DIGITAL NEWS REPORT:
AUSTRALIA 2020

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FOREWORD

Kerry McCallum, Director, News & Media Research Centre

We release this year’s Digital News Report: Australia 2020 as the world is in the grip of the worst pandemic for a century. While we don’t yet know the long-term outcomes of COVID-19 on global health or the economy, as a community we watch transfixed as the pandemic disrupts almost every aspect of our lives.

For many Australians, the pandemic crisis came just as we were emerging from a catastrophic Summer. This year’s 2020 survey was conducted during the country’s worst bushfire season on record, with much of the Eastern Seaboard blanketed in a thick pall of smoke.

The Digital News Report: Australia 2020 provides an annual snapshot of how Australians are consuming news in a digital media landscape. Now in its sixth year, the study provides in-depth analysis of news consumption and performance over time. The Australian study is part of a global research project involving 40 countries, co-ordinated by The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford.

Over the years the DNR: Australia annual report has become a valuable tool for policy-makers and media industries. The 2019 report offered a vital point of reference to the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission’s Digital Platforms inquiry, and team members provided evidence at several parliamentary inquiries in 2019-20.

This year’s report, supported by supplementary research conducted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, provides evidence that people do turn to news in times of crisis. This year, Australians are no longer the world’s lightest news consumers. The surging demand for news during the bushfire crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic led to an overall increase in news consumption, with significant increases in television news viewing. The increased audience for ABC radio news provides further evidence of its role as the national emergency broadcaster.

The paradox of this surge in demand for reliable news is the precarity of the Australian news media industry with more than 200 Australian newsrooms closing either temporarily or permanently since January 20191. The global pandemic has accelerated the decline in print, television and online news production.

The report shows people’s growing concern about misinformation and ‘fake news’, particularly as spread through social media platforms. Our findings support the global trend towards an overall decline in trust in news.

Unsurprisingly given the bushfire emergency, climate change was at the forefront of respondents’ minds, but our findings show opinion is polarised between older and younger generations, rural and city dwellers, and between right and left-wing respondents.

I’m incredibly proud of the N&MRC Digital News Report: Australia team who produce this report in-house at the University of Canberra. Led by Professor Sora Park and Dr Caroline Fisher, the team is supported by the analytical expertise of Dr Jee Young Lee and Dr Kieran McGuinness. The writing of the report is a team effort with report co-authors Glen Fuller, Mathieu O’Neil, Yoonmo Sang, Michael Jensen and myself. Commentators, including leading journalists and media industry professionals, have provided context and cogent insights into the survey results.

The production of the report by the News and Media Research Centre is supported by the Faculty of Arts and Design and the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research & Innovation. This year, we welcome the Judith Neilson Institute as a major sponsor of the DNR: Australia 2020 report.

METHODOLOGY

This report is part of a long running international survey coordinated by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, an international research centre in the comparative study of journalism based at the University of Oxford. The Digital News Report delivers comparative data on media usage in 40 countries and across 6 continents.

The News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra is the Australian partner institute and author of the Digital News Report: Australia. This is the sixth annual DNR: Australia report.

The questionnaire and the overall project methodology were consistent across all territories. With the exception of Brazil, Turkey, South Africa, Malaysia, Mexico, Kenya, and the Philippines, where internet penetration is still relatively low, each country sample reflects the national population distribution. Core questions were asked in all 40 countries in order to provide an international comparison.

AUSTRALIAN SAMPLE

The survey was conducted by YouGov using an online questionnaire between 17 January and 8 February 2020. The sample is drawn from an online panel of 89,850 Australians. The final sample is reflective of the population that has access to the internet. To be included, respondents must have consumed news in the past month. As a result, 7% of the initial survey respondents were excluded.

The data were weighted to targets based on age, gender, region and education level to represent the total population based on Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

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<th>AUSTRALIAN SAMPLE</th>
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As this is an online survey, the results will underrepresent the consumption habits of people who are not online (typically older, less affluent, regional residents, and with limited formal education). The survey in Australia was conducted in English and does not represent the linguistic diversity of Australia.

EDUCATION QUOTA

The education question reflects the categories in the UN’s International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). In the past, the lower educated population was underrepresented. The categories we used in the Australian survey are summarised in the following table.

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As news consumption is closely tied to age, we adopted a generational approach to our analysis. We applied the generational categories used by PEW Research. In this year’s sample the maximum age of the respondents was 94. Instead of using PEW’s Greatest and Silent Generation categories, we merged the two and used ‘74+'. The age span calculation is based on the respondent’s age as of December 2019. This is because the fieldwork was conducted in early 2020 and most people would not have reached their birthdays at the time of the survey.

**GENERATIONS**

While the data is weighted according to the population size of each State and Territory, the data has also been analysed by postcode. This is important because it allows our report to reflect the geographic diversity of Australia and the differences in news consumption between urban and rural populations. The Australian Bureau of Statistics geographic classifications are used to analyse the data based on the groupings of major cities, inner region, outer region, remote, and very remote. However, because of the small number of participants from remote and very remote areas, we combined news consumers outside of major cities as ‘regional’.

Core sponsors of the international survey include Google, 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 Hans Bredow Institute, Hamburg University, the University of Navarra, the University of Canberra, Le Centre d’études sur les médias, Université Laval in Canada and Roskilde University in Denmark.

**ADDITIONAL COVID-19 SURVEY**

In April we conducted an additional survey to understand the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on news consumption. An online survey of N=2,196 Australians aged 18 and older was conducted by McNair yellowSquares Pty Ltd between 18-22 April 2020. The final sample is reflective of the population that has access to the internet. We used a quota for gender, age and education, reflecting the Australian Bureau of Statistic’s Census 2016 for adults aged 18+. The data was weighted based on the quota. In contrast to the Digital News Report annual survey, we did not exclude non-news consumers. In the final sample, 2% of the respondents said they access news less than once a month. Wherever appropriate, we compared the surveys conducted in Jan/Feb and April.

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**BIRTH YEARS** | **GENERATION** | **ABBREVIATION USED** | **AGE SPAN**
---|---|---|---
1901 - 27 | Greatest Generation | 74+ | 92+
1928 - 45 | Silent Generation | 74-91 | 
1946 - 64 | Baby Boomers | B | 55-73
1965 - 80 | Gen X | X | 39-54
1981 - 96 | Gen Y, Millennials | Y | 25-38
1997 - | Gen Z, Post-millennials | Z | 18-22

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1 https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/
AUTHORS

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Kieran McGuinness is a Research Associate for the Digital News Report project. He is a current PhD candidate with the News & Media Research Centre. His research looks at defence journalism and the role of the news media in shaping political discourses of military planning and procurement.

Yoonmo Sang is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Canberra and a member of the News & Media Research Centre. Prior to this, he was an Assistant Professor at Howard University in Washington DC in the USA. His research focuses on media law and policy and digital media users.

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Michael Jensen is Associate Professor at the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis. He has a background in political communication and has published books with Cambridge University Press and Palgrave concerning online political behaviour. His work concerns the use of digital communication technologies in the development of new forms of political organization within political campaigning and protest movements.

Kerry McCallum is Director of the News & Media Research Centre. Her research in Political Communication specialises in the relationships between changing media and Australian social policy. She is co-author of The Dynamics of News and Indigenous Policy in Australia (Intellect, 2017) and is currently lead investigator on the ARC Discovery project ‘Breaking Silences: Media and the Child Abuse Royal Commission’.

Glen Fuller is an Associate Professor of Communication and Journalism and Head of the School of Arts & Communication at the University of Canberra. He conducts research at the intersection of media, technology and culture. His focus is the role of specialist media in scenes and the relation between media and enthusiasm (affect), both in the context of technology, experience and the shifting composition of relations.
CONTRIBUTORS

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Creina Chapman is the Deputy Chair and CEO of the Australian Communications and Media Authority. She has held senior executive and advisory roles with Southern Cross Austereo, News Corp, Publishing & Broadcasting Limited and the Nine Network. Her experience spans television, radio, print, mobile services, podcasting and online services. Creina has also been a senior policy advisor to Federal members of Parliament.

Vanessa Wiltshire is an Australian Broadcast Corporation researcher for the critically acclaimed Australian Story program and has 25 years’ experience working across ABC and commercial television, radio and digital platforms. In 2019, she was a Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford, producing a paper on local news and collaborative journalism.

Margaret Simons is an award-winning freelance journalist and author. She won the 2015 Walkley for Social Equity Journalism for her essay Fallen Angels, published in The Monthly. She is the recipient of the 2015 Quill Award for best feature and the 2016 Quill Award for feature writing. As a freelance journalist her work has been published in The Monthly, Inside Story and The Age.

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Sally Lehrman, CEO and founder of the Trust Project, is an expert and speaker on building a more trustworthy press, and was named one of MediaShift’s Top 20 Digital Innovators (2018) for her work. Previously a reporter on medicine and science, her honours include a Peabody Award, duPont-Columbia and the John S. Knight Fellowship. She has written for Scientific American, Nature, Health, and NPR.

Leo Shanahan is The Australian’s Media Editor and co-host of Business Weekend on Sky News Live. He has previously written for The Australian and The Age newspapers. He is a multi-Walkley Award finalist, winner of a Westpac Excellence in Financial Journalism Award and News Awards, including Scoop of the Year in 2017 for revealing the government’s plan to introduce a bank levy prior to the federal budget.

Michelle Grattan is the chief political correspondent for The Conversation and one of Australia’s most respected political journalists. She has been a member of the Canberra parliamentary press gallery for more than 40 years, during which time she has covered the most significant stories in Australian politics.

Nic Newman is Senior Research Associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and is lead author of the annual Digital News Report. He also authors an influential annual report on media and technology trends. Nic has a background as a journalist and was a founding member of the BBC News website. Later, as Head of Product Development for BBC News, he helped introduce innovations such as blogs, podcasting, and mobile apps.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This year’s report has been shaped by unprecedented health and weather events. The main survey was conducted toward the end of the extreme bushfire season in Australia, and additional research was undertaken while the country was in lockdown due to the coronavirus.

At the time of publication, the news media are grappling with the economic impacts of the pandemic. Many local and regional outlets have closed or been suspended, and the long term financial and social consequences of the global health pandemic are not yet fully known.

In times of great uncertainty, news consumers seek more reliable, accurate and up-to-date news, as unfolding events directly influence their safety and well-being. This was reflected in the increase of news consumption and reliance on trusted news sources during the bushfires and the coronavirus outbreak. The findings confirm the critical role that news media play at times of crisis.
NEWS CONSUMPTION SURGES DURING CRISIS

During the bushfires, Australians were already consuming more news. The percentage of heavy news users had risen to 56% (+4). This increased further during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic to 70%. Last year, Australians had the dubious honour of being the lightest news consumers globally. This is no longer the case with Australia climbing six places in the global ranking. Interest in news has been declining over the past five years, but during the bushfires, it rose slightly to 60% (+2).

TRUST CONTINUES TO FLUCTUATE

During the bushfires, trust in news in general was low at 38% representing a six percent decline since last year. This decrease is consistent with the global trend. However, trust in news about COVID-19 was much higher at the peak of the pandemic (53%), especially for local reporting about the pandemic (61%). This reflects how trust can fluctuate depending on external circumstances and the context of news consumption.

AUSTRALIANS PREFER IMPARTIAL AND INDEPENDENT NEWS

The majority (62%) of Australian news consumers consider independent journalism to be important for society to function properly, but this is less so among those who rely on social media for news (57%). Australians also have a strong preference for impartial news (54%) rather than news that shares their point of view (19%) or challenges their viewpoint (13%).

MOST AUSTRALIANS WILL MISS LOCAL NEWS IF IT DISAPPEARS

During the bushfires, almost half of news consumers (45%) said that they were very or extremely interested in local news. Local newspapers and their websites were cited as the top source of local news (41%). We found that almost a quarter of news consumers were turning to alternative sources such as local social media groups for news about their community. This suggests that traditional news media are not fully meeting consumers’ demands for local news. This was particularly the case for younger generations. We also asked news consumers if they would miss local news if it were to close. The majority say they would miss local news sources if they were to close. Three-quarters would miss local newspapers (76%). Local radio would be missed the most (81%), especially by low income and regional Australians. This reflects the important role of radio during the bushfire crisis.

CONCERN ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE IS POLARISED

This year we asked about climate change, if people are concerned about the issue and where they get news and information about it. The results of this survey show that climate change is at the forefront of many Australians’ minds. Four out of five news consumers say they consider climate change to be either somewhat, very or extremely serious (79%).

Despite the drought, bushfires and floods, regional and rural news consumers are less likely to think climate change is a serious problem than people in the city. Younger people are more concerned than older. Left-wing news consumers (93%) think climate change is more serious than right-wing (63%).

The proportion of climate deniers in Australia is among the highest across the 40 countries surveyed. Almost one-fifth (18%) think climate change is not a serious issue (10% not very; 8% not at all). Those who access news via commercial AM radio (i.e. 2GB, 2UE, 3AW) (35%), Sky News (35%) and Fox News (32 %) are less likely to think climate change is serious.

TV IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SOURCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE NEWS IN AUSTRALIA

TV is the main source of news on climate change (28%), but some are getting information from non-news sources such as specialist websites and blogs. However, 15% of Australians do not pay any attention to news about climate change.

News consumers are evenly divided in their opinion about the accuracy of reporting on the issue with one-third (36%) saying it is accurate and one-third (33%) saying it is not. Those who take climate change more seriously are more likely to think the coverage is accurate (47%) and that it helps them know how to act in response to it (43%).

CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION IS HIGH BUT EXPERIENCE OF IT IS LOW

Concern about misinformation remains high (64%). However, during the pandemic less than a quarter (23%) encountered misinformation about the coronavirus. Compared to news sites, search engines and other social media platforms, people are most worried about misinformation on Facebook (36%). News consumers are also much more concerned about misinformation produced by the Australian government, politicians or political parties.
than by foreign.

AUSTRALIANS THINK POLITICIANS’ FALSE CLAIMS SHOULD BE REPORTED

If a politician does make a false or misleading statement, 54% of Australian news consumers think those claims should be reported by the media rather than ignored. However, Australians are torn about whether political ads should be allowed on TV and social media. Generally, news consumers think political ads are ok on TV but not on social media, except for younger people who are more supportive of political ads on social media. When it comes to misleading political ads, 58% think it’s up to the tech companies to block them.

TV CONQUERS DURING COVID

During the bushfires, TV had fallen but was still the main source of news for Australians (39%, -3). This markedly increased to 51% during the pandemic. There was a decline in the use of radio, print and social media for news during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, using social media brands to access news is steadily growing, particularly among older generations. Facebook is still the most commonly used social media platform for news but this has plateaued. YouTube for news continues to grow (21%, +2). One in four Gen Z consumers use Instagram (24%) and Snapchat (23%), and more than one-third (37%) use YouTube for news.

DEMAND FOR CURATED NEWS IS GROWING

The number of consumers going directly to news brand websites or apps for news is declining and indirect access to news on digital platforms is increasing, particularly among older generations. Social media and search are the two major pathways to online news. News outlets are seeking to establish direct connections with news consumers via email newsletters and mobile alerts. At the same time, news consumers are trying to find efficient ways to curate and organise the vast amount of news available to them. A growing number of people are accessing news through mobile alerts, newsletters and aggregator apps.

NEWS SHARING IS UP

Sharing or participating in news coverage also increased during the bushfires by six percent (69%). The largest increase occurred in ‘sharing on social media’ (21%, +5), ‘talking in person with others’ (41%, +5), ‘talking online’ (18%, +4) and ‘sharing on messaging apps’ (14%, +4). This reflects the importance of news over the past year and people keeping their friends and families up-to-date with the latest information.

ONGOING NEWS SUBSCRIPTION IS STEADILY INCREASING

While the overall number of Australians paying for news remains low (14%), ongoing subscription is steadily going up (8%, +1). Younger people, especially Gen Y (20%) and those who value independent journalism (18%) are more likely to pay for news online.

PAYWALLS INDUCE FOMO

While most Australians do not think paywalls for online news are a problem, they are more concerned (25%) about missing out on information that is locked behind them than news consumers in other countries (20%).

PODCASTS AND VIDEO NEWS RISING

Video news consumption is growing, with 60% of news consumers viewing news related videos. Podcast use is steadily growing, particularly among younger generations. More than half of Gen Z and Gen Y listen to podcasts, and almost half of Gen Y are willing to pay for them.

In many ways, the bushfires and COVID-19 have acted as a circuit breaker and helped stop some of the downward trends in news consumption and attitudes that we have recorded via this survey over the past five years. Without the bushfires, interest in news and levels of consumption may well have continued to decline further. Instead we have recorded a small turnaround in both. The report also marks an increase in news sharing and interaction on social media, particularly among older generations. The importance of local radio to communities during the bushfires is also underlined, with consumers saying they would miss it the most if it were to disappear. With COVID-19, the slide in news trust was reversed in response to high quality reporting of the global pandemic which has provided critical public service information relevant to all Australians. This increase in constructive health reporting underscores this year’s finding that the majority of Australian news consumers prefer news that is impartial and independent. The challenge for news outlets is to see if these positive changes can be sustained once these crises subside.
KEY FINDINGS

NEWS ACCESS (Chapter 4)
• Australian news consumers are accessing news more frequently but their interest in news is declining.
• During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of heavy news consumers increased to 70% (+14).
• TV remains the most popular news source but is decreasing; social media is rising.
• Half of Gen Z and 30% of 74+ use Facebook for news.
• YouTube for news has increased 6% since 2016.

TRUST AND MISINFORMATION (Chapter 6)
• Trust in news fell to 38% (-6) in Jan/Feb 2020 but trust in news about COVID-19 during the pandemic was much higher (53%).
• People who use TV as their main source of news have the highest level of trust in news (47%).
• Two-thirds of Australians (64%) say they are concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet.
• Compared to news sites or other social media, Australians are most concerned about false or misleading information on Facebook (36%).
• News consumers are more concerned about misinformation produced by the Australian government, politicians or political parties (35%) than by foreign (11%).

LOCAL NEWS (Chapter 2)
• 45% of Australian news consumers have very or extremely high interest in local news.
• Those with lower incomes, low education and live in the regions rely more on local news.
• 82% of Gen Z are not interested in local news.
• Almost a quarter (23%) get local news from local social media or online groups.
• If closed, 76% would miss the local newspaper, 79% would miss local TV news and 81% would miss local radio.

ROLE OF JOURNALISM AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS (Chapter 3)
• More than half (54%) of news consumers say they prefer impartial news, but 19% want news that confirms their worldview.
• Two-thirds (62%) of news consumers say independent journalism is very or extremely important.
• 54% say journalists should report claims made by politicians that could be false and 23% say they shouldn’t.
• Right-wing consumers are least likely to want their world view challenged.
• One-quarter (24%) of those reliant on social media for news are also the most likely to want news that confirms their world view.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE MEDIA (Chapter 1)
• Four out of five Australians think climate change is a serious problem.
• Australian news consumers (8%) are more than twice as likely than the global average (3%) to believe climate change is not serious at all.
• 15% don’t pay any attention to news about climate change; this is higher in regional areas (21%).
• 23% of right-wing news consumers do not pay attention to news about climate change, compared to 5% of left-wing news consumers.
• Commercial AM, Sky News and Fox News consumers are more likely to think climate change is not a serious problem.

POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND POLITICAL ADVERTISING (Chapter 8)
• There is a generational divide in political orientation with 74+ age group identifying strongly as right-wing, while Gen Y and Z strongly identify as left-wing.
• Online news consumers have a wider range of political orientation compared to offline news consumers.
• Half of respondents say political ads on TV are OK, but not alright on social media.
• Older generations are more opposed to political advertising on TV and social media, and their opposition to political advertising on social media is much higher.
• More than half (58%) believe tech platforms should block false political ads and 24% say they shouldn’t.
PAYING FOR NEWS (Chapter 7)

• The number of ongoing online news subscribers has doubled since 2016.

• Those interested in politics are most likely to pay for online news (28%).

• Those who value independence in journalism are more willing to pay (18%).

• Those who prefer news that shares their viewpoints are more likely to pay for news (25%) compared to those who prefer impartial news (14%).

• Australian news consumers are not so concerned about paywalls (25%) but among the highest globally.

EMERGING NEWS HABITS (Chapter 5)

• Social media as a pathway to news is growing among older generations.

• News emails are read by the majority (76%) of subscribers.

• There was a 5% increase in news sharing on social media.

• Younger generations are more likely to interact with news.

• Half of Gen Y are willing to pay for podcasts.

AUSTRALIA AND THE WORLD (Chapter 9)

• Australians are no longer the lightest news consumers, climbing up six places in the global ranking.

