Tiktok), social Q&A websites (like Reddit and Yahoo!Answers), and live streaming platforms (such as Twitch) (Kim et al, 2014; Linde & Stock, 2011).

As interactivity stands as the basis of communication, these platforms have proven to be incredibly precious resources in the world of news production and distribution, and an ever increasing number of people nowadays relies on SNS's for news consumption (Pew Research Center, 2018). By focusing on the power of collaboration and interoperability, the users' position is centralized, providing them with the twofold advantage of consuming and sharing news simultaneously (Campbell et al., 2011). This represents one of the most determinant factors of these platforms' success in the news-sharing field, and distances them significantly from other kinds of news mediums that merely allow readers to retrieve information without actively engaging with it (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Just as Napoli underscores, the real potential of social media stands in their ability to connect a huge range of news consumers en masse, while concurrently providing each of them with a personalized experience and chances for individual interactions (2016). A very insightful research study conducted by Mitchell et al. (2018) shows just how widespread the phenomenon of adopting social media as news sources is. This global trend transcends even discrepancies in national GDP, with people living in developing countries being just as likely to consult SNS's for news on a daily basis as residents of wealthier nations (Mitchell et al., 2018).

The ease with which news can be divulged and consumed via SNS's has over time led some people to gradually turn to social media for information searching and sharing as compared to traditional media, and the simplicity of the process made it possible for an increased amount of individuals, especially younger ones (Pew Research Center, 2018), to become engaged with current news, resulting in a constituent expansion in the audience base of international affairs over the last decade (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Apart from age, studies report that other personal features that determine a more extensive use of social media for news consumption are higher level of education, higher individual income, and populist views holder (Mitchell et al., 2018; Pew Research Center, 2018).

Moreover, another element which favored the boost in social media usage for informational purposes is the seemingly cost-free accessibility of these platforms, for which users are almost never required to pay (Duru & Duru, 2009) (although this apparent upside weighs out downsides such as the risk of being shown biased or false information, or facing privacy invasion threats due to cookies). This feature appears

to be particularly captivating to younger generations who, for lack of funds or other reasons, usually prefer consulting free information sources like social media accounts, rather than conventional online newspapers, since most of them now instituted a digital paywall and require readers to subscribe in order to access their content (Aral & Zhao, 2019). While this practice certainly increases monetary circulation (Pattabhiramaiah et al., 2019), research conducted by Chiou and Tucker shows that overall, they lead to a decline in content consumption for online newspapers (2013).

Naturally, this is only one side of the medal, because just as we can pinpoint several upsides of social media as NSPs, there are just as many (some would argue *more*) downsides to take into consideration. In fact, many media organization do not possess such a positive opinion of SNS's, since many of them believe that the rise of news-sharing on social media is hurting their business and will eventually steal the totality of their audience's time and attention, which they are already competing for (Aral & Zhao, 2019) (although it is noteworthy that most studies presenting these findings have been conducted in Western nations, and could thus not be applicable to other regions of the world). This notion takes on the name of "time displacement effect", which is explained by Kayany and Yelsma (2000) as an imbalance in the user's time, for which the more time they spend on one medium, the more the usage of other mediums will consequently decrease. A study by Cho et al. (2016) backs this belief, reporting that the rise in social media news consumption stands as a direct cause to the disappearance of small local newspapers. Although this is certainly true for physical newspapers, when it comes to digital news media, a decline in consumption by the hand of social media is not a given. As it happens, according to Stocking's Digital News Fact Sheet (2017), online news consumption has increased greatly in the last few years, and over 93% of the American adult population searches and reads news content through online sources. Being a survey conducted in the US though, there is no guarantee these results could be additionally applicable to the rest of the world.

Additional research conducted on this topic presents similar findings, but these could have contrasting implications. For instance, throughout their research on the role of social media in the field of online news consumption, Aral and Zhao (2019) found that SNS's have a significant positive causal effect on news viewership overall, meaning that the increased use of social media leads to an augmentation of online news consumption in general, including that of conventional online newspapers and journals. A possible explanation for this could be that since news on social media platforms are usually only displayed with a short snippet or headline, viewers who are interested in knowing more about that specific topic will be driven to delve deeper into it by looking it up through online newspapers websites. According to this train of thought, social media could thus bring about beneficial effects on media organizations, which reflects findings by Levy et al. about these platforms being a major source of circulation for digital news (2017).

However, apart from this first positive analysis of their study's results, a second, more critical, observation is worth mentioning. While Aral and Zhao claim that SNS's contribute to amplifying the content of other media channels (2016), this enhancement might not always be beneficial. On the contrary, in many cases, information on social media is amplified via means of exaggeration, meaning that news are shaped and rephrased in a more accentuated way by using strong, emotionally charged words to leverage on the reader's sensibility or by primarily focusing on merely one facet of the new topic in question. Political information is oftentimes over-partisanized via social media, which thus takes away from the objectivity of the information and rather contributes to polarizing the audience's perspective (Chinn, Hart & Soroka, 2020). Later chapters will elaborate on this matter in greater detail.

## 2.2 Citizen Journalism

The revolutionary success of SNS's in the field of news media is in part attributable to networked mechanisms that allow for the connection of people who share mutual values, attitudes, and opinions, who can communicate interests and concerns regarding contemporary matters without needing any central coordination, and possibly plan action for common targeted purposes, such as protests, marches, or strikes (Hermida, 2016). While this phenomenon could seem an adherent only of SNS's, Harrison and Bartel actually argue that in human history, and long before the creation of social media platforms, people have always utilized any form of media to generate products in support of specific causes, whether that is a community-oriented initiative, or a social movement (2009). Such discourse is tightly interrelated with the rise of social awareness through news-sharing media, and the birth and spread of *citizen journalism* resulting from the development of social media. This type of journalism refers to the gradual awakening of the regular citizen as a reporter, meaning that with the transformation of social media in information outlets, users started to realize that aside from authorities and newspapers, they, too, had the power to play a vital role in news-sharing, by reading, gathering, assessing and propagating information through the use of SNS's (Alakklouk & Gülnar, 2023). Citizen journalism therefore represents a direct consequence of the greater individual engagement that these services allow users to have regarding contemporary matters, and it is believed to be directly proportional to the decline of *traditional journalism* (Luengo, 2014).

Citizen journalism finds its roots in the South Korean amateur-generated information platform *OhMyNews!*, launched in the year 2000, which is often considered to be the founding father and stepping stone for the birth of this phenomenon (Kang, 2016). One year later, following the unfolding of the 9/11 attacks, the term *citizen journalism* started appearing in the media due to the high number of amateurial reports regarding the destruction of the Twin Towers made by citizen witnesses. These contents proved to

be of utmost importance to raise awareness about the tragedy and were overall an incredibly useful tool for the US news discourse (Allan, 2013). Since then, journalism amongst average citizens has seen a very rapid world-wide increase, attributable to several rudimentary factors, amongst which Flew (2007) identifies *collaborative editing, open publication, and distributed content* as the most important ones. These elements, in addition to the simplicity and accessibility of the platforms through which citizen journalists usually share content, have contributed to making this new kind of journalism the first instance of information media being completely in the hands of the people, constituting a powerful resource for citizens to make their voices heard (Odey et al., 2021), bringing about a revolution in the news-sharing world. This phenomenon is essential to turn the audience's attention to instances that have been overlooked by the rest of the media, and it is therefore relevant for this thesis since Yemen has been specifically chosen as a case study because of the negligence that media organizations have displayed in its regard. Thus, understanding the workings, benefits and flaws of citizen journalism is important in order to assess whether an increased amount of coverage by citizen journalists could help to ease Yemen's crisis by bringing out greater international attention.

In his research about participatory online news, Robinson (2011) highlights that what fundamentally distinguishes citizen journalism from the regular way of spreading news is the collaboration amongst a multitude of authors that build upon each other's work. While in traditional journalism, multiple authors often collaborate as well on one article, the interconnectedness of social media allows anyone to contribute, and notably simplifies the process of gathering and adding onto existing information. Although the open-to-all accessibility of engaging in citizen journalism is certainly a controversial aspect of this news-sharing approach that makes people doubt the truthfulness of news spread by these SNS journalists (Dahlgren, 2016), a substantial amount of other people believe it is an overall very positive phenomenon, as it fosters the growth of a more democratic news production process (Alakklouk & Gülnar, 2023). Following this train of thought, Nah and Chung (2020) have argued in favor of citizen journalism, claiming that it stands as proof of increased civic participation, interest, and engagement, and could thus not be damaging (2020). Many believe that its value and importance extend to great lengths, because it allows for a fairer distribution of global information, and it is particularly useful to shed light on issues or occurrences that Western media not pay much attention to simply because they might fall out of their area of financial or cultural interest (Al-Hilu, 2014). Or again, in instances where professional journalists are absent or delayed in arriving, citizen journalism has proven to be an efficient way to record crucial events, such as episodes of police brutality in the United States (Roberts, 2019). On top of that, citizen journalism has contributed extensively to keeping the general public updated with the world's latest events over the last few years, providing the people with the possibility to share their insider

perspective of what is going on with the rest of the world in real time, delivering an alternative (an at times more truthful) news source to that of mainstream media (Alakkhouk & Gülnar, 2023).

Despite presenting several upsides, citizen journalism has certainly not been immune to criticism. On the contrary, it has been heavily attacked by a great number of academics and professional journalists for quite some time, who disapprove of its lack of regulations and guidelines, and denounce its subjective opinion-driven character, which, they claim, hinders the propagation of factual information (Alakkhouk & Gülnar, 2023; Lewis, Kaufhold, and Lasorsa 2010; Örnebring 2013; Jack, 2010). As underlined by Min (2016) in his publication on this matter, news organizations oftentimes denounce citizen journalists for their deficiency in proper journalistic skills and education, referring to their practice as ‘amateurial’ and ‘incoherent’, with regard to coverage scope and quality. Moreover, other publications on the topic, such as that of Jack, even went as far as to say that the whole practice of *participatory journalism*, another name for citizen journalism, “diminishes the overall quality of journalism” (2010, p.126). This is attributable to the belief that amateurial citizen journalists usually fail to adhere to specific journalistic values, which conventional journalist sources are supposed to strictly follow (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013; Banda, 2010). Under this conception, citizen journalism would thus be damaging to the field of news and information sharing, as there are little ways to fact-check the informative contents that citizen journalists produce, which could thus lead to a rapid spread of unobjective information, much more prone to half-truths, fallacies, and inaccuracies (Niekamp, 2011; Wall, 2015). This clearly takes away from the founding principles of journalism, namely to provide the audience with the most factual informational content possible, and thereby explains why this phenomenon has brought forth such a great deal of criticism.

Nonetheless, while some advocates of citizen journalism partly recognize the flaws of their approach, they also claim that it was born as a collective activist response to the shortcomings of traditional journalism in the first place (Carr et al., 2014; Radsch, 2013). For example, in conflict environments that professional journalists may be unable to reach, the citizen reports of the residents of said area are incredibly precious. As a matter of fact, in many instances of humanitarian or environmental disasters, citizen journalism has played a pivotal role in informing the world of the unfolding of events and clarifying aspects of them that were at times overlooked by conventional media, providing the audience with an amplified and more raw perspective (Zahzah, 2021). Reconnecting to the example mentioned earlier, throughout the conflict between Israel and Palestine, social media platforms and increase in number of citizen journalists have acted as a lifeline for the victims of the hostilities, giving the concerned people the ability to convey personal messages and testimonies of their first-hand experience, shedding light on facets of the war that Western media were purposely not showing (Alakkhouk & Gülnar, 2023).

Similarly, in the case of Yemen's humanitarian crisis, citizen journalism through social media coverage would have proven to be a very effective tool in letting the world know what was going on, and how bad the living conditions of the Yemeni population really were. Nevertheless, as we already know, this particular conflict did not receive nearly as much (social) media attention as other matters (Jenkins, 2020), and citizen journalism did not spike significantly since the beginning of the dispute, which is exactly what makes Yemen's situation an incredibly interesting case to analyze further. One could argue that being a nation with very little freedom of press and speech (OHCHR, 2023; Waseh, 2022), the citizens of Yemen do not really have the tools to express their truthful opinions or simply cannot afford to because they have to think about saving themselves before posting an informative video on SNS's. However, according to the Freedom of Press Index of *Reporters Without Borders*, Palestine scores even lower than Yemen (RSF, 2024), which raises the question of *what is different about Yemen's situation?* More on this will be discussed in the Results section.

