

Earlier this year, the Reuters Institute for Study of Journalism at Oxford University published a report titled “ [How Young People Consume News](#) .” Are its finding as apocalyptic as all the hype in the conventional media leads us to believe? The report confirms that established news outlets had failed to stay relevant. Young people’s needs and patterns of consumption have changed. But, news have not. Still, there’s a light at the end of the tunnel.

The Reuters report used an innovative three-pronged approach to analyse the behaviour of young people (18-35 year olds) in the UK and the US.

First, twenty people were selected to have their “smartphone behaviour” tracked over a period of twenty days.

Second, sixteen of these individuals were asked to keep a news diary over the period of three days. “Using an online app, they captured information about the news they consumed offline, on laptops, tablets and phones as it happened.” This was followed by tailored interviews with each participant. Half of the interviewees were then joined by 2 friends for an informal focus group.

Finally, news content itself was analysed “semiotically to ascertain what is at play within different formats, content and tones.”

Based on this research, the report concludes “that young people are less likely to go directly to news apps and websites, and spend much of their time online with social media and entertainment services. Against this background, it has proved hard to attract attention to traditional news content – which is often seen as a chore – or to news brands that often feel irrelevant to their personal lives.”

It offers three specific recommendations to help traditional news players regain relevance:

1. “The experiences of news should feel as easy and accessible as Facebook,” both in terms of content and access.
2. “News brands need to tell stories in ways that fit the expectations of young people, and the moments when they are open to news.” This means more flexibility and greater variety of outputs, such as visual content and on-demand podcasts;
3. “The ways the news media covers stories may need to change.”

The last point is crucial. The report found that young people were tired of overly-negative bombast. This is not to say that they “want media to shy away from serious issues”—it is to say that this market also wants to hear stories that affirm the possibility of positive change and provide a path to action.

Likewise, young people are tired of extremely partisan news coverage. At the same time, they reject principles of balance for balance’s sake. As respondents explain:

*“Too many extreme opinions [are] given equal voice, often in the name of being balanced or impartial.”*

For example, think back to the BBC’s decision to invite a climate-change denier to a panel on climate change, despite overwhelming scientific evidence. Instead of such fake ‘impartiality’, young people want to hear diverse voices of real people on the ground, who have their own lived perspective to contribute to a discussion the issues at stake.

I couldn't help noticing some structural issues with this report. The report suggests that established media brands must try "to fully tailor news 'pipeline'" to the individual user, But the report fails to consider the young readers' intersectional characteristics such as gender, socio-economic class and religion.

The report's gender-blindness made the report a frustrating read. For example, page 15 of the report suggests that young people consume news to meet three "progress-related needs": status; identity; and, learning. For status and identity, the report provides answers by two men in evidence. For learning, it cites a woman. Does this mean that women read news to learn while men do it to cement their status and identity? As the report rests on stereotypes instead of incorporating gender differences into its analysis, we never get to find out whether young men and women have different news-related needs from each other.

In addition, the names of the young people interviewed suggest that the ethnic, cultural and religious background of research participants is somewhat homogeneous. If young people increasingly think big-brand media is irrelevant to their needs, can research that is blind to the true diversity of our societies actually help to make media more relevant?

Read the full report, [here](#) .