• More than half of Australians get news on social media, but fewer (39%) use Facebook for news than the global average (42%).

• Trust in news has fallen and Australia is on par with the global average of 38%.

• Australians are less ‘mobile’ when it comes to accessing news; 41% of Australians use mobile phones as the main device to access news compared to 51% globally.

• The desire for independent journalism in Australia (62%) is lower than the global average (64%) and in the US (66%).
1 CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE MEDIA

• Four out of five Australians think climate change is a serious problem.

• Australian news consumers (8%) are more than twice as likely to deny climate change than the global average (3%).

• 15% don’t pay any attention to news about climate change; this is higher in regional areas (21%).

• 23% of right-wing news consumers do not pay attention to news about climate change, compared to 5% of left-wing news consumers.

• Commercial AM, Sky News and Fox News consumers are more likely to think climate change is not a serious problem.
When this survey was in the field (end of January and beginning of February 2020) the extreme summer bushfire season was just coming to an end. For months, news coverage had been dominated by reports of destructive blazes across the country. Coverage ranged from emergency broadcasting on the ABC to stories disputing whether climate change was the cause for the duration and intensity of the bushfire season. The fires came on top of the drought which continues in many parts of the country. They were also followed by floods and cyclones.

The results of this survey show that climate change is at the forefront of many Australians’ minds. Given the rapidly changing nature of the online information environment we asked participants about sources they used other than news. In light of the extreme weather events, the findings in this year’s report provide insight into peoples’ concerns about climate change, the impact that has on their information consumption about it and their perception of how well the news media covers it.

**CONCERN ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE**

Four out of every five participants say they consider climate change to be a serious problem (79%). This is in line with other surveys conducted during the bushfires in January this year. When we look at that figure more closely, we find 58% consider it to be a very or extremely serious problem, 21% consider it somewhat serious, and 10% consider it to be not very and 8% not at all serious (see *Figure 1.1*). Compared to the global average of 3%, Australia has the third largest proportion of news consumers that think climate change is not at all serious.

The highest is the United States of America with 12% (see Chapter 9).

In Australia, the levels of concern vary considerably depending on age, gender, education and income level as well as place of residence. Women are a more concerned than men. Two thirds of women (62%) say they are very/extremely concerned about climate change compared to 55% of men (see *figure 1.2*).

---

GEN Z IS MUCH MORE CONCERNED ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE THAN PEOPLE AGED 74+

There is a large generational divide in concern about climate change. Those aged 74 and above are significantly less concerned about climate change than members of Gen Z. Almost three quarters (69%) of Gen Z consider climate change to be very/extremely serious compared to 37% of those aged 74 and over. Further, more than one-third (37%) of those aged 74 and above think climate change is not at all/not very serious, compared to just 11% of Gen Z (see figure 1.3).

REGIONAL NEWS CONSUMERS ARE LESS CONCERNED ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE THAN THOSE IN THE CITY

News consumers in regional and rural Australia are less likely to be concerned about climate change. Despite the disproportionate effect of drought, bushfires and floods on regional communities, one-quarter (24%) of regional news consumers say climate change is not at all serious compared to 14% of city dwellers (see table 1.1). This is possibly due to the proportion of older and more conservative leaning Australians living in rural and regional areas.

Concern about climate change is strongly linked to education and income levels. Those with higher education and incomes are more likely to think climate change is a serious problem than news consumers with lower incomes and education. People who rely on traditional news sources are less concerned about climate change than online news consumers; and people who trust news are also more concerned about climate change, compared with those who don’t trust news.

LEFT-WING ORIENTED NEWS CONSUMERS ARE MUCH MORE CONCERNED ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Political orientation is strongly linked to the level of concern Australians express about the climate. More than 80% of left-wing oriented news consumers consider climate change to be very/extremely serious compared to 37% of right-wing news consumers. A similar number of conservative news consumers (38%) do not think climate change is a serious problem compared to just 6% of left-wing oriented consumers (see figure 1.4). Similar polarisation on this issue is seen in other countries like the US.

FIGURE 1.3: CONCERN ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE BY GENERATION (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Very/extremely serious</th>
<th>Somewhat serious</th>
<th>Not very/not at all serious</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>74+</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1.1: CONCERN ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE BY REGION (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Very/extremely serious</th>
<th>Somewhat serious</th>
<th>Not very/not at all serious</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major City</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Area</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 1.4: CONCERN ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE BY POLITICAL ORIENTATION (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Orientation</th>
<th>Very/extremely serious</th>
<th>Somewhat serious</th>
<th>Not very/not at all serious</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right-wing</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-wing</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[QIF] Some people talk about ‘left’, ‘right’ and ‘centre’ to describe parties and politicians. (Generally, socialist parties would be considered ‘left wing’ whilst conservative parties would be considered ‘right wing’). With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale?
COMMERCIAL AM RADIO, SKY NEWS AND FOX NEWS CONSUMERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE CLIMATE DENIERS

We examined consumers of news brands and their level of concern about climate change. There is a strong connection between the brands people use and whether they think climate change is serious or not. More than one-third (35%) of people who use commercial AM radio (i.e., 2GB, 2UE, 3AW) and Sky News as a source of news are ‘not at all’ or ‘not very’ concerned about climate change, followed by Fox News consumers (32%) (see figure 1.5).

FIGURE 1.5: CONCERN ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE BY NEWS BRANDS (%)
15% GET INFORMATION ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE FROM NON-NEWS SOURCES

We asked people about how they were informed about climate change (see figure 1.6). More than half (54%) get their information from traditional and online news sources, with TV dominating (28%). In contrast, a significant percentage (15%) say they pay more attention to non-news sources such as specialist outlets (9%) or alternative sources (6%) such as social media posts and blogs. Nine percent say they pay more attention to what their colleagues, friends and family have to say about climate change. Another 15% of news consumers say they do not pay attention to news about climate change at all.

There are significant differences between older and younger news consumers. Those under the age of 35 are more likely to pay attention to information about climate change from online news sites, alternative sources and conversations about the issue with friends and family (see figure 1.7).

The level of concern about climate change depended on where news consumers mainly accessed information about it. Those who use specialist outlets expressed the highest concern with 82% saying they were extremely/very concerned. Those who access climate change news on TV (64%) are less concerned compared to those who access news via online news, specialist outlets and alternative sources (see figure 1.8). This suggests those who are interested and engaged with the issue are more likely to access more specialised sources about it.

**FIGURE 1.6: SOURCES OF NEWS ON CLIMATE CHANGE (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online news sites from major news organisations</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations with colleagues, friends, or family</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialised outlets covering climate issues</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative sources such as social posts or blogs</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed newspapers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t pay attention to climate change news</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 1.7: SOURCES OF NEWS ON CLIMATE CHANGE BY AGE (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>U35</th>
<th>35+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online news sites from major news organisations</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative sources such as social media posts or blogs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations with colleagues, family, or friends</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t pay attention</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 1.8: CONCERN ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE BY SOURCES OF NEWS (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Extremely/very</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Not very/not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online news sites from major news organisations</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialised outlets covering climate issues</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative sources such as social media posts or blogs</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations with colleagues, friends, or family</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*“Don’t know” % was in the range of 0-2% and while included in the calculation they were not included in the figure*
DISINTEREST IN NEWS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

THOSE WHO DON’T PAY ATTENTION TO NEWS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE ARE ALSO NOT CONCERNED ABOUT THE ISSUE

We further analysed those who say they don’t pay attention to climate change news, which is 15% of the respondents. The data show there are significant differences between those who view climate change as ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ serious compared with all other respondents. For those who do not consider climate change to be a significant concern, they are uniformly less interested in news on the subject (see figure 1.9). However, more than one-quarter (27%) of those who say they are somewhat concerned about climate change still do not pay attention to news about it.

Those who say they do not pay attention to news about climate change tend to be older and have lower levels of education (see figure 1.10). This is possibly a reflection of the relationship between education and news interest more broadly, rather than climate change as a particular issue. The data suggest that those with lower education are less interested in news generally (see Chapter 4).

However, there is a much bigger difference in relation to age. Older generations say they are more interested in the news generally, but in this case, they pay less attention to news about climate change specifically and are much less concerned about it. On the other hand, younger generations say they are much less interested in news generally and yet they pay more attention to news about climate change and are more concerned about it than older people (see figure 1.11).
TRUST IN NEWS IS LINKED TO ATTENTION TO CLIMATE CHANGE NEWS

Those who do not pay attention to climate change news are less likely to trust the news. Conversely, News ‘trusters’ are less likely to ignore stories about climate change (see figure 1.13). As discussed below, audiences are concerned about accuracy and relevance of reporting on this issue.

FIGURE 1.12: INATTENTION TO CLIMATE CHANGE NEWS BY REGION AND POLITICAL ORIENTATION (%)

Australian news consumers are fairly evenly divided in their opinion about the quality of climate change news. Roughly one-third consider the accuracy of reporting about climate change to be good (36%) and another third (33%) think journalists are doing a bad job of accurate reporting. Similarly, slightly more than one-third think the news coverage helps them know what to do about climate change (35%) and 31% disagree (see figure 1.14).

FIGURE 1.14: NEWS MEDIA PERFORMANCE ON CLIMATE CHANGE (%)
PERCEPTION OF NEWS COVERAGE REFLECTS LEVEL OF CONCERN

The data reveal there is a strong link between concern about climate change and perceptions of how well or poorly the news media cover the issue. Those who take climate change more seriously are more likely to think the coverage is accurate and that it helps them know what to do in response to it. Conversely, news consumers who do not think climate change is a serious issue consider the reporting of it to be less accurate (see figure 1.15).

FIGURE 1.15: NEWS MEDIA PERFORMANCE ON CLIMATE CHANGE (%)

MORE RIGHT-WING NEWS CONSUMERS THINK REPORTING ON CLIMATE CHANGE ISN’T ACCURATE

Age and political orientation all play a role in perceptions of journalistic performance. Gen Z are more likely to think the accuracy of reporting about climate change is good (41%) compared to 28% of those aged 74 and over. Similarly 27% of right-wing news consumers think the reporting about climate change is accurate compared to 44% of left-leaning news consumers (see figure 1.16).

FIGURE 1.16: NEWS MEDIA PERFORMANCE ON PROVIDING ACCURATE INFORMATION ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE BY POLITICAL ORIENTATION (%)

Further, left-wing news consumers are more likely to feel the reporting helps them know what to do (38%). Whereas conservative news consumers are less inclined to agree with this (29%) (see figure 1.17).

FIGURE 1.17: NEWS MEDIA PERFORMANCE ON HELPING ME KNOW WHAT I CAN DO ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE BY POLITICAL AFFILIATION (%)

---

**Figure 1.15: News Media Performance on Climate Change (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extremely/very concerned</th>
<th>Somewhat/not very/not at all concerned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provides accurate information about climate change</td>
<td>Helps me know what I can do about climate change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Neither</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.16: News Media Performance on Providing Accurate Information About Climate Change by Political Orientation (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Orientation</th>
<th>Provides accurate information about climate change</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Doesn’t provide accurate information about climate change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Left-wing</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right-wing</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.17: News Media Performance on Helping Me Know What I Can Do About Climate Change by Political Affiliation (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Affiliation</th>
<th>Helps me know what I can do about climate change</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Doesn’t help me know what I can do about climate change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Left-wing</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right-wing</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, those who rely on traditional offline news sources, such as TV, radio and newspapers, are more likely to think the coverage is accurate and that it helps them respond to climate change. This reflects general higher trust in offline news sources than online and social media sources (see figure 1.18).

FIGURE 1.18: NEWS MEDIA PERFORMANCE ON CLIMATE CHANGE BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Providing accurate information</th>
<th>Helping me know what I can do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Offline</strong></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

NEWS ‘TRUSTERS’ THINK CLIMATE CHANGE COVERAGE IS ACCURATE AND HELPS THEM TO RESPOND

There is a strong association between perceptions of accuracy of climate change coverage and trust in news. More than half (55%) of those who do not trust news think climate change coverage is not accurate. Conversely, 55% of people who trust the news think the reporting is accurate. Similar results are found in relation to the question of whether coverage helps them respond to climate change. Half of news distrusters say that the news does not help them know what to do (51%) (see figure 1.19).

FIGURE 1.19: NEWS MEDIA PERFORMANCE ON CLIMATE CHANGE BY GENERAL TRUST IN NEWS (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Providing accurate information</th>
<th>Helping me know what to do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distrust news</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neither</strong></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trust news</strong></td>
<td>55</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

55% of distrusters say climate change reporting is inaccurate.
SUMMARY

This year’s survey shows that Australian news consumers are more than twice as likely than their counterparts in other countries to think that climate change is ‘not at all’ serious. The data reveal that perceptions of climate change reporting are strongly divided along generational and political lines. Those on the left of the political spectrum are more concerned about the issue and think the coverage is more accurate and informative, whereas those on the right are less concerned about it and view the reporting about climate change less favourably. Older generations are also less concerned, pay less attention to the coverage and are less likely to view reporting about it positively. While the distinction is most prominently seen in those aged 74 and over, Baby Boomers are also less concerned about climate change and pay less attention to news about it.

Particular brands also stand out when we look at the news sources that deniers use. Around one-third of news consumers in the survey who use Commercial AM, Sky News and Fox News are more likely to think climate change is not a serious problem. These brands are known for their high-profile presenters who challenge the scientific consensus on climate change.

One of the most interesting differences is between regional and city news consumers. Those living in regional and rural areas are less concerned about climate change and pay less attention to news about it. Given this survey was in the field during the bushfire season that hit regional and rural Australia hardest, these findings appear surprising. One might assume that those under the most threat of fire and who had been through the drought would be more concerned about climate change. However, the results might simply reflect the ageing nature of regional and rural communities and a tendency toward more conservative politics.

The responses on journalism performance require deeper reflection. Regional news consumers consider the coverage to be less accurate and less helpful than their counterparts in the city. This possibly reflects that news media are not comprehensively reporting the impacts of climate change on regional and rural communities. The coverage might also not be providing stories about solutions or adaptation that are useful to people in those parts of the country. In which case, news outlets could consider more constructive ways of reporting on the issue that are more relevant and useful to the experience of regional and rural news consumers.
Nothing better demonstrates the old adage that “a lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on” than the reporting of climate change.

Whenever I write on any issue to do with climate change, whether it be the latest greenhouse gas emissions data or the global temperatures, I know the difficulty is two-fold.

The first is the standard problem of journalism – covering complex information in such a way that readers are able to understand without losing key aspects of context and detail. But the second problem is much harder – conveying it in a manner which will be read by those who disagree with the entire premise.

“So much of a journalist’s job when reporting on climate change is devoted to correcting falsehoods.”

This is not particularly unique for any public policy area – politicians frequently push the edges of reality into a shape which best represents how they would like it to be presented. But the big problem with climate change is that major media groups are also behind the clouding of the truth.

It is hard enough to convey scientific knowledge to the lay person without having to compete with news organisations who devote large space and time to those who push the view that climate change is a conspiracy.

It is so very easy to fake reports about climate change – to suggest scientists in the 1970s believed we were about to have an ice age (they didn’t), that scientists ignore a multitude of factors such as sun spots and volcanic activity (they don’t), or to argue that the world hasn’t warmed since 1997, 2001, 2010 (it has), or that it has but not significantly (it has) and then throw in reference to hacked emails and “hiding the decline”.

And such columns can be regurgitated, and once again the demand comes from readers for you to correct or answer them.

What has not helped is that providing balance, the standard position that journalists attempt to take whenever confronted with politically charged issues, only serves to undermine the work of those seeking to convey reality and facts.

Audiences expect there to be political debate across media outlets over aspects such as the efficacy of a tax cut – in a sense there is a balance that can be found when covering such issues. But the climate change debate, despite over 30 years of extensive coverage (Time Magazine named “The Endangered Earth” its “Person” of the Year in 1988), remains largely stuck.

The finding of this report showing that 82% of left-leaning news consumers regard climate change as very or extremely serious compared to just 37% of right-leaning consumers is bad enough. But that only just over half of those who class themselves as politically “centre” are very or extremely concerned suggests those journalists attempting to seek a balanced path are mostly doing so by underplaying the issue.

It would be easy to get somewhat smug and point to the correlation between age and education and the lack of concern about climate change, but if media’s role is to convey information people need to know, this suggests a great failing by our media.

And while you might expect that 36% of those who do not at all regard climate change as a serious problem to say they do not pay attention to any news on the issue, more worrying is that 27% of those who see it as “somewhat serious” also do not pay any attention...
to such news. That suggests a major media failing – especially given a higher likelihood for such people to live in rural areas that are at the sharp end of climate change impact.

While it may be right to put a majority of the blame on those political parties and media companies which seek to sow doubt about climate change, these results also suggest other media organisations perhaps should reconsider how they are telling the stories, and think more about how to reach those who are not currently listening.

NEWS MOMENTS OF 2020
Jan 07 2020 | Adelaide wildlife rescuer is seen with koala rescued at a burning forest near Cape Borda on Kangaroo Island, southwest of Adelaide.
IMAGE: DAVID MARIUZ / AAP IMAGE
2 LOCAL NEWS

- 45% of Australian news consumers have very or extremely high interest in local news.
- Those with lower incomes, low education level and live in the region rely more on local news.
- 82% of Gen Z are not interested in local news.
- Gen Y and Z access local news from social media or online groups.
- The majority say they would miss local news services if they were to close.
Local news is facing significant challenges as media outlets compete with digital platforms and social media for news consumers’ attention. The increased financial pressure has left many regional communities with reduced or no local news coverage. This year, we asked news consumers about their interest in local news, where they get it and how much they would miss it if their local news provider closed down. Local news was broadly defined in the survey as news from the city, town, municipality or immediate surrounding area that you live in.

INTEREST IN LOCAL NEWS IS HIGH

The majority of news consumers say they are interested in local news. Almost half of news consumers (45%) are ‘very or extremely interested’ in local news, 38% say they are ‘somewhat interested’ and 15% say they have very low or no interest in local news. While interest in local news is lower than interest in general news (64%) it is higher than interest in politics (35%) (see figure 2.1).

There is a sizeable gap between older and younger generations’ interest in local news; only 18% of Gen Z are interested in local news compared to 71% of those 74 or older (see figure 2.2).

While interest in local news is generally consistent across education, income and region there are some variations. In contrast to general interest in news where those with high education level tend to be more interested (see Chapter 4), the opposite is the case with news consumers’ interest in local news. Those with low education have the highest interest in local news (48%). Furthermore, regional Australians say they are more interested in local news (49%) compared to urban Australians (44%). This is likely a reflection of the more prominent role smaller local media outlets play in regional communities that are underserved by larger metropolitan based newsrooms. This also highlights the fact that information inequalities are likely to get worse if local news media continue to close.

FIGURE 2.1: INTEREST IN NEWS, LOCAL NEWS AND POLITICS (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest in politics</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>22</th>
<th>34</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in local news</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in news</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*High interest = very/extremely interested, low interest = somewhat/not very/not at all interested, excluded ‘don’t know’ responses

FIGURE 2.2: INTEREST IN LOCAL NEWS BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)

Interest in local news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>BB</th>
<th>74+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*High interest = very/extremely interested, low interest = somewhat/not very/not at all interested, excluded ‘don’t know’ responses
The data show a clear trend in interest in local news based on what participants say is their main source of news. Those who access news mainly via traditional media (TV, radio, print) are more interested in local news, compared to those who access news mainly via online and social media. The interest gap is most significant between TV and social media users. Those who say their main news source is TV (58%) are almost twice as likely to express high interest in local news compared to those who say they mainly use social media (31%) (see figure 2.3).

We also asked participants what sources of local news they access more generally. Local newspapers and their websites are the top source of news about a particular town or region (41%), followed by local TV and websites (35%), local radio and websites (26%) and personal communication with other residents (26%). Fifteen percent say they didn’t access any local news (see figure 2.4).

For Gen Y and Z, local social media or online groups are the most popular way to access news about their area. Almost one-quarter (24%) of Gen Z use local social media or online groups, followed by TV (22%). Thirty percent of Gen Y say they use local newspapers and 30% say they use social media or online groups to access local news. Older generations - Gen X (40%), Baby Boomers (50%) and those aged 74 and older (69%) - prefer local newspapers or newspaper websites (see figure 2.5).
LOWER INCOME AND LESS EDUCATED NEWS CONSUMERS RELY ON LOCAL NEWSPAPERS

The type of local news that news consumers use differs by income level. Local TV and newspapers are the most popular way to access local news for all income levels. However, those with higher incomes are more likely to say they also access local news through social media (32%) compared to those on lower incomes (20%). Those on low incomes are the most likely to say they access local news through TV (39%) and newspapers (43%) compared to other income groups.

