



**BBC News and Current Affairs review:
Observing real news behaviours
Executive Summary**

Introduction

The increase in online and personalised news content has triggered a considerable shift in the news landscape, fuelled in particular by the rise of smartphones as a core platform for consuming news.

People are now able to engage with the news they want, whenever and wherever they want to, on their phones, tablets and other devices. With this shift comes a significant diversification in the ways in which people come across news content. People no longer need to wait for the six o'clock news; instead, they can go to their online browsers, view a constant stream of notifications from their chosen sources, receive links from friends or scan Twitter. Furthermore, online news consumers are less likely to see as well-rounded an overview of a variety of news topics from one provider, as they may have done on traditional platforms such as TV and radio.

This has clear implications for the value people place on the news they consume.

Exploring the BBC's place in a changing news landscape

The BBC has a duty to provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them. While the BBC continues to be the most widely used source of news and current affairs in the UK, it faces increasing competition from an ever more diverse news market.

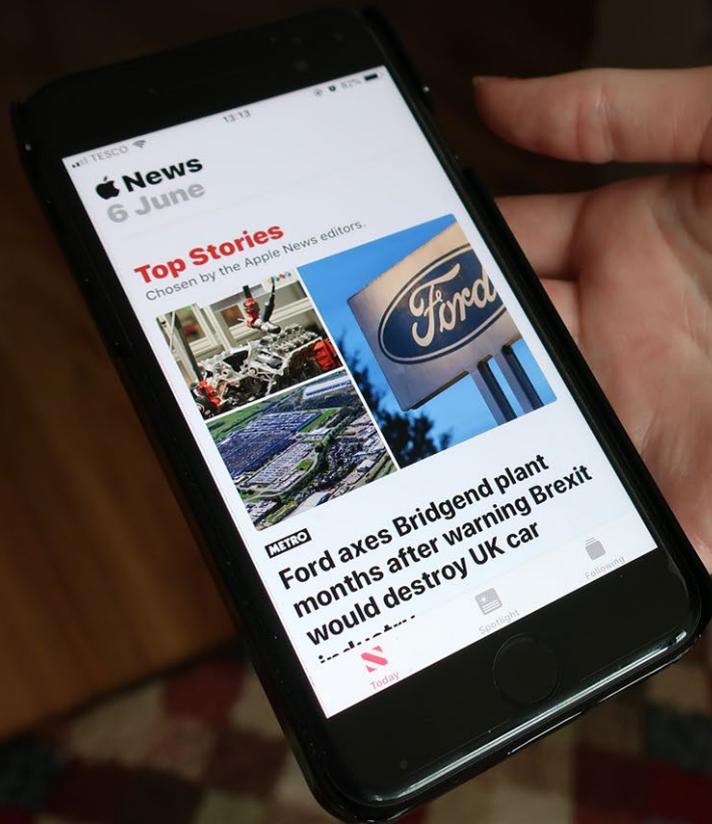
Recognising the importance of the BBC's role as a trusted provider of news and current affairs in the UK, Ofcom commissioned this research to understand how people consume news online and the role the BBC plays in this. More specifically, this research looked at the ways in which people came across, interacted with, and departed from the news content they engaged with.

Understanding people's genuine news behaviours

This research set out to understand what news people engage with and why. In order to do this, it was important to capture not only what people said they did with regards to their news consumption, but the actual ways in which they did it.

Most research on people's behaviours, including behaviours around news, relies on **self-reported** data from the people taking part, either through surveys, diaries or interviews. This can be an issue as people struggle to accurately report their news consumption. Often, they are not aware of what they do, may not have a clear frame of reference or may try to portray themselves in a certain light. Throughout this research, participants regularly mis-reported, whether through exaggeration or underestimation, the nature and quantity of the news they consumed. This highlighted the vital role of **behavioural tracking** in understanding the current news landscape.

Collecting an objective behavioural dataset allowed the research to explore a number of questions that participants were not able to accurately answer in an interview—for instance, how does the news they see reach them? How engaged are they with the content they read or watch? What patterns of behaviour do they display? Behavioural tracking allowed us to quantify relevant behaviours, reveal patterns and compare people's habits to test hypotheses.



Key findings

Social media and news aggregators are increasingly dominant for smartphone users: Participants were more likely to access news on their smartphones than TV and Radio. Many were regularly accessing news on aggregator apps and social media, which made a wide range of content and providers easily available to users.

This in turn drives passive news consumption: Much of participants' news was being consumed passively. This led to a low level of engagement which was most prominent when participants were on social media—for example, sifting through headlines or skimming quickly through articles.

People are less aware of news providers: When on social media and news aggregators, participants were less aware of the provider of their news content and more drawn in by 'clickbait'¹ headlines or images.

BBC News content is competing for attention on news aggregators: For some, often younger participants, BBC News did not appear on their aggregators or social media feeds, meaning they did not engage with BBC News content at all.

Method

Twenty-four people between the ages of 17 to 64 took part in this research, which was carried out between April to July 2019. Participants lived in a range of locations across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and were selected to represent a broad range of demographic characteristics. Participants were selected based on their self-reported news consumption and use of the BBC—the whole sample were recruited to be medium

¹ Clickbait content refers to headlines written in a way to encourage people to click on it above anything else. Examples we came across in this research included “Rhonelle Bruder ran away from home at 16. Her new life in Toronto was supposed to be a fresh start” or “WhatsApp update could stop Android phone users from making an embarrassing mistake”

or high news consumers, and half of the sample to be medium to high-engaged BBC users, including both online and offline. The sample was not recruited specifically to be news consumers via smartphone, but they had to be smartphone users.

