

## **Where the Young Get the News**

**A background paper prepared by Aralynn McMane, Director, Youth Readership Development, World Association of Newspapers**

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### **Introduction**

When a publisher of newspapers for children and adolescents in the U.S. and France was deciding how to treat pictures of the execution of Saddam Hussein, he had to think about more than basic news judgment and age appropriateness.

“A lot of my readers would have already watched the illegal footage of the entire execution on YouTube or Daily Motion before seeing the cover page of the newspaper,” The editor, François Dufour, explained. “That doesn’t mean an editor should not make a decision it, but that fact has to be taken into account.”

His dilemma encapsulates the issues of where young people can and do find news and of how much can traditional media can count on a future generation of users in the face of the increasingly pervasive presence of multiple, free and un-edited channels?

If traditional news providers expect support from the young for traditional concepts of press freedom, they are going to have to do a great deal more to meaningfully connect to a generation that is increasingly willing and able to bypass the journalist.

At the same time, new media technologies offer an enormous potential for news organizations to meet and empower young news audiences.

In 2006, with the support of Norske Skog paper producer, WAN commissioned a review of the main research conducted since 2000 that addresses questions about the news and information consumption of young people. D-Code, a Canada based youth consultancy firm, analyzed more than 60 different studies, reports and academic papers covering six continents. The analysis has limitations, including a heavy reliance on English-language and North American sources. However, key sections of the review provide useful background for a discussion of the topic at hand: “How the Young Get The News.”

### **Being informed, engagement and empowerment**

As far back as can be traced, older generations have chided younger generations for their apparent disengagement from public affairs. This clichéd perception of the young is not only alive and well, it has been reinforced by a sense that the information age and its technological toys have spawned a self-absorbed, plugged-in and tuned-out youth culture without comparison or precedent.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, evidence from several studies indicates that young people do not see themselves this way and that, once again, the perception is just that, a cliché.

Studies of youth attitudes suggest that despite their sometimes-disenchanted view, a lower interest in national or international political news is not necessarily an indication of political apathy. Young people often pay more attention to local political news because they feel that this type of news content has a stronger connection to their daily (social) life.<sup>2</sup> Experiencing the affect of local politics first hand also makes it much easier to follow. Studies in Western Europe and the United States make a case that the central issue is not apathy but cynicism. According to this argument, expressions of disinterest in political and social life are simply a front that youth put up.

But even that view is finding a counter-argument in the most recent studies. Only 11% of the young Canadians between the ages of 14 and 34 in the 2006 *Reading Between the Lines* study conducted for the Canadian Newspaper Association consider themselves not engaged with society (as defined by civil activities such as voting, volunteering and social activism).

The 2004 report for UNICEF, *Children, Youth and Media Around the World*, contends that the number of youth who participate in media programs are a testament to their interest in learning about the world. Researchers concluded that youth particularly want to give input or seek information regarding policies that affect young people and help government initiatives in areas such as children's rights and the environment.<sup>3</sup> Observations presented in this report also indicated that many young people feel that there are not enough avenues for them to voice their opinions in a way that will actually facilitate change.

Research in 2005 on 5 000 Internet users between 13 and 24 years old from 11 countries found a very strong emphasis on the importance of self-expression, along with need to feel connected with one another while retaining a strong self-direction. Respondents in this study were clear that it was their own messages to one another that counted, the "My Media," not those from mass media.<sup>4</sup>

Portraying an image of indifference to issues may simply be "part of the condition" of being young.<sup>5</sup> This rebellious trait that some refer to as "cynical chic" is a way young people sometimes deal with their own sense of powerlessness and what they see as inconsistency, complacency or hypocrisy on the part of adults.<sup>6</sup> This may explain why young people often express interesting and informed opinions on political or social issues, regardless of whether or not they refer to those issues as "boring."<sup>7</sup> The issue of cynicism is becoming more serious as the current generation is less likely to trust politicians and news media, therefore potentially having an impact on long-term loyalty to those media.

