English summary

This dissertation explores how people’s experiences of news use can be captured and how these experiences can help us to make sense of everyday news use. Although news users have become increasingly central to scholarly discussions about journalism, we still have a comparatively limited understanding of news use from an emic perspective (Pike, 1967): from the perspective of news users themselves. First, research tends to focus on news professionals’ ideas about and conceptions of audiences instead of on audiences themselves. Second, research is dominated by approaches that measure and quantify news use rather than seek to understand (changing) news use from users’ own vantage point. Third, increasingly, data are collected by and thus in and on the news industry’s terms, in ways (i.e., big data) which tend to be framed as more “data-driven” and (thus) “scientific” (see Napoli, 2011), risking replacement of efforts to understand news users from their own perspective.

A second point of departure for this dissertation is scholars’ conception of audiences, which often center around the idea of agency and/or activity. Though valuable for grasping changing news use in a fast-changing media landscape, this notion of the more or less active user is prone to overlook three things: First, a focus on what news users do or do not do risks essentializing them based on a singular (e.g., page views, time spent) or limited (e.g., types of media used) dimension of their news practices. Second, the idea of active users making deliberate and rational choices is not easily compatible with researching – respectively – subconscious dimensions of people’s news use (e.g., automatic, habitual behavior) and how their practices and experiences are shaped by (everyday) structures beyond their control. Third, relatedly, the notion of active agents tends to lead to a focus on cognitive dimensions of news use (selection, meaning-making, production) at the cost of other experiential dimensions, such as affective and sensory ones. This dissertation therefore implements three shifts, which could potentially reveal a different, more nuanced picture of everyday news use:

1. From assumptions about news users to understanding news users in and on their own terms;
2. From categorizing and quantifying what news users do to understanding what it is like to (not) use news;
3. From a focus on cognition to including other (experiential) dimensions of news use.

Capturing the experience of everyday news use requires a carefully designed methodological set-up. The methods used in this dissertation are described, illustrated and evaluated in Chapter 2. This chapter seeks to go beyond justifying qualitative methods vis-à-vis quantitative methods and – in particular – to be more reflective and
critical regarding the limitations and possibilities of the qualitative interview. It makes the case for taking experience as point of departure for studying news use, explicating this notion by drawing from four theoretical conceptions of experience: the distinction between undergoing (erleben) and having undergone (erlebnis) an experience; the temporal orientation toward one’s experience (real-time, retrospective); various modes of experience (sensation, perception, conception); and different dimensions of people’s experience (e.g., cognitive, emotional, sensory). Subsequently, the chapter critically reflects upon three interview-based methods that center around users’ experience of news use – the think-aloud protocol, watching and discussing news, and the two-sided video-ethnography – by discussing their theoretical, methodological and epistemological implications. A common thread emerging from the different user studies is that people require support to be able to access and communicate their experiences of news use. The methods discussed proved successful at doing so, respectively by having informants comment on what they saw right in front of them (see), by giving them the tools and the vocabulary to reflect on a prior experience (think), and by bringing them in touch with their sensations of using news (feel).

Chapter 3 explores the extent to which news users desire to tailor news to their personal preferences and practices. The chapter triangulates the results of in-depth user interviews (N=24), a user survey (N = 270), production interviews with (chief) editors and policy makers (N=5), and an inventory of new “news products” on mobile and social media. Overall, the results suggest that users have limited interest in tailor-making their news: participants were not willing to put time and effort into personalization, they did not want to miss potentially relevant news (even if it concerned a topic or genre they did not usually care for), and they wanted the news organization to select relevant and topical news for them. What they desired in particular is control, which means that news should be 1) readily and separately available, 2) easy to pass or ignore at all times, 3) presented in a clear (and clean) manner, and (4) selected and presented on the basis of relevance and topicality. In short, they want the option to choose without having to choose.

