



## Youth Online and News: A Phenomenological View on Diversity

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As the amount of information consumed daily by young Internet users increases, researchers and policymakers have begun challenging conventional understandings of diversity exposure. Drawing upon findings from two mixed-method studies conducted in 2011 and 2013 by the Youth and Media project at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, this article argues that a phenomenological approach to diversity that takes into account a broad range of developments in the digitally networked environment, including behavioral trends related to seeking, sharing, and creating information, might be a helpful starting point for discussing both the problems and solutions related to different facets of the diversity concept. Following the case study on youth interaction with online news, this article analyzes a spectrum of transformations: changing definitions of news, changes in news reading (such as new forms of participation, changing access modalities, and new types of gatekeepers), developments in social media practices, and emerging genres (such as memes). Throughout, this article discusses some of the conceptual challenges that emerge when applying current diversity frameworks to a real-world scenario and highlights complex behavioral patterns that should be taken into account before considering any interventions aimed at increasing diversity.

*Keywords: diversity, information, Internet, news, online, social media, youth*

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## Introduction

Massive amounts of information are generated and shared over the Internet every day. Recent numbers illustrate the scale and speed by which the digital ecosystem continues to expand: every minute, users share 3,600 new photos on Instagram, upload 48 hours of video on YouTube, share 684,478 pieces of content on Facebook, and enter over 2 million search queries into Google (Spencer, 2012). At the same time, more people are making the Internet their information medium of choice. Eighty-five percent of American adults use the Internet to search for information, send or read e-mail, use social networking sites, get news, check the weather, look for information about politics, watch YouTube videos, do banking, and play games (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2012). These statistics—a select few among many—suggest that the Internet has become an important reservoir of information and site of its actual usage. In combination with structural shifts in how information, knowledge, and entertainment are created, distributed, accessed, and reused, the aforementioned data points suggest that the Internet enables a wide dissemination of information from diverse and occasionally antagonistic sources.

Despite—or perhaps because of—these developments, recent debates among researchers and policymakers have raised concerns about the *actual exposure* of an individual user to a diverse set of information online. Theories about echo chamber effects and homophily and some supporting data give reason to be skeptical about the extent to which diversity of sources and content contribute to an environment in which individual users actually consume a diverse array of content (Benkler, Roberts, Faris, Solow-Niederman, & Etling, 2013; Zuckerman, 2013).

In light of these and related concerns, scholars and policymakers have started to map and examine various approaches for promoting exposure diversity in the digitally networked environment, which include a broad range of possible instruments and interventions, including a revitalization of public-service media, government-sponsored navigation aids promoting exposure to diversity by implementing diversity by design, and media literacy programs (Burri, 2012; Helberger, 2011; see the contributions in this article).

Concerns about exposure diversity and proposals aimed at increasing diversity deserve careful consideration. This article suggests that a *phenomenological approach* that takes into account a broad range of developments in the digitally networked environment, including behavioral trends related to seeking, sharing, and creating information, might be a helpful starting point for discussing both the problems and solutions related to different facets of diversity. To demonstrate the value of such an approach, the article focuses on one specific use case: youth online and news. This use case is appealing for several reasons. First, news is a particularly important category of information from a societal perspective, given its link to sound decision-making, civic engagement, and democratic participation (Costanza-Chock, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Lopez et al., 2006; Pasek, Kenski, Romer, & Jamieson, 2006). It is also heavily affected by the aforementioned structural shifts that occur as we move from an analog to a digital environment. Second, youth are a population that typically makes extensive use of digital technologies and often offers interesting insights into emerging practices and trends of seeking, sharing, and creating information (Gasser, Cortesi, Malik, & Lee, 2012).

Taking American youth online and news as a case study, this article seeks to add findings from surveys and focus group interviews conducted by Youth and Media at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University to current debates concerning source, content, and exposure diversity as defined by Napoli (1999, 2011). This article presents a brief overview of youth online and news, discusses the changing notion of news, and then focuses on changes in the news ecosystem, including new forms of participation, changing access modalities, and new types of gatekeepers. It then highlights recent developments in various news sources and examines trends in the diversification of social media platforms. The article discusses some of the conceptual challenges that emerge when applying current diversity frameworks to a real-world scenario and highlights complex behavioral patterns that should be taken into account *before* considering any interventions aimed at increasing diversity.

### **Method**

This article draws on findings from two studies, conducted in 2011 and 2013 by the Youth and Media project at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

In the first study, 114 participants were included in 16 focus-group interviews conducted between May and December 2011 in Boston and New York City. Focus group interviews lasted for one hour each. Additionally, 38 participants were randomly selected to complete a questionnaire consisting of 26 multiple-choice questions about their online behavior and social media practices in particular. Participants ranged in age from 12 to 18.

The second study was conducted between February and August 2013. The Youth and Media team conducted 30 focus-group interviews with 203 participants in the greater Boston area, Chicago, Greensboro, North Carolina, Los Angeles, and Santa Barbara. Each focus-group interview lasted 90 minutes, including 15 minutes to fill out the questionnaire, which consisted of 20 multiple-choice questions and one open-ended response. Participants ranged in age from 11 to 19.

