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# With Facebook, Blogs, and Fake News, Teens Reject Journalistic “Objectivity”

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the news behaviors and attitudes of teenagers, an understudied demographic in the research on youth and news media. Based on interviews with 61 racially diverse high school students, it discusses how adolescents become informed about current events and why they prefer certain news formats to others. The results reveal changing ways news information is being accessed, new attitudes about what it means to be informed, and a youth preference for opinionated rather than objective news. This does not indicate that young people disregard the basic ideals of professional journalism but, rather, that they desire more authentic renderings of them.

## **Keywords**

youth and news, Facebook, fake news, objectivity, civic engagement

Most people under 30 do not subscribe to newspapers or habitually tune in to TV and radio newscasts. Some scholars interpret these trends as indications that today’s youth are not interested in news and are less civic-minded than prior generations (Jones, 2008; Mindich, 2005; Patterson, 2007; Quigley, 1999). Others contend that waning consumption of traditional news media does not necessarily mean youth are disinterested in news or politics (Costera Meijer, 2007; Harrington, 2008a; Marchi, 2012; Raeymaeckers, 2004; Sherr & Staples, 2004). These differing interpretations reflect two distinct models of citizenship laid out by Bennett (2008). In the first model, correlating with older Americans, the Dutiful Citizen feels an obligation to closely follow the daily

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news and participate in government-centered activities such as voting and party politics. In the second, corresponding with youth, the Actualizing Citizen has a diminished sense of government obligation, a mistrust of mainstream news media and politicians, and a higher sense of self-purpose. Actualizing citizens express civic engagement via volunteering, social movement activism, and communication networks facilitated by new technologies (Bennett, 2008). Based on interviews with 61 teenagers, conducted from December 2007 to February 2011, this article illustrates how 21st-century adolescents are trending toward the latter model of citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

Teens were chosen as the subject of this study because they are a significant subset of young media consumers but are relatively understudied in research on youth and news. Most recent studies have focused on news habits of young adults within the age range of 18 to 34 (Associated Press [AP], 2008; Brown, 2005; National Annenberg Election Survey [NAES], 2004; Pew, 2004; Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010). Others have included limited survey data about teens while focusing predominantly on youth above 18 (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Patterson, 2007; Pew 2010) or have focused more on newspapers and TV news than on new media venues (Costera Meijer, 2007; Raeymaeckers, 2004). To date, the vast majority of research on youth and news focuses peripherally, if at all, on the teen years—a period in life when people begin to develop their political views and news habits. Numerous studies indicate that news consumption habits formed during the teen years shape adult news habits (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991; Burgon et al., 1983; Collins & Armstrong, 2008; Grusin & Stone, 1993; Robinson & Levy, 1996; 1998). The following discussion of the news habits of contemporary teens attempts to fill this gap, illustrating changing notions of citizenship.

## Literature Review

The dearth of young people in contemporary print and broadcast news audiences has been widely noted (Brown, 2005; Jones, 2008; Mindich, 2005; Patterson, 2007; Purcell et al., 2010) and scholars and news organizations are struggling to understand the phenomenon. Mindich contends that there has been a “generational shift” away from news, particularly political news. Noting that 80% of people below 30 do not read newspapers daily while 70% of older Americans do, and further noting that the median age of TV news viewers is 60, he foresees grave consequences for the future of democracy (Mindich, 2005). A study by the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy echoes this concern, showing further decreases in youth news consumption and concluding that there is a “basis for pessimism about the future of news and young adults” (Patterson, 2007, p. 24). It also notes that when young adults and teens follow the news, they “are attracted disproportionately to stories that have little or no public affairs content” (Patterson, 2007, p. 16). These studies are representative of the *disengaged youth* paradigm (Bennett, 2008), which takes traditional civic actions such as voting and news consumption as the proper measures of a healthy democracy.

