

Engaging Youth in Social Media: Is Facebook the New Media Frontier?

A NewsCloud – University of Minnesota Research Report

Part II: Executive Summary of Findings from The Daily Social Media Experiment

Prepared by: Christine Greenhow (greenhow@umn.edu), University of Minnesota

Introduction

Counter to the decline in young people's (print-based) reading for pleasure and traditional media consumption is a noted *increase* in out-of-school online reading and writing through online fan fiction and social network sites.^{i,ii} Yet, according to the Pew research institute, over one third of people under 25 get no news on a daily basis.ⁱⁱⁱ However, teens spend many hours a week online ([a recent British study said 31](#)), particularly on Facebook -- the most-trafficked social media site in the world. [Facebook has more than 250 million active members](#).

Can youth be persuaded to critically engage in news and conversation -- on Facebook? Can they feel a sense of community? Furthermore, can their involvement translate into real-world actions, or will it consist solely of virtual activism? And if we understood how young people prefer to manipulate, produce and talk through information online, would that move us closer to understanding how to develop successful media-rich and educational environments?

Answering such questions is critical. If we hope to inform, educate and mobilize an engaged citizenry — as the vision for not only the future of news industries but also for [full participation](#)^{iv} in a [21st century](#)^v democracy says we should — we need to make sharing news and experiences fit easily into teens' lives and be easily tracked and observed to ensure success.

The Social Media Experiment

In 2008, [Jeff Reifman](#), founder of news aggregation company [NewsCloud](#), and University of Minnesota researcher [Dr. Christine Greenhow](#)^{vi} were awarded a generous \$249,529 grant from the [John S. and James L. Knight Foundation](#) to study how young people use and share news. To gather study data, two Facebook applications were developed to investigate how social networking sites engage youth in news and information.

Development on the project began in December 2008. "[Hot Dish](#)," a Facebook application for sharing articles about the environment and climate change, was launched in March 2009 and included an "Action Team" feature, which inspired 16- to 25-year-old users to take actions within the Hot Dish community in return for points redeemable for prizes. A second application, "[The Daily](#)," (<http://apps.facebook.com/mndaily>) was launched in April 2009 for the student-run newspaper at the University of Minnesota. This research summary focuses on findings for **The Daily**.

Research Goals

The Newscloud – University of Minnesota Youth and Social Media Study sought to investigate whether and how the Hot Dish social media application could do the following:

- 1) Engage youth in news and information
- 2) Build community
- 3) Develop users' knowledge about the topic
- 4) Generate real world impact
- 5) Promote reading and writing practices (e.g., new media literacy).

The Daily is an experiment in "[*public media 2.0*](#)," that is, the generation of *dynamic, networked publics around problems* that aim to inform, educate and mobilize users. Public media 2.0 ventures, such as Hot Dish, facilitate media for and by the people; they pair quality content with avenues for engagement, providing digital tools for media-sharing, and creating new opportunities for civic engagement. Finally, they seek to foster participatory user behaviors such as *choice, conversation, curation, creation, and collaboration*.^{vii}

The Daily Features: Overview

The Daily is a niche social network, designed to facilitate news and information-sharing, commentary and community "challenge" activities among young people interested in University of Minnesota issues and /or local Minnesota community issues. The Daily features allow users to read, rank, annotate, post, create, share and discuss climate change topics. For example, users can *read* and *share* relevant news stories and articles; *post* their own articles; *vote* up others' stories; write *blog* entries and *comments*; and interact with other users via online discussion boards, chat and Twitter functions.

The Daily on Facebook was intended to be a community-oriented complement to the free printed versions of the student-run newspaper, *The Minnesota Daily*. *The Minnesota Daily* has been serving the University of Minnesota campus since 1900 and covers news that affects University students, faculty and the surrounding community. *The Minnesota Daily* also has an online version of the newspaper at <http://mndaily.com>. The *Minnesota Daily* newsroom staff contributed content regularly to The Daily Facebook application, which is the subject of our study. This editorial content was complemented on The Daily by user-generated content.

The Daily application can be spread to contacts in the user's existing social network, and existing contacts can be invited to join or view content within The Daily community. That said, one of the greatest opportunities and challenges to working with the Facebook platform are unannounced changes. For instance, [changes to Facebook's stream technology](#) in the midst of The Daily implementation may have dampened the viral impact of our application.

To aid in data collection and analysis, the software tracks, records and archives users' activities.

