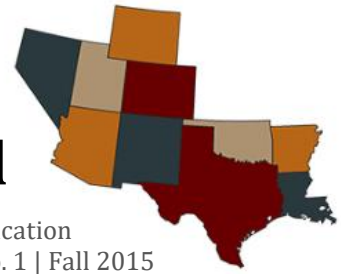


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## Hazy habits: What kinds of news do young people want?

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## **Hazy habits: What kinds of news do young people want?**

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## **Hazy habits: What kinds of news do young people want?**

### **Abstract**

Based in the climate of a digital culture, this study examines what kinds of news young adults seek, enjoy and share. Employing an online survey, respondents answered whether they enjoyed or avoided news stories from a list of 12 general categories of news. Sharing habits based on preference for these categories were examined as well. Findings indicated a clear separation between preferences for hard or soft news and that respondents were more likely to share news stories related to topics they enjoyed. Results also indicated that young adults enjoyed a variety of news and that satirical sources had little influence on enjoyment or avoidance.

Keywords: News, online sharing of news, young adults, news enjoyment, news avoidance

### **Hazy habits: What kinds of news do young people want?**

News organizations are understandably concerned about how best to attract young adult audiences, in part to get them more engaged in public opinion and debate (see e.g., Mindich, 2005; Zerba, 2011). The number of young people who say they enjoy following the news “a lot” has fallen steadily each year since 2008 (Pew, Sept. 2012). Various studies have shown news consumption that begins at an early age will likely become habit-forming (see e.g. Stone & Wetherington, 1979; Lee & Delli Carpini, 2010), but how will that tendency play out in the context of the rampant declines in newspaper circulation and broadcast news audiences?

Earlier studies about habits have generally focused on the medium itself and not the type of news in which an individual is interested (See e.g., Robinson, 1980). However, habits have changed since the days when parents watched the evening news and read the newspapers aloud during family dinners. The advent of the Internet, , smartphones, tablets and Kindles, among other technological advances, has allowed individuals of all ages not only to access news and entertainment whenever they wish, but also to customize the way they access that content. Consumers can design their information feeds to include or exclude anything they wish. So young adults may be using online sources such as news aggregators (e.g., Google News), specific news organizations (e.g., the *Chicago Tribune* or NPR), gossip-focused entertainment websites (e.g., TMZ.com)—or any combination of these and more.

Given this nearly infinite variety, attempting to figure out the habits and preferences of young adults in their news consumption is of paramount importance to news producers. When people can get their news from anywhere, the focus of research must shift to news topics, tone and formats. This study tackles that idea by examining the views and habits of young adults

concerning the kinds of news they seek, enjoy and share. The research questions focused on the types of news young adults enjoy/avoid and the factors that predict the variety or breadth of their enjoyment of news and information.

The findings from this study should benefit both scholars and journalism practitioners. Scholars can benefit from learning more about the evolution of news values and motivations of a younger generation of news users. Similarly, practitioners can use these findings to help inform their content strategy. It might be possible to reconsider how to target this audience more effectively after learning more about young adults' interests and habits in news consumption.

### **Literature Review**

Close to one-third of Americans ages 18–24 said “they got no news yesterday either from digital news platforms, including cell phones and social networks, or traditional news platforms,” according to a recent study by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (Pew, Sept. 2012). That proportion has not changed substantially since 2010, and it marks a sharp difference between young adults and older Americans. The same study found that 41 percent of all adults “had used a social networking site on the previous day,” an increase of 10 percentage points from 2010. Understandably, the percentage of all Americans who get news from social network sites has increased in that time, and 31 percent of all Americans ages 18–24 surveyed in 2012 said they regularly “see news on” social network sites (Pew, Sept. 2012).

In effect then, the Pew study results suggest that most young adults are getting news and information, but their habits are much different from those of older adults and need further exploration. That is, the examination of news habits today needs to be less about media platforms (such as newspapers vs. television, or newspapers vs. magazines) and more about the kinds of

information in which consumers are interested. The Internet has changed the way individuals receive, seek and consume news. Before the early 2000s, the public's access to news was limited to local newspapers, radio and TV; network television news; and a handful of national news magazines. Among all Americans ages 18–24, the Pew study found that 60 percent get news from online/digital sources, while only 43 percent use traditional news sources, including TV and radio (Pew, Sept. 2012).

In contrast to the recent Pew report, a comparison of several studies of Americans' news habits conducted from 1946 to 1977 focused on time spent reading newspapers vs. time spent reading books and magazines, noting that the amount of time spent reading newspapers had declined for all age groups (Robinson, 1980). “[T]he decline of the daily newspaper habit did not originate in the 1970s, but was already evident in the 1950s and 1960s. ... The 20–29 age group shows the greatest decline” (Robinson, 1980, p. 142).