Other studies present a more hopeful portrait, positing that youth have an interest in current events but find conventional newspapers and TV news boring (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991, 1998; Costera Meijer, 2007; Livingstone, 2002; Raeymaeckers, 2004); difficult to understand (Raeymaeckers, 2004); and irrelevant to their lives (Barnhurst, 1998; Buckingham, 1999; Costera Meijer, 2003; Frola, 2006; McKee, 2005). Rather than interpreting low rates of news consumption as signs that youth are “tuned out” from the world of politics, Raeymaeckers (2004) concludes that news producers should use clearer language and provide greater background and contextualization of stories. Similarly, Costera Meijer (2007) argues that news organizations need to develop new quality standards that young (and all) people will not find boring.

An emerging theme in the literature concerns the definition of “news.” For people who hold traditional ideas of what news is, young people do not appear to be interested in the news. However, for those with more flexible definitions of “news” and how it may be accessed, there is more optimism. A recent study of undergraduate university students found that “young people today are not necessarily uninformed, but rather they are differently informed” than previous generations, getting news via cell phone texts, email, social networking sites, and conversations with friends and family (Singer, Clark, & Monserrate, p. 26). In an “a la carte” model of news gathering, youth tend to know a little bit about a lot of subjects, researching topics of special interest in more detail. Costera Meijer (2007) observed similar youth strategies regarding TV news consumption, pointing out that what may look like youth inattention by older adult standards is a reflection of the younger generation’s comfort with monitoring multiple media sites simultaneously. She notes that youth feel at ease zapping from station to station and “snacking” on tidbits of news, gaining superficial knowledge of a broad variety of topics, while older people prefer in-depth knowledge about a smaller number of topics. Unlike older generations, accustomed to postponing their news needs until a fixed hour of the day, young people prefer to get news instantly whenever they want it (Costera Meijer, 2007). This latter group of research falls within the *engaged youth* paradigm, which emphasizes the empowerment of youth as agents and recognizes a new spectrum of civic actions occurring online and in other nontraditional arenas. As Bennett (2008) observes,

In this view, if there is an attendant decline in the credibility or authenticity of many public institutions and discourses that define conventional political life, the fault lies more with the government performances and news narratives than with citizens who cannot engage with them. (p. 2)

While teens, in particular, are often thought to be too young to care about politics, the results of the present study contradict this notion. Those interviewed tended to fall within the engaged youth paradigm, exhibiting low levels of credibility in mainstream news while gathering news in alternative ways.

## News Consumption Among Teens

Most of the teens interviewed reported reading print newspapers “sometimes” (ranging from once a week to once a month), with fewer than 10% reading them daily. All those who reported reading a paper daily had parents who subscribed to daily papers. The remaining students who read newspapers did so at school, where they received free copies and were usually required to read them by teachers. Students who took public transportation read *The Metro*, a daily newspaper distributed free to commuters at subway stations. Most of the teens did not independently seek out television news, but watched it “by accident” when flipping channels or when older family members happened to be watching it. Dylan, 18, explains, “As far as TV, I’m usually watching reality television or something like that and then during the commercials, I’ll flip to CNN. That’s how I get my news. During the commercial breaks.” In keeping with other recent findings that the dry and predictable format of professional news alienates youth (Costera Meijer, 2007; UNICEF, 2005), the teens we interviewed found TV news boring, repetitive, and irrelevant to their daily lives:

I like the sports, but in the rest of the news they just keep blabbing about what other people are doing. (William, 14)

ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, they all have the same exact stories, even the same exact *order*. It isn’t interesting or original. Everyone copies each other. (Dennis, 16)

They repeat too much of the same thing! (Xela, 17)

When we see the news, it doesn’t pertain to us that much . . . It’s just so boring! (Manuel, 16)

My mom and dad watch the news . . . They just look at pictures of fires and be like, “Oh, my God, there’s a house burning up!” It could be a house burning up from three days ago, but they keep showing it and showing it on the news. (Sopheap, 15)

I don’t watch broadcast news unless it’s the winter and I want to know if there’s no school. (Maneeya, 17)

