

# **Youth and the Mainstream Media: A David and Goliath Story**

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## **DRAFT**

Much of today's rhetoric around the future of legacy media and their engagement with youth relies on a narrative of phone-addled teens- that somehow, in order for the mainstream media to engage youth, they must understand youth and their engagement with social media. Implicit in these efforts is a sense of urgency to reach the youth demographic within the mainstream media. While these efforts are genuine and understandable, engaging with youth may require a different approach. Instead, it could be argued that the issue lies in the ways that the mainstream media misunderstands youth culture and identity, and thus, misrepresents narratives that eventually reach youth. Thus, if youth do not see themselves and their narratives told accurately through the reporting of legacy media, they are likely to turn toward platforms they see as more relevant, and truthful.

These newer, less mainstream platforms, known as grassroots publications or digitally native media, utilize specific strategies to engage in youth audiences. These publications are typically "born on the web," and aren't found on the website of a legacy news brand, though they may be owned by a legacy media company. They must publish content about news and current events, and is not a user generated/aggregated platform. (State of the News). For example, Vice News, Refinery29, and Elite Daily, are often run by staff that err on the younger side, the average age being twenty seven. This allows grassroots media reporters to relate, and report, youth needs and interest more so than other news sources. (Ip). Possibly becoming more relevant than the New York Times among the youth demographic could be Mic, Vice, or the Young Turks. These non-traditional forms of media put traditional news institutions in positions where they must compete both with and for the youth demographic. Part of deconstructing the false youth narratives in the media is truly understanding the motivations behind youth engagement in the political scene.

An excellent example of this is the mainstream media coverage of the Bernie Sanders' campaign. The Sanders campaign held the record for the most youth support compared to any other politician during the 2016 primaries. (Blake). Yet, even with this unprecedented support from a single demographic, the mainstream media failed to anticipate the rise of Bernie Sanders; instead, much of the legacy media deemed him as an outsider. (Horowitz). A large part of this is the mainstream media's failure to understand youth morals and narratives that were dominant within the campaign, such as a distrust for traditional institutions.

This youth movement against traditional institutions is also apparent in the recent campaign of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Ocasio-Cortez embodies similar ideals as the Sanders campaign; her policy stance reflects the same basic suspicion of institutions that youth hold, and she received an unprecedented level of youth volunteer support among her grassroots campaign. (Budds). Unlike Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez wasn't an experienced political operator, but a newcomer in the field of politics. It can be inferred that her victory was largely due to the unprecedented numbers of youth involvement and support. Yet, as her youth led campaign steadily gained momentum, *The New York Times* failed to report on representative-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a serious contender in the recent New York primary- the only mentions that she received were in a few political roundup pieces, and a brief op-ed that was written by a non-NYT staffer. Of the major news networks that covered her campaign, many never even mentioned her by name, with headlines such as "Primary Opponents of Gov. Cuomo and Rep Crowley Set to Endorse Each Other." (Ocasio-Cortez). Instead, news networks like the Young Turks, and Refinery29 picked up on Ocasio-Cortez's campaign- news networks that explicitly aim to cover youth stories and narratives. This is an example of how legacy media sets the standard for truth, so the narratives that this traditionalist culture culls from youth narratives without entering these same spaces are often incorrect.

Examples like this in the political sphere are abound. The evolution of Representative Maxine Waters, to the hagiography of 'Aunty Maxine' in the Trump era is deeply steeped in grassroots media coverage. Youth focused sites like Mic and BuzzFeed have featured countless articles and interviews with stories like "Maxine Waters is Back and She's Not Here to Play," or "Congresswoman Maxine Waters Will Read You Now." (Wire). Grassroots media, in this example, were able to capitalize on a moment that appealed to their demographic in youth spaces, and elevate that moment to a larger, more broadly culturally significant phenomenon.

What each of these examples have in common are a dismissal of the power of youth narratives and youth political movements as irrelevant. Whether that means referring to the longest serving Independent member of Congress as an 'outsider,' or not reporting on an issue entirely, the media coverage of these political movements fails to draw the connection between anti-establishment views and youth populist movements. Instead, the uninformed youth

narratives and values that are portrayed in the media err on the side of violent crime, and antisocial behavior. Moreover, legacy media describe youth as news avoiders; often excusing an entire generation as politically averse.

