

# Youth MediaDNA

In Search  
of Lifelong  
Readers





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## In Search of Lifelong Readers

The results of a 2008 NAA Foundation study of young people, their interest in news and their media habits reflect many of the same trends that U.S. newspaper publishers already know. A look beyond the surface findings of the study, which was part of broader international research into youth media habits, offers opportunities for newspapers in terms of promotion, design and content changes that could provide help in growing readership among young adults.

“Youth Media DNA,” conducted by the research firm DECODE of Canada, was initiated by the World Association of Newspapers to investigate news and information habits of young people around the world. The U.S. portion was sponsored by the NAA Foundation; those findings are detailed in this white paper.

The U.S. findings are based on the responses of young people ages 15 to 29 to an online questionnaire developed with input from the NAA Foundation. The online method was selected for two reasons: the significant role the Internet plays in the lives of U.S. youth; and the challenges imposed by reaching young people through traditional landline telephone service.

Among survey participants, television dominates as a source for information on news topics. It is their top medium on a number of fronts, from credibility to time spent.

But underlying attitudes and behaviors suggest there is an interest in news among a significant portion of young adults, and if newspapers move to address the specific needs of younger

readers in their communities, there are readership gains to be made.

A number of the findings also support or build on previous NAA Foundation research on building media habits and engagement in younger readers.

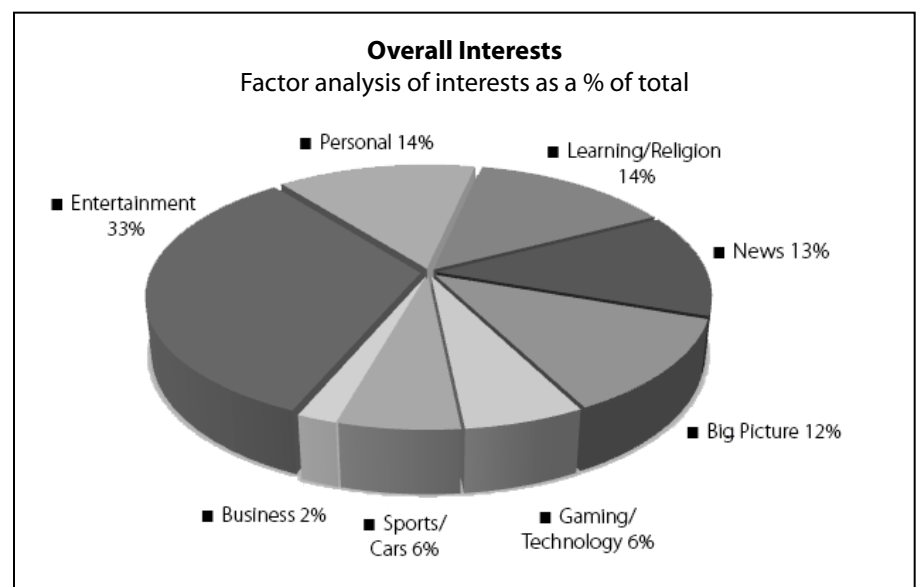
In considering these findings, it is important to note that “Youth Media DNA” addresses life stages of young people as opposed to charting the attitudes and habits of various age groups. Researchers structured the study in this fashion to get a better picture of the lifestyle transitions that occur between youth, adolescence and adulthood and how – or if – they influence media habits.

Four specific life stages are addressed: living at home with a parent or parents; living alone or with roommates; living with a spouse or partner; and living with

children. The study found that as young people make key decisions about education, careers, life partners and families, time available for media consumption changes, as does the structure of their lives and their information needs.

## Needs and Preferences

Overall, when U.S. youth were asked about their interest areas, entertainment emerged as the topic picked by one-third of those questioned, with news – meaning local, national, international, weather and breaking news – picked by only 13 percent. However, delving a bit deeper into the findings shows that interest in news and news topics may not trail by nearly as much.





For example, in addition to the 13 percent who chose news as an interest area, 12 percent selected “big picture,” which includes cultural and arts events, human interest topics, environmental issues, politics and government, social injustices, literature and books and subjects related to various ethnic groups and cultures. All of those are areas that are part of traditional news offerings.

Also, 2 percent picked business as an interest area, defined as business, finance and real estate information – again, traditional news topics.

