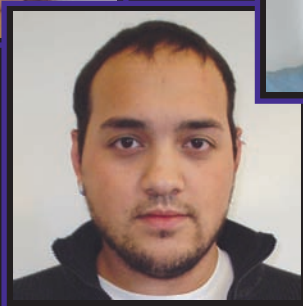
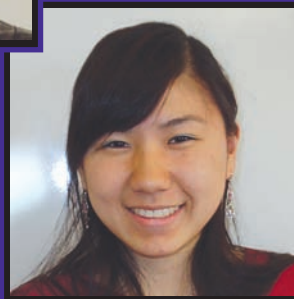
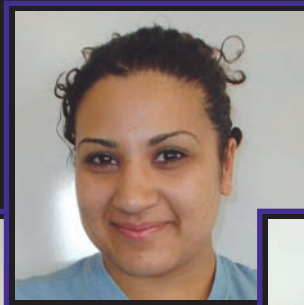
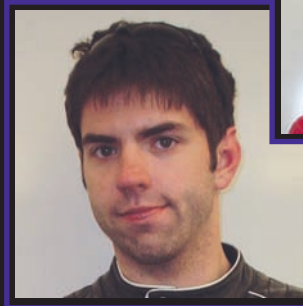


From "Too Much" to "Just Right"

Engaging Millennials in Election News on the Web

August 2008



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FROM ‘TOO MUCH’ TO ‘JUST RIGHT’

Engaging Millennials in Election News on the Web

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Millennials have a growing interest in the 2008 elections but frequently click away from political news online because they feel too much information is coming at them all at once and too many different things are competing for their attention. To serve and attract this important demographic, news organizations need to develop online election resources specifically designed to minimize this “too much” sensation and to better serve the news needs of first-time voters.

These findings are the result of a qualitative, in-depth study Media Management Center (MMC) at Northwestern University conducted of a diverse group of 89 Chicago-area young adults in 2008, to identify what would “catch their eye” and deepen their engagement in serious news online. The research focused on sites that provide information about the 2008 election and on young people who visit news sites at least once a week. For information about methodology, see Appendix A on page 34.

Researchers also found that:

- **Millennials strongly dislike the dissonance and vituperation they associate with comments online.** If news Web sites want to allow discussion on news pages, young people will like it better if the discussion is moderated, prioritized, and sortable, the report advises.
- **Attempts on news sites to offer social networking, amateur content, humor and youth orientation can backfire,** by diminishing the seriousness, expertise and professionalism young people expect from sites with election news.
- **Young people want to become informed about the election – but they don’t want to follow the news day-in and day-out.** To them, there’s a big difference between the two—one that has real implications for news organizations. They are willing to spend time getting informed—exploring and learning more about public issues, candidates and races—but they want their news updates to be quick, very selective and prioritized.
- **They prefer to get election news from sites that are well-known for news—sites whose primary business is news.** They trust those sites more than others. Generally, they prefer sites that are dominant in their field, that are known for something specific and stick to it. Thus, they tilt toward strong news brands—particularly national brands—for election news.

Researchers observed that it isn’t usually the subject of the news that triggers the “too much” reflex (unless it’s a subject they perceive the media has flogged to death). It’s more about presentation and quantity:

- Too many things competing for their attention, without any indication as to which is most important;
- Too many details;
- Too wordy; not distilled to the essence;

- Too many choices;
- Too much text, too high a percentage of text to graphics, or a screen of mostly text;
- Site features which they don't immediately understand;
- Pages or stories that go on and on and on;
- Too much emphasis on trivial stories;
- Too much dissonance and vituperation.

To deal with the “too much” sensation, news organizations should:

- **Place huge emphasis on clear, helpful and immediately understandable organization and page design** that helps the reader decide what to focus on and conveys the relative importance of the offerings on the page. Short, meaningful and compelling headlines are essential.
- **Offer content in manageable layers and chunks**, letting the reader decide how deep to go. When stories go more than a page, young adults tend to tune out—but if they express enough interest to click on a link, they want some substance.
- **Have a lot but display a little.** It's better for this audience to be selective in what is presented on a page—and to offer links to more information – than to overwhelm them with too much information or too many options on a page.
- **Concentrate most on developing and marketing information resources that help young people (and other new voters) understand the basics** about the candidates, the issues and the election process. That means devoting less space and emphasis on the home page to news about day-to-day developments. Millennials don't want comprehensive daily updates; they just want to see what the site thinks are the most important or interesting things they should know, and what other people may talk about.

For the report's complete recommendations, see page 29.

FROM 'TOO MUCH' TO 'JUST RIGHT'

Engaging Millennials in Election News on the Web

ELECTION 2008: A NEWS OPPORTUNITY WITH MILLENNIALS

Background

The 2008 election campaign is historic for a number of reasons—the primary battle between formidable female and black candidates, the possibility of a black president, the extraordinary length of the campaign cycle and the high primary turnout, especially among young voters.

Young voters cast primary ballots at the highest rates seen in decades in most states.¹ The rise in youth turnout began before this year's election campaign, however, so this year's increased turnout and interest among members of the Millennial Generation has more to it than the appeal of Sen. Barack Obama, although that certainly is a factor.

Millennials are more likely than Generation X to want to be engaged in elections.² This study reinforces the point:

I think it's really in the cultural consciousness right now... We all feel like it's important for us to be informed. And we have some really interesting and kind of fantastic candidates to read about and listen to, and there's some subjects that they've been talking about that really pertain to us. (Jeff, 19)

I think it is important that we start getting involved. It is kind of cheesy to say that we are future, but we are. (Laura, 19)

This is really my first time being that interested in the election. I guess I was too young before to really care. Being in high school it wasn't something that mattered. ...It is really interesting. You have to keep up with it because it is going to affect me more in the next four years or eight years ahead that I have to know what's going on. (Rebecca, 20)

One reason for their new feeling of empowerment and engagement may be the increased attention from the candidates and the news media.³ Numerous studies have shown that people who are contacted by campaigns are more likely to vote; in the past, young people were largely ignored.

¹ In Mississippi's March 11 Democratic primary, 14 percent of those aged 18-29 voted compared with 4 percent in 2000. On Super Tuesday (February 5), youth turnout in seven of the eight states that also participated in Super Tuesday 2000 tripled or quadrupled, according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. (<http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=265>)

² A CBS News/MTV poll of 18-29 year-olds released in April showed that younger Americans believe they will be a force in this year's presidential election. Two-thirds say they will have at least as much influence as older voters in deciding the next president. This feeling of empowerment is up nearly fourfold from last year. (http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1585936/20080421/id_0.jhtml)

I think it's a delight. ...It's just fun to feel engaged. It's fun to see that my voice is important even though I've never met other candidates. It's cool to know that my generation is being considered more than they've ever been considered before. So it's really an exciting time. (Jeff, 19)

In addition, the context of this year's election adds to young people's interest. The excitement of the race between Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton influenced all voters, not just young ones. In a survey given to participants before their interviews, a large majority (77 %) say the campaign is interesting. It is clear from past studies that an exciting, contested race drives turnout upward.

Survey: They are interested

Young people in this study exhibit interest in the election and generally have some knowledge of the presidential race. Almost 60% say they follow news about the presidential campaign either fairly or very closely. Almost half say they go online at least once a week for news about the elections (49%), politics (44%) and political candidates (44%)—almost as often as for news about entertainment (50%), hobbies (47%), and their school (44%). They talk about the election with family and friends.

It comes up in a lot of the classes...so if you're not...at least somewhat versed in what's going on, it is kind of a disadvantage. ...It comes up in a lot of conversations. If you're talking to adults, it's nice to be able to keep up. (George, 21)

We're often criticized for not knowing what's going on with our own country. ...You feel like you should try to at least understand these things. (Brenda, 19)

Who's going to be president is really important. It's going to affect me, my future and everyone else in the country. And then it's also a topic of discussion between some of my peers in certain settings so it's good to be informed. (Kyesha, 18)

Almost half say they go online at least once a week for news about the elections, politics, and political candidates—almost as often as for news about entertainment, hobbies, and their school.

These young adults express concern and curiosity about the world around them. The war in Iraq, the economy, global warming, homosexuality, race, and the election are all on their radar screens. Their interest and engagement deepens when they see a direct impact on their lives, with many mentioning gas prices and the economy, especially jobs, as issues they want to know about.

While most of those interviewed say they plan to vote and want to become informed and learn where candidates stand on issues important to them before they vote, most say they haven't really

³ An Associated Press/Yahoo poll (<http://www.news.yahoo.com/polls>) released in the spring showed 18 percent of those aged 18-34 had been contacted by a candidate or campaign, and youth get-out-the-vote efforts such as Rock the Vote, the New Voters Project and Mobilize.org have increased their reach this year. Almost every day since the Iowa caucuses, a media outlet somewhere in the country has run a story about the role of young people in this year's presidential election.

started getting informed.⁴ They're waiting until closer to the election. And few are aware of any ideal Web sites for this purpose.

A recent Century Foundation report⁵ quotes political scholar Norman Ornstein as saying two decades ago that whichever party captures the youth vote will dominate the political landscape. Not only is that true again today, but the same could be said about news about politics and government: news organizations that successfully capitalize on this year's heightened interest in campaign news among young readers have a chance to gain their interest and loyalty for tomorrow. The drama of the 2008 presidential contest is the perfect entrée for news organizations to gain young people's attention, satisfy some largely unmet needs and try to turn their news and information interest into a continuing interest in serious news.