Despite contrary perspectives with regard to the legitimacy of citizen journalism though, recent literature has provided some hope for a mediation between the two discussing parties. In fact, as Salaudeen (2022) highlights in her comprehensive review of the different stances on the topic, an essential aspect of both citizen and traditional journalism that oftentimes many forget to take into account, is that they have the potential to work side-by-side complementarily (Austin, Liu & Jin, 2012; Kperogi, 2011; Konieczna, Hatcher, & Moore, 2018; Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010; Robinson & Wang, 2018), filling into the voids and fallacies of one another in order to provide the audience with the most complete, unbiased and multi-faceted range of information possible. For instance, research by Chua and Duffy pinpoints that in recent years professional journalists have gradually started to rely more on peripheral sources such as contributions from citizen journalists, which indicates "growing salience of hybrid roles in newsrooms that serve as linchpins to connect divergent professional fields" (2019, p.112), and contributes to bridging the gap between innovation and tradition (Salaudeen, 2022). Likewise, citizens can chip into conventional media news to back up their claims and get informed from different professional sources in order to make their claims as objective and unbiased as possible when posting on social media. There is thus a lot of room for collaboration, from which every citizen and the whole news-sharing world can benefit.

## 2.3 Social Media in Disaster Information

In some instances more than others, SNS's have contributed greatly to filling into the informative gaps that mainstream news media presented regarding certain topic areas, of which the most relevant is the

field of disaster information. But before mentioning why social media platforms have proven to be so useful in news propagation in times of crisis, and how regular social media users have taken it upon themselves to embark in news-sharing activities when other news sources were lagging behind, it is important to provide a background explanation as to why this specific field is frequently prone to inadequate coverage by news media.

Firstly, in a situation of emergency, whether that is an environmental disaster or a conflict outbreak, it is often relatively dangerous for journalists to reach the area right away, and traditional media thus tend to reach the spot after the incident has taken place, rather than during, for safety reasons (Meikle & Redden, 2001). This might imply a delay in help and coverage, especially in cases of disasters occurring in remote locations or without warnings (Houston et al., 2015). Secondly, in contexts of emergency it is always very hard to precisely quantify the number of victims or injured following a disaster, so the amount communicated by news organizations is often an inaccurate assumption (Gideon et al., 2010). Thirdly, considering all possible environmental casualties following a catastrophic event, for instance destroyed electric cables or damaged streets, it is very difficult for traditional news channels to operate smoothly and make efficient use of their equipment (Qu, Wu, & Wang, 2009). On the other hand, it is arguably much easier for those directly affected by the emergency to inform the rest of the world about the incident, and the information is oftentimes more accurate (Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2006). This explains why the topics of disaster information on social media and citizen journalism are tightly interrelated, and often perceived contributing to one another.

Before the development of ICTs, information about disaster and emergency situations was disseminated through a unidirectional way of communication: from the authorities and relief organization to the general public (Mukkamala & Beck, 2016). However, with the proliferation of social media platforms as ICTs, people started noticing and understanding the potential of these networking services in quickly spreading disaster information via a multi-directional web of communication amongst all social media users. The gradual increase in awareness about the power of each individual citizen led people to start reorienting their personal social media accounts towards social causes in times of emergency (Sutton, Palen & Shklovski, 2008) in order to help with the gathering, assessment, and sharing of primary information (Palen & Liu, 2007). User-generated content has thus proven to be a vital asset in many instances of emergency situations, because it facilitates a three-way communication and coordination between social media users, governments, and traditional media organizations, which consequently improves disaster response capabilities, providing the affected community with quicker and more effective help initiatives (Mukkamala & Beck, 2016). Literature on this topic recognizes the manifold advantages of the increased use of social media as NSPs in disaster information, and seems to form a general consensus that these platform are particularly efficient in performing four main functions: gathering and delivering factual

information in real-time, organizing relief initiatives, building resilience, and providing collective moral support to those affected.

The increased informed capacity, interactivity and dependability proper of web-based technologies advantages SNS's over conventional media channels (Jaeger et al., 2007) particularly because of their low-cost and easy accessibility, in addition to their GIS (geographic information system) feature (Mills et al., 2009). In fact, geographic localization and visualization tools are essential capacities of social media that can be helpful throughout every phase of a disaster, but also for disaster prevention. This a crucial difference between web-based technologies and conventional media, as the former allow users to run into disaster information unintentionally, thereby reaching a larger audience (Houston et al., 2015). Geospatial technologies additionally facilitate the report of current conditions in disaster zones because they allow users to create crowd-sourced maps by linking each report to a specific geographic location, which in turn improves the overall situational awareness of disaster management for the authorities (Rive et al., 2012). What is more, owing to the rapidity with which these reports can be posted and shared, particularly through platforms such as Facebook and X, people can find out about an imminent environmental danger through social media before it actually reaches them (Jaeger et al., 2007). An example of this scenario occurred during the earthquakes in the state of Virginia, USA, in 2011. While the seismic waves were moving from the Western to the Eastern side of the state, residents in the Eastern part reported reading Tweets about the earthquake before feeling the actual shock, meaning that the Tweets were moving faster than the earthquake itself (Ford, 2011; Lotan, 2011).

The evolution that SNS's brought about in the field of disaster news has changed the character of information sharing from a centralized, authority-led dissemination approach, to a 'decentralized, highly distributed information production' and sharing (Palen et., 2007, p.476). In this new era, the average social media user has the potential of becoming a key information broker, and the collective effort of each broker in exchanging information contributes to forming what is known as '*collective intelligence*' (Vieweg et al., 2008).

A final reflection regarding the effectiveness of social media platforms in emergency information has to do with their power in assistance and resilience-building processes post-disaster. In fact, not only can these services aid the reconnection of all those affected by the event to mourn victims and create support groups, but they additionally ease the organization of several relief initiatives through online forums and blogs by linking the general public to the impacted community (Procopio and Procopio, 2007; Hughes et al., 2008; White et al., 2009; Smith, 2010; Hjorth and Kim, 2011; Taylor et al., 2012).

Overall, emergency organizations, local governments, and NGOs can benefit greatly from the contribution of SNS's in contexts of disaster, as they can act as valuable decision support systems and

should thus be increasingly implemented and aligned with the work of all other forces involved in emergency situations, maximizing their potential in facilitating the response processes. Web-based technologies can thereby play a crucial role in preventing, assessing, and handling current and future disasters, which goes to show just how many uses of these platforms one can make aside from their primary functions.

## 2.4 SNS and Political Polarization

The increased use of Social Networking Services as news media by the general public has not only revolutionized the way people approach the search for information about current events but possibly also the way people perceive such information. The rise in news information being shared on these platforms led to an inevitable change in their character, making them much more political and partisan (Chinn, Hart & Soroka, 2020), to the point that governmental authorities as well as political figures also make daily use of social media to elaborate on current affairs and foster a connection with their target audience (Marozzo & Bessi, 2017; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). And when contemporary matters are discussed online, people's diverging stance on them will come to the surface.

Because of the communicative nature of social media, they constitute the perfect playing ground for people to partake in online discussions about contemporary issues. While ideally this could mean that the discussing parties would engage in said talk not merely to express their personal viewpoints but also to actively assess their counterpart's, possibly changing their opinion by acknowledging perspectives they did not take into account before (Beam, Hutchens & Hmielowski, 2020), most of the time this is not how online discussions end up working out. On the contrary, instead of making the most of the potentially enriching interconnectivity of these platforms, for instance by finding out what people from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds have to say about contemporary matters (Lee et al., 2014), a vast majority of people utilize social media to attempt at convincing others to agree with them, expressing strong opinions freely and automatically disregarding opposing viewpoints. This dynamic is further enhanced by the fact that SNS's allow users to hide behind their virtual profile, thus giving them the feeling of being able to say *anything* they want, even opinions that one would not normally dare to disclose in a real-life conversation (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). This feature of social media platforms often leads to heated arguments in the comments sections, with users throwing insults targeting one another rather than actively taking into consideration divergent opinions. Of course, this is not true for all SNS's. In fact, while this dynamic mostly takes place on the most mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook, X, Instagram, or Tiktok (although they technically have restrictions

regarding hate speech), it is still worth mentioning that there exists a multitude of different SNS's envisioned specifically for the purpose of (civilly) discussing topics amongst people of divergent opinions (e.g. Reddit, Quora or Discord) (Lee, Liang, Cheng, Tang, & Yuen, 2022). These act more as online forums, and since they are much less commonly used by the general public, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyze them.

Going back to conventional social media, and given everything that has been pointed out so far, one could assume that discussions on these platforms can often lead to a strengthening of already existing beliefs regarding a certain topic, rather than a shift in attitude, and this assumption would be supported by a constituent amount of literature, which will be now appraised, and compared to opposing findings.

There are many different schools of thought regarding the way in which social media influences people's ideologies, particularly in terms of how people's own political convictions determine different stances taken in view of salient international news. Scholarship on the topic of the relation between social media use and political perspectives appears to split in two main viewpoints, the first one being that (1) Social media leads to further political polarization, and the second being that (2) Social media moderates (and in some cases even decreases) political polarization. Let us elaborate more on each of them in a second.

Firstly, before delving into the thick of it, it is imperative to make two initial distinctions, the first one being between the two facets of political polarization. In fact, while several studies adopt the term *political polarization* as a whole, this concept should more appropriately be subdivided in *ideological polarization* and *affective polarization*. *Ideological polarization* refers to the divergence in beliefs, attitudes, and opinions amongst different political factions (Dalton, 1987). On the other hand, *affective polarization* is related to the extent to which individuals feel warmth towards people who are politically like-minded, and rather dislike political opponents (Iyengar et al., 2012). A second differentiation should be laid out regarding the different types of exposure to media sources, namely *pre-selective exposure* and *selective exposure*. While the former refers to content that the user is indirectly exposed to, i.e. because of algorithms, thereby falling out of their discretion, the latter refers to information that the user actively searched for (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021). With these distinctions clearly explained, an overview of the role of SNS's in political polarization can now follow.

The last decade has seen a simultaneous growth in animosity between opposing political parties (Finkel et al., 2020), political polarization (Hmielowski, Beam, & Hutchens, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2017), dissemination of partisan news (Jurkowitz et al., 2020), and also use of social media (Shah, 2021). However, the fact that the increase in SNS's users parallels a rise in political polarization, does not imply that social media platforms can fully or partly be considered a determinant factor for this phenomenon,

because, as we know, correlation does not equal causation. But while uninformed guesses should be avoided, the aligned upward trends of both occurrences (Barnidge et al., 2022) caught the eye of a multitude of scholars, driving them to conduct extensive research on the topic. Although the amount of relevant literature is substantial, the findings are incongruent, stating contradicting results and following different lines of logic, thus requiring an in-depth review of the extant research to gain a better understanding of where each standpoint is coming from.

In their essence, social media platforms are envisioned to accommodate the needs and preferences of each user, providing every individual with a customized experience (Beam, Hutchens & Hmielowski, 2020), and this holds true even for the political content we are exposed to (Pariser, 2011). Factors such as cookies and algorithmic calculations, which make up *pre-selective exposure*, play a primary role in determining which information is shown to us on social media, and are often appointed as the driving force that makes SNS's a root cause for increased political polarization (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017; Xia & Shen, 2023). However, while they surely represent a key element in this dynamic, they are not the only features of these platforms that can potentially foster political polarization. In fact, *selective exposure* (Barnidge, Peacock, Kim, Kim, & Xenos, 2020; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Sunstein, 2018), and *selective avoidance* (Zhu & Skoric, 2021) are also frequently identified as two determinant elements causing the strengthening of political divides. These two functions together, significantly contribute to the homogenization of information on social media, driving users to mainly interact with like-minded people, thereby promoting the reinforcement of their beliefs and the development of more extreme attitudes (Baysha, 2020; Garrett, 2009a). Through selective exposure, users purposely and selectively consult sources that are consistent with their personal political beliefs and attitudes (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013). Simultaneously, they tend to avoid information that contradicts their viewpoints, practicing selective avoidance, which Xia and Shen define as “purposive behaviors aiming to shield oneself from dissonant content by screening out unwanted information and breaking social ties that transmit such information completely” (2023, p.2). While this dynamic can occur also through the consultation of mainstream media sources, it is a particularly common phenomenon on SNS's, because the way in which these platforms are designed makes it incredibly easy for users to create their pro-attitudinal bubble of information. It merely takes a second to unfriend, unmute, or unfollow undesired sources, which consequently favors the creation of echo-chambers (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Sunstein, 2018).

