



ENGAGING TELEVISION NEWS AUDIENCES USING SOCIAL MEDIA

[Document subtitle]



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This paper will discuss many aspects of the large issues that face the future of TV news as the Millennial generation enters the global audience in our attention economy. To begin, the research will expand on the history of television news, some transitions the genre has made over time and where TV news stands today in a media system that is overly saturated with content. Beyond the history of TV news, this paper will explore social media engagement and news. The explosion of social media in the past decades must be addressed due to its large impact on news, audience engagement and the role news plays in social media. After discussing social media and news, the paper will dive deeper into understanding the effects social media has on young audience engagement with TV news; how the Millennial generation's perceptions are effected, the impact social media has on civic engagement and the role social media plays in TV news with regards to young audience trends. To wrap up the paper, the research will propose a potential solution to TV news' ever prominent issue of audience engagement. The paper will expand on participatory journalism and news engagement; how participatory journalism can be used in TV news, the assumptions the solutions makes and the benefits of this potential solution. Overall, this paper will discuss the issues of audience engagement with TV news, where the issues stem from and how the genre can change its approach to ensure an engaged civic audience in the future.

Television was something novel in 1949 when the Canadian government's national television system was given approval for development. By 1951, CBC television was broadcasting news and other programs in both English and French¹. By the end of the decade,

¹ Desbarats, Peter. 1996. *Guide To Canadian news Media*. Toronto: Harcourt brace & Company, 44

the private network CTV was established bringing with it the growth of TV. When TV news was first aired there was a slow appreciation within the industry for its capacity to reach audiences in a more engaging manner. Everyone from government workers to journalists resisted the change from their beloved radio programs; however, as the years passed TV news became increasingly popular. By 1964, CBC had released the famous "This Hour Has 7 Days" public affairs show, which to this day remains one of the most controversial programs in Canadian broadcast history. Previous to the expansion of these popular news programs, citizens generally tuned in to large events such as Queen Elizabeth's first televised speech to the Commonwealth in 1957. Her speech grabbed the attention of 4.5 million Canadians and more than 70 million Americans. Blast forward to the 1980s and within that short window TV had reached its peak. For the first time in 20 years, audience sizes began to decrease substantially. By the time the Generation Xers were in their teens cable TV was ready to offer this new audience programming that was about anything but news. From here society would see a steady normalization of passive civilians as the entertainment genre became overly abundant on TV. Shresthova states that "this was created through the... false dichotomies of commercial versus political, and participation versus resistance"². These dichotomies shaped TV news media's landscape and in consequence journalists took to the street with MOS interviews looking to engage their audience with news. Unfortunately, MOS interviews did not produce the diversity of perspectives audiences were looking for and as a result ratings and civic engagement with the news plummeted. At this stage, audiences were unengaged and left to discuss the

² Shresthova, Melissa M. Brough and Sangita. 2012. "Fandom meets activism: Rethinking civic and political participation." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 12.

marketing and publicity content they consumed over news. Moving forward to the present, TV news is left to compete in an overly supplied attention economy. In consequence, “research claims that journalists tend to prefer soft news for public attention”³. Unlike the entertainment genres which utilises social television (also called ‘second screen’), TV news has failed to market their programming as a social experience that is no longer a one-way report. Furthermore, TV news sees young generations as not newsworthy yet, assuming that once they become of age they will automatically start consuming news.⁴ Moving forward, TV news needs to change their approach in order to engage all audiences in the consumption of news; not only for their benefit, but for the benefit of a democratic society. Today’s economy is driven by an economy of networks⁵ which accelerates the decomposition of the fragile news audience. Although research shows YouTube has a news specific platform⁶, more action must be taken to further engage young and old audiences with news. In summary, TV news has transformed dramatically since the 1950s and will continue to change at great speeds with an engaged or unengaged audiences. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders to ensure an engaged audience is developed.

Moving past the fierce competition TV news faces with entertainment programming lies the titan of social media. Social media plays a large role in the audience’s engagement, and the news, while different social media platforms also play different roles in this landscape. To start, social media developed when most Millennials were entering young adulthood which may have

³ Gearhart, Sherice. 2014. "Social Media in Television News: The Effects of Twitter and Facebook Comments on Journalism." *Electronic News* 243-259. 247

⁴ Poindexter, Paula. 2012. *Millennials, News and Social Media*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 121.