FIGURE 2.6: TYPES OF LOCAL NEWS USED BY INCOME (%)

Similarly, while still using TV and newspaper at high levels, those with higher education are more likely to say they supplement this with local news from social media or online forums (27%) and personal communication (29%). Those with lower levels of education tend to rely more on newspapers (and websites) and TV (and websites) more than those with middle or high levels of education (see figure 2.7).

FIGURE 2.7: TYPES OF LOCAL NEWS USED BY EDUCATION (%)

Regional news consumers access local news more than news consumers in major cities and this is true across local TV, radio, newspaper and social media sources. They rely particularly on local newspapers and websites (see figure 2.8). Almost one-quarter of both regional (24%) and urban participants (23%) reported similar rates of accessing local news through social media or online forums.

FIGURE 2.8: TYPES OF LOCAL NEWS USED BY REGION (%)
THE MAJORITY WILL MISS LOCAL NEWS IF IT CLOSES

We asked news consumers how much they would miss a local news source if it went out of business. The majority (74%+) said they would miss local news services if they closed. Among those who access local news, the majority say they would miss their local radio news service somewhat or a lot if it closed (81%), followed by local TV news (79%) (see figure 2.9). This finding suggests that although radio is less typically used as a source of local news (26%), it is highly valued by local news audiences, during emergencies such as bushfires.

Of those who currently access local news, women are more likely to say they would miss it if it went out of business compared to men. Older generations say they would miss local sources more than younger generations if they closed (see table 2.1). Gen Z are the least likely to say they would miss local news sources, but even so, more than half (56%) say they would miss their local newspaper and almost three-quarters say they would miss their local radio news (69%).

![Figure 2.9: Type of local news that would be missed if closed (%)](image)

**TABLE 2.1: Type of local news that would be missed by gender and age**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th></th>
<th>AGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local TV news/local TV news website</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local radio or local radio website</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local newspaper or local newspaper website</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those living in regional areas say they will miss local radio and local radio websites the most (82%), and they are more likely to say they will miss them than city news consumers. Low income news consumers say they will miss TV, radio and newspapers more than medium or high income news consumers. Those with low education are more likely to say they will miss local TV, radio and newspapers than those with medium or high education (see table 2.2).

**TABLE 2.2: Type of local news that would be missed by education, income and region**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EDUCATION</th>
<th></th>
<th>INCOME</th>
<th>REGION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Major city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local TV news/local TV news website</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local radio or local radio website</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local newspaper or local newspaper website</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, those with high political interest are more likely to say they would miss local news compared to those with low political interest. This indicates that people with high interest in politics are in general more interested in news including local news. Those who are interested in politics will miss local TV and websites the most, whereas those with low political interest will miss radio the most (see figure 2.10).

**FIGURE 2.10: Would miss local news by interest in politics (%)**

![Figure 2.10](image)
RIGHT-WING NEWS CONSUMERS WILL MISS LOCAL NEWSPAPERS

Overall, centre oriented news consumers are more likely to say they would miss local news sources if they closed. Right-wing news consumers will miss local newspapers and websites more (79%) than left-wing news consumers (70%) (see figure 2.11). This likely reflects the conservative political orientation of older regional news consumers (see Chapter 8). If local news outlets were to close, news consumers who value independent journalism would miss it the most (see figure 2.12).

FIGURE 2.11: WOULD MISS LOCAL NEWS BY POLITICAL AFFILIATION (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Left-wing</th>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>Right-wing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local TV news/local TV news website</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local radio or local radio website</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local newspaper or local newspaper website</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 2.12: WOULD MISS LOCAL NEWS BY IMPORTANCE OF INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Independent journalism is important</th>
<th>Independent journalism is not important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local TV news/local TV news website</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local radio or local radio website</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local newspaper or local newspaper website</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SUMMARY

The overall interest in and consumption of local news is high but is significantly lower among younger generations. This is consistent with findings that suggest that young people are in general less interested in news. Even among young people who access local news, they are less likely to miss it if it were to close. Younger generations rely on social media or online groups for local news more than they rely on TV, radio and newspaper sources (online and offline). This may indicate that local news provided by traditional news media are not fulfilling the needs of young news consumers.

Local newspapers have always been an important part of keeping citizens informed about what is happening in their local community. In light of the COVID-19 outbreak the findings in this year’s survey are important. Shortly after this survey was in the field, local news outlets were hit hard by the negative economic impacts of the global pandemic. Social distancing measures led to a contraction of the economy and withdrawal of advertising, which particularly impacted on regional and local newspapers. This led to the subsequent closure or suspension of more than two hundred local media outlets.

The data show the closures are likely to particularly affect news consumers on low incomes, with lower education levels and regional news consumers who are more likely to rely on local newspaper sources (online and offline) for information about their community.

Almost half (47%) of regional news consumers say they mainly use their local newspaper (online and offline) for information about their community. Three-quarters of city and regional news consumers say they would miss their local newspaper were it to close. However, local radio services will be missed the most (82%) by regional news consumers if those services were to close. Given this survey was administered during the bushfire season, this likely reflects the significant role played by local ABC radio as the emergency broadcaster in regional and rural Australia.

Globally, industry and governments introduced financial support for local news organisations and journalists during the COVID-19 outbreak and while these initiatives are much needed, most are short-term remedies. Longer-term, sustainable policies and interventions to maintain public interest journalism are needed in this dramatically changing local news environment.
The year 2020, with its devastating bushfires and pandemic has brought into even stronger focus the indisputable value of news and particularly our local news. While the onset of the recent health crisis is seeing news consumption in Australia increase, the lockdown is damaging revenues, particularly those of traditional publishers of news. Unfortunately, this challenge is exacerbating fragile business models which were already under extreme pressure. COVID-19 saw a 10.6% reduction in ad spend on all platforms for the month of March, following 17 consecutive months of decline 1.

Again this year, the longitudinal research demonstrates the migration of news consumption to online formats and the stark generational and socio-economic differences in consumption.

“While this march online is now well and truly entrenched, it is useful to remind ourselves that the rise in online consumption is not reflected in an equivalent fall in consumption of news from traditional news publishers—it is often just the way we are accessing it that has shifted.”

It may be accessed online directly from publishers themselves or it may be reached via third parties including digital platforms. This dynamic, and the question of control of and fair remuneration for that content, is the subject of considerable public debate here and internationally and is front and centre in the work on a mandatory Code being undertaken by industry participants and the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission.

It is very interesting for the first time to see an analysis of consumption and interest in local news. While the value of local journalism to our society and democracy is a given for policy makers and regulators, it is reassuring to see this shared by consumers. There may be clear generational differences in interest in local news versus other news, and a strong reliance on local personal communication rather than journalism, but it is clear that local news matters. This accords with ACMA research which stated that 89 per cent of regional Australians consider local content important and 86 per cent consider local news important 2. The 2018 ACCC commissioned Roy Morgan survey found that local news was the most important genre of news content in ‘allowing people to participate and engage in Australian society’ at 71%.

“In the face of increased pressure on local news, with reduced numbers of journalists reporting locally and the closure of some publications and newsrooms, it is becoming more urgent to tackle the increasing difficulty for traditional models to support local journalism.”

In March 2020, printing of over 60 regional and local newspapers across Australia was suspended 3 and regional broadcasters have experienced more financial pressures on top of their already falling advertising expenditure 4.

The problem is not unique to Australia and nor are the methods being adopted to try to address it. Funded by the BBC licence fee, the UK Local News Partnership funds journalists recruited into local newsrooms to report on local public bodies including Councils; the New Zealand government provides contestable grants to producers and content creators for documentaries, features, news and current affairs and funds journalists into local newsrooms; Ireland’s Sound and Vision funds factual content; the Swedish government provides a press subsidy to publications and the Canadian Periodical Fund provides

2 Local Content in Regional Australia report (2017).
3 News Corp Australia, News Corp Australia to suspend community print titles, 31 March 2020; ABC News, ‘Mildura’s Sunraysia Daily and other regional papers close as coronavirus wipes out more than a century of tradition’ 24 March 2020.
4 The Sydney Morning Herald, ‘Regional media broadcasters to shut down signals, end bulletins’ 6 April 2020.
funding to assist magazines, non-dailies and digital periodicals to create Canadian content. In contrast, in the USA a wide-range of philanthropic not-for-profit ventures fund local news coverage.

Since 2018, across two rounds of the Australian Government’s Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund, the ACMA has made 86 grants totalling $12.3 million to assist publishers to adapt to the challenges of the evolving media landscape. Funded projects have included; the development of audio news, the purchase of video production equipment to publish podcasts and videos, training on the use of new digital technology, and the transition to new or updated websites.

A further $5 million of grants of up to $400k each will be awarded in 2020, aimed at a range of publishers and content service providers but weighted to those in regional areas. Also this year, in response to a recommendation of the Digital Platforms Inquiry for more government support for high quality news, in April, the Minister for Communications Cyber Security and the Arts has put in place a new $50 million Public Interest News Gathering program. The PING, is specifically aimed at regional public interest journalism.

While our curiosity and need to be informed about and understand our immediate environment will remain, the business models to support journalism are changing and our consumption is constantly shifting. The challenge is how local journalism can be supported to ensure it is available in the short, medium and long term. The tasks of finding new sources of revenue, increasing digital skills, changing business and revenue models and direct financial assistance are being embraced by governments the media and communications industry, academics and not-for-profits.
The focus on local news as part of this year’s Digital News Report: Australia comes at a critical time for the media industry, now working through the impacts of COVID-19 after years of disruption, newsroom cuts and consolidation.

As international and national news ramped up coverage of the pandemic’s global and domestic challenges, locally we’ve bunkered down at home, needing information and stories of what is happening in our suburbs and regions to help us through isolation and connect us to our community.

Local news’ strength is in the stories impacting our daily lives – where we live, shop, send our children to schools, our sports clubs, cafes, pubs and small businesses as well as the people who make their community a better place. It also delivers a vital public interest journalism function, which includes examining regional and community specific issues 1.

This year’s Digital News Report: Australia finds 45% of Australian news consumers have a very or extremely high interest in local news, generally accessing it through two sources. Around 80% of local news users said they would miss it a lot if it went out of business; local radio would be missed most, closely followed by local TV, newspapers and news websites.

The report has also reinforced an important generational point - that many aged under 30 are not interested in local news, and if they are, it is mostly accessed from social media or online groups.

“Local news has not always come out the winner in battling for its share of attention amid the flood of digital and social content. At the same time, competition from technology and social platforms has sliced through advertising revenue leaving local news vulnerable.”

Last year the ACCC highlighted concerns within its much-awaited Digital Platforms Inquiry report. In the decade to 2018, over 100 newspapers closed, leaving 21 local government areas without a single local or regional newspaper. Among its analysis and many recommendations, the report addressed the wider impacts of digital platforms on the supply of local news and journalism across the country 2. COVID-19 has accelerated the trajectory with several more local media outlets forced to close or suspend operations during the pandemic.

So why should the industry and broader public worry if a regional or suburban news operation in another part of the country is at risk or cannot reopen? The news industry is an ecosystem, and within the food chain is local news. Fewer outlets mean even less diversity and less stories that will elevate to a state or national level. Without the presence of a local media outlet, certain stories of public interest will not see the light of day. While the ABC operates in 56 locations, it cannot fill all the gaps and be in every small community and outlying suburb within its current budget.

News deserts research in the UK and US indicates that when a community loses its local media outlet, it suffers. Those communities devoid of fresh news and information risk an environment where “citizens miss important information and public officials are potentially less accountable than they should be”. 3

However, solutions for long-term sustainability of local news, and which potentially allow for new players, require structural change. Industry might consider a broader range of models within the mix of subscription, not for profit, and overseas experience. In the US, UK and Europe collaborative models have been explored at various levels of success with local media outlets partnering

with other news organisations, technology companies, and with communities themselves to attempt to better tell their local stories¹. In the US there are numerous examples of local investigations, solutions journalism and projects produced with the support of the philanthropic sector and social media investment. In the UK, the BBC and local media share content from regional, suburban and hyperlocal reporters who scrutinise councils. The collaboration has also established a data unit to share investigations plus strengthen the skills of local journalists through training. Additionally, in the UK, The Bureau Local network of journalists operates with funding from the Google News Initiative to deliver data-driven investigations. One of the collaborators is a media co-operative, the Bristol Cable, with over 2000 public members who own shares and have a say in the stories that will be covered.

Acknowledging the Australian local market has its own unique challenges, we may still draw on some of the international experience at a time when COVID-19 has thrown a curve ball yet again at the local news industry. During the pandemic, the Federal Government announced a package of measures for media businesses including a $50 million program to support public interest journalism by commercial television, newspaper and radio in regional Australia, and moved to release money from the Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund. Additionally, the Judith Neilson Institute continues to provide philanthropic grants for local initiatives as part of its $100 million commitment to journalism. These initiatives may buy some places time as the industry works through 2020 while the longer term is considered.

¹ Wiltshire, V. “Keeping it Local – can collaborations help save local public interest journalism”. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University, 2019.
3 ROLE OF JOURNALISM AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS

- More than half (54%) of news consumers say they prefer impartial news, but 19% want news that confirms their worldview.
- Two-thirds (62%) of news consumers say independent journalism is very or extremely important.
- More than half (54%) say journalists should report claims made by politicians that could be false and 23% say they shouldn’t.
- Right-wing news consumers are the least likely to want their worldview challenged.
- One-quarter (24%) of those reliant on social media for news are also the most likely to want news that confirms their worldview.
This year we asked questions about the changing role of journalism and news media with digital platforms playing a major role in the dissemination and consumption of news. The values of ‘independence’ and ‘impartiality’ have traditionally been core principles of journalism. In an online news environment, those ideals are being increasingly challenged. There has been a shift away from traditional ‘objective’ news reporting with an increase in hybrid forms of journalism emerging that blur the distinction between opinion and news reportage. The public broadcaster has also come under attack from commercial news organisations in the battle over shrinking media markets.

In this context, participants were asked questions about their preference for impartial and independent journalism, whether news media should report false claims made by politicians and political parties, and what the role of news media and digital platforms is in this changing environment.

**THE MAJORITY PREFER IMPARTIAL REPORTING**

Participants were asked if they preferred news that does not reflect a particular point of view, shares their point of view or challenges it. More than half (54%) said they preferred impartial news, that being news that does not display a particular point of view. One-fifth (19%) said they liked to access news that confirmed their worldview and 13% said they prefer to have their views challenged (see figure 3.1).

**FIGURE 3.1: PREFERENCE FOR NEWS THAT SHARES, CHALLENGES OR HAS NO PARTICULAR POINT OF VIEW (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preference</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting news from sources that don’t have a particular point of view</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting news from sources that share your point of view</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting news from sources that challenge your point of view</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding

**OLDER GENERATIONS PREFER IMPARTIAL NEWS MORE**

Men are slightly more likely to want impartial news (57%) compared to women (52%), as well as news that confirms their worldview (men 20%; women 17%). The biggest differences can be found across generations. Two-thirds (62%) of Baby Boomers and those aged 74 and older say they prefer news without a particular point of view. This compares to roughly half of Gen X (49%), Gen Y (49%) and Gen Z (52%).

Members of Gen Y are the most likely to want news that shares their perspective (25%) compared to 12% of Baby Boomers. This partly reflects the growth in opinion and commentary in news and current affairs as well as a blurring of opinion and news in the online environment (see figure 3.2).

**FIGURE 3.2: PREFERENCE FOR IMPARTIALITY BY GENERATION (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>BB</th>
<th>74+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting news from sources that share your point of view</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting news from sources that don’t have a particular point of view</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding
Those with higher education and income are more likely to want news that supports their worldview. High income earners are the least likely to want news that challenges their point of view.

In contrast, those who have low education and income are the least likely to want news that either reflects their views or offers an impartial account of events. This possibly implies the wealthy want news that supports their privilege and the less well-off want to read about circumstances that are different to theirs (see figure 3.3).

**FIGURE 3.3: PREFERENCE FOR NEWS BY EDUCATION, INCOME AND REGION (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding

- Getting news from sources that share your point of view
- Getting news from sources that don’t have a particular point of view
- Getting news from sources that challenge your point of view
- Don’t know

**RIGHT-WING CONSUMERS ARE LEAST LIKELY TO WANT THEIR WORLDVIEW CHALLENGED**

Almost two-thirds (63%) of right-wing news consumers are more likely to want news that doesn’t reflect a particular point of view, compared to 56% of left-leaning news consumers. One-fifth of left-wing (22%) and right-wing (21%) news consumers prefer news that shares their worldview. However, those on the right-wing of the political spectrum are the least likely to want news that challenges their point of view (see figure 3.4).

**FIGURE 3.4: PREFERENCE FOR NEWS BY POLITICAL AFFILIATION (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Affiliation</th>
<th>Left-wing</th>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>Right-wing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting news from sources that share your point of view</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting news from sources that don’t have a particular point of view</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting news from sources that challenge your point of view</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding

Left and right-wing are more likely to prefer impartial news than centre

[Q1F]: Some people talk about ‘left’, ‘right’ and ‘centre’ to describe parties and politicians. (Generally, socialist parties would be considered left wing whilst conservative parties would be considered right wing). With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale?
3. ROLE OF JOURNALISM AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS

3. ROLE OF JOURNALISM AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS

IMPARTIAL NEWS IS LESS IMPORTANT FOR SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS USERS

Impartial news appears to be less important for those who use social media as their main source of news. Less than half (48%) of those who rely on social media prefer news that doesn’t reflect a particular point of view compared to 63% of radio listeners. One-quarter (24%) of those who mainly rely on social media for news are also the most likely to want news that confirms their worldview compared to 13% of radio devotees. This points to concerns about echo chambers on social media whereby users choose information sources that support their perspective (see figure 3.5).

FIGURE 3.5: PREFERENCE FOR NEWS BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)

THOSE WHO DO NOT TRUST THE NEWS ARE MORE LIKELY TO WANT IMPARTIAL NEWS

People who say they do not trust the news are slightly more likely to want impartial coverage (58%) than those who say they trust the news (54%). This is supported by research that shows the presence of bias and opinion in news is a cause of low trust for many consumers. However, those who trust the news are more likely to want news that confirms their point of view (see figure 3.6).

FIGURE 3.6: PREFERENCE FOR NEWS BY GENERAL TRUST IN NEWS (%)

INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM IS IMPORTANT FOR SOCIETY

Participants were asked to reflect on how important independent journalism is to the proper functioning of society. Independence means free from commercial and political interests in the making of editorial decisions. Two-thirds (62%) consider independent journalism to be very or extremely important for society to function properly. A quarter say it’s somewhat important. Only 5% say it isn’t important and a further 7% did not know (see figure 3.7).

FIGURE 3.7: IMPORTANCE OF INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM (%)
INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM IS LESS IMPORTANT TO GEN Z THAN OTHER AGE GROUPS

Gen Z are much less likely to think independent journalism is important to the proper functioning of society. Only 45% think it is very or extremely important compared to 77% of Baby Boomers (see figure 3.8). There is a small difference based on gender. Men are slightly more likely (68%) than women (65%) to think independence in journalism is very or extremely important to society. People with higher levels of education (72%) and income (73%) are also more likely than those with low education and income (both 65%) to think independent journalism is important. Regional news consumers are also slightly less likely to think it is very or extremely important (65%) compared to 68% of those in major cities.

LEFT-WING ORIENTED NEWS CONSUMERS MORE LIKELY TO VALUE INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM

One of the bigger differences found is based on political orientation. More left-wing news consumers (78%) consider independent journalism to be important to the proper functioning of society than right-wing (69%) or those who identify with the centre of politics (60%) (see figure 3.9).

LIGHT NEWS USERS THINK INDEPENDENCE IS LESS IMPORTANT

Those who access news more often have higher interest in news and politics and also value independent journalism more. Light news users are much less likely to think it is important to the functioning of society (figure 3.10).
SOCIAL MEDIA AND PRINT NEWS CONSUMERS CONSIDER INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM TO BE LESS IMPORTANT THAN TV, RADIO AND ONLINE USERS

Those who rely on social media (57%) and print (60%) as their main source of news are the least likely to think independent journalism is important for society to function. TV (71%), radio (71%) and online (70%) news consumers are more likely to think it is important (see figure 3.11).

However, those who trust news are more likely to think independent journalism is important compared to those who say they do not trust news or are uncertain about it (see figure 3.12).

