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Online News-Seeking Behavior among Three Generational Cohorts: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y

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Online News-Seeking Behavior among Three Generational Cohorts:

Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y

by

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Table of Contents

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Abstract

News-seeking behavior has been a matter of study for many years. With the rise of the Internet, online news has become a new interest for scholars studying the news field. This research surveyed 73 Generation Y, 46 Generation X, and 54 Baby Boomers members at the Rochester Institute of Technology to understand the differences between the three cohorts when it comes to online news readership using the social network Twitter and to learn the differences between the preferred devices each generation uses to read online news.

Keywords: news-seeking behavior, social media, Twitter, generations, devices

Online News-Seeking Behavior among Three Generational Cohorts:

Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y

Past research about news consumption has shown that news consumers are now choosing what they want to read according to their tastes and beliefs instead of reading what is laid out for them (Xiang & Sarvary, 2007). Despite the fact that mainstream news outlets remain dominant (Boczkowski, 2004), reading news online represents a different experience for its users since they have an active role in their interactions with news institutions.

According to previous research, the superiority of Internet news over traditional media except for cable is understandable because online news is constantly available and can be searched on the Internet at any time of the day. Other news media are available at more limited times (Dimmick, Chen, & Li. 2004). Other important factors for the favorability of the Internet over other media are its freedom from censorship, low distribution costs, worldwide reach, ease of interaction, and the fact that the Internet provides a faster way of communicating and receiving information (Dimmick, Chen, & Li, 2004).

News organizations have noticed a new trend that emerged in the mid-2000s in the online world: social networking sites. Recognizing the importance of social networks as a journalistic tool, news organizations have created accounts on these sites to reach their audiences (Hong, 2012). Newspapers are also using this instrument to route traffic to their websites (Hong, 2012). A very popular networking site is the micro blogging website Twitter. News organizations have adopted the use of this medium because it makes it easy for them to spread news since it is an ideal space to spread information quickly and push breaking news (Farhi, 2009). According to research by Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, and Olmstead (2010), 37% of Internet users

have contributed, commented, or spread news on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

There is remarkable evidence that young adults have different ways to learn about news compared to their elders (Rainie et al., 2012), but there is no evidence of what are the reasons that create these differences when it comes to news-seeking behavior between different generational cohorts.

This study focuses on three different generations: Generation Y, Generation X, and Baby Boomers. The Generation Y is identified as tech savvy individuals born between 1982 and 2002 who are also known as the digital natives of our times. Generation Y members in the United States, also known as Millennials, are numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse than any other youth generation living in memory (Howe & Strauss, 1991). This generation has approximately 78 million people (Howe & Strauss, 1991).

Generation Y members have many media choices that previous generations didn't have and the members of this generation want instant responses that sometimes don't come fast enough (Petka, 2007). This needs to be considered when talking about how Millennials decide to inform themselves about news because the fact that Generation Y wants instant responses can lead to the assumption that its members will want to use the fastest medium. Research must be done to understand the real needs of this generation.

Generation X is the U.S. population born between 1965 and 1976 while the Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 (Harmon, Webster, & Weyenberg, 1999).

Generation X members are the first individuals to grow up in the Internet era and there

are 84 million Americans who are a part of this generation (Miller, 2011). Baby Boomers are a smaller segment comprised of 78 million people (Harmon, Webster, & Weyenberg, 1999).

Very few studies have examined the use of social media by news organizations taking into consideration the differences between the living generations in the United States. This research examines the three generational cohorts predominant in the United States' current population in order to understand the changes that the American population has been going through as a consequence of the advancements in technology when it comes to news-seeking behavior.

The researcher chose Twitter as the social network analyzed for this study because it enables news organizations to have an asymmetric position for them to spread information. This position exists because many users can view the information spread by the news organizations, but these organizations don't necessarily view the information spread by those users (Hong, 2012).

Literature Review

A study conducted by Chen et al. (2011) found that daily printed newspaper readership in the United States decreased in every cohort of people from 1999 to 2006. People aged 18 to 24 years old were the least likely to read the newspaper daily. Since newspaper readership starts in adolescence and develops in early adulthood, it is expected that they will maintain the same reading habits as they grow older. Newspaper organizations started realizing that if young adults kept being indifferent to reading the newspaper daily, newspapers will not have a group of people to replace their aging readers.

Another issue regarding printed newspaper readership was the rise of the Internet as a medium that became competition for the newspaper business in the United States (Yang & Chyi, 2011). Newspaper organizations that predicted the high usage of the Internet responded by launching a digital edition of their paper online in the 1990s (Yang & Chyi, 2011).

Newspaper websites were the first incursion into delivering news online by news organizations, followed by aggregators and e-mail digests to deliver information to the online readers (Greer & Yan, 2010).

Research by Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, and Alter (2005) suggests that newspapers were forced to learn how to approach online news readers because past research found that there are significant differences between traditional news readers and online news readers. The authors argue that traditional news platforms have always indicated the worth of certain news by emphasizing a specific subject on the front page, using big illustrations for specific news, or giving priority to certain topics in a newscast. It has been demonstrated that these pointers guide readers to the news that will be more valuable for them to read and make readers think these are the most important subjects.