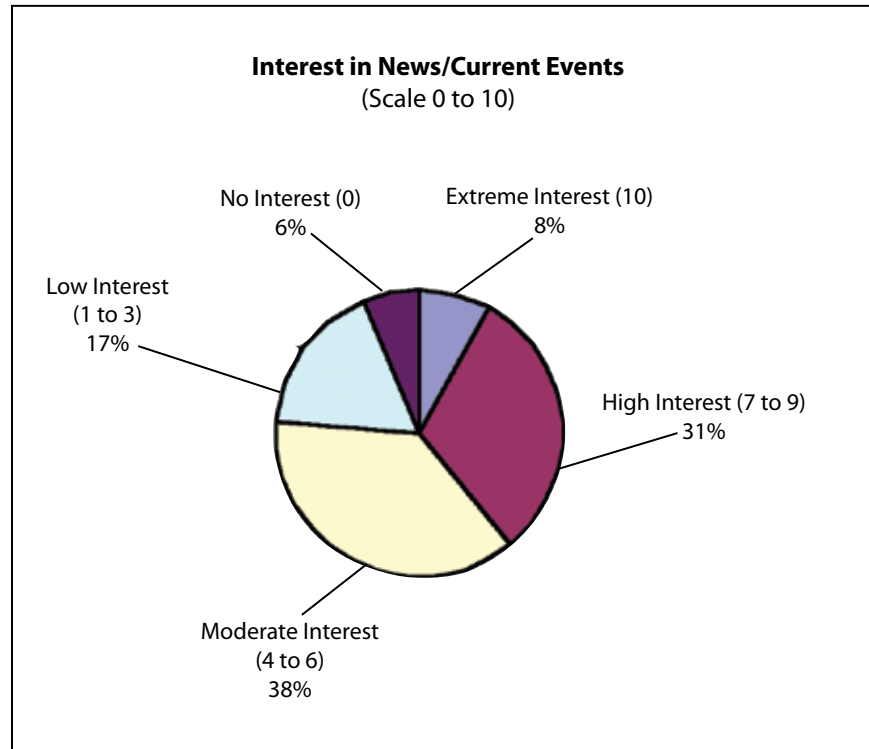
Combining these categories would move interest in news areas up to 27 percent. Presumably, one can garner a few more percentage points from other youth interest areas such as sports/cars (6 percent) and learning/religion (14 percent), resulting in a total that surpasses the entertainment percentage.

One of the other areas of interest, personal, includes topics such as health/exercise, relationships, careers and travel, while the entertainment segment includes everything from music and film to food and beverage. These categories also contain possible news elements.

These findings clearly demonstrate that among the young audience, the interest is there. The question is how to package that material so young people recognize the newspaper as a source of information they are interested in and can use.

Another positive finding came when young people questioned in the survey were asked, on a scale of 1 to 10, how they would rank their interest in keeping up with news and current events. Twenty-five percent gave news a score of eight or higher, meaning strong interest. At the other end of the spectrum, 25 percent indicated little interest in news, ranking their interest level between 0 and 4.

The remaining 50 percent fell into the 5 to 7 interest levels, which demonstrates some interest, even if not exces-



sive. That means as many as 75 percent of the young people surveyed had some interest in news, from modest to strong.

Interestingly, that percentage is nearly identical to the percentage of those questioned who agreed that there were benefits to being informed. Seventy-two percent said they agreed with this statement: “If you are well-informed about current news, you get ahead in your school and your career.” The percentage of non-newspaper readers agreeing with that statement was almost the same.

Newspaper readers also appeared to be much more involved in activities related to civic engagement – a finding consistent with the NAA Foundation’s 2007 research study, “Lifelong Readers: Driving Civic Engagement.” Specifically, these newspaper readers said they had given money to a community group (54 percent), volunteered for a charity (38 percent), visited online forums about issues (30 percent) and voted in the last

