

media tenor

Getting the youth into media

WADIM SCHREINER says that to get the youth consuming media, you need to know what they want.

MOST MEDIA DON'T REALLY GIVE A HOOT about young people. Coverage for youth is centred on two events per year: matric results and Youth Day. In between? Not much. And the feeling is mutual. But this is not good for the future of our country or the media.

I was part of a group of researchers, led by Rhodes University, that did a baseline study called 'Youth identity, the media and the public sphere in South Africa'. The study aimed to discern how the various forms of media shape the identity of young people in South Africa. We wanted to find out whether the media reflected youth voices, and if media contributes to the civic identity of young people. We analysed the content of media coverage over 18 months in the mainstream press and spoke to 956 respondents aged 15 to 30 about their news consumption. We topped this up with focus groups of a total of 107 participants. Here are some of the results:

In terms of actual content in the media, youth were reported on in the context of education (failing them, no schoolbooks, poor results and similar issues) and crime (here mostly as victims rather than perpetrators). The third most prominent issue was health, mostly linked to HIV/Aids and teen pregnancy.

Youth, as described by mainstream media, are abused, failed by the educational system and in dire circumstances. While this reporting might be linked to reality, I question the proportionality of coverage. It might raise awareness about the challenges, but will it resonate with young people as a potential audience?

So what kind of media do young people consume? Most respondents say radio (70.8%), followed by TV news (67.3%) and the internet (62.8%). Mainstream newspapers had a response rate of just under 55%, tabloids the

least of all, just under 40%. Six out of 10 young people use social media as a news source. Local online news websites and international news websites scored as low as 39%.

When young people consume news, 'popular culture' tops the list of their interests, but education and health are not far behind. Young people are looking for advice, case studies, direction, new insights and not being told how hopeless their future is likely to be. At the bottom of the interest scale: politics and business. While young people are consuming media, only between 30 and 45% find the content "relevant to them".

What would make it relevant? Top response: "Help me understand the world I live in" (86.9%). What media currently do is tell the youth how bad the world in which they live is, while what they want to know is what it means to them. Second top response: "Help me in my education and career" (79.9%). "More coverage of the youth" got 77.9% favourable responses. "More coverage by youth" got almost 70%. Some 71% of respondents would like to see a dedicated youth page in newspapers.

For the mainstream press, the future is bleak, unless something changes dramatically. Saving the daily news might be social media and perhaps to a lesser degree online media, but only if the content becomes more interactive and engaging. The content has to change, from fact-driven news to offering alternatives, solutions and suggestions. The overall topics don't need to change but the angle does. Media are in a survival mode, and catching the audience of the future now might just make the difference between those who make it and those who don't. <<

The full study is available on:
<http://www.ru.ac.za/highwayafrica/projects/>

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