⁴Of those surveyed, 74% said they are planning to vote in November; 5% said they are not planning to vote; and 21% don't know. However, only 47 % were registered to vote when the survey was administered in April.

⁵ (<http://www.tcf.org/publications/electionreform/youthvote.pdf>)

POLITICAL NEWS IS CURRENTLY A “TOO MUCH” EXPERIENCE

The interest of today’s young adults in news about the election is notable and growing. But make no mistake; their interest is not intense. It’s just budding. Getting informed about the election feels like a serious, grown-up thing to do, but it doesn’t feel fun or exciting. It is something to squeeze into lives that already seem too busy.

These young people feel like they’ve grown up in a “too much” world, always bombarded with options, always having to prioritize how to spend their time because they don’t have enough time to do everything they want. So when asked to comment on various Web sites designed to provide news and information about the elections, they use two words quite frequently: “too much.”

I feel like it's too much sometimes, too much unnecessary material. (Justin, 19)

It was just too much, ...too much stuff. ...By the time you get down here...I don't even want to finish it. ...It was all thrown at you at once. It was just kind of overwhelming. ...There's so much going on in a younger person's life already. ...They are stressed at school and with work and those different things and they don't want to just sit there and have to filter through all this extra information. (Rebecca, 20)

It was too much information bunched up together. (Felicity, 19)

It looked like too much information. [It] just kept going and going and going. (Susie, 20)

It's kind of like brain overload. ...At first I liked it, but...then as I scrolled down, it's like, 'When does it end?' (George, 21)

When I opened CNN, a lot of the stuff on it kind of seemed a little bit overwhelming. ...You had to really get into it and really focus on it. (Amanda, 17)

The interest of today's young adults in news about the election is notable and growing. But make no mistake; their interest is not intense. It's just budding. It is something to squeeze into lives that already seem too busy.

What triggers the “too much” response

Notably, it isn’t usually the subject of the news that triggers the “too much” reflex (unless it’s a subject they perceive the media has flogged to death). It’s more about presentation and quantity:

- Too many things competing for their attention, without any indication as to which is most important;
- Too many details;
- Not distilled to the essence; too wordy;
- Too many choices;
- Too much text, too high a percentage of text to graphics, or a screen of mostly text;
- A site feature which they don’t immediately understand;

- Pages or stories that go on and on and on;
- Too much emphasis on trivial stories;
- Too much dissonance and vituperation.

Their reaction to the “too much” feeling is to click away. While news organizations might rue this ability to click away so quickly, young people see this as a real strength of online news. With television news, it is much harder to control exposure. Online, they like being in control and choosing what they look at, how long they look, how deep they go and in what direction, instead of having everything thrown at them. They like being able to click away if they start feeling inundated, threatened, uncomfortable or bored. This is how they whittle down demands on their time to a level that fits their interest.

They like being able to click away if they start feeling inundated, threatened, uncomfortable or bored. This is how they whittle down demands on their time to a level that fits their interest.

If I'm in the dining hall and I read The New York Times, like the paper version, that would go over my head. It's like too much. If I read it online, I can handle it because it just doesn't seem as overwhelming because I feel like I can just click on things that I think are interesting. ...I don't know if it's the paper itself, like the print is so small, or if it's just that there's so much there that I'm just like, 'Whoa.' (Vicky, 20)

FEELING TIME-PRESSED AFFECTS NEWS BEHAVIOR ONLINE

The feeling of being constantly time-pressed and of needing to avoid having “too much” information thrust at them affects their consumption of serious news online in many ways:

- **It makes them value sites that make choices.**

Young people don't have the interest (and thus the time) to look at ALL the news. They say they want someone (or something) to make choices, to separate the wheat from the chaff. They just want to see 1) what's important, 2) what's new, 3) what's interesting and 4) what people are likely to be talking about—and to see it quickly. Thus, they like sites that pick the most important stories and links instead of displaying all stories. Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that headlines on aggregators like GoogleNews and Yahoo! suit them just fine; there are only a few of them.

- **It makes them make snap decisions based largely on headlines.**

The young people MMC spoke with make snap judgments about where to spend their time. They click away if the headline or subject doesn't interest them immediately, or if they can't tell what the story is about from the headline.

- **It makes them highly value well-designed sites.**

They want the design and organization of a site to make it easy for them to find what they want, to highlight interesting things and to signify the relative priority and importance of the various stories. They click away if they don't like the graphic look or if they can't tell what a site offers or how to use it. Thus, they like sites with designs that direct them to the most important offerings (instead of providing multiple design elements that vie for their attention) and sites that organize information in order of importance. Good site organization even affects the site's credibility.

They want the design and organization of a site to make it easy for them to find what they want, to highlight interesting things and to signify the relative priority and importance of the various stories.

- **It makes them leery of things that threaten to engage them, draw them in or make them lose track of time.**

They say they don't need another time sponge. Even some who have lost themselves in social networking sites report feeling resentful or guilty afterwards, like they had wasted time or been taken away from other things they should be doing. That's not to say that they never want to be engaged online—they just want to carefully pick and limit what they engage in.

- **It makes video news seem too slow to bother with sometimes.**

They like video that enables them to see a remark or a candidate first hand. And, of course, they like funny videos. But as a method of getting basic news, they often find that text is quicker, and thus preferable. They don't mind spending time watching YouTube videos; that's entertainment. But news is for a purpose; for news, they want to get what they need and get off.

- **It makes them annoyed if a site gives them “too little” or doesn't deliver as promised.**

They may not want “too much,” but neither do they want “too little.” They're disappointed if they click on a link or headline that interests them and all they get is a paragraph or more links; if they're interested enough to click, they want something that offers more depth than the page they clicked from. And they hate it when graphics and flashy displays aren't backed up by substance.

The least satisfying part is when you...find some neat graphs or something, you click through, and there's really not a lot of information on it. It's just sort of superficial. ...I don't mind reading a good article if it's well-written and interesting, but...I don't want to be deceived from a flashy graphic and have nothing really behind it. (Brad, 19)

I wanted actually more information ...This is all just little stuff... I just wanted to see basically what people thought...but it never really gave me too much. (Felicity, 19)

I was actually kind of disappointed because when you open it up, it's like a line. It's not even really a story. ...I thought it would be more fleshed out. (Jeff, 19)

So, like Goldilocks, young adults are searching for a site that's “just right”—that has the right mix of speed and depth, activity and passivity.

MILLENNIALS WANT TO BECOME INFORMED BUT THEY DON'T WANT TO FOLLOW THE NEWS

While these young people express interest in **becoming informed** about the election, the issues and the candidates, few express much interest in **following the news** about it on a regular basis.

I've had plenty of discussions on abortion. And it's important to know some history and it's important to know some news, but you don't have to be too involved in news avidly in order to have an intelligent discussion. ...I mean, often it's just telling you the latest things that have been happening. ...There's a difference between being well informed and being someone who follows politics or news avidly. And I wouldn't consider myself one of those people, but I like to be informed. ...It's more meaningful. ...It's kind of meaningless for me to follow...what candidate is winning what state. (Kyle, 20)

Becoming informed means learning enough to understand something, to decide what you think about it and perhaps to be able to talk about it (or at least understand what others are talking about).

Understanding the distinction they make between getting informed and following the news appears to be key to reaching them.

- Becoming informed means learning enough to understand something, to decide what you think about it and perhaps to be able to talk about it (or at least understand what others are talking about). It's something you do on your own time, at your own pace and depth. The information needed to be informed doesn't usually change every day.
- Following the news means keeping up with day-to-day events and incremental developments in a series of ongoing stories. It is something you generally have to do every day, whether you want to or not. And the information changes constantly.

The two are fundamentally different experiences: one is a pleasurable, personal, sit-back experience while the other is a functional, lean-forward experience that feels more like an obligation.

Becoming informed

Becoming informed is something they want to do. It can even be pleasurable and something they don't mind spending time on or even occasionally losing track of time on.

Many of those interviewed are delighted (and surprised) to find a site like Election Center at CNN.com⁶ that has concise, basic explanations of the major options on issues such as the economy, and simple side-by-side comparisons of the candidates' stands—a site which, in a non-patronizing way, also defines commonly used political terms and explains how the election process works. They also appreciate sites that make it easy to go deeper, bit by bit, with links to

⁶ <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/>

other resources and stories, if they want. Control is the key: they want to be the ones to decide how long to spend and how deep to go.

CNN has the issues, like what each candidate says about each issue. I really liked that. I really, really liked that. (Susan, 19)

It is almost like I just want one article telling you what happened, but I want more articles on the issues and telling me what is going on and what they believe in rather than what just happened. (Amanda, 17)

I think it's good that they [CNN.com] acknowledge that there are people who don't know. ...Sometimes it's not that people aren't interested in politics. I think it's just a lack of knowledge. ...For me it was overwhelming. ...You don't want to vote just because you feel like 'I don't know enough so I don't know what to do.' ...I don't want to say how I feel about something if I don't know enough, and just the way that they acknowledged it. It wasn't like, 'You don't know?' It was kind of like, 'Okay, there's tons of people who don't know.' (Female focus group participant)

Following the news

In contrast, **following the news** is more of an obligation—one that seems impossible to manage in their lives today. These young adults express little interest in keeping up with the ins and outs of ongoing stories on a daily basis, knowing all the latest developments, following every tit-for-tat as candidates spar over their policy positions, or developing and maintaining detailed knowledge of the issues, players and developments. Doing that would simply take more expertise, time, patience, effort and interest than they currently have. Just mastering the basics is enough for now.

