

**Examining Information Processing Practices among Young News Consumers:
A National Study to Inform Librarians, Educators, and Journalists**

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Summary

We are conducting a definitive, national study of several thousand young news consumers that will be the basis for actionable recommendations to librarians, journalists, and educators as they grapple with pressing issues of misinformation and credibility in the media environment. Leveraging the combined domain expertise of the study's authors in information science, library science, data science, and media research, we will conduct a news cycle analysis and online student survey to provide deeper and more quantitatively driven insights into the information processing habits of emerging news consumers than have previous reports in this realm. This study has been generously funded by The Knight Foundation and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA).

Project Description

In our "post-truth" age, where personal beliefs carry more weight than objective facts and information technologies fuel endless debates, the authority of traditional media is falling away. The American news media diet is increasingly drawn from a flow of Facebook feeds and a menu of Google searches. News consumers, whether active or passive recipients, are exposed to a constant stream of unrelated print and video snippets, many from questionable and ambiguous sources with origins many cannot recall.¹ Such consumption patterns may work for staying current with movies, sports, or the weather, but they are detrimental for living in a democracy, where an informed citizenry is essential for dealing with such critical issues as climate change, global conflict, health

¹ A. Kalogeropoulos and N. Newman (2017). "I saw the news on Facebook: Brand attribution when accessing news from distributed environments." Reuters Institute for Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-07/Brand%20attributions%20report.pdf>
A. Mitchell, J. Gottfried, E. Shearer, and K. Lu, (2017, Feb, 9). "How Americans encounter, recall and act upon digital news." Pew Research Center, <http://www.journalism.org/2017/02/09/how-americans-encounter-recall-and-act-upon-digital-news/>

care, and government accountability. Meanwhile, long-term concerns are mounting as a significant percentage of the public, faced with a bewildering, 24-hour onslaught of headlines, all seemingly carrying equal weight, are tuning out altogether.²

As fundamental changes to the media continue to unfold, journalists and educators are asking two crucial questions: How can we unravel the complexities of the “post-truth problem,” specific to our time, our technologies, and the information habits of today’s news consumers? And, how can we begin to see the long-term course of action available to us now?

To formulate an empirical response to these two urgent questions, Knight Foundation and ACRL have supported a 12-month research study on news consumption and today’s information processing practices. We will focus on two of the most pressing issues of our “post-truth” times: currency and authority. The report will break new ground as an empirical and quantitative study of many issues that have thus far been left to speculation and debate in public discourse. It will also formulate a “full stack” set of recommendations for professionals directly implicated in addressing the problem, offering insights to three groups in particular: librarians, journalists, and educators.

The news consumers studied will be a sample of young adults (i.e., students enrolled in nine two-year and four-year colleges and universities, and three high schools in the U.S.). As a demographic group, today’s young adults are an important subset of the adult cohort, fitting for this research plan. These young adults are likely to have grown up digitally and to consume news online from social media networks like Facebook and Twitter, and to a lesser extent, traditional news sites. Their news habits today will determine to a large extent the future of news production. The role of journalism in the service of democracy rests on understanding how young people gather, assess, and critically engage with news now. Deriving fundamental insights with respect to this cohort can help inform programs and interventions by educators that are actionable in the near term.

Three sets of questions will guide our research study:

1. How precisely has the pace of the news cycle changed in recent years? How do students interact and experience news when using social media networks?
2. How do students conceptualize what constitutes “news” and how do they keep up with the latest news, if at all?
3. How do students determine the authority and credibility of the news content they encounter from traditional as well as new media sources and when authorship is often oblique and collaborative?

This research study, the first of its kind in terms of its deeper cognitive and an information science focus, will provide open access resources (i.e., survey and social media analyses) that examine the changing pace of the news cycle via time stamped news items and the information problem-solving potential of today’s young adults. A series of semi-structured interviews with thought leaders in the various domains – librarianship, education, and journalism – will be included to help inform the recommendations for the report. Our research results will be of particular interest to educators,

² M. Prior (2007). *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

journalists, and librarians. Further, results will have applicability to fellow researchers, policymakers, and concerned members of the public.

Project Goals and Objectives

There are five objectives that will be used to accomplish our study goals. Over 12-months, we will: (1) apply a computational large dataset analysis of social media that measures the pace of news posted (i.e., the velocity and volume) as well as interaction factors (i.e., occurrence of clicks, “likes,” and re-posting), (2) conduct a large-scale survey of high school and college students to collect quantitative data about their information practices used for processing news,³ (3) conduct semi-structured interviews with “thought leaders” as a partial basis of the report’s recommendations, (4) write and produce a research report (18-20 pages) with findings and recommendations for courses of action, and (5) build an open access data toolkit consisting of the survey and news cycle data for depositing in digital library repositories.

So far, recent research on “post-truth” and “fake news” has included rigorous and worthy efforts. Notably, there is the much-discussed study of college students and their inability to differentiate fake news from “real news.”⁴ The Knight Foundation’s also conducted a qualitative research on how young people find and verify, and ultimately, trust, the news.⁵ But, as a whole, there have been few quantitative studies, especially ones that use national large-scale samples to investigate information seeking strategies for keeping up with the continuous news cycle (if at all), and evaluating news sources for participating in a democracy as civic-minded individuals as well as in academic learning.

