The Changing World of News: Qualitative Research

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1. Overview of key findings

Qualitative research exploring why participants used different news sources was carried out between January and March 2018 with 96 participants across the UK using a combination of online pre-tasking and group discussions. More details on the background and methodology can be found in section 2. Outlined below is a brief overview of the key findings from the research.

Why participants engaged with the news

Participants saw the category of 'news' as broader than just direct, formal, journalistic sources and included comedy and satire, word of mouth, documentaries, and even 'selfie news' in their definition. Fundamentally, participants engaged with the news to satisfy their curiosity and help them understand what was going on in the world that they felt part of, whether local or global.

In terms of its role in participants' lives, news was seen as having greatest impact primarily in personal and social terms, and for some at a societal level as well. The personal role of news was a mixture of practical (need to know) information and stories about broader issues which may impact participants directly. Socially, news was an important source of interaction and inclusion, and widely discussed in person or via social media. Participants did not want to feel ignorant or left out of the news conversation.

Whilst news was also seen to be playing an important societal role in holding authorities and others to account, many participants took longer to realise this, and questioned how well the news was fulfilling its role in the democratic process, particularly in the light of the EU referendum experience.

At its most functional participants needed the news to make them aware of, and alert to, what was going on in their world at any given time. Participants also looked to be emotionally stimulated and entertained by the news. There could be a tension between the more functional, and more emotional needs that the news served, and participants recognised that news sources were required to strike a balance between them.

As a minimum, participants needed the news to inform them of what has happened 'the what', a relatively straight forward and factual accounting of the news. Many participants were also interested in understanding 'the why' from the news, which drove a need for more in-depth, explanatory analysis and interpretation. A final core need for some participants was understanding 'the so what?' of the news, primarily in terms of the implications of the news for themselves, or sometimes the wider country.

How participants engaged with the news

News engagement was grounded in habit and routine, shaped by context of time of day, week, and the participants' situation at the point of consumption. News engagement was highest, and most habitual during the week, with participants typically following stable habits throughout. However, news consumption could become more dynamic in response to a particularly engaging or salient story. The morning was often a peak in engagement with many accessing the news during their first waking moments, driven by a need to know what has happened while they have been asleep.

Daytime consumption was characterised by grazing throughout the day, dipping in and out of different sources to keep abreast and updated of developments. Engagement with the news in the

evenings and weekends varied widely; some disengaged altogether, while others invested in consolidating their knowledge.

Socio-economic group, life stage, and geographic location, all shaped source preferences and levels of engagement, whether light or heavy, preferred genres or sources, or means of consuming.

Participants observed how changes in technology have had a fundamental impact on how they engaged with the news, with the most recent change being the wide spread use of personal handheld devices that enabled access to 'the world' in the palm of your hand. One of the impacts of technology was the increasingly 'push' nature of news, as news was fed to participants via a wide array of sources and feeds, whether through their own devices, or being displayed in public places.

An important consequence of these developments appeared to be increased levels of passive, non-conscious processing of news, with participants often absorbing multiple sources only at a superficial level. Many participants did not have to make a choice to engage with the news as they would be exposed to it in some form throughout the day.

News habits were constantly evolving to reflect both changing personal context and developing technology, which will continue to be the fundamental driver of change in this area.

How sources were selected

Participants' selection of specific news sources was driven by the outcomes of four key decisions, relating to context, behavioural habits, their preferred platform, and brand affinity. It was clear that brand played a pivotal role in the selection of sources in terms of expected content, quality, and style of news reporting.

To become a preferred news brand, it had to satisfy five key areas to be deemed 'right for me'. These were: sharing the participant's values, cognitive fit with their intellectual abilities and interested, behavioural convenience, social compatibility, and emotional tone, whether serious or more entertaining.

A brand also had to meet quality requirements, and these broke down into two broad categories; the 'robustness' of the reporting, and the 'delivery' of the news. The emphasis placed on 'robustness' of reporting indicated the importance of 'the truth' in news reporting. Veracity was typically the most sought-after ingredient in news, especially for political news. However quality criteria varied by genre of news. There was relatively greater permission for genres like entertainment and celebrity news to be more speculative compared to what were regarded as more 'serious' genres.

Broadcast brands were generally well regarded with participants valuing their reputation for trustworthy, quality and credible news, in particular the BBC, but also other broadcast brands.

In contrast, newspaper brands were seen as relatively partisan and biased in their delivery of the news although this was also recognised as part of their appeal to a given newspaper audience. In addition, certain newspaper brands were sought out for their sometimes-entertaining treatment of the news, which was also a valued brand attribute amongst some audiences.

Participants were less familiar with online-only news brands and therefore less able to judge their credibility compared to more established sources of news. However, consumption of news via social media appeared to have increased participants exposure to online-only brands, and other non-established and unfamiliar sources of news.

Overview of online and social media

The availability of online news, particularly via handheld devices, had a significant impact on how news was accessed and processed. Online and social media exposed participants to a wider range of sources, offered greater personalisation, and increased levels of passive, non-conscious consumption of news. Both source selection and personalisation via digital interfaces were defining exposure and filtering news information for participants, potentially facilitating an 'echo chamber' effect.

Despite the availability of alternative sources, much of the purposive online news engagement still appeared to be via established news brands, both broadcast and newspaper. However, social media users in particular were potentially exposed to a wider array of sources via various feeds they have chosen, news shared by others, and news pushed by third parties.

Social media platforms were not seen as news providers in themselves but as platforms through which news is transmitted via other sources and brands. Social interaction around a news story via social media was a valued part of the experience, with the commentary often becoming the focus of engagement, highlighting a story's importance, and aiding interpretation.

Unless from an established brand, participants generally claimed to treat news via social media with scepticism and to seek verification. However, the research suggests participants may be over claiming this behaviour when in fact they were absorbing more news non-consciously, and often at face value via these platforms.

Challenges in processing the news

Participants raised a number of interlinked issues relating to how they processed the news. These issues included:

- News overload coupled with complexity posed significant cognitive challenges for participants making the news both harder to process and comprehend
- In the context of a wider crisis in trust, diminished trust in news, and potential bias in sources, were raised as issues, particularly with online and social media, but also other platforms
- The news was often seen as tilting towards negativity, and often fatiguing, in particular the national political news, and international news, with many avoiding the news as a result
- The news was also seen as a distorting lens on the world, with a propensity to sensationalism and exaggeration that could warp perspectives, including sometimes in a malevolent way.

In light of these issues attention rather than information had become the scarce resource, and news sources therefore had to work even harder to engage audiences. This in turn could drive an increased propensity for news providers to sensationalise and overdramatise the news.

Online and social media generated further issues specific to the medium, including shallow, fragmented engagement, increasing non-conscious absorption, and potential for the echo chamber effect. In light of trust issues many claimed a preference for established news brands as a relatively safe and reliable choice. The BBC, despite occasional criticisms of bias, was typically seen as the most trusted brand in this context.

More widely, when evaluating the news participants were regularly forced to fall back on their gut instincts and intuitions in an increasingly challenging news ecosystem. Confirmation bias, i.e. favouring information that confirms your prior beliefs, was a particularly powerful mental trait in this context.

2. Background, objectives and methodology

2.1. Background to the study

Ofcom currently runs an annual quantitative News Consumption Survey (NCS) which examines people's consumption of, and attitudes towards, news on different platforms. Ofcom was looking to complement the NCS with qualitative research to understand in greater depth the public's perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the news, including establishing an understanding of why people choose the news sources that they use. This report provides feedback on qualitative research carried out between January and March 2018 across all four nations of the UK.

2.2. A note on qualitative analysis

This report is based on the views and experiences of 96 participants overall. The research was qualitative in nature; the findings included in the report are indicative and are not intended to be a comprehensive national picture of consumers' views. Its findings should be treated as illustrative and illuminating, rather than fully representative of the population. References to 'most', 'some', 'a few', etc. are relative to the size of this sample of participants.

2.3. Research objectives

The research needed to establish the following:

- An understanding of why people choose the news sources that they use
- Why people go to different sources of news
- What people are looking for from news sources
- How people's expectations of different sources vary
- Whether people are fatigued or depressed by the news - and if so, what impact this is having on how people consume news
- The role and perceptions of online in news consumption, including social media.

2.4. Methodology and approach to the research

The project was qualitative in approach and was carried out across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland between 19 January and 14 March 2018. The approach included individual reflection through an online diary and a behaviour change process, followed by group discussion with the same participants.

Specifically, each component of the methodology included the following:

- Daily news diary: This was conducted online and was designed to follow consumption behaviour and use of news over time, recording daily engagement with the news, and requesting participants to reflect on the experience in terms of why they chose the sources they used and what they thought of the way they provided the news. Each participant completed a five-day news consumption diary which, included weekdays and a weekend.
- Sponsored behaviour change: After the first three days of the diary process, participants were asked to do without their two most preferred news brands and seek alternative sources. For example, if they consumed the news via the BBC they had to do without any sources of news provided by that brand across all platforms and channels. In the light of the very habitual

nature of news consumption, using deprivation in this way was a very effective means of exposing the deeper drivers of behaviour, and prompted much sharper reflection from participants in the group discussions .

- Group discussion: The group discussions consisted of 12 focus groups. Each lasted 120 minutes and typically contained eight participants. The discussions explored participants perceptions of the news, its role and purpose in their lives, how they accessed and engaged with the news, why they used different sources (including brands and platforms) and any issues they experienced with the news.

The data from all these components have been combined in the analysis of the findings. This report will not reference individual components of the methodology unless it is relevant to do so.

2.5. Overview of participants

96 participants were drawn from and grouped into ABC1 and C2DE groups. Each group included a mix of men and women, all of whom consumed news at least five out of seven days a week. Specific criteria for selection included:

- Used a mix of different genres of news: minimum quotas on celebrity and entertainment, politics, international, local and UK (sport was out of scope)
- Used a mix of different media: minimum quotas for print, TV, social media, internet, radio, etc.
- A mix of levels of news engagement, from light to heavy users
- On average at least two per group were BAME (depending on location).

Given that perceptions of the news were likely to be influenced by factors such as political outlook and leanings, a range of political criteria were incorporated into the sample to ensure it was representative of the profile of the local area and of the country. These included EU and Scottish referendum votes, religious backgrounds in Northern Ireland, and an appropriate range of political leanings, captured from past voting behaviour in each location. Incorporating these criteria into the sample structure helped to ensure an appropriate balance of opinion and minimised the potential for political outlook to skew or bias the overall findings.

Fig. 1. Map of locations used in the research

1. Belfast
2. Glasgow
3. Aberystwyth
4. Leeds
5. Peterborough
6. London

The detailed breakdown of the group locations and sample structure is outlined in Table 1.

Table.1. Detailed breakdown of the research sample

Group	Nation	Location	Age	SEG	EU Referendum	Scottish Independence Referendum or religious background where relevant
1	England	Greater London	26-35	C1	Remain	N/A
2	England	Greater London	36-50	AB	Remain	N/A
3	England	Peterborough	50-65	C1	Leave	N/A
4	England	Peterborough (rural)	26-35	C2D	Leave	N/A
5	England	Leeds	18-25	E	Remain	N/A
6	England	Leeds	36-50	C1	Leave	N/A
7	Northern Ireland	Belfast	36-50	AB	Fall out	Protestant background
8	Northern Ireland	Belfast	26-35	C1C2	Fall Out	Catholic background
9	Wales	Aberystwyth (rural)	18-25	C2D	Remain	N/A
10	Wales	Aberystwyth (rural)	36-50	C1	Leave	N/A
11	Scotland	Glasgow	50-65	C2D	Leave (mainly)	NO
12	Scotland	Glasgow	26-35	AB	Remain	YES

2.6. Guide to the report

The news ecosystem is large, diverse, and complex. Given the complexity of the topic, comprehensive analysis was required in order to fulfil all the research objectives. Understanding the drivers of engagement, including why people use different sources of news, required a layered picture to be built up and elaborated in stages, each of which is outlined below:

- Why people engaged with the news – exploring broadly how participants define 'the news', the role it played in their lives, and why they engaged with the news as a category
- How they engaged with the news – what factors shaped the nature of news engagement
- How sources were selected – why people preferred to use different sources of news
- Overview of online and social media – brief overview of the impact of online and social media on news engagement
- Audience challenges in processing the news – key issues identified by participants in relation to how they processed the news

A copy of the discussion guide used in the research is contained in the appendix.

3. Why people engage with the news

3.1. Summary

The research revealed a range of reasons why participants engage with news as a category. In summary:

- Participants saw the category of 'news' as broader than just direct, formal, journalistic sources and included comedy and satire, word of mouth, documentaries and 'selfie news'.
- Participants engaged with news to satisfy their curiosity and help them understand what was going on in the world, whether local or global.
- In terms of the role of news in participants lives, the greatest impact was in personal and social terms, and on occasion at a societal level as well.
- The personal role of news was a mixture of practical (need-to-know) information and stories about broader issues that could directly affect participants.
- Socially, news was a key means of interaction and inclusion, and widely discussed in person or via social media. Participants did not want to feel ignorant or left out of the conversation.
- Participants felt that news played an important societal role in holding others to account, but many questioned how well news was fulfilling its role in the democratic process.
- At its most functional and basic role, participants needed news to inform them of what has happened: 'the what', a relatively straight-forward and factual accounting what was going on in their world at any given time.
- Participants also looked to be emotionally stimulated and entertained by news.
- There could be a tension between these different sets of needs, and participants recognised that news sources were required to strike a balance between them.
- Many participants were also interested in understanding 'the why' from the news; a need for more in-depth, explanatory analysis and interpretation
- A final core need for some participants was the 'so what?'; an understanding of the implications of the news for themselves, or the wider country

Each of these will be discussed in more detail in the following sub sections.

3.2. A broad definition of 'the news'

Participants saw the category of 'news' as broader than just direct, formal, journalistic sources and included comedy and satire, word of mouth, documentaries and 'selfie news'

Comedy and satire - for some participants, comedy and satire were a valued means of engaging with the news. Programmes like the *News Quiz, Mock the Week, Have I Got News for You*, or *The Last Leg*, could highlight important stories, and help participants understand and interpret them. And this light-hearted treatment was valued as an emotional antidote to news that was generally seen as depressing and negative.

When I'm watching, like, The Last Leg or Mock the Week or things like that where they're talking about the news. It's in a comedy way, so it's light-hearted (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

Word of mouth – some participants reflected that people have always been transmitters of news through word of mouth and gossip, and this has now been extended through social media, giving the social transmission of news much greater reach and scale than hitherto. Social media platforms had greatly amplified this aspect of engagement, allowing participants to take part in discussions around news, and share, and comment on, individual stories. This social commentary around news could also help people interpret and understand a given story, as well as alerting their attention to it in the first place.

A lot of people get their news from word of mouth. Neighbours, friends (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

It takes, the social media because it snowballs so much and everybody's got a story, and everybody has a news story to share. It takes away from the actual, like the Harvey Weinstein and things like that, because it becomes so much, everybody has a voice, and everybody has a story to share, they can jump on the news bandwagon (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)

Documentaries – some participants included certain documentaries in their definition of news. These included documentaries covering topical news items, such as *Panorama*, or investigative reports that explored social issues, such as *Stacey Dooley Investigates*.

'Selfie news' – although relatively rare, a few participants described how they could play a role in providing hyper-local news. This was enabled through social media and typically focused on events and happenings in the local area, whether a crime in the neighbourhood, a car crash, or even a local weather report.

Participants remarked that in theory anyone could now become an informal journalist, using tools we all have at our disposal, in particular online and social media platforms distributing the story via Facebook or a blog, and adding footage from their smart phone.

If you think about it like that, like a local thing, something's happened and somebody, a person, not news people have commented on it and you find out quicker. What the hell's happened up the road? You know? For example, I was awake in the night last night. I opened my Facebook like you do, and something came on in a village near us, oh, there's this paedophile living in the village. Somebody on Facebook put that on. Well, there were 631 comments. I'd gone to bed at 10 o'clock last night but all these comments (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

(Facebook) Sometimes for local stories comments are good, because sometimes you'll get local information, you know, you'll get bits thrown in. It's usually if somebody's been shot and you're trying to see where it is or something. People have no filter and they'll say who's been shot on what street and what they've done (Age 25-35, ABC1, Belfast)

3.3. The role of news in our lives

Participants engaged with the news to satisfy their curiosity and help them understand what was going on in the world, whether local or global

Participants observed that they themselves, and people in general, were innately curious, and it was a fundamental human need to know what was going on around you. How participants defined that 'world' varied; some focused on more local and personal horizons, whilst others sought wider perspectives, whether macro-societal issues, or international topics.

