CONNECTED (WITH) YOUTH
Information consumption, trust and influencers among youth in Slovakia
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CONTENT

Methodology 04
Why youth? 05
Key findings 06
Sources of information 08
Facebook 12
Instagram 14
Youtube 16
Impact, trust and influencers 18
This report is a product of the research conducted under the project “Targeting Youth: Countering disinformation by data and role models”, financially supported by the US Embassy in Slovakia. The aim of this report is to provide a unique insight into online social behaviour and information consumption of young Slovaks while identifying role models they respect and trust.

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on an online questionnaire carried out between 23 April and 30 May 2018, and on focus group discussions conducted in April 2018 with young people in Slovakia.

The questionnaire was filled out by 1,486 Slovak citizens aged between 16 and 24 years equally represented by gender. Each region was represented by at least 100 respondents. The questionnaire’s results contain both quantitative and qualitative data focusing on three main categories – media consumption, social media behaviour and trust, and influencers. The method of the online questionnaire was identified as the most suitable for data collection given that young internet users constituted the primary target group of the research.

The qualitative data presented in the report were primarily gathered during focus group discussions conducted with students aged between 18 and 24 years. Four focus groups of around 8 participants were organised in four different cities in Slovakia. Each focus group discussion was led by an expert moderator and lasted approximately 2 hours. The discussions were based on a consistent set of questions and were conducted under the project “Countering disinformation in Central and South-Eastern Europe: Mapping needs, building capacity, and generating civic activism” financially supported by the U.S. Department of State.

Having in mind inconsistencies in definitions of “young people”, this publication uses “youth” when referring to the age group of 16-24.

Blurred boundaries between the online and offline world in information consumption and day-to-day communication have changed the patterns of our societies’ behaviour. While every generation is marked by societal, political and technological developments of their decades, today’s youth is the first generation already growing up on social media with mobile phones in their hands.

Information overflow, spread of disinformation and consequential distrust are not just a few buzz terms that dominate current debates but constitute key phenomena affecting:

- how information is perceived and consumed;
- who is seen as a role model;
- and what kind of content is preferred.

As a Strategic Communication Programme, understanding youth is vital to us in the context of evaluating societal dynamics (and, potentially, predicting developments). By approaching them in their natural environment – online – we were able to gather responses that help us create a clearer picture of how young people consume information and whom and what they consider relevant.
Parents and relatives belong among the most trustful and relevant opinion-shapers: 91% of respondents tended to agree that the opinion of parents is important for them.

Alongside with family, friends are an important source of influence on social media. 39% of respondents claimed to receive information on current affairs on Facebook through articles shared by friends.

Instagram accounts of youth magazines and accounts specialised in young and entertaining content resonate among Slovak youth on Instagram – Interez.sk, Refresher or EMEFKA SK/CZ were the three most commonly mentioned as favourite Instagram accounts.

YouTube is being used for similar purposes as TV, 65% of respondents claimed to watch their favourite channels regularly.

Young people care – 94% of respondents claimed to be interested in current domestic and world affairs.

Facebook still plays a key role as an information source while Instagram and YouTube were more considered to be “leisure activities”. 88% of all respondents admitted receiving information about world affairs from Facebook.

There is a disbalance between “readers” and “sharers” on Facebook – only 26% of respondents claimed they usually shared posts of others.

A great variety and accessibility of sources trespassing national boundaries make it more difficult to identify a few key influencers among the youth.

Nevertheless, top recurring influencers among young Slovaks were rappers Ego, Rytmus and Kali, radio and YouTube host Sajfa and the President of the Slovak Republic, Andrej Kiska.

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KEY FINDINGS
A rather passive consumption of information was identified among Slovak youth. The responses suggested that young Slovaks do not actively search for information, but they are aware of current developments – 94% claimed to be generally interested in both domestic and world affairs. Furthermore, many personalities from various spheres (media, art, politics) who have been crucial to recent political and social developments in the country recurred in the young's responses. For example, when asked about which journalists in the country recurred in the young's responses. For example, when asked about which journalists they considered as influential or shaping public opinion, the most repeated name was Ján Kuciak, a investigative journalist assassinated in February 2018. Had the survey been done prior to the tragic event, his name would probably not have topped the list of responses. On the other hand, their interest does not necessarily imply their proactiveness in searching for information via trustful channels.

To further confirm the assumption of youth being rather passive consumers, rather than active seekers, of information, many participants in the discussions admitted to start paying attention to a piece of news only after seeing that it had been shared by several people or pages. Social media and the algorithms used to filter information thus can play a crucial role in forming opinions.

