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“I Use Social Media as an Escape from All That” Personal Platform Architecture and the Labor of Avoiding News

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ABSTRACT

We examine the work that U.S. young adults undertake to design and maintain their personal media worlds across digital platforms, and the consequences of those practices for news use. Drawing on 50 in-depth interviews with 18–34-year-olds, including a shared reading of participants’ most-used social media platforms, we develop the concept of *personal platform architecture* and articulate links between this architectural work and other forms of digital labor. We illustrate the types of labor young platforms users engage in as they construct and curate across multiple “public” and “private” spaces online, with an emphasis on architectural labor that leads away from encounters with news.

KEYWORDS

Media repertoires; news use; youth; social media; new media

Introduction

News use practices are transforming rapidly among younger cohorts as their reliance on digital platforms continues to grow. In the U.S., for example, roughly 40% of 18–24-year-olds rely primarily on social media platforms to access news, and substantial numbers of young adults encounter little or no news in the course of their everyday activities (Edgerly 2017; Newman et al. 2022). This has led some scholars to call for renewed focus on understanding the informational practices of young adults (Peters et al. 2022).

We take up that call by proposing a new conceptual lens through which to investigate how young adults come to encounter (or avoid) news *via* digital platforms. Our approach begins by taking seriously the work young adults must do to build and maintain media repertoires that include multiple platforms, each of which affords unique ways of organizing audiences, content exposure, and the possibilities for publicity and privacy. We observe this work across 50 in-depth interviews with 18–34-year-olds in the U.S., including a shared reading of participants’ most-used digital platforms, to understand how the labors to manage one’s own media world shape opportunities for exposure to news, and how these labors traverse micro, meso, and macro spaces within and across social media platforms.

We illustrate (1) the substantial efforts that young adults put into the construction and maintenance of their personal public spheres, (2) that these labors are undertaken within the constraints set by platform companies themselves and depend on the constellation of platforms an individual uses, and (3) that these labors change the structure of opportunities for engagement with news content, even though these consequences are often unintended and incidental. We propose the concept of *personal platform architecture* as a framework through which to analyze these everyday labors, arguing that seeing young adults as active builders toward an idealized personal media environment helps to clarify why news engagement among this cohort remains elusive.

We describe three forms of everyday labor that our participants undertake to manage the presence (or absence) of news within their personal public spheres: 1) Emotional, 2) immaterial, and 3) visibility management labor. Across each of these, we find that participants work hard to build and manage boundaries between public and private, and to exert some control over their encounters with news. They are active architects of their own media worlds that arc *across* platforms and that are instantiated *within* platforms in multiple ways.

The framework of personal platform architecture provides a valuable tool for wrestling with a key question for scholarship about meso news spaces: Through what practices do social media users connect with such spaces, and why? Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik (2020) outline a hopeful vision of news engagement in meso realms between the public and private. However, we find that for the American young adults in our interview sample, meso spaces are used to *escape* from the news rather than to engage with it. Meso spaces can feel like a safe haven from accidental encounters with news content, especially during times when high volumes of negative news are expected (such as the Covid-19 pandemic and presidential election cycles). When we look across the constellation of platforms used by our respondents (in the U.S., where Whatsapp is not currently widely used), meso spaces play only a small role in the complex set of spaces that make up their personal media worlds. These findings are yet another reminder of the complex dependencies of platformization as shaped by national context (Villi et al. 2022).

Literature Review

The Platformization of News Consumption

We are witnessing rapid changes across age cohorts in how audiences encounter and engage with news. These changes are part of a broader process of the platformization of news consumption. Digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok act as intermediaries between news organizations and their audiences (Nielsen and Ganter 2022). News organizations have become dependent on platform companies for audience reach. Audiences encounter news content on social media platforms as a byproduct of their everyday usage (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018). Data about what users watch and read are collected by platform companies and used in algorithmic ranking and selection of future content options (Thorson et al. 2021).

We situate our study within one important aspect of the platformization of news consumption: Digitally situated individuals are positioned to take on roles that were previously the purview of journalistic professionals. Prior research has highlighted the ways in which, for example, social media users have come to feel they should rely on their own best judgment in evaluating news credibility rather than trusting in news institutions (Nelson and Lewis 2023; Schwarzenegger 2020; Tandoc et al. 2018). Feedback loops between users' content selections and algorithmic responses (enabled by datafication) create new, more reciprocal relationships between user preferences and content exposure—to some extent upending widely understood news gatekeeping processes (Thorson and Wells 2016). Audiences have been characterized as “producers” of news, acknowledging that digital platform users have new opportunities to be part of the news production process, to create their own versions of the news, and to share, circulate, and reframe news content (Bruns 2009; Wang 2016).

Changes to the role of news audiences open up new possibilities for reciprocal relationships between audience members and journalists. Metrics that capture audience interest can be used to inform engagement initiatives by news organizations (Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt 2018). Similarly, the vast “virtual geographies” (Papacharissi, 2009) of platforms enable news organizations to innovate by building spaces where journalists and audience members can interact (Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim 2020). Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik (2020) suggest possibilities for news engagement in platform spaces that exist in-between the public and the private, such as Facebook or WhatsApp groups. They build on a long line of research showing that news engagement can—and does—sometimes happen within online communities (e.g., Jenkins et al. 2006; Swartz and Driscoll 2014), and argue that *meso news spaces* within platforms have substantial potential to invite audiences more deeply into news processes.

We observe that these possibilities for news engagement outcomes in platform spaces are contingent on whether and how platform users are connected to news spaces and news content. As we begin to outline below, digital platform users are now also positioned as the architects of their own media environments—potentially with consequences for news exposure and engagement. As such, the pathways through which users encounter and connect with meso news spaces (or fail to do so) are likely complex and not based on individual motivation alone.

