REUTERS INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF JOURNALISM
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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COVID-19 increases appetite for trusted and reliable news, but turning this into revenue remains a significant challenge

This year's Reuters Institute Digital News Report provides evidence that some news organisations have benefitted from a desire for reliable information over the last year – in terms of higher reach, higher trust and more subscribers. But the pandemic has also accelerated shifts to digital, social and mobile environments putting further economic pressure on publishers worldwide. Overall, still only a minority are prepared to pay for online news while younger generations continue to rely on new, convenient ways to access news that are proving hard to monetise.

These are some of the conclusions of the 10th edition of the Digital News Report, which is based on an online survey of 92,000 people in 46 media markets, representing the views of more than half the world's population and including India, Indonesia, Thailand, Nigeria, Colombia and Peru for the first time.

The report is embargoed until Wednesday 23 June 00.01 BST. You can download an embargoed PDF version in this link. It will be live on our dedicated microsite at www.digitalnewsreport.org/2021

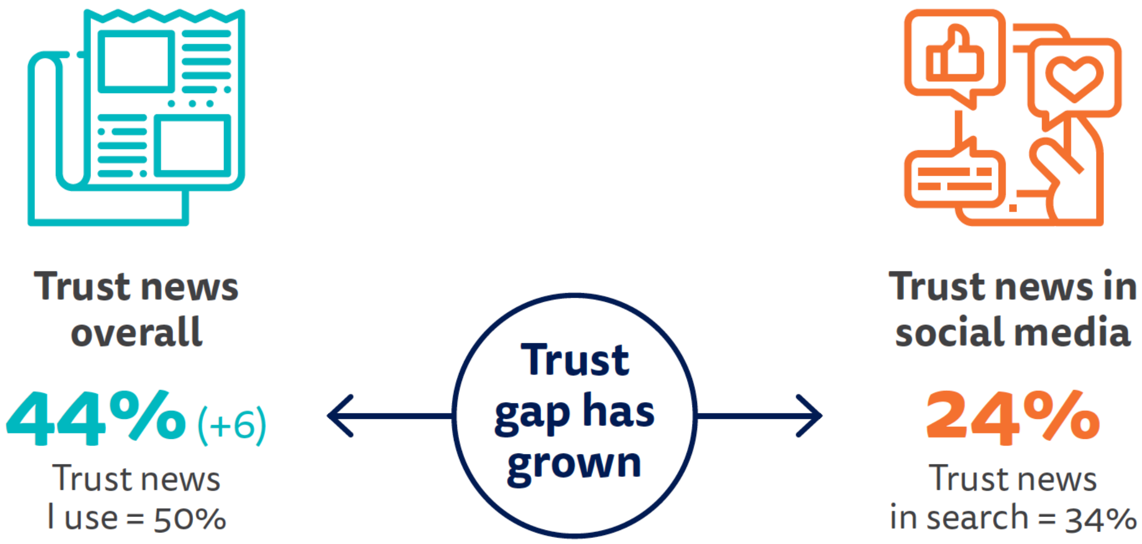
Trust in news is up in almost all countries

Trust in news has grown, on average, by six percentage points in the wake of the pandemic – with almost half of our total sample (44%) saying they trust most news most of the time. This partly reverses falls in average trust over the last few years that have, to some extent, been driven by increasingly bitter political and social debates. Finland remains the country with the highest levels of overall trust (65%). The United States has the lowest levels (29%) reflecting a divisive election and the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd.

In a number of countries, especially those with strong and independent public service media, the report also documents greater consumption of trusted news brands. The pattern is less clear outside Western Europe, in countries where the crisis has dominated the media agenda less, or where other political and social issues have played a bigger role.

Proportion that trusts most news most of the time

All markets



Q6_1/2/3/4. Please, indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: I think you can trust the news/news I use/news in social media/news in search most of the time. Base: total sample in all markets: 92,372.

At the same time, trust in news from search and social media has remained broadly stable. This means that the *trust gap* between news in general and news found in aggregated environments has grown.