In our study, we will address some of these limitations by surveying a sample of students from 12 schools and asking the following questions: How do college students get their news and stay current about the world around them? What does “news” mean to today’s students? How do they see news in the way it informs their course studies and political views, as well as the way they answer practical questions about health, finance and professional ambitions?

Moreover, what information strategies do students use for determining the credibility and authority of the news content they encounter from traditional as well as new media sources? Ultimately, the study’s goals will be achieved by delivering empirical findings and two related datasets from a multidisciplinary research team of four experts in Information science, journalism, computer science, and information technology.

³ We estimate that we will receive between 3,500 completed surveys from students enrolled at the 12 high schools and colleges and universities in our sample, based on survey research we have conducted at Project Information Literacy (PIL). PIL has access to 275 U.S. colleges and universities that are already in the PIL Volunteer Sample, and have an expressed interest in future study participation, such as this one. A map of the sample is available at: https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1kJ3upaLNbqAC9qmwHHQIVP_Fs_E&ie=UTF8&hl=en&msa=0&ll=23.241773920220453%2C-94.39453100000003&spn=53.03485%2C82.089844&z=4&dg=feature

⁴ J. Breakstone, S. Wineburg, S. McGrew and T. Ortega (2016, Nov. 16). “Evaluating information: The cornerstone of civic online reason,” Stanford History Education Group, <https://sheg.stanford.edu/upload/V3LessonPlans/Executive%20Summary%2011.21.16.pdf>

⁵ A. Lenhart, M. Madden, and C. Fontaine, “How Youth Navigate the News Landscape” (2017, March 1), Knight Foundation, <https://www.knightfoundation.org/reports/how-youth-navigate-the-news-landscape>

Plan of Work: Schedule 1

The research study will employ a 12-month work plan that will occur from October 16, 2017 through October 16, 2018. The project has five different research stages. Figure 1 provides a breakdown of each project stage and the different research activities occurring.

	2017			2018		
	Oct 16 – Dec 31	Jan - Feb	Mar - April	May - June	July - Oct. 16	
Project Start-up. Assignment of Core Team and consultation with ACRL thought leaders: (1) Interview and hire PIL research analysts and PIL Fellow, (2) virtual meeting with ACRL thought leaders in information literacy to discuss the study, research questions, and objectives.						
Stage 1: News cycle analysis Design and execute a computational analysis of a large data set using data mining and reduction techniques for measuring news consumption on social media sites, e.g., Twitter.						
Stage 2: Survey preparation Undergo IRB review and approval at each of the 12 partner schools in the sample and finalize survey design, and pilot test survey instruments.						
Stage 3: Survey administration and data analysis Administer the student survey at 12 partner schools. Collect, clean, and analyze data. Identify key trends.						
Stage 4: Industry and academic “thought leaders” and student interviewing Conduct “Thought Leader” interviews with librarians, journalists, and educators for generating recommendations and conduct follow-up student interviews from a voluntary sample collected from the survey.						
Early Findings presentation by Alison Head ALA Conference, June 21-26, 2018, New Orleans; sharing early results with attendees.						
Stage 5: Preparation of project deliverables (report, open datasets, and findings video) Write the report, prepare the open access datasets for the survey and news cycle, and create a short key findings video and press release.						

Figure 1. Schedule 1: Deliverables for “Information Processing Practices among Young News Consumers”

Evaluation

Our study will employ a plan for its project evaluation that is continuous as well as summative. The evaluation plan for the news cycle is based on designing computational pipelines for verifying the data analysis results, and making sure they ultimately, provide meaningful results that match the study's research questions. The evaluation plan for studying students is based on use of two methods—an online survey and follow-up interviews—to collect data from a sample of high school and college students. Together, these methods will create a rich matrix of findings and allow results to be triangulated and evaluated for both reliability and content validity. To enhance validity of our survey results, we will also pilot test our interview scripts and the survey instrument, and modify each, as needed.

We will also seek input from research liaisons at each of the participating institutions in the sample as we develop and pilot test our tools. Moreover, we will use another method of evaluation by conducting post-survey interviews with “thought leaders.” This will consist of a team of highly acclaimed leaders in the library, education, and journalism fields that we assemble. The structure of both of these collaborative teams—research liaisons and “thought leader” interviews—will allow for a cross-pollination of ideas and analysis, adding to the richness, relevance, and applicability of the study's outcomes in ways that would, otherwise, not be possible.

Statement of Alignment

Our proposed research study will be conducted at time when the future of journalism and the role of libraries is being widely discussed and deeply questioned, especially in light of “fake news” and the perils of the “post-truth” era continue to mount.⁶ This research will advance this discussion by: (1) providing unique, quantitative findings about young adult's news processing practices and conceptualizations of “news,” based on our national survey results, (2) developing an open access survey and news cycle dataset so that future researchers can access our data and use it for research inquiries of their own, and (3) informing the debate and discussion about news consumption with empirical data and findings and “thought leader” interviews.

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⁶ For a recent example from the U.K. that includes an analysis from “both sides of the Atlantic,” see P. Harding, “Journalism versus lies and fake news: Time for a rethink” (2017). Journalism.co.uk, <https://www.journalism.co.uk/news-commentary/journalism-versus-lies-and-fake-news-time-for-a-rethink/s6/a707495/>