

# Plugged in, tuned out

Young Americans are embracing new media but failing to develop an appetite for news **BY DAN KENNEDY**

**IT'S MORNING IN** Boston. Take a look around. Whether you're on the subway, walking through downtown, or standing in line at Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts, you're surrounded by young people—twentysomethings, thirtysomethings, maybe a few teenagers, all of them getting ready for work or for school.

Now look more closely. What are they doing? Maybe a few (a very few) are flipping through the section fronts of *The Boston Globe*, or carrying a folded-up *New York Times*. You might see a couple of *Boston Herald* readers poring over news about the Patriots. Quite a few more might be glancing at the *Metro*, or possibly the newer *BostonNOW*—thin weekday freebies with a distinctly lite approach to the news.

Most, though, will be staying as far away from the news as they can. They might be talking to one another. They might be keeping to themselves, staring into space or reading a book. Or they might be wearing the distinctive white earbuds of an iPod. And if you assume they're not listening to a podcast of *All Things Considered* or *The NBC Nightly News*, you would most likely be correct.

For some years now, media executives and social scientists alike have been fretting over the disconnect between young people and the news. It's not just that those under 40 are less attuned to current events than older people are. It's also that they pay dramatically less attention to what's going on in the world than did people of the same age a generation or two ago.

"What's happening, I think, is that many more of them are entering adulthood without a news habit," says Tom Patterson, the Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. "As they age, they'll probably consume a bit more news, but it's not going to get up there to the level of older people today."

This past July, Patterson and the Kennedy School's Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy released a study called *Young People and News*, which asked why most young adults—despite spending as much as six hours a day with

media of various kinds—are unable, for example, to identify the secretary of state by name. The answer: Despite being saturated with media, young people, when surveyed, evince a notable aversion to news media. For instance, just 16 percent of young adults (ages 18 to 30) read a newspaper every day, compared with 35 percent of those older than 30. Despite the rise of the Internet, young adults are more likely to watch a national newscast (31 percent) or local newscast (36 percent) every day than to read online news (22 percent)—although, again, they're far less likely to watch television news than are older adults. And a whopping 24 percent of young adults "paid almost no attention to news, whatever the source."

If you suspect it's ever been thus, you're wrong. Because, the study notes, in the late 1950s, some 53 percent of Americans in their 20s read newspaper coverage of national politics, a proportion not much lower than that of older adults during that era. A study of television news in 1967 found roughly the same pattern.

To Patterson, the culprit is obvious: cable television and a concomitant rise in choices. The typical household news habit of a newspaper on the doorstep every morning and Walter Cronkite on television every evening has given way to all entertainment, all the time. "I think we've broken the link between adult and child, or parent and child, in the transmission of the news habit," says Patterson.

That broken link represents a threat not just to the news media, which are losing readers, viewers, and listeners, but to civic life, the ideal of an informed citizenry, and our ability to govern ourselves.

**STEVE BABCOCK IS** a self-professed news junkie. As one of my students at Northeastern University, from which he graduated earlier this year, he read the *Globe* and the *Times*, the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and the *New York Review of Books*, and he listened to National Public Radio whenever he found himself in a car. But Babcock was unusual, and he realized it whenever he would try to engage his friends in a conversation about the news.

"I'm the kind of person who wants to know what's going on in Sri Lanka. I never found many people who have that kind of knowledge," says Babcock, 23, who's now working as a reporter for the weekly *Rio Grande Sun*, in Española, N.M. "I think college is when your consciousness about the world gets raised. If you come up in an environment where you haven't been exposed to these things, you don't understand that keeping up with the news is important."

It's also a leading indicator of community well-being. In his oft-cited 2000 book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, the scholar Robert Putnam found that young adults were far less likely than older people not just to read a newspaper, but also to attend religious services, sign a petition, go to a public meeting, write to an elected official, or serve as an officer in a local organization. "Newspaper readers are older, more educated, and more rooted in their communities than is the average American," Putnam wrote.

Similarly, Peter Levine, director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, at the University of Maryland, observes that there is a direct correlation between voting and news awareness, and that young people are distinctly lacking in both. In his new book, *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens*, Levine writes that "you cannot vote unless you know whom you will support, and you cannot know that unless you are aware, at least, of the candidates or parties and a few fundamental issues."

Earlier this year, veteran television journalist Judy Woodruff hosted an hourlong documentary on PBS called *Generation Next*, which examined the lives of people between the ages of 16 and 25. The program was accompanied by a lengthy survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, which found that there had been a slight uptick in news interest among young people since the late 1980s, but that their knowledge of current affairs was dismal nevertheless.

