



**KNIGHT  
FOUNDATION**

**HOW YOUTH**

**NAVIGATE**

**THE NEWS**

**LANDSCAPE**

**Recent Qualitative Research — February 2017**  
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**Data&Society**



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***“I just think it’s important to be a productive member of society and be aware of what’s going on around you. You know, like—it sounds really cheesy and cliché, but we all affect everything around us inadvertently and directly, so it’s like important, at least for like my generation, to know what’s going on in the world.”***

— Female / 24 / Hispanic



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017, what it means to “know what’s going on in the world” has become a hotly contested issue. Years of change and innovations in the journalism industry have radically transformed the way Americans consume, share and even produce their own forms of news. At a deeper level, the public’s eroding trust in journalistic institutions and the rise of a highly politicized networked digital media environment have underscored the urgent need to understand how these disruptions might evolve in the future.

As is often the case with technological revolutions, young people are on the front lines of change. They are deeply immersed in social media and mobile technologies in their daily lives, and are tasked with navigating an increasingly malleable media environment. And as researchers seek to understand the shifting behaviors and attitudes of today’s young news consumers, it has become increasingly important to reexamine the shifting boundaries of what counts as “news.” If we want to understand the place that news holds in young people’s lives, it is imperative that we understand their language, their conceptual models, and their frames of reference. These are the kinds of insights that interpretive qualitative research has the potential to surface.

In June and July of 2016, Knight Foundation commissioned a series of focus groups with 52 teenagers and young adults from across the United States to learn more about how young people conceptualize and consume news in digital spaces—with a focus on understanding the growing influence of mobile devices, social media and messaging apps. The research team conducted six exploratory focus groups of about 90 minutes each in three cities in the United States: Philadelphia, Chicago and Charlotte, North Carolina. Participants were between the ages of 14 and 24 and included an even mix of young men and women.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Four groups, including two homogenous groups, were composed of 18- to 24-year-old high school graduates. These older groups included college students, non-college students and college graduates. The remaining two groups were composed of 14- to 17-year-old high school students or recent graduates. Both of these groups were broadly recruited. As a whole, this sample represents a wide range of youth voices with good racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. However, this study is not nationally representative and the findings are not generalizable to all teens and young adults in the United States. Instead, this research signals emerging practices and indicates directions for further inquiry in qualitative and quantitative studies.



Among the key findings that emerged through these discussions:

## 1. The way young people encounter and understand news in their daily lives is rapidly evolving.

Long-held assumptions about the patterns and rhythms of news consumption are being upended by a generation that largely experiences journalism through the mediated lens of mobile apps and the algorithmic authority of social media platforms. Many of these teens and young adults are at the leading edge of a shift in behaviors that could call into question fundamental research and audience measurement methods that have become deeply ingrained in the news media infrastructure. These shifts appear to be driven by several larger trends:

- In an age of smartphones and social media, young people don't follow the news as much as it follows them.
- News is frequently encountered by accident and in interstitial moments, as young people dip into flows of news across various platforms.
- Youth news sharing practices are varied, and certain behaviors—such as taking screenshots—may elude current tools to record and track traffic to news platforms.
- Many young people assume that a news industry that is driven by advertising will continue to take on new forms and eventually permeate every aspect of their lives.

## 2. Most teens and young adults express low levels of trust in the news media and are relying on networked strategies to help them navigate the stories they most care about.

Lack of trust and perceived bias in the news was an important theme across all of the groups. These issues came up early and often in discussions when young people described what “news” meant to them. Some of these views may be attributable to changes in how news is shared and consumed, while others may have also been influenced by the tragic national events that took place during the same period as the interviews. However, because social media plays such a significant role in disseminating news for these youth, it was clear that they are regularly exposed to a range of content of varying quality that they must rapidly learn to assess. In addition, while algorithms were rarely discussed, many of the participants were aware of the bias that can result from the automated selection of news. In this environment, many



young people assume a great deal of personal responsibility for actively seeking out opposing viewpoints and educating themselves from a range of perspectives.

The following themes were expressed repeatedly through our discussions:

- Teens and young adults expressed widespread skepticism about the news and assume that much of the information they encounter may be inaccurate or biased.
- Teens and young adults often consult multiple news sources to verify the stories they encounter.
- A news source is considered more credible when its biases are known.

### 3. Many of today's news-related attitudes and behaviors among youth can be traced to larger structural changes in the journalism industry.

In much the same way that the news industry has been disrupted in the digital era, teens' and young adults' understanding of what "the news" is and should be has largely been unhinged from the traditional understanding of journalism and institutional authority. Because this study focused on youth, it is unclear whether older generations would express the same views today. Nevertheless, a variety of assumptions and attitudes appears to be pervasive and worthy of deeper analysis and consideration moving forward:

- Young people's concept of what constitutes "the news" is amorphous and often extends well beyond the content produced by traditional journalistic institutions.
- News is "depressing," but it is something you need to know.
- Sharing news and opinions on social media is seen as having the potential to negatively affect one's online reputation.
- Many participants consider user-generated content—especially live video—to be more trustworthy than mainstream media sources.