Paradoxically, young people receive information mainly through the pages of media and news outlets on Facebook, but they claim to trust the content shared by their friends more than the content shared by the pages they like.

The trend of ever-growing relevance of the internet as a primary source of information is not new. Its dominant role has been confirmed in many studies1 and re-confirmed in our survey. In fact, more than half of respondents simply stated “internet” as one of the two sources of information that first came to their mind when thinking about receiving information about current affairs. Overall, “Internet and TV” was the most common response to the question above.

A generic formulation of the question enabled us to analyse what young people consider as a “source” of information and how they understand the term. While those who inclined more towards the generic categorical responses such as internet and TV constitute a relative majority, the strong position of Facebook should be emphasised as it belonged to the top 5 most frequent responses. Also, Facebook is the only specific social media platform mentioned in the top 5.

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ONLINE DOMINATES BUT TV IS NOT “DEAD”

While online sources clearly dominated the top sources that the respondents claimed to use in order to receive information about current affairs, TV still remains relatively strong. Despite the claims, recurring also during focus group discussions, that TV is no longer being used, it was the second most mentioned source that came to the minds of the young – more than a third of all responses explicitly mentioned TV. The role of TV thus should not be underestimated.

Of all sources mentioned, 55% were solely online and 22% were solely TV-based.

One of the most common ways of watching TV can possibly be through “multi-screening”. With the increased use of certain media in the background, it is becoming more common to consume multiple sources at the time – so-called “multi-screening”. While watching TV with their family, young people can simultaneously check Facebook and chat with their friends. Therefore, although TV was mentioned as a common source of information, it can often be watched only in the background. Instead of receiving the full amount of information, consumers thus must focus only on the parts catching their attention.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Family and friends were confirmed as an important element in opinion-forming and information consumption. Many responses included either family or friends as one of the two sources of information about current affairs coming to the mind of the respondents as first.

39% of respondents receive information on current events via Facebook through articles shared by their friends.

Receiving news from friends via Messenger or simply learning about new issues through offline interactions with friends and family were commonly mentioned during the discussions too. Participants themselves spoke of the fact that, by acquiring their information from Facebook, they are consciously getting news from their friends’ circles as well as from the pages they liked, mirroring their beliefs and personal interests. At the same time, however, 80% of young respondents stated they take information shared by a friend cautiously.

SLOVAK SOURCES DOMINATE

Slovak sources clearly dominate the information space of the young respondents – individual Slovak sources were mentioned four times more than foreign ones. Unsurprisingly, English sources came as the second, while rare cases of Hungarian, French and Russian sources also appeared within the responses.

TRUST

While Standard Eurobarometer regularly measures trust towards the media, Eurobarometer 464: Fake News and Disinformation Online from March 2018 examined people’s trust towards different types of the media. In their findings, 65% of young people aged between 15 – 24 years in Slovakia either tend to trust or totally trust the news and information accessed through online newspapers and news magazines, compared to 60% who expressed trust towards printed newspapers and news magazines, being the only age group where more people expressed a higher degree of trust towards online outlets than printed ones. Perhaps unsurprisingly, young people turned out most trustful towards the content accessed on online social networks and messaging apps – 55%.

Despite an ongoing debate about the tendencies of youth to distrust the system and the media, the Eurobarometer showed the age group of Slovaks between 15 – 24 being the most trustful towards information accessed through social networks, as well as video hosting websites and podcasts, which further confirms the downfall of the traditional media among the age group. This research went a step deeper while examining trust towards more specific types of outlets used in Slovakia.

QUALITY JOURNALISM STILL VALUED

Our research suggests that quality-journalism newspapers and public service broadcasters belong to the most trusted Slovak media, with around a fifth of respondents claiming to trust them completely. This is a significant finding.
given the constant pressure from many political representatives to discredit quality journalism. On the other hand, it might be worth mapping the development of trust towards the public service broadcaster (RTVS). Since mid-2016, RTVS news has been rated by the public as the most objective in Slovakia according to several surveys but significant changes have recently been made in the broadcaster’s management, resulting in resignations of several journalists.