Although neither research sample was designed to constitute representative cross-sections of particular populations, the samples included participants from diverse ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds. Interviews were structured but flexible; that is, interviewers were guided by a common questionnaire based on the research questions identified in Gasser et al. (2012), but they also had the flexibility to adapt questions according to emergent themes.

We selected the group interview method because group interviews reveal participants' differences of opinion and personal preferences (Frey & Fontana, 1991). Additionally, the method lends itself to this research because behaviors such as decision-making processes are inherently unobservable in a research setting but can be identified through individual participants' reflection, and the interaction between participants in focus groups allows comparisons between behaviors and preferences to be drawn during the interview (Morgan, 1997). Furthermore, the qualitative interview allows participants to reflect on what is often invisible to the interviewer: their feelings, emotions, and thoughts as they reflect on the process of search, evaluation, and creation of information online (Weiss, 1994). Modeling the work on Agosto (2002), the research team developed a coding scheme after iterative readings of the interview transcripts

and identified emergent themes. The first iteration yielded major themes, and successive readings focused on more specific topics. Given the size of the data sets, the research team employed the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to systematically analyze news information themes and other topics pertaining to information behavior online.

### **Youth and Online News**

Data on youth access and consumption of news online are sparse, and even fewer data are available on more active user practices such as news creation and sharing. The state of research about adults' general news behavior online is slightly better.

These data indicate that 62% of online teens aged 12 to 17 consume news online, and these numbers tend to spike to 70% during election years (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Adults follow similar patterns: 61% of adults report that they get some kind of news online (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010), and 64% of voters under 30 name the Internet as a main source for election news (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012).

Additional data are available on the ways in which users access news in a digital environment. In a recent study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2013), 33% of study participants consume news on at least two devices. In particular, surveys indicate the increasingly important role of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets for interacting with news: 62% of smartphone owners and 64% of tablet owners get news on their mobile devices weekly or more often. Users who consume news through their mobile devices spend, on average, at least 50 minutes a day getting their news online (Rosenstiel & Mitchell, 2012). And while one might assume that most mobile device owners would get their news on the go, 85% of tablet users and 58% of smartphone users say they tend to be at home (Rosenstiel & Mitchell, 2012).

Moreover, most Americans (92%) get news on a typical day via national TV, local TV, the Internet, local newspapers, radio, and national newspapers (Purcell et al., 2010). Almost half of the respondents of Purcell and colleagues' (2010) study use between four and six different media platforms to get news on a typical day, whereas just 7% get their news from a single media platform. Even though people report that they access their news via multiple platforms, many users (57%) routinely use the same websites for their news (Purcell et al., 2010). In addition to visiting their favorite news websites, users also rely on social media platforms and channels they trust to access news, with 75% of online news consumers getting news via social networking sites or forwarded through e-mail, 23% following news organizations or individual journalists on social networking sites, and 52% saying they share links to news with others via e-mail or social networking sites (Purcell et al., 2010).

In addition to the devices and platforms used to get news online, demographic factors are important variables that shape news behavior. For example, 66% of white youth search online for news and political information, whereas only 59% of Hispanic youth and 44% of African American youth search online (Lenhart et al., 2010). Also, older youth, those aged 14 to 17, are more likely (68%) to visit sites

for news or political information than younger youth, those aged 12 to 13 (49%) (Lenhart et al., 2010). Gender has no known effect on whether young people visit online news sites (Lenhart et al., 2010).

### The Definition of News

The definition of *news* is becoming more complicated in the digitally networked environment (Downie & Schudson, 2009; Gillmor, 2006). On one hand, citizen blogs, aggregators, and eyewitness testimony delivered directly through social media (Allan & Thorsen, 2009) all fall outside the traditional model of a small number of large, professional journalism outlets acting as qualified gatekeepers and curators (Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Benkler, 2006; Paterson & Domingo, 2008). On the other hand, long-established professional outlets have been changing, with the newspaper industry in crisis (Pew Research Journalism Project, 2008; Picard, 2006), media organizations laying off long-form reporters (Weprin, 2012), and news outlets increasingly echoing one another's content (Boczkowski, 2010).

But the notion of what news is has not changed only at the systematic level. Perhaps even more important from a phenomenological viewpoint is that youth have an understanding of news that might be different from a traditional adult-normative perspective. When asked to explain what *news* meant to them, focus group participants offered a nuanced set of practices, understandings, and opinions. Rather than discuss news as a singular type of information, youth used a variety of framings. Several focus group participants understood news to be related only to politics or current events, which aligns with the systematic definition of news as information that empowers citizens to be active and engaged in their democracy and community (Downie & Kaiser, 2003).

Female (age 17): "It depends, but the first things that come to mind, for me, when you hear about news, is politics or political things like the government. And I think of the newspaper, because even news shows are not separate from gossip anymore." (2013)

Female (age 17): "All I can think about when I hear news is what I see on WGN [Chicago local news TV station]. Like political stuff, that's all." (2013)

Consistent with an empirical definition of news, most focus-group participants defined news very broadly, as referring to anything from breaking news about current events to learning about a friend's new relationship (Cortesi, Haduong, Gasser, & Beaton, 2013).