# INTRODUCTION

Today's young news consumers face a dizzying array of options for getting their news. While their parents' generation relied on print media, television and radio, teens and young adults now have an ever-expanding suite of platforms to supplement those traditional formats; news and magazine websites, blogs, social media, messaging apps, text alerts, online video, GIFs, emojis and even virtual reality experiences may play a role in how today's youth engage with the news. Less than a decade ago, simply getting any kind of news on a mobile device was considered a leading-edge activity.

Today, news consumption has become mobile by default. Smartphone-based news consumption has increased notably in the past two years, such that 89 percent of mobile phone users in the U.S. now access news and information on their devices.<sup>2</sup> These shifting trends in consumer behavior are also evident in traffic patterns; the majority of the top 50 digital news websites reported in 2015 that visits from mobile devices outpaced those from desktop computers.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time that news has become mobile, it has become increasingly social. Multiple research studies have pointed to the fact that younger generations are increasingly consuming news through social media apps.<sup>4</sup> Facebook continues to dominate as a primary social media news source, but some of this news consumption is happening unintentionally. In particular, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram news users are more likely to stumble across their news, whereas LinkedIn, Twitter and Reddit news users are more evenly divided between news seekers and non-seekers.<sup>5</sup> In addition, youth and media researchers have pointed to the way that this increasingly diversified networked environment has enabled new genres of content, new modes of production and new definitions of news to emerge.<sup>6</sup>

Within the journalism industry, patterns of news production are also shifting. In breaking news situations, user-generated content (which may or may not be accurate) is routinely pulled from social media platforms, and stories may start to take shape before the reporter is engaged in reporting. Researchers studying trends in local television newsrooms have noted that stories trending on social media are likely to be allocated more time and placed higher in newscasts than stories that are not.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, young

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2 Knight Foundation. [Mobile-First News: How People Use Smartphones to Access Information](#). May 2016.

3 Pew Research Center. [State of the News Media 2015](#). April 2015.

4 Knight Foundation. [Mobile-First News: How People Use Smartphones to Access Information](#).

May 2016; Pew Research Center. [State of the News Media 2016](#). May 2016.

5 Pew Research Center. [State of the News Media 2016](#). May 2016.

6 Cortesi, S., & Gasser, U. "<http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/2761/1369>" Youth online and news: A phenomenological view on diversity." *International Journal of Communication*, 9. (2015): 1425-1448.

7 Adornato, Anthony C. "[Forces at the Gate: Social Media's Influence on Editorial and Production Decisions in Local Television Newsrooms](#)." *Electronic News* 10, no. 2 (2016): 87-104.

doi:10.1177/1931243116647768.



people are sometimes turning to social media sources to help them verify the facts of the stories they find out about elsewhere.

Yet, as the election campaign of 2016 repeatedly illustrated, misinformation can be incredibly persistent on the internet, and one party's fact is another party's fiction. This is not a new phenomenon, but the pace with which false information proliferates on social media creates significant challenges both for reporters trying to stay on top of rapidly evolving stories and for young news consumers who are trying to decide what information they can trust.

In this environment, it becomes especially critical to re-examine fundamental questions about how young people think about the role of news in an increasingly mobile and social world. Are young people's news consumption behaviors changing in ways that media institutions and social scientists should be aware of? How receptive are they to current efforts by news outlets to keep them engaged and informed? Do they find some platforms are better than others for getting the news that they want? And how do they assess the trustworthiness of the stories they encounter?



# MAIN FINDINGS

## How Teens and Young Adults Think About the News

*Young people's concept of what constitutes "the news" is amorphous and often extends well beyond the content produced by traditional journalistic institutions.*

The findings in this report challenge the pervasive myth that young people don't care about the news. Instead, they suggest that American teens and young adults consume a wide range of news in their daily lives and that this news is delivered through a variety of formats, lengths and platforms. News content often provides a jumping-off point for social discussion and conversation within families and serves as a motivation to learn more about issues that affect young people personally.

***"I think that's why people watch the news in general. I think that, like, we as humans, we want to naturally do good. We want to be good. So we want to do good things for the betterment of society. So we watch the news to see what all is going on."***

— Female / 24 / Hispanic

At the same time, many describe the news as biased, and there is widespread skepticism regarding the accuracy of the news. Young people's concept of "the news" is amorphous and includes a broad range of content that extends well beyond the output of traditional journalistic institutions. When asked about the first words that come to mind when they hear the word "news," they offer a wide array of positive and negative associations that reflect the complex and transforming media environment in which they live.

