Why We Need To Talk About Young People

This is the attention economy. The politics of personality.

Trump, Farage, Polanski, Mamdani. Hate them or love them, their ability to dominate the narrative and social media is winning out over traditional means.

Trump's particular approach is, of course, the most egregious. By saturating the market to the nth degree, it's hard to even remember what happened last week. Let alone care about it.

I think this is the problem facing more traditional media. Younger audiences have grown up with this as the norm. Fake news. A brutal job market. Housing so unaffordable that living in a shipping container is quite an attractive proposition.

The negativity of news is not a good escape. It is, in fact, quite the opposite.

TL;DR

1. Individuals overpower brands. Mistrust in legacy publishers and social media has helped the creator economy boom. This is the reverse halo effect in action.
2. For every visitor that reaches your website, 10 are getting to know your brand on platforms you don't control.
3. 56% of young men and 60% of young women get the majority of their "news" from social media.
4. Over the last decade, interest in news fell by 40% among 18-24 year olds and 38% for 25-34 year olds.
5. Since 2024, the average user has spent nearly 43% more time on TikTok.

(Young) People Don’t Care As Much About News

Interest in the news is plummeting.

Content consumption is at an all-time high, but between 2015 and 2024, interest in news fell by 40% among 18-24 year olds. 38% for 25-34 year olds. While *everyone* has lost interest over that time, the younger you are, the more significant this is.

Over the last 10 years, interest in news has dropped by 22 points for 18-24 year olds (Image Credit: Harry Clarkson-Bennett)

It’s not a market problem. Not entirely. It’s a marketing problem. A content problem. An engagement problem. The

fragmentation of the news and content industry means people have options. All pretty terrible in their own way.

Creators are soaring, but publishers are playing the same game they did 10 years ago. We're competing with platforms so addictive the written word doesn't cut the mustard anymore. This isn't a gun fight anymore; it's an all-out nuclear war. And we are still fighting with a rolled-up newspaper (albeit the digital edition).

News is seen as depressing. It isn't "fun" and, according to a large proportion of younger audiences, doesn't represent them. It hasn't done for some time.

Really, It's Hard To Care About Anything

The average teen spends 7 hours and 22 minutes looking at screens each day. Nearly five hours a day on social media. More than three hours watching videos.

What doesn't feature in these reports is how much time is spent reading content. The majority of influencers don't write because it doesn't hook people in the same way.

Or they're illiterate.

When every app has been built to manipulate you psychologically, it's hard to stop consuming. When you're constantly on, breaking news becomes a background story. Unless the story is astronomical, it just fades into obscurity as the next disaster strikes 10 minutes later.

This Is A Structural And

Psychological Shift

According to research from IPSOS and Joe, young people (16-34 years old) trust social media as a news source despite its obvious misinformation.

- 56% of young men and 60% of young women get the majority of their “news” from social media.
- This doesn’t even include YouTube (16% of young men and 9% of women).
- 72% of young men trust YouTube, compared to just 47% of women.
- 79% of them are concerned about misinformation in the content they consume.

Twenty years ago, my dad read The Telegraph and The Times. Yours probably did, too. We’re the last generation to have grown up with a broadsheet paper on the kitchen table. But this doesn’t exist anymore. Certainly not at the same scale.

This really impacts trust.

The kitchen table paper has been replaced by a personalized algorithm. One we all have a different experience of. As individuals and people who work for or with publishers, understanding this shift and combatting misinformation is fundamental to acquiring a younger audience.

Remember, we don’t see the same version of the world. Where you live, how old you are, what you engage with shape what you see. You build your very own echo chamber. These algorithms have fundamentally reshaped the nature of free speech by determining who sees what.

Yours is all “stop the boats,” and mine’s cat videos and street fights.

> *Interestingly, **trust in news in social media is rising** among this age group, up from 45% in 2024 to 52% in 2025. How much*

> *of that is just because it's easy and 'agrees' with your world view? Who knows.*
>
> *Like it or not, the shift is happening with or without us.*

Young People Don't Care About Brands

It's why the creator economy is absolutely booming. The $250 billion market is predicted to nearly double to $480 billion by 2027, according to Goldman Sachs' 2023 Creator Economy report.

It has completely reshaped modern marketing, attention, and legacy brands' ability to attract and retain audiences. People don't trust brands. Not to the extent they did. Particularly young people.

