

**News Industry Disruption and Civic Participation:
Understanding How Shifting Business Models Influence Local Engagement**

by

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NEWSPAPER INDUSTRY DISRUPTION

ABSTRACT

Based on data from an online Qualtrics survey of national respondents, the thesis explores relationships between demographic traits, subscribing behaviors, and civic engagement, all in the context of the news industry's evolving business models. Findings include a reaffirmation of the well documented positive relationship between subscribing to news media and engaging in such civic-minded activities as voting in elections and contacting elected officials. Notably, though, the study finds evidence that this relationship is especially potent among younger individuals. The study also expands the definition of subscribing behavior to include subscriptions to cable and/or streaming services.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

The founding fathers held that in order for American democracy to thrive, those who participate in government have to be informed citizens. Traditionally, it is the responsibility of the free press to fill the role of gatekeepers of the information that voters need to stay informed. This is why the freedom of the press is enshrined as a right in the first amendment of the United States Bill of Rights (Powe, 1992). The free press is considered to be “an indispensable element in democracy and the attainment of truth” (Lichtenberg, 1987).

Unfortunately, it can no longer be taken for granted that a community is reading the same shared print paper each morning, or watching the same evening news each night, acts that give communities a shared single resource from which to base civic discourse. Instead, the rise of the Internet through the 2000s has lowered the barrier to entry for media production and given consumers greater access to a wider variety of sources for information, creating significant fragmentation in the media landscape. Research suggests that this media fragmentation has been a significant factor in the political polarization apparent in the last two decades (Duca & Saving, 2017).

Newspapers are defined in this paper as a news publication that has a printed issue that is published at regular intervals, typically on newsprint, to a base of subscribers. Historically, they are an important indicator of the health of American community (Putnam, 2000), so close attention should be paid to the social effects of market disruption in the news industry. Recent industry reports indicate that newspaper subscriptions in the United States are undergoing a shift from local print newspapers to national online newspapers (Molla, 2018). This paper analyzes how technological disruption in the news industry has historically influenced civic society and examines whether and how modern news engagement correlates with civic participation rates.

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This study finds that younger generations pay for national and streaming news to a higher degree than older generations, and pay to subscribe to local news in a similar amount. This in turn corresponds with higher rates of civic participation. The results of this study indicate that the positive correlation between paying for news and civic participation rates is stronger for younger generations than it is for older generations. The paper discusses the possible reasons and implications of these results within the historical context of civic participation media research and modern industry trends.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

History of the Technological Innovation in News

The press is an instrumental institution to American society. Technological disruption to the business model of newspapers has long had broad effects across American society in the sociological and political realms (Kuypers, 2014; Pariser, 2012; Putnam, 2000).

Stephens (2007) details the history of news in the context of American history. He found that in 18th century America, the news business was unprofitable, and reliance on the manual printing press made mass distribution difficult. During this time, newspapers were funded and operated by individuals, many of whom were advocates for the Revolutionary War. He also showed that these early newspapers were responsible for “animating and binding a new society” in a way that solidified the identities of the colonists as Americans. As a direct result of this, the founding fathers enshrined the right of a free press in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution after they saw how instrumental newspapers were to the American Revolution as vehicles that unified and enfranchised Americans (Lichtenberg, 1987).

In the early 19th century, the primary funding mechanism of the press was found in printing contracts with the government, establishing newspapers as political mouthpieces designed to guide readers to the views of the party and persuade them to vote accordingly (Kuypers, 2014). Newspapers that influenced the outcomes of elections were subsequently rewarded with government contracts.

In the mid 19th century, the invention of the steam engine led to a new era of printing presses. Where an older Guttenburg press could print 125 copies of a newspaper per hour, the steam engine press enabled publishers to produce 18,000 copies per hour by 1851 (Stephens,

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2007). The ability of the press to produce newspapers at a faster rate dropped the cost of a newspaper issue and incentivized publishers to adopt an editorial strategy that appealed to large audiences, by covering populist issues such as crime, fashion and human interest stories, and avoiding issues that risked offending readers (Kuypers, 2014). To appeal to a broader audience, content was produced with less of a political slant, and more of a commitment to objectivity. These “penny papers” were the first newspapers that were able to turn large profits, because their large circulation sizes led to a substantial amount of revenue from subscribers and advertisers. This era of profitability led to an explosion in corporate newspapers around the United States, many of which are still active today. For example, *The New York Times* was founded as a penny paper in 1851. By the end of that century, the United States had more newspapers in daily circulation than any country on earth (Stephens, 2007).

The 20th century led to an explosion in mass media technology. Television and radio created new mediums that increasingly appealed to audiences. Television, in particular, saw rapid growth. In 1948, just 4% of American households owned televisions. By 1956, this number was 65% (Putnam, 2000). By the early 1960s, more Americans were getting news from television than from the traditional newspaper (Kuypers, 2014; Putnam, 2000). Interestingly, television and newspapers were considered by economists to be complements, not substitutes (Putnam, 2000). While television news offered something that newspapers could not – the ability to appeal directly to emotions with imagery and sound – research of the time showed that Americans who watched the news on TV were also more likely to read the newspaper (Putnam, 2000). People who liked getting news appreciated it in all media formats (Putnam, 2000), and preferred objectivity (Kuypers, 2014). Newspaper publishers of the time appealed to this audience preference of objectivity by creating professional societies to determine a code of ethics

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(Kuypers, 2014). In 1923, The American Society of Newspaper Editors established the “Canons of Journalism” around the idea that the “primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinion is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgements on the issues” (Saalberg, 1973). This professionalism led to “the golden age of journalism” – a time in the mid 20th century when objectivity and journalistic ideals were emphasized in the press (Stephens, 2007).