Even so, Woodruff expresses some hope, saying that critics are too focused

on the traditional media, and that alternative venues such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and even cartoons such as *Family Guy* are reaching young people with substantive critiques of politics and public affairs in ways that, say, *The New York Times* or the network news can't, or won't. With about 1.4 million viewers, *The Daily Show* is hardly a threat to the Big Three network newscasts, whose combined audience can reach as high as 30 million. But its viewers' median age (35) is considerably lower than that of the audience for traditional news outlets.

"Much of the news young people see is not presented in a way that's relevant to them," says Woodruff in a telephone interview. "It's presented in a way that makes sense to people who are older, who know what Medicaid Part B is, or who know what the Kyoto Accord is, or McCain-Feingold. There's a lot of jargon in the news, and there's an adult framing of the news, if you will."

Woodruff adds: "I think we need to put ourselves in their shoes. I'm not at all saying we should dumb stories down, because young people today are smart. They're better educated than any generation that preceded them. But we need to find out what they're interested in and address the news to



them. They're young. They're not at a stage in their lives where they own property and are home by 6 or 6:30 at night."

Woodruff is far from alone in pointing to Jon Stewart as a way of commenting on serious news so that it's entertaining without being aimed at the lowest common denominator. For instance, Saint Michael's College journalism professor David T.Z. Mindich, a former CNN assignment editor and the author of *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News* (2005), says that *The Daily Show* is consid-

## The Daily Show is seen as a smarter alternative to CNN.

erably more intelligent than a lot of what passes for news programming on television these days, especially on cable.

"If you can contrast *The Daily Show* with a typical hour on CNN now," Mindich says, citing the evening talk shows hosted by Glenn Beck and Nancy Grace, as well as *Showbiz Tonight*, "the only conclusion that we can reach is that the CNN executives think that we're idiots. In contrast, *The Daily Show* assumes that we're intelligent people capable of sophisticated thought."

Surveys show that news interest and voter turnout among

young people was up slightly in 2004 and '06, a likely reflection of worries over the war in Iraq. Mindich says that's borne out by conversations he's had with young people since writing his book—and he notes that the consequences of not paying attention to the news can be a government whose officials do not fear having to suffer any consequences for their actions.

"One of the clearest examples of this is Abu Ghraib," Mindich says, referring to the notorious abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers. "You'd think that days after Abu Ghraib, [then-secretary of defense Donald] Rumsfeld would have been out. But the Bush administration was operating under the assumption—perhaps the correct assumption—that bad news would just blow over. So nobody in power was held accountable."

**IF THERE'S ONE** downward trend that appears irreversible, it is the cratering circulation of daily newspapers, caused in large part by the near-total abandonment of daily papers by young adults.

Peter Kadzis, executive editor of the weekly *Phoenix* newspapers, in Boston, Providence, and Portland, says studies of



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the *Phoenix's* core demographic—readers in their late 20s and early 30s—show two trends. First, with Americans marrying, having children, and buying their first houses later than ever, they have less need for the nuts-and-bolts news about government and community goings-on that are the typical fare of daily papers. Second, young adults are accustomed to using media that are well-designed and easy to use—cell phones, laptops, and iPods. The broadsheet newspaper (though not as broad as it used to be) is seen by this age group as a 19th-century relic, says Kadzis, who presided over a 2005 redesign to make the *Phoenix* papers more magazine-like in appearance.

“We’re in the trenches with this age group, because if we lose them, we’ve got no one else to get,” says Kadzis. (Disclosure: I worked with Kadzis at the *Phoenix* from 1991 through 2005, and continue to be an occasional contributor to the paper.)

Daily newspaper executives understand the problem, which is why they’ve been so aggressive about pursuing younger readers online. It’s a difficult challenge; despite the long hours young adults spend on the Internet, they’re not necessarily looking for news. And even if they are, that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re going to visit the Web sites of local newspapers.

Still, the region’s two biggest dailies, the *Globe* and the *Herald*, have enjoyed some success on the Internet. Nielsen/NetRatings reports that the *Globe's* Boston.com site attracted 4.2 million unique users in June, making it the fifth-most-popular news site in the country, and that BostonHerald.com drew 1.2 million unique users, good for 30th place. (A technical aside: BostonHerald.com’s internal count showed 4.4 million unique users in June. Experts say such a disparity is not unusual, and there’s widespread frustration with Nielsen’s methodology, which is based on surveying people by phone. Nevertheless, the Nielsen numbers are the only ones available for making apples-to-apples comparisons.) The evidence also suggests that the papers’ Web sites are attracting a younger audience than their print versions are. Boston.com, for example, reports that 54 percent of its users are between 25 and 44; by contrast, the median reader of the *Globe's* print edition is 46, according to the paper.

Both Boston.com and BostonHerald.com rely heavily on blogs, multimedia, interactivity, and featury material. Much of this might appear fluffier than what’s in print. But is it condescending?

