

# Searching for a new journalistic lexicon: The impact of new digital ecosystems on how post-millennials define news

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## Abstract

As the demands upon technology increase, news outlets are forced to consider innovative ways to capture the attention of audiences. A large proportion of the population admit to accessing news via social media; however, clarification of what qualifies as news has caused some confusion, particularly to post-millennials, and traditional concepts in journalism must be challenged to ensure audiences renew in the upcoming years. This paper explores how post-millennials characterise news and how they ultimately define it. It uses a focus group of post-millennial students, exploring their consumption of news and, overall, identifying how they define news, enabling the formulation of a new journalistic lexicon.

## Introduction

There is a false assumption that post-millennials are not interested in news. In fact, amongst the ones born after the year 2000, the consumption of traditional formats of journalistic content such as open television, radio, magazines, newspapers, and web is in decline. What

## **happens in fact does not suggest the youngsters are disconnected from journalistic contents. In reality, there is a change in the way they define news and in what they recognise as such.**

The information overload in a post-truth era plays an important role on the credibility of the content, as social media is turned into the main source of information. In this study, focus groups helped to identify that a new lexicon – permeated by scepticism on the content – is being adopted by post-millennials: words such as points, view-points, information, stories, and aspects – but not limited to these terms – are being used to replace the lexicon news. It shows that the new generation still consume news: they just do not call it that exclusively as such anymore.

More than tailored content to specific audiences, publishers must recognise what is perceived as news, knowing that the values embedded to the concept have themselves changed. This study (restricted to university students) shows a generation with a critical perception of the journalistic content available on social media, for whom the plurality of sources within an article is not enough. They seek for a plurality of versions of the same story to separate reality from fake content. The change reflects an identity construction of a generation that lost the connection between content and authorship, dismantling the scheme where media outlets used to have the truth as a commodity.

## **Contexts of news consumption**

Generational theory defines characteristics which are accepted to belong to specific age groups. In relation to technology, baby boomers (1946-64) consider it as something which may be useful; millennials (1981-1997) believe it is vital for day to day living and with over 90 percent of post-millennials in the UK having social media accounts, it stands to reason that technology is playing even more of a role within the lives of the new generation (Twenge 2006). In 2019, there was a 280 million increase in people using social media taking it to almost half (45 percent) of the world's population (Battisby 2019).

The development of social media and its influences on audiences has become of particular interest in academia in the recent years. Vaidhyanathan (2018) emphasised the dangers of Facebook in relation to politics and how it spreads misinformation; Twenge (2017) also alluded to the internet and smartphones being responsible for the perceived faults of the present generation; to mention some aspects.

Harcup and O'Neill (2017) revisited their original findings into what is defined as news fifteen years on due to the ever changing digital factors. Whilst the aims of the studies are different, the values still play a part in the lexicon used by post-millennials as context is considered a variable in language analysis (Song 2010). However, the lexical preferences used to refer to the news is as of yet to be explored and it is a fundamental piece to understand the way the new generations perceive the news content, because as time progresses, technology is becoming more prevalent with each generation.

For instance, baby boomers feel that the internet is something that is useful unlike millennials who predominantly feel it is vital for today's living (Bucuta, 2015). Despite more than 90 percent of post-millennials in the UK having a social media profile, it must be acknowledged that this is slightly less than that of millennials at 96 percent (Statista 2018). Young adults seem to be consuming less social media than that of their parents (Birkner, 2018).

Despite speculations on its decline (Bell 2019), Facebook still remains one of the most popular social media platforms (Battisby 2019), with post-millennial's citing it as one of the main platforms on which they will initially find out about news. This differs from those who are 65 and over: the average person in that age range, will watch thirty-three minutes of TV news per day; post-millennials, on average watch two minutes per day (Waterson 2019).

Following what happened to the newspapers, the decline in the popularity of TV news has been widely attributed to the developments in social media and the instantaneity of its content and participatory elements, as well as an increase in streaming (Newman 2009a; Waterson 2019). It is estimated that over half of internet users rely on Facebook to access the news (Mitchell et al. 2014) and of these, 78 percent had not logged on with this intention. Evidence has also been found to suggest most users of social media have friends whom will post articles relating to politics (Halberstam and Knight 2016; Waterson 2019) and therefore giving the user access to news they may not have otherwise received.