I think it's important to know what's going on in the world (Age 50-65, C2D, Glasgow)

I think it's important to know what's going on in the world…So you're aware of what's going on, not just in your town, but in other countries (Age 18-25, C2D, Wales)

Participants described the news as playing a role in their lives at three levels: personal, social, and societal

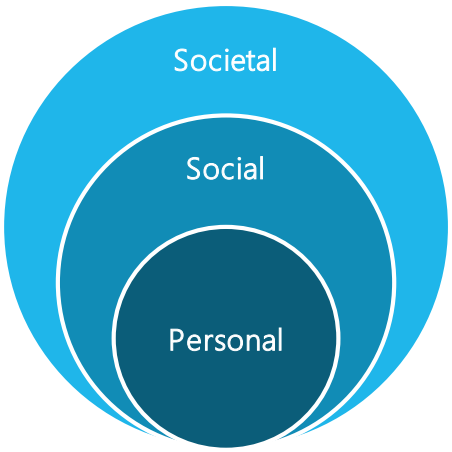
However overall the news was primarily seen as meeting needs at personal and social levels, and across the sample fewer participants tended to highlight the societal role of news; for example, its role in the democratic process. These three roles are illustrated in the figure below:

Fig. 2. The personal, social, and societal role of news in our lives

Societal role
- Making society aware of important issues, holding authorities to account and supporting the democratic process

Social role
- Important social role, part of social inclusion and interaction – 'being part of the conversation', transmitting news amongst social groups

Personal role
- Primarily focused on the personal and individual impact of news first from a self interested perspective – 'that affects or interests me'



The personal role of news

Participants defined the role of news primarily in terms of how it affected them personally

The personal role of news was a mixture of practical need-to-know information that might affect the individual in the short term, and awareness and understanding of broader issues that might have a direct bearing on their lives in the longer term.

I want to know about things of interest to myself and my family, like. As somebody touched on earlier, I don't need to know what Donald Trump is doing. I don't really care if he builds a wall between America and Mexico, it has no bearing on my life (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

At a practical and emotional level the personal role of news included the following:

At a practical level:

- News played a strong 'utility' role in terms of what was happening in an individual's vicinity.
- This typically included items like the weather, travel, or alerting people to issues that may affect their day.
- But also items that might impact their broader life such as finance, education, health, housing etc.
- Radio and local news were often used for day-to-day practical information, while TV and newspapers were relied on more for broader issues.
- The news was also seen as helping people make informed choices and decisions.
- These included practical, small, and short-term decisions in reaction to daily 'utility' information, and longer-term decisions, such as about how and where to live.

At an emotional level:

- News reassured participants - either that nothing bad had happened in their vicinity - or that they had been alerted and forewarned about an event.
- It also satisfied their sense of curiosity and interest in what was going on around them.
- The news had the emotional power to engage their emotions, typically through 'human interest' stories.

When there was a big weather warning a few weeks ago on BBC News, they listed all the schools that were closed the night before. It was about ten o'clock at night, so you could make all your plans for the next day, which were 'don't leave the house' (Age 36-50, C1C2, Belfast)

You know, a lot of it doesn't affect me and I think there's something about being blissfully ignorant to be honest. You can't do anything about half of it. So, maybe local news is the best news. You're going to find out what's relevant to you. (Age 36-50, C1, Wales)

The news was often seen to be delivering what was needed at a personal level, in terms of its practical, and 'utility' role. But participants also highlighted the negative side of news in terms of its stirring up concerns or fuelling anxiety.

The social role of news

News was a key means of social interaction and inclusion, and widely discussed in person or via social media. Participants did not want to feel ignorant or left out of the news conversation

Many participants highlighted the news as an important means of social interaction and inclusion. It was a topic of conversation among family, friends, and work colleagues, and this social dimension of the news had extended into social media. Users of social media would share and comment on stories, or read other people's comments.

Participants placed a lot of emphasis on the social role of news, and there was clearly a certain amount of social pressure not to appear uninformed or ignorant of what was going on in the world.

I think it's also the fear of missing out. As humans, we're always feeling like we're missing out on something. If there's any breaking news, you don't want to be the last one in the office, or just amongst your friends and family, where you're like, 'I haven't got a clue,' because you're, then, classed as a bit of a you know, if you don't know what's going on (Age 26-35, C1, London)

The social role of news included:

At a practical level:

- The social transmission of news was a way of raising awareness, and the level of social interaction around a story was an indicator of its importance.
- Social interaction around the news enabled people to verify information and enhanced their understanding of a story.
- It helped people interact and socialise by providing an engaging topic of conversation.
- The news could play a role in helping parents educate their children about the world.

At an emotional level:

- It was a way of bonding, through sharing and discussing the emotional impact of the news.
- It provided a feeling of social inclusion, through knowing the same news as the peer group.
- It allayed fears of missing out, or feeling excluded, by being uniformed or ignorant.
- Sometimes being 'first' with 'breaking news', or an 'authority' on the news, could provide a feeling of social status among peers, in a similar way as gossip.

The social role of news appeared to be fundamental and part of the fabric of daily life. This may be rooted in our evolutionary past, when it was important to make others in the group aware what was going on, particularly regarding dangers and risks, or even using 'news' as a means of group affiliation by sharing gossip.

Like, a couple of hours of not being in the know and you feel like, 'Oh, gosh'. You feel almost guilty, like, 'Oh my God, I really didn't know about that. That's awful' (Age 25-35, ABC1, Belfast)

I try and influence my kids, trying to get them to understand about the news (Age 50-65, C2D, Glasgow)

I think a bit of keeping up with the news lies in the social aspect. Just discussing stuff. With some stories, like the Madeleine McCann stuff years ago, everyone has an opinion (Age 18-25, C2D, Wales)

<u>The societal role of news</u>

The news could also play an important role in holding authorities, institutions, and individuals to account

The societal role of news included the potential to lead to wider change through raising awareness about pressing issues, helping audiences understand their nature, and changing people's perceptions, and potentially behaviour.

In addition, some participants talked about how the news helped them make up their minds during an election, and its role in the democratic process. However, a combination of low trust in politics, and perceptions of bias and partisanship in the news, meant that many questioned both its

influence and effectiveness in helping voters at election time, particularly in the light of the EU referendum experience.

It influences my life, it influences the way I voted, it influenced a lot of things. I'm a police officer, a lot of it's talked about, the government, the Conservatives, what Theresa May's doing, and so that influences in a big-, because my job's a big impact on my life, so for me, it does influence me, a lot of things they say, because it affects how I vote, it affects how I think, it affects a lot of things for me, it's big decisions for me, that I need news (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

I'm not sure it helps me, but you think back to some of those headlines that they've had before general elections and you think about the power that some of these media outlets have. News outlets, when you think of something that is Murdoch dominated, so you think about those headlines that they've put out before certain general elections. That's hugely powerful, it's made a huge amount of people make their minds up on that one headline. That's quite concerning that they have that much power and people are that way influenced (Age 36-50, AB, London)

If you're not informed, when it comes to voting for things, you can't make a decision. You need to make an informed decision and say there was no Internet or no knowledge, if I was illiterate or hadn't seen any news and somebody said, 'Right, tomorrow, we're all going to take a decision, we're going to vote this, this.' If you don't know what you're voting for (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

At practical and emotional levels, the societal role of the news was defined in terms of the following:

At a practical level:

- News could support the public interest by exposing issues that society needed to be aware of.
- It could (and should) play an important role in holding figures and authorities to account.
- It plays an important explanatory and educational role in understanding wider public issues.
- Theoretically, it plays an important role in helping citizens make electoral decisions.
- It can also play an important role in changing people's behaviour around important issues such as the environment.

At an emotional level:

- For some, particularly younger groups, the news had the potential to be inspiring in the way it reported significant social issues.
- It could, in theory, provide a feeling of reassurance that issues had been exposed or identified, and a sense of hope that they would be addressed.
- Conversely, the emotional result of such news was often increased anxiety by being made aware of problems and feeling powerless to do anything about them.
- For some participants, the news helped engender a wider sense of public, national and even global consciousness and belonging, which extended outside their immediate social circles.

I think they did about a twenty minute or half hour slot in the program, and then they did a separate program later on about all the homeless people. I used to always write homeless people off as people who just didn't bother, you know, doing that through choice, but after watching that, I really changed (Speaking about Channel 4 news) (Age 50-65, C2D, Glasgow)

3.4. Fundamental needs driving news engagement

Beyond innate human curiosity, three sets of fundamental needs emerged through the research, some more cognitive, others more emotional. These were defined as: a need to be aware and alert, to be stimulated and emotionally engaged, and comprehension.

3.4.1. Aware and alert

At its most functional and basic level, participants needed the news to make them aware of, and alert to, what was going on in their world at any given time

They saw the news as playing a vital role in making participants aware of important issues and alerting them to things that might affect them. This could be a local traffic report or the impact of global warming, depending on their interests and horizons. The news could also play a practical role in helping participants make decisions about their lives, whether large or small.

It's about being prepared. Just to be prepared, if we can (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

3.4.2. Stimulated and emotionally engaged

Alongside more functional needs, news also needed to stimulate and engage emotions

Participants would engage with the news partly because of a dramatic, exciting, or moving event, or sometimes to be provoked, or even inspired, by a story. At these times, participants' engagement with the news could become much more active and intense; they would often use additional news sources to follow a particular story. Examples included events like the Grenfell disaster or the shootings in America.

The research indicated that there could be a tension between these two sets of needs

Some participants recognised that the news needed to strike a balance between making you aware and emotional engagement. Some observed that, on the emotional side, news sources could be prone to sensationalism, over-dramatising the news to grab audience attention, and draw them in to that source, often with a commercial motive. There was a sense that the competitive intensity of the news ecosystem drove greater emotional intensity in the presentation of news, as different news outlets had to fight harder for attention and engagement.

The news is an entertainment industry in a way now. It's very competitive (Age 36-50, AB, London)

3.4.3. Comprehension

Participants also relied on the news to help them understand the world around them

This central function of the news had to answer three key questions. At its most basic the news needed to help participants understand 'the what', a straight-forward factual account of what had taken place. For some participants, this more basic factual description of events was how they defined what the news was, seeing news primarily as 'just the facts' and 'what has happened'. Beyond this the news also needed to help participants understand 'the why', explaining to audiences why a news event had taken place.

Or the Grenfell disaster, about who was responsible for the cladding. When they first of all said it was the fire in this apartment, and then it came out it was more than that (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

Finally, participants looked to the news to help them understand 'the so what?' in terms of conveying the implications and meaning of the news, primarily for them as individuals, but also for society. However, for many participants 'the so what?' could be relatively elusive as the news did not always convey the implications of a given story.

Comprehension needs are summarised in the figure below.

Fig. 3. Comprehension needs – three levels

Comprehension needs	Description of news needs	What looking for from news sources
Knowing 'the what'	• Most functional form of news • Factual report of what has happened • Straight forward accounting of news	• Brief update or summary of the news • Headline announcement of what has happened • Or a more detailed description of the facts of the story and sequence of events
Understanding 'the why'	• Beyond 'the what' and understanding 'the why' behind the news • Why things were happening • The explanation behind events • Prepared to invest more time in engaging with the news	• Analysis and explanation on top of factual accounting • More in depth elaboration of the causes behind events or reasons driving decisions • Can be delivered in shorthand, as a headline, which could be sufficient for some • Headlines sufficient particularly if implied explanation confirms pre-existing beliefs
Understanding 'the so what?'	• Implications and meaning of the news • Knowing what the impact of the news will be • For themselves or for the wider world	• Interpretation, commentary, and opinion • Bespoke in depth analysis designed to elaborate 'what this means for you'

'Informative', as in, like, local crimes or local finances, what's happening with the companies, as in Carillion going pear-shaped, how does that affect the locals? RBS shutting, how that's going to affect the local area? There are 30 banks in this area, so there are going to be a few hundred people out of jobs (Age 50-65, C2D, Glasgow)

4. How we engage with the news

4.1. Summary

How people engaged with the news varied widely and was influenced by a range of factors. In summary:

- There was a spectrum of news engagement, from light to heavy, driven by different needs and preferences.
- News engagement was driven by users' habits and routines, shaped by context of time of day, week, and the participants situation at the point of consumption.
- Even when news engagement became more dynamic, participants still used familiar sources.
- News engagement was highest and most habitual during the week, structured around the day with participants typically following recurring and stable habits.
- Morning was a peak in engagement with many accessing the news during their first waking moment, driven by a need to know what has happened whilst asleep.
- Daytime consumption was typified by grazing throughout, dipping in and out of different sources to keep abreast and updated of developments.
- Engagement in the evening and weekend varied widely, with some disengaging altogether, whilst others invested in actively engaging and consolidating their knowledge.
- Socio-economic group, life stage, and geographic location all shaped preferences, whether light or heavy, preferred genres or sources, and how it was consumed.
- Changes in technology had a fundamental impact on how participants engaged with the news as they now had access to 'the world' in the palm of their hand via personal devices
- As a consequence of these changes many observed that news was increasingly pushed at them via a wide array of sources and feeds, whether their own devices, or public places.
- Many participants did therefore not have to make a purposive choice to engage with the news as they would be exposed to it in some form throughout the day.
- The ubiquity and 'push' nature of news was driving increased levels of passive, non-conscious processing, with participants absorbing multiple sources at a superficial level
- However active engagement was still an important aspect for many participants, whether as a deliberate and regular habit, or when gripped by a salient story

Each of these will be discussed in more detail in the following sub sections.

4.2. Factors shaping news engagement

4.2.1. The spectrum of engagement

A spectrum of news engagement from light to heavy was evident across the sample

Light or heavy engagement could be a habit or a behaviour (i.e. where someone who was normally a light engager would become more engaged because of a particular story that had hooked their interest, such as a disaster, or during a specific context, such as an election). Some participants were innately heavier consumers of the news and tended to engage with a range of sources in depth, with some describing themselves as 'news junkies'. Engagement with the news was therefore dynamic.

However, due to the habit-based nature of news engagement, even when consumption became more dynamic it was still often done in a habitual way, using respondents' familiar sources.

Lighter engagement

Light engagement with the news tended to be characterised by:

- A news overview or quick briefing, when a headline was enough;
- Scanning at headline level only or registering breaking stories;
- Focused on finding out 'the what';
- More practical, just need to know, information;
- Often fitting it in with what they were doing, on the go, rather than paying focused attention;
- Tended to be more passively absorbed in the background; and
- Sometimes a discrete part of broader media consumption e.g. a news update embedded in an entertainment context.

Heavier engagement

Heavy engagement with the news tended to be characterised by:

- Heavier engagers tended to be curious about a range of topics;
- More looking to focus on finding out and understanding 'the why' and 'the so what?';
- Or a more detailed and in-depth description of 'the what';
- Greater value placed on in depth analysis and explanation, opinion and comment;
- Deliberately using different sources for specific news needs and genres;
- More active engagement, and focused on news rather than passively absorbing; and
- Prepared to make time for it, and invest greater effort in engaging.

4.2.2. News habits and routines

Across the sample, news consumption was based on habit and routine

The context of time of day, whether a weekday or weekend, and the participant's situation at the point of consumption, all served to shape news engagement around stable habits and consistent routines. Overall engagement tended to be highest and most habitual during the week, structured around daily routines, especially the morning when engagement appeared to peak.

> *It's probably just because Monday to Friday's work, so I've got my Good Morning Britain, and at work during the day the radio's on constantly, and then on an evening teatime while I'm getting dinner ready the news is on, and we always watch it while eating dinner (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)*

> *Is it just that we're like Pavlov's dogs? We wake up and have got to turn the television on to see what's on, we're programmed to do that now (Age 25-35, ABC1, Belfast)*

During the week, routines tended to be characterised by the following:

Morning: peak in engagement

Participants described how their first waking moment would include engaging with the news

Engagement first thing would often be via their smartphone which would be at their bedside. Many participants' news engagement peaked in the morning. Participants felt they needed to know what had been going on in the world while they had been asleep. The news during this time was seen as fresh, and therefore more engaging than later bulletins and updates, which would become repetitive as the day progressed.