The Daily Community Challenges

The Community Challenge feature within The Daily gave users the opportunity to earn points for taking actions, both on- and offline, that bolstered their involvement in the application and, to a lesser extent, offered opportunities to become involved in the offline campus community. These *challenge* activities allowed Action Team members to earn points for local activism and civic engagement (such as writing a letter to the editor). Daily members who were part of the “Action Team” would submit a report of their completed activities through the application, providing primarily text and digital photographs. The Community Coordinator, a member of the newspaper staff, needed to verify each submitted challenge before awarding points. In addition, some challenges – mostly those that had to do with taking action online (e.g., posting stories, sharing stories, inviting friends, etc.) – were awarded points automatically.

For The Daily competition, we spent approximately \$2300 on prizes (water bottles, T-shirts and cinch bags with The Daily application logo) to be awarded to eligible 16- to 25-year-old users who participated. However, these prizes were not really put to use in competition until very late or after data collection had concluded. Staff at *The Minnesota Daily* generated the Grand Prize: two tickets to a Minnesota Twins baseball game.

By the end of the competition, the two most popular challenge activities were both *promoting the brand* activities, i.e., “receiving SMS updates from Minnesota Daily” (n=667 participants) and “receiving email from Minnesota Daily (n=633 participants). Of the challenge activities that had to be *submitted* for approval and points manually awarded, the most popular was “Following Minnesota Daily on Twitter” (n=42 participants).

The Daily Study Sample

Teens and twentysomethings constitute about one fourth of the U.S. population (72.5 million people).^{viii} Understanding how this group connects (or doesn’t connect) with news and with each other is essential to our economic, cultural and educational futures.

To be eligible for participation in our research study, The Daily users had to meet five criteria, including be 16-25 years of age; be a U.S. resident; have completed the registration form on the Facebook application; have authorized the Facebook application to access their profile; and have opted into the research study. The Daily members not in the study did not complete all of these steps.

Unforeseen leadership changes at The Minnesota Daily itself -- including the unexpected resignation of the Editor-in-Chief who originally championed the application, end-of-semester staff turnover, and a weeklong break at the term’s end -- led to less than ideal staffing, promotion, and management of The Daily Facebook application. These factors, combined with a short, two-month window for data collection and at the end of the spring semester, surely contributed to the low sample size (n=183 users for The Daily on Facebook). A more longitudinal approach to data collection and analysis would allow further insights and confirmation/disconfirmation of the following themes.

The Daily social media application on Facebook launched officially on March 30, 2009, and data were collected from the evolution of The Daily user base over a two-month period (March 30-June 4, 2009). Data from three different sources were collected and analyzed (i.e., a survey, an online focus and user statistics) in order to address the research questions goals.

The Daily: Summary of User Statistics

The Daily attracted ~1,749 monthly active users; 867 total users. One hundred eighty-three participants (ages 16-25) completed the requirements to be included in the research study. During the two month study and contest period, users completed the following activities. This group was half female (53%) and half male (45%) with 2% not identifying either gender; 86% were Caucasian and the majority (68%) had at least one college-educated parent (as self-reported on The Daily user survey). Fifteen states were represented with 85% of participants from the state of Minnesota.

Stories read:

- 362 stories available during the study period
- 60.2% of these were read at least one time¹
- 34% of active users read at least 1 story
- Articles related to University of Minnesota Educational issues were the most read

User-generated content and interactions among ALL users in the study group:

- 215 comments
- 918 votes cast
- 187 stories posted
- 7 stories shared
- 1305 friends invited
- 79 challenges which required documentation (text, photo, etc.) were submitted (29 participants undertook submitted challenge activities)

Overall snapshot of active users' engagement:

- 30% of people completed at least 1 submitted challenge (2% completed 5 or more)
- 14 % of people read at least 1 story (8% read 5 or more stories)
- 33% of people voted at least once (10% voted 10 or more times)
- 44% of people invited at least 1 friend (23% invited 10 or more friends)
- 14% of people posted at least 1 story (4% posted 12 or more stories)²
- 17% of people posted at least 1 comment (7% posted 10 or more comments)
- 4% of people shared at least 1 story with a friend (0% shared 10 or more)

¹ The statistic previously cited in the preliminary results report for The Daily (9/11/09) is incorrect. It asserted that 322 or the 362 available stories, or 89% of stories possible, were read. This was an incorrect figure calculated from two separate exported results reporting from The Daily application which should not have been combined.