***"The news is only what the majority wants to hear. It's never the complete truth, and it may be false in some aspects.... There's bias in the language. Loaded words. It's just the way they word it."***

— Female / 22 / African-American



Within the industry, definitions of what counts as news are also evolving, as new forms of media, such as social media, aggregators and messaging apps, as well as new media practices, such as user-generated content, eyewitness testimony and live video are transforming the processes of news production and consumption. Historically, definitions of what qualifies as news have been codified by large professional journalism outlets that have also served as gatekeepers of the news.<sup>8</sup> But teens and young adults have little if any experience with that world. Theirs is a world with a different set of algorithmic gatekeepers that are often invisible and unaccountable to the average user.

***“[I was] not purposefully looking for it. Like Facebook, you get a notification for Facebook or something and you click on it and you start scrolling. You’re going to find a bunch of news articles that you didn’t necessarily go there to see, but you’re going to see them and you’re going to click on them.... I wouldn’t know a lot of the news if I didn’t go on Facebook and just look through it. Like the Orlando shootings—that’s how I found out about it, through Facebook.”***

— Female / 16 / White

One unanticipated but important thread across these discussions was the cascade of tragic national news events that unfolded over the course of the interviewing period. The mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, the police shootings of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Philando Castile in suburban St. Paul, Minnesota, and the attack against Dallas police officers were among the series of violent events that took place either shortly before or on the day of our focus groups. At the same time, the role of live-streaming video on social media was growing in importance; in several cases, these tragedies or their aftermath played out on video in real time and were then shared widely across social media sites and mainstream news outlets.

<sup>8</sup> Malik, Momin M., Sandra Cortesi, and Urs Gasser. [“The Challenges of Defining ‘News Literacy’.”](#) Berkman Center Research Publication. October 2013.

*Young news consumers express widespread skepticism about the accuracy of the news and assume that some level of bias is inevitable in much of the information they encounter.*

Of all the themes that surfaced through these discussions, the most striking point of consensus across the groups was their shared lack of trust in the news media. There was no assumption that the news would convey the truth or would be worthy of their trust. As recent Knight studies have illustrated, like U.S. adults in general, the majority of college students (59 percent) “have little to no trust in the press to report the news accurately and fairly.”<sup>9</sup> However, they also show that college students understand the value of having a free press, and that it is no less important to democracy today than it has been in the past.

Other studies have echoed this broad crisis of confidence in the news media. According to a recent Gallup poll, “Americans’ trust and confidence in the mass media ‘to report the news fully, accurately and fairly’ has dropped to its lowest level in Gallup polling history.” Just 32 percent say they have “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust.<sup>10</sup>

***“News doesn’t have to give even accurate information on a situation. It just has to be current and, like, an interest in society right now.... It’s always biased in some way or another.”***

— Female / 23 / Hispanic and African-American

This issue of bias in the news was an important theme across all of the groups and often came up unprompted in early discussions of how young people described what “news” meant to them. Part of this may be attributable to changes in how news is shared and consumed. Because social media plays such a significant role in disseminating news, teens and young adults are exposed to a range of content of varying quality whether or not they specifically seek it out.

<sup>9</sup> Gallup Organization, Knight Foundation, and Newseum Institute. [Free Expression on Campus: A Survey of U.S. College Students and U.S. Adults](#). 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Gallup Organization. [“Americans’ Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low.”](#) September 2016.

Accuracy has been identified as one of the most important components for establishing trust in the news, while timeliness and clarity are considered the next two most important features.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the two most common reasons for Americans to lose trust in a news source are perception of

***“Even if it’s factual, it may be sort of tainted.”***

— Female / 23 / Hispanic & African-American

***“Well, essentially I think information can be more factual than news. That’s why I was saying before it’s hand-in-hand, because you need that factual information to get a story, even though news-wise it’s usually always altered in some form, which throws in that bias or that where everything is not completely true.”***

— Female / 21 / African-American

***“Personally, when I want to know about news, I don’t go to, like, TV. If I want to find news, like, TV’s the last place I go to look. Because a lot of the major news channels, I feel like they don’t tell you the whole story, they just tell you the story that they want you to hear. So a lot of times I’ll just go on the internet and see what my friends are talking about sometimes.”***

— Male / 16 / White

<sup>11</sup> The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, and American Press Institute. [A New Understanding: What Makes People Trust the News](#). April 2016.

bias and inaccuracies.<sup>12</sup> When consuming news on social media platforms, clear identification of the original reporting source is key to establishing the trustworthiness of the information.<sup>13</sup> This is especially difficult on social media, as any friend or connection can post or repost content that may or may not have a link to a news outlet.

Some participants dismissed television news because of a perceived tendency toward bias, but others discussed TV's role as a trusted verifier of news stories that they may encounter elsewhere. In particular, television news reporting was viewed as more trustworthy by certain participants because it was connected to a news organization's institutional reputation, and tendencies toward bias could be balanced by the multiple viewpoints of all the people involved in the production. Certain teens believed that big cable news brands like CNN were more invested in being right than other sources of news.