Authenticity wins in the current environment. People value "realness." It's why the spotty teenager can become a millionaire from his mum's bedroom. There is very little connection with a publisher. To many, they're seen as *the establishment.*

The British Brainwashing Corporation, you could say.

> *84% of teenagers express a negative sentiment when asked what word best describes news media. They think journalists are unethical and deceitful.*

Some See The Solution As The Problem

In an era where publishers are hemorrhaging organic traffic, UGC sites have bucked the trend. Outside of Reddit, has any single site done better than Substack?

Google-owned products excluded, of course.

Substack’s growth over the last five years has been something to behold (Image Credit: Harry Clarkson-Bennett)

And it’s not a mistake. It’s not luck. It’s not because Google has a deal with Substack (cough, Reddit, cough). It’s because people (and by proxy Google) trust people.

While this isn’t limited just to younger audiences, it’s indicative of what is happening in society. People want to hear people’s real opinions. They don’t want watered-down versions or over-optimized content that fits a mould.

So the solution is to build individuals. Individuals who will create a halo effect for your brand.

I can’t think of a better example than Dave Jorgenson – The Washington Post’s TikTok guy. Dave was a senior video producer

at the Post between 2017 and 2025, and was responsible for launching the paper's TikTok channel in 2019. He built a huge TikTok following, saw an opportunity, and bolted.

He also took the audience with him. But *them's the brakes*. You've got to give people freedom to grow and build something brilliant. They'll leave. Some to competitors, others to do their own thing.

But it's the best option. You can't escape the fact that individual news creators have greater weight than ever. Brands have to lean into it.

> *Future are doing some really interesting things in this space. By forging brand partnerships with individual creators with* ***Future Collab*** *they're doing just this. Or at least trying to.*
>
> *Build people's profile. Absorb the halo effect to your brand. Rinse and repeat.*

The Discovery Layer Has Changed

Google isn't a homepage for younger people.

It's not their first port of call. It may not even be their second or third. But that isn't new. And news brands have spent a decade or more focusing on driving clicks to their site. Their entire business (outside of the subscription models) relies on traffic from external sites.

Why Google when you can endlessly swipe through 30-second, AI-made videos telling you how unsuccessful and stupid you are for paying tax? From platforms (and people) specifically designed to make you dependent and unhappy.

But referral traffic is drying up. And Google is certainly not the worst offender. It is still the most valuable platform, by

some distance, for last-click conversions.

Facebook referrals down 50% since start of 2019 (Image Credit: Harry Clarkson-Bennett)

A quote I stole from Rand, I think, sums this up perfectly:

> *“For every visitor that reaches your website, 10 are getting to know your brand on platforms you don’t control.”*

There is no big tech company that wants to do you a favor. They identify their moat (usually customer data), open the gates, and close for monetization in brutal fashion.

This is the modern-day version of the 1980s crack epidemic, but with worse people at the helm. Back then, it was crack and flares; now it’s brightly colored vapes and TikTok.

Google Is Trying To Be Sexy

Google's latest and almost certainly most irritating shift is to attempt to turn its search engine into a destination. Prioritizing UGC sites, individual creators, videos, and answering the question without the need for a click.

Facebook has quietly built an advertising business so evil that children are targeted with some pretty despicable practices. And who'd have thought OpenAI and Google would be so evil that we'd all be cheering for Anthropic?

Well, actually, I would back the first two to be dreadful. I just thought Anthropic would've followed suit.

I suspect this is quite a clever ploy from Anthropic. Maybe they know they can't beat Google, but they can become the go-to for people who value security and safety. *Which I hope is everyone.*

> *Always worth remembering that you can't beat the algorithm.*
>
> *My friends father-in-law started using social media in the last two years. His views have changed. Significantly. He's been targeted by a world that he didn't know exists.*

Video Dominates The Young Mind

Nothing grabs the young mind like short-form video. And no platform has mastered the art of short-form addiction like TikTok.

TikTok is almost completely at odds with how legacy publishers define themselves. Since 2024, the average user has spent nearly 43% more time on TikTok. When you compare that to all the other platforms, that is an extraordinary difference.

Everyone’s stable, but TikTok has that premium grade crack (Image Credit: Harry Clarkson-Bennett)

Here today, gone tomorrow. No real quality control. Fact-checking. A human touch.

And TikTok’s not much better. (Nice little joke for you there.)

