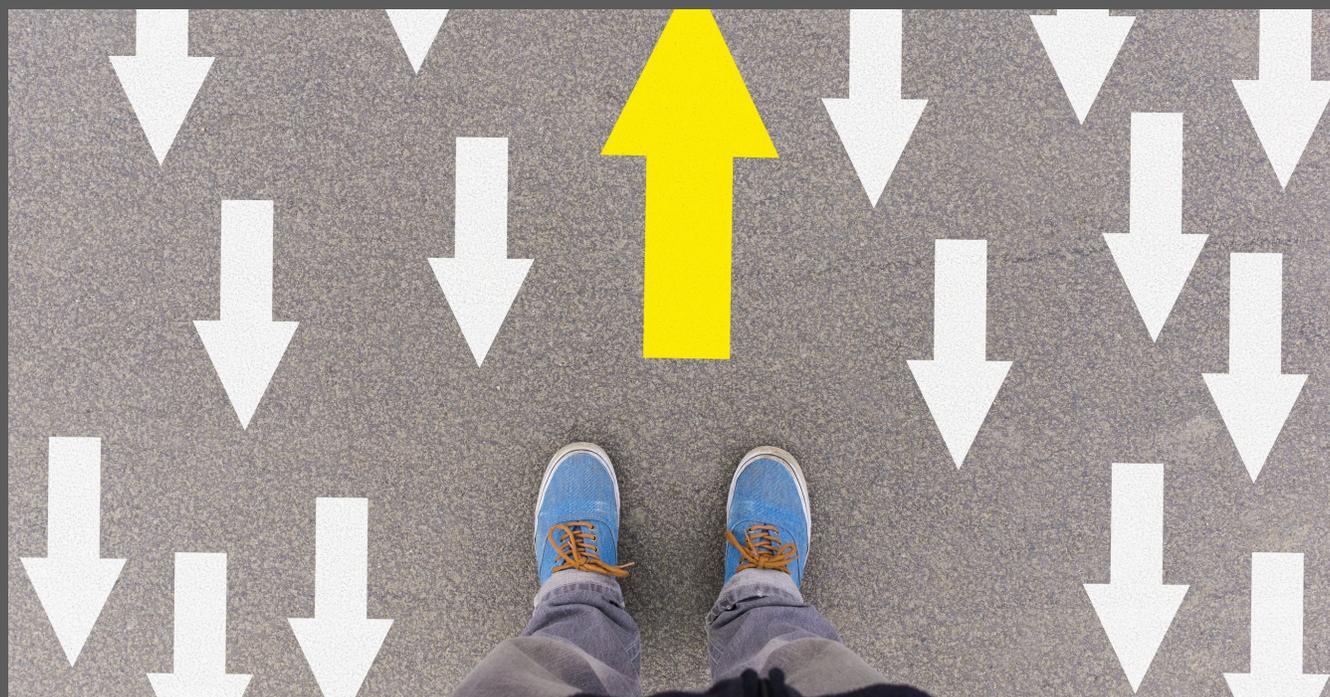


PROJECT INFORMATION LITERACY

HOW STUDENTS ENGAGE WITH NEWS

FIVE TAKEAWAYS FOR EDUCATORS, JOURNALISTS, AND LIBRARIANS



Alison J. Head, Ph.D.

John Wihbey

P. Takis Metaxas, Ph.D.

Margy MacMillan

Dan Cohen, Ph.D.



**KNIGHT
FOUNDATION**



Executive Summary: How Students Engage with News

This report represents perhaps the largest and most comprehensive research effort exploring how U.S. college-age students are accessing, consuming, and engaging with news in the digital era. This work seeks to understand how students see the role of news in their lives, in their learning and social communities, and in a democracy at a time when personal beliefs may carry more weight than objective facts, information platforms fuel endless debates, and the authority of traditional media is falling away. The yearlong study was funded by John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and a grant from the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), the largest division of the American Library Association.

For this generation, news is social, visual, and fast. News is often overwhelming, and it can be difficult for students to tell what news is true and what is false. While most students think news is important to democracy, they do not define news by traditional standards, nor do they necessarily assign authority based on the platform or authors from which news comes. Students know they need to invest the time and critical thinking to assemble, evaluate, and interpret news as it is delivered in the 21st century, and although many students make this effort, others do not. Sharing news on social networks provides some, but not all, students with a valuable opportunity to interact with their communities, whether sharing breaking news from *The New York Times* or political memes from Facebook.

Findings are drawn from an online survey administered at a diverse mix of 11 colleges and universities from across the country, yielding a sample of 5,844 students.¹ Follow-up interviews with 37 survey respondents complemented the survey. A computational analysis of Twitter data from survey respondents ($N = 731$) and a larger Twitter panel of more than 135,000 college-age persons provided observational and external comparative data to help frame the survey results.