⁵ Willis, Shayne Bowman and Chris. 2003. *We Media*. Reston: American Press Institute, 13.

⁶ Poindexter., 130.

determined the fate of news engagement for future generations. This fate was sealed by the 'social' in social media. "While social media can be used for professional networking and as a platform for breaking news and communication marketing and political messages, it's the social in social media that has turned upside down our understanding about the factors facilitating and impeding engagement with news"⁷. This glorification of constant socializing distracts audiences and undervalues the priority of being informed; consequently, "the audience is unlikely to engage with news"⁸. The use of social media not only directly competes with news as audience's attention is limited, but also indirectly as time is consumed on social media platforms instead of spent in normal socialization activities such as discussing the news with friends. To this extent, TV news should recognize that engaging viewers with relevant news stories will enable them to engage further with the stories. In consequences, this will lead to a deeper understanding and greater retention of TV news. These relevant stories also have "the potential to develop a more loyal and trustworthy relationship with [the] audiences"⁹. These more engaged audiences tend to be more demanding than passive consumers; however as mentioned above, the network economy suggests that information, such as news, is becoming more referral driven. The referral theory explains why some stories become viral upon being aired live while others don't. However, beyond the negative impacts of social media on TV news and audience engagement, research has shown that audiences' that viewed the 2008 Presidential Debate on YouTube had reduced cynicism in regards to politics¹⁰. This lead to the

⁷ Poindexter., 18.

⁸ Poindexter., 25.

⁹ Willis., 53.

¹⁰ McKinney, Mitchell S. 2009. "Not Your Parents' Presidential Debates: Examining the Effects of the CNN/YouTube Debates on Young Citizens' Civic Engagement." *Communication Studies* 392-406, 400

largest young voter turnout since 1972¹¹. More research has stated that audiences engage via social media “to participate in the debate, to make their own contribution, to help spread news and ideas, and to attract other users’ attention”¹². Viewers also used social media to see what others think, and to compare the engaged audience’s views with their own¹³. In conclusion, the effects on news from social media consist of a competition for attention which leads to an unengaged audience; however, if TV news can overcome this deficit, TV news will be able to harness some of social media’s positive effects on news which include of the increase of audience engagement, ratings, and most importantly distribution through referrals.

The primary audience the TV news genre should concentrate their social media engagement on is Millennials. Research expanding on Millennials and their perception of TV News, their civic engagement and their generation trends will be discussed further here. For starters, youth’s current engagement with news consists of SNS (Social Network Site) comments (mainly Twitter comments for hard news and Facebook comments for soft news). Beyond that Millennials minor engagement, their perceptions of news are predominantly negative. As a consequence, research shows that Millennials associated a large number of negatively connoted words (useless, boring, biased, propaganda, lies, garbage, crappy) to news; while, other research by, “University of Florida journalism scholar Amy Zerba found in her focus groups that young adults say the news is redundant”¹⁴. All these negative thoughts and feelings towards news in general don’t bode well for TV news. Furthermore, “Millennials are critical of

¹¹ McKinney., 401.

¹² Selva., 167

¹³ Selva., 167

¹⁴ Poindexter., 113

the news coverage [on] their generation”¹⁵ due to the bias image programs like 60 Minutes portray this generation to be. The last thing Millennials want is to have a media outlet tell them they aren’t newsworthy. On the contrary, this generation wants to interact with the news, and share it with their peers; however, to date they have struggled to accomplish this. Generation Me, as some call them, are looking for more quality stories on themselves, on a quick, accessible and free platform. Unfortunately, the day TV news is all such characters is far from now and shows that both the media outlets and young audiences are going to have to make compromises before this issue has passed. For example, one College Sophomore stated, “We are so lazy, like we’re only gonna know something if it’s like in our face... So it we have to work to find stuff out, it’s gonna be even less likely that we’re gonna be politically active and like know what’s going on”¹⁶. Currently, beyond the misalignment of the two parties, TV news engagement amongst young audiences is still happening. As a study showed, for example, that young viewers who watched the 2008 Presidential Debate hosted on YouTube had a decrease in political cynicism which leads to a more civically engaged population¹⁷. Both YouTube videos, such as the example above, and Facebook comments both succeeded in mobilizing Millennials to vote. One study suggests that having Millennial aged news reporters could solve a major part of the issue¹⁸, while others suggest that “more positive stories and fewer celebrity stories,”¹⁹ would help increase young audiences’ civic engagement with TV news. All in all, young

¹⁵ Poindexter,. 35

¹⁶ Vidali, Debra Spitulnik. 2010. "Millennial Encounters with Mainstream Television News: Excess, Void, and Points of Engagement." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 372-388, 376.

