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The future of media is here

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Streams of consciousness

Millennials expect a steady diet of quick-hit, social-media-mediated bits and bytes. What does that mean for journalism?

By Ben Adler

(Daniel Chang)

My first encounters with journalism were the same as most American males: through the sports pages. Sometime in middle school I started picking up *The New York Times* on my parents' dining table during breakfast and reading the Sports section to catch up on the Yankees and Knicks. West Coast games were frequently too late for the home-delivery edition, and the standings were a day out of date, which would probably strike today's middle-schooler as comically archaic or incomprehensible. Despite that shortcoming, a deeply ingrained habit was formed: The day starts by perusing *The New York Times*. And now I read the *Times* for the same reason that I eat Hebrew National hot dogs, tie my necktie in a schoolboy knot, and aspire to buy a brownstone: because it's what my parents did.

But I'm 31, a dinosaur browsing the Internet on my computer. Today's 23-year-old—never mind a 12-year-old—probably doesn't get his news by perusing the homepage of the website of his parents' favorite newspaper. And even I click on more daily news links on my smartphone or from Twitter and Facebook than from website homepages.

This is simply the norm for the generation that entered adulthood in the age of the Internet: adults born between 1978 and (depending on whom you ask) sometime in the 1990s, now aged 18 to about 34—a group Madison Avenue has dubbed Generation Y, or the millennials.

Of course, change is never uniform across ages and social groups, or even within a specific group. Wealth and education correlate with early adoption of expensive new technologies. And those in certain professions—journalism, public relations, finance, and politics, to name the most obvious—must always stay ahead of the information curve.

However, studies show that several emerging shifts—from print and broadcast television to digital news, from computers to mobile devices, and from homepage browsing to social-media filtration—are all widespread among millennials.

How does it change the value of journalism to strip away the context that a credible publication provides? A reader who comes through a social-media side door is given no sense of a story's relative importance. A blog post on the latest fad diet that would never have made it onto the front page, or even into print at all, can go viral and attract far more readers than the latest news from Syria. Readers who no longer page through a newspaper or sit through the evening news are bound to miss some information they might not click on but could benefit from knowing nonetheless.

To get a sense of these evolving patterns of news consumption, and their implications, I interviewed some two dozen young journalists (mostly editors of new digital publications), as well as social-media directors, digital-media executives, academics, and researchers.

I found four overlapping, and mutually reinforcing, trends:

- **Proliferation** of news sources, formats, and new technologies for media consumption
- **Participation** by consumers in the dissemination and creation of news, through social-media sharing, commenting, blogging, and the posting online of photos, audio, and video
- **Personalization** of one's streams of news via email, mobile apps, and social media
- **Source promiscuity** Rather than having strong relationships with a handful of media brands, young people graze among a vast array of news outlets.

Here are some specific insights, as well as a few nascent trends worth watching.

They're an intrinsic part of the process

Social-media tools allow anyone with a Facebook or Twitter account to play a role in determining how many readers a story reaches. And online communities such as the heavily trafficked Reddit enable readers to submit links to their favorite content, and vote up or down the content submitted by others, thereby changing a given item's prominence on the site. The result is that the mainstream-media oligopoly is now just one force deciding what "the news" is and how important a story or image might be.

"Over the last 100 years, you go from a point when a newspaper would be able to set the tone and the five top stories of the day, to what Walter Cronkite and his cohort would say on the evening news, and then to the explosion of cable news, and now the Internet," says Gabriel Snyder, 36, the editor of The Atlantic Wire and former editor in chief of Gawker. "We've gone from having just a few handfuls of places that might set the agenda to this proliferation that is reaching a near infinite number of people who can define what the top story is today."

Since many young people share on social media what they consume online, their notion of what makes an item good is tied to an outward, rather than inward-looking, set of priorities. "Media is now a way for readers to communicate, not just consume content," says Jonah Peretti, 39, the founder of BuzzFeed who earlier helped to launch The Huffington Post. As he points out, people pause before sharing an article or video to ponder what it says about them that they are promoting it. "Social sharing is about your identity," says Peretti. "You want to say, 'Look, I'm smart, or charitable, or funny.'"

Callie Schweitzer, 24, director of marketing and communications for Vox Media, a fast-growing network of new online publications, agrees. "How we get and share news has become much more reflective of who we are," she says. "People are proud to have gotten something first, and they want to be known for having found the cool piece of video first." Also working to develop its editorial style with an eye toward shareability is Quartz, a business website launched last fall by Atlantic Media. Zach Seward, 27, a senior editor there, argues: "Putting the lede in the lede is *burying* the lede; get it in the headline! If there is a striking fact or statistic that tells the story, it should be the headline—the kind of thing you want to tweet."

And what would you want to tweet? In essence, any factoid that a follower might find remarkable and therefore clickworthy. Pieces of content that pop on social media tend to have a certain "wow" factor. Editors routinely mention visuals—usually photographs, but sometimes charts or other graphics—as being enormously helpful in making something go viral in social media. Social-media companies agree. "Tumblr is a very visual medium," says Mark Coatney, media outreach director for the image-friendly microblogging platform. "Twitter rewards words; Tumblr rewards visually presented info, whether great photography or graphics that grab your eye."