Newspaper Business Model Shifts in the Modern Age

The modern age has been characterized by the rise of the internet and the subsequent disruption of many industries. A report commissioned in 1982 predicted that by the end of the 21st century, “electronic information technology will have transformed American home, business, manufacturing, school, family and political life,” and that it would be funded largely by advertising (Tydeman, Lipinski, Adler, Nyham, & Zwimpfer, 1982). This prediction largely came true. By 2000, 52% of American adults used the internet. By 2010, that number had skyrocketed to 72% of American adults, including an astonishing 92% of adults aged 18-29 (“Demographics of Internet and Home Broadband Usage in the United States,” 2018).

Social networks, such as Facebook, have created a low barrier to entry for content creators, and algorithmic curation by social networks and online search organizations has upended the traditional methods for content distribution (Pariser, 2012). In today’s digital environment, news outlets, regardless of their original medium, are now direct competitors for the Internet user’s attention (Pariser, 2012). Rather than choosing between turning on the television or picking up a newspaper, a user can now log onto the Internet and access a news story from either CNN or the *New York Times*. In light of this blurred definition, it is important

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to define a newspaper for the context of this research. A newspaper is a news publication that has a printed issue that is published at regular intervals, typically on newsprint, but also online, to a base of subscribers. Newspapers have historically been large businesses with deeply ingrained processes that were unable to shift their operations fast enough to catch up to the internet's rate of public adoption (Kuypers, 2014). As a result, newspapers strained to adapt business operations to find profitability in the new digital era (Perry, 2015).

Internet digital news has two primary means of revenue generation – subscriptions and advertising. Subscriptions are generally seen as the most desirable revenue stream for publishers and can be either direct or indirect. A direct subscription is created when a user makes a payment directly to the news organization for access to news content – for example, a citizen writing a check to his or her local newspaper. Readers pay subscription fees for access to content, which establishes a direct financial relationship between the reader and the newspaper. In a direct subscription relationship, a reader's trust is an asset to be protected, and so business decisions are made with a goal of protecting this asset. Newspaper content quality and credibility have strong influences on both circulation and profitability (Meyer, 2004).

However, the low barrier to entry created by the Internet has threatened subscriptions as a viable business model for most newspapers. The decline of print newspaper subscriber readership has been well documented, and its effect on the newspaper business can be easily seen in the decline of print advertising revenues. Between 2000 and 2015, the newspaper industry shrank 66%, from \$60 billion to \$20 billion annually (Perry, 2015). Over this same timeframe, Sunday newspaper circulation numbers of US daily newspapers have declined 31%. As local newspapers have disappeared, 81% of Americans now get news from online sources, both free and paid (Perry, 2015).

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There is recent evidence to suggest that where consumers are turning away from local print newspapers, they are turning toward national digital newspapers. Between the third quarter of 2016 (July – September) and the second quarter of 2018 (April-June), digital subscriptions to *The New York Times* grew 60% to 2.4 million (Molla, 2018). Similarly, *The Washington Post* more than doubled its digital subscriptions in 2017 (Nickelsburg, 2018). Business professionals have dubbed this the “Trump Bump,” as the subscription rate increases for these newspapers began in the month following the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016. Industry press has speculated that the causes of this are the increase in interest in national politics as well as the public’s desire to support journalism that is aggressively covering the Trump administration (Molla, 2018).

An indirect subscription is created when a user makes a payment to an intermediary organization rather than to the news organization itself. An example of this would be cable news bundles that include subscriptions to *CNN*, *MSNBC* and *Fox News* within one monthly subscription payment. In this type of subscriber-publisher relationship, the reader’s trust as a variable is less important to a media organization’s bottom line than maintaining viewer attention.

Indirect subscriber viewership is declining as well. The audience for cable subscriptions is declining, as people “cut the cord” and move from paid cable packages to more direct subscription services such as *Netflix* and *Hulu*, which provide access to content over the Internet at a cheaper monthly rate. In 2018, an estimated 30% of all television households are now cord-cutters, including 42% of all millennial households. Of the millennial households that continue to pay for cable television packages, 76% of them supplement their service with direct subscription services (Feldman, 2018).

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Digital advertising revenue, particularly on social platforms, has proven to be a more cost-effective communications channel for advertisers than subscriptions. Companies that specialize in digital advertising technology and services vacuumed up the resulting loss in newspaper advertising revenue. The digital advertising industry grew to \$72.5 billion dollars in 2016, but 89% of all revenue growth went to Facebook and Google (Alba, 2017). Online advertising pricing is typically based on audience scale and traffic, which means that publishers are incentivized to get as many users to view the content as possible. Publishers have discovered that users clicked most on "headlines that induce arousal by appealing to emotional extremes like shock, empathy, curiosity and anger," known in industry parlance as "clickbait" (Wu, Sundiman, Kao, & Chen, 2018). A 2014 study showed that in any given week, 60 percent of American adults read only headlines, without going more in-depth with the news story. When the emotional intensity of headlines was combined with social media's algorithmic serving of content that appealed to individual interests, the Internet became the outrage factory that is likely a causal factor in the political polarization evident in America today (Pariser, 2012).

Native advertising is another major revenue stream for publishers, one that is expected to grow from \$4.7 billion dollars in total spend in 2013 to \$53 billion dollars in 2020 (Hyman, Franklyn, Yee, & Rahmati, 2016). Native advertising is created by a publisher in direct paid partnership with an advertiser, often designed to look and feel like organic publisher content. This type of advertising is particularly popular with large, national newspapers, many of which have created internal content studios specifically to pitch and design this type of content. *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times* and *POLITICO* are all examples of publishers that have established these internal agencies. While this type of advertising is a revenue boon for publishers, it risks degrading reader trust. Despite routine guidance from the Federal Trade

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Commission on how to avoid deceptive advertising practices in this format, a recent study indicated only 37% of readers were able to discern the difference between paid and unpaid content (Hyman et al., 2016). In an advertising-focused business model, reader trust is a resource to be exploited rather than protected.