The Internet introduced a high level of specialization into the news media environment, vastly expanding the number of news sources available to the audience (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Tewksbury, 2005). This also increases a person's ability to zero in on well-liked topics. As Tewksbury explains, “Audience fragmentation is most likely to occur in the joint presence of *audience* and *outlet* specialization” (2005, p. 333, italics in original). Audience specialization occurs when individuals choose specific news topics (e.g., sports or politics), thereby limiting their exposure to other types of news content. Outlet specialization occurs when a media entity differentiates itself and its content to appeal more to a particular audience, or “the tendency for Web sites to attract distinct groups of users and uses” (2005, pp. 343–344). Analyzing page views at 30 news websites in 2000, Tewksbury found audience differences even among daily

newspaper websites such as the *Seattle Times* and the *San Diego Union-Tribune* (youngest audience), compared with the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and the *Detroit News* (oldest audience).

However, other research has indicated that outlet specialization may have limited impact. In an analysis of 1,603 articles from 10 news websites in France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States, Quandt (2008) found the sites shared a similar emphasis on traditional news topics, led by national politics and the economy. He found considerable differences among the five countries but “striking similarities” among sites within each country (2008, p. 733). Perhaps then, while audiences tend to engage with specific areas of news they find interesting rather than a broad mix of topics, they still choose a relatively small number of sites from which to gather news, resulting in far less outlet variation than the Internet makes possible. This concern has been longstanding among some media producers, but it has recently been supported in work by Hindman (2008, 2007), who found that individuals visited a limited number of online news outlets in general, and that those sites still largely reflected stories offered in traditional news media.

Despite these findings from studies done within the last decade on news habits, interactivity and recent technological advances have allowed the individual to become the creator and distributor of content online. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2012) found Internet users very likely to make use of the interactivity offered to them through the Internet. Through email, comments, and social media such as Twitter and Facebook, individuals can become a news source for others. Hermida (2010) describes how Twitter has affected news gathering and distribution, noting that often the conversation on Twitter about an event becomes the reporting on an event. Hermida explains:

“Traditionally the journalist has been the mechanism to filter, organise [sic] and interpret this information and deliver the news in ready-made packages. Such a

role was possible in an environment where access to the means of media production was limited. But the thousands of acts of journalism taking place on Twitter every day make it impossible for an individual journalist to identify the collective sum of knowledge contained in the micro-fragments, and bring meaning to the data” (2010, p. 4).

In the context of participatory journalism, the diversity of news sources for public consumption might be expanding more than some studies (Quandt, 2008; Hindman, 2007) seem to indicate. As individual perspectives on events become more common, each individual acts as both a voice (in communicating a perspective) and a gatekeeper (in choosing what to share).

*Sharing News:* A necessary step in examining news habits today is to look at what news items individuals are willing or likely to share with others. That is, aside from the information an individual seeks or enjoys, what kinds of news is she willing to give to others, through email, tweets, or interpersonal discussion, for example? Several studies have shown a link between involvement and the sharing of news stories interpersonally (Perloff, 1985; Levy & Windahl, 1984; Tan, 1980). Rubin and Perse define involvement as “a sense that certain communication content has personal relevance” (p. 62). This sense of involvement can be attached to the perceived importance of a news story, the enjoyment of the content by the consumer, or the overall interest one had in the story itself. Stories consumers considered particularly important were more likely to be discussed and passed on to others. Through their uses and gratifications research, Rubin and Perse found support for a distinction between entertainment and actual news-seeking behavior.<sup>1</sup> Whereas viewers who consumed news as entertainment were more likely to passively engage with news (effectively using it only as a way to spend some time), those who engaged in news seeking showed a much higher level of involvement/enjoyment with

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<sup>1</sup> This study employs some ideas behind uses and gratifications research, although it is not a uses and gratifications study, per se.



news content. As enjoyment and interest increased, so did the likelihood of discussing and sharing these news items.

Research has also indicated that the motivations for sharing news differ from those for viewing it. In a study examining the motivations of YouTube users for sharing news stories with other users from the site, Hanson and Haridakis (2008) found a relationship between sharing and establishing a type of gatekeeping identity within the online media landscape, where the act of media selection and then sharing with others helps a user feel she is establishing a unique voice. Sharing, in this scenario, allows a user to function as both a gatekeeper and a distributor. In many cases, these individuals are seeking to establish themselves as a gatekeeper and thus an “expert” in news judgment. The present study is interested less in the user’s goals in sharing (e.g., building a reputation) than in the types of news content a news consumer is likely to share.

