



Gen Z

Trends, Truth and Trust

Speech by Alex Mahon, Chief Executive, Channel 4

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Gen Z, beyond any other generation, defies easy pigeonholing. We have been researching and studying them for five years and know that individuality, identity and inequality are overriding themes in their experiences.¹

Today we are sharing our latest research. It shows the environment that young people are growing up in has become even more complex, and in ways that I believe warrant serious debate and action.

In Britain, the 30% of us who are under 25 have experienced life in fundamentally different ways to the rest. It is, of course, the worldviews of that minority that will increasingly shape our society.²

This cohort were young children when the first iPhone was released. They have always had fast broadband, ubiquitous Wi-Fi and notification-activated dopamine hits. They're used to day-long connection and getting news through social media. They check their phones constantly, often hundreds of times a day.³

They've grown up in a time when the rate of technological change has increased perhaps more than at any time in history – alongside an age of global unpredictability and political turbulence.⁴

Older people believe Gen Z's lives have been made worse by connectivity, by social media and by immersive technology. But ironically what we found when we did our first piece of work on Gen Z, was that they shared the worries of their elders – about money and housing and careers – and the same role models – family and teachers.

Where they differed was in being the first generation in recent history to be less tolerant of other people's views than the preceding generation.⁵

Our second study focused on video, and on its emotional impact. For young or old, video viewing is our number one leisure activity. The difference is where you get your video from.⁶

In 2024, adults spent on average more than 5 hours a day watching video and 34% of that was on social platforms and YouTube. For 16-27s, that rises to 64%.⁷

In our latest set of research, we concentrated on what it is like to be Gen Z in Britain right now. Even in the last two years, that has shifted.

Research shows 16-29-year-olds are now the loneliest group in society.⁸

Consider that. The most connected people feel the most disconnected from others.

Britain's Gen Z are broadly happy, but that happiness is declining. In the past, happiness followed a U-shape: people start happy, get sadder as they move into adulthood; then later in life, rebound back into happiness. But no longer: older people are now happier than younger people.⁹



For the young, increasing loneliness and socio-economic pressures are diminishing their happiness.¹⁰

Inflation, housing, job security, education – all feel beyond their control. Diminished autonomy amplifies their feelings of unfairness.¹¹

And their worries are valid.

While almost everyone felt the long drag of the global financial crisis and the austerity that followed, Gen Z's experience was worse for one simple reason: Covid.

Gen Z endured the pandemic right on the cusp of the traditional transition into adulthood. It created for them a three-year black hole in coming-of-age experiences. While older generations could 'pick up' their lives where they left off – Gen Z had a bigger 'reset'.

By effectively delaying their advance into adulthood, the collateral damage of the pandemic also extended the phase of life everyone experiences where our opinions are plastic and mouldable.

That means views and identities are remaining flexible for longer. Generation Z may be the first to continue questioning norms and challenging authority far beyond their teenage years and the time when our brains stop developing at 25 or so.¹²

Truth, trust, individualism

For Gen Z, social video has been their primary cultural compass. But it has been individualised. Through personalised feeds, they see not only different information from earlier cohorts and certainly from their parents, they also crucially never see quite the same things as their peers.

It's vital to stress one perhaps obvious fact: they will not revert. Young people will not adopt the behaviour of older generations as they age. Just as I will not start going to the shops to buy a physical newspaper, Gen Z will not stop watching YouTube or start getting their information from News at Ten.

However the way Gen Z do get their information is creating immense issues for them. The combination of extended plasticity of views and the personalised information flow has had profound effects.

They've grown up with access to vast amounts of information. But being informed for them is, in essence, a matter of personal choice, not a shared understanding.

Gen Z faces growing uncertainty in who and what to trust, struggling to reconcile issues of bias, impartiality and truth in such an information-saturated environment.¹³

They demonstrate a much 'flatter' pattern of trust in media than older generations – that is, they gather information widely, valuing friends, influencers and traditional media alike. There is no hierarchy of validation.¹⁴

And that is why, in our research, we found that the most meaningful way of grouping young people is no longer using cultural markers, such as their hobbies, or even their identities.¹⁵

We found that the most significant divisions among Gen Z are explained by their worldviews and beliefs – and how happy and in control they feel.

We discovered six groups that were predominantly Gen Z.

Girl Power feminists: the young women who are happy, optimistic and not politicised.



Fight for Rights activists: they are also empowered and happy but they feel the UK is fundamentally an unfair place to live and want to push for justice for those they feel are losing out.

The Blank Slates – disengaged boys and men.

The Boys Can't be Boys group, both male and female, who believe that traditional masculinity and values are under threat.