These uninformed narratives can be warped and dangerous; a study done in the *For Young People Now* magazine, by Mori, found that nearly a third of youth related articles in legacy networks discuss young people in a violent or antisocial context, while nearly three in four youth related articles have a negative tone. Seventy percent of these articles describe young males as perpetrators of crime and violence, and ninety percent of these articles describe women as victims, reinforcing gender roles, and narratives of violence that are found to be statistically untrue. Few articles spoke of youth politics and collective action- furthermore, only eight percent of youth related stories included any form of comment or input from youth. Genuine examples of youth driven political change and uprising are being drowned out by a blatant mischaracterization of youth identity; a mischaracterization that implies that few youth are interested in politics and collective action. In fact, the articles that *do* cover youth stories with an emphasis on positive youth narratives succeed drastically better than mainstream publications.

The makeshift solution to this dichotomy between legacy news and youth narratives that young people have chosen to stand by is no less dramatic and revolutionary as their own political convictions. A grassroots media movement has crept up on a complacent media industry to address the issues that young people have with these institutions.

How can the media maintain their readers' trust if their readership never sees themselves in the news that they report? How does that make the news that they report relevant? Youth readership has evolved with the rise of today's identity politics; this new age politics demands both physical and informational safe spaces of belonging and cultural acceptance. These spaces are unavailable in the mainstream media, a system that is entrenched in news narratives that serves the white, privileged, and elite, rather than the individual. Thus, the youth generation has fled the readership of legacy media to join the ranks of this grassroots media movement.

The creation of independent media outlets produced by youth, for youth are challenging the mainstream media for the youth demographic- and they may be winning. These media sources are generally aimed at specific demographics with niche content. *The Root*, for example, is dedicated entirely to covering "Black opinions, politics, and culture." *Mic* news has a weekly newsletter 'Transplaining,' with written advice for, and by people who identify as transgender. Other sources that have gained traction include the Young Turks Network, and Elite Daily-- all of which are sources that reported on the Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez's campaign before the mainstream media caught on. The rising popularity of these sources, and growth of this form of

media, can be seen as a direct repudiation of the distance between the news that traditional media chooses to report on and the everyday youth of America.

Legacy news networks however, excuse this demographic shift with the pervasive myth that youth are news avoiders with headlines like “Why Don’t Young People Read News?” (Rogers). or “Hold the Front Page! Young People Don’t Read News!”. (Greenslade). This complaint that youth are uninterested in current events and politics is as old as the news industry itself. The modern iteration of that stereotype aided by false the narrative that youth are simply too distracted by social media to engage with current events. But that misconception stems from the same basic misunderstanding of America’s new political generation. This is called into question by the Sanders campaign, Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign, or even the #NeverAgain movement (the largest youth led movement since protests against the Vietnam War). Moreover, it should be noted that there is no comparable, reliable data that can prove this assumption. Instead, there is plenty of evidence showing that news consumption among youth has remained unchanged. (Shehata 2010).

Thus, the relevancy of legacy news networks is brought sharply to focus with the advent of the grassroots media movement. The mainstream media must define its modern *purpose*, and its identity in the modern age. This new purpose must allow it to coexist and contribute to a modern media ecosystem that includes youth moral and political movements. This situation leaves the media with two fundamental options; either to evolve as an institution to the new digital age and embody the information sources that they are competing with, or to cling to its identity as a behemoth, institution with diminishing relevance in the youth demographic.

If legacy media networks choose to adapt, they must look towards the impeding success of grassroots media sources. One aspect of this has already been picked up on- diversifying social media platforms reflect a genuine attempt to create news in youth spaces. Making news that youth can retweet, comment on, and share broadly. In addition to participation in online spaces, it is imperative that the mainstream media create physical, youth driven spaces and opportunities within their respective organizations. Grassroots media staff tend to err on the younger side (Vice News has an average age of 26, and Elite Daily, 27). In order for legacy media to accurately report on youth movements and narratives, youth representation within reporting staff are required. Making the news interactive, and creating opportunities for young people to actively interact with the youth narratives told in the media allows for these narratives to be more accurate, rather than simply reflecting the existing stereotypes of young people.

Another aspect of grassroots media success is their commitment to creating niche news for niche demographics. Part of the mainstream media’s current function is to create news that defines our nation’s shared experiences, and thus, defines our national identity. However, a part of the

creation of a national identity is the erasure of individual identity. This national identity results in the alienation of the youth demographic. This is largely because much of the youth political landscape is centered around identity politics; the protection and reappropriation of individual ethnic, sexual, and gender identity is a crucial part of youth political identity- the very identities that a singular national identity seeks to erase. Thus, news stories and news sources that are focused on minority demographics resonate with youth and youth politics.

We are entering a new age media economy; one that is dominated by publications that center around youth values and youth politics. It is imperative that legacy media organizations evolve-the process will be arduous, but ultimately necessary for their own survival.

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