It is possible that the motivations found by Hanson and Haridakis (2008) are linked with the involvement dimension in Rubin and Perse (1987) in a way that incentivizes sharing behavior. The present study has adapted involvement into enjoyment of the news type or topic. The Internet has made it possible not only to discuss news, but also to more easily share it. Links to text, video or audio news stories can be shared through social networking sites and email. While the concept of building an identity or reputation through what a user shares was not a part of the Rubin and Perse study, it could be that identity or reputation construction is an extension of enjoyment facilitated by technology.

Individuals’ decisions about what to share can affect the extent to which news items are viewed and spread. In an online survey of 1,682 Canadians, Hermida et al. (2012) found that more respondents said they preferred news links and recommendations from friends and family on social media sites (43 percent) than links from journalists or news organizations (20 percent).

It follows then that news values—as perceived by both the news producers and consumers themselves—may also influence how news is enjoyed and shared. This is addressed in the following section.

### **News Values**

The concept of news values harks back to ideas taught in journalism schools to help students determine what news is and what it is not. In effect, the more these values apply to a story, the more newsworthy it is deemed to be. Newsworthiness is generally demonstrated by a story's having more of these values and to a higher degree. This argument was supported empirically by Lee, who said that “news values are routinely used journalistic criteria that help journalists make decisions about the amount of coverage of an event” (2009, 184). The most common news values found in both textbooks and scholarly articles about news decision-making include prominence, impact, timeliness, proximity, unusualness, and controversy (Mencher 2000); objectivity (Gans 1979); surprise, magnitude, relevance, good/bad news, and entertainment (Harcup and O’Neill 2001); celebrity, visual and market appeal (Weaver et al., 2007); and human interest (Shoemaker and Reese 1996; Schaudt and Carpenter, 2009).

In one of the first studies of news values, Galtung and Ruge (1965) proposed twelve influential elements for the selection of news, including frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance (prediction of something to happen), unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to persons, and reference to something negative. In a later study, Harcup and O’Neill (2001) examined these values in an empirical analysis of British news and determined that unambiguity, reference to elite people and frequency were the most commonly encountered values. The least likely values

to be encountered were consonance and composition (i.e., less newsworthy events that appear to “balance” the presentation of news).

Based on their study, the two authors proposed a revision of the Galtung and Ruge (1965) values, suggesting the following: (1) stories about powerful people or institutions; (2) stories about celebrities or entertainment; (3) stories that are entertaining or are about show business or other entertaining things; (4) surprise; (5) bad news; (6) good news; (7) magnitude (in terms of the number of people or impact); (8) relevance to the audience; (9) follow-up, or continued coverage of stories already in the news; and (10) stories that fit the news organization’s agenda (Harcup and O’Neill, 2001). Specifically, they discussed entertainment emerging as a value, noting that numerous stories included references to celebrities, humor or sex. A recent study also found that the presence of opinion in news content has also become more prominent as a value for young adults (Armstrong, McAdams & Cain, 2015).

In a cross-cultural study of newsworthiness, Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) suggested two typologies that can encompass all news values: *social significance*, or stories that have relevance to the social system, and *deviance*, or stories about things that are unique or different from the norm. Those values that fall into the social significance typology include importance, impact, consequence, or interest, while those in the deviance typology include novelty, oddity, conflict, controversy and sensationalism. Another study on news values examined the most-viewed stories on the *Arizona Republic*’s community websites to determine the news values displayed in those stories (Schaudt and Carpenter, 2009). The researchers found that conflict and proximity were the news values most preferred by readers, while timeliness and prominence were the least preferred. The authors also noted that although news values appear to be revered in journalistic

circles, news consumers may not share the same ideals, which suggests a disconnect between the producers of news and the audience.

Weaver et al. (2007) employed three cohort studies over a 20-year period to examine the views of journalists of their audiences. The studies generally found that journalists generally do not gather input from their audiences when determining content. Specifically, in 1982, 42 percent of journalists said they used audience-based research, while by 2002, that number had dropped to 30 percent. In effect, these findings suggest that journalists determine news content for the audience without input from the audience itself, a result which was later supported by the findings of Schaudt and Carpenter (2009). Further, Chen (2011) asserted that news is what is shared by users, at least on Facebook. “News organizations’ cohesive worldview ... simply may not jibe with the way most of the organizations’ readers see the world” (¶5). To further examine the news values of consumers, Fry (2008) employed focus groups comprising various segments of news consumers to determine their views on what is considered news. Most relevant for this research was the finding that consumers enjoy entertainment news as well as more serious news topics, and they demonstrated the ability to differentiate between the two categories.

