



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

National study reveals college students believe strongly in the value of news, but struggle with navigating a complex media landscape

Santa Rosa, Calif. – During the run up to the 2018 midterm elections, many college students are just as apt to get their news by talking to friends and professors as from social media, challenging conventional wisdom claiming twenty-somethings are distracted and disinterested in staying current.

That is just one of the findings of a [newly released research study](#) into the news consumption habits of the nation’s youngest voters, who are coming of age at a time of “fake news,” deep political polarization, and an ever increasing number of information sources, many biased and unreliable.

“News is fast, social, and visual and typically delivered to students in posts, alerts, tweets, and conversations that stream at them throughout the day,” Dr. Alison Head, the study’s lead researcher said. “And young news consumers are left to assemble and interpret what news means, while many take this evaluative step, others do not.”

The study also found that most students are keenly aware that all news is not equal and struggle to vet their information sources for reliability. As one science major summed it up, “I spend more time trying to find an unbiased site than I do reading the news I find.”

In the yearlong, comprehensive study, commissioned by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), researchers, surveyed nearly 6,000 students from 11 colleges and universities from across the country, They also conducted follow-up interviews and computational analysis of social media data, as part of an ongoing study by [Project Information Literacy](#) (PIL), a nonprofit research institute, working in partnership with co-researchers from Wellesley College and Northeastern University.

The study’s findings include:

- Students detailed how staying current often meant navigating a complex minefield of misinformation, commercial interests, affective pleas for their clicks, “fast news” from social media, and political manipulation; more than a third (36%) said “fake news” had made them distrust the credibility of any news and only 14% felt confident they could tell “fake” from “real” news.

- More than two-thirds of the respondents (68%) said the sheer amount of news was overwhelming; half agreed it was difficult to discern the most important news stories on a given day (51%).
- Students were selective in the news topics they followed, though most had gotten news about the weather, traffic, and national politics during the past week. As one female student following Planned Parenthood stories said, "I'm looking for news that really affects me, that's what prompts me to click a link."
- Eight in 10 students agreed news is "necessary in a democracy" but most said, the news had fallen short of their idealistic standards of accuracy, independence, and fairness.
- A majority of respondents (58%) had shared or retweeted news on social media in the preceding week; many shared political memes (33%) or stories about national politics (29%).
- Traditional standards for evaluating news were increasingly problematic for students to apply at a time when the 24-hour news cycle treats all stories like breaking news.

The findings suggest young adults believe news is valuable to their lives and to society on the whole, and many see social media as an important channel for giving them a voice in the world. Yet, the new digital environment and current political reality has made successful navigation extremely difficult.

"One thing to take from this study is seven in 10 survey respondents said they got news from professors and class discussions during the past week," Head said, "making the classroom a powerful incubator for learning how to interpret news and navigate today's complicated media landscape."

The study includes commentaries from leading experts around the country, as well as extensive recommendations for education and information-industry professionals.

Co-researchers on the multi-disciplinary study were: John Wihbey, Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Innovation at Northeastern University; Takis Metaxas, Professor of Computer Science at Wellesley College; Margy MacMillan, a librarian and Senior Researcher at PIL; and Daniel J. Cohen, Dean of Libraries and Vice Provost for Information Collaboration at Northeastern University.

Project Information Literacy (PIL) is a nonprofit research institute in the San Francisco Bay Area that studies what it is like to be a student in the digital age. In a series of 10 groundbreaking scholarly research studies, PIL has investigated how high school, college students, and recent graduates utilize information competencies, skills, and strategies for completing course work and solving information problems in their everyday lives.

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