



TEENS KNOW WHAT THEY WANT FROM ONLINE NEWS:

DO YOU?



A 2009 research study from the NAA Foundation and the Media Management Center at Northwestern University looks at how newspapers can engage with young people.



Newspaper
Association
of America





WHY THIS STUDY MATTERS

Over the course of two major in-depth studies¹ with young people, researchers from the Media Management Center (MMC) at Northwestern University heard clearly how current online news offerings fall short or don't connect. Most sites overload teens with information that they find monotonous and often unintelligible.

The Newspaper Association of America Foundation and MMC teamed up in early 2009 to test previous findings on better ways of engaging young people in news.

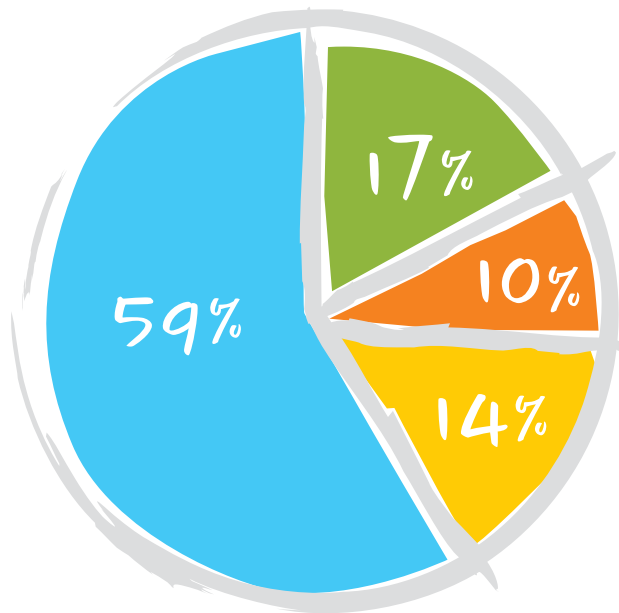
The Foundation and MMC consider this work of vital importance, not only for the future of the news industry but also of democracies, which require informed citizenries to function properly. People are often quick to dismiss concern about low news engagement in teens by saying, "Why worry? Young people have never been that interested in news. But once they get a house and a mortgage and pay taxes, they'll start to pay attention, just like their parents did."

The reality, however, is that today's young people are more disengaged from news than their counterparts in previous generations were. Extensive research shows that if people aren't news consumers by the time they become adults, they're not likely to develop much of a news habit later.

In this study, we offer an overall strategy and specific approaches for serving teens better. We test ideas gleaned from earlier research with possible home-page and story-level prototypes. We see that online news sites can serve teens better and that the answer isn't to dilute the news but to be bolder in our approach.

¹"If It Catches My Eye: An Exploration of Online News Experiences of Teenagers" and "From 'Too Much' to 'Just Right': Engaging Millennials in Election News on the Web," both from the Media Management Center.

PART ONE: How Teens Connect (or Don't) With the News



● Preteens	53,108,458	17.4%
● Teens	29,748,838	9.7%
● 20-somethings	42,750,013	14.0%
● 30 and older	179,940,874	58.9%
TOTAL	305,548,183	100.0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates as of November 2008

Today's teenagers constitute 10 percent of the U.S. population but are part of a much larger cohort that shares something very powerful: They have all come of age since the dawn of the Internet in the early 1990s. Altogether, these preteens, teens and 20-somethings (the oldest of whom were barely teens when the Web browser Mosaic was invented in 1993) represent more than 41 percent of the U.S. population.


If you could spend 100 hours listening to 250 young people around the country talk about news, particularly news online, you'd hear certain refrains repeatedly:

- ★ News as presented on the Internet is just “too much.” It frequently and quickly turns them off, overwhelms them and makes them click away.
- ★ They are only somewhat interested in news. They would like to “be informed,” but don't want to spend too much time on getting information.
- ★ They seldom seek out news. They encounter it while doing something else, such as turning on their computers, checking e-mail, sitting with their parents or doing homework.
- ★ They like it when a story reaches out and “catches my eye” and makes them want to read it. But when they click for more, they're very upset if they find little substance.

These insights were gleaned from two previous studies² in which, through focus groups and individual interviews, researchers probed young people's online news habits, attitudes and experiences. Researchers have tried to understand better where news fits in teens' lives and what might be needed to help them become more informed, particularly about serious subjects.



² “If It Catches My Eye: An Exploration of Online News Experiences of Teenagers” and “From ‘Too Much’ to ‘Just Right’: Engaging Millennials in Election News on the Web,” both from the Media Management Center.



Clearly emergent from these conversations is that what most news sites offer today simply doesn't fit the needs, interests and current capabilities of young people very well. There's a mismatch involving what's offered, what they can process and absorb, and the amount of time they're willing to spend on it. To engage them, news organizations must offer something different.

Interestingly, from related MMC research with adults,³ many similarities are apparent between the experiences of the young people surveyed and those of adults who are light readers. Thus, if news organizations develop something to meet the needs of young audiences, that might well simultaneously serve the needs of another sizable and underserved group.

Fortunately, strong clues have emerged from the research about what would make news sites more compelling, more enjoyable and more manageable for young people – from letting information unfold in manageable, bite-sized chunks and layers to placing more emphasis on explaining things, clearer prioritization and cleaner organization and design.

In this study, researchers worked with a design team to develop a series of prototypes to address some of the research findings. The prototypes all featured the same news stories, ads and other realistic content. They were tested with 96 young people, ages 13 to 18, in 12 focus groups held in six U.S. cities: Denver; Philadelphia; Fort Lauderdale; Fresno, Calif.; Springfield, Ill.; and Orangeburg, S.C. The team refined and revised the prototypes as the process continued. Interestingly, responses were remarkably consistent, varying little from group to group or city to city, regardless of market size or geographic area.



CATCHES MY EYE

³ “What It Takes to Be a Web Favorite” and “How to Become ‘Easy to Use’ Online,” both from the Media Management Center.

A large, stylized lightbulb is positioned on the left side of the page, with several five-pointed stars scattered around it. The background is a solid orange color with a white, torn-paper-like border at the top and bottom.

WHAT DRIVES HOW TEENS REACT TO NEWS?

To understand the solutions proposed, it's important to understand what seems to influence the responses of teens to news today. Several things appear to be at work:

- ★ Today's young people feel intensely time-starved. Adults may wistfully think that teens have it easy. But young people express feelings of being bombarded by options, of always having to prioritize because they don't have enough time to do everything they want. They feel burdened by having to weigh the time something takes against how much it's worth to them.
- ★ They're only somewhat interested in news. While their interest in news grows from year to year, it's not strong, just budding, and can be easily squelched. So a quick news fix, such as those offered on search engines or generic portals such as AOL, suits them just fine. But if the news is too time-consuming, difficult or unpleasant, it's not worth the effort.
- ★ Understanding the news is not always easy for them. It's clear from listening to them that most news stories and sites assume users possess a certain background of orienting knowledge about issues, players and history – knowledge many teens don't have. They don't have a lifetime of background knowledge in their heads. To them, it sometimes feels just as hard and hopeless to understand the news as it would be to master calculus if they had missed the first half of the semester.
- ★ Teens can find the very subjects of the news stressful. News of crimes and wars makes them feel unsafe. News about the economy and the environment worries them.
- ★ They frequently get a “too much” feeling from the news and quickly click away. That's triggered by having too many things competing for their attention, too many details, too much text and stories that are too long or too difficult to understand.
- ★ They'd like to understand the news better, to understand the basics of what people are talking about and to be able to form their own opinions and perhaps talk about news. But they don't know of any news sites that fit that bill.
- ★ They don't want to “follow the news.” That would mean mastering daily ins and outs of a variety of news stories, which requires more background, time and interest than they have. Yet to them, that's what most news sites seem to offer.
- ★ They fuzz out when confronted with long, uninterrupted blocks of text. They don't seem to be able to absorb information or become interested in it unless it's broken up and illustrated.