I'm always engaged first thing in the morning. The first thing I see, that's the information I'm going to absorb and take forward with me for the rest of the day because there's always going to be some sort of top up along the line to be able to reignite you into that same story (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

Until this project, I hadn't really reflected on the pattern I have each morning, which is the same. Whilst waiting for the kettle to boil, I look at BBC on my phone and then I put on the Today programme on the radio. It's like a ritual actually, but I've realised how ritualistic I was (Age 36-50, AB, London)

Needs and platforms – most participants were looking for a relatively quick briefing and update on the key headlines to keep them abreast of developments overnight, and what may be coming up during the day. Practical 'utility' information was especially valued during this time, particularly in terms of traffic and weather reports.

A wide range of platforms appeared to be used during this time ranging from smartphones first thing on the morning, radio in the background whilst getting ready for the day, watching morning TV during breakfast, and then reading newspapers, both online and print, on the way into work, or listening to the radio in the car.

At that time in the morning, I'm just looking for a headline, like, the breaking news that might have happened (Age 25-35, ABC1, Belfast)

Yes, the news comes on at seven o'clock, I'll get the news on the radio in the kitchen and then you go into the living room and you'll get the GMTV and then I'm away at 7:30 (Age 50-65, C2D, Glasgow)

Day time: grazing throughout

Daytime news consumption was largely characterised by 'grazing' throughout the day, dipping in and out of different sources to keep abreast and updated

During the daytime participants would typically involve dipping in and out of the news, or simply coming across it through various encounters in their environment. Exposure to the news would often be going on in some form in the workplace whether newspapers in the staff room, being broadcast in the canteen, or shared work spaces, and in one instance, broadcasting news in the lifts. News would be a source of conversation among work colleagues.

Throughout the day participants would often be dipping in and out of the news as they took a break from their work, perusing via their smartphone, or engaging in a more focused way during their lunchbreak.

Mine's just sporadic throughout the day, it just depends if I get two minutes at work, if I get two minutes with the kids, or just whenever I get time (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

Yes. I tend to dip in and out on those sorts of moments where you've just grabbed a coffee, or you can't think straight, and so you tend to dip into Twitter, or BBC sometimes, or someone may say something and you think, 'Oh, that's interesting. I didn't catch that.' (Age 36-50, AB, London)

Needs and platforms - News needs during the daytime tended to focus on keeping updated and abreast of breaking news and developments. If participants had the time at lunch they could take this opportunity to catch up on the general news or follow certain stories in greater detail, either prompted by what they had heard during the morning, or a story brought to their attention by others.

The platforms used varied widely depending upon the context, but typically involved a combination of quick updates via smart phones, work computers, and also exposure to other sources in the work place, whether a shared newspaper, or flat screen displays. These were typically tuned into the BBC news channel.

Evening: unhook or reengage

Participants would either disengage altogether or actively reengage via evening bulletins

For some participants the priority in the evening was decompression after the working day, which included disengaging from the news. For these participants the wealth of entertainment available via the TV, including time-shifted and streaming services, were more engaging options.

For other participants, particularly older ones, the evening was their regular time for 'appointment viewing' of the news. These participants saw this time as an opportunity to view one of the evening bulletins, usually via the main channels. This type of engagement with the news tended to be relatively active, with participants paying focused attention throughout.

Needs and platforms – TV was the dominant platform during the evening, whether for news or entertainment. The key evening bulletins tended to be the most preferred sources of news across the main channels. Participants were looking for a balance of both information and analysis to keep them informed about what was going on, but also help them understand more about what was happening, sometimes elaborating or clarifying a story that they may have caught sight of during the day. For a minority of participants contextual news programmes, like *Newsnight*, were a valued source during the evening, helping them to understand specific stories or topics in greater depth.

Supposing you listen to it in the morning, you've got all the breaking news, haven't you? So, you've got your news for the day that's in front of you. So, unless there's something breaking, it's not really needed… there's no need to watch in the evening much... (Age 36-50, C1C2, Belfast)

Weekends: taking a break or consolidating knowledge

Participants would either take a complete break or consolidate their knowledge of the news

For some participants the weekend was a time to take a complete break from the news. Recreation and other weekend routines were the priority, and if they did engage with news, it tended to be in a relatively lighter way, perhaps catching one of the weekend bulletins. For other participants the weekend allowed an opportunity to delve more deeply into the news and consolidate their knowledge on the week's events.

Needs and platforms - For participants who were lighter engagers at the weekend, a quick update would meet most of their needs, which could be from any platform or source they happened to come across. For heavier weekend users of the news, needs tended to focus on greater analysis, in-

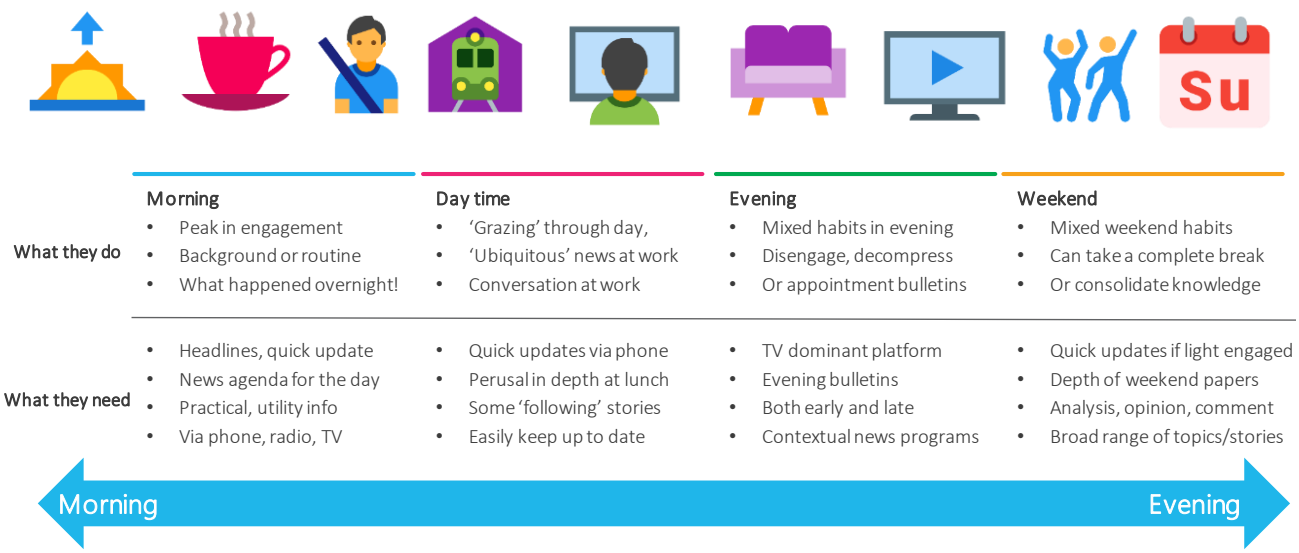
depth explanation, comment and opinion, which was often delivered by newspapers more than any other sources. For these participants the weekend papers, in particular the Sunday editions, could play an important role in fulfilling this need, and the Sunday papers were a regular ritual for some.

Saturday and Sunday's just we're never in, so I just do not see. Might read an odd newspaper, but totally depends what I'm doing (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

I buy papers at the weekend. I buy a few, and it's part of my relaxing time at the weekend, actually. So, I read the news. I read the supplements (Age 36-50, AB, London)

These patterns and resulting needs are summarised in the figure below.

Fig. 4. Summary of news consumption patterns and needs



4.2.3. Influence of social factors in shaping news engagement

Socio-economic group, life stage, and geographic location all had a bearing on what news sources participants engaged with and how they engaged

Although some clear patterns were apparent across the sample, it is important not to overgeneralise, as exceptions were also evident. But despite this caveat, the way in which a participant consumed the news, the sources they used, and the topics they were interested in, revealed a lot about them in terms of their values and outlook, as an indicator of their social class and educational attainment, and their technology age, all of which shaped their news behaviours and preferences.

Very different kinds of people read those compared with those. They're for the posh and educated (the broadsheets) and they are more light hearted and full of gossip (Red Tops) (Age 36-50, C1, Wales)

Socio-economic group

In terms of socio-economic group, the following tendencies were observed across the sample:

ABC1

- More news engaged with news on an ongoing basis
- Used a wider range of sources
- Sought deeper understanding and insight, characterised by an 'educated' curiosity
- Interested in 'broadsheet' analysis, opinion and comment
- More engaged with contextual, in-depth, or specialist coverage
- More interested in 'serious' news such as politics, UK, international etc.
- Topic interests relatively less defined by personal horizons

C2DE

- Could be less news engaged
- More interested in 'general news', and just keeping updated and abreast
- Drawn towards certain topics such as local news, entertainment/celebrity/sport
- Also took an interest in wider issues if they felt they affected them directly e.g. schools, NHS, immigration etc.
- Could become more intensely engaged during major national events such as an election or going to war
- Relatively more personal and practical: 'how does it affect me?'
- Preferred more 'entertaining' styles of delivery
- Delivered in their style of language in terms that they understand

I work for the local council, and my wife works for the NHS, probably two of the most talked about things within Leeds, it's generally Leeds City Council or it's generally about the NHS, so it's always good to find out and get information so you can assimilate that, and understand how it's got an effect on your actual day-to-day working life more than anything else (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

Life stage

In terms of life stage, the following tendencies were observed across the sample:

'Empty-nester' stage

- Most news-engaged with a wide interest in news
- Had more time to engage; 'more interested' as they got older
- Habits had formed and settled, but could still evolve with technology
- Engaged with more sources and in greater depth
- More likely to use long established formats such as print and scheduled bulletins

Family stage

- Could be the least engaged, as time poor, busy lives, juggling children and work
- Had the least time to consume and had to 'grab' news on the go
- Quick updates and headlines often had to be 'good enough'
- If more engaged had to 'make time' for it in the evening or at the weekend
- Sometimes engaged more as having children increased their social & political engagement in topics such as NHS and education

I've found that the way I consume news has changed. Pre-kids, it was actually about a routine, experience of actually reading the news. Go to the pub on a Sunday afternoon, get some papers in, couple of pints, leisurely read the papers. I quite like that, but now, two kids, I haven't got any time for that. I'm flicking through things really quickly. I manage to get a bit of an overview so I know what's happening. Maybe I'm getting old, I quite like local news these days. I like to know what's happening in my area probably more than national (Age 36-50, AB, London)

Pre-family youth

- Digital and social media natives
- Exclusively online and often via smart phone
- Had the time and inclination to engage widely with news to satisfy curiosity or out of a sense of idealism
- Could be deliberately 'alternative' in choice of sources
- But could have more limited interests and be focused on themselves and their own life

I dare say, when you were younger, you'd maybe just read the paper or catch a bit of news, but when you get older, you study it a little bit more. I think it's because, when you're younger, it doesn't really affect you... (Age 50-65, C2D, Glasgow)

Well, it's never really relevant to anything I do most of the time, so it doesn't bother me, the only thing I really watch is the weather nine times out of ten. I can't see the point of it, for me (Age 18-25, C2D, Wales)

It is important to note that with younger participants their habits were not yet fully formed. Their news habits were constantly evolving and were likely to evolve further over time to reflect both their changing personal context (e.g. studying, children, retirement) and the developing technology which was a fundamental driver of change in this area.

<u>Location</u>

Geographic location had an important bearing on which topics participants engaged with and their news horizons

London participants tended to be more international and global in their news horizons, taking an interest in world events and global issues outside of the UK. Regional towns like Peterborough or Aberystwyth tended to have a greater interest in local news. Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales were also engaged in 'nations' news, and drawn towards sources that delivered the required regional focus and coverage.

Look how much people of Scotland got into the news after we were voting on independence. Everybody really was interested in politics and that's all that everybody talked about for about a year (Age 50-65, C2D, Glasgow)

However, all the participants still expressed interest in the national picture and news across the whole of the UK. In terms of meeting more local and regional needs, these were satisfied through a combination of BBC, and to an extent ITV local news, local and regional newspapers, and local radio.

Participants viewed local news as a valued contrast to national and international news in terms of offering more potential for positivity

As well as covering more innately positive stories than national and international news, the localness of the news itself also offered the possibility of getting involved and influencing outcomes, as well as making participants feel part of the community. This was highly valued when other news was often seen as overwhelmingly negative and depressing, and where many participants felt powerless in terms of being able to influence outcomes.

4.3. How engagement is changing

4.3.1. The impact of changes in technology

Participants observed how broader changes in technology have had a fundamental impact on how they engaged with the news. They now had access to 'the world' in the palm of their hand

The relevant changes included the following:

- **Hyper connectivity** – in line with wider society, participants were fully networked and connected using multiple means of communication through which the news was transmitted
- **Consumed via handheld devices** – handheld devices, particularly the smartphone, played a key role in how participants accessed and consumed the news. They now had constant access to 'the world' in the palm of their hand
- **Ability to filter information** – participants had utilised technology's capacity to filter information based on their own preferences; whether selecting news sources or individual journalists to follow via social media, or setting content preferences via a digital source
- **Exposure to a wider range of sources** – at the same time many participants remarked on how the range and number of sources they were exposed to had increased over time, particularly when consuming news online via search and social media, where news would often be 'pushed' at them via these platforms

I'm never more than two metres from my phone. So, if anything happens, or I want to check, I probably check the news a hell of a lot more than I think (Age 36-50, AB, London)

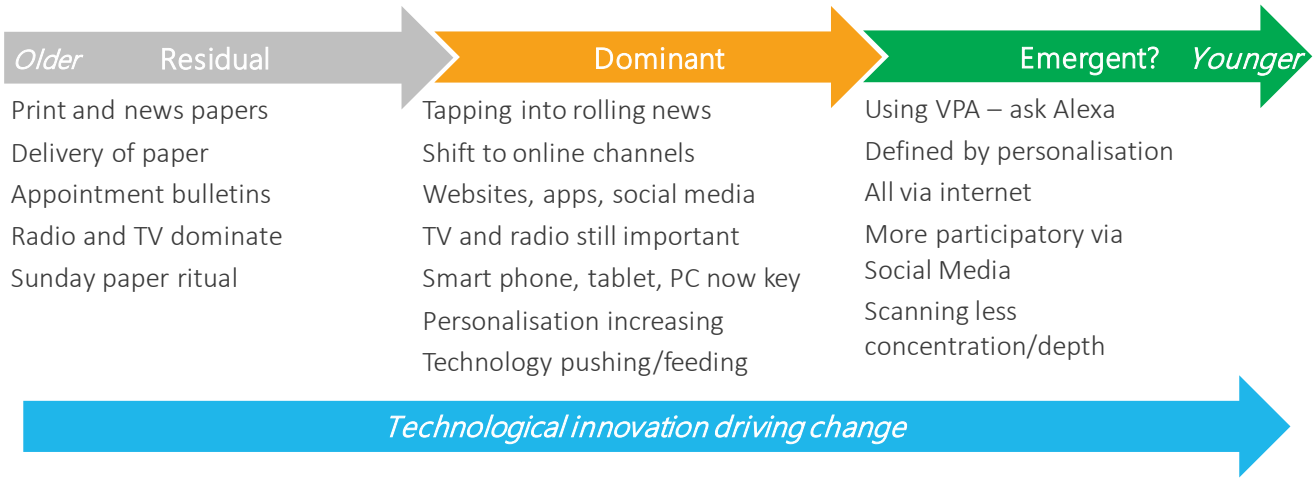
4.3.2. Technological innovation driving long term change

Over the generations, innovations in technology have driven transformative changes in how news is engaged with, and will continue to do so

Technology has always been a significant driver of change in this area and is likely to continue to shape how news is engaged with going forward, but exactly how these emergent changes will manifest themselves, and their implications, are unknown.

These shifts and resulting patterns of engagement are illustrated in the figure below:

Fig. 5. Technical innovation driving long term change in news engagement



One of the key impacts of technology was changing levels of passive consumption of news, which is explored in more detail below.

4.3.3. Passive versus active consumption of the news

One of the areas the research was required to explore was the degree to which engagement with the news was passive versus active. Participants were asked to consider this question during both the pre-task exercise and as part of the group discussion. Suggested definitions of what was meant by passive an active consumption were provided to aid reflection and discussion:

- **'Active'** - e.g. you might actively engage with the news because you sit down to watch a news programme, you focus on reading through a newspaper, you engage in-depth with a particular website or app etc.'
- **'Passive'** - e.g. you might absorb the news because the radio is on in the background at home or in the car, you come across a story on your news feed on email or social media, or you pick up a paper on the train and skim through'

Passive absorption and low attention processing

The ubiquity and 'push' nature of news was driving increasing levels of passive absorption and low attention processing of news, including in a non-conscious way

Participants observed that news was increasingly pushed at them via a wide array of sources and feeds, whether through their own devices, or being displayed in public places. This ubiquity and push nature of news meant that many participants did not have to make a purposive choice to engage with the news, as they were frequently exposed to it in some form throughout the day.