Several studies have reported the polarizing effect of selective exposure and selective avoidance (Barnidge, Peacock, Kim, Kim, & Xenos, 2020; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Koironen et al., 2020; Shen & Xia, 2023; Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2018; Zhu & Skoric, 2021), but some point out that the latter might have a more powerful impact in determining a growth in political polarization (Shen & Xia, 2023; Zhu, Skoric & Shen, 2018). This could be explained by the fact that, while practicing selective exposure

does not necessarily prevent users from encountering counter-attitudinal information (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013), selective avoidance leads to increased network homogeneity, which constitutes one of the main determinants of political polarization. Nonetheless, as highlighted by Zhu and Skoric (2021), it is important to mention that selective avoidance is only practiced by a minority of social media users, which is in line with findings from Shen and Zia (2023), whose study reveals that more than half of the respondents in their sample of 1200 individuals (65.8%) never engaged in any selective avoidance behaviors. Contrarily, selective exposure and pre-selective exposure are habits that most social media users practice on an almost daily basis (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). Favoring the selection of pro-attitudinal content while purposely avoiding counter-attitudinal content is almost natural, as we, as human beings, want to be right and secure in our own convictions, but exposure to either of these types of content brings about a different effect on our ideologies, and on the direction of this influence, too, scholars disagree.

In their literature review on the role played by social media in influencing political polarization, Kubin and Von Sikorski (2021) found that a vast majority of the existing literature on the impact of pro-attitudinal content unanimously agrees that exposure to attitude-consistent information increases both ideological and affective polarization. However, when it comes to counter-attitudinal content, findings from different studies tend to present opposite results. For instance, research conducted by Kim (2015), reported that exposure to attitude-inconsistent information has a negative effect on both ideological and affective polarization, as it introduces individuals to divergent ideas, which facilitates the development of their critical thinking skills (Hmielowski, Beam, & Hutchens, 2017) and the understanding of opposing convictions (Lee, Kwak, & Campbell, 2015), thus driving them to question the validity of their own beliefs. This claim relates to literature by Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2017), and Shen, Xia and Skoric (2020), who underscore that the great variety of information sources on SNS's allows for the creation of network heterogeneity, which has been found to predict a decrease in opinion and attitude strength. As a matter of fact, just as for those who are convinced that social media platforms are mainly content-homogenous due to algorithms, the heterogeneous characteristics of social media platforms are commonly identified by supporters of the belief that 'social media moderates political polarization' as the main determinant for this depolarization/moderation. Their conviction is that network heterogeneity "can play a depolarizing role by promoting users' understanding of the rationale of opposite viewpoints and decreasing their animosity against opponents through cross-cutting exposure" (Xia & Shen, 2023, p.7). The heterogeneous character of SNS's has been documented in a few studies, including one by the Pew Research Center (2018) conducted amongst eight different European nations. Their findings reveal that a majority of social media news users claim that the information they see on these platforms is rarely or only sometimes aligned with their political stances, whereas they encounter views that are more in line

with their own during in-person conversations, and this finding holds true for both right and left wing individuals. This suggests that an *echo-chamber effect* due to the homogeneity of perspectives might be more likely to occur in real life discussions rather than online (Pew Research Center, 2018). Nonetheless, an analysis conducted by Xia and Shen (2023) revealed that the depolarizing effects of social media due to network heterogeneity were only significant for individuals with high levels of political tolerance, which brings us back to the starting line.

While data discussed above pointed towards a beneficial impact of attitude-inconsistent information, other studies have reported contrary and more skeptical results. Amidst these, is research conducted by Kim (2019), who put forward that counter-attitudinal content display leads to a growth in ideological polarization, and under specific circumstance also affective (Garrett et al., 2014). This conviction holds that attitude-inconsistent content contributes to strengthening, rather than weakening, people's already existing political views, as people who seek information that contradicts their convictions often do so solely in order to critique it (Kim, 2019). Moreover, as Taber & Lodge (2006) pointed out, placing attitude-consistent and inconsistent contents side by side can reinforce one's sense of being right and their opponent being wrong. A final consideration should be made with regards to findings by Johnson et al. (2020), who make us question the validity of all the literature discussed above by claiming that it is not the content we are exposed to on social media that drives (or not) political polarization, but rather what we choose to share on these platforms. But while certainly interesting to investigate, this focus point falls outside of the scope of this work.

Evidently, investigating the direction of the relation between all these factors is quite hard, and often results in contradictive findings. However, the inconsistency of results does not make them any less relevant, but rather further contributes to making this topic so interesting to delve into. This goes to show that more extensive studies are necessary to really assess whether findings could actually be applicable to the general population. Both scholars and journalists are urgently concerned with finding it out, as they worry about the repercussions that a rise in political and partisan polarization would provoke, potentially increasing the risk of conflicts. Because of this, a reflection on the potential effect of social media platforms on our own political viewpoints is beneficial, as users can learn how to navigate through political contents they find on web-based technologies with a critical eye and utilize SNS's wisely. Additionally, such knowledge is also useful for app and website developers, as they could bring about a positive impact by designing platforms that specifically aim at moderating and decreasing polarization amongst individuals (Xia & Shen, 2023). In this way, social media could really be exploited to their full potential to heal political divides rather than foster them.

## 2.5 Algorithms, Echo-Chambers, and Fake News

The overflowing amount of information that can be found online might at times seem overwhelming. Being on our phones, or laptops, we are constantly bombarded with a thousand different streams of information, and it is up to our own discretion what to make with it, and what sources to pay attention to as compared to others. While social media platforms have the potential to bring about significant contributions to the public sphere by facilitating the free flow of internationally diverse information, this primary feature is not often enforced by individual users, as the influence of algorithms makes it extremely easy to fall into a tunnel of homogenous information. These platforms' tendency to organize information in clusters has been thoroughly documented (Barberá, 2015b; Conover et al., 2011; Aragón et al., 2013; Schmidt et al., 2017), and, as discussed before, has often been pinpointed as a driving cause of increased political polarization (Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021).

Functions such as following, liking, sharing, commenting, or recommending make up the virtual persona of each user, indicating their content preferences and their typical online behavior, both individually as well as in relation to interactions with other users (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). These personalized actions are subtly recorded by web-based technologies that store and analyze the data to then rearrange content according to the user's taste, thereby becoming 'organizing agents' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 752). They constitute a programmed routine that continuously modifies the user's feed, or home page, through the implementation of algorithmic calculations, which act as a running code in control of what is shown and how (Gillespie, 2014; McKelvey, 2013). With regards to news, this content personalization functions have for prolonged time worried experts that social media users, and particularly young people who largely consume news through SNS's (Kalogeropoulos, 2019), will construct a biased and constrained understanding of the world around them due to the uniformity of the information proposed by the algorithm (Swart, 2021). However, not only do researchers and scholars fear that this dynamic might contribute to polarizing people's ideologies (Sunstein, 2001; 2017), but that it additionally might foster the spread of false information (Zimmer et al., 2019).

Distorted news circulate frequently and freely through several types of social networking sites, but they are not all categorized in the same way. In fact, when talking about deceptive information online, three distinctions should be made: (1) *disinformation*, indicating the conscious dissemination of erroneous information; (2) *misinformation*, meaning untrue information which is disclosed unintentionally (Shin et al., 2018); and (3) *fake news*, which Torres, Gerhart, and Negahban describe as "phony news stories maliciously spread by outlets that mimic legitimate news sources" (2018, p.3977). Despite some accounts actively working towards the purposeful propagation of misleading news, most of the fake news being

spread online are not diffused with the objective of tricking people, but simply because the propagator is unaware that said information is false. The reasons that determine this habit are multifaceted. In the first place, when users find themselves in an online environment that only displays a certain viewpoint, their own beliefs are going to be reinforced (Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021). It thus becomes easier to get increasingly more sure of the veracity of their opinions and therefore also trust that what they are being shown is true, without really questioning the origin of the information. A very interesting study on this topic sheds light on such dynamics, reporting that in several European countries, as many as 30% of people who consume news on social media do not check the sources (Pew Research Center, 2018). However, it also highlights that daily social media news consumers are more likely to check the sources as compared to people who consume news on SNS's less frequently, which would mean that young people, being avid users of social media (Kalogeropoulos, 2019), possess all the skills to collect objective information online. Nonetheless, many believe that we are currently living in an age of deception, which "has had a dramatic effect on our society in recent years" (Volkova & Jang, 2018, p. 575), and social media are at least partly to blame. These platforms make it extremely hard to assess whether information being posted is true or not, as anybody can post anything and fact-checking guidelines are more loose than the ones normal newspapers adopt (Hagar, 2013; Warner-Söderholm et al., 2018). Moreover, the ease with which one can create a fake account allows for the emergence of fake profiles impersonating figures of relevance that we would otherwise trust, further contributing to deceiving users (Steinfeld et al., 2008). The interplay of these dynamics, in addition to the influence of algorithms, makes this topic a very heated and controversial matter, which deserves greater attention, but in order to enter a discussion about the actual impact of algorithms on people's social media news consumption, it would be ideal to first explore how these calculations practically function. However, since platforms that use them tend to release very little information about them, this topic is largely considered to be a "black box" (Barberá, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2014; Pasquale, 2015; Swart, 2021). What we do know is that these deep-learning methods make predictions about the relevance of content based on each user's online behavior (Mosseri, 2018), and following the principles of *affinity*, *weighting*, and *timeliness* (Zuckenber et al., 2006). While *affinity* is concerned with determining the user's interest for a post (for instance, if they frequently checked someone's content, their posts will appear higher in the user's feed), the *weighting* function measures different interactions to understand which one catches the user's attention the most, whether that is a higher like count or a specific form or post (i.e. photo, text, or video). Finally, *timeliness* gives precedence in displaying more recent content in a user's social media homepage (Zimmer et al., 2019). The complexity of all interactions between computational techniques and variables, makes algorithms hard to fully grasp even for high-skilled engineers (Burrell, 2016; Seaver, 2017), especially when considering that they are in constant evolution due to the ever changing nature of the Web as well as the

user's online choice (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020), which makes it progressively harder to develop an exhaustive framework regarding these code pieces (Swart, 2021). This implies that users also do not know much about algorithms and might not even notice them unless they display unexpected content (Bucher, 2017; Hargittai et al., 2020), a mistake that could occur as a result of the human-based training dataset adopted by algorithms, which could accidentally replicate human flaws (Caliskan, Bryson, and Narayanan 2017).

There is no doubt around the influence of algorithms in leading like-minded individuals to gravitate towards one another (Del Vicario et al., 2016), but what is really worrisome is the resulting homogeneous online environments in which only people of similar political ideologies interact. To provide an example, Barberá, Jost et al. (2015) found that almost 75% of retweets regarding politics occur between individuals of akin political convictions. This phenomenon can eventually lead to the creation of *echo-chambers* and *filter bubbles*, two concepts that have been exhaustively explored in recent years. While these notions are somewhat similar and therefore often confused, scholars point out that it is important to be aware of their distinctions. This thesis draws on Pariser's work (2011) to explain the concept of *filter bubble* as "a unique universe of information for each of us [...] which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information" (2011, p.9). Filter bubbles thus lead the user to mainly be exposed to pro-attitudinal contents as a result of the algorithm's recording of their online behavior choices (Raynauld & Greenberg, 2014; Thorson et al., 2019). On the other hand, *echo-chambers* occur when groups of ideologically-aligned individuals only interact with each other in an online environment, thereby sharing "information that both conforms to the norms of their group and tends to reinforce existing beliefs" (Dubois & Blank, 2018, p. 731). Research has shown that this phenomenon is tightly linked to the concepts of *homophily* - the tendency to associate with similar individuals - (McPherson et al., 2001), *confirmation bias* - the tendency to look for information that confirms pre-existing beliefs - (Murungi et al., 2019; Vydiswaran et al., 2015), and *selective exposure* (Garrett, 2009; Stroud, 2010), which all stem from the wish to avoid *cognitive dissonance*, meaning the distress one experiences when holding contradictory beliefs (Festinger, 1957). Therefore, while filter bubbles are more closely related to "bad-algorithms" leading to exposure to uniform information (Zimmer et al., 2019), echo-chambers have more to do with "bad user behavior", meaning biased online interactions due to clusters of like-minded individuals (Bruns, 2017). Although both dynamics lead to belief reinforcement and polarization (Sunstein, 2018), most studies carried out on this topic tend to give more importance to the influence of interactions, rather than content exposure (Terren & Bergen-Bravo, 2021).