We invite you to read the full reports of earlier research on how teens and adults experience news at www.mediamanagementcenter.org. Now, we'll explore how to take action on these insights to provide a more engaging experience for teens.

PART TWO: What Works With Teens and Online News

A Strategy for Reaching Teens: 'Interest Me, Please'

For teens, the news makes sense only sometimes. All too often, they struggle just to determine what is happening and what it means. Trying to follow the news without a basic, orienting knowledge of the world feels like an exercise in frustration and boredom. As a result, young people and other inexperienced news consumers describe the news as “all the same” and “too much bad stuff” and just plain “too much.”

The first step in being interested in a news topic – knowing what it is and why it’s interesting or important – is often the point at which current news sites provide beginning news consumers the least help. Beyond the constant stream of terms and jargon, which can be intimidating, is a whole subtext about what’s important and has meaning. Most news sources leave teens on their own to answer basic questions such as, “What exactly is the Gaza conflict?” or “Why is a governor being impeached a big deal?”

Many young people decide that if they have no hope of understanding, it’s easier to tune out. So they do.

From our broad base of research, we observe that many teens experience a chicken-and-egg problem in which general ignorance begets low interest and vice versa. In teens, we see the effect magnified by a profound feeling of time starvation. With so many things clamoring for their attention, news can fall far down the priority list.

In this research, we sought to find and evaluate ways to help teens enjoy and become more involved with news. We wanted to eliminate negative experiences wherever possible and enhance positive ones. We decided to test specific ideas and Web sites. We devised hypotheses based on previous research.

Among these are: They would want only small amounts of news and very few words, they wouldn’t want to follow breaking news and they would want to read in-depth. We created a fictitious news source, “DailyNews.com,” and about two dozen prototypes of different approaches for home pages and story pages. We took these to 12 focus groups in six cities. [For more on Methodology, see Appendix A.]

A few things were intentionally left aside. We didn’t explore lifestyle- or entertainment-oriented approaches versus straight news. We didn’t explore effects of different color schemes, typefaces and other design particulars. Our purpose was to create a general news site covering a broad range of top news stories.

We learned interesting and encouraging things. By and large, teens want to be interested and knowledgeable about news. Although they may not care about every topic, when they engage they want coverage to be meaty. They don’t want just a snippet.

Teens are surprisingly consistent in their views about what kind of news site would best serve them:

1. It should help them become interested in news by focusing their attention on a few items, illustrated with photos, and explaining clearly but briefly what is happening and why it matters.
2. The home page should provide a general sense of the news and a seductive pitch for each story in the simplest, most visually enticing manner.
3. Story-level pages should richly supplement breaking news with basic information, background material, definitions and other insights about the topics. Everything should be displayed in manageable chunks with multiple points of entry and plenty of illustrations. Once teens become interested and click through to a story page, they are ready to engage but need help because they don’t have insider knowledge.

To achieve these overarching goals, we identified 10 key lessons for satisfying young audiences.



INTEREST ME,
PLEASE ...

10 Key Lessons About Serving Young Audiences

1. DON'T OVERLOAD THEM.

Teens drive home the point that many news sites completely overwhelm them. The surest way to turn away teens – and Internet users in general – is to leave them feeling overloaded. So make choices.

The first step is obvious. Reduce the volume of information on the page by offering fewer stories, words and photos. We didn't determine a magic story count, but found that teens were often satisfied with fewer than a dozen stories overall on a home page. Significantly higher story counts sometimes worked, but it's clear teens generally crave "top headlines" and the kind of simplified overview of the news they often find at Yahoo!, Google, AOL and their e-mail providers.

The second step is perhaps more important. By reducing the overall volume of news, Web sites can dedicate more space to highlighting and offering explanation and/or context with selected stories. Home pages with fewer stories can include stronger visual elements, a key selling point. We'll explore what specific organization and presentation tactics work and why.

"It's like a whole bunch of news stories thrown at you. ... It's just stuff after stuff after stuff, and it's just too much." – Brandon, 17

* * *

"News sites would appeal more to me if they didn't, like, attack me with their stories." – Carter, 14

"If you want to sit down and really read through every word of something, you'll probably read the paper ... but if you're accessing a Web site, then you want information to be displayed very clearly – and maybe less information can accomplish that sometimes – but mostly just associating with pictures or headlines that organize things effectively." – Luke, 17

2. CREATE HOME PAGES THAT SATISFY.

Teens said clearly that a successful home page should provide an adequate sense of the news without further clicking or reading. An ideal home page would offer a brief but understandable overview of news and quickly convey major news and what else is happening, much like television or radio news reports do. It should offer a variety of topics and be sufficient in and of itself. Teens should have to click only if they become interested in a story and want to learn more.

Simply giving them lists of headlines, like the ones in the prototype at right, won't do. While a heavy news user may find headlines such as "Budget leaves \$750 billion for bailouts" meaningful, they're gibberish for most teens. They need more.

For example, teens complained about the common approach of listing large numbers of headline links on a home page. The prototype at right used this practice to almost universal rejection. Not only did teens complain about an overwhelming amount of text, but they also found that many news headlines used too much jargon or were too abrupt to allow understanding much without clicking on the headlines and reading the stories. Such a page wouldn't interest them in anything; it would just make them give up.



"I kind of just want to be able to scan it and get all my information I need. I think just a little sentence or something below the pictures and just something to click into the story ... would be good because I can just right-click and open a new tab to get the answers." – Anthony, 14



3. ENTICE THEM TO KEEP READING.

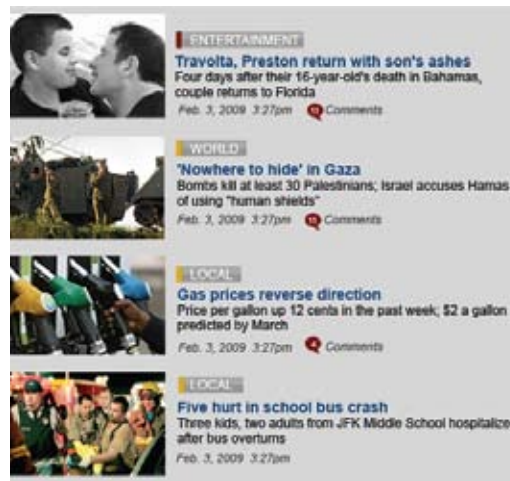
While teens want home pages to be sufficient unto themselves without clicking, they also like it when something “catches my eye” and draws them in. Repeatedly, they praised pages that made stories look more interesting to them, whether through photos, graphics, good descriptions or headlines. To them, photos aren’t just illustrations, but devices that really help to interest them in a story and understand it. They want the page to try affirmatively to sell them on reading an item and entice them to click for more.