Some participants described the news as being like advertising, and felt that it was increasingly hard to 'escape', and get away from news these days. In the light of these characteristics the research indicated that passive absorption and the low attention processing of news has increased.

I think it is quite hard to escape. I mean, I am on Facebook but not being on it is a way to really, kind of, cut down on this oversaturation of news. I think that's a problem that I've dealt with occasionally, where there has just been constant information fed to you. (Age 26-35, C1, London)

All the passive news that you consume, you're not really listening to it. It's constantly going into your ears and into your brain. That is building up a picture, whether you're paying attention or not, and you believe it, because when you get bombarded with something constantly, right, you take that in as if it's the truth, and that's the problem with the news now (Age 50-65, C2D, Glasgow)

I think I switch off to anything that I'm not interested in. It's only the news that I actually want to know about that I absorb. I passively listen to the news, and passively engage in news. If it's not of any interest to me, and politics wouldn't be a big thing of interest to me as well, so I just, like, it's non-active listening, if you get me (Age 25-35, ABC1, Belfast)

I'm not going on social media to find news, like this type of news…you unconsciously absorb it. (Age 25-35, ABC1, Belfast)

Multiple sources and superficial engagement

As a result of passive absorption participants appeared to take in news from multiple sources, often at a superficial level

In the light of increased passive absorption few participants were using only one or two sources of news; most appeared to take in news from multiple sources, sometimes without attributing or registering the source itself.

In addition, participants would often only engage with the content at a superficial level, as headlines were scanned or only a snippet of information was processed. However, passive absorption and low attention processing of the news could be enough for the participant to feel relatively informed at a basic level about the major things that had happened that day.

There's the news app on the iPhone so it, kind of, picks from all the sources it has and then brings you the breaking one. It's not a specific one you use. It's, kind of, a news app (Age 26-35, AB, Glasgow)

Active engagement

Active engagement was still an important aspect of participants' interaction the news, whether as a deliberate and regular habit or when gripped by a salient story

This could be a deliberate habit; for example regularly watching the evening news, or could be triggered by a particular story that had caught their attention. Major breaking news could trigger intensely active engagement, such as the Florida school shooting. In these instances, participants would often closely pursue a given story over a period of time, and through multiple sources. However, even when switching to heavier engagement in this way, the sources selected still tended to be ones that they would habitually use, rather than trying new ones.

Given the propensity for younger groups to engage with the news via their smart phones, whether via feeds on their home screen, news apps, or social media platforms, this research suggests that passive and low attention processing of the news is likely to increase going forward.

5. How sources are selected: why people go to different sources

5.1. Summary

In terms of the selection of specific sources, several factors were relevant in driving choice, from the context within which news was consumed, to brand preferences and expected quality of the source. In summary:

- Selection of specific sources was driven by the outcomes to four key decisions related to context of engagement, behavioural habits, platform, and brand preferences.
- Platform and interface was a key factor in shaping choice via a combination of convenience, usability, and engaging formats.
- Brand played a pivotal role in driving the selection of sources in terms of expected content, quality, and style of news reporting.
- To become a preferred news brand, it needed to satisfy five key areas to be 'right for me'.
- These five key areas included sharing the participants values, cognitive fit with their intellectual abilities, behavioural convenience, social compatibility, and emotional tone.
- A brand also had to meet required quality requirements which broke down into two broad categories, namely the 'robustness' of the reporting and the 'delivery' of the news.
- The emphasis placed on 'robustness' of reporting indicated that in the main audiences wanted 'the truth' from the news.
- Expectations of quality varied across different genres, with participants valuing specific attributes depending upon their engagement with a specific genre.
- Broadcast brands were relatively well regarded with participants valuing their reputation for trustworthy, high quality and credible news, in particular the BBC, but also other brands.
- Newspaper brands were seen as relatively partisan and biased in their delivery of the news although this was recognised as part of their appeal to a given newspaper audience.
- Participants were largely unfamiliar with online-only news brands and therefore unable to judge their credibility compared to more established sources of news.
- However, consumption of news via social media appeared to have increased participants exposure to online-only brands and other non-established and unknown sources of news.
- Taken together a multiplicity of sources of news were used for different purposes, at different times, and across a range of contexts

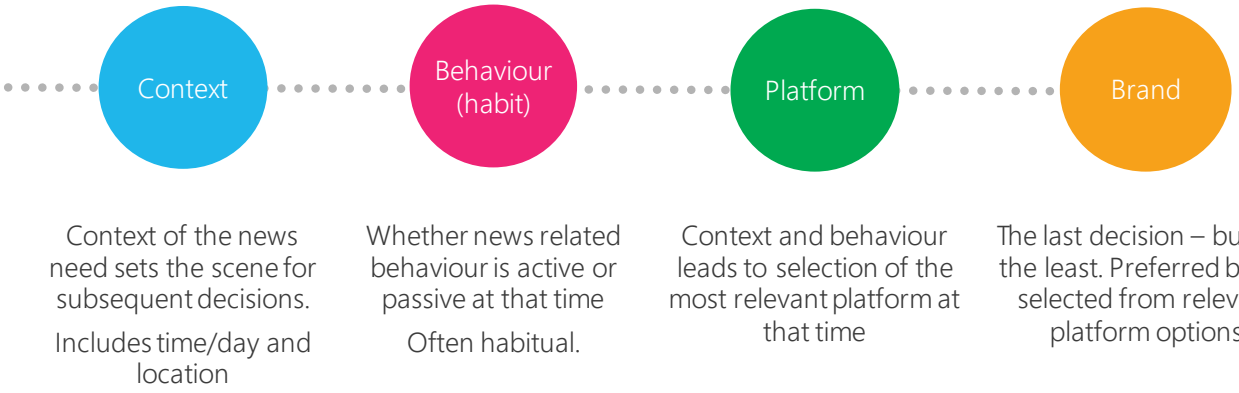
Each of these will be discussed in more detail in the following sub sections.

5.2. The drivers for choosing sources

The selection of specific sources was driven by the outcome of four decision points

These decision points are illustrated in the figure below:

Fig. 6. Source selection driven by the outcome of four main decision points



The choice of source was driven by a coming together of interconnected decision points, starting with the context the participant was in at the time, and ending with their brand of choice.

Because I work in the van all night and the radio is on so it's on all night anyway, I don't need to seek it out (Age 36-50, C1, Wales)

You watch the evening one when you're having your evening meal. You've got a wee bit more time. In the morning you're getting up, you're getting ready, you're going to work (Age 50-65, C2D, Glasgow)

I tend to watch the breakfast news while I'm having my breakfast. Anything really takes my interest and I want to know more, then I'll probably go online and Google and search it out (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

5.3. The role of platform and interface in shaping choice

Platform and interface were critical in shaping choice, driven by a combination of convenience, usability and engaging formats

Getting and accessing the news today couldn't be easier, and the availability of news across multiple platforms greatly enhanced the convenience of a given source. Some brands, like the BBC, really delivered on convenience by making the news available across all devices and platforms.

Participants were drawn towards a platform or interface for a number of reasons. These included convenience in terms of availability and access, how easy it was to use in terms of format and layout, and how engaging the medium was, for example whether it included video.

Ongoing habits also played a central role as preference was usually then driven by what participants were used to using. Personalisation of a digital interface, and familiarity with its layout, all served to further entrench preferences and habits.

Social media platforms were a highly convenient means of accessing the news, particularly, though not exclusively, for younger groups

Users of Facebook in particular would tend to look at the platform on a regular basis anyway for wider purposes and come across news content either shared by friends or deliberately followed by the user. Twitter also played a role with some following specific journalists or commentators that

would be providing them with various news content. Some participants claimed that they would hear about a news story on social media before they came across it in mainstream news sources, usually because a friend had shared it first.

Sources that required minimal behavioural effort from participants, were fundamental in shaping the choice of which news source to access. This in part explained why both the smartphone and social media had become an increasingly important means of accessing the news.

5.4. The role of brand in driving preferences

Brand played a pivotal role in driving the selection of sources in terms of expected content, quality and style of news reporting

As with other consumer categories brand was used as a decision making short cut to a preferred source that would deliver what the participant wanted.

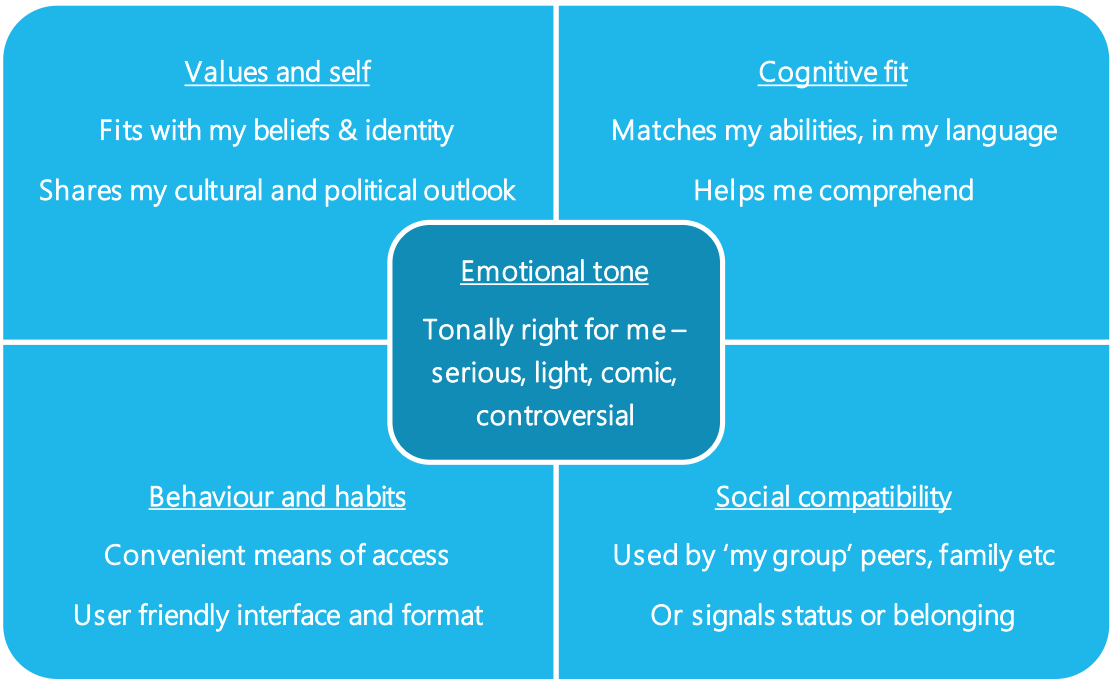
Established news brands were seen as a vital source of relatively reliable and reasonable quality news in what was a fragmented and diverse news landscape. Some participants claimed that they would verify news via social media by using more established brands particularly the BBC, although some of this was likely to be over claim on the part of the participant. Nevertheless, established news brands carried with them an expectation of professional and formal journalism that reassured participants that the news they were engaging with was of high quality and credible.

In addition, some news brands were also sought out for providing the news in a more entertaining and humorous way. This could be a particular newspaper that was known for its sometimes-mocking stance towards certain new stories, or sources such as breakfast TV where the humour and entertaining delivery of the main presenter was valued by audiences.

Finally, certain news sources were also chosen for their reputation for a specific genre of news whether international or celebrity and entertainment news.

From the overall analysis a model was developed to help explain why participants were drawn to a specific brand. Essentially a preferred brand needed to satisfy five key areas in order to be judged right for an individual. These five key areas are outlined in the figure below:

Fig. 7. A brand had to deliver on five key areas to be deemed 'right for me'



5.5. How quality criteria drive preferences

Quality criteria were a key driver of preference and were closely associated with brand

Overall, quality criteria broke down into two broad categories: the 'robustness' of the reporting and the 'delivery' of the story. How the quality of a specific brand was ultimately judged was of course highly subjective.

'Robustness' of reporting

Robustness was defined in the following terms by participants:

- Accurate, timely, and up-to-date
- Researched and evidence-based, with visible proof and corroboration, such as an eye-witness report, video footage, or expert assessment
- Sourced, with clear provenance of evidence
- Potentially including a range of opinions, or at least 'two sides' of the story

Participants tended to assume that TV and radio delivered on robustness, but newspapers and online had to display the credentials of robustness more overtly, to explicitly reassure participants on this count.

'Delivery' of the story

Delivery of the story was defined in terms of:

- The way in which the story was communicated including how engaging and easy to understand it was

- The appearance of presenter in terms of professionalism, whether they looked competent, serious, authoritative, used an appropriately serious emotional tone, and were interrogative when necessary
- For more entertaining sources the likeability and relatability of the presenter: relaxed, humorous, conversational, etc.
- The literacy level of source: was it easy to understand, clear, or well-written?
- The style and tone of the report and whether it was delivered in an entertaining or humorous way, or conveyed as a powerful and dramatic narrative and so forth.

I like the idea of credibility, you know, the person who is telling you the news is actually telling you the news. They're not making it flippant, they're not making it light hearted and all this they need to and they can adapt to that, sort of, time of the delivery (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

This sounds silly. I like when they bring the news they're wearing a suit, and it's all respectable, and that helps you believe a bit more, which sounds a bit stupid (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

5.6. Expectations of quality by genre

Quality criteria varied across genres; participants valued different attributes based on the particular genre they were engaged with

These are summarised in the figure below:

Fig. 8. Summary of quality criteria, by genre

The emphasis placed on 'robustness' of reporting indicated that in the main audiences wanted 'the truth' from the news. Veracity was the most sought-after ingredient in news. This included both 'serious' news, but also entertainment news where avid consumers of the genre would still want 'the gossip' to be true.

However, of all the genres explored in the research, politics was where this quality of the news was felt to be falling short in that ultimately participants wanted the truth and felt that they were not getting it. This was generally attributed to politicians rather than the media, although some

newspapers could be seen as a distorting influence in the context of this genre, due to their partisan and politically biased stances.

You want to hear the facts, don't you? You don't to hear the laws, the bi-laws and the subsection, this, that and the next thing. You want, 'This is what we've got, this is how we're doing it. This is what it's going to achieve.' It's got to be to the point. The main in the street doesn't understand all the laws in politics and the words and that that go with it. They want facts and to make sure that it's understandable (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

Look at an interview with Theresa May and ask her give a direct quote on something, she goes round the roundabouts, you never get a figure, you never get a direct, 'This is what's going to happen.' It's like, 'Well, this, this, blah, blah, blah,' you never get, 'This is what it is.' Never (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)

Broadcast brands

Broadcast brands were generally seen as providing high quality and credible news

The research did not aim to provide exhaustive and comprehensive feedback on specific sources however a summary of why participants were drawn towards individual broadcast brands, and also criticisms of those brands, is provided below.

Fig. 9. Summary of feedback on specific broadcast brands

BBC NEWS	• Relatively impartial and neutral in approach, providing high quality, reliable and trustworthy reports, from world to local news. • Offered a wide range of formats, platforms and topic coverage making it a highly convenient and broadly appealing brand • However the BBC could be accused, by both sides of the political spectrum, of being biased • Some participants questioned whether the BBC was pro establishment or biased towards the Government due to funding mechanism
sky NEWS	• Seen as professional, comprehensive and high quality, trusted and factual, on a par with other TV news brands • Highly convenient brand available across a range of platforms and devices including a news app • Seen as a popular brand with mass appeal and good for breaking news • But potentially subject to bias through its commercial nature and also associations with Rupert Murdoch
4 News	• Seen by those that watched it as unbiased and well regarded within the TV news category • Liked by heavier users for providing in depth and investigative reports on important issues • Appreciation of time given to more in depth reporting with specific reports praised for their high quality • Interrogating style of reporting can be seen as excessively adversarial and disruptive
itv NEWS	• Seen as a high-quality news provider, trusted as a brand with some perceiving it as 'getting to the truth' • Delivered in a slightly lighter and more entertaining way compared to other brands, which for some was an appealing attribute • Offers some regional and local coverage
ALJAZEERA FOX NEWS CNN	• Other broadcasters such as Al Jazeera, Fox, CNN, and Russia Today, were rarely used in the sample • However those that did saw them as valuable counter points to mainstream UK or western centric brands.