Young Adults and the Building Materials of Platform Ecosystems

The platformization of news consumption, particularly on social media platforms, has especially affected news use among younger adults (Clark and Marchi 2016; Peters et al. 2022; Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and Sixto-García 2022). A majority of U.S. young adults now primarily learn about the world through social media platforms. For more than 80% of 18 to 29-year-olds, digital devices are their preferred mode of news access, compared with 64% of 30 to 49-year-olds (Forman-Katz and Matsa 2022). The constellation of platforms where young adults encounter news are changing as well, in patterns rather different than those observed in older cohorts. Where 30 to 49-year-olds still rely heavily on Facebook, 18 to

29-year-olds report encountering news on Snapchat and TikTok (Liedke and Matsa 2022; Matsa 2022). Young adults are more likely to use “side-door” sources of information such as news aggregators and search engines, in addition to social media (Newman et al. 2022).

This state of affairs has led to a great deal of empirical research on how youth and young adults navigate publicity and privacy in regard to their social media use. In the U.S. in particular, there has been a slower shift to closed, group-based chat platforms. Compared to many other countries, Americans are much less likely to use WhatsApp (eMarketer 2022). Only about a quarter of U.S. adults report using WhatsApp (Auxier and Anderson 2021). This suggests that overall, the opportunity structures to engage in meso news spaces may vary across national contexts, dependent in part on differences in the popularity and availability of meso spaces more broadly.

Platform Architecture and the Geographies of News Consumption

Emergent from the interviews reported below, we propose the concept of *personal platform architecture* as a route to investigate the everyday labors that young adults undertake to build their own media environments. *Personal platform architecture* is a concept entered into a crowded conceptual field. The “spatial turn” within journalism studies has led to greater attention to the spaces and places within which news is consumed, and use of the word “architecture” has been widespread within that literature (Peters 2012; Reese 2016). In this section of the paper, we briefly outline the theoretical lenses with which we entered our interviews, toward distinguishing personal platform architecture from closely related concepts in the field. We then offer a distinct conceptual definition below, after reporting on our interview findings.

One approach to consider platforms as spaces for the circulation and consumption of news is through analysis of how platforms themselves are designed. There is a large literature on platform architecture in this sense. This literature focuses on how the design of platforms shapes or nudges user behavior. Papacharissi (2009) offered an early analysis of the “virtual geographies” of social media sites. She argued that the underlying architecture of platforms sets the grounds for the types of user interactions that emerge. Papacharissi’s analysis illustrated that architectural features inclusive of structure, design, and organization of each platform create distinct types of boundaries between public and private—and, in turn, afford different styles of user communicative behavior and modes of self-presentation.

More recently, Blaschke et al. (2019) developed a taxonomy of digital platforms based on their architectural elements, theorizing which different dimensions and characteristics of platforms distinguish them from one another. At a more macro level of analysis, van Dijk, Poell, and de Waal (2018) outlined the architecture of platform ecosystems as an “assemblage of networked platforms, governed by a particular set of mechanisms that shapes everyday practices” (p. 4).

These studies analyze platform architecture as a noun—that is, as the outcome of the work of coders and designers at platform companies; a set of digital features and

functions that are ready to be filled up and filled in by user action. In contrast, our emphasis is on architecture as action. We are focused on the architectural practices of users, not of employees at platform companies. Van Dijk and colleagues' (2018) platform ecosystem is the background against which digitally situated individuals are positioned to create their own individualized media world—or their personal public sphere, in the term used by John and Gal (2018).

The concept of personal platform architecture recognizes that the rise of digital platforms has enabled new forms of activity on the part of users. This capacity to select content, to customize, to curate, and to personalize has been studied from a variety of perspectives, primarily in the context of the “high choice” media environment (e.g., Dylko 2016; Edgerly 2015; Merten 2021; Sundar and Nass 2001). What has been less well explored in this diffuse literature is a focus on actions that change the structure of a user's personal public sphere by opening up or closing down the possibilities of connection with news content not only by curating content within a specific platform (Merten 2021), which we refer to as *micro level architecture*, but also by architecting connections at the *meso* level, connecting to group spaces in-between public and private, and *macro* level architecture, which includes adding, deleting, or pausing usage of a platform altogether. Personal platform architecture is comprised of actions that alter the flows of communication received by a user both in the short term and into the future.

A nascent concept of *personal platform architecture* highlights the active building activity undertaken by young curators of their digital environments, but we also emphasize that personal platform architecture is not based on individual agency alone. Architectural practices are both constrained and enabled by platforms themselves—by virtual geographies—in terms of their design and functionality, as well as the social contexts within which personal platform architects are embedded (Jansson and Lindell 2015). Platform users are “nudged” in their architectural behavior and attention to content by architectural features of platforms themselves, such as recommendations and algorithmic curation, among other means (Wu, Taneja, and Webster 2021). In turn, even quite small individual-level actions (simply watching a video or liking a post) have architectural consequences, because these actions are read into data and used to inform the ranking or availability of future content (Thorson et al. 2021).

Personal Platform Architecture as Digital Labor

“Digital labor” has become a central concept for understanding—and critiquing—the political economy of social media platforms (Fuchs 2015). At its core, the concept of digital labor is defined as the extraction of unpaid work by digital media users (as they click, browse, and share) for the purpose of generating profit for platform companies. This labor is not always seen by platform users as unpleasant work, leading Archer (2019) and others to characterize digital labor as “playbour,” in the sense that it typically emerges from leisure contexts. The literatures on digital labor have examined a broad array of practices ranging from the datafication of everyday platform activities to sell advertising to the self-branding efforts of online influencers and platform-facilitated work associated with the gig economy (e.g., Uber, Amazon's

Mechanical Turk) (Gandini 2021). Within media studies, there is a longstanding awareness of audiences as both active consumers and producers who, as users, engage in unpaid work that they enjoy but that also produces profits for companies in which they do not share—they are understood as prosumers or produsers (Ritzer, 2015; Bruns 2013).