It’s almost as if they are saying, “Interest me, please!”

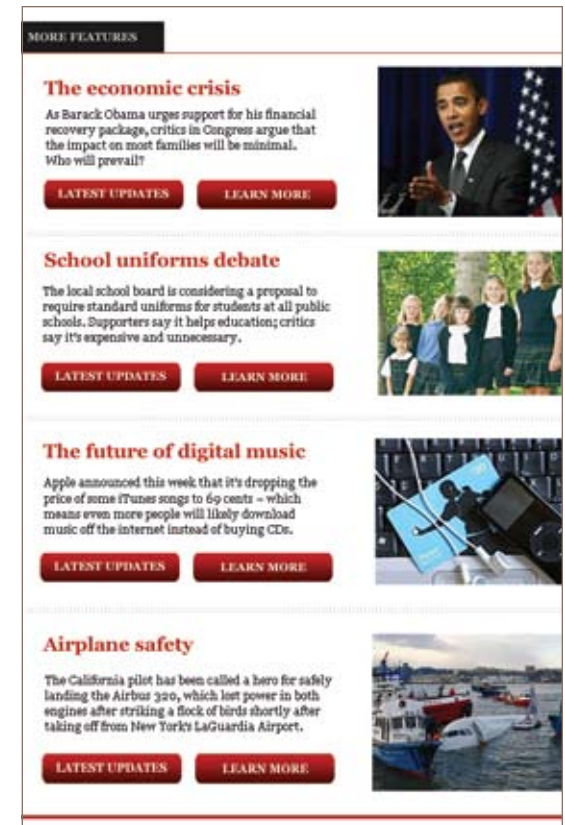
To be clear, they didn’t want a teasing headline. But they did want Web sites to explain why things matter. Thus, an overwhelming majority of teens said they want a brief summary of each featured story on the page.

4. SUMMARIZE STORIES ON THE HOME PAGE.

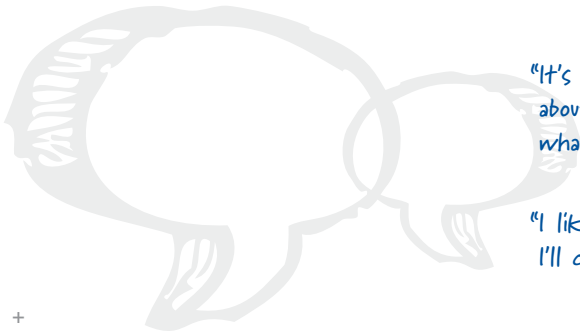
Good story summaries solve teens’ two major problems with a news home page – getting the gist of a news story without clicking on it and knowing what to expect if they do. We explored several approaches to news summaries and found that for most, one sentence is about enough. On very unfamiliar topics, a slightly longer approach sometimes worked.



This length and approach for summaries worked well for a large majority of teens. Having a header that conveys the general category, a headline and the full sentence description offers a quick summary of the story.



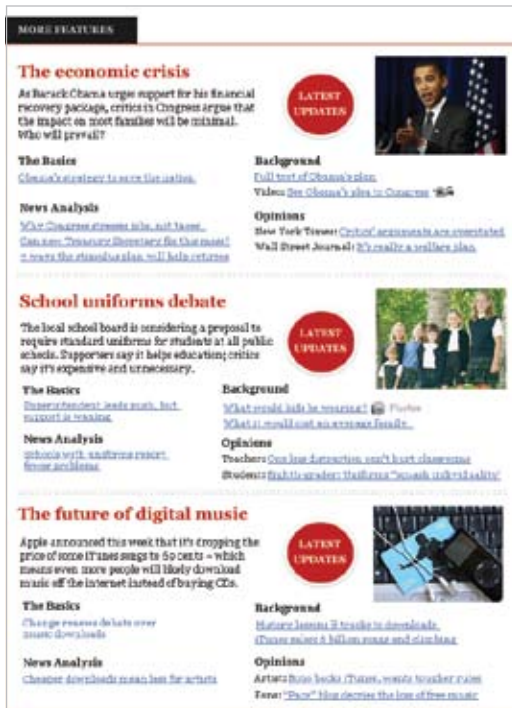
Some teens also preferred a longer summary, but only for very unfamiliar or important stories. The danger of longer summaries is that once the word count climbs, a page begins to feel text-heavy. For a majority of teens, a shorter version worked better.



“It’s not only the amount of stuff that’s on there. It’s how descriptive it is and how much it’s telling about the article. ... So you already know what the story is going to be about. ... It’s telling you what to expect when you read the story.” – Aaron, 17

* * *

“I like the blurbs ... just a little tidbit of the information so if a story really attracts my attention, then I’ll click onto that. But if I don’t want to see a story, then I won’t have to read it.” – Nathan, 15



An involved home-page summary with detailed links underneath went far beyond what teens wanted. It overloaded them. For most teens, the challenge isn't locating specific details within a story as much as engaging them in the first place.

5. INCLUDE VISUALS WITH ANYTHING THAT MATTERS.

Not surprisingly, teens are visual. Clearly, their eyes go first to photos and then, based on what they glean from the photos, perhaps to the text.



This prototype featured three stories with photos and included additional headlines underneath. Most teens complained that there “were only three stories” on this page. They didn’t even notice the additional headlines. They saw three photos and assumed there were three stories.

Again and again, it became clear that if you want teens to notice something and engage, visuals must be included. On the home page, this means a photo with each major headline. A good photo, or any photo, is an important part of selling the story to teens.



On a story page, visuals provide key information and make the page more attractive and compelling to them. Story pages with multiple photos rated far and above those without. *Caveat:* This will require limiting the number of stories and offering some clear priority lest it become “too much.”

“It would be a lot better if they had a picture that went with each subject, because they are kind of cramped into that little area. ... I'm just very visual, so with the picture, I would be more likely to click on it to see more about it.” - Erica, 17

* * *

“You have a picture, especially the beginning picture, [that] makes it stand out, and you go to really just any article you want to go to - it has all the information about it, so that's what I want to read.” - Alexander, 18

"There's a lot of pictures. I like pictures, but there's a lot on this page ... too many pictures. You don't want to focus on too many things at one time." - Mary, 15



This prototype included graphics with each story – a good thing – but the overall effect was too much. Too many thumbnail photos can look cluttered. Also, trying for a high story count means that photos become too small to be distinguishable. Again, the key is focusing on a limited number of story items and presenting them well.

6. CONVEY WHAT'S IMPORTANT WITH A CLEAR VISUAL HIERARCHY.

Teens need you to help them understand what's important. They want you to take a stand on which stories of the day are most important and to convey what you've decided. The most disliked prototypes combined a lack of hierarchy with a good dose of general overload.

Effectively conveying importance draws on many time-tested rules of design. Important stories should:

- ★ Be given more space on the page
- ★ Appear higher on the page
- ★ Have larger visuals and larger headline typefaces.

Additionally, labels can help but must be applied judiciously.

Strongly preferred pages chose one key story for particular focus and designated a small number of additional stories as worthy of attention. Additional stories may be featured, but lower priority should be conveyed clearly. A relatively common practice on many Web sites of having a "feature" focal story unrelated to the top news is very confusing for teens and should be avoided.