This changing business model of news toward digital revenue is having dramatic consequences for news organizations. Reduced revenues call for leaner organizations, and changing communication habits of readers require investment in new technology. The two largest newspaper organizations, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, are evidence of this change. *The Post* stabilized its business model by integrating itself with Big Technology after it was purchased by Amazon's CEO, Jeff Bezos, in part of a nationwide trend in newspaper acquisitions by billionaires. It has built-in newspaper access for customers within the Amazon ecosystem, and it has diversified its product offering by selling publication software to other media companies. The *Times* has undergone a long-standing effort to shift people towards paying subscription revenue online, which decreases its dependency on advertising revenue for stability. This shift is working, as the New York Times is seeing record growth in digital subscription revenue this year ("The New York Times Company Reports 2017 Third-Quarter Results," 2017).

Social Effects of News Industry Disruption

Generational effects consider the changes in society that broadly affect a population, comparing a generation's collective behavior to the behavior and circumstances of other generations at the same age. Without multiple datasets over time, this can be difficult to contrast with life cycle theory, which focuses on the idea that individuals change during the context of a life (Putnam, 2000). When different generations behave differently in their news consumption, is

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it because they are at different points in a common life cycle, where older people are more engaged in their communities than younger people, or are those traits aligned with the cultural differences that come with each generation's ride through history? It is difficult to quantitatively define the difference in these two ideas unless research is able to analyze the behavior of multiple generations across multiple life cycles. (Putnam, 2000).

The generational trend that is evidenced in modern news subscription behavior is notable. In 1995, Robert Putnam noted that "virtually all of the precipitous decline in newspaper circulation... is due to... generational succession" (Putnam, 2000). This is still reflected today, as 48% of people older than 65 still read print newspapers, decreasing with each younger generation (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016). In particular, millennials, generally grouped between the ages 18-34, are a large part of the shift away from local print publications to national online newspapers. Only 5% of millennials say they often get news from print newspapers, but, according to a recent report in POLITICO, millennials are far outpacing other age groups in online subscription growth at *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* (Schwartz, 2017). These publications all had record subscriber growth in 2016 (Wamsley, 2016). Millennials seem more willing to pay for online news subscriptions than older generations. It has been theorized that online subscription services such as Netflix and Hulu have conditioned this demographic to pay for online subscription services (Schwartz, 2017).

Civic participation rates measure the propensity of a population's members to participate in activities that benefit their broader community. This can be any act where an individual is engaging as a citizen - voting, serving in a local charity or serving in a local club or association. Civic participation is closely linked with interpersonal trust to form a "virtuous circle," called

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social capital, which allows citizens of a community to collectively solve problems. Research in a wide variety of fields indicates that the quality of American public life is powerfully correlated with civic participation and interpersonal trust. Communities with high levels of civic engagement have better outcomes in unemployment, crime and healthcare, making it a good measure for overall societal health (Putnam, 2000).

Earlier research indicates that newspaper readership is a positive indicator of civic participation (Putnam, 2000). Newspaper readership has a strong positive correlation with institutionalized participation, which includes acts like voting or calling a representative (McLeod et al., 1999). Newspaper readership has shown to be greater in people with strong ties to their community, though causality is difficult to determine (Davidson & Cotter, 1997). This earlier research has a noted lack of differentiation between different forms of media use in civic engagement research, with newspapers often serving as a substitute for all local media (McLeod et al., 1996).

There has been some research to suggest that online media “erodes social connection through time displacement and social withdrawal,” though this effect can be mediated by complementing traditional media and encouraging discussions with friends and family (Shah et al., 2005). Consumption of news on social networking sites has shown itself to be a positive predictor of civic participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). There is inconsistent research in how Internet behavior affects civic participation, which suggests there is nuance to be found in the different trends of online newspaper distribution.

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam demonstrated that newspaper readership is a substantial indicator of this civic participation. When controlling for other variables, Putnam found that while total television viewing time is negatively associated with both civic participation and

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interpersonal trust, newspaper readership is positively correlated with both measures (Putnam, 1995, 218). In the time since *Bowling Alone* was published, the correlation between newspaper readership and civic participation has not been studied with the same nuance as television, though research has continued to indicate a positive relationship between the two, generally (Shah, 1998; Nah et al., 2018). In "Dead Newspapers and Citizens' Civic Engagement," Lee Shaker studies the change in civic participation in large metropolitan areas from 2008 and 2009. In Seattle, he saw a decline in civic participation after the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* ceased print publication and moved to an online format. There was a similar trend in Denver after the closure of the *Rocky Mountain News*. This decline in civic participation was not replicated in other American cities that did not lose local newspapers (Shaker, 2014).

Rationale and Hypothesis

These rapid changes in the business models of the news industry have large implications for the way consumers are engaging with news content, and scholarly research must take these changes into account when studying the important relationship between newspaper readership and societal health.

This research seeks to determine how different generations are consuming news and whether there is nuance in the civic participation rates between paid and non-paid news subscribers. Specifically, the research will investigate the following hypotheses about associations between age and subscribing to different types of news outlets:

H1a: Subscribing to national news outlets is associated with age.

H1b: Subscribing to local news outlets is associated with age.

H1c: Subscribing to cable news outlets is associated with age.

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H1d: Subscribing to streaming media outlets is associated with age.

The following hypotheses will look for similar patterns in news outlet subscribing, but with platform type – print or digital – considered:

H2a: Subscribing to national digital news outlets is associated with age.

H2b: Subscribing to local digital news outlets is associated with age.

H2c: Subscribing to national print news outlets is associated with age.

H2d: Subscribing to local print news outlets is associated with age.

Next, the research will test several hypotheses about demographic and behavioral traits as predictors of civic engagement. Specifically:

H3a: Age will correlate positively with civic engagement.