Much like our platform architects, digital creators construct online portfolios. This construction is a multi-dimensional process that entails accounting for overarching, platform-specific power structures, such as algorithmic inference. Their labor involves assembling multiple platforms to construct a collective means of telling a story about their professional identity. When architecting a portfolio, creators mold their content to platform culture, design affordances, and the audiences that use those platforms. The labor associated with forging these connections also requires creators to negotiate the amount of external influence on their work. But, the connections they encounter and enable collectively compliment one another with the portfolio as a multi-platform system. The temporally dynamic nature of these multi-platform portfolios help creators keep up with the daily demand of content sequencing and curation, along with staying relevant and visible. For creators, this intentional approach to digital labor with offline impact centers on increasing their profit or return while decreasing the labor expended to accomplish these needs (Cohen 2019; Scolere 2019; Thorson et al. 2021). This labor that creators undertake in creating and curating their online presence is a form of visibility labor. Studies within other domains have highlighted other types of digital labor such as the immaterial labor of seeking out and piecing together information from disparate sources (Mathews and Ali 2022) and the labor of emotional regulation while undertaking digital work (Gandini 2019).

The lens of digital labor is useful for understanding personal platform architecture among digitally situated young adults. Through this lens, we can consider how platform users are positioned to take on responsibility for building out the media systems through which they are (or are not) exposed to news, as well as to decide for themselves what to believe—both roles that in the immediately prior era were reserved for journalistic actors and reinforced by widespread institutional trust. Platforms and their affordances are constantly changing, as are the flows of news and information distributed *via* platforms from sources of many kinds. The “spaces” of information and sociability within and across platforms are constantly evolving as well. As such, the social shaping of technological affordances, falling somewhere between technological determinism and social constructivism debate (see Bucher & Helmond, 2017) not only requires ongoing architectural labor but affords users limited agency in doing so. We thus apply the lens of digital labor to our investigation of personal platform architecture.

Accordingly, we ask:

RQ1: How does personal platform architecture shape opportunities for exposure to news?

RQ2: What kinds of labor are involved in personal platform architecture related to news consumption?

RQ3: In their platform architecture related to news consumption, how do US young adults make use of meso spaces?

Method

Between October 2020 and March 2021, we conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with 18-34-year-olds in the U.S. We recruited participants through a university paid community recruiting pool in addition to local Craigslist, Reddit, NextDoor, and Facebook Groups. Participants included 33 females, 16 males, and one non-binary person. Of these, 38% were between the ages of 21 and 25, 22% were 26-30, 22% were 31-34, and 18% were 18-20. Our participants were primarily White (62%), but also included participants who are African American (10%), Asian (18%), two or more races (6%), Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (2%), and Hispanic (2%). The highest level of completed education was a 4-year degree for half our participants (52%) followed by high school or equivalent (28%), associate or trade degree (6%), graduate degree (6%) and four (8%) who declined to provide educational information.

Interviews were conducted online due to pandemic-related research restrictions and were approved by the Michigan State University Institutional Review Board under STUDY00005013. The semi-structured interview guide focused on participants' media use, online and offline, their habits of seeking out (or avoiding) news and political content, information sources for learning about the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 U.S. presidential election, their perceptions of source credibility and trust, and their understandings of the role of algorithms and recommendation processes in shaping content visibility.

During the interviews, participants engaged in a co-browsing task with the interviewer. This approach to data collection was selected for two key reasons. First, co-browsing provides researchers with observational data on the types and quantity of content that participants are exposed to, circumnavigating platform data-collection restrictions and accounting for algorithmic differences of the user (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018). Secondly, participants' narration of their feeds helps participants answer questions through pointing out examples as well as offering opportunities for researchers to ask emergent questions based on an individual's feed and practices (Jørgensen 2016).

We asked participants to describe how they used their preferred digital platforms, such as the audiences they thought about when posting, the content they encountered, sought out or shared, and any routines or habits. Participants were then invited to share their screen and walk the interviewer through their top three most frequently used social media platforms, as defined by the participant. Platforms that were frequently shared with us were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, TikTok, and YouTube. Review of each platform was typically limited to the participant's user profile as well as their feed. In some cases, the participant would volunteer additional content, such as Instagram Stories, or Facebook group profile pages. Some participants chose to log in to their platforms on their computers; others held their phone up to their computer's camera to walk the interviewers through platforms they could not access on their computer.

Due to the sensitive nature of individuals' social media feeds, several precautionary steps were taken to protect our participants. First, participants were advised that they were not required to share their screen and could stop screen sharing at any time in the written consent prior to interview scheduling. Second, during our interviews, we advised participants that only audio would be recorded and the only

documentation of the content on their feed would be limited to audio transcription and observational field notes.

Third, at the beginning of the interview, the interviewer reminded participants about the screen sharing part of the interview, prior to receiving audio consent. This review provided the interviewer and participants the opportunity to have open discussions about any privacy concerns and how those could be addressed, proactively. For instance, one participant was a member of a Facebook group that was affiliated with group therapy. Group members were not permitted to break confidentiality, online or offline. To maintain this during the interview, the participant would scroll slowly through their feed and once they encountered the name of the group, they would immediately turn off the screen, scroll through the content, and then turn their screen sharing on again.

All participants were active social media users. On average, participants used 3.02 different social media platforms. One participant only used one platform; 14 used 4 or 5 platforms. Patterns of preferred platform use reflected what is seen in U.S. national survey data (Auxier and Anderson 2021): Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were the most commonly used platforms among our sample.

Interviews ranged from 45 min to two hours and were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. We inductively coded the transcribed interviews using an iterative process in which both authors read through transcripts and generated initial open codes while engaging with relevant literature. The authors then discussed those codes and organized them into higher level themes and identified connections (Strauss and Corbin 1990). All interviews were then coded for a second time based on the smaller set of high-level codes. Based on this second coding, we began to develop the theoretical concept of *personal platform architecture*. Using that concept, we returned to the coded transcripts to refine our analysis and develop the findings reported below.

Findings

The findings begin by addressing RQ1 through outlining the empirical and theoretical background for the concept of *personal platform architecture*. Then, we address RQ2 by outlining three kinds of labor that guide the building practices in personal platform architecture, and how these labors relate to news consumption. Finally, we address RQ3, which explores how our participants connect with meso spaces and the links between meso spaces and encounters with news.

