Navigating news in an online world

Ofcom's commentary on its qualitative research on news

Summary of key findings

The news landscape has changed significantly over recent years

Online news is playing an increasing role – almost two-thirds of people use the internet for news.

Some people feel overwhelmed by the increasing volume of news

Some feel a sense of social pressure to keep up with the news, while others admit to feeling fatigued by the amount of negative news stories they are exposed to.

People tend to underestimate how much news they consume online

A lot of online news is processed unconsciously, where people are exposed to news stories without realising it.

Social media has 'blurred' the boundaries between news and other content

This means many people cannot discern what 'counts' as news and where it originally comes from.

People often engage with news in passive and shallow ways

As people consume more news online they tend to engage with it in a more superficial way, in part driven by the way social media and smartphones work.

People recognise they should think critically when navigating news online

People are aware of common concerns related to online news but can't articulate what these mean in practice.

Some people try to counteract these concerns by relying on shortcuts and intuition to assess the reliability of news stories – but these mechanisms are limited in their effectiveness.

These challenges sit within a broader context of distrust in media and other institutions

Many people talk about a wider lack of trust in public figures and other institutions, and there are mixed views about how this relates to distrust in media.

Overview of our research

The news environment is changing rapidly. Our new research helps us better understand how people's behaviour and attitudes are changing in response

News consumption has changed significantly over recent years, with online platforms in particular playing a growing role. Almost two thirds of people use the internet for news, more than any other platform except television[1]. Understanding what news people consume as well as why and how they consume it seems less clear in this new and changing landscape. Understanding people's behaviour and their attitudes towards different news sources is also challenging, so we have commissioned new and innovative research to better understand these issues.

News plays an important role in people's lives in a variety of ways

People engage with news to understand what is happening in the world around them and how it will affect their own everyday life, such as checking the weather and travel alerts.

News also plays a wider role in people's lives. It helps raise awareness, unveils scandals, and holds authorities and institutions to account. News also helps people make informed decisions when it comes to voting.

> "I find myself constantly feeling miserable when I've watched the news… it feels like it's just a debrief of everything terrible that's happening in the world."

Some people feel overwhelmed by the amount of news available and sometimes feel a social pressure to keep up with the latest news

Many people describe the current news landscape as busy and overloaded, with new news stories constantly available.

> "I think it's everywhere now, I don't think there's really a break from it, I wouldn't say."

Some people are concerned they will miss a news story they perceive as important if they don't get regularly updated, feeling a 'fear of missing out'. To counteract this, many have adopted a routine where they simply 'go through' large volumes of news stories, without actually engaging in a meaningful way, only to make sure they have up-to-date information.

Many people also admit they feel there is a social pressure to keep up with the latest news, and they can feel excluded if they don't keep up to date with the news and know what their friends are talking about.

> "I do feel a pressure to keep up with the news… It's a feeling of being out of the loop."

In some cases, people also find news fatiguing and depressing, and that it often focusses on negative stories. Some of them have tried to consciously reduce their news intake through 'detoxes' but returned to similar levels of consumption after a short period.

[1] Ofcom News Consumption Survey 2018

People tend to underestimate how much news they consume online

Our research found there was a significant difference between the number of online stories people said they looked at and those they actually saw. In a typical example, one respondent reported seeing nine news articles online throughout the week. Her browser history, however, showed that she actually saw 13 online news stories in a single day, not including the news she saw on her Facebook app which she used for about an hour per day.

In many cases, people tend to most readily associate the term 'news' with traditional sources, such as those in newspapers and on TV, as opposed to online, which can lead to under-reporting their online news consumption. People are also not always fully aware of how much time they spend consuming news online as lots of this is processed unconsciously, when people are exposed to news stories without realising it.

Smartphones and social media can encourage 'unconscious processing'. Their interfaces typically mix news with other types of content, which can sometimes lead to people not being aware they are consuming news.

Unconscious processing of news is not new, nor is it restricted to online news. News is often associated with well-established routines, such as driving to work while listening to the radio, and as a result people are not always aware that they are consuming news during these times.

In the 'blurred' environment of social media, people can struggle to discern what counts as news, and to identify the original source of a news story

Social media offers an efficient way to get a wide range of information across different topics. It is now used by 44% of people to access news[2] and displays news content from different sources alongside other types of content. However, given this blurring of boundaries between news and other content, some people are becoming less able to distinguish news from other types of content, and where it ultimately comes from. While lots of people are able to recall the platform they consumed the news on (e.g. Facebook) they struggle to remember the original source of the news story.

"Oh, I read about that news story on Facebook... I don't know where it came from."

