News for a New Generation Report 1: Content Analysis, Interviews, and Focus Groups

Susan Sherr
Principal Investigator
Eagleton Institute of Politics
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
ssherr@rci.rutgers.edu
Meredith Staples
Graduate Research Assistant

CIRCLE
The Center for Information & Research
on Civic Learning & Engagement

The following report represents the findings from the qualitative portion of the News for a New Generation project. These data provide information about what kinds of news are 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 combination of textual analysis, interviews with youth news producers, and focus groups with young people enable us to examine whether the products that are being created are responsive to young people's interests and what possibilities exist for increasing levels of news consumption among young citizens.

I. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF NEWS CONTENT

Our original intention was to conduct a quantitative content analysis of currently available news designed for a youth audience. Unfortunately, the complexity of the questions we wanted to explore in this analysis resulted in an inability to achieve inter-coder reliability on a number of measures. As a result, we are presenting a descriptive analysis of the sources of news we located. The target audience for this project is 18-24 year-olds. However the very low number of sources aimed at this age group resulted in a decision to include in the analysis news aimed at middle and high school students as well.

Data Collection

We began our data collection of youth-oriented news from television, magazines, newspapers, radio, and Web sites by seeking out these materials through Internet searches, professional journals and associations and interviews. After compiling a list of news outlets, we contacted the news organizations to request print material, video clips, or taped recordings of the news programs. We also taped news programs as they aired and viewed programs using on-line streaming video.

Using a number of methods including conducting on-line searches, contacting professional organizations and academics, and

searching for stories on Lexis/Nexis, we located a number of news products aimed at younger people. We found three radio programs, five television programs or segments, twelve Web sites, nine newspapers, and four magazines. These totals do not include high school and college newspapers, television or radio stations. Media based at educational institutions are certainly aimed at young audiences, but there are likely thousands of these, and they tend to have fairly standard formats. Therefore, we decided against their inclusion in this analysis. There is also an ever-increasing number of tabloid newspapers aimed at younger audiences being developed across the country, so the number of newspapers will undoubtedly be in flux for some time.

The number of news media outlets is also limited by our definition of news. We included only Web sites, print publications, television or radio programs that featured some topics that might traditionally be considered news. For example, we considered discussion of local, national or international political or social issues to be news. Another criterion was whether there were lengthy discussions of these issues. So, Web sites that encouraged youth activism and that allowed young people to post messages about issues but did not provide any background information were not included. There are many Web sites designed to engage youth in community service or other activist activities but few provide "news" to their audiences.

Since we were relying on contacts at the various newspapers, magazines, radio and TV programs to provide us with issues or programs and because of the variation in publication and production frequency, the number of examples of each news source we were able to obtain varied significantly. Also, the issues or TV and radio news programs we received were selected by a producer or editor, who was aware of the content of our study. As a result, issues or programs may have been selected based on their content that may or may not be representative of the publication or program. Furthermore, although many of these

news outlets were happy to provide us with the requested material, there was also unanticipated reluctance and refusal of our requests on the part of a few news outlets, especially in the TV medium. Despite repeated attempts to acquire tapes of *Channel One* broadcasts, for example, we did not obtain any from the company. We were able to view a few programs on-line. Members of the research team analyzed each source by reviewing whatever examples we had available, answering a series of questions about the sources, and entering the information into a database[1] (for questionnaire, see Appendix One).

There was considerable variation among the sources collected. Print sources included newspaper tabloids, magazines for use in classrooms, and educational newspapers. Web sites ranged from an on-line version of a mainstream television program to sites created by young people themselves to provide opportunities for their peers to share information and opinions about current events. There are few television programs currently in production that bring news to younger audiences. Only two, *CNN Student News* and *Channel One News* are daily broadcasts, and both of these are meant to be watched in middle and high school classrooms. We located only one radio program, which is interesting considering that young people are frequent consumers of radio.

NEWSPAPERS/MAGAZINES

The print news sources we located can be divided into two broad categories. The first category is newspapers and magazines geared towards middle or high school age youth that are specifically designed to be used in the classroom. Often these publications are put out by large well-respected newspapers/magazine companies such as *The Wall Street Journal, Time* or *Newsweek*. The frequency of publication among these periodicals ranges from weekly to bi-monthly.

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[1] Since all the Web sites analyzed change their content periodically (often daily), each website could only be qualitatively assessed once.

Student readers get access to these publications if an educational institution or individual educator pays for a subscription. Issues are then delivered to the classroom.

The second category of print publications is tabloid newspapers geared to the young urban commuting crowd. These newspapers also are often distributed by "parent" newspapers such as *The Chicago Sun Times* and *The Boston Globe* or directly published by a media corporation. For example, am New York is an independent newspaper published by the Tribune New York Newspaper Holdings. These publications are often given out for free or at a very nominal cost in subway and bus stations and other commuter spots in order to capture a younger audience that is attractive to advertisers and that may one day develop into regular newspaper readers. Publications of this kind are currently proliferating in big cities across the country.

We located and collected the following classroom publications: *Wall Street Journal Classroom Edition, Time for Kids, The New York Times Upfront* and *Teen Newsweek.* There are a number of noteworthy similarities among these publications pertaining to both content and presentation that appear to set them apart from mainstream news. Most notable of these was a consistent focus on young people either by featuring young people in many of articles and photographs or by discussing topics that may be of interest to young people. For example, in the March 28, 2003 issue of *Upfront*, the feature article was on being a poor teen in America. Accompanying this article were color photos of the teens interviewed in the story. Although we did not collect data on news sources aimed at general audiences, it seems safe to assume that the majority of mainstream stories do not focus on younger citizens.

The Wall Street Journal Classroom Edition featured young people the least often. Although it featured topics that seemingly would be of interest to young people such as the college application

process and SATs, careers, and consumer technology, analysis of our sample suggests that this publication used quotes by and pictures of young people less than similar sources.

Another consistent theme was the frequent use of maps, charts and other graphics to illustrate the stories or to set off interactive features such as polls. Usually, an article would be accompanied by a map of the region, country or state discussed in the article.   For example, included with *Teen Newsweek's* article about the civil war in Liberia was a prominent color map of Liberia and its adjacent countries. An issue of *Upfront* featured a pullout map of the Middle East, along with charts of government facts about different Middle Eastern countries, world-wide oil supply etc. As will be discussed in the next section, producers of youth news believe that providing substantial visual content is important in creating a successful source of news for young people. *Teen Newsweek's* reader poll topics ranged from "Which was your favorite summer movie?" to "What is your opinion of the war in Iraq?"

A third theme common to all of these news magazines/newspapers was that the feature stories often contained background and historical information on the topic being discussed providing a context for understanding the issue or event. In fact, some issues contain articles that dealt exclusively with history. For example, in *Upfront's* March 7th, 2003 issue there was a two page article on the U.S. occupation in Japan after WWII, a thematic accompaniment to the articles about the US occupation of Iraq in the issue.

A fourth similarity among these youth-oriented educational news sources can be found in the language and grammar used in these publications, which was noticeably geared to a younger and less educated reader. Specifically, the vocabulary used was at about a 7th grade level, and sentences were short and usually followed a simple subject verb order. Although, the vocabulary was suited to the age and educational level of the readers, all of these publications used somewhat

formal to somewhat casual language, meaning that neither slang nor improper grammar was used. Another aid for younger readers used in some of these publications was the phonetical spelling of names and places especially names of foreign countries, cities and leaders.

The following hard news topics were found in the publications we reviewed: technology, law and politics, economics, war in Iraq, international affairs, the environment and education. Since all of the publications we reviewed in this category have national circulation, there were no local news stories; rather the articles were international and national in scope. In addition to news articles and briefs that focus on national and international political and social events and issues, these publications also have brief sections on sports, TV, and movies as well as other lifestyle topics of interest to teens.

The second category of youth-oriented publications included tabloid newspapers aimed at young city-dwellers and commuters. We located and collected the following: *Red Eye, Red Streak, Noise, Washington Post Express, a.m. Journal Express, a.m. New York, Pittsburg Trib p.m., Thrive,* and *Philadelphia Metro*. Many other such publications are currently being developed and produced in many cities throughout the country, but at time of this writing are not in circulation. These youth publications, geared to the 20-something urban commuter, share some characteristics with the classroom news publications discussed above such as simplified language, colorful graphics and brevity of news articles. However, in comparison to the classroom publications, the articles in these publications do not provide as much background information, do not specifically feature young adults, have considerably more articles on celebrities and lifestyles, and predominantly tend to focus on local issues and events. Interestingly, although these publications are aimed at older audiences, producers assume they must be less substantive because the actual target audience, and not a teacher, makes the decision about consumption.

These newspapers share three defining traits: very short news articles; a heavy focus on pop culture, entertainment and sports; and a focus on local news and events. The brevity of the news articles is related in part to a heavy reliance on news wire briefs such as briefs from the *Associated Press*. The main hard news topics that were not local stories were the war in Iraq and terrorism, the same central topics covered in mainstream newspapers[2].   Other topics mentioned include crime, technology, racism, education, the environment, unemployment, international affairs, business, science and technology, money, travel, political campaigns, state policy, health and economics. However, the majority of these publications were dedicated to celebrity and entertainment news such as movie and music, bar and restaurant reviews, and sports.

