

2019
MAY

FINAL REPORT

The News and Information Habits of
Rural, Mid-Missouri Teenagers

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PROJECT STATEMENT

There is a heightened interest in what goes on in the heads and hearts of modern teenagers – dubbed “Generation Z” (Gen Z) – particularly by legacy media. But teenagers from rural communities, especially in the Midwest, are not often factored into mainstream Gen Z coverage. This can be attributed to a number of factors, such as living in a news desert, living in the middle of the country, and/or unpredictable Wifi access that hampers engagement with news and information sources.

With these barriers to access in mind, the central question becomes: **do rural Gen Z teenagers see themselves in the news they consume?** If they do, what news topics and/or information is of interest to them? Where do they consume it? And if they don't consume news and information, how can they be compelled to engage with it?

As a residential fellowship with the Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism, Nico Gendron spent August 2018 through April 2019 working with rural, Mid-Missouri teenagers who live in news deserts.

Initially, the project plan was to work with rural high school students in the counties that surround Columbia, Missouri and the University of Missouri (Mizzou). Gendron wanted to find out whether the surrounding high schools have active school newspapers and/or journalism opportunities so students have an advantage when applying to Mizzou. It arguably has one of the best undergraduate journalism programs in the country.

But this was not the case. Only Boonville High School has a print student newspaper funded by the school board. If other high schools have a student newspaper, it is a WordPress website that read like a blog and hasn't been updated in over a year. Furthermore, if a high school offers a "Media" class, the teacher does not teach a journalism curriculum. Instead, students help update the school website or create a monthly broadcast to air during homeroom. Missouri requires teachers to be certified and/or have a Masters in Journalism to teach it.

Therefore, the project's focus shifted to have the participating students not only produce news stories about their communities, but also engage with the media in a meaningful way.

Gendron's fellowship project was designed for students to identify what makes a news outlet reputable and trustworthy, understand the mechanics of journalism and the work involved in producing well-reported and objective stories.

Gendron worked with five high schools, spanning four counties. The fifteen juniors and seniors who participated in Gendron's fellowship project were given the opportunity to produce an original, local news story about their community which they felt hadn't been explored by legacy, regional and/or local media.

They could choose from one of three story categories: profile, investigative feature or a photo essay.

The students pitched stories aimed at incorporating the perspectives and issues important to them and their communities. Students were steered away from producing general local news stories about homecoming, a sporting event and/or a favorite teacher. Why? The story had to resonate with "outsiders" - people unfamiliar with or overlooking a student's hometown, Missouri and/or the Midwest.

In the process of producing their stories, students learned the basics of journalism and were encouraged to adopt a digital news and information "diet," whether that was following a news outlet they like on Instagram or finding a news-oriented podcast.

Students were incentivized by the opportunity to win a MacBook Pro (grand prize) or an iPad (runner up prize). The remaining students were paid with a \$150 Visa gift card.

As one of the participating students at Russellville told Gendron upon filing in his final draft, "journalism is much harder than writing fiction." Project goal achieved.

BACKGROUND ON MID-MISSOURI HIGH SCHOOLS SURVEYED

Total number of students at all five high schools: 1,142



Boonville High School (Boonville, MO)

Student body: 549

Boonville High School ranks among the top twenty best high schools in the state of Missouri.

Community High School (Laddonia and Martinsburg, MO line)

Student body: 106

Community is the second smallest high school in Audrain County.

Twenty-eight percent of Audrain County citizens who are under 18 are living in poverty. The state average is 21.1%.

South Callaway High School (Mokane, MO)

Student body: 251

The high school receives generous funding from Callaway Nuclear Plant in neighboring Portland, MO where many Mokane residents are employed.

Prairie Home High School (Prairie Home, Missouri)

Student body: 47

The closest gas station is in Boonville and 10.4 miles from the Prairie Home town center.

Russellville High School (Russellville, MO)

Student body: 189

Females ages 18-24 are the largest demographic living in poverty in Russellville.