No, says Dave Beard, the editor of Boston.com, who argues that members of a generation who’ve been putting together PowerPoint presentations since they were in grade school aren’t necessarily going to sit still and read a long story on a computer screen. He’s focused on pulling in readers for the *Globe's* longer stories through online features such as a slide show on what you could buy with the \$456 billion spent on the war in Iraq. (Some answers: 30 Big Digs; 52,615 years of Daisuke Matsuzaka’s contract; or five and a half years of

feeding and educating the world's poor.) "I think the impact of that is much more than another 2,000-word article on what we're doing in Iraq," says Beard.

Adds Kerry Purcell, director of content development for Herald Interactive: "It's very difficult to get younger people involved in reading newspapers, even getting online to learn what is happening. But I think most news organizations ought to, first of all, get the readers involved with more user-generated content." For instance, BostonHerald.com (which

## Young readers can get involved through more user-generated content.

underwent a spiffy redesign in September) published reader reviews of the Police concert earlier this year, and posted a survey asking users whether they would read "spoilers" giving away the ending of the last Harry Potter novel. The site also had a notable success with posting the payrolls of public employees this past spring—so much so that the Web traffic crashed the paper's server.

Two other 24-hour news organizations in Boston—WBUR

radio (90.9 FM) and New England Cable News—don't have any specific strategies for attracting young people but are pursuing on-demand delivery systems that younger users would presumably find attractive.

Some of WBUR's programs are already available via free podcasts through outlets such as Apple's iTunes online store. Also, the new weekly *Radio Boston* program, hosted by former WCVB-TV (Channel 5) reporter David Boeri, had a strong Web presence even before its on-air debut. "You walk down Commonwealth Avenue, and all you see are white earbuds, and those people aren't listening to the radio. Those people are listening to downloaded content," says John Davidow, the station's news director and managing editor. According to Sam Fleming, managing director of news and programming, 18 percent of WBUR's audience is under 35, and another 22 percent is under 45. With an average age of 48, he says, WBUR listeners are about four years younger than those of news-oriented NPR affiliates nationwide.

Much of the news video at NECN is available online (the station is a content partner with the *Globe* at Boston.com) and can even be accessed through cell phones and personal digital assistants. But Tom Melville, NECN's assistant news director, resists the idea that young people need to be ap-



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## MASS. MEDIA

proached differently from the rest of the television news audience. "The people who are dying in Iraq right now are young people," he says. "We're very committed to covering, from a local angle, the war in Iraq. I think it's the most important story of our time, and we get a very positive response."

But even if local news organizations are doing a reasonably good job of repositioning their content for digital delivery, is that enough? The buzz phrase in online media for the past year or so has been "Web 2.0." Get past the hype, and it means this: Increasingly, users of online media see themselves not as passive consumers but as members of a community who create, share, and discuss content. If news organizations want to engage young people on their own turf, then that is the paradigm they're going to have to embrace.

**WHAT DOES A** successful Web 2.0 news outlet look like? Well, it might look something like Blue Mass. Group, a liberal political site started in 2004 by three youngish Democratic activists. Blue Mass. Group is small (it attracts 2,500 to 3,000 unique users a day). It does little in the way of original reporting, relying mainly on links to the mainstream media (though it does include some on-the-ground accounts). And it's noncommercial, despite the presence of a few ads.

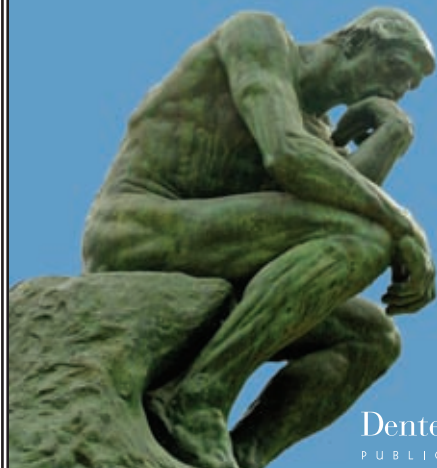
But Blue Mass. Group is built on a software platform that has enabled a community essentially to assemble itself. It's a group blog. Anyone can post items, and any of the site's three co-editors can promote those items to the "front page," making them more readily available to casual readers. The comments are as lively as the posts. Blue Mass. Group can be engaging or enraging, and it can be criticized for giving Gov. Deval Patrick the benefit of the doubt even though he doesn't always deserve it. (To be fair, Patrick does take an occasional hit.) But it's rarely dull.