Online newsreaders have a notion of "purposive news-seeking mode". Ten elements have been identified of the online news-seeking mode (So & Lee, 2006):

1. Pick and choose: Online newsreaders visit news organization websites only to locate news stories that they are interested in.

2. Non-linear reading: Online newsreaders explore different stories when they visit news sites. If they are really interested in a topic, they look for more information through related articles that can be found in the databank of the website.

3. Convenient search: Efficient search and clarity of information are important factors when seeking for news for online readers.

4. Target search: Online newsreaders are characterized as using the search function of websites when looking for their topic of interest.

5. Global and local search: The World Wide Web provides online newsreaders the opportunity to search for both local and international news.

6. Comparative reading: Online newsreaders visit more than one web site to compare news coverage.

7. Timely search: Online news readers look for web sites that provide quick streaming and downloading.

8. Interactivity: Online news readers like interacting and participating in the news making.

9. Multi-media reading: Online news readers have adopted a graphic way to absorb information.

10. Customization: Tailored news is the type of news that interests online news readers.

Other authors such as Berger and Milkman (2012) argue that for online content to be widely spread it needs to be viral. They found that positive content is more viral than negative content and physiological arousal is what partially drives the wide spread of online content. However, positive (happiness) or negative (anger) emotions generally have more spread than deactivating (sadness) emotions (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Purcell et al. (2010) found there are also other reasons why people read the news. Seventy-two percent of news following adults said that they read the news because they enjoy talking with friends and family about what's going on in the word, while 69% said they do it

because they feel a civic obligation to stay informed. Finding information that helped them improve their life was the third reason to access news by 61% of adult respondents, while 44% said they accessed news for entertainment. Lastly, 19% said they followed news because of their jobs. Purcell et al. (2010) also surveyed handheld devices users and discovered that 33% of these users access news on those devices.

Mobile devices such as smart phones, e-readers, and tablets have been analyzed by newspaper organizations that have become aware of how rapidly they can reach their audiences, thanks to the high usage of these gadgets (Greer & Yan, 2011). The development of mobile content by newspaper organizations started in the late 2000s and the benefits were visible in a short period of time as mobile traffic increased (Greer & Yan, 2011).

News organizations have started to deliver online news through handheld devices, also known as mobile news (Emmett, 2008). American news companies are now offering mobile websites and applications with text based news or links to stories for users of handheld devices (Emmett, 2008).

Although handheld devices are popular products, a study conducted by Koutsourelakis and Chorianopoulos (2010) to understand the differences between older and younger users in comprehensibility of icons in mobile phones showed that the performance of icons on these applications is problematic. Younger users were more likely to understand icons in mobile phones than the older generation, but despite the acceptance of these applications, there are still problems in the designs of these icons (Koutsourelakis & Chorianopoulos, 2010). Differences between different generations in usage of these devices leads one to wonder which type of device is preferred by each generation when it comes to accessing news.

Purcell et al. (2010) found that 68% of online news readers are under the age of 50 and 29% are under the age of 30. The same research showed that online news readers in the US are more likely to look for news about the weather (81%), national events (73%), health (66%), economy (64%), international events (62%), science and technology (60%), local news (58%), sports (52%), arts and culture (49%), entertainment (47%), and traffic (32%). Online news readers have also reported they obtain their online news from journalists and news organizations on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

Since the mid-2000s newspapers began to use social networks as a new format for delivering news online. News organizations are not an exception from all the businesses that use social media in order to reach their audiences and attempt to drive traffic to their websites (Greer & Yan, 2010). Newspapers entered the social media world because it's an inexpensive way to connect with current readers and reach new audiences such as the young adult market. Young audiences are an attractive demographic for news organizations because they congregate and spread information with like-minded users (Greer & Yan, 2010). It has also been demonstrated that 30% of online newsreaders use social networks as a news media source (Purcell et al., 2010).

News organizations have become aware of the needs of online news readers and have quickly adopted the usage of social media, especially Twitter, because of this main reason: its speed makes it an ideal space for pushing breaking news to Twitter-savvy readers (Farhi, 2009). From plane crashes to riots, natural disasters, and political events, news has been covered more rapidly on Twitter than in any other medium (Farhi, 2009). Twitter works best in situations

where the story is quickly changing and the mainstream media can't deliver all of the facts at once (Farhi, 2009).

Another appealing aspect of Twitter for news organizations is that not only teens and college students are using this social network: The site has become well established among adults who have confessed that they sometimes use the service while they are at work (Farhi, 2009).

A downside of Twitter for users who want to get accurate information is that both news organizations and users can create news stories (Schmierbach & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2012). This situation generates critical judgments about credibility since the source of information can be unclear (Schmierbach & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2012).

Different studies have determined that credibility should not be a big preoccupation for users because user generated content on social media is rarely news/informational content (Jonsson & Omebring, 2011). Social media users are more likely to create popular culture-oriented content and everyday life-oriented content (Jonsson & Omebring, 2011).

Overall, past research has demonstrated that newspaper organizations are using the Internet and social networking sites, including Twitter, to reach the young adult audience, also known as Generation Y. Although newspaper websites were the first incursion on the Internet made by news organizations, these organizations are now using news aggregators to drive the young audience to news websites (Greer & Yan, 2010).