This idea becomes particularly compelling when one examines the interest of news consumers. That is, are those individuals with an interest in news content—or perhaps possessing a journalism background—willing to share and utilize different types of information content than those without such characteristics? The current research attempts to determine what role these news values have in predicting the news habits of young adults. That is, are young adults particularly attracted to news that demonstrates certain news values? Conversely, does the presence of certain news values detract from their enjoyment of news content? And finally, can

we find differences in the types of news consumed by college students who are majoring in mass communication and those who are not?

### **Young adults**

Young adults have been defined in several ways, although the general view is that adults in their twenties must be included. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau (2011) defines young adults as ages 18–34; the Pew Internet & American Life Project (March 2012) defines the group as ages 18–29; the Pew People & the Press study (September 2012) specifies ages 18–24. Often these young adults are defined as the millennial generation, persons born between 1980 and 2000 (Hartman and McCambridge, 2011), but other studies have defined young adults as 15–25 (Meijer, 2007) or “young people” as ages 11–36 (Mindich, 2005). The sample in the present study fits within all three groupings, as it is composed predominantly of respondents ages 18–24.

This general demographic is of great interest to the information, entertainment and advertising industries, so the media consumption habits of young adults constitutes a key research area. More than 30 years ago, research found “a pronounced negative correlation between age and the enjoyment derived from newspaper reading” (Robinson, 1980, p. 150). Prior work has found that traditional newspapers are not appealing to young adults because they don’t have the time to read newspapers and cannot find relevance for their lives in that news (Zerba, 2011). Respondents in Zerba’s study indicated that young readers would enjoy shorter, to-the-point stories, with more diversity and a mix of entertainment and hard news. Lewis (2008) found that those young readers with a positive perception of news planned to seek out more traditional media as they aged, but those with a negative perception were more likely to seek out satirical news programs, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (see also Meijer, 2007; Jarvis, Stroud and Gilliland, 2009).

## **The present study**

The current work explores the kinds of news and information that young adults enjoy and the types they avoid. Journalists and journalism educators generally teach that news judgment relies on a traditional list of news values. However, as noted above, the values enshrined on the list might not match the values sought by news consumers. Thus, it may be that the news judgment that determines news content is some distance removed from what consumers—particularly young adults—actually seek out in news content.

This study also examines what kinds of factors may influence the views of young adults about news content. Do certain news values impact their views? Prior work has found that young adults do not perceive timeliness and proximity as key values in news content, while the presence of opinion (or lack of objectivity) has become more accepted in their news value perceptions (See Armstrong, McAdams & Cain, 2015). A recent Pew study (Feb. 2012) found that overall, adults generally still favor objective and unbiased news over more opinionated accounts. However, with the popularity of TV shows such as *The Colbert Report* on Comedy Central and *The O'Reilly Factor* on Fox, perhaps it's time to check in with young adults to determine what kinds of news interest them.

In addition, this study examines the kinds of news that young adults typically want to share. That is, in addition to enjoying/avoiding particular topics in news content, what kinds of news are young adults likely to pass on to others? Finally, does one's having an interest and training in journalism influence the way they consume content? Do enjoyment and avoidance differ one's news background?

Based on the above rationale and literature review, the following research questions are proposed:

**RQ1a: What types of news do young adults enjoy?**

**RQ1b: What types of news do young adults avoid?**

**RQ2a: What factors predict the breadth of enjoyment that young adults get from news content?**

**RQ2b: What factors predict the breadth of avoidance that young adults employ in news content?**

## **Methods**

To examine these research questions, an online survey was conducted in the fall of 2011 with participant recruitments coming from six undergraduate classes at a large southeastern university. Data were collected October 12–27, 2011. The total  $n$  was 596, although 36 cases were excluded due to the respondent's failure to complete the entire survey. The final  $n$  for analysis was 560, with 62 percent female participants; and 66 percent who chose white as their race. Of that 560, 223 respondents (40 percent) reported that their major was in mass communication, with any of five specializations: journalism, telecommunications, public relations, advertising or media studies. The remaining 337 reported their major was something other than mass communication. We split the sample based on these two groups.

*Dependent variables:* Two main dependent variables were employed for this analysis: enjoyment of news and avoidance of news type. Respondents were asked to choose (yes/no) from a list of 12 general categories of news whether they enjoyed that type of news content. The categories were: Sports; Weather and natural disasters; Celebrities' lives; Events involving foreign governments; Economy/financial; Business and companies; Reviews of new movies, music or books; Events involving U.S. government; Events involving state or local government; Events involving crime, police or courts; Science, technology; Consumer products; or Others.

Those results were added together ( $M = 6.19$ ,  $SD = 2.50$ ) and a proportion of news enjoyment was created for each respondent. Using the same categories, respondents were asked to choose which they avoid or rarely seek out. Those results were also added together ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ) and a proportion of news avoidance was created for each respondent.