"I liked how the top story was set out apart from everything else, and I liked [how] it was simple yet modern, and the proportion of the size of the headlines [showed] importance. Like the bottom left is the less important, and then the more important and then [the] top story is most important." - Ruby, 16

* * *

"It's kind of like, 'Just pick a story, any story, whatever you read, fine, whatever.' It's not like, 'OK, look at this in this category, and there's stories under it.' It's more like, 'We have all the news, whatever you want, just pick one.' ... How do you know what stories are more important?" - Sophia, 18



This prototype was popular with participants because of its clear, appealing focal-point story set apart at the top of the page, with dramatically more space than other stories and additional detail.



7. BEWARE OF TOO MUCH SCROLLING AND CLICKING.

It's pretty clear that teens don't like scrolling down long news pages; they want to click on stories only when thoroughly engaged in the topics. Web usability has long emphasized limiting the number of clicks to reach information, but the degree to which teens want to avoid clicking is noteworthy. Although the effort involved in clicking might seem inconsequential to adults, the potential for wasted effort concerned many teens. They complained vigorously about feeling "duped" into clicking by a misleading headline.

They want story pages to be rich with information, not just lists of links for other information. They do appreciate story pages that offer a very limited selection of well-chosen links to other resources. The key is selectivity.

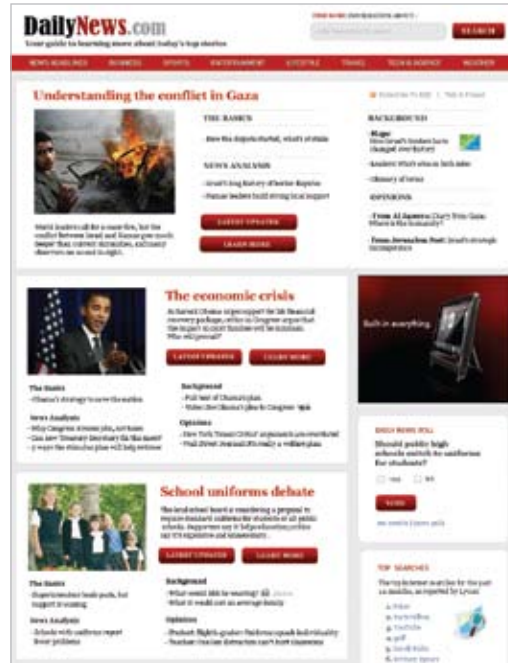
"I don't know if it is just me, but scrolling down a bunch of information is more overwhelming to me. It doesn't keep me interested if you have to keep scrolling down." - William, 18

* * *

"I don't really want to click on things. I don't know, but, like, if it's telling me what I want to know right there, then I shouldn't have to click on it." - Maria, 14

* * *

"Whenever I see a news Web site, I know I just look at the very top of it, like kind of read it, don't really think about it and go somewhere." - Caroline, 14



On home pages, if something interests them, they want to be able to click just once – on a headline or a simple “more” link – to be connected to a page where information already has been gathered. We offered prototypes such as the one above with many specific links associated with each story. Teens found the amount of text and choice overwhelming.

This research argues for a very stringent standard on scrolling and clicking. Although the concept is easily grasped, many news sites struggle to implement it because it limits the volume of news that can be presented. For teens, embracing, not rejecting, those limits makes sense.



8. PROVIDE BACKGROUND, EXPLANATION AND CONTEXT.

It seems obvious that Web sites must help teens understand basic terms and background on news events. Like those in previous studies, teens in this survey were delighted when presented with story pages that assemble a mix of current and background information in one place. They didn't like story pages that provide just short articles. When they decide they are interested enough in a story to click, they want it to be worthwhile.

It became clear to those preparing these prototypes how challenging it can be, even for editors, to find such information online.

The prototype design team noted that while basic information is out there on the Internet, users must search all over and cobble it together. Finding quality material is easy in some cases – for instance, articles from well-known, reputable news sites. But a query involving Google or other search engines does not involve quality filters. Much of what turns up in these searches is from sources with agendas or is simply poorly researched or written. The team found that being a “filter” was extremely important when designing the prototypes for this study.





We found that offering a basic look at issues appealed strongly to virtually all the teens. The above example succeeded in outlining the latest news and basics about it. The same was true about background on the issues. Maps, definitions and “who’s who among newsmakers” features allowed teens to become interested in the news

more readily. We also highlighted news analysis and opinions in clearly labeled areas so teens could continue to explore stories of interest to them. Although such depth wasn’t appealing to all teens, it did enhance their feeling about a story’s meaning and importance.

“I’m not totally sure about the whole background on the conflict in Gaza, and having the ability to look up a back story really helps.” – Nathan, 15

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“I really liked that it had three options – analysis, a background and opinions – and I liked that it was in-depth articles on today’s topics, so if you were really interested, you could go there and get a bigger article.” – Katherine, 15

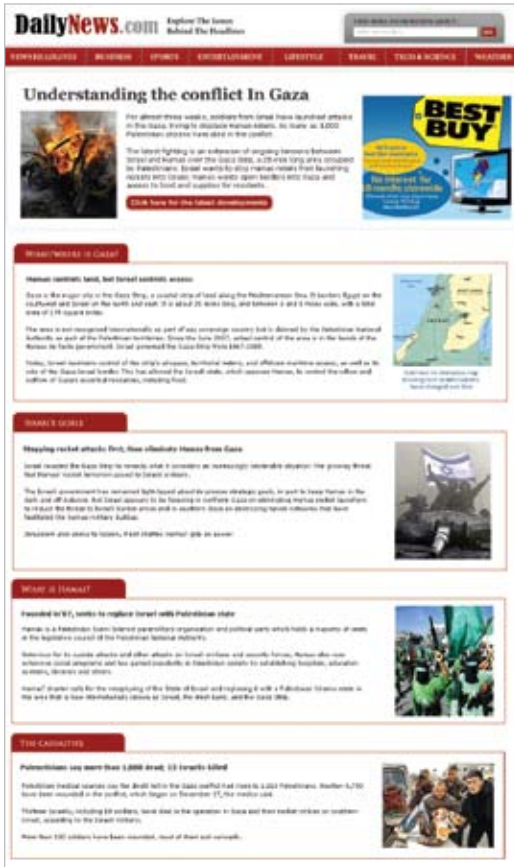
9. BREAK UP INFORMATION INTO MANAGEABLE CHUNKS.

On home pages, breaking the page into different categories works, each with a clear lead story and a summary and picture, followed by a limited list of other stories in that category.

For story-level pages, once teens click on an article of interest, they’re ready to engage. They want more than just a little bit. But almost universally, teens rejected pages with uninterrupted text in favor of those offering information in smaller, bite-size chunks.



The story page above worked for many teens because it broke what could have been one long article into several pieces that teens could consume with greater selectivity. Each section included a clear headline, summarizing subhead and a photo so that even if teens didn’t want to read the entire story, they could skim the headlines, look at photos and grasp the story more easily. They could read some sections and skip others.



This example also was very popular because it boxed related components together and offered color to the organization. In all successful cases, each section was summarized and given a photo.

Interestingly, overall story length is less important than whether the story is broken up. Teens are intimidated by long expanses of unrelieved text but not by the same amount of text divided into chunks.