H3b: Education will correlate positively with civic engagement.

H3c: Attention to news will correlate positively with civic engagement

H3d: Subscriber "buy-in," meaning how many different subscribing behaviors a respondent engaged in, will correlate positively with civic engagement.

Finally, the research will test one hypothesis about an interaction between age and "buy in" as predictors of civic engagement:

H4: Respondent age and subscribing "buy in" will interact significantly as predictors of civic engagement, such that "buy in" correlates positively with civic engagement, and more so among younger respondents than among older respondents.

CHAPTER 3 - METHOD**Data**

The study depends on a survey that was completed by 965 respondents using a Qualtrics panel and fielded during August 2019. Qualtrics is an online research company that provides survey technology and a recruited sample panel to poll from, and calls itself the top internet survey technology provider among business schools (“Qualtrics Online Survey Software - Trusted by 5.5M Survey Creators”, 2019). Respondents received an invitation to take the survey by email and were selected by a random sample from the Qualtrics market research panel made up of online participants in the United States that have been recruited by Qualtrics. These respondents were not offered an incentive to participate in this survey. Results were counted only if the full survey was completed. Table 1 summarizes basic demographics of the survey's respondents.

Independent/Input Variables

Age. Age was measured by the question asking respondents to place themselves in one of six age groups: 18 to 24, 25 to 34, 35 to 44, 45 to 54, 55 to 64, or 65 and older. For purposes of the analysis, these categories were represented with ordinal codes ranging from 1 for the 18 to 24 group up to 6 for the 65 and older group. Research suggests that shifts in media usage and civic participation are generational in nature (Putnam, 2000).

Education. This variable measured each respondent's self-reported education level in eight ordinal categories ranging from "Less than high school" to "Professional degree," such as a J.D. or an M.D.

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Table 1

<i>Respondent demographics</i>			
Category		n	%
Gender			
	Male	410	42.5
	Female	555	57.5
Age			
	18-24	116	12.0
	25-34	305	31.6
	35-44	166	17.2
	45-54	109	11.3
	55-64	118	12.2
	65+	151	15.6
Race			
	White	726	75.2
	Black	156	16.2
	American Indian	17	1.8
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	9	.9
	Asian	44	4.6
	Other	65	6.7
Education			
	Less than High School	36	3.7
	High School Graduate	239	24.8
	Some College	242	25.1
	Associate's Degree	107	11.2
	Bachelor's Degree	227	23.5
	Master's Degree	82	8.5
	Doctoral Degree	13	1.3
	Professional Degree (MD, JD)	19	2.0
Income			
	<\$10,000	110	11.4
	\$10,000 - \$19,999	95	9.8
	\$20,000 - \$29,999	124	12.8
	\$30,000 - \$39,999	115	11.9
	\$40,000 - \$49,999	108	11.2
	\$50,000 - \$59,999	89	9.2
	\$60,000 - \$69,999	52	5.4
	\$70,000 - \$79,999	64	6.6
	\$80,000 - \$89,999	38	3.9
	\$90,000 - \$99,999	47	4.9
	\$100,000 - \$149,999	80	8.3
	>\$150,000	43	4.5

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Attention to news. The survey asked respondents to estimate how frequently during the past seven days they had gotten news from each of eight different news sources: social media, a print or online local newspaper, a print or online national newspaper, cable news, network news, free websites, podcasts, or radio. Each item's response task consisted of a scale ranging from "Never" (coded as 1) to "Very often" (coded as 10). These responses were recoded to zero through 9 values, summed, then divided by the total possible to produce a scale ranging from zero to 100% of the total "attention to news" points possible.

Subscriber status. This is a qualitative variable based on a respondent's subscription behavior, based on the response to questions 1-4 (Appendix A). The specific operationalizations of "subscriber status" describe each respondent as fitting, or not fitting, into each of the following five categories:

- Direct national news subscriber: Respondent indicates they pay a monthly fee to receive a newspaper subscription to *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, or similar.
- Direct local news subscriber: Respondent indicates they pay a monthly fee to receive a local newspaper subscription.
- Indirect (cable) news subscriber: Respondent indicates they pay a monthly fee for a cable news package that includes access to *CNN*, *MSNBC* and/or *Fox News*.
- Streaming services subscriber: respondent indicates they pay a monthly fee to access streaming services such as Netflix or Hulu.
- None subscriber: Respondent indicates they do not pay for any type of news.

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Subscriber buy-in. These same five categories were combined into an additive index aimed at measuring how many of the subscribing behaviors a respondent engaged in. Specifically, respondents received one point on the index for each subscriber status they matched.

Subscriber buy-in / age interaction. The subscriber buy-in and age measures were multiplied to produce an interaction term suitable for regression analysis purposes.

Platform and scope of subscriptions. Yet another set of measures that were derived from the base questions for the subscriber status measures classified respondents according the platform and scope of the news sources, if any, respondents self-report being subscribed to. These classifications took the form of four dichotomous variables, each coded as 0 for "No" and 1 for "Yes":

National news payer. Whether the respondent held a paid subscription to a national news outlet.

Local news payer. Whether the respondent held a paid subscription to a national news outlet.

Cable news payer. Whether the respondent held a paid subscription to a cable news outlet, as part of a subscription to cable television programming generally.

Streaming service payer. Whether the respondent held a paid subscription to a media content streaming service.

National print payer. Whether the respondent held a paid subscription to a national print news outlet.

Local print payer. Whether the respondent held a paid subscription to a local print news outlet.

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National digital payer. Whether the respondent held a paid subscription to a national digital news outlet.

Local digital payer. Whether the respondent held a paid subscription to a local digital news outlet.

