

# The Missing Middle

BY / WITH / FOR YOUTH  
▶▶ INSPIRING  
NEXT GEN ▶▶▶  
PUBLIC MEDIA  
▶▶ AUDIENCES

Reimagining a Future for Tweens,  
Teens, and Public Media

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## / EXECUTIVE SUMMARY /

In the 1960s, Joan Ganz Cooney published *The Potential Uses of Television in Preschool Education*, a report that would revolutionize television for children. Where others saw a “vast wasteland,” Cooney saw possibility, and from it, educational programming for children, like *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, was born.

Half a century later, the Joan Ganz Cooney Center and Corporation for Public Broadcasting seek to carry forward this vision of programming with the *By/With/For Youth: Inspiring Next Gen Audiences* project, which prioritizes youth wellbeing and supports learning and the development of life skills. The focus of this new initiative is tweens and teens, identified as a “missing middle” audience for public media. Young people enjoy an abundance of options for watching, playing, and listening, but are often underserved in terms of quality content appropriate to their developmental stages and needs.

Amidst a global pandemic, while adults and children alike were spending most of their waking hours online, we spoke with 50 tweens and teens across the United States. We talked about how they spend their time; what they find interesting; how they find new shows, apps, or videos; what issues are important to them; and what misconceptions adults have about them. We also talked to kids about their experiences with public media. We asked them what public media should do if it wants to engage with people their age, and we talked about how their lives have changed during the pandemic.

Tweens and teens view the current media landscape as one of abundance and seemingly endless personalization possibilities. They describe spending their free time moving across platforms and devices depending on their moods, their interests, and their access to certain kinds of connectivity.

Ten key takeaways emerged from our interviews:

- + **Video dominates media experiences** for youth and is the lifeblood for social media and gaming. In addition, informational how-to videos support self-driven learning for tweens and teens across a range of settings. We were surprised by the frequency with which tweens and teens rely on how-to videos to support their schoolwork, gaming, creativity, and development of life skills.
- + In terms of discovery, social media, search, and **recommendations are paramount**. In particular, TikTok’s personalized “For You” page and YouTube’s “Recommended” videos were mentioned by many as how they find what to watch, and often were the first places they would find out about new shows, apps, or other videos.

- + Tweens and teens fluently described **deploying different apps for specific purposes** and **seamlessly moving across various media environments** depending on their interests and needs. As they coped with varying degrees of pandemic-related lockdown, video and video-augmented activities provided a wide range of escapist entertainment and digital social glue to help maintain connections with friends and families.
- + While tweens and teens were grateful for digital media to help maintain connections with friends and family, **many expressed eventually reaching a state of boredom with technology.**
- + **Online learning has been especially difficult** for a subset of youth who have found the stress of hours spent in front of a screen managing a flood of new communications and deadlines overwhelming. The lost routines and support structures that school provides have added to a sense of disconnectedness that some youth report.
- + **Tweens and teens are accustomed to having a great deal of control in how and when and where they express themselves online.** By contrast, when they encounter content that is developed by adults without youth input, it often strikes them as perpetuating stereotypes about teens or as being out of touch.
- + **Youth largely want to see kids like them featured in and participating in the development of programming.** Tweens and teens expressed how they turn to “real” youth their age for meaningful content, and how they contribute their voices to media in different ways, whether through the creation of their own content or by becoming part of online communities through comments and other forms of engagement.
- + When talking about fiction and escapist content, priorities for youth centered around whether it was free or fun or something their friends were into. **While “public media” as a concept might be an afterthought to teens, the need for something trustworthy was frequently mentioned.**

+ **Youth often had difficulty discerning fact from opinion.** A few tweens and teens we spoke with sought more mature content, particularly documentaries, for deeper dives into topics of interest to them.

+ Accustomed to personalization of media content and delivery, the teens we spoke with had very clear ideas for types of content and how best to deliver it to their age group. The most frequent request for public media was to address **the everyday challenges tweens and teens face.** And regardless of format, tweens and teens felt they had matured past the often simple storylines directed at their age group.

Drawing on these findings, public media has several opportunities to connect with this “missing middle”:

- + **How-to videos** are a fruitful area for public media to explore because youth are increasingly seeking out this short-form, sometimes ephemeral video content to help answer questions that they have to support interests they want to explore or simply just to solve a problem.
- + Public media has a real opportunity to **provide more trusted content** so that when kids are searching for information, they can turn to the public media brand to provide reliable answers in a space where they do not need to be on their guard. Public media is already a space known and trusted for a diversity of voices in its programming. In 2020 it provided resources across its networks for discussions of race, inequality, and prejudice. There is an opportunity here to amplify how public media goes beyond binaries and into the nuance of issues, since this seems to be missing, but much desired, in youth media experiences.
- + When we ask youth for advice on how public media could create more appealing content for kids their age, the issue of **representation** is especially important. They want to see kids like them, as well as others who reflect the diversity they see in their generation. In order for this content to be perceived as authentic, it will be important to integrate the input from youth and also take advantage of the fact that these kids love to create and share their unique perspectives.

+ Our method of talking to tweens and teens, asking for their opinions, and thinking about what is possible and what might help to fill some of these gaps in commercial media is a model moving forward for public media to consider. Kids are grateful for a chance to be heard, and they were surprised that we were taking their opinions seriously. **One space where public media can differentiate from YouTube and other platforms is adults taking seriously what kids have to say.**

Similar to the “vast wasteland” moment Joan Ganz Cooney faced in the 1960s, the abundance of content and personalization of the current moment can seem more noise than promise. Public media has an opportunity to evolve Cooney’s blueprint of a kinder learning space for young children into one that also addresses the pressing needs of tweens and teens. This is a moment to be visionary, to use this trusted space for learning and growing as youth transition from childhood to adulthood and develop identities deeply intertwined with the media ecosystem.

## Methods Overview

The findings in this report are based on interviews with a total of 50 youth participants, including tweens (aged 10–12) and teens (aged 13–17). Three researchers from the Joan Ganz Cooney Center conducted 16 online video-based and phone-based focus group interviews between September 18–December 8, 2020. In order to carry out this work, we partnered with nine different youth-focused organizations, recruiting participants from the Northeast, Midwest, South, and West Coast in rural, urban and suburban areas. Our interview sample is not nationally representative, but was designed to include a diverse mix of typically underrepresented voices, including those from low-income households, students of color, and youth with disabilities. For more details about our study design, please see the appendix at the end of this report.