Hard news—especially the depressing kind—is less popular than lighter lifestyle coverage on social media. "If you look at stories being shared, no one shares news," observes Alex Leo, 30, head of Web products for Thomson Reuters Digital and a former senior editor at HuffPost. "No one ever emails '73 People Killed in Iraq.' They email stories like 'Sitting Kills You.'" Sure enough, on the day I spoke with Leo, *The New York Times*'s five most-emailed stories were a Style section feature called "The End of Courtship?", a Travel section list of "46 Places to Go in 2013," a column by Woody Allen riffing on hypochondria, and advice pieces on parenting and money management.

By posting observations and arguments on everything from personal blogs and discussion boards to Twitter feeds and comment threads, every young person is now, on some level, an amateur journalist. As bandwidth and connection speeds have increased, they are also publishing vast quantities of photos and videos with the help of services like Instagram, Flickr, and YouTube.

Increasingly, established news outlets are turning to these on-the-ground snippets of raw material to report on important social issues,

from the Occupy protests to the presidential election. Twitter has famously been used for disseminating eyewitness accounts of events such as the Arab Spring uprising. Instagram, a swiftly growing service that is essentially Twitter for photographs instead of text, allows anyone to take a photo and effortlessly post it online. Instagram shots taken during Hurricane Sandy, for example, went viral on social-media outlets and were even published by mainstream news organizations.

Since Instagram was bought by Facebook, in April 2012, its photos are no longer allowed on Twitter itself. But Twitter now has its own short-video tool, called Vine, which allows users to record and post 6-second videos to their feed with just a few clicks on their smartphone. "The new generation on social media is much more visual than it was in the past," says Mark Luckie, 30, manager of journalism and news at Twitter. "It used to be 140 characters [per tweet], and that's it. Now we're seeing many more tweets that have photos or videos." On the allure of the image, he adds: "That's why media outlets often include a photo and a link saying, 'Click here to read more.' It's just like how newspapers often include a photo on page A1 to lure people in."

But as in traditional media, selection is crucial. Merely sticking a generic image on every item won't accomplish nearly as much as a well-chosen one. "Photos have always been really popular on Facebook—it's the most popular piece of content that people upload and interact with," says Vadim Lavrusik, 27, journalism program manager at the social-network giant. "Bigger images get higher clickthroughs, and ones of logos that aren't real images of something don't work as well."

The New York Times has figured out at least one way to appeal to Tumblr's photo-crazy users: "The Lively Morgue," which posts several photographs from the *Times*'s vast archives every week. "That's a way the *Times* can make a *Times*-y Tumblr blog, but fun and lively," says Aron Pilhofer, 47, the newspaper's editor of interactive news.

If you're wondering why the *Times* cares about having a successful Tumblr presence, you're clearly over 40. Tumblr, which the average middle-aged American has probably never heard of, is an Internet behemoth, heavily skewed toward the young. There are some 100 million Tumblr blogs, drawing 172 million monthly unique visitors. Roughly 60 percent of Tumblr's audience is under the age of 34, and more than half of that group is under 24. "Go to where young people are; don't expect them to come to you," says Jessica Bennett, 31, executive editor of Tumblr until her department was eliminated in April.

In addition to being a forum for reaching younger readers, Tumblr is a launching pad for content throughout social media. When Starbucks announced that it was introducing a new larger cup size in 2011, graphic artist Andrew Barr of the National Post of Canada made an illustration showing that it was larger than the capacity of the average human stomach. A Web producer posted it to the National Post Art & Design Tumblr blog, and it was reblogged widely, picked up by the Huffington Post, Gizmodo, and Buzzfeed, and discussed by Anderson Cooper on CNN. It received thousands of retweets and Facebook likes.

So photos aren't the only kind of image that goes viral. Rather it is content that makes the person you share it with feel something, whether shock, amazement, or delight. While that may mean random ephemera like the infamous video of a chain-smoking toddler in Indonesia, it can also describe serious enterprise reporting. Vice Media has broken through with short gonzo documentaries like *The Vice Guide to Karachi*. "We're exploring the insanity of the modern condition," says Jason Mojica, *Vice*'s lead video producer, adding that the *Vice* website tries to focus on "things that make you say, 'Holy shit! I can't believe this exists!'"

They feel strongly about trust, taste, and tone

Back in the dark ages of the 20th century, one typically had to choose a handful of news brands and forgo the content offered elsewhere. For example, a reader living in New York or Boston might subscribe to the *Times* or the *Globe* rather than *The Washington Post*, and just accept the fact that sometimes her hometown paper would not have that day's most important inside-the-Beltway story. Now, anyone can read the three most important political stories of the day from three different sources based in three different cities. So there is also a need for someone to sort through all those different sources, and others, to find the best or most important stories every day.

A key factor at play here is that many young people have come of age amid growing suspicion of experts of all types, and they are exposed to increasingly bitter partisan critiques of mainstream reporting. In September 2012, Gallup reported that "Americans' distrust in the media hit a new high this year, with 60 percent saying they have little or no trust in the mass media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly."