Lead author Nic Newman says:

> *"The focus on factual reporting during the COVID-19 crisis may have made the news seem more straightforward, while the story has also had the effect of squeezing out more partisan political news. This may be a temporary effect, but in almost all countries we see audiences placing a greater premium on accurate and reliable news sources"*

Pandemic increases economic pressures on news publishers

The report documents how badly print publications have been affected by COVID-19, due to restrictions on movement affecting sales and the associated hit to advertising revenue. Countries that have traditionally had high levels of circulation, such as Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, have seen some of the biggest falls and this is accelerating the push to digital subscriptions.

Across 20 countries where publishers have been actively pushing digital subscriptions, we find 17% saying that they have paid for some kind of online news in the last year (via subscription, donation, or one-off payment). That's up by two points in the last year and up five since 2016. Despite this, the report notes that the vast majority of consumers in these countries continue to rely on freely available sources and do not pay for any online news, and most of those who do subscribe to a single title. Subscribers tend to be richer, older and better educated and tend to pay for just one online publication.

Most success comes in a handful of wealthy countries with a long history of high levels of print newspaper subscriptions, such as Norway 45% (+3), Sweden 30% (+3), Switzerland 17% (+4), and the Netherlands 17% (+3). Around a fifth (21%) now pay for at least one online news outlet in the United States, 20% in Finland, and 13% in Australia. By contrast, just 9% say they pay in Germany and 8% in the UK.

Profile of ongoing digital subscription

Selected markets

Country	% paying for online news	Examples of national titles	Median number of subscriptions	Average age of subscriber (ongoing payment)
🇳🇴 Norway	45 %	VG, Aftenposten, Dagbladet	1	50-55
🇸🇪 Sweden	30 %	Aftonbladet, Dagens Nyheter	1	50-55
🇺🇸 USA	21 %	New York Times, Washington Post	2	50-55
🇫🇮 Finland	20 %	Helsingin Sanomat, Aamulehti	1	45-50
🇳🇱 Netherlands	17 %	De Telegraaf, AD, Volkskrant	1	45-50
🇩🇰 Denmark	16 %	Berlingske, Politiken	1	55-60
🇮🇪 Ireland	16 %	Irish Times, Irish Independent	1	40-45
🇦🇺 Australia	13 %	Sydney Morning Herald, Herald Sun	1	50-55
🇨🇦 Canada	13 %	Globe & Mail, Toronto Star	1	50-55
🇮🇹 Italy	13 %	Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica	1	50-55
🇦🇹 Austria	12 %	Kronen Zeitung, Der Standard	1	45-50
🇪🇸 Spain	12 %	El País, El Mundo, elDiario.es	1	40-45
🇫🇷 France	11 %	Le Monde, Mediapart	1	45-50
🇩🇪 Germany	9 %	Bild, Der Spiegel	1	45-50
🇬🇧 UK	8 %	Times, Guardian, Telegraph	1	50-55

Q7_subs_name. You said you have paid a subscription/membership to one or more digital news services in the last year... Please enter the name of the news subscription you value most, followed by your supplementary subscriptions? Base: All that paid for a subscription/membership to a digital news service in the last year: Range: UK = 125 to Norway = 656

One striking finding from our survey this year is the difference in contribution made by local and regional publications across countries. In Norway, 57% of subscribers pay for one or more local outlets in digital form. This compares with 23% in the United States, but just 3% in the United Kingdom.

Co-author Rasmus Kleis Nielsen says:

> *"Subscriptions are beginning to work for some publishers but it won't work for all publishers and most importantly, it won't work for all consumers. Many people don't wish to be tied to one or two news sites or apps, others don't find the product worth the price. Given abundant access to free news,*

publishers will need to develop compelling options to bundle publications or more ways of paying a smaller amount for limited access for payment to become a mass phenomenon."

Misinformation and COVID-19

Concern about misinformation remains high, with 58% of our global sample expressing concern about what is true or false on the internet when it comes to news.

More respondents said they had seen more misinformation about coronavirus than any other subject, including politics. They expressed most concern about the role played by politicians in spreading inaccurate or misleading information about COVID-19, followed by ordinary people, activists and journalists. Concern was even higher in Brazil (41%) where President Jair Bolsonaro has made many false claims about the pandemic.