FIGURE 3.11: IMPORTANCE OF INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of News</th>
<th>Somewhat/not very/not at all important</th>
<th>Extremely/very important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online news</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 3.12: IMPORTANCE OF INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM BY GENERAL TRUST IN NEWS (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Distrust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

JOURNALISTS SHOULD REPORT FALSE CLAIMS BY POLITICIANS

There has been a lot of attention paid to the false statements made by politicians during election campaigns. Key among those are the untruths told by US President Donald Trump and claims made during the Brexit referendum in the UK. Closer to home, there was much debate about false claims in political advertising during the 2019 Australian federal election. In light of these events, news consumers were asked how political reporters should deal with statements made by politicians that could be false. Should they a) report the comment prominently because it is important for the public to know what their elected representatives are saying; or b) not give emphasis to the potentially false statement.

More than half (54%) said political journalists should report the comments that could be false because the public needs to know what their elected representatives are saying. Around one-quarter (23%) said the political statements should not be given unwarranted attention and the same number of participants said they did not know (23%). These divided results reflect ongoing debate about whether the news media should ‘give oxygen’ to comments from politicians that could be untrue (see figure 3.13).

FIGURE 3.13: NEWS MEDIAS RESPONSE TO STATEMENTS FROM POLITICIANS THAT COULD BE FALSE (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Report the statement prominently because it is important for the public to know what the politician said</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not emphasise the statement because it would give the politician unwarranted attention</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[3. ROLE OF JOURNALISM AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS]
In contrast to the views on impartiality and independence, Gen Z news consumers are less likely to think political comments that could be false should be reported and are more supportive of journalists ignoring them. Older generations are more supportive of the reporting of potentially false statements because they come from an elected politician (see figure 3.14).

Men (58%) are more likely to think the comments should be reported than women (51%) who are also less likely to have a view. A quarter of female news consumers (27%) say they don’t know compared to 19% of men. This reflects that women tend have a lower interest in politics than men.

Interestingly, there is little difference based on political orientation. Right-wing orientated news consumers (58%) are only slightly less likely to support false statements from politicians being reported than left-wing (61%) (see figure 3.15).

Given the spread of misinformation on social media and the wide use of Facebook and Twitter by politicians to communicate directly with the public, the data show that those who rely on social media as their main source of news are less likely to think false political statements should be reported prominently (48%). Instead, those who rely on TV and online news sources are more inclined to support this view (59%). Print news readers are the most likely to think statements by politicians that could be false shouldn’t be given unwarranted attention (see figure 3.16).
SUMMARY

In a news environment under financial pressure the majority of Australian news consumers say they prefer impartial news and think that independent journalism is important to the functioning of society. This is particularly true of older news consumers (BB and 74+) who tend to rely on traditional offline news platforms such as TV, print and radio. This is good news for the public broadcasters and quality commercial journalism outlets with foundations in solid traditional reporting.

However, there are generational and political divisions about these journalism ideals. Younger news consumers are less concerned about journalism’s independence from commercial and political interests and are more open to accessing news that shares their point of view, rather than offering an impartial one. The data also show that more left-wing news consumers deem independent reporting to be important to society than centre and right-wing news consumers. Given that more right-wing news consumers watch commercial TV news and more left-wing news consumers rely on the ABC and SBS, these findings likely reflect the different news consumption habits of Australians based on their political orientation.

Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016 there has been growing discussion about the reporting of false claims made by politicians and whether the news media should ignore them or print them. Similar debate has emerged in the UK in response to the Brexit campaign. Closer to home, there has been significant discussion about political claims made by both major parties during recent election campaigns. Most notably was the ‘Mediscare’ campaign run by the ALP in 2016 and the ‘Tax Scare’ campaign run by the Coalition in 2019. In the US, Twitter has begun fact-checking tweets from the US President, some outlets have stopped reporting the President’s live press conferences until his statements have been verified, and others continue to report what the President says.

In Australia, more than half of news consumers think the news media should prominently report what a politician says because it is important for the public to know what their elected representatives are saying. The remainder are split. Around one-quarter think statements by politicians that could be false should not be reported and the rest did not know. The results point to important questions about the quality of political reporting and how false claims by members of parliament and political parties are treated, whether they are challenged, or given a ‘free kick’ without scrutiny. In many ways, the choice is overridden by the fact that politicians publish their claims directly to the public via social media. The decision left to news editors is whether to amplify those claims, dissect them or ignore them.

2 https://pressthink.org/2020/03/today-we-switch-our-coverage-of-donald-trump-to-an-emergency-setting/
There aren’t many signs of hope for public interest journalism in Australia at present. The advertising business model that has supported most journalism continues to erode and the public broadcasters struggle on despite cuts to funding. Digital subscriptions, while on the increase, don’t meet the shortfall.

Over the last decade news media organisations have experimented, trying to find ways of earning money by exploiting their cultural capital. We have seen Fairfax – now Nine – try to branch out into luxury travel with journalists as hosts. The Guardian in Australia, like its British parent company, tried public events and running courses on things such as how to use Freedom of Information. Virtually all mainstream media tried bundling subscriptions with other cultural products – such as theatre tickets and restaurant discounts.

Most of these things yielded trickles of revenue, but proved to be not worth the considerable effort involved. Instead, the data suggests that what people value most about journalism companies is their “core business” – providing independent, reliable information. This point of view gets a further boost from the findings here – that more than half of news consumers say they prefer impartial news, and 67% see independent journalism as very or extremely important.

What does the market tell us? For most of my 40-year career as a journalist, the majority of newspaper revenue was earned from advertising, and only about 20% from subscriptions. Today, if we look at the outlets specialising in serious journalism (regardless of political leaning) that has changed.

The Australian, for example, earns about half of its revenue from subscriptions – both hard copy and digital. So too what used to be the Fairfax mastheads – now part of the Nine network. And, in one of the most hopeful signs, The Guardian internationally, as well as in Australia, has gone from deficits to surplus on the back of a simple appeal to their readers to pay to support the journalism, even though there is no paywall and the content can be accessed for free. The response has been extraordinary.

But in the meantime we can draw from this, and from the results of the work presented here, the encouraging lesson that journalists are most valued when they stick to their knitting, and to the core principles of journalism. Opinion pieces are of course part of journalistic work, but not the most important part. Lots of people purvey opinions. Opinion is cheap in every sense of the word, and impotent without facts. The thing that journalists do that others don’t do, or not consistently, is finding things out in real time, and communicating the results promptly and in language easily understandable by the general public.

The Digital News Report: Australia findings beg another question – what is impartial news? Is it even possible? The survey results are presented as though this is to do with a right-wing/left-wing divide.

There is only so much you can do with a survey, but of course understanding what people mean by impartiality is far more complicated than left/right divides. This is where qualitative research – interviews and focus groups – could help us understand more.

We might consider, in the context that I am writing this, points of view on the importance of schools opening after COVID-19 related shutdowns. People have many views, probably reflecting their personal position and life experience. Left/right divides on this issue, and many others, can obscure public opinion rather than illuminating it.
“Moving on, there is a broader point here. Journalists agonise over whether, in these opinionated times, “objectivity” is even possible. I think “objectivity” is one of the most misunderstood words in the industry – but also one of the most important.”

It does not necessarily mean balance. I am old enough to remember when the public relations hacks of the tobacco industry regularly presented “evidence” that smoking didn’t damage health. Was it our job, as journalists, to balance their views precisely with those of medical specialists and public health advocates? Of course not. One could make the same comparison with climate change sceptics and scientists in our own time. Nor does objectivity necessarily mean not coming to a conclusion or communicating a point of view.

The scholar and journalist Michael Schudson has written eloquently on the functions of democratically useful journalism. They include analysis, investigation and “social empathy” as well as providing information. The first three imply coming to a point of view – and I would argue that does not necessarily mean a lack of impartiality or objectivity. Nor, I would argue, is communicating false information put about by politicians necessarily a journalistic failure – and the survey results presented here suggest most agree.

Most journalists would say the statements should be presented in context. Again, it would be nice to know more about how people think about this. I doubt they believe politicians’ words should be reported uncritically. They would expect journalists to call out the falsehoods, while reporting them.

The key here, as Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel conclude in their classic book “The Elements of Journalism”, is that journalists should inquire and investigate and report in ways that reflect the weight of the evidence. Objectivity or impartiality is a discipline of verification, not a quality that resides in an individual journalist. Rather, it lies in her methodology, the way she conducts her work and her inquiries. The evidence suggests that it is what the public value about serious journalism and, importantly, are prepared to pay for.
4 NEWS ACCESS

- Australian news consumers are accessing news more frequently but their interest in news is declining.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of heavy news consumers increased to 70% (+14).
- TV remains the most popular news source but is decreasing; social media is rising.
- Half of Gen Z and 30% of 74+ use Facebook for news.
- YouTube for news has increased 6% since 2016.
MORE THAN HALF OF AUSTRALIANS ARE ‘HEAVY’ NEWS CONSUMERS

The survey was conducted during an unprecedented bushfire season. News consumers were accessing news more than ever before. At the end of January/early February 2020, more than half of Australian news consumers accessed news more than once a day (56%), which was a 4% increase from 2019 (see figure 4.1). This rise mainly occurred among women and Gen X during the bushfires. As a result, we are no longer the lightest news consumers in the global survey (see Chapter 9 Australia and the World). This increased even further during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**FIGURE 4.1: FREQUENCY OF NEWS ACCESS (%)**

![Graph showing frequency of news access from 2016 to 2020.](image)

We conducted an additional survey between 18-22 April 2020, about a month after social distancing measures were put in place in response to the coronavirus. For the purposes of comparison, some of the results are presented here.

During the pandemic, more than two-thirds (70%) of respondents were accessing news more than once a day, which is a much higher proportion than usual (56%) (see figures 1 and 4.1).

**14%**


[Q1b.NEW] Typically, how often do you access news? By news we mean national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online).

**FIGURE 1: FREQUENCY OF NEWS ACCESS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC (%)**

![Graph showing frequency of news access during COVID-19 pandemic.](image)
Men continue to be heavier news consumers than women. Gen Z are the lightest news consumers. Those with higher education and income are also more likely to access news more often. Residents of major cities are slightly more likely to be heavy news consumers than those in the regions (see figure 4.2).

During the COVID-19 outbreak, there was a considerable increase in news consumption across all demographics. The proportion of heavy news consumers increased by about 15% regardless of gender, education and region. However, the increase in heavy news consumers varied between age groups. The highest increase in news access was among those aged 74+ (+24%) and the lowest was among Gen X (+8%) (see figure 2).
INTEREST IN NEWS IS DECLINING

Despite the increase in news consumption among Australians, interest in news has declined over the past five years. In 2020, 60% of Australian news consumers say they are extremely or very interested in news (see figure 4.3).

FIGURE 4.3: INTEREST IN NEWS (%)

Male and older news consumers are more likely to be interested in news. Those with higher education and income are also more interested in news. There is no significant difference in terms of location (see figure 4.4).

FIGURE 4.4: INTEREST IN NEWS BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)
SOCIAL MEDIA FOR NEWS IS UP

While TV (63%) is the most used general source of news among Australians, its popularity has declined. News consumption through traditional news media such as newspapers, magazines, and radio has also fallen since 2019. In contrast, the use of social media for news has increased from 46% in 2019 to 52% in 2020. Online news has remained stable (see figure 4.5).

FIGURE 4.5: GENERAL SOURCE OF NEWS (%)

TV still remains the most used source of news in 2020, but there has been a slight decline over the last year (- 3%). Seven percent of respondents say radio is their main source of news, which is a 2% decline from 2019. Print is the least mentioned main source of news (6%). Instead of traditional news sources consumers are turning to online and social media for news (see figure 4.6).

FIGURE 4.6: MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)

Differences in news sources are evident across generations. Almost half of Gen Z (48%) say social media is their main source of news, whereas only 4% of 74+ say it is. The majority of Baby Boomers and people aged 74 or older use TV as their main source of news. Gen Y (33%) is more likely to access online news than other generations. Print remains popular among people aged 74 or older (16%); however, this is a 3% decline from last year among this age group (19% in 2019) (see figure 4.7).

FIGURE 4.7: MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS BY GENERATION (%)
More than half of the respondents (51%) said TV was their main source of news during lockdown, which is a 12% increase from the survey conducted in Jan/Feb. All other sources declined (see figure 3).

The same pattern can be found in relation to general sources of news. There was a large increase in TV news viewing during the pandemic and a decline in the use of other news sources. Most people (76%) accessed TV for news which is a 13% increase from Jan/Feb. In contrast, news access via other sources declined during the pandemic (see figure 4). This likely reflects the fact that people were spending more time at home and not needing to access news on the go.

While overall news access through social media declined between Jan/Feb and April, it increased among Gen Z. More than half of Gen Z (52%) used social media as their main source of news during the pandemic, which is a 4% increase compared to Jan/Feb (see figure 4.7). Online news fell in its popularity across all age groups. News access through print also decreased, particularly among news consumers aged 74+, with a 7% drop compared to February (16%) (see figure 5).

**Figure 3: Main Source of News Before and After COVID-19 Pandemic (%)**

**Figure 4: General Source of News Before and After COVID-19 Pandemic (%)**

**Figure 5: Main Source of News During COVID-19 Pandemic by Generation (%)**
More men mainly use print sources of news compared to women; more women use TV as their main source compared to men. Female news consumers (41%) are more likely to rely on social media for news than male news consumers (37%) (see figure 4.8).

News consumers in regional Australia are more likely to rely on TV as their main source of news (45%) than those in major cities (36%). On the other hand, major city news consumers (30%) are more likely to use online news compared to those in regional areas (22%). There is no regional gap in the use of radio, print and social media for news (see figure 4.10). There have been no significant changes since last year.

News consumers with low education and income are more likely to rely on TV for news compared to those with high education and income. Those in the latter group are more likely to rely on online news sources (see figure 4.9).
During the bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, we could see strong generational difference in news source preferences. Gen Z watched TV news less during the bushfires (43%) than the year before (55%) but this went up again after COVID-19 (58%). Younger generations’ use of social media for news also increased during COVID-19.

In the past few years, older generations’ use of social media for news has grown steadily. However, during COVID-19 it dropped again. This is possibly linked to older generations staying home more and relying less on their mobile phones. However, in the case of younger generations, regardless of where they are, they tend to be ‘always on’ their devices and therefore still increasing their news consumption via social media while also watching TV (see figure 6).

**FIGURE 6. TV AND SOCIAL MEDIA AS GENERAL SOURCE OF NEWS BEFORE AND AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC BY GENERATION (%)**

During the COVID-19 outbreak, 49% of respondents used Facebook as a source of news about the coronavirus, representing a much higher proportion than Facebook use for general news (39%). The use of Instagram for news about the coronavirus (14%) was also 5% higher than for general news (9%) (see figure 7).

**FIGURE 7. SOCIAL MEDIA BRANDS USED FOR NEWS BEFORE AND AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC (%)**

[Q7] Which, if any, of the following social media or online platforms have you used in the last week as a source of news or information about the coronavirus? Please select all that apply.
MORE EDUCATED NEWS CONSUMERS ACCESS MORE SOURCES

Overall, Australian news consumers use an average of three sources to access news. Highly educated news consumers use a larger number of sources to access news than lower educated news consumers. A similar pattern is found in relation to income (see figure 4.11).

FIGURE 4.11: NUMBER OF NEWS SOURCES BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION (%)

ONE-THIRD OF GEN Z RELY ON ONE SOURCE

There is a difference in the number of sources used between generations. Younger generations are more likely to rely on a single source to access news. A third of Gen Z access news via one platform (33%), compared to 14% of people aged 74 or older. This coincides with the fact that Gen Z heavily rely on social media to access news. In contrast, more than one-third of 74+ access news via four or more sources (see figure 4.12).

FIGURE 4.12: NUMBER OF NEWS SOURCES BY GENERATION (%)

NUMBER OF NEWS BRANDS USED

From a combined total of 58 (26 offline and 32 online brands) asked in the survey, more than half of Australian news consumers (51%) use five or more news brands. Only 7% access one news brand (see figure 4.13).

FIGURE 4.13: NUMBER OF NEWS BRANDS ACCESSED (%)
TV BRANDS TOP THE RANKING

Table 4.1 shows the percentage of news consumers surveyed who use different traditional offline news brands. Australian news consumers prefer TV news brands. Sixteen percent access a regional or local newspaper, which is higher than the number of news consumers of national or capital city newspapers. However, this is a 4% decline from 2019 (20%). This possibly reflects the difficulty of delivering newspapers during the bushfires in regional areas. The ABC had the highest audiences (41%, +1) among all offline brands. This includes both TV and radio. While radio news consumption declined overall during the bushfires, ABC Radio news consumption increased this year to 18% (+3). ABC TV news consumption remained the same (33%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4.1: OFFLINE NEWS BRAND ACCESSED IN THE LAST WEEK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC News *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel TEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A regional or local newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBS TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sky News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial FM radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Telegraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Australian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIN Television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial AM radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courier Mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Financial Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Advertiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Capital city newspapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other newspapers or broadcast news channels from outside country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News channels or newspapers in languages other than English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Q5a] Which of the following brands have you used to access news in the last week (via TV, radio or print only)? Please select all that apply.  
[Base: All] *ABC News includes ABC TV (33%) and ABC Radio (18%)

ONLINE BRANDS

Table 4.2 shows the percentage of news consumers surveyed who use different online news brands. The top three online news brands have retained their rankings from 2019. News.com.au and ABC News online topped the ranking with 23% of news consumers accessing these brands. BBC News online and Guardian Australia online outperform the Sydney Morning Herald and Skynews.com.au.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4.2: ONLINE NEWS BRAND ACCESSED IN THE LAST WEEK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News.com.au</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC News online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nine.com.au</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7News.com.au</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC News online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guardian Australia online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald (smh.com.au)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skynews.com.au</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Telegraph (dailytelegraph.com.au)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BuzzFeed News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Australian (theaustralian.com.au)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age (theage.com.au)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun (heraldsun.com.au)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other regional or local newspaper website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courier Mail (couriermail.com.au)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HuffPost (Huffington Post)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PerthNow.com.au</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10Daily.com.au</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Financial Review (afr.com)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Advertiser (adelaidenow.com.au)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other online sites from outside country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BrisbaneTimes.com.au</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junkee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Saturday Paper online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crikey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other non-English online news sites</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Q5b] Which of the following brands have you used to access news in the last week (via websites, apps, social media, and other forms of Internet access)? Please select all that apply.
**INCREASE IN YOUTUBE FOR NEWS**

Overall the use of social media for news has increased, particularly on YouTube. The percentage of Australians who get news from YouTube has steadily increased from 15% in 2016 to 21% in 2020. This year, there was a small rise (+3%) in the use of Facebook for news. Snapchat and LinkedIn have plateaued since 2019, whereas other social media brands have seen a slight increase. The use of Instagram for news (9%) is now almost equal to the use of Twitter for news (10%) (see figure 4.14).

![Figure 4.14: Social Media Brands Used for News (%)](image)

When it comes to social media use for news, generational differences are evident. Almost half of Gen Z say they use Facebook for news, compared to only 30% of 74+. One in four Gen Z use Instagram (24%) and Snapchat (23%) for news. YouTube is also a popular platform among Gen Z (37%). Messaging apps such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp are more popular for news among Gen Y than other generations (see figure 4.15).

![Figure 4.15: Social Media Brands Used for News by Generation (%)](image)
MOBILE CONTINUES TO TOP THE LIST OF DIGITAL DEVICES FOR NEWS

Sixty percent of Australian news consumers use their mobile phones to access news compared to 48% who use their desktop or laptop computers. About one-fifth use tablet/ebook and smart/connected TV for news. The use of wearable devices (2%) or voice activated speakers (3%) for news remains low (see figure 4.16).

FIGURE 4.16: DEVICES FOR ACCESSING NEWS (%) *

The use of mobile phones to access news has risen steadily since 2016. In contrast, the use of laptop/desktop computers to access news has fallen. The use of smart/connected TV as a main way of accessing online news is also increasing steadily. The use of wearable devices or voice activated speakers as a main way to access online news is still in its infancy with less than 1% of news consumers using these devices. This figure has remained persistently low since 2017 (see figure 4.17).

The largest increase in the use of mobile phones to access news was among Gen X and Baby Boomers. The use of computers to access news has fallen across all generations, except for those aged 74+ (see figure 4.18).
**FIGURE 4.18. MAIN DEVICE FOR ACCESSING ONLINE NEWS BY GENERATION (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mobile phone</th>
<th>PC/laptop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74+</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SUMMARY**

Australian news consumers are accessing news more often and are no longer the lightest news consumers. This possibly reflects that this survey was conducted during a major bushfire season and people were seeking regular updates. However, general interest in news has fallen in the past five years.