The good news for traditional media is a continuing link between use of those media and civic activity. A 2004 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation, *Media Youth and Civic Engagement* shows that the more time teens spend with media watching TV news or reading newspapers, the higher their civic knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Some national research suggests that reading domestic news is particularly linked to higher voter turnout.<sup>9</sup> Students who report reading domestic news in newspapers are more likely to indicate that they expect to vote as adults, in comparison to students who report not reading. On the flip side, a reduction in newspaper reading is linked with diminished civic awareness and a decline of democratic values.<sup>10</sup> Among youth in Canada, daily newspaper readership is a strong predictor of activities that can be loosely grouped under the umbrella of civil engagement. The most dramatic illustration of the correlation between newspaper readership and civil engagement is evident in electoral participation. Fully 78% of daily newspaper readers of voting age reported having voted in the last federal election (Jan. 23, 2006), compared with 56% of infrequent readers of newspapers.<sup>11</sup>

Analysis of data from 29 countries by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement from the 2000 IEA Civic Education Study (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) in 1999 and 2000 also demonstrated that students in all countries studied who frequently read domestic news were more likely to report that they expected to vote as adults in comparison with students who were less frequent readers.<sup>12</sup>

So far, news media have offered the main channels through which youth consume political and social information. But that is changing very quickly. The Internet has also rapidly become a key source of information for youth to keep informed of election and campaign news. In fact, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation report, *Media, Youth and Civic Engagement* indicates 28% of American voters age 18 – 29 use this medium as a source of election news.<sup>13</sup> The sea of knowledge available on the Internet makes it an incredibly powerful tool to learn about an infinite list of social and political issues.

Little research on the relative importance of media platforms has meaningfully included both Internet and mobile phones in the mix. But the one recent global study that does so found Internet far above television or even mobile phones as something respondents between ages 13 and 24 “couldn’t live without.”<sup>14</sup>

### **What ever happened to a news ritual?**

Traditionally, researchers have found a “news ritual” among media users, a pattern in how people consume news: newspapers in the morning, television news at night, etc.

While research is inconclusive about whether or not young people have created any kind of pattern for news consumption, we know that young people today tend to seek news as they need it, as opposed to during dedicated time spent for this purpose.<sup>15</sup> The tendency for the young to be news “grazers” may relate to the fact that youth are the heaviest Internet users, and that the Internet is suited for this kind of behaviour.<sup>16</sup>

Five studies, both national and global in scope, confirm that online time is increasingly occupying a larger part of the youth media diet. The 2004 *European Interactive Advertising Association (EIAA) Media Consumption Study* found that, compared to adults, European youth spend considerably longer amounts of time using the Internet, while adults spend slightly more time on average watching TV or listening to the radio. In France, for example, some studies show that youth have significantly changed their media diet to reflect their growing preference for the Internet. Findings show that in 2004, 55% of youth, aged 15-25, spent more time on the Internet than they did the previous year and 55% spent less time watching television.<sup>17</sup>

Canadian research in the *Reading Between the Lines* study shows a similar trend as the time youth spent online surpassed the time they spent watching television, listening to the radio or reading magazines and newspapers. According to this national report, the Canadian youth media diet on a typical day includes: 3.5 hours surfing the net, 3.1 hours watching television, 2.4 hours listening to the radio, 1.5 hours reading a book, 0.7 hours reading a newspaper, and 0.6 hours reading a magazine.<sup>18</sup> This finding is consistent with *Canada Online*, a national Internet report, which showed that 85% of Canadian youth report being “heavy” Internet users.<sup>19</sup> While these statistics reflect current usage patterns, research in the 2002 global report, *Confronting the News Readership Puzzle*, suggests that online penetration may have peaked among youth in many parts of the Western world.<sup>20</sup>

Internet usage in China has also grown significantly over the last decade. The CAAS 2005 Internet Report, *Surveying Internet Usage and Impact in Five Chinese Cities*, shows that younger people are more likely to be Internet users. Over 80 percent of respondents who are less than 24 years old use the Internet, in comparison with approximately 60-80% of people 25-29 years old, with numbers continuing to decline among respondents over 40.<sup>21</sup> Findings from this study also show that on a typical day, younger respondents spend more time surfing the net than older groups.

