

Young People Flee from the News, Whatever the Source

By Thomas E. Patterson

A few decades ago, young Americans were heavy consumers of news. More than half of the adults under 30 years of age were regular readers of a daily newspaper. Most of them also watched the evening newscasts on a regular basis. As Martin Wattenberg notes in his recent book *Is Voting for Young People?*: “There was little variation in news viewing habits by age. TV news producers could hardly write off young adults, given that two out of three said they had watched such broadcasts every night.”

Analysts agree that today’s young Americans are less interested in news than their counterparts of a generation or two ago. However, estimates of the decline vary widely, and some analysts claim the digital revolution is a generational watershed that is bringing young people back to the news. “The notion is that no young person cares about news, and that is wrong,” says Lee Rainie of the Pew Internet and American Life Project. “They’re moving to a different distribution system.”

We recently conducted a large national survey to discover what can reliably be said about the news exposure of today’s young Americans.

The study had several special features. For one thing, our sample included teenage (ages 12-17) respondents, who’ve seldom been polled nationally on their news habits. We also stratified our sample, overselecting young adults (ages 18-30) in order to estimate more precisely their news habits. Finally, we used several measures of news exposure, looking not only at the frequency of Americans’ news exposure, which is the typical focus of media surveys, but also at the depth of their exposure and their familiarity with specific news stories.

Precise assessments of young adults’ news habits are important in at least two respects. First, young people’s interest in news will affect the economic vitality of news organizations and thus their ability to invest in quality journalism. Also at stake is the grassroots vitality of America’s democracy. Although it is inaccurate to equate the news-consuming citizen with the informed citizen, the news, as the journalist Walter Lippmann noted, is our window onto the world of public affairs. If we fail to look through that window, we will know little of the world that lies beyond our personal experience.

Most older Americans have a daily “appointment” with the news. Many of them, for example, routinely sit down each evening to watch the nightly news. Many fewer younger Americans behave this way. Most of them do not set aside a particular time of the day for news.

Whereas one in five older adults is a heavy user of the newspaper—meaning they read it every day and pay reasonably close attention to its stories while doing so—only one in twelve young adults and a mere one in twenty teens rely heavily on the newspaper. The picture is marginally brighter in the case of television news. For both national and local television news, about one in six young adults, and a like proportion of teens, are heavy viewers. They watch television news almost daily and sit through most of the newscast while doing so. Nevertheless, this level is far below that of older adults—more than twice as many of them, two in every five, are heavy viewers of national news and a slightly larger proportion follow local TV news closely.

Age differences shrink for Internet-based news but do not disappear. Even though older adults are somewhat less likely than young adults and teens to access the Web, they make greater use of it as a news source. Nevertheless, only a fraction of each age group uses it extensively. Roughly one in seven older adults, one in eight young adults, and one in twelve teenagers are heavy consumers of Internet-based news.

When news use is viewed from the perspective of the non-users, teens and young adults far outnumber older adults. Indeed, in the case of the newspaper and the Internet, an absolute majority of teens and young adults are non-users. The newspaper particularly has little appeal to young Americans.

Two in every three young Americans largely ignore the daily paper. A smaller proportion—two in every five—pay almost no attention to national and local television news.

Of course, citizens do not have to avail themselves of every conceivable source of news in order to stay informed. It may be enough that they play regular attention to a single medium only. Roughly half of older Americans do so. Among teens and young adults, the number is closer to one in five. In fact, roughly a fourth of younger Americans pay virtually no attention to news from any source, and another fourth are moderately

Searching for a Source: Are Young Americans Getting News from Non- traditional Outlets?

attentive to a single medium only.

Clearly, there is a wide generational gap in news consumption. The daily news is not an integral part of the daily lives of most teens and young adults.

There remains the possibility that young Americans have devised new ways of getting the news, relying on entertainment programs, new media, acquaintances, or an irregular mix of traditional media.

To assess that possibility, our study deployed an innovative measurement technique. Each day of our national survey, respondents questioned that day were asked about their awareness of a current top news story. The next day, a new top story was the basis for the questioning. Respondents who claimed exposure to the story in question were then asked to identify the source of this news. If they encountered the story in the newspaper, on a late-night entertainment

program, heard about it from their uncle, or any other source, this information was recorded.