These young adults express little interest in developing and maintaining detailed knowledge of the issues, players and developments. Doing that would simply take more expertise, time, patience, effort and interest than they currently have.

So while willing to spend time **getting informed**, the young adults interviewed want to spend as little time as possible **following the news**. They may check in a few times a day to make sure they are not missing anything. But when they do, they want to get in and out quickly – to glance at the headlines and, if something interests them, read perhaps a paragraph, perhaps a page, perhaps a short video clip. That's all. Any news site whose aim is to increase the amount of time they spend following the news day to day isn't giving them what they want.

I'm already busy as it is, I barely have time to do what I need to do, let alone...see what's going on with election and try to keep up with it. There's so many new things happening every day with that, that you can't really keep up. (May, 17)

I'm interested but I don't follow it as closely as I wish I did. I probably couldn't tell you a lot about what's going on—the basics I could, but not too much in detail. But I'll look at stuff when it comes up as I'm maybe online and looking for other stuff. If something comes up and catches my eye, I'll look at it, but I usually don't go online for the purpose of looking at election news or political news. (Julie, 20)

I need time for myself. So it is pretty much a struggle. If I want information, I want to get it and get out instead of spending time dillying and dallying around. (Laura, 19)

Interestingly, everyone easily identifies someone who is serious about following the news. They usually admire that person—but few want to become one. They believe following the news is just a personal choice—like choosing to take up a hobby or pursue a passion. If that’s what you choose, fine, but not everyone needs to do it. Further, while they might look up to someone for following the news and having detailed knowledge about it, they might also consider that person a bit “dorky.”

They believe following the news is just a personal choice—like choosing to take up a hobby or pursue a passion. Not everyone needs to do it.

I respect him as a person and I respect him for knowing more...for being so interested. But...I don't necessarily look up to him because he's interested—just like people like the fact that I'm passionate about other areas but I don't think it's a reason for people to look up to me. That's just what I'm interested in. (Kyle, 20)

MMC did not do a content analysis to determine how much emphasis current news sites place on “news” versus “information,” but it’s likely such a review would show that news sites are far heavier on the kind of news that young people aren’t interested in than on the kind of information they find more compelling.

CLEAR, DOMINANT AND CONSISTENT BRAND IDENTITY AS A NEWS SITE MATTERS

When these young people decide which Web sites about the election to favor and trust, clear, dominant and consistent brand identity as a news site is a key determinant.

A reliance on category killers

Just as they go to “category killers” like Best Buy for electronics and Bed Bath & Beyond for household goods, they tend to go to—and to trust—well-known, successful news sites for news. Echoing what young people told MMC researchers in a previous survey,⁷ these young adults say if a site is known for news, if news is its primary business, and if it is successful at news, it must be good—better than other sites. Otherwise, the site would lose its dominance. Relying this way on category killers saves them time, too: they don’t have to choose among sites whose differences they cannot discern.

These young adults say if a site is known for news, if news is its primary business, and if it is successful at news, it must be good—better than other sites. Otherwise, the site would lose its dominance.

They have people who that's their job. ...They are more prone to state facts. ...People who make a living off of doing it I think are a little more credible, especially if they are...representing a bigger organization. ...If they state something that isn't true, they'll be called out on it by people who are also knowledgeable. (Jorge, 17)

I feel this is what their [CNN.com's] goal is, just to keep the news updated and make sure everyone know what's going on—whereas MTV, it's not really their main goal. ...It's like CNN focuses...the news is their niche, I guess. It's what they do. (Alex, 18)

I think they're trustworthy because it's USA Today and you know they're a big organization as well. So I trust what they say. (Jackie, 20)

It's kind of hard to tell if sites are good or not. It's just the bigger they are, I think with the big news sites, the easier you can trust them probably. (May, 17)

Their answers to the MMC survey reinforce this conclusion.⁸ In terms of trust, they gave general television news and local newspaper sites the highest trust rating, while video-sharing sites are not rated as very trustworthy. CNN.com is favored for election news by more interviewees than any other site.⁹

It should be noted, however, that Google, Yahoo! and other news aggregators all score very high as sources of political news for those surveyed, even though they do not actually produce news. They score well on credibility, too, although not as high as sites of news organizations.

⁷ <http://www.mediamanagementcenter.org/research/teeninternet.pdf>

⁸ See “Usage and trust” on page 41.

⁹ See “Favorite sites for election news” on page 39.

A premium on focus and consistency

The young people who were interviewed like sites whose identity is clear, focused and unambiguous. Witness their reaction to the possibility of a news site having a social networking component. Over and over, different interviewees voiced the same refrain: News sites are for news, and social sites are for socializing. They say it doesn't make sense to go to a news site for socializing. They go to sites for what they are known for.

If a site takes actions that seem inconsistent with what they perceive to be a site's primary identity, it makes them uncomfortable and even calls into question how serious the site is about its primary purpose. For example, some say putting comments of "random people" on news Web sites makes the sites seem less credible; news Web sites are supposed to offer people who are expert at news. Having ads about home mortgages pop up on an election site doesn't seem right to some.

Likewise, consider their reaction to Think.MTV.com, an ambitious experiment by a television network to create a current affairs social media and news platform aimed at youth. It covers topics of interest to youth, features young-looking graphics and pictures of young people, enlists young people to cover the news and encourages young people to comment, contribute and connect around the news and issues. While the interviewees like the youthful look of the site and the topics it features, they all say they wouldn't trust it for news. Why? Because MTV is known for entertainment; why, they ask, would you go there for news? You'd go to a site known for news.

Those interviewed give more credence to a news site with frequent updates and good design; this tells them the site is serious about what it does.

This premium on focus and seriousness of purpose—particularly for sites with information about the presidential election—manifests itself in interesting ways. For example, those interviewed give more credence to a news site with frequent updates and good design; this tells them the site is serious about what it does.

A company that takes the pride and time to make their Web site look good and look serious and look professional is already a step ahead than some kid who is at home making some Web site 'cause now anyone can make a Web site. So, I think, definitely it would have to look professional. (Leslie, 20)

The MTV one is great for my type of audience, but at the same time, the bright colors, ...the different types of fonts, takes away a little bit of credibility. (Leslie, 20)

If you think of CNN, you know it's news; it's up-to-date. (Rebecca, 20)

While they are skeptical of information from any source, they say they trust facts more than opinion—and they trust facts about the election from someone whose job it is to follow the news more than from an amateur. They understand that reporters have training to get information, and they like that. As for opinion, they say they trust and would spend time getting the opinion of an expert more than the opinion of some "random" person they don't know, even someone their age. Opinions expressed by "ordinary" or what they call "random" people may sometimes be amusing but they don't trust them.

Special expectations for news brands

When young people are asked about the sites that really engage them, where they can lose track of time, they talk about sites that entertain them (like YouTube and funny videos or music downloading sites) or connect them with friends (like Facebook) or enable them to enjoy something they're passionately interested in (like ESPN.com for sports) or sites where they can play games. Spending time on them is fun and/or relaxing; thus, it's OK to lose track of time.

They talk very differently about news and elections sites. They don't associate the words entertain, connect, enjoy, fun or relaxing with news. They say news is serious, adult business and it's not supposed to be fun. It's for a purpose. They have a hard time imagining what would make them get lost in a news Web site or join a social network on a news site.

News isn't supposed to be fun. It's supposed to be just facts and seriousness. ... "View The Latest Cartoons" is one of the first things you see.¹⁰ It kind of lessens the seriousness of the whole site. (Jorge, 17)

As a result, attempts to inject some levity or personality into sites about the election sometimes fail. For example, illustrating the election site VoteGopher.com with cartoonish graphics immediately turns many away from an otherwise noteworthy (and serious) site. The election is serious, they say; any site that uses a clownish graphic must not be serious and is therefore not to be trusted.

I can't take a site seriously that's based on gopher... I'm not familiar with this news source so I don't know where they're getting that information... I don't like the way it looks. ...The gopher, it looks like a kids' Web site. (Kyle, 20)

Likewise, some who might comment on other sites wouldn't do so on a news site about the election because of the seriousness of the subject.

On a gossip Web site, I think they [comments] are great, because it is hilarious and it is not something serious and is not something that you have to be aware of who is right and wrong. You know, you formulate an opinion, that isn't going to change anything... But commenting on presidential Web sites... I think is a bad idea. (Leslie, 20)

Therefore, news organizations need to be careful when adapting things that work elsewhere on the Web to news sites. They need to be sure not to jeopardize the very seriousness and focus on news that gives news sites a leg-up on credibility with Millennials.

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National vs. local brands

When these young people talk about the upcoming election, they talk almost completely about the presidential election. State and local races seldom come up.

¹⁰ <http://detroitnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=POLITICS01>

I do kind of find it hard to connect with the more local stuff that's going on as opposed to the national. (Jeff, 19)

And when they talk about their favorite sites for news about the election, they mostly talk either about the big aggregators or portals (like Google, Yahoo!, AOL and Comcast) or the big national news sites, particularly CNN.com. They don't usually think to look to the sites of their local news providers for this type of news. Several even say national sites are more knowledgeable and credible about the presidential race than local sites.