The research comprised **three core stages**:

- Behavioural tracking
- In-home interviews
- Coding and in-depth analysis

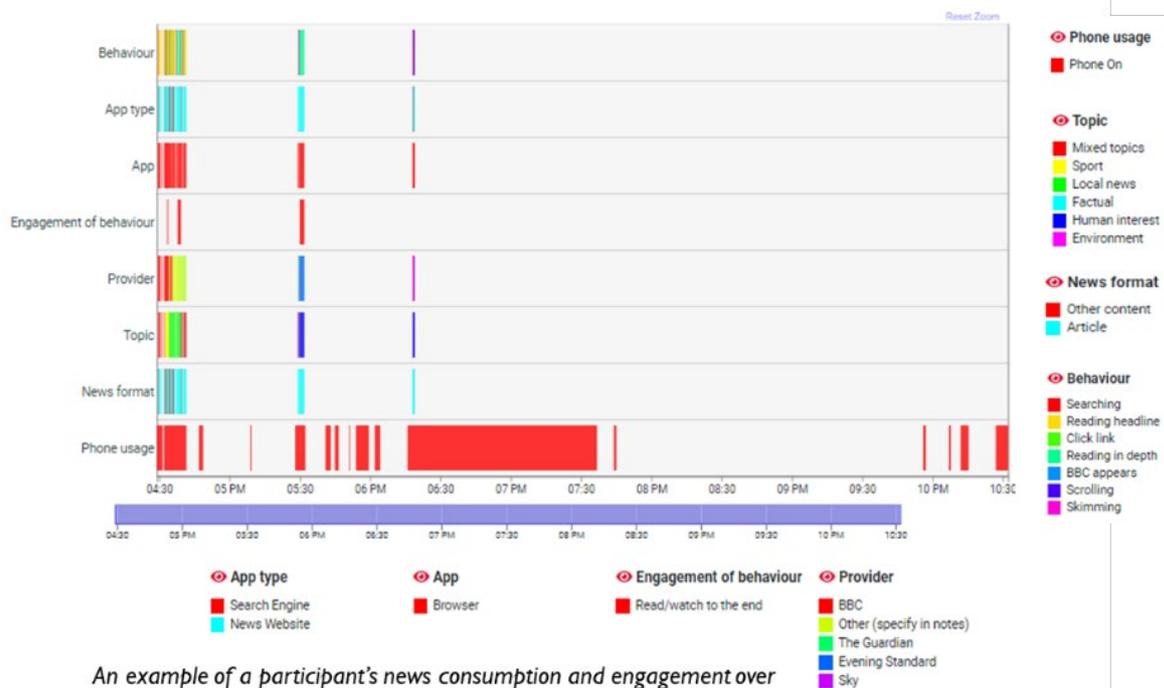
All participants were asked to complete a five-day media diary of news content they came across, both offline and online, detailing where they found it and what they thought of it. They were also asked to include screenshots of their browser history and app usage. Over the same period, their phone activity was tracked through 'screen recording'. For the 18 out of the 24 participants with an Android device we captured screen record whenever their phone was active over a five-day period; for our six participants with iPhones we captured multiple clips each day over a five-day period. Six of the 24 participants also had Nest cameras² set up in their living rooms for five days. This enabled us to capture offline news consumption, especially TV.

In-home depth interviews were completed with all the participants, each lasting three hours, to explore and understand their news preferences and behaviours. These also enabled the collection of observational, video and photographic data as well as allowing researchers and participants to review media diaries and screen record together.

Finally, all screen record and Nest camera footage was coded by our in-house coding team. All news moments were identified, described and coded for features such as topic, provider, platform and engagement so that we could look at individuals' behaviours in detail. The data was structured so we could analyse it using our data visualisation tool (see below) developed in-house for this specific purpose.

This allowed us to compare what participants said in the depth interviews with the data collected via screen record and Nest camera video footage to give us an in-depth insight into their news habits and behaviours.

Julian Wed 29-5-19.xlsx



² Nest cameras are small, unobtrusive cameras we install in people's homes which allow us to observe their behaviour. For this project, we set up two cameras in participants' living rooms – one facing their television and one facing where they usually sit.