² This is a correction from the preliminary results report for The Daily (9/11/09). Further analysis revealed that only 14% of active users (not 43% as originally quoted) posted at least 1 story.

Summary of Findings

1. **Correlations between visits to social network sites and visits to news Web sites, as well as other online behaviors, suggest the potential of integrating applications like The Daily into young people’s online social networking routines.**

Similar to points made in the executive summary for the Hot Dish project (the first of our social media design projects), findings for The Daily show significant positive correlations between young people’s visits to online social network sites and their news-gathering and information-seeking online (as discussed in research question 1d within the full report).

Although less than one quarter of respondents reported contributing to online news sites in the last week, all reported regular contributions to a social network site. One hundred percent (100%) of the young people surveyed reported sending messages through a social network site, with the vast majority (76.4%) doing so daily or every other day.

Moreover, the vast majority of young people surveyed reported getting news from their social network site at least once in the last week, with only slightly less (62.4%) reporting getting news from The Daily application. This suggests perhaps that users’ news-seeking behaviors within the Daily dovetailed with their general social network site use. However, three times as many survey respondents (42.4%) reported getting news more frequently (3 or more times in the last week) within their general social network site than from The Daily (i.e., only 14.2% reported getting news 3 or more times in the last week from The Daily). This result is not surprising given that it takes time for online routines to mature and stabilize. More longitudinal study is needed to determine how usage of The Daily paralleled (or not) the regular news and information-seeking within Facebook reported by roughly half of respondents.

With over 65% of U.S. teens— and 85% of U.S. college students—maintaining profiles on social network sites (mostly Facebook) and accessing these sites regularly,^{ix} such findings from The Daily perhaps indicate that global networks like Facebook may provide a promising way to get young people a daily dose of news and stimulate youth-initiated contributions around important issues/problems. Such correlations are suggestive for the future of news organizations and the evolution of a “public media 2.0.” Young news users are using social network sites; news organizations and other organizations that depend on youth-involvement and community outreach ignore these trends at their peril.

A caveat. The ease with which students could freely access The Minnesota Daily printed newspaper and the duplication of content on the MnDaily.com Web site complicated our driving adoption of The Daily Facebook application within the two-month time frame. This factor, combined with the short timeframe and inopportune timing of the study itself, and complications with The Minnesota Daily staffing, all reduced the quantity of data. Difficulties we faced in implementing this short-term investigation prevented us from fully exploring and documenting the potential revealed here among a small group of users.

2. **As a vehicle to express opinions, stay informed, and connect with a local community, social media publications like The Daily may have an advantage over traditional news sites.**

The majority of Daily users surveyed agreed that they were motivated to use the Facebook application in ways that aligned with their motivation to use more traditional news Web sites (i.e., to keep up to date with current events; to scan many stories to understand what is happening; and to identify issues or problems in the community).

However, survey respondents reported being **more motivated** to use The Daily to “**express my opinion.**” About half of respondents agreed that they were motivated to use The Daily to express opinions versus 37.7% agreeing that were motivated to use online news sites for that purpose. Similarly, slightly more respondents were motivated to use The Daily to “interact with like-minded people,” but this difference was much smaller in The Daily than it was in Hot Dish.

The majority of respondents enjoyed staying informed and connecting with others within The Daily application by “**reading other people’s stories**” and “**reading comments.**” Commenting on stories was also reported by 41% of respondents as a means of connection, aligning with respondents’ perception of The Daily as a place to express opinions more than they reported for traditional online news sites. Fifty-two percent (187 out of 362) stories on The Daily were posted by The Daily users. They also posted 215 comments with a mean of 1.21 comments per user.

“The MN Daily Facebook app allowed me to see the profile (for some articles) of who wrote the piece, as well as who posted it, who commented, etc. etc. It allowed me to feel much more connected to the news [emphasis added]...I don't think this would be as important for me if I was reading the *NYTimes*, because it is such a global institution, however being able to see profiles for people who go to my college and live in my neighborhoods allowed me to feel more connected and more excited about the news I was reading.”

Within The Daily application, the most common activities in which users engaged were through **inviting friends** to join, **voting on stories**, and **reading stories**. About one-fifth of active users read an article or posted a comment or posted an article within the study period. About a third of active users submitted at least one challenge, which required documentation in text or images.