[2] Ofcom News Consumption Survey 2018
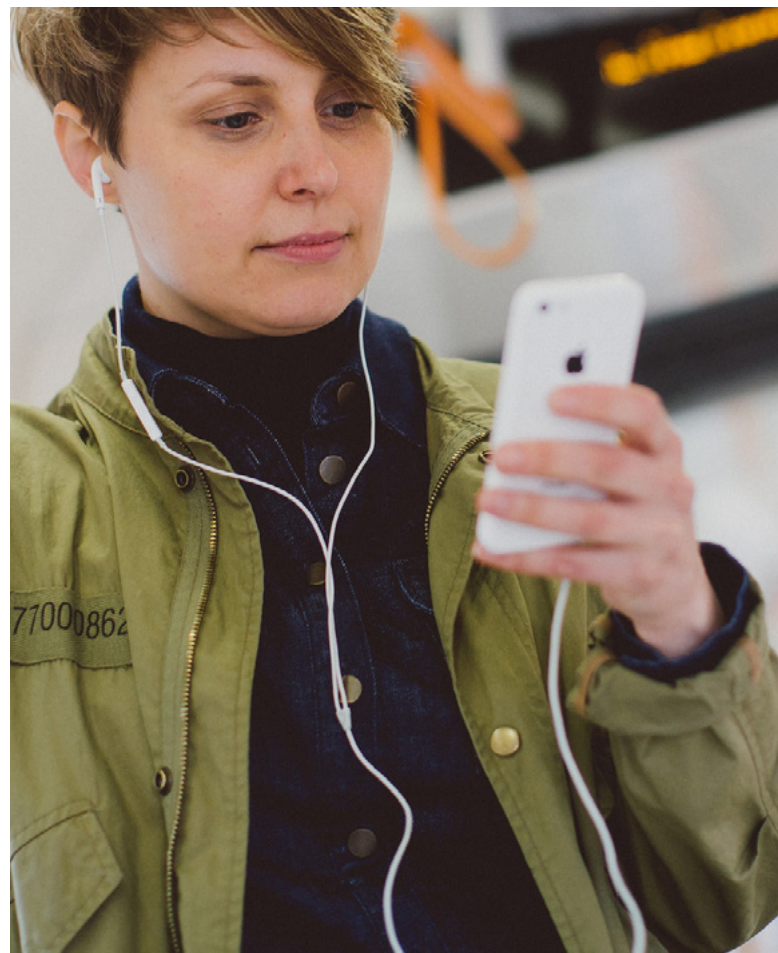
Even when people are aware they are consuming news, they often engage with that news content in shallow or passive ways

News stories are competing for people's time and attention. As a result of people feeling increasingly stretched across a wide range of news sources and stories, as well as other content, they end up consuming it in less depth. In many cases, when people did remember reading a news story, they still could not recall much of the detail.

Shallow or passive news consumption is not new either. Scanning newspapers and having TV or radio news programmes on in the background are common behaviour. However, features such as the newsfeed and push notifications, which are typically associated with smartphones and social media, can drive further passive consumption. Many people tend to see only what they are exposed to in their newsfeeds, as opposed to proactively searching for specific content. Others quickly scroll through their notifications only to make the 'unread' symbol disappear.

> "Most of the time it's just what I see when I'm scrolling. It's only if I have more time that I'll go on Google and actually look for news."

While people are often aware of common concerns relating to online news, they do not always fully understand them

Levels of trust vary across different platforms, with many considering TV and radio to be the most trusted and regulated platforms. Our News Consumption Survey 2018 found that only 39% found social media trustworthy, compared to 70% and 66% who trust TV and radio respectively.[3]

[3] % of ratings from regular users who rated source highly

Most people are aware of terms associated with concerns around online news, such as 'fake news'. However, they are less able to articulate what these terms mean or look like in practice.

> "I think sometimes they put fake news on Facebook so you click on them."

People recognise the need to think critically when navigating online news, but often fail to adopt effective mechanisms

In light of these concerns, some people look to attributes such as pictures to assess the reliability of a news story, and logos to assess the trustworthiness of a news source. For some people, especially younger individuals, the actual content of the news story plays a secondary role to these attributes.

> "If I look at a news article and it's got an image, straight away I'm like, yeah it's trustworthy. That is my shortcut."

Others think that the popularity of an online news story can judge its reliability, claiming that if a news story has been shared widely it must be reliable. Others who consider themselves more digitally savvy, claim that they just inherently know the value and trustworthiness of a news source.

While many people believe they should take a critical approach to navigating online news, in reality most are not doing anything at all. Some people think that any strategies, such as cross-referencing stories or fact-checking, are time-consuming and take too much effort, especially if they need to leave a news app to go and look elsewhere.

> "I wouldn't think to fact check something myself, I'd just tend to assume it's fact, and assume it's authentic."

Concerns about online news sit within a broader context of distrust in media and wider institutions

Many people talked about a wider lack of trust in public figures, politicians and other institutions, with recent events and the reporting of recent scandals, further undermining their trust.

> "Well, what do people trust now? You know, churches have been wrecked by scandal, police forces have been wrecked by scandal, and so have politicians. People, in my opinion, are increasingly sceptical about anything, and especially authority figures."

There are mixed views about the role that news plays in relation to the wider distrust issues to public figures and other institutions. Some people said they are less sure about what the news is actually telling them. This concern particularly applies to online and social media platforms in light of concerns, such as 'fake news' and 'clickbait'. However, other people think that news media have played an important role in exposing wrongdoings and scandals.

Changes to the news landscape have created a range of complex challenges for news consumption

The rise of online news has presented rapid and significant changes to the news landscape. The way that smartphones and social media deliver news to people has been a key driver of this change. In response to changes in what news people are consuming, we are also starting to see some important changes to how people are consuming news – and even to their understanding of what news is or where it comes from.

These changes are taking place against a backdrop of concerns about fake news and 'filter bubbles', among wider issues of distrust in general. While people tend to recognise these concerns, they do not always fully understand them, nor are they equipped to address them. Overall, these factors combine to build a very complicated picture of the current news landscape that presents a range of challenges to how people understand and navigate the news today.

In light of this complex environment for news, we consider that the argument for independent regulatory oversight of the activities of online companies has never been stronger. Ofcom will outline further thoughts on the role that independent regulation could play in the autumn.

Full reports at:

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/news-media/navigating-news-online