*News values:* Eight news values were selected for this analysis. The selection was based on an analysis of three prior scholarly studies (Harcup and O'Neill 2001; Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006; and Schaudt and Carpenter, 2009), one journalism textbook (Mencher, 2000), and one professional journalism instructor (Potter, 2008). Six of the values—prominence, timeliness, controversy, impact, unusualness, and proximity—appeared in three of the five sources, which made them the most commonly appearing.

Timeliness ( $r = .20$ ,  $M = 5.50$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) was constructed from a two-item index asking participants if they felt a story was news if it happened one month ago, even if they had just found out about it, and whether information that was new to them was news, even if it was a few days old.

Controversy ( $r = .39$ ,  $M = 7.09$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) was created from a two-item index asking participants if they enjoyed news stories where a difference of opinion was expressed and whether news often shows conflict or opposition.

Proximity ( $r = .47$ ,  $M = 6.78$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) was created from a two-item index asking participants whether they agreed that news about locations near them is more important than news from faraway places and whether U.S. news was more important to them than news from other countries.

Impact ( $\alpha = .78$ ,  $M = 12.59$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ) was created from a three-item index asking participants if they agreed that issues that affect a lot of people were news, or that the magnitude



of an event (such as the Japanese earthquake of 2011) makes it news, or whether it is important to them to be informed about news affecting a lot of people.

Prominence ( $r = .33$ ,  $M = 7.67$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) was created from a two-item index asking participants if they enjoyed knowing news that everyone is talking about and whether it was important to them to know if an event is being covered by a large number of outlets.

Oddity/unusualness ( $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 10.97$ ,  $SD = 2.28$ ) was created from a three-item index asking participants if they enjoyed getting news about odd events, if “News of the Weird” was among their favorite kinds of news, and if bizarre or unusual things that happen make good news stories.

Opinion (subjectivity) was created from a two-item index ( $r = .28$ ,  $M = 7.24$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) asking respondents how strongly they agreed that news should be presented without opinion and that news should be objective—both were reversed for analysis.

The concept of news spin looks at how news pundits and cable TV satirists shape news messages through their content creations. This index was created from a three-item index ( $\alpha = .61$ ,  $M = 11.5$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ) asking respondents whether they agreed that watching late night satire shows (such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), listening to commentators discuss news, or reading magazines was considered getting “news.”<sup>2</sup>

*Sharing hard and soft news:* Sharing hard news was created from a two-item index ( $r = .62$ ,  $M = 7.01$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ) asking respondents to rate their level of agreement on a 1–5 scale with statements that they frequently share national news stories with others and they talk with others about current events. Sharing soft news stories was created from a two-item index ( $r = .34$ ,  $M = 7.84$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) asking respondents to rate their level of agreement with statements that they

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<sup>2</sup> While this index is lower than ideal, a factor analysis found that all three load highly on one factor and we believe that conceptually they represent the concept of news spin.

frequently share with others news stories that they find amusing and stories about entertainment news.

*Other variables:* Variables of hard news seekers and soft news seekers were created from a battery of eight items asking about their habits, using a 1–5 scale where 1 was strongly disagree and 5 was strongly agree. The questions were placed into a factor analysis and loaded into two distinct variables, each with an Eigenvalue greater than 1 and factor loading of at least .599. The results can be seen in Table 1. Hard news seekers were those who were interested in what experts said about issues, spent at least an hour a day seeking news, searched for news, went to specific websites for news and were interested in what others were saying about news ( $M = 17.01$ ,  $SD = 3.26$ ). Soft news seekers was created from three items: those who sought out news about political, sports, and entertainment celebrities ( $M = 8.83$ ,  $SD = 2.87$ ).

The variable parental values ( $M = 21.93$ ,  $SD = 4.32$ ) was created from a six-item index asking respondents if either of their parents kept up with the news while they were growing up, if they were *encouraged* to read the news growing up, if they actually kept up with the news as a child, if their parents' definition of "news" would be similar to theirs, and if keeping up with current events was important to them while growing up. Respondents were asked for their level of agreement on each question on a 1–5 scale.

## **Results**

The first set of research questions examined the news topics that young adults seek out and avoid, comparing those with a mass communication major to those without. The results can be seen in Table 2. Of the 12 topics examined, statistically significant differences between the two groups for both enjoyment and avoidance were found in six of the news types—state/local government; weather/natural disasters; sports; foreign government; crime/police/courts; and

consumer products. Specifically, those with a mass communication major more frequently enjoyed news about consumer products (60.1 percent compared to 45.7 percent) and state/local government news (73.1 percent compared to 60.5 percent) while those in other majors were more likely to enjoy news about weather/natural disasters (67.4 percent compared to 50.7 percent); foreign government (63.5 percent compared to 38.6 percent), crime/police/courts (58.2 percent compared to 43.9 percent) and sports (61.4 percent compared to 49.3 percent). Similar patterns were found for avoidance, as noted in Table 2.