Video really relies on individuals being comfortable in front of the camera. Being engaging and, crucially, being willing to do it. Which is a very, very different skill from writing. It’s crucial for a journalist and creator to master, but there are too few who can do it.

And if they can, they’ll probably be better off going it alone.

Links & References

I couldn’t find all of these numbers in the same report, so here is where I sourced the watch hours per user for each platform. Some inconsistencies here, of course, as the data doesn’t completely align. I accept I am flawed.

Legacy Media Publications Haven’t Kept Up

The older you are, the more likely you are to use social media to read news stories. The younger you are, the more likely you are to use it to watch videos.

Some publisher’s social strategies amount to sharing their articles. On platforms that actively devalue an external link.

Make it make sense.

Your content needs to be platform-specific. You have to add value on that platform. You can’t expect Instagram to drive direct conversions. It doesn’t work like that. You should be aiming for a positive interaction. A stop and smile. A save.

Google is pushing UGC and video content because people want to see more of it. While they don’t care about spam or stealing your traffic, they aren’t stupid. They see the shift and are maintaining their relevance at all costs.

> *You have to make your content work harder for you. Shares videos and photos on the proper channels and your website. Share quotes of articles. Get the writer of a big story to run an AMA. Answer the top comments. Add value to your audience wherever they are.*
>
> *And, of course, create platform-specific content.*

How The NYT Has Combatted This

But it’s not all doom and gloom.

The NYT now has over 12 million total subscribers. That is, by any measure, a lot. Their affiliate revenue, digital and print subs, advertising revenue, and M&A (The Athletic), alongside smaller digital subscription offerings, are all thriving.

Not hard to see where digital paywalls came in (Image Credit: Harry Clarkson-Bennett)

- 11.3+ million, subscribe only to the company’s digital products
- Subscription revenue increased 9.6% year-over-year, to $481.4 million.

- Digital advertising revenue rose 18.7%, to $94.4 million, beating the company’s estimates, because of strong demand in areas like games and sports

But that’s not all.

This is a truly excellent (paid) look at how they have become so successful – they aren’t a news company anymore. The NYT now has only 1.5 million news-only subscribers, compared to 10.8 million on a bundle or other single-product plans.

They have managed the decline of interest in news and built a diverse, resilient company that can withstand the decline in its core product.

Worth noting that the decline in news-only subs doesn’t represent that level of decline in people who subscribe to news. Just that fewer people *only* subscribe to news.

From the horse’s mouth:

Their goal(s) are not that newsy (Screenshot from LinkedIn, March 2026)

It’s Not All Doom And Gloom

You have to accept you can’t compete with these platforms on scale. But that’s not a bad thing when it’s all rubbish. According to Matt Southern from Search Engine Journal, AI-generated slop accounts for 21% of YouTube Shorts shown to new users.

This Kapwing study of 15,000 trending channels identified:

- 278 channels producing nothing but AI slop.
- Amassing 63 billion views.
- 221 million subscribers.
- An estimated $117 million in annual ad revenue.

But for you and I, this is short-term bullshit. It’s black hat guff. Drop domain abuse. It works until it doesn’t. It’s not something you or I should or could do.

But scale isn’t where this is won. Meaningful connections are where this is won.

What Can We Do?

Reporting on the news isn’t enough anymore. Just saying what happened isn’t enough to generate a click. Let alone loyalty. Miles away from a subscription.

Legacy media outlets need to cut through the noise in their own way. Things like BBC Verify are a very good step. But we’ve got to get out there.

We’ve seen right- and left-wing publications get further away from the middle, I think, directly because of this. Pushing the boundaries further and further to resonate in some way with people.

In an age of misinformation and AI slop, accuracy is the golden ticket (Image Credit: Harry Clarkson-Bennett)

The questions for all publishers are the same:

- How do we reach the right people?
- How do we cut through the noise?
- How do we become habitual?

The answer is very unlikely to be “write more.”

It’s about connecting with audiences at the right time and place in the right format. Follow the four E’s of content production. Entertain them when they want to be entertained. Educate them when they want to be educated. Empower and engage them in equal measure. Create great stuff.

Younger people have grown up in a pretty harsh environment when it comes to money, work, and screens. It’s not easy. Good for us to remember that.

More Resources:

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https://www.searchenginejournal.com/why-we-need-to-talk-about-young-people/568903/