Dependent/Outcome Variable

The dependent variable estimated civic participation, based on a scale developed by McLeod et al., in 1999, asking whether, over the last 12 months, the respondent had:

1. Attended a neighborhood meeting.
2. Written a letter to the local editor or called in to a radio station.
3. Circulated a petition for a local candidate or issue.
4. Voted for a locally elected official.
5. Worked for a political campaign locally, or
6. Contacted a local public official.

Participants received a point for every ‘yes’ answer to the above questions, which were then aggregated to a civic participation scale ranging from 0 to 6.

Procedures

The analysis unfolded in three phases. The first phase used bivariate crosstabulations and chi-square tests to explore relationships between age, on one hand, and each of the subscriber status and platform and scope of subscription measures, on the other. These procedures tested hypotheses H1a through H2d. Next, a multiple regression analysis tested hypotheses H3a through H3d by evaluating a model predicting civic engagement from age, education, attention to news, and subscriber "buy in." Finally, adding to the model a term for the interaction between

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age and "buy in" tested hypothesis H4. The bivariate procedures represent an effort to identify basic parts of the relationship between demographics, subscribing, and civic engagement. The multivariate procedures test hypotheses about how some of those parts function in a model and about each part's individual contribution to the outcome variable, controlling for the other parts.

CHAPTER 4 - RESULTS

Table 2 breaks out the percentage of each age group that pays for a particular form of media. Younger age groups are more likely to pay for national newspapers, $\chi^2(5, N=965) = 48.28, p < .01$, as 33.6% of 18-24 year olds report paying for a subscription to a national newspaper; whereas 16.1% of 55-64 year olds and 9.9% of those who are 65+ report the same. 25-34 year olds have the highest percentage, with 37.0% reporting that they pay for national newspapers. H1a is supported.

There is a similar trend in streaming services, as younger groups are more likely to pay for streaming services, $\chi^2(5, N=965) = 133.0, p < .01$. 89.7% of 18-24 year olds, the highest percentage reported, and 88.2% of 25-34 year olds report paying for streaming services, whereas only 43.0% of those 65+ report the same. H1d is supported.

Cable news shows that older respondents are more likely to pay for cable news, $\chi^2(5, N=965) = 9.6, p > .05$. However, this finding is not statistically significant. 55.2% of those 18-24 report paying for cable news, while 67.5% of those 65+ report the same. 45-54 year olds report the highest percentage of cable news subscribers, with 71.6% reporting they pay for the service. H1c is not supported.

There is less of an obvious trend when looking at local news, with a relatively stable percentage of all generations paying for local news, with those in the 25-34 demographic having the highest reported percentage of local news subscribership, as 37.9% report paying for local news, $\chi^2(5, N=965) = 11.5, p < .05$. 31.0% of 18-24 year olds report paying for local news, while 32.5% of those 65+ report the same. H1b is supported.

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Table 2

Percent of Respondents that pay for a form of media, by age

Age Category	% National News**	% Local News*	% Cable News	% Streaming Services**
18-24	33.6	31.0	55.2	89.7
25-34	37.0	37.9	60.0	88.2
35-44	30.7	16.6	61.4	78.9
45-54	25.7	27.5	71.6	68.8
55-64	16.1	23.7	66.6	64.4
65+	9.9	32.5	67.5	43.0

*p<.05, **p<.01

As Table 3 indicates, younger respondents show a higher propensity to get their national news digitally, $X^2(5, N=965) = 30.9, p<.01$; as well as local news digitally $X^2(5, N=965) = 16.1, p<.01$. 22.4% of 18-24 year-olds report getting national news digitally, and 23.3% of them report getting local news digitally. Those in the 65+ demographic report the lowest percentage of digital news. 6.0% of them report getting national news digitally, and 13.2% report getting local news digitally. All age groups surveyed report a higher instance of paying for local news digitally than national news. H2a and H2b are both supported by these results.

Table 3

Percent of Respondents that receive digital news, by age

Age Category	% National News**	% Local News**
18-24	22.4	23.3
25-34	24.3	26.6
35-44	19.3	21.2
45-54	14.7	16.5
55-64	10.2	14.4
65+	6.0	13.2

**p<.01

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Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents in each age bracket that indicated they pay for print news, either national or local. Younger generations have a higher percentage of receiving print national newspapers, $X^2(5, N=965) = 38.1, p < .01$. Specifically, 27.5% of 25-34 year-olds report receiving a national print publication, whereas only 6.6% of respondents 65+ report the same. Younger generations in the sample also have a higher percentage of receiving print local news, although this finding is not significant $X^2(5, N=965) = 9.3, p > .05$. For example, 30.5% of 25-34 year-olds report paying for local print news, while 25.4% of 65+ report the same. H2c is supported, while H2d is not.

Table 4

Percent of Respondents that receive print news, by age

Age Category	% National News**	% Local News
18-24	19.8	19.0
25-34	27.5	30.5
35-44	21.7	24.7
45-54	16.5	22.0
55-64	9.3	20.3
65+	6.6	15.6

**p<.01

Table 5 summarizes a multiple linear regression model predicting civic participation from age, education, attention to news, subscriber "buy in," and, in a separate step, the interaction between age and buy-in. In the first step of the model, education, attention to news, and subscriber "buy in" all correlated positively and significantly with civic engagement, affirming H3b, H3c and H3d, respectively. H3a's assertion that age would correlate positively and significantly with civic engagement, however, did not find support – a surprising finding, given

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the literature's substantial evidence that older individuals tend to show higher levels of civic engagement than younger individuals.

