



An Exploration of the News Consumption Habits of College Students: Implications for Journalism Education

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Abstract

Previous studies have shown declining news consumption habits among college students. This study goes a little further to investigate what factors would make them engage more with the news. Results from focus group interviews indicate there may be a disconnect between the students and the news industry which continues to produce content that doesn't meet their needs. Their tastes challenge the way we teach journalism and points to a widening gap between current journalism curriculum and the needs and habits of the students in our classes. The study suggests ways of closing the gaps without sacrificing the quality of journalism education.

Introduction

Two trends portend darkly for democratic societies: the longstanding but worsening disinterest of young adults in news and public affairs information and the precarious state of independent, local sources of such information (Arias-Robles & Carvajal, 2023; Ardia, *et al.*, 2020; Lund, 2019; Patterson, 2008; Pinkleton & Weintraub, 2004).

Previous studies have raised concern about declining news consumption habits among college students (Mellman, 2020; Poindexter, 2012; Zerba, 2011; Patterson, 2008). This is significant because changes in media technology have made it easier to find and consume news stories from traditional news outlets or social media (Thurman, 2011; Spyridou & Veglis, 2008; Thompson, 2005). Research has shown that

news consumption is a predictor of civic engagement (Mwangi, *et al.*, 2014). In other words citizens who are involved in important activities such as voting, or working on solutions to community problems tend to be active news consumers to stay on top of what is happening in their communities. More importantly, it is hard to engage with the democratic process when you are not informed about what is happening around you. Ultimately college students' declining news consumption habits threaten the future of our democracy. Further, the media industry has for a long time lamented the continued decline of audiences as a result of disruptions created by technology that has upset the media business model which for a long term relied on advertising to fund the news production process. Audiences are reluctant to pay for content that is

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now freely available online. But this research project goes a step further by noting that even though news content is freely available, college students are not consuming it (Thompson, 2005; Spyridou & Veglis, 2008; Thurman, 2012). This research project sought to investigate why. What kind of stories would draw them back to engage with the news? What is lacking in the content now available? Answers to these questions are critical for the future of our democracy as well as the future of the media industry. In addition, their answers have implication for the way we teach journalism (news values, story ideas, content production, and identifying and serving audience needs).

Literature Review

While the lack of funding for traditional reporting puts all citizens at risk, scholars (Gentilviso & Aikat, 2019; Liu, *et al.*, 2018) have pointed out that the state of local media is particularly pernicious for citizens 18–30 years old:

- Lower levels of local media use by young adults perpetuates inequalities in political participation, which in turn exacerbates economic and social inequalities. In other words, lower voting rates for young adults translate into a government less responsive to young-adult needs, which explains in part lower access to health insurance, for example.
- Local government, being closer to citizens, has been a refuge for civic participation as citizens become increasingly alienated from federal-level governance. The “nationalization” of local-media content and the dearth of reporting on local issues not only threatens this haven of citizen participation, but also denies citizens and political leaders needed information about community problems, priorities, and opinions.
- In the U.S., the current cohort of 18–30-year-olds is more diverse racially and ethnically than any previous generation. Connecting this cohort to each other and older citizens is, therefore, an important challenge and greater imperative for shared democratic values. Community media have and can play a vital role in creating and sustaining these community connections.
- The 18- to 30-year-old cohort reports some of the highest levels of support for authoritarian governance, including a willingness to sacrifice civil rights for safety and security. Thus, there is a palpable need for this demographic to engage

with information sources that give audiences reasons to embrace democratic values.

Research suggests that Generation Z, or post-millennials, comprising people born in 1997 or after, have different news consumption habits than those of previous generations. They are less likely to engage with traditional news sources such as newspapers, magazines, television, and radio (Gentilviso & Aikat, 2019). Instead, they rely more on new media and social media platforms for news, with a higher percentage using the internet and social media as their primary sources (Wada, 2019). Generation Z’s media consumption patterns are influenced by their digital and media literacy, as well as their native familiarity with technology (Panagiotou 2022). This younger generation is more inclined to prioritize entertainment and interaction over accuracy when consuming news (Gentilviso & Aikat, 2019). A meta-analytical study that reviewed 16 key studies published between 2017 and 2019 on post-millennials’ consumption habits theorizes that this generation’s embracing of the visual, verbal and viral media and their propensity to participate in the news cycle is reshaping news content (Gentilviso & Aikat, 2019).