I go on my local paper [site] to see what's going on locally, maybe like what mayor won the race or something like that, but it's not for political news. (Ken, 20)

If I was there [Chicagotribune.com] first and something caught my eye, I'd probably just go and recheck it at CNN. (Rebecca, 20)

I think any state Web site is going to be more focused on that certain state or a candidate that that state somewhat endorses. For something that is as nationwide as an election, more general sites are probably a better bet. (Leslie, 20)

I mean if you watch MSNBC...they're going to have so and so who writes for New York Times. ...I feel like they're the prime source of news, like the most credible at least in terms of who's actually there and who they're talking to, who's writing that article, who they're interviewing about that, versus just some random blog. Even a local, more local news station I don't think is as credible as say the New York Times, or CNN, or MSNBC, or ABC. (Vicky, 20)

I was fairly surprised by the Detroit News Web site though....I did notice it was all basically national news compared to local news. ...I was expecting to see...like a cat was stuck in a tree or something. (Colleen, 21)

This means that sites of local newspapers and broadcast stations must not only develop content and presentation that appeals to Millennials, they must also conduct concentrated marketing campaigns with this group to make them aware of what local sites offer.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH FOCUS IN ELECTION NEWS EITHER LEAVE THEM COLD OR TURN THEM OFF

It may be a Web 2.0 world; it is said that young people, particularly, want to contribute, comment, hear other young people, not just experts, and connect online with each other. But researchers simply didn't see much evidence that young people want to do these things in the context of news consumption.

The young adults surveyed mostly pan the various examples of social media they saw relating to news of the election. They express little interest in commenting on news or contributing news content; looking at amateur news content or opinions of ordinary people about the news; incorporating news into their social networks or in joining any kind of social network around news.

Additionally, none of the more youth-focused sites shown to interviewees (Think.MTV.com, CampusPolitico, VoteGopher.org, and Novotenovoice.org), scored high overall. It appeared that other factors—such as being clearly organized, having good story selection and being a well-known, trusted news brand—trumped youth focus as a factor in determining their choice of sites for information about the election.

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Comments aren't a hit

Regarding comments, researchers thought they'd love USAToday.com, which seamlessly allows commenting, ranking and rating on every story; they didn't. They weren't interested in commenting or looking at comments. And incorporating all the commenting, ranking and rating links on each story added to the "too much" sensation most experienced on the site.

It's people's personal opinions. ...It's nice to hear that, but I'd rather hear it from people I know and not some just random faceless person on the Internet. (Steve, 20)

I don't like the idea of posting my ideas for people who don't know me. ...Why would I do that? Do you really care enough to know my opinion? (Laura, 19)

I did notice the comments on the article because they just seemed so unprofessional and it was like he was a big baby. ...[It] just kind of made me lose a little bit of credibility, even though obviously, it is not the comments of the Web site, it is comments of people who just look at the Web site. But still, because this is a serious matter and because it is supposed to be a Web site that is giving you facts and not opinions, it kind of lowered a little bit for me. (Leslie, 20)

Researchers initially found the interviewees' lack of interest in comments puzzling, since it was also clear from their comments that they greatly value hearing different perspectives and viewpoints. As noted above, they frequently seek out different points of view as a technique for determining for themselves what is true or what they believe.

I wouldn't trust one news source in particular. I would try to get my information from multiple sources just because...it's impossible to avoid bias. It's important to look at different perspectives. (Kyle, 20)

I like having conversations with my parents, or my parents' friends...to see how different age groups...feel about certain topics. ...I like having a calm political discussion with people...and seeing where other people come from and what they think about stuff... (Kevin, 18)

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But they say that most online commentary is just ill-informed and thus not worth their time. Note their reactions to Think.MTV.com and Campus Politico, two sites aimed at young people, with young faces, opinions and issues. They both fall flat with these interviewees because they don't seem authoritative. The interviewees question why they should spend time reading opinions of some random young person who might or might not know any more than they do.

I know everybody has their opinion, but I don't think that a student is well enough informed or educated...for me to spend my time reading what they have to say on the issues. (Jason, 20)

They value difference not dissonance

Additionally, they dislike the vituperation and unpleasantness they often see in comments online. As a result, few can imagine commenting on stories themselves; they don't want to be flamed. Some speak of being burned when they have commented online—and those who haven't assume that's what would happen. Even blogs can lead to trouble, one interviewee says, because people start fights.

I definitely never read blogs. I don't want to hear about what nobody else is just randomly ranting about [sic]. ... [He commented on MySpace once.] That's why I don't write blogs to people. ...It was over something real stupid. ...I said something. Next thing you know, I got about eight messages the next day, like, 'Oh, so you think you're cool because da da da da da.' I'm like, 'Man, are you really going to send me this many messages about a blog?' ...That's why I don't do blog –because people are sensitive. (Nick, 21)

Even when talking with their friends in person, they don't like controversy.

With the people I know, we don't really agree and it ends up being an argument. They start yelling. It's like, 'Okay, I was just trying to make a point.' I like to avoid stuff like that. ...I try to be level-headed about it, but then when you say something and they just come back and attack you more on a personal attack rather than a solid argument, then it's not fun anymore. (Steve, 20)

In short, while they say they value difference, they hate dissonance—and what they see online is dissonance.

Many say they might like online comments better if they were edited, so the know-nothings and the abusive and inflammatory comments were screened out. They also express interest in being able to sort comments in various ways, such as by the age, gender or geography of the commenter or by the popularity of the comments—so they can both see what people like them think, and what other people think.

User-generated political news not worth the time

Many are also turned off by user-generated content about the elections; their attitude seems to be a blend of their preference for expertise and their feeling of being time-starved. Generally, most of what they see doesn't seem worth their time.

An example is Think.MTV.com's "Street Team,"¹¹ which features dispatches about the election from one young person in each state. Interviewees like seeing pictures of people their age but they quickly turn off when they see the content: mostly opinion, mostly on topics only loosely related to the election. They do not find this worth their time or credible. They question whether Street Team members have any expertise. Just because they're young doesn't make them credible, the youth say.

Many are also turned off by user-generated content about the elections; their attitude seems to be a blend of their preference for expertise and their feeling of being time-starved.

It lured you with all the different pictures of people. ...I kind of wanted to look for more credible news than that. ...I respect all their opinions but I just don't really have the time or the desire to go through and read them. (Alex, 18)

We can't say from their reaction that young adults would never be interested in reading blogs or citizen journalism about the election from peers: perhaps the efforts researchers showed them were good ideas, badly executed. For example, several interviewees say they might have liked Think.MTV.com better if it had featured young people reporting, not just opining, and if the young people clearly had some special expertise or experience.

Social networks and youth focus

Another much-discussed form of social media is social networking. Young people can lose track of time on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. But on news sites, the concept seems odd to them; they ask why they would want to do that. News sites are news and social sites are for social. Several advise news organizations not to worry much about creating their own social networking capabilities. Instead, they say, news organizations should do what they're best at and let others provide what they're best at.

¹¹ <http://think.mtv.com/Issues/politics/>

For example, none of them find the social networking features of Think.MTV.com appealing. The site is designed to be a social network for politically active youth, with opportunities and incentives for youth to display their views, interests, causes and activities; to look at the displays of others; and to connect both to other people and to their causes. Some say perhaps someone who is “really into” politics might like it, but even then they aren’t so sure. They seem mostly either turned off or confused by the effort.

That said, those interviewed appreciate some of the attempts by these sites to cover issues they care about and to present them in relevant ways. In particular, they like Think.MTV.com’s story selection. While many mock the site as not being serious enough (several cited the Illinois correspondent’s Earth Day dispatch proclaiming “peeing in the shower” an energy-saving strategy), they admit they are more likely to talk about such stories than they are about stories of more traditional sites.

I like MTV because it’s speaking to the youth. ...I like the idea of something being centered around younger kids or adults and teens. (Laura, 19)

I just liked the MTV one just because it had a lot more topics that are teen-related so that kind of would spike my interest if I was to come across it. (Ted, 19)

Young people can lose track of time on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. But on news sites, the concept seems odd to them; they ask why they would want to do that. News sites are news and social sites are for social.

However, youth focus can actively turn off these young people if not done well. They don’t like efforts that seem too juvenile and don’t like feeling that something is being “dumbed down” for them. For example, some dismiss Think.MTV.com as being “too young,” just as others dismiss VoteGopher.com because of its cartoonish graphics. And CampusPolitico just didn’t click.

WHAT CATCHES THEIR EYE

Teens and young adults have said that they will read serious news “if it catches my eye.” (See MMC’s previous report, “If It Catches My Eye.”¹³) In these interviews, young people are lightning-quick to decide whether a site or story is worth sticking with. Its importance, relevance or interest must be immediately apparent.

It appeared to researchers that there are two primary reasons for what the young adults chose to read online:

- The subject of the story as reflected in the headline (or to a lesser extent the artwork) interests them;
- The site indicates to them in some way (placement, size, prominence, graphic treatment) that a story or feature is particularly important.

They also click on things that piqued their curiosity and things with a humorous, ironic or offbeat angle.