"If I don't want to read the full article, which I typically will not unless it's something that I truly think the details really will matter in how I understand it, just looking at each of these headlines, I feel like I've read ... not the whole story but at least gotten a very good idea of what is going on right now." - Luke, 17

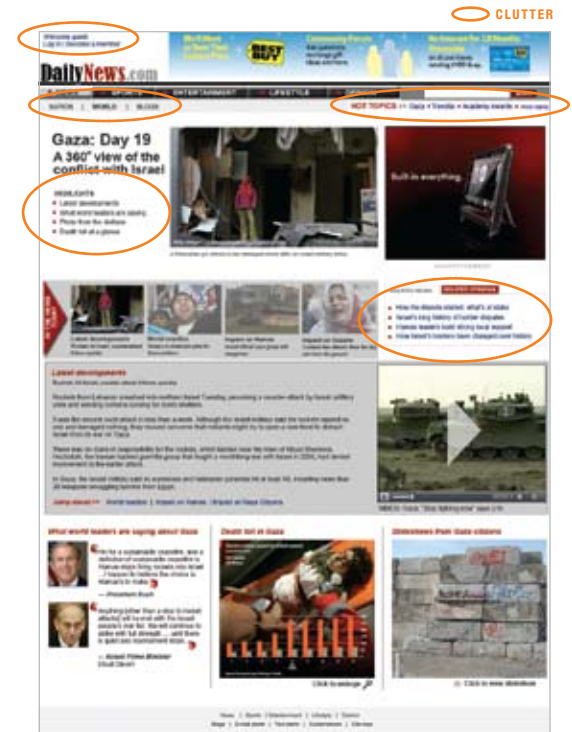
10. GET RID OF CLUTTER.

As many Web sites do, we found ourselves filling small open areas on prototype pages with little bits of interest – top searches, “Did You Know?” boxes, video clips, small ads, tabs, pictures. We thought these might add visual energy or variety to the mix. But they just added clutter.

These features-turned-clutter didn't add value to the page – participants struggled to locate them on the page even after prompting. More important, they also made it difficult for teens to find essential elements.

Of the page at right, a participant said: “My eye bounces off of things. I can't concentrate. I keep looking down here, and I also look up there.”

"I just don't like how there's so much stuff on one page, like it's so confusing to look at and there's, like, so many words. I like it simple." - Lily, 16



Even more damning, many said that as the amount of information increased, their interest in a page decreased. “I was kind of overwhelmed, I guess, with all the information,” one said. “I thought it was kind of boring.”

So, grab the red pen and eliminate clutter – little links, lines of text, boxes and throwaway features that distract from good information and don't add value. The net effect will be significantly better.

Other Observations

MAKE CLEAR WHAT'S RELATED AND WHAT'S NOT.

It's so simple, but teens appreciate it when related news items are linked graphically in an immediately and intuitively understandable way, when related items are boxed together or have the same colored screen behind them. This allows teens to grasp and quickly manage the volume of information on the subject and to find related information of interest. Without a clear prompt, they often don't notice such relationships.



THEY WANT CLEAR ESCAPE HATCHES.

If a site or page doesn't interest them, they want it to be very easy to go elsewhere. So they appreciate clearly defined, bold navigation aids such as bars or buttons, but won't see them if they are too subtle.

Interestingly, they want things that belong on a page (see previous item) to look different than teasers to other pages. If a page is all about tax hikes and they see an item about Britney Spears, they wonder why a Spears item is on a "serious" page unless it's clear that the purpose of the item is to give them an escape hatch if they're finished with the page.

WHEN THEY'RE INTERESTED, THEY EXPECT TO READ FIRST.

Teens may not enjoy reading, but when ready to engage in a topic they expect an article, not just photos, graphics or snippets. When a page has multiple elements, most said they prefer a brief story first rather than leading with a video, photo gallery or other storytelling device. Some said a story is the fastest way to become truly informed; others just expected it. Either way, they found story pages without text at the top to be disorienting and unsatisfying.

"Articles aren't really that fun to read, but overall, if you really want to know something, it's good to read it." - Alyssa, 18

PHOTO GALLERIES ARE NO SUBSTITUTE FOR A STORY.

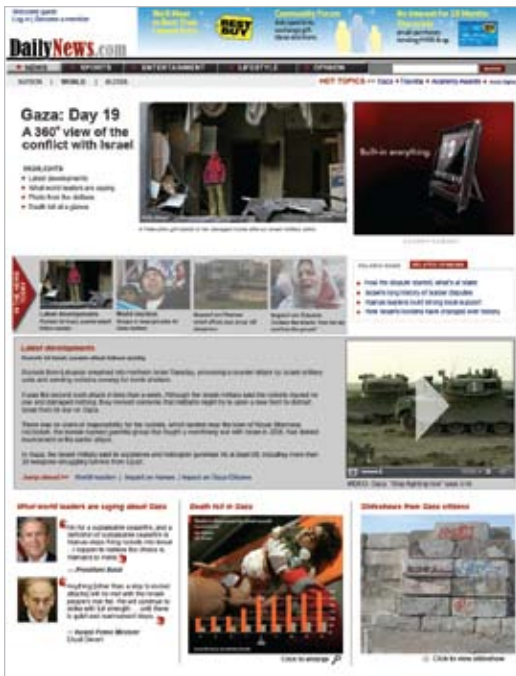
If teens like photos, why not tell them the news through photo galleries? The logic is sound, but teens soundly rejected the idea of obtaining serious news that way. Some of the resistance was practical because waiting for pages to load and then flipping through them can be time-consuming. Other objections were more serious. They expressed concern about seeing gruesome or disturbing photos, needed help deciphering some images to understand what was happening and didn't believe short captions could cover news adequately.

The overall message was clear: Individual photos help to interest them in stories; they like photo galleries when they want to relax and enjoy themselves or as story supplements. But as a way to learn about serious topics, galleries are too slow and clunky.



THEY LIKE A CHOICE OF STORYTELLING MODES.

Although teens want a text summary of the news to lead a page, they respond very positively when the approach is varied. They found the design a bit jumbled but liked how this page offered a choice of other ways to access a story – videos, photo galleries, text and graphics. Television sets many teens’ standards for news coverage, so this approach connects with those sensibilities.



“I do like watching videos and looking at different pictures ... and for the people who aren't as focused on the news, they can just watch a video, or they have [a] death toll graph and they can just look at it in [a] quick, simple view.” – Madeline, 14

INTRUSIVE, INTERRUPTING ADS TROUBLE THEM.

Teens don’t care for ads. When mixed among and interrupting news content or seeming to masquerade as news content, ads really irritate them. They would rather see ads prominently atop a column than between news items. They object when ads are larger than important news items, intrude excessively on news content or are positioned where art normally would illustrate the story. Any ability to mitigate intrusiveness of ads is likely to appeal to teens.

THEY'RE NOT LIKELY TO PAY FOR NEWS.

Not only are teens not rushing to pay for content, but they also struggle to envision in what realm they would need to pay for content. Barriers to success are plentiful.

“I mean, if I had to pay \$5 a month to have Facebook, I would do it just because Facebook is pretty much my life, but that would be one of the only things that I would buy.” – Noah, 14

* * *

“Since there are so many different places where you can get virtually the same news, why pay \$4.95 a month for this site plan when I can watch Channel 6 and use our cable line?” – Nathan, 15

THEY OFTEN RELY ON AGGREGATORS, PORTALS AND SEARCH ENGINES.