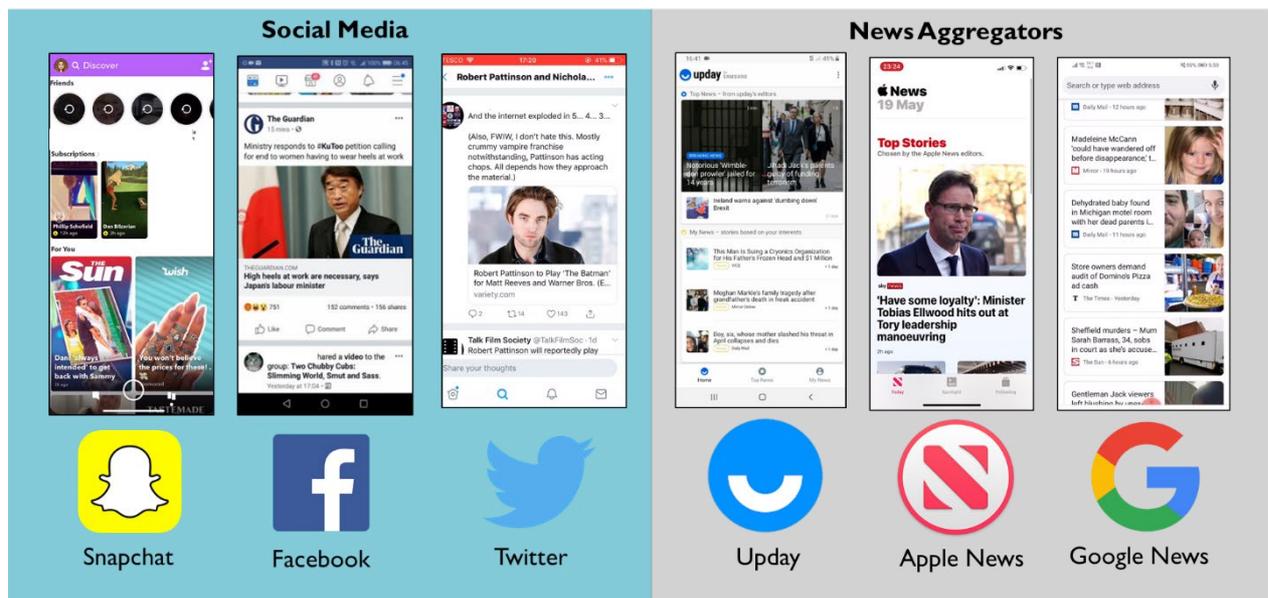
I. News consumption is changing

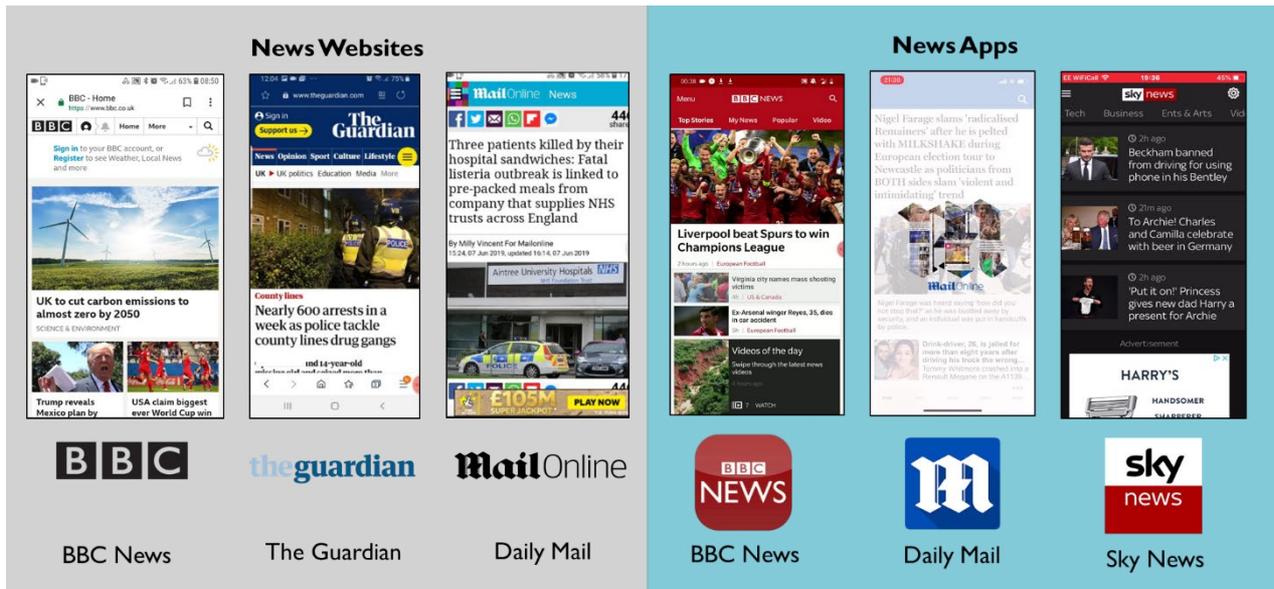
Smartphones are increasingly the dominant means for consuming news

The way people consume news has been transformed by digital devices, allowing people to access news from a wide range of providers wherever and whenever they want. As a result, traditional news sources, such as TV, radio and newspapers, are facing increasing competition.

The main platforms for news consumption on smartphones we observed within the sample were:

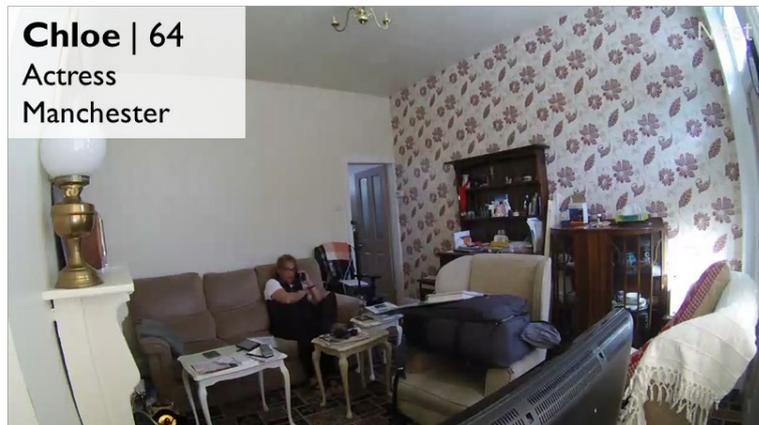
- **Social media** isn't designed for news but tends to offer news content from a range of providers as well as short-form video content. It also makes personal opinion and commentary on news easily available, given that people share and react to news stories on their social media feeds. Social media also facilitates the sharing of news content in private messages between friends.
- **Aggregators** are apps that collate news stories across a range of providers and topics. They often come built into smartphones but can also be downloaded by users. They have become commonplace in everyday news consumption.
- **News apps** made by specific providers offer notifications and a wide variety of news content, especially in comparison to offline news sources. They are downloaded by users onto their smartphone and can be tailored according to interests and preferences.
- **News websites** by specific providers offer much of the same content as news apps. They are more likely to be used for a one-off visit, commonly directed from another platform or via a browser search, rather than through habitual use.





Radio and television are often used habitually

While offline platforms such as newspapers, radio and television are still used by many, they are competing against diverse online news sources. Participants in the 24-strong sample were more likely to use these 'traditional' mediums habitually. Radio and television tended to be used in the background (as can be seen in the photographs below), for in-depth discussion, or to follow a specific morning or evening news broadcast. Newspapers were used for in-depth analysis or a quick browse on public transport. Within the sample, from self-reported regular use, five used printed press, twelve used TV and eight used the radio.