A recent study by George Washington University and the market-research firm ORI finds this skepticism especially pronounced among young people. According to the report, 24 percent of American adults overall say information they get on social networks is of the same quality or of higher quality than that from traditional media outlets, versus 39 percent who say it is about the same quality and 31 percent who say it is of lower quality. But among those 18 to 25 years old, 31 percent said social networks provide higher-quality information than that of regular media, and only 25 percent said social networks offer information of generally lower quality. That's a

significant change from the Cronkite era of mainstream media authority.

"For years, people didn't see information on social media as equally trustworthy," says study author Dr. David Rehr, a professor at GWU's graduate school of political management. Social-media news, he adds, "has moved into the mainstream of quality information."

Those who no longer believe what the media tell them turn to people they do trust to help them decide what to think. "People don't know who to trust, so they trust their friends," says Jen Nedeau, 28, a director at the digital advertising firm Bully Pulpit Interactive. "People read what their friends recommend."

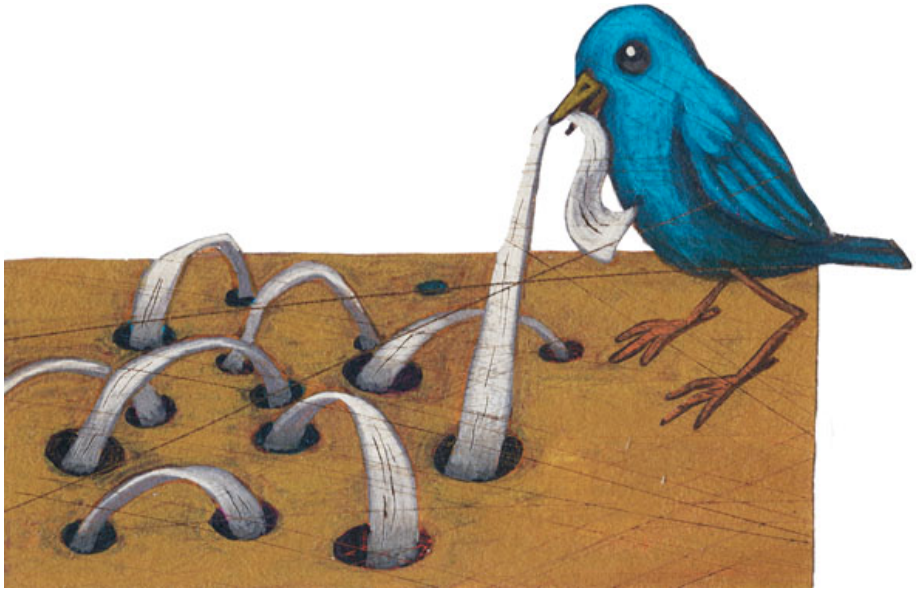
In other words, young people do not want to entrust the decision about what's news to the editors of one geographically proximate newspaper or another mainstream media outlet. They want to decide for themselves, via specialized streams. But the Internet has created such a deafening cacophony of information that they cannot sort it all by themselves. That would be a full-time job. And so it is, for some people. They are known as aggregators.

In the first decade of the 21st century, websites such as The Huffington Post garnered massive traffic for their fast-twitch aggregation, summarizing, quoting from, and linking to the sexiest and hardest-hitting news stories, catering to obsessives who would check in frequently. But many young consumers prefer to have their news filtered by an individual or a publication with a personality rather than by a traffic-seeking robot or algorithm. They like to see news that is selected, and sometimes analyzed, through the prism of a certain sensibility or set of interests.

Many blogs and websites have found great success with this approach (particularly if they add a dollop of attitude, in the tradition of The Drudge Report, which began as a gossip column in 1996). TalkingPointsMemo, founded in 2000, examines the news through a serious, if slightly sardonic, lefty lens, in the image of its chief blogger and editor, Josh Marshall. Gawker, begun 10 years ago by blog impresario Nick Denton, made its reputation with snarky takes on media, politics, and popular culture. And Andrew Sullivan's blog, the Dish—which employs a team of like-minded writers and interns—is largely a collection of links to outside stories, with a heavy focus on his favored political causes, such as civil liberties and gay rights. On the strength of the blog's 1.3 million monthly unique visitors—one-third of whom are younger than 35—Sullivan decided to leave The Daily Beast late last year, and is now running the site as a free-standing, reader-supported operation. (After an enthusiastic show of financial support early on, subscriptions have slowed, and Sullivan recently tweaked his payment model.)

At these outlets, the editor—Marshall, Denton, Sullivan—is the public embodiment of the blog's attitude and ethos. Not coincidentally, all of these sites are also known for the loyalty and active involvement of their readers. TPM famously relied on readers across the nation to contribute reports about the firing of US Attorneys, which added up to a major Bush-era scandal. Sullivan frequently quotes commenters, often at great length, and Gawker is the envy of the Internet for its volume of high-quality user feedback.
The contrast with traditional media is stark. How many readers can tell you about the personality of their local paper's editor? "I think the invisibility of editors has really hurt news organizations," says Ann Friedman, 31, the former executive editor of *Good* and a weekly Web columnist for *New York* magazine and CJR. "Except for the occasional ombudsman and the very top editors at *The New York Times*, I don't know who's curating my news. When I go to Andrew Sullivan, or the Hairpin, or [*The Atlantic*'s] Ta-Nehisi Coates, I know who is curating my news."