It seems that all of these tabloid newspapers aim to catch a potential reader's attention using large catchy headlines and colorful front pages. Some examples of catchy headlines are "Extreme Makeover" (*Red Eye*), "Stre$$ed Out" (*Pittsburgh Trib p.m.)* "Bennifer Backlash" (*Red Eye*) and "What Kind of Man Is Yours?" (*Red Streak*). The newspapers also contain many photographs both in color and black and white, and many advertisements by local shops, clubs, car dealerships, and realtors.

TELEVISION

We found four TV news programs designed for a youth audience. They are *CNN Student News, Channel One, Nick News*[3] and *In the Mix*. All of these programs have national TV audiences. *CNN Student News* is shown daily in the early morning hours on *CNN's Headline News* channel for the purpose of being taped by an educator and shown later to his or her class. *Channel One* is directly broadcast in schools that have contracts with

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[2] The Washington Post Express contains the most hard news of all tabloid papers sampled.
[3] Nick News is no longer produced or broadcasted.

Channel One and is shown in homeroom before classes start. *Nick News* and *In the Mix* are after school news programs. *Nick News* appeared on the cable station, Nickelodeon. *In the Mix* is produced by PBS. Of the four, *In the Mix* presents the most diverse story topics, some of which cannot be categorized as news or current affairs. We looked at these programs in terms of both content and style to analyze the ways that producers geared them to a younger audience.

All of these shows feature both national and international news stories ranging from the war in Iraq and terrorism to the 2004 presidential election, crime, education, and natural disasters. Although they specifically target a youth audience, none of the four shows had young people anchoring or narrating the hard news stories or featured young people in the story. Rather, the average age of narrators was 30 years old. *Nick News* was the only TV program out of the four that had a youth perspective. We considered any story that seemed to represent a youth voice or a view of the story from the perspective of a young person as representing a youth perspective.   However, three of these shows, *Channel One, Nick News* and *In the Mix* featured youth lifestyle stories like fashion, hobbies, and young people's place in the community. In these stories young people are more prominent.   Young people could either be seen in stories, or narrating them as in *Nick News* and *In the Mix*. Furthermore, in all three of these programs lifestyle stories were often told from a youth perspective.

These shows were also analyzed for other more stylistic appeals to younger audiences such as music, stylish clothing, color and graphics, quick scene cuts, and innovative camera angles. We found that *CNN Student News* and *Channel One* used formal language. *Nick News* used somewhat casual language and In the Mix used very casual language. All four programs used modern or contemporary music in their segments. *Channel One*, for example, used current popular music as part of its presentation. *Channel One* and *Nick News* used more vibrant colors in their production

than *Student News* and *In the Mix.*

With the exception of *CNN Student News,* the anchors and reporters all wore casual clothing, differentiating themselves from reporters and anchors on mainstream news media who generally wear business clothing. Unlike mainstream news programs, all four programs used quick scene cuts and a variety of camera angles, especially *In the Mix*. While *CNN Student News* and *In the Mix* used computer generated graphics, *Channel One* and *Nick News* did not use computer graphics to illustrate the topics being discussed.

WEB SITES

We found that the Internet contained a number of news outlets oriented to younger audiences. We located more youth oriented news sources online (9 Web sites) than on television or radio or in newspapers and magazines. The youth-oriented Web sites we found were *Metro Times*[4], *News by Teens, Youth Outlook, Spank!, Simpson Street Free Press, Wiretap, Teen World News, MTV News* and *Fresh Angles.* They are all independent news sources except for *Metro Times* and *MTV News* which are part of parent media organizations. *Teen World News* is part of an alternative news source. Since their main function is to provide an open forum for discussion about current events and issues among young adults, a number of these sites, with the exception of *Metro Times* and *MTV News*, lacked a great deal of "hard news." Consequently, many of these articles prioritized the expression of opinion over an objective account of the facts using mainstream news norms. The interviews described in the next section suggest that many of these Web sites do not fact check or edit articles posted on their pages.

These Web sites share a number of common features relating to both content and design. For all of the Web sites analyzed the main focus was on national news/issues with a few also having a

local focus (*Metro Times* and *Simpson Street Free Press*). Only *MTV News* and Fresh Angles had a secondary focus on international news. Hard news topics commonly found on these Web sites included: Iraq[5], terrorism, crime, education, HIV-AIDS, political affairs, teen pregnancy, healthcare, religion, drugs, personal health, technology, poverty, political campaigns, racism, inequality and technology. Also all of the Web sites contained entertainment news, which was more often than not separated from the hard news sections.

The Web sites had some features that made them similar to other youth-oriented media such as a heavy emphasis on entertainment and lifestyle and somewhat casual language. However, 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. For instance, most of the Web sites had young people featured in at least some of their articles. Also, seven of the eleven Web sites had writers between the ages of 11-24 and five had writers between the ages of 11-18[6]. *News by Teens*, Teen Outlook, *Teen World News*, *MTV News*, and Fresh Angles all had a youth perspective in their hard news articles, and these same Web sites along with *Simpson Street Free Press*, *Spank!* and *Wiretap* also had articles narrated by a young person.

With the exception of *Metro Times*, all of the sites had a separate "youth lifestyles" section where topics such as student life, family life, health and young people's place in society were discussed. Lastly, all of the Web sites except for *Spank!* and *Youth Outlook* featured young people in photos. In sum, all the Web sites either had young people in or narrating stories and/or had a youth perspective.

Like the print and TV media mentioned above, all the Web sites typically projected a

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[4] Metro Times also puts out a print version of its publication, but we were unable to obtain copies of the print version.

[5] War in Iraq and terrorism were considered national topics/ focus if there were no other international stories and if the focus of the story was the US involvement in Iraq and/or its efforts at combating terrorism.

[6] For two Web sites, Metro Times and MTV News, the age of the reporter could not be determined.

youthful style either through, color, graphics, or fonts.   The number of graphics or photos on each of the website's homepage ranged from 2 (*Spank!*) to 37 (*Teen World News*). Most Web sites had between 2 and 10 separate graphics/photos. Yet, only one website (*News by Teens*) had moving features or graphics. Four of the nine had click polls. All of the sites had numerous links to other Web sites ranging from 13 to more than 50.

Most of the Web sites incorporated colors besides black and white such as green purple, beige and blue. However, only one website (*News by Teens*) used fonts other than Times, Times New Roman, Ariel, or Courier[7]. All of the Web sites except *Spank!*, *Metro Times* and *Simpson Street Free Press* had message boards, which seems to be a common interactive feature of youth Web sites. *News by Teens* and Channel One had real time chat available on the sites. *Youth Outlook*, *Simpson Street Free Press*, *Teen World News* and Fresh Angles did not have any advertising on their website. Advertising found on the other Web sites ranged from educational tools, public service and Internet tools to entertainment and restaurants-all targeting a young consumer.

RADIO

We were able to locate only one radio program that fit the description of a youth news program. *Youth Radio* is a radio broadcast that can be picked up by various local radio stations across the country. *Youth Radio* segments are broadcast regularly on National Public Radio (NPR). The segments that air on NPR generally take the form of commentaries by a young person about a particular issue or situation they are experiencing that is included in an adult-oriented news program like *All Things Considered* or *Morning Edition*. It covers current issues and events such as civil rights, education, youth protest, taxes, national security and campaign finance. Both young people and adults are interviewed or give commentary for

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[7] Wiretap used a different font for its name but for no other part of the website.

the program on a given topic. These stories often feature the topics relevant to young people such as education and always give a youth perspective.

II. INTERVIEWS WITH YOUTH NEWS PRODUCERS

Although there is widespread concern in the news media about the declining youth audience, there are few news products aimed specifically at younger people. However, as the first section of this report demonstrates, there are efforts underway to provide news in a format that will be enticing to young people, though many of these are aimed at school-aged children and teen-agers rather than potential young voters in their twenties. Through a series of interviews with the producers of these products, we were able to gain insight into the assumptions producers make about the tastes of youth and a greater understanding of the range of techniques being used by stakeholders to target younger audiences.

Method

After compiling our list of media sources, we contacted the media outlets and requested interviews with a member of the staff who had knowledge about editorial/production decisions and the history of the product.

We conducted interviews with representatives from the following media: *Red Eye*, *Red Streak*, *The Express*, *News by Teens*, *Spank!.com*, *The Wall Street Journal Classroom Edition*, *CNN Student News*, *Youth Radio*, *Teen Newsweek*, *Fresh Angles.com*, and *Upfront*.

All interviews were conducted over the phone by either the Principal Investigator or Graduate Research Assistant of the News for a New Generation project. Interviewers followed a script consisting of eight questions (for questionnaire, see Appendix Two). Question topics included what makes news for young people different from other types of news, how the news outlet decided on the format of the source, what topics young people are

interested in and how the outlet selects the topics they will cover, what types of market research the organization does with audiences, and what the producer predicts the news will be like in ten years.