Headlines

The importance of headlines that immediately catch young people’s interest cannot be overstated. As mentioned earlier, their level of interest in news is weak and their tendency to quickly click away if not interested is strong. Researchers thought images, graphics, motion and video would be major factors in the decisions of young people about which stories to read. While those features definitely were of interest, these potential first-time voters repeatedly choose a story to read or view based largely on a different factor: the headline. They appear to use headlines more than any other single piece of content as guideposts in deciding what to read. And they make their decisions on which headlines to click on very quickly.

The headlines that attract them are short and meaningful and use compelling language. They clearly and quickly describe the story’s topic and mention people or events of interest. Headlines that try to be clever or cute but don’t quickly deliver the point of the story are ignored as unhelpful or confusing. And, while humor can be an attraction, the wit had better not come at the expense of obscuring the topic.

The importance of headlines that immediately catch young people’s interest cannot be overstated.

It’s the headline that catches my eye. (David, 21)

Headlines...that have interesting names grab my attention. (Monnie, 18)

The headline...has to be something that really draws your attention. If it seems like it’s going to be a dull article, then you’re not going to read it. It has to be good information on what the article is about, but also very interesting. (Justin, 19)

¹³ <http://www.mediamanagementcenter.org/research/teeninternet.pdf>

On Think.MTV.com's political site, several interview subjects notice the headline "Malaria No More," saying its brevity and clearly stated subject makes it appealing. Another Think.MTV.com headline includes the word "shooting," which several mention as a dramatic word that catches their eye and causes them to click on the story, particularly when teamed with an emotional picture.

This research also indicates that headlines—and the subjects they reflect—can actively turn young people away from news, particularly when they use unfamiliar terms or reflect subjects that don't interest them. "Bush Administration Opposes Housing Bailout Plan" is a CNN.com headline that confuses several young people. The topic doesn't resonate and they don't necessarily understand the terms used.

When I first read that, I had absolutely no idea what they were talking about. ...It is an interesting thing, but at the same time you are, 'What does that even mean'? (Amanda, 17)

The use of short summaries underneath headlines gets mixed reviews. A number of young people notice and like the short summaries DetroitNews.com provides under its headlines because they help them decide whether to read the story, but others say this feature adds to the "too much" sensation by adding to the number of words on the page.

I don't want to spend my time reading an article that I don't think is going to be worthwhile. ...I do like that, where it gives a little bit of information about it so I don't waste time picking something [I don't like]. (Laura, 19)

It is easier to read when you have it organized like this [with summaries] than CNN with no summary underneath. A lot of times it's more interesting for me to be able to read a summary because then I know if I'm actually interested in the article and that usually provides more motivation for me to click on it and actually read further. (Marianna, 19)

Clear, helpful site organization and design

They make snap judgments not only on headlines but on a site's overall appearance and features. They want the design to help them quickly navigate their way to what they want, clearly show them what is important and give them tools and resources to learn more about the issues that they consider important, according to this research. If the site's design isn't clear and immediately understandable or they don't like the graphic look, they click away.

They make snap judgments not only on headlines but on a site's overall appearance and features.

I just saw all these pictures and all these words and it's like, 'Well, I don't know what I want to click on because I don't really know where anything' and it was really hard to navigate. ...I would probably leave this Web site at this point. (Alex, 18)

I think the structure is important for credibility. When I see something that's all cluttered, I'm like, 'Oh, that must be garbage.' But if somebody makes sense [of it], then my eye can find everything on the page. I think that helps. ...If a Web site is making me stressed, I will close that Web site immediately. ...The clutter is annoying. It's cumbersome. (Ken, 20)

To make understanding the news of the day something they can do quickly, a site's design must clearly signal what's important. For that reason, the "Top Stories" feature at the top of the CNN.com politics page¹⁴ showcasing just a few major stories often catches their eyes. They also like its features that tell them the story at a glance, often through the use of charts or other graphics.

Sites that overwhelm them with long columns and too many stories or features turn them off.

The layout of the Web site is an important element because...people often check their news on the fly...five minutes before they go to work. ...So if a Web site is overwhelming, I'd rather go to a Web site with a simpler layout that's easier to navigate. (Kyle, 20)

The too much/too little dynamic comes into play on site design. They say they do not like cluttered sites, but sites that are too spare in design don't appeal, either. (Many criticize Think.MTV.com as being too plain, not eye-catching.) They say content areas need to be clearly marked and clearly signal what they are for and what they contain. A page can be full of different content features if it is clearly organized and easy to understand and navigate, they say.

The elections/politics pages of both CNN.com¹⁵ and DetroitNews.com¹⁶ generally get good marks; both have lots of features and content. But those interviewed favor CNN.com because it is deemed easier to figure out. The headlines and names of features—like "Meet the Superdelegates" and "Jargonbuster"—are clear and engaging. It also has the most horizontal look of the sites reviewed, with copy blocks often fitting on one screen.

All the information is right here. I can just click on it. (Aaron, 18)

CNN has that Election Center, which has all the stuff. ...They have stuff to help you like the Jargon Buster. They just covered all bases, know what I mean? ... [On DetroitNews.com] the information's out there and it's just so much that you kind of get annoyed with being[on] the site...CNN just goes straight to the point. (George, 21)

Information in non-text formats

Young interviewees are drawn to graphic features that distill complex information to a single glance: charts, maps, and numbers.

[Looking at CNN.com's political graphics] ...just seeing the statistics, ...wanting to know how many super delegates do they have, how many delegates, how many pledged...just stuff like that, you can see it right there, get it and move on; whereas, some of the articles you have to go and read through them, which is nice—if you have the time. (Monnie, 18)

For example, USAToday.com's charts and maps with poll numbers¹⁷ and the Delegate Tracker feature¹⁸ catch their eye. Think.MTV.com's "Hot Tags"¹⁹ that highlight major subjects and lead

¹⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/politics>

¹⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/politics> and <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/>

¹⁶ <http://detroitnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=POLITICS01>

¹⁷ <http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/poll-tracker.htm>

¹⁸ <http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/delegate-tracker.htm>

¹⁹ <http://think.mtv.com>

easily to stories are also popular (but it's clear that not all interviewees understand what tag clouds are and how they work).

Movement appeals. For instance, Think.MTV.com's "What's Happening"²⁰ feature, in which a half dozen stories with photos rotate on the page, is popular. Sometimes unusual icons do too, like a bumblebee graphic used to illustrate DetroitNews.com's "Campaign Buzz with George Bullard."²¹ However, while some like this bee, others don't. They say its whimsical nature reduces the credibility of the site.

Editorial cartoons are a hit. Interestingly, a number of interviewees have not seen editorial cartoons before: they don't realize these are staples of newspaper editorial pages. DetroitNews.com's cartoon gallery²² definitely catches the eye with its combination of graphic illustration and humor; many like cartoons that are periodically featured at USA Today.com as well.

I just thought it was a unique thing on a Web site. I mean it's just a way for you to kind of learn about the situation without being too serious about it, I guess. It's nice to know that there's still quotable cartoons that you can laugh at. Of course, it's like you have to understand the news to understand the cartoons. (Brenda, 19)

I just like political cartoons...because they make you actually think about it. They don't just give you what's going on. (Aaron, 18)

The fact that it was a cartoon, ...that kind of surprised me to see that, instead of just words on a page. It's more interesting for me to see that. (Robin, 19)

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Of course, photos and videos catch the eye—but they did not appear to researchers to be as important a factor in the interviewees' story selection as headlines and story subject. Most seem to prefer short video clips to longer packages with reporters on-camera, although a few say the video reporters are good as neutral voices. Videos are considered good sources to clarify or confirm remarks by newsmakers, to "see for yourself." But, as noted before, they're slow.

Some of the things I find most interesting... [are] the actual videos of the candidates talking because you can actually hear them. Because the thing with text, you don't get the emotion that's behind it. Whereas, when you hear them talking, you can tell the passion about what they are talking about—how they actually feel about what they are doing. (Stephanie, 19)

[Video] wouldn't draw me in because I could get that on TV. I don't know. I just like reading. (Laura, 19)

The main reason I'd watch videos is if it's amusing or something, or entertaining. But if you want to find news, I'd probably read about it instead. (May, 17)

²⁰ <http://think.mtv.com>

²¹ <http://www.detroitnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=POLITICS01>

²² <http://info.detnews.com/edittoons/indexCAMPAIGN.cfm>

Subjects They Care About

It isn't just the dynamism of the headline that matters, though; it's also the subject of the story. They say stories about college costs, gas prices and global warming get their attention. Several specifically mention liking Think.MTV.com because it features environmental stories. Many who read a story about Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain's criticism of the federal government's initial reaction to Hurricane Katrina say the devastation caused by Katrina and ongoing rebuilding efforts are topics they care about.

As shown by primary turnout, young people have gotten caught up in the election itself, particularly (at the time of the interviews) the Democratic primary battle. News about Obama and Clinton, but especially Obama, often catches their attention.

I think it's really cool right now to know what's going on, to be able to talk about Obama slipping up or Hillary doing something. (Jeff, 19)

I mean I'm definitely interested in just the whole Obama and Clinton rivalry so that is usually what I look for. (Monnie, 18)

An eye-catching headline, "Obama Plays 3-on-3," works for several young men, who say it quickly and clearly tells them the subject of the story—basketball—which they follow closely.