Our second set of research questions examined what factors predict the breadth of news content that young adults enjoy. Employing hierarchical linear regression (see Table 3), we split the sample into those with a mass communication major and those without and used the proportion of those who enjoy a variety of news topics as a dependent variable. The first block included demographic control variables of race and gender. This block was not significant for either dependent variable.

The second block included beliefs in traditional news values of timeliness, proximity, prominence, impact, unusualness, controversy and family news values. Statistically significant betas were found for non-mass communication participants and family news values ( $\beta = .14, p < .01$ ), impact ( $\beta = .17, p < .05$ ), and proximity ( $\beta = -.21, p < .01$ ); the variance of that block was ( $R^2 = 15.3\%, p < .01$ ). No significant findings were reported in that block for those in other majors.

The third block examined the impact of two news types—news spin and opinion. For the news enjoyment analysis, neither variable was significant.

The final block examined the activities of the respondents through their habits and sharing of hard and soft news topics. For those with a mass communication major, two

statistically significant items were found: hard news habits ( $\beta = .18, p < .01$ ) and sharing hard news ( $\beta = .30, p < .01$ ); the block accounted for 13.9% of the variance ( $p < .01$ ). None of the variables in this block were significant for those with other majors.

The same model was used to analyze news avoidance, as seen in Table 4. For those with a mass communication major, timeliness was found to be a positive predictor ( $\beta = .18, p < .01$ ) in the second block, and sharing hard news was found to be a negative predictor ( $\beta = -.20, p < .05$ ) in the final block, accounting for 16.9 percent of the variance. In the non-mass communication condition, family values was found to be a negative predictor ( $\beta = -.18, p < .05$ ) and proximity was found to be a positive predictor ( $\beta = .13, p < .05$ ), both in the second block. In the final block, sharing hard news ( $\beta = .20, p < .01$ ), hard news habits ( $\beta = -.17, p < .05$ ), and soft news habits ( $\beta = -.21, p < .01$ ) were all found to influence news avoidance, accounting for 17.8 percent of the variance.

## **Discussion**

This study examined the news habits and information-seeking activities of young adults—both those with a mass communication major and those without. Findings indicated that some differences exist between the two groups in terms of the kind of news they enjoy and avoid. Non-mass communication participants were more interested in news about foreign governments, sports, courts/crime and weather, while those with a mass communication major were more interested in news about consumer products and state/local news. Those with a mass communication major were more likely to enjoy hard news and share it with others and also to avoid news stories that are less timely. Conversely, those in other majors were more likely to demonstrate somewhat more soft news habits. Finally, these results suggest that the presence of

opinion or news spin in media content was not influential in participants' enjoyment/avoidance of a topic.

One of the first things we noted in our findings is that these young adults like news content. Regardless of their college major, they like to consume news about a variety of topics—an encouraging result for both scholars and journalists. It appears that only Economy/financial news seemed to be evenly split between those who enjoy that content and those who avoid that content (40 percent for each category). It was also interesting to note the differences between the mass communication majors and the others. We expected that state/local government would be more appealing to mass communication majors and the enjoyment/avoidance of sports and weather would be more interesting for the other participants, but the differences in enjoyment and avoidance for crime, consumer products and stories concerning foreign governments were surprising.

One can argue that weather, sports, and crime are more general news topics and so appeal to a broader base—the general public. It is also noteworthy that six of our chosen news topics did not have significant differences between mass communication majors and the others, which suggests that both groups share interests in some of the same topics. This suggests, as did a recent Pew study (Sept. 2012), that young adults *do* care about news and information—even to the extent that they actively seek out news. In fact, the difference between the two groups in enjoyment/avoidance of news about consumer products may be the most telling, in that those with a mass communication major may be the true information-seekers—more interested in learning about the gadgets and apps that can provide more information for them. That is, the distinction between mass communication majors and others may be that the former seek information more actively.

Our enjoyment findings contradict what might be assumed from studies made 30 years ago, in which “a pronounced negative correlation between age and the enjoyment derived from newspaper reading” was found (Robinson, 1980, p. 150). Past findings that concerned young adults and newspapers may not be relevant to how young adults seek and enjoy news today. For example, Tewksbury (2005) argued that the Internet allows for individuals to zero in on topics of interest, but our findings on enjoyment of news topics suggests that, in fact, the current digital news environment may allow individuals to enjoy a wider variety of news topics. Future research may wish to explore the implications, as we did not examine the motivations of participants for these patterns.