Female (age 15): "News doesn't have to be major, though—just something that needs to be told." (2013)

Female (age 14): "Well, news means to me, I don't know, updates. Things that are going on. Things that are going on around the world." (2013)

Male (age 17): "New games." (2013)

In many ways, the definition of news has changed and expanded in our digitally networked environment (Downie & Schudson, 2009). For instance, social media platforms refer to their stream of friend updates as a “news feed” (Facebook) or “feed” (Twitter, Tumblr), indicating to users that their friends’ postings can be thought of as news.

Female (age 14): “Anything that people post counts as news. ‘Cause everything shows up in your news feed.” (2013)

Male (age 16): “If it shows up in my news feed, it’s news to me.” (2013)

Moreover, participants frequently identified news to be an individualized concept.

Male (age 16): “Some people may see something as news and some may not.” (2013)

The changing notion of what news is, as evidenced in our qualitative studies, has a number of potential implications for the diversity debate. Conceptually, it illustrates how diversity frameworks might have to incorporate membranes aimed at ensuring interoperability among perspectives and notions of blurring content categories such as news—for instance, between an adult-normative perspective and an ethnographic (here, youth-generated) perspective. These differentiations are not merely semantic; they also affect the diversity analysis. At the practical level, for instance, a broader understanding of what constitutes news is likely to impact our evaluation of source and exposure diversity (positively), as it broadens the spectrum of sources from which youth can gather information, and it broadens their willingness to engage with diverse information.

### **Youth Activity in the Changing Online News Ecosystem**

Recent research on youth online and news highlights youth’s strong tendency to take advantage of opportunities for content sharing and creation (Lenhart et al., 2010) and options for the broader expansion of interactivity (or the shift toward social production) across the information ecosystem (Benkler, 2006). In particular, the range of online tools and techniques through which youth access news is expanding. Across these activities, new types of gatekeepers have entered the arena, especially when considering social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Structural shifts and behavioral trends in the news environment suggest an increased interactive and iterative relationship among elements such as source, content, and exposure within current conceptualizations of diversity as described in the literature (Napoli, 2011).

### ***Participation and Content Creation***

In recent years, the news landscape has become more complex as a growing number of highly interactive news sources, including social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Reddit), citizen blogs (e.g., CNN iReports), and user-generated online news platforms (e.g., YouTube, PolicyMic) have emerged. Many of these platforms and some traditional news sources’ websites include room for comments and discussions, creating an easily accessible space for participation in the news ecosystem.

In this increasingly interactive and social information ecosystem, creating and sharing information have become central activities of youth online, particularly on social media platforms. For example, 86% of teens who use social networks also report posting comments to a friend's page or wall on a social networking site (Lenhart, et al., 2010). Although adults commonly share small bits of information on social networking platforms (Junco, 2012; Lenhart et al., 2010; Madden, 2010), youth report additional forms of information creation and sharing that encompass a wider range of practices, such as creating video; writing blogs; remixing photos, videos, and music; writing fan fiction; participating in role-playing communities; writing news content for online publications or outlets; and a plethora of other content-creation activities (Junco, 2013; Madden et al., 2013; Ólafsson, Livingstone, & Haddon, 2013). The rate of youth content creation appears significantly higher than that of adults in the United States, with more than a third of youth (38%), compared with 30% of adults, sharing content they've actually created themselves (Lenhart, et al., 2010). One out of five teens (21%) remixes content created by others, and 14% of teens blog, compared with 15% and 11% of adults, respectively (Lenhart, et al., 2010).

For example, youth participants in our focus groups reported using Instagram, Tumblr, and Facebook in a variety of creative ways beyond simply posting pictures or status updates.

Female (age 15): "I use Textgram, where you put lyrics under your pictures in Instagram. When I'm on Pandora, and Pandora is playing all of my hits, I screenshot my Pandora Station." (2013)

Female (age 18): "The reason I made a Tumblr was so I could upload my book. It's linked with my Twitter, and I would hashtag Mount Everest and adventure stories, so it got me in contact with a bunch of publishers and mountain climbers." (2013)

Female (age 16): "On Facebook, you could like my status for a shout-out video. At the end, whoever likes your status, you've got to make them a little video and tell them how you feel, and then you tag them in it." (2013)

There is very little research on youth news creation available, but anecdotal evidence suggests that at least a portion of youth's content creation and sharing practices are related to news, particularly when one takes into account youth's broadening understanding of what news means (see above). Aggregated data on news-related and interactive practices on social networking platforms illustrate the phenomenon. For instance, Barack Obama's victory post on Facebook was the most liked photo in 2012, with over 4 million likes (Honigman, 2012). On Twitter, the 2012 election's 31.7 million political tweets broke records; Election Day was the most tweeted-about event in U.S. political history (Finn, 2012). Users of Instagram (a platform that is particularly popular among teenagers) uploaded more than 800,000 photos of Hurricane Sandy tagged with "#Sandy" (Markowitz, 2012). These examples suggest that many users of social networking sites are engaged in interactive news practices, including content creation, news sharing, and commenting on news.