### **Technology time squeeze**

Many country-specific research studies explore the emergence of new media choices and what impact these choices have on overall media consumption. Research indicates that young people may be spending less time with a individual medium, especially traditional formats. Seija Nurmi's research in *The Plan of Work: The Effects of The Diffusion of Information Technology on Traditional Media Use* explains that the adoption of new digital media can enhance communication and often save time, but it still decreases the amount of spare time youth have available for traditional media and leisure. Although traditional media usage has declined as a result of new media adoption, this study suggests that traditional media have not been completely supplanted.<sup>22</sup> This study notes the current knowledge gap on the impact of new media on the use of traditional print media.

Decreasing leisure time may also have an impact on traditional media consumption. Five national studies touch on this topic. According to the *Youth and Media: A Worldwide Approach* study, limited leisure time affects print reading habits more than use of other media for Australians.<sup>23</sup> In 2002, a Belgian research study, *Editorial Strategies to Reach Young Readers* found that youth frequently say limited leisure time is the key reason they spend limited amounts of their time reading print.<sup>24</sup> Austrian research conducted in 2005 indicates that constrained leisure time is also the reason adolescents in that country tend to spend more time reading newspapers on the weekend than they do during the week.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the 2004 Pew Research Centre Biennial News Consumption Survey from the United States indicates that approximately half of respondents under the age of 25 say that they are frequently too busy to follow the news.

*Young and Media: A Worldwide Approach* found that among Australian youth, decreased leisure time did not have an impact on the amount of time spent on the Internet or going to the movies as much as it did on the time reading print.<sup>26</sup> However, research in *The Plan of Work: The Effects of the Diffusion of Information Technology on Traditional Media Use* from Belgium, found that new media compete most with television for youth consumption.<sup>27</sup>

### **Multi-tasking combinations**

Simultaneous media usage clearly has a potential impact on how and where young people find news and information. Several North American studies stress that multi-tasking is second nature for today's young people – especially with regard to media consumption. According to *Our Complex Media Day*, Americans spend two-thirds of their day interacting with media, and one-third of that time consuming multiple media simultaneously.<sup>28</sup> A 2003 study, *Born to Be Wired* found multi-tasking to be common for American young people between the ages of 13-24. Among respondents in the study, while surfing the net, 68% listen to CDs/MP3s, 50% watch TV, 45% talk on the phone, 45% listen to the radio, and 45% do their homework.<sup>29</sup> Another American study by Nielson Media Research showed that more than half of American youth

multi-task while watching television. According to this study, it is becoming more and more unlikely that youth will only watch their television screen – as over 50% are performing other activities.<sup>30</sup>

Other studies suggest there is a link between Internet usage and television viewing, and not just among the young. The U.S.-based Middletown Media Studies described an “exposure to content from multiple media simultaneously available through shared or shifting attention,” calling it “concurrent media exposure (CME).”<sup>31</sup> The analysis suggested that such a strategy was common across ages and genders, especially as evidenced in the pairing of television and the Internet. The study found that young people, however, tend to engage in concurrent media exposure that involves more “new” media and computer-based communication media.

### **Mobile Consumption**

The impact of cell phone usage is subject to many studies. *The 2005 World Youth Report*, a United Nations report compiled by its Department of Economic and Social Affairs, highlights two trends in the global mobile phone market that will affect media consumption habits overall: cell phone users are getting younger, and adolescents continue to spend more and more money on mobile communication every year.<sup>32</sup> *The World Youth Report* also notes that youth are more likely to use their cell phone for numerous activities other than placing calls: to access the Internet, download music, download ring tones, text message other mobile phones, and take pictures.<sup>33</sup>

U.S. research presented in the 2006 report, *The State of Our Nation’s Youth*, by the Horatio Alger Association, points out that gender also has an impact on cell phone usage: 68% of female youth between the ages of 13 and 19 report having a cell phone in comparison with 57% of males. This report also suggests that young people may value their cell phone more than other media. When asked to decide between their cell phone, the Internet, and television as to which they would be most willing to give up first, 48% said television, 28% said their Internet access, and only 23% said their cell phone.<sup>34</sup>