When they see headlines about personal attacks or headlines with a negative or highly politicized tone, they tend to close the story or leave the Web site.

However, when they see headlines about personal attacks or headlines with a negative or highly politicized tone, they tend to close the story or leave the Web site.

(It should be noted that interviews took place after Sen. John McCain sewed up the Republican presidential nomination but before the contest between Clinton and Obama came to an end. Thus there were fewer stories displayed about McCain during this period.)

They also like explanatory information about the election that helps them make decisions—that gives them "just the facts," in both a quick, top-line manner and with great detail if they want to dig deeper. They repeatedly gravitate to issues comparisons, candidate comparisons and stories and features that explain the basics of the process and the rules—from campaign contributions to the Electoral College.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The unusual excitement surrounding this election has created an opportunity for news organizations. Young adults are talking about and interested in the election, the issues and the candidates. They want to be informed, but they haven't yet found a resource that suits them perfectly. And most haven't yet spent the time to learn what they feel they need to know in order to vote for president, let alone for more local races. They are waiting until closer to the election. So there is time and opportunity for news organizations to respond to their needs and the results of this research.

In many ways, traditional news organizations are well positioned to create such a resource for Millennials:

- They are automatically trusted more by young adults than organizations whose business is not news. If young adults want news, they say they turn to a news site.
- They are skilled at doing many of the things young people say they want—separating the wheat from the chaff, selecting not only what's important but what people will want to talk about, displaying things in attractive ways that indicate the relative importance of the items, providing up-to-date information, striving for the facts and the truth, not the spin.

The research suggests that tackling the “too much” response is the key to success in engaging young adults with election news (and potentially with other serious news).

News organizations need to pay attention to what young people say about what makes them tune out on news sites: too much information, too many details, too many choices coming at them all at once without enough guidance as to which are most important; too much unrelieved text; stories that go on and on; endless coverage of trivial stories; features that aren't immediately and intuitively understandable. That includes listening to what they say about wanting more basic information that explains things, and fewer (or less prominently featured) stories about incremental developments.

First-time voters don't have a lifetime of information in their heads about candidates and issues; most everything is new to them. And they can't possibly learn it all at once.

They should think about what happens when anyone is learning something new; if you barrage them with too much too fast, before they've mastered the basics, they tune out. First-time voters don't have a lifetime of information in their heads about candidates and issues; most everything is new to them. They don't necessarily know what a red state is or how conventions work or what supply-side economics and trickle-down politics are—and yet most news stories assume they do. And they can't possibly learn it all at once. (The same is probably true for many serious news topics.)

Then news organizations should go and design something for Millennials that will meet their needs—that will make the job of getting informed enough to vote for the first time manageable, and perhaps even enjoyable. They should accept that young people have a short attention span for politics right now and work with it, consciously designing sites to reduce that “too much” feeling, through outstanding organization, simple navigation and prioritization. What they develop for the election may serve them well later, for coverage of other serious topics.

MMC recommends that news organizations:

1. **Place huge emphasis on developing better, clearer and more immediately understandable organization and site design.**

Young people want the site design to signal to them what's really important. They want the design to guide their eyes, instead of being confronted by a bewildering array of choices. They want headlines that quickly and concisely telegraph the essence of a story. They haven't yet seen a site design that suits their needs completely so it's up to news organizations to develop one.

2. **Let information unfold in manageable, bite-sized chunks and layers.**

Sites should prominently display basic, digested and understandable information but provide links enabling them to go deeper on the subjects or in the ways they want. Sites should have a lot but display a little, and make it easy to navigate to more. MMC has not done research about optimum site length. But it appears from watching the interviewees that sites should consider not letting anything run more than a page and providing links to other pages and resources if they're interested.

3. **Concentrate most heavily on helping young people get informed and develop their own opinions about the election, the candidates and the issues.**

This means creating and marketing special information online resources designed for first-time voters, such as a page devoted solely to the election, with all the kinds of information young people say they like, all handily arranged, uncluttered by other types of information. News organizations don't have to create all this information themselves: Detroitnews.com uses issues comparisons supplied by the Associated Press. Various sites draw compelling election content from other sources, such as Politifact.com, RealClearPolitics.com, and Politico.com. News sites should consider offering:

Candidate and issue comparisons: This research shows that this is the most important single feature a site can offer. Young people like prominently featured, simple to understand, side-by-side comparisons of candidates, and of stands taken by candidates on particular issues, with carefully chosen and clearly labeled links to other related resources. Links to original video are good—both clips of statements on particular issues and whole speeches. For some interesting examples, see CNN.com, DetroitNews.com and VoteGopher.org.

Candidate and issue comparisons are the most important single feature a site can offer.

Basic background information and explanations: How does the process work? What's a delegate? How do I...? Sites should answer these questions in a respectful (not patronizing) way that doesn't make new voters feel dumb for not knowing. They will probably find that it's not just young people who appreciate these explanations. Sites shouldn't stick the explanations off in a corner where newcomers will never see them but instead should weave them in and around stories young people may not understand. Good examples are CNN.com's Election 101 (including great features like Jargonbuster) and NYTimes.com, which enables readers to call up instant definitions of key words in a story just by clicking on them.

Question and answers: Sites should create an interactive election Q & A, where readers can ask questions and get (and perhaps give) answers about the election.

Graphics that make the complicated simple: maps, graphs, charts, etc.

Easy access to other resources and viewpoints: Young people decide what's true by comparing, so sites should make it easy for them to do this. Even if young people don't ever click, they'll think more of a site that enables them to see more than what it alone offers.

Editorial cartoons: News organizations should follow DetroitNews.com's lead and feature them. Young adults will probably be surprised and delighted.

4. **Be selective not comprehensive with news updates.**

To please young adults, make it quicker and easier to check in frequently to see what's new. Sites should provide and prominently display a quick-to-scan, constantly updated, very prioritized and selective digest of election news—but just the most important news and the news that people are most likely to be talking about. For this audience, it's far better to be selective than comprehensive; they want news organizations to make decisions about what's important to pay attention to. News organizations shouldn't try to get them to spend more time following all the day-in, day-out developments. The goal is not to increase the time they spend when they check the news; the goal is to make it attractive for them to come back frequently because they know they can get what they want how they want it—quickly.

5. **Offer comments, if at all, in a way that's moderated, prioritized, and sortable.**

Comments aren't currently much of a draw for young people. But, perhaps not surprisingly, given their interest in seeing multiple perspectives and their constant feeling of being pressed for time, young people say they might be interested in reading comments online that have been vetted and screened—so they only have to read the best ones and so the flaming, vitriol, attacks and banal comments are weeded out. They are also intrigued by the idea of ranking, rating and sorting comments, so they can see at a glance which ones are the most important, most interesting or most talked about—and so they can choose whether to look at comments of people like themselves (by age, geography, gender, etc.) or of people who aren't.

6. **Proceed with caution on applying other forms of Web 2.0 to the political news arena.**

Try those types of participatory media that seem to resonate more with young people when it comes to election news (like ranking and rating), but tread carefully on things that might conflict with the brand identity you have chosen (such as wide-open commenting, amateur content or social networks).

7. **Address topics young people are particularly concerned about.**

Write about student loans, the environment, how what's happening in the economy now will affect them in the future, and other topics of special interest to Millennials. Take a look at Think.MTV.com, Campus Politico and other sites targeted at youth for ideas; while those interviewed don't like these sites for other reasons, they love their story selection.

8. **Develop and zealously maintain a clear and consistent site identity.**

Whatever identity you pick, be outstanding at it and avoid actions that will conflict with this identity. Young people gravitate to sites that pick one thing and do it really well.

9. Market what you do.

Young people don't necessarily know what news sites have and don't go that often to the sites of their local news providers. So news organizations shouldn't assume that if they build something interesting and useful for the elections that young people will automatically come to it. Therefore, news organizations that create something for the elections need to go where young people are with their content and marketing—to music stations, school venues, existing social networks, etc.—and tell them what they are offering:

News organizations shouldn't assume that if they build something interesting and useful for the elections that young people will automatically come to it.

- Something that's designed just for new voters like them;
- A place where they can quickly learn who stands for what;
- A place that explains things they may not understand;
- A place that separates more important from less important news;
- A place that connects them to lots of opinions and views;
- A place that's easy and enjoyable to use;
- A place produced by an organization dedicated to news—where people are paid to become experts and find the facts, that's dedicated to playing it straight, that tries to filter out the spin and the hype, that scans the universe of information and commentary and brings them the best.

A FINAL WORD

News organizations should think of whatever they do for this election as part of a strategy to both drive traffic today and build it for tomorrow. If they help young people feel good about getting themselves informed enough to decide today, if they make getting informed about the election more of a pleasurable than a stressful experience, they make it more likely that those young people will grow into more regular news consumers in the future. Next time, they may be more interested in and able to process more complicated news.

News organizations may also find that, in the process, they have developed new methods and products that make caring about public affairs more enjoyable and compelling—not just for young voters but for people of all ages.

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APPENDIX A: ABOUT THE STUDY

In April, 2008, the Media Management Center at Northwestern University conducted a qualitative study of 89 Chicago-area young people, ages 17-22, who are eligible to vote for president for the first time in 2008. The purpose was to identify and test techniques and strategies that news organizations might use online to first “catch the eye” of young people and then deepen their engagement and involvement with news about the 2008 election. It did not attempt to address an equally compelling, but separate topic, of what it would take to attract them to a site in the first place. Researchers examined specific aspects of engagement, such as trust and credibility, entertainment, and sharing.