Female (age 16): "Twitter's good if you can't go to one of the school games. If you went to the soccer game instead of the lacrosse game, or vice versa, then generally there's a tweet about who won, and the score. And it's not even just with school games. The ACC [Atlantic Coast Conference] is going on right now, so all the guys are tweeting about that." (2013)

Youth's widespread adoption of sharing and creation techniques has several implications for notions of diversity. At the conceptual level, increased interactivity suggests that traditional categories such as producers, distributors, and recipients are blurring when applied to youth and news online. Viewed from this phenomenological angle, diversity models will have to take into account the interactive relationship between what has previously been labeled the audience, as part of exposure diversity, and nontraditional co-creators of news, as part of source diversity. As youth are no longer only consumers but also co-creators and sharers of news, traditional notions of source and content diversity now might take into account demographic or ethnic diversity outside the familiar dimensions of organizational and economic structures of professional media companies.

### ***Push, Pull, and Everything in Between***

When applied to the news ecosystem, diversity frameworks, approaches, and policies must also take into account the changing modalities in which news is accessed. Opportunities to access the news have increased as digital devices have multiplied among youth: 82% own at least one mobile device; 78% of youth own a cell phone, 47% of whom own a smartphone; and 25% of all youth have a tablet (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013).

Female (age 13): "If you're not at home, but you have your phone, you can keep up with the [sports] game. And then you're like, okay, I'm doing good." (2013)

Traditionally, to access information, consumers "pulled" news from sources. In such a scenario, a consumer must actively choose to read a newspaper, watch a television program, or navigate to a news website. On electronic devices, however, users now have the option of receiving "push" notifications about information that may be interesting or relevant to them individually, even if they do not immediately access the app. Many focus group participants reported having installed *The New York Times'* app, which pushes breaking-news alerts to users, contributing to a news landscape where mobile device users can automatically receive news. This trend of happening upon or stumbling upon news occurs on various other online platforms as well, occasionally without users even being aware of the phenomenon.

Female (age 15): "Yeah, I'd say I use the Internet mostly for school and social. I don't really look at the news. I use the TV for that, or my parents tell me. But I'm definitely on Facebook, Gmail, Skype, ooVoo, and YouTube all the time." (2013)

Though this participant—using a narrower definition of *news*—specifically stated that she does not look at the news, she probably still gets news through several of the online services that she mentioned using regularly, particularly through her Facebook news feed or YouTube's Most Viewed. For example, in

2011 and early 2012, a news-related event was the most searched term on YouTube for five out of the 15 months, according to YouTube's internal data (Pew Research Journalism Project, 2012).

Female (age 12): "Usually our teachers, like, I will see people post a lot on Facebook about it, and then I will go on YouTube, and sometimes if there's a big event that happens, it'll be at the top of the YouTube page." (2013)

The changing access conditions that focus group participants described—including the move to accessing news sources via mobile devices—are likely to have long-term implications for exposure diversity. While the net effects of the growing number of connection points through which youth access news remains to be studied in greater detail, early indicators suggest that apps on mobile phones with breaking-news alert systems, in tandem with social networking sites' push notification schemes of, have the potential to increase youth exposure to at least the headlines or leads of news stories from a relatively diverse set of speakers and sources. Furthermore, youth usage of a growing portfolio of nontraditional and interactive news platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, has interesting theoretical and practical implications for both source and content diversity, including emerging issues such as the power of algorithms that determine what appears in news feeds and questions about platform demographics in the case of user-created content.

### ***Information Gatekeepers***

Research on youth online and news practices makes visible the emergence and importance of new types of information gatekeepers, particularly on social media, that might have a significant impact on source and exposure diversity. In the traditional news ecosystem, a relatively small group of professionals organized in hierarchically structured and typically commercial news organizations served as information gatekeepers. Since the disruptive transition to a digitally networked news environment, such traditional source-side gatekeepers tend to be less important (although websites and platforms such as NYTimes.com, WashingtonPost.com, and WSJ.com still operate in accordance with more traditional concepts). Rather, new intermediaries such as search engines and information aggregators with opaque algorithms are playing an increasingly important role in shaping what news youth are exposed to online (see below), blurring the lines between issues previously associated with source, content, or exposure diversity. Other platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, are mostly left unedited and unmoderated, drawing content from the recommendations and postings of friends (Zuckerman, 2013).

As new institutional intermediaries have emerged, individuals on social networking sites have started to play an increasingly important role in determining youth's exposure to news. According to Cohen and Kahne (2012), 45% of youth get news at least once a week from friends and family via Facebook or Twitter.

Interviewer: "If a big event happens, where would you find out?"