Table 5

Predicting Civic Participation from Age, Education, Attention to News, and Subscriber Buy-in.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients				
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	-.585	.136		-4.302	.000***
Age Range	.028	.024	.033	1.197	.232
What is the highest level of school you have completed?	.091	.025	.102	3.687	.000***
Attention to news	1.317	.189	.234	6.974	.000***
Subscriber buy-in	.376	.175	.344	10.102	.051
2 (Constant)	-.929	.175		-5.301	.000***
Age Range	.135	.042	.159	3.23	.001**
What is the highest level of school you have completed?	.094	.025	.105	3.798	.000***
Attention to news	1.297	.188	.230	6.899	.000***
Subscriber buy-in	.557	.069	.510	8.046	.000***
interaction	-.060	.019	-.205	-3.091	.002**

a. Dependent Variable: Civ_Scale

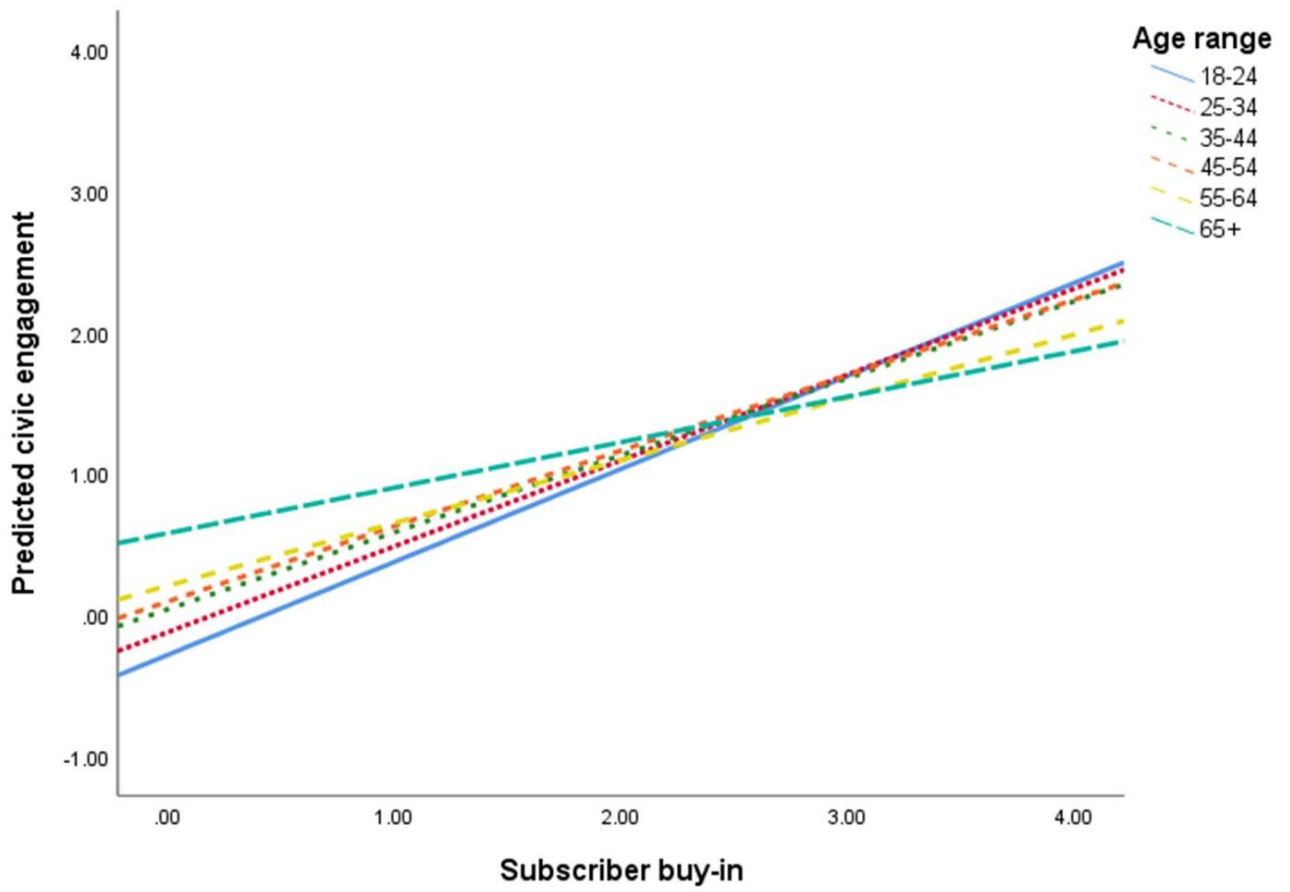
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** $p < .01$, *** $p < .0005$

Considering the earlier bivariate findings of significant relationships between age and various measures of subscriber type and behavior, an interaction term was added to the model in a second step. The term produced a significant partial correlation, while the education and news attention measures remained significant and positive – thus, preserving support for H3b and H3c. Examination of a graph of the interaction (Figure 1) provided a more nuanced understanding of how age and subscriber buy-in relate to civic engagement. Specifically, the rising regression lines for subscriber buy in across all age groups suggested that buy-in significantly predicted civic engagement regardless of age. The Y intercepts of the lines also suggest that, among those with lower levels of subscriber buy-in, older individuals show more civic engagement than younger ones. However, the steeper regression lines – significantly steeper, given the interaction term's p value – for respondents in the younger age groups suggested that the association between buy-in and civic engagement was stronger for these younger respondents than for the older respondents. Thus, H3d remains supported; subscriber buy-in generally correlates positively with civic engagement. But H3a's assertion that age correlates positively with civic engagement is supported mainly for younger respondents who exhibit higher levels of subscriber buy-in.

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Figure 1



CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The data gives us some interesting, and sometimes surprising, insights into how different generations are financially engaging with the news and participating in their communities.