The findings were surprising to us in that we expected news spin to also play a role in this analysis. We expected to see correlations between liking news spin and opinion in news with a preference for soft news, for example. Given the lack of significance in our study, researchers may wish to more thoroughly examine what effect these types of content have on the preferences of young adults for news or non-news content. Perhaps young adults do not approve of the lack of objectivity within much media content and are processing that information accordingly. For example, work by Zerba (2008) found that young adults enjoyed narrative or long-form journalism more than straight summary news stories. Comparing our findings with Zerba’s work may suggest it’s not the type of news content that young adults are avoiding, but rather the way news topics are being presented. Our findings indicate that the tastes of younger news consumers are eclectic, so perhaps it is the style or type of presentation that turns them away. This area is certainly ripe for future research.

Our hierarchical regression results also illuminated some interesting differences between our two groups. Those with a mass communication major were more likely to enjoy and share

hard news stories, but a more noteworthy finding was that the others were more likely to share soft news and to avoid specific news topics. That is, those who more actively avoided news content were more likely to share the soft news that they found. In the world of cat videos on social media, this finding seems to make sense. In effect, mass communication majors are the main population segment in our sample sharing hard news. These individuals probably include the “news junkies,” who survey the news on a regular basis and often share those items they believe others should know about.

Regarding news values, these findings echo previous work suggesting that the traditional news values of timeliness (for those with a mass communication major) and prominence (for the others) are predictors of news avoidance and are not highly valued by young adults (e.g., Armstrong, McAdams & Cain, 2015). The 24-hour news cycle may make these consumers feel less concerned about hearing news immediately, because it’s always easy to find it online when they want it. Today’s news culture makes gathering information about any news topic just a quick Google search away, so knowing about news the minute it breaks is less important to these young adults. However, classic issues like family encouragement and behaviors clearly still play a role in determining news interest.

Finally, these findings suggest some support for Tewksbury’s (2005) audience specialization concept, although some contradiction as well. Our results found distinct sets of hard vs. soft news seekers—those who sought out specific kinds of news content. But when one looks at enjoyment and avoidance findings, our results suggest that some of these young adults are traditional news junkies—seeking out a wide range of news. Our study did not look at specific media formats, but future research may wish include that in their work to adequately address Tewksbury’s outlet specialization as well.

This research is not without its limitations, however. Our study is exploratory in nature, as our sample was one of convenience; thus, any generalization of our results to a larger population is limited. Our study also did not include specific definitions of news types (e.g., general weather versus major hurricanes or tornadoes, so it is possible that some participants have different conceptions of these news types. We operationalized those with a mass communication major as being the news interest group, but it is certainly possible that those with other majors also have a strong interest in journalism. We also have to consider that these participants could have given socially desirable answers, not wishing to admit that they have less interest in some news topics than others. But given our wide-ranging student sample population, we argue that these participants overall had no reason to be dishonest. Our findings were maintained even after we took out the mass communication majors. Given the anonymity afforded by our online survey, we feel there was a low risk of this possibility.

Despite these limitations, our results have clear implications for both scholars and practitioners. Our findings can help practitioners recognize the value of understanding their audiences as a way to shape their content and produce more relevant news. Further, this study certainly suggests that some differences exist between mass communication majors and others, although each enjoys a variety of news types and understands how to get information they want. Some go one step further and share news they enjoy with others, contributing to the dissemination process. These results suggest that journalists may need to re-evaluate their understanding of audiences and their interests in news. All in all, the means by which people now encounter, seek and find news are different; their potential access to news is wider and deeper than in any past era; they are under no obligation to agree with journalists about what is



news. The more we learn about the news habits of young people, the more opportunities there will be to engage them in the conversation.

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**Table 1: Factor analysis examining typical news habits of young adults**

Factor Loadings	Hard News Seekers	Soft News Seekers
Find out what experts say about national events or issues	.718	
Spend at least an hour per day looking for news	.673	
Usually search for news	.636	
Find out what people like me are saying about national issues	.630	
Find news by browsing or going to website or app	.599	
Find out about personal lives of entertainment celebrities		.809
Find out about personal lives of sports celebrities		.762
Find out about personal lives of political celebrities		.745
Eigenvalues	<b>2.78</b>	<b>1.35</b>

