

Young People & the News

Millennials are the most important audience for the future of the news industry, for obvious reasons. They will be (and in many cases already are) the primary participants in the emerging new media environment, and will be the customers of new efforts to monetize online news production. Those concerned about the health of democracy or the health of news companies must understand and act on the changing habits and attitudes of this generation.

Evidence suggests that news and civic habits built in youth tend to last into adulthood, which makes current trends especially important. The available data demonstrate that millennials are interested in the news and are increasingly using the Internet to get it. They also consume news in a “civic context,” relying on friends and family to send stories over e-mail, social networks and word of mouth. Young people get news more randomly than previous generations of consumers, checking in when it is convenient rather than at habitual times. They report frequent feelings of “too much information” online and appear to desire a simple, highly prioritized news experience. There also remains the question of whether the majority of millennials are interested in “serious accountability news” about government and public affairs. Though the data are mixed, I believe the evidence suggests many already are interested and many more could be if such news is packaged and presented in a more convenient, understandable and useful manner.

In summary, young people find “the news” relevant and important to their personal, civic and social lives and express an interest in keeping up with what’s going on in the world. At the same time, however, there are many problems—both with content and with user experience—that prevent this generation from being as engaged with the news media as it could be. This report aims not only to discuss what we already know about young people’s news habits, but also to examine what can be done to capitalize on and improve them.

TRENDS: NEWS, CULTURE AND SCHOOLS

1. Engaged, but differently

Young people appear generally engaged with current events and public affairs, expressing a high interest in staying informed about the world around them but also skepticism about the usefulness of following the news every day. However, their engagement differs in several important ways from the news habits of older Americans.

2. A gap between interest and news consumption

Eighty-five percent of 18-29-year-olds reported being interested in “keeping up with national politics and political issues” in a 2007 survey, an increase from 49% in 1999 (when no young people were millennials). Yet a 2008 survey found just 33% of 18-29-year-olds said they “enjoyed keeping up with the news.” How can young people be interested in keeping up with ‘issues’ both not with the news? There are two compelling possibilities. (1) First, data examined in this study suggest many young people don’t see the connection between keeping up with news and being informed about issues of importance. (2) Second, the constant availability of news online may make it seem less important to check in regularly, particularly when (as the full report examines) young people report feelings of “monotony” in news content.

3. An on-demand culture

“People increasingly want the news they want, when they want it,” writes the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) in its [2009 State of the News Media Report](#). Young people are leaders of what PEJ calls an “on-demand” culture, where rather than checking in with news sources at appointed times (like the 6:30 evening news), consumers visit when it suits their schedules and expect the content to be ready.

4. Young people are “news grazers”

News is not the habitual practice for young people that it is for older Americans. Young people get their news more randomly (or less regularly) than other age groups. A 2008 [survey](#) found 20 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds got their news “at regular times,” while 78 percent got their news “from time to time.” PEJ calls this trend “news grazing,” and it has important implications for how to improve young people’s engagement with news.

5. Sharing and social networks are vital—and growing

Most young people get a large part of their news from social networks, family and friends rather than from news outlets directly. “Young people consume news in a more broadly “civic” setting than their parents and grandparents did,” writes Megan Garber in a *Columbia Journalism Review* [article](#). “Thus, the resonance of the quote, from a college student participating in a 2008 focus group: ‘If the news is that important, it will find me.’” If young people do expect news to “find them,” prodigious changes in the structure of news organizations are necessary (or at least wise).

6. Less interest in day-to-day developments

Young people report low interest in daily changes in ongoing topics; they appear more interested in the broad context of events and issues. Because they consume the news more randomly, “update” stories that only discuss what changed in the last 24 hours are less relevant for young people than they are for older consumers. The [Media Management Center](#) describes this in the context of the 2008 presidential election: “Young people want to become informed about the election – but they don’t want to follow the news day-in and day-out ... They are willing to spend time getting informed—exploring and learning more about public issues, candidates and races—but they want their news updates to be quick, very selective and prioritized.”

7. Internet is the most popular medium; aggregators are key

The Internet is named as the top source of national and international news by most young people, slightly more than name television. Certain subgroups of young people such as college students rely on the Internet even more than their generation as a whole. Young people are not, however, going primarily to “new media” and independent publications like blogs and community reporting: most millennials use a handful of top news sites, a fact that contradicts concerns about “audience fragmentation” on the Internet. Eighty-six percent of online news users 18-29 in one [survey](#) reported using aggregators such as [Yahoo!](#) and [GoogleNews](#), an important statistic given recent controversies about “free-riding” and paywalls online. The Web is also the only platform experiencing consistent audience growth across all age groups.