ABC Radio news has increased its share of audience over the last year which reflects the importance of radio in an emergency situation such as bushfires. Our supplementary survey conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic shows a further increase in news consumption. This highlights the importance of external influences like natural disasters and health crises on news consumption. While many were affected by the bushfires which drove a small increase in news consumption, all Australians have been directly affected by the coronavirus, making the news coverage personally relevant to everyone, causing an even bigger rise. It would be interesting to see if these increases will be maintained in the long term or whether they will fall again once the crises pass.

TV remains the most popular news source but its popularity has declined. In contrast, social media use for news has increased. Younger generations are driving this trend with half of Gen Z saying social media is their main source of news. On the other hand, print continues to be predominately used by people aged 74 or older. Younger generations are more likely to rely on a single source of news than older generations. We continue to see a division in news consumption across all demographics with women, young people, less education, lower income earners accessing news less often and from fewer sources.

The consumption of news via social media platforms is steadily increasing. One notable phenomenon is that news consumption on YouTube has been steadily increasing over the past few years. Given that YouTube is a source of alternative perspectives, it will be interesting to see how the increasing use of YouTube for news influences people’s changing perception of news as well as their understanding of politics and contemporary issues.
COMMENTARY

NEWS INDUSTRY’S UNCERTAIN FUTURE MAY DEPEND ON COOPERATION FROM TECH GIANTS

Stephen Hutcheon, Digital Story Innovation Team, Australian Broadcasting Corporation

For many media organisations, the first half of 2020 has seen a stampede of readers, viewers and listeners flock to their platforms, hungry to absorb the fast-moving developments in this once-in-generation global crisis.

Bad news has always been a big driver of news interest and this public health emergency combined with a collapse of many of our societal props, has given a supercharged boost to most of the success metrics that matter to the news industry. But as the curve of reader interest flattens - as it inevitably will - and the shock of the unprecedented diffuses, we are going to be looking at a very different media landscape on the other side of this pandemic.

To start with, there’s the problem of the big, black hole of funding. The sudden withdrawal of advertising has already claimed a number of scalps. Publications have closed or laid off staff, others have suspended their print operations or cut their programming. That is going to continue to impact the bottom line for the foreseeable future, depending on the pace and nature of the economic recovery. And even though many publications are reporting a jump in digital subscriptions, these will not likely offset the precipitous drop in advertising revenue.

News start-ups and other niche publications may also find themselves unable to raise seed funding, working capital or find benefactors with deep enough pockets. And even publicly funded news organisations could feel the pinch as the federal government seeks to defray the cost of funding the emergency budgetary response.

What’s worse is that this comes at a time where structural changes in the way news is distributed and consumed, will continue to have far-reaching impacts on the news industry. It’s a double whammy for which there is no easy fix. The seeds of this predicament were sown years ago when digital news organisations turned a blind eye to the emerging opportunities of the digital world. Many newspapers and broadcasters were slow to switch to a digital footing. When they eventually did, they either viewed it as a defensive strategy to protect the print product or were too reluctant to invest in the systems needed to build a strong digital business.

The news business became a textbook casualty of disruptive innovation, a term popularised by the late Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen who first defined the concept in the mid-90s. And the legacy of that slow response - though not unique to the media industry - continues to play out today. Don’t forget that it’s only five years since Netflix launched in Australia, throwing down a challenge to linear broadcast television. And even today, news organisations are having to adapt to the whims of digital platforms and their algorithms. But there’s no alternative. As the home page goes the way of the printed page, using the platforms as key distribution channels is no longer afterthought, it’s become a baked-in necessity. As this year’s Digital News Report Australia shows, discovery through search and social continues to replace the habit of direct visits.

There are some upsides to this. The platforms give publishers an opportunity to grow their reach and find new audiences. Although too often those readers are what are called one-and-done types. Among the most successful channels cited in the Digital News Report Australia 2020 are Facebook and YouTube. Not surprisingly, they are also two of the most popular platforms used to spread misinformation and extremist views.

Social media platforms have shown themselves to be unwilling or unable to contain the spread of falsehoods and dangerous hyper-partisan content often disguised as news.

If the government gets its way, some of these issues may be addressed in the proposed mandatory code of conduct designed to level the playing field between Australian media organisations and the global technology platforms. This stemmed from findings in the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission’s report into digital platforms which was released last year. The proposal to force the tech platforms like Facebook and Google to share revenue, and importantly data, will help plug some funding holes and give publishers more transparency over audience data that has been lost to the platforms over recent years.

Knowing that the eyes of the world are watching to see if Australia can prevail, the tech platforms are expected to put up some stiff resistance. But in these difficult times, it may throw a lifeline to an industry that is a vital component in the maintenance of a healthy, functioning democracy.
5 EMERGING NEWS HABITS

- There is a rise in the use of social media as a pathway to news among older generations.
- The use of mobile news alerts has doubled since 2016 from 8% to 16% in 2020.
- There has been a 5% increase in news sharing on social media.
- Younger generations are more likely to interact with news online.
- Half of Gen Y are willing to pay for podcasts.
News consumers are challenged by the vast amount of information that is available online. This chapter explores the different pathways and tools they use to discover and curate news online.

**DIRECT TO BRAND IS BECOMING A LESS POPULAR PATHWAY TO ONLINE NEWS**

News consumers are increasingly turning to social media and search engines to find news. Social media (37%) is more popular than going direct to brand websites or apps (31%). When combined, 39% of news consumers either search for brands or search for news stories online. Mobile alerts (16%) and news aggregators (13%) are less popular but are growing. Email newsletters appear to be less popular. This suggests an increasing preference for curated news (see figure 5.1).

**OLDER GENERATIONS ARE INCREASING ACCESS TO NEWS VIA SOCIAL MEDIA**

The shift towards accessing news via social media is occurring more among older generations. There has been little change among Gen Z and Y who continue to use social media the most to access online news. However, there is a growth among Baby Boomers and those aged 74 or older in their use of social media for news. There has also been a concurrent drop of accessing news brands directly by these older news consumers (see figure 5.2).

**FIGURE 5.1: PATHWAYS TO ONLINE NEWS (%)**

![Pathways to Online News graph]

**FIGURE 5.2: DIRECT TO BRAND VS SOCIAL MEDIA AS PATHWAYS TO ONLINE NEWS BY GENERATION (%)**

![Direct to Brand vs Social Media graph]

**Q10** Thinking about how you got news online (via computer, mobile or any device) in the last week, which were the ways in which you came across news stories? Please select all that apply.

+5% **social media as pathway to news among 74+**
**USE OF MOBILE ALERTS IS CONSISTENTLY GROWING**

News consumers are diversifying their pathways to online news as they are trying to find efficient ways to curate and organise the vast amount of news available online. The use of mobile news alerts has doubled over the past five years from 8% in 2016 to 16% in 2020. The growing use of mobile news alerts can been seen across all generations. Among news consumers 74+, there has been an 8 percentage point increase during this period (see figure 5.3).

**EMAIL NEWSLETTERS REMAIN POPULAR AMONG OLDER GENERATIONS**

As figure 5.4 shows, 16% of news consumers subscribe to email newsletters and these are most popular among older age groups. Using email newsletters was slightly more popular among regional news consumers (18%) than news consumers living in major cities (16%) (see figure 5.4). This reflects that older people use computers more to access online news (see Chapter 4).

**FIGURE 5.4: USE OF EMAIL NEWSLETTERS BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Major city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Regional area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BB</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74+</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those who mainly rely on computers for news receive email newsletters more than those who use mobile phones. In contrast, news consumers who mainly use mobile phones to access news are more likely to receive mobile news alerts (22%) (see figure 5.5).

**FIGURE 5.5: USE OF EMAIL NEWSLETTERS AND MOBILE ALERTS BY MAIN DEVICE FOR NEWS (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Device</th>
<th>Email newsletter</th>
<th>Mobile alert</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobile phone</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC/Laptop</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than half (53%) of people who access news via email newsletters subscribe to up to three brands per week (see figure 5.6).

**FIGURE 5.6: NUMBER OF EMAIL NEWSLETTERS OR ALERTS (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 3 per week</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 or more per week</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### NEWS CONSUMERS PAY ATTENTION TO NEWS EMAILS

Among those who subscribe to news emails, 44% said they read most of them. About one-third (32%) said they read some of the news emails they receive. If combined, 76% of news consumers pay attention to news emails they receive. One-fifth say they only read a few of the news emails they receive. Given that publishers tend to rely on email newsletters to reach out to audiences and gain attention, this is a positive sign (see figure 5.7).

**FIGURE 5.7: ATTENTION TO NEWS EMAILS (%)**

![44% of subscribers read most news emails](image)

[Q10b_EMAIL_ATTENTION_2020] Which of the following statements best applies to you?

#### PEOPLE PREFER GENERAL NEWS UPDATES, BREAKING NEWS, AND LOCAL NEWS

Among those who use email to access news, daily update emails from different news organisations (57%) are the most popular form of newsletter, followed by breaking news (50%) and local news (31%) (see figure 5.8).

**FIGURE 5.8: TYPE OF EMAIL NEWSLETTER RECEIVED (%)**

![31% get email newsletters for local news](image)

[Q10b_EMAIL_TYPES_2020] You say you use email to access news. Which of the following types of news emails do you get sent? Please select all that apply [BASE: those who subscribe to email newsletters]
GOOGLE NEWS REMAINS THE MOST POPULAR NEWS AGGREGATOR

Over the last five years, the use of news aggregator apps has increased overall from 9% in 2016 to 13% in 2020. Google News (17%) remains the most popular, increasing from 14% last year. Use of other news aggregator apps remains static (see figure 5.9).

FIGURE 5.9: USE OF NEWS AGGREGATOR APPS (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>App</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Google News</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple News</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reddit</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat Discover</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upday</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flipboard</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TopBuzz</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

INCREASE IN ONLINE NEWS INTERACTION

The level of interaction with news increased from 63% in 2019 to 69% in 2020. There was a slight increase in most types of online news interaction with some exceptions. Talking face-to-face continues to be the most common mode of news interaction (41%), with a 4% increase from 2019. Talking online with friends and colleagues about a news story also increased from 14% in 2019 to 18% in 2020. Sharing a news story via social media increased from 16% in 2019 to 21% in 2020 (see figure 5.10).

FIGURE 5.10: NEWS INTERACTION (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rate, like or favourite a news story</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on a news story in a social network (e.g. Facebook or Twitter)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on a news story on a news website</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write a blog on a news or political issue</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share a news story via email</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share a news story via social network (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share a news story via an instant messenger (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post or send a news-related picture or video to a Social Network site</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post or send a picture or video to a news website/news organisation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote in an online poll via a news site or social network</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take part in a campaign or group based around a news subject</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk online with friends and colleagues about a news story (e.g. by email, social media, instant messenger)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk with friends and colleagues about a news story (face to face)</td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Q10c_2016] When using the Internet for news, have you used any of the following sites or mobile apps that aggregate different news links in the last week? Please select all that apply.

[Q13] During an average week in which, if any, of the following ways do you share or participate in news coverage? Please select all that apply.
**GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN NEWS SHARING**

As figure 5.11 shows, across all age groups, sharing news via social media is a more popular way of spreading news compared to email and messaging apps. It is noteworthy that 20% of Baby Boomers share news via social media, while only 9% of them share news via email. The same number of news users aged 74+ share news via social media (12%) and email (12%), however they are the least likely to share news via an instant messenger (5%). Gen Y are the most active sharers of news via social media (24%) and messaging apps (22%).

**AUSTRALIAN NEWS CONSUMERS PREFER TO TALK ABOUT NEWS OFFLINE THAN ONLINE**

Australian news consumers consistently prefer to talk about news offline than online. This trend applies to all age groups but is more pronounced among older generations. Conversely younger generations are more likely to talk about news online. One-quarter of Gen Z and Y talk about news online compared to 12% of people aged 74+. More than half of news consumers aged 74+ talk about news in person compared to roughly one-third of Gen Z and Y.

**FIGURE 5.11: BY GENERATION NEWS SHARING (%)**

![Bar chart showing news sharing by generation](chart.jpg)

**FIGURE 5.12: TALKING ABOUT NEWS BY GENERATION AND GENDER (%)**

![Bar chart showing news discussion by gender and generation](chart2.jpg)

[Q13] During an average week in which, if any, of the following ways do you share or participate in news coverage? Please select all that apply.

- [ ] Sharing news via email
- [ ] Sharing news via social media
- [ ] Sharing news via an instant messenger

**Gen Y and Z more likely to talk about news online**

Women are more likely than men to talk about news both online and offline (see figure 5.12).
THOSE WHO ARE INTERESTED IN POLITICS SHARE MORE

Those who have a high interest in politics are more likely to engage in sharing activities online and offline. Those with high interest in politics (83%) interacted with news in one or more ways compared to 62% of news consumers with low interest in politics (Figure 5.13). This reflects that people who are interested in politics tend to also be more interested in news.

FIGURE 5.13: NEWS INTERACTION BY POLITICAL INTEREST (%)

PEOPLE ARE MORE COMFORTABLE SHARING NEWS WITH LIKE-MINDED OTHERS

Those who prefer news that reflects their point of view are the most likely to share it compared to those who prefer impartial news (see Figure 5.14).

FIGURE 5.14: NEWS INTERACTION BY PREFERENCE FOR IMPARTIALITY (%)
WATCHING ONLINE NEWS VIDEOS

News related video consumption has increased from 55% in 2019 to 60% in 2020 (see figure 5.15). Men (64%) are more likely than women (56%) to consume news videos (a short clip, a live-stream or a programme) when browsing news organisations’ websites or using social media platforms. Gen Z leads the consumption of news videos (80%). Older people are less likely to view a news related video. People with higher education and income use news videos more than those who have lower education and income. Regional news consumers access news videos less (56%) than city news consumers (62%) (see figure 5.15). This contrasts with TV news consumption where those with lower education and income, and people in regional areas are more likely to watch TV news. This difference can be explained by the data costs associated with watching videos online, particularly on mobile phones.

Most video news consumption takes place on news websites (31%) and on Facebook (29%) (see figure 5.16).

---

FIGURE 5.15: VIEWED AN ONLINE NEWS VIDEO IN THE LAST WEEK BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>BBQ</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>BBQ</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>BBQ</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>BB</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>BBQ</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>74+</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>BBQ</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Major city</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Regional area</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 5.16: PREFERENCE FOR VIDEO CONTENT (%)

- When browsing a news website or news app: 31%
- When on Facebook: 29%
- When on YouTube: 20%
- When on another platform (e.g. Snapchat, WhatsApp, Twitter): 10%

[Q11_VIDEO_2018a] Thinking about consuming online news video (of any kind) over the last week, which of the following did you do? Please select all that apply. I consumed a news related video (a short clip, a live-stream or a programme) when browsing a news website or news app. I consumed a news related video (a short clip, a live-stream or a programme) when on Facebook. I consumed a news related video (a short clip, a live-stream or a programme) when on YouTube. I consumed a news related video (a short clip, a live-stream or a programme) when on another platform (e.g. Snapchat, WhatsApp, Twitter). I haven’t consumed any news related videos in the last week.
PODCASTS

One-third (32%) of Australian news consumers listen to podcasts generally, and 11% listen to news podcasts specifically. Compared with other countries in the survey, podcasts are not as popular in Australia as the rest of the world (38% global average across 33 countries).

PODCASTS ARE POPULAR AMONG YOUNGER GENERATIONS

More than half of Gen Z (57%) and Gen Y (51%) are listening to podcasts compared to 10% of people aged 74 and older (see figure 5.17). Globally, young news consumers are much more likely to listen to podcasts than older generations (see Chapter 9, see figure 9.11).

PEOPLE ARE MORE WILLING TO PAY FOR PODCASTS THAN NEWS

Podcast producers are starting to ask people to pay for the service and we asked how willing podcast listeners are to do this. Of those who listen to podcasts, 39% are willing to pay for the service. This is a much higher figure than the willingness to pay for news (see Chapter 7). Almost half (49%) of Gen Y say they are willing to pay for podcasts, followed by Gen X (38%) and Gen Z (31%). Older generations are less willing to pay for them (see figure 5.18).

Gen Y are most willing to pay for podcasts

[POD3a] Some providers are starting to ask for payment to access certain types of podcasts. If asked, how likely or unlikely would you be to pay for a particular podcast that you like? [BASE: podcast listeners] (Excluded ‘don’t know’ responses)
SUMMARY

More people are accessing news via social media, particularly Gen Z. This year we saw a rise in the use of social media as a pathway to news especially among older generations. Getting news via mobile alerts and aggregator apps is on the rise, indicating an increasing demand for curated news. The data reveal generational differences in preferences for curated news with email newsletters being more popular among older generations.

The number of news consumers going directly to news brand websites has fallen. Instead they are adopting various indirect methods to access news such as search engines and social media. This highlights the increasing importance of major platforms in directing audiences to news brand websites.

This year shows an increase in most types of news interaction. This possibly links to the unprecedented level of severe bushfires that lasted until February of 2020 in Australia. During the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season, people were more likely to interact with news in a variety of ways including sharing stories about the fires via social media and talking about the crisis with friends online.

The motivation to share news is related to the level of political interest. Those who have a high interest in politics are more likely to share news offline and online. Interestingly, those who prefer news that represents their viewpoint are also more likely to share news. This reflects concerns about people surrounding themselves with only like-minded individuals on social media.
Like many journalists, I consume a lot of news. I enjoy reading news to the extent that I tragically spent half a day in COVID-19 isolation curating the ‘news application’ folder on my iPhone and deciding which international outlets were best to buy subscriptions to.

I suspect the average Australian does not spend their free time doing the same, but I often wonder how others find news articles. Do they look up a subject on Google? Do they scroll through their Facebook feed? Do they have a media company’s application on their phone that notifies them of breaking news? When I ask the answer is almost always Facebook or LinkedIn. Sometimes Google. Rarely Twitter. And in the case of satirical news website The Betoota Advocate, almost always Instagram. It’s unsurprising that as of this year social media has become the most popular pathway for Australians to access news online (37%).

An inquiry into the market power of digital platforms conducted by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission released last year reported millions of Australians use Google and Facebook each month and there is plenty of evidence social media use increases during periods of crisis. The overwhelming 24-hour news cycle that evolved with the internet means consumers now have access to millions of stories at the click of a button. Platforms like Facebook have been able to aggregate and disseminate those stories in a palatable and accessible way. But as millions flocked to social media, so did news publishers. There are some online media companies today like BuzzFeed and LadBible which owe their audiences, in part, to Facebook’s algorithm.

Publishers have lost large portions of advertising to these global companies and have not been able to make money from the content they distribute on the platforms. But the tech giants argue they give publishers more readers and that they have introduced initiatives that help attract new subscribers.

That ‘cost’ was at the centre of the ACCC’s digital platforms inquiry last year, which looked at the substantial market power of digital platforms and the implications for news media businesses, advertisers and consumers. The Federal Government later released its response, which included the creation of a voluntary code of conduct that would govern the commercial relationship between publishers and platforms.

After months of consultations the government decided this year the code needed to be mandatory. It has since charged the ACCC with its creation and a draft is expected to be released before July. This means there is every chance local media companies will be paid by these platforms for use of their news content by the end of the year. The amount remains to be seen, but major outlets like Nine Entertainment Co (my employer) which publishes The Sydney Morning Herald, The Age and The Australian Financial Review, and News Corp, publisher of The Australian, The Daily Telegraph and Herald Sun are recommending hundreds of millions.

The platforms are reluctant. They say commercial partnerships are already in place and believe they do enough to support publishers. Google Australia’s local boss Melanie Silva said in May the tech giant struggles to make money from news content that appeared in organic search results or in the ‘News’ tab.

“For as long as I can remember the relationship between news publishers and technology giants has been under pressure. Social media may have given publishers mass reach and a way to distribute content, but they argue it has come at a massive cost.”

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“In the offline print world, publishers have long paid retailers, newsstands and kiosks to distribute their newspapers and magazines – acknowledging the value of acquiring audiences to a publisher’s content and the advertising publishers sell alongside it,” Ms Silva said. “In contrast, Google Search sends readers from Australia and all over the world to the publishers’ sites for free – helping them to generate advertising revenues from those audiences and convert them into paying subscribers. Everyone benefits from this exchange.”
“The digital giants don’t consider themselves publishers. But they aren’t really notice boards or news agencies either and this lack of classification means they often avoid responsibility and accountability.”

The findings of this year’s Digital News Report come at a crucial turning point. The survey, which took place during the national bushfire crisis and further research on media consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic proves just how reliant Australians - particularly Gen Z - are on these platforms for news content. More than half (56%) of Gen Z came across online news through social media. Google News remains the most popular news aggregator, while Gen Z’s preferred platform for news related video consumption was YouTube, which is owned by Google. Facebook makes up most video news consumption (29%), just behind news websites.