The most significant result is that younger respondents were more likely than older ones to report that they pay for national and local digital newspapers. This result aligns with other metrics across the newspaper industry that millennials are largely driving the growth in national newspaper subscriptions, particularly with digital subscriptions (Schwartz, 2017). Previous research has shown that the decline in print newspaper readership over the last century has been largely generational, with each successive generation reading less print media (Putnam, 2000). The results of this study may suggest the opposite, that younger generations tend to engage with print news more than older generations. If news consumption is indeed a lasting generational habit, this suggests that younger generations will provide a healthier demand for local and national journalism in the future. Because this result conflicts with the previous newspaper consumption habits of prior generations at a younger age, it is likely that engaging with newspapers is a generational trait specific to current generations of young people. Given the historical context that young people of today came of age in a constant state of disruption due to the internet, perhaps younger people have a more innate understanding that the internet makes everything free and quality should be paid for. Modern political upheaval around the world as young people have come of age in the last decades could also have instilled an appreciation for the watchdog of role of journalism to hold power to account.

Additionally, respondents indicated a higher tendency to pay for local digital news than national digital news across all age groups. There are a few possible reasons for this. Perhaps people feel more compelled to pay for news that is connected to their community, or they have a

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greater understanding for the need for newspapers to continue to have paying subscribers. Local newspapers have intentionally offered subscribers a way to reduce their print consumption and transfer to a digital only subscription, and this strategy may be partially responsible for this result. The higher rate of digital subscriptions for local news may be an echo of behaviors that subscribed to print newspapers in the past. Future research should seek to understand this trend over time, to see if this finding is steady, rising, or falling over time.

While older generations see lower rates of paying for national news, they do have high rates of paid cable news subscriptions. In addition, older generations exhibit less of a positive relationship between paying for news and civic participation. There are a few possible reasons for this. First, for cable news, the reader's trust as a variable is less important to a media organization's bottom line than maintaining viewer attention, which perhaps does not lend itself to encouraging civic behavior. Second, older generations have had a longer amount of time to solidify their news consumption and civic participation habits, which might explain why there is less of a correlation between these two factors.

While older generations have a higher tendency to pay for cable news, younger generations are significantly more engaged with streaming services, which are the most popular form of paid media in the study. Streaming services don't typically have a large catalogue of news shows and networks, so it is possible that younger users are "cutting the cord" and turning to newspapers for their news consumption. There is additional avenue for research here to determine exactly what type of news people are engaging with on each platform.

Newspaper subscriptions correlate with higher rates of civic participation than television viewing, furthering Robert Putnam's hypothesis in *Bowling Alone* that television negatively

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affects American civic life, as well as research showing that newspaper readership positively affects civic participation (McLeod et al., 1999).

The regression model analyzed the degree each variable plays with regard to civic participation score. Notably, when the interaction variable was added to the model, the news attention variable was the largest predictor of civic participation score, accounting for more of an increase in civic participation score than payment alone.

When civic participation scale is broken down by age, the results show that paid media consumption is a bigger predictor of civic participation rates among younger people than older people. Previous research shows that news consumption habits are generational, and these results seem to suggest that the way young people consume media is more important to their civic engagement than older generations. Younger generations, whose media economy has been in a constant state of disruption since they came of age, show a stronger link between these two variables. Older generations, who have had the longest amount of time to formulate habits in both their news engagement and civic engagement scores, see a lesser relationship between these two factors, indicating that the correlating relationship between these two factors decreases as people grow older. Because news consumption habits are typically generational, it can be hypothesized that as these younger generations age, they will provide a more stable source of revenue for news publishers than older generations have. Further research should look at this question over time to determine whether this is a generational trait among younger generations that will stay steady as they age, or if this trend is something limited to younger generations that they grow out of as they age and their media consumption habits become more ingrained.

This research does have a few weaknesses. The first is that it is difficult to determine causality when examining the relationship between paid news behavior and civic engagement

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rates. Perhaps those who have high civic engagement rates are more likely to pay for news as a way to enhance their understanding of their communities. It is also true that a person who reads news that they trust enough to pay for is likely to have a higher confidence when acting on that information in the public sphere. Because the study is just a snapshot in time, it is difficult to ascertain the difference in life cycle effects and generational effects.

Secondly, the survey asked respondents to self-report their subscriber and media behaviors without using additional methods to verify the accuracy of these claims, such as receipts. It is certainly possible that the way a respondent self-reports media consumption habits differs from the reality of a respondent's media consumption habits. For example, a user might have a subscription that they are unaware they pay for, perhaps because a subscription auto-renews or is included with another media product.

Additionally, the study is limited to those who participate in online Qualtrics panels, and is not an exact mirror of the US population, as it skewed younger and female, potentially biasing results toward those with an internet connection while ignoring members of the general population who rely on print information. This is potentially a significant limitation, and while the results were statistically significant, there should be some skepticism when applying the results more generally. In this context, statistical significance indicates that random variation, alone, likely could not have produced relationships as intense as those found. Sampling bias could have, though, in part or even in whole, given that the sample is not a random sample of the broader US population. Further research could examine these relationships with a nationally representative sample, and the findings presented here suggest the associated effort and cost might be worthwhile.

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Finally, the linear regression model considered in this paper ignores possible interactions involving education and other demographics and offers only a fuzzy glimpse of the interaction between age and subscriber buy-in. Together with the surprising positive correlation between age and subscribing, the results presented here suggest the need for a re-examination of the relationships among demographics, subscribing and civic engagement using a more sophisticated technique such as process modeling, which can test hypotheses about mediation and moderation along the paths that link the outcome variable and its preceding factors (Hayes, 2017).

Future research into this field should look at the persistence of these results across time to better determine whether the relationships found stem from a life cycle effect or a generational effect, and to better understand the historical consequences of media business model disruption.

Prior research in the field indicates that there is an important relationship between the way people consume news and the rate of civic participation in their local communities. In recent decades, there has been a substantial shift from local print newspaper readership toward national digital newspaper readership. Ongoing research should pay attention to how younger generations are engaging with the news, as they appear to have tremendous market power to shape the future of the industry. This study attempts to understand the correlations between the types of news a person pays for and their civic engagement rates, by analyzing this relationship by generation.