INTRO TO SURVEY

Gendron came to know the fifteen participating juniors and seniors very well over the course of the eight-month project. She drove over 400 miles a week to visit with each high school and work on their stories in the high school library (or weight room). She also observed how the students' news and information consumption habits evolved as they produced an original news story about their community.

However, Gendron remained curious about the rest of the student bodies' news and information habits, particularly at the four high schools without a student newspaper. She wanted to find out if these students consumed news and if they did, did they see themselves, their community, and/or Missouri accurately portrayed? And if they didn't, would students be inclined to consume the news more consistently if they saw themselves and their communities accurately portrayed?

To crowdsource responses to these questions, a survey was developed using GroundSource, a mobile engagement platform which surveys participants via SMS (text) messaging. Based on Gen Z's perpetual cell phone use, Gendron concluded an SMS survey would be the most effective way to achieve a high rate of participation from the high school students.

The survey questions were developed by Nico Gendron and Kaylin Burris, a Missouri School of Journalism student majoring in Convergence Journalism with an emphasis in investigative work. Inspiration for the survey questions came from a GroundSource survey developed by 100 Days in Appalachia, an organization narrating "a region dubbed 'Trump Nation' 100 days at a time" and Inspire U.S., a non-profit that supports "high schools in planning and conducting...peer-to-peer voter registration activities". Their survey was administered to 1,100 Appalachian high school students from 20 different high schools to better understand their stance on issues like: immigration, reproductive rights, gun control, healthcare, etc.

Gendron's survey was administered at each of the five high schools participating in the project. A Google document on the basics of GroundSource was shared with the administration at each high school. It explained what GroundSource is, and how the survey could be activated on each student's cell phone.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Listed below are the exact survey questions sent out to 1,142 Mid-Missouri high school students

1. Hey! Welcome. It's Nico - I have been working on a journalism project funded by Mizzou. This project has allowed me to work with some of your friends and classmates for the last seven months. I'm excited to hear from some **~*new*~** high school students (aka you!) in today's survey. All of your responses will be recorded in a report that will be released in a month. But the better news? If you complete the **entire** survey, you will be invited to a pizza party/given candy!

To start, I would love to learn a little bit more about you. So, first question: what year are you in high school?

Please circle one of the following:

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

2. Cool beans. So you live in Missouri. Do you feel like Missouri or even the Midwest is accurately portrayed in the news?

Please circle one of the following:

Yes (If you circled "yes", please skip to question #4)

No (If you circled "no", please skip to question #3)

3. I get that. Where I grew up was only portrayed in the news when something bad happened (like a drug -related crime).

What stories aren't being told in the news about the "Show Me" state? Please write a sentence or two below then move on to question #4.

4. Did y'all know that the "Show Me" state isn't actually the official state motto even though it's on our license plates? Kind of weird!

How do you think people outside Missouri would view the state based on what they see in the news? Please write a sentence or two below then move on to question #5.

5. Do you care about the news?

Please circle one of the following:

Yes (If you circled "yes", please skip to question #6)

No (If you circled "no", please skip to question #6)

6. Okay! We're halfway to the pizza/candy! If you saw more of the issues that faced YOU and your community in the news, would you be more likely to follow and engage with it online? Please circle one of the following:
Yes (If you circled "yes", please skip to question #8)
No (If you circled "no", please skip to question #7)

7. How about this - what issues would you like to see more of in the news (online or on TV)?
Please write a sentence or two below then move on to question #8.

8. Alright, last question for now: of the following, what is your go-to platform for news?
Please circle one of the following:
Instagram (After you circle, please skip to question #9)
Snapchat (After you circle, please skip to question #9)
Twitter/Facebook (After you circle, please skip to question #9)
Reddit (After you circle, please skip to question #9)
Google search (After you circle, please skip to question #9)

9. Okay, okay, you made it! But just one more thing... by 9PM tonight, please send a screenshot of your favorite meme you saw *today*. PG-rated please. If it's X-rated, no pizza or candy for you. Thanks a bunch, gang.