Past research has found that the news-seeking behavior of online readers is known as "purposive news seeking mode" (So & Lee, 2006). Searching for news with a purpose has been

made easier for online newsreaders that can access news faster with new mobile technologies such as smart phones and tablets.

Besides the extensive research that has been conducted about how readers access news, little is known about how different age groups access news nowadays. Understanding the different news-seeking behaviors of the three largest generations of the US should be relevant for news organizations and journalists to know how to target each different audience. This research should also help scholars as "pilot research" to use as an instrument of guidance on how to study generational cohorts and their preferences.

The following section explains how the present research collected information from members of the Generation Y, Generation X, and Baby Boomers in order to understand the differences among them when it comes to news-seeking behavior in social media, in this specific case Twitter, and their preferred device to access online or mobile news.

Research Questions

This study explored the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the differences between Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y and the reasons they say they use Twitter to read the news?

RQ2: What differences are among Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y and the frequency with which they use Twitter in order to read the news?

RQ3: What differences are there among Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y and the news topics they choose to read more often on Twitter?

RQ4: What differences are there among Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y and the reasons why they choose the news topics they choose on Twitter?

RQ5: What differences are there among Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y and the technological devices they use to read the news on Twitter?

Method

In order to examine the news-seeking behavior of the three generational cohorts, this study surveyed the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) undergraduate and graduate students and members of their faculty and staff. RIT has 17,950 students and 3,753 members of faculty and staff, for a total of 21,703 people. A convenience sample was selected at the RIT campus, where the researcher delivered personal surveys to students, faculty, and staff. A total of 173 respondents consisting of 73 members of the Generation Y, 46 members of the Generation X, and 54 Baby Boomers were surveyed for this study. The first part of the data collection started in May 2013 and ended in August 2013 (Summer Quarter) where 75 surveys were distributed in one academic building (James E. Booth Hall) and in The Wallace Library. The second period where the data was collected started in September 2013 and ended in October 2013 (Fall Semester), where 98 surveys were distributed in three academic buildings: George Eastman Hall, Liberal Arts Hall, and Golisano Hall. The sample ranged in age from 18 to 67 years old, ($M = 38.07$), and 49.7% were female while 50.3% were male.

Each survey was entered into the Microsoft Excel software by the researcher. After having all the data on Microsoft Excel, the data was entered on the SPSS Statistics software where the data was analyzed.

Results

The main purpose of this study was to identify differences in online news-seeking behavior on Twitter among the three largest generations in the U.S. population: Baby Boomers,

Generation X, and Generation Y. The data analysis began with a frequency analysis to provide

information about the amount of people in each generation that actually read the news the week

before they took the survey. Generation Y members who read the news daily in the previous

week before taking the survey totaled 37% of the respondents that belong to this Generation,

while only 4% said they never read the news in the previous week. When it came to Generation

X, 61% said they read the news daily in the previous week whereas only 9% said they never read

the news in this timeframe. Baby Boomers responded with a 57% of daily readership of news

compared to 7% who said they never read the news in the previous week. A total amount of 11

surveys (6% of responses) were not analyzed for this research since that is the segment of the

population that never read the news in the previous week before taking the survey (see Table 1).

Table 1

How Often You Read the News Last Week

Frequency	Generation			Total
	Generation Y	Generation X	Baby Boomers	
Never	3	4	4	11
Once	4	2	2	8
Twice	8	3	1	12
Three times	10	5	3	18
Four times	12	3	3	18
Five times	9	1	6	16
Six times	0	0	4	4
Daily	27	28	31	86
Total	73	46	54	173