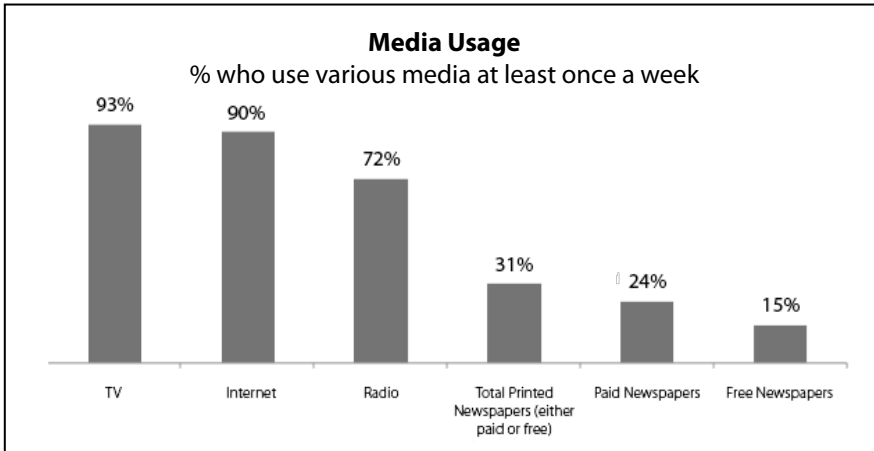
national election if eligible to do so (43 percent).

Again, the conclusion seems to be that interest in news and understanding of its importance exist among young people. The challenge is finding a way to connect with them.

## Media Usage

Not surprisingly, television and the Internet are the forms of media used most frequently by young people. Ninety-three percent of those questioned said they use television at least once a week, and 90 percent use the Internet at least once weekly. That compares with 72 percent who said they listen to radio at least once a week and 31 percent who said they regularly use newspapers. The newspaper figure included both free and paid newspapers.

In terms of actual time spent with



media that deliver news, U.S. youth reported spending on average 203 minutes a day with television, magazines, Internet sites, newspapers and other media. When the question turned to how much time was spent with media for the purpose of getting news, the usage per day dropped to 103 minutes.

Television continues to dominate here. In terms of overall media usage, U.S. youth spent 93 of those 203 minutes a day with television, compared

with seven minutes reading newspapers and five minutes with online newspapers. For news purposes, youth reported spending 40 of the 103 minutes with television and 29 minutes with radio, while paid newspapers accounted for just four minutes of daily media usage. Free newspapers were used for two minutes, while online newspapers were used for four minutes.

Young people who identified themselves as newspaper readers spent

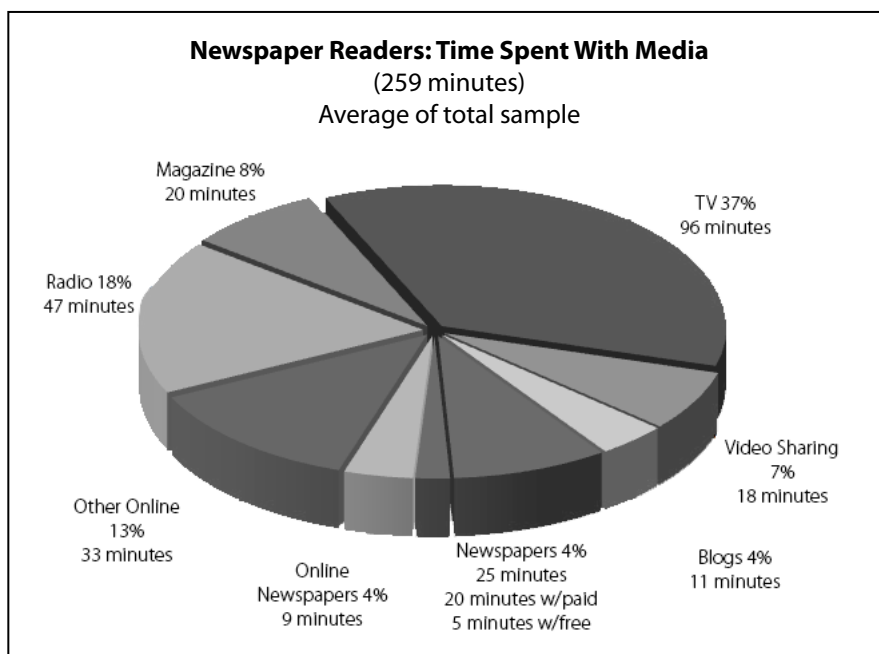
more time (259 minutes) daily with media than the total group surveyed. But even newspaper readers still spend the vast majority of their daily media time with television (96 minutes compared with 25 minutes for newspapers, both paid and free, and nine minutes with online newspapers). This group also reads magazines an average of 20 minutes a day.