Chapter 4 problematizes the relationship between clicks and audience interests. Clicking patterns are often seen as evidence that news users are mostly interested in junk news, leading to concerns about the state of journalism and the implications for society. Using the think-aloud protocol, this chapter asked and observed how 56 users actually browse news and what clicking and not clicking mean to them. This generated thirty distinct considerations for (not) clicking, classified into three categories: cognitive, affective and pragmatic. The results suggest, first, that interest is too crude a term to account for the variety of people’s considerations for (not) clicking. Second, even if one aims to roughly estimate people’s news interests, clicks are a flawed instrument because
a lack of clicking does not equal a lack of interest in news. For instance, participants often gathered sufficient information from news headlines to get a sense of what the news was about, especially if it concerned an on-going news event. Third, browsing patterns (including clicking) might give a more accurate picture of users’ interests, and taking these patterns seriously could help bridge the gap between what people (supposedly) need as citizens and what they actually consume. For instance, news sites or news apps might be designed in such a way that they facilitate a broader range of user practices (from “checking” and “scanning” to “reading”) (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015), in effect catering to the diverse needs of different users at different times. Finally, the chapter argues that all metrics should be critically assessed from a user perspective rather than taken at face value.

Chapter 5 explores how political information can be told in such a way that news users experience it as captivating. More specifically, it seeks to bridge the gap between what attracts and satisfies viewers, by developing bottom–up, user-defined, quality criteria for current affairs TV. Items from two Dutch current affairs shows (EenVandaag and Buitenhof) were watched and discussed immediately afterward with 54 viewers. The study found that informants were able to distinguish between two viewing experiences: “enjoyment” and “appreciation” (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Enjoyment is characterized by pleasure in the sense of fun and amusement and is associated with a lean-back viewing practice in which the news often functions as a soundtrack to other activities (e.g., cooking). Appreciation, on the other hand, is associated with concentrated, lean-forward viewing and is characterized by a willingness to invest time in exchange for gaining insight and learning new perspectives (an aha-experience). While certainly enjoying sensational news items, a key finding is that informants greatly appreciated feeling enabled by journalism – through empathetic, explanatory and constructive approaches – to better understand how politics work and impact their daily life and society at large. This suggests that what viewers want from political journalism might differ from what journalists produce yet is perfectly compatible with their democratic remit.

Chapter 6 seeks to capture material and sensory dimensions of everyday news use that usually remain unexplored. To that end a two-sided-ethnography was developed, filming people while they use news, allowing both researchers and participants to look in and reflect on their news use. Tapping into news users’ embodied, tacit knowledge, the study found that the materiality of devices and platforms and the ways users physically handle and navigate them impact how they experience and engage with news, in ways they themselves had not realized. The study also deepened our understanding of previously found news user practices (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015), and identified the distinct practice scrolling, which is characterized by an embodied urge
to keep up the movement of the hand, even when the user finds content appealing. Finally, the chapter shows how people actively ‘make’ place and time through their news practices, using coping strategies that mediate between the comfortability of ritual news use and the disruptiveness of news content. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical, methodological, and epistemological implications of the study, which include a call for more in-situ, real-time, and non-news-centric approaches to studying everyday news use.

Chapter 7 explores what spending time means from a user perspective. It takes as point of departure three tendencies within journalism and journalism studies: measuring news consumption in terms of how much time people spend on it, using “time spent” to make inferences about news users’ interests or preferences, and seeing more time spent on news use as inherently or automatically desirable. The chapter draws from the data generated in the audience studies described in chapters 4, 5 and 6. It reveals three complexities regarding time spent in relation to news use. Overall, the study finds that time spent does not necessarily measure interest in, attention to or engagement with news. First, time spent does not reflect the quality of attention being paid. Second, there is no linear relationship between time spent and interest or engagement. More time spent on news use can be the result of little interest or engagement, and vice versa. Experienced users engage in quick news practices because they are practiced and skillful at using news: they know how to handle and navigate their devices, they can efficiently scan digital environments for new and relevant information, and they are aware of news conventions or title-specific tendencies telling them which parts of news they could skip. Third, different news devices, platforms and genres coincide with different temporal experiences of news. For instance, while the print newspaper is often experienced as a moment of relaxation, on digital news media speed and efficiency appear to be valued more, making the experience of time become intensified. This suggests that while time spent is certainly useful to measure how people divide the finite resource that is their attention, we must be mindful of what we can infer from differences between platforms in terms of time spent.