The first research question (*RQ1*) of this study attempts to find out what are the differences among Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y and the reasons they say they use Twitter to read the news. After analyzing the data, it was found that only 20% of respondents used Twitter to read the news, where 23 people of these Twitter users were members of the Generation Y (13%), five were members of Generation X (2.9%) and six were Baby Boomers (3.5%). It can be seen how Generation Y is the generation that uses Twitter the most to read the news, followed by Baby Boomers, and then Generation X. In order to answer *RQ1*, individuals who said they use Twitter to read the news were asked what were the reasons why they selected this medium. Accessing Twitter because they were directed from the website of a news organization was not a common reason for accessing Twitter to read the news since members from the three different generations said that they rarely access Twitter for that reason. The most common reasons why Generation Y members access Twitter to read the news are (1) because someone they are following on Twitter shared (retweeted) the news on their timeline, (2) because many people were talking about that topic, and (3) because they were personally interested in that topic and looked for it.
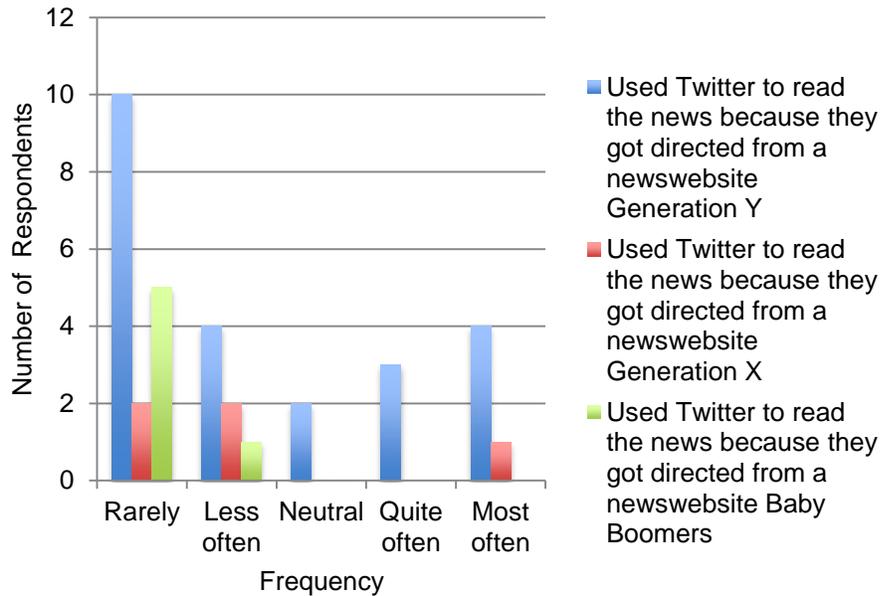
Figure 1. Used Twitter to read the news because they were directed from a news website.
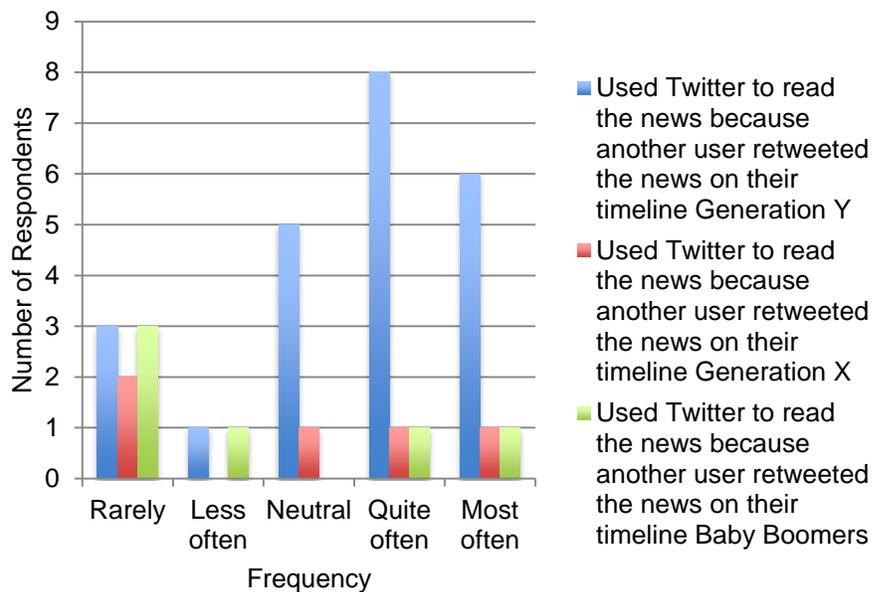

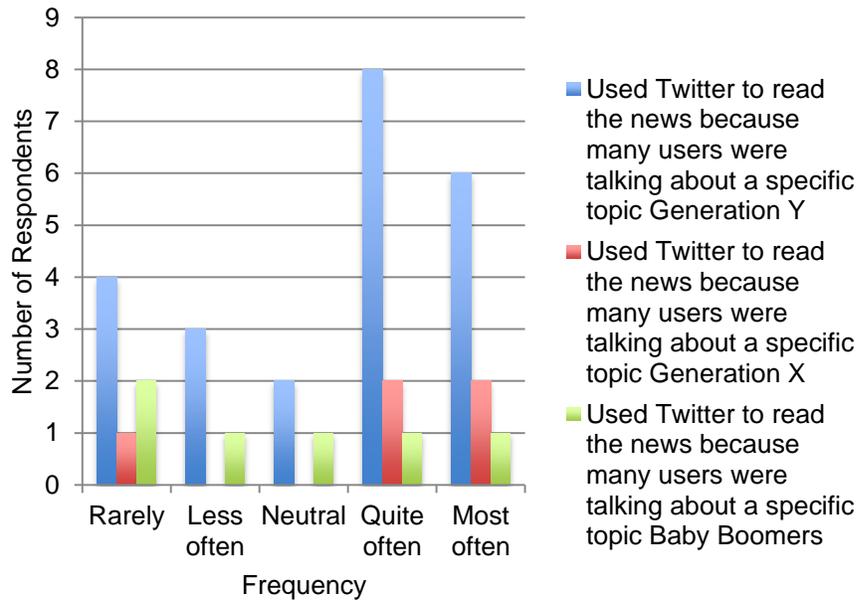*Figure 2*. Used Twitter to read the news because another user retweeted the news on their timeline.