The cultural, generational, and often racial disconnect between young people and the faces, news priorities, and reporting styles of mainstream journalists (Baym, 2010; Harrington, 2005; Marchi, 2012; Miller, 2007) helps explain the common sense of boredom youth feel regarding official news media. Yet, while most teens did not make a daily habit of reading newspapers, watching TV news, listening to news radio, or logging onto official news web sites, nearly all expressed that keeping up with the news was important. This was revealed in common statements such as, “It’s important

for the public to be educated on subjects they need to make decisions on” (Dennis, 16) or “It’s important because you need to know what’s going on in the world” (Maria, 18). They noted that the public depended on journalists in numerous ways, from warnings about health hazards and political corruption to information about public policies and elected leaders. They felt that news organizations have a “huge role in society” (Agata, 15) and “a heavy responsibility to bring out the truth” (Miles, 17) and should “stand up for what’s right” (Danny, 18). Ideas related to collective well-being were frequently expressed: “Journalists need to communicate to the public and let them know about important things they should know about but maybe they don’t know about” (Lily, 14). “The job of the journalist is to not only keep the people informed, but to be always checking up on the corporations and politicians” (Mark, 17). “They warn us of things, like contaminated chicken and meat and other things you can’t see” (Andy, 17). Most of the teens were at least nominally aware of recent news concerning local or national politics and some spoke with unexpected passion about the economy, the mortgage crisis, war in the Middle East, or local neighborhood issues. Aside from “accidental” TV news, there were three main ways that the young people learned about news: (a) Via trusted adults; (b) Internet social networking sites and blogs; and (c) humorous and/or acerbic current events programs.

### *Trusted Adults*

With mixed admiration and astonishment, the teens noted that their older relatives consumed “a lot” of news: “My father is a faithful news watcher. He literally watches the news at 12:00 noon, 6:00 p.m., 11:00 p.m., and also the 6:00 a.m. news!” said Tara, 15. Anthony, 16, described his father as a “news junkie” who “*lives to get the news.*” The teens were urged by their teachers, parents, grandparents, or older siblings to pay attention to the news, and many listed these adults as their main sources of news:

My mom watches news a lot . . . She’s always telling me about something she saw on the news so I can look out for it. You know, swine flu, be careful, use hand sanitizer. Or there was an accident, or a shooting at this place, so be careful when you go there. (Marvin, 17)

I get news from family and friends. Like my grand pop. He always tells me. I don’t always pay attention. But he always talks about the news and how I should watch it. He’s like, did you hear about blah, blah, blah? And I’m like, “No I didn’t,” and then he tells me the whole story. (Jackie, 15)

My older sister watches the news daily. I get most of my news from her. (Stefani, 17)

My parents are always watching the news and reading newspapers. So I think it’s a priority in their life. They always want me to watch the news. (Brielle, 17)

My dad and stepmom watch the news and weather and everything. They'll give me the whole newspaper and tell me to read it. (Brian, 15)

While adults were often initial sources of information about a news story, the teens sought further information online if their curiosity were piqued: "My mother told me that a priest in our parish was accused of child abuse. The next day, I looked it up online" (Mike, 18). "I first learned about Michael Jackson's death from my sister. Then, I Googled it to check the rumors" (Stefani, 17). Sara, 18, who had family in Egypt, stated, "My uncle told me about the protests and then I went to YouTube."

In a world of "information overload," where youth report feeling overwhelmed by an onslaught of information (AP, 2008; McMane, 2007; Nordenson, 2008; Purcell et al., 2010), trusted adults served as news "filters" and "translators" for the teens, pointing out important issues and explaining their relevance. Teens found this guidance useful, as a major theme to emerge in the interviews was the belief that newspapers and TV news did *not* elucidate the relevance of political events to their lives:

The news is just people talking and talking about things I don't care about. (Brian, 15)

News is entertainment because everything they repeat is not what people really need to know. It isn't stuff that can help you. (Katie, 15)

I don't really know what they're talking about most of the time. (Shaniece, 17)

I don't read newspapers because nothing applies to me. (Phola, 17)

