



PROJECT

Information Literacy

HARVARD



GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF EDUCATION

How Today's Students Engage with News

Presenters: Alison Head, Ph.D., John Wihbey, and Pangiotis Takis Metaxas, Ph.D.

Tuesday, October 23, 2018, 2:30 p.m. – 4 p.m. (Reception to follow 4 p.m. - 5 p.m.)

Askwith Hall, within the Longfellow Hall Building ([directions](#)), 13 Appian Way

Harvard Graduate School of Education

As soon as their day begins, news finds them. A CNN alert flashes across a smartphone screen, a tap to a Feedly app pumps out a steady flow of top news stories, or a Facebook check-in brings up a meme with a satirical twist on a Congressional debate. In an early morning class, an instructor uses a breaking news story from *The New York Times* to start a discussion on election meddling. Over lunch, two friends pore over news of a school shooting. For many college students in America today, the daily news is a bewildering hodgepodge of headlines, posts, alerts, Tweets, visuals, and conversations that stream at them throughout the day from all directions. While some stories come from news sites students choose to follow, other content arrives uninvited, tracking the digital footprints that many searchers inevitably leave behind.

For this generation, news is social, visual, and fast. News is often overwhelming, and it can be difficult for students to tell what news is true and what is false. While most students think news is important to democracy, most do not define news by traditional standards, nor do they necessarily assign authority based on the platform or authors from which news comes. Students know they need to invest time and critical thinking to assemble, evaluate, and interpret news as it is delivered in the 21st century. While many students make this effort, others do not. Sharing news on social networks does provide some, though not all, students with a valuable opportunity to communicate with their communities, whether sharing breaking news from *The New York Times* or memes from Facebook that poke fun at politicians.

In this panel discussion, three co-researchers, with a combined domain expertise in library and information science, data and computer science, and media research, discuss key findings from their large-scale October 2018 study that asked how college-age students in the U.S. are accessing, consuming, and engaging with news in the digital era. An online survey was administered at a diverse mix of 11 colleges and universities in red and blue states across the country, yielding a sample of 5,844 students, complemented by follow-up interviews with 37 survey respondents. A computational analysis of Twitter data associated with the survey respondents and a larger Twitter panel of more than 135,000 college-age persons provided observational and external comparative data to help frame and situate the survey results. Six recommendations for a way forward are provided for a diverse set of stakeholders, including educators, journalists, and librarians as they unravel the complexities of the “post-truth problem,” specific to our time, our technologies, and the information habits of today’s news consumers.

Findings from this research suggest young adults believe news is valuable to their lives and to society on the whole, and many see themselves as active participants in its dissemination. Yet, the new digital environment has made successful navigation extremely difficult. Educational and media institutions need to do far more to help this emerging generation succeed in operating in this confusing, overwhelming, and often misleading online environment. Ultimately, they must innovate curricula from K-20 around issues of information credibility. There is a pressing need now to cultivate among young adults the knowledge tools necessary to fulfill both their personal needs and civic roles. This may be the one of the most difficult, yet vitally important endeavors, of our current times.

Presenters:

[Alison J. Head, Ph.D.](#) is the Principal Investigator on the News Study, and the founder and director of [Project Information Literacy \(PIL\)](#), a national research institute that studies what it is like to be a student in the digital age. She is an information scientist and social science researcher and Senior Researcher at the metaLAB (at) Harvard and a Visiting Research Scholar at University of Pittsburgh University Library System (ULS).

[John Wihbey](#) is a Co-Researcher on the News Study. John is an assistant professor of journalism and media innovation at [Northeastern University](#), where he serves as graduate programs advisor and as a faculty affiliate with the Global Resilience Institute and the NULab for Texts, Maps, and Networks. His forthcoming book is *The Social Fact: News and Knowledge in a Networked World* (MIT Press, Winter 2019).

[Panagiotis Takis Metaxas, Ph.D.](#) is a Co-Researcher on the News Study, and a Professor of Computer Science and founder of the Media Arts and Sciences Program at [Wellesley College](#). He is Faculty Director, M. K. Albright Institute, an Affiliate, Harvard Center for Research on Computation and Society, and a Visiting Scholar, Oxford's Centre for Technology & Global Affairs.

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If you have questions, please feel free to contact the organizer for this event: [Alex Hodges](#), Librarian and Director of Gutman Library and HGSE Faculty, alex_hodges@gse.harvard.edu