The findings suggest young adults believe news is valuable to their lives and to society on the whole, and many see themselves as active participants in its dissemination. Yet, the new digital environment and current political reality has made successful navigation extremely difficult. Educational and media institutions need to do far more to help this emerging generation succeed in operating in this confusing, overwhelming, and often misleading online environment. Ultimately, they must educate young adults to understand how to find and engage with credible information and give them the knowledge necessary to fulfill both their personal needs and civic roles. This may be one of today's most difficult, yet vitally important, educational endeavors.

For this generation, news is social, visual, and fast.

Leveraging the combined domain expertise of researchers in library and information science, data and computer science, journalism, and media research, five multifaceted takeaways and six recommendations are presented. They are meant to inform the work of diverse stakeholders, particularly educators, journalists, and librarians, as they unravel the complexities of the “post-truth problem,” specific to our time, technologies, and the information habits of today's young news consumers.

Five Research Takeaways

- 1. There are many pathways to news — not only on social media.** Today's young news consumers are “multi-modal”: 67% of the survey respondents received news from five pathways to news during the preceding week. Most common were discussions with peers (93%), while 70% got news from discussions with professors. Social media was another common source (89%) and to a lesser degree, online newspapers (76%) and news feeds (55%).

1. The institutional sample made up of the following 11 U.S. colleges and universities: Belmont University, Brandeis University, California State University Maritime Academy, DePaul University, John Tyler Community College, Oklahoma State University, Saint Mary's College of California, University of Alaska Anchorage, University of Michigan, University of Texas at Austin, and Wellesley College.

2. **News knows no personal boundaries, so students follow selectively.** More than two-thirds of the respondents said the sheer amount of news was overwhelming; half agreed it was difficult to tell the most important news stories on a given day (51%). News digests, such as the Skimm and BuzzFeed’s “Top Five,” were mentioned by interviewees as being essential for keeping up. Many students were judicious news seekers, only engaging with news topics that “directly affect me,” such as traffic and weather (90%) or national politics (89%).
3. **Tension exists between idealized views of journalism and a distrust of today’s news.** Eight in 10 students agreed news is “necessary in a democracy” but the news, most said, had fallen short of their idealistic standards of accuracy, independence, and fairness. Staying current often meant navigating a complex minefield of misinformation, commercial interests, affective pleas for their clicks, “fast news” from social media, and political manipulation; more than a third (36%) said “fake news” had made them distrust the credibility of *any* news.
4. **Students share news on social media as stewards of what’s important to know.** A majority of respondents (58%) had shared or retweeted news in the preceding week; many shared political memes (33%) or stories about national politics (29%). Females (70%) shared more news than males (28%). Almost half (44%) indicated that they shared news to have a voice about a larger cause.
5. **Traditional standards for evaluating news are increasingly problematic.** A wide gulf exists between students’ news-seeking habits for academic versus personal use, with most relying on library databases (66%) for courses and social media (56%) in their personal lives. Criteria taught for assessing academic information were of limited use when applied to newer social media forms, where currency and authority are less defined.

Recommendations

1. **Teach students “knowledge in action” skills early on and throughout their education.** Educators and librarians need to teach their students how to frame questions of their own while helping them develop mental and intellectual frameworks for credibility testing of information that comes (and will come) in different genres and formats.
2. **Integrate news discussions into the classroom.** Educators and librarians must incorporate news into classroom discussions, leveraging their authority as guides and models in order to help prepare students as effective news consumers in their academic, workplace, personal, and civic roles.
3. **Reconsider how we teach evaluation.** Librarians and educators need to expand how they teach critical thinking about information to include news sources. Additionally, they should incorporate strategies for evaluation based on content not format to develop students’ agency in engaging with news.
4. **Bring the value of context back to news coverage.** News organizations need to provide hypertext links and add valuable contextual information to news stories while increasing investment in “explanatory” and “solutions journalism.”
5. **Journalists need to continue embracing new forms of storytelling and new audience engagement strategies.** Journalists need to listen to a wider array of voices and expand the diversity of coverage, particularly in stories about youth and minorities, while increasing transparency about how they cover news.
6. **We need to pressure social media companies to do much more to empower young news consumers.** Social media companies must behave responsibly in serving young news consumers by ensuring algorithms give greater weight to fact-checked news items, offer news digests based on reliable sources, and provide clear indicators of manipulated media.

To explore the implications of this study’s findings, a small group of leading thinkers in education, libraries, media research, and journalism, were convened for a workshop to discuss “the way forward” in the “post-truth era.” The report includes concise commentaries from each of these experts. ❖