Female (age 14): "My dad. He usually reads CNN on his iPad a lot." (2011)

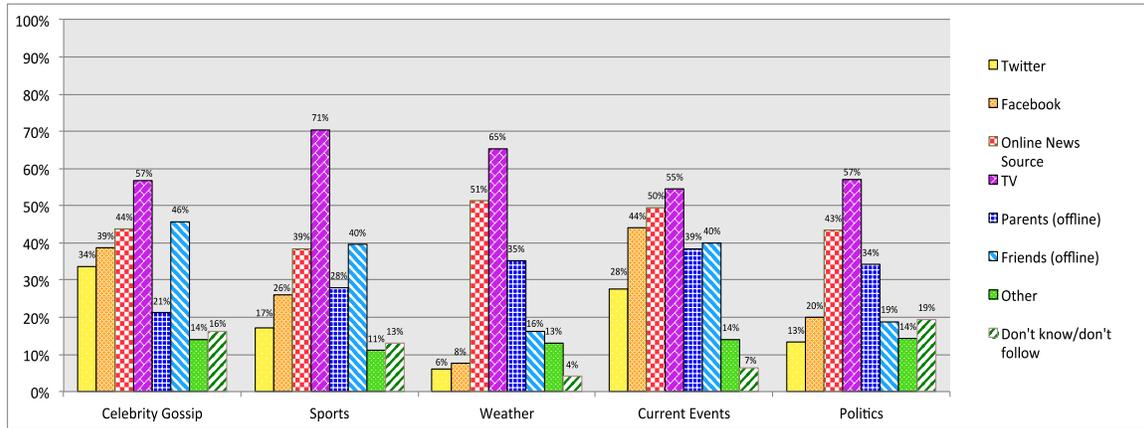
The effects of the transition away from traditional source-based information gatekeepers toward powerful algorithms and peer recommendations on youth's news interaction patterns and exposure to diverse content remain to be studied. Scholars have not reached a consensus on whether the use and structure of social media lead to a broader or narrower exposure to diverse perspectives, as compared with traditional offline sources of news (Zuckerman, 2013). Some observers argue that social media users are immersed in ideologically uniform information from narrow perspectives because the new social media gatekeepers are individuals the user has chosen as "friends" and because people tend to create networks out of other like-minded people (Kossinets & Watts, 2009; McPherson, Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Zuckerman, 2013).

Other research suggests that sharing behavior may still open new possibilities for contact with diverse lives, stories, and perspectives. Individuals with a passion for a particular cause, region, or issue may become opinion leaders who expose their networks to news that would otherwise fall outside of their typical reading habits (Zuckerman, 2013). In a study of 253 million Facebook users, Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, and Adamic (2012) found that although users are more likely to share links from their closest Facebook friends—their strongest ties—they still share many links with their weakest ties (the majority of the people in users' Facebook networks are considered by the authors to be weak ties). Because these numerous weak ties are responsible for the majority of novel information that users see and reshare, this research indicates that Facebook may not be as much of an echo chamber as the concept of homophily might suggest.

### **Portfolio of News Sources**

From a diversity perspective, news is a particularly interesting use case with respect to the question of *where* users look for information. Recent data on adult news consumption show that the number of news sources the average user accesses daily has increased (Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, & Skeeter, 2012). In an effort to gather data on youth practices, we asked study participants to identify one or more sources where they find news. The results are summarized in Figure 1.

At least three aspects from this survey in the thematic context of diversity are worth highlighting. First, the survey suggests that the distribution of news sources varies across categories of news. Some of the sources are more traditional, but others are nontraditional, such as Twitter or Facebook. Focus group interviews confirm that youth select news sources based on information needs, type of news, and context (e.g., time constraints). Second, the results corroborate data from other sources (Kohut et al., 2012) about the prevalence of TV as a news source. Finally, offline news sources such as parents and friends play a role as well. While not statistically significant, respondents' mentions of parents as news sources in interviews occurred frequently in the contexts of politics and breaking news.

**Where do you find the following information? Please mark all the appropriate boxes.****Figure 1. Where U.S. Focus Group Participants (Ages 11–19) Find News (N = 201).**

Source: 2013 data from the questionnaire administered by the Youth and Media project at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

As far as the online news ecosystem is concerned, search engines— which youth use widely (Bilal & Ellis, 2011; Rowlands et al., 2008)—have leveled off as a news source at 33% of Internet users. A recent survey (Kohut et al., 2012) suggests an increased relevance of news sites like Google News, Yahoo! News, and CNN.com, a finding that our focus groups confirmed:

Male (age 16): “Like, I don’t really read newspapers, but on the Internet you can just go to CNN.com and get information about everything.” (2011)

Youth also find news through online news aggregators and by having news stories pushed to them on mobile devices from traditional outlets such as *The New York Times* (Kohut et al., 2012). Many youth seem to enjoy the social dimension of news obtained through social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (Kohut et al., 2012; Rainie, Hitlin, Jurkowitz, Dimock, & Neidorf, 2012), a phenomenon that will be discussed in greater detail in the next section. Focus group participants also described the ability to choose the type of news they received as important.

