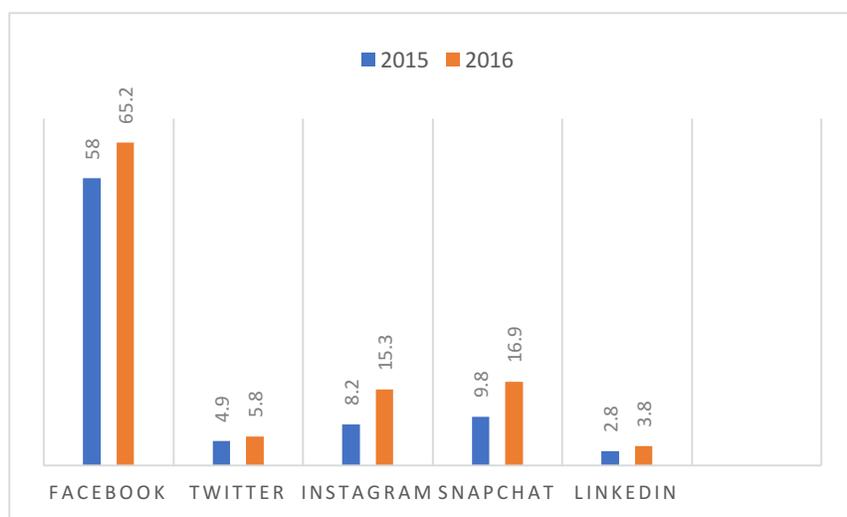


## DECIDIS Survey 2017, Insight into Danish information practices

The 2017 edition of the annual DECIDIS survey on Social Media and the Digital Society adopted a specific focus on news consumption and information practices on social media. 2016, as well as 2017, have shown us the central democratic role that social media and social networks have in the process of news diffusion and consumptions. Key issues for the future of our democratic societies, such as echo-chambers effects and viral propagation of fake news, have often been depicted as real threats to the democratic processes and this has stressed the need for more research-based effective solutions. Within this context, the DECIDIS survey have chosen to investigate how Danish society fulfills its information needs, how citizens encounter new information and if online environment seems to configure as a polarizing echo-chamber of if it can still support the democratic debate among citizens.

### A mature digital society



The overall level of social media adoption in Denmark is still remarkably high. Continuing the trend that we observed last year most of Danish social media activity is concentrated on Facebook that is used daily by 65% of the population (7% more of the level observed in 2016). Similar small increases in daily users have been observed for several of the major platforms, Instagram

reached 15.3% of daily users (8.2 in 2016) and Snapchat 16.9% (9.8 in 2016).

While the daily use of social media platform increases, we have observed a general decrease of the use of social media to discuss politics. **In 2016, 41% of the respondents reported to have “discussed politics” on Facebook at least “rarely”. In 2016 that percentage decreases to 27.7%.** A possible interpretation of this data is that the high number of political discussion registered in 2016 was actually boosted by the political election that happened that year. If this is the case, the number currently observed should not be understood as a decline but rather as a stabilization after a peak of activity.

While discussing politics online seems to remain a minor activity the 2017 survey registered a considerable part of the Danish Facebook users that engages with News and Current affairs on the platform (18.5% of Danish Facebook users do it at least one or two times a week).

### Confronting the diversity

Our 2016 survey showed how a relevant part of users had changed their mind on a political issue after an online debate. 20% of the users declared that it had happened at least

*occasionally*. This year's report digs deeper into this problem by investigating three dynamics that frame the problem of online echo-chambers: a) the frequency of encountering something you disagree with, b) the frequency of learning something new and c) the frequency of changing your own opinion after a debate. These three aspects are part of the complex problem of algorithmically supported echo-chambers and confirmation bias (Del Vicario et al. 2016). This states that online social network sites' algorithms will present us only content that we will likely agree with and that will not challenge our pre-existing opinions. While this is an important hypothesis it still requires major empirical evidences to be confirmed. On the opposite, recent large scale international research seems to suggest that even if real the actual danger of echo-chambers might have been exaggerated (Newman et al. 2016).

Figure 3a shows how often **Danish Facebook users are actually confronted with content they disagree with. It is a frequent experience (often + always) for 23.5%. On the opposite 33.8 of the users feel that this never or rarely happens.** At the same time 13.8% of the users is unable to express an opinion on this specific issue stressing the complexity of the problem. When users are confronted with something new (Figure 3b) they show to be relatively open to it, 62.3% affirms to learn something at least sometimes (always + often + sometimes). Figure 3c shows how frequently users admit to change their mind after online debate. While most of the users (44.5%) declare to change their mind rarely, a substantial group of users declare that it happens sometimes (29%).