Figure 3. Used Twitter to read the news because many users were talking about a specific topic.
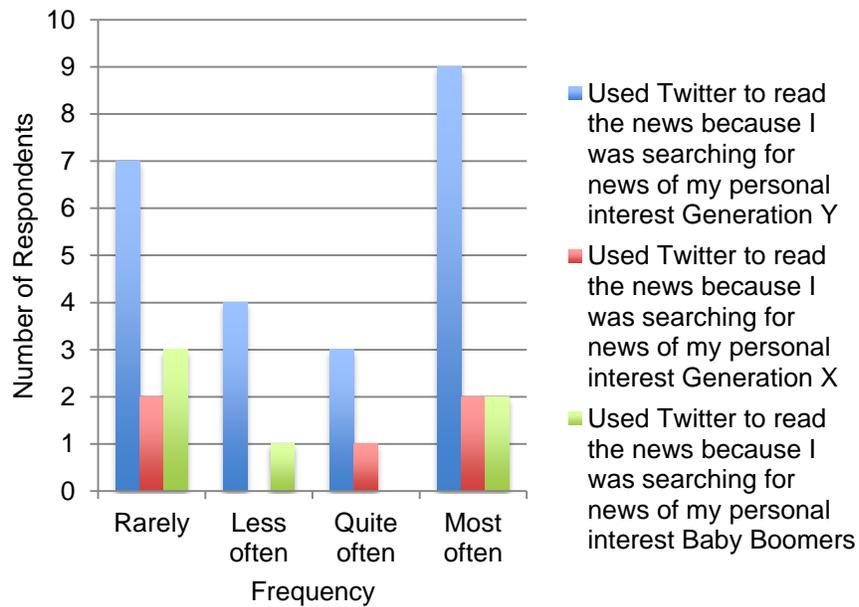

Figure 4. Used Twitter to read the news because I was searching for news of my personal interest.

In order to understand the differences among the three generations and the frequency with which they use Twitter to read the news (*RQ2*), the researcher analyzed how many times each generation accessed Twitter the day before they answered the survey. From the respondents who used Twitter to read the news, most Generation Y (39%) and Generation X (80%) members said they accessed Twitter once the day before taking the survey. Baby Boomers (50%) said they accessed Twitter to read the news twice the day before taking the survey.

In order to analyze the differences of Twitter usage among the three generations, a chi square test was run on the data to determine if the results were statistically significant. This research surveyed 173 people from which only 34 were relevant for the study since these were the respondents that actually used Twitter to read the news. The selection of only Twitter users for the research made the sample smaller, and the results were not statistically significant. However, the frequency scores show that there is not a big difference among the three generations when it comes to using Twitter to read the news.

Table 2

*How Often You Used Twitter to Read the News Yesterday * Generations*

Frequency	Generation			Total
	Generation Y	Generation X	Baby Boomers	
Once	9	4	2	15
Twice	7	1	3	11
Three times	3	0	0	3
More than three times	4	0	1	5
Total	23	5	6	34

Table 3

Chi-Square Tests

Parameter	Value	*df*	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.885[a]	6	.559
Likelihood Ratio	6.212	6	.400
Linear-by-Linear Association	.382	1	.536
N of Valid Cases	34		

Note. [a] 10 cells (83.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .44.

RQ3 asks for the differences among the three generations and the news topics they choose to read more often on Twitter (see Figure 5). The most common news topics read on Twitter are international news (7.5%) and technological news (9%). The news topics Generation Y members read the most are international news (48%), technological news (39%), sports news (26%), and entertainment news (39%). The most common news topics read on Twitter by Generation X members were national news (40%) and technological news (40%). The most common news topic read on Twitter by Baby Boomers was local news (67%).
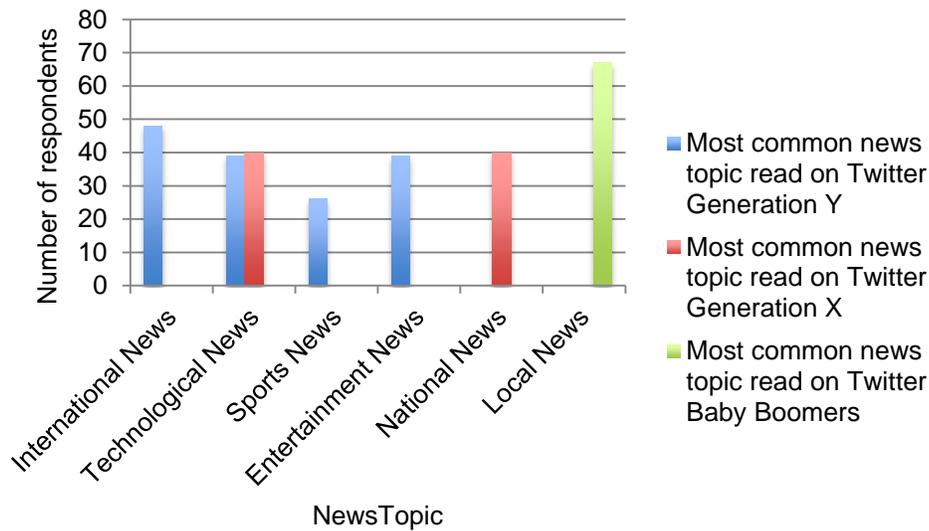
Figure 5. Most common news topics read by each generation.