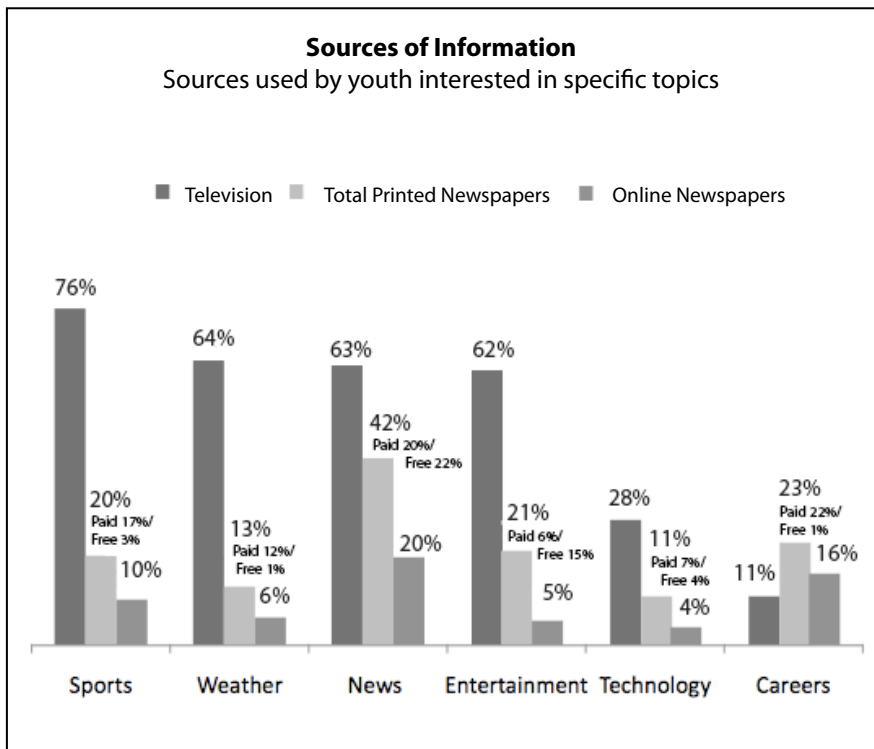
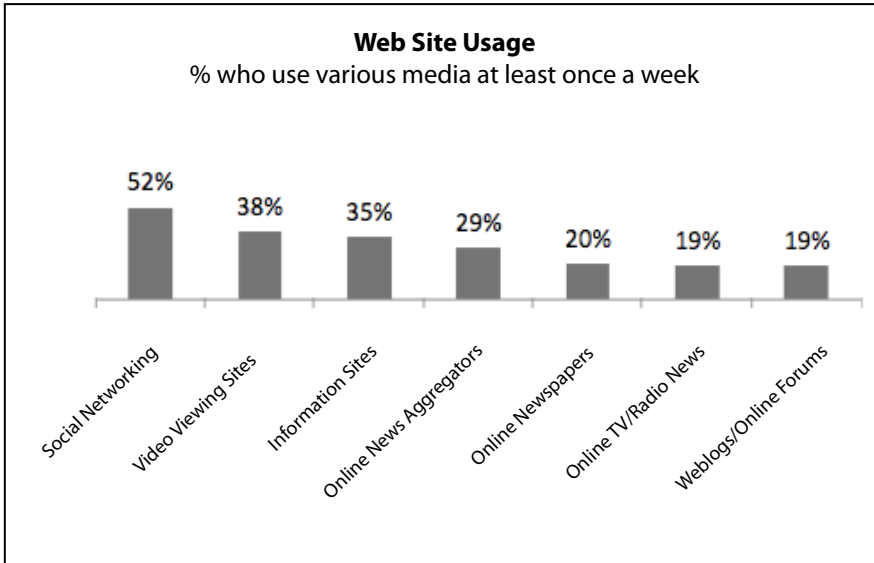
And even among newspaper readers, there was distance between the product and the role it plays in a young reader's daily life. Forty-two percent of newspaper readers disagreed with this statement: "Reading the newspaper is part of my daily ritual."

In terms of implications for new media, the survey found a healthy component of Web site usage is information-related. Of young people who reported using Web sites at least once a week, information sites were visited by 35 percent of the group, 29 percent said they visited online news aggregators such as Google or MSN or Yahoo, and 20 percent said they visited online newspaper sites. Online TV or radio news sites were visited by 19 percent of those frequent Web site users.

But when newspapers go up against television, there is no question which medium is considered the most important source of information. That finding is true not only for topics related to news of all sorts (breaking, local, national and international) but also for sports, weather and entertainment.