Lorenz (2018) points out that post-millennials look to who they know for what they consider “unbiased news.” They keep up with journalists themselves or news-related pages on Instagram, Snapchat, or Twitter (now called X). The comfort stems from the face or brand they follow. Post-millennials feel these platforms will positively shape the broader media and political landscapes (Lorenz, 2018). They see online participation as a vehicle for change. Although a good number are too young to vote, Generation Z-ers feel social media makes their voices heard. Social media facilitates connective journalism that empowers voice and identity.

Connective journalism refers to how people share news – the role of content shared via social networks and social media rather than produced and circulated solely by professional news organizations (Clark & Marchi, 2017). These connective practices have implications for the ways we think about journalism, political activism and youth citizenship. Generation Z loves to debate or share, and news organizations must create spaces in the comments section to allow that engagement to happen (Yadav & Rai, 2017).

A 2018 study by The Pew Research Center of Generation Z’s media use found that social media and technology were prominent, especially YouTube,

Instagram, and Snapchat.

A focus on creativity, engagement and interaction was more important than credibility. Brodeur Partners, a Boston-based strategic communications company, conducted an extensive 2018 study on younger generations' news usage. Generation Z mirrored previous generations in the amount of news they receive through watching or listening compared to reading, which is about two-thirds. Young adults deploy drastically different methods than older adults' traditional newsgathering plans. "A recent study of undergraduate university students found. young people today are not necessarily uninformed, but rather they are differently informed, than previous generations, getting news via cell phone texts, email, social networking sites, and conversations with friends and family." (Marchi, 2012, p. 248; Singer, Clark, & Monserrate, 2009, p. 26). Post-millennials love sensory journalism, which is defined as news content that engages audience senses visually and sonically. Generation Z's penchant for brevity means their attention span is short. They live in an 8-second world, looking for "snackable" information and pictures, in an integrated, cross-channel experience (Brodeur Partners, 2018).

Gentilviso and Aikat (2019) have developed five theoretical constructs to explain how millennials news consumption habits are reshaping the news:

(a) Age shapes media attitudes and preferences of news consumers. Post-millennials are the first generation for whom digital technology is second nature.

(b) Post-millennials read less and watch or listen more. Such trends have prompted technology companies to seize on postmillennial interests, with news platforms that serve the desire for creativity, interactivity and self-tailoring customized media content.

(c) The news preferences of post-millennials are challenging longstanding methods for news delivery and forcing legacy media outlets to reconsider their practices.

(d) For post-millennials, social media platforms fuel and facilitate a verbal, visual, and viral news cycle replete with risks.

(e) Post-millennials embrace the convenience of social media but are not confident in their ability to decipher fake news. Trust in traditional media is waning and news credibility is less important among post-millennials.

Based on this work to date, we see an opportunity to strengthen journalism education and training, community media, and young-adult participation by

first listening to young adults, asking them to reflect on their community connections, how they learn what they know, what kinds of community information content they create and disseminate, and how they would run community media if empowered to do so.

Community media refers to "locally oriented media access initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content, dedicated to the principles of free expression and participatory democracy, and committed to enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity" (Howley, 2005: 2).

Community media is developed as a *response to local needs and peculiarities* and under community control, focusing on issues which are directly relevant to the specific community and involving its members in all aspects of media production (Hintz in Cammaerts and Carpentier 2007: 245). Thus, the community of community media "is characterized by the shared values of cultural diversity, autonomy, decentralization and horizontality, challenging the global village" and mass media's bias. Previous literature has pointed out the positive relationship between local media connection and community participation (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Liu, Chen, *et al.*, 2018) conducted an exploration of the relationship between residents' connection to a hyperlocal news website and civic participation. The study found reciprocal influences between hyperlocal news connection and civic participation

Unlike Generation X and boomers, the post-millennials or Generation Z sparsely engage with traditional news sources they deem as nearly extinct, including print media such as newspapers and magazines. They rarely watch television news or listen to radio. They report different news values with less concern about accuracy and more attention toward entertainment and interaction. (Patterson, 2008).

The researchers came up with the following research questions:

1. What are the news consumption habits of college students?
2. What are their primary news sources?
3. What factors would encourage college students to engage more with the news?

Methodology

After Institutional Review Board approval, researchers conducted two focus group interviews. Participants were all undergraduate students in the School of Media and Communication who volunteered to

discuss their media consumption habits in an open forum. The students were randomly selected to participate in these sessions after responding to research recruitment announcements that were made in various media and communication classes. There were no other screening criteria used to recruit the students. The sessions ranged between 60-90 minutes and consisted a total of 15 students. Participants shared their news consumption habits, the news sources they rely on, their experiences as news consumers, their use of social media versus traditional news outlets, their opinions about legacy media, and better ways to align journalism training and education to what they view as the needs of their generation. Responses were analyzed for emerging themes common among the students experiences.