### *Social Networking Sites and Blogs*

In addition to getting news from conversations with trusted adults, the teens reported learning about current events from social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace; YouTube, and blogs. A number of them also mentioned "pop-ups" that appeared on AOL, Hotmail, Yahoo, and Google email accounts. "I'll be on email and a headline will pop up at me and I'll check it out . . . If a headline catches my eye, I'll look at it," explained Terry, 17. Anna, 15, noted, "Facebook and MySpace, that's how we get information. Me and my friends are on Facebook, like, 24/7." Anthony, 16, said, "I check Facebook at least once a day and I know people who check it at least once every hour. My friends post links to articles and videos and I learn about things that way." And Phola, 17, quoted earlier saying she did not read newspapers because "nothing applies to me," checked Facebook and YouTube "at least five times per day."

While most Facebook news pertained to mundane activities of close personal and distant virtual "friends," the site was also a source of national and international news about celebrities (i.e., the death of Michael Jackson and the arrest of Charlie Sheen),

outlandish events (Somali pirates or teen boy falling from plane), and political news (immigration laws; gay marriage referendums; or the 2011 protests in the Middle East). Again, personal connections with friends and family in social networks served as news “filters,” bringing various stories to the teens’ attention and helping them understand their relevance via posted commentaries. A number of studies that emphasize the importance of the Internet for young people in expressing their identities and maintaining social connections with peers have noted that sharing news is a part of that process (Livingstone, 2009; Singer et al., 2009; Watkins, 2009). The ability to connect and contribute to ongoing conversations about news via posting comments and/or content on social networking sites and blogs was highly valued by the teens we interviewed, as was the immediacy of the exchanges. Mark, 16, explained,

I have a friend who’s obsessed with technology and stuff. He’s always posting technology news [on Facebook], and now I’m very into it. There’s a blog called Engadget.com. They have a new story like every five minutes. They have writers from all over the place that search the web for anything new related to technology news. That’s how we keep up.

Lily, 14, who had recently moved to the United States, used blogging as a way to adjust to her new life and share news with friends in both her home country and her new one: “I started blogging at school. It’s a web site and I blog about things that I’ve experienced that are different from over here.” Social networking sites and blogs were also valued for their ability to transmit firsthand experiences and diverse perspectives that allowed the teens to develop their own opinions on issues such as war, gay marriage, or gun control. “I like how bloggers post on a lot of articles and weigh in on stuff. They have some good things to say,” said Jamal, 17. Anthony, 16, felt that blogs offered more local news than did newspapers or TV:

If you want to get local news that’s reliable, people post pictures of certain streets and certain things that happen locally. A lot of bloggers capture things that regular media outlets don’t. So the positives of reading a blog is actually getting personal insights on what’s affecting the lives of your neighbors.

Having first learned of a news story from face-to-face or online interactions with family and friends, teens would go to online news sources such as CNN.com, if interested in a topic. Comparing these sites to newspapers and TV news, Eric, 17, felt that “online sites are much more organized with a wealth of information and archives,” so he could look back at past articles. Sujeong, 18, liked AOL online because “they explain things more and have more sources,” and Gisela, 16, appreciated that “on CNN.com, MSNBC.com, Boston.com, there’s no commercial interruptions” so she could get news faster. The teens felt that traditional news outlets force fed them stories in which they had no interest, so they preferred to self-tailor their news. Omar, 18, explained,

Often times, I couldn't care less about the stories that TV news thinks we should care about . . . I don't care about the B.S. they talk about. So I don't get my news from television, I don't get it from the radio, I get it from the Internet.

Online activities allowed the teens to engage with news in a more complex way than possible with traditional news formats. The links embedded in stories made it easy for them to learn about the history of a topic, related issues, or definitions of unfamiliar terms. They especially liked how online comments exposed them to a variety of opinions that helped them form their own opinions on issues. "When I was reading a blog about the legalization of marijuana and saw all the different comments people posted for and against it, I thought about certain things I didn't consider before," noted Lily, 14. "I like reading blog discussions about politics, like when they raised taxes, I was reading the pros and cons and how it affected welfare," said Kim, 17. "I just love to know people's points of views, even if it's bad, so I can know where I stand," said Michelle, 17. The desire to gain perspective on current events through exposure to diverse opinions was a salient theme, helping explain teen preferences for online versus traditional news. As the teens discussed their practices of staying informed, a third source of news was mentioned: humorous and/or acerbic current events programming, particularly the genre known as "fake news."