Another source of concern that has emerged in recent years with regard to algorithms is the so-called 'microphone hypothesis' (Head et al., 2020), according to which social media platforms illegally record

users' conversations, in addition to collecting information about their online behavior and choices. Individuals who support this *folk* theory - as it has not been scientifically verified (Pan et al., 2018) - claim that after having discussed a specific topic in person, they were soon shown an advertisement regarding that topic on a SNS (Swart, 2021). If this were true, it would definitely depict an alarming scenario, but interestingly, it does not appear to be scary enough to discourage people from using social media, as Swart (2021) points out. Although it does have an impact on users' feelings regarding algorithms and social media usage.

The mismatch between people's emotions and consequent actions regarding SNS's has also surfaced in other studies. For instance, research by Vaniea et al., (2014), and a survey conducted by McAfee-NCSA (2007) in the field of cybersecurity both report that awareness of privacy invasion threats does not necessarily lead people to take action against them. Scholarship by Furnell et al., reveals that a possible explanation for this phenomenon is that individuals either overestimate their tech security skills (particularly younger generations who are presumably more knowledgeable about ICTs) (2007), or underestimate the risks of data invasion (2008).

Parallel to this whole discourse regarding the risks of algorithms, echo-chambers and filter bubbles, another, just as constituent, amount of literature dismantles all the concerns that were just laid out above, illustrating that algorithmic calculations might not be as powerful as we believe them to be (Barberá, 2020; Haim et al., 2019).

Firstly, their influence on the content that users are shown does not appear to be 100% determinant. In fact, Facebook researchers found that while Facebook algorithm leads to a small reduction in counter-attitudinal posts, individual user choices, more than algorithms, are responsible for the scarcity of cross-cutting content (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). These results are backed by Haim, Graefe, and Brosius (2018), Flaxman, Goel, and Rao (2016), and Feuz, Fuller, and Stalder (2011), who conducted similar studies but adopting Google as their focus case, finding that personalized search algorithms predicted small effects in the content being displayed to the user.

Along the same lines, Zimmer et al. (2019) review a series of studies that highlight how the user's own choices when using a social networking site are much more influential than the algorithms themselves in creating a homogenous news bubble. For example, Del Vicario et al. (2016) explains how the primary factor responsible for the creation of *echo-chambers* is selective exposure, as it determines which kind of content is diffused, thus leading to the creation of information clusters. As for *filter bubbles*, DiFranco and Gloria-Garcia (2017) similarly conclude that they are the result of the user's past engagement and interaction behavior. These findings imply that the creation of information bubbles and the spread of

misinformation cannot be caused by the algorithm alone, but rather by the users' information behavior patterns as well as the collaborative work of each user (Seargeant & Tagg, 2019; Zimmer et al., 2019).

Continuing onto this line of logic, the whole conviction of content uniformity on SNS's is challenged by Barberá, who underscores that "the fact that users tend to self-select themselves into homogeneous communities does not necessarily imply that they are never exposed to dissonant political messages" (2020, p.38). On the contrary, research has shown that people who consume news that are aligned with their ideologies do not necessarily avoid cross-cutting information (Garret, 2009). Drawing an example from the Pew Center study (2018) that was previously mentioned, although Spanish respondents in their research constituted the highest amount of social media news consumers who mainly see pro-attitudinal information (26%), they also scored the highest in preference for a greater diversity of online content (84%).

As compared to other platforms, literature also illustrates how SNS's are not more likely to lead users into online filter bubbles than other media, in fact, they actually display higher amounts of diverse news than, for instance, direct browsing, TV news channels, or newspapers (Barnidge, 2017; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Silver et al., 2019). A viable explanation for this could be that since social media platforms foster the exchange of content amongst *weak ties* (Gladwell, 2010), such as friends of friends, co-workers or neighbors, there is a higher chance that they will have cross-cutting ideologies as compared to closer acquaintances and will thus diversify the user's feed (Bakshy et al., 2012; Barberá, 2015a). Coherently to this argument, homophily levels tend to be lower amongst weak ties (McPherson et al., 2001), and it is thus the heterogeneous character of these relationships that explains why they lead to the diversification of news on social media (Bakshy et al., 2012).

Finally, a significant amount of literature (Haim et al., 2018; Kitchin, 2017; Min, 2019; Thorson, 2020; Thurman & Schifferes, 2012) explains that users should not be seen as helpless victims overpowered by the dominating presence of algorithms in the scenario of social media news consumption, as they actually possess the capabilities to at least partly avoid them or weaken their influence (Swart, 2021). Users have, in fact, the chance to intervene in the algorithm's decisions by both implicit (through the manual personalization of cookies and algorithms) and explicit (like adjusting and modifying browser behavior) practices (Haim et al., 2018). And while these actions might not completely neutralize the influence of algorithmic calculations, they definitely contribute to refining the content being displayed and shaping it into a less constrained range of information (Swart, 2021).

Having illustrated all the different viewpoints on this topic, it is important to conclude by highlighting that while literature reports contrasting findings, there is a noteworthy conviction which almost all studies agree upon: the necessity for increased social media and news literacy education (Bulger & Davison,

2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Vraga & Tully, 2021). What is meant by ‘literacy’ is the combination of knowledge, awareness, adeptness and understanding of how these platforms work both with regards to their intrinsic structural functions (e.g. algorithms), and to the way they direct and shape users’ interactions with one another. In the current scenario of SNS’s constituting a predominant news outlet, scholars point out the need for users to take news media literacy seriously in order to recognise and address misinformation and distinguish it from factual news (Garrett, 2017; Sydell, 2016). For this purpose, skepticism can prove to be a crucial attitude to train in order to become more mindful and critical of the information found online (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). Vraga and Tully (2021) thoroughly underscore its importance, claiming that by questioning the quality and truthfulness even of apparently trust-worthy information, users leverage the democratic character of social media, as doubting fosters engagement and participation. Skepticism should however not be confused with cynicism, meaning the tendency to distrust and reject novel information right away, which rather leads to disengagement (Pinkleton et al., 2012; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). By teaching users how to become more skeptical, news literacy thereby provides them with the tool to pinpoint partisan and/or fake news, allowing them to conscientiously navigate the Web (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Maksl et al., 2015). Likewise, in-depth awareness of how social media algorithms work, which Bruns (2019) refers to as “algorithmic literacy”, is useful for users to go a step forward. Not only should users be able to critically assess the content they are displayed online, but to additionally evaluate how algorithmic calculations may influence such content (D’Ignazio & Bhargava, 2015; Head et al., 2020; Mihailidis, 2018; Powers, 2017). While algorithmic literacy is partly predicted by age and education level (decreasing as age increases, and increasing parallel to higher educational levels) (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; Min et al., 2019), research by Swart (2021) reports that the most influential factor is, straightforwardly, prior experience with algorithms. Developing literacy around this matter thus appears to be simply a ‘learning-by-doing’ process (Blank & Dutton, 2012; Butcher, 2017; Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; DeVito et al., 2018), which can be strengthened by breadth of use rather than frequency, meaning that individuals who make use of multiple platforms sporadically have shown higher levels of algorithmic literacy than those who only use one SNS but on a daily basis (Swart, 2021). Interestingly enough though, this dynamic might not hold for news literacy as well, as people with higher levels of news literacy are less likely to encounter news and political information on SNS’s, possibly indicating that they might rely on alternative sources for news consumption, preferring to utilize social media mainly for entertainment and communication purposes (Maksl et al., 2015; Vraga & Tully, 2021).

These findings are insightful, as they shed light on the complexity and interconnectedness of both algorithmic and news literacy with regards to social media use and exposure to (mis)information,

highlighting the need for more extensive research on this matter (Bulger & Davison, 2018; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

## 2.6 Age Differences in Social Media Usage

It is no novelty that young adults make extensive use of social networking sites (Hruska & Maresova, 2020). Studies have shown that 88% of adults between the ages of 18 and 29 use several social media platforms on a daily basis (Ilakkuvan et al., 2019), averaging a time ranging between 3 to 6 hours spent online daily (Ilakkuvan et al. 2019; Vannucci et al., 2019).

Having grown up parallel to the advent and growth of SNS's, young generations such as Millennials and Gen Z mechanically adopted the use of these services as an intrinsic part of their being, using social media in almost every aspect of their life, and often switching from one platform to another or using multiple simultaneously thanks to their multi-tasking skills (Micó, 2012; Van Dijk, 2006). As pioneers of the world's digitalization process, these *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) can confidently navigate through social media sites for entertainment, communication, and, becoming particularly salient during the transition from adolescence to early adulthood, information consumption (Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Stockdale & Coyne, 2020), with a vast majority of them preferring SNS's over conventional news outlets as their main source of information (Casero-Ripollés, 2012). While research reveals that news readership via traditional media amongst young people has been in a constant decline since the mid-nineties (Brites, 2010; Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Lauf, 2001; Qayyum et al., 2010), this phenomenon does not imply that younger adults are not interested in contemporary news topics. On the contrary, their appetite for information is definitely strong, and they regard news consumption as a cardinal civic value, but they merely choose social media as their primary news source (Casero-Ripollés, 2012). The motives behind this preference are manifold. Firstly, younger generations tend to see news as a public service, rather than a product (Costera, 2007), and thus prefer its consumption through cost-free social media rather than online newspapers with paywalls or tv news channels for which one has to pay cable subscription (Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Hruska & Maresova, 2020). Secondly, a consistent amount of adolescents and young adults feel like newspapers and traditional media somehow fail to meet their interest and needs, sensing that their generation is marginal to these media agendas and is either never displayed (Figueras & Mauri, 2010; Kotilainen, 2009) or discussed with a negative connotation (Túñez, 2009; Faucher, 2009; Bernier, 2011). In other words, they do not feel represented by these kinds of media (Santamaria, 2005). On the other hand, being mostly used by young people (Hruska & Maresova, 2020), social media platforms can provide young adults the feeling of belonging to a community and the chance

to connect with like-minded others (Bolton et al., 2013; Valkenburg et al., 2006). Contents on SNS's target their interests best and can match the fast-paced lifestyle they are accustomed to, providing them with an overflowing amount of real-time information about any topic they wish to explore (Stieglitz et al., 2018).

As for older generations, such as Gen X and Baby Boomers, they are considered immigrants to the digital world (Tsai et al., 2016), and as such, they started utilizing SNS's in a later stage of their life and are presumably less comfortable with using them as compared to their younger counterparts (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Nonetheless, according to Smith (2014), 65% of people aged 50-64 and 46% of individuals over 65 use social networking sites, but given that this study dates back to 2014, one could assume that these percentages may be even greater now. More recent research conducted by Pabian and Vandebosch (2024) amongst Belgian adults confirms this assumption, revealing that around 66% of people over 75 reported using at least one social media platform or chat service regularly. These numbers are interesting, as they show that, although in smaller amounts, SNS's are commonly endorsed by people of all ages. Nevertheless, the fact that these services are an intergenerational phenomenon does not imply that all age groups make the same use of them, as their functions and effects change according to the user's personal characteristics (Forest & Wood, 2012; Orr et al., 2009).

Differences in utilization of ICTs between distinct age groups have been widely investigated and verified in previous literature (e.g. Cotten et al., 2011; Forest & Wood, 2012; Tsai et al., 2016; National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), 2013; Orr et al., 2009; Smith, 2014; Vandebosch and Eggermont 2002). These differences expand to several realms of people's approach to social media, ranging from size of virtual network, purposes of use, amount of time spent online, and trust in these platforms. Let us elaborate on the most salient ones.

First and foremost, as was previously mentioned, social media usage declines as age increases (Hruska & Maresova, 2020). A possible reason for this stems from the simple fact that older people are less knowledgeable about new technologies (Berkowsky et al., 2013), and feel more alienated from them as they represent a relatively recent addition to their way of living (Tsai et al., 2016). Extensive literature has shown that compared to younger generations, older individuals lack device ownership and internet use, including social media platforms (Furnell et al, 2008; Liang & Xue, 2010; NTIA, 2013; Perrin & Duggan, 2015; Rainie, 2012; Shillair et al., 2015; Smith, 2014; Tsai et al., 2016). This consequently leads them to view new technologies with a more critical eye, displaying more skepticism and/or fear towards the virtual world. Tsai et al. (2016) took it upon themselves to analyze differences in online safety perceptions between Millennials, Baby Boomers, and Silent Generation individuals (ages 79-96), and their in-depth

literature review reveals that not only do older people feel more threatened by ICTs overall, but they are also more vulnerable to several online risks, such as identity theft or financial abuse (Clark-Wendel, 2014).