Results and Discussion

Post-millennials are digital natives and are perpetually tethered to technology. The first research question sought to understand millennial college students news consumption habits and asked follow-up questions about what they watch or listen to in the morning, afternoon and evening; news websites or news publications read on a regular basis; social media platforms as news sources; deliberate actions taken to look for news.

All the respondents had a phone which they regarded as an extension of themselves. They began their days by checking their phones for messages from friends or to get on social media platforms, a process that continued throughout the day and sometimes included playing their music list, checking sports scores or gaming. About 50 percent them avoided the news altogether because it was depressing, too biased or irrelevant:

Watching the news is boring. Could you imagine listening to BBC news. I used to fall asleep.

It is not as entertaining as the other programs.

Another said regarding the news:

If we are not impacted by it, we don't care.

Maybe if they were putting up things relevant to me I would watch. But I don't want to watch politicians who have been in office for 40 years.

I am not interested.

They are looking for entertainment even in news:

The entertainment value in news is very low. It is very monotone and geared towards older folks. They need to add more charisma. I am not as engaged as I would be if they were more

entertaining.

I love True Crime because it is so entertaining. There is a podcast called "Real Dictators." I am learning information while still being entertained.

Others deliberately avoided watching the news because it is biased.

When I think of our politics right now, it is a turn off for me.

I don't want to watch two guys yelling at each other. It is opinion and not news. I would say that if they stopped catering to specific demographics and just cater to the truth, that would help.

Others felt that legacy media does not represent them:

Mainstream media is outdated. They just push stuff out to make money. They are making money with being controversial. We already know that.

Harrington (2008) points out that the mainstream news agenda has largely alienated young adults. Some felt that reading news feels like a chore.

There are too many news outlets and it is overwhelming. How do I know where to go for reliable news. I am too young to discern.

If there were 10 stories, I would read them. But fifty? I also feel a lot of us are more visual than print.

These comments are in line with previous research that found that the young generation preferred visual and viral content that was short and snackable (Brodeur Partners, 2018; Gentilviso & Aikat, 2019).

The second research question sought to identify their primary news sources. All of them named social media as their primary news source. Instagram, Snapchat, and Tiktok were the top favorites. But there is a twist. 70 percent of them said they were not on social media looking for news but that is where they will find out what is happening in the course of connecting with their networks. They therefore consider word of mouth as an equally important news source.

If it is important enough, I will hear about it.

I have a feeling that if they got rid of all radio and TV and left podcasts and social media, there would be no change in the world.

When I wake up I will check my social media platforms. During the day if I hear something, I will check it on a platform. I don't watch CNN or Fox because they are biased.

Another important source of news is their classroom

experience:

I feel like I learn a lot of news from classes and teachers

Only two students read the college newspaper regularly and they only did so because it was required in a class they were taking. But they had ways of finding out what was happening on campus: sidewalks, flyers and word of mouth.

This finding about the primacy of social media as a news source as well as word of mouth is in line with previous research (Gentilviso & Aikat 2019; Brodeur Partners, 2018; Patterson, 2008; Marchi, 2012; Singer, *et al.*, 2009).

The third research question sought to find out what factors would encourage students to engage more with the news.

Respondents felt that news content needs to be more relevant to the audience.

Maybe if the news wasn't so marketing and business oriented. It seems that all they want is money. I learnt that the news they put on is not what is happening a lot. Maybe if they were putting up things relevant to me I would watch.

They want news that is entertaining and affordable, citing paywalls as a big hindrance. They also want news that will make them think:

Like the story of the Idaho college students who were killed recently. It is an interesting puzzle that affects students like me.

They would also engage with the news more if they thought it was based on facts:

It is tiring because you have to filter so much out.

I feel like for some things you are not hearing the facts but opinion. You have to search for the facts.

I think you have to filter news items. Treating it with a general caution. I am better informed because I am skeptical.

They do not like the kind of "entertainment" they find on major networks such as CNN and Fox:

For people our age, there is need to be entertained. So CNN and Fox have to spice it up with onion. I find two adults yelling at each other entertaining but sad. In the competing opinions, you are left wondering what the truth is. They are trying to make the other side look really bad.

Our generation has been turned off by these

echo chambers and people butting heads and it is tiring.

They see the news as overwhelmingly negative and sad and would engage with news more if there were happier stories.

A teacher said Canadians are much happier because they get more happy news.

During Covid, people were looking for happier news.

There is much negativity so I look for happier news.