To ensure that participants had at least some experience with news online, only those who visit online news sites at least once a week were included. The recruiting company screened for gender, race/ethnicity and educational attainment to ensure diversity. Participants had the following characteristics:

Gender:

48% Male
52% Female

Year born:

2.3% 1986 (22)
29.5% 1987 (21)
26.1% 1988 (20)
21.6% 1989 (19)
20.5% 1990 (18)

Education:

22% High school (no degree yet)
13% High school graduate (12th grade)
10% Special or technical training or junior college
56% Some college (not junior college)

Race/ethnicity:

66% White/Caucasian
14% African-American or Black
8% Spanish/Hispanic/Latino
7% Mixed/Multi-Racial
5% Asian
1% Other

Participants report high levels of knowledge about the Internet: they give themselves an average score of 8.4 on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being extremely knowledgeable. Almost two-thirds say they have been using the Internet between 6-10 years; about 20% say they have been using it for more than 10 years; and about 15% say they have been using it between 3 and 5 years.

In the first phase of the study, MMC researchers conducted five 90-minute focus groups with 31 teens and young adults to test responses to selected Web sites and to better understand how online

news fits in with young people's lives. This informed the individual interviews and improved the interview guide.

In the second phase, five interviewers, trained for this project, conducted a series of 31 semi-structured, hour-long interviews with 58 participants—27 interviews with two young adults at a time and 4 one-on-one interviews. Participants were paired on the basis of education, age, interest in news, and online use.

In the focus groups and before the interviews, participants were given time to familiarize themselves with several Web sites chosen in advance by the research team to reflect diversity on several criteria:

- Source: whether the sites are produced by news organizations, non-news media organizations, or non-media organizations,
- Target audience: whether the sites appears to appeal to any news consumer, young people in general, or first time voters,
- Content: whether the site includes news headlines, videos, photos, links, opinion and commentary, and user-generated content,
- Design: different approaches to design in terms of colors and layout, and in terms of the “feel” of the site, and
- Functionality: the degree to which the sites has interactive features.

Focus group participants were asked about these sites:

CNN.com (<http://www.cnn.com>);
Think.MTV.com (<http://think.mtv.com>);
USAToday.com (<http://www.usatoday.com>);
NoVoteNoVoice.com (<http://www.novotenovoice.com>);
VoteGopher.com (<http://www.votegopher.com>);
Campus Politico (<http://www.politico.com/campuspolitico>);
Election TV (<http://www.election.tv>).

Interviewees were asked about these sites:

CNN.com (<http://www.cnn.com>);
Think.MTV.com (<http://think.mtv.com>);
DetroitNews.com (<http://www.detroitnews.com>).

Researchers asked questions probing participants' behavior, observations, attitudes, and engagement with the study sites and with Internet news about politics in general. Additionally, to get basic information about young people's behavior and attitudes regarding online news, all participants completed a brief survey assessing their overall media use, interest in news, responses to online news, and interest in, and preferences about, news on the elections. Some of the results of this survey are included in charts in this report.

The focus groups and interviews were conducted on the Northwestern campus, either in the offices of the Media Management Center or in classrooms of the Medill School. All focus groups and interviews were recorded using audio and video recording equipment and were professionally transcribed.

Please note that while care was taken to have a group that was diverse in gender, race and ethnicity, and educational background, given the small sample, these results cannot be generalized to the general population. In addition, the study took place during the Democratic primaries, traditionally a time of “horse race” coverage by traditional media, which may have also contributed to context-specific results. The value of this kind of research is in developing insights that news enterprises can use to create and test new approaches, products or means of distribution.

APPENDIX B: INTEREST IN ELECTION NEWS

How would you describe the 2008 presidential election campaign so far?

- 77% Interesting
- 11% Dull
- 12% Don't know

How closely do you follow the news about the campaign for the 2008 presidential election?

- 59% Very or fairly closely
- 41% Not too closely or not at all

Which of the following statements best describes your own behavior online when it comes to the 2008 presidential election?

- 67% I won't go out of my way to get news about the election online, but if something catches my eye, I may click on it.
- 27% I like to look at news about the election when I go online.
- 6% I rarely look at news about the election online.

When you see something online that interests you about the 2008 presidential election, how often would you say you click on it and read or view it?

- 54% Every time or frequently
- 36% Occasionally
- 9% Rarely or never

How interested are you in each of the following types of information about the 2008 presidential election? (5=Very, 4=Interested, 3=Somewhat, 2=Not, 1=Don't know/NA)

- 3.30 Stories about where the different candidates stand on issues I care about
- 3.03 Stories about how candidates are doing in the race and who is ahead
- 2.35 Funny stories about the campaigns
- 2.34 Opinion and commentary about the election
- 2.34 Unedited video of candidates' speeches

Source: 2008 Media Management Center Survey of 89 Young Adults

APPENDIX C: REACTIONS TO ELECTION NEWS ONLINE

Research participants were asked: How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the news you see online on the 2008 presidential election? Here are their answers, on a scale of 1-5, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

4.3	I like sites where it is easy to find the answers to questions I have about the elections
4.2	I like it when a site makes it easy for me to understand what's going on
4.0	I like knowing what people are talking about
4.0	I like to see the candidates themselves talk about things
4.0	I like sites that have the latest news about the campaign
3.9	I like learning about the candidates as people
3.9	I like to be able to compare what the different candidates are saying
3.7	It makes me feel good that I'm not totally clueless
3.7	I like unusual stories, offbeat angles and funny takes on the news
3.6	It helps me figure out where I stand on the issues
3.5	It makes me feel good about myself that I'm keeping up
3.5	I like sites about the election that are interactive
3.3	It's hard to follow all the details
3.1	It amuses me
3.1	I like being more knowledgeable about it than my friends
3.1	It gets me excited
2.7	It's hard to understand what they're talking about
2.5	I'm bored by it
2.3	It stresses me out
2.2	It depresses me

Note: The order was randomized so that each participant was given this list in a different order.

Source: 2008 Media Management Center Survey of 89 Young Adults

APPENDIX D: FAVORITE SITES FOR ELECTION NEWS

Research participants were asked to volunteer the name of their favorite site for news about the 2008 presidential election. More named CNN.com than any other site.

	%
cnn.com	29.2
yahoo.com	16.8
chicagotribune.com	7.8
comcast.net	5.6
google.com	5.6
nytimes.com	5.5
msn.com	3.3
abcnews.com	2.2
msnbc.com	2.2
thedailyshow.com	2.2
wgn.com	2.2
bbc.com	1.1
drudgereport.com	1.1
economist.com	1.1
foxnews.com	1.1
myfoxchicago.com (local)	1.1
nbcnews.com	1.1
nbc5.com (local)	1.1
USAToday.com	1.1
wikipedia.com	1.1
aol.com	1.1
mnhc.net	1.1
(missing/NA)	4.5

Source: 2008 Media Management Center Survey of 89 Young Adults

APPENDIX E: MOST VISITED SITES FOR ELECTION NEWS

Participants were asked how often they visited each one of these sites in the past 30 days for news and information about the 2008 presidential election.

	%
Yahoo!News.com or Google News	70
CNN.com	61
ChicagoTribune.com	47
YouTube.com	46
MySpace or Facebook pages of ordinary people	36
Local TV sites (NBC5, ABC7, FoxChicago)	33
NewYorkTimes.com	30
MySpace or Facebook pages of candidates	30
Web sites of political candidates	23
Think.MTV.com	8
DrudgeReport.com	5
VoteSmart.com	5
VoteGopher.com	3
NoVoteNoVoice.com	3
RealClearPolitics.com	1
DailyKos.com	1

Note: Respondents could check more than one site.

Note: The order was randomized so that each participant was given this list in a different order.

Source: 2008 Media Management Center Survey of 89 Young Adults

APPENDIX F: USAGE AND TRUST

Participants were asked how often they go to each of these types of sites for news and information and how much they trust the news and information from each type (on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being most trustworthy).

News aggregator sites and video sharing sites are the most often visited, while general television news and local newspaper sites enjoy the highest trust ratings. The difference between the most trusted sites and most frequently used sites is statistically significant.

Percent who say they go to these sites...