The findings from this method of questioning were remarkably similar to what we found using standard measurement techniques. Older adults were substantially more likely than younger adults (62 percent versus 43 percent) to claim exposure to the story in question. Teenage respondents were even less likely to claim exposure; their recall level was 10 percentage points below that of young adults. Younger adults and teens were also less likely to correctly identify a simple factual element contained within a story they claimed to have encountered. Overall, whereas slightly more than a third of older respondents claimed awareness of the story and could identify accurately the factual element, only a fifth of younger respondents could do so.

In regard to the source of young people's story awareness, "old media" predominated. Roughly 50 percent of older and younger respondents who claimed awareness of the story in question cited television news as their source. No other news source was cited even half as often. The daily newspaper was at the bottom of the list for young adults and teens.

Conspicuously missing from the list of sources were television entertainment programs. Only a tiny number of the teens and young adults cited Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* or some other late-night television program as their story source. Such programs have a hard-core following, but it is a relatively small audience in the context of the full public.

The notion that young Americans get their news from "a different distribution system" was not borne out by our survey. It is true that teens and young adults make more use of "the new media" than

do older adults, but the fact that many young adults spend a lot of time on the Internet and watch a lot of entertainment television does not necessarily indicate they are using them as news sources. When it comes to news, young adults are far more likely to get their information from television than from one of the new media and, within television, from a newscast rather than an entertainment program. The large fact about teens and

The Changing Media Environment, and Why It Leads to Less News Exposure.

young adults is not that they are heavily dependent on new media but that they partake only lightly of news, whatever the source.

News exposure is at a historic juncture. From the early 1800s until recently, the news audience was expanding. The introduction of the hand-cranked rotary press in the 1830s drove down the price of the newspaper from five cents to a penny, and newspaper readership immediately began to rise. By the end of the 1800s, helped along by the invention of newsprint and the steam-driven press, some metropolitan newspapers were selling as many as 100,000 copies a day. Radio news came along in the 1920s, expanding the news audience beyond those reached by the newspaper.

Television news' contribution was even more substantial. Early studies of the television news audience produced a startling finding: many of the people who watched TV news regularly had only a slight interest in news. Georgetown University's Michael Robinson was one of the first analysts to recognize the significance of these viewers. They were

“inadvertent viewers,” brought to the news less by an interest in news than a fascination with television. The news in most markets had a monopoly on dinner-hour television, and viewers who were intent on watching television had no choice but to sit through it.

Over time, some of these viewers developed a liking for news, and it rubbed off on their children. Television news was an early-evening ritual in many families and, though the children might have preferred to watch something else, it was the only dinner-hour programming available. By the time many of these children finished school, they had acquired a news habit of their own.

Television’s capacity to generate interest in news through force feeding ended in the 1980s with the rapid spread of cable television. Viewers no longer had to sit through the news while waiting for entertainment programming to appear. Television news did not lose its regulars, a reason in the cable era why its audience has aged as it has shrunk. But TV news did lose much of its ability to create interest in news among young adults who preferred other programming. And its capacity to generate interest among children was greatly diminished. Fewer of the parents were watching the news and, even if the parents were watching, the children, as a 1999 Kaiser Family Foundation study revealed, were usually in another room watching something else.

The Internet has even less capacity to generate a daily news habit for those without one. Although, like television, the Internet has its addicts, their pursuits are largely determined by the interests they bring to the Web. Their existing preferences govern the sites they choose to visit. A 2006 Pew Research Center study indicates that the Internet is not even

particularly powerful in strengthening the news habit of those who use it as a news source. Compared with the typical newspaper reader or television news viewer, the typical Internet-news user spends many fewer minutes per day attending to the medium’s news. Even the on-demand feature of Internet news can work against the formation of an online news habit because it breaks the link between ritual and habit. Newspaper reading, for example, is a morning ritual for some Americans— the almost unthinkable walk to the door to retrieve the paper, followed by the almost unthinking opening of the paper to the preferred section. As the scholars Maria Len Rios and Clyde Bentley note, online news exposure is less fixed by time, place, and routine—elements that reinforce, almost define, a habit.

The Internet cannot be faulted for the decline in news interest among young Americans. Other factors, including a weakening of the home as a place where news habits are acquired, underlie this development. Notwithstanding the cartoon father with his nose buried in the paper after a day at work, news exposure in the home was a family affair. The newspaper sections were shared, as was the space around the radio or in front of the television set. Today, media use is largely a solitary affair, contributing to the tendency of media use to reinforce interests rather than to create new ones.

Thomas E. Patterson is Bradlee Professor of Government & the Press at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, where he is also acting director of the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. He designed and directed the national survey on which this article is based.