Note:

1. The survey was intended to have a "conversational" tone to mirror an authentic SMS Messaging conversation.
2. Students were incentivized to participate in the survey in exchange for free pizza and candy at an upcoming school lunch.

THE FACTS

These are just a few of the hundreds of answers we received in response to the survey question: “What stories aren’t being told in the news about the “Show Me” state?” about news coverage in the state these students call home.

Note: The “Show Me” state is Missouri’s unofficial state motto.



Gendron with Boonville High School students



Gendron with Russellville High School students

“Drugs is a situation that is getting worse and worse everyday. People are dying and suffering and our overall economy is failing. Businesses in our downtown areas are leaving and aren't coming back. How are we supposed to be the heartland of America when the heart is dying?” (Senior, Boonville)

“Missouri isn't really in the news that often. But I feel like if they were to see Missouri on the news I feel like people would believe it just because it's not a state that's on the news often.” (Sophomore, Boonville)

“They only talk about the big cities. It shows only a very small part of the state in which we live.” (Sophomore, Community)

“Events happening that people can attend or have fun at. You have to listen to the radio to get these. The news also happens to show more crime and arrest in Missouri then any good things. Making it quite unviewable for kids.” (Freshman, Community)

“All the smaller but impactful community service projects. No one really knows about those.” (Senior, S. Callaway)

“I think they should tell more stories about the schools in the community and not always focus on the bad things like crime, but also inform us, they should talk about the improvements and accomplishments.” (Junior, S. Callaway)

“That our rural schools are not being funded enough for us to get the best education.” (Sophomore, Prairie Home)

“When people come together to support a cause, or when something small happens because the media doesn't think it will get enough attention.” (Junior, Russellville)

“People who get interviewed are not the most educated group of people. We only focus on the bad things that happen.” (Senior, Russellville)

WHY MEMES?

These are just a few of the hundreds of memes we received in response to the survey question: "please send a screenshot of your favorite meme you saw *today*. PG-rated please."



It may seem insignificant to analyze memes. They're meant to be funny meditations on popular culture, especially politics. And they are inherent to social media. Teenagers share them with one another on Snapchat and Instagram.

The memes received during the news and information survey Gendron administered revealed what topics of information are of interest to rural, Gen Z teenagers in Mid-Missouri:

- Politics
- Guns
- Agriculture
- Missouri winter weather
- Video games
- Country music

Memes also fill a void. Because these teenagers don't feel represented in mainstream news, memes create a sense of identity and belonging.

As Elia Rathore wrote for The New York Times' newsletter, [The Edit](#), "using humor as a coping mechanism is nothing new, but the millennial and Gen Z tendency to approach serious issues with jokes adds another layer to political discourse — a layer that senior political analysts ... didn't, or couldn't, properly factor into their analyses."

THE FIGURES

Number of GroundSource survey respondents: 472 (~42% of 1,142)