Many of the references to TV as a news source were influenced by the social conditions of news consumption. Because TVs were in the homes of most of the participants or their family members, they often described conversations that would either be inspired or augmented by news stories that were witnessed together. Young people highlighted the ways that TV can become a conversation point across generations and can facilitate a process of making sense of major news events together. At times, the trust that was expressed in TV news was clearly tied to these social processes that happen within families and among friends.

***“A lot of the views that they give on TV are really objective.... Because like, for the TV it's not just one person who's in charge of writing a story. It's like a collaboration of a bunch of people. So it's like you feel like you can trust it more; whereas, if it's one person it's more likely that that person's views are in it, too”***

— Male / 16 / White

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. See also the work of Tonya Mosley, a 2016 Knight journalism fellow at Stanford whose fellowship project focuses on how unconscious bias affects journalists and what can be done about it:

<http://jsk.stanford.edu/journalism-challenges/2016/how-might-understanding-the-implications-of-unconscious-bias-improve-journalism/>.

<sup>13</sup> The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, and American Press Institute. [A New Understanding: What Makes People Trust the News](#). April 2016.

***“I think more national things I don’t trust as much from Twitter for some reason or on the internet as I would on the TV but I also follow certain smaller things that are just for election years.”***

— Female / 21 / White

***“I definitely trust more of what I see on TV than something that I’m reading.”***

— Female / 23 / White

There are also new dynamics of trust that young people value in the digital age. Ads that are not overly intrusive, navigability on mobile phones, quick load times and having the latest details of a story are all critical factors for establishing trust that were mentioned in our groups and have been highlighted in other recent research.<sup>14</sup> Trust in a news source often implies an emotional connection and a relationship of convenience.<sup>15</sup> However, part of this convenience stems from an increasing reliance on and comfort with the algorithmic selection of news. Some scholars are concerned that algorithmic news selection will exacerbate the echo chamber effect and prevent young people from encountering views that challenge their own, a concern shared by some of the young people in our groups.<sup>16</sup>

***“The problem with Facebook is if it constantly just shows you the stuff you want to see, it can create like a echo chamber, and you can really become very entrenched in your own opinion, and you won’t be able to understand people who have different views.”***

— Male / 16 / White

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Newman, Nic, Richard Fletcher, David A. L. Levy, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. [Digital News Report 2016](#). Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. 2016.

Bias can be introduced at many moments in the process of keeping up-to-date on current events. Algorithms that adapt to our preferences are one source of bias, and the unconscious bias of some journalists is another. While aware of the bias that can result from the algorithmic selection of news, many young people assume a great deal of personal responsibility for actively seeking out opposing viewpoints and for educating themselves from a range of perspectives.

***“The news that we get individually is so filtered down, both by our own hand and by the hands of the people who are making it and displaying and producing it.”***

— Female / 23 / Hispanic & African-American

***News is “depressing,” but something you need to know.***

In what may partly be a result of a range of tragic news events that happened over the summer, many participants also described news as “depressing” or “scary.” Some participants noted that fear and drama are what drive people to the news, while others noted that they specifically avoid the news because of the negative feelings it generates.

***“There’s never really anything that [good to] talk about. I mean, when’s the last time you heard something good come on the news, other than like what’s the local stuff that’s going on in Chicago? Like a fair or a festival or, like, you know a beer run or something like that. Everything else is just depressing.”***

— Male / 22 / Hispanic

***“I don’t really like looking into the news ‘cause I find it depressing, but I’d rather know than not know.”***

— Female / 18 / Hispanic & African-American



The barrage of news being posted on Facebook and Twitter can feel overwhelming to some users. Some noted that they prefer Instagram and Snapchat, which have been described by tech industry commentators as a space for “honest, unself-conscious personal sharing” that evokes an earlier era of “carefree” socializing online.<sup>17</sup> Other participants noted that celebrity news and tech news provided a welcome diversion from the depressing nature of current events around the world.

***“Well, I like the celebrity and the gossip stuff just because it’s interesting, but I also like news that isn’t necessarily bad but it’s just like an update or a change. Like if Apple’s releasing a new phone, that’s cool. I want to know about it. What can I, where can I read about it? Or if a company’s acquiring another company, I just feel like that’s news that I would like to know ‘cause it’s not depressing.”***

— Female / 24 / White

## Assessing Credibility and Verifying the News

***Teens and young adults often consult multiple news sources to verify the stories they encounter.***

When assessing the quality of the news they encounter, rather than turning to one primary news source, many young people rely on a form of “distributed trust” to verify the stories they come across. Information first encountered on one platform, most commonly Facebook, is often corroborated or complicated by other sources. Some young people seek out perspectives from across the political spectrum before making up their own minds. CNN was noted by several participants as serving a verification role for content they encountered first on social media, while Reddit was seen as a particularly helpful source because it aggregates content from across the news landscape.