Female (age 14): “I’m always on Facebook. And occasionally, I go on Twitter, but that’s more for celebrity stuff, because they’re more direct on Twitter. So, that’s kind of helpful if you want to find out exactly what this person—this is going to sound kind of creepy, but—where they are, and how they are. How they’re doing and what they’re up to. That’s easier for celebrities, but for my friends, I use Facebook.” (2011)

Female (age 15): “You get to choose what you hear on Twitter and Facebook, because you follow certain friends. But, on the news, they inform you about everybody.” (2011)

Breaking news is an interesting example that shows how traditional and nontraditional news sources might play together for youth. Focus group participants reported hearing about breaking news stories from several sources: established news outlets' websites (e.g., NYTimes.com, CNN.com, BBC.co.uk), social media (e.g., Facebook), and friends or family, who in turn often received the news through online sources.

Male (age 14): "When I want to find something out, I log on to my computer, and I go to see Chicago breaking news."

Interviewer: "But where do you find out about breaking news?"

Male (age 14): "I find it out on Facebook, of course!" (2013)

Female (age 13): "Well, any kind of event really hits Twitter really fast, and everyone spreads it. And everyone finds out, like, the second it happens, or even before." (2011)

Participants frequently reported discovering breaking news by reading posts on social media platforms. However, no matter what source they found first, youth said that they consulted additional sources to learn more about the news story or to verify the information.

Female (age 14): "On Facebook, I heard that Jackie Chan was dead. And I had to go look that up and see if that man was dead."

Interviewer: "So you have to verify the information you see on Twitter and Facebook?"

Female (age 14): "Yeah. Often I do. But if it's very new information, it's sometimes hard to find out if it's true or not." (2011)

In sum, recent research on youth's information behavior shows that youth get their news from a *broad variety of sources*—offline and online, traditional and nontraditional. From a diversity perspective, it is important to understand that youth use different sources in a range of options depending on their information, the type of news (e.g., weather, celebrity gossip, sports.), and the context (e.g., time constraints, social setting). This news-seeking behavior illustrates how nuanced today's digital news ecosystem is from a young user's perspective and that it is factually complex to a degree that is not easy to incorporate into theoretical models of diversity.

### **Social Media Practices**

As noted in the previous section, social media have become relevant sources of online news among youth. Facebook continues to play an important role in youths' lives despite a trend toward platform diversification (Madden, 2013). In broad terms, focus group participants see Facebook as a source that informs them, sparks their interest, or makes them aware of the occurrence of a particular news event.

Interviewer: "For example, if you think about a recent event that happened, how would you usually find out more about it?"

Male (age 13): "Facebook." (2011)

Other participants confirmed that Facebook often fulfills a primarily social or interest-driven purpose but also introduces them to news-related links, articles, videos, and other information. One youth directly pointed to the diversity of types of information that might be shared nearly simultaneously on Facebook:

Female (age 13): "On Facebook you can just post a quote or make a lyric from your song and people will see it. But you can also say what happened." (2011)

Some participants also explained that using social media is a useful way to learn about what is happening in their communities. One participant felt that social media could be even more reliable than traditional news sources:

Female (age 17): "The other day in my neighborhood, someone got shot. And before it got to the news, someone put it on Facebook. So I do think it often gets on social media before it's in the news. Also, the news doesn't show everything. They leave stuff out. And the news often doesn't get stuff right."

Interviewer: "And on Facebook people do?"

Female (age 17): "Yeah. 'Cause on Facebook there are people that maybe were involved or knew the people. Those people really know what happened." (2013)

Several focus group participants highlighted the timeliness of information shared over Facebook or Twitter as a key feature of social media platforms as news sources.

Male (age 17): "I think the fastest way to find out something is both Facebook and Twitter. For example, when Jerry Buss [Los Angeles Lakers owner] died, everybody was tweeting and everybody was on Facebook about it. . . . It just shows up based on your friends." (2013)

Because of the speed at which information is shared on social media platforms, youth can even become the first recipients of news about an important event, as one youth told us:

Male (age 13): "In my house, I was the first person to find out about Steve Jobs' death because I saw it on Facebook, just a friend commenting. That was like the first time I heard about it, and yes, I guess everything happens really quickly." (2011)

Recent research indicates that the general finding that youth select traditional news sources based on the type of content they desire also applies to social media platforms. One study on Twitter, for instance, found that "interest in entertainment and celebrity news is an especially strong predictor of site adoption" (Hargittai & Litt, 2011).

In our focus group interviews, we spoke to youth who use Twitter to follow their favorite bands, sports stars, or other figures in popular culture, with several youth actively participating in the Twittersphere.

Female (age 18): "I follow a bunch of music on Twitter. I have this internship at another school and I follow their Twitter page and a bunch of other organizations I work with. It's good for keeping you updated. And hashtags are really fun—I love hashtags." (2013)

As already noted, youth perceive Twitter to be a platform over which news spreads very quickly, as the following focus group quotes illustrate:

Male (age 17): "I follow sports teams, politics, and yeah, for news, because it's just faster." (2013)

Female (age 13): "Any kind of event hits Twitter really fast, and then everyone just spreads it." (2013)

Although youth's primary motivation for using Twitter may not be driven by the need to stay on top of current news events, the broader social circle of public figures Twitter connects them to may lead to unanticipated or initially unintended news exposure.