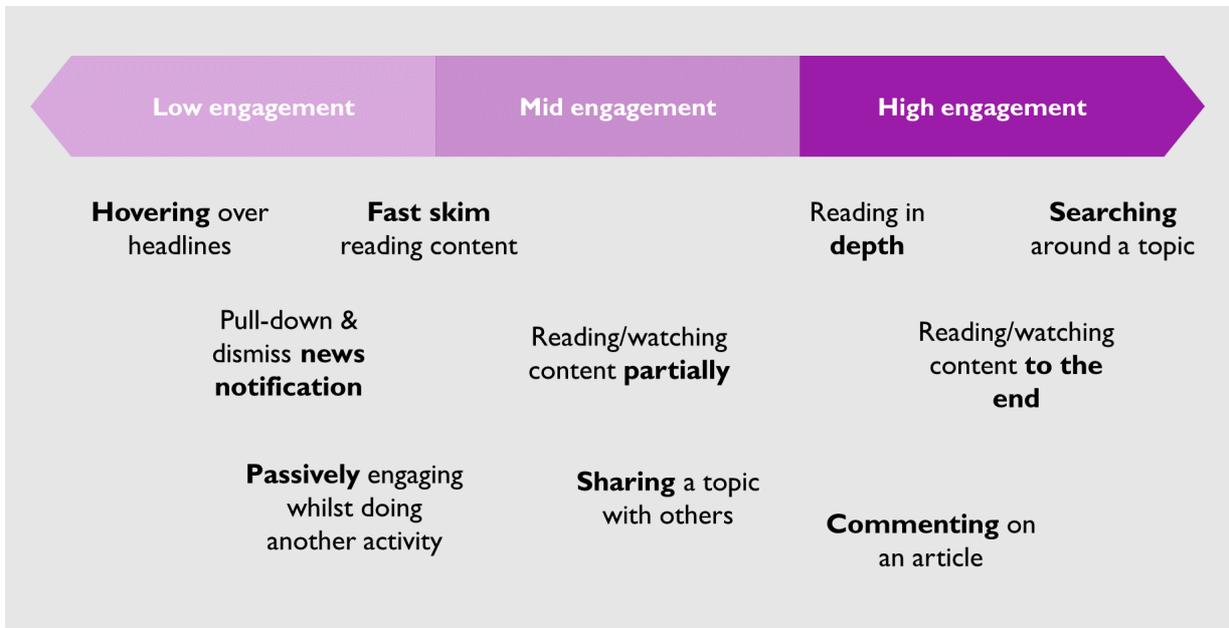
2. How and why people consume news

People’s motivations for consuming news impacted how they engaged with news

Across all platforms, online and offline, this research observed three predominant patterns of news consumption behaviour within participants’ news journeys. Participants were consuming news *habitually*, *incidentally*, and in pursuit of *specific goals*:

 <h3>Habitual consumption</h3> <p>Habitual consumption included daily or regular news consumption from the same source or set of sources, whether they were specific channels, newspapers or news apps.</p> <p>Motivation To consume news <i>e.g. to keep up to date with what was going on, keep up in conversations with friends</i></p>	 <h3>Goal-driven consumption</h3> <p>Goal-driven consumption referred to news consumed with a specific goal in mind. This would usually be to find out about breaking news or seek out more information about a topic.</p> <p>To consume specific news <i>e.g. to verify something they had heard or seen, find out more about something</i></p>	 <h3>Incidental consumption</h3> <p>Incidental consumption referred to news that was consumed without deliberate intention—for instance, viewed while scrolling through social media (shared by friends, interest groups or providers), through a notification, or sent via a message.</p> <p>Something other than news <i>e.g. for entertainment, interacting with friends and family on social media</i></p>
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We coded the **different levels of engagement** for each news item captured from the screen record, both the duration of engagement and the depth of engagement.



The three patterns of behaviour—habitual, incidental and goal-driven—and the different motivations within each pattern resulted in differing levels of **engagement** with news.

- With habitual news consumption the level of engagement depended on the source. Habitual use of offline platforms, such as a TV or radio news, often seemed to demonstrate fairly **low** engagement, whereas habitual checking of news websites or apps sometimes illustrated **high** engagement.
- With goal-driven news consumption, participants usually showed **high** engagement.
- With incidental news consumption participants showed **lower** engagement.

News items coded for from 24 hour screen record for 5-days



Katie | 30
Mother, Aberdeen
Android user

One of our sample, Katie, 30, consumed most of her news incidentally, coming across content while scrolling through her Facebook feed. During these news moments, she exhibited low-engagement behaviours such as simply reading headlines or skimming through content. However, when consuming news on her phone browser with a specific goal in mind, she read all news items she consumed in-depth.

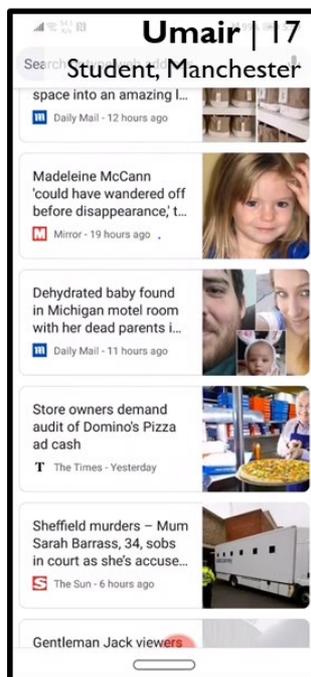
Facebook app – 44 items	Smartphone Browser – 19 items
<div style="background-color: #f08080; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">40</div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; padding: 0 5px;"> 1 3 </div> <p style="font-size: small; color: #800040;">Reading headline Skimming Watching</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">Out of the 44 news items Katie consumed on Facebook 40 were only reading the headline. The other 4 items were read or watched partially.</p>	<div style="background-color: #800040; color: white; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">19</div> <p style="font-size: small; color: white;">Reading in depth</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">However, on her browser, she read all of the items she consumed in depth and displayed a variety of engagement levels below.</p>
<div style="background-color: #008080; color: white; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">4</div> <p style="font-size: small; color: white;">Read partially</p>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; padding: 5px;"> <div style="background-color: #008080; color: white; padding: 2px 5px;">6</div> <div style="background-color: #008080; color: white; padding: 2px 5px;">9</div> <div style="background-color: #008080; color: white; padding: 2px 5px;">4</div> </div> <p style="font-size: small; color: white;">Read beginning Read partially Read to end</p>

3. The rise of personalised news

News consumption is, for some, almost entirely personalised

News aggregators and social media feeds have become a popular medium for news consumers, with all but two of the sample of 24 using one or the other to access news. The main aggregators used were Google News and Upday for Android users and Apple News and Upday for iPhone users. Most of these apps came built into phones, meaning that many participants used them by default, particularly those who did not have a previous preferred source or provider.

The personalisation of news feeds was seen as an attractive feature of news aggregators by the participants. Personalisation works by algorithms offering content to users based on their past consumption or search history, thereby narrowing their news consumption. We noticed during interviews and through screen record that participants were often offered news that covered only a small number of topics from a narrow range of providers. A small amount of the sample saw this as a negative, given that it narrowed the types of news stories they were exposed to.



Personalisation often led to people receiving news that covered only a small number of topics from a narrow range of providers

In the interviews, some participants said they didn't consume much so-called 'soft' news, including human interest, celebrity gossip stories and 'clickbait' titles. However, screen record analysis revealed that aggregators were presenting a considerable amount of this kind of news content. This seemed to be driven by participants' previous clicks and searches. We observed through screen record that this was the case for some participants, and that this led them to consume this kind of news content. For instance, Matt, 45, would often be drawn in by 'clickbait' articles on the side of his email screen, which he would then read "for twenty pages".