### *Opinionated Talk and "Making Fun of Stuff"*

"Fake news" refers to entertainment TV shows that parody network news, using satire to discuss public affairs. Recent research notes the increasing popularity of mock TV news shows such as *The Colbert Report* (TCR), *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (TDS), the "Weekend Update" on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) and other satirical productions, and the public's increasing reliance on them as sources of news (Baym, 2005; 2010; Borden & Tew, 2007; Fox et al., 2007; Harrington, 2005, 2008a, 2008b; McKain, 2005; Turner, 2005). Researchers react with varying degrees of approval and concern to the public's growing reliance for news on shows that are not produced by journalists and lack commitment to journalistic objectivity. However, according to recent national studies, viewers of such shows are better informed about national and international affairs than those who rely exclusively on official news. Young adults who watched *The Daily Show* scored higher on campaign knowledge tests than those who watched network news or read newspapers (NAES, 2004). Viewers of *The Daily Show* and *Colbert* had the highest knowledge of national and international affairs, outranking consumers of major print newspapers, newspaper web sites, online news sites such as Google News and Yahoo News, news magazines, news radio, CNN, and network news. These studies did not collect data on people under 18, but when asked to name their main sources of news, more than a quarter of the teens we interviewed listed *TDS*, *TCR*, *SNL*, *David Letterman*, Jay Leno, or *O'Reilly*.<sup>2</sup> Combined with students who said they got news from humorous talk radio, about a third of the teens mentioned humorous or acerbic talk shows as sources of news.



Previous research has found that adults consider fake news shows to be “knowledge-enabling” as opposed to merely “informational” (Baym, 2005, 2010; Fox et al., 2007; Harrington, 2008a, 2000b; MacDonald, 2000). Baym (2005) notes that while typical TV news reports the “facts” in rapid succession, switching topics with little or no contextualization, fake news “places its topics in wider contexts, often providing background information and drawing historical linkages of the sort uncommon to television news” (p. 264). The in-depth discussions found on *TDS* and *TCR*, in particular, provide information on institutional processes (i.e., how a bill becomes law, or how the Electoral College functions) rarely explained in mainstream news. While official news increasingly resembles banal entertainment, growing numbers of scholars note that fake news provides the type of political communication that promotes public debate. Although they are not officially “the press,” these shows enact the classical watchdog role of the press by striving, through satire, to hold powerful authorities accountable for what they say and do (Baym, 2005, 2010; Harrington, 2005, 2008a, 2008b). Recognizing the hybrid nature of news information in our discursively integrated age, Baym (2010) urges us to move beyond mutually exclusive dichotomies of “entertainment or information” (p. 104). Borden and Tew (2007) argue that since fake news shows are free from the official news constraints of gatekeeping and objectivity, they offer the same kind of authenticity promised by bloggers, in terms of drawing attention to lapses of journalistic integrity. Warner (2007) contends that Jon Stewart’s Socratic questioning technique is “a rhetorical tactic to point out incongruities, inconsistencies and internal contradictions” in the public discourse of politicians and other powerful actors (p. 23). By purposely eschewing the authoritative voices that are the hallmark of professional reporters, such shows critique the trivialization of news and superficial reporting that have become commonplace in professional journalism. They offer audiences a taste of what current events news could be if stripped of its dependence on the authority of the presenter, focusing instead on the quality of political arguments (Turner, 2005).