The increased use of social media to find news content particularly among generations only reiterates how crucial Google and Facebook are for distribution. But will they cooperate with a mandated code to make them pay for publishers’ content or find a way to leave the market? That’s the multi-million-dollar question.
6 TRUST AND MISINFORMATION

- Trust in news fell to 38% (-6) in Jan/Feb 2020 but trust in news about COVID-19 during the pandemic was much higher (53%).

- People who use TV as their main source of news have the highest level of trust in news (47%).

- Two-thirds of Australians (64%) say they are concerned about what is real or fake on the internet.

- Australians are most concerned about false or misleading information on Facebook (36%).

- News consumers are more concerned about misinformation produced by the Australian government, politicians or political parties (35%) than by foreign (11%).
TRUST IN NEWS FLUCTUATES

This chapter examines the level of trust Australian consumers place in news and how this can fluctuate in response to major events. Those who said they trust the news most of the time declined from 44% in 2019 to 38% at the end of January and beginning of February this year. Trust in the news people use also fell from 51% to 46%.

The trust levels in news found on social media or from search engines remain similar to last year. However, there was an increase in the number of news consumers who expressed distrust in news found on these platforms. More than half (52%) of news consumers said they do not trust news found on social media and almost one-third (31%) do not trust news from search engines (see figure 6.1).

We see clear differences in levels of trust based on the main source of news people use (see figure 6.2). Those who mainly rely on television for news are the most trusting (47%). Those who mainly use social media to access news are almost twice as likely to say they distrust news (43%) compared to those who mainly use television (26%). Online news media also generates significant distrust, with only 35% of those who rely on online news sources saying they trust news generally.

Trust in news generally is falling across all platforms that participants said were their main source of news. Trust among those who mainly use print newspapers and magazines has fallen the most, dropping by nearly 20% since 2018 to a low of 39% in this year’s survey (see figure 6.3).

However, trust in news is sensitive to a range of external factors such as political events, global crises and specific topics. As figure 6.4 shows trust in news about the coronavirus during the COVID-19 pandemic was significantly higher than trust in news generally.
AUSTRALIANS PLACE FAITH IN COVID-19 NEWS COVERAGE DURING GLOBAL PANDEMIC

We asked respondents how much they trust news and information about the coronavirus from a range of different sources. Respondents said they trusted scientists, doctors or health experts the most (85%), followed by health organisations (78%). However, only half said they trusted most news (53%) and news organisations (52%) on this issue. Local news was seen as more trustworthy in its reporting about the pandemic (61%) (see figure 6.4).

Even though more than half of Australians access news via social media, the level of trust is very low with only 17% of respondents saying they trust news they find on social media (see figure 6.1). This increased slightly in relation to stories about the coronavirus during the pandemic to 21%. Similarly the distrust level was much lower during the COVID-19 lockdown. Distrust in news about the coronavirus found on social media was 40% compared to 52% who said they did not trust news on social media generally (see figure 6.4).

FIGURE 6.4: TRUST IN NEWS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of News</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Distrust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust the scientists, doctors or health experts</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust health organisations</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust the state government</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust the federal government</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust local news</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust people I know</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust most news</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust most news organisations</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust the politicians</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust health and lifestyle websites and blogs</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust news found on social media</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q10. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about news and information provided about the coronavirus? [Strongly disagree; Tend to disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Tend to agree; Strongly agree]

DISTRUST IN NEWS ABOUT COVID-19 ON SOCIAL MEDIA IS LOWER THAN DISTRUST IN NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA GENERALLY

Those who mainly use newspapers and magazines as their main source of news were the most trusting in news coverage about the pandemic (67%). While use of newspapers declined during the COVID-19 outbreak, trust remained highest among print newspaper readers. Those who say their main source of news is TV are also very trusting (61%) of news about the coronavirus (see figure 6.5).

FIGURE 6.5: TRUST IN NEWS BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of News</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Distrust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online news</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The link between trust and age is clear in figure 6.6. Generations Y and Z have higher levels of distrust in news generally (approximately 40%) and Gen Z has the lowest trust in news (24%). In contrast, members of older generations have high levels of trust and low levels of distrust. Overall, those aged 74+ are the most trusting of news (45%). This reflects the sources of news different generations prefer. Older generations predominantly access traditional news sources and younger generations are more likely to choose online and social media for news (see Chapter 4).

TRUST IN NEWS INCREASED THE MOST AMONG GEN Z

Trust in news about the coronavirus among Gen Z is twice as high (53%) as their general trust in news (24%). The level of distrust in news about the pandemic is low across all generations. This reflects a high reliance on news media by all members of the community during a global crisis, and the provision of community service information by many news outlets (see figure 6.7).

Respondents with medium to high levels of education (35%) are equally distrusting of news generally. However, respondents with lower levels of education are more trusting with 46% saying they trust news in general. Those with medium or high incomes are more likely to trust news in general (see figure 6.8).
HEAVY NEWS CONSUMERS CONTINUE TO TRUST NEWS MORE

Respondents who access news more often have a higher level of trust in news (42%), but levels of distrust remain comparable between heavy users (31%) and light users (35%). People who say they are more interested in news have substantially higher levels of trust (46%) than those with low interest (26%). Political interest is also correlated with trust. Interestingly, those with high interest in politics have both higher trust (42%) and higher distrust in news (35%) (see figure 6.9).

38% of those uninterested in news distrust it

TRUST IN NEWSPAPER BRANDS HAS FALLEN MORE THAN TV

Trust in individual brands has declined over the last three years. On a scale of 0-10, Australians continue to have the highest trust in public broadcasters (ABC News 6.9, SBS News 6.8). Since 2018, trust in newspaper brands has fallen more than TV news brands. Trust in local or regional newspapers (6.4) is higher than commercial TV or newspapers brands (see figure 6.10).
TRUST IN NEWS IS LINKED TO POLITICAL ORIENTATION

Respondents who identify as left-wing tend to have a higher level of distrust in news (41%), particularly compared to one-quarter of those who identify as centre (25%). Those who identify as right-wing or centre are more trusting of news (42%) than left-wing (34%) (see figure 6.11).

THOSE WHO USE MORE SOURCES OF NEWS HAVE HIGHER TRUST

The data show that the more sources of news people use, the more likely they are to trust the news they choose to consume. This is consistent with findings from previous years. Trust in my news is highest among those who use four or more sources of news (58%). This is much higher than those who only use one source of news (38%) (see figure 6.12).

AUSTRALIANS REMAIN CONCERNED ABOUT MISINFORMATION ONLINE

This year we asked participants whether they were concerned about what was real or fake on the internet. Among all participants 64% say they are concerned about possible misinformation online, 25% say they are uncertain and only 11% say they are not concerned. The figures have not changed from previous years’ findings (see figure 6.13).
Concern about fake news is high across all demographics. Gen Z are the least worried about fake news (55%) while Baby Boomers are the most concerned (69%). Those with higher income and education (68%) are more concerned than those with lower income (62%) and lower education (58%) (see figure 6.14).

FIGURE 6.14: CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION BY AGE, INCOME AND EDUCATION (%)

Concern about fake news is linked to levels of trust in news. Those who are worried about misinformation trust news less (38%) than those who are not concerned (42%). However, concern about misinformation has little impact on the level of trust people have in the news they choose to consume (see figure 6.15).

FIGURE 6.15: CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION BY TRUST IN NEWS AND TRUST IN MY NEWS (%)

However, there is a strong link between concern about misinformation and trust in news on social media. Those who say they are worried about misinformation express the highest level of distrust in social media (61%) (see figure 6.16). In contrast, those who are not concerned are more likely to trust social media (25%).

FIGURE 6.16: CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION BY TRUST IN SOCIAL MEDIA (%)
THE MAJORITY DID NOT COME ACROSS MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

Australians say they haven’t encountered much misinformation about COVID-19. Less than a quarter (23%) say they have encountered a great deal or a lot of misinformation about the coronavirus and 30% say they didn’t encounter it much or at all. Around one-third (36%) say they came across misinformation some of the time, and 12% didn’t know. Men (25%) and Gen Y (32%) are more likely to say they encountered misinformation about COVID-19. Those with higher education levels said they encountered misinformation more frequently, along with city dwellers and those who identify as left-wing. This possibly reflects higher media literacy among these groups (see figure 6.17).

FIGURE 6.17: EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)

AUSTRALIANS ARE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT MISINFORMATION FROM GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL SOURCES ONLINE

We asked participants to tell us which potential sources of false and misleading information they were most concerned about online (see figure 6.18). More than one-third (35%) indicate they are most concerned about misinformation produced by the Australian government, politicians or political parties and one-fifth say they are worried about misinformation generated by activists and activist groups. Only 14% say they are concerned about journalists and news organisations as sources of misinformation. Foreign government and political sources were of least concern (11%) (see figure 6.18).

FIGURE 6.18: CONCERN ABOUT SOURCE OF MISINFORMATION (%)

Q. Which of the following, if any, are you _most_ concerned about online? Please select one: False or misleading information from: The government, politicians or political parties in my country; Activists or activist groups; Journalists or news organisations; Ordinary people; Foreign governments, politicians or political parties; I am not concerned about any of these.

The government and politicians are most concerning sources of misinformation.
Those with higher education and income are more worried about misinformation from news organisations than people with low education and income. In contrast, those with low education and income are more concerned about misinformation from activist groups. News consumers with low income are more worried about misinformation from the government and politicians than those with medium and high income. People in regional areas are also more concerned about misinformation from the government, activists and journalists than people in the city (see figure 6.19).

**FIGURE 6.19: CONCERN ABOUT SELECTED SOURCES OF MISINFORMATION BY EDUCATION, INCOME AND REGION (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Education</th>
<th>Medium Income</th>
<th>High Income</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium Income</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Regional Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The government, politicians or political parties in my country</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activists or activist groups</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists or news organisations</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RIGHT-WING AND LEFT-WING HAVE DIFFERENT CONCERNS ABOUT SOURCES OF MISINFORMATION**

Those who identify as left-wing are much more likely to say that they are concerned about government and political sources of misinformation (45%) compared to 26% of right-wing news consumers. In contrast, those who identify as right-wing are more likely to be concerned about misinformation from activists or activist groups (38%) compared to just 12% of left-wing news consumers (see figure 6.20).

However, concern about misinformation from the government is higher than from activist groups across all generations except for those aged 74 and older. Those aged 74+ are more concerned about misinformation from activist groups than from the government. This reflects that older generations are more likely to be conservative in their political outlook (see figure 6.21).

**FIGURE 6.20: CONCERN ABOUT SOURCE OF MISINFORMATION BY POLITICAL ORIENTATION (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Left-Wing</th>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>Right-Wing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The government, politicians or political parties in my country</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activists or activist groups</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 6.21: CONCERN ABOUT SOURCE OF MISINFORMATION BY GENERATION (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>BB</th>
<th>74+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The government, politicians or political parties in my country</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activists or activist groups</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PEOPLE ARE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT ENCOUNTERING MISINFORMATION ON FACEBOOK

Compared to news sites, search engines and other social media platforms, people are most concerned about encountering misinformation on Facebook (36%). Less than one-fifth (19%) said they are worried about misinformation on news websites and apps, and to a lesser degree on Twitter (7%), YouTube (5%) and search engines such as Google (9%) (see figure 6.22).

![Only 5% are concerned about misinformation on YouTube](Q_FAKE_NEWS_2020)

FIGURE 6.22: CONCERN ABOUT SOURCE OF MISINFORMATION BY PLATFORM (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Concerned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News websites or apps</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search engines</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messaging applications</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not concerned about any of these</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q. Which of the following, if any, are you most concerned about online? Please select one. False or misleading information via News websites or apps; Search engines (e.g. Google, Bing); Facebook; Twitter; YouTube; Messaging applications (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger); I am not concerned about any of these.

SUMMARY

This chapter highlights the impact of wider contextual factors on the people’s perceptions of trust in news. Trust in news generally was quite low and had fallen from last year. But when asked specifically about trust in news coverage of COVID-19 in our additional survey, trust was much higher.

There are several likely reasons for this. Firstly, when people are asked to think about ‘most news’ that includes politics, the economy, the environment, education, sport, entertainment and so on. That general news coverage ranges from important to trivial, much of it may not be relevant to people’s lives. In contrast, news about the coronavirus is relevant to every citizen. In response, we have seen groups normally not interested in news consuming more of it. Rather than turning to the news for an update on a sports match or what happened in parliament – much of which has no immediate impact on people’s lives – tuning into news about the coronavirus is central to everyone’s health and wellbeing.

Secondly, the news media has taken on the duty to inform the public about the pandemic as a social responsibility. Online news outlets dropped their paywalls to ensure the public had access to this vital and rapidly changing information. While traditional emphasis on conflict and sensationalism has featured in much of the coverage, many news outlets have focused on the provision of constructive information from authoritative sources rather than click bait and fuelling dissent.

In other words, the global focus on the coronavirus gave the public a temporary reprieve from general news reporting about party political infighting, crime and celebrity trivia, and provided essential information that directly impacts on their lives. The challenge will be for news organisations to try and extend that higher trust to news coverage more broadly.
We’ve seen it around the world. As the new coronavirus invaded one community after another, the Trust Project’s news partners reported huge spikes in traffic. The Digital News Report: Australia 2020 confirms this trend. When accuracy is a life or death matter, people flock to journalism for reliable information. During the pandemic, Australians have placed their confidence in magazines and newspapers, particularly local news, closely behind health experts and government entities. This makes sense, considering that journalism is the best avenue to hear from carefully vetted scientists and doctors, and to learn what government entities are recommending, all in context. People recognize and rely on the journalistic commitment to serve the public good first, through providing accurate and impartial news. If journalism is to survive, we must tap this instinct.

Overall, however, the 2020 report sounds an alarm about trust in news: Australians are losing faith, with distrust building in the news they consume. Even those who previously had trusted a specific brand or “my news” were now less trustful (see figure 6.1). The report connects this drop to an increase in the use of online and social media for news. Indeed, in the 2018 report, social media and search portal use was a predictor of low trust. In contrast, people who went directly to a branded news site to learn about issues and events were more trusting of news. Importantly, considering the financial crisis wrought by COVID-19, a large portion of this group paid for news (30%).

Has the public recognized the critical danger of misinformation and rumours around COVID-19, and as a result, become more thoughtful in sharing habits?

These questions, combined with what we learn from the survey before the pandemic, point to some solutions. Use of social media and online news generally seems to correlate with a high level of distrust in news. We can do more within social media to make people aware of the distinctions between journalism and other kinds of information, and to help people quickly recognize the former. In the early days of COVID-19, the Trust Project and its news partners launched a social media campaign to alert people to questions they should ask of news to assess whether or not it’s trustworthy. We presented our Trust Indicators™, which are transparency disclosures on partner news sites that help people know a site’s standards, ownership and more – basically who and what is behind a news story. These Trust Indicators can serve as a checklist to sort real journalism from imposters.

It’s already a global trend among news organizations to work harder to pull people directly to their branded site, as opposed to relying on search engines and social media for traffic. We can do more here, too, and while it may seem counterintuitive in today’s competitive environment, collaboration is a particularly important tool. Note the Digital News Report’s finding of higher levels of trust among people who consulted at least four sources of news (see figure 6.12). Just like journalists, they are cross-checking more than one perspective. The Trust Project model cultivates the sharing of discoveries, knowledge and best practices among news sites around the world. Through our Trust Indicators, we emphasize ethical practices such as pointing to other news organizations that broke a story or added important facts.

The new data in this report point to extending such sharing to actual cross-brand promotion in social media or elsewhere. We can guide avid news users, those who read and curate lots of news for others, to share their assessment practices with the people they influence. They can help regular subscribers of one or two sites to see the value of consulting a variety of news sources – and supporting them with their Australian dollars. They can encourage the uninvested, opportunistic users to check more than one site when a news story pops up in their notifications or is shared by a friend.

COMMENTARY
NEWS ORGANISATIONS MUST WORK TOGETHER TO REGAIN TRUST
Sally Lehrman, CEO, The Trust Project

“...formal source of information warrants further exploration. What has changed people’s views? Is it the quality of the news they read? Journalists’ obvious commitment to public service, shown through a willingness to risk their lives for the good of the community? Are they simply paying more attention?”

How about the role of social media and search engines? Have crisis-responsive changes in policies and algorithms resulted in more trustworthy news rising to the surface?

...
The DNR research also identified a rise in uncertainty about whether or not to trust their news (see figure 6.1), even when respondents formerly trusted it. This may not necessarily be a dangerous trend. The public may be gravitating toward healthy scepticism, possibly in response to increasing concerns about misinformation. Those who worry about misinformation are right. It’s become a dangerous scourge that dresses up in the trappings of journalism or presents itself as a noble counterpoint. Journalists must respond to the rising uncertainty by making the standards and commitments behind their work especially clear, highlighting the distinctions of public service journalism. As outlined in our Trust Indicators, we must clarify ownership, be transparent about funding, and describe the guardrails that protect newsgathering from the influence of both corporate and government interests. We must spell out our commitments to inclusive reporting, the expertise of journalists and the ethical boundaries we observe.

The good news embedded throughout this report is that news use is rising. Journalism must respond to this climb in interest by using all the tools we have available to show why, collectively and individually, news sites are worthy of the public trust.
7 PAYING FOR NEWS

• The number of ongoing news subscribers has doubled since 2016.

• Those interested in politics are most likely to pay for online news (28%).

• Those who value independence in journalism are more willing to pay (18%).

• Those who prefer news that shares their viewpoint are more likely to pay for news (25%) compared to those who prefer impartial news (14%).

• News consumers are not so concerned about paywalls.
RISE IN SUBSCRIPTIONS TO DIGITAL NEWS SERVICES

Paying for online news has slowly increased in recent years. The global average for paying for news is 14% and is rising in most countries. Australian consumers match the global average with 14% saying they pay for news online.

While the number of Australians paying for news online is still relatively low, there are signs that consumer behaviour might be changing. There has been a steady increase in ongoing payment for a subscription to online news, which is both the most common and fastest growing method of payment. While still small, the number of people in this group has doubled from 4% in 2016 to 8% in 2020. Other methods such as making a donation (3%), paying as part of a print-digital bundle (4%) and making a single one-off payment (2%) have stayed the same over the past twelve months (see figure 7.1).

There was a slight increase in getting access as part of a subscription to other services. This possibly reflects people moving away from print-digital bundles and subscribing to various digital content, where news is included.

FIGURE 7.1: TYPES OF NEWS PAYMENT (%)

ONGOING PAYMENT FOR NEWS IS ON THE RISE GLOBALLY

The continued growth in online payment for digital news services possibly reflects a broader acceptance of subscription news services and a recent rise in the number of online news websites putting up paywalls. This is consistent with the trend in other English-speaking countries (see figure 7.2).

Australia trails US, but leads UK, Canada, Ireland in news subscriptions

FIGURE 7.2: MADE AN ONGOING PAYMENT (SUBSCRIPTION OR MEMBERSHIP) FOR A DIGITAL NEWS SERVICE (%)
GENDER ‘PAYING’ GAP NARROWS

Age, gender, education and income are all factors associated with a person’s willingness to pay for news. Men (17%) are somewhat more willing than women (12%) to pay for online news. This is likely a reflection of men expressing more interest in news and politics than women and accessing news more frequently (see Chapter 4). However, the gap between men and women has narrowed by 2% from 2019, with the number of women paying for online news rising slightly.

Gen Y (20%) is more likely than other generations to pay for news, with Gen Z and Baby Boomers the least likely (11%). While fewer members of Gen Z are paying for online news, the proportion of those who do is growing faster than other generations.

Education and income are similarly associated with paying for news. Those with higher education (20%) and higher income (20%) are much more likely to pay for online news. However, those on medium incomes (16%) are not far behind in terms of willingness to pay. Overall, those with higher education are twice as likely as those with low levels of education to pay for news (see figure 7.3).

FIGURE 7.3: PAYING FOR NEWS BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)

Broadly, these findings reflect the link between interest in news and politics, and willingness to pay for news online (see figure 7.4). If you access news more often and are more interested in news, politics and local issues, you are more likely to pay for news. Those who read, watch or listen to news more often (20%) are more likely to pay for it than those who do so less frequently (8%). Similarly, those with a higher interest in news (20%) are more willing to pay than those with low interest (6%). Additionally, those with a higher interest in local news (20%) are more willing to pay than those with lower interest (10%).