Those who used news aggregators seemed less aware of the sources of news they read

The layout of news aggregators encouraged users to focus on the headline rather than the source of news. Aggregators usually offered content from a wide range of providers, including niche providers as well as advertisers and social media content providers. Often, participants assumed that the inclusion of an article on a news aggregator was a mark of its trustworthiness, whatever the source.

"I'm not sure what [Apple News] is... I think it's stuff from the media and trending stories. It's a really great news app, I'm always in and out of it." – Abby, 54

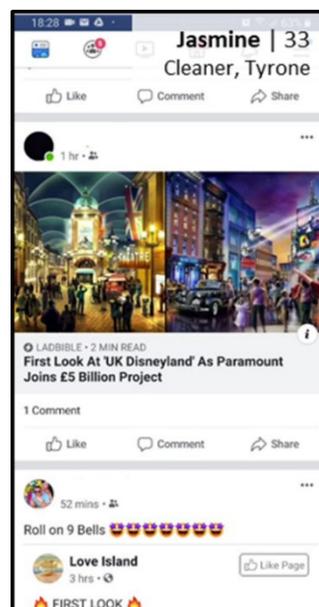
While some aggregator users in the sample paid little notice to the source of news, a minority reported that they would deliberately not choose articles from a specific source because they didn't think the provider was trustworthy or produced good quality content. However, this wasn't always reflected in the screen record footage.

On social media, some people were coming across a narrow set of news sources and topics

Across the sample, all but one person accessed news on social media, despite this not being a recruitment requirement. For eight of the 24-strong sample, social media was their primary source of online news. The main social media platforms we observed were Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

As with news aggregators, social media feeds were highly personalised. News was curated based on friendship circles, followed pages and algorithms based on previous engagement. Many in the sample had joined topical interest groups, followed news providers they liked or unfollowed news sources they didn't agree with.

On Twitter, trending hashtags on the search page could expose participants to a wider range of headlines. However, most participants only used the newsfeed, which suggested content based on previous clicks or engagement. This was also the case for Facebook newsfeeds. Overall, the widespread use of social media to access news meant participant's networks were narrow or lacked diversity of viewpoints.



4. The impact of the changing news landscape

People were regularly consuming news incidentally through social media feeds

Many participants, particularly those who were younger, did not consume their news in a consistent or structured way. Instead, they were regularly consuming news in an incidental and one-off manner through social media feeds. For example, Tamsyn, 27, got some of her news from Snapchat, which she would check throughout the day or whenever she was on her phone. During these moments, her main motivation was to see what the people she was following had posted rather than to consume news.

“I definitely see news articles without seeking for them. So for example, if I’m just going through my phone, let’s say Snapchat for example, there’ll always be clickbait articles that you can see” – Tamsyn, 27

Older participants tended to retain some habitual news routines, such as watching the News at six every day on BBC One or listening to the news on their car radio on the way to work. However, they also supplemented this with news content on their devices throughout the day.

The shift towards incidental news consumption through social media and notifications appeared to have been mirrored by a shift in the ways participants were engaging with the news content they came across.

Incidental consumption led people to consume news more passively

The large quantity of news received incidentally on phones via social media, aggregators or notifications meant that some participants said they no longer needed to actively seek out content to feel they were getting an overview of the news. For eight of the sample, social media was their main source of news. While scrolling on social media, many were exposed to some sort of news content, either by following news providers or through sponsored or shared content on their feed. On their phones, participants were coming across news content while catching up with friends, looking at memes or scrolling out of boredom, rather than specifically seeking news.

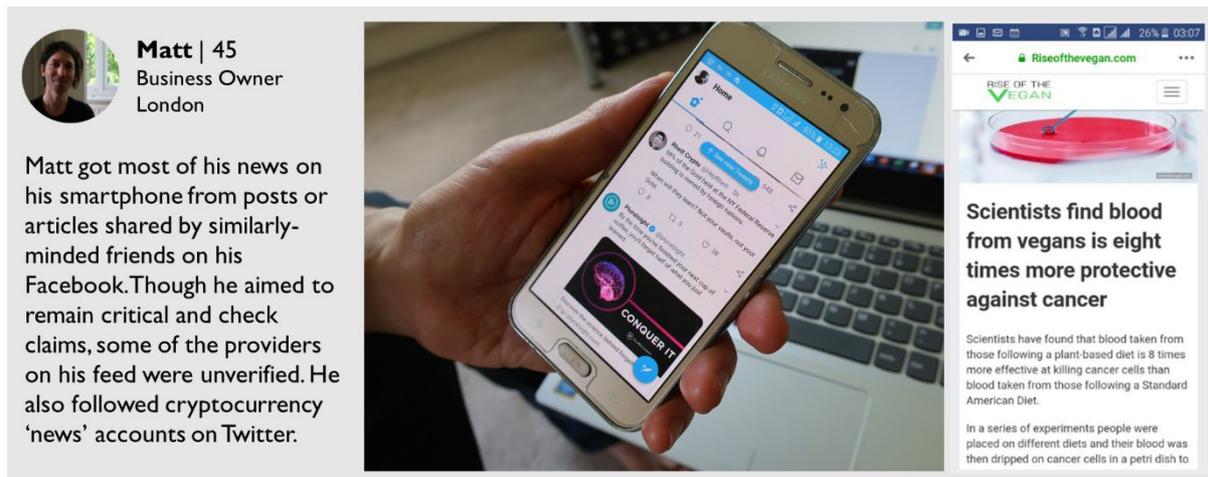
“A lot of my news kind of comes to me, especially on Facebook” – Sky, 19

However, a small number of participants did actively seek out news as part of goal-related news consumption. We observed six participants in the sample do this and most of this group used search engines and websites for this purpose rather than downloading specific news apps. Some who did have specific apps for news often said they had downloaded them out of topical interest—for example, downloading Hypebeast for fashion news and sponsored content—or because they had grown up consuming news from that provider offline.

When seeking out news with the goal of finding correct information or around a topic of particular interest, participants were aiming for impartiality, trustworthiness and accuracy. As such, when displaying goal-related news consumption, participants reported that they were likely to choose providers they had heard of or felt had a longstanding influence, such as the BBC, Sky News or ITV.