Although the producers we interviewed work at a variety of different media with diverse goals, some patterns do emerge among the recommendations they give for creating news that is likely to appeal to young audiences. In general, producers believe that news stories must be shorter than they are in traditional news outlets, that pop-culture elements are beneficial in attracting the attention of young consumers, that news should have a significant visual component, and that the relevance of stories to young people's lives should be explicit. Although this was mentioned by fewer respondents, several also contended that young people are interested in many of the same issues as older people.

"It's all About Relevance"

When asked what the important differences are between news aimed at young people and news targeted at general audiences, the co-editor of *Red Eye* explained, "one thing that we know from our research, and almost any young reader will tell you, it's all about relevance. What's interesting to me." The Washington Post's *Express*' publisher agrees that it is important to consider the life-cycle stage of readers when deciding on story topics. For example, since most of the paper's readers are renters, they would be likely to do a story on the increase in rents across the country. Similarly, because papers of this kind are aimed at commuters, their editors say they readily print stories related to the transportation system.

The outlets that feature content created by young people such as *Youth Radio* and Fresh Angles, work actively to present stories from the perspective of a younger person. Inherent in the title of Fresh Angles, is, of course, the claim that the stories on the Web site will feature an unfamiliar viewpoint. The education director and producer of *Youth Radio* explained that young people are often ignored in standard news or are

presented in a stereotypical way. When an actual young person is telling the story, the depiction of youth is likely to be more nuanced. She added that young people often have access to stories involving their peers that would not be available to an older reporter. Young reporters do not have to approach youth-oriented stories as outsiders, but can examine the situations from within. This enables them to tell a story from a different perspective and one that is perhaps more relevant for an audience of their peers.

It is interesting to consider what exactly "relevance" means in the context of political news. Certainly this is different for young people who are still in high school than it is for young adults who work and pay for their own housing. The answers given by some of these producers suggest a somewhat narrow concept of relevance: commuters and apartment-dwellers want to learn about transportation issues and rent control policy. That seems reasonable, but what about national issues that have an impact on people across the country, such as health care policy or privacy issues?

According to the publisher of *Express*, 95% of the paper's content is national news. However, the level of interest in national news among the young citizens of Washington D.C. is undoubtedly unparalleled elsewhere in the country. When asked whether they ever cover national news in a way that demonstrates what the relevance is for their readers, the *Red Eye* co-editor pointed to a story they did on the second anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks. In this story, the paper chronicled actual changes in the lives of people who live in Chicago that resulted from the attacks such as enforced wearing of identification in the workplace and being required to take off one's shoes at airport security checkpoints. This was the only example available. Otherwise, she said, they focus mostly on local news.

> *News really goes over well. If there's a great news story, that's definitely what we're going to go with... We found that our readers are very interested in things that*

go on in Chicago, things that go on in the neighborhoods where they live. So for instance while most papers might lead with something really important that happened in the UN that day, we're more likely gonna focus on you know, a rapist caught in a neighborhood where a lot of our readers live.

In this case, the definition of news appears to relate mostly to local news.

This focus on relevance is not limited to current affairs news, but extends to entertainment news as well. *Red Eye* uses similar criteria in selecting its pop-culture topics.

Inside the paper what you'll see, like for instance, we have a lot of pop-culture coverage, and it's gonna be the stars in our galaxy. So, it's not going to be Simon and Garfunkel and all the baby boomer people, it's going to be 50 cent and Christina Aguilera and it's going to be a lot more diverse star galaxy, because that's what our audience is, the most diverse audience in history. So, and then like on the money page, it's not going to be about stock, company mergers and, you know, the New York Stock Exchange guy resigning, it's going to be about how to keep a job, how to get a job, what to do if your boss is a jerk, are they reading your e-mail, things like that. On the body page, it's not going to be about Alzheimer's and cancer, it's going to be about fitness and supplements. So you know it's pretty easy to figure out… in any topic subject area, what we mean by relevance. What affects their lives.

There appears to be a real difference in perception here between the outlets that are working to inform younger people and the tabloids being produced by mainstream newspapers to attract a younger audience. Like local TV news, which is notoriously uninformative, these tabloids focus on the more sensational stories that may not

have obvious consequences for broader political and social issues.

"Our Briefs are Briefier"

In many of the interviews the media representatives mentioned brevity as a key component of news aimed at younger audiences. According to the editor of *Red Streak*, the paper's "challenge is to give (readers) information, give them what they need to know in a format that fits to their lifestyle. So we have our approach is to give you a little bit of everything, and we give you a short news story. Our briefs are 'briefier,' and we just have shorter news stories for the most part."

Young news consumers have access to many sources for news, and as *Red Streak*'s editor also contended, they can seek out in-depth information if they chose. Therefore, according to the producers, young people appreciate having a source that will tell them what is going on in the world in as concise a manner as possible. This probably reflects a mentality developed through the use of on-line information sources where one is presented with short synopses or links with the option of reading further about a particular topic. As the 16-year-old creator of *News by Teens* told us, "I have the shortest attention span you will ever see."

An editor at *Teen Newsweek* echoed this sentiment, but implicated adults as well.

To some extent, newspapers like USA Today when they adopted their format, when they first started, took kind of an approach that you would take to kids, to writing for kids. The articles are shorter. That's something that if you're writing for kids you'd be… our articles are much shorter. We don't have much room for any more than just the facts. They're shorter because you know kids don't have perhaps as long an attention span, but then again, neither do adults these days. That's why USA Today does so well. People want their news delivered quickly and concisely I think.

Those with an interest in younger citizens becoming more informed might have concerns about this kind of truncated encounter with the news, however, the senior editor of *The Wall Street Journal Classroom Edition* argues that shortening stories for young people does not create a reading experience much different from the one had by most adult readers.

> *The only editing that we do is for length, which really doesn't change your reading experience because very few Wall Street Journal Readers will read an entire story. Some do, but most, the vast majority, don't... So, we take a fifty inch story and cut it down to twenty. We're probably giving the students what most readers read anyway.*

Even taking this point into account, it is worth exploring the question of whether young people's attention span could be increased if they were given the opportunity to read a longer, but engaging news story. Despite the *Red Streak* editor's belief that readers will seek out more information if a story sparks their interest, it is, of course, questionable whether the consumers of "news in brief" ever explore the issues further. With the ticker going by on every cable news channel, links to major news stories on the homepage of Internet service providers, and bullets that appear on pagers and cell phones, it is easy to be exposed to "news bites." However, whether this exposure is whetting the appetite of younger news consumers for more in-depth coverage on certain issues is an open question.

Tewksbury, Weaver, and Maddex (2001) investigated whether exposure to news stories while seeking out other types of information on-line (incidental exposure) increases current affairs knowledge. Although the results were somewhat mixed, the authors did find evidence that unintentional exposure to news stories can lead to greater knowledge about current affairs, supposedly because interested readers click on links to news stories and read more about the

topic. This will not necessarily cross over into other media, however. When one is on-line, more information is often just a click away. A different level of motivation is required for one to read a news brief on the subway and then subsequently seek out information from another source at a later time. Whether the shortened versions of news being presented to teenagers and young adults in many of these media will lead to knowledge that goes deeper than headlines is a question that should be explored in future research.

"Pop-culture is the...Leading Force in a Teen's Life"

It seems to be a universal belief that for a news product to capture a young audience, it must contain content about pop-culture. The publisher of *Spank!* Youth Culture Online explained that teenagers use pop-culture information as the basis for social interactions, but when it comes to exploring topics in a more comprehensive, in-depth fashion, they are more interested in current affairs or political issues. All articles that appear on the *Spank!* site are submitted by teenagers. In an effort to control the quality of the submissions, the young reporters are asked to base their stories on something they saw or read in the news.

> *Pop culture is the strongest leading force in a teen's life, I think. And it's not something that's bad, it's just the way it is. We do notice that through the new system that we're running... the interest is not specifically in pop-culture. Pop culture is really something that they utilize the forums for. For instantaneous peer to peer relationship, for them to talk about music or books or any movie or video game... it's really instantaneous relationship. The news stories and features that are submitted and that we do run are news. They are things about discovery, war, politics or issues. So that's what I found most interesting. When we launched the new system, (the) peer to peer, teen to teen, youth to youth system I thought we'd get a huge amount of 'here's entertainment' stuff. There's no*

desire on the teen side to spend the time or participate in building a piece of news about pop-culture. It's really an instantaneous kind of issue, more suited towards three lines, quickly posted in a forum or in a chat situation. The news turns out to be what they want to invest time in.

Pop culture knowledge is the currency young people exchange when interacting with peers. Teenagers need to have pop-culture information readily accessible for social interaction. This is reflected in the frequency with which those being interviewed mentioned the importance of featuring pop-culture in any media product aimed at youth. The education director and producer of *Youth Radio* said that a desire to play music on the air is what motivated many of the students to participate in the program. To varying degrees a mingling of news and pop-culture information seems crucial in any of these media.