Personal Platform Architecture

Our first research question asked how personal platform architecture shapes opportunities for exposure to news. To answer this question requires us to first briefly outline the empirical grounding for the concept of personal platform architecture. The theoretical background we brought to the data analysis trained our focus on moments in the interviews when participants articulated how they made changes to the digital platforms they use. Participants described undertaking frequent changes to their platforms, along three scales: (1) *Micro* level changes internal to within-platform

interactions. These include design decisions about, for example, who or what to friend or follow (or whether to remove or mute people or content), what content to post and where, whether to “like” or otherwise engage with certain pieces of content (or people), and whether and how to make use of platform settings that affect privacy and visibility; (2) *Meso* level changes that shape participants’ connections to social platform spaces “in between” public and private (Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik 2020). For example, joining a new Facebook group or creating a “finsta” (an additional Instagram account typically reserved only for the closest of friends); and (3) *Macro* level changes, which involved adding or removing an entire platform from one’s personal public sphere.

In iterating between conceptual work and analysis of the interview data, we turned to classical concepts from architectural theory to explicate the micro, meso, and macro level changes our participants were making on (and across) their platforms as architectural. First, our findings highlight that personal platform architecture is *vernacular architecture*. In the field of architecture, vernacular buildings are those that are produced by “non-experts.” These non-experts often create design rules of their own making, in part by observing and following the practices of those around them (Brown and Maudlin 2012; Oliver, 2006). These constructions are the product of ordinary people working with the knowledge they have, typically deeply rooted in local needs and shaped by local culture, as well as by availability of construction materials.

Like the architecture of physical spaces, platform architectural practices are contoured by “complex social and cultural relations, spatially constituted” (Brown and Maudlin 2012, 341). For our participants, personal platform architecture was influenced, first, by friends and important social others. At the macro level, participants reported adding or removing platforms from usage based on the presence of their friends, Nora (24) added Instagram to her personal public sphere based on gentle ribbing from her social group. She told us, “I’d be tagged in Instagram posts, and they’d put “Instagram-less Nora” for years. And then, I finally got one. They’re like, “Oh, my God. See, you got one.” Renee (34) keeps her Facebook “just mostly to see what my friends or family are doing,” even though she otherwise no longer finds much value in the platform. Joel holds onto Snapchat because that is where his friends are: “I don’t send so many pictures and videos on there. I just have some group chats with friends from out of state and stuff that were started on Snapchat and never really moved off Snapchat.”

Vernacular architecture is also characterized by temporality. Professional architects are trained to view a completed building as timeless; whereas in vernacular architecture “all buildings are incomplete and subject to change, as the occupants constantly alter and adapt their surroundings in response to changing cultural, economic, social and technological conditions” (Brown and Maudlin, 2012, 354). The same is true of the everyday practices of personal platform architecture.

Gabriela (20) describes how she chooses to drop a platform from her personal public sphere. “I don’t know why it goes out of style, but it just does. You get tired of it. Maybe the platform changes or the platform doesn’t change and because the platform doesn’t change, it’s like you get bored with it because everything else is changing.” Just as the functioning of platforms themselves is always in a state of

transience (Barrett and Kreiss 2019), so too are the labors of personal platform architecture never finished.

Our findings also highlight that personal platform architecture is *functionalist architecture*. Characterized by a “form follows function” design approach, architectural choices are undertaken to fulfill specific needs (Sullivan 1896). Interview participants articulated this “functionalism” in their architecture when describing their decision to add, drop, or continue using a specific platform.

For example, personal platform architectural practices can be undertaken to serve the emotional needs of users. Ash (28) joined Facebook groups about chronic illness as they struggled to find a diagnosis—seeking information, but also looking for a more intimate community in which they could share their experiences; Renee (34) opened and closed her Twitter account three times in just the last year alone to protect her mental health. Ellie (21) relies on Reddit “flairs” to filter out information that is not depressing. Lilly (18) got off Instagram entirely to avoid having her eating disorder, which was in remission, algorithmically retriggered. Instead, she became active on woodcarving subreddits.

As has been found in other interview studies, news content was largely peripheral to the social media experiences of our participants when they talked about how they made changes to their platforms (Schwarzenegger 2020). But as we will show below, the deprioritization of news in these architectural practices are highly consequential for news exposure.

“I Use Social Media as an Escape from All That”

Our interview protocol was designed to explore encounters with news and political content across participants’ social media platforms. Given that focus, it was surprising how difficult it was to keep the focus on news during the interviews. Reading together through the spaces of participants’ three most-used platforms, journalistic news was most notable in its absence. This insight led to our focus on personal platform architectural practices as labor, and specifically, the labor that young social media users are positioned to undertake as regards to news. Participants prioritized content that helped them get through their day: physically, mentally and/or emotionally. In cases illustrated below, participants exerted considerable energy to create cross-platform personal public spheres that kept news out or contained where it was encountered.

The Labor of Platform Architecture

RQ2 asked what kinds of labor are involved in personal platform architecture related to news consumption, while RQ3 asked how U.S. young adults make use of meso spaces in their platform architecture related to news consumption. We identified three types of platform architectural labor related to news use: Emotional labor, immaterial labor, and visibility labor. Each of these forms of labor had implications for news seeking, news avoidance, and evaluations of news among our participants.

Emotional Labor

Emotional labor is managing one's own feelings or managing the emotions of others (Hochschild 1983). Early research on emotional labor focused on service workers who were required to manage their emotions as a necessary skill to retain their job (Wharton 2009). Our findings suggest, similarly, that young adult platform users are required to manage their (often negative) emotions as the price of using digital platforms (see also Gandini 2019). Interview participants described themselves as working hard to maintain emotional well-being in the context of sometimes challenging experiences on platforms. A core tension animating this emotional labor for our participants was the desire to stay connected with friends and family warring with the emotional distress that incidental content encounters with news can induce. Personal platform architectural practices were used to resolve this tension.