<sup>17</sup> Manjoo, Farhad. [“A Charming Alternative Universe of You, Your Friends and No News.”](#) The New York Times. August 17, 2016.

***“Sometimes I believe a thing is more credible if it comes on CNN. When Prince passed away, when I’d seen that on Instagram, I was like, ‘It’s not true.’ But when I’d seen it on CNN, I was like, ‘Prince is dead.’ Same thing with Muhammad Ali.”***

— Female / 22 / African-American

***“This is the main reason I like Reddit so much, is because you get CNN, you get Fox, you get—it’s an aggregate site, so you get a whole bunch of different sources. And more importantly, the comments, not for those specific websites, but for Reddit users. So if something’s off or something’s not being accurate, people will call that out. . . . And mostly because of that, you can get yourself a better perspective of it.”***

— Male / 23 / African-American

In general, there is a pervasive attitude of platform agnosticism, with more value placed on the reputation of the author or the person sharing the news and less trust placed intrinsically in content producers. This largely echoes other recent research from Knight, which found that news seekers depend on trusted contacts as sources of news as much as or more than they depend on media outlets.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, in the absence of a sense of trust in a single source of news or platform, many young people hold themselves personally responsible for verifying what they read by triangulating across diverse sources.

***“I think you have to really just listen to everything, and then pick out what you believe and what you think is really truthful.”***

— Female / 22 / African-American

<sup>18</sup> Knight Foundation. [Mobile-First News: How People Use Smartphones to Access Information](#). May 2016.



***“I just compare them and... go through that and see what they do have in common and see how they kind of validate each other.”***

— Female / 22 / White

In addition, several participants pointed to the value of trending lists on social media as a way to stay on top of what was going on in the world. Having perspectives on current events and familiarity with current internet memes serves as a social lubricant and gives young people common ground and fodder for discussion with family, friends and strangers alike. For many young adults, the fact that many other people found something important or compelling enough to share or discuss meant that it was important for them to know about, too.

***“Twitter is what I use mostly to see what’s trending. Interacting with my peers on what’s trending, what’s going on in our lives. So whether that be in the news, in the world, or just like some funny video that’s trending, that everybody’s looking at. That’s what I use Twitter for.”***

— Male / 17 / African-American

***A news source is considered to be more credible when its biases are known.***

Youth largely view all individuals as having their own biases—whether that’s journalists writing for mainstream news outlets or citizen journalists reporting on social media. In general, news sources that are seen as somewhat outside of the mainstream are regarded as more honest or transparent about their biases. This often translates to a higher level of perceived credibility and authenticity for smaller news outlets or individual reporters. Some young people in the focus groups specifically used international news sources such as Al-Jazeera to provide a more detached perspective on US events and politics than US media. Again, the reputation of the producer of content is a critical component of what they decide to trust.

***“Fox leans toward more the red side. CNN cares more about necessarily being the first. MSNBC cares more leaning toward the left. Everyone already has their biases. As long as you’re really aware of them, you can make a better opinion about something. And it’s better to get it from multiple sources. At the very least, you have a bunch of facts to work with, instead of just one person’s particular story or agenda.”***

— Male / 23 / African-American

The mixed race / ethnicity focus groups emphasized political bias in news coverage, whereas the African-American focus group articulated keen awareness of racial bias in news coverage in addition to political bias. However, there was a general consensus that the most important news to verify is political news.

***“Regarding presidential elections, first I try to observe the information from the U.S. source of information because they try to put way too much emotion into it. At the same time, countries from Europe or from Asia, they don’t put much emotion into the U.S. presidential election. So as I do compare those, both their information to see how is it, are they pointing toward the same direction or not.”***

— Male / 19 / African-American

***“I make my own judgment. I take it for what it is, and I guess it’s just about doing more research, and like you might hear something about one of the candidates or the president.... I’ll go further in-depth in my research to find out the truth on it.”***

— Male / 17 / African-American

***Many participants consider user-generated content—especially live video—to be more trustworthy than mainstream media sources.***

Video, especially live video, is generally considered to be more reliable than many other news sources. Young adults believed that individuals on the ground would have less motivation to manipulate the footage than a media company. For instance, video taken by a protester filming from inside a march held more credibility for many than CNN's coverage professionally filmed from a few feet away and then later edited for repeat airing.

***“I’ll believe your [citizen-captured] video before I’ll believe theirs. Because they will tamper with theirs. Why would you tamper with yours? They tamper with theirs to get more views for it so more people will watch their channel to see the news. You don’t have to do that. You just add a video. Why would you tamper with it?”***

— Male / 17 / African-American

***“I personally think that live video is more reliable than like a video that’s taken and is given to like everyone.... When it’s live there’s—I mean, I’m not saying there isn’t a complete chance that it’s not being tampered with, but it’s less of a chance because it’s happening as the person’s watching it.”***

— Female / 16 / White

Participants also highlighted one particularly powerful feature of video: the ability to provide another perspective to counter evidence from law enforcement. In situations where there is a dispute over how events played out, video is seen as a powerful (if imperfect) way to challenge mainstream media coverage of controversial news events. One teenaged African-American participant recounted a story about a fight that had happened at his high school and resulted in an altercation with a police officer who was attempting to arrest one of the students.