News consumers who have high interest in politics (28%) are the most likely to pay for online news. This correlation is supported by data from a number of the countries surveyed, suggesting that interest in politics - more so than the general interest in or access to news - is globally associated with the willingness to pay for news.

FIGURE 7.4: PAYING FOR NEWS BY NEWS ACCESS, INTEREST IN NEWS, POLITICS AND LOCAL NEWS (%)
SOCIAL MEDIA USERS ARE LEAST LIKELY TO PAY FOR NEWS

As figure 7.5 shows, those who mainly use print (20%) and online news (20%) as their main source of news are the most likely to pay for online news. By comparison, only 11% of those who say their main source of news is social media are willing to pay for news. The percentage of people paying for news who mainly use television (14%) and radio (12%) for news is also lower. However, these findings likely reflect the long-standing popularity of free-to-air TV and radio news in Australia.

There is a distinct difference in the willingness to pay for news between those who access it directly through brand websites and those who seek it via social media. People who pay for news most commonly access it by going directly to the brand website (30%). People who mainly get news via email are the least likely to pay for news (15%).

FIGURE 7.5: PAYING FOR NEWS BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)

FIGURE 7.6: PAYING FOR NEWS BY MAIN PATHWAY TO NEWS (%)

LEFT-WING NEWS CONSUMERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO PAY

Results identify a divide based on political orientation, with 21% of left-wing respondents saying they have paid for news in the past year, compared to 15% of right-wing news consumers. Of those who don’t know their political orientation, 97% have not paid for news in the past year. This reflects that those who do not know their political orientation also tend to have less interest in news and are therefore less willing to pay for it (see figure 7.7).

FIGURE 7.7: PAYING FOR NEWS ONLINE BY POLITICAL ORIENTATION (%)

21% of left-wing pay for news
THOSE WHO VALUE INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM ARE MORE LIKELY TO PAY FOR NEWS

Among respondents, there is strong appreciation of the importance of independent journalism (see Chapter 3). The data suggests that those who value independent journalism are more likely to pay for news online (see figure 7.8). Almost one-fifth of those who agree that independent journalism is extremely or very important (18%) pay for news, compared to only 11% of those who view it as somewhat, not very or not at all important.

While Australians overall prefer news from sources that are impartial (see Chapter 3), this strong preference does not correspond with willingness to pay for news. The data show that those who prefer news from sources they agree with are the most likely to pay for it (25%) (see figure 7.9). Those who prefer sources that challenge their point of view (14%) or are impartial (14%) are less likely to pay for news. This is possibly due to generational differences, as Gen Y is both the most likely to pay for news (20%) and most likely to prefer news from sources that share their point of view (25%).

THOSE WHO TRUST NEWS ARE MORE LIKELY TO PAY

The decision to pay for online news appears to be linked to trust as well. Those who trust news in general are more likely to pay for it (18%) than those who do not trust it (14%). Similarly, those who trust the news they use are more likely to pay. Interestingly, those who distrust news in all categories are slightly more likely to pay for news than those who have no strong feelings either way (figure 7.10).

Those who are not concerned about misinformation are much more likely to be paying for news (23%) compared to those who are concerned (15%) or who are indifferent (10%). This possibly reflects those who are paying are likely to be more selective in their choice of news and therefore less concerned about encountering misinformation (see figure 7.11).
MOST AUSTRALIANS ARE NOT CONCERNED ABOUT PAYWALLS

The majority of news consumers are not that concerned about missing out on news from sources they have to pay for (see figure 7.12). One-quarter of respondents are worried that they or others might be missing out on news from sources because of paywalls. This relatively low level of concern reflects that Australians are able to access quality news from a range of free online and offline sources, including the public broadcasters. While only 25% say they are concerned about paywalls reducing their access to news, this is higher than the global average (see Chapter 9).

FIGURE 7.12: CONCERN ABOUT MISSING OUT ON NEWS BECAUSE OF PAYWALLS (%)

Among those who are concerned about missing out on news due to paywalls, women (29%) are slightly more worried than men (27%), and Gen Y (34%) are much more concerned than other generations about other people missing out on news. Gen Z are the least concerned that they (21%) or others (20%) might be missing out on news because of paywalls. Those with high education are more likely to be concerned about paywalls, but income is not strongly correlated with FOMO due to paywalls. News consumers in cities are more likely to say they are concerned about paywalls than regional news consumers. It will be interesting to see if this changes in response to local and regional newspaper closures, the suspension of print editions and introduction of paywalls in response to the impact of advertising losses during the coronavirus pandemic.

FIGURE 7.13: CONCERN ABOUT MISSING OUT ON NEWS BECAUSE OF PAYWALLS BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)
Again, these findings are likely a reflection that those who are more interested in politics are more active in their pursuit of news. As figure 7.14 shows, those with a high interest in politics are much more likely to express concern that they (34%) or others (35%) might be missing out on news due to paywalls. Those who highly value independent journalism are more concerned that they (29%) or others (31%) might be missing out, as are people who prefer sources of news that share their point of view. Those who prefer sources of news that challenge their worldview, are more concerned that others might be missing out on news due to paywalls (31%) compared to themselves (26%).

**FIGURE 7.14: CONCERN ABOUT MISSING OUT ON NEWS BECAUSE OF PAYWALLS BY INTEREST IN POLITICS, ROLE OF JOURNALISM AND PREFERENCE FOR IMPARTIAL NEWS (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest in politics</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Extremely/very important</th>
<th>Somewhat/not very/ not at all important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent journalism</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impartiality</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I might be missing out on news from sources that I have to pay for</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other people might be missing out on news from sources that they have to pay for</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LEFT-WING NEWS CONSUMERS ARE MORE CONCERNED THAT PEOPLE WILL MISS OUT ON NEWS**

Left-wing news consumers (31%) are more concerned than right-wing (24%) that other people might be missing out on news from sources behind paywalls. However, left-wing individuals are almost on par with right-wing individuals in concern that they might be personally missing out on news. The least likely to express concern about themselves (23%) or others (23%) missing out were those who did not know their political orientation (figure 7.15).

**FIGURE 7.15: CONCERN ABOUT MISSING OUT ON NEWS BECAUSE OF PAYWALLS BY POLITICAL ORIENTATION (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political orientation</th>
<th>Left-wing</th>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>Right-wing</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I might be missing out on news from sources that I have to pay for</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other people might be missing out on news from sources that they have to pay for</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
News consumers who rely on print as their main source of news are more likely to express concern about themselves (36%) and others (36%) missing out on news due to paywalls (figure 7.16). Among those who use radio as their main source of news, more were concerned about other people missing out on news (27%) compared to themselves (22%). This reflects that general radio news services are free-to-air.

**FIGURE 7.16: CONCERNS ABOUT PAYWALLS BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TV</th>
<th>Radio</th>
<th>Print</th>
<th>Online news</th>
<th>Social media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Other people might be missing out on news from sources that they have to pay for
- I might be missing out on news from sources that I have to pay for

**SUMMARY**

Overall Australians remain relatively unwilling to pay for online news at 14%. However, ongoing subscription services are steadily emerging as the preferred way for consumers to pay if they choose to. Although more people are selecting that payment option, the overall number of people prepared to pay for online news isn’t growing. Willingness to pay for news appears to be closely linked to interest in politics as well as interest in and access to news. There are also significant generational differences, with Gen Y continuing to demonstrate much greater willingness to pay for news and concern about the impact of paywalls on access to news stories.

Those who rely on newspapers and online news are the most likely to be paying for news. For news payers, the preferred way of seeking out news is to go directly to a brand website. Those who prefer sources of news that agree with their point of view are also more likely to pay. This suggests that consumers place a higher value on news that reflects their own perspective. However, it is also the case that those who value independent journalism and those who trust news are more likely to pay. These trends indicate a willingness to pay for quality news.

Generally speaking, most Australians are not concerned about paywalls reducing their own or other people’s access to news. Among the 25% who are, interest in politics, political affiliation and the value of independent journalism are influential factors associated with degree of FOMO due to paywalls. Age is an important factor as well, with Gen Y being significantly more concerned about paywalls than other generations. News consumers who rely on print as their main source of news are more likely to be concerned about paywalls.

Had this question been asked during the coronavirus pandemic a very different response might have emerged. Most news organisations dropped their paywalls to ensure the public had easy access to credible information about the spread of COVID-19. During this period concern about people missing out on information due to paywalls may have been even lower. In the future however, this might change. Given the large number of newspaper closures and suspension of print editions in response to the negative economic impacts of the coronavirus, it will be interesting to see if a shift to online only will see FOMO due to paywalls rise in the future.
This year, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism conducted an additional study that focused on paying for news. The fieldwork was conducted between 30 January and 4 March 2020. Here, we introduce data from the US and the UK that reveal why people pay for news and what would motivate non-payers to pay in the future.

**SNAPSHOT**

**PAYING FOR NEWS IN THE UK AND THE US**

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020, 20% of respondents in the US and 7% of respondents in the UK say they pay for online news (see Chapter 9). In this additional survey we found that the most popular type of payment was a single brand, digital-only subscription. Less people were subscribing to a print-digital bundle, which is consistent with the global trend of news consumers moving towards ongoing digital-only subscriptions (see supplementary figure 1).

**QUALITY NEWS IS WHAT PEOPLE PAY FOR**

The data compares the UK, a country with a high quality, much used public broadcaster, with the US, a country with mainly commercial media competing against each other. In the US there are more people wanting to fund good journalism, and they cite it as one of the most important reasons for paying. Overall, the main reason for paying is to get quality news and information; 48% in the UK and 50% in the US. They pay mainly because the content is differentiated from free news. A quarter of paid consumers in the UK, and almost one-third in the US think easy and simple payment method is important (see supplementary figure 2).

**POTENTIAL SUBSCRIBERS CONSIDER PRICE**

About 13% of those who currently do not pay are considering paying for news next year. Cost (18%) and the value of content (17%) were cited as the most important factors among US news consumers. UK consumers wanted no ads (14%) and lower price (14%). News consumers not only want quality content but also convenience and value for money. News that is tailored to individuals is not a priority (see supplementary figure 3). We should note that a large number of people - 40% in the US and 50% in the UK - say that nothing could persuade them to pay. Many news consumers are content with the free news sources available.
For all the things that 2020 will be remembered for in the media, the structural impact upon the industry may be one of the most noticeable as we recover from this crisis.

There is within Australian media a “shake out” taking place that even established players may not survive. COVID-19 may have been the catalyst to the event, but it merely accelerated a series of trends that were already present for years prior. The magazine industry is battling to stay afloat. There have been large-scale redundancies across the board and likely magazine closures following a recent buyout of the Seven West Media owned Pacific Magazines by its closest rival Bauer.

Free-to-air television in Australia is under pressure like never in its history. Ad revenues have taken a battering in recent years and have all but fallen off a cliff during COVID-19. They face challenges from high quality and good value entertainment streaming services like Netflix. Network 10 went into administration several years ago and was bought out by CBS, who, in turn, have since merged with Viacom. Seven West Media’s Seven Network is in deep financial trouble and there are real questions about its viability. Nine Entertainment was buoyed by the purchase of Fairfax and its Domain asset, however it is still a company that is being carried by the elephant that is free-to-air television and must find the money to fund and grow other parts of the business. This all while cutting hundreds of millions from its bottom line.

Pay television has struggled as well, with Foxtel writing down hundreds of millions in assets and having to reposition itself as a streaming service with Kayo and now Binge.

Regional newspapers are disappearing in Australia during COVID-19 and may not return. News Corp recently announced that 60 community and regional newspapers would stop printing and it’s unclear if they will publish again, with some titles over 100 years old.

Among this somewhat depressing carnage however are established newspaper mastheads with digital subscriptions that do offer some hope. Newspapers who erected paywalls in the last decade (like The Australian) were often mocked by many in their own industry as being deluded and an anathema to the internet culture where “information is free.”

It has since dawned on all major newspaper mastheads that information is not free and that Google and Facebook in particular have been making a lot of money out of it. All major publishers in Australia have their major mastheads behind some kind of paywall or encourage some system of payment.

While this year’s Digital News Report shows that 14 per cent of Australians pay for online news (on par with the global average) these trends have accelerated into 2020.

“With the bushfire and COVID-19 crises that have enveloped Australia and the world, all the readership trends are pointing to the fact that people are flocking to trusted and established news brands to give them reliable news.”

The Australian, for example, has more than doubled its online audience to 4.9 million as of March this year making it the No 1 subscriber-only news site in the country. The masthead’s digital audience surged by 110 per cent over the 12 months to March, and by 101 per cent month-on-month as readers sought the latest on the health crisis and economic fallout.

The Digital News Report data demonstrates this finding those who trust news in general (18 per cent) are more likely to pay for news than those who do not (14 per cent). Consistent with this, those who trust the news they access are also more likely to pay for it. It is also those who use social media, as opposed to those who read print or online news, that are the least likely to pay for it. Only 11 per cent of those who mainly use online news are willing to pay for it.

This final stat is particularly relevant when it comes to another crucial decision of 2020: how much big tech is going to pay traditional media for the use of content. With the ACCC now forcing Google and Facebook into a revenue sharing agreement with media companies, 2020 may not be remembered as a year of entirely bad news for Australian journalism.
8 POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND POLITICAL ADVERTISING

• There is a generational divide in political orientation with 74+ age group identifying strongly as right-wing, while Gen Y and Z strongly identify as left-wing.

• Almost two-thirds of Australians continue to have low to no interest in politics (65%).

• Online news consumers have a wider range of political orientation compared to offline news consumers.

• Half of respondents say political ads on TV are OK, but not alright on social media.

• More than half (58%) believe tech platforms should block false political ads and 24% say they shouldn’t.
POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF AUSTRALIAN NEWS CONSUMERS

In this year’s survey, the largest group of respondents (31%) identified as broadly ‘left-wing’ (very left-wing, fairly left-wing, or slightly left-of-centre), with another 29% identifying as ‘centre’. One-quarter of respondents identified as ‘right-wing’ (very right-wing, fairly right-wing, or slightly right-of-centre) (see figure 8.1). A high number (16%) of Australian news consumers ‘don’t know’ their political orientation.

FIGURE 8.1: POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS (%)

![Political Orientation Bar Chart]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very left-wing</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fairly left-wing</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly left-of-centre</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly right-of-centre</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly right-wing</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
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</table>

[QIF] Some people talk about ‘left’, ‘right’ and ‘centre’ to describe parties and politicians. (Generally, socialist parties would be considered ‘left wing’ whilst conservative parties would be considered ‘right wing’). With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale?

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Age is the strongest factor influencing Australian news consumers’ political orientation, with more than half of people aged 74+ identifying strongly as ‘right-wing’ (52%). Thirty percent of Baby Boomers identify as right-wing, 29% as centre and 28% identify as left-wing. Interestingly, Gen Y and Z share almost identical political orientation and identify most strongly with the left side of politics (37%). Just 17% of those in Gen Y identify as right-wing. Gen X, those aged 40–54, are the group most likely to nominate their political leaning as ‘centre’ (32%) (figure 8.2).

FIGURE 8.2: POLITICAL ORIENTATION BY GENERATION (%)

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<td>14</td>
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<td>24</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

32% of Gen X identify as centre
EDUCATION AND INCOME

Along with age, education and income are associated with political orientation. News consumers with low education are more likely to identify as right-wing (30%) than those with high education (22%).

Those with higher education and income are more likely to identify as left-wing (38%) than those with low education (16%) and income (28%). News consumers with low education are more likely to identify as right-wing (30%) than those with high education (22%). High income earners are more likely to be left-wing than low income earners. A high proportion (22%) of those with low education ‘don’t know’ their political orientation, reflecting their low interest in politics.

Those who live in regional areas (27%) identify as right-wing compared with 23% of news consumers in major cities. City dwellers are more likely to identify as left-wing (33%) than people living in regional areas (27%) (see figure 8.3).

THE MAJORITY OF NEWS CONSUMERS ARE NOT INTERESTED IN POLITICS

When asked whether they are interested in politics, two-thirds of respondents (65%) said they have low to no interest in politics. This figure is unchanged from 2019, despite the intervening federal election. Women are much less interested in politics (28%) than men (43%) (see figure 8.4).

Participants who say they are highly interested in news (35%) and politics (44%) are more likely to identify as left-wing than other political orientations. In contrast, those who say they are less interested in news (32%) and politics (33%) are more likely to identify with the centre of politics (see figure 8.5).
POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND ACCESS TO NEWS BRANDS

We asked a series of questions about which online and offline news brands were used by survey respondents, and then analysed the political orientation of the audience for each brand. Figures 8.6 and 8.7 show, the diversity of news consumers for each brand across the political spectrum. Overall, we found that those who identify as left-wing are the least likely to read newspapers and by far the most likely to access news via social media and online-only brands. Those who identify as right-wing are the most likely to access TV news and the least likely to get news from online-only brands.

Online news brand consumers are slightly more left-leaning overall and have a wider range of political orientation. Traditional offline brands with an online presence tend to be clustered close to the centre of the spectrum (see figure 8.7).

FIGURE 8.6: POLITICAN ORIENTATION OF OFFLINE NEWS BRAND AUDIENCES

Midpoint within country (3.857)
Polarisation score for each brand is the difference between the mean score out of 7 of the news consumers and the mean score of the population as a whole, expressed in multiples of the standard deviation of the mean score of the population as a whole.

FIGURE 8.7: POLITICAN ORIENTATION OF ONLINE NEWS BRAND AUDIENCES

Midpoint within country (3.857)
TV NEWS VIEWERS AND POLITICAL ORIENTATION

When we examine individual brands more closely, we can see that access to TV news brands is divided quite strongly along the lines of political orientation. Almost half (44%) of Sky News viewers identify as right-wing, whereas only 22% are left. Fox News, despite being known for its partisan content, is accessed by both right (40%) and left (31%). Channel Ten tends to attract slightly centre-left audiences, and 9 and 7 attract slightly more centre-right audiences. The audience of the two public broadcasters, SBS (39%) and ABC (40%), are more left-wing, while just 26% of ABC viewers say they are right-wing (see figure 8.8).

NEWSPAPER READERS AND POLITICAL ORIENTATION

The recent change of ownership of papers from Fairfax to the Nine Entertainment Co. appears to have had little impact so far on the political orientation of their readership. About half of news consumers who read The Age (47%), 40% of Australian Financial Review readers, and 39% of those who read the Sydney Morning Herald identify as left-wing. News Corp. papers in the survey attract a relatively balanced audience across the political spectrum, except for The Advertiser, which has a more left-wing audience (see figure 8.9).
ONLINE NEWS BRANDS AND POLITICAL ORIENTATION

When it comes to accessing news brands that mainly have an online presence in Australia, the orientation of news consumers is firmly to the left of the political spectrum. The majority of the online news outlets attract left-wing news consumers; Junkee (68%); The Guardian Australia and Crikey (67%); The Conversation and New York Times (65%). This likely reflects the younger age and higher education levels of those who identify as left-wing. Online news brands tend to have fewer right-wing readers with The Saturday Paper (Online) (28%) being the most popular online outlet amongst conservative news consumers (see figure 8.10).

FIGURE 8.10: POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF ONLINE NEWS CONSUMERS (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Brand</th>
<th>Left-wing</th>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>Right-wing</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian Australia (Online)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Saturday Paper (Online)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junkee</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crikey.com.au</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News.com.au</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Conversation</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail (Online)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huffington Post</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice News</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BuzzFeed News</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times (Online)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Saturday Paper – only the online version was listed in the survey. Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

SOCIAL MEDIA BRANDS AND POLITICAL ORIENTATION

Those who use social media to access news tend to be left-wing. This is especially true of Twitter users, half of whom identify as left-wing. This reflects that more young people use social media for news. A large proportion of WhatsApp and Facebook users ‘don’t know’ their political orientation, implying low political interest among younger news consumers (see figure 8.11).

FIGURE 8.11: POLITICAL ORIENTATION BY SOCIAL MEDIA BRANDS FOR NEWS (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media</th>
<th>Left-wing</th>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>Right-wing</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Half of Twitter users are left-wing

1 We define “Online news brands” as either foreign brands with no print edition in Australia or local brands that either launched with a digital platform or have prioritised digital news production.
POLITICAL ADVERTISING

50% SAY POLITICAL ADS ON TV ARE OK, BUT NOT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Participants were asked whether politicians should be able to advertise on television, or on Facebook, Twitter and Google. Overall Australians are more supportive of political advertising on television (51%) than they are of political advertising on digital platforms (35%). About half (52%) disagree with political advertising on social media and search platforms but 36% disagree with politicians advertising on television (see figure 8.12).