	Don't use	Rarely	A few times a month	At least once a week	Every day	Average Trust Rating
News aggregator sites (Google, Yahoo, AOL, etc.)	3	2	5	28	62	3.21
Video sharing sites (YouTube, Current TV, etc.)	6	9	11	55	19	2.26
National newspaper sites (NewYorkTimes.com, USA Today.com, etc.)	16	29	21	22	11	3.42
General television news sites (CNN.com, MSNBC.com, etc.)	9	23	24	34	11	3.54
Local newspaper sites (ChicagoTribune.com, SunTimes.com, etc.)	12	16	29	35	8	3.46
Local television news sites (NBC5.com, MyFoxChicago.com, etc.)	23	28	17	26	7	3.27
Humor sites (CollegeHumor.com, Fark.com, etc.)	43	19	16	16	7	1.78
Blogs (DrudgeReport.com, HuffingtonPost.com, etc.)	51	34	3	10	3	2.06
Free daily newspaper sites (RedEye.com, etc.)	47	34	8	8	3	2.62
International news sites (BBC.com, Reuters.com, etc.)	38	32	16	13	2	3.27
News magazine sites (Newsweek.com, Time.com, etc.)	22	27	27	21	2	3.30
Satirical news sites (TheDailyShow.com, TheOnion.com, etc.)	43	22	16	17	2	2.20
News rating sites (Digg.com, NewsVine.com, Reddit.com, etc.)	67	23	3	6	1	2.30
Alternative publication sites (ChicagoReader.com, InTheseTimes.com, etc.)	60	23	9	8	1	2.67
Ethnic news sites (ChicagoDefender.com, HoyInternet.com, etc.)	71	19	7	3	0	2.50
Local radio news sites (WBBM780.com, WBEZ.com, etc.)	50	30	10	10	0	2.94

Note: The order was randomized so that each participant was given this list in a different order.

Source: 2008 Media Management Center Survey of 89 Young Adults

APPENDIX G: INFORMATION INTERESTS

Participants were asked how often they go online to get news and information about the following topics.

Percent who say they go online for this type of information...

	Don't use	Rarely	A few times a month	At least once a week	Every day
Music	1.1	2.3	8.0	45.5	43.2
My school	4.5	15.7	10.1	43.8	25.8
Hobbies	5.7	15.9	9.1	46.6	22.7
Entertainment	1.1	5.7	22.7	50.0	20.5
Sports (general)	11.2	20.2	14.6	36.0	18.0
Specific Sports Teams	16.9	15.7	16.9	34.8	15.7
Online games	21.3	24.7	16.9	27.0	10.1
Jobs	16.9	21.3	22.5	30.3	9.0
Shopping	6.7	24.7	33.7	27.0	7.9
Political Candidates	6.7	19.1	23.6	43.8	6.7
Arts	27.0	33.7	18.0	14.6	6.7
Celebrities	15.9	30.7	9.1	38.6	5.7
Health & Fitness	5.6	22.5	37.1	29.2	5.6
Science & Medicine	18.0	31.5	21.3	23.6	5.6
Fashion	20.5	25.0	22.7	27.3	4.5
Elections	5.6	13.5	27.0	49.4	4.5
Politics	4.5	21.6	26.1	44.3	3.4
Cars	23.9	33.0	23.9	15.9	3.4
Political Causes	4.5	34.1	20.5	38.6	2.3
Environment	13.6	38.6	22.7	22.7	2.3
Food	20.5	29.5	25.0	22.7	2.3
Religion & Spirituality	38.2	41.6	11.2	7.9	1.1
Volunteer Efforts	22.7	38.6	25.0	13.6	0.0
Advocacy Groups	44.3	38.6	10.2	6.8	0.0

Note: The order was randomized so that each participant was given this list in a different order.

Source: 2008 Media Management Center Survey of 89 Young Adults

APPENDIX H: ENJOYMENT OF NEWS MEDIA

When it comes to news, the only medium young interviewees rate as enjoyable is online.

How much do you enjoy the following?

	Average Score
Online news sites	3.0
Television news	2.9
Printed newspapers	2.7
Printed news magazines	2.5

(1 = not at all enjoy, 2 = not too much enjoy, 3 = enjoy and 4 = very much enjoy)
(Anything under 3 is considered not enjoyable.)

Source: 2008 Media Management Center Survey of 89 Young Adults

APPENDIX I: ELECTION-RELATED WEB SITES

To identify which Web sites to test in this research, MMC put a call out for suggestions. Here are some of the sites that were recommended. The list includes a mix of types of sites: journalistic, political and non-profit sites that take a wide variety of approaches to the election, providing news, information, advocacy and social networking. MMC suggests browsing through them for ideas of how other organizations are approaching information about the election.

Dallas Morning News Voter Guide

<http://a3.thevoterguide.org/a-dallas/index.do>

Activote

<http://activote.com>

Syracuse Post-Standard weekly teen Web page

<http://blog.syracuse.com/voices/>

Washington Post "The Fix" blog

<http://blog.washingtonpost.com/thefix/>

USA Today On Politics blog

<http://blogs.usatoday.com/onpolitics/>

Campaigns Wikia

<http://campaigns.wikia.com>

Civic Alert

<http://civicalert.org/>

Media Research Center's Cybercastnews

<http://cnsnews.com>

Daily Kos wikipedia

<http://dkosopedia.com>

Future Majority

<http://futuremajority.com/>

Kaiser Foundation site on health issues

<http://health08.org>

Associated Press fundraising interactive at DetroitNews.com

<http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/files/specials/interactives/wdc/2008money/index.html?SITE=MIDTN&SECTION=MULTIMEDIA>

Inthefray blog

<http://inthefray.org>

Mobilize.org
<http://mobilize.org/>

AOL Elections page
<http://news.aol.com/elections/primary/delegates/democrats>

Medill Students' Superdelegate feature
<http://news.medill.northwestern.edu/washington/package.aspx?id=92155>

CNN.com political ticker
<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/>

Obamatracker.com
<http://rawobama.typepad.com>

Students for Obama
<http://students.barackobama.com/page/content/sfbohome>

New York Times "The Caucus" blog
<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/>

Think.MTV.com Choose or Lose page
<http://think.mtv.com/Issues/politics/>

University of Tennessee journalism school site's politics page
<http://tnjn.com/politics/>

Debatepedia
[http://wiki.idebate.org/index.php/Welcome to Debatepedia!](http://wiki.idebate.org/index.php/Welcome_to_Debatepedia!)

270towin.org
<http://www.270towin.com>

CNN.com
<http://www.cnn.com>

CNN.com Jargonbuster
<http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/01/03/jargonbuster/index.html>

CNN.com ElectionCenter2008
<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/>

CNN.com Issues comparisons
<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/issues/index.html>

CNN.com Elections 101
<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/path.presidency/>

CNN.com politics page
<http://www.cnn.com/POLITICS/>

Daily Kos student reporting

<http://www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2008/3/4/04242/68517>

Declare Yourself

<http://www.declareyourself.com/>

DetroitNews.com politics page

<http://www.detroitnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=POLITICS>

DetroitNews.com elections page

<http://www.detroitnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=POLITICS01>

DoSomething.org

<http://www.dosomething.org/>

Election TV

<http://www.election.tv>

Eyeblast.tv

<http://www.eyeblast.tv>

Obama Facebook site

<http://www.facebook.com/barackobama>

Clinton Facebook site

<http://www.facebook.com/hillaryclinton>

McCain Facebook site

<http://www.facebook.com/johnmccain>

Facebook/ABC election application

<http://www.facebook.com/politics/>

FactCheck.org

<http://www.factcheck.org>

Generation Engage

<http://www.generationengage.org/index.php>

Headcount.org

<http://www.headcount.org>

Huffington Post politics site

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/politics>

Comedy Central's 2008 election site

<http://www.indecision2008.com>

Medill Student's site on John McCain

<http://www.jriot.org/seela/seela.html>

Obama MySpace page
<http://www.myspace.com/barackobama>

Clinton MySpace page
<http://www.myspace.com/hillaryclinton>

McCain MySpace page
<http://www.myspace.com/johnmccain>

Australian election site
<http://www.news.com.au/youdecide2007>

Northwestern student site
<http://www.northbynorthwestern.com/category/1-content/news-politics/>

NoVoteNoVoice.com
<http://www.novotenovoice.com/>

The Palestra college site
<http://www.palestra.net/news/politics>

Campus Politico
<http://www.politico.com/campuspolitico/>

Pennsylvania political site
<http://www.politicspa.com>

Politifact Truth-O-Meter
<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/>

Pollster.com
<http://www.pollster.com/>

Farai Chideya blog
<http://www.popandpolitics.com>

Real Clear Politics
<http://www.realclearpolitics.com>

Rock The Vote
<http://www.rockthevote.com>

Student Association for Voter Empowerment Web site
<http://www.savevoting.org>

Scoop 08 national online student paper
<http://www.scoop08.com>

Sexypolitics
<http://www.sexypolitics.com>

Slate delegate counter

<http://www.slate.com/features/delegatecounter/>

Chicago Tribune "The Swamp" blog

<http://www.swamppolitics.com/news/politics/blog/>

Taking It Global

<http://www.takingitglobal.org>

Tech President

<http://www.techpresident.com>

The Onion

<http://www.theonion.com>

USA Today Politics page

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/default.htm>

USA Today candidate match game

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/candidate-match-game.htm>

USA Today delegate tracker

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/delegate-tracker.htm>

USA Today presidential poll-tracker

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/poll-tracker.htm>

Vote Gopher

<http://www.votegopher.com>

Project Vote Smart

<http://www.votesmart.org/>

Washington Post elections page

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/interactives/campaign08/primaries/>

What Kids Can Do

http://www.whatkidscando.org/youth_on_the_trail/y-press_intro.html

Wiretapmag

<http://www.wiretapmag.org>

WISN Student site

<http://www.wisn.com/studentcommitment2008/index.html>

Young People for Civil Rights

<http://www.youngpeoplefor.org/blog>

Youth Noise blog

<http://www.youthnoise.com>

YouTube/CNN presidential debates
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5mDCDAkOIQ>

YouTube You Choose 2008
<http://www.youtube.com/youchoose>