However, the changing of media consumption behaviours is not necessarily connected to misinformation. In the UK, six out of ten children aged 12-15 years claim to be interested in news and the lack of interest of

40 percent of this specific age group happens because the content “is ‘too boring’ and that it is ‘not relevant for people my age’” (OfCom 2018, 2). But the abandonment of traditional news outlets such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and even the web – 65 percent now use side-door over direct accesses to websites or apps (Newman and Kalogeropoulos 2017) – does not mean less access to news contents. However, it leads journalism to discuss a forceful rebranding on its most traditional output: the news. The journalistic contents are definitely being read but they are not being exclusively called news anymore.

This happens because new technologies are intrinsically connected to new formats of expression (Domingo 2016) and language is an important component of the generational identity. Different age groups use language as a tool to represent themselves and it is not only connected to the meaning of the words itself, but also to a sense of how they relate to the world (Darwin 2016). The same happened to journalism. Reading news can be easily connected to the act of open a print newspaper or a magazine. Watching the news, still means facing non-streaming tv program. But the internet transformed the sector in both ends: how the content is produced, and how it is consumed. Overall, it is still an ongoing process and the next step is to understand how the new generations perceive and identify what is journalism and by creating a common terminology, enabling the news production to reach the post-millennials.

## New terminologies

It is impossible to determine the level of consumption and engagement of post-millennials with news contents without overcoming a linguistic barrier. It is evident, as previous discussed, that they received a significant part of the content through social media. It is also notorious that social media has introduced a new jargon to the modern vocabulary. In 2016, post-truth was elected the word of the year, following a sequence of technology related neologism both, in the UK and in the US, including words such as selfie, gif or an emoji (Oxford n.d.).

The creation of new words in digital environments is being largely discussed in different fields of the academia (Glowka et al. 1999; Luo et al. 2018; R. Chen and Wu 2013; Zhiwei 2012). Inside the newsrooms, terms such as timelines, posts, engagement, traffic, user generated content (UGC), search engine optimisation (SEO), hashtags, trending, influence, platforms, applications, memes or emojis are now as commonly used as copy, splash, headline or interviews used to be 30 years ago.

Timelines replaced the frontpages and homepages, and scrolling is the substitute for turning to the next page. In addition, if the print editions and webpages used to be the certain location to find news content, the social media timelines are now uncharted seas, ruled by locked algorithms. The delimitation of what is news, entertainment or marketing content is not clear anymore. This situation requires different strategies to catch the attention of the readers. There is “a historic shift of control from traditional news organisations to the audience themselves” (Newman 2009b, 4).

Other than that, the content authorship become blurred and the connection of a specific information to its original author or media outlet can now be easily lost (Newman and Kalogeropoulos 2017). The social media platforms are getting more credit than the news publishers. The readers can recollect the platform where they accessed a specific content but not the media outlet or the journalist signing it.

News content originally has two undissociated characteristics: first, regarding the non-fictional value and its intrinsic newsworthiness. Second, directly connected to its platform or support: by being broadcasted in news bulletins, by being printed to a newspapers or magazine, by being host by a news website. However, as seen, the social media prevalence plays an important role on removing the authorship and the gatekeeper stamp to what is considered news. Among the information overload, post-millennials are exposed to a wide range of information and they are consuming news content, sometimes, without even noticing. Ebel (2018) defines it as “Hamburger news”, where the content is disguised as is the salad within a fast-food chain sandwich.

This lack of identification of what is news interferes directly on the capacity of publishers to reach their audiences. The very own survival of the news outlets is intrinsically connected to its capacity of understanding what the public is consuming in order to get informed. Without understanding the lexicon used by post-millennials as a generational categorisation of the contents, it is impossible to understand how much of the content consumed by them to get informed is, in fact, news.