The idea has long been that an editor is "this faceless, objective Wizard of Oz type," to maintain the appearance of objectivity. "Editors should be communicating as humans with their readers," Friedman says. "The idea that you're getting a point of view is important. It's not necessarily a left or right political view; it's just knowing you'll get a certain type of tone and content."



(Daniel Chang)

They like having the news find them

A corollary to the existence of empowered and participatory news consumers is that media organizations must now be simultaneously more aggressive in reaching out to them and more humble in their tone when doing so. One can no longer simply produce strong content and rest assured that readers or viewers will order a subscription or tune in every night. They must try to be everywhere their potential readers are: on social-media platforms, in their email inbox, and in their mobile device's app store. "We're moving from 'pull,' where you request your morning newspaper, to 'push,' where links are being put in front of your in your morning inbox or Twitter stream," says Quartz's Seward.

Sites like The Atlantic Wire, Slate, and The Daily Beast have recently found success by distributing their take on the day's news through the digital revolution's oldest invention: email. Newsletters such as Slate's "The Slatest" and The Daily Beast's "The Cheat Sheet" are the modern equivalent of *Time* or *Newsweek*, catering to the upper-middlebrow tranche of online news consumers. For them, it used to be enough to get the news sifted and summarized once per week; now, with news sites churning out stories every few minutes, a daily email recap serves a similar function.

In this era of customization, the aggregating and summarizing functions are now being divided into specialized demographic markets, such as the 22- to 34-year-old upscale women targeted by theSkimm, a daily email newsletter founded last year by Carly Zakin, 27, and Danielle Weisberg, 26, who met while working at NBC. TheSkimm's online sign-up page says it "simplifies the headlines for the educated professional who knows enough to know she needs more." The Skimm uses cut-to-the-chase phrases but introduces topics playfully: A hostage-taking by militants in Algeria was teased as "A Really Bad Argo Sequel."

"We saw our friends weren't getting served by traditional media," says Zakin. "An email newsletter made the most sense . . . to make it part of the daily routine. I wake up, roll over, and look at my email."

While many general-interest sites say that email subscriptions form an important part of their readership base, email aggregation can also serve a knowledgeable, insider audience with specialized information. This form was popularized by Mike Allen, Politico's star reporter, who in 2007 launched the site's Playbook, his morning blast of urgent political news and analysis. Playbook excerpts a smattering of the top political stories, interspersed with in-crowd gossip, such as birthday wishes to the politicians, lobbyists, and journalists who both read Playbook and are covered by it. Reading Playbook daily has become such a staple of the Beltway insider's media diet that *The New York Times Magazine* titled its April 2010 cover profile of Allen "The Man the White House Wakes Up To."

Even within the political realm, though, there is room for variation. Ezra Klein, 28, started Wonkblog, a policy-oriented blog at *The Washington Post*, in 2009. The next year he decided to add an email roundup, called Wonkbook, which follows the same basic template as Playbook but focuses on policy rather than horse-race politics. It has grown to more than 40,000 subscribers. Wonkbook content is also posted as an item on the blog, where it receives tens of thousands more pageviews every day. "We're seeing a move from media you seek out to media that comes to you," says Klein, "because you opted into it in some form."

The strength of newsletters is a bit counterintuitive, since email is declining in importance relative to synchronous means of communication such as instant messaging. Today's teenagers are constantly IMing, texting, and using social networks, rather than

checking their email. But once they get to college or get a desk job, they find themselves using email all day. It is still the primary means of distributing information within limited networks such as companies or universities.

The rise of the smartphone has also given new life to email as a means of distributing journalism. "Newsletters are one of the projects that I will spend the most time on in the next few months," says Nico Pitney, 31, head of product at The Huffington Post. Just as young digital natives demand, newsletters delivers content to them instead of expecting them to seek it out. The Atlantic Wire's daily Five Best Columns "has pretty high open rates and a pretty devoted audience," says Gabriel Snyder. "There are people who spend all day in meetings, and the way they catch up on news is an email newsletter."

They consume news on an array of devices

Digital publications have seen their share of traffic from mobile devices and social media increase dramatically in recent years. And so they are redesigning their sites and content to maximize the experience for those readers and the value of those readers to the publication.

Designing for mobile devices means building in flexibility. Mashable, a well-read site covering technology news, used to get 70 percent of its visitors via search engines; now, traffic is evenly split among search, social, and direct traffic. "We overhauled the front end and homepage to be optimized for mobile," says Adam Ostrow, 30, Mashable's chief strategy officer. "You get a one-column view on a phone, two columns on a tablet, and three on a computer. We now have more line breaks and not very long paragraphs; we introduced pullquotes. We're generally trying to break up the story and make it more digestible."

If you are launching a site today, you engineer it from the beginning to be easily read on mobile devices. That's the approach taken by Quartz. "What we built works across a variety of devices, including your laptop or regular old computer," explains Seward. "Depending on what device you visit us on, we try to display an appropriate layout for you."