This would be less the case for a publication like *The Wall Street Journal Classroom Edition* because the audience is captive. If a teacher elects to distribute the publication to his or her class, the students are obligated to read it. According to the senior editor of the paper, the aim is to increase the economic literacy of students to a significant degree so that they will elect to purchase the paper once they are college-age or older. However, even this editor said that if they could find a story about a record label spending millions of dollars to promote a particular star, it would be "perfect," for the young audience since it would have both economic and pop-culture elements.

Interestingly, when asked what they thought news would be like in ten years, both of the teenagers we interviewed predicted that there would be more entertainment intertwined with news. The older people who were interviewed did not mention this, but it does appear that news media are already moving in that direction. According to these interviews, although young people may not want to invest significant mental energy into consideration of pop-culture

information, they do want to have this information readily available in their news sources.

"Visual Appeal"

Several producers of news for younger people stressed the importance of including a significant amount of visual content. *Red Streak*'s editor explained that young people are more sophisticated users of news media than previous generations, and this gives them a greater comfort level with the marriage of imagery and words in message creation. Producers of youth-oriented news are not bound by traditional notions of the black and white newspaper. Of course, very few newspapers are still produced in only black and white, yet producers seem to believe that younger people crave a level of visuality even greater than older consumers.

When asked what made *Teen Newsweek* unique, the first thing that an editor and spokesperson from Weekly Reader, the company that produces *Teen Newsweek*, mentioned was that it is a "very visually appealing magazine." She explained that because television is so pervasive in the lives of young people, teenagers expect to be stimulated visually.   Even though they are working in a print medium, the magazine tries to appeal to this preference for the visual. *The Wall Street Journal Classroom Edition* senior editor said that there are more graphics in the classroom edition than in the regular Wall Street Journal, and according to *Red Eye*'s editor,

> *people like visual ways to present stories, and we will do a lot more of that. Probably just because we don't want to look gray, we have a lot of color, and there are lots of ways, fun ways to present stories. We don't take ourselves too seriously, and we're willing to have a little fun. And we think that's appealing.*

According to this argument, a lack of visual content in a publication, or, presumably on a Web site or television program, denotes seriousness and tradition. Conversely, the presence of copious

visual material sends a signal to the consumer that a news source is fun, hip, and exciting. It is clear from the producers' comments that they believe exciting, colorful visual content serves as a cue to young people that they are the target audience.

On the other hand, according to the senior publicist of *CNN Student News* the program must occasionally forgo the use of graphic video that would certainly be shown to adult viewers during the regular CNN broadcast. He said that they will still tell the story, but they will tell it without the more disturbing illustrations.

"Teen Angle"
The managing editor of Freshangles.com, himself a teenager, contends that people his age are interested in many of the same issues as older people, however they are interested in hearing about these issues from a different point of view. When asked whether different topics appeal to young people, he said

> *I would say that a lot of them at least today may be actually the same. I think one section that we were going to try but we abandoned because we thought maybe that's a little too heavy for the average teen is business. We were going to include a business section and we had a couple of students that were really interested in that, but we eventually said that any business articles of major interest can just go in our real time section, which is our news section. We…every article we do we try to direct toward a teen angle, but some of the time, I'll admit this, we sometimes just write articles simply for our own interest, not just from the teen angle, from the adult angle.*

Although every interview included a question asking whether there are topics that interest younger people that might not be of interest to older news consumers, most said that it was more a matter of perspective than subject. Of course there are some issues that are clearly of no interest to younger people. For example, the editor

of *Teen Newsweek* explained that, for obvious reasons, they would never do a story on hormone replacement therapy for menopausal women, as Newsweek for adults might. However, providing that the news is presented in a short, punchy, and relevant form, there is a sense that young people are interested in the major issues of the day and want to learn about them in the news.

The selection of *CNN Student News* topics is based almost exclusively on what are the top stories of the day. The program does try to provide historical background for students and to spell-out acronyms that might be left unexplained in an adult news story, but as Student News' senior publicist said, topics are decided based on "what's the biggest story of the day, period." Presumably, the stories that appear on the parent station, CNN would serve as a model for what should be considered the top stories of the day.

The education director and producer of *Youth Radio* responded with particular passion to the question of whether young people were interested in different topics than their elders.

> *Young people care about the same issues that the rest of us are worrying about, and in some cases they care about them in a first hand way that we only can imagine. When we talk about debates about education or about the economy, and these are kids living inside American public school classrooms every day and are the ones who are being affected by standardized testing or No Child Left Behind. Or if you look at the economy and they're out there having to get jobs, or thinking about how likely it is that they are going to get a job if they do make the investment in a college tuition, or you know, just social issues. I mean the war, it's their generation that is fighting the war. So all of those same issues, and certainly popular culture is part of what they care about and want to be covering and we do a lot of great stuff that has to do with popular culture, but you know that's*

one of the things I learned most, it is so clear to me working here, and working with young people here, is that they might bring a different perspective, they might bring different nuances. As I was saying, they have access, they may take a different, they may shape the product to sound the way they want it to sound. But the issues, the underlying issues to me are the same stuff as the rest of use want to read about or listen to or have some way of affecting.

"We are our Audience"

With a few exceptions, most of these media outlets have not done extensive market research with youth. The classroom publications are more interested in teachers' opinions since it is they who decide what is brought into the classroom, and they can be relied upon to report what appeals to students and works well in the classroom. A number of the producers themselves are young as are their staffs, so they feel they already have a good sense of what a younger audience wants. Nonetheless, the age of the audience does allow for employing some innovative research techniques. *Red Eye*'s editor described their method of measuring audience response.

For the first six months we got overnight feedback from our readers … they would get an e-mail. It wasn't scientific, but it was very informative: Did you pick up the paper today? Did you read the cover story? Did you like the cover? Did it entice you to pick it up? What was it, the headline, the picture, the topic? How much of Red Eye did you read today? What time did you read it? Where did you get it? What's your favorite feature? After six months of that and overnight, almost like television research, we were definitely able to see the kind of covers that play well, and we were able, you know, to know what visually works. We know what kind of topics that our readers are interested in, and it really helped us to think about what we were doing each day

and presenting things in the most appealing manner.

This intense interest in feedback from the readers was unusual among our respondents. The comments from *The Wall Street Journal Classroom Edition*'s senior editor more accurately reflect the type of efforts made by these media outlets.

We did a little market research, but really not much. We had a couple of focus groups of students. Every year I go visit the students, the managing editor in Detroit… he's constantly in touch with teachers.

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.

Conclusions

Producers of news for young people have a set of clear ideas as to what that news should look like and sound like. There are some differences depending on whether the news is aimed at high school students or young adults. Those who are teenagers or work closely with them are more optimistic about the interest their audience has in news of national and global importance. Companies aiming their products at a slightly older audience appear to view their readers as somewhat myopically focused on issues of local concern that have a direct and immediate impact on their lives. Those who produce publications and programming for classroom use are more concerned about what teachers will view as having educational merit. All 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.

Of course, the next question that must be answered is what young people themselves

want to receive from the news. The uses and gratifications approach in Communication research is based on the premise that people use media to satisfy certain needs and to receive certain gratifications. The motivation for media use helps to determine what effects might occur as a result of consumption. As we consider the quality of news aimed at younger citizens and evaluate what factors producers take into account when determining format and design, it is interesting to contemplate what gratifications young people are seeking from their use of these products and what benefits they might receive from them. Are young people trying to use these sources for surveillance of their environments, a need that can be satisfied through news consumption, or are they predominantly seeking entertainment? For those who are trying to survey the political landscape, are they satisfied by the shorter stories being presented to them or would they prefer more detail? Perhaps most young people only want something fun to do while riding the subway.

A few of the producers appear to believe that young people are far more likely to be interested in stories taking place in their local area by which they are directly affected. Perhaps it is true that young people see less need to seek out information about broader issues than those they encounter in their daily lives. Their surveillance requirements may be more limited than would be anticipated. This may be attributable to the fact that they are coming of age in a time marked by fragmentation of the media. It is also possible that young people really will go to news media aimed at the general population when they want to consume less local news.

According to Ruggiero (2000), the uses and gratifications approach must include the notion of the "demassification" of the media. New media permit users to more specifically select information that meets their needs from among the media offerings. This takes the "mass" out of the media and allows for more individualized mediated experience. So, we ask the question: are younger consumers who are more habituated to this type

of message reception less interested in information that does not appear to be directly relevant to their lives? Some producers of youth media seem to accept this as fact.

There is also the more pleasing possibility that with more systematic research and a large dose of creativity, news that covers a broader spectrum of topics could be formatted in a way to be engaging and informative as well as relevant to the young people who look to it for information.