The biggest difference between television and newspapers came among young adults seeking information on sports and weather. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed said they went to television for sports news compared with 20 percent who used paid or free newspapers. For weather news, 64 percent said they used television compared with 13 percent for newspapers. The gap for entertainment was slightly smaller, with 62 percent saying they used television and 21 percent using newspapers.





For news, the nod went to television but the gap was considerably smaller. Sixty-three percent said television provided their news fix, but 42 percent said they turned to newspapers as their normal source of information.

In terms of specific news topics, the widest variance between use of television and newspapers was breaking news. Seventy-one percent said television was where they got their information in that category compared with 9 percent from newspapers. The closest competition came in the area of international news, with 50 percent saying that television was where they normally got that information compared with 40 percent who turned to newspapers.

And in terms of ease of usage, television surpasses newspapers among young people in terms of convenience, enjoyment, credibility and relevance.

## Life Stages and Newspapers

“Youth Media DNA” clearly underscores the need to reach young people early if newspapers are to have the best chance at keeping them as readers in later years.

Thirty percent of the young adults currently reading newspapers said they started reading in elementary school when they were younger than 11 years old. Researchers noted that children in this age group have yet to begin extensive Internet usage or have access to mobile phones, meaning less technological competition for their information interests than would be the case during middle school and high school years.

In addition, about half the group of young adult current readers recalled having access to newspapers through Newspaper In Education (NIE) programs. Previous NAA Foundation studies also have shown a strong



correlation between students who used newspapers in the classroom and future newspaper readership.

Another finding of recent NAA Foundation studies relating to future readership is the importance of high school newspapers and/or youth-oriented content in local newspapers with special teen sections written by or about young people.

This latest study takes those findings a step further. Responses of the young adults suggest that NIE programs could be highly effective during the elementary school years, given that 30 percent of current newspaper readers recalled that they started reading newspapers when they were younger than 11. The study showed that newspaper youth content may have more traction in the middle-school years.

Interestingly, respondents were more likely to recall reading school newspapers prepared by their peers while in high school rather than newspaper youth content prepared for them. That shift demonstrates “the degree to which youth seek to see their own voices in print products as they get older,” researchers concluded.

This study also confirms earlier findings in NAA Foundation research of the importance of parents in developing their children’s newspaper readership habits. Among young adults who are current newspaper readers, two-thirds said someone in their immediate families actively encouraged them to read papers, and in most cases, it was their mothers or fathers.

Time spent with media also grows as young people progress through life-stage transitions, and this trend is particularly evident when their living situations are examined.

For example, young people living with their parents spend about 195 minutes a day with media. As they leave home and live with roommates, a partner or spouse and have children, they spend on average an additional

16 minutes a day consuming media content, but that extra time does not necessarily go to newspapers because there are a large number of media options and formats available to them.

Interest in news also is growing among young people who are leaving home for new life experiences, but ironically, it is at this very point that former readers are most likely to stop reading newspapers regularly, with online sources taking a more central role in providing their news.

Among those former readers, the dropoff in newspaper readership is sharpest at ages 18 and 19, with fully one-third of the former readers recalling that they stopped reading newspapers at that point in their lives. An additional 21 percent said they stopped reading newspapers between ages 20 and 24, while 16 percent said they stopped reading papers between