However, people were not always looking for news that was impartial, accurate and trustworthy

The changing news landscape offers a wide range of content from a broad set of providers, presenting participants with news that fulfils a variety of different needs depending on their mindset. Within the sample, participants were regularly motivated to consume news that fulfilled their need for drama, opinion and local information. **Drama** included stories and news about human interest, gossip and celebrity information. Many were drawn to news that offered **opinion** rather than facts, in particular that which reinforced their worldview or commentary from individuals and friends. Many within the sample wanted highly **localised** news—information they felt was more directly relevant to their lives.



These needs tended to be satisfied by news published by unregulated news sources, where trust in the integrity of the provider was not considered important by the reader. Often, participants' desire for local news was satisfied by, for example, social media updates from individuals or local groups on Facebook. When participants wanted a local perspective, nation-wide coverage wasn't appealing. When participants were seeking out news for gossip, exaggeration could add to the drama and the trustworthiness of a source was not a priority for most of the sample.

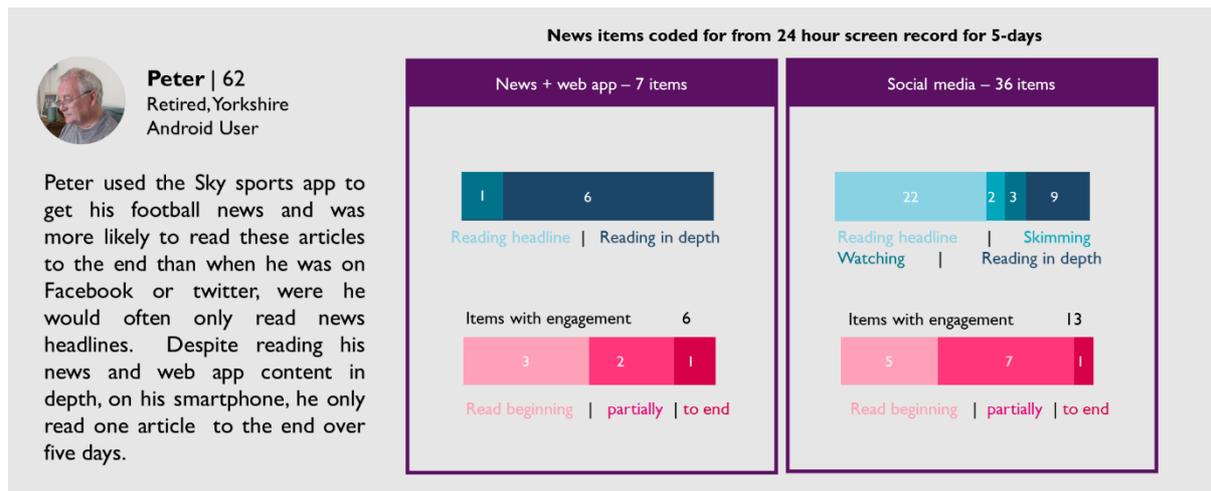
Another effect of using social media to access news was the likelihood of coming across news and current affairs content from a variety of unverified or less mainstream sources, some of which could be considered fake news. This included news from niche news providers accessed via social media and aggregators, alongside news presented through friend's posts or Facebook groups. Though some within the sample were aware of the dangers of such sources, many did not think to check claims made by their friends or lesser-known providers.

"I have 4000 or so friends on Facebook so I can't really control what's on there [...] Usually I don't mind other people's opinions or getting things second hand – Matt, 45

Incidental consumption encouraged low engagement with news

Social media has become a key portal for news. However, in the sample, participants tended to consume content they accessed on those platforms in a passive way. On social media, participants were more likely to skim-read the headlines only rather than clicking through to the full articles. When participants did click on articles, they often only skim-read or read the beginning of the article before returning to their social media feed.

Within the sample of 24 participants, we saw all but one consuming news on social media through screen record although only 19 reported that they did. Out of these, 13 displayed lower engagement behaviours with content they accessed on social media than with news they consumed habitually or with a goal in mind. They were more likely to only read the headline or beginning of the article, or to skim-read or scroll through rather than read in-depth to the end.



This passivity was however not exclusive to incidental news consumption and was present when participants were consuming news through offline sources such as television and radio. While the news was on the television, most participants were simultaneously using other devices or doing other activities for the majority of the time, paying less attention to the news broadcast.



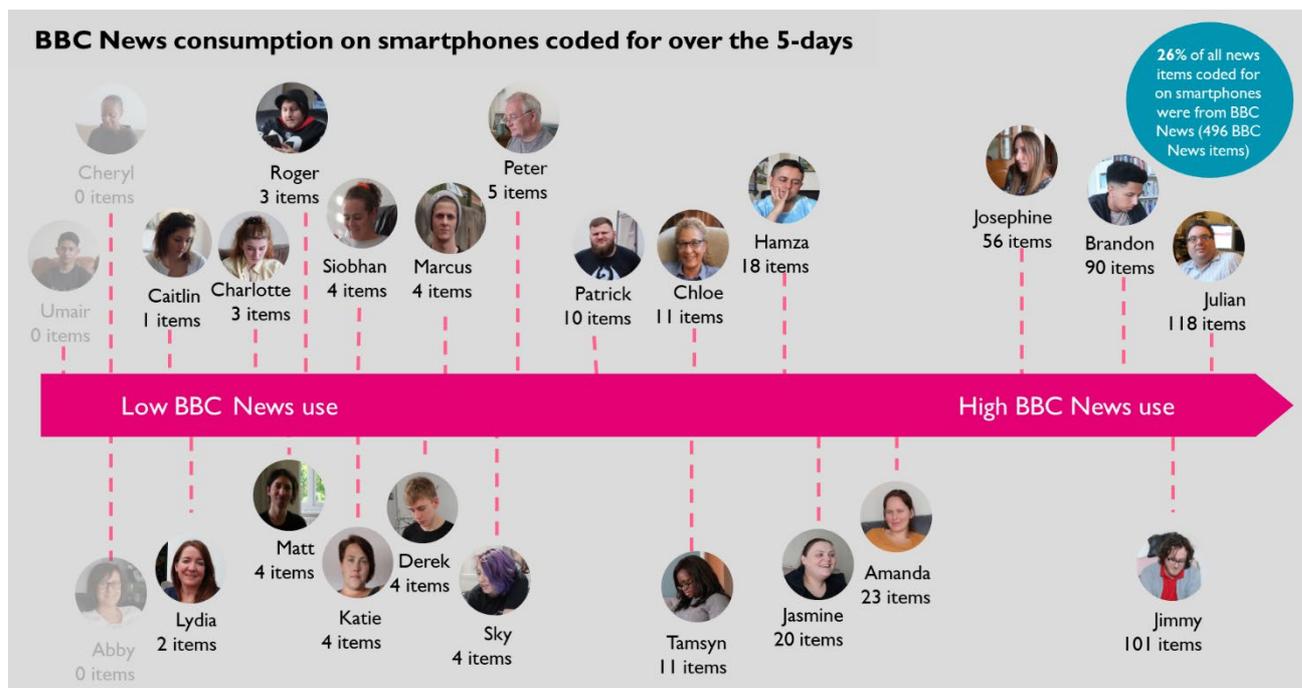
We noted that the highest level of engagement with news content across the sample was when participants were actively seeking out news content, either via their search engine or on a news app. Participants were more likely to read articles they clicked on through these platforms to the end or in-depth.