From a diversity perspective, the rise of social media as news sources is a fascinating and currently underexplored phenomenon with potential implications for exposure diversity. As noted above, scholars generally disagree on the diversity effects of social media, with studies pointing in both directions (Benkler, 2006; Hindman, 2007; Napoli, 2011). While the effects of social media on exposure diversity remain contested, our research highlights a second phenomenon worthy of further exploration (Madden et al., 2013): as mentioned above, youth not only maintain portfolios of various types of news sources but are also diversifying their social media platforms (Madden, 2013). To what extent this trend toward platform diversification might ultimately shape not only source diversity but also content diversity (because news shared over Facebook tends to provide different content, timeliness, relevance, and other factors from Instagram, Twitter, or Tumblr) remains an open research question.

### **Popularity of New Genres**

The increased popularity, heterogeneity, and persistence of memes as a genre through which youth contribute to conversations about current events, politics, and other news is another diversity-relevant phenomenon that emerges from our case study on youth online and news. Internet memes, such

as the images in Figures 2 and 3, are viral media objects that tend to be humorous imitations of some product or concept (Shifman, 2013). They can present themselves in the form of an image, hyperlink, video, picture, website, or hashtag, and they often spread through iterative versions instead of exact copies.

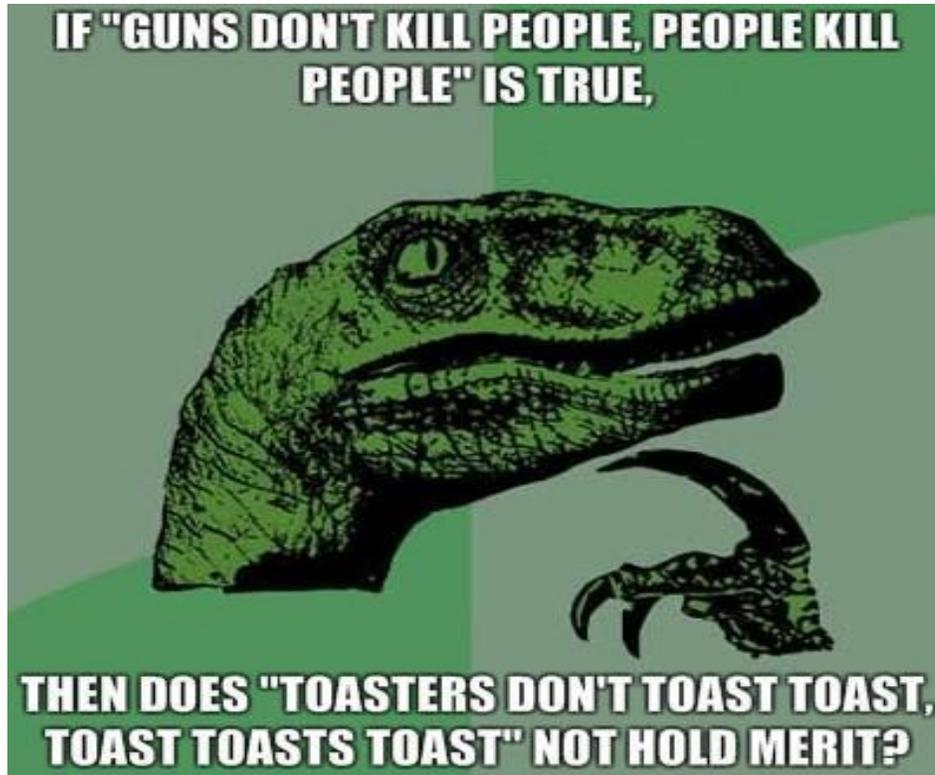
Although memes can appear to be silly and irrelevant from an adult perspective, they can also function as a form of civic engagement, particularly participation in the news ecosystem.



**Figure 2. DOMA in the Supreme Court.**

Source: KnowYourMeme.com

Figure 2 is a reference to *United States v. Windsor*, a landmark Supreme Court case decided on June 26, 2013 (United States v. Windsor, 2013). In the days leading up to the decision, many Facebook users changed their profile pictures to a variation of this meme, riffing on the Human Rights Campaign logo (Kolodji, 2013). Figure 3 is a reference to the gun-control debate that emerged immediately after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting on December 14, 2012 (Know Your Meme, 2013; The Sandy Hook Project, 2013; Trotter, 2013).



**Figure 3. Philosoraptor on Gun Control.**

*Source: KnowYourMeme.com*

Memes can spread and evolve rapidly and in unexpected ways across social and cultural boundaries (Buchel, 2012). The Internet is particularly well suited for large-scale meme distribution, as it has three key properties that Dawkins (1989) introduced in his work on memes: (a) high copy-fidelity (accuracy), because digitization allows for information transfer without loss; (b) fecundity, as many more copies of a meme can be made per time unit; and (c) longevity, because information can be stored indefinitely in archives. Additionally, the Internet transcends national boundaries, so theoretically, it should allow for the transnational spread of successful memes (Shifman & Thelwall, 2009). The massive heterogeneity in the popularity and persistence of memes can be explained by the combination of two key factors: competition for limited attention, and the structure of social networks (Weng, Flammini, Vespignani, & Menczer, 2012).