In order to find out the differences among each generation and the reasons why they choose the news topics they choose on Twitter, the researcher analyzed the topics each generation read the most and the reasons why they chose those topics in a cross tabulation. Generation Y members who said they read international news on Twitter stated they specifically looked for it on Twitter because they were interested on that topic (58%). When it comes to technological news, both Generation Y (60%) and Generation X (67%) members said they read this topic because they looked for it because they were interested on the topic. When asked about national news, Generation X (67%) also said they read this topic so often because they looked for it because they are interested in it. Finally, Baby Boomers said their most common thread to look for is local news because they looked for it out of their own interest (40%) and because they saw it was a Trending Topic on Twitter (40%).
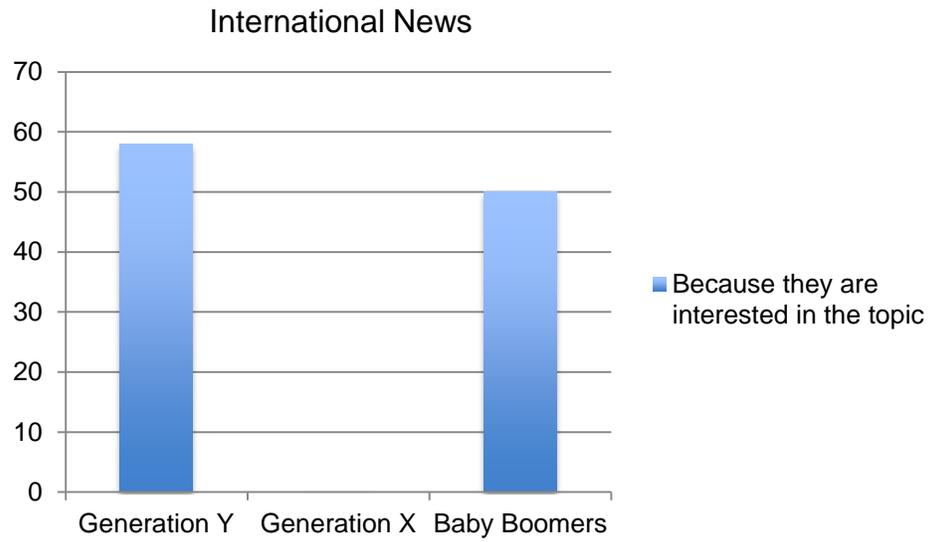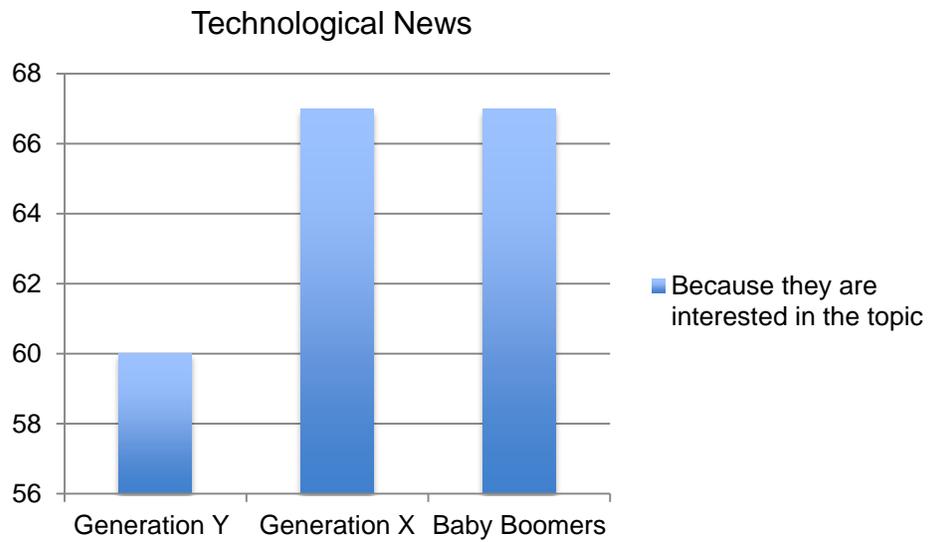
Figure 6. Reasons to read international news.

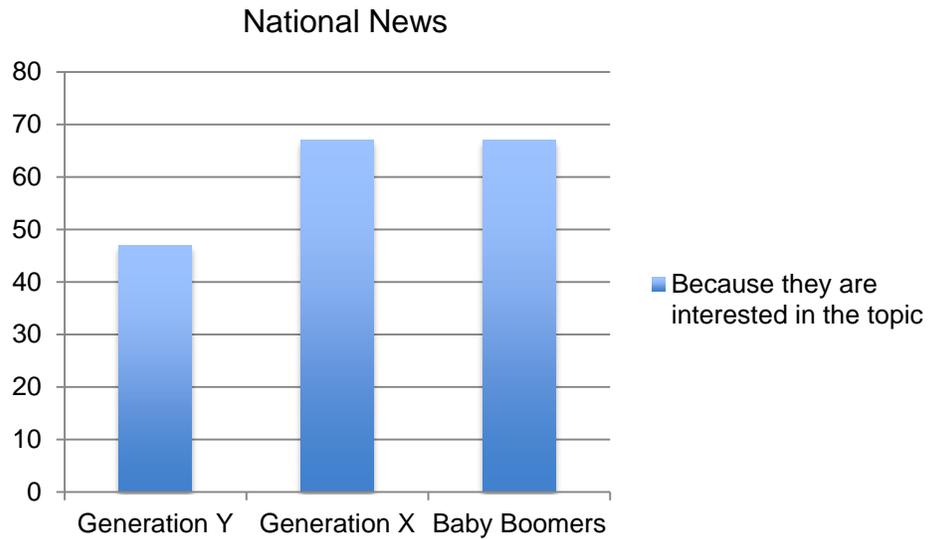*Figure 7.* Reasons to read technological news.