Fifth, the Dice Are Loaded group, again male and female, who are unhappy, who don't feel in control and believe economic and political systems are stacked against them.

And finally, the Zero-Sum Thinkers, young men and women who believe that for one group in society to succeed, another has to lose out.

Their worldviews fall are defined by ideas of what's fair and unfair, winners and losers.

And if our research uncovered one common theme – and it is not one that older people will be comfortable with – it is that many young people, from all these groups, are grappling with the idea of truth itself. It is harder than ever to separate fact from fiction.

In short, the way in which Gen Z learn to judge fact, fiction and fairness as they grow older may become the defining issue of our age.

Impact and risks

What are the dangers arising from all this? You could say there is no crisis at all. Young people have never been particularly high consumers of serious news. Society has always worried about new developments in the distribution of information, but overall has been liberated rather than limited by the introduction of writing, of the printing press and of all technologies since.

But I would argue that we are now at a point where we need to think much more urgently about the risks.

Because Gen Z curate their own understanding of 'the truth' in ways that exacerbate a gender division and undermine the value of democracy.¹⁶

There is clear evidence of democratic disengagement and an increasing shift towards authoritarianism already. Among those aged 13-27 in the UK, we found, shockingly, that 52% say they think the UK would be better with a strong leader, unfettered by Parliament and elections. This compares to 40% of those aged 45-65.¹⁷

This should not surprise us. Today's young people have faced a "polycrisis": growing up with concerns about climate change, as well as increased economic, technological and geopolitical turmoil.¹⁸

Many can only recall a perpetual state of crisis and struggle, unimproved by successive governments. It's not surprising that the Edelman work shows trust in UK government and media reached a 10-year low last year.¹⁹

Their latest Trust Barometer showed that 61% of those aged 18-34 approve of hostile activism to drive change.²⁰

In addition, for the first time, we have seen gender rather than education drive an ideological split where young women hold more liberal views on gender politics, immigration and racial justice than their male peers; in older generations, views are much more similar across genders.²¹

This gap reflects and is surely related to an attainment gap between young men and young women, particularly pronounced for white working-class men.²²

Figures like Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson use this, perhaps explaining why 45% of young men said they feel that promoting women's equality has now led to discrimination against men.²³

A world where trust declines, truth is not universally accepted, the gender divide is widening and young people increasingly feel they are missing out is a dangerous world. We could lose the connections that bind us into community. And increasingly disconnect from democracy. The breakdown in cohesion around a set of shared facts leads to weaker civic society. If we cannot even agree on the facts, how can we have a civilised argument or even a discussion?

Information consumption

Alongside this, young people's relationship with what they consider news is changing. Their news is social, ubiquitous, ambient and contested: it comes to them in snippets and by happenstance. They don't want to be hit by weighty news all the time, they want and expect choice and variety. They distinguish between "news" and "the news" – which for them is politics and current affairs.²⁴

During the most recent UK and US elections we saw the change in news consumption play out. There was a huge amount of TikTok viewing – so fragments, not detail.²⁵

For many, the more dyspeptic or noisy the politician, the easier they were to engage with. We are moving to engaging more with how people say things than what they say.

It is important to remember that there are four ways that the change in consumption by platform impacts what is consumed: short form means less detail; speed means less context; the algorithms move the salacious faster to the top of feeds; solo viewing reduces socialisation of points of view, thus reducing the likelihood that radical or socially destructive perspectives will be questioned.

But this environment is not giving Gen Z the tools or knowledge to interpret and navigate the world. Decision-making and comprehension often requires detail and context that take more than 30 seconds to explain. Unsurprisingly, Gen Z feel less and less able to trust what they read or see.²⁶

Of course, we all tend to gravitate towards novel, interesting and entertaining views. Young people were probably doing this when Gutenberg was still wiping ink off his fingers.

However, people are hungry for information, explanation and clarity about the world.²⁷

And if anything, younger people have a greater desire for that than older people. But they have grown up in a news cycle where everything is being updated all the time, where there is constant new information.

And they are bored faster, so focus is affected and they move on rapidly. A new study from Nature shows that divided attention elevates the desire to engage whilst reducing the sense of meaning in each engagement. The impact is that chronic boredom is increasing by more than 1% per annum, even as people engage with their phones for 1 minute for every 5 minutes of the day.²⁸

We see confusing and conflicting signals about information consumption. Students don't want to read books at university when they can get AI extracted clips.²⁹ But three-hour podcast episodes are something we quite gladly commit to. The Trump / Rogan interview did 54 million views on YouTube alone and it is 179 minutes long.³⁰ We see a rise in the devouring of detailed conspiracy theories – a third of the UK public say they believe in conspiracy theories about Covid-19, mainstream media and government efforts to control people.³¹

A belief that the government doesn't work anymore, that the social cohesion we have previously valued might be damaging individuals' prospects, a lack of tools to distinguish truth and a shift towards authoritarianism are things that should really worry us. All of us.