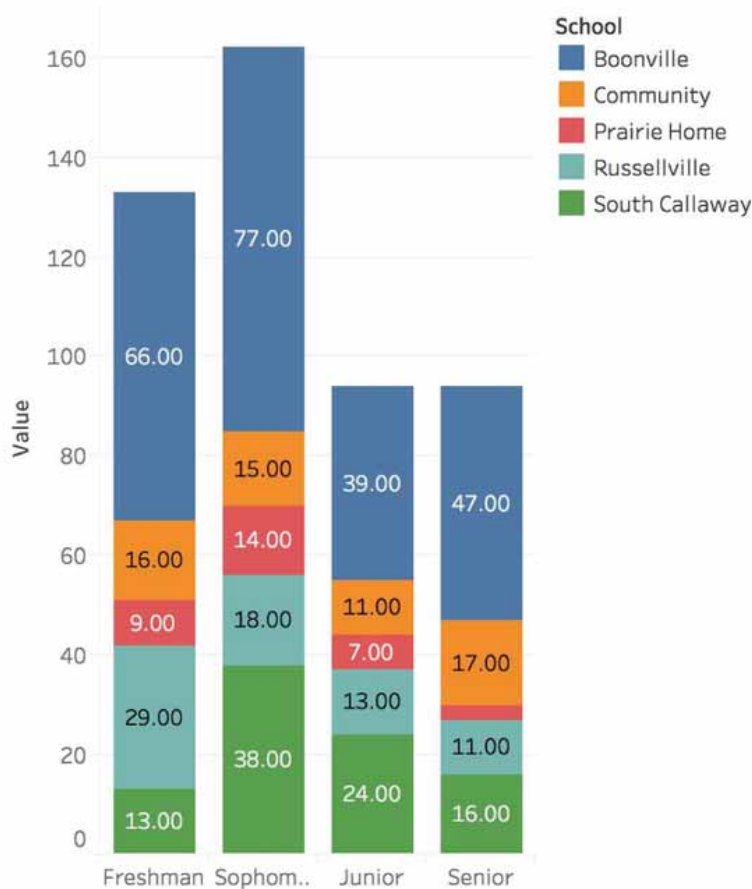
Total number of students at all five high schools: 1,142

The following are the results of and findings for the survey question: "What year are you in high school?"

Freshman and sophomores made up the majority of the survey's respondents. Ultimately, juniors and seniors are harder to engage with because they are less flexible during the school day to participate in external projects. The lack of flexibility may be due to involvement with FFA (Future Farmers of America), taking online college courses, and/or taking classes at a bigger high school (i.e. Prairie Home students will travel to take classes at Boonville).

Furthermore, ten Prairie Home High School students do not have cell phones. The principal of Prairie Home, Mark Shore, said it surprised him that even though a majority of the students' live below the poverty line, they still have a personal cell phone.

What year are you in school?



Two variables that may have affected the overall results of the survey:

1. Russellville High School students experienced a "technical glitch" the first time they took the survey. This is likely due to the fact that another high school was completing the survey when Russellville began taking theirs. GroundSource deactivated the survey for the day and reactivated it the next school day. Russellville students did not experience any interference during the second survey attempt and overall, the survey had a much higher response rate compared to the first attempt.
2. Ten Prairie Home students, who are predominantly freshmen, do not have cell phones. Therefore, they took the survey by hand. Their responses were manually inputted.

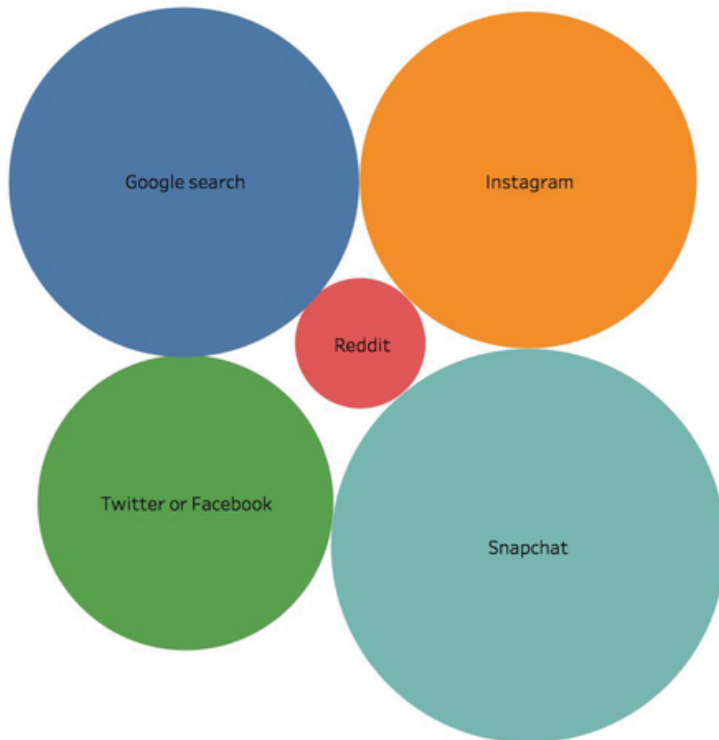
The following are the results of and findings for the survey question: "What is your go-to platform for news?"