Meanwhile, media entrepreneurs are devising new news products specifically for the smartphone. Circa, an iPhone app, launched in October; by February, it had seen hundreds of thousands of downloads. Instead of excerpting reported articles, Circa's journalists compile new pieces that simply cite the originals as sources. The app is essentially a series of bullet points on the 20 or so biggest news stories of the day.

"We're just trying to inform," says Matt Galligan, Circa's cofounder and CEO. "We're looking for long-term user trust. I think even young people do still care about brands." Circa's largest demographic, accounting for about one-third of its users, is the group aged 25 to 34. Thirteen-to-24-year-olds are about one-quarter of the Circa audience.

Circa's user interface has its advantages: Sliding from one point to the next, often with relevant art, makes the most of the iPhone in a way that text emails do not. The problem with Circa is its business-side implications. Unlike other aggregators, Circa is simply condensing information on a major story from several sources, not just grabbing one story in particular—so those who are paying for the original reporting are not making money from it. Summarizing for smartphones has suddenly become big business: In March, Yahoo raised eyebrows with its purchase of Summly (for a reported $30 million), acquiring both a text-condensing algorithm and the services of its 17-year-old founder.

One might assume that a phone, with its small screen, would lend itself only to reading short items. But young readers are willing to consume longer features on their phones as well, often in several chunks throughout the day. "We've seen really surprising numbers—almost a quarter of all our traffic is on the iPhone," says Max Linsky, 32, co-founder of Longform.org, an aggregator of in-depth magazine pieces.

While nearly half of American adults own a smartphone, nearly a third own a tablet computer. A majority of all these people say they use the devices to get news. In September 2012, Pew found that 67 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds had a smartphone, versus 46 percent of all American adults. Young people spend more time on mobile phones or tablet devices than their elders, and are more likely to browse the Web and get their news via social-media platforms. A June 2012 Pew study found that 19 percent of American adults of all ages saw news or news headlines on a social network the day before being interviewed, up from just 9 percent in 2010. In the same survey, Pew reported that 34 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds said they had seen news on a social-networking site the previous day, compared with 12 percent in 2010.

Browsing the Web by typing URLs into a browser is a less-than-enjoyable experience when using a handheld device without a keyboard. So mobile-device users gravitate toward products that let them simply scroll with their thumbs and click on links. The September 2012 Pew study revealed that 47 percent of smartphone users and 39 percent of tablet users said they got news through a social network "sometimes" or "regularly." In fact, that Pew study states, "Major news websites in the US now get, on average, 9 percent of their traffic

from Facebook, more than double the 4 percent seen just 15 months ago."

They're crazy about video

Some folks might think of YouTube, which is owned by Google, as a repository for silly homemade videos and illegally posted songs, but it is increasingly a source of news. One-third of YouTube searches are for news-related terms, according to the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2011), and 51 percent of the most-watched videos bore a news organization's logo. According to YouTube itself, 7,000 hours of news-related video are uploaded to the site every day. And the site's overall usage numbers are extraordinary: More than 1 billion unique visitors per month watch 4 billion hours of video (the site does not release audience statistics segmented by age). What's more, the eight-year-old site is still growing: Pageviews are up 25 percent since the beginning of 2012.

As with photos, a "wow" factor is the single biggest driver of video popularity. In 2011, for example, the most-watched YouTube clip featured dramatic footage of the Japanese earthquake and resulting tsunami. Sometimes, of course, what goes viral is too good to be true: As *The New York Times* recently reported, a September 19 YouTube clip about a pig helping a baby goat out of a pond was actually staged as a promotion for a new Comedy Central show. (Before the fakery was exposed, the clip had been promoted by *Time* magazine's Twitter feed and several network news shows.)

Like text-based media companies, YouTube is in the process of transforming itself from user-requested "pull" mode to "push." "The noun of yesterday on YouTube was *video*, and the noun of the future is *channels*," says Tom Sly, director of content partnerships for news and education at YouTube. "We want people to actually come and subscribe to channels—to say, 'I want to know the latest and greatest from *Vice*.'" Thus YouTube itself becomes a news source. Whereas before you had to know what news you were looking for, now you can subscribe to the BBC's channel and see all of the BBC's videos posted in reverse chronological order when you log in. Ultimately, YouTube hopes to use an algorithm that will note that, say, you watch BBC videos on the Middle East but not on soccer, and use that knowledge to refine your version of the channel, reordering the videos accordingly.

If phones seem like lousy formats for reading long magazine articles, they are even less obviously conducive to watching TV. In the age of 60-inch high-definition television, who wants to squint at a screen so small it can fit in your hand? But people are beginning to do just that, and as tablets and phones move toward a point of convergence in size and functionality, mobile will make up an increasing portion of video views.

In November 2012, Huffington Post cofounder Ken Lerer (a member of CJR's Board of Overseers) launched a new digital video product called NowThis News, on the premise that young people would watch short news clips on their phones. "Younger people don't dislike video; it's just never been in their life to run home to watch the evening news," says Drake Martinet, 29, the company's social-media editor. NowThis News produces videos featuring condensed highlights of major stories; a typical entry is the 80-second video "KnowThis: Why Hugo Chavez's Death Matters." Rather than doing original reporting, it's trying for clever packaging: For example, Martinet says, NowThis recently recut widely available NASA space-station footage in the style of MTV *Cribs*.