The teens expressed similar ideas. Explaining how she first became aware of the 2008-2010 financial crisis watching *SNL*, Maneeya, stated, “At first, when the economy was going down, they did a joke about it and I thought it was very funny. Then I saw the regular news and was like, “Oh my God, it’s true!” Mike explained, “I watch *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. I actually find it a really interesting way to get news, because it’s funny, but you learn from it.” Mohamed, 15, watched *TDS* “every night before bed” and, on the ideologically opposite end of the scale, he also watched *The O’Reilly Factor*. Although he held progressive views, he prided himself on being open-minded and tuned in to conservative shows to “hear the other side.” What did he like about these shows? He said, “They remind me of myself.” He continued, “I’m very opinionated and quick to start an argument, but sometimes when you start an argument, it could lead to either yourself discovering something new about a topic or someone else discovering something new.” Like many of his peers, he appreciated that the hosts of such shows provided unambiguous political opinions:

O’Reilly is very opinionated, very strong willed and he’s quick to jump on anyone else, but also Jon Stewart criticizes people. He doesn’t do it in the same

way . . . but he's sort of sarcastic about it. Satire. And that's what I do when I argue with people. I just kind of make fun of their points.

For similar reasons, Mark, 16, found sarcastic news commentary on his favorite rock station more appealing than official news: "I listen to WBCN a lot. 104.1. I think it's a great show. It's very funny. But, they incorporate a lot of news. They make fun of stuff, indirectly, but they mention news."

So, what was it about being opinionated and "making fun of stuff" that made these programs more satisfying newsgathering experiences for the teens?

## Youth, News, and the Public Sphere

A commonality of these genres is that they do not just *relate* the news, but provide interpretations and judgments about current events. Since the mid-20th century, the ethic of public service in U.S. journalism has been a revered professional standard, whereby journalists ideally functioned as "watchdogs" protecting the public from government and corporate abuses. Yet this ideal has been eroded in recent decades for reasons related to the changing economics of the news industry and major transformations in U.S. culture and politics (Hallin, 2000; McChesney, 2000, 2004; Schiller, 2000). In the fiercely profit-driven battle for news market share, basic tenets of professional journalism, such as independence, investigation, and verification, are too often superseded by sensationalism and generic reporting. Experiencing massive budget cuts, newsrooms have slashed independent research and fact checking, becoming ever more dependent on free sources of news produced by corporate and government public relations staff (Stauber & Clyde, 1995). Despite this reality, the appearance of objectivity is staunchly maintained by professional news outlets, giving rise to skepticism among the public, particularly the young.

Youth tend to have both idealistic and rebellious tendencies, as evidenced in the youthful countenance of so many movements for social justice. Young enough to believe change is possible and old enough to recognize when something is amiss, they admire individuals who are not afraid to confront hypocrisy. As the teens' comments reveal, they value truth in reporting, but are not convinced that professional news is truthful or trustworthy. Recall that they described traditional news as "boring" and "the same"—implying that it was predictable and devoid of any questioning of power. In contrast, they felt that Facebook postings, YouTube videos, blogs, opinionated talk shows and fake news provided background information and perspectives that enabled them to understand the larger meanings of political events and develop their own opinions. For them, this was a more truthful and authentic rendition of news.

The concept of objectivity—reporting the "facts" in a nonpartisan fashion—has been a cornerstone of professional U.S. journalism. Herbert Gans (1979) stated that objectivity "includes the freedom to disregard the implications of the news. Indeed, objectivity could not long exist without this freedom . . ." (p. 188). Yet our teens indicated that the implications of the news were what they *most* wanted to understand.

Sadé, 17, said, "Right now, they're too focused on things that entertain and not stuff like a more complete evaluation of the war in Iraq or Obama's administration or some more important things like that." Mohamed, 15, said,

It sort of gets on my nerves that, back when the housing bubble was still intact, there would be hundreds of articles in the *New York Times* talking about what restaurant is best, but very few talking about what happens if the housing bubble pops, what happens with these companies like Enron.

Mainstream news media's "objectivity" was not something the teens found useful. George, 16, spoke sarcastically about the concept of objectivity, implying that reporters used it to appear unbiased while glossing over wrongdoings:

In a news story, you can't say certain things. Like you can't point fingers and say, "Well, *he* screwed up the economy by overpaying everybody and making stocks crash." You have to be more "objective" [sarcastic tone] about it, you have to say [mocking official voice], "This company crashed because of the 'financial crisis.'"