National News
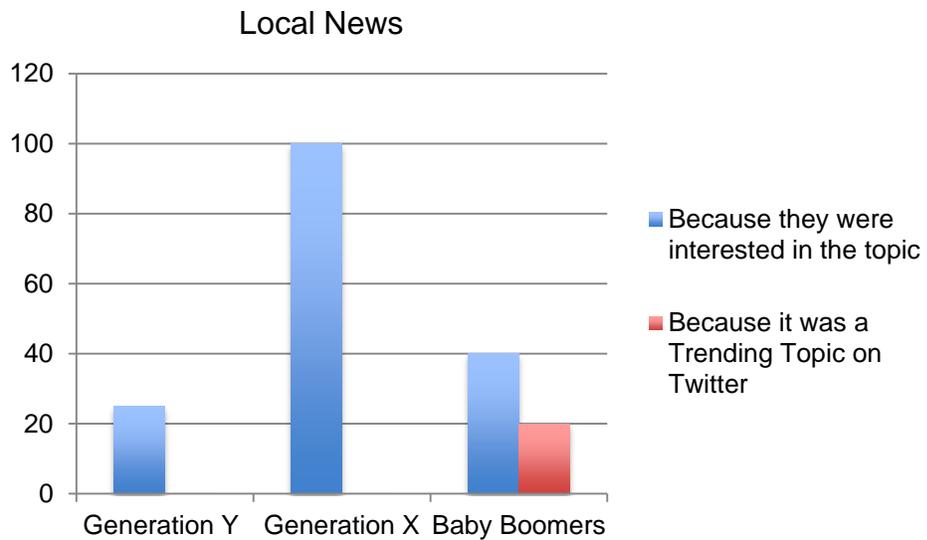
Figure 8. Reasons to read national news.

Local News

Figure 9. Reasons why they read local news.

RQ5 asks for the preferred devices to access news by each generation and attempts to

find if there are any differences in those preferences. Generation Y members (83%) and Baby

Boomers (50%) said the devices they use the most to access news on Twitter were Smartphones

(83%), whereas Generation X members use personal computers (60%) for this purpose.
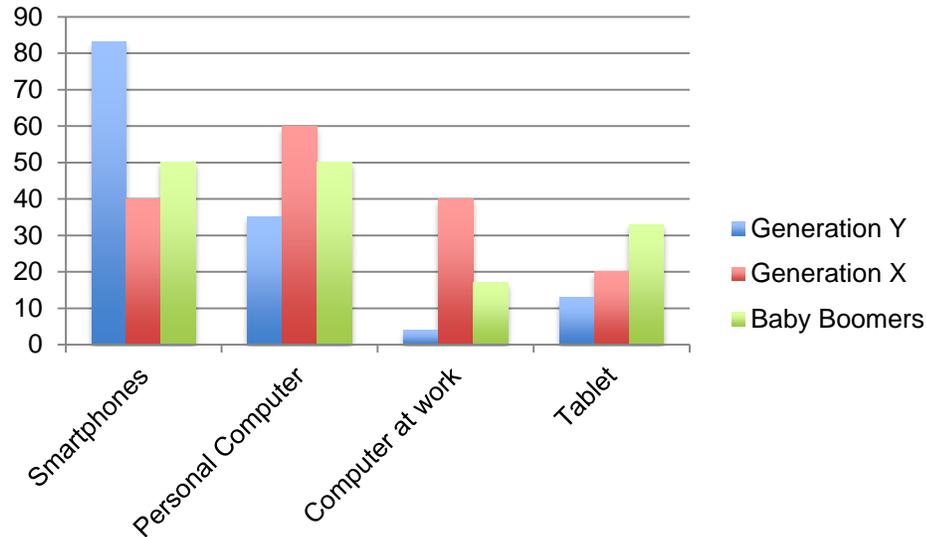

Figure 10. Preferred devices to read the news by each generation.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to understand the online news-seeking behavior on

Twitter of the three largest generations in the US. However, the findings of this study show that

the usage of this medium from the three generations is not large since only 20% of respondents

said they use Twitter to become informed about news. This research found that the three

generations are more likely to read the news on the social network Facebook and on News

Aggregators when it comes to reading news on social media. Forty-seven percent of the

respondents who said they use social media to read the news stated that one of the outlets they

use for this purpose was Facebook, while 25% said they use News Aggregators for this purpose.

When comparing Facebook to Twitter, Farhi (2009) emphasizes the news "feeds" feature

on Facebook that does not exist on Twitter. The Twitter timeline is filled with posts that cannot

exceed 140 characters while Facebook provides more information and gives the user the option

of viewing more than just a link, which can be a faster alternative for online newsreaders.