On the TV, that's interesting to see how they view the world, because CNN is a different country altogether, and how they see the same story that's been put here (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

It depends very much what channel you're watching. I mean, I find if I watch BBC or Sky coverage, it tends to be much more serious and probably a bit more political, whereas if you watch, like, ITV it's very much more gamey and kind of frilly (Age 26-35, C1, London)

Channel 4 News go in depth a bit more. It's a bit different, Channel 4, they speak to you like you're, they're not patronising, they're not dumbing it down. You get the whole thing and they'll go in depth on certain things every night (Age 26-35, C1, London)

Newspaper brands

Newspaper brands were regarded as much more tailored to specific audiences, in particular according to educational attainment and political outlook

Newspaper brands were seen as highly partisan and sharply defined by their political stance and ideological outlook. They were generally regarded as the most prone to potential bias in how they reported the news. However, their partisan treatment and interpretation of the news was part of their appeal amongst their given audiences, and a key reason why they were chosen by their readership.

I think you'll find people, to be honest, probably because of their political views, I don't know, but you find that people that tend to buy a particular paper, tend to stick with that paper. (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

Everyone's trying for an audience, aren't there? Like, The Sun's probably working class, kind of, general everyday people, The Guardian and that are probably going for a more upper class, I'm a self-employed, self-made millionaire who owns a business, you know? They're all going for a different audience, aren't they? (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

I feel like The Sun and things like that, it's, like, I always think of it with a pinch of salt. Like, it's an entertainment paper. You look at some stuff like The Guardian, which is, like, probably, very middle-class, sort of, some of it can be very political, very well-written, very factual, very objective, things like that. Then you look at things like The Sun and it's just, like, it's a bit of fun? (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)

Newspapers were seen as the most polarised area of the news media

Non-users of particular brands could be highly critical of their outlook and stance towards particular issues and would often object to how such brands presented the news and characterised the issues they highlighted. Rejecters of such news brands could see them as a misleading, and at times malevolent, influence in our culture.

Newspapers were also seen as relatively prone to sensationalism and sometimes speculation

Newspapers more than other sources could be criticised as over dramatizing events. Whilst these attributes could make newspapers emotionally engaging amongst their particular audience, they could also trigger scepticism or even sometimes anxiety from that same audience.

Newspapers were also sometimes used as a source because of their entertainment value

Newspapers were also valued by some audiences for their more entertaining approach to the news, in particular Red Top titles, but also others. This could include their sometimes-mocking treatment of what might be regarded as 'serious' news stories, or when they focused on genres that were seen as intrinsically entertaining, such as celebrity news.

As already outlined with genres like celebrity news there was relative permission to be more speculative and 'gossipy' in the treatment of individual stories. Having said this, participants who were avid consumers of entertainment and celebrity news still wanted the such news to be

truthful, almost as much as those engaged in more 'serious' genres. Veracity could still be the most sought-after ingredient in celebrity news as participants were keen to know whether the 'gossip' was true or not.

A summary of why participants were drawn towards different categories of newspaper brands, and also criticisms of those brands, is provided below.

Fig. 10. Summary of feedback on categories of newspaper brands

Broadsheets	• High quality and credible sources – some use as an information source for work • Good for world news and offer specialist coverage of particular topic areas, specific stories, etc • Well-regarded online and digital products • Well written and high-quality articles – perceived as in-depth and analytical • Many felt or recognised that they can be inaccessible to mainstream audiences • As with other newspapers, broadsheets were also seen as partisan in their perspective
Mid range	• A credible yet accessible newspaper with broad coverage of issues – sitting in between the broadsheets and the 'red tops' • Easy reading – more of a magazine style and more light-hearted than broadsheets • Gives a clear opinion – has a strong journalistic style • Not politically correct – perceived by readership as being prepared to say 'what others only think' • Comprehensive – covers wide range from politics, entertainment and sport • 'Right-wing' bias and conservative in outlook • Plays to the readership rather than providing balanced news
Red Tops	• Bring the news to audiences who are likely to be turned off by more in-depth sources • Easy and quick to read – requires less investment in time as well as effort, very accessible – via straightforward language • Not boring – keeps it entertaining/fun, cheaper to buy than other newspapers and available in work common rooms/public spaces • Biased – on political lines and sensationalist and headline grabbing – opinionated and playing to their readership • Not particularly informative – do not explain issues and not always well written – including spelling and grammar mistakes • Focused on advertising and selling papers over journalistic integrity

(Talking about The Mail) People that are outspoken, people that are not afraid to ask questions, like you said, the politically correct environment we live in nowadays, you know, if you ask a question and people have thought about it but, 'No, I daren't ask it.' No, ask it. Go on. (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

People see The Times, and The Guardian, and the Independent as a bit highbrow, whereas The Daily Mail is accessible to all (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

Online-only brands

Overall participants struggled to judge online only news brands due to unfamiliarity

Social media platforms such Facebook and Twitter were not seen as news providers in themselves but platforms through which news was transmitted via other sources and brands. More detailed analysis of how participants regarded news via social media, and the impact of online more widely, is outlined in the next section, section 6.

Online-only news brands were defined as those that were only available online, as opposed to broadcast and newspapers, and the research included briefly exploring reactions to brands like Buzzfeed, The Canary, and the Huffington Post.

When it came to discussing online-only news brands, these were very rarely used across the sample and were largely an unknown quantity. Participants were typically unsure about their relative strengths and weaknesses compared with established news brands.

I've never heard of them (Age 36-50, C1C2, Belfast)

That Huffington Post, I've never heard of it, but even the name of it, are they having a bake off, you know? (Age 36-50, C1C2, Belfast)

I didn't even know BuzzFeed had its own independent content until now (Age 25-35, ABC1, Belfast)

Never used any of them (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

I've never looked at HuffPost in my life (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

It would be interesting to know how many people here have been on Buzzfeed before. I didn't know what it was (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

There was very limited feedback on specific online-only brands. Buzzfeed appeared to be the most familiar source and was generally regarded as a source of entertainment, with its main focus being on, sometimes speculative, celebrity news.

Well Buzzfeed is just ridiculous. Yes, Buzzfeed will never take responsibility, they'll say this is probably opinion (Age 36-50, C1C2, Belfast)

I don't trust Buzzfeed. I associate them with, sort of, humour and the way the report news, everything's in, like, twelve things. Everything's in twelve things or what these celebrities have said (Age 26-35, C1, London)

However, some London respondents had tried the Huffington Post as part of the behaviour change exercise and had been surprised at its quality in terms of delivering interesting stories, and its international coverage. In addition, the Huffington Post appeared to be a brand that would be cited in the mainstream media, which could potentially enhance its credibility overall.

Remarkably good, actually. I think it was quite good, quite interesting stories, lots of headlines but then you could read more into them, obviously. Then it also had quite a nice spread of international stuff. I saw some interesting stories from Australia, and some interesting stories from America that maybe I wouldn't have seen otherwise. I thought it was quite good. I was surprised, pleasantly surprised (Age 36-50, AB, London)

A lot of Huffington Post gets recited actually by the media. They seem to do it a lot (Age 36-50, AB, London)

However, it is important to note that whilst there was relatively little deliberate usage of online-only brands, participants were still potentially exposed to these brands via their social media platforms and feeds. This is discussed in more detail in the next section, section 6.

5.7. Multiple sources for different purposes

Multiple sources of news were used for different purposes, at different times

From the analysis taking into account all of the influencing factors discussed above, it was evident that participants would be taking news from multiple sources throughout the day and evening, whether actively selected or passively encountered. In terms of sources that were selected by participants often used different news sources for different purposes, and at different times throughout the week. This included across a range of different platforms depending upon situational context and preferences.

From the analysis a range of archetypal 'news journeys' have been developed to help illustrate the variety and multiplicity of news engagement in a given day, and how the range of contributory factors discussed above all served to shape usage. These are illustrated in the figure below.

Fig. 11. Archetypal news journeys

Paul, single 29 years old

Graphic designer

Light engager

As soon as Paul wakes up he looks at his smart phone

He sees headlines from different sources on his home screen, and then some news via his social media both a news brand he follows and news shared by others overnight

He takes the Tube to work and picks up a Metro newspaper which he scans through, dwelling on the details of shocking crime stories and the celebrity gossip pages, with only a brief scan of the main headlines

At work Paul often takes a break by briefly looking at his mobile phone. He might encounter some news via his social media and occasionally looks at the Guardian App, potentially following up on a particular story he heard that day

If he is not out in the evening then at home Paul's priority is to switch off from the working day

His preference is to watch a box set via Netflix and not engage with the news at all

However he will have one last look at his social media before going to sleep and may encounter some news via that platform

Martin, married, 3 kids, 53

Business manager

Heavy engager

Martin has a radio alarm tuned into Radio 4 and wakes up at 6.00am every day when the Today programme begins

He continues listening to the programme via his radio app on his way to work, but also reads his preferred paper, The Times, which he subscribes to digitally and actively engages with via his iPad on the train

News is broadcast in his office via a wall monitor tuned into the BBC which he occasionally captures a glimpse of

Martin's day is busy but if he gets a break at lunch he will look at the BBC news site via his work computer, or sometimes Google a specific story that has triggered his interest and look at the different sources that have covered it

On the way back from work he will sometimes listen to an afternoon news bulletin, typically PM via Radio 4 and his radio app

But at other times on the commute back from work Martin wants to decompress from work and doesn't want anything too serious. Instead he watches a downloaded programme via his iPad instead

In the evening Martin is focused on dinner with the family and if he doesn't have to work he may watch some entertainment on TV

He likes to watch the news at 10 most evenings as a regular habit and depending upon what is being covered may extend this into watching Newsnight which can provide the more in depth contextual news that he finds interesting

Morning → Evening

6. Overview of online and social media

6.1. Summary

In this research, we briefly explored the impact of online and social media on how participants engaged with news. The main findings are summarised below:

- The availability of online news, particularly via handheld devices, has had a profound impact on how news is accessed and processed.
- Online and social media exposed participants to a wider range of sources, offered greater personalisation, and increased levels of passive, non-conscious absorption of news.
- Both source selection and personalisation via digital interfaces were defining exposure and filtering news for participants, potentially driving an 'echo chamber' effect.
- Despite the availability of alternative sources, much of online news engagement still appeared to be via established news brands, both broadcast and newspaper.
- However social media users in particular were potentially exposed to a wider array of sources via various feeds they chose, news shared by others, and pushed by third parties.
- Social media platforms were not seen as news providers in themselves but as platforms through which news was transmitted via other sources and brands.
- Interaction around news via social media was a key activity, with the commentary often becoming the focus, highlighting a story's importance, and aiding interpretation.
- Unless from an established brand, participants generally claimed to treat news via social media with scepticism and to seek verification.
- However, the research suggests participants may be over claiming this behaviour when in fact they were absorbing more news non-consciously, and at face value via social media.

Each of these will be discussed in more detail in the following sub sections.

6.2. Impact of online

Online was continuing to drive significant changes in how news was accessed and processed

These changes were evident in terms of the following:

- **Increased exposure to a range of sources:** Online news feeds and sharing news via social media were exposing individuals to a wider range of stories and sources, including sources that were unknown to participants. This was particularly prevalent via smartphones.
- **Personalisation:** Personalisation was being used by some participants to filter the news and define their exposure, which had the potential to lead to an 'echo chamber' effect
- **Increased levels of passive absorption:** consumption of the news online appeared to have increased levels of passive, non-conscious and low attention processing of news, including non-attributable stories, and via unfamiliar sources. This was particularly the case when consuming news via social media which was popular amongst younger groups.

6.3. Social media and news

Social media was seen as delivering a number of benefits for engaging with news

The potential benefits of accessing news via social media included convenience and familiarity of the interface, and potential exposure to a wider range of sources. It's use tended to be highest among younger groups, although some older participants also accessed the news in this way. Social media was also sometimes seen as providing faster access to a story, before it was featured or encountered elsewhere in the mainstream media.

Sometimes social media was seen as covering news events that the mainstream media had missed altogether. A salient example of this at the time of the research was the BBC's non-coverage of NHS marches that had taken place, but which had been picked up by social media. This omission by the BBC was mentioned in a number of the research locations and for some was a signal of the BBC's potential bias towards the Government.

I feel like the BBC only report the things that they want you to hear. I feel like you see a lot on social media that's not reported on the news, like the most recent thing was the NHS marches. That was not reported on BBC News (Age 26-35, AB, Glasgow)

A lot of the time it feels quicker because if there is a major developing story then I will tend to go on Twitter because it will be on there a lot quicker than the conventional broadcasters. It's a bit more constant (Age 36-50, AB, London)

The good thing with Facebook is that it's friends who saw a story in a local paper or a police report. You usually get it before you'll ever see it on the news or in a newspaper because it's instant. Sometimes, it's more accurate because the news hasn't got a chance to put a spin on it (Age 50-65, C2, Glasgow)

Attitudes and experiences relating to social media news consumption can be summarised as follows:

- **News platforms rather than providers -** Social media platforms were not seen as news providers in themselves but platforms through which news is transmitted via other sources and brands.
- **Exposed to a wide array of sources** – Participants were exposed to a wide range of sources via feeds they had chosen, or news being shared by others, or pushed by third parties.
- **Social interaction around news was a key activity** - Users were playing an active role as transmitters of news, sharing, commenting, and circulating different stories.
- **Comments surrounding news were a focus of attention** – the comments and chat surrounding the story were potentially more of a focus than the news itself. Participants could use the social traffic surrounding news to help identify which stories were significant. Comments were also used to help understand and interpret the story, as well as sometimes being a source of entertainment in themselves. Ultimately the social media comments could become what was popularly believed and remembered about the story.
- **Participants claimed to seek verification** – some participants claimed that they would not take news processed via social media at face value, unless it was clearly provided by a trusted brand such as the BBC, or one of their trusted newspaper brands.

Reading comments valuable because then you get one clever person that actually goes into depth on everything, and you're like, 'Oh my God, I'd never have thought of that.' Because then when you can go back and read that, then you get a different point of view on what you've read. (Age 26-35, AB, Glasgow)

It's actually reading the comments and seeing-, I find there's something really pleasurable about how intelligent people are. I mean, you get into these long debates. I love when I see lots of comments. I can see the comments and just watch and hopefully someone says something ridiculously inflammatory, or stupid and then just watching them get rowdily set upon (Age 36-50, AB, London)

Sometimes, like, reading comments or-, because other people can have their opinion and you can read people's opinion, like, sometimes it does open your eyes a bit more. Like, you can read an article or something and then, sometimes, like, somebody'll say something in, like, a comment or something that you think, 'Actually, I might check that out.' (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)

While participants generally claimed to take news and information via social media with a pinch of salt, and to verify stories via more established brands, the research suggests that this may be over claiming on their part. The findings indicate that participants were absorbing considerably more news non-consciously and at face value via these platforms than they were aware of, and without seeking verification in every instance.

7. Audience challenges in processing the news

Participants raised a number of challenges they encountered when processing the news, and the extent to which it delivered to the core needs highlighted previously. The issues raised included:

- News overload and complexity, a lack of trust and perceptions of bias, negativity and fatigue, and the news media acting as a distorting lens on the world.
- Participants described the news today as being never-ending and everywhere, and increasingly pushed at them via an array of sources.
- News was also often dealing with complex and dynamic issues that were often fast-paced and constantly changing.
- Participants therefore felt challenged in terms of sustaining their attention and processing what the news was telling them. Attention rather than information was the scarce resource.
- News sources therefore had to work harder to gain audience attention which in turn could drive an increased propensity for providers to sensationalise and overdramatise the news.
- There was a broader crisis in trust which also featured in discussions and impacted how people regarded the news, in particular political news, as well as for news via online and social media.
- News was often seen as being negative, and often fatiguing, in particular the national political news, and international news, with some avoiding the news as a result.
- News was also seen by some as a distorting lens on the world, with a propensity to sensationalism and exaggeration that could warp perspectives.
- Online and social media generated further issues including shallow, fragmented engagement, increasing non-conscious absorption, and the echo chamber effect.
- Overall, TV and radio were trusted the most by participants, and in the light of trust issues many claimed a preference for established news brands as a relatively reliable choice.
- In the light of the challenges posed by these issues participants were often forced to fall back on their gut instincts and intuitions in an increasingly challenging news ecosystem.
- Confirmation bias, i.e. favouring information that confirms one's prior beliefs, became an even more powerful mental trait in this context

Each of these will be discussed in more detail in the following sub sections.