David Kravitz, one of the co-editors, says he has no way of knowing Blue Mass. Group's demographics, but he suspects they skew young based on some of the live events the site has sponsored. "I think that younger people are just more accustomed to interacting with the world through a medium like the Internet than through a medium like radio [or TV or newspapers], which is more like other people talking to you," says Kravitz, a lawyer who is himself a not-particularly-young 43. "To the extent that blogs are able to bring in a somewhat younger demographic than *The CBS Evening News*, maybe that's why, because it does become a conversation."

Can mainstream news organizations reinvent themselves through conversation and community? John Wilpers thinks

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so. The founding editor of *BostonNOW* (he was let go in August, though he's still consulting on Web projects), Wilpers helped put together the paper's unusual hybrid model—letting readers set up blogs on the paper's Web site, and running excerpts from those blogs, as well as from other blogs in Greater Boston, in the print edition.

To be sure, the paper itself is pretty uninspiring, but the model is interesting, potentially giving readers what Wilpers describes as a sense of ownership in the newspaper. "If they feel they have a stake in something, if they're a member of something and have a say in its direction and they get their viewpoints out there, I think that's really powerful," Wilpers says. "And it can bring people back to the print medium."

Young people are already involved in non-news-related social media. Social-networking sites, especially MySpace and Facebook, have been enormously successful, with their mostly young users spending hours tweaking their profiles with photos, videos, blogs, and lists of their favorite musicians and movies. Politicians have also been quicker to embrace social media than have news organizations, and most of the current presidential candidates have set up shop on both sites. YouTube, another type of social network that allows users to share videos, has become the go-to site for raw political content, whether it's former US Sen. George Allen's "macaca" meltdown or positive footage posted by the campaigns themselves. Pauline Millard, a 30-year-old former Associated Press reporter who's now online editor for the newspaper trade magazine *Editor & Publisher*, believes news sites need to adopt some of those participatory features.

"I think it works because the young people actually get to participate in it," she says. "And one of the big things that newspapers are overlooking is that if you're a young person, you already create content all the time."

Perhaps the most popular example of social-media-meet-the-news is Digg.com, a site that allows users to submit news stories that are then rated by other members of the community. The more people who "digg" a story, the higher it moves toward the top of the list. Digg tends to be heavy on tech stories, and the most popular political items are often silly or of dubious provenance. But the idea of a community forming itself around the news is compelling.

In fact, shortly after issuing his *Young People and News* report, the Kennedy School's Tom Patterson put out another Shorenstein study showing that Digg and news sites based on other kinds of participatory models, such as Newsvine and Reddit, were growing exponentially faster than traditional news sites—with Digg exploding from fewer than 2 million unique users in April 2006 to more than 15 million in April 2007. Digg could conceivably pave the way for more serious attempts to build news communities, such as NewsTrust, an experimental site whose users are asked to rate stories on such journalistic values as importance, sourcing, and fairness.

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Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Washington-based Project for Excellence in Journalism, is optimistic about the power of technology and community to revitalize the news business. "I think that, to some extent, these Web sites like Digg and Reddit represent something really meaningful," Rosenstiel says. "Digg's got really big numbers. There's something going on there." The idea, Rosenstiel adds, is to "make it participatory—it's a dialogue now, not a lecture. People don't just want to be able to complain afterwards, they want to converse." Social media, he says, allows users to "re-edit the agenda," adding that news organizations need to "give up some control and give up some of that omniscient-narrator pose."

**NONE OF THIS**, of course, is meant to suggest that transforming a typical 25-year-old news ignoramus into a well-informed citizen is simply a matter of persuading her to watch Jon Stewart, check in on a few news sites, and then turn her loose on a social-media network or two to discuss what she's learned with like-minded young people. The news is a hard sell, especially in a time of affluence and a war that, thanks to the all-volunteer military, can seem very distant from the life of a typical young adult living in Massachusetts.

The ongoing reinvention of the media that's being driven by the Internet could lead to a better, more democratic, more decentralized way of staying informed—a type of participatory news that could evolve into an example of civic engagement in and of itself. But for participatory news to work, you need participants. And the evidence suggests that young adults (most of them, anyway) are not using these new tools to learn about the world around them.

When Matt Storrin was editor of the *Globe*, he once told me there was nothing wrong with newspaper circulation that a depression and a draft wouldn't cure. Indeed, in many ways the disconnect between young people and the news is a product of prosperity and, if not exactly peace, then at least the security of knowing that the government can't compel you to fight and die in a foreign land.

Even so, we need a certain amount of information in order to govern ourselves, to be full participants in civic life, to vote knowledgeably on matters of more significance than who ought to win the latest version of *American Idol*. The late social critic Neil Postman warned us a quarter-century ago that we were "amusing ourselves to death." If anything has changed, it's that the trends he warned of then have accelerated. Yes, the news media need to evolve. But young people—and all of us—also need to get over our self-absorption and start paying attention to what's going on, too. **CW**

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