Algorithms designed to elicit anger, surprise or outrage have a devaluing effect on the currency of reliable information. The business model of the technology giants is at odds with the safety of our societies.

They make no profit from encouraging people to feel, safe, stable or fairly treated.

We can already see how an inability to constructively disagree can be compounded by the effects of viewing alone, without being in touch with others who might help us question radicalising content and messages. As The Home Secretary Yvette Cooper told the Commons in the wake of the Axel Rudakubana trial last week, a young person viewing extreme violence online can become a killer in real life. The number of children investigated for involvement in terrorism has trebled in three years. Cooper described a "wider challenge of rising youth violence and extremism" and said tech companies should not be profiting from hosting such material.³²

Solutions

I think we need to think about our responsibilities to lead and to act to restore bonds between young people and reliable sources of information. If not now, when? And if not us – the public service media – then who?

Young people want information and of course they have the attention for it. But we are not making it easy for them.

And if we want to continue with democracy, if we value civic society, if we believe that the strength of that is inherently related to truth then what should we do?

First of all, it is important to remember that the UK is in a better situation than most other countries. We have spectacular advantages, given the world-leading regulatory structure that underpins Public Service Media. The BBC is trusted globally and reaches hundreds of millions of people around world.³³ Channel 4 has a brand that cuts through to young people and that they still trust.³⁴ Reuters Institute and EBU evidence proves that in countries with strong regulated Public Service Media polarisation levels are lower.³⁵

Let's compare to somewhere else. The simplest case would be the USA, where many people get their information from non-verified platforms or from those with a vested economic interest in the algorithms set to promote popularity rather than factuality.³⁶ Here, in the UK, we can still resist sliding into an American news swamp.³⁷

So what are we doing?

The first thing is to adapt what we ourselves as news providers do.

First, we have to rapidly change how we make things, where we publish them, and how we promote them. PSM needs to accelerate delivery of our news to these platforms where people consume.

Young people want their news to be rapid, easy, entertaining and digestible. They want it to be timely, well-made, engaging and accessible. It needs to be in an appealing voice. We need to move from text to video, from long to summary, from our networks to theirs, and to be always entertaining and accessible. All while working to retain impartiality.

We've already done a huge amount of this at Channel 4 with billions of views on social and the vast majority of the network published daily on YouTube. Over at C4 News, we publish 25 pieces to social platforms daily alongside our one-hour of live TV news. In 2024, we had 1.8 billion social views – 57% on TikTok. To make the content work we construct it entirely differently. We have to create thumb-stopping content, not behave like people have tuned in to a 7pm broadcast. A package needs to be arresting from the first image and work hard to hold them for the next two seconds. Then we can retain them for the full item, adding analysis and perspective but never reducing drama.³⁸

This works if done right. Indeed, we have an advantage over creators because we have the video and reporters on the ground. And we find that young viewers are engaging with serious and heavy content – Ukraine, Gaza, Politics, Climate Change.

So, we've done the hard bit of working out how we adapt to the new platforms in a way that engages young people. And our reach, of 35 million every week on social, is about 8 times greater than on television.³⁹

But. We need to think bigger than adaptation if we want to reach the crucial goals of maintaining the benefits of civic society, the rule of law and democracy, the belief in objective truth.

And that is going to require more help.

That's because the global platforms are dominant. And there are two things we must never forget about them.

First is that TikTok, Meta and YouTube are not classified as publishing businesses. They do not need to take responsibility for what they publish, nor prioritise facts over opinion. The passage in 1996 of Section 230 in the US has meant that by statute they are not regulated to be concerned about such issues.⁴⁰ They are perhaps the only people in the world who do not believe they are publishers or broadcasters and yet broadcast, every second, content that influences democratic discourse.⁴¹

And, with the touch of a keyboard, they can make their algorithms brush aside or skip over our news output in favour of news made up in someone's living room. Our billions of views can turn overnight into mere millions.

And just this month, we are facing a new era... where un-regulated platforms that dominate distribution have publicly announced a wanton abandonment of the pursuit of truth.

The second thing to remember is that defenders of the truth are always on the back foot. Lying is more exciting and fiction travels faster than fact.

So, we live here in the UK with what I see as a rather ludicrous juxtaposition – on the one hand a brilliant array of public service media adapting content to make it work differently in different places. On the other hand, we are filled with concern about young people's relationship with facts and fearfulness about the impact.