**Table 2: Frequencies of those who enjoy or rarely seek out types of news**

Type of news	Enjoy News Percent (n)			Avoid News Percent (n)		
	<i>Journalism</i>	<i>Non-journalism</i>	$X^2$	<i>Journalism</i>	<i>Non-journalism</i>	$X^2$
Science/Technology	69.1 (154)	65.3 (220)	.86	12.6 (28)	17.2 (58)	2.24
<b>State or Local Government</b>	<b>73.1 (163)</b>	<b>60.5 (204)</b>	<b>9.37**</b>	<b>10.8 (24)</b>	<b>17.5 (59)</b>	<b>4.84*</b>
Celebrity News	64.6 (144)	63.8 (215)	.04	12.1 (27)	12.8 (43)	.05
Business News	65.5 (146)	61.4 (207)	.94	23.3 (52)	30.3 (102)	3.25
U.S. Government	65.9 (147)	57.9 (195)	3.66	16.6 (37)	21.4 (72)	1.95
<b>Weather or Natural Disasters</b>	<b>50.7 (113)</b>	<b>67.4 (227)</b>	<b>15.67**</b>	<b>23.8 (53)</b>	<b>15.4 (52)</b>	<b>6.12*</b>
<b>Sports</b>	<b>49.3 (110)</b>	<b>61.4 (207)</b>	<b>7.99**</b>	<b>37.2 (83)</b>	<b>24.3 (82)</b>	<b>10.72**</b>
<b>Foreign Government</b>	<b>38.6 (86)</b>	<b>63.5 (214)</b>	<b>33.55**</b>	<b>45.7 (102)</b>	<b>20.8 (70)</b>	<b>39.31**</b>
<b>Crime/Police/Courts</b>	<b>43.9 (98)</b>	<b>58.2 (196)</b>	<b>10.87**</b>	<b>44.8 (100)</b>	<b>24.3 (82)</b>	<b>25.74**</b>
<b>Consumer Products</b>	<b>60.1 (134)</b>	<b>45.7 (154)</b>	<b>11.13**</b>	<b>31.8 (71)</b>	<b>47.5 (160)</b>	<b>13.54**</b>
Reviews of movies, music or books	49.3 (110)	47.2 (159)	.25	27.8 (62)	30.3 (102)	1.95
Economy/Financial News	39.9 (89)	42.1 (142)	.27	41.7 (93)	40.1 (135)	.15

\*\* =  $p < .01$

\* =  $p < .05$



**Table 3: Hierarchical linear regression predicting news enjoyment**

<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Betas for mass com. (proportion)</b>	<b>Variance (R2)</b>	<b>Betas for non-mass com. (proportion)</b>	<b>Variance (R2)</b>
<b>Block 1: Controls</b>			-.06	
Race (White)	-.08		.16*	
Gender (Female)	.02			
<b>Incremental R2 (%)</b>		<b>1.4</b>		<b>1.3</b>
<b>Block 2: Values</b>				
Family news values	.11		.14*	
Timeliness	-.05		.01	
Controversy	-.01		.05	
Prominence	.01		-.11	
Impact	.06		.17*	
Proximity	-.11		-.21**	
Unusualness	.05		.11	
<b>Incremental R2 (%)</b>		<b>14.2**</b>		<b>15.3**</b>
<b>Block 3: News types</b>				
Spin	.06		.05	
Opinion	.03		-.04	
<b>Incremental R2 (%)</b>		<b>0.8</b>		<b>1.0</b>
<b>Block 4: Activities</b>				
Share soft news	.01		-.07	
Share hard news	.30**		.11	
Hard news habits	.18*		.10	
Soft news habits	.05		.06#	
<b>Incremental R2 (%)</b>		<b>13.9**</b>		<b>4.5**</b>
<b>Total R2</b>		<b>32.4**</b>		<b>21.2**</b>

**Table 4: Hierarchical linear regression predicting breadth of news avoidance**

<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Betas for mass com. (proportion)</b>	<b>Variance (R2)</b>	<b>Betas for non-mass com. (proportion)</b>	<b>Variance (R2)</b>
<b>Block 1: Controls</b>				
Race (White)	-.04		.07	
Gender (Female)	.04		.03	
<b>Incremental R2 (%)</b>		<b>0.3</b>		<b>0.1</b>
<b>Block 2: Values</b>				
Family news values	-.01		-.12*	
Timeliness	.18**		.01	
Controversy	-.04		-.10#	
Prominence	.02		-.03	
Impact	.04		-.09	
Proximity	.08		.13*	
Unusualness	-.06		-.05	
<b>Incremental R2 (%)</b>		<b>9.2**</b>		<b>9.4**</b>
<b>Block 3: News types</b>				
Spin	.01		.02	
Opinion	.09		-.03	
<b>Incremental R2 (%)</b>		<b>1.1</b>		<b>0.4</b>
<b>Block 4: Activities</b>				
Share soft news	.06		.20**	
Share hard news	-.20*		-.17*	
Hard news habits	-.10		-.01	
Soft news habits	-.09		-.21**	
<b>Incremental R2 (%)</b>		<b>6.4**</b>		<b>7.8**</b>
<b>Total R2</b>		<b>16.9**</b>		<b>17.8**</b>