### **Youth portrayal in news media**

The 2004 global report, *Children Youth, and Media around the World: An Overview of Trends and Issues* and the *2005 World Youth Report* stresses that the portrayal of young people in the media is a critical issue. According to research presented in *The 2005 World Youth Report*, young people want to see a connection between their lives and the stories they read in newspapers. Instead, global research indicates that young people often feel alienated or disserved by the media because they are often portrayed simplistically as superficial, apathetic or delinquent. Findings from *The 2005 World Youth Report* show that youth rarely have the opportunity to read articles that discuss issues that are relevant to their everyday concerns. The report also discusses the lack of youth-oriented content in news media and explains that youth are looking for stories that focus on ordinary young people.<sup>35</sup> This problem was also reflected in a 2004 project by the World Association of Newspapers in 24 countries that found newspaper coverage of children by far most often portraying them as victims.<sup>36</sup>

In developing countries, this need for more balanced youth coverage is reflected in several studies. *Children Youth, and Media around the World: An Overview of Trends and Issues* explains that many young people who live in developing countries with widespread poverty, corruption and political turmoil seek realistic and meaningful content that will enable them to better cope with issues that affect their daily lives.<sup>37</sup> Youth also appreciate media content that

deals credibly with topics that they have trouble discussing with adults such as sexuality, AIDS, drugs, and self-esteem.<sup>38</sup>

Like adults, young people are attracted to content that entertains them. This does not, however, eliminate their desire/need to obtain credible information on the most important news of the day. According to the 2006 Canadian research, the news-heavy front section of the newspaper is the most frequently read part of newspapers among youth. Young respondents in this study report reading the front page and national sections of newspapers more often than the entertainment, sports or movie listings section.<sup>39</sup>

### **Intellectual growth**

Numerous examples across the globe demonstrate the effectiveness of programs that give young people the opportunity to participate in media. Findings from the 2003 report, *What Works in Youth Media: Case Studies from Around the World* suggest that young people who are exposed to, and engaged with, various types of news media at a young age treat them as part of their intellectual habit.<sup>40</sup>

*The 2005 World Youth Report* stresses that such opportunities for youth to participate in media programs need to be viewed as a priority. Case studies outlined in the study indicate that learning to reach out and change the status quo through print media also enables youth to hone critical skills and develop intellectual courage. The seven different media projects profiled in this report illustrate that youth participation in media generates highly positive outcomes for young people, especially when it gives them the chance to meaningfully express their views on issues affecting them.<sup>41</sup>

In some countries, this quest for intellectual growth through information sharing is especially important. The 2005 *World Youth Report* outlines the story of a small group of young people in Zambia who were motivated to publish *Trendsetters* in 1997 in light of rising teen pregnancy rates, high rates of sexually transmitted diseases, and the prevalence of HIV in their country. Although many parents and religious groups initially disapproved of the content of the newspaper, *Trendsetters* continued to educate young people about sexual health so that they could adopt safer sexual practices that decrease the incidence of unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS.<sup>42</sup> Research findings documented in the report show that since many young people are accustomed to passively receiving information, they place a high value on having the opportunity to participate in the communication process and strive to positively influence the opinions of both peers and adults.<sup>43</sup> Equally important, young journalists themselves learn valuable skills, gain stronger, more positive, self-images, and develop a greater appreciation for the importance of print media as a channel of communication.<sup>44</sup>

However, few such programmes have included research that indicates such a link empirically. Among the exceptions is work done to track the effects of a 2003 project in Latin America. In Argentina at the height of that country's economic crisis the eight competing newspapers of Buenos Aires agreed to hold a joint journalism contest for the city's secondary schools. Editors-in-chief picked the eight winning special reports from more than 100 school teams. Then each newspaper printed one of the stories – randomly selected – on the same Sunday. Qualitative research later indicated that the more than 1 000 13- to 14-year-olds who participated in that fairly simple exercise tended to develop not only higher levels of appreciation of media as a source of information but also more interest in freedom of expression.<sup>45</sup>