¹⁷ McKinney,. 400.

¹⁸ Poindexter,. 119.

¹⁹ Poindexter,. 118

audiences are looking for TV news that is “fun to hear”²⁰, and if TV news catered slightly to this need, young audience engagement would rise. Until changes as such are made, the following negative trends will continue. Research found that young audiences were moving more to online news sources²¹, and that “a negative experience with news in the classroom can lead to a life-long turn off”²². However, these negative trends can be countered if TV news paid more attention to young audiences, “research shows that if you pay attention to young people as an audience that they will come”²³. In conclusion, TV news and young audiences clearly have a disconnect that has been a result of both parties’ actions. Not only do Millennials have unrealistic expectations for news, but TV news broadcaster see the entire young audience as not newsworthy.

The recognition of this disconnect is step one to understanding and solving the issue so that future generations can continue consuming TV news, staying informed and most importantly civically engaging. Beyond this critical first step lies multiple solutions. The research for this paper lead to one particular solutions, participatory journalism, that has already been adopted by certain TV news broadcaster such as CNN. This section will define participatory journalism, discuss the assumptions regarding this solution and explore the benefits of the model. Participatory journalism is “the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and

²⁰ Vidalj, 381.

²¹ Vidalj, 383.

²² Poindexter, 39

²³ Poindexter, 115

relevant information that a democracy requires”²⁴. Essentially, if TV news were to adopt the model of participatory journalism, audiences would be more engaged with the stories because they would play a vital role; not only in the consumption of the TV news, but also in the production and distribution of TV news. As founder of Ohmynews, a Korean news outlet, Yeon-Ho believes, “every citizen can be a reporter”²⁵. Some assumptions of the model suggest “participatory journalism is a big piece of our information future”²⁶. Another assumption is that journalists and TV news broadcasters will know less than their viewers on stories and finally, that this model would provide “free” content. Expanding on that last point, free content would be possible because citizen reporters would be providing their labor as a resource. As Brandel states, “it doesn’t take new resources, but a different deployment of resources”²⁷. This participatory journalistic model views the audience as collaborators in journalism; as a result, this deepens their involvement and improves to quality of stories told²⁸. As one may assume, there are a plethora benefits in enabling the audience. The research conducted found a list of benefits to the participatory solution; no barrier for entry, “a broader base of sources who are experts in wide ranging subject matters”²⁹, and the synergistic benefits to society. In summary, the solution presented is currently in its early stages of adoption with news such as iSeeChange, iReport and Ohmynews leading the way for participatory journalism. This solution should be seriously discussed by TV news broadcasters as their disconnect with young audiences

²⁴ Willis,. 9.

²⁵ Willis,. 12.

²⁶ Willis, vi.

²⁷ Koski, Olvia. 2015. "Listen Up: How involving news consumers in the reporting process can improve stories and enhance audience engagement." *Nieman Reports* 32-35, 35.

²⁸ Koski,. 33.

²⁹ Willis,. 56.

continues to grow. The objective of TV news genre should be to “educate the public about journalism’s mission of providing people with the information they need to be free and self-governing”³⁰.

Currently the TV news genre has been struggling to maintain high ratings as its core audience diminishes continuously, meanwhile Millennials are eager to become a newsworthy audience given the right circumstances. In conclusion to this research on the TV news genre, it is clear that social media, social television and a participatory model are required for the success on the genre and democracy. Although perceptions of the news genre are mainly negative from younger generations, the solutions provided will not only increase news engagement and young audience civic engagement, but it will also allow the TV news genre to compete against the entertainment genre. Given TV’s rapid growth to the internet and the TV news genres relatively rapid decay in our attention economy, the TV news genre will need all available support and resources to stay relevant. It’s time for news audiences to play a role in the production, distribution and consumptions of TV news, stop allowing TV news broadcasters to produce soft news and play a civically engaged role in their democracy.

³⁰ Poindexter, . 31.

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