Lina (24) told us, in response to "today's political climate," that "I did get rid of Twitter, I loved Twitter when I had it, but it just got to be really, really toxic. And it was detrimental to my mental health. So, I wound up just completely deleting my account and I felt a lot better after I did." Ash (24) struggled with the decision to stay on Facebook, where they often saw content that threatened their self-identity concerning gender, sexuality, and chronic illness, particularly because they had ended their relationship with several family members. However, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, the amount of news coverage on their feed and the emotional toll that it took pushed Ash to the brink of deletion. In the end, Ash decided to stay on the platform but re-architected their connections, shifting toward semi-private meso spaces within the platform: "I drastically decreased my friends... But I didn't want to completely delete my Facebook because there are some people that I genuinely only communicate with on Facebook, and there are a lot of Facebook groups that I'm a part of that I find very beneficial. I spend less time per day on Facebook, but I think it's more quality." For Ash, these topical meso spaces were a place to escape from incidental encounters with news that were more common on the main Facebook newsfeed.

Experiencing a particular platform or a space within a platform as "toxic" was tightly linked to encounters with unwanted content. Elissa (34) architects her personal public sphere as a way of managing negative emotions from hearing about sad events, by managing who she follows and their visibility, before decreasing her use: "because we have so much access to information, it's just, everything's just in your face, you can find anything. So, you hear one sad story somewhere and you're like, "Oh my God, this is terrible"... And every time you go on social media, and you see a story like that, oh my God. You're like, "How do I live like this and all these tragic things are happening to everybody?"

In this way, emotional labor and platform architecture can together function as an engine of news avoidance. Nadia (28) said, "So if I really want to avoid it, which happens, I stay off Facebook, Facebook has the most in-your-face political stuff that's not necessarily fact checked and stuff." Martin (27) colorfully described Facebook as "definitely like the herpes of news." He engaged in micro level platform architecture to remove politics from his Facebook in the run-up to the U.S. presidential election. "[Politics is] just everywhere... I know that recently Facebook has at the very top,

like, "Are you registered to vote?" And I just turned that off today. I found out how to do it while listening to the radio."

One interesting complement to this phenomenon is the use of meso spaces as an "escape" from more public spaces within platforms. Meso spaces, such as Facebook groups, are more tightly controlled than the newsfeed spaces on Facebook or Instagram, in terms of who can create content (group members only) and the type of content shared (typically related to the topic of the group). Participants told us it is easier to avoid emotionally toxic content in these spaces.

Tracee (24) described joining Facebook groups for crafting tips and to learn how to train her new dog. As she enthusiastically described the groups she's in, Tracee mused, "I think one of the reasons I set it up like this [relying mostly on groups] for my social media is there's so much going on in the world, good and bad news, that I like to use my social media as an escape and a distraction from that. If I see something that makes me upset or sad I don't want to follow that." Nadia (28) told us, "If I'm looking for pure escapism purposes, I have a group called This is Not Flavortown Where the Heck am I, where people post really disgusting food or stuff like that. So if I want to escape, I go to those silly Facebook groups." In some cases, this escape to meso spaces can help platform users avoid news.

Among our participants, we did not encounter anyone who participated in Facebook groups that were dedicated to sharing news (such as a group curated by a news organization). We did however encounter Facebook groups that would minimally meet Tenenboim and Kligler-Vilenchik (2020) definition of *meso news spaces* as places "where participants are involved in news-related processes." For example, Joel (23) joined a local group about the COVID-19 pandemic. As Joel looked through the group feed with the interviewer, he noted the presence of local news.

I'm looking at it now... In this group, one of the posts is linked from our local news station, talking about new restrictions coming. Then we've got it looks like a bunch of news articles... A lot of them are just from the local news stations. I'm going to trust those pretty much by default. I've never heard any false news from them, so I would trust any of those.

Immaterial Labor

Immaterial labor is unpaid work that produces an intangible or less visible outcome, such as communication or knowledge generation (Hardt 1999). Widely explored empirically in research on amateur platform content producers, the concept is also useful to make sense of the work young adults do to seek out, make sense of, and authenticate information across their platform repertoires. Our findings highlight the use of platform architectural practices in doing so, extending existing work on news-related personalization and validation strategies (Swart 2023, Swart and Broersma 2021).

Interview participants described themselves as active evaluators of information, not only about news and politics, but of content that leads to personal identity development, caters to self-interest, and informs their relationships with themselves and others in personal, professional, and academic settings. Joel (23) architects his connections to learn about sports on Twitter, prioritizing following accounts that are sports players, provide commentary on sports, or are dedicated sports news accounts. Zach (21) tunes his for book recommendations by strategically selecting book

subreddits to elicit (future) recommendations for similar content. Lilly (18) optimizes for information on hiking, whittling, and wood carving by actively seeking out and going to topical content directly in order to avoid stumbling on other content that negatively impacts her mental health. Personal architecture for preferred content (getting more of what you want to see; seeing less of what you don't want to see) requires labor across multiple platforms, each of which requires skills to know how the platform functions (Swart 2023) and, among our participants, a rough understanding of how choices about what to watch, read, and like have downstream impacts on shaping the algorithms that will select content for you in the future.

When we asked about what information sources they would trust, we heard versions of "you can't just trust what you are given." As Tandoc et al. (2018) found in their study of news authentication practices on social media, our participants said they would rely first on their own gut instinct or, if they were really interested in the topic, they would try to fact-check it themselves.

Gabriela (20) told us, "For the most part, I think that biases are constantly changing. I think the moment you find a news source you think is not biased, it is biased the next week. It depends on who's writing the article. It depends on who's delivering the news, what tone they represented in. And so I skim through articles. I'll read it. I'll try to determine if they're biased. And if I find that they're biased, I'll look for a different article." When we asked her how she would find a different source, she told us she would leave her carefully architected platform spaces and head to the web: "I just go to Google and the first actual, reliable, news website that comes up like NBC or whatever. RCNs, CNCC? One of those, with all the Cs and N in it, then I'll go to one of those." Her response highlights some potential uncertainty about what sources she might ultimately deem reliable.

