

Youth still very keen on news - just differently

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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Young people with internet access may not be reading newspapers, but they are consuming more news than ever. This was a key finding presented at a Future of News colloquium at Wits Journalism this week, which brought together industry leaders grappling with how to adapt their news operations to the impact of the internet and the collapse of the traditional advertising model that has been paying for journalism.

Media researcher Jos Kuper showed how young people are accessing news via social media, blowing apart notions that the many hours they spend every day on Facebook and Twitter are wasted only on trivialities.

They don't read papers or watch traditional TV, but they need quick and current news to keep up with their peer group. They just find and use it differently from the way their parents did. And South African youth, the research showed, are intensely involved with politics and discussing it a great deal. They check their cellphones often during the day and pick up snippets on social media, radio (still the most popular medium) or street news posters, and they Google it to learn more. They don't trust a single source, knowing that the internet can feed them falsities, and so look at a number of reports, particularly those from branded sites, such as News24, CNN, and BBC. Once they have verified the story, they share it - tweeting, posting it on Facebook or e-mailing a screen-print. If the story is particularly interesting, it may go viral - and then the mainstream media might report it.

They watch TV news if something big happens. Otherwise it is video on demand, watched in their own time. And while they watch, they are using multiple screens to interact with their friends.

A healthy state of affairs

There is a lot that is healthy about this. These young people are sceptical about what they read, not accepting any single authority. News is much less controlled, as the traditional media are often scrambling to keep up with the flow of news on social media. Editors and journalists have less power to choose what you should know or not know, as you will just get it elsewhere. As one participant, David Boardman, former executive editor of the respected Seattle Times, put it: "We have to see ourselves no longer as gatekeepers, but gate-openers."

The difficult part is that all the news operations are struggling to make money from this changed news flow, as young people are reluctant to pay for news sites while they can still get so much free. Boardman had to oversee a cutback from an editorial staff of about 350 to almost half of that.

Yet his story of the Seattle Times is an inspiring one. A few years ago it was threatened with closure, like so many US

papers, and Boardman had to turn it into an operation that delivered compelling news delivered on multiple platforms. But he rejected the notion that news operations had to be "platform neutral". Every platform needs a different way of telling the story, he emphasised, as it is consumed in a different way. His paper still faces serious challenges, but no one is talking about it closing anymore. And, meanwhile, it won two Pulitzer Prizes for investigative reporting.

A comparatively rare success... getting online readers to pay

Raju Narisetti, strategist for News Corp, spoke of different ways to get people to pay for the information they want and new ways of approaching advertising and sponsorship, including an openness to the controversial new form of "native advertising". The Wall Street Journal, where he was managing editor, is one of the few newspapers that have succeeded to get online readers to pay for the privilege.

Many South African papers are facing similar challenges as their readers move online. The cost of our bandwidth means that we are a few years behind the curve, but newspapers are already feeling a loss of readers and advertisers, and TV a loss of young audience (though not yet of advertising). And they are all finding it difficult to earn money online. The New Wave research done by Wits Journalism last year showed that more South Africans are now accessing the internet than reading a daily paper - and it is set to grow quickly.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011), *Recht Malan* Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/5), *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010) and *Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism* (Jacana, 2010).

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