Younger generations on the other hand, hold a much more positive opinion of these platforms (Czaja et al., 2006; Van der Kaay & Young, 2012), and are significantly more confident in navigating them (Miltgen & Peyrat-Guillard, 2014; Tsai et al., 2016). However, this confidence might not be necessarily positive, as it can lead young users to underestimate online threats and fall victim to scams, cyberbullying, misinformation or hacking attacks (Furnell et al., 2007; Agatston et al., 2007). Moreover, an interesting phenomenon that these researchers - Tsai et al. (2016) - noticed throughout their study was a *third person effect*, for which older participants believed Millennials to be more reckless in their approach to the internet and social media and thus vulnerable online. Vice versa, Millennials thought that older generations were not shrewd enough to utilize web-based technologies and needed to be very careful when navigating them (Tsai et al., 2016).

Another crucial distinction in their social media usage stems from the way in which different age groups approach creating online social networks. Young adults tend to have very extensive networks of virtual friendships, following and engaging not merely with friends but also with remote acquaintances or strangers. Contrariwise, older individuals opt for smaller virtual communities, solely made of trusted individuals they know well in real life, and with a wider age distribution (Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2008). Chang et al. (2015) provide a possible explanation for this phenomenon: it could be that because young people have a longer life ahead of them, they adopt a more future-oriented mindset and thus choose to prioritize the establishment of new social ties, even online. Vice versa, older individuals are more focused on the present, wishing to keep on cherishing the social relationships they already have and maintain intimacy, thereby spending less time online and rather centering their attention on face-to-face interactions (Lang & Carstensen, 2002).

Finally, a last difference worth mentioning is the divergent fashions in which old and young adults utilize SNS's for information searching and sharing. In terms of degree of news consumption, young people make a much more extensive use of social networking sites as news sources (Pew Research Center, 2018). In the Netherlands for example, 55% of people aged 18-29 obtain news from SNS's on a daily basis, as compared to 24% of people over 50 (Pew Research Center, 2018). What is more, these age cohorts also differ significantly with regards to their assimilation of news found online. Extant scholarship on this matter has reported that while older generations are used to looking up information themselves, young adults tend to encounter news online rather accidentally, without actively looking for it (Qayyum et al.,

2010). Because of their lifestyle previous to the advent of SNS's, older people are accustomed to picking up a newspaper and reading all the news on it, or watching a tv news channel and listening to every news report. And although they could technically still endorse these habits on web-based technologies, for instance by consulting the social media account of their preferred newspaper, it cannot be denied that information on SNS's tends to be much more niche or episodic, which may contribute to explaining why these generations prefer more conventional news media (Schröder, 2018). On the other hand, due to their familiarity with SNS's, young adults are wont to passively be shown news online. This entails that most of their knowledge about current news derives from headlines or snippets they run into by chance - although we are aware this dynamic does not occur accidentally but is rather driven by algorithmic calculations - and will primarily access news stories that appeal to their interests (Patterson, 2007). For instance, fast-paced platforms such as X or Instagram can function as an ignition by providing short captivating news headlines (Marcella-Hood & Marcella, 2023), and if the title catches the user's attention, it is likely they will then look up that specific topic on Tiktok or Youtube to gain a deeper understanding of it through explanatory videos (Wang et al., 2024). Amidst all SNS's, the preference for specific social media platforms over others by different age groups has also been documented. A Pew Research Center study by Gottfried and Shearer (2017) on American online news consumers illustrates that while college undergraduates and people of younger ages adopt Instagram and Snapchat as their main news sources, graduates and adults in the 20s and 30s rather rely on LinkedIn and X. Additionally, older Americans utilizing social media as a news outlet almost exclusively consult Facebook sources. The fact that the news user base of Facebook is made of older individuals explains why Facebook news users tend to additionally retrieve news information from local TV channels more often than Snapchat, X, or Youtube users (Gottfried & Shearer; 2017).

This line of reasoning raises a compelling question: since younger generations tend to pick and choose the news they want to find out more about, do they possess a more narrow or confined knowledge of current news as compared to older individuals, who rather prefer to approach a wider variety of news at once? This thesis aims to shed some light on this dubious assumption.

From the overview of all the literature mentioned so far, it is noticeable that there is a dearth of research in relation to different topics.

While sufficient studies have been conducted on comparisons between Millennials and Baby Boomers, it appears as if there is a gap in literature regarding younger generations, such as Gen Z or Gen Alpha (ages 0-11), and middle-aged individuals. For this reason, this thesis aims at laying out an exhaustive comparison between Gen Z and Gen X in order to fill the scholarship void.

Secondarily, given the lack of direct evidence on this matter, it is still not clear to what extent the approaches that different generations take in obtaining news on social media, as compared to other sources, can influence their opinion about current affairs, surely an interesting thematic area deserving further attention.

Lastly, as was just mentioned above, uncertainty still holds on which generational cohorts is more knowledgeable with regards to current news, and consequently, which approach to information searching is the most effective and efficient. The Results and Discussion sections of this thesis will attempt at providing answers to these questions in a resolute way.

## 3. METHODS

### 3.1 Sampling and Participants

For the purpose of this thesis, qualitative analysis is the most adept research method, as it allows to thoroughly tackle topics that are not straightforward nor well-defined (Fossey et al., 2002). With the research question being “*To what extent does the use of social media as news sources by Gen Z and Gen X at Tilburg University influence their understanding of Yemen’s displacement crisis?*”, it appears clear that the complexity of this study is not measurable with numbers, but rather with *soft data* (e.g. words, expressions, images, sentences..etc.) (Neuman, 2014). For this reason, in-depth individual interviews were employed in order to fully grasp and assess the sample participants’ beliefs, attitudes, and experiences, thus gaining detailed insights to compare and contrast in order to reach a comprehensive answer to this multifaceted puzzle. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that the researcher had prepared a series of questions to guide the dialogue but respondents were free and encouraged to let their thoughts flow, possibly digressing towards aspects of the interview topic the researcher had not taken into consideration before, thereby prompting new unscripted questions. This approach enabled reciprocity between the researcher and the respondents, allowing them to fully convey their feelings and perspectives regarding the questions without having to feel constrained to stick to a structured speech (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

This research was conducted amongst students and staff of Tilburg University, in The Netherlands. The reason for this choice stems from the twofold practicality that interviewing members of a University body involves. In the first place, with regards to time constraints, it appeared to be more convenient to collect sample participants within the same environment the researcher is a part of, as students and academics are

aware of what it means to conduct research and therefore might have been more prone to take part in this interview process (although this could constitute a limitation). Secondly, and more importantly, the complexity of this research question and of all different factors that interplay in this matter as a whole requires an amount of general awareness and interest for contemporary news which not all might have, but it can rather be expected from people with higher educational level (Correa, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2018; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014), like university students and staff.

As the scope of this thesis aims at evaluating differences in social media use and news consumption between individuals belonging to Gen Z (born between 1997-2012) and Gen X (born between 1964-1980), twenty potential respondents were invited to take part in this research project, and eventually eight agreed to be interviewed, four for each generational cohort. The younger group was composed of three women and one man, while the older group was made of three men and one woman. The nationalities within the sample also varied significantly, with two respondents being Belgian, one Romanian, one Iranian, one Indian, and the remaining three being Dutch (see *Figure 1* for a clearer visualization). It is important to mention differences in gender and nationality, because, although they do not constitute a focus point of this thesis, these factors also play a role in determining people's use of social media as news outlets (Geers, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2018).

Participants were asked to take part in the interview via an email invitation, where an overview of the purpose and description of the thesis project were provided, as well as indications about the structure, expected length, and contents of the interview. The Information Letter and Informed Consent forms were attached to the invitation email, and interviewees were asked to sign them prior to the interview. The emails were at first sent out randomly to both students and lecturers/researchers via Tilburg University's email network, but due to a scarcity of answers they were eventually forwarded to targeted individuals picked out through a process of snowball sampling: the first interviewees suggested other people who fit the age demographic and who they believed would be willing to participate in the interview process (Neuman, 2014).

*Figure 1 - Nationality of Respondents*

	Dutch	Belgian	Iranian	Indian	Romanian
Amount	3	2	1	1	1

## 3.2 Procedure and Analysis

Participants were given the choice of conducting the interview either in person at Tilburg University campus, or online via Google Meet. Seven interviews were eventually carried out offline and one took place telematically. The interview time ranged from 43 minutes to a maximum of 1 hour, averaging a time of 54 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the author between the months of April, May and June 2024. Each interview was recorded on the researcher's mobile phone, with the interviewee's consent, and the recordings were later utilized to analyze each conversation in-depth. The interviews' recordings were uploaded on Word, anonymized, and automatically transcribed using the *Transcription* function offered by the software. The researcher then went over each transcript while listening to the recordings in order to make sure that every part of the dialogue had been transcribed correctly. All transcriptions were uploaded onto the Atlas.ti coding platform, on which they were once again reviewed by the researcher. After a first line-by-line inspection, an initial round of codes were identified, pinpointing important information and categorizing it with different labels based on the topic it targeted. Each transcript was then re-analyzed in order to erase superfluous codes and check that no crucial statement had been overlooked. All codes were later grouped based on distinct themes, and connecting patterns were recognized amongst the different groups. This iterative process eventually resulted in six main groups of code categorization, namely: *background information, pros/cons of social media, pros/cons of conventional media, social- and news-media literacy, perception of age differences, and awareness of Yemen* .

The recordings were stored safely for the whole duration of the analysis process and eventually erased at its end.

## 3.3 Interview Process

The interviews consisted of a total of 34 guiding questions, although more questions came up throughout each conversation as every interviewee's input inspired new interesting prompts for the research to investigate further. The questions were grouped in several different categories, based on the topic they were covering, with the first few questions aiming at gaining a general understanding of the respondents' approach to using social media, including the age at which they started making use of them, the purposes of their use, and their preferred platforms. The interview then moved on to asking the respondents about their news consumption habits (both on and offline), and, if applicable, their approach to consuming news on SNS's. The respondents had to express their stance with regards to the benefits and downsides of utilizing social media platforms as news outlets, with a specific focus on the influence of algorithms and cookies, as well as the risk of encountering fake news online. Subsequently, they were asked about their

opinions regarding differences in social media usage and news consumption between different generational cohorts, basing their answer on their own convictions and possibly drawing examples from personal experiences (e.g. with younger or older relatives). Finally, the last set of questions assessed the interviewees' knowledge of contemporary matters, specifically investigating their level of awareness, or lack thereof, of Yemen's ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis.

In order to guarantee the unbiased unfolding of the interview process, and prevent the conversations from steering in a narrow direction too soon, the topic of Yemen was never explicitly mentioned until the last stage of the interview, and neither did it appear on the Information Letter. While this decision might seem deceiving towards the participants, it was absolutely necessary to objectively analyze their awareness of Yemen's situation, and to prevent the risk of any of them looking up information about it prior to the interview (see Swart, 2021, for a similar approach). Following the same logic, no specific definition of *news* was provided, so that each respondent could express in their own words and according to their conviction what they valued as news, thus expanding the range of topics that could be considered current affairs and additionally investigating whether there were differences in the way the two age groups conceptualized the notion of news.

Participants did not receive any financial compensation for taking part in this study.

## 4. RESULTS

As was previously mentioned, throughout the coding process of the interview transcripts six main thematic code groups were identified, each targeting a different aspect of the interview topic. Each of these code themes represents a salient point of discussion for which the respondents' opinions varied greatly. They will therefore be presented one-by-one in this section through an in-depth analysis, assessing and comparing differences in answers amongst the two distinct age cohorts, with quotation and explanation of the most interesting statements. The code groups being *background information*, *pros/cons of social media*, *pros/cons of conventional media*, *social- and news-media literacy*, *perception of age differences*, and *awareness of Yemen*, the answers regarding the respondents' background information will be examined first, and the rest will follow in order.

### 4.1 *Background Information*

This code group included any kind of information regarding the interviewees' approach to both social media and news consumption. For instance, they discussed the age at which they started to use social

media platforms, the initial reasoning for this choice, whether their purpose of social media usage changed over time, their preferred SNS's, the frequency with which they use them, their overall online behavior, their online and offline news consumption habits, their news outlets of choice, their least used news media, and the motives driving these preferences. Their answers diverged greatly between Gen Z and Gen X respondents but were similar within each cohort.