Lina (24) told us that it is often difficult to find unbiased news sources without extensive fact-checking (which she is not eager to do and does not do often). One way around this for her is following former news anchors on Twitter, who she perceives as "unbiased" because they are no longer associated with a profit-focused news company. Platform architectural choices with relevance for news often involve trying to connect with more "authentic" or "raw" coverage of events, where authenticity is contrasted with "bias." While Heather (31) is more right-leaning and Lina is more left-leaning, they both prefer to get political information "straight from the source," as Lina phrased it. For Lina, this entails following the Facebook page of a local NBC-affiliated television station—not to watch a news broadcast, but in case she wants to watch her state governor's livestreams. With livestreams of politicians it is "hard to misjudge or misconstrue information, but with articles, it's really hard to believe pretty much any article right now," Lina said.

Heather notes that "news that's posted now is very speculative and very biased" and that content is "cherry-picked" and taken out of context when reported. To this end, she followed President Trump on Facebook to stay updated with what he was actually saying. However, she noted that she contemplated following presidential candidate Biden because his win was anticipated and she wanted to know his positions. Ultimately, she decided against including him in her feed because seeing Biden describe his proposed strategy for handling the pandemic (which she disagreed with) would cause her emotional distress (see emotional labor, above).

Thus, although participants readily distinguish between news and non-news sources, these quotes illustrate the tendency to treat all sources of information as equally deserving of suspicion. Stories produced by the news media were seen as requiring authentication labor just as were the other sources of information our participants encountered on social media (e.g., political candidates, public health departments, friends who are doctors). As a result, platform architectural choices that affect news exposure were often aimed at *reducing the labor* of determining what to believe.

The cognitive work to authenticate news under conditions of mistrust feels very different for interview participants who are interested in news or politics. For Ken (20), an interest in politics is an important part of his identity. When he describes authentication work and architectural labor related to news, it sounds like what Archer (2019) and others call "playbour."

I'll be reading through social media, whether it's Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and then when I have a question or something, then I'll think of stuff that I'm interested in politics-wise and I'll go on YouTube or Google and I'll do some more independent research about that... I'll say, "Can I figure out exactly what's happening?"—So I'll look at the different sides of it. I'll see a video on Twitter of them surrounding a Biden bus and I'll go on Reddit and I'll say, "Okay, what are the different perspectives here? What are the people thinking? What are their arguments on both sides here?"

Another way that individuals use platform architecture practices to help make sense of the information environment is by opting-in to platforms that offer useful simple heuristics for establishing content credibility. These heuristics are appealing because they minimize the amount of immaterial labor that one must exert to assess content credibility and trustworthiness. One such example is Reddit's practice of upvoting, which is a feature that enables content to be crowdsourced into prominence. Zach (21) noted that the news articles he saw on Reddit got there because they were upvoted by other users. He explained that posts that have a comment questioning the accuracy of the original post and that receive a lot of upvotes suggest that the original post is not a good source of information. Zach also told us he mostly sees content about the election on Reddit because the feed devoted to that topic (R/Politics) is set up as a default when you start using the platform—he just never bothered changing it. Default settings are an important way that platforms nudge visibility of content genres.

Participants also architect to reduce immaterial authentication labor by relying on or adjusting push notifications. Push notifications from their phones typically signal to Monica (28), Libby (19), Kym (21), Elona (27), Nathalie (31), Hattie (23), Steffie (22), Jocelyn (19), Olivia (18), Savannah (25), and Dalton (21) that something happened in the news that they should be aware of. For them, push notifications also implied a digital vote of confidence in the content, as they were selectively used by outlets. Savannah told us that these notifications were unbiased due to their "bluntness," thus frequently eliminating the need for further investigation.

Visibility Labor

Visibility labor encompasses platform architectural practices linked to positive self-presentation, amplified by awareness of real and imagined audiences (Abidin

2016). Macro-, meso-, and micro-level platform architecture work can be motivated by the need to present different aspects of oneself to different audiences. We observed substantial effort to sort audiences and architect a sense of personal safety and privacy—to be more or less visible to the right audiences.

Martin (27) told us he spends time thinking about which platforms are the right ones for different connections to occur. For him, this is a matter of carefully navigating public and semi-public spaces. “There are some people I will not have in all platforms. Snapchat, I don’t want family on there. I’ll have my cousin because she’s cool. Facebook is for people I know, family, friends and whatnot.” Max (28) works hard to architect a private-feeling world within quasi-public social media spaces. To do so, he keeps friend lists small and relies on Facebook messenger and groups.

I would say I’m pretty private. I don’t really post much at all. I keep my social media usage a one-on-one basis. So instead of reaching all my friends or all of my friends on either... Or my connections on LinkedIn, Facebook or Snapchat, I mostly use it for a one-on-one basis. And so, I’m not as private, as private goes, but try to keep myself to a more small group gathering I guess, a small cluster of close friends.

Ken (20) described his frequent experience of paralysis in deciding where to post a recent photo: “I could post it on my regular Instagram or I could post it on my Instagram story. Or I could post to my Finsta [fake Instagram account] story. And then I was like, ‘Wait, I have the whole Snapchat to post it on, I have a Twitter I can post it on.’ My camera roll is filled with things I haven’t posted.”

A concern among our participants was how the content they posted influences how others perceive them, and how those perceptions are likely to vary across members of their imagined audience (family members compared to friends, for example). Content about news or politics was cited as being particularly likely to create “drama” among platform audiences. Reluctance to post or even engage with political or news content was often rooted in how quickly such content could incite drama and thus shape how others see them. For some, concern for potential outcomes shaped their willingness to share content. Olivia (18) told us that she would “occasionally repost things, but not until I’ve thoroughly checked it and made sure it’s not inflammatory, at all.” For Nathalie (31), sharing news detracted from a platform’s ability to function as a leisure space: “I get attacked and I’m not interested in that. So it does not entertain me to get into debates over the internet with people.” Simone (23) linked her hesitation to post news and political content to an experience where she was “called out” for posting a video of the aftermath following police brutality-related protests, which in turn, impacted a relationship offline.