He felt angry and deceived that journalists, in his opinion, hadn't "pointed fingers" and interrogated the people and policies responsible for the economic meltdown. Even some of the youngest teens expressed doubts about the objectivity of the news. William, age 14, stated, "I don't trust the news all the time because I've heard that sometimes they tell lies. I used to think it was all facts and true. But now I don't completely trust it."

Ironically, while the students' comments and behaviors implied that they were uninterested in "objective" news, it was, in part, their desire to gain a more balanced understanding of news that attracted them to blogs, Facebook postings, YouTube videos, fake news, and other nontraditional sources of news. In contrast to the disinterested observations about the political world typical of "boring" professional news, the ironic and passionate remarks of blogs and humorous or acerbic current events shows "put things in context," offered "different opinions," and were "not afraid to tell it like it is." The teens enjoyed the use of opinion and sarcasm employed to expose lies and abuses. They understood that shows such as *TDS* and *O'Reilly* were not "news," but indicated that they provided clearer understandings of current events, helping them to see what was at stake regarding a given event or policy. As Kara, 16, put it, "The regular news gives you one side and another side, but you don't really know which one is good or bad."

Potential concerns regarding "a la carte" news consumption among youth include fears that this may allow them to avoid important political stories in favor of trivia, or encourage the creation of an "echo chamber" where individuals are exposed only to views that match their own (Garnham, 1992; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2007). Others respond, in contrast, that gaining access to new political ideas and differing opinions is common on social networking sites (Clark & Van Slyke, 2010; Rainie & Smith, 2012). Based on our interviews, the "echo chamber" effect does not appear to be any more likely today than in the past, and may even be less likely. Exposed to diverse "friends" and commentators, the teens liked blogs and Facebook postings because they could "hear the pros and cons," "know other people's views" and "think about

things I didn't consider before." And since news is now transmitted via myriad platforms, from cell phones to blogs to entertainment shows, to TVs in stores, subways or taxi cabs, youth who would otherwise not seek news at all are at least nominally exposed to the top stories of the day, while those who want to follow news closely have access to more sources and opinions than ever. The question remains whether young people can decipher factual from false information. Bloggers and talk show hosts are riveting sources of opinion, but many do not fact check or show concern for reliability. While this problem is not limited to youth, it underscores the critical importance of media literacy and journalism training for high school students.

An additional concern regarding today's fragmented news environment is the potential weakening of democratic deliberation. If everyone gets their information from different places, it is argued, our ability to hold common conversations and debates is diminished. However, the a la carte news strategies of today's youth offer possibilities to strengthen rather than weaken national conversations. As feminists, LGBT people, racial minorities, and other historically marginalized groups point out, there has never been only one public sphere. Rarely seeing their concerns represented in mainstream news, such populations have depended on a variety of alternative media through which to become informed (McKee, 2005). The multiple public spheres now existing online, on TV, and on talk radio help citizens of all ages, socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, sexual orientations, or political leanings develop their ideas and viewpoints, making them better prepared to contribute to larger public debates.

## Conclusions

Although bored and skeptical of official news, teens are not necessarily tuned out when it comes to current events. More connected than ever to friends, family, and the larger world, they get much of their news from their social networks. While this has long been the case, as the Personal Influence research of Lazarsfield and Katz (1955) attests, it is even more common in today's media saturated world, where youth are in more frequent contact with more expansive networks of friends, family, and peers. This study expands on youth and media research, finding that teens gravitate toward fake news, "snarky" talk radio, and opinionated current events shows more than official news, and do so *not* because they are disinterested in news, but because these kinds of sites often offer more substantive discussions of the news and its implications. Such formats are "marked by a highly skeptical, alienated attitude to established politics and its representation that is actually the reverse of disinterest" (Turner, 2005, p. 92). The assumption that newspapers and broadcast news are the primary venues for learning about politics (The Dutiful Citizen model) leads to conclusions that today's youth are uninformed and apathetic. This fails to capture the many socially networked and entertaining ways young people become informed about current events.