7.1. News overload and complexity

7.1.1. A busy news ecosystem

Participants described the news today as being never-ending and everywhere, and increasingly pushed at them via an array of sources

This characterisation was driven by 24/7 transmission via an array of outlets, whether scheduled bulletins or rolling broadcasts, across a wide range of platforms and devices, including both traditional and digital media. News was not only accessible via the participants own devices, it was also seen as widely available in public places and the work place.

So, I think the news is constant, 24/7. I don't think you can get away from it, you can't get away (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

Additional news channels, I think. It used to be, years back, I mean obviously, basically it was just BBC News, either on the radio or the television. Then you had the advent of ITV, came much more news-conscious, I think. Then, obviously you had Channel 4, Channel 5, Sky News. You've got a much broader scope of it (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

I think it's just everywhere now, I don't think there's really a break from it, I wouldn't say (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

It's just there all the time, you can't escape the news now. The phone or 24/7 on the TV, newspapers (Age 36-50, AB, London)

You know, you go onto social media, you get something. You put the telly on, guaranteed, something's going to be the news. It's just everywhere, isn't it? (Age 36-50, C1, Wales)

It's the accessibility of media, the way you can, you've got a phone, you've got a laptop, you've got radio, you've got TV, all these things that are, if you go into a shop, they might have a news programme on (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

Added to this the news is often dealing with complex and dynamic issues that could be fast paced and constantly changing

There was always something happening that was a news worthy occasion, with developments in particular stories being reported as they unfolded. While news was seen as constantly changing in this way, it could also be seen as repetitive due to the wide range of news outlets reporting the same stories, and constant updates being provided by rolling 24-hour news, even when there had been no substantive developments in a given story.

I do think there's something about the way we consume news which makes it feel overwhelming. I think that feeds this sense of, there's this big stuff happening and it's too overwhelming. (Age 36-50, AB, London)

Participants therefore felt challenged in terms of being able to sustain their attention and process the news. Attention rather than information was the scarce resource

In the light of these characteristics participants could find it hard to sustain their attention and process what the news was telling them. Extensive research in cognitive psychology has shown how reliant people are on mental short cuts and heuristics (simplifying strategies) to form their judgements, which are often highly subjective and construed. These cognitive constraints have been compounded by the increased exposure to the news.

News sources therefore had to work harder to gain audience attention, which could drive a greater tendency towards sensationalism and overdramatising the news

As a result, news organisations had to work harder to acquire and retain audience attention in a very busy news ecosystem, which in turn could lead to an even greater tendency to sensationalise and overdramatise the news in order to hook attention.

So, it just feels to me like it's trying to get ratings. Everything in the news is trying to be sensationalist, and as I say, polarisation is more interesting than, maybe, a middle ground (Age 36-50, AB, London)

The news was often seen as exposing participants to complexity, but not always helping them understand it

By its nature, news was covering intrinsically complex topics and issues that many participants struggled to both comprehend and engage with. As already outlined, an important motivation for engaging with the news was to try and understand both what was happening in the world, and why it was happening, including understanding the potential implications. However, news did not always deliver the understanding audiences were hoping for, leaving them with a sense of confusion.

<u>News overload</u>

The main issues that emerged were characterised by:

Drivers of the issue

- The volume of sources and the frequency of news: more sources producing more frequent news, including 24/7 rolling bulletins & feeds
- The ubiquitous distribution of news, increasingly pushed at participants via personal devices through to public places such as the workplace
- Exposure to stories as they evolve results both in repetitive news and in shifting details as the news unfolds in real time, with different editorial slants and variable levels of accuracy

Impact on participants

- The relentless and saturated nature of news meant it became harder to keep up and process
- The greater array of sources meant it could be harder to pick out what mattered
- Inconsistent information as the story unfolded, including from multiple sources, meant it was harder to decide who or what to believe
- Too much information and choice could lead to a sense of cognitive paralysis as the participant was unable to decide what was credible
- Alternatively, participants had to apply their critical faculties to work out what to believe and take on board, requiring more skill to interpret, and energy and time to sift through
- Stories evolving over a long period of time could feel relentless and repetitive, and the effort involved in engaging can feel wasted if there is no genuinely new information
- All this effort leads to mental fatigue and a loss of confidence. It was therefore easier for participants to rely on their gut instinct or confirmation bias when interpreting the news

I don't need to know if a politician rubbed a lady's leg fifteen years ago. It's irrelevant to my life. There's so much news now, and, like you say, they've got these 24-hour news stations, they've got to fill it, haven't they? (Age 36-50, C1, Wales)

There is so much there, and then you scroll down and think, 'Oh, I want to read that bit'. You carry on reading what you're reading and then you can't find where you were, and, yes. So, I only have ten minutes, and it's now and again when I feel like there's something I want to catch up with, because it just sends my head spinning (Age 26-35, C1, London)

There's so much information about politics. I hate it. I hate it. Especially on, like, BBC, you cover politics and the first thing that comes up is Brexit (Age 18-25, C2D, Wales)

Complexity

In terms of complexity, the main issues raised by the research were:

Drivers of the issue:

- The news was understood to be communicating complex topics, whether political, economic or international
- Although these issues have always been complex, arguably they have become even more complex in a globalised world, and participants were increasingly exposed to this via the news
- The array of sources meant that different ones could be saying different things about the same topic, which increased confusion even further
- The nature of 24/7 transmission compounded this complexity as news items could be rushed out without any analysis of the context, which did not help participants understanding.

Impact on participants:

- Participants generally struggled to understand many of the intrinsically complex issues featured in the news
- If the issues being reported were 'closer' to the participant then they felt they had more knowledge to be able to evaluate, for example, the NHS
- But if the issues were further from their own experience then they became harder to comprehend, for example, international events or macro-economics
- Complexity and distance created a sense of powerlessness about many of the problems reported in the news, which could lead to a reluctance to engage
- Exposure to problems without any sense of resolution could simply raise levels of frustration, anxiety and fear in response to news.

It's a race to get the story and the headline. That's why quality is diminished all the time, (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)

I think, especially with the repetitive news, it's just repetitive and then there's no solution. Then you start hearing, from that same news, about other things that are negative about (Age 26-35, C1, London)

Well, I think they're looking for a story that isn't there, most of the news channels. They want to cover Brexit, but they haven't got any significant news. So, they try to make-up stories from the slightest rumour or pick up stuff (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

Different sources with different news, different takes on it. Then you start becoming cynical and you start thinking, which one's telling the truth? Then you just want to switch off (Age 26-35, C1, London)

So, I always find there's a lot of conflicting news, and for people who are not very aware of politics and aware of what's going on it can be quite dangerous, I think (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)

The problem that I think with online media is that everything's a race, and, you know, you're keeping up with the competition, because it's immediate. You have to get something out. You have to do something straight away, and it's easier to edit it, if you did something hastily and wrong (Age 25-35, ABC1, Belfast)

7.2. Lack of trust and perceptions of bias

7.2.1. A wider crisis in trust

Wider trust issues in society featured heavily in discussions and impacted how participants regarded the news, in particular the political news

Participants talked about these broader trust issues in two main respects:

- **A lack of trust in politicians** – whilst mistrust of politicians is not necessarily a new phenomenon, many participants remarked on how the impact of events like the EU referendum in particular had further undermined their trust
- **Exposure to scandals** – some participants also highlighted how the reporting of wider scandals had undermined their faith in public institutions and figures.

With this Brexit thing, you were led to believe, on the news, that it would be a good thing to vote 'in', and if you didn't, if you voted 'out', God only knows what would happen, instantly. The day we voted 'out', it was like something terrible had happened, and it was a dead silent. But, what's happened? Nothing (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

Well, look at Brexit, right? We all voted, but what did we vote for? We didn't know. There were no facts, we never heard about what was going to happen. I still can't believe that we all went out and voted like sheep, but there were no plans, no promises or discussion about what we were really voting for (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

It really annoys me, because I don't think half of it's true. I don't believe half of it (Age 26-35, C1, London)

Well, what do people trust now? You know, churches have been wrecked by scandal, police forces have been wrecked by scandal, politicians. People, in my opinion, are increasingly sceptical about anything, and especially authority figures (Age 25-35, ABC1, Belfast)

The Brexit coverage. They had a big bus covering with so many millions going to the health service, and that was all shown to be complete and utter nonsense. (Age 36-50, C1C2, Belfast)

The politicians, constantly. We used to trust them. Now you can't trust them. Now they're just lining their own pockets where you used to think they were to be made to work for you. (Age 36-50, C1C2, Belfast)

7.2.2. Trust and bias in the news

Participants wider sense of mistrust reflected back on the news, and diminished trust and potential bias in news sources were raised as issues across the sample

The wider trust issues highlighted by participants inevitably reflected back on the news itself in terms of an increased sense of doubt and mistrust about what the news was telling them. Trust issues were felt to be most pertinent in the context of online and social media platforms, through associations with fake news, and the use of news as click bait, but were also talked about with respect to other platforms, including newspapers and broadcast.

> *For me personally, I think there's definitely a decline in trust. Even news that you think are news, you always get twenty years down the line a scandal of actually wasn't the truth. (Age 26-35, C1, London)*

> *See, a lot of people stopped trusting the BBC after, like, when the Jimmy Savile thing came out. I know loads of people that don't trust the BBC anymore (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)*

Potential bias in news sources was widely talked about across the research, in particular with newspapers

As an issue, bias was felt to apply most strongly to the highly partisan newspapers, which were known for adopting a particular stance. However, loyal readers of a specific newspaper would invariably perceive bias in other brands, but regard their own preferred brand as conveying 'the truth'.

Questions of bias were also raised with respect to broadcast news brands including the BBC

Although widely regarded as relatively fair, neutral, and impartial, the BBC could still be criticised by both sides of the political spectrum for a suspected pro establishment or pro government stance, or sometimes for being overly 'liberal' in its outlook.

> *For me, the BBC has always had that sort of governmental, political bias anyway because obviously it's state funded, whereas the commercial channels tend to be a bit more perhaps less political, a bit more open on things. They're not beholding to a government for a licence fee (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)*

Having said this the BBC in particular was typically a highly trusted source of news, and despite some questions of bias, it was still seen as the most dependable and high-quality brand for news.

> *It's gone to the extreme now, to the point where there's so much, I'll go to one review. I almost need to then go, how much do I trust that review site or that news? I'll go and check it again somewhere else and you almost feel that you need to corroborate everything. Unless it's coming from the BBC (Age 36-50, AB, London)*

Some participants speculated about potential hidden agendas and conspiratorial manipulation of the news media

This was discussed in a number of respects whether in terms of establishment conspiracies, or interference by foreign powers and so forth. Whilst other participants could be sceptical about the existence of these influences, the discussion is perhaps an indication of the extent to which trust issues and questions of bias have filtered into people's imagination in the current climate.

There was some debate as to whether issues of trust were new or not

There was some debate in the groups as to whether politicians and public institutions were more or less trustworthy these days compared with the past. Some participants felt that the more intense scrutiny and transparency provided by the news was resulting in greater exposure to falsehoods and scandals than hitherto and, as a result of this transparency, public trust had been eroded further. Participants raised the question of whether people were savvier and more sceptical these days compared to previously when they may have been more accepting, and even gullible.

'We will now tell you the news'. There was no, kind of, I think, interrogation of political leaders. They were very deferential. I'm talking probably the 50s and 60s more than more recently (Age 36-50, AB, London)

There wasn't all this news years ago, so you automatically just believed… There wasn't really a way to check it (Age 36-50, C1C2, Belfast)

That's maybe that it's not less trustworthy, it's more that we're more informed, you know. It's, like, we were maybe gullible back in the day, because that's the only source you had (Age 25-35, ABC1, Belfast)

Lack of trust

The main issues raised by the research were characterised by the following:

Drivers of the issue:

- The broader crisis of trust in politicians and society was evident in discussions and inevitably reflected back onto the news itself
- The scrutiny of the news, and the resulting increased transparency that resulted, meant that audiences were more aware of scandals and falsehoods across society
- More sources and news in general also highlighted obvious inconsistencies which prompted the question of who or what to believe
- Online and social media were the least trusted news platforms compared to traditional TV and radio, partly through associations with fake news
- 'Fake news' was talked about in groups as a phrase that was being used mainly in America, and strongly associated with online and social media, and to a far lesser extent the tabloid press
- Some participants had also experienced or were aware of the use of news as click bait, in particular celebrity news, to grab audience attention.

Impact on participants:

- These trust issues added to participants general sense of scepticism, cynicism, and doubt about public voices including the news media
- Some participants would claim to disbelieve what was being said in the news as a result
- Participants were unsure whether 'fake news' was a significant issue or not. Nevertheless, usage of the term was another reason for them to doubt the news and withhold their trust
- To compensate participants would also fall back on established and relatively trustworthy brands such as the BBC to deliver reliable and credible news in this context.

There was a time they were putting things on Facebook, such and such a celebrity died, is dead. You know, and you would Google it and it was a lie (Age 36-50, C1C2, Belfast)

You've got to be sceptical with anything you read online (Age 36-50, C1, Wales)

I think sometimes they put fake news on Facebook so you click on them (Age 18-25, C2D, Wales)

It's so easy to just scroll [on social media], and then you see some rubbish, and you don't know what's right or wrong. You don't know what's true or false (Age 18-25, C2D, Wales)

I said that because you go on Facebook and stuff, and, say you've got the Mirror or something, and it'll say something like 'can you believe what's happened with this woman?' and then you click on it and it's like a goat bumped into her (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

I was reading the news a couple of weeks ago, and this big thing about something called fake news. I didn't know. I read an article the Queen had died, and I was telling everyone at work, and they were like, 'What are you on about?' and 'No, it's fake.' (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

The whole fake news things has really exploded over the last nine months or so. I feel like it's become such an overwhelming movement now that people are questioning more what they're seeing, Facebook and the social media streams and questions around propaganda and influence from foreign, it's quite a hot topic now (Age 36-50, AB, London)

Perceptions of bias

In terms of perceptions of bias the main issues raised by the research were:

Drivers of the issue:

- Questions of bias were raised in terms of a given news brands selection of the news agenda, or its treatment of stories
- Perceived bias arose from a range of forms: editorial, commercial, establishment (the BBC) and political correctness (The Guardian)
- The proliferation of sources meant that disparities and inconsistencies were more visible and this served prompted questions about bias
- Newspapers were well known for their partisanship, but participants still questioned the potential influence of commercial or editorial agendas whether Murdoch or Osborne etc.

Impact on participants:

- As with trust issues, questions of bias added to participants general sense of scepticism, and doubt about what the news was telling them
- Some participants claimed to disbelieve what was being said in the news as a result

- Some would also claim to compensate for potential bias by using a wider range of sources, to enable them to arrive at a more balanced view
- Others would tend to fall back on established brands that were seen as relatively impartial and objective, such as the BBC
- Some participants claimed that they were simply aware of the bias of a particular sources, and would take this into account when engaging with the news via that source.

They're (BBC) very selective. A few years ago, there was Jimmy Carr, right, copping a wee bit of tax avoidance, and then two years ago the Duke of Westminster, and he's got billions of pounds, and didn't pay a single thing in Inheritance Tax. You didn't find that on the general news, did you, because he's got major influence, obviously, in the government (Age 36-50, C1C2, Belfast)

I looked across various newspapers, and you can get the same story in three or four different newspapers, and every single one of them will read differently. There are a lot of ways to actually absorb and read news, but trying to get the truth out of all four would give you a totally skewed understanding of what's actually being talked about (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

I trust 90% of what they say [BBC], because I think they do have a slight leaning towards the political establishment, and the political right (Age 18-25, C2D, Wales)

Yes. I think sometimes you've got two different news channels reporting the same story and sometimes the facts aren't the same. (Age 26-35, C1, London)

No, it's twisting the facts to suit the agenda that you've got. A classic example, for me, of that is if you remember that story about the charity dinner where it ' s all men and they were supposedly harassing. (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

7.3. Negativity, fatigue and a distorting lens

The news was often regarded as overwhelmingly negative and sometimes fatiguing, leading to news avoidance, particularly with political news

Both of these attributes featured strongly in participants spontaneous characterisation of the news. The world, as seen through the news, was generally regarded as depressing and also scary, whether it be disasters such as Grenfell, the ongoing war in Syria, terror attacks, nuclear threats from North Korea, the administration of President Trump, or the latest gruesome crime.