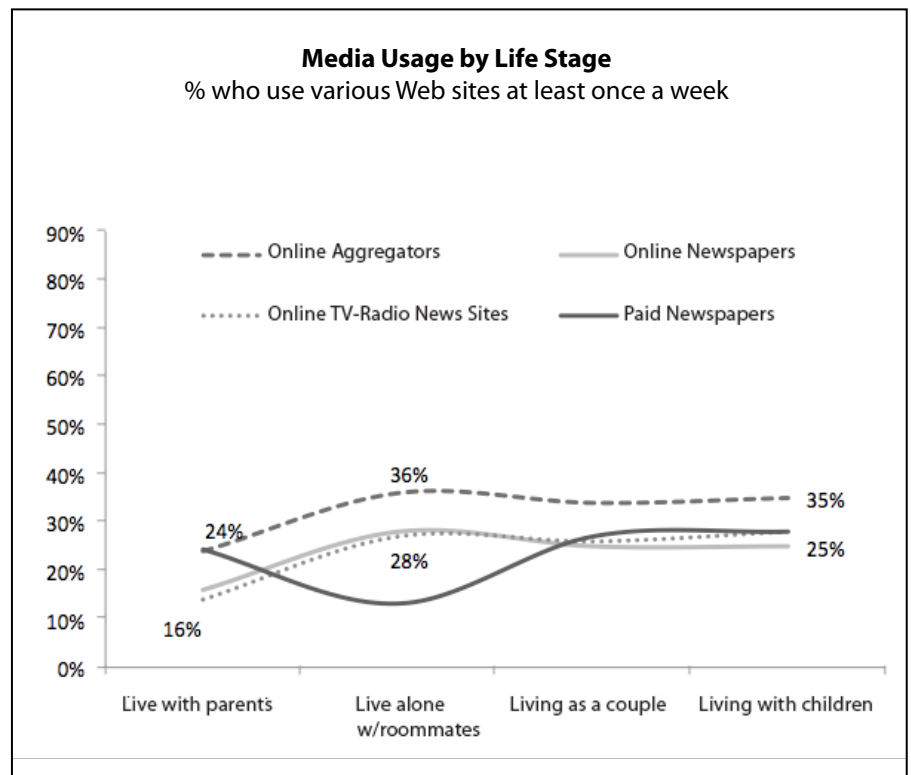
ages 25 and 29.

That means that newspapers are losing more than half – 54 percent – of their young newspaper readers between ages 18 and 24.

Contrast those figures with the average level of interest in following news and information:

Living Situation	Average Interest in News (out of 10)
Living with parents	5.0
Living alone or with roommates	5.5
Living as a couple	6.2
Living with children	6.2

Interestingly, use of free newspapers rises steadily during the same period and even overtakes paid newspaper usage among those young people living





alone or with roommates.

Researchers speculated that the shift in newspaper readership among young adults living alone or with roommates could reflect loss of subscriptions paid for by parents or newspapers available at no charge in school settings. Also, given the budget pressures facing these young people as they set out on their

own, there may be a greater inclination to move toward free news sources.

Whatever the reason for the shift, something is definitely pushing young people away from newspapers they had been reading while living at home. Although online newspapers could benefit from the move toward free news sources, the research showed only a slight increase in their use during the

life stages after young people leave home.

Clearly, newspapers need to find a way to continue to engage young readers in both their printed and online newspapers as they complete their high school education and leave home for college or careers.



## New Youth Strategy

Michael P. Smith, executive director of Northwestern University's Media Management Center, says the "Youth Media DNA" study shows that U.S. newspapers should not give up on attracting young readers. They just need to be more creative.

"This study shows you have to stay away from absolutes," Smith said. "You can't absolutely say young people don't care about news or that young people get their news from television. There are large numbers of people who get their first news from television, but while you may hear it first on television, that doesn't mean television is the only source of news."

Smith, a member of the NAA Foundation Board of Trustees, said previous studies have found a dramatic decline in newspaper readership among young people in the 21 to 25 age group, prompting a great deal of speculation as to why.

"People have argued that with the introduction of new technologies, young people are just reading less. But the study shows young people are actually looking at newspapers when they are living with their parents, but when they are off on their own and living independently, they don't subscribe. That's when the decline occurs, when kids move out of the house. It is dramatic in this study how that happens."

Smith, who was involved in the broader international study of youth media habits conducted by DECODE, said young adults in other countries have more access to free newspapers than their counterparts in the United States. One way newspapers might counter the dropoff in readership



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— **Michael P. Smith**, executive director  
*Media Management Center*

among young people leaving home and entering into a more independent life stage would be through a free publication aimed specifically at a younger audience.

One example is Red Eye, an edition of the Chicago Tribune aimed at people in their 20s that is "compact [and] not like the Tribune in tone, attitude, style and size," he said. The news selection varies greatly from the parent publication, with a greater focus on popular culture and entertainment and news of interest to people who pick up the paper on the street.

Another possibility would be to find ways to make sure the paper stays available to young people who are leaving home and heading out on their own.

"When they are living at home, the newspaper is free to them because their parents pay," Smith said. "But when they are off on their own, they just don't buy it. Newspapers may think of ways to either have parents buy subscriptions for young adults or, as they move out on their own, find ways to get newspapers free to young adults in their apartments or college dorm rooms.