The shift toward online consumption has been slower for the television-news industry than for print, but among young people it is catching up. A September 2012 report Pew found that "among adults younger than age 30, as many saw news on a social networking site the previous day (33 percent) as saw any television news (34 percent)." That is a substantial drop in TV news viewership among under-30s from 2006, when Pew found 49 percent of them watched TV news.

"If you're doing investigative journalism and the purpose is to have influence, digital is the tip of the sword," says Andrew Golis, 29, *Frontline*'s director of digital media. For a scoop to ripple outward, it has to be linked and shared in social media, so *Frontline* works every angle, before and even after the airdate. Source agnosticism, he argues, is limited to short, immediate news. It's one thing to click on a link of unknown provenance to read 200 words or watch a quick video; it's another to commit to an hourlong documentary or a 10,000-word article. "When I see on my Twitter feed that the House voted for Hurricane Sandy relief, I'd be willing to read that from a million different sources," says Golis. "When it comes to longform storytelling, you're investing [time] in a serious thing, and you don't do that without some confidence. Either someone has told you it's good, or you trust the brand."

Vice, too, produces original longform video, albeit with a very different attitude. Its crews go out and shoot documentaries like no one else's—most recently, the brand scored a world exclusive with basketball star Dennis Rodman's visit to North Korea. HBO has contracted *Vice* to do a 30-minute weekly show that debuted in April. The first episode featured trips to report on political violence in the Philippines and child suicide bombers in Afghanistan.

A descendant of the *Voice of Montreal*, which was founded in 1994, *Vice* is now a free monthly magazine with a circulation of 1.2 million; its website has almost 10 million monthly unique visitors. Vice does not have a sweatshop of aggregators churning out summaries of other people's reporting; it finds original stories and puts a distinctive spin on them (a classic example: "Heavy Metal in

Baghdad," a 2007 documentary about an Iraqi band that also, of course, explored the Iraq War).

Vice is the modern Web's answer to a subversive alt-weekly tabloid, housed in a converted warehouse in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. "We have hundreds of young people here, telling stories in their own voice," says Sterling Proffer, *Vice*'s director of platform. "The training in journalism school is to remove yourself from the story. We don't."

Another new video brand that has found serious traction is The Young Turks (TYT), which calls itself "the largest online news show in the world" and now logs 30 million page views per month. Begun as a Sirius Satellite Radio show in 2002, TYT has since branched out beyond politics and economics to produce shows on everything from film to sports. The presentation is energetic and irreverent. As founder and host Cenk Uygur says, "You know what, old media? We're comin' for ya."

They rarely visit your homepage

Early on, websites were designed like print publications, with homepages serving as a front page or table of contents, and individual articles, as in a magazine or newspaper, offering little besides the piece itself and a few links to related content (often chosen by a software algorithm). Today, a reader usually arrives at an article page through a link to a particular item, as if opening a newspaper to the fourth page of Section 3.

"At both Huffington Post and Reuters, the majority of traffic comes through at the article level or content-piece level," says Thomson Reuters's Alex Leo. "That's a huge shift. The older you get in the spectrum, the more people go to a homepage or topic page. Young people are more source-agnostic."

Erica Berger, 26, until recently product partnership director at Storyful, a wire service for social media, has the same view of the generational divide. "I hate homepages," she says, adding that "millennials are thinking about content according to topic" rather than provider. "I want to read about the [presidential] inauguration from six or seven publications, and I want see what my friends are saying on Twitter and pictures people are taking on Instagram. I'm not just reading highly credentialed journalists; I'm also reading snarky commentary and regular people who were on the ground somewhere."

Social-media users just click on whatever interests them. "If you're talking about how normal [young] people are consuming news, it's mostly links they see on social networks: Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr," says Benjamin Jackson, 31, who worked on developing iPad and iPhone apps for *The New York Times*. "It is what we in computing nerdspeak call a 'breadth-first search' rather than 'depth-first search.' You cast a wide net and take out the best fish."

They expect a conversation

Legacy media outlets can reach young audiences by pushing their content out through the mobile applications and social-media platforms. It's the digital equivalent of what newspapers have always done: delivering the product daily right to your doorstep, giving that paper away for less than the cost of printing and distributing it, and also making sure they're on every newsstand in town.

But the next step is something newspapers have traditionally not done: treating readers and viewers as partners in a conversation. That can mean fostering dialogue with readers in comment sections; through Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr accounts; or even giving some reader-generated content special visibility. *The Wall Street Journal* invites readers to participate in live video chats on its website, as does HuffPost Live, which airs 12 hours per day, five days a week, and then repeats. "The conventional media approach is, 'We do our thing, and you consume it'—it's one-way," says Mark Coatney, who launched *Newsweek*'s highly regarded Tumblr account when he was a Web editor there in 2008. "Effective media organizations on Tumblr interact with the audience as equals."