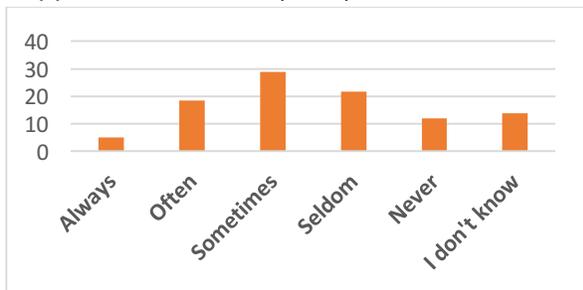


Figure 2a: How often are you confronted with opinions different from your own? (While discussing Politics or News on Facebook)

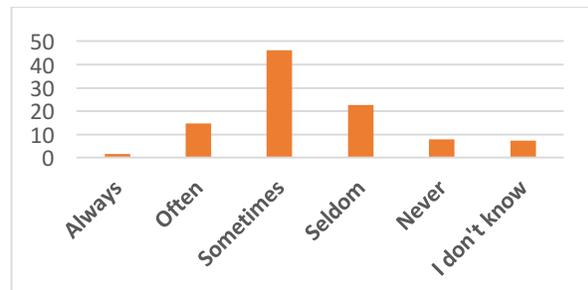


Figure 2b: How often do you learn something you didn't know before? (While discussing Politics or News on Facebook)

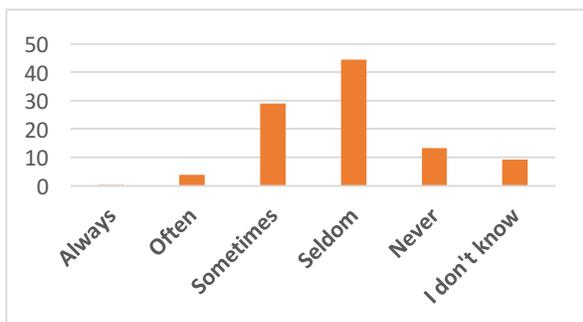


Figure 2c: How often do you change your opinion? (While discussing Politics or News on Facebook)

These are relevant data because on the one side they show how Facebook users are to some extent meeting new content that in several occasions is not aligned with their pre-existing ideas,

but they also show how users are open toward different opinions. While the number of users who declare to have changed their mind might appear small (4.1% often or more frequently, 32.8% sometimes or more frequently) it should be noted how recent studies have stressed how being confronted with different opinion might easily lead toward polarization of pre-existing ideas rather than toward moderation of them (Lindell et al. 2017).

### Getting the news

These data are particularly relevant when properly framed within the growing role that Facebook has in shaping the information we actually get. Besides being a digital space for public debate Facebook is more and more distribution platform for digital content. Within this perspective, 49,6% of the respondents receive news and information through Facebook at least once a day. Obviously over the years Facebook has grown into a complex digital ecosystem that no longer contains just “Friends” but a large range of different actors. This is why it is important to focus on the actual sources of the news (Figure 3): 44,5% of the respondents declare that they always or often read the news shared by the Facebook page of a news organization. Content shared by Friends and “well known contacts” play a less relevant role being a frequent (always or often)

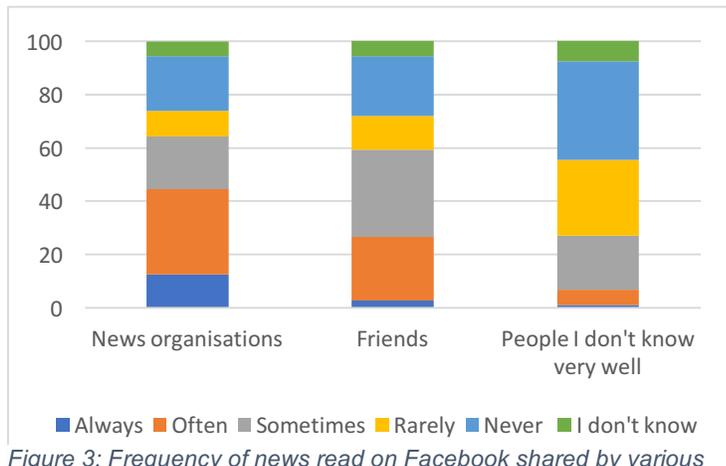


Figure 3: Frequency of news read on Facebook shared by various types of sources.

source for news and information for the 26,6% of the respondents. Weak ties and acquaintances play an even minor role with just 6,7% of the users saying that they provide news and information often or always. These numbers indicate that while the consumption of news has definitely moved toward social network platforms the traditional news organizations still play a relevant role as sources of information.

**Within this perspective, it is interesting to point out how**

**Facebook, and social network sites in general allow for new and unprecedented styles of news consumption. 40,7% of Facebook users declare to receive the news without looking for them but just encountering them on their Newsfeed while they are online for other reasons. An equal number of Facebook users, on the other side, declare to actively look for the news visiting Facebook pages of news organizations.**

The data suggest that Facebook is emerging as a digital space where two encounters, the deliberate and the incidental news consumption coexist. A bivariate analysis shows that age is a major element deciding how a user will encounter the news, with 55.1% of the users from 15 and 35 years old who report an “incidental news consumption” as their main way to be informed. This type of news consumption is reported only by 32,8% of the users above 60 years old.

**Methodological note:**

Data collected by Gallup based on a representative sample of Danish population over 18 years old. Data collection: December 2016 // N: 1233 questionnaires // Confidence level 95% // Margin of Error 3%

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DECIDIS is a research network based at the IT University Copenhagen. The core objective of the international network is to analyze and understand the ongoing changes in digital society. Given the intense pace of the development of communication technologies and their wide-ranging – if at times equivocal – impact on the way we live, think and experience the world, we believe that research has a major responsibility to keep up with and illuminate the social and cultural transformations this ensues, not at least in terms of their significance for democracy. Thus, the core research objective that unites the work and interests of the participating scholars is to explore ongoing processes in the ways citizens as individuals and in groups interact and act in and with digital society and culture.

More information about DECIDIS: [blogit.itu.dk/decidis](http://blogit.itu.dk/decidis)