There is a growing body of research that links use of some media in school with later consumption of those media along with other kinds of social benefits. One example is newspapers in education programmes, which call for use of the adult newspaper in the teaching of many kinds of topics, now have such indicators. Studies in Argentina, Finland and the United States indicate strong links between having used newspapers in the class and academic achievement.<sup>46</sup> Further, research in the U.S. makes a very strong link between use of the newspaper in the class to retaining a newspaper reading habit into adulthood.<sup>47</sup>

### **Expectations of truth, balance and objectivity**

Both European and Canadian research suggests that young people may be losing trust in traditional news media. InterMedia research presented in *Young People and Media in Central & Eastern Europe, The CIS & Baltic States* in 2001, indicates that youth value and expect the media to be truthful, balanced and objective and are quick to sense when a medium is attempting to manipulate information.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the growing presence of non-standard media messages, such as blogs, “we media,” and webzines, reflect the lack of trust among youth in traditional news media.

*Attention to Media and Trust in Media Sources: Analysis of Data from the 2004 IEA Civic Education Study* (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) found that many European adolescents are becoming increasingly suspicious of news media in general, and tend to view newspapers as biased, believing that coverage decisions often depend on what those in power are trying to portray.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the *Report Card on Canadian News Media 2004* shows the low levels of trust youth place in news media: 68% of youth believe that news media try to cover up mistakes, in comparison to 54% of the general Canadian population.<sup>50</sup>

In 2006, young Canadians ranked trust and credibility as the most important criteria for any news or information source.<sup>51</sup> *The Report Card on Canadian News Media 2004* showed that many young people question the influence and agenda behind news stories. The study found that 81% of 19–25 year-olds believe and disapprove of the notion that powerful people or powerful organizations influence news organizations.<sup>52</sup> The cynicism Canadian and European youth display in these studies toward the motives of news media demonstrates their need to be convinced of the credibility of news content.

### **Some opportunities**

News organizations have a number of opportunities to meaningfully connecting to the young in a new-media environment and to engage them in a fight for freedom of expression and of the press. Here are just a few that emerge from this research review:

#### **1. Meet them where they are.**

All kinds of news organizations can alter the platform they use to reach the young. In print, that could mean a model that puts the product in the hands of the consumer with absolutely no effort on the part of that consumer. Many newspapers have launched free products to do this as well as begun quality newspapers in education programmes. All kinds of news organizations have begun to look hard at how they can make a better connections to the young through online and mobile channels.

#### **2. Provide a journalistic experience.**

News organizations still offer a chance to become part of a recognized, professional platform with branded access to a wide audience. Those organizations that have made the effort to

provide a meaningful programme for young people to experience what it's like to be a professional journalist have not regretted it. Such projects offer a side benefit because an organization's own journalists naturally come into meaningful contact with the young. One could argue that the young people interested in such an experience would become part of the audience anyway, but that is no longer the case given the wide choice of easy, on-demand options for satisfying a desire for news and information.

### **3. Remember the lessons of basic diversity.**

Few news organizations treat young people as normal sources beyond the "youth" story or news of the young beyond "school" or "youth" sections. They should.

### **4. Champion freedom of expression for all, not just the press.**

The young can rightly feel left out of discussions that concentrate only on freedom of expression for journalists. News organizations should, minimally, join youth-run efforts that exist in this area. Among them is the Berlin-based Loesje International, which creates an entire book on Press Freedom Day (3 May), with input from more than 20 countries. <http://www.1-day.org>

### **5. Find out more.**

One continuing gap in the research by news organizations is the lack of inquiry about what young people need and want in news and information and, indeed, what they consider useful content and service by any provider. The World Association of Newspapers plans to launch a worldwide study to examine just that. Organizations interested in knowing more to consider joining this effort should contact Aralynn McMane, [amcmane@wan.asso.fr](mailto:amcmane@wan.asso.fr), by 1 March 2007.

## Notes

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