Like most individuals belonging to their generation (Kalogeropoulos, 2019), all Gen Z'ers claimed to use multiple social media platforms on a daily basis, for a duration of time ranging between 1 to 3 hours. The most popular apps were Instagram, used by all four respondents, followed by Tiktok, which three of them had an account on and used regularly. The main purposes for social media usage were staying up to date with their friends' life, entertainment, and news consumption, the latter being the most commonly mentioned reason for using SNS's (only one respondent ratioed her social media usage as 60% entertainment and communication with friends and 40% news consumption). While Tiktok, Instagram, and Telegram were pinpointed as the preferred social media news outlets, services such as Whatsapp, Snapchat, and Facebook Messenger also came up during the interviews, but were merely used for communication purposes. All four individuals utilized Facebook for educational reasons, accommodation search, or to keep in touch with older relatives, although their use of this platform was not frequent, and they believed there is a lot of fake news being shared on this platform. Two of the four respondents had an X account (also known as Twitter) but were not active on it.

Three respondents started using social media at the age of 13, and one at 15. However, all of them highlighted that their online behavior and reasons for being active on these platforms changed greatly over time. At first, the motive driving their social media usage was related to the peer-pressure of "not wanting to miss out", said one respondent, as all their peers started using these platforms at the same age and they would feel left out by not also using them. With time however, the drive to utilize SNS's in order to engage with friends online transitioned into several other purposes, such as the desire to nurture one's own interests. All four Gen Z'ers explained how, approaching the ages of 16/17, the focus of their social media usage gradually shifted towards the consumption of information, not only regarding current news but additionally extending to recipes, sports, celebrities, and pop culture. This tendency could be explained by the fact that individuals of younger ages have yet to develop their critical thinking and interests regarding ongoing events and are still unsure about their political stances (Adelson & O'Neil, 1966). But as they start to make up their own perspective on current affairs, their SNS's usage changes over the years and transitions into a more news-oriented approach to navigating Web-based technologies. What is more, given that social media developed considerably as news outlets in recent years (Bangun, 2017), it is likely that news dissemination on these platforms back when the respondents started using them was not a common phenomenon yet.

In terms of news consumption habits, although all four respondents of the younger generation make extensive use of SNS's as news sources, particularly Instagram and Tiktok, they additionally rely on online newspapers and news organizations such as NOS.nl, New York Times, de Volkskrant, Al Jazeera, UN News, and NRZ. Nonetheless, the majority of them mentioned they first find out about news through social media and only look it up on other online news sources if that news is particularly interesting to them. All four interviewees in this age group affirmed they used to watch news on television when they still lived with their parents, but stopped once they moved out on their own. While it is worth mentioning that they all lived in student houses which oftentimes do not have a TV at all, all four of them claimed they would not use it to watch news even if they had one.

Moving on to the older age cohort, while all of them had or have had a LinkedIn account for professional purposes, only two out of four respondents were active on other social media platforms, and started using them between their mid-thirties and mid-forties. These two individuals used Facebook on a weekly/bi-weekly basis to either connect with friends and acquaintances or to be a part of Facebook groups where users shared local information regarding an area where one of the interviewees owned a property, which she would not be able to find otherwise. On the other hand, two respondents did not use any SNS at all, claiming that they either did not have time, they would not gain any benefit from it, or social media were simply "too complicated" for them.

The approach to news consumption was similar amongst all Gen X'ers, with all of them relying primarily on online newspapers and websites that the younger generation also consulted (e.g. The Guardian, NRZ, The New York Times, BBC, De Volkskrant, Al Jazeera, NOS). Physical newspapers were also popular in this sample group, as three participants had one or more subscriptions and read paper journals everyday. Moreover, three respondents also watched news on TV information channels. Only one respondent additionally listened to news information via the radio, a habit that was passed onto to him by his parents who both worked as journalists. All interviewees in this age group consumed news daily, and two of them referred to the act of news consumption as 'routine', an intrinsic part of their everyday life that they would not be able to give up, which goes to show that they are all very interested in and engaged with local and global news. This also extends to Gen Z individuals, who conveyed eagerness to be on top of current affairs, confirming Casero-Ripollés' findings (2012) about young adults perceiving news consumption as a cardinal civic value. All respondents additionally were part of social circles amongst which news information was shared regularly, which contributed to fostering their interest for current news. Amongst the contemporary events that most respondents mentioned were Palestine and Israel, war in Ukraine, rise of populist parties in Europe, Sudan's and Congo's plights, European and American elections, and climate change.

## *4.2 Pros and cons of social media*

To justify their wide-ranging use of social media platforms, also as news outlets, the younger generation pointed out that the rapidity with which they gather any kind of information in real time is the most useful feature of these apps. All four of them underlined the value of receiving instant updates about ongoing events and mentioned that it is particularly important for global issues that are complex and require urgent attention, such as the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Two individuals preferred Instagram to Tiktok in terms of news consumption claiming it works better for localized information. An example provided were the ongoing student protests in the Netherlands, with which university student bodies are asking their institutions to cut ties with some of their partner universities in Israel (Buheji & Hasan, 2023). As details about the organization and unfolding of these events are mainly conveyed through Instagram, one Gen X respondent said it was ‘unfortunate’ that he was not able to gain much information about the details and location of the protests because he did not use Instagram. In line with findings from Van der Kaay and Young (2012), all four Gen Z’ers held a positive view of SNS’s, saying that the interconnectedness these platforms provide is incredibly important to stay on top of global news. However, most interviewees also underlined the addictive character of social media, claiming that while they are very time consuming, one cannot help but keep on using them. For example, one respondent tried to get off social media for two years as she felt it was becoming too detrimental for her to be active on them, but she eventually reinstalled Instagram because she realized it was ‘necessary’ to know what is going on around the world and she could not completely cut it off. Moreover, the majority of young interviewees claimed that social media are useful to get information from several different sources, making it easy to compare the content of each. Interestingly, two of them mentioned that as they started consuming news on social media, they became much more critical of information they were gathering from traditional sources, such as cable TV or national newspapers. This could be explained by the fact that these individuals had relatively low trust in the government and its media, according to them. Moving onto news consumption on social media, they might have therefore gained access to a wider variety of information that made them more skeptical about mainstream media outlets.

All Gen Z’ers mentioned that what they liked the most about consuming news on SNS’s is that the information conveyed feels more real than that of conventional media sources, as it is oftentimes expressed according to people’s own opinions rather than the government’s, or in the words of one interviewee: **‘The thing I really like about social media is that it’s from the people’s point of view and it’s not about who is behind the desk telling the news to you, not about the people who are in charge’**. This is particularly interesting, given that the older generation believed the opposite was true, meaning that one should avoid information based on personal stances and rather only listen to official

news. This Gen Z conviction was tightly interrelated to their opinions with regards to citizen journalism, which all young respondents believed to be a very positive phenomenon, as well as a fundamental stepping stone in the process of democratization of news sharing and consumption. Two of them claimed such practice is crucial in countries with corrupted authorities or instances of oppression such as Congo or Gaza. A few names of famous citizen journalists who are currently covering the Palestine situation came up (i.e. Bisan Owda and Motaz Azaiza), and their work was praised by respondents, who explained how their reportages show sides of the conflict and crisis that are not displayed via traditional media. These journalists are thus helping viewers to open their eyes about the more raw and cruel aspects of the war, e.g. dead bodies, raising awareness about the severity of the situation, said one woman. While two respondents claimed it important for citizen journalists to have a journalistic educational background (like Owda and Azaiza do), the other two believed it was not necessary and that anybody could contribute to participatory journalism. Furthermore, one respondent affirmed that social media forster connection, because by receiving news from people speaking in a first-person perspective users feel more invested in the information being conveyed, and will be more driven to share it with others. Quoting her words: **“It’s the personal feeling that social media brings which makes us realize how we are affected by things ourselves. When it comes to abortion laws, when it comes to LGBTQ laws, when it comes to climate change, Gen Z feels invested because we are active on social media. So we will share.”**

On the other hand, the older generation believed that users should be very careful with trusting information from citizen journalists, as it is very hard to verify the objectivity of their content, additionally highlighting that there is a need for stricter regula

Nonetheless, three of them still recognized the potential benefits and strengths of this practice in the field of news media, **“especially if carried out on slow-paced platforms by journalists who possess journalistic craft and can contextualize information with supplementary sources. In that way, citizen journalism could even have an edge over traditional media which are usually much slower to respond”** affirmed one interviewee. Other individuals mentioned that citizen journalism has been crucial in coverage of Russian bombings in Ukraine, and in unveiling episodes of police brutality through Facebook live streams, so in that way it should be seen as a “very democratic practice”.

Other features of social media platforms that younger respondents particularly appreciated were the fact that they are cost-free, the “watch/like history” function, to never lose track of content you ran into, and Tiktok’s *stitch* function. A respondent explained that this is a crucial tool to consult opposite perspectives, because through stitching users usually react to videos they do not agree with by illustrating and arguing in favor of an opposite stance. In this way, the audience can evaluate both views and make up their own opinions.

Remarkably, three Gen Z'ers held a positive view of algorithms, and one went as far as to call it 'comforting'. Their conviction seemed to be that it is overall nice that these calculations are able to pick up on your preferences as you are always going to be shown information that falls within your interest areas. However, they also saw the problematicity of that, aware that this dynamic leads to homogenous bubbles of information which can isolate users from learning about the opposite side of a news story. Only one young respondent seemed afraid of the effects involved with the algorithms, claiming that one always had to keep a critical eye on when navigating through social media because algorithm can act as a process of 'indoctrination' and their effect **"is just too strong, it's actually kind of scary"**.

The older cohort's negative connotation of SNS's appeared very evident throughout three of the four interviews, with one respondent claiming that he **"hates being bombarded with social media videos and things he did not ask for"**, another saying she felt **"sorry for this generation for being in the middle of all these social media, I'm happy I did not grow up like that"**, and a third individual referring to social media apps as **"very dangerous"**. Moreover, it was interestingly mentioned that the apparent cost-free character of SNS's is actually compensated by the risks related with algorithms. In fact, social media platforms are based on what a respondent called *the attention economy*, meaning the continuous stimulation of engagement that makes money by grabbing users' attention and keeping them from moving to other platforms. This could explain the addictive nature of these services that some younger individuals brought up.

A final consideration relates to the questions about political polarization. While the older age group had no hesitation in claiming that algorithms contribute to increasing political polarization, the younger generation was much more unsure in answering the question, and only one of them firmly stated that they could have a polarizing effect. But they seemed convinced that algorithms could surely reinforce one's own political beliefs.

### *4.3 Pros and cons of conventional media*

Regarding traditional news services, particularly referring to newspapers, older respondents mentioned that they thoroughly appreciate the length and meticulousness with which content is presented on these media as compared to SNS's. As a matter of fact, they all preferred more extensive and explicative articles about current news than snippets or short explanatory videos one usually finds on social media. One respondent highlighted the fallacy in believing that fast news is always positive: **"There is a conviction that the faster we get the news the better, but fast news simply goes to your head and doesn't really inform you. Slow news is better and more informative, but people appreciate fast**

**news much more. It's like fast food. It's easier. It's more convenient.”** Additionally, this group felt like information on traditional media is much more trustworthy, as most of the time these services have legal departments that fact check information so consumers do not have to worry about engaging with misinformation. Another point in favor of conventional media is that they provide the same information to everybody, claimed one respondent, and there is thus no concern for biased, personalized information. Younger respondents disagree with this stance, with the majority of them believing that information on conventional news sources was not necessarily more truthful, but merely written in a more objective way. One of them believed there was a lot of misinformation being spread on conventional media, and two others claimed that the information is always limited to one side of the story. Even in this discourse, the topic of Gaza came up, as Gen Z'ers claimed that most European mainstream sources did not release complete information about the tensions between Palestine and Israel, but solely the ones that were more convenient for our governments. One interviewee also explained that when she used to watch TV news channels back at her parents' house she would notice that all information was framed within a very Western perspective, which she did not appreciate. Instead, through social media, she was able to consult a much wider variety of sources from different regions of the world, which provided her with a more objective view of certain events. Although young respondents tended to dislike and distrust news from television, they recognized the importance of reading newspapers as an addition to the knowledge gained from social media sources. However, they strictly consulted online newspapers, and a few of them mentioned they could not remember the last time they picked up a physical newspaper.

#### *4.4 Social- and news-media literacy*

In terms of awareness and skepticism, all eight interviewees seemed to have a solid understanding of how cookies, algorithms, echo-chambers, and filter bubbles work, in addition to being aware of the large presence of fake news online (Dragomir, 2017). The younger generation was used to gaining input of news from social media platforms and looking it up on trusted online newspapers when they suspected the information to be fake. In a different fashion, since none of them consumed news on social media, all older respondents claimed to be very sure of their sources, and very rarely felt the need to fact check the content they were reading.