# Methodology

The application of a focus group to identify this lexicon allows the exploration of what is important to post-millennials and the language they use. It also prevents the participants from feeling pressured into reaching a consensus or deciding along with allowing the researcher to observe communication forms (Kitzinger 2005 p57; Llamoutong 2011). Two focus Groups were conducted over a week period. The first focus group (F1) was made up of seven (N=7) post-millennials (five male and two females) who were first year university students. The second focus group (F2) was conducted with six participants (N=6) (five females and one male), also first year students.

F1 participants were gathered from Engineering and Technology subject areas, whereas the participants of F2 were students from Arts, Humanities and Education programmes. The decision to have homogeneous and pre-existing groups was taken, as it was hoped that this would avoid restrictions with regards to openness and sincerity within the discussion (Conradson 2005; Llamoutong 2011; Morgan 1997). Furthermore, given time constraints, the prior familiarity of the post-millennials led to a much quicker group dynamic development (Leask et al. 2001). The need to examine the lexis used in everyday conversations meant pre-existing groups were preferred to that of constructed groups as the purpose was to find a common lexical pattern. If a constructed group was collated as conventionalists advocate, participants although feeling they have less to lose with regards to expressing their opinions, they may not feel comfortable using their usual colloquial language (Kitzinger 2005; Llamputtong 2011; Morgan 1993).

The data gathered during the focus groups was recorded and transcribed by the researcher. This was to build on the researcher's already present familiarity with the social and emotional aspects of the experiment as well as aid the understanding of the data when analysis is underway. A thematic analysis approach was decided upon for this study as this was the most suitable path given the aim: to identify reoccurring lexis (Conradson 2005; Kitzinger 2005; Liamputtong 2011). Although others such as Parker and Tritter (2006) argue that attention should be paid to group dynamics, the aim of this research is predominantly to identify words specifically used by post-millennials when referring to news and therefore, this is not applicable. The thematic approach is also considered the most appropriate for laying the foundations for a qualitative analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Liamputtong 2009).

The second phase of analysis used axial coding which focused specifically on the frequency of words used by participants to determine a common lexicon (Minichiello et al. 2008). This part of the study also enabled the researchers to establish an underlying attitude towards the news by post-millennials after grouping the vocabulary into positive, neutral or negative connotations. Although it may be argued connotations are subjective as one word may vary in its meaning when presented to another (Song 2010), by exploring the most simplified definition of the lexis as outlined by the Oxford dictionary and applying it to the context of discussion (news), it was possible to divide the lexicon into positive, negative or neutral categories.

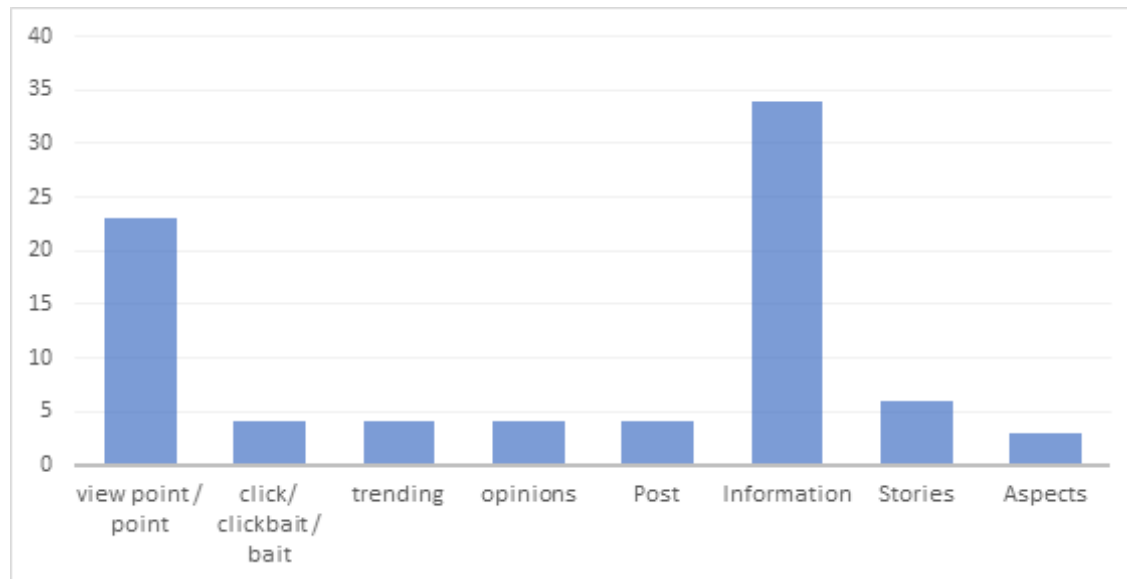
The focus groups were representatives of post-millennials, however, it must be acknowledged that all participants were university students and, for that reason, not reflecting the general population of post-millennials, where only 27.9 percent in England, 26.3 percent in Wales and 28 percent in Northern Ireland were enrolled in Higher Education last year (UCAS 2018). In 2018 it was reported a growing number of teens were preferring to take up apprenticeships rather than go on to higher education (Wylie 2018). However, figures have revealed an increase in young people attending university yearly (Adams 2017; UCAS 2018) demonstrating a fairer representation of post-millennials than first considered.

