

GEARING NEWS TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Studies show that young people today are less likely to follow the news than older Americans. For example, a CIRCLE Fact Sheet “Media Use Among Young People” shows that only around one quarter of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25 use television, radio, or newspapers to obtain news on a daily basis compared to over 40 percent of those 26 and older. Moreover, fewer than one in ten young people use the internet for news seven days a week. A new CIRCLE Working Paper by Susan Sherr of the Eagleton Institute of Politics attempts to find ways to increase youth news consumption by examining the kinds of news available for young people, why producers create youth-oriented news the way they do, and what young people say they really want in news.

The working paper entitled “News for a New Generation” combines textual analysis, interviews with youth news producers, and focus groups with young people to find out whether today’s news products appeal to young people’s interests. A second working paper will be available later this year with findings from an experiment testing whether changing the format in which news is presented to young people will increase their interest in news.

Youth-Oriented News Programs Today

From MTV to Newsweek, there exists a small and varied network of organizations reaching out to young audiences. As a Pew Research Center poll recently pointed out, young people are the most likely age group to go online.² This fact has not gone unnoticed by news producers as the internet is the medium most often used by producers trying to reach young people. According to the author, “We located more youth oriented news sources online than on television or radio or in newspapers or magazines. Additionally, what differentiated these Web sites from the print and TV media was the additional presence of young people writing articles and being featured in them.” Examples of Web sites studied included Wiretap, MTV News, and Teen World News.

Producers had a clear idea of what they think young people want in the news. According to Dr. Sherr, “All producers see an intermingling of news and pop-culture as an important element of producing news for the young, and most view the shortened attention spans of the younger generations as a reason for reducing the length of news stories. There also is a preference for heavy use of visual content among these producers.”

However, it appears that many of the beliefs producers have about youth preferences have not been heavily researched. In fact, most of the producers interviewed admitted to doing little, if any, market research on the youth population. Dr. Sherr notes, “Considering this lack of systematic research, it is worth considering whether the media are underestimating the receptiveness of the young audience to a more complex discussion of issues and events.”

What Young People Think About the News

The second phase of the research involved five focus groups that included both college and non-college attending young people between the ages 18 and 24 from central New Jersey. The focus groups were designed to find out what young people want in a news program. The following recommendations are based on feedback from these focus groups and from interviews with news producers:

- 1. Reduce Sensationalism:** It appears that any news source aimed at younger people should provide audiences with a sense of control over the information gathered. Young people do not like stories that “try to lure viewers with tantalizing details about stories that turn out to be less than thrilling.”
- 2. Make it Relevant:** Youth news producers emphasize the importance of relevance, and young people express a greater interest in news that is local and familiar. While it’s important to cover national and international affairs, these stories need to be presented in a way that is relevant to the lives of young people.
- 3. Increase the Number of Positive Stories:** Young people in the focus groups complained that news is too negative. One solution may be to use positive stories as a starting point for an in-depth discussion of related stories with farther-reaching implications.
- 4. Bring in New News Anchors:** Young people do not like the traditional, straight-faced method of delivering the news, according to this study’s focus groups. Figuring out how to adjust news presentations to younger sensibilities will require creativity and experimentation. ★

The full report and recommendations can be downloaded from CIRCLE’s Web site at <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP16Sherr.pdf>

² Fox, Susannah (2004). “Older Americans and the Internet.” Pew Internet and American Life Project. http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Seniors_Online_2004.pdf