This new form of engagement can pose some challenges. On *Newsweek*'s Tumblr site, Coatney cultivated a punchy, irreverent tone and often discussed controversies swirling around *Newsweek* itself, such as the news that the magazine had been put up for sale. That kind of personal, informal voice might clash with the sensibilities of a straitlaced newspaper, wire service, or network news program. And most reporters are already scrambling to meet the escalating demands of the Internet and the 24/7 news cycle, so they have little time to interact with readers.

Indeed, media organizations are now willing to let the audience help cover the news (look at CNN's iReport). Amateur uploads may be the best—or, indeed, the only—content available in a crisis such as the 2009 protests in Iran. Twitter and Instagram users have also proven themselves vigilant when it comes to identifying frauds and hoaxes. Berger says that at *The Economist*, where she previously worked, video from the 2012 campaign trail was contributed by civilians "in every state who were tweeting on the ground."

With all of the user-generated content floating around the Internet, it's not surprising that something like Storyful emerged to organize it. News outlets subscribe to the service, which combs the Web (typically trawling through Twitter and other social-media platforms) to

find the best video, photos, and written content produced by average users. Storyful then relies on a team of journalists to verify each item's accuracy, and pass the vetted material along to its subscribers for reuse. "ABC News calls every night asking for the best content to put up tomorrow," says Berger.

They like to anoint new brands

If there is one website that epitomizes the general-interest newspaper in the era of social media, it is BuzzFeed. Almost 60 percent of its readers are between the ages of 18 and 34—easily the highest proportion of any major general-interest news site. More than 40 percent of the traffic comes through mobile devices, and the majority of that is through social-media apps such as Facebook's. "Sharing is our main goal and quality metric," says Jonah Peretti, referring to those times when an item gets posted or linked to on social media by a BuzzFeed reader.

Visiting the New York office of the rapidly expanding company is like watching a cartoon of new media at work. The publication's headquarters, tucked into a nondescript Chelsea building, seem like a metaphor for the Web itself: casual, transparent, and non-hierarchical. There are massive windows showcasing impressive views of midtown Manhattan, and large communal workspaces that—in the manner of online publications—lack the loud banter of newsrooms. Reporting and discussions among the overwhelmingly young staff are more likely to take place over email and IM apps than face-to-face or on the phone.

Peretti sits in a glass-walled office in the middle of the floor. After Huffington Post was sold to AOL in 2011, Peretti left to focus on BuzzFeed's expansion into original reporting. And just as HuffPost's mastery of search-engine optimization defined media wizardry a few years ago, BuzzFeed defines it today.

"When we launched, we didn't have verticals around traditional content categories," Peretti explains. "We organized the site around the emotions that lead to sharing. If a football player does a funny touchdown dance, you share the video because it is funny, not because it is sports."

Search engines are still a major driver of traffic. In fact, according to Pew, search remains the second-largest source of website traffic coming from the population as a whole, trailing behind direct visits to homepages and far ahead of social media. "Nobody sees what you search for," notes Peretti, so it's the best way to find anything that's "less socially acceptable"—anything relating to sex, for example, or one's medical ailments.

Peretti, of course, is a big believer in the salutary effects of social media on journalism. Writing for search engines led to notoriously gimmicky and unilluminating pieces such as HuffPost's infamous 2011 "What Time Does the Superbowl Start," an empty page designed to capitalize on people searching for the Super Bowl's kickoff time (and yes, the title of the event was intentionally styled incorrectly to catch more search traffic). But people share only what they think is worth looking at. Say what you will about pictures of cats overlaid with ungrammatical phrases—but at least they go viral because Internet users actually find them funny.

The emphasis on sharing may result in even more soft, feel-good material. As the *Times* reported in May, "By scanning people's brains and tracking their emails and online posts, neuroscientists and psychologists have found that good news can spread faster and farther than disasters and sob stories." Jonah Berger, a social psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, told the *Times*: "When you share a story with your friends and peers, you care a lot more how they react. You don't want them to think of you as a Debbie Downer."

Advertisers want to avoid that, too. "Whenever I hear from ad sales, it's, 'I want to be around positive news,' and most news isn't positive," says Alex Leo. "That's why we've seen *The New York Times* Style section expand to two days a week, and so much more health content and blogs about parenting. It's the same with HuffPo."

What might they want next?

Some analysts believe that young people are no less trusting of high-quality news brands than were previous generations. "Mistrust is not necessarily any stronger than it used to be, when you adjust for life stage," argues danah boyd, 35, a senior researcher at Microsoft Research (her formal name is lowercase). "Adults have a different level of trust than teenagers." Baby Boomers, too, were suspicious of mainstream media when they were younger (remember Abbie Hoffman's famous admonition not to trust anyone over 30?). As they mature, today's teenagers may develop trust for certain news sources, but perhaps not the ones their parents favored.

The New York Times, hoping to remain one of those brands, is already targeting the next generation. In February, the newspaper revealed that it is prototyping a pared-down digital subscription offering—with less content and at a lower price point—intended to appeal to teens and twentysomethings.