***“The student didn’t want to get arrested. The cop swung at the student first, but the news only got video where the student was swinging on the cop. They never got where the cop was swinging on the student. But somebody else recorded it and sent it to the news. The news had that video, too, then. And the cop got fired, because the student wasn’t doing anything at all.”***

— Male / 17 / African-American

At the same time, video was not seen as a panacea. Some participants noted that even live video could be manipulated by using certain camera angles or other editing that may happen between the time of recording and viewing.

***“I feel like live videos can be tampered with too. Like surveillance videos are live while they’re being taken.”***

— Female / 17 / White

## How Teens and Young Adults Find and Share News

***In an age of smartphones and social media, young people don’t follow the news as much as it follows them.***

News consumption is often a byproduct of spending time on social media platforms. When it comes to getting news content, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and native apps like the Apple news app are currently the most common places where the teens and young adults in our focus groups encounter news. Mainstream news sources such as CNN or ESPN still play an important role for some youth, but printed newspapers have clearly been relegated to something that’s consumed only when visiting grandparents or other older adults. Instead, news is frequently encountered by accident and in interstitial moments, as young people dip into flows of news across various platforms.

***“If I don’t see it on social media, I’m not going to hear it.”***

— Male / 17 / African-American

***“Typically, a lot of times, I’ll look at the news by accident. Like I accidentally swiped left.”***

— Female / 23 / Hispanic and African-American

A subset of participants described purposeful daily news consumption practices, often in the morning and evening, but much of the news young people encounter happens accidentally, by happenstance or during in-between moments. Participants in our groups described some of these experiences.

***“I’ll just like look through it [the ESPN app] sometimes if I have nothing to do.”***

— Male / 14 / White

***“Sometimes when I’m at my grandparents’ house I’ll look at the newspaper.”***

— Male / 20 / White

In addition, a subset of youth appreciates the way that push notifications help them stay up-to-date on news stories or other information that is important to them. However, notifications are not uniformly popular. Young people are generally happy to receive notifications about incoming text messages, but more ambivalent about notifications designed to entice them into apps. Many youth loathe notifications and disable them immediately, noting that much of the information they receive is not relevant to them. Others use them but find them annoying around routine events and anxiety-provoking around major events.

***“I get unnecessary information sometimes. And it keeps on popping up. And I don’t have the time to control it properly.”***

— Male / 23 / Asian-American

***“When I look down at my phone, and I see like a stream of notifications, my anxiety goes through the roof. I don’t know what’s going on.”***

— Female / 24 / White

***“The first thing I do when I wake up is check my phone. Like I wake up, turn my alarm off, check my phone—like so usually it’s when I do that, I’ll have notifications from [the] Al-Jazeera app I have.”***

— Female / 24 / Hispanic

***Youth news sharing practices are varied and may elude current tools to record and track traffic to news platforms.***

Youth engage in a variety of news sharing practices. In some cases, these practices are measurable, as when young people use sharing features of platforms to send links and tag intended recipients. Other practices are less likely to be captured by current tools and methods, especially when they involve messaging and chat apps (WeChat, Viber, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger), which now have more combined users than the top social networks (Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram).<sup>19</sup> That these practices may not be detectable to news content producers who track audience engagement may have important implications for traffic measurement and advertising.

<sup>19</sup> Ballve, Marcelo. [“Messaging Apps Are Overtaking Social Networks to Become the Dominant Platforms on Phones.”](#) Business Insider. April 10, 2015.



Many young people remove content from its original platform and share it through other means and channels. Some described cutting and pasting a link into a text message or screen shotting stories to send to friends through a third-party messaging app. Screen shotting was preferred by some to sending links because it provides a quick overview of the story while eliminating the need to click through advertisements.

***“Either I would just send him the link, like it would say share the story or whatever—and I would send it to him through Kik or I would just take a screen shot and send it to him.”***

— Female / 23 / Hispanic and African-American

***“I’ll take screen shots so I can save things for my reference. Or I’ll just tag people on Facebook, that’s what I’ll do for sharing. Or if I do the screen shots, I’ll just send it through in a text message. That will make it easier for them.”***

— Male / 20 / White

***“[I use] the iPhone messenger app or Facebook Messenger, just take a screen shot, send it to them. Links are kind of like a pain because you have to go through a bunch of ads. They want to show you something before they actually show you the article. So I just give them a summary of what happened, they’ll see it.”***

— Female / 19 / African-American

***“I’ll screen shot something, if it’s interesting. Send it to someone that I knew would like it.... Just like send them the whole article so they can read it.”***