While most teens probably care more about news of personal interest to them than about broader political issues, this is a starting point for civic engagement, reflecting

the Actualizing Citizen model. As Bennett (2005) observes, the development of information-seeking skills in adolescents begins with motivation, generally powered by personal interests. The teens we interviewed *did* believe it was important to be informed. But unlike Dutiful Citizens, they did not exclusively equate an informed citizenry with daily rituals of seeking official news reports. Nor did they associate “objectivity” with a rote presentation of two sides, “pro” and “con.” Instead, they savored the ideological clashes found on social networking sites, blogs, fake news, and opinionated talk shows, which they considered more objective and informative forms of news gathering. As Actualizing Citizens, they mistrusted mainstream news but stayed informed about people and issues they cared about via alternative news consumption practices, relying heavily on communication networks facilitated by new technologies. Mistrust in mainstream media and politics is not necessarily bad, as Michael Schudson points out: “because of distrust, we have checks and balances; because of distrust, we are enjoined as citizens to be watchful” (Schudson, 1999, p. 301). Today’s Actualizing Citizen may not be the classic “informed citizen” of yore—well-versed on all the political topics of the day. Yet this ideal has never actually applied to most Americans (Schudson, 1999). Actualizing Citizens can, however, be “monitorial citizens” (Schudson, 1999), equipped with enough basic information to take action on issues of importance, if required.

Adding to evidence that young audiences are skeptical about the concept of objectivity (Amadeo, 2004; Brown, 2009; Gigli, 2001; Torney-Purta & Barber, 2004), this study points to the need for news organizations to return to the original intention of the concept of journalistic objectivity, which was to disaffiliate news from public relations and propaganda, providing the public with information that would allow them to “not only know but to understand” (Schudson, 2001, pp. 162-164). The findings suggest that what youth gain from nontraditional news formats illuminates an area of potential improvement for mainstream news media. Twenty years ago, Barnhurst and Wartella (1991) stated that journalists could better connect with youth by offering a more subjective framework in place of “the sterile ‘objectivity’ of modernism,” asserting “the validity of the subjective experience of both the writer/journalist and the reader/citizen” (p. 208). Today, as young people study, work, and live amidst more racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, and political diversity than ever, they are even less inclined to accept news coverage from a single “objective” point of view. Taking a cue from radio and TV talk shows that acerbically critique public figures, Facebook and blog postings that express diverse opinions, and TV game shows and competitions that invite viewers to participate via call-ins and cell phone voting, mainstream news producers in TV, radio, print, or the web, could experiment with alternative storytelling formats and redefine news content to integrate “facts” with more opinion, critique, and commentary. This would go a long way toward reinvigorating the ideals of democratic deliberation for which the news media are meant to be a foundation.

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### **Notes**

1. Individual interviews and focus groups of 45 to 60 min each were held with 61 high schoolers aged 14 to 19. (Most fell between the ages of 15 and 18, with three 14 and two 19-year-olds). Thirty-eight individual interviews were conducted at after-school youth programs in Boston and Philadelphia. Additionally, four focus groups (of five to six members each) were held with 23 students of an alternative high school run by the Boston Public Schools. The total sample had approximately equal numbers of males and females and consisted of 26% Black, 25% Latino, 23% White, 16% Asian, and 10% Middle Eastern. With IRB approval, subjects were recruited via distributing flyers about the study to relevant staff, program participants, and parents. Through letters and phone calls, youth and/or their parents were contacted to set up and confirm interviews. Written consent was acquired from all participants and parental consent for those under 18. Participants' names were kept confidential and pseudonyms have been used. Except for ellipses to shorten lengthy quotes, all statements are written as they were recorded.
2. A small minority of teens listed *O'Reilly* as a source of news. This show is not in the "fake news" genre, but employs sarcasm, finger pointing, and strident opinions to discuss public affairs. Letterman and Leno both comment sarcastically on the news.

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