"Maybe you give a year's subscription for free to a young person who rents their first apartment. Make it a reward for transition to adulthood by encouraging an adult activity like reading the newspaper."

Another possibility would be to find ways to get newspaper content in front of young people by "going to the places they go," Smith said.

He noted that in Sweden, for example, a newspaper recently hired the five best bloggers in the country to provide content for the newspaper Web site on the topics of love, shopping, entertainment, music and sports.

"They were already blogging and had their own audience, their own communities and their own brand. This brought that under the brand of the newspaper," Smith said. "You go to where they [young readers] are, and you hope that by bringing them under the brand of the newspaper, they will see something that catches their eye that is more journalistic in nature. That is their new youth strategy."





## Filling a Void

A new entry in the race to find a way to reach young adult readers through a publication that does not look like, feel like or otherwise resemble a regular newspaper is *b*, a free daily produced by the Baltimore Sun Media Company that made its debut in April 2008.

Brad Howard, general manager of *b* at the time this white paper was written, said the publication is aimed at young people in their 20s and 30s in the Baltimore area.

"It's a free daily tabloid with a magazine feel to it distributed in print, with a focus on real quick news – world, national and local – real quick sports, feature articles, user-generated content, and pop culture and entertainment," he said.

The goal is to attract young people to the daily printed product, then move them to an online location, *bthesite.com*, "where we can continue that conversation. We are encouraging people to comment on this blog, start your own forum, upload your own pictures, whatever. Let us hear what is going on in the community," Howard said. "Our goal is to really get the young adult population in the area engaged in the product and talking about it so we know it is their voice."

By June 2008, *b* was getting about 45,000 copies into the hands of readers (very close to the initial goal of a 50,000 distribution), and the plan was to ramp up to 75,000 copies in fall 2008 and 100,000 in January 2009, Howard said.

Distribution is "through a sampler network" of street teams that hand out the newspaper on the street and through bright orange boxes on the

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Baltimore Sun Media Company

street and in some retail stores and office buildings, as well as five "anchor" chains – the Royal Farms convenience stores, CVS pharmacies, Merit Athletic Clubs, Brick Body (also an athletic club) and Mr. Tire.

"We are a different product and a unique product for the young adults in the Baltimore area. We are attracting an audience that wasn't reading the Sun. We are filling a void in this market because nobody else is reaching young adults on a daily basis," he said.

The strategy for *b* came about when managers of the Baltimore Sun Media Group took a group of employees in their 20s and 30s, "put us in a room and said, 'How do we reach you? And by the way, you have 11 weeks to figure it out,'" Howard, 30, recalled. "It was a very quick turnaround. I remember constant brainstorming, notes being written, ideas scribbled down and separate task forces. We had representation from every department at the paper, and we received approval for the rollout in January."

The newspaper also got ideas from existing publications such as *Red Eye* in Chicago, *tbt\** in St. Petersburg and *Quick* in Dallas, Howard said.

"We looked at those markets that

have successful young adult products to see what worked in their markets and how it could relate back to the Baltimore area," he said.

Howard said in June that *b* seems to be achieving what was intended, but the paper was just beginning reader studies to get some hard data on how it is doing in reaching its target audience and making an impact.

Howard said *b* will succeed because it has met the challenge of "listening to our readers and adapting to what they want." But he said it is uncertain whether *b* will move young people toward traditional newspapers as they grow older or whether *b*'s approach marks the beginning of the end for traditional newspapers.

"Maybe there is a combination of transitioning from *b* to the Sun, or maybe once our reader is no longer a *b* reader, perhaps there is another product that is introduced, be it print, digital or another medium yet to be seen," he said. "Newspapers have a very strong core readership, and I think what any publication has to do is always evaluate itself to make sure it is still responding to readers and their needs. Newspapers are not dead."



## Methodology

From Jan. 17 to Feb. 6, 2008, 1,462 U.S. youth ages 15 to 29 were surveyed using an online panel. A total of 39,762 respondents were contacted, yielding a response rate of 3.7 percent. The questionnaire fielded was developed with input from the NAA Foundation and an advisory group composed of U.S. academics and media researchers. Data were weighted on age, gender, region, ethnicity and household income using U.S. Census data to provide a representative sample of this age group. The study was conducted by DECODE of Canada for the NAA Foundation as part of a global research effort initiated by the Paris-based World Association of Newspapers with funding from Norske Skog, the Norway-based paper producer.

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