Participant Media, an Oscar-winning film and documentary production company, plans to launch a millennial-oriented cable network,

called Pivot, this summer. Evan Shapiro, president of Participant Media Television, says its programs "will be more about conversation and less about one person speaking from a pulpit, giving their opinion." He cites the shows of MSNBC's Christopher Hayes and Melissa Harris-Perry as models of respectful discourse, featuring a range of panelists sparring with wit rather than belligerence. "The shows that millennials look to usually have a point of view, with a bent they are interested in, like *The Daily Show* and *Colbert*. They are interested in politics, but not partisan bickering." Alas, the first program announced is a gimmicky-sounding show described by its host, the notably unwitty pundit Meghan McCain, as a "cross between *Meet the Press* and *Jackass*."

The Daily Show and *The Colbert Report* are frequently cited as popular news sources by teenagers and preteens, according to Alan Miller, president and CEO of the News Literacy Project, which works to teach middle-school and high-school students how to approach the vast array of news sources they encounter. He warns that snippets of information or video are often posted online and linked by blogs and shared on social media, without relevant context. Miller cites the cautionary tale of Shirley Sherrod, the Department of Agriculture official who was forced to resign after conservative commentator Andrew Breitbart posted misleading video showing selective portions of what she said in a speech. "Getting information from so many sources underscores the need for skepticism," Miller says, "especially because there is a tendency to believe things that come from friends, and that is especially true among young people."

A new level of engagement

Eli Pariser, 32 and a former executive director of MoveOn.org, last year launched Upworthy, a site aimed at fostering the spread of content it considers important. "Upworthy is an effort to ensure that people getting their news through social feeds see content about the topics that really matter," explains Pariser. "*The New York Times* often promotes articles on the front page that, if you look at the Web metrics, do very poorly. Articles about Afghanistan get very low social traffic—they get hundreds of shares, compared with thousands for other topics—but the editors make a decision that people need to know about a war in a foreign country. As we move into the Twitter and Facebook era, how do you make sure people stay on top of topics like that?"

The answer, Pariser believes, is to showcase essential aspects of important stories: "It's about finding shareable bits of content and dressing them up with great headlines and page design so they can compete with the cat photos that fill up people's news feeds," he says. "There's a chart about media consolidation—when you got people to look at it, they got really interested and wanted to share it. But it's hard to get people to care about media consolidation. The hook of the headline was 'The Real Reason They Still Play "Mrs. Robinson" on the Radio.' Eighty percent of stations have the same playlists across the country, because they are owned by the same company. Several hundred thousand people came to check out that chart. But if you had a headline that said, 'Here's a Chart about Media Consolidation in America,' obviously it wouldn't do as well."

For young people who are already interested in an issue and want to address it, there are websites that plug right into social-media platforms. On Change.org, "someone starts a petition, and they're asked who in their networks they want to share it with," says Matt Slutsky, 32, the site's managing director of business development. A recent Change.org petition asking the Boy Scouts to accept gay members got 1.4 million signatures and was covered by major media outlets such as CBS News.

In his 2012 book *The Filter Bubble*, Pariser frets that personalized information streams allow people to avoid contrary opinions, inconvenient facts, or simply boring but important news, a tendency that Miller of the News Literacy Project says is especially prevalent among the young. Personalized streams can also prevent the accidental discovery of new items of interest that one gets from a well-edited publication or program. But Ethan Zuckerman, director of the MIT Center for Civic Media, predicts that social media will find a way to fix that. "We've gone from a model that was good at discovery and bad at customization to one that is highly customizable," he says. "The next step will be to find new ways of serendipity. It will involve some combination of returning to curators, but in a very different form."

Zuckerman points to Maria Popova, who runs the blog Brain Pickings, as an example of a modern curator. Brain Pickings collects items of "interestingness," over a range of creative fields from science to literature. Twitter does have an algorithm for identifying the kinds of people and outlets you follow and then suggesting similar ones, notes Zuckerman, so why can't Twitter take the same information and offer material on subjects you would otherwise never see?

What might they pay for?

Conventional wisdom has long held that once young people become accustomed to getting something for free online, they will refuse ever to pay for it. But the historical evidence—from the launch of Apple's iTunes service 10 years ago to *The New York Times* digital paywall—is more ambiguous. Certainly more sources of original reporting are grappling with their own finances: In March, *The Washington Post* announced it would be joining *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* in erecting a paywall. "People don't think twice about paying for cable or satellite television," says Zuckerman. "We went from TV being absolutely free to paying for it. It's

possible mobile phone providers will create subscription products for young consumers."

Young people may be willing to pay for once-free media if they care about it enough. Recently, Rob Thomas raised money from fans on Kickstarter to produce a movie based on his *Veronica Mars* series. Perhaps the same approach could be applied to news. "If Joss Whedon decides he wants to make a movie without studios, he can go right to his fans," says boyd, referring to the producer-director and Comic-Con favorite. "So suppose [*New York Times* reporter] David Carr wants to do a story with high reporting costs. Can he fan-fund it?"

She answers her own question with a sweeping assessment: "All roles are being disrupted—including the role of the audience."

The print version of this story, which appeared in the May/June 2013 issue of CJR, also included the following elements: "Old news," "Cause and affect," "That's incredible," and "Hard numbers."

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Ben Adler covers climate-change policy for Grist and is a contributing editor for CJR