Ask teens where they find news, and they typically say Yahoo!, Google, AOL or MSN. Sometimes, they mean Yahoo! and other times they mean Yahoo! News; sometimes they mean Google, the search bar, and other times they mean Google News or iGoogle. And sometimes they say MSN but mean MSNBC.com.

Whichever option they choose, it’s clear that they believe such aggregators, portals and search engines serve them well. They like their brevity and compact approach. They think Yahoo!, MSN and AOL do a particularly good job of identifying stories of interest to teens. In approach and story choice, these sites are clearly ones to watch.

“When you have that iGoogle page and everything is kind of very compact with information, you can just read the headlines. And if I don't have time to read the article, it's nice to just go through. ... Especially during the presidential election, you could kind of ... tell how big of a deal it was by how many headlines it showed up on.” – Luke, 17

* * *

“When I get online, I go to the Yahoo! site and click five things, and then I'm done because it bores me.” – Carter, 14



PART THREE: Straight Talk on What to Do Right Now



>> GOOD

- ✓ Keeping related items in the same column
- ✓ Boxing related items
- ✓ Including a visual with anything important
- ✓ Dramatically emphasizing hierarchy
- ✓ Offering places to find additional information
- ✓ Stating directly: “What is it?” and “Why is it news?”
- ✓ Providing summaries on home pages



>> BAD

- ✗ Stacked lists of headlines
- ✗ Mixing ads and news (news gets ignored)
- ✗ Lots of uninterrupted text
- ✗ Gray, bland color scheme
- ✗ Filling every blank spot

Let’s boil it down. After all this investigation, what would we do if we ran a news organization?

First, we’d create a news site not just for teens, but for all people who lack experience with news and have a limited amount of time to become engaged. Say “youth news Web site,” and many people start thinking about a lifestyle- or entertainment-oriented site with a little news on the side.

We heard quite clearly that teens want news sites that do news well and don’t dumb it down or try to become experts in teen culture. They want a site that provides what they need, which is different from the needs of news junkies who already have a great grasp of and interest in news. The added benefit of this approach is that whatever we create should appeal to a much larger but underserved audience than just teens.


We’d focus the site’s home page on the day’s few key stories, probably half a dozen, and try to make them really engaging. We wouldn’t try to compete with news sites offering comprehensive reports for heavy news consumers. Instead, we’d offer a focused, selective report.

We’d immediately start running photos and summaries with every news major story on the home page. Well done, this would make skimming the page more satisfying and help teens engage in more stories. We’d try for summaries that state clearly what is happening and why it’s interesting or important.

We’d get far more serious about home-page hierarchy. We’d make one major story clearly bigger and more visual, with a distinctive treatment. We’d make clear the relative importance of stories to each other and demote or eliminate low-priority news.

We’d eliminate clutter with a vengeance – all one-line links and little icons tucked here and there, and all such elements that seem to gather, particularly around the mast, and steal attention from important information while making the page look boring or overwhelming. But we’d keep the weather and the date because teens depend on them. We’d consider cutting page length. Nobody scrolls down there, anyway.

Then we’d create new story-page templates to use regularly to break long text easily into sections. Teens love pages with the newest, most important information at the top and clearly labeled sections of background and explanation down the page. If possible, we’d template in photos and create anchored positions for different types of additional information. As a consistent approach, this would be a great improvement for teens, so we’d try to make it easy to present on a regular basis.



On story pages, we'd emphasize the basics and helpful background information so teens could better understand featured stories. Doing this consistently and well would offer real value in this complex world as we embrace aggregating and distilling information for teens. Our value would be in knowledgeably editing and filtering reliable and clear information. Clearly labeling sections as background, definitions or basics would work well for teens, too.

So what might a successful site look like?

We have examples. But first, let's be clear about the limitations of these prototypes. In response to what we heard in the focus groups, our design team created pages that we believe would address much of what teens told us. We are confident the teens we interviewed did or would like these pages much, much better than what they usually see on news Web sites.

But are these pages the only answers? Is the road to success for every newspaper to copy them? No. They are the first step. If we ran a newspaper, we'd ask our designers and editors to look at these examples, read this report and determine how best to serve news needs of teens and other light readers. Although our editors and designers are talented, we challenge you to make their work better and more suited to your audience.

We'd probably start with something very much like these and then test and tweak and try, and test and tweak and try some more, learning as we go and becoming increasingly better at satisfying and attracting our target audience.



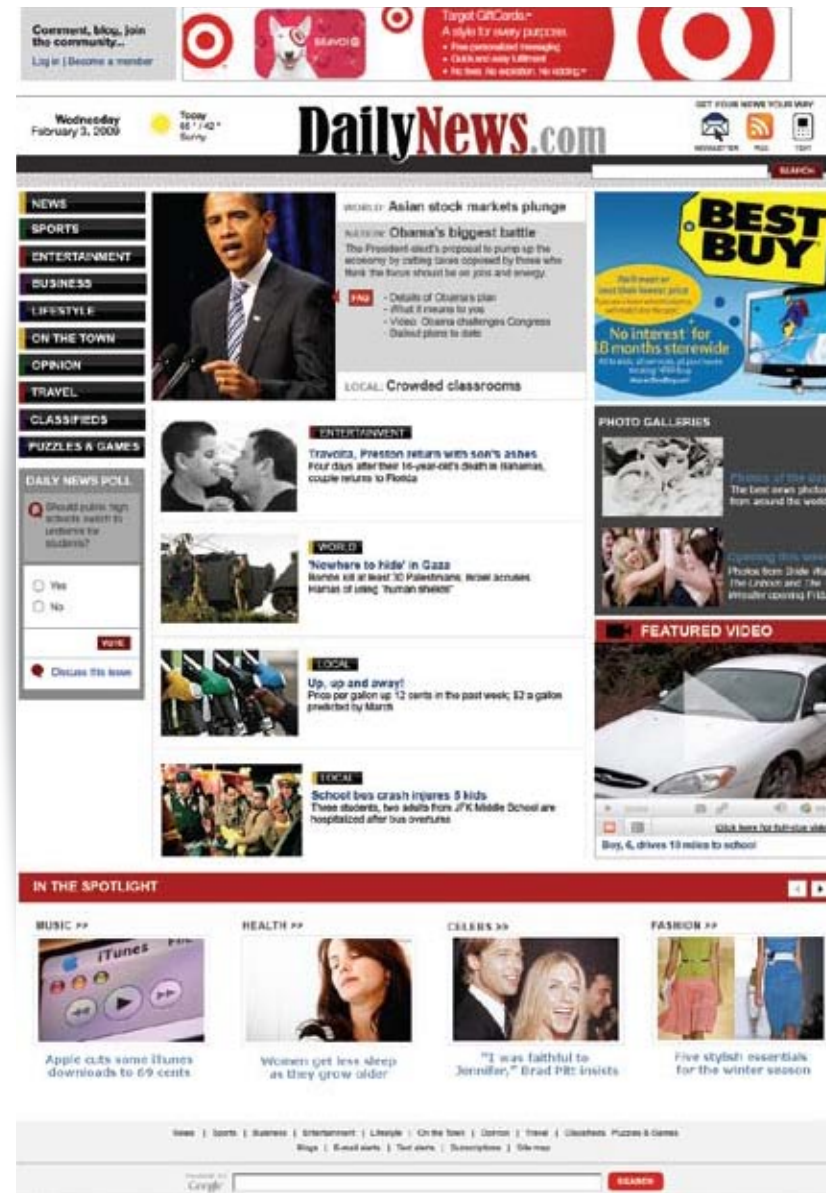
WHAT TO DO

After the prototype tests, we created one “best of” home page that incorporated many features teens liked in different prototypes we showed them in focus groups. Thus, it wasn’t tested with the groups. Then we selected two story-page prototypes that stood out: one tested with participants online but not in the focus groups; the other tested online and in focus groups.