Of all the social media platforms, Snapchat was the leading "go-to" platform for news and information among respondents from all five high schools.

According to survey results, the top platforms rural, Mid-Missouri high school students use to consume news and information are Snapchat (137 votes) or Google search (108 votes). Instagram was not far behind, with 100 votes.

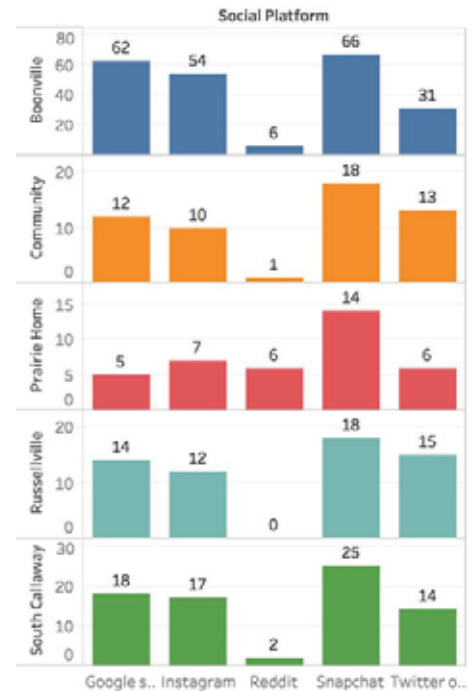
With these insights in mind, the fact that the majority of newsrooms use Facebook and Twitter to engage with their audiences doesn't align with consumption habits of high school students. Our survey shows that only 77 rural high school students seek out news on Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, if newsrooms want to engage with younger audiences, they need to produce visually stimulating content that performs best on social media platforms like Snapchat and Instagram.

What is your go-to platform for news?



Social Platform. Color shows details about Social Platform. Size shows sum of Totals. The marks are labeled by Social Platform.

What's your go-to platform for news?



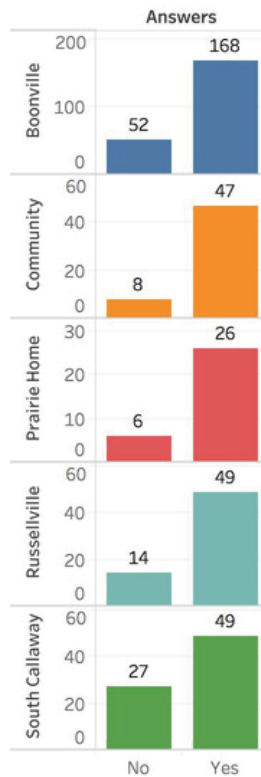
Sum of Boonville, sum of Community, sum of Prairie Home, sum of Russellville and sum of South Callaway for each Social Platform.

The following are the results of and findings for the survey question: "If you saw more of the issues that faced YOU and your community in the news, would you be more likely to follow and engage with it online?"

The majority of respondents at all five participating high schools responded "yes". This response rate is best represented by Prairie Home High School because of the size of their student body. Out of a 47-person student body, 32 students completed the survey. 26 of those 32 students responded "yes" to this question. Only six responded with "no".

These results show that teenagers living in rural Mid-Missouri are aware that their communities are rarely reflected in the news. But if the issues and/or topics that were relevant to their communities were consistently covered by news organizations, the surveyed teenagers would be more likely to engage with the news on a regular basis.

If you saw more of the issues that faced YOU and/or your community in the news, would you be more likely to follow and engage with it online?



Sum of Boonville, sum of Community, sum of Prairie Home, sum of Russellville and sum of South Callaway for each Answers.