My really close friend was like, “Why would you post this but not post about what’s causing it?” And I thought do I want to? Show the aftermath? Why does it have to be so political? But I think that incident kind of opened my eyes up to the political climate on social media, how it’s very important now. How your perception is perceived. I genuinely thought the video wasn’t that provoking, but I guess since it was showing the side of anti-looters, I guess, to my friends that seemed like I was supporting, or I wasn’t supporting looting. But we’re still friends now. We didn’t talk for a few months but I talked to her again and we solved our differences.”

The visibility labor of architecture that our participants engaged in included: moving potentially heated or politicized interactions off one platform and on to another, or moving them into a closed space within a platform; muting family members who were posting politicized content (but who had to be kept as connections to preserve family harmony); leaving groups that become too full of drama; deleting posts that attracted negative comments; and deciding to self-censor opinions to avoid the possibility of unpleasant responses.

At the end of her interview, Tracee (24) reminded the interviewer that she makes a very careful separation between the function of her personal platform architecture and her preferences for learning about the news: “I just want to emphasize that I use social media as an escape from all that [news and politics] and I then do research when I do want to learn more about the world and politics and stuff, so it’s more of two different resources that I go to for different things. Just wanted to emphasize that.”

Discussion

In this paper, we described practices of *personal platform architecture* among young adults, articulated architectural practices as digital labor, and began to outline the consequences of these practices for exposure and engagement with news. Our findings highlight the importance of a cross-platform perspective on the platformization of news consumption, as well as the need to develop theory to explain the entanglements of platform architecture practices and the informational genres young adults encounter in their social news feeds. Young adults are active architects of their social media spaces. They make decisions every day about which platforms to use and which to leave, who to connect with and who to “mute,” what interests to pursue into the long tail of Facebook groups and which gaming celebrities to follow from Discord to Twitter. They are *personal platform architects*.

Based on our findings, we offer a nascent conceptual definition of personal platform architecture as the labors of users that alter the future flows of communication received by that user within or across digital platforms, both in the short and long-term. This simple conceptual definition offers an invitation to researchers to analyze the ongoing multi-level modifications that young adults undertake every day across their platform repertoires, using their limited skills and available tools in an effort to fulfill their constantly evolving informational, emotional, and social needs.

Interviews illustrate the variety of ways in which young adults engage in everyday labor in support of architecting their personal public spheres. These architectural changes happen across three levels: Macro-level changes to the overall repertoire, meso-level adjustments to enhance privacy and control in group spaces, and micro-level adjustments within platforms to alter connections and adjust settings. These include specific architectural practices such as hiding content to preserve one’s well-being (emotional), adding a shortcut that will help evaluate the trustworthiness and credibility of content (immaterial), and tailoring social connections to avoid seeing content from a political family member (visibility) These architectural labors are not necessarily motivated by a desire to avoid or consume news (although sometimes they are), but we identified several ways in which their work can be consequential for news exposure.

Young adults are not professional architects, designing media systems around themselves with the skill of a journalist or an editor. Rather, their practices are akin to vernacular architecture, or buildings that are produced by ‘non-experts’ (Brown and Maudlin 2012; Oliver, 2006). Our interview participants are ‘ordinary people’ architecting to suit their needs, with the local knowledge and resources they have on hand. This means that how young adults architect in one part of the world may look quite different from other parts of the world, depending on the prominence of meso spaces, or the dominance of different platforms. Ultimately, the outcome of their efforts—a dynamic, architected personal public sphere that serves as a window to the world—is constantly changing, being re-designed and tweaked to fulfill changing functional requirements.

Young adults are also platform architects working within constraints. Our inductive method, relying on interviews, naturally emphasizes a focus on the agency involved in platform architecture. During the co-browsing section of the interviews, it was easy to observe the active engagement of our participants in shaping what they see. Participants not only described but *showed us* how they adjusted platforms to suit their needs. However, their capacities to build and maintain the architecture of their personal public sphere are shaped by what platforms afford and by the broader platform ecosystem within which they are embedded. Further, the actions of platform architecture itself (building, adding, deleting, engaging, tweaking, tuning) are also, through the processes of datafication, contributing to the profit-generating enterprises of platform companies. Or, as Lai (2021) puts it, these “datafied relational communications enter directly into the economic circuits of the commercial internet” (p. 9). For this reason, we argued that personal platform architecture is best conceptualized as digital labor.

In the findings, we described three types of digital labor linked to personal platform architecture. First, emotional labor is work that users do to manage their emotions, often in response to incidental encounters with content perceived as “toxic.” Interview participants showed us how they engaged in architectural practices to reduce exposure to toxicity while still trying to maintain important social connections. The experience of emotional toxicity occurred in many different contexts. Among these, and as found in previous research, our interview participants voiced their desire to avoid encounters with upsetting news (Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2021; Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). We illustrate that the practices of intentional news avoidance are more complex than simple non-selection of a news story. Personal public spheres can be architected in many ways to keep news out.

Second, we observe immaterial labor related to the use of architectural practices to manage authentication of news and information on platforms. The platform users we talked with saw it as their own responsibility to decide what content to believe, rather than deferring to journalistic expertise. This sense of uncertainty about what to believe or who to trust is entangled with labors related to personal platform architecture.

There is an interesting parallel here to the “informational labor” that Mathews and Ali (2022) observed in a rural community that was poorly served by news and lacked broadband internet access. In their case, residents had to work hard to find local information that in an earlier era would have been produced by journalists at the

local newspaper. In our case, some young adult platform users work to architect simple ways to decide what to believe. Both are forms of audience labor that are amplified by the decline in news institutions and the rise of digital platforms.

Third, our participants labored to shape their own visibility on platforms, with the goal of protecting the presentation of self. Visibility labor has been observed by scholars working in a variety of domains (e.g., Cotter 2019; Marwick and Boyd 2011). Our contribution is to articulate this labor in the form of material architectural practices. Within the constraints set by the platforms themselves, users attempt to construct a media system around themselves that accommodates shifting needs for connection, publicity, and privacy. Specific to content about news and politics, we observed a range of architectural techniques deployed to keep from politicizing platform spaces or creating political “drama” among friends or family.