It is important to recognise that the study was conducted with a small sample size, however generation theory allows to apply a certain degree of behavioural generalisation even if, in this case, restricted to the ones attending higher education programmes. The sample includes participants with origins ranging across the UK to Eastern Europe. As previously discussed, the decision was made to have homogeneous and pre-existing groups to allow for greater fluidity in the conversations at an earlier point in the study. The participants were gathered from the same subject areas so were already familiar with each other, but again, this is where the similarities between members ended.

# Results

The conversations between both groups displayed a strong mistrust of the news and its outlets. This was further supported by regular references to articles as points or viewpoints (See Figure 1). Viewpoint is a

word commonly associated with political journalism. It is acknowledged that viewpoints are gathered from a variety of sources and this may sometimes challenge the credibility of a story (Bennett 1996). Park et al (2009) referred to aspects as being areas of reality which producers and editors select to present different tones and styles which results in a bias being evident. In reference to this particular study, participants used this language in a broader sense, applying it to all areas of news and not just that of political leaning. This expression was used when referring to newspapers presenting only one view-point and exploring other articles online for other points. In addition, opinion and aspect were also used, much in the same way as points or viewpoints again implying outlets are not impartial.



**Figure 1: Frequency of lexis used by post-millennials**

This finding shows a profound dissociation from the principles of journalism, where traditionally, each story must contemplate its different sides, perspectives and viewpoints. It means offering a fair selection of sources to frame a story (Baden and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2018). Counterpointing arguments, originally accepted as a praxis to each story, have now achieved a different level of plurality. The trust does not rely immediately in one copy published by one media outlet or journalist, but the counterpointing is established within the scope of the information overload, where the same story is available simultaneously from different media outlets. The pretence neutrality of the media outlets seems to have its importance diluted, as the content is consumed as one viewpoint and not as the established truth.

Post and trending featured in both groups although not as frequently. Post could be considered as neutral as this is simply referring to what has appeared on the participants' newsfeed without them having engaged with it. Trending however is perceived as popular and something which is of interest to others therefore having positive connotations. In this case, it is possible to identify a generalisation of the contents, where the variety of formats or authors lost its characteristics. It can be seen as the ultimate simplification of the convergence process, when different formats originally treated as such (audio, video, pictures, graphics, text) are now blended into a general definition of posts. The prevalence of subjects within the posts categorises as trending.

The lexis stories was used in both groups. As this word is usually used in reference to fiction and given the context of the discussion, implications are that some participants believed publications not to be wholly factual. In fact, in the groups, the use of this specific terminology is connected to its denotation. In a connotative perspective, where stories is adopted as synonym for news, it is possible to grasp a perishable credibility on the newspapers, removing the truth as its only commodity (Williams Jr 2005).

As evidence points to the internet being the most popular outlet for post-millennial news consumption (Waterson 2019), the plurality of platform is also much more difficult to police. There is clear evidence for an accelerated distribution of false news to that of factually correct reports (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). This supports the need emphasised by post-millennials within the focus groups, to collect a catalogue of evidence to reach an informed conclusion to publications. In other words, even though stories can be used by post-millennials as a synonym for news, it represents the sort of informative content that is not yet decided

to be trustworthy, factual or even real.