However, Farhi (2009) proposes that Twitter has become a popular news source not only for

teenagers, but also for adults who say they use the social network at work. Research by Farhi

(2009) found that adults use Twitter at work to read the news, but this finding was not consistent

with the findings from this study. The oldest generation responded with the following regarding

using Twitter to read the news: 67% of Baby Boomers who said they access Twitter to read the

news said they rarely do it on their computers at work.

Farhi (2009) states that the audience of Twitter is an adult and more serious crowd than

its opponent Facebook, but the findings of this research show that the younger generation,

Generation Y, spends more time on Twitter (13%) than Baby Boomers (3.5%) and Generation X

members (2.9%).

Members of Generation Y were asked to provide the reasons why they accessed Twitter

in the week before taking the survey and the answers were the following: First, because someone

they were following shared the news on their timeline (61%), and second, because many people

were posting about a specific subject on Twitter while they were using the social network (61%).

Research by Purcell et al. (2010) found that 72% of adults who read online news said they do it

because they enjoy talking to friends and family about what is going on in the world. Another

study mentioned in the literature review by Berger and Milkman (2012) suggests that the

emotions that online content evoke on the readers have a high level of impact on making content

shareable. It is clear that one of the main reasons why online newsreaders use social media to

read the news is because of the sharing features that these media provide.

This study also found significant differences among the preferred news topic by each generational cohort. The topic Generation Y reads the most on Twitter is international news (48%), Generation X reads national news the most (40%), while Baby Boomers read local news the most (67%). This information is consistent with previous research by Purcell et al. (2010) that found these news topics are commonly read among online news readers: national events (73%), international events (62%), and local news (58%).

The three generations studied in this research said that the reasons why they looked for specific news topics were because (1) they were interested in the subject, and (2) because they realized it was a popular topic among Twitter users (Trending Topic). The second reason why online readers looked for specific subjects on Twitter can be related to the research by Berger and Milkman (2012) that links the popularity of online content to how much it has been shared.

Finally, this study found that the preferred device for Generation Y to read the news on Twitter is the smartphone (83%), while Generation X has two preferred devices (computer at work 40% and personal computer 60%), and Baby Boomers said the device they use the most is the smartphone (50%). Research by Koutsourelakis and Chorianopoulos (2010) found that younger audiences are more likely to understand icons in mobile phones than older generations. However, this study found that Generation Y and Baby Boomers are the most likely to use smartphones to read news on Twitter while the generation in between does not use mobile devices.

Limitations and Future Research

This sample only includes members of the RIT population in which a very small segment (20%) responded to be online newsreaders who use Twitter to read the news. Researchers who

want to study news-seeking behavior on Twitter in the future should use a larger sample of

Twitter users that utilize the social network for this purpose since it would give more detailed

information about the differences between the three generations. Future research should also

include other social networks such as Facebook, news aggregators, and LinkedIn and analyze the

differences of usage among the three generations.

Future researchers of online news-seeking behavior are also encouraged to investigate the

relationship between the reasons why users share online content, in this case online news, and

the amount of users that read the news because they were shared with them on social media.

Retrieving information by analyzing the relationship between the emotions that online news

evoke and the popularity of those news items would add more data to the existent literature as to

why online readers use social media for this purpose. Future researchers should also study the

differences among the three generations when it comes to reading and sharing news because of

the emotions that the content evokes.

Another topic to be explored in future studies should be to investigate the reasons why

the youngest and the oldest audiences prefer mobile devices, while news readers in their 30s and

40s prefer to use their computer at work, and analyze if the usability functions of those devices is

related to online news readership.

Conclusion

This study found that there are differences among Generation Y, Generation X, and Baby

Boomers and the reasons why they use Twitter to read the news. Generation Y members read

news on Twitter because other users share news on their timelines, while Generation X members

read the news on Twitter because of popular topics that become Trending Topics, and Baby

Boomers use Twitter to access news topics of their interest because they think it is an appropriate medium to look for news.

When it comes to frequency of usage, Generation Y and Generation X both access Twitter once a day while Baby Boomers access Twitter to read the news twice during the day. There also differences among the three generations and their preferred topics to read on Twitter. Generation Y members' preferred news topic to read on Twitter is international news, while Generation X members look for national news, and Baby Boomers look for local news. The three generations responded with the same motivation of why they look for these subjects: They are interested in reading about these topics on Twitter.

Lastly, there are no differences between two generations (Baby Boomers and Generation Y) when it comes to their preferred device to access news on Twitter, but Generation X does differ from the rest. The preferred device for Generation Y and Baby Boomers to read online news on Twitter is their smartphones while the preferred devices for Generation X members are their personal computers and their computer at work.

This research found that Twitter is not a common source of news for any of the three largest generations in the US, but the social network has two features that make it a news source for a small group: the fact that Twitter serves as a place to talk with others about the news, and as an alert system to encourage users to look for important topics on other media. The researcher encourages future research to analyze other social networks such as Facebook and news aggregators, which are the most common social media outlets for the three generations to look for news.

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