We propose that *personal platform architecture* is an important conceptual extension to existing literatures on the geography and spaces of news use. News use among young adults cannot be well understood by focusing simply on media choice. Platform users are not choosing among bundled news sources (as in a newspaper, or a television broadcast, or even a news website). They are not even choosing among pre-existing platforms—there is no “Facebook” or “Twitter” that exists before being animated by the architectural practices of a particular user. Instead, they are architecting their personal public sphere under conditions set by the platforms themselves. They are everyday builders and maintainers of their own personal public spheres.

This suggests the importance of considering platform architectural choices as an explanation for variation in incidental news encounters across digital platforms. Some Facebook users may see a lot of journalistic news; others see almost none (e.g., Kämpel 2020). When it comes to news exposure, it matters not just which platforms a person uses, but how they build and maintain their connections with people, groups, pages, notifications, privacy settings, and other elements that shape the likelihood of news exposure (Merten 2021).

Our findings also highlight the importance of temporality and change in our understanding of news repertoires as they arc across digital platforms. Peters and Schröder (2018) argue that too little attention has been paid to change over time in people’s news use. They note the many different elements that can lead to temporal change in platforms used for news: Change over the lifespan, changes in technologies, changing personal interests. We see each of these elements at play among our interview participants. However, the time window for change among our participants is quite short. Personal platform architecture is an everyday process—platform users are constantly making changes driven by their own needs, their social context, and by nudges or even larger changes to the functioning of platforms themselves. This constant change creates empirical obstacles for scholars interested in the dynamics of news exposure. News exposure among this young audience is more difficult to predict because it is contingent on personal platform architecture and is subject to a more complex set of dynamics than in the broadcast era.

Our findings help push back on the narrative that young adults are lazy or disengaged regarding news. Instead, we show that staying informed is a constant, complex process in a shifting landscape that requires daily effort and is, in fact, hard work.

Young adults have taken on the often-invisible labor of architecting their own media spheres, with very little training in a role that was once the purview solely of journalists. In this time of information abundance, it is often difficult for even the most seasoned news follower to sift through what is trustworthy and what is not. Young adults attempt to take this all on in a media environment rife with often grim and emotionally taxing news. Where older generations perceive news as more serious, young adults' tendency to conceive of news more broadly with a focus on fun and personal interests (Collao 2022; Newman et al. 2022) further adds to this narrative of laxity. Many young adults are working hard to carve out digital spaces, particularly in the form of meso spaces, that help them *escape* from hard or traditional news, like COVID, politics, and death and violence, to balance staying informed and maintaining their mental health (Collao 2022).

The findings in this study are of course limited by our research design. Our interview sample gives us a glimpse into the messy labors of personal platform architecture and the myriad everyday decisions that add up to content exposure for each of our participants. However, our data cannot speak to the frequency of these architectural practices among the population of young adults. Our participants did not spend time in meso news spaces, but we cannot determine whether rates of engagement in these spaces would be similar in the broader population of young adults.

We hope the concept of personal platform architecture inspires additional work on how young adults build media worlds around themselves. The dynamics of these labors have implications for news exposure and engagement, as we have shown. These dynamics may also help us make sense of the puzzle as to why levels of news consumption are not increasing even as news content is more readily available online. Our approach highlights that being informed about what is happening in the world *via* social media is not easy—social media spaces are both public and experienced as deeply personal. Our interview participants find it difficult to know what to believe and are often overwhelmed not just by the volume of information but by a lack of widely agreed upon authentication practices. Their practices of platform architecture are not usually undertaken to find news or to add news to their media systems, but, even so, those choices are consequential for what news they see. News exposure is a direct byproduct of everyday platform architecture practices.

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Appendix A: Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Education
Corrine	female	28	White	Graduated College
Martin	male	27	White/ Hispanic, Latino, Spanish	Graduated College
Lina	female	24	White	Graduated College
Michaela	female	24	White	Graduated College
Ash	non-binary	28	White	Associate
Gabriela	female	20	White/ Hispanic, Latino, Spanish	High School
Nadia	female	28	White	High School
Cassie	female	30	White	Graduated College
Tracee	female	24	White	Graduated College
Oliver	male	32	White	In Grad School
Max	male	28	Asian	Graduated College
Ken	male	20	Asian	In College
Nora	female	24	White	Graduated College
Renee	female	34	White	Graduate Degree
McKenzie	female	24	White	Graduated College
Monica	female	28	White	Decline
Heather	female	31	White	Trade School
Danica	female	32	Black	High School
Joel	male	23	White	Graduated College
Lilly	female	18	White	High School
Libby	female	19	Asian	In College
Hugo	male	29	Asian	Graduated College
Mae	female	26	White	Decline
Kym	female	21	Black/Indigenous	Some College
Porter	male	24	White	Decline
Zach	male	21	Asian	In College
Elissa	female	34	Native Hawaiian	Graduate Degree
Elona	female	27	Black	Decline
Darien	male	22	Black	Graduated College
Viktor	male	34	White	Graduated College
Jasmine	female	23	Hispanic	In College
Simone	female	23	Asian	Graduated College
Luann	female	32	White	Graduated College
Dwayne	male	33	Black	Trade School
Craig	male	31	White	Graduated College
Lucas	male	22	White	In College
Phoebe	female	32	White	Graduate Degree
Nathalie	female	31	White	Graduated College
Hattie	female	23	White	Graduated College
Steffie	female	22	White	Graduated College
Ellie	female	21	Asian	Graduated College
Devin	male	23	Asian	Graduated College

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Education
Quinn	female	22	White	In College
Jocelyn	female	19	White	In College
Nola	female	21	Asian	Some College
Norman	male	21	Black	Some College
Olivia	female	18	White	Some College
Meghan	female	30	White	Graduated College
Savannah	female	25	White	In Grad School
Dalton	male	21	White	Graduated College