**SEARCH FOR OBJECTIVITY**

During the focus group discussions, the most crucial factor for evaluating a source as trustful was its objectivity. Participants did not necessarily expect all the content to be unbiased but expected a clear distinction between reporting and a commentary or opinion piece. In addition, the young also evaluated trustworthiness of an article based who or what page shared it, naming tabloids as rather untrustworthy. This is in accordance with the findings in the online survey – the respondents expressed the highest degree of distrust towards the tabloids with almost 30% claiming they “rather do not trust” and 19% claiming to completely mistrust these outlets.
FACEBOOK

Many studies examining U.S. youth argue that young people are slowly abandoning Facebook. Similar tendencies can be observed in Central Europe. The main reasons, which were to a large extent confirmed in our regional study, From Online Battlefield to Loss of Trust? Perceptions and habits of youth in eight European countries, are that young people were annoyed by the omnipresence of advertisements and sponsored content dominating their walls; by the overflow of information, as well as by the presence of their parents and grandparents on the medium. However, the dominant role of Facebook among Slovak youth in information consumption is still incontestable:

88% of all respondents admitted receiving information about world affairs from Facebook.

68% of respondents indicated they were “interested in” and they stopped scrolling to view articles on current affairs while on Facebook.

Facebook was the third most mentioned source of information as a response to an open question asking respondents to identify two sources of information on current affairs that first came to their minds.

INFLUENCE

76% of all respondents claimed to receive some information on current affairs through the Facebook pages of media and news outlets that respondents had “liked”. The influence of Facebook pages and algorithms selecting what consumers see and do not see on Facebook is thus still valid and greatly influences the way young people access information, and, in the end, shapes their perception of the world. During the focus group discussions, many participants declared that they started paying attention to a piece of news only after seeing that it had been shared by several people or Pages.

HOW DO YOU RECEIVE INFORMATION ON CURRENT AFFAIRS WHEN ON FACEBOOK?

Through articles shared by my friends 39%
Through Facebook pages of media and news outlets 90%
Through sponsored content or recommended content 18%

Receiving news through Facebook pages in the news feed heavily depends on the types of pages young people like and follow. As the algorithms come in play based on individual behaviour of a user, they contribute to the selective news consumption and the creation of the so-called “information bubbles”.

WHICH CONTENT DO YOU TRUST MORE?

Shared by my friends 38%
Shared by the Facebook pages I like 23%
Both about the same 39%

The same, however, applies to friends’ posts as sources of information. The role of friends and family on Facebook as opinion shapers cannot be omitted with 39% of respondents claiming to receive information from them on Facebook. Despite the great majority (80%), of young people stating that they treat with caution the content shared by their friends, their friends’ posts are generally regarded as more trustworthy than the content shared by Facebook pages.

In addition to disbalance caused by the algorithms selecting what activity is featured on Facebook walls based on (previous) interactions with friends and Facebook pages, the evident disbalance is caused by the uneven proportion between the “readers” and the “sharers”. While almost 40% of respondents receive information on current affairs through friends’ posts, only 26% claim to share the content (similar findings have been noted during the focus group discussions). This underlines the problem of a lack of diversity of information and opinions and a lack of balanced discussion on social media that contribute to distorted pictures of the public opinion. As confirmed during the focus group discussions, young people tend to find their “favourite” friends sharing posts relevant to them who then often substitute the role of media in terms of providing information.

The passivity on the internet, and, respectively, on Facebook, is also linked to participation in the discussions below posts. During the focus group discussions, participants admitted they preferred not to join the discussion, even if they disagree. When coming across a disputable opinion, they prefer to discuss it with friends or people they know than online.

When you disagree with an opinion on Facebook, do you join a discussion?

Yes 26%
No 74%

1 in 5 does not check the source when sharing something on Facebook

During the focus group discussions, the majority of youngsters claimed that they were able to distinguish hoaxes and disinformation from quality and trusted sources. Their confidence was mainly based on the arguments that unlike older generations, they have been growing up on the internet and thus can distinguish credible content. However, despite these confident claims, a little above 20% of respondents who said they shared content on Facebook from time to time admitted they do not check a source before sharing anything on Facebook. So theoretically, every fifth post shared by a friend on a wall of a young Slovak could be from an unverified source.
INSTAGRAM

Do you have an Instagram account?

89% Yes
11% No

Instagram is widely used and mostly popular among young people whom the platform can be thankful for its major increase in popularity. While data from Reuters’ Digital News Report 2018 indicate that 18% of Slovaks use Instagram, a study conducted by the Slovak Youth Council shows that 39% of young Slovaks use the platform daily for at least 10 minutes per day.

MORE INTIMACY AND FREEDOM

During the focus group discussions, many young people voiced their preference of using Instagram over Facebook as the main social media platform, especially to follow and stay in touch with their peers. Instagram was perceived as less political and commercialised, as young people tend to be overwhelmed by all the sponsored content and ads featured on Facebook. At the same time, Instagram is perceived as a more intimate and personal platform focusing more on an everyday life. As such, it provides more flexibility in choosing what to see and whom to follow. This is, to a large extent, also due to Instagram Stories, praised by young people for providing them with the freedom to share and disclose more personal and immediate moments of their life, knowing that the stories disappear in 24 hours. This platform was viewed by many as “less serious”, citing that they can even post a picture “in pyjamas”.