In the UK, media exists under a patchwork quilt of regulation which is looking increasingly frayed and anachronistic. This gives both regulators and broadcasters problems they used not to have. We bind broadcasters with things like the delivery of lunchtime live news bulletins... requirements from a different century in return for increasingly low-value spectrum. Yet we give no policy incentive for the modern delivery of news or current affairs. We're concerned about the platforms and about AI but we have not regulated for must-carry or must-use on their systems.

But in this juxtaposition, we also find the bones of making this fixable. Platforms need to be able to operate in every market in order to make money but will avoid unnecessary conflict. We only need to choose how to regulate and encourage them towards quality.

This becomes increasingly important in a world, where tech titans are so hellbent on the potential profitability of what they deem to be free speech that they are perfectly happy to eradicate truth and facts along the way.

These are massive issues which we ignore at our peril. And we simply cannot be complacent about what is at stake.



As I have shown: at Channel 4 we have successfully worked out how we improve our output to work on platforms in an authentic way to offer audiences value without losing values.

We must start thinking about objective truth and validated news as a public good. We need to ensure they are present on new platforms, rather than see them as market failure that we regulate for on the old platforms. Freedom of expression and responsible speech can co-exist.

There are three major solutions that we should be discussing because they will determine how content like ours – regulated, accountable, validated, duly impartial – can remain a public good.

Firstly, can we introduce a trustmark? An indicator of factual, trusted accuracy for content that emerges from professionally-produced, regulated media. A simple concept that could allow tech companies, their algorithms, their advertisers, and most importantly their audiences, to distinguish instantly between what is checked and true and what is not.

It could be derived from standards-based certification: not a mark of quality, but a mark of safety; not a recommendation, but a basic stamp of authenticity. Through it, people can know that this news is professionally-produced, that those who produced it have editorial codes, street addresses and are accountable for what they produce.

This is not a question of force-feeding an approved diet of information. It's a matter of allowing consumers to know what is safe. This is not much to ask; some might say it is not much to do, but it is certainly much more than we have right now.

Second, we need to regulate for public service media to be prominent on the new platforms, what you might call algorithmic prominence. We have prominence on the EPG, we have it on some, but not enough, smart TVs, but what we need urgently is prominence for PSM content on social platforms. It is essential we ensure quality is boosted, not throttled or shadow-banned. The platforms are fighting the steps we are taking in Britain and the EU to make them clean up their act precisely because this reduces easy routes to short-term profits. Theirs is a position of weakness, political expediency; ours is a position of principle that should play to the strengths of our media ecology and help it thrive in the long-term.

But these are not just issues of principle. We will need to ensure we can make money. At the moment our content is successful everywhere, but there is no monetization mechanism on TikTok or on YouTube shorts for our news, because the money is made elsewhere on their service - that's clearly a blocker to growth for quality content providers. If we want to promote an antidote to toxicity, then we need to ensure we can fund ways to make more of it.

And finally, we need to think about the next wave, the impact of LLMs and generative AI on this. The fundamental LLMS are up and running but they are trained only on aspects of the internet. So the answers you will get are a synthetic derivative, a regurgitation of the internet.

We of course need data transparency so we know how they are using inputs.

But what if we went further? As we consider our approach to GenAI, we should think carefully about how these models are 'trained' and how we can shape the data they ground themselves in.

What if they had to be trained with validated public service content, with public service values? And to help fund that content by paying fairly to license it? We could go further and think about that for other publicly-funded, transparent data subject to oversight and independent verification, that kind of data as an input might give us outputs that shape the kind of society we want to live in rather than one that feeds off spin, propaganda and sometimes stolen copyright.

We have been focused on the culture wars in the past few years. I fear that we have spent far too much time worried about the culture and not enough time thinking about the war. The percentage of the young in the UK who get their news from print or TV is effectively zero.



The dangers are clear – a shift to non facts, to untruth, a world where the challenging rigour of our media ecosystem is steadily devalued; where meaningful engagement, integrity and shared understanding are subsumed by the trade in shallow attention.

Believe me, if we do not come up with a British solution, it is clear that international market forces will impose on us some other reality that we can regret at leisure.

As our work shows, Gen Z in this country are a brilliant, vibrant, creative, bubbling mass of ideas and deep beliefs. Their collective genius is our future, but Britain's need for them has to be matched by a Britain they can trust in. So, please, leave here asking yourself what you can do to keep us together with them in one cohesive, shared society. And I will end by asking you to face these two questions again: If not us, who? If not now, when?

Thank you.

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