Click-bait and bait were used in relation to some articles. The term click-bait is used in reference to content which has the purpose of enticing audiences to click on a particular link (Y. Chen, Conroy, and Rubin 2015) and can be considered a form of deception. In the context of the study, the language maintained its original definition and was used as a way of portraying their distaste for certain articles. This considered, participants did also confess to only clicking on stories which were of interest to them suggesting this strategy from organisations does work, however as previously discussed, there was still the tendency to explore other agencies. Overall, post-millennials demonstrate a mis-trust of the news and use of this language is perceived to mean they believe news is being sensationalised to attract audiences.

On the other hand, the use of the word information is supposed to have a positive connotation, meaning to present facts to others. This alone was the most commonly used lexis by participants. According to McQuail (2010) audiences receive gratification when receiving information from outlets. This information is considered educational or something of which has enlightened the consumer to something they may have not already been conversant. Contradicting this expectation, further analysis of the language used to surround this word displayed overall negative feelings, with sentences such as “it is not like a piece of information you retain”, “I don’t think it’s a good source of information”, and “you are given the information they want you to hear”. However, this reveals that post-millennials demonstrated a contempt for the news presented to them and when using the word information it does not imply a direct acceptance of the content.

This critical notion of news trustworthiness can be further witnessed by a division of the lexis used into positive, negative and neutral connotations. The majority of the language used to identify news was negative. The study, however, does not offer percentages, as the sample is too small to provide an accurate indication of the sentiment. For instance, information was initially considered a positive vocabulary in relation to journalism, but given the context it was used in this occasion, this previous assumption was discarded. Trending when referring to the popularity and the shareability of the story, although it is seen as a positive. It may be argued that the post-millennials have unconsciously incorporated revised news values outlined by Harcup and O’Neill (2017) such as relevance. However, it does not emphasise the need for accuracy: a core news value.

As digital media is evolving, the trust placed in journalism is waning. Lexicon relating to bias emphasise this: viewpoint, point, opinions, aspects. However, post-millennials were quick to use these terms when relating to newspapers and broadcast journalism too, with no differentiation of sources. This may be due to the amount of choice available now for consumers (Burns 2016). Organisations no longer have the monopoly of the information that circulates on social media and inaccurate reporting can also be responsible for this negative attitude. As previously discussed, social media has been considered dangerous by some, especially when it comes to topics such as politics (Vaidhyanathan 2018). False news has been found to have a further reach than true news and is spread much more quickly (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018).

## Conclusion

Post-millennials are accessing news, be it mostly via social media or still by the more traditional offline routes. What has become clear from this study, is the overwhelming lack of trust post-millennials have in news outlets and the publications released. The reoccurrence of the theme of bias was prevalent in both focus groups with all participants claiming to explore stories of interest further by accessing several sources. Lexicon such as point and view-point both suggest an assumption of prejudice along with aspects and opinions. The reference to click-bait also suggests an ulterior motive, again adding to this mistrust and suspicion.

Although some post-millennials have claimed a lack of interest in the news, the reference to posts and tweets does imply that they are coming into contact with some content whether that is intentional or not. It also confirms the use of an alternative lexicon to refer to what was traditionally conceptualised as news. This also corroborates the rising emphasis media outlets are placing on the value of a story in relation to its shareability. At the same time, for this digitally savvy generation, the influence on editors by advertisers and metrics is widely acknowledged. Post-millennials are casting shadow on the motives behind articles as well as its credibility.

This study contributes to understand that a new journalistic lexicon is being created. Just the same as it happened inside the newsroom, when the rise of the web changed the production jargon, now the very basic concept of news is being adapted by the new generation. For now, there is not a clear separation of the dif-

ferent contents displayed in a timeline and news content has been pasteurised to the information overload mix. The progression of the syntax used by post-millennials, has clearly outlined the challenges posed for the journalism industry. In an era where clicks equal money, the sensationalising of articles and features is leading to a generation of mistrust, cynicism and suspicion. The very own definition of news is acquiring a new layer of values.

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