VARIETY

The rise of social media created an unprecedented opportunity for many to start their career with a personal brand only by communicating with and gaining followers. The global use of the platforms has also created a space to surpass both state and regional borders by connecting with anyone across the world. The interconnectedness and accessibility thus led to further diversification of role models and influencers who young audiences follow. This phenomenon can be best demonstrated by their behaviour on Instagram. When asked about the favourite Instagram accounts, a wide range was returned – in 1113 responses, 893 different accounts or role models had been identified.

When sorted by categories, the accounts related to sports or sportsmen (8%), accounts of friends and family (8%) and accounts with funny content (7%) were the most commonly mentioned. Young people are also interested in following YouTubers (6%), their favourite (primarily Slovak lifestyle) web pages or magazines (6%), musicians’ accounts (6%), travel content (5%) and other publicly known persons (5%).

The results showed that accounts specialised in youth-content and youth-magazines resonate significantly among the young. The three most commonly mentioned Instagram accounts were online Slovak lifestyle magazines Interesz.sk and Refresh or EMEFKA SK/CZ sharing funny content mostly in the form of memes. Denník N, a quality Slovak journal, was the 5th most mentioned Slovak account overall.

The top 3 Slovak personalities mentioned were a YouTuber and radio host Sajfa (mentioned 25 times out of 1113 responses), rapper Rytmus (16 times) and rapper Ego (14 times). These numbers further demonstrate the diversification of the youth’s interests, which, on one hand, gives them the freedom to truly find role models who match or represent their interests while allowing them to explore and go beyond the usual suspects. On the other hand, it makes it difficult to identify common credible influencers for the target group.

The international character of the platform is also demonstrated by the popularity of foreign accounts, which were mentioned approximately twice as much as the Slovak ones.

TOP 3 FOREIGN INSTAGRAM ACCOUNTS:
- 9GAG
- National Geographic
- GoPro

TOP 3 FOREIGN INSTAGRAM PERSONALITIES:
- Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson
- Cristiano Ronaldo
- Elon Musk
As the fourth most popular website on the internet where hundreds of hours of content are being uploaded every minute, the diversity of YouTube’s content is what makes the platform popular, especially among the young crowd. In fact, while according to Digital News Report, 64% of Slovaks use YouTube, 93% of youth in our survey between 16-24 claimed to watch YouTube.

As the focus group discussions proved, the main purpose people go to YouTube is for music, entertainment and education, which further proves the increasing role of the platform as the supplement for TV. Similarly to watching regular shows on the TV, around two thirds of respondents claimed to watch specific channels or shows on a regular basis. 43% of regular viewers watch their favourite channels from 1 to 3 times a week, while during the focus group discussions, the majority stated they watched YouTube on a daily basis. This gives many organisations or companies aiming at transmitting a message a solid reason for long-term cooperation with the channels’ owners.

The phenomenon of “YouTubers”, i.e. video bloggers or vloggers, of whom a majority started their careers by creating videos on YouTube, is widely debated since many YouTube personalities have joined the group of the strongest influencers within younger communities. Older focus groups participants generally agreed that entertaining content generated by individual YouTube personalities is mostly watched by younger teenagers (12-16). If someone admitted watching the YouTubers’ channels, it was usually framed as a “guilty pleasure”. Overall, the most followed Slovak on the platform is David Dobrik with 9.2 million subscribers (in October 2018). However, living in the U.S. and communicating in English, he does not top the charts for Slovak speakers. The most popular Slovak YouTuber producing content in Slovak, according to the number of subscribers, is “GoGo” with his channel GoGoManTV of 1.8 million subscribers.

The most favorite Slovak channels mentioned in the survey were GogoManTV (125 times), Sajfa (105 times) and menameselassie (84 times) – entertainers who offer mixed content of personal life, challenges and funny and gaming videos. Interest in accounts that offer a mixture of content was also demonstrated in the discussions, where Sajfa’s work was provided as an example of videos showing content beyond the personal life of the vlogger (e.g. travel, fun). While “GoGo” and “menameselassie” can be classified as typical YouTube “stars” who built their base of followers and popularity by starting to publish videos on YouTube, “Sajfa” is a well-known personality known to the Slovak public as a radio host.