GOOGLE SEARCH

The older rural, Gen Z teenagers become, the more they resent how "sheltered they are because of the lack of information and experiences available to them in their hometowns", explained one of the two English teachers at Community High School. **How can Google capitalize on and engage with rural Gen Z teenagers who utilize Google search as an education tool?**



According to our survey results, the top platforms rural, Mid-Missouri high school students use to consume news and information are Snapchat (137 votes) or Google search (108 votes).

At first glance, Google search may seem like an unlikely answer. But without a strong local and/or regional newspaper and with access to the internet on their cell phones, high school students try their luck with Google search.

There is also a very real technology gap between Gen Z and not only their parents but also their Millennial siblings. We joke that "we would die" if someone saw our Google search history. However, for some of the students who participated in Gendron's fellowship project, Google search is a valuable tool in debunking information they don't want to accept as fact.

One of these students, Paige R., who is a senior at Community High School, wasn't old enough to vote in the 2016 election. However, when information about the candidates didn't sit right with her, Paige utilized Google search to compare and contrast Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's campaign promises instead of "blindly agreeing" with the information she heard via word of mouth.

CONCLUSION

Despite living in news deserts and not having access to a student newspaper, the 472 rural, Mid-Missouri high school students who participated in the GroundSource survey are aware that their home state is not consistently and accurately portrayed in the news. **Nevertheless, the majority of respondents do care about the news.** Some of the students surveyed have news stories, top of mind, that they wish the media would cover. These topics represent issues that most likely impact their communities, i.e. drug rehabilitation, local community service projects, lack of funding for rural high schools, local improvements and accomplishments, local events, etc.

Furthermore, the respondents stated they would be even more compelled to engage with and consume the news if they saw more of the issues that they face covered by the media. Students are tired of seeing Missouri's news coverage consumed by shootings, drugs (meth) and crimes related to drugs.

It's a difficult time for local news organizations. Since 2004, more than 1,800 local papers in the United States, about one in five, have ceased publication or merged with a mass media company, according to a report by the UNC Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media. In the process, newsroom staffs have been decimated. The local Mid-Missouri newspapers Gendron worked with during her fellowship project, the Fulton Sun and California Democrat, only have two people remaining on staff.

However, at the papers' height, the Sun had six people on staff and the Democrat had four. Staff members were responsible for both reporting and design and had no digital duties as the papers only ran in print.

Because of this, local newspapers rely on stories that will generate "clicks", like crime and drug coverage. Furthermore, a majority of the content published in local newspapers, both print and online, is syndicated. Daily local newspapers struggle to fill their print real estate since they lack reporters, resources and time.

Additionally, local readers appear to be unaware of this breakdown. In a study by Pew that surveyed 35,000 Americans between October and November 2018, 70% of Americans said they think their local news outlets are doing very well and therefore; less than 15% of Americans have paid for a local newspaper subscription or donated to their local news outlet in the past year. Ultimately, the majority of Americans don't seem to be aware of the country's rapidly expanding news desert.

The saving grace among Gen Z teenagers, who are the current and future of news consumers and subscribers, is their unprecedented access to cell phones. Even if they're a thirty-minute drive from the nearest grocery store, they still have the world at their fingertips with a cell phone in hand. This is confirmed by data released by Google that Gen Z utilizes Google search 63 more times a month than their Millennial counterparts.

Furthermore, Gen Z's digital and social media savviness enables them to consume news and information at a constant and rapid rate. Even though the average high school day is 6.5 hours long and students are not allowed to use their cell phones during classes, as reported by Business Insider, Gen Z spends at least five hours a day on social media.

As Gendron's fellowship project and survey shows, engaging Gen Z with the news requires content that is not only social and visual first but most importantly, reflects their local and regional interests, concerns and ultimately, cultural diversity. News organizations can do this by **collaborating** with Gen Z to better understand this generation's narrative instead of creating one for them.