A majority of the sample felt low engagement behaviours such as reading headlines or skim-reading the beginning of articles were sufficient to gain an understanding of a news story or a topic. Despite a large amount of low-level engagement with news content they came across incidentally, most people felt they were well informed about what was going on in the world, and often over-reported their level of engagement with the news they were consuming.

“I don’t want to drill down into the detail, but it is good to know what’s happening” – Lydia, 37

5. Perceptions of the BBC: Where does the BBC fit in this new news landscape?

BBC News consumption varied widely across the sample. This graph shows the amount of online BBC News items coded from the five-day screen record footage for each respondent, which made up 26% of all the news moments coded for within the sample. Three participants did not consume any BBC News items via their smartphone.³



Most engagement with BBC News was by habitual consumers

Within the sample, ten participants were regular BBC News users either online or offline. Only five in the sample had downloaded the BBC News app onto their smartphones, and out of these, four checked their app on a daily basis.

Those who habitually engaged with BBC News nearly always had a longstanding relationship with the BBC, having consumed it for years or having grown up with BBC broadcast news as a key element of family life. This was particularly true of older participants in the sample who tended to watch or listen to BBC News on their TV or radio at specific times of the day, although this self-report was sometimes disproved through a review of their Nest camera footage, as was the case with Peter.

“TV news in the morning and in the evening, sort of 6 o’clock for the local news and the national news” Peter, 62

However, there were also younger participants in the sample who engaged with BBC News. In some cases, participants had downloaded the BBC News app and developed a routine of regularly checking it. For example, Brandon, 17, checked the BBC News app on his smartphone every morning upon waking up. Despite this, habitual use of the BBC did not necessarily translate into a deeper engagement with BBC News content: Hamza, 33, for example, had the BBC News app and checked it daily, but rarely read any articles in any depth.

³ To be noted that half the sample were recruited to be medium to high BBC News consumers.

BBC News content appeared relatively little on social media and news aggregators

In contrast to these habitual BBC consumers, the majority of the sample was seldom exposed to BBC News content on their devices and 11 out of the 24 participants came across five or less BBC news items over the five-day screen record. Many did not come across or engage with BBC News content even incidentally when on, for example, social media. Indeed, participants relying on news aggregators or social media for news rarely came across BBC News content or did not click on it when it did feature on those portals.

Amanda | 33
Receptionist
Newcastle

Amanda received Uplay notifications on her phone regularly. She would browse the aggregator on her lunch break at work and found the content on there entertaining and amusing. She was often drawn in by the “bizarre” headlines.

Shock Footage Shows A Python Swallowing Another

Elizabeth Hurley, 53, reveals her ample assets and taut midriff in a sequinned string bikini in sizzling Instagram snap

MASS SINGALONG AND FIREWORKS AS SPICE GIRLS END SUNDERLAND SHOW IN STYLE

People’s clicks and engagement on aggregators led to content on their feeds that focused on human interest, gossip and often had ‘clickbait’ titles

Throughout the footage of news aggregator use we analysed, BBC News content appeared less often than content by other providers, such as The Daily Mail, The Sun and The Daily Mirror—partly as a result of users’ consumption. Participants’ clicks and engagement on aggregators led to content on their feeds that focused on human interest, gossip, and often had ‘clickbait’ titles. This was often self-fulfilling, as the users who did not have an existing relationship with the BBC were less likely to be exposed to BBC News content via their preferred aggregator service. For example, in the five days of screen record, Umair, 17, did not come across any BBC articles on Google News and did not engage with BBC News on any other platforms, including TV and radio despite being an avid news consumer.

Even where BBC News did appear on social media and news aggregator feeds, it appeared not to stand out to users more than content published by other providers. Tamsyn used the hashtag feature on Twitter to get her news, which she liked because she felt it gave her access to a variety of opinions and providers. She said she never saw articles from the BBC on the platform, however while reviewing the screen record it appeared that when the BBC was on her feed, she would always scroll straight past its articles. Some participants admitted that the headline or thumbnail image of BBC News articles was not “catchy” enough to draw their attention and that they were more likely to read a “clickbait-y” equivalent of the same news story from a different provider. As the provider doesn’t feature prominently on news aggregators in our sample, BBC News did not benefit from its positive reputation when it came to clicks.

“I think the BBC needs a bigger online presence...I never see their articles when I’m on Twitter” – Tamsyn, 27

Positive perceptions of BBC News didn’t always translate into high engagement with its news content

Across the sample, most participants were broadly positive about the value of the BBC when asked, commenting on its trustworthiness, quality and impartiality. Several participants felt the BBC was synonymous with news, viewing BBC News as the UK’s leading news “brand” and as a British “institution”. In some instances, this was the result of having been brought up with the BBC. For example, Josephine, 32, grew up watching BBC News

every evening with her parents. She now watches the evening news broadcast whenever she can with her husband and considers the BBC to be her go-to news source.