This home page is the after-the-fact composite of attributes that focus groups liked in different prototypes. It offers a very condensed view of the news – one clearly identified major story and then top stories in other categories.

- ★ News summaries, labels and headlines allow readers a basic grounding in the news without clicking.
- ★ Photos and summaries make the stories more appealing and more likely to entice further interest.
- ★ Navigation along the left is bold and colorful. Teens liked a more clearly distinguishable navigation bar than horizontal versions featured in most other prototypes.
- ★ Although ads have prominent positions, they aren’t interspersed with news content that makes teens likely to ignore the entire right column.
- ★ Overall, the page is clean with few items tucked in and among other text.



WHAT TO DO



This story page rated highest among those tested online. But it was not tested in live focus groups. What did the online group like?

- ★ It parcels a lot of information into clearly labeled sections with related items boxed.
- ★ Each section includes labels, headlines and a clear photo to help communicate information and stimulate interest.
- ★ It offers additional information if readers want more, but doesn't require clicking for a satisfying experience.
- ★ Readers particularly thought that it offered just the right amount of information and nicely balanced the size of photos with the amount of text.

The screenshot shows the DailyNews.com website interface. At the top, there are promotional banners for 'BEST BUY' and 'Community Forum'. Below the site logo, there is a search bar and a navigation menu with categories like NEWS HEADLINES, BUSINESS, SPORTS, ENVIRONMENT, LIFESTYLE, TRAVEL, and TECH & GADGETS. The main content area features a large article titled 'Understanding the conflict in Gaza' with a sub-headline 'World leaders are called for a cease fire, but the conflict between Israel and Hamas gets much deeper than current allegations. Both are adamant about their position, and many observers are not so sure.' Below this are several smaller sections, each with a title, a photo, and a short text snippet. These sections include 'THE BASICS', 'NEWS ANALYSIS', 'FIRST PERSON', 'DOCTOR'S DIARY', and 'OPINIONS'. Each section has a 'Read the full story from Times' link. The layout is clean and organized, with clear visual cues for each section.

WHAT TO DO

This second, highly successful story-page design was tested in focus groups and rated at or near the top of those shown with all groups. It succeeds for the same reason the other story page works.

- ★ It offers an appealing balance of text and photos.
- ★ It breaks up a lengthy bit of text into clearly labeled sections and boxes related items.
- ★ It offers headlines and a one-line summary in each section. The summaries are a valuable addition.

The screenshot shows a news article page from DailyNews.com. The main headline is "Understanding the conflict in Gaza". Below the headline is a large photo of a fire. To the right of the photo is a "BEST BUY" advertisement. Below the photo is a section titled "WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO CONTROL GAZA?" with a sub-headline "Israel controls land, but Hamas controls access". This section includes a map of Gaza and text explaining the situation. Below this is a section titled "ISRAELI GOALS" with a sub-headline "Stopping rocket attacks first, then a full-scale Hamas from Gaza". This section includes a photo of a person holding a flag and text about Israeli goals. Below this is a section titled "WHERE IS HAMAS?" with a sub-headline "Founded in '89, seeks to replace Israel with Palestinian state". This section includes a photo of a crowd and text about Hamas. Below this is a section titled "THE CASUALTIES" with a sub-headline "Palestinians say more than 1,000 dead; 52 Israelis killed". This section includes a photo of people and text about casualties.

WHAT NOT TO DO

To appeal to teens, home pages should definitely not look like these six.



By committing many sins common to typical news sites, this page would just make them give up.

- ★ It loads the page with too much small text.
- ★ The headline lists are a killer for teens. They offer little to entice teens into the story and include too much jargon, or they are too abrupt to allow understanding much without clicking and reading the stories.
- ★ The focal-point item gives little information that would inform or entice teens.
- ★ The page uses few visuals.
- ★ It offers little or no guidance about which stories are really important. A photo highlights one significant story, but overall in a preponderance of news, the reader must determine what matters.
- ★ The total effect is somewhere between blandness and overload.

However, the page has several appealing aspects, particularly the way related items appear in the same column and the relatively clean approach, except for the “comments” and “recommend tags” in the “Latest News” column.

The screenshot shows the DailyNews.com homepage. At the top, there are several promotional banners: 'We'll Meet or Beat Their Lowest Price' with a 'BEST BUY' logo, 'Community Forum' with 'Ask questions, exchange gift ideas and more.', and 'No Interest for 18 Months' with 'Spendable on all purchases totaling \$499 & up.'. Below these is the 'DailyNews.com' logo and a search bar. The navigation menu includes 'NEWS', 'SPORTS', 'ENTERTAINMENT', 'LIFESTYLE', and 'OPINION'. The main content area is divided into several sections: 'TOP STORIES' featuring 'THE GAZA EFFECT' with a photo of a soldier and the headline 'Israel's Hamas conflict enters 17th day'; 'LATEST NEWS' with a list of headlines like 'Impeached governor vows to fight' and 'Obama urges Congress to support plan'; 'KEEP AN EYE ON' with a list of items like 'Asian stock slump good indicator of U.S. news'; and 'JUST FOR FUN' with a list of items like 'Apple cuts some iTunes downloads to 60 cents'. On the right side, there are 'EDITOR PICKS', 'READER PICKS', and an advertisement for 'Kate Hudson vs. Anne Hathaway BRIDE WARS'. At the bottom, there is an 'IN THE SPOTLIGHT' section with three small featured stories and a footer with navigation links and a Google search bar.

WHAT NOT TO DO



This prototype included graphics with each story – a good thing – but the overall effect was too much.

- ★ It set no priorities because the four center stories are presented with equal weight while other devices clamor for attention. Teens didn't like not being able to tell which item was most important. If things were "in the spotlight," why weren't they at the top, they asked? If the four items at the top were "don't miss" items, why were they so small? Under "explore more topics," what was all that text? The items were too small to interest them.
- ★ The page was too cluttered and unfocused.
- ★ It used so many pictures that each was far too small to be attractive.
- ★ The "quick answers" buttons and lists of questions about each of the four major stories added visual clutter without value.

Again, it's better to focus on a limited number of story items and present them well.



WHAT NOT TO DO



This home page does not overload them, but it doesn't tell them anything, either. Nothing is explained. To learn anything, they'd have to click on each item – a pain.

It was unclear where to find anything else. Most teens found it so devoid of meaningful content as to be uninteresting, although in each city, a couple of teens liked its simplicity.