In some instances, parents had been prompted to shield their children from the news when a story was broadcast, that they felt was inappropriate for their child to hear e.g. the reporting of a rape case on the lunchtime radio bulletin.

How the world is today. What you hear. The terrible, terrible things that are happening on the doorstep, getting nearer, bombs going off, people shooting. There's nothing positive (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

I find myself constantly feeling miserable when I've watched the news, either because it's frustrations like Brexit or it's the Syria thing and it's just sadness. The news, I suspect, isn't meant to be a half hour of good things that have happened, but it just feels like it's just a debrief of everything terrible that's happening in the world (Age 36-50, AB, London)

Is the news depressing? What gets me, it angers me that the world's coming to this. I have a daughter, only four, but I just hope that I can keep her away from it (Age 36-50, C1C2, Belfast)

It was the other day, and it was all about somebody being raped, and my grandson was there, and I was like, I don't want him hearing that word (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

Long running political narratives could add to sense of news fatigue, in particular Brexit

In addition, political narratives such as Brexit were regarded as marathon in nature and too exhausting to stay engaged. This was particularly as the topic was both so complex and heavily reported in the news, even when very little appeared to be happening from a participant perspective.

I think the general opinion is that people are sick of hearing it, like everyone just rolls their eyes when they hear the Brexit word (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)

The news was also seen as a distorting lens on the world, with a propensity to sensationalism and exaggeration that could warp perspectives, including sometimes in a malevolent way

In one sense the very nature of the news meant that it always had an inescapably distorting effect as it would direct attention in a very focused way to a particular story, often a negative one, giving rise to a warped salience in participants' minds.

Beyond this however participants also felt that the news could be prone to gratuitous distortion. Sometimes this was through the tendency to sensationalise and overdramatise events, even including the weather (there was widespread snow fall at the time of the research).

A more potentially malevolent form of distortion manifested itself in certain brands treatment of particular topics or societal groups, such as immigrants or benefit claimants. This type of distortion was felt to be particularly the case with some newspapers, rather than other platforms. Again, users of such brands could often defend their treatment as being, in their view, a truthful and accurate representation, as well as seeing it as a refusal to conform to an imposed culture of political correctness. Conversely rejecters of such brands saw such treatment as highly divisive, potentially sowing discord, and in their view responsible for unduly influencing voting behaviour, in particular during the EU referendum.

I think, like, as well, with the Brexit issue, like, the crazy papers. Like, The Sun and the Daily Mail and the working class were, like, literally just, they made it, sort of, like, a one-side argument. Like, all about immigration, when EU and Brexit are so much more than that. It's about, like, trading and free trade and Britain's' position in the world, and they, sort of, made it all about immigration. 'The NHS is going to collapse because so many immigrants are getting in,' all this stuff, and just focusing on the negative, all that stuff. Like, some people, like, they just think that Brexit is about that and, like, getting immigrants out and I just hate that opinion, but that's how it is (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)

It just seems like they [the Daily Mail] say whatever it takes to sell the paper. They tend to do a lot of scaremongering in their headlines (Age 26-35, C1, London)

The Sun, everyone is an immigrant that's on benefits that's been given a million-pound house. (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)

It's a one-sided view of immigration. They (Daily Mail) just put bad stuff out there and their own biased opinion, like, take on it, seeing it as a negative, but then they never, like you said, bring up all the immigrants that have, like, trained abroad and work in the NHS or, like, the immigrants that have been here for so many years and are now, like, volunteering and things (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)

Negativity and fatigue

The main issues raised by the research were characterised by the following:

Drivers of the issue:

- All news except local news was seen as consistently negative in its coverage always focusing on negative events, or dangers and risks
- Editorial treatment of 'gruesome' stories such as crime reporting could overly focus on too much gratuitous detail (although for some, this could be a motivation to engage)
- Long political narratives such as Brexit, or the ongoing Trump 'circus', or long-term war in Syria were intrinsically fatiguing
- Constant and ongoing exposure to these stories which were without resolution or end in sight
- A sense of negativity and fatigue was exacerbated by a sense of powerlessness in the face of these issues as participants felt unable to do anything to help resolve them

Impact on participants:

- Some participants claimed to have become news avoiders. The only way to escape these problems was to avoid the news and 'switch it off', or disengage from certain narratives such as Brexit
- Parents had been prompted to shield their younger children from the news, particularly during the daytime because a story was inappropriate or too scary for them
- Local news often valued as a relatively positive or more light-hearted counterpoint
- Some participants claimed to have become desensitised to the negativity in the news, possibly as a defence against the anxiety it could induce

I am interested in it but you just get too much of it, it just then becomes boring and I've just had enough of it now. It's putting me off (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

I sometimes think I need a break from it. I'm just fed up of hearing sad news all the time. It's constant though so it's hard to get away. (Age 36-50, C1, Wales)

It just makes me become more cynical. I think, especially with the repetitive news, it's just repetitive and then there's no solution. Then you start hearing, from that same news, about other things that are negative about (Age 36-50, AB, London)

A distorting lens

Beyond the natural tendency of the news to focus sharply on certain stories, in terms of the news acting as a distorting lens. In this area, the main issues raised by the research were:

Drivers of the issue:

- News providers were driven by competition to hook audience attention through over-dramatisation and sensationalism, or retain an audience by playing to their beliefs and preconceptions of a given issue
- Seek controversy and fuel conflict, in order to engage an audience, whether stories about the weather or in exaggerating threats and risks, and newspapers promoting a political stance on topics such as immigration and welfare, in a way that appealed to users of a specific news brand

Impact on participants:

- Some participants strongly criticised sensationalism and attention-grabbing headlines
- Participants felt that this could warp their perceptions of a topic making it loom large in their minds, and create undue anxiety and concern
- Such treatments could be perceived as scaremongering by exaggerating issues or threats
- At its worst could be seen as divisive maltreatment of certain groups in society, such as immigrants or benefits claimants.

Again, newspapers far more than any other platform were felt to be the most prone to these forms of distortion, although broadcast brands could also be accused of exaggeration. Broadcast brands could be criticised for overdramatising extreme weather for example, or choosing to feature certain stories that were not widely regarded as news worthy, such as the Kentucky Fried Chicken supply chain malfunction.

The KFC crisis. It just made me so, honestly, it just made me so angry watching whoever was out reporting this news. It's not news is it? (Age 36-50, AB, London)

They distort statistics and stuff when they give you the news, don't they? You see something like, sliced bread causing cancer. There's no foundation to it, really, but that's going to be in people's heads now (Age 36-50, C1, Wales)

7.4. Issues specific to online and social media

Online and social media amplified the issues already highlighted but also gave rise to new ones specific to the medium namely shallow, fragmented engagement and the echo chamber effect

In addition, the context of online gave rise to new issues, unique to the medium, in particular shallow engagement, and the echo chamber effect. The very nature of the medium encouraged shallow engagement, particularly when news was consumed via handheld devices such as smart phones.

Online and social media generated specific issues in term of the following:

Low attention processing – shallow and fragmented

- Increasing use of online news feeds and social media had altered the depth of engagement News was often scanned at headline level only without going into the story in any depth
- 'Fragments' of news from different sources would be picked up by participants via their smart phones
- Greater low attention processing and non-conscious absorption of unverified or unrecognised sources of news would take place via online news feeds and social media
- Participants would not necessarily verify the story or source before sharing it via social media
- The comments surrounding the story could be looked at more than story itself. What was being said via comments could 'become' the story, and in effect what people believed.

We see headlines and we see headlines cross our sight all of the time. We often don't read beyond those. Actually, I think there's just a way of consuming all of the information. We skim so much more now and I think I still really like printed media and I enjoy getting the chance to read around something and hear opinions about it. You rarely get that online (Age 36-50, AB, London)

Echo chamber effect – news in a bubble

Few participants were aware of the concept of an echo chamber or that they may be subject to such an effect. The main exception to this was in London with participants that had voted Remain in the EU referendum. The shock of the result had led to a personal realisation for some participants that they may not understand how other parts of the country felt about certain issues.

These London participants observed that they, and their peers, might live in a bubble of perception, and only look at sources of news that were consistent with their social identity and political outlook. Realising this, some participants claimed that they deliberately sought out alternative sources to develop a wider perspective. But despite this, they did not look at news brands that they felt held views that were diametrically opposed to their own.

These sites are so intelligent now they know what you've been clicking on for the last five years. So, actually, you feel like you're reading the news but you're not really reading the news, you're just seeing a feed of things that are likely to resonate with me. That's very different to having an impartial 30-minute view of what's happening in the world (Age 36-50, AB, London)

Everywhere I went was Brexit, Brexit, Brexit. All the campaigns were Brexit. The fisherman, everyone. It was a few weeks before and that was when I really, for the first time, thought, 'Jesus, there's actually, this is a real danger.' You live in London and you read certain papers (Age 36-50, AB, London)

I think it's about what we were talking about, in your own little bubble. In your bubble, that's the thing with London (Age 26-31, C1, London)

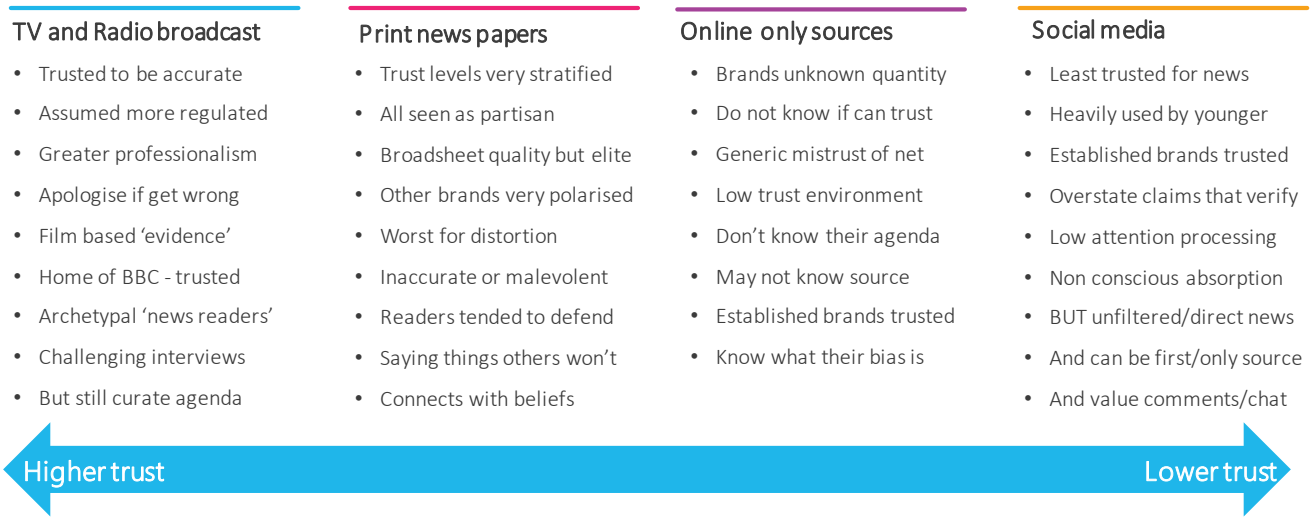
The potential echo chamber effect was characterised by the following:

- Personalisation and news filtering could drive an echo chamber effect
- Narrowed and limited exposure to different views and perspectives
- Increasingly used online via established brands and social media preferences
- Potentially more prevalent amongst younger groups who were heavier consumers via these platforms

7.5. Comparisons across platforms

As already indicated these issues raised by the research varied across different platforms, some of which were trusted more than others, with TV and radio being the most trusted and credible. These variations are summarised in the figure below:

Fig. 12. Issues by platform

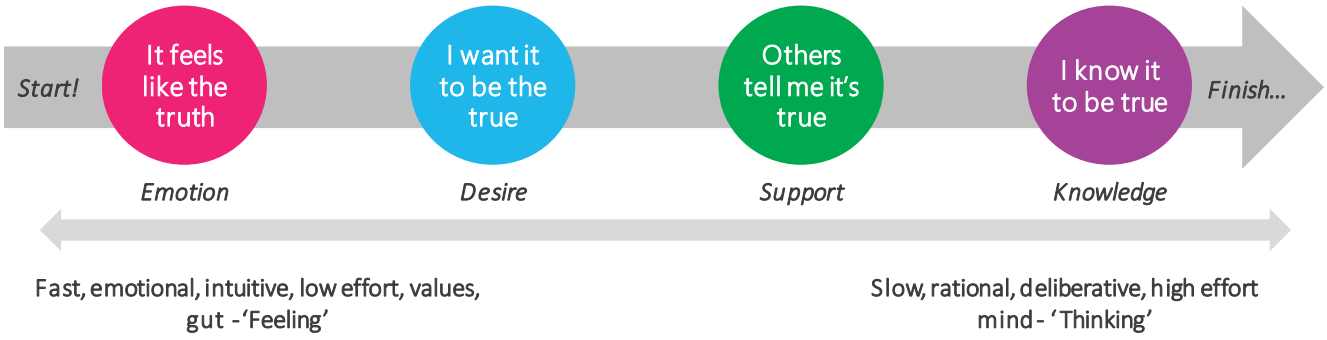


7.6. The potential for conformation bias to dominate

In light of the challenges posed by these issues participants were often forced to fall back on their gut instincts and intuitions in an increasingly confusing news ecosystem

In this context confirmation bias, favouring information that fits with your prior beliefs, could become an even more powerful mental trait. From the analysis a model was developed to illustrate how this psychological process could work in terms of how participants judged 'the truth' of a given story. It in part helps explain the potential for fake news or social media commentary to become the popular version of the truth of a particular story. This psychological process is illustrated in the figure below:

Fig. 13. Psychological process for judging 'the truth' of a given story



I just don't know what to believe anymore…I think you go with your gut, nothing more (Age 35-50, C1, Leeds)

Take something like Brexit, at the end of the day we all only hear what we want to hear don't we. Theresa May can speak but we have all made up our minds (Age 50-65, C1, Peterborough)

I mean, like, some people are easily swayed, and if something keeps being repeated over and over again, you know, then people just presume, 'Oh god, it must be true!' (Age 25-35, ABC1, Belfast)

I think it can be quite dangerous, social media, for like, how quickly stuff gets out and, like, how quickly people form opinions, it is scary, like, the effect social media has (Age 18-25, E, Leeds)

8. Concluding thoughts

The issues highlighted above appeared to drive eight key consequences for participants in today's news ecosystem

These are summarised as follows:

1. They avoid the news because it's too depressing and scary
2. They check out and disengage from some news especially political news because its too fatiguing
3. They have more information but can feel less informed about what is going on
4. They can't decide who or what to believe because of lots of different or conflicting sources
5. They have to rely more on your own intuition and short cuts
6. They find it harder to pay sufficient attention or concentrate in depth
7. They claim to want he truth but can find it very uncomfortable when confronted with it via news
8. Stories become amplified by social media and become 'the truth' without being verified

However, despite these issues, people's appetite and need for 'news' did not appear to be fading. They still needed and wanted to know what was going on in the world, whether in their local area or in a wider sense. For those who wanted to know, the wide variety of available sources enabled them to be better informed than ever before.

9. Appendix

9.1. Discussion Guide

Background/start (5 mins)

Researcher introduction and welcome:

Thanks for coming – explain we will be here for two hours and will finish on time

We are doing this research on behalf of Ofcom and as you already know we are here tonight to have a discussion about how you engage with the news. Just to clarify again when we say news we are talking quite broadly about all sorts of news. News can come from many different places and in lots of different forms, not just newspapers and the evening news but also when scrolling through Facebook, having the radio on in the background, talking to family and friends and so forth. We are interested in hearing about all of the different forms of news you may experience in your daily life

We want to really understand everything there is to know about why you get or access the news in the way you do, what is driving that, and how you feel about it, so we will be exploring around the topic from lots of different angles and shifting focus throughout the discussion. We going to start off with a very general discussion to begin with and then focus on specific areas

- **First some reassurances and ground rules (written up on FLIP as reminder)**
  - Not trying to sell anything
  - No right/ wrong answers, your perspective and opinion that counts
  - Not trying to build a consensus, ok to have a different opinion to someone else/to disagree
  - Explain confidentiality and anonymity
  - Sessions audio or video recorded for analysis purposes & one-way viewing if relevant

Finally, as you might expect conversations may understandably stray into talking about the news stories themselves so I may need to just bring the discussion back to how this impacts your usage of the news, rather than focusing on the specific story or topic, though they might of course be related. So, apologies if it sounds like I'm cutting you off, I promise I'm not I just need to keep the conversation focused on what we need to find out in this research

a) Introduction & Warm Up (10 mins)

1. Tell us a bit about yourself - first name, job, home, family, what you enjoy in spare time

b) High level perceptions of the news and its overall role in their lives (40 mins)

Spontaneous/un-primed associations and top of mind thoughts

NOTE: Throughout all discussions ask respondents to give examples

2. We just want to start with doing a quick word association about news in general
3. **ACTIVITY 1:** take a blank piece of paper and jot down when I say 'the news', what are the first three words that come to mind - it can be anything, positive or negative
4. **FLIP** words, probe what mean, how it impacts on engagement with news, and any examples
   - Probe impact on which sources you choose to engage with, including whether avoid any

- Where do these perceptions come from - your own experience or things you have heard?