All individuals in the sample, aside from one person belonging to the younger age group, were fully aware of how cookies work. However, two of them would still accept all cookies when provided the option to choose on the popup buttons. This dynamic confirms research by Vaniea et al. (2014), which found that knowledge about online safety threats does not necessarily lead users to take action against them.

Three Gen X'ers called for more guidelines and regulations for social media news content to undergo stricter verification procedures. Two of them, together with one Gen Z'er, specifically mentioned the need for increased social media literacy, with one suggesting SNS usage awareness programs should be introduced in the educational systems from an early age, as the risks associated with these platforms constitute a societal issue. Overall, all eight respondents agreed in unison that one always needs to be mindful when using any kind of social media.

#### *4.5 Perception of age differences*

When being asked about what they believed the main differences were in the way in which Gen Z and Gen X individuals consume news, the answer of each generation was only partly correct (and by 'correct' is meant only in relation to the differences within the sample). Although all four of them knew that young adults make extensive use of social media as news outlets, two of them believed that they adopt social media as their sole source of information. This reasoning stems from their beliefs that young people do not want to pay for newspaper subscriptions, and have increasingly less trust in official news channels and information conveyed by politicians. A younger respondent actually confirmed this conviction, claiming that he tended to be more prone to trust unknown sources rather than bigger media organizations. He however justified this tendency by explaining that, coming from a country with limited freedom of press, he has grown up to distrust official news media, as they were often used for propaganda purposes. One older respondent referred to this growing distance from traditional media as 'damaging', because it makes youngsters turn to unreliable 'internet gurus', who make them lose trust in professional journalism. While a Gen X member wrongly assumed that the younger generation did not consult online newspapers, another person knew from interactions with his students that they all indeed possessed that news consumption habit. Nevertheless, according to him, younger adults outside of a university environment are not so responsible in consuming news. As a matter of fact, the most interesting dynamic which spurred during the interviews was a *third person effect*, previously mentioned in chapter 2.6, for which each generational cohort believed their counterpart to be less knowledgeable about how to effectively consume news. Although one older respondent claimed his kids were more **"tech savvy"** than him, he believed them to be reckless in their social media usage, and warned them continuously about the threats involved. Two other respondents of the older generations called younger people **"quite naive"** because of the way they consume news via unreliable sources, explaining that when exchanging information with younger individuals their knowledge would be less complex, less accurate, and more rhetorically charged. On the other hand, Gen Z individuals believed their older counterparts to be **"awkward"** in their usage of social media, they had less knowledge about how to properly consume news on SNS's and would rather

rely on more traditional platforms. One interviewee suggested older generations do not really invest time in looking beyond Western-centric news sources which don't focus on the human rights aspect of things. This leads them to be less invested in global societal issues and rather only care about local news, claimed another. In relation to this, a third respondent noticed how her older relatives tend to be much less prone to take action regarding the same contemporary issues as her: **“They are much less passionate about activism, much less willing to take part in protests. This is because the news we get from social media are more emotionally charged, which makes you feel more involved and engaged, whereas the news on mainstream media is more depersonalized”**. Another interviewee expressed a similar opinion by saying **“They're getting the same content, but they have a different perception of it”**. Moreover, two of them interestingly claimed that Gen X'ers had a harder time than them recognizing misinformation online and actually contributed to the spread of fake news by sharing on Facebook unreliable information they gained from Whatsapp groups.

Finally, respondents were asked whether they believed that different news consumption approaches could lead to different perspectives about ongoing events. Three young respondents answered *yes*, one answered *only partly*, and so did three older respondents. The remaining one answered by claiming that differences in perspectives amongst people of different ages are simply due to contextual factors as each generation is a product of their time. Another Gen X respondent agreed with this statement by saying: **“it's our context that creates our thinking”**. Other background factors that were mentioned as relevant in determining differences in ideologies were class, economic status, and living location. As for younger interviewees, three of them attributed these differences to the fact that traditional media were much less progressive than social media.

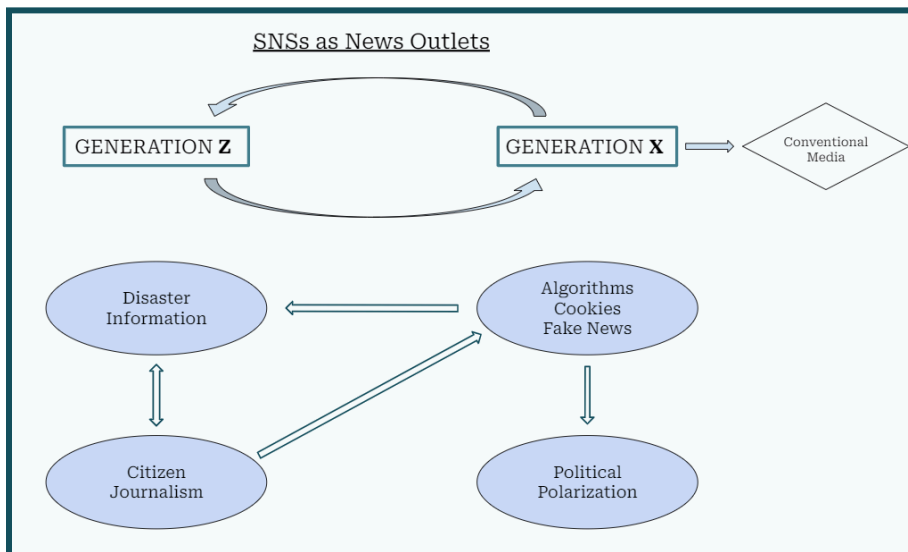
#### *4.6 Awareness of Yemen*

Moving onto the topic of Yemen, significant differences in the amount of knowledge regarding this matter showed between the two groups. In the Gen X group, three respondents possessed good awareness of the unfolding of events in Yemen, but were not totally aware of the severity of the situation up to this day. Impressively enough though, they knew that country had been used as a combat field by Iran and Saudi Arabia to fight for their own interests, that it is an **“open-air prison”** for its population, that it is not so much a civil war but rather a political struggle, that it lack natural resources Another respondent only knew general facts about the country, for instance that it is a very poor nation, its population has undergone multiple famines, and that rights for women are limited. On the other hand, Gen Z knew relatively less about Yemen, with only two of them being aware of what was happening there. Their knowledge of this case extended to the fact that it has been a nation at war for quite some time, it is

involved with the Israel-Palestine conflict through the Houthis, the government is poor and unstable, and there is a significant number of Yemenis who are stateless. The remaining two respondents of the younger group did not have any knowledge of Yemen at all. An overview of the main points in the unfolding of Yemen’s situation was provided to each person towards the end of the interview. When asked about what they believed were the reasons explaining Yemen’s lack of media coverage, many interesting options were mentioned, the most common being that it is simply not an interesting instance to discuss for Western media. Lacking oil, especially compared to many of its neighboring countries, Yemen lacks financial ties with powerful nations (Elayah & Fentiman, 2021), and is therefore eclipsed by other events that are more interesting for the West, such as Gaza and Ukraine. Another relevant factor that most respondents mentioned was racial bias, although that would not explain why Congo and Sudan are more talked about. Additionally, the prolonged length of the conflict was believed to also contribute to a lack of media attention, as it could have led to reporting fatigue over the years. An interesting final consideration was made by a respondent from the Gen X group: **“it has to do with the context of this conflict because it is a context that very few people are able to relate to: while we are used to hearing about famine in African countries and we feel more guilt as previous colonists, problems in Yemen relate more with conflicts within the Arab world, which somehow feels farther from us”**.

## 5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 2



Explanation:

This conceptual framework aims at creating a comprehensive visualization of how the different factors related to the use of social media as news outlets are interconnected. Specifically, it distinguishes between these factors based on how relevant they are for each generational group, so that the two elements in the column of Generation Z are the ones which that specific generation deems as most relevant and same goes for Generation X. This scheme additionally highlights how the interplay of all these factors, and people's stances on them, determines their use, or lack thereof, of SNS's for news consumption

The two generational cohorts, Gen Z and Gen X, hold different views with regards to consuming news on social media. While the younger generation seems aware of the flaws of social media, it does not necessarily see them as a downside, and rather focuses on the ease, rapidity, and accessibility with which it can obtain a wide-range of real-time information regarding ongoing events, and particularly conflicts and disasters. Young adults point out the democratic character of social media as news sources, providing a voice to anybody who wishes to express themselves, and allowing users to shed light on problematic events that were overlooked by traditional media. This prompts the success of social media in the field of disaster information, which consequently drives more people to speak up on contemporary matters, hence the mutual influence of citizen journalism and disaster information, and leads younger generations to perceive news consumed through SNS's to be more 'authentic' and 'raw' than those obtained through traditional media sources. However, the fact that everyone can have a voice on these platforms gives rise to the problem of misinformation, as it is much harder to fact check information being spread on social media as compared to online newspapers, for instance, and many people who disseminate news do not have a journalistic background. This shortcoming is crucial for the older generation, who highlights the inadequacy of SNS's as news-sharing platforms because of the unreliability they are characterized by. They believe that the strong influence of algorithmic calculations in determining the content shown to users makes it impossible or at least very hard for individuals to gain unbiased and diverse information on these platforms, and would thereby prefer to rely on more conventional news sources. Moreover, older adults tend to believe that since the work of cookies and algorithms leads to the creation of homogenous information bubbles, news consumption on social media contributes to increasing political polarization, and it is thus damaging. The development of echo chambers and filter bubbles extends to every kind of information on social media, including disaster information which the younger generation found to be more truthful and 'democratic'.

Interestingly, each age group holds strong opinions towards the other cohort, both with regards to their news consumption habits as well as their social media use. Young people are quick to point out the technological inaptness of older generations just as older individuals do not fail to underscore the recklessness and naivety of Gen Z on social media platforms. These reciprocal convictions are marked by

the curved arrows, which symbolize a cycle of one generation criticizing the other, stemming from the different contexts and upbringings that characterize each age group.

Overall, the younger generation holds a much more positive opinion of utilizing SNS's as a news medium, underscoring the benefits that can derive from them. On the other hands, the older generation focuses on the severity of its flaws, and is convinced that social media cannot constitute a valid source of information.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis' purpose was to analyze differences in social media usage as news outlets between two different generational groups at Tilburg University and see whether these could explain distinct degrees of awareness regarding Yemen's conflict and humanitarian crisis. After having illustrated all necessary background information about Yemen's situation, including its lack of coverage in the media, a literature review of all key aspects involved with the transition of social media into NSP's was laid out. The methodological analysis involved a qualitative interview process with eight individuals within Tilburg University. Results and conclusions were later drawn through the assessment of each singular interview.

The findings reveal that, as expected, younger people mostly use social media platforms as their preferred source of information (Ilakkuvan et al., 2019; Kalogeropoulos, 2019), but further extend their consumption to online newspapers when they become skeptical of the veracity of content they are shown, which Kahne and Bowyer (2017) and Maksl et al. (2015) claim is a good habit to practice. Contrarily, Gen X'ers tend to avoid consuming news on SNS's, relying on more conventional media platforms such as online and printed newspapers, TV news channels, and, to a lesser extent, radio, confirming previous findings by Gottfried and Shearer (2017). The false results additionally back the dynamic explained by Hruska and Maresova (2020): as age increases social media usage tends to decrease. In line with literature from Marcella-Hood and Marcella (2023) and Wang et al. (2024), half of the younger respondents displayed a habit of gaining a primary insight for news from headlines on Instagram, and would then move to Tiktok to conduct further research by watching 'educational videos' on the topic.

While both age cohorts could identify both upsides and flaws of social media platforms as news outlets, Gen Z individuals held a much more positive perception of them as compared to older respondents. Young adults tend focus on the accessibility and rapidity that characterizing the process of information in gaining and sharing on Web-based technologies (Tkalcic et al., 2014), while Gen X'ers valued quality, complexity and thoroughness of their information sources more than their rapidity at covering events.