Often participants were quick to state the BBC's value, but when asked, struggled to articulate why, for example, they perceived BBC News as trustworthy. Many participants realised they had not critically reflected on the BBC as a news provider prior to the interviews, assuming it was reliable "because it's the BBC". Jasmine, 33, admitted she had "not thought on that before" and realised she was not sure why she trusted the BBC as a news provider.

"I trust the BBC – I can't tell you why but if I didn't, you would know [...] because I wouldn't watch it" – Peter, 62

Those who could articulate BBC News' value felt it was trustworthy due to it being "fact-based" rather than opinion-based, and in not taking a particular stance on topics. Charlotte, 19, said she was frustrated by BBC News' "centrism", but also recognised that it was this very centrism that meant she was more likely to trust the BBC above other providers.

"Sometimes the BBC is just so centrist and I want them to give an opinion and say that something is good or bad... but then if they did that I might trust them less" – Charlotte, 19

Despite the apparent value participants saw in the BBC, this did not always translate into actual news consumption or engagement with the BBC as a news provider online or offline. As mentioned, there were ten habitual BBC News consumers within the sample. However, even those engaging with BBC News did so in the same way that they did other news providers, often partially reading or skimming articles, or simply reading the headlines.

Many of those who did consume BBC News in some form felt the BBC offered little difference from other providers when it came to their everyday news consumption, seeing the BBC as "one of many". Out of the sample of 24, nine felt the BBC was the same as ITV and Sky; of these, four were habitual BBC news consumers. This was particularly true where participants were using news aggregators or social media as a platform for news within an eclectic news landscape.

"I think they're [ITV and Sky] the same as BBC – there's nothing additional, they don't go above or beyond. I don't favour any of the channels really" – Josephine, 32

In some instances, however, the BBC's perceived value did translate into actual behaviours. For example, when participants were actively seeking out information about a particular story or topic, the BBC was a popular choice among the sample due to its reputation. Many participants reported using the BBC to "fact-check" a breaking news story or any news that they were unsure of or wanted clarity on. However, these claims were not always verified and supported by the coded screen record data. Although we did observe some goal-driven behaviour, BBC News was not used more than other providers.

Others felt the BBC wasn't for them

While participants were broadly positive about BBC News, some participants in the sample felt the BBC wasn't suitable for them for a variety of reasons:

- Political bias
- Lack of specialism on certain topics
- Insufficient local coverage
- Unengaging content—considered boring, old-fashioned or stuffy

Many felt that BBC News leant in the opposite political direction to theirs, whichever way that was

Some participants felt that BBC News had a political bias that did not align with their own. It was common for participants to feel that the BBC leant in the opposite direction to their own political beliefs, whichever way that was.

For instance, Abby, 54 felt that BBC News was anti-Israel and misrepresented news in the Middle East to push that agenda. This left her feeling strongly negatively about the BBC overall. Additionally, Patrick, 27, felt that the BBC had a right-leaning bias and highlighted its relationship with some Conservative donors, citing online discourse that referred to it as the “British Bias Conservatives”.

Some participants felt the BBC wasn’t sufficiently specialist for their level of knowledge or passion, instead providing only a generalist level of depth. Roger, 33, felt the BBC was attempting to be a “jack of all trades” and, in doing so, could not provide appropriate detail on his interests around tech and gaming.

On a similar theme, those particularly interested in local news felt that the BBC’s provision wasn’t “as good” as local providers, which were able to provide specific content to their area. Despite regarding the BBC as an authority, Jasmine, 33, rarely used BBC News and preferred to use the non-BBC local radio station and her local paper, The Ulster Herald, for coverage of her area.

Others, particularly younger participants within the sample, felt that the BBC was designed and tailored for an older generation, often preferring to use other news providers found through social media. Sky, 19, wanted the BBC website to more closely resemble BuzzFeed; she liked that the BuzzFeed page was colourful, easy to navigate and covered topics like Game of Thrones. Some felt the BBC couldn’t offer the gossip, drama or human interest stories they preferred as much as other providers could. This was the case of Umair, 17, who felt that the news he wanted to read, which was based on human stories and personal testimonies, wouldn’t be available on the BBC.

“The BBC website is quite grey...It’s boring. It needs to be more colourful, more like BuzzFeed” – Sky, 19

6. Implications for BBC News and other news providers

The findings of this research have implications for both BBC News and the news sector more broadly.

Social media and smartphones influenced which news providers people engaged with

First, this research showed that news consumers’ habits and behaviours around social media, and smartphones more generally, influenced what news they consumed and which providers they engaged with. The appetite for long-form writing and offline news was relatively low in this sample, which showed a marked preference for short-form media such as bullet-pointed ‘highlights’ or brief videos, often consumed on smartphones.

Social media decreased depth of engagement with news

Second, the results from this sample showed that depth of engagement with online news was generally lower when it was the result of an incidental journey through, for example, social media rather than a habitual journey to check the news each morning. A person’s motivation—either to consume news or to achieve something else,

such as entertainment or socialising—and journey to news content appeared to impact their level of engagement with that content.

People who primarily got their news through social media and news aggregators, appeared to seldom see BBC News content

The screen record data across the sample suggested a reliance on social media and news aggregators for a large proportion of most participants' news engagement, with human interest, gossip and celebrity news topics, and 'clickbait' headlines appearing to draw the most attention. The screen record footage showed that for most participants BBC News content appeared relatively rarely via these platforms, and when it did there were few examples of participants engaging with that content.

BBC News did not appear to be attracting younger 'online-first' consumers

Within the sample most habitual BBC News consumers had a historic, offline relationship with the BBC. These were often older participants who had grown up watching BBC News on TV every day. Younger online-first consumers rarely displayed habitual and regular BBC use, especially on traditional news platforms such as TV or radio and preferred to go to other platforms or providers.

The BBC had a good reputation, but its content often was not noticed among other providers

Finally, while many participants articulated that they valued the role of the BBC for providing news that is trustworthy, impartial and accurate, this often didn't translate to regular engagement with BBC News. Some users who were less aware or concerned by the source of news stories on aggregators and social media, were less influenced by the positive brand perceptions of the BBC. In addition, many of the news moments analysed did not seem to be driven by a *need* for accurate, trustworthy and impartial information; rather, a preference for human interest, celebrity drama or gossip, local information, or confirmation of firmly held beliefs were what attracted participants to much of the news they consumed.