8. Cable television remains important, but network news struggles with young audiences

Cable television remains a top source of national and international news, and local television remains the strongly dominant source of local news for young people—though young viewers report spending less time with both than do older Americans. Thirty-six percent of people 18-29 reported watching cable news regularly in a 2008 Pew survey; just 21% reported watching network news regularly. Cable’s popularity is likely due to its omnipresence: young people can switch to 24/7 news networks at any time, much as they can online. The decline of the network newscast can be attributed, at least in part, to the news grazing habits discussed earlier: the show comes on at only one time for just 22 minutes of news, making it a relatively inconvenient (and not particularly thorough) choice.

9. Newspaper use falling, but hope for content online

Newspaper readership among young people (and the population as a whole) has fallen consistently over the past 30 years. In 2008 just 21% of people 18-29 reported the newspaper as their primary source of national and international news (and just 15% of young people read a newspaper yesterday, compared with 34% of all other adults). There is hope online, however: though revenue and profitability remain challenging obstacles, newspapers have significantly more eyes on their work today via the Internet than ever before. Top national newspapers such as [The New York Times](#) consistently rank among young people’s top news sites. For local news, though, the numbers are more unsettling: television remains vastly more popular among young audiences, and many local newspapers have yet to establish substantial online readership. It is reasonable to predict that

the virtues of newspaper journalism will survive online and through other technologies, but the printed product (and perhaps the profits that accompanied it) will not.

10. Radio is a (surprisingly) common news source, but engagement is limited

“Radio is easily America’s most underrated news medium,” says the [Shorenstein Center](#)’s 2007 [report](#) on “Young People and News.” Twenty-two percent of 18-29-year-olds name radio as a primary news source (compared to 14% of older Americans), but most of this is accidental: the same report found that 80% of teens 12-17 and 70% of young adults 18-29 said their radio news consumption “just happens.” Though this suggests there is potential in the radio format, it is important to remember that music radio stations tend to carry light news focused on entertainment and pop culture rather than on community, national or international issues.

11. Teachers are using news in classrooms, but institutional support is lacking

The available data suggest that teachers want to use news in their classrooms, and in many cases are doing so, but that there is very little institutional support for them to do so. Survey data from a 2007 [Carnegie-Knight Task Force](#) report indicate that “news is being widely used in the nation’s classrooms” despite the pressures of standardized testing and textbooks. Online news is used much more widely than television and printed publications, and national and international news is used much more than local news. Most local newspapers, however, continue to invest in putting printed papers in schools through programs such as [Newspapers in Education](#). Just 6% of teachers in the Carnegie-Knight survey reported that administrators “encouraged them to make greater use of the news.”

12. Student-produced news remains strong and important to young people’s engagement

Student journalism at the high school and collegiate levels remains popular and important both for the future of the journalism profession and the future of its audiences. For example, a 2006 [study](#) by Youth Media and Marketing found that 77% of college students regularly read the print edition of their campus newspapers; at colleges with daily publications, 92% did so.

13. Comparing news habits across generations: similar use, less benefit?

When use of all mediums is combined, the data do not support the conclusion that millennials are generally less engaged with the news media than previous generations of young people were. However, the data do indicate that today’s young people recall fewer facts from news stories and have lower recollection of political and civic facts in surveys than do older Americans. This suggests that while millennials might be interacting with the news in similar proportions to previous generations, they remember or get less from doing so.

14. Will young people read “accountability news?”

For many concerned about journalism’s role in the democratic process, this is the most important question regarding young people’s habits. Will they be interested in (and pay for) what newspaperman and scholar [Alex S. Jones](#) calls “iron core” “serious accountability news”? The data are mixed: young people report interest in serious community, national and international topics, and many are active around those topics. Yet at the same time many young people report less interest in “keeping up with the news,” and a worrisome percentage cannot recall major facts about civic institutions or the news content they read. Given the information examined in this report, the strongest conclusion is that the problems discussed below have contributed to a media environment that makes it difficult for young people to find, process and use “serious accountability news.” Many more young people would be interested in this sort of serious content if it were presented in a way that was more accessible, useful and relevant to this generation.