Proportion that say they are most concerned about spreading false or misleading information about COVID-19

All markets

29%
Most concerned about behaviour of **politicians**

More in ... Brazil, Spain, Poland, Nigeria

16%
Most concerned about behaviour of **ordinary people**

More in ... South Africa, Thailand

15%
Most concerned about behaviour of **activists**

More in ... Netherlands, Australia

11%
Most concerned about behaviour of **journalists**

More in ... Greece, Peru

9%
Most concerned about behaviour of **foreign governments**

More in .. Mexico

Q_FAKE_NEWS_2021b. Thinking specifically about COVID-19 and its effects, which of the following, if any, are you most concerned about online? False or misleading information from... *Base: Total sample in all markets = 93,372.*

When it comes to the spread of false information about COVID-19 through online channels, respondents in many countries were most worried about Facebook. However, in parts of the Global South, such as Brazil, Mexico, Malaysia and Chile, people say they are more concerned about closed messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram. This is a particular worry because false information tends to be less visible and harder to counter in these private networks.

A vote of confidence in impartial news

The growth of online and social media has in some cases encouraged the growth of news organisations and individuals that take more overtly partisan positions than in the past. But survey evidence, backed up by qualitative interviews in four countries, shows that the public still strongly supports the ideals of impartial and objective news, while recognising that they themselves are sometimes drawn to more opinionated and less balanced content.

Across countries, most respondents (74%) say they still prefer news that reflects a range of views and lets *them* decide what to think. Most also think that news outlets should try to be neutral on every issue (66%), though some younger groups think that 'impartiality' may not be appropriate or desirable in some cases – for example, on social justice issues.

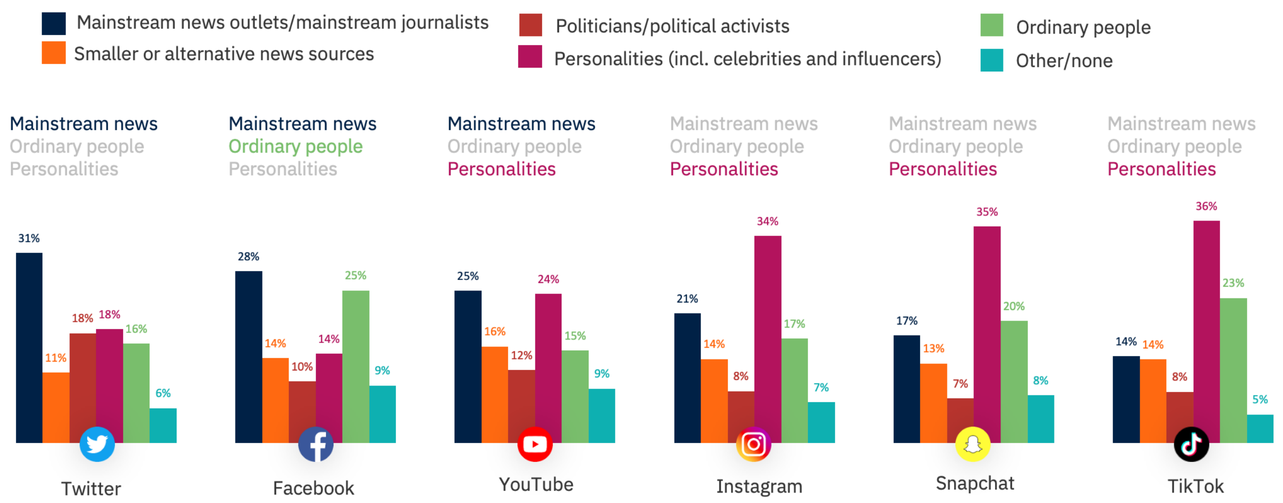
Younger audiences turn to new networks and listen to influencers

Across all markets, just a quarter (25%) prefer to start their news journeys with a website or app. Those aged 18–24 (so-called Generation Z) have an even weaker connection to traditional news sites and are almost twice as likely to prefer to access news via social media, aggregators, or mobile alerts.

Facebook has become significantly less relevant for news in the last year, while WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram have continued to attract more use, especially among the young. Coronavirus and Black Lives Matter have both galvanised the sharing of news-related posts in TikTok over the last year. The network has also been central to a wave of protests by younger people across the world, in countries such as Peru, Indonesia and Thailand. TikTok reaches 30% of our Thai sample, with 14% using it for news.