Each age group holds strong opinions about one another, though mostly critical. Both cohorts think their approach to consuming news is better and believe they are more knowledgeable in regards to news information strategies and content. However, the interview analysis reveals that the value either of them attributes to this ‘knowledge’ might refer to different aspects of the information-gaining process. In fact, while Gen X individuals are convinced they are better at obtaining factual and objectively written information, Gen Z’ers find increased satisfaction with news conveyed in a more down-to-earth manner, for instance through Tik Tok videos. This approach is more appealing to them as it makes them feel like the information comes from a real person, a peer on their same level almost, someone they can therefore trust, as they find it rather hard to trust what official governmental news channels communicate. Instead, the unfilteredness of SNS news represents for them a further advancement towards global democracy, which provides the regular citizens whose voices were previously worthless to finally have a say in international politics, thus partly rebalancing global power structures in the field of news media and giving greater power to the people. An interesting point about this matter was made by a member of the older generation, who believes that young adults decide which news to share on social media not so much based on its content but rather the underlying meaning it stands for, what it symbolizes, for instance, being part of a community. According to this view, people attribute higher relevance to news which reflect the struggles and issues of their generation. A younger respondent confirmed this statement, claiming that, for Gen Z, being active on social media represents “**a shared sense of identity**”, a way in which young adults can take their first steps in the world of news consumption and leave a mark by facilitating the process of raising awareness about key issues.

With regards to social media and news literacy, both generational cohorts presented high levels of awareness about the risks associated with adopting social media as news outlets, such as algorithms, echo-chambers, political polarization, fake news, and privacy invasion threats. In order to steer clear of misinformation, Gen Z frequently cross-referenced social media news with trusted online newspapers, displaying a proactive approach to media literacy. Just as illustrated by Swart (2021), the frequency and breadth of their social media usage habits allowed most respondents to possess in-depth knowledge of how algorithmic calculations and cookies function, although one of them still tended to accept all cookies, which highlights a gap between knowledge and action that Vaniea et al. (2014) and McAfee-NCSA (2007) also previously illustrated. The older generation rather felt much less the need to fact-check their sources of information, thus reflecting a higher degree of trust in conventional media institutions.

Backing a vast amount of literature (Bulger & Davison, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Vraga & Tully, 2021), all Gen X respondents unanimously agreed on the urgency for increased literacy with regards to news consumption on SNS’s, to be advisably carried out within educational institutions. Interestingly, the younger generation did not feel the same need for increased awareness, which could be attributed to the

fact that Gen Z'ers tend to be much more confident in their social media usage as well as overall tech skills, backing research by Miltgen & Peyrat-Guillard (2014). Conversely, while aware of the risks of these platforms, Gen X individuals seemed to know less about how to use social media (Berkowsky et al., 2013), which, according to Tsai et al. (2016), drives this generation to criticize SNS's to a greater extent, a tendency which older respondents surely displayed throughout the interview process.

An insightful way of perceiving social media platforms which could contribute to explaining why distinct groups could hold such divergent opinions of them, is the fact that these kinds of Web-based technologies work as an *amplifier*, as Aral and Zhao (2016) demonstrated in their study. Cunningly, one older respondent also pointed out this aspect of social media, saying that **“technology works like an amplifier in both directions. So if your aim is to attempt at improving the quality of debate by making information more explicative and nuanced, then technology will help you. But the same thing goes for the opposite, and the thing is you can't have one without the other. For example, you can use social media in elections in Egypt to organize resistance against an oppressive government. But we also know that the Chinese government uses all kinds of technology and algorithms to basically oppress their people. It has both of these faces”**. As explained through the conceptual framework, differences in opinions regarding social media could thus simply constitute a matter of focus preference, meaning that while young adults tend to focus on its positive aspects, older adults take more into account these services' flaws. Furthermore, these preferences are additionally determined by contextual factors, a few respondents underscored, just like illustrated by Reis et al. (2000) through a research that highlighted the influence of context on human behavior and attitudes.

As for the case of Yemen, the older generation overall knew significantly more information about the ongoing conflict, its root causes, and the consequent humanitarian crisis. What is more, they also seemed to have clearer ideas with regards to possible explanations for Yemen's lack of coverage on both social and mainstream media platforms. The motive providing reason to this phenomenon which most respondents, including younger ones, pinpointed was the lack of (financial) interest from Western countries. The unison in agreement over this aspect goes to show that most people, at least amongst the educated, are fully aware of how crucial the influence of geopolitical and financial ties of the West with the rest of the world is determining which events are newsworthy. Sadly, being poor in resources that would otherwise be interesting for the West, Yemen's plight has fallen victim to this power and coverage imbalance. As findings for humanitarian aid keep on decreasing (UN, 2024), there are not a lot of signs of improvement for this unfortunate nation, and respondents additionally conveyed their hopelessness for this instance throughout the interviews. A quote worthy of mention stated:

**“Western nations are not affected by the fact that people are stateless, don’t have rights to education, assistance, healthcare, bank accounts. So the solution is no solution at all. There’s no future for those people”**

The sharpness of these words conveys the depth of their meaning, and calls for collective condemnation of the West’s reprehensible attitude in the field of news information.

In an attempt to provide a cohesive answer to the initial research question “*To what extent does the use of social media as news sources by Gen Z and Gen X at Tilburg University influence their understanding of Yemen’s conflict and humanitarian crisis?*”, this thesis project has shown that individuals who make more extensive use of social media as news outlets, namely Gen Z, tend to have lower awareness of the unfolding of events within and around Yemen. The limitedness of their understanding of this case study could thus be attributable to the fact information conveyed on social media tend to be shorter and less explicative, so it would be hard to thoroughly unveil all factors that contribute to the complexity of Yemen’s situation through SNS content. Contrarily, the topic of Yemen appeared to be more extensively explained on online newspapers consulted by the older generational group, although they mentioned that even on those platforms it was rare to run into news reports regarding Yemen.

All in all, this study provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of digital communication and its profound impact on societal engagement with pressing humanitarian challenges. The findings underline the necessity to foster collaborative efforts between social media developers and media organizations to harness digital platforms for positive social change, in order to provide increased support to vulnerable nations worldwide.

## 7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this research contributed to adding onto the body of existing literature about the intricate dynamics that interplay in making up people’s news consumption habits on social media, and shaping their understanding of current humanitarian disasters, it certainly does not come without limitations.

The first one has to do with the inconsistency in results between this and other studies, which could be attributable to the small sample size of the groups that were interviewed. For instance, according to the 2018 Pew Research Center Study, 24% of Dutch people over 50 make daily use of social media as news outlets, representing a much higher percentage than the one that was found in this sample (0%). This could be explained by the fact that all respondents worked or studied within a university setting, making up a highly educated sample group that is not representative of the general population, and therefore not comparable to other studies. However, this thesis’ finding that the older age category refuses to consume

news through social networking sites is not in line with research conducted by Mitchell et al. (2018), who rather demonstrated that the frequency of news consultation on social media increases parallel to higher educational levels. This discrepancy is interesting because, given that Cotter and Reisdorf (2020) and Min et al. (2019) demonstrated the growth of algorithmic literacy in correlation to higher education, one could adopt two divergent assumptions. The first one being that since educated people have greater awareness of algorithms, they have a complete understanding of their risks and would therefore prefer to consume news through other media, which reflect this thesis' findings. A second assumption would however be that because of this vast knowledge they possess, they also know how to bypass algorithmic calculations or use them in their favor, thus making the most of the rapidity of social media in conveying news while not having to worry about getting stuck in a filter bubble, which rather relates to Mitchell's findings. The significance of this inconsistency in findings should motivate future research to dig deeper into this matter and attempt at providing a possible explanation to this discrepancy. Furthermore, it would be compelling to expand the sample size to a much larger amount and include participants of different economic backgrounds and educational levels, in order to counter test Mitchell et al.'s (2018) conviction that these two factors play a key role in shaping people's news consumption on social media.

Another limitation has to do with the sampling methods. A few academics have pinpointed the difficulties of this method in collecting an unbiased group of participants (Geddes et al., 2018), a random sampling method is thus advisable for any study who wishes to add onto this thesis' body of knowledge in the most objective manner possible. On the other hand, for research that wants to keep on focusing its scope within a university setting, it might be interesting to analyze differences in social media news consumption and/or knowledge about humanitarian crises amongst students and staff of different faculties, possibly hypothesizing how an individual's study/research focus can influence their SNS usage as well as understanding of international news.

# APPENDIX

## 1. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### GENERAL APPROACH TO SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

- How often do you use social media?
- At what age did you start using social media?
- What do you mostly use social media for?
- What kind of information do you normally look up on social media?

### PREFERRED NEWS-SHARING PLATFORMS

- What platforms do you turn to to gain information about current news?
- What platforms do you use the least and why?
- In your opinion, what platforms are the most trustworthy when it comes to finding information?
- How much of your knowledge about ongoing events comes from social media as compared to mainstream news-sharing platforms?
- How much of your knowledge about said events did you look for yourself and how much were you indirectly exposed to? (e.g. heard it on TV or popped up on social media feed without actively looking for it)

### SOCIAL MEDIA AS NEWS OUTLETS

- (In case they use them for information) How do you approach using social media as news-sharing outlets?
- Do you share news found on social media with your acquaintances or do you simply keep them to yourself?
- Do you compare information gained from mainstream media with information found on social media and vice versa? Why or why not?
  
- (In case they do not use them for information) Why do you not use social media as news outlets?
- What risks do you think are associated with looking for information on social media?
- Would you take into consideration using social media as news outlets if there were stricter guidelines for information fact-checking?
  
- What is your opinion on citizen journalism? What are its possible downsides and upsides?

### COOKIES AND ALGORITHMS

- What role do you think algorithms play in shaping people's opinions about these events?
- When looking for information online, do you take into consideration the possibility of it being fake? How do you fact check information?
- Do you take into account algorithms, cookies and fake news when looking for information online? If yes, how do you navigate these to ensure gaining the most factual information?
- Are you aware of how cookies work?
- How often do you accept or decline cookies?

### AGE DIFFERENCES IN USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- Do you think there are differences in the way younger/older people utilize social media?
- (If yes) What do you think these differences are? And did you notice any of them personally?
- Do you think these differences contribute to explaining differences in ideologies and beliefs amongst different generations? If yes, how?

#### CURRENT NEWS THAT RECEIVED MEDIA EXPOSURE

- What are some current/recent events you have heard a lot about in the past couple of years that come to your mind?
- Why do you think that these news received a lot of online attention?
- Did you find out about these news through social media or other platforms?
- Did you notice that some news topics were more talked about on social media as compared to other platforms? If yes, which ones?

#### YEMEN

- What do you know about Yemen's displacement crisis?

If they know something about it:

- How did you come about obtaining this information?
- Did you ever come across information about Yemen on social media platforms? If yes, how often?
- How much of this information did you look up yourself and how much were you indirectly exposed to?

→ researcher provides overview about Yemen's situation

- Do you think Yemen's situation is sufficiently talked about online?
- (If answer is no) Why do you think it is less talked about than other events?

## 2. CONSENT FORM TEMPLATE



### INFORMED CONSENT FORM INTER-GENERATIONAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AS NEWS OUTLETS

#### INTER-GENERATIONAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AS NEWS OUTLETS

##### Researcher

Elettra Righi, LAS Social Sciences, School of Humanities and Digital Sciences,  
Tilburg University  
Email: [e.righi@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:e.righi@tilburguniversity.edu)

##### Signature

By signing this informed consent form, you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Signing this form does not interfere with your right to withdraw from this study at any time without an explanation.

By signing this informed consent form, I (the participant) confirm that I have read and understood the entire information letter and confirm that:

- I have read and understood the entire information letter that belongs to this study.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and that these questions were answered to my complete satisfaction.
- I had sufficient time to decide whether I would participate or not.
- I know that participation is completely voluntary.
- I know that the duration of the study is maximum one hour.
- I know I can decide to withdraw from the study at any time, without any negative consequences and without providing any explanation.
- I know I have the right, in principle, to request access to and rectify, erase, restrict or object to the processing of my personal data.
- I know that my research data will be processed as described in the information letter and only the researcher team have access to this data.
- I give permission to use my research data for the purposes that are mentioned in the information letter that belongs to this study.
- I give permission to store my research data for the period of 10 years.

*INFORMED CONSENT FORM TEMPLATE ENGLISH*



**INFORMED CONSENT FORM INTER-GENERATIONAL ANALYSIS OF  
SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AS NEWS OUTLETS**

I hereby voluntarily agree to participate in the study:  
Intergenerational Analysis of Social Media Usage as News Outlets

Name participant:

---

Signature:

Date : 17 / 05 / 2024

In case of an online informed consent, participants can click an 'accept' button to 'sign'.

---

To be completed by the researcher(s):

I hereby declare that I have fully informed the above-mentioned participant  
about this study.

Name researcher:

Elettra Righi

---

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elettra Righi".

Date : 17 / 05 / 2024

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*INFORMED CONSENT FORM TEMPLATE ENGLISH*

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