III. FOCUS GROUPS

For the third stage of this study, we convened five focus groups of 18-24 year-olds from central New Jersey to discuss their news consumption and their opinions about the news. A total of 62 participants took part in the focus groups. Thirty-two of the participants were men and 30 were women. Although a few of the focus groups were relatively homogeneous, we did achieve racial diversity in the overall group of participants. Two of our groups were comprised predominantly of Rutgers University students. A third group consisted of students from Mercer County Community College. The majority of participants in these groups were white, but a third or more of the participants in each group were people of color. The final two groups were comprised of African-American and Latino young people who had received no more than a high school education, but who were enrolled in job-training programs in Trenton and New Brunswick, NJ.

We asked participants a number of questions designed to gather information about their news consumption habits, their likes and dislikes regarding the media they consume, and what they would envision as an ideal source of news (for questionnaire, see Appendix Three). We also showed each group three news clips: one from ABC nightly news with Peter Jennings, one from NBC nightly news with Tom Brokaw, and one from MSNBC's news program, *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*. The *Countdown* program incorporates fast moving graphics and an elaborate, technology-filled set into the broadcast. The top stories of the day are listed in a *Countdown* format and reported in that order. Olbermann is a middle-aged man, who is a former anchor from ESPN's *Sportscenter*. The ABC clip covered an alleged security breach in the US Capitol Building, the NBC clip focused on the war in Iraq, and the Olbermann clip dealt with a soldier who recently returned from Iraq and criticized aspects of the military operation. Participants told focus group moderators whether they liked these clips, whether they would continue to watch the program if given the opportunity, and whether they thought the program was aimed at them.

Several themes recur throughout the focus group transcripts. Of course, for every cluster of participants that seemed to favor a particular type of coverage or option for revamping the way news is presented, there were dissenting voices expressing different preferences. Nonetheless, it is possible to sort out a number of recommendations that might have the potential for increasing youth news audiences, particularly within the demographics that have traditionally been among the least engaged.

More Local, More Positive

There was a clear tendency among a significant subset of focus group participants to say that they were more interested in local news than in news about the nation and the world. This appeared to stem from the fact that they were able to identify with local news and see a clear connection to their lives. A number of participants expressed an interest in seeing more local news about their communities. This was particularly true of our non-college groups who also tended to be urban residents. They felt that they needed more local news in order to carry out surveillance of their communities. They wanted to know if there were any dangers they needed to be aware of and whether anyone they knew was involved in any situations that warranted news coverage.

One male participant argued that if the news media paid more attention to his environment, positive changes might occur in the community.

I would make a news show and have more reporters in the hood, stop worrying about the suburbs. Show how the kids play up in the hood, with the dirty needles and crack bottles all on the ground. More reporters showing that…

When asked what effect he thought this increased coverage might have, he responded, "better playgrounds and probably better schools… not so

many potholes in the street. And I would be the main reporter. Me. I've seen everything."

Many of the urban, minority participants also longed for less negative news coverage. A participant in one of the job training groups explained that he avoided the news because of the lack of positive information. When asked what he would like to see reported, he described recent events in which he had taken part.

> *Like we had over 100 kids going to the recreation center from different youth groups in Philly, Camden, Newark. Situations like that. We got together and had a social and everybody got to know each other. Things like that. Maybe doing volunteer places, like we had a street cleanup and we won first place. Things like that. We went to the state house and fought for affordable housing, stuff like that. I like to see stuff like that. That is when I watch the news.*

In a strikingly similar exchange during the second focus group of job trainees, one participant argued that, the news, if it presents a more affirmative view of young people, could serve as a positive influence on younger audiences.

> *I think that they should acknowledge the young people who are making a difference in their lives, like people who volunteer or young people who graduate college, give them a spotlight. People who are going through things and accomplish it. Open up opportunities like that…if people could see them going to school, then people would be like, 'maybe I'll start going to school,' 'maybe I'll stop skipping school.'*

It would, however, be inaccurate to portray these two groups as being exclusively focused on local events. There was clearly an interest in the war in Iraq and whether new threats were brewing oversees that could affect Americans. Moreover, several participants have relatives serving in the

armed forces, and so they take a keen interest in affairs in the Middle East.

It would also be misleading to suggest that only the less educated participants expressed a preference for information about local affairs and less depressing news content. Students in our Rutgers groups talked about their regular reading of the University newspaper, *The Daily Targum,* which does contain some national and international news. As one student said:

> *When the Daily Targum comes, I find myself reading that (more) than other newspapers. I think it is more about what is going on in New Jersey, with the school and things like that. I like to read about what I know about basically.*

When one group of Rutgers students (as well as a Middlesex County College student and recent graduate of Kean University) was asked whether they had heard about a recent bombing in Istanbul and where they had heard the story, one participant responded

> *I went on the Web site today, but I never saw pictures of it. I just don't really, I think sometimes when it comes to things like that, I am not as interested. Not like I don't care, but because maybe it is not happening here, in general, like it is not happening in New Jersey or New York. Maybe if they said there was a bomb in New York City, I would have been like, OK, I would have been reading it. But maybe because it was someplace that I had never heard of, I was just not interested.*

Another agreed:

> *I usually just, if I watch television most of the time, I don't really go on-line to check the news. But I'll pay attention more to the things that pertain to New Jersey or New York, just like she said. Anything that is global, I don't really pay attention to. I don't*

know why. If it has anything to do with like the president I don't listen to it. It just doesn't interest me.

One student argued that young people are more interested in issues that they can do something about. Keeping track of more remote issues that do not seem to have a direct effect on their lives can be too overwhelming.

When there is so much news and chaos going on, you obviously have trouble getting in touch with one issue. That is why, like I said, I was looking for that one article, it has to do with Rutgers, and I am taking an interest in that. Suppose I wanted to know what is going on in the entire world. I would go to six or seven different channels, get six or seven different perspectives, and I feel this chaos, like what is going on here?

One participant did express a contrary opinion. In fact, she articulated a preference for international news. While she is not a United States citizen, there were a few international news fans in the community college group who were US citizens. One expressed a preference for watching the BBC on cable because it provides a more complex view of what is going on the world than you can get from American news programs. This was a relatively unusual perspective, however.

The negative nature of news was mentioned frequently by all the groups. When asked why they thought that young people are turning away from news, a number of participants argued that it is because of the overwhelmingly depressing content found there. Young people have many options when deciding what media to consume and avoidance of bad news may be leading them to make choices other than news consumption:

Like he said, a lot of the news these days is bad news. There is a lot of stuff that goes on that I think everyone is maybe not tired of it, but kind of used to it. They know that there is bad stuff going on, and maybe

they just don't want to watch it. They try to tune it out. And for young people, there is so much more easily accessible technology for young people, like the Internet, video games, television shows, that people can watch rather than watch the news. I think people, especially young people, have better things to do with their time. They are not particularly concerned with current events.

A member of the community college group admitted to being put off by the negativity of the news in the past, but said his perspective was changing:

I think the news is a little depressing. There is never anything, like one good happy thing after they say like a whole bunch of depressing things that get you down about the world. So, for a really long time, like when I was 18, I didn't care about the elections or anything that was going on in the world. I never watched the news or cared or read anything. Now more recently I am starting to watch it more and get more involved, and realize, yeah, it is depressing, but you have to be aware of what is going on also, you can't just hide from it.

Don't Tease Me

The young people we spoke with expressed particular irritation at the tendency for television news to try and lure viewers with tantalizing details about stories that turn out to be less than thrilling. One of the stories we showed participants described how two young staffers entered the US Capitol building with a toy gun on Halloween. It was not until after they entered the building that a security crisis ensued. The story was several minutes long and did not indicate that the gun was a toy until some tension developed around the idea that someone with a gun had made his way into the building. Almost all of the participants hated this story. The following are a selection of responses to the news clip:

And there was all that build-up. Oh! Security

breech at the capitol building and all that, then all of a sudden, no, it is a toy gun. So why did you need all that build-up? (Community College Student)

What I found interesting about that report is the order in which they reported the pieces of evidence or the facts. Kind of like the way they relayed the whole story, they started out with what really didn't happen, they call it a security breach, and the headline, 'security breach' is in the corner. When it really wasn't a security breach, they just thought there was a security breach, but somebody really brought a Halloween costume to work, so they just throw something out and bit by bit they dismantle the fear they've created by the headline they used. So, if I could redo something, I would take it back to what actually happened and make that the headline. (Job Training Program Participant)

The whole beginning of it wasn't even what really happened. Why don't they just tell us what really happened? The first half of the entire segment was what happened, and then you realize that actually didn't happen. So just tell us what happened in a concise way. (Rutgers Student)

They didn't get to the point, they knew there was only 30 seconds worth of stuff, they just wanted to fluff it up and make it all nice to waste everybody's time basically, and get everybody all scared. (Rutgers Student II)

Similarly, one Rutgers participant criticized local news for advertising upcoming news broadcasts by suggesting that the featured story will provide life-saving information when, in reality, the information that is eventually reported is far less consequential to most viewers.

In one of the discussions, participants came to the conclusion that sensationalized stories about security breaches and other fear-inducing segments would work better on older people because they have a more heightened sense of anxiety about risks than younger people. Perhaps the reason young people seem to react with such visceral disgust to stories of this kind is that the reporters remind them of their parents or other older people who are constantly warning them about life's dangers.