The second most mentioned category after YouTuber personalities were regular host shows. The most popular was a weekly show “Ťažký týždeň s Jánom Gorduličom” (A hard week with Ján Gordulič, mentioned 34 times). The show is a political satire focusing on the Slovak political scene and current issues in Slovakia, hosted by Ján Gordulič, an entertainer. “Hard week” is currently the only political satire show based on the TV host model watched regularly in Slovakia. This is proven by the fact that, of the next shows mentioned, the most often were US-based Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (19 times), Late Night with James Corden (13 times) or their hosts Ellen DeGeneres (17 times), Jimmy Fallon (14 times) and Jimmy Kimmel (8 times).

The findings confirm the premise identified by students themselves as well – YouTube’s main purpose is to entertain.
While distrust in media and confusion within the information environment increases, the adherence to traditional influence “pillars” in the lives of young people remains strong. Parents and teachers preserve a role of key opinion-shapers as this research shows. The willingness of young people to listen to and consider the opinion of their parents and teachers more than those of journalists, political figures and public personalities confirms that despite (or due to?) changing patterns of information consumption, the traditional role models still play a key role in opinion formation. However, the average age of our respondents is 19.1, which already counts with a higher degree of maturity and respect. 

At the same time, about 50% of the respondents acknowledge the opinion of journalists and their favourite public personalities. Despite Standard Eurobarometer showing relatively low levels of trust towards the media – in the survey from March 2018, 43% of young people between 15 – 24 expressed trust towards the media, compared to 50% expressing distrust – this research demonstrates that the journalists’ role should not be underestimated.  

On the contrary, the numbers confirm that more segments of society should be involved in working with youth. The so-called “whole of society” approach should be systematically implemented to involve schools, relatives, media as well as publicly known personalities.
A great variety of channels, accounts and personalities available to follow across the world make it impossible to identify a few key influencers who would appeal to youth. This was confirmed by the survey, in which the majority of young people could not name a single persona who is the most admired or followed by the people of their age. This diversification, on the other hand, enabled the rise of the so-called micro influencers whose impact is much stronger within their smaller communities. Cooperating with such micro influencers has begun to be used as a more efficient way of engaging with the audience as a higher degree of trust and engagement can be observed within smaller communities.12

Nevertheless, several key publicly known personalities were recurring within the survey responses:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politicians</th>
<th>Journalists</th>
<th>Publicly known personalities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can you name a political figure whose opinion you listen to/is important for you?</td>
<td>Can you name a journalist whose opinion you listen to/is important for you?</td>
<td>Can you name a celebrity whose opinion you listen to/is important for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of 193 who considered the politicians’ opinion important:</td>
<td>Out of 787 who considered the journalists’ opinion important:</td>
<td>Out of 787 who considered the publicly known personalities’ opinion important:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 62 Andrej Kiska</td>
<td>&gt; 48 Ján Kuciačik</td>
<td>&gt; 26 Sajfa</td>
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<td>&gt; 23 Richard Sulík</td>
<td>&gt; 33 Monika Tóthová</td>
<td>&gt; 21 Leonardo DiCaprio</td>
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<td>&gt; 17 Igor Matovič</td>
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<td>&gt; 11 Robert Fico</td>
<td>&gt; 20 Marek Vagovič</td>
<td>&gt; 16 Rytmus</td>
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<td>&gt; 14 Štefan Hrib</td>
<td>&gt; 15 Selena Gomez</td>
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Musicians, especially rappers, and YouTube stars still dominate the online world of young Slovaks aged between 16-24. 40% of responses consisted of a musician as a person whom young people believe their peers follow. Out of these, 80% were rappers. YouTube personalities come as the second with recurrence in 20% of responses. When asked to name a publicly known person they themselves admire or follow, many more responses returned containing “no one” or “no one particular”. This corresponds to the findings from the focus groups discussions, in which students were generally reluctant to name people they admired. The matter was particularly sensitive when the issue of trust was brought up. Despite following certain influencers, young respondents emphasised it did not mean they trusted them. Still, a relative majority of responses (28%) was linked to music artists and producers.

While the results show that top influencers come from Slovakia’s domestic public space, overall, more non-Slovak public personalities were mentioned than Slovak ones (Czechs constitute only 7% of “foreign”), which further proves the blurring of state boundaries in the online information sphere. This finding, on one hand, makes it more difficult to reach certain groups of young people who generally prefer to follow non-Slovak source and personalities, on the other hand, it creates a greater opportunity for the young to stop perceiving current affairs within nation-state boundaries. The most popular foreign role model mentioned across the responses was Tesla-founder and entrepreneur Elon Musk.
8 The Moz Top 500, MOZ, https://moz.com/top500
10 In October 2018