— Female / 16 / White

***At the same time, sharing news and opinions on social media is sometimes seen as having a negative impact on one's online reputation.***

Several of the participants in the focus groups noted that sharing a news story on social media would affect their digital footprint and might affect potential employers' assessments of them. This is especially the case around controversial or politically polarizing topics. On social media platforms, multiple audiences are collapsed into a single context, and content and opinions intended for an audience of like-minded friends might also be seen by others of different political persuasions. Media researchers have documented a range of techniques that users have developed to navigate the demands of "context collapse," including targeting different audiences, concealing subjects, and avoiding certain kinds of public channels.<sup>20</sup> Screen shotting and off-platform sharing through messaging apps may be yet another technique for managing the challenges of context collapse.

***"If I shared my opinions on social media about some of these issues and stories, I would be one of those people where they're like, 'No, I'm not hiring her.' I just screen shot it and send it to my friends."***

— Female / 22 / African-American

***"One of the reasons why I like Reddit is because it's ... everyone's anonymous. There's no need to color their opinion so much. So people have a tendency to be a lot more honest. Whether that's right or wrong, that's up to you. But at least you can talk about some complicated issues without getting yourself into trouble."***

— Female / 23 / African-American

<sup>20</sup> Marwick, Alice E. and danah boyd. ["I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience."](#) *New Media & Society* 13, no. 1 (2011): 114-133.





## The Future News Landscape

*In the future, young people assume that news content will continue to take on new forms and eventually permeate every aspect of their lives.*

As is the case in many industries that have been transformed by digital technologies, studying the preferences and perceptions of younger users can serve as a valuable forecasting tool. However, insights gleaned from current behaviors should also be considered with the caveat that future technologies could fundamentally change the way news content is delivered and consumed. Today's relentless flow of news headlines across social media may pale in comparison to the methods of news delivery that are embraced over the next decade. Asked what they think news will be like in the future, participants offered a wide array of creative responses. Younger teens were more likely to think expansively, while older participants were generally a bit more negative about the future of news—that it would be everywhere, unavoidable and still biased.

***“You’re going to end up having to see it. Like in the future, they’re going to want you to see it. You ain’t going to have a choice. It’s going to pop up on everything.”***

— Male / 17 / African-American

***“This is going to sound so stupid, but I think like it’s going to be little holograms. You’re going to open this thing and a little guy’s going to come out and tell you about stuff.”***

— Female / 17 / White

***“It seems like everybody in this room is aware that there’s a bias which I don’t know if it’s been like that outspoken in our parents’ generation—so I think it’s going to be more interactive and maybe like breaking down from those big conglomerates to smaller stuff.”***

— Female / 21 / White

Some envision a future in which individuals have more control and agency, and media outlets are held to higher standards of truth and transparency. Others anticipate a future in which bias persists, and the news delivery mechanisms are more direct, less porous and more surveillant. Some envision a single ubiquitous platform or device through which news content is funneled, while others point to a move away from large media companies and centralized editorial control. These predictions reflect some of the challenges of our current moment and highlight the importance of proceeding with care and attention, for decisions made in this moment will have implications far into the future.

***“So whatever like the next Facebook is, I guarantee they’ll all be there. And then after that one is done, they’ll be there again. It will just like keep going like that. Every new social media site that gets like popular, the news will be there eventually.”***

— Male / 16 / White

***“I feel like with the world being so big, it’s just like we need a big platform to unite them all.... We need a platform that anybody can hear about news.”***

— Male / 17 / African-American

***“People will be able to choose more specifically what they’re interested in. Because the people don’t trust giant conglomerates.... So I think it’s going to be very decentralized and probably a lot more news media companies.”***

— Male / 17 / White



# CONCLUSION

Many teens and young adults in our focus groups expressed a lack of trust in the accuracy of the news media and a feeling that they must rely on a system of distributed trust across multiple people and sources in order to feel confident about certain stories. This general crisis of confidence in the news media echoes the historically low levels of trust that the American public has reported in recent years across an array of institutions.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, it is clear that young people do make brand-related distinctions when it comes to assessing the veracity of the news stories they encounter. So while a general question about “trust in the news” may suggest millennial audiences have little confidence in the mainstream news media, they may at the same time express high levels of trust in specific news brands that they have come to rely on for the stories that matter most to them. In addition, we found that the importance of relying on trusted sources is more pronounced for certain kinds of news—in particular, political content, which millennials see as much more subject to manipulation and bias.

The news forms that teens and young adults encounter are also extremely varied and multidimensional. A story featured on Snapchat may also be discussed on Twitter. That same story may be encountered through CNN on television, which then integrates comments on Twitter. If there is a humorous angle to the story, parodies may emerge on YouTube and take on a life of their own through various online memes and remixes. In this fast-paced environment, our participants said that they may first notice a story circulating through social media channels, but they won’t always trust it as being real until they see it reported by a more traditional source. In this way, young people experience the role of the mainstream media as the “elevator” of stories rather than the “originator.” In an era where for most young people printed newspapers and viewing the news at set times are no longer relevant, young people don’t follow the news as much as it follows them.