Finally, chapter 8 reflects on the conclusions that can be drawn from the research in this dissertation. First, it has nuanced dominant assumptions about the interests of news users. While taken at face value, metrics such as clicks and time spent appear to confirm long-held suspicions about users’ preferences for news (i.e., junk news), this dissertation has shown that their interests are not fully reflected by metrics. For instance, clicks are a problematic measure of people’s interest in news because they overemphasize headlines that ‘demand’ a click (i.e. that evoke curiosity more than reflect a pre-existing interest) and miss browsing practices that do not require a click but that users do experience as valuable and informative (chapter 4). Likewise, while time spent
can be an indicator of interest or engagement, it can also point to a lack thereof or be a sign of users’ skills and practice (chapter 7). **Second**, relatedly, this dissertation nuances the narrative of “the rationalization of audience understanding” (Napoli, 2011) which suggests that more data necessarily get one closer to a better or more ‘objective’ understanding of news audiences. While metrics (and tracking data) have certainly added an indispensable – and previously unattainable – perspective to understanding news audiences, this dissertation has shown that capturing people’s *experiences* of news use allows for a critical assessment of the strengths and limitations of metrics, and helps avoid essentializing news users based on an isolated dimension of their news use.

**Third**, this dissertation captured experiences and practices of news use that do not neatly fit within established categories, generating nuances and new insights that further our understanding of everyday news use. For instance, “measured avoidance”, which refers to people’s careful measuring of and slaloming around (negative) content to protect their frame of mind, illustrates that the decision to (not) consume (particular) news is made on a much more specific level that can be captured in the categories of news-seeking and news avoidance. Likewise, chapter 4 found thirty considerations for clicking or not clicking on news that were generated bottom-up, adding further detail to known phenomena (e.g., the difference between ‘bemusement’ and ‘bullshit’ as reactions to clickbait headlines) as well as yielding original considerations such as “gleeful annoyance” which is a mix of positive (delight) and negative (rage) affect. A **fourth** conclusion is that experience is a helpful starting point for making sense of news use because it requires a more holistic approach that can generate an understanding of news use unattainable when looking at singular or separate dimensions. Indeed, cognitive, affective, sensory and other dimensions of news use have significance in their *interconnectedness*. This is illustrated by the practice of “scrolling”, characterized by an incessant urge to keep moving down one’s Facebook feed, even if one is interested in the content: it includes cognitive (perceiving the content), affective (being emotionally impacted by the content; feeling an embodied urge to move on) and sensory (moving one’s finger on the mouse or keyboard) dimensions. **Fifth**, the notion of experience proved useful for capturing how using news involves embodied knowledge and practical skills that need to be acquired, such as learning how to efficiently handle and navigate a technology or platform. Such skills of news use have been underappreciated in journalism studies. Whereas news literacy has focused mostly on being a “good citizen” through critical thinking and comprehension of news (production) processes, it might also include teaching people how to be a *proficient user*.

To conclude, the results of this dissertation indicate that – contrary to popular belief, and in line with Costera Meijer’s (2013) suggestion – listening to news users can help *increase* rather than lower the quality of journalism, albeit quality from a user
perspective that is not necessarily aligned with conventional journalism. While people certainly do consume and enjoy ‘junk’ news or sensational news when offered to them, they also have a desire for ‘public affairs’ news. Specifically, the informants in this dissertation say they also want to be (en)able(d) to understand news events better: What does it mean and why does it matter? What is it like to be in such a situation? What is a possible way forward and what are barriers to a potential solution? This suggests that while news organizations may continue to bring news that provides instant gratification but little substance (and, similar to junk food, possibly also generates feelings of guilt or regret after consumption), this should not come at the expense of news that requires a bit more chewing but provides a luscious, quality experience and leaves one satisfied. In other words: news that creates a user experience that is both currently pleasurable and retrospectively appreciated.