Younger people are also presumed to be more cynical and more wary of being "sold a bill of goods." The type of bait and switch used frequently by the television news media plays into their preexisting assumptions about institutions in general: they are self-serving and duplicitous.

Disdain for the Old White Guys

Members of our focus groups also reacted negatively to the same network news anchors who are generally well-known and often admired by older Americans. Many of the young people could not identify Tom Brokaw or Peter Jennings, but they knew they did not like them.

Why don't they fire all those old commentators?
They are not emotional. Some of them probably have dentures. Get rid of that. (Rutgers Student)

As far as the anchor people go, it was just an abundance of racism and bigotry with the anchor people. They are just all old white males. I guess that is just like the stereotypical trustworthy person, when in actuality they are the ones that kind of dick you the most. (Rutgers Student II)

And this about Tom Brokaw:

He looked, like, constipated all the time. He wasn't moving his mouth, he didn't seem like, it kind of is like when you call up and you need help and they don't help you. And they act like they hate their job, that is what he sounded like. (Rutgers Student I)

First of all, the guy in the beginning was too dramatic. I know it is affecting all of us, but he was just being too dramatic. And it made him sound dumb, because he was talking about something serious, and I am laughing because he is trying so hard. He did look like he was constipated, he was trying too hard. (Rutgers Student II)

Clearly we see a real difference here between older and younger viewers and what they are looking for in a news anchor. Young people may not be drawn in by excessively flashy camera work or special effects, but the convention of the older man in a suit speaking in a formal manner is anathema to young viewers' view of the world. News organizations certainly assume this and as a result are hiring younger people to present the news throughout the day. This is most obvious on cable news channels such as CNN or Fox News. However, evening news programming, even on cable, is still dominated by middle-aged to old white males.

One group suggested that Michael Jordan would be a good choice for a news anchor. Another said that if you got younger anchors who delivered the news in a serious way, it would attract young viewers without alienating older viewers. Regardless of whether either of these possibilities will come to pass, the suggestion that the people who present the news should be more reflective of the world young people inhabit is one worth considering.

Source Preferences

The young people in our focus groups report turning to a variety of news sources when they are looking for information. They certainly use on-line sources, but they also read newspapers and watch local news on television. Overall, when seeking out national and international news on television, they generally select a cable news station. Very few mentioned national network news as a preferred source.

Several of the students in our first Rutgers group said that a headline on AOL will catch their eyes when they are logging on for e-mail, and this is how they become informed about stories that interest them.

Young people seem to like the Internet for the freedom it affords to select the news stories that they want to read.

That is what is good about the Internet ones. You can just read a bunch of headlines in a nice little list. You don't have to go through the newspaper to look at the headlines, and you just pick out what you want to read about. (Rutgers Student)

For a similar reason, participants across the focus groups specifically mentioned New York's UPN news program as one of their favorite sources of news. This show provides an on-screen list of which stories will appear on the program at specific times. Participants value this format because it allows them to tune in and out depending on which stories are of interest. This type of news program is the direct opposite of the teasing that the young people found so offensive. The program is explicit about what stories will appear at what time, giving audiences the opportunity to change the channel rather than trying to force them to remain with UPN.

I like what UPN does. They'll say entertainment and then have that. They'll say something like, health issues, then talk about health issues. I think that is a bullet point right there, if they break it down into different sections, like entertainment, JLo and Ben, health, AIDS is going down. New York City, this is happening. Around the world, this is happening. I think if they break it down to little bullets, maybe that would help. Because maybe for the people who don't want to see JLo, they'll turn off until 10:30, and then at 10:30 they'll watch health issues. I think UPN 9 does the run-down or something like that. (Rutgers

Student I)

They don't lead you on, they won't say Michael Jackson, you see the headlines, then you have to wait right to the end to see it. Two minutes of what you already know. But UPN actually gives you the time when you can see what you want to see. (Rutgers Student II)

These comments demonstrate that young people want to have power over the kind of information they consume. The focus group participants also said that they are often too busy to consume news, and these types of formats give them more flexibility in terms of time. Interactive media such as the Internet provide the consumer with a great deal of agency in making decisions about information sources, and younger people have come to expect this.

The news media are trying to adapt to these expectations by creating formats like the ones used on UPN or on MSNBC's *Countdown* program. Whether young people are using this power to select public affairs programming or political information on-line is an open question. Based on the responses of the AOL users, it appears that news consumption is often a second-thought rather than a behavior that is undertaken deliberately. Perhaps by combining these formats with other innovative techniques, purposeful news consumption among the young can be increased.

There are some unique aspects to New Jersey that warrant mention in this discussion. There are no commercial television stations in New Jersey, which means that all local television news comes from either Philadelphia or New York. A few participants mentioned watching the public television station, the New Jersey Network (NJN) in order to get news. This is probably not a habit that would be generalizable to people in other areas. Also, New Jersey has numerous local newspapers to compensate for the lack of local news, so there may be a greater tendency toward newspaper reading among our participants than you would find

elsewhere. Finally, students at Rutgers have free access to a number of newspapers in their dorms, so this also might lead to an overrepresentation of newspaper reading.

Visual Aspects

The members of our first group of job trainees responded positively to an NBC news story about the war on terrorism and the large numbers of young people being trained to be suicide bombers. They praised the story for its use of visual material. The story had a good deal of video including footage from a terrorist training camp, which made the story more interesting to the viewers, and to some, more believable. One participant remarked that the video made it seem, "Like it was live. Like we were there." Other participants said that the footage gave them a better idea of what was going on and what the reporters were talking about.

A community college student agreed that the use of visuals in this story made it more engaging.

> *For some people that might be a little distracting, but for those of us who are visualizers, that really helps them pay attention. That is why I prefer to see it visually rather than hearing it. So I like the way it had all sorts of multimedia, just wasn't one straight, bland format.*

Conversely, there were mixed responses to the clip from MSNBC's *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, a program that makes extensive use of quickly moving computer graphics and rapidly flashing images. Although several people thought the visual effects were eye-catching and might make them watch the show, many also found them distracting. Several participants said they were unable to follow what the story was about because their attention was drawn to the special effects and rapid scene changes. As with UPN, the overall concept of the *Countdown* did receive positive feedback.

I just think that it is appealing to us, only because it has a lot of graphics and all this stuff. But I just think it is exaggerated. Like the big numbers and everything is flashing. Too many things are going on. He has a map of Iraq. Why does he have a map there? I haven't paid attention to the story… they only do that to get ratings. I want the people to get that news story from us, so how to appeal to them. Oh, we'll just put up these graphics, five, four, three, two, one. It was unnecessary. (Rutgers Student)

This professed aversion to flashy graphics could certainly be a case of these young people stating what they believe is the more socially acceptable opinion. However, it did seem clear in a number of cases that the participants were confused by the story and did not have a firm sense of what it was about after viewing it. Admittedly, the clip was brief, and it is possible that with frequent viewing of this type of program one would learn to expect the graphics and not find them so distracting. However, it is also possible that this kind of format discourages learning. As one Rutgers student said

> *I had a hard time following the story. Everything was too flashy. I didn't know what to pay attention to. I was really trying to follow the rest of the story, I had a hard time following it… I prefer something simple and short where you get to the point.*

Don't Waste My Time

The young people who participated in our focus groups offered a number of reasons why they think young people, in general, are not active news consumers. Several complained that the news is too redundant, that reporters should be concise when they are delivering the news and not repeat the same information day after day. Even information about the war in Iraq can seem like old hat to young audiences.

> *Rumsfeld was saying stuff that was like, oh yeah, how long has this war been going on? Like, oh yeah, it's going to take time to stop terrorism. Yeah, you know, obviously, it is on every night of my whole life…I don't think I would watch it. It is like how many times have we heard that? …It is the same type of thing going on every night in the news since the first George Bush. (Community College Student)*

A Rutgers student argued that instead of talking about the same topics repeatedly, news organizations could provide a broader range of stories to audiences.

> *Yeah, sometimes you hear about one thing 30 times instead of 30 things at least once…Instead of the snow for five or six hours, tell me what's going on in the Congo, in some village in India or somewhere.*

This is clearly in contradiction to other participants who expressed little or no interest in international affairs, but of course, like all people, young people represent a diversity of interests and appetites.

In general, participants did not consider consuming news to be a way that most young people would prefer to spend their time. When we asked why participants thought young people were not interested in news, the first response in both Rutgers groups and in the second job training group was that young people have so many other entertainment options. Why would young people spend their time engaged in boring activities like "reading a book or newspaper" when they can "chat online or (they) play videogames or do things on the computer or go out more than they used to?"

Many of the young people in these focus groups do not view news consumption as a requirement or a civic duty but as a preference or a kind of entertainment. People who are entertained by reading or watching news will want to spend their time that way, others will not. This reinforces the importance of learning whether news can be made more entertaining without losing any

information value.