5. What other words you would associate with the news? Positive and negative, probe as above
6. **NOTE:** Listen out for these words and follow up if they are raised but do not prompt - trustworthiness, boring, depressing, irrelevant, biased – will also be explored later on

Overall role of news in their lives – explore at overall level (e.g. news informs us, gives us something to talk about, for work etc)

7. **NOTE:** Remind respondents of the broad definition of news as above
8. Thinking about your own lives, what overall role does the news plays in your life would you say?
9. How important is the news to you personally/in your life?
10. If you were unable consume news of any kind for a week how would you feel about it?
    - What might you miss, what might you gain? (practical, how feel, positive, and negative)
    - What about for a whole month?

Influence of news on outlook

- How influential do you feel the news is on your views and outlook?
- Are some sources of news more influential for you than others, what's driving this?
- Have you ever changed your views about something having seen the news? What and why?
- How do you feel when you read or see something that goes against your beliefs/what you think?

Societal/cultural role of the news

11. We want to talk about the role the news plays in this country or in our society
12. **ACTIVITY 2:** (in pairs) hand out speech bubble sheet showing conversation with 'an alien'
13. **EXPLAIN:** Imagine you had to explain this to an alien who knows absolutely nothing about it
14. Discuss and write down how would you describe the role the news plays in our society?
    - Why do we have 'the news'?
    - What is its function or purpose?
    - How well does it fulfil this role in this country?
15. Explore descriptions, listen for/probe themes e.g. informed citizen, democratic participation etc
16. How would you describe the news landscape in the UK, what words would you use?

c) News consumption (50 mins)

EXPLAIN: The next thing we want to do is to start building an overall picture of your news consumption across the group to help us understand what's behind it. So in terms of the process we are going to go through a number of steps to build up an overall picture

1. Sketch out the different news occasions or scenarios that are relevant to you, when and where and how you engage with the news, and how it fits into your daily life
2. Look at what your needs are and how you go about meeting them across these occasions
3. Then look at the different news sources and brands you use, what are they giving you and how do you feel about them
4. Then look at specific genres of news and understand what's important to you

News consumption occasions and scenarios - exploring when, where and how, regular habits versus occasional, and the active versus passive distinction

- **NOTE:** Remind people news can come from many different places, in lots of different forms, some of it you might actively engage with, some of it you might passively absorb and so forth
- **NOTE:** Use analysis of pre-task as a prompt to get discussion going and speed up initial process
- **FLIP**: each occasion/scenario
- We will start with during the week
- When would you start to consume any news on a weekday?
- **NOTE:** Start with 'morning at home' and then probe across different times of day - traveling to school/work, lunchtime, afternoon, traveling home, at home in the evening, week and weekend
- For each one
- Where would you be, what would you be doing? Would you be alone or with others?
- How would you be getting the news – reading, watching, listening etc?
- What technology would you be using? What device?
- How would you be feeling, what would your mood be?

Explore whether habit and routine or occasional/spontaneous

- How much of this would you say is habit?
- Which occasions/scenarios are regular habits or routines for you i.e. you always do the same thing? Which are you biggest habits?
- Which are more spontaneous or every now and again?
  - Can you give some examples?
  - If spontaneous or occasional what might prompt you to do this?
  - Is it a particular story or sudden desire to engage with the news?

Explore active versus passive distinction

- One thing we are particularly interested in exploring here is when and how much of the news you 'actively' engage with and when and how much news you just 'passively' absorb
- By active and passive, we could mean the following – refer to definitions on **FLIP**
  - ACTIVE: e.g. you might actively engage with the news because
    - You sit down to watch a news programme
    - You focus on reading through a newspaper
    - You engage in depth with a particular website or app etc
  - PASSIVE: e.g. you might absorb the news because
    - The radio is on in the background at home or in the car
    - You come across a story on your news feed on email or social media
    - You pick up a paper on the train and skim through
- Does this idea of actively or passive engaging with the news ring true in your experience?
- How much of your engagement would you guess is active or passive – most active/most passive?

- **ACTIVITY 3:** Take a blank piece of paper draw a line down the middle on one side write active at the top, on the other side write 'passive'
  - Write down some examples of your own engagement with the news that are:
  - What sorts of things prompt you to be more actively engaged in the news – the topic or stories, or how you are consuming the news?
- Which of these occasions/scenarios (refer back to previous scenarios) are more passive?
  - What would you say is behind your passive engagement – is it just filling a bit of time, happens to be on in the background?
  - Is there anything that switches you from one mode to another so from passive to more active – e.g. you might pay greater attention or follow up, click through on something?

Explore needs across each scenario/occasion

- For each scenario/occasion explore news needs in terms of:
- What are you looking for here when consuming the news on this occasion/scenario?
- How would you describe your needs, what's important to you on this occasion/scenario?
- If required prompt with:
  - Are you looking to be informed or entertained?
  - Just wanting headlines or a quick roundup/update of the main stories?
  - Something serious or light hearted?
  - Seeking certain coverage/topics/stories?
  - Practical information that's useful to you?
  - More in-depth analysis or opinion?
- What news sources are you using on each occasion/scenario to give you what you want?
  - Go through each occasion/scenario and capture main sources
- How is the way they are providing news meeting your needs on this occasion?

NOTE: By end of this section should have a range of news occasions/scenarios captured on flip charts each including following information:

- Nature of scenario/occasion – when, where, and how news was engaged with
- Understanding of whether habit/routine or spontaneous, active versus passive mode
- What looking for from news – needs and wants from the news across each
- What sources of news are meeting those needs and how

Evaluation of different news sources and brands used to consume the news

NOTE: Have sort cards with sources of news mentioned in the pre-task and supplemented with others mentioned in previous discussion if required. Sources may be mix of **specific sources/brands** or **generic sources** e.g. Daily Mail/TV evening news etc.

EXPLAIN: So, these are all the different sources you have mentioned either in the pre-task or the discussion we have had that you use to get news

We have seen how they play a role in different news occasions/scenarios. Some of them are news brands such as (x) and some are more general sources of news such as (y)

We want to use this next bit of the discussion to understand how all these different sources relate to the way you get the news, and how they all work together

- **ACTIVITY 3:** The first thing I want you to do is as a group is sort the sources into different groups or whatever way makes most sense to you, talking me through as you do it
- **NOTE:** Respondents may sort by platform i.e. online, TV, newspapers etc. If they do get them to sort into sub groups. Once respondents have sorted groups/sub groups
- Take each grouping in turn and explore with respondents
  - Why did you sort into these groups, what are they about, what defines them?
  - NOTE: Take photos to record card sorting exercise
- Thinking about these different sources of news, do you have a main preferred source, a 'go to' source, or do you use a number or range?
  - Which ones are your preferred sources of news that you find yourself using the most?
  - What makes it your preferred or 'go to' source for news?
  - What sort or quality of news do you expect to get from your preferred sources?
- Thinking about all these different sources of news you are using throughout the day, and on different occasions
  - How do your expectations of the news you get from each source vary?
  - Are they giving you different things? If so how?
  - E.g. some are giving you…
    - In depth explanations
    - An overview
    - Just the facts, or checking facts
    - Opinions and interpretation
    - Alternative or different viewpoints
    - Entertainment, something light hearted
    - Impartial or balanced views
  - Are there any that you would trust more or trust less?
  - Which one would you trust the most, which one would you trust the least? Why is this?
- **NOTE:** If necessary prompt with stories/topics that they have been following in pre-task
- Thinking about some of the stories/topics you have told us about in your pre-task
- Have you been accessing the same story through different sources, how has that happened?
  - Do you deliberately use more than one source for the same story/topic?
  - If you saw a story/topic in one source do you follow it up in another source?
  - Or are you just exposed to the same story/topic across different sources by coincidence?
- If you use multiple or a range of sources, why are you going to different sources?
  - Why do you use more than one?
  - What do you get out of each source in relation to the news or a given story/topic?

- Do you use different sources in different ways for different things or genres?

Briefly explore the role of news brand

- **NOTE:** choose a small range of 5 or 6 brands based on group preferences. Ensure if possible different platforms represented i.e. TV, print, online only, social media etc
  - TV - BBC, Sky, ITV, C4
  - Print (including online) - Times, Telegraph, Guardian, Independent, Mail, Express, Sun, Mirror, Metro
  - Online only – Buzzfeed, Huffington Post, The Canary
  - Social Media - FB, Twitter, Instagram (for younger groups)
- **EXPLAIN:** Some of these sources are obviously different news brands and we want to explore the role of brand plays in which source of news you use
- How important is the news brand, so reputation and image, in your choices? Why/how?
- Can you use these brands to give me some examples of how it helps you choose?
- How would you describe the positives about the way these brands provide the news?
- What about limitations are there any drawbacks of negatives about them as a news brand?
- Do you look to different brands for different stances or points of view on certain topics/stories?
- Are there some brands that you trust more than others? Why is that?
- What about these different qualities – how does each of these brands compare in terms of:
  - Accuracy
  - Exclusivity
  - First for breaking news
  - Trustworthiness
  - Impartial or unbiased
  - Offers a range of opinions
  - Is high quality
  - Helps me make up my mind
  - Helps me understand what's going on
  - Has a depth of analysis I can't find elsewhere?

17. Of these brands we are talking about are there any that you feel closest to, that you feel are 'for people like me?'
    - If not describe who are they aimed at? And why?
18. What about the news brands that aren't represented here, that you might deliberately not use?
    - Are there any news brands that you would deliberately avoid or reject?
    - Why is this, why do you view them negatively?
    - How do they compare to the news brands you do prefer?
19. **NOTE:** Briefly probe on **platform** at this point as part of brand conversation
20. **EXPLAIN:** I just want to talk a bit about the different platforms that we have represented here. By platform I mean whether it's TV, radio, online only, social media, newspapers/print etc

21. Some of these brands are available on different platforms, some are just one platform
    - If you are using one brand across different platforms do you feel you are getting the same quality of news?
    - Does style or opinion vary by platform, if so how?
    - Which platforms do you trust the most, which do you trust the least?
    - Which do you find most engaging and interesting?
    - Which do you think provide the best quality news, which the worst quality news?
    - Are some platforms more reliable and accurate than others?

Online deep dive – exploring the role of online, including social media

- **EXPLAIN:** We now just want to focus on online news including social media
- Overall how important is online as a means of consuming news for you?
    - To what extent are you consuming news through an established news brand e.g. BBC, or a newspaper website - versus online only outlets or via social media
- What about Facebook/Twitter (or Instagram for younger groups) how do these play a role?
- What are the pros and cons of getting news this way from social media? For example
    - Does the news feel more tailored to you?
    - You can see similar views to yours?
    - You are exposed to a greater range of sources and news?
- Do you follow/consume news from sources that you might not do normally – e.g. you see a post from a source that you might not normally read? E.g. The Canary
- What is your understanding of what sort of news are you getting from social media sites?
    - Do they provide news in themselves?
    - Or do they feed news from different sources?
    - Do you consider friends comments or status updates as a source of news in this context?
    - Are you actively following certain news or is it just streamed to you?
    - Do you always check the source of the news, is it from a news provider or from a friend?
    - If the story is shared by a friend do you feel you can trust it more, does it feel 'vouched' for?
    - Have you ever checked up on a news story to see whether it is real/true at all?
    - How do you validate the news via Social Media?
    - What sort of sources on social media do you feel are most accurate?
- Some people have said you can't trust this sort of news and they don't ever believe the news they get via social media?
    - But do you think in reality you find yourself trusting news that you consume this way?
    - If you hear the same story repeated via social media over a period of time do you tend to believe it more?

Criteria for judging the quality of news including across different genres

- **EXPLAIN:** We want to talk a bit about how you judge the quality of the news, and how this may vary by news genre. Before we talk about each genre

- How do you judge the quality of the news you are engaging with?
- What specific things or criteria are important when judging whether the quality of the news?
- Listen for and list general criteria on **FLIP** - if necessary prompt with:
  - Accuracy
  - Trustworthiness
  - Impartial or unbiased
  - Offers an opinion
  - Helps me make up my mind
  - Easy to understand and digest
  - Has a depth of analysis I can't find elsewhere?
  - Other criteria?
- Which criteria are the most important to you overall?
- How do you know or judge whether the news you are using delivers these criteria on not?
- For example, what tells you whether it is accurate or impartial? How can you tell?

How quality criteria varies across different genres

- **ACTIVITY 4:** SPLIT group pairs and make them editor in charge of a selected news genre. Genres to be rotated across groups and include
  - Local news, UK news, International, Entertainment/celebrity, Breaking news, political news
- **EXPLIAN:** In pairs you are editors in charge of this genre of news. Write down top four most important things in terms of quality, regardless of whether you engage with the genre and explain your thinking
- How do these criteria we have discussed change depending upon which genre? For example:
  - Is easy to understand and digest more important in some genres than others?
  - Is accuracy as important in entertainment/celebrity news versus political news?
  - Is depth of analysis as important in local news versus world events?
- What are your 'go to 'sources for these genres of news?
- How well are these genres covered by sources of news, do they live up to/or fall short of ideal?
- Would you like to see any of these sources improve on certain criteria that are relevant?
- If so which genres and how should they improve, for example
  - Do some genres need to be easier to understand and digest, if so which ones?
  - Do some genres need to be more trustworthy than they are for you, if so which ones?
  - Explore where respondents would like to see improvements across genres
- (If not mentioned already) has anyone heard term **'fake news'**, what does this mean to you?
  - How do you feel about it, do you think it's a real issue or not? Does it matter?
  - Are there specific genres or sources of news that you would associate with fake news?
  - Have you come across any examples of fake news?
  - What sort of impact do you think this is having on how people regard the news?
  - How do you work out whether the news is fake or not?

- How do you know what to believe now if there is fake news going on?

d) Recapping overall feelings and looking to the future of news (15 mins)

- Looking back has the way you consume news changed over your life time at all?
  - What have been the biggest changes? Positive and negative
- How do you feel the way you consume the news compares to older/younger generations?
- Probe spontaneous perceptions of changes and differences, then in terms of:
  - How consumed, sources available, way reported, depth and style, fact vs opinion

22. How do you feel about these changes we are talking about?
    - What are the benefits? What are the drawbacks? good thing or bad thing in your view?
- If you could change anything about the way the news is delivered, what would you change? **NOTE:** We would expect these issues to be raised and if so we will discuss them earlier in the group. But if not already covered – explore here
- **EXPLAIN:** We just want to talk about some final issues some people have talked about in relation to the news and see if they ring true to you at all
- Some people have said…
- "There has been a decline in the **trust** in news"
- "The news is just **depressing"**
- "You **can get tired** of the news because there is too much of it and just want to switch off"
- For each theme explore
  - Is this something you have felt yourself, is it true for you?
  - What impact do you think this might be having on you personally, on wider society?
  - Why do you think it might be happening?
  - How would you address this issue if you could?
  - Specifically, for **trust** – what sources do you trust the most, trust the least?
  - Specifically, for **depressing** in family/parent groups – are you ever concerned about your children seeing the news?
  - Have you ever turned off the news or shielded them from it in some way?

THANK AND CLOSE

www.jigsaw-research.co.uk

Jigsaw Research Ltd.
4th Floor, 1-2 Berners Street
London W1T 3LA

Tel: +44 (0)20 7291 0810
Fax: +44 (0)20 7291 0811
Email: info@jigsaw-research.co.uk

USA Office
Tel: +1 352 224 5994
Email: jknox@jigsaw-research.us.com