Most of them will watch local news but not national news. They fault the media for focusing on negative and depressing stories and ignoring impactful stories about people and places making a difference.

If I saw a story about someone making a difference in the local community, I will read it.

There are a lot of events going on and you never hear about them. What we do get is political. There is so much going on that is not political. For my Leadership studies class, we went to all the resources on campus such as the health center and the food assistance resource. But they don't get covered.

There are so many resources that never get covered: Local farms that are therapeutic, the theater... They never get covered.

Local news doesn't matter who is producing it. It is the quality of what they produce.

Implications for Journalism Education

Despite the small sample size, it is critical to note that the students' views echo and amplify the views expressed by other young people in previous studies. Given the repeated concerns and reservations that the young people have raised regarding news products and journalism itself, it is only fair that journalism educators begin to think about the implications of such sentiments for journalism education. This research paper suggests a few starting points, based not on just this limited sample, but on the entire body of research that has come up with similar findings (Gentilviso and Aikat 2019; Brodeur Partners, 2018; Marchi, 2012; Singer, *et al.*, 2009; Patterson, 2008).

First, infotainment is often treated in journalism classes as a bad word. We think of it as a treatment that cheapens serious journalism. The younger generation wants more creativity in the way we create and deliver content:

It is easier to pay attention to the news when it

is entertaining.

I think there is a way of balancing the entertainment factor and the non-entertaining.

There is a way of making stuff entertaining. Veggie stuff.

Journalism schools have given sufficient attention to the impact of technology in the way we create and distribute content and have tailored curriculum to ensure we are producing students who can report across platforms. It may be time to think about our audience in terms of generations and produce content tailored to different generations as standard practice. The standard practice today is to write stories specific to different media. It is time to think of generational needs and to meet those needs if we want to attract the younger audiences.

We could also teach creativity as a journalism skill. After all we are storytellers. Have students write a traditional journalism story answering the five “Ws” and the H. Then challenge them to take the same story and find a creative and entertaining angle to it. While not every story will lend itself to such a challenge, we need to place greater emphasis on creativity and stop treating entertainment as mutually exclusive from fact-based stories. You can still create factual content that is entertaining.

A second implication of these findings is the need to offer on-going training opportunities for journalism educators to keep up with the tastes of the young students they are teaching. If educators have never been on certain platforms frequented by their students, they may not be able to help them create the right content for that platform. We need to become familiar with new media platforms in order to see what our students are consuming so that legacy media are not our only true north. Content that is trending is a goldmine of opportunity to find out why it is trending and what we can borrow from it to create engaging content.

Today’s young adults have short attention spans. Research indicates they are more attracted to the visual and viral and not the long journalism stories.

People learn a certain way. Personally I don’t want to read so many words. It is the visuals and the videos. Finding the heart of the story is what is important and the way that information is relayed.

The young generation treats brevity as core requirement of journalism for their generation and want it delivered visually. This predilection elevates

the place of visual journalism in our curriculum and training.

The overwhelming use and reliance on social media have another implication for journalism training and education. Students are digital natives who understand the technology they use better than their instructors. But they need to learn how to use those platforms in ethical ways. That means media ethics is critical training for students. They also need lessons in media literacy to learn how to identify misinformation. Media ethics and media literacy should be required courses in our curriculum.

There is also a need for journalism trainers to have an honest conversation about the news values we teach our students to use in determining the stories to cover. Do they overwhelmingly favor content that ultimately leaves audiences feeling sad and depressed. Is there need for balance? What would that look like?

The most surprising finding of all is how little we really know about the news consumption habits of the young students in our classes. If educators have a really honest conversation with them about what they know and how they know it, it will help close the huge generational gap between instructors and their young students and craft a more relevant curriculum without sacrificing quality.

Related to all this is the implication of the research findings to democracy itself. Research has shown that news consumption is a predictor of civic engagement (Mwangi, *et al.*, 2014). Important civic activities such as voting or working to solve public or community problems require citizens to stay informed and to know what is happening in their communities by following the news. Young adults who are disengaged from the news consumption process are not just contributing to a decline in media audiences. Ultimately college students’ declining news consumption habits threaten the future of our democracy. Finding ways to get them to re-engage with the news process may save both the media and democracy itself.

Study Limitations and Future Research

The study is limited by the small sample size and future research could interview more students, both journalism and non-journalism majors. Future research could also explore the civic agency implications for young people who may not be well informed about the issues of the day. Do they vote? How do they get the information that informs their choices at the voting booths? Another research project could in

future investigate whether catering to audiences' desires could increase their long-term engagement with the news.

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