Again, if young people generally do not regularly contribute to online news Web sites but do regularly contribute to and interact with their social network site — and **perceive** these as spaces for contribution and interaction — designed social media applications and materials would seem to offer an as yet untapped space for fostering in young people the awareness and participatory behaviors we desire. In higher education, especially, instructors struggle with students who disengage or under-contribute in online distance learning or hybrid/blended learning settings. Social networking applications, designed in light of learning objectives, offer an untapped resource in this regard.

3. Interest in The Daily application's focal topic — University of Minnesota community issues — increased. Daily users mostly used the application for what it was intended, namely, to engage them in campus-related issues.

Results indicate that students' interest in University of Minnesota community issues, the focus of the application, increased significantly for both low and high groups of users. As with Hot Dish, the highest increase was seen among the *low* group of users.

Two categories respondents reported being most interested in were **University of Minnesota Educational issues** (90.5% agreed or strongly agreed) and **Metro Area/Minnesota** stories (92.8% agreed or strongly agreed). Users' reported interest in these story topics *mostly* aligns with the kinds of stories that actually received the most activity.

Story reports from The Daily reveal that the most *read* story category was **University of Minnesota Educational Issues**; the most *popular* story category (most voted on) was **University of Minnesota Business**; the most *shared* story category was **National News**; the most *commented* on story category (most discussed) was **Miscellaneous**. These results suggest that Daily users found and engaged with content in which they were already interested (e.g., University of Minnesota stories and articles about University of Minnesota Educational issues). However, they also engaged with other content.

Moreover, focus groups revealed that The Daily stimulated greater awareness of University issues or events or sparked offline conversations. For instance, two focus group participants reported attending University cultural events they would not have attended if it weren't for The Daily trivia/community engagement challenge. Five out of six participants reported that involvement in The Daily led to offline conversations with other students, friends or family members about what they had read online or posted on The Daily (e.g., "some of the discussion [on The Daily] led me to talk to other friends about what was going on").

4. The Daily application attracted a base of users who were already active in the community. The profile for these users and the high rate of viral invites, suggest that social media publications such as The Daily might not only attract "influentials," but that these highly connected individuals will also invite their friends.

Young people (16-25) were the targeted demographic for The Daily Facebook application. Eighty-five percent of The Daily users were students, mostly college undergraduates. In order to better understand who was using The Daily site and their level of involvement in University issues and events, we asked respondents about their relationship with the University of Minnesota.

The students' engagement in the campus community was impressive. Close to 20% serve in some leadership role weekly and more than 25% serve on a monthly basis. A majority (69.5%) participate in activities organized by student organizations at least monthly. Sixty-eight percent (68.1%) also watch a sporting event monthly. A majority (58.4%) vote at least yearly in campus elections.

To compare involvement with the university community to involvement with the community at large, we asked students how often they engaged in categories of activities drawn from the CIRCLE civic engagement surveys. Survey respondents reported well above national averages in their civic participation.

Moreover, active Daily users seemed to fit the profile of “influentials” or those individuals who tend to be influential in their communities. For instance, RoperASW, a well known marketing research and consulting firm, has identified 1 in 10 Americans as “Influentials,” defined as an individual who “tells the other nine [individuals] how to vote, where to eat and what to buy.” Roper explains that these Influentials are more politically and socially engaged than their neighbors and friends, so others look to them for advice. They are also more likely to promote products or services than others, going out of their way to make recommendations. The reported levels of university involvement; the civic engagement profile of The Daily users; and their tendency to invite friends to the site suggest that these are an influential group of people that could in time attract others to the site.^x

5. Examination of digital literacy practices reveals Daily users engaged in *scanning* stories rather than reading in full. Users participated in a range of non-school online reading and writing activities via social network sites, suggesting the potential for future applications.

Summary statistics reveal that out of 362 possible stories, 60.2% were read at a level I click (i.e., scanning). More than 25% percent of stories were read at a level II click (i.e., in full). Similar findings were reported for the first social media experiment, Hot Dish. Stated preferences and observed literacy activities within The Daily aligned with young people’s desires today; [according to a 2009 study](#) from the Newspaper Association of America,^{xi} teenagers want information in manageable and illustrated chunks rather than in long, uninterrupted blocks of text with too many details that make the stories difficult to understand. They’d like to understand the issues better, to understand the basics of what people are talking about and to be able to form their own opinions and to talk about the news. Similar to Hot Dish, The Daily layout aligned with and seemed to satisfy these preferences. That said, changes to application’s design (e.g. including full story text) might increase literacy by promoting more full story reading.