By creating and remixing memes using websites such as memegenerator.net and quickmeme.com, youth produce highly contextual, humorous, visual, and easily digestible news content

and social commentary. Based on recent surveys and our focus group work, we hypothesize that memes are one way in which young people participate in dialogue about current events, politics, and news information.

Male (age 16): "Memes give you an idea. It's kind of like putting a serious topic into a comical way. When they legalized marijuana, they had a picture of fog everywhere and they put, 'The next day . . .'" (2013)



**Figure 4. Colorado Marijuana Legalization.**

*Source: WeKnowMemes.com*

The example of meme production illustrates one of several means through which youth not only have become creators and advocates of topics of their interest but also have shaped the online news ecosystem and the notion of what constitutes news. Youth post their opinions on social media, share articles they like, and engage in more creative forms of online news creation, such as memes. In fact, memes emerge as an additional content category complementary to more traditional formats, such as those available via news sites such as NYTimes.com. Youth who access, create, and share memes with their peers do so through social media platforms or meme-aggregating websites such as [www.knowyourmeme.com](http://www.knowyourmeme.com). While the long-term effects of such creative and news-relevant practices remain to be studied in detail, it seems safe to say that they are likely to affect at least some of the facets of source, content, and exposure diversity.

### Conclusion

This article offers an alternative view on current policy debates and underlying concerns about the diversity of our information ecosystem. Taking the notion of exposure diversity seriously, this article offers a concrete use case focusing on ways in which youth engage with news online as one particularly important category of information. Building upon findings from recent surveys and focus group interviews, the article sketches the contours of an impressively diverse news landscape from a youth perspective. Youth access news through a broad range of offline and online sources, including both traditional and new media, depending on their information needs, the type of news, and context. In addition, youth actively engage with news as sharers, co-creators, and commentators because of the new possibilities for engagement afforded by the Internet and social media platforms. Participation in the creation of news and news commentary has increased, while the spectrum of information objects that can be considered “news” has broadened. Together, these behavioral trends—mediated by an increasingly diverse portfolio of social media platforms—suggest a highly complex and fluid news ecosystem.

More specifically, and using Napoli’s (1999) diversity framework, the following insights into diversity from our use case on youth online and news seem worthy of consideration:

- *Source Diversity:* Interview findings and survey data show that youth access news through a broad range of online and offline sources, including parents, friends, TV, news websites, and social media, depending on the type of information they seek and the context in which they interact with it. TV, for instance, is the preferred source for sports news, while Twitter is often used to reach celebrity gossip and entertainment news. Social media platforms play an important role as news sources because they support personalization and make news more relevant and interesting for youth. Another driver for social media as news sources is the speed with which news, particularly breaking news, spreads, although youth are wary of whether the information is accurate, and they report to confirm stories using multiple sources. Across these activities, youth not only maintain a rich portfolio of traditional and nontraditional news sources but also diversify their social media platforms.
- *Content Diversity:* At the most fundamental level, our research suggests that the notion of what constitutes news is in flux. Rather than think of news as a well-defined type of content, youth in focus group interviews refer to anything, from current events and celebrity gossip to sports and weather, as news. This broadened understanding of news has important implications with respect to how often and where youth access news. When we asked youth about a particular incident or breaking news (e.g., President Obama’s re-election), it became clear that they typically used multiple news sources and various news formats. Youth often perceive creative news genres such as online memes as more contextual, humorous, visually appealing, and digestible than traditional content shared over sites such as NYTimes.com, and thus these genres might affect what youth access and share. While recent youth news practices give reason for cautious optimism, to what extent the diverse portfolio of news sources and platforms youth use ultimately translates into content diversity remains an open empirical question.

- *Exposure Diversity*: The ways in which youth are exposed to online news are evolving. The modalities of exposure change as we transition from an environment where we pull information from traditional news sources toward a more flexible ecosystem where we include receive push notifications from smartphone news apps or where we happen upon news articles in our Facebook news feeds. Our findings suggest that youth are widely utilizing opportunities to actively interact with digital content—by commenting on news, sharing it with friends, and the like. In many of these instances, youth not only encounter a broad range of important issues but also use creative digital forms to contribute directly to online discourse, as the examples of community news and meme creation illustrate. Overall, our findings support the proposition that young users' online news behavior is best understood as a complex and iterative process involving practices of seeking, sharing, and creating news information, with potential consequences for the framing of exposure diversity.

This article cannot answer the question of whether legitimate concerns about source, content, and exposure diversity are more or less pressing in the digitally networked environment, and it does not seek to draw conclusions about the promises and limitations of potential interventions aimed at increasing diversity at large. However, it does argue that any debate about diversity—especially exposure diversity—is likely to benefit from an in-depth exploration of the nuanced behavior of actual users in any given context. Taking youth online and news as our use case, this article builds upon recent survey data and focus group interviews to call attention to some of the conceptual challenges of applying current diversity frameworks to real-world scenarios and to highlight complex behavioral patterns that should be taken into account before considering any interventions aimed at increasing diversity.

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