Who people pay most attention to when using each network for news

All markets



Q12_Social_sources. You said that you use <social platform> for news… When it comes to news on <social platform> which of these do you generally pay most attention to? *Base: All that use Twitter / Facebook / YouTube / Instagram / Snapchat / TikTok for news in all markets: 6,338 / 28,762 / 15,663 / 6,570 / 924 / 1,500.*

The report also shows how influencers play a much bigger role in TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram than in more traditional networks like Facebook and Twitter. Journalists have traditionally led the conversation in news-focussed Twitter but struggle to attract attention in these newer networks compared with celebrities and other personalities.

Co-author Simge Andı says:

> *"The lack of strong journalistic presence could make those relying on these networks particularly vulnerable to misinformation. On the other hand,*

news is largely incidental in these spaces and the expectations of snappy, visual, and entertaining content do not always come naturally to newsrooms staffed by senior journalists with a focus on traditional formats"

Other findings from the 2021 report

In the light of debates about diversity and inclusion, the report finds that in many cases young people (especially young women) and political partisans feel that media coverage is less fair to them than to other groups. In the United States three-quarters (75%) of those who self-identify on the right feel that media coverage of their views is unfair, compared with just a third of those on the left. Black Americans, Hispanic Americans and young women are also more likely to say media coverage is unfair.

The use of smartphones for news (73%) has grown, with dependence also growing through coronavirus lockdowns. Use of laptop and desktop computers and tablets for news is stable or falling, while the penetration of smart speakers remains limited in most countries – especially for news.

Growth in podcasts has slowed, in part due to the impact of restrictions on movement. Our data show Spotify continuing to gain ground over Apple and Google podcasts in a number of countries and YouTube also benefiting from the popularity of video-based and hybrid podcasts.

Methodology

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Survey conducted in 46 markets; United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, Singapore, Australia, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Kenya and South Africa. Total sample size was 92,155 adults with around 2,000 per market (1,501 in Hong Kong). Fieldwork was undertaken at the end of January/start of February 2021.

The survey was carried out online. Samples were assembled using nationally representative quotas for age, gender, region in every market, and education in all markets except Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines, Romania, South Africa, Thailand, and Turkey. In the US, UK, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Italy we have applied additional political quotas based on vote choice in the most recent national election. The data in all markets were also weighted to targets based on census/industry-accepted data.

Data from India, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa are representative of younger English-speakers and not the national population, because it is not possible to reach other groups in a representative way using an online survey. The survey was fielded in English in these markets, and restricted to ages 18 to 50 in Kenya and Nigeria. Findings should not be taken to be nationally representative in these countries.

More generally, online samples will tend to under-represent the news consumption habits of people who are older and less affluent, meaning online use is typically over-represented and traditional offline use under-represented.

Contact

For more information, interview requests or a copy of the full report, please contact Eduardo Suárez at eduardo.suarez@politics.ox.ac.uk or Matthew Leake at matthew.leake@politics.ox.ac.uk.

More information on the 2021 Digital News Report

The report can be found on our website https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/ from 23 June, including slide-packs, charts, and raw data tables, with a licence that encourages reuse. A description of the methodology is available along with the complete questionnaire.

Sponsors of this year's report include Google News Initiative, BBC News, Ofcom, Edelman UK, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI), the Media Industry Research Foundation of Finland, the Fritt Ord Foundation in Norway, the Dutch Media Authority (CvdM), the Korea Press Foundation, the Open Society Foundations as well as our academic sponsors at the Leibniz Institute for Media Research/Hans Bredow Institute, Hamburg, the University of Navarra in Spain, the University of Canberra, the Centre d'études sur les médias, Quebec, Canada, and Roskilde University in Denmark. The Fundación Gabo is supporting the translation of the report into Spanish.

About the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism is dedicated to exploring the future of journalism worldwide. The Institute receives core funding from the Thomson Reuters Foundation and is based in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford. It was launched in November 2006 and developed from the Reuters Journalist Fellowship Programme, established at Oxford almost 40 years ago. See http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/

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About YouGov

YouGov is an international market research agency and pioneer of market research through online methods. YouGov has a panel of 15.8 million people worldwide, including 2.5 million in the UK representing all ages, socio-economic groups and other demographic types.