As for writing, The Daily survey respondents reported practicing non-school oriented ONLINE writing activities, with some activities being performed on a daily basis by the majority of respondents. For instance, the vast majority of The Daily survey respondents reported performing the following online (multimedia) writing at least once in the past week: (1) **sending or reading** email (100%), (2) **sending messages through a social network site** (100%), (3) **viewing videos on a computer** (95.3%), and (4) **sending instant messages** (74.1%).

The design of The Daily, especially its multiple channels for users’ communication and self-expression, accommodated the many forms and functions of online writing that young people appear to prefer and integrate into their daily routines. Through The Daily, users could send messages to their online social network or to an email address, inviting people to view specific content. Messages could be sent both synchronously (via the chat feature) and asynchronously, thereby making it possible for users to intensify or soften social cues depending on their purposes.

Conclusions, Questions & Suggested Next Steps

Insights from this exploratory study suggest that social media applications hold promise for piggy-backing onto young people's existing online reading, writing, and socializing preferences and habits.

Questions this work raises are:

1. How do we capitalize on spikes in interest to move low users to become more engaged in (or contributing to) targeted content over time?
2. Similarly, how do we capitalize on the kinds of "influentials" that these innovative, social media experiments may attract in order to build a larger, more engaged and powerful base of sustained users?
3. How do we intensify and transfer the *feeling* of community to actually increase peer-sharing and community involvement?
4. How do we cultivate the public self-expressions and opinion-sharing that young people reportedly view these as ideal sites for?
5. How does interest, knowledge, civic participation, and a sense of community develop over time? If we hope to generate dynamic, networked publics around important problems like access to higher education and educate a more informed and engaged citizenry, answering this question is critical but merits pre- and post measures and comparison on intended and actual activities within the site over a longer time period.
6. How might design variations improve the amount and depth of online reading and multimedia writing practices? How might future iterations of The Daily or similar sites encourage more behaviors we seek? For instance, The Daily Facebook application was designed in a certain way with some limitations; story pages (level I read) presented comment threads, the poster's bio, related articles, and a chat opportunity. To read the Full article on the Web site of origin (level II read) required a second click. Changes to this approach might yield significantly different findings. Future improvements to the social media publication might offer publishers (or licensees of syndication services) the ability to show the full text of an article within Facebook.

In our final report, we intend to compare insights from Hot Dish and The Daily, highlighting where they intersect and diverge, and the resulting lessons learned.

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Author Contact Information

Dr. Christine Greenhow

University of Minnesota
 Email: greenhow@umn.edu
 Phone: 651-226-4015
 Website: www.cgreenhow.org
 Campus Address:
 Institute for Advanced Study
 131 Nolte Center
 315 Pillsbury Drive S.E.
 Minneapolis, MN 55455

Endnotes

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ⁱⁱⁱ See the August 2008 report, "Audience Segments in a Changing News Environment: Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources" issued on August 17, 2008. from the Pew Research Center Biennial News Consumption Survey. Available online at: <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/444.pdf>

^{iv} See the vision for full online participation in Clarke, J. & Aufderheide, P. (2009, February). *Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics*. Washington, D.C. Center for Center for Social Media, American University. <http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/documents/whitepaper.pdf>

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^{vi} Greenhow's previous work (www.cgreenhow.org) has focused on young people's learning, literacies, citizenship demonstration, and identity formation within social network sites. See for example:
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^{vii} See the vision for full online participation in Clarke, J. & Aufderheide, P. (2009, February). *Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics*. Washington, D.C. Center for Center for Social Media, American University. <http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/documents/whitepaper.pdf>

^{viii} U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates as of November 2008 as reported on page 3 in the 2009 *Teens Know What they Want from Online News: Do You?* from News Paper Association of America and Media Management Center, Northwestern University. Available online at:
<http://www.mediamanagementcenter.org/research/teensknow.pdf>

^{ix} According to a January 2009 Memo on *Adults and Social Network Sites* prepared by Amanda Lenhart for the Pew Internet & American Life Project, a full 65% of online American teenagers (ages 12-17) have a profile on a social network site. For data on college students' use of social network sites, see Chapter 2 in Salaway, G., Borreson, J., Nelson, M.R., (2008). *The ECAR study of undergraduate students and information technology*, 2008: Vol 8. (Educause Center for Applied Research). Boulder, CO: Educause.

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^{xi} See "Audience Segments in a Changing News Environment: Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources" a report issued on August 17, 2008 from the Pew Research Center Biennial News Consumption Survey. Available online at: <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/444.pdf>