September 11, 2001

The effects of September 11 on the participants' interest in news varied considerably. Many young people in New Jersey have a particularly close relationship to this tragedy as many of the employees who died in the World Trade Center were New Jersey residents. The state's proximity to New York also personalizes these events for New Jersey citizens. Some of the focus group participants were driven to consume more news by September 11, others turned away from the saturation coverage. Several said they began consuming news in great quantities after the attacks, but their consumption waned considerably when they grew weary of hearing coverage of the events.

> *I just wanted to say that I started watching the news when things started happening with the World Trade Center and the bombing and Bush cheating on the election. I started watching the news once I started realizing those things were happening, then I started getting more involved with the world. Because before, I never knew about the news, I thought it was just maybe a TV show. (Job trainee)*

CONCLUSIONS

With the stipulation that all of the above research is qualitative, and therefore, cannot necessarily be generalized beyond the individuals with whom we spoke and the specific content we reviewed, there are a number of general conclusions and recommendations that can be generated from a review of these data.

First, it would appear that any news source aimed at younger people should provide audiences with a sense of control over their information gathering. Young people value flexibility when they are making information choices and appreciate when news sources are honest about their offerings rather than trying to coerce audiences into consuming their product. The danger here is of

course that young people will limit their information intake, and as a result will remain relatively uninformed. However any reforms in this regard would have to be combined with other innovations to make news content more interesting.

News outlets could solicit story recommendations from audiences. This would be somewhat similar to civic journalism reforms, and as a result would no doubt meet with resistance from elite media organizations. However, it would not be necessary to hand agenda-setting responsibility completely over to audiences. Instead, stories suggested by audience members might be a feature of a newspaper, magazine, Web site or television program. These recommendations could be limited to those of the young or expanded to the entire news audience.

Youth news producers emphasize the importance of relevance, and young people express a greater interest in news that is local and familiar.   Therefore, news producers must find a way of making news about the nation and the world appear more relevant to younger audiences. There should be an emphasis on providing context and demonstrating the impact more broadly-based issues have on the lives of younger citizens. This would be a risky reform for news producers because it would mean increasing the substance of news rather than moving to more entertainment-oriented genres, but it might be a risk that would pay off. This type of news might have the added benefit of being more informative for older audiences as well.

A number of focus group participants complained that news is too negative, an opinion older people also voice when asked what they think about news. This is a more difficult problem to address considering that there are many things the news must report that are not uplifting. However, a significant amount of local broadcast news time is dedicated to stories about fires and car accidents, events that have little effect on the average citizen. The cable networks and national news broadcasts also devote significant amounts of time to celebrity

scandals and ongoing trials that, again, have little effect on the lives of most people. Therefore, some time could surely be designated for "positive" stories about young people. Perhaps younger people themselves could help to supply these stories through college or university television stations, newspapers, or radio stations. This would have the added benefit of motivating students on these campuses to tune in and see their school represented. Programs like *Youth Radio* could serve as a model for this type of effort. Newsweek has recruited a team of college reporters to write articles about student opinion during the 2004 election. This is also a good example of how this type of newsgathering might work.

It would also be possible to use positive stories as a starting point for an in-depth discussion of some related story that has more far-reaching implications. Most human-interest stories can be related to a broader social or political issue. By using this technique, the attempt to be less depressing would not result in less substantive news.

Newsmakers already know that young people appreciate a significant amount of visual content in the news they consume. However, at least among our focus group participants, an abundance of quickly moving graphics did not have a great deal of appeal. Several people thought this type of format was eye-catching, but others found it confusing and distracting. For the most part, participants appreciated when visuals were used to illustrate the story and to provide a more lively viewing experience, but not when they overwhelmed the information that the news program was trying to deliver.

As market researchers would no doubt agree, it appears to be of great importance that young people do not think they are being manipulated or tricked in any way by the news source that hopes to attract them. A news product aimed at young people should not use headlines, links or teasers that are clearly meant to lure audiences, nor should they build up a story if

there really is no pay-off at the end. Young people want the real story as quickly as possible. They do not want news producers to waste their time by stringing them along with sensationalized information.

Finally, younger people appear to have a clear aversion to older, white anchors presenting the news with a serious demeanor. This is not a particularly surprising revelation, but the degree to which focus group respondents not only expressed disdain for the major network news anchors but also appeared to be completely ignorant of who they were was somewhat startling. It does appear, at least based on our focus group findings, that the traditional, straight-faced method of delivering the news is unfamiliar and unappealing to members of the younger generations. Figuring out how to adjust news presentations to their sensibilities will require creativity and experimentation.

APPENDIX ONE

Coding Instructions

News for a New Generation

Instructions for all Media

1) Medium:
   Indicate the medium for the particular content you are looking at by selecting from the list provided.

2) Product affiliation:
   The youth news product may be affiliated with a mainstream news organization such as a major TV network (NBC, CNN) or newspaper (New York Times). It is also possible that the product has no affiliation or is connected with an alternative news source, for example an extreme right or left wing Web site. It may also be connected with an entertainment medium such as Nickelodeon. Finally, the product may be affiliated with an activist or other organization, such as the Sierra Club, whose primary goal is not to produce news, but that does engage in information dissemination. Please select the most appropriate category from the list.

3) Main Focus: Please indicate whether the stories presented are predominantly of local, national, or international interest (80%) or select one of the other choices if there are more equal combinations of stories. Stories of local interest can be defined a stories that deal with an issue or event in a locality that has little or no relevance for the nation or world.

4) Hard news can be defined as, "the report of an event that happened or that was disclosed within the previous twenty-four hours and treats an issue of ongoing concern." Since most of the content we are analyzing does not come from a daily publication or program, we must allow for a longer time period. So we should consider anything that deals with current events, public affairs, or social or political problems as hard news. Sports, entertainment, and lifestyle stories should NOT be included here.

5) Topics: Please check any topic that appears in the content you are analyzing.

6) Context: Many stories found in youth media will be told from the perspective of how young people are affected by the issue or event being discussed. Select yes for this question if the subjects of the story are young.

7) Youth Perspective Select yes for this question if the story is being told from the   perspective of the young people in the story.

8) Young Voice Select yes for this question if the story is both narrated by a young person and that young person is inserting his or her perspective into the story.

9) Youth Narration Select yes for this question if the story is being narrated by a young person.

10) Other features with youth perspective: Select yes for this question only if the content mentions/

or suggests a youth opinion i.e. a young person's reaction. Do NOT select yes if the content only mentions an issue that has youth involved (i.e. just a fact)

11) <u>Proportion of young people</u>: Please provide an estimate of whether there are more people under 25 quoted or featured in stories or whether the majority of people quoted or featured are older than 25.

12 <u>Editorials</u>: Indicate whether any of the news stories are presented in an editorial or commentary format. In other words, are these stories strictly the opinion of the writer or person delivering the commentary?

13) <u>Age of Speaker/Writer</u> : Select yes for this question if the speaker or writer of the editorial is under the age of 25.

14) <u>Proportion of editorials</u>: Select yes for this question if the content consists of only editorials or commentaries.

15) <u>Language</u>: Consider the language being used by reporters, anchors, writers, people quoted, etc. Does it sound like the language you might hear on a nightly news broadcast or on CNN? Is the text written in the type of language you might read in a typical city newspaper? If the language does remind you of a regular news text, select the first option (very formal). If you feel that the language is less complex and is aimed at kids but that no slang is used, select the second option (somewhat formal). If there is some use of slang, but it is not overwhelming, select the third option (somewhat casual). If there is a lot of slang used and very informal language, select the fourth option (very casual).

16) <u>Other news</u>: Select yes for this question if entertainment or sports news appears. This would include anything about music, TV, movies, sports, video games, celebrities, etc.

17) <u>Location</u>: If the answer to the above was "yes" indicate whether the entertainment/sports news is separated from the hard news in any way. For a TV show, this might mean that the first part of the show is dedicated to more hard news, and the second part features entertainment and sports. A Web site might have different sections or links. On the other hand, all types of information might appear next to each other on the home page of the site.

18) <u>Life-style</u>: Select yes for this question if the content text contains stories about any of the topics listed in the following question. Entertainment or sports stories should NOT be included here.

19) <u>Topics</u>: Select all topics that appear somewhere in the text.

20) <u>Experts</u>: Code the following as you did for hard news.

21) <u>Other features with youth perspective</u>: Select yes for this question if the content includes diaries/ journals or other first-person narratives that provide a youth perspective on any of the topics selected.

22) Select yes for this question if most of the people quoted or featured are 25 or younger.

23) <u>Visuals</u>: Select yes for this question if the people shown in photographs, film, or other graphics appear to be 25 or younger. You will have to use your judgement here and approximate people's ages.

24) <u>Language</u>: Consider the language being used by reporters, anchors, writers, people quoted, etc. Does it sound like the language you might hear on a nightly news broadcast or on CNN? Is the text written in the type of language you might read in a typical city newspaper? If the language does remind you of a regular news text, select the first option (very formal). If you feel that the language is less complex and is aimed at kids but that no slang is used, select the second option (somewhat formal). If there is some use of slang, but it is not overwhelming, select the third option (somewhat casual). If there is a lot of slang used and very informal language, select the fourth option (very casual).

