[GB] Ofcom publishes research on online news consumption

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On 13 July 2018, Ofcom, the UK communications regulator, published two qualitative research reports on people's attitudes towards online news consumption.

The purpose of the research was to acquire a more detailed understanding of the behaviours sitting behind the increase in the number of people accessing the news via online platforms in order to inform policy considerations. Respondents, who were selected to represent a cross-section of the United Kingdom, were asked to complete a combination of online pre-tasks as well as a set of activities on their media use. The data captured was followed by in-depth interviews and group discussions, exploring participants' views on their own news intake and their engagement with such content.

Although news plays a significant role in people's everyday lives in several ways, some respondents reported that they felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of news in circulation and increasingly stretched across a wide range of sources and content. In some instances, a feeling of social pressure to keep up-to-date with the latest news was expressed. Feelings of negativity and fatigue featured strongly in the participants' characterisation of the news, with some respondents claiming to have become 'news avoiders.' An important consequence of this overloaded news landscape appeared to be increased levels of faster and less critical processing of news, with participants often engaging with multiple sources only at a superficial level. Ubiquitous newsfeeds and features like push notifications were shown to drive further passive consumption.

The majority of the respondents' news consumption occurred via news-aggregators or social media, which remain largely unregulated. The 'blurred' boundaries between news and other content (for instance, advertising and entertainment) on these platforms made it difficult for participants to discern what 'counts' as news and identify its original source. Most respondents had a general awareness of 'buzzwords' associated with current concerns around online news, for example 'fake news', but demonstrated varying levels of understanding of their meaning, whilst few of them adopted effective mechanisms to counteract these types of issues. In order to assess the accuracy, importance and reliability of online news, most individuals relied on shortcuts and their own heuristics, such

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as the number of times an article was shared, liked or retweeted. Some younger respondents used the rule of thumb that if an article had an embedded still or moving image, it was probably true.

The research also revealed a mis-match between the number of online stories participants said they looked at and those they actually saw, showing that people tend to underestimate how much news they consume online. This finding also suggests that the extent of online news consumption is essentially unknown. Unconscious processing of news, encouraged at times by smartphone user interfaces, might account, to some degree, for its under-reporting.

The studies also highlight that concerns about online news should be set against a backdrop of distrust in media, public figures, politicians and other institutions. Although some participants recognised the role of news media in exposing wrongdoing, others expressed uncertainty over what the news is actually telling them. Finally, the research acknowledges that the rapid and significant changes to the current news landscape have given rise to complex challenges in relation to how people understand and navigate news today, thereby strengthening the argument in favour of independent regulatory oversight of the activities of online companies.

Scrolling news: The changing face of online news consumption

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/115915/Scrolling-News.pdf

The Changing World of News: Qualitative Research (13 July 2018)

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/115916/The-Changing-World-of-News.pdf

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