

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

MAKING NEWS FUN AND FUNCTIONAL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

BY EMILY KIRBY

Many young people are turning away from traditional news sources such as the local newspaper or nightly news and opting for other sources such as John Stewart's *The Daily Show*.¹ Recent research by Susan Sherr of The Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University examines what news producers are doing to attract a younger audience and asks whether there are formats for news that would be more engaging and informative for young adults than current media offerings.

To test the effectiveness of different news formats Dr. Sherr utilized an experimental design where subjects were assigned to view one of four different news Web sites: 1) a traditional site 2) a site with a youthful design and traditional text 3) a site with traditional design and youth-oriented text and 4) a site with youthful design and youth-oriented text. The research included a total of 266 18-24 year old college students, mainly from Rutgers University.

Her research suggests that for young people there is a tradeoff between news that is informative and news that is enjoyable; to prepare this next generation to be politically engaged it is important that news producers find a way to balance fun and function. According to Dr. Sherr, "It is not clear how to strike a balance between what is informative and what is enjoyable to ensure that people are willing to consume the information they 'should' learn. The results of this research provide some clues as to where the boundaries between education and entertainment might lie and provides realistic suggestions for creating an informative youth news media."

WHAT THEY LIKE ISN'T ALWAYS WHAT THEY LEARN FROM

Dr. Sherr found that while young people preferred the news Web sites with the youthful design and youth-oriented text, they actually learned more from the traditional Web sites. One reason young people may have learned less from the youth sites is that the sites appeared to lack a certain amount of credibility. Interviews after the experiment revealed that many respondents did not like the use of quotes by people without obvious credentials or the inclusion of satire pieces on a news Web site. In addition, some reported that the moving ads on the youth sites made it difficult to concentrate on the articles. According

to Dr. Sherr, "It is very possible that the motion and bright colors found on the youth design sites reduced the number of cognitive resources available for learning the information provided."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

The research suggests that presenting news using a modern, dynamic design format certainly makes the source more attractive to young audiences. However, these features must be employed judiciously. Overloading a TV program or Web site with too many moving elements or colorful features may not only distract consumers but may also make the information seem unreliable. The author notes, "People are not attracted to those things that would make them the most educated or best able to function in a democratic society. Instead they seek out those stimuli that are more likely to produce less lofty satisfactions. Those of us who would like to achieve the idealistic goal of creating an informed citizenry must acknowledge this reality." ■

YOUTH SOCIAL REPRESENTATION IN THE U.S. MILITARY

BY JARED SAGOFF

Although some minority groups are over-represented in the United States military as compared to the nation's population, there is no correlation between race and a willingness to join the military, according to a recent study.

A recently-released CIRCLE report by Capt. Mark Adamshick indicates that white and minority youth are roughly equally willing to join the U.S. Armed Forces, even though minority representation in the military has increased steadily since 1980. In 2002, for example, minorities comprised 36 percent of all active duty soldiers as well as 39 percent of enlistees. This figure is significantly higher than the minority representation (31 percent) in the U.S. civilian population. This difference can be largely attributed to the 22 percent of enlistees who are African-Americans as opposed to the 12 percent of the civilian population who are of that ethnicity.

GENDER AND EDUCATION PLAY A ROLE IN DECISION TO JOIN THE MILITARY

While the study demonstrates a discrepancy between the representation of African-Americans in the armed forces as compared to the civilian population, the author finds no significant difference

¹ <http://peoplepress.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=834>

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in the willingness of members of either group to join the military. Nineteen percent of whites expressed willingness to join, while 20 percent of African-Americans did so, according to a survey of 1,490 U.S. youth by Lake Snell Perry & Associates and the Tarrance Group.

Although race does not seem to be a significant factor in determining willingness to join the military, several other variables have a strong impact on that decision. The gender of the survey respondents provides a stronger indicator of willingness to join the military, as women were nine percentage points less likely to be willing to sign up for service than men. Also, education plays an important role as well – “less-educated” and “unsuccessfully-educated” young people were 8 and 12 percentage points more likely to express willingness to join than successfully-educated youth. This result is largely due to a 28-point difference between “unsuccessfully-educated” and “successfully-educated” Latino youth. The study also shows a correlation between immigration status and willingness to join the armed forces.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS ALSO CONTRIBUTE TO WILLINGNESS TO JOIN THE MILITARY

The study also examined several psychological factors that might influence an individual’s proclivity to enlist: how empowered the respondents felt, how much of a difference they thought they could make in society, and their desire to “get ahead.” Of these

three, only the last demonstrated any significant effect on willingness to join. According to the report, whites who viewed the armed forces as a way to get ahead were 11 percentage points more likely to be willing to join than those who did not. The study also examined whether the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 had any effect on the respondents’ willingness to join up. Surprisingly, the attacks had no significant impact on the respondents’ interest in joining the military and even made some age groups less likely to consider signing up. The study also found no relationship between the factors that influence a young person’s willingness to join the military and his or her willingness to practice other community-oriented occupations, such as teaching or working as a police officer.

Determining minority representation in the armed forces represents a necessary field of inquiry for several reasons. First, minority representation in the military continues to grow, from 23 percent in 1980 to 36 percent three years ago. Second, according to the author of the study, “recruitment of minorities to serve in the active component of the U.S. military service is an important priority for military force planners.” Finally, this study attempts to address the question of whether the burden of military service is distributed unfairly across society. The author writes: “This analysis seems to suggest that it is the nation’s under-educated and less empowered youths who are joining the military, all else being equal.”

CIRCLE FACT SHEETS

CIRCLE has produced a number of Fact Sheets which are brief documents with basic information and graphs on various topics. The following Fact Sheets can be found on CIRCLE’s Web site:

- ≡ **How Teachers’ Preparation Relates to Students’ Civic Knowledge and Engagement in the United States: Analysis from the IEA Civic Education Study** (June 2005) reports American student performance on knowledge measures in relation to the international mean, home background, topics studied in school, and attitudes about types of civic participation.
- ≡ **The Youth Vote 2004** (July 2005) compares voter turnout for 18-24 year olds and 18-29 year olds to that of older voters.
- ≡ **Youth Voter Turnout in the States during the 2004 Presidential and 2002 Midterm Elections** (July 2005) shows a substantial variation in voter turnout rates by state in the 2002 and 2004 elections.
- ≡ **Electoral Engagement Among Non-College Attending Youth** (July 2005) provides information on the voting rates of non-college attending youth.
- ≡ **Electoral Engagement Among Minority Youth** (July 2005) presents data on the characteristics of the youth population and youth voting trends through 2004 by race and ethnicity.
- ≡ **Voter Turnout Among Young Women and Men** (July 2005) presents information on one measure of civic engagement, voter turnout, across men and women. It also highlights some of the similarities and differences between young women and young men in their attitudes towards voting.