25) <u>Advertisements</u>: Select yes for this question if there are any advertisements in the publication, on the Web site, in the program, etc.

26) <u>Products:</u> Select what types of products are being advertised. A public service announcement would be an advertisement telling the audience to do some kind of positive behavior (don't smoke, read, talk to you kids, etc.).

TV Instructions

27) Cut Speed: Fast or slow?

28) Camera angles: Please indicate whether any of the types of camera angles are used in the filming of the show.

a) High: we are looking at the scene from above
b) Low: we are looking at the scene from below
c) Straight-on: we are looking at the scene at eye-level
d) Rotated: The camera is tilted to the right or left
e) Close-up: the camera is close to the subjects
f) Medium-shot: You can see the subject from a medium distance. If it is a person, you would see him or her from the waist up.
g) Long shot: the camera is far away from the scene, and you get a full view. You would see a person's entire body if they were filmed in long shot.

29) Computer imagery: Select yes for this question if there are computer graphics or other computer generated imagery shown during the program.

30) Anchors: Select yes for this question if there are news anchors who host the program and/or if there are reporters who cover stories for the show.

31) Anchor Age: Using your best judgement, indicate the approximate age of the anchors if there are any.

32) Reporter Age: Using your best judgement, indicate the approximate age of the reporters if there are any.

33) Anchor Clothing: Indicate if the anchors are formally (suits, jackets) or informally (jeans, khakis, t-shirts, other stylish attire) dressed.

34) Reporter Clothing: Indicate if the reporters are formally (suits, jackets) or informally (jeans, khakis, t-shirts, other stylish attire) dressed.

35) Music: Select yes for this question if any music is played during the program.

36) Music Style: Using your best judgement, indicate how recently the musical selections are played on the program were produced. If there is range of types of music, code for the most current.

37) Set color: Select yes for this question if colors besides traditional reds, whites, blues, and grays are used in the sets and studios.

Newspaper or Magazine Instructions

38) <u>Font</u>: Select yes for this question if there are unusual fonts used in the publication. Use the alphabet guide if you need help deciding which fonts are used.

39) Using your best judgement, please select the approximate age of the writers from the list. If there is no indication of age, select "can't tell."

40) <u>Other visuals</u>: Select yes for this question if computer generated images, drawings, cartoons, or other types of artwork appear in the publication

41) <u>Comics</u>: select yes for this question if any comics or cartoons appear in the publication.

42) <u>Visual/Verbal Ratio</u>: Estimate to the best of your ability the approximate ratio of photographs and other graphic materials (colorful charts, pictures, cartoons) to written text.

43) <u>Photograph color</u>: indicate whether photographs in the publication are in color or black and white or whether both types of photographs appear in the publication.

Radio Instructions

44) Transitions: During a radio broadcast, there will be transitions when topics change or the reporter changes location.

45) Music: Select yes for this question if any music is played during the broadcast.

46) Music Style Using your best judgement, indicate how recently the music played during the broadcast was produced. If there is range of types of music, code for the most current.

Website Instructions

For each Web site you analyze, you should code three layers of the site. So, you should code the home page, the pages you reach by clicking on all the links on the home page, and the pages you reach by clicking the links on the second layer of pages. Unless otherwise specified, the questions should be answered based on
 the content found on all three layers of the site.

47) Type of Site: Select yes for this question if the site you are analyzing is one part of a larger Web site. If you had to link off of a home page to reach this site then you should select yes.

48) Font: Select yes for this question if there are a variety of fonts used on the site. Use the alphabet guide if you are unsure which fonts are used.

49) Visual/Verbal Ratio: Using your best judgement, estimate how much of the overall site consists of photographs, graphics, artwork etc. relative to the amount of written text on the site.

50-53) Interactivity: Select yes for each of the next four questions if the interactive features mentioned are found anywhere on the site. A click poll is a question asked of the site user with a list of responses from which the user can select the one that most closely matches his or her opinion. A message board is a place where users can post their opinions and respond to the postings of other users. Real-time chats are spaces where users can communicate in real-time with each other and discuss issues related to the site. A questionnaire is a survey to which users can respond on the Web site.

54) Link to Educational Materials: Many youth news sites have information for teachers to use in the classroom or to more information to provide more context and background for the stories on the site. Select yes for this question if these kinds of materials are available on the site. This would include links to more material on the site itself or links to outside resources.

55) Classroom Materials: Select yes for this question if the materials mentioned above are specifically designed for teachers to use in classrooms (curricula, exercises, etc.)

56) Reporter Age: Using your best judgement, please select the approximate age of the writers from the list. If you there is no indication of age, select "can't tell."

57) Please count every news article or news story that appears on the home page of the site and write the total in the space provided.

58) Please count every photograph that appears on the home page and write the total in the space provided.

59) Please count any other visuals, such as graphics or cartoons that appear on the home page.

60) Please count any other link that appears on the home page not accounted for in the first two tallies and write the total in the space provided.

61) Select yes for this question if there are dominant colors on the site other than traditional shades of

red, white, gray, or blue.

62) <u>Moving features</u>: Select yes for this question if anything moves on the site. If font colors change when you move the cursor over them, also select yes. Pop-up ads should not be included here.

63) <u>Site accessibility 1</u>: Select yes for this question if you are able to link directly off the home page of the mainstream site to the youth section of the site.

64<u>) Site accessibility 2</u>: If it is not directly accessible off of the home page, count the number of links you must go through to get to the youth site and write the total in the space provided.

65) <u>Mainstream Link</u>: Select yes for this question if you can link from the youth site to mainstream sites such as CNN, NBC News, or any other similar site.

66) <u>Archive</u>: Select yes for this question if the site provides a list of previous news stories that one can access.

67) <u>Students</u>: Select yes for this question if the site clearly indicates that it is aimed at a student audience. For example, the site might have the word student it its title or there might be information on the site that links to school lessons. Only select yes for this question if it is made very clear that the site is for students (e.g. "*CNN Student News*").

APPENDIX TWO

Elite Interview Protocol:

Greeting:

Hello, thanks so much for agreeing to talk with me today.   Do you mind if I record our conversation? Could you please state your name and title.

 I know you have been told something about what we are doing here. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Can you tell me about _____? When was it launched? What makes it unique?

Q1) What do you think are the important differences between news aimed at younger audiences and standard news?

Q2) Do you do market research with young people in order to determine what your (program, publication, website, etc.) will look like?

Q3) How did you decide what formats or features to use in creating news for young people?

Q4) How do you select what topics will be covered?

Q5) How are the topics that interest younger people different from those that are of interest to older news consumers?

Q6) What do you do to attract younger news consumers to your (site, program, publication, radio show, etc.)?

Q7) What is your prediction for what news will look like in ten years?

APPENDIX THREE

"News for a New Generation"   Focus Group Moderator's Guide

Objectives
   ☐ What would young people like news to look like and/or provide
   ☐ Assuming they don't consume much news…Find out why they do not like the news

I Introduction

Good afternoon, and welcome to our session. Thank you for taking the time to join our discussion of news media…

- Introductions: self and assistant moderator
- Overview of topic: "Today we will be discussing what you think of the news, what you like and how you think it can be improved."
- Guidelines to help the discussion go smoothly
     o We're tape recording this discussion b/c we don't want to miss any of your comments so please speak up and only speak one at a time
     o No names are attached to any report
     o This study is sponsored by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement a research organization at the Univ. of Maryland
     o My role as moderator is only to ask questions and listen
     o Feel free to talk directly to each other
     o There are no wrong answers, only differing points of view
     o Please turn off your cell phones and pagers
- Ice breaker: Please introduce yourself and tell us what was the last movie you saw

II Opening Discussion

- Have you heard about [Current News Story]? If so how did you acquire information about this story?

     o Are you more likely to watch the news because of a particular event, story, or issue or to generally get an idea of what is going on in your community, nation, or world?

- For people who have not heard of the story When was the last time you watch/read/listened to the news?

     o Are you more likely to watch the news because of a particular event, story, or issue or just get an idea of what is going on in your community, nation, or world?

     o What source (TV, radio, website, newspaper or news magazine) did you go to?

- Research shows that young people today consume less news than generations before them. Why

do you think this is?

- o For those of you who don't have a chance to watch the news, are the reasons you have expressed why young people don't look at news similar to why you don't?

- o What would you change about the news to make it more interesting and/or informative?

III News clips

Introduction: Now we are going to watch some actual news clips

After each tape segment:

- If you saw this clip on TV would you keep watching the broadcast (the rest of the show)?

- How could this news program be better or be improved?

- Do you think this is made for people like you?

IV Discussion after news segments   Having looked at some news and thought things through…

- Describe your ideal news source.

  - o Do you like news that strictly gives the facts (who, what, where and when) or do you prefer that the news contains analysis and opinion?

V Summary

- Here is what I got out of this discussion…. is this accurate? Would you like to add anything?

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