The biggest practical takeaway from this study is that younger generations see an increase in engagement with paid forms of newspapers, whether national or local, which corresponds with higher rates of civic participation. Additionally, the results suggest that younger Americans break with tradition when it comes to their paid media consumption habits. Prior research in the field, such as in Robert Putnam's groundbreaking work *Bowling Alone*, shows a generational decline in engagement with the news and with civic participation rates. The

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results of this study indicate that younger generations are more disposed to pay for the news that they consume, and that paying for news correlates with higher rates of civic participation for younger generations than for older generations.

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Appendix A**Media consumption and civic participation, Survey**

August 2019.

Start of Block: Block 1

Q15 Information and Disclosure Section 1. **Purpose:** This research project is designed to help us evaluate The relationship between media business models and civic participation rates.

o **Description:** There are several parts to this project. They are: o Questions about your media consumption habits o Questions about your civic participation habits 2.

Duration: The whole activity should take about 10 minutes **Here are your rights as a participant:**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may skip any item that you don't want to answer, and you may stop the experiment at any time (but see the note below) If you leave an item blank by either not clicking or entering a response, you may be warned that you missed one, just in case it was an accident. But you can continue the study without entering a response if you didn't want to answer any questions. Some items may require a response to accurately present the survey. 3. **Risks & Discomforts: None** 4.

Benefits: The survey will help us understand the social effects of disruption in the media industry. 5. **Identifiable Information:** You will NOT be asked to provide identifiable personal information 6. **Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in this study** 7. **Confidentiality.** All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information private but total privacy cannot be promised. Your information may be shared with MTSU or the government, such as the Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board, Federal Government Office for Human Research Protections, *if* you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law. 8. **Contact Information.** If you should have any questions about this research study or possibly injury, please feel free to contact Laura Brown by email lb5w@mtmail.mtsu.edu OR my faculty advisor, Ken Blake, at ken.blake@mtsu.edu. You can also contact the MTSU Office of compliance via telephone (615 494 8918) or by email (compliance@mtsu.edu). This contact information will be presented again at the end of the experiment.

Q16 I have read this informed consent document pertaining to the above identified research

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Click to write Choice 3 (3)

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Skip To: End of Survey If I have read this informed consent document pertaining to the above identified research = No

Q17 The research procedures to be conducted are clear to me

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If The research procedures to be conducted are clear to me = No

Q18 I confirm I am 18 years or older

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If I confirm I am 18 years or older = No

Q19 By clicking below, I affirm that I freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this study. I understand I can withdraw from this study at any time without facing any consequences.

- YES, I consent (1)
- NO, I do not consent (2)
- Click to write Choice 3 (3)

Skip To: End of Survey If By clicking below, I affirm that I freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this study. ... = NO, I do not consent

Skip To: End of Survey If By clicking below, I affirm that I freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this study. ... = NO, I do not consent

End of Block: Block 1

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 Do you pay a subscription fee to access any local newspaper?

- Yes, in print only (1)

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- Yes, digital and print (2)
- Yes, digital only (3)
- No (4)

Q2 Do you pay a subscription fee to access any national newspaper? (Example: USA Today, The New York Times, The Washington Post, or similar).

- Yes, in print only (1)
- Yes, digital and print (2)
- Yes, digital only (3)
- No (4)

Q3 Do you pay for a cable television package that includes cable news such as CNN, Fox News or MSNBC?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q4 Do you pay a subscription fee to access streaming video providers like Netflix, Hulu or similar?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q5

Out of the last seven days, between today and this time last week, how often did you get news from the following sources?

Never Very often Not
Applicable

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0 2 4 6 8 10

Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc) ()	
Local newspaper (print or online) ()	
National newspaper (print or online) ()	
Cable News (CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, etc) ()	
Network news (ABC, CBS, NBC, local news) ()	
Free websites ()	
Podcasts ()	
Radio ()	

Q6 In the last 12 months, have you done any of the following:

	Yes (1)	No (2)	Unsure (3)
Attended a neighborhood meeting? (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Written a letter to the editor or called in to a radio station? (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Circulated a petition for a local candidate or issue? (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Voted for a locally elected official? (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Worked for a political campaign locally? (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Contacted your local public official? (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q7 Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal (left) to extremely conservative (right). Where would you place yourself on this scale?

1 2 3 4 4 5 6 7

Political Ideology ()	
------------------------	--

Q8 Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?

- Republican (1)
- Democrat (2)
- Independent (3)
- Other (4) _____
- No preference (5)

Q9 What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than high school diploma (1)

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- High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED) (2)
- Some college but no degree (3)
- Associate degree in college (2-year) (4)
- Bachelor's degree in college (4-year) (5)
- Master's degree (6)
- Doctoral degree (7)
- Professional degree (JD, MD) (8)

Q10 Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:

- White (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (3)
- Asian (4)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
- Other (6) _____

Q11 What is your sex?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)

Q12 What is your age range?

- 18-24 (1)
- 25-34 (2)
- 35-44 (3)
- 45-54 (4)
- 55-64 (5)

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- o 65+ (6)

Q13 Information about income is very important to understand people's media choices. Any information you provide will not be traced back to you or provided to third parties. Please indicate your best estimate of your entire household income in (previous year) before taxes.

- o Less than \$10,000 (1)
- o \$10,000 to \$19,999 (2)
- o \$20,000 to \$29,999 (3)
- o \$30,000 to \$39,999 (4)
- o \$40,000 to \$49,999 (5)
- o \$50,000 to \$59,999 (6)
- o \$60,000 to \$69,999 (7)
- o \$70,000 to \$79,999 (8)
- o \$80,000 to \$89,999 (9)
- o \$90,000 to \$99,999 (10)
- o \$100,000 to \$149,999 (11)
- o \$150,000 or more (12)

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Block 2