So what does participation as a news consumer look like in this world? The spectrum of engagement with the news was considerable across the participants in our groups; some passively consumed the news, while others expressed quite elaborate methods for assessing sources, fact-checking and triangulating different perspectives on the same story. Still others actively avoided serious news topics because they felt overwhelmed or depressed by it. For these participants, celebrity news was often seen as a respite from the burden of tragic current events in the U.S. and abroad.

For stories that affect participants personally, there is a long tail of engagement. However, privacy-related concerns may keep some users from sharing or commenting publicly. This may be driving some of the conversation around news to the “dark social” realm—where traffic from sources such as chat apps, text messaging and even email lists is much

<sup>21</sup> Gallup Organization. [“Americans’ Confidence in Institutions Stays Low.”](#) June 2016.



harder to track.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the merging of traditional journalism, user-generated content, and law enforcement-initiated surveillance through body-worn cameras and other forms of video capture are rapidly blurring the boundaries that Americans have traditionally associated with the Fourth Estate.

Because patterns of news consumption among teens and young adults are changing in such fundamental ways, the concept of “following the news” may no longer resonate broadly in these demographics. If researchers wish to understand the emerging environment, the way they measure young people’s engagement with different types of news will also need to evolve. Some of the most interesting and challenging news-related behaviors may not be measurable with traditional research methods, and this study suggests that a combined qualitative and quantitative approach will provide a more comprehensive portrait of behaviors and attitudes.

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22 Barot, Trushar and Eytan Oren. [Guide to Chat Apps](#). Tow Center for Digital Journalism. 2016.



# METHODS

The findings in this report are based on the analysis of transcripts from six focus groups commissioned by Knight Foundation in June and July of 2016. The focus groups were conducted with 52 teens and young adults from across the United States to learn more about how they conceptualize and consume news in digital spaces. The groups focused on understanding the growing influence of mobile devices, social media and messaging apps. This exploratory research project was designed to ask teens and young adults fundamental questions about how they define “news” in the digital age, where they encounter or share news, and what makes them trust certain kinds of information more than others.

Each focus group was moderated by a professional facilitator and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The three cities chosen (Charlotte, Philadelphia and Chicago) were selected for their regional diversity and, in some cases, their distinction as Knight communities. To capture a wide range of perspectives, four of the focus groups were broadly recruited to be racially and ethnically diverse, with approximately half non-Hispanic white participants, and half a mixture of African-Americans, Hispanics and Asian-Americans. However, to allow for the possibility of a different dynamic emerging within relatively homogenous groups, one focus group was composed entirely of African-American participants, and one group entirely of Hispanic participants. The decision to separate participants by race and ethnicity in these two groups was intended to help the researchers explore potential differences in attitudes toward the news media identified in other recent studies.<sup>23</sup>

Participants were between the ages of 14 and 24. Four groups, including the two homogenous groups, were composed of 18- to 24-year-old high school graduates, including a mixture of college students, non-college students, and college graduates. The remaining two groups were composed of 14- to 17- year-old high school students or recent graduates. Both groups were broadly recruited. To preserve participants’ privacy, the quotes in the report contain only their gender, age and self-reported race or ethnicity.

Our sample represents a wide range of youth voices with good racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. However, this study is not nationally representative and the findings are not generalizable to all teens and young adults in the United States. Instead, this research serves to signal emerging

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23 For example, the recent Gallup poll commissioned by Knight Foundation and the Newseum found that white college students are twice as likely as black students (56 percent vs. 27 percent) to first turn to traditional news outlets for “an accurate picture of what is happening in the U.S. and the world on the issues you care about.” By comparison, black college students were slightly more likely to say they would consult a digital-only news source (36 percent) or social media (33 percent) before a traditional news organization. See “Free Expression on Campus: A Survey of U.S. College Students and U.S. Adults,” page 24. Available at: [http://www.knightfoundation.org/media/uploads/publication\\_pdfs/FreeSpeech\\_campus.pdf](http://www.knightfoundation.org/media/uploads/publication_pdfs/FreeSpeech_campus.pdf).



practices and indicate directions for further inquiry in qualitative and quantitative studies.

## Data&Society

Data & Society is a research institute in New York that is focused on social, cultural and ethical issues arising from data-centric technological development. To provide frameworks that can help address emergent tensions, Data & Society is committed to identifying issues at the intersection of technology and society, providing research that can ground public debates, and building a network of researchers and practitioners that can offer insight and direction. To advance public understanding of the issues, Data & Society brings together diverse constituencies, hosts events, conducts directed research, creates policy frameworks and builds demonstration projects that grapple with the challenges and opportunities of a data-saturated world.

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