Comment, blog, join the community...
Log in | Become a member

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NEWSLETTER RSS TEXT PRINT

DailyNews.com

NEWS SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT LIFESTYLE OPINION

Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2009

Power lunch, presidential-style
Three former presidents gather for historic meeting with Obama and Bush

TODAY'S TOP STORIES

- WORLD: "Where to hide" in Gaza
- LOCAL: Gas prices reverse direction
- LOCAL: Fire hurt in school bus crash
- WIRE: Apple to cut prices for iTunes downloads
- NATION: Party budget: \$77 million and counting
- WORLD: The coolest places on earth
- More headlines

PHOTO GALLERY VIDEO GALLERY MOST SEARCHED

Photos of the day
The best news photos from around the world

Opening this week
Inside Wars, The Unborn and The Wrestler

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WHAT NOT TO DO

This story page has too much uninterrupted type. After one look, teens we interviewed wanted to click away immediately. It so overwhelmed them that they would probably read fewer words than if the story were shorter or broken up.

The “further reading” box in the upper right offers related information but was often overlooked because it didn’t appear related to the story overall and the gray screen was a turnoff. Many teens complained about the ad inset in the text, saying that it was intrusive and that a photo should illustrate the story. They hardly noticed the poll and top search boxes at the end.



“This is something when you go to every news site ... I think it has too much.” - Aaron, 17

* * *

“I think, yeah, the story is too long. I don't want to read for that long.” - Madeline, 14

* * *

“There's no subtitles. I feel like I'm going to be reading forever. ... It looks like a textbook. If I came home from school, I don't really want to see another textbook.” - Carter, 14

WHAT NOT TO DO



This looks like most story pages on Web sites – just an article and a related piece of art pasted on a page with a few other elements.

Teens complained that if they were interested enough in a story to click on a link from the home page, they wanted more. They said this page did little to draw them into the story. Compared with other, richer story pages they were shown, it paled in interest.

Welcome guest
Log in | Become a member

DailyNews.com

NEWS | SPORTS | ENTERTAINMENT | LIFESTYLE | OPINION

NEWS | NATION | WORLD | BLOGS | PHOTOS

HOT TOPICS >> Gaza | Travolta | Academy Awards | more topics

SEARCH

NEWS

NATION

Obama party budget: \$27 million and climbing

Donations expected to surpass the \$40 million spent on Bush celebrations

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
Published Feb. 3, 2009 10:34 a.m.

Washington — Despite the economic hard times, money keeps pouring in for President-elect Barack Obama's inaugural party.

The committee in charge of the festivities has raised \$27 million, according to information on its Web site. Most of the donations have come in over the past three weeks. If fundraising continues at that pace, Obama's committee will have no problem reaching or exceeding the roughly \$40 million raised for each of President George W. Bush's inaugural celebrations.

More than 2,000 donors donated to Obama's Jan. 20 swearing-in festivities, and at least 378 gave the maximum \$50,000.

The \$50,000 donors will get access to events including candlelight dinners with appearances by members of Congress and the Obamas and tickets to an official ball, the swearing-in ceremony and parade seating.

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Enter your comments and click "submit"

SUBMIT

MEMBER COMMENTS | 1 comment

Posted by [cphuels](#) on 2/3/2009 at 11:45 a.m.

If all of us 2 million commit to giving \$50 each month for the next 2 months, that's \$100 million a month for O. Who's with me?

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Advertisements on the page include: 'We'll Meet or Beat Their Lowest Price BEST BUY', 'Community Forum Ask questions, exchange gift ideas and more.', 'No Interest for 18 Months Storewide on all purchases totaling \$499 & up.', 'Today's Top Stories' (World: The coolest places on earth; Local: Gas prices reverse direction; Music: Apple to cut prices for iTunes downloads; Local: Five hurt in school bus crash), and 'Kate HUDSON vs. Anne HATHAWAY BRIDE WARS January 9th VISIT THE SITE WATCH VIDEO'.

WHAT NOT TO DO



This, too, underwhelmed them. If they click, they expect text accompanied by photos. They thought it was cumbersome to click on different numbers to see other photos and were confused about what the news items in the right-hand column had to do with the story.

The screenshot shows the DailyNews.com website interface. At the top, there are navigation links for NEWS, SPORTS, ENTERTAINMENT, LIFESTYLE, and OPINION. Below this is a main navigation bar with categories like NATION, WORLD, BLOGS, and PHOTOS. The main content area features a photo gallery titled "Gazans on the run as Israeli attack intensifies" with a grid of numbered thumbnails (1-7) and navigation arrows. The main image shows a group of people, including children, running through a debris-strewn street in Gaza. Below the image is a caption and a short paragraph of text. To the right of the main article is a sidebar with "RELATED NEWS" and "TOP STORIES" sections, each containing small thumbnail images and headlines. At the bottom of the page, there is a search bar, a Google logo, and a copyright notice for 2009 Daily News.

Appendix A: METHODOLOGY



FOCUS GROUPS HELD
IN SIX U.S. CITIES

Prototypes were tested with 96 young people, ages 13 to 18, in 12 focus groups held in six U.S. cities: Denver; Philadelphia; Fort Lauderdale; Fresno, Calif.; Springfield, Ill.; and Orangeburg, S.C.

Teens were recruited by professional services using specific criteria discussed below and were paid \$75 to \$100 for their participation. Meetings were 75 to 90 minutes long. To familiarize teens with prototypes being discussed, participants were required before the focus groups began to complete an online survey, in which they previewed prototypes and answered brief questions.

RECRUITING CRITERIA

Teens had to be at least moderate Internet users, reporting that they go online at least three days a week for a minimum of 15 hours of Web surfing, excluding e-mail. Equal numbers of either gender were sought. Recruiters matched racial and ethnic diversity in parity with each market.

Within each city, one group (eight participants) had stronger news interest and the other weaker. To determine news interest, these screening questions were asked:

Which of the following statements best describes how you follow the news?

1. I follow the news every day no matter what.
2. I follow the news regularly but not necessarily every day.
3. I only pay attention when something major is going on.
4. News isn't important to me at all. I rarely pay attention to it.

How much do you enjoy keeping up with the news – a lot, some, not much or not at all?

1. A lot
2. Some
3. Not much
4. Not at all.

A combined score equal to or less than three classified a participant as having heavy news interest. All others were eligible for the light news interest group.

Appendix B: **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES + READINGS**



AVAILABLE AT WWW.NAAFOUNDATION.ORG

“Lifelong Readers: Driving Civic Engagement”

Newspapers play a role in encouraging young people to get involved with their communities.

“Targeting Teens 2007”

A report from NAA’s Business Analysis & Research Department reveals how the teen market thrives with diverse interests and immense buying power.



AVAILABLE AT WWW.MEDIAMANAGEMENTCENTER.ORG

“If It Catches My Eye: An Exploration of Online News Experiences of Teenagers”

“From ‘Too Much’ to ‘Just Right’: Engaging Millennials in Election News on the Web”

“What It Takes to Be a Web Favorite”

“How to Become ‘Easy to Use’ Online”



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The NAA Foundation strives to develop engaged and literate citizens in a diverse society. The Foundation invests in and supports programs designed to enhance student achievement through newspaper readership and appreciation of the First Amendment. The Foundation also endeavors to help media companies increase their readership and audience by offering programs that encourage the cultivation of a more diverse work force in the press.

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