

News and the Social Network:

A News Consumer Autobiography of a (Near) Millennial

Throughout middle and high school, breakfast meant two things to me: Honey Nut Cheerios and the Boston Globe. My family and I would gather around the kitchen table, flipping through the pages over bowls of cereal before heading off in different directions for the day, newsprint still on our fingers. The scene sounds more idyllic than it was: my dad loved to read pithy, political articles out loud in his booming voice, eliciting eye-rolls from my brother and me as we tried to focus on more interesting sections like *Dinner with Cupid*, the blind date column. Nevertheless, these moments developed into a treasured ritual that I missed when I left home for college. When I opened my 19th birthday package in the mail center in McCullough, I found a *Dinner with Cupid* column tucked into the card from my mom, carefully cut out from the pages of the Globe.

The newspaper --in its cuttable, tangible, touchable form-- had become a treasured object of my past, like the stuffed animals and high school art projects that lined my childhood bedroom. With no Boston Globe tossed to my dorm-room doorstep, I began to rely on the news emanating from the small rectangle glued to the palm of my hand. Now, with the swipe of my index finger, I could open Facebook and access hundreds of articles, not just from the Globe, but

from virtually any news source my “friends” cared to share. *Dinner with Cupid’s* blind dates between bumbling Bostonians began to pale in comparison to the bite-size videos that popped up on my news feed with eye-catching titles like “*When your celebrity date turns out to be your cousin.*” These days, as I scroll through my Facebook feed and click on links shared by friends from various walks of life, I realize that the exchange of articles that once took place between me and my family over the breakfast table has simply shifted to a bigger stage. What was once a private, family ritual is now a public, world-wide event.

The way I interact with news now is hardly unique for my generation (Born in 1998, I straddle the line between Millennials and Gen Z, so I’ll be comparing myself to both groups). Most Millennials and Gen Z-ers also report getting their news from social media sources as newspaper sales continue to decline (Agility, 2018; Barthel, 2018). A 2018 study found that nearly 60 percent of Gen Z identified social networks as their most important or second-most important news source (Millennials were close behind with nearly 50 percent) (Agility, 2018). My reliance on Facebook seems to reflect my proximity to the Millennial generation: almost 90 percent of Millennials get their news regularly from the site, which appears to serve as a social network and news platform at once (The Media Insight Project, 2015, pp. 2, 25, 26). While most Millennial users enter Facebook with the intention of socializing and finding out about their friends’ lives, roughly 70 percent of them often “serendipitous[ly]” find themselves clicking on news articles with regularity (p. 25). I see this reflected in my own life: the way I consume news no longer requires the intentional act of sitting down at the breakfast table *in order to* find the news I want to read. Instead, as I open the Facebook app on my phone throughout the day to respond to a notification or see who’s birthday it is today, the news finds me.

This method of news consumption isn't only convenient; it's also pleasurable. When articles and videos are woven into the threads of a social network, clicking on them becomes more than just an act of news consumption; it becomes an act of socialization, more akin to attending a party than sitting down to read the paper. The Media Insight Project echoes this sentiment, noting that Millennials "appear to be drawn into news that they might otherwise have ignored because peers are recommending and contextualizing it for them on social networks" (2015, p. 2). While I might normally flip past an article on the rise of gender-neutral child rearing in the newspaper, I'm eager to click on it when a friend has shared it on his timeline along with the inflammatory caption, "These crazy feminists have really gone too far." No longer is the article an isolated piece of information; it is social information about the opinion of one of my friends. I don't just want to know what the article says; I also want to know how it reflects my friend's beliefs and personality. *Does Jake hate feminists? Is he against non-binary people? He always seemed so open-minded!* I'm curious about what the people I know think, and the news media's infiltration of social networks capitalizes on that curiosity.

My Facebook friend's criticism of feminists and gender-neutral child rearing brings up an important point: Gen Z-ers and Millennials who consume news through social media often cross paths with the news shared by people with different perspectives. While many from older generations like New York Times columnist Frank Bruni and Upworthy CEO Eli Pariser argue that Facebook creates a "filter bubble" where users are mainly exposed to material that they already agree with, allowing them to "retreat into enclaves of the like-minded," I'd argue that I see articles and videos posted by a much more diverse cast of characters --and thus from a more diverse array of news sources-- than I would ever come across at my breakfast table, both at

home or in the Middlebury dining halls (The Media Insight Project, 2015, p. 3; Bruni, 2016). In addition to the scores of left-leaning, intellectual news articles and videos circulated among my largely college-educated, liberal social circle, I also see the pro-life articles shared by my high school classmate who recently became a mom, the study attempting to refute the existence of a gender wage gap from my Freshman-year hallmate, the pieces on Bolsonaro's election from my transgender acquaintance in Brazil, and the inspirational, Catholic quotes from my host-mom in rural Argentina (I'm not sure if inspirational quotes qualify as news, but some of Jesus's supposed opinions were news to me). This is not to say that I am a unusually open-minded social media user; in fact, 70 percent of Millennials agree that their social media feeds expose them to diverse viewpoints (The Media Insight Project, 2015, p. 3).

It's hard to feel more than a little nostalgic about my old habit of pouring over the *Globe*. The way I consume news now seems undeniable *better*. Through the social networks on my phone (including, but not limited to, Facebook), I discover a greater quantity and variety of news stories than I would ever have access to otherwise. I can do this in a way that fits seamlessly into my busy lifestyle and feels more like socializing than consuming. While Facebook does "suggest" articles and videos that seem to match the profile it has constructed of me, it also causes me to bump into material shared by people who I'd rarely have a chance to converse with in real life. It's no surprise to me that the majority of Gen Z-ers and Millennials seem to consume news in the same social-network-based way.

I recently visited home for February break and had the chance to relish in the simple pleasures of doing laundry for free, waking up in my childhood bed, and devouring the Sunday *Globe* over breakfast. I read the articles that caught my interest, leaving *Dinner with Cupid* for

last. Once finished, I pulled out my phone to check Facebook. The first item on my newsfeed was a video shared by a friend from Venezuela: “*We traveled to Venezuela to show you what you don’t see on TV.*” Intrigued, I clicked and read on.

I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

student name

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