GEN Z ARE LEAST OPPOSED TO POLITICAL ADVERTISING ON TV

Older generations are more opposed to political advertising on television and social media, although their opposition to political advertising on social media is much higher. Conversely, Gen Z is the most supportive of political advertising on Facebook, Google and Twitter. Almost half (48%) of Gen Z approve of social media advertising compared to just 20% of 74+ and 24% of Baby Boomers. This likely reflects that younger generations rely on social media platforms to access news and information more than older Australians (see figure 8.13).

FIGURE 8.12: POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL PARTIES SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO ADVERTISE (%)

66% of Baby Boomers oppose political ads on Facebook, Google, Twitter

FIGURE 8.13: POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL PARTIES SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO ADVERTISE BY GENERATION (%)
LOWER EDUCATED ARE LESS SUPPORTIVE OF POLITICAL ADS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

News consumers with higher levels of education are more supportive of political advertising on TV and social media platforms. In contrast, those with lower education are less in favour. In regard to political advertising on social media, 64% of less educated news consumers oppose it, compared to 47% of the highly educated. This possibly reflects that news consumers with lower education are less interested in politics (see figure 8.14).

RIGHT-WING NEWS CONSUMERS ARE MOST SUPPORTIVE OF POLITICAL ADS ON BOTH TV AND SOCIAL MEDIA

When it comes to political advertising those who identify as right-wing are more supportive of ads appearing on TV and social media platforms than left-wing or centre news consumers. Half (51%) of news consumers who identify as left-wing think politicians should advertise on TV compared to 59% of right-wing consumers. Right-wing news consumers are also slightly more likely to support social media advertising (40%) compared to left-wing (36%). This is a possible reflection of the 2019 election outcome when aggressive television and social media advertising campaigns appeared to be successful for the Coalition.

59% of right-wing support political ads on television
NEWS TRUSTERS ARE MORE SUPPORTIVE OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING

Those who don’t trust the news are less supportive of political advertising on both TV and social media platforms. Those who say they have general trust in news are more supportive of political advertising. This possibly reflects those who trust news also trust journalism’s ability to hold politicians and political parties to account. As a result, trusters have lower concern about the possible persuasive impact of political advertising on them as voters. This could also be a reflection of personal confidence in one’s ability to identify misinformation (see figure 8.16).

MAJORITY THINK TECH COMPANIES SHOULD BLOCK POLITICAL ADS THAT COULD BE FALSE

We asked participants about how the tech companies, such as Google and Facebook should deal with political advertising that could be inaccurate. They were given two options: Should the tech company allow the ads because it isn’t their job to determine what is true or false? Or, should the tech companies block the ad because they are responsible for the accuracy of the information on the platform?

More than half (58%) think it is up to the tech platforms to block misleading political ads and one quarter (24%) think the ads should be allowed because determining truth is not the role of the tech companies. Almost one-fifth (18%) said they didn’t know.

Across all generations, the majority of news consumers think it is the responsibility of tech companies to block political advertisements that could be inaccurate. This is particularly true of older news consumers, two-thirds of whom think such ads should be blocked (see figure 8.17).

FIGURE 8.16: POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL PARTIES SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO ADVERTISE BY TRUST IN NEWS (%)

FIGURE 8.17: RESPONSIBILITY OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS TO DEAL WITH POLITICAL ADVERTISING THAT COULD BE FALSE BY GENERATION (%)

*Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding.
LESS EDUCATED THINK FALSE POLITICAL ADS SHOULD BE BLOCKED

Those with low to middle levels of education and income are slightly more likely to think dubious political ads should be blocked by tech companies. Those with higher levels are more likely to think the ads should be allowed. This possibly reflects that those with higher education and incomes are more interested in politics and have higher news media literacy (see figure 8.18).

LEFT-WING NEWS CONSUMERS THINK FALSE POLITICAL ADS SHOULD BE BLOCKED

There is a significant difference in response to this question based on political orientation. Those who identify as left-wing most strongly support the option of tech companies blocking misleading political advertisements on their platforms (69%), and right-wing the least supportive (54%). In light of the outcome of the 2019 federal election and concern about the impact of big spending on political ads, these results are interesting (see figure 8.19).

FIGURE 8.18: RESPONSIBILITY OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS TO DEAL WITH POLITICAL ADVERTISING THAT COULD BE FALSE BY EDUCATION AND INCOME (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Education</th>
<th>Medium Education</th>
<th>High Education</th>
<th>Low Income</th>
<th>Medium Income</th>
<th>High Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allow</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding

THOSE INTERESTED IN POLITICS WANT TECH COMPANIES TO BE PROACTIVE

News consumers with high political interest prefer tech companies to block potentially false political advertisements (63%), compared to those with low political interest (56%). However, almost one-third of those with high interest in politics also think the tech companies should allow the ads because it isn’t their job to determine what is true or false. This is a higher number than those who have low interest (21%). A larger proportion of those with low political interest did not have an opinion (23%) (see figure 8.20).

FIGURE 8.19: RESPONSIBILITY OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS TO DEAL WITH POLITICAL ADVERTISING THAT COULD BE FALSE BY POLITICAL ORIENTATION (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Left-wing</th>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>Right-wing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allow</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding

FIGURE 8.20: RESPONSIBILITY OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS TO DEAL WITH POLITICAL ADVERTISING THAT COULD BE FALSE BY POLITICAL INTEREST (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allow</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding
SUMMARY

This chapter has shown that news consumption habits are divided along the lines of respondent’s political orientation and age. Age appears to be strongly associated with political orientation, with the 74+ age group identifying strongly as right-wing, while Gen Y and Z strongly identify as left-wing. Education, income and geography are also factors, with left-wing respondents more likely to have higher levels of income and education and live in the city. Political interest is particularly strongly related to political orientation, with almost half (44%) of those who express high interest in politics identifying as left-wing.

More young people nominated a political orientation in this year’s survey compared to 2019. There is a range of possible reasons for this shift. Firstly, each year the generational differences shift through annual change. Secondly, a federal election was held between these two surveys which may have caused younger news consumers – some of whom would have been first time voters – to give more thought to their political orientation. We do not suggest this represents a wider community shift, but it is important to note for year on year comparative analysis.

The number of respondents who say they are uninterested in politics remains consistently high. Despite the intervening federal election, around two thirds of Australians say they have low to no interest in politics.

Political polarisation remains strong between audiences who rely on traditional offline news and online brands. Those who identify as left-wing are the least likely to access newspapers and by far the most likely to access news via social media and online only brands. Left-wing respondents are more likely to have accessed Twitter for news than any newspaper or television brand. This is partly a reflection of age and may change as audiences continue to shift online.

There is more concern about political advertising on social media than on TV. Half of Australians think political ads on TV are OK, but don’t feel comfortable about social media. When it comes to false ads, the majority think the tech platforms, Google and Facebook, should block them. This is particularly true of left-wing consumers. The success of the Coalition advertising and the failure of the Labour campaign during the 2019 federal election might help explain some of this difference. However, about one-quarter of Australians do not think that it is the responsibility of tech companies to decide what is true or false. In an age where political mendacity appears to be rising, these are important discussions for the public, news media and legislators to have.
If the summer bushfires showed how events can galvanise debate around a crucial, generational issue, the COVID-19 crisis has brought home dramatically how a massive unforeseen disruption can drive attention off everything else.

In Australia the pandemic, in itself a non-political phenomenon, has had multiple political effects. It has reduced, for the moment, hyper-partisanship, reminding us that policy can usefully be debated in a more measured way. It has, frighteningly, shown how vulnerable even the most advanced countries are to a catastrophe beyond their control. The strongest army will not stop a virus, and although a good health system and quick responses provide defences, there can be no certainties, as many nations have found. The pandemic has changed the political focus in Australia, as elsewhere, in a manner unimaginable before it. It is not just the virus that’s been suppressed – so has attention on matters that seemed urgent. We’ve been living in a one-issue state.

What we don’t know is how altered the political debate will be when it returns to that “new normal” we keep talking about on the “other side”. Partisan argument is slowly returning, but the noise and the aggro, including literally in federal parliament, remains dialled down. But whatever the “new normal” brings, it must include the need to address climate change as a pressing problem (although notably, the downsides of the “abnormal”, for example greatly diminished international and domestic air travel, mean some relief on the emissions front).

Generations have their particular causes, and their heroes of those causes. For today’s young, the cause is climate change, and the face is teenager Greta Thunberg. For many Australian baby boomers the cause was the movement against the Vietnam war, and Labor politician Jim Cairns was an inspirational figure. A generational contrast comes out sharply in the survey of news consumers. Reporting attitudes on climate change, it found significant differences between young and older people. Among those 18-22 (Gen Z) 71% believe climate change is “very” or “extremely” serious, compared with 55% of baby boomers. But it also should be noted that despite age differences there is wide recognition across the whole Australian community that climate change is significant (the main fights being about how much should be done to address it and the cost of action). It’s just that the young have marked it as their generational issue.

The survey was done after much Australian land had been ravaged by the fires. Yet it found those in the regions less galvanised by the climate issue than metropolitan dwellers. This result can be complicated by characteristics including age, education, and political orientation. As well, the debate about climate and fires is a complex one. Both climate and fuel loads contributed to the recent bushfires, and also changing climate is a general contributor to worsening fire seasons rather than the immediate cause of a particular blaze. While the urban-regional differences are significant, it is also true many farmers are acutely aware the altering climate is affecting their fortunes, a fact often remarked upon during the drought. Something that affects, in a bad way, debates around issues such as climate is the increasing polarisation of our media, a feature of the divisive “culture wars”.

“The contemporary media has become less like your weekend farmers market, with everyone rubbing shoulders and examining the same range of products, and more like on-line shopping, done alone with an almost unlimited choice.”

While in theory more is better, in practice, perversely, huge choice can narrow people’s outlooks – they just go where they feel comfortable and stay there – rather than broaden them. The survey provides an insight into this polarisation. For example, 44% of Sky News viewers identify as right wing, only 22% as left. In contrast, the ABC audience has a roughly similar lean but to the left (40%-26%).

Currently the tech behemoths Google and Facebook are in the frame, with concern by government and media companies about various aspects of their behaviour, including their reluctance to pay for content. This survey found majority support for the proposition Facebook and Google should block misleading ads (about a quarter disagree).

False advertising, particularly on these platforms, is a big issue - especially when increasingly politicians seem to have a cavalier attitude to the truth, the political battle often moves faster than accountability can run, and social media is fertile ground for wild claims. It is an issue that needs addressing, but doing so is difficult as well as controversial. When it comes to politics, what’s “true” or “false” is often highly contested ground.
9  AUSTRALIA AND 
THE WORLD

• Australians are no longer the lightest news consumers, climbing six places in the global ranking.

• More than half of Australians get news on social media, but fewer (39%) use Facebook for news than the global average (42%).

• Trust in news has fallen and Australia is on par with the global average of 38%.

• Australians are less ‘mobile’ when it comes to accessing news; 41% of Australians use mobile phones as the main device to access news compared to 51% globally.

• The desire for independent journalism in Australia (62%) is lower than the global average (64%) and in the US (66%).
A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

This year, 40 countries participated in the global digital news survey. How does Australia fare? We compared Australian news consumers against select countries in relation to main sources of news, trust, paying for news, concern about fake news, perceptions of journalism, political advertising, climate change and podcasts.

AUSTRALIANS ARE NO LONGER THE LIGHTEST NEWS CONSUMERS

Last year, Australians were the lightest news consumers in the global survey. We had the highest number of news consumers who accessed news once a day or less (48%) compared to the global average (34%). This year, we are no longer the lowest with seven countries consuming less news. While we still have a higher proportion of light news consumer (44%), compared to the global average (35%), there has been a 4% decrease. This is likely a reflection of the increased news consumption during the bushfire season in Australia (see figure 9.1).

FIGURE 9.1: HEAVY AND LIGHT NEWS CONSUMERS BY COUNTRY (%)

Typically, how often do you access news? By news we mean national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online).

*Global average across all 40 countries
*Excluded 'don’t know' responses

We excluded seven countries (Brazil, Turkey, South Africa, Malaysia, Mexico, Kenya, and the Philippines) from some of the analysis because these countries have lower internet penetration and are likely to have more elite samples in online surveys.
OFFLINE SOURCES REMAIN THE PREFERRED WAY TO ACCESS NEWS IN AUSTRALIA, BUT THE SHIFT TOWARDS ONLINE SOURCES CONTINUES. IN 2020, MORE THAN HALF (52%) OF AUSTRALIANS RELY ON OFFLINE TRADITIONAL NEWS SOURCES COMPARED TO AN AVERAGE OF 49% GLOBALLY. FEWER AUSTRALIAN NEWS CONSUMERS ARE RELYING ON DIGITAL NEWS SOURCES (48%) THAN AN AVERAGE OF 51% AMONG OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE SURVEY. LAST YEAR, 57% OF AUSTRALIANS MAINLY USED OFFLINE SOURCES COMPARED TO 55% IN OTHER COUNTRIES, AND 43% OF AUSTRALIAN NEWS CONSUMERS RELIED ON ONLINE SOURCES, COMPARED TO 45% GLOBALLY.

GLOBALLY THIS MARKS A STEADY 3 PERCENTAGE POINT AVERAGE INCREASE IN THE CONSUMPTION OF ONLINE NEWS. IN ABOUT HALF OF THE COUNTRIES (15 OUT OF 33) ONLINE IS THE MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (SEE FIGURE 9.2).

MORE AUSTRALIANS RELY ON SOCIAL MEDIA AS THEIR MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS THE MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS HAS CONTINUED TO RISE BOTH GLOBALLY AND IN AUSTRALIA. ACROSS THE COUNTRIES SURVEYED, THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS THE MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS HAS Risen FROM 17% IN 2019 TO 20% IN 2020. THERE HAS BEEN A COMPARABLE INCREASE IN AUSTRALIA. THIS YEAR 21% OF AUSTRALIAN RESPONDENTS INDICATED THEY USE SOCIAL MEDIA AS THEIR MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS, WHICH IS A 3% INCREASE FROM 2019 (SEE FIGURE 9.3).

FIGURE 9.2: MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS OFFLINE VERSUS ONLINE BY COUNTRY (%)

FIGURE 9.3: SOCIAL MEDIA (MAIN SOURCE) AND FACEBOOK USE FOR NEWS BY COUNTRY (%)

*GLOBAL AVERAGE ACROSS 33 COUNTRIES

Q4. YOU SAY YOU’VE USED THESE SOURCES OF NEWS IN THE LAST WEEK, WHICH WOULD YOU SAY IS YOUR MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS?

24-HOUR NEWS TELEVISION BULLETINS OR PROGRAMMES; 24-HOUR NEWS TELEVISION CHANNELS; RADIO NEWS BULLETINS OR PROGRAMMES; PRINTED NEWSPAPERS; PRINTED MAGAZINES; WEBSITES/APPS OF NEWSPAPERS; WEBSITES/APPS OF NEWS MAGAZINES; WEBSITES/APPS OF TV AND RADIO COMPANIES; WEBSITES/APPS OF OTHER NEWS OUTLETS; SOCIAL MEDIA SUCH AS FACEBOOK, TWITTER, YOUTUBE.

FOR EXAMPLE, IN KOREA YOUTUBE (45%) IS MORE POPULAR THAN FACEBOOK (19%) FOR NEWS. OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS ARE MORE POPULAR. FOR INSTANCE, IN KOREA YOUTUBE (45%) IS MORE POPULAR THAN FACEBOOK (19%) FOR NEWS.

FIGURE 9.3: SOCIAL MEDIA (MAIN SOURCE) AND FACEBOOK USE FOR NEWS BY COUNTRY (%)

*GLOBAL AVERAGE ACROSS 33 COUNTRIES

Q4. YOU SAY YOU’VE USED THESE SOURCES OF NEWS IN THE LAST WEEK, WHICH WOULD YOU SAY IS YOUR MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS?

Q12B. WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING HAVE YOU USED FOR FINDING, READING, WATCHING, SHARING OR DISCUSSING NEWS IN THE LAST WEEK? PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY. *GLOBAL AVERAGE ACROSS 33 COUNTRIES
AUSTRALIANS ARE LESS ‘MOBILE’ WHEN IT COMES TO NEWS

While the use of mobile phones to access news has continually increased among Australian news consumers over the past five years, fewer Australians (41%) use mobile phones as their main device for news compared to the global average (51%) (see figure 9.4).

FIGURE 9.4: MOBILE PHONE AS MAIN DEVICE FOR NEWS BY COUNTRY (%)

[Q8B] Which, if any, of the following devices have you used to access news in the last week? Please select all that apply. *Global average across 33 countries

TRUST IN NEWS HAS FALLEN GLOBALLY

Trust in news continues to fall. In 2019 the percentage of Australians who said they can trust most news most of the time (44%) was just above the global average (42%). This year Australia has matched the global average which has dropped to 38%. Even though our levels of trust have fallen, it is relatively stable compared to some other countries.

FIGURE 9.5: GENERAL TRUST IN NEWS BY COUNTRY (%)

[Q6_2016] We are now going to ask you about trust in the news. First we will ask you about how much you trust the news as a whole within your country. Then we will ask you about how much you trust the news that you choose to consume. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: I think you can trust most news most of the time: Strongly disagree, Tend to disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Tend to agree, Strongly agree.
PAYING FOR ONLINE NEWS IS SLOWLY INCREASING GLOBALLY

There has been a slight increase in both the global average and percentage of Australian respondents who paid for online news in the last year. The proportion of Australians who have paid for online news (14%) is similar to last year and slightly above the global average (14%). Australians who make an ongoing payment for news (8%) is also above the global average (6%) this year (see figure 9.6).

FIGURE 9.6: PAYING FOR NEWS BY COUNTRY (%)

[Q7a] Have you paid for ONLINE news content, or accessed a paid for ONLINE news service in the last year? (This could be a digital subscription, combined digital/print subscription, a donation, or one off payment for an article or app or e-edition) *Global average across 33 countries

MORE AUSTRALIANS HAVE FOMO ABOUT NEWS BEHIND PAYWALLS

Australians are among the most concerned in the world about missing out on news they are not paying for. One-quarter of Australians (25%) say they are extremely or very concerned about missing out on news behind paywalls, which is 5% above the global average. Australia just pips Canada (24%), the US (23%) and Ireland (21%) (see figure 9.7). The UK has the smallest percentage of respondents who are concerned about missing out on news they have to pay for (9%). This is likely due to the BBC’s contribution of free high-quality news. In this context it is surprising how concerned Australians are given that the ABC is among the most trusted and widely used news brands.

FIGURE 9.7: EXTREMELY/VERY CONCERNED ABOUT MISSING OUT ON NEWS FROM SOURCES THAT I HAVE TO PAY FOR BY COUNTRY (%)

[P3] Some news providers now charge money for access to their online news content. How concerned are you, if at all, about the following? *This question was asked in only 21 countries.
GLOBALLY THERE IS A STRONG DESIRE FOR INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM

On average most respondents suggest that independent journalism is important for the functioning of society. However, fewer Australians hold this view than the global average. Two-thirds (62%) of Australians think that independent journalism is extremely or very important for the functioning of society, which is slightly less than the global average of 64%. Among the English-speaking countries, 66% in the US agree with this position, compared to 52% in Canada (see figure 9.8).

FIGURE 9.8: INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM EXTREMELY/VERY IMPORTANT BY COUNTRY (%)

AUSTRALIANS’ CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION IS MID-RANGE

Among English-speaking countries there are different levels of concern about misinformation. The spread of responses provides some insight into the way news functions as part of the public sphere in each of the countries. US respondents are the most concerned about fake news from government, politicians and political sources (see figure 9.9).

FIGURE 9.9: CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION FROM GOVERNMENT, POLITICAL AND POLITICAL PARTY SOURCES BY COUNTRY (%)

Australia ranks 26th in concern about fake news from government.

[Q_FAKE_NEWS_2020b] Which of the following, if any, are you most concerned about online? Please select one. False or misleading information from: The government, politicians or political parties in my country? *Global average across all 40 countries.
US NEWS CONSUMERS PREFER MEDIA TO REPORT ON POLITICIAN’S FALSE STATEMENTS

US news consumers are more supportive of media outlets reporting false statements made by politicians than consumers in the UK and Australia. Given concern about the truth and accuracy of public statements made by the US President, perhaps this in unsurprising, though there is strong debate about whether or not the news media should cover misleading comments made by President Trump (see figure 9.10).

GEN Z TOPS PODCAST LISTENING GLOBALLY

Podcasts are more popular among Gen Z than other generations in the countries surveyed. In Australia the percentage of Gen Z respondents that indicated they have listened to podcasts in the last month matches the global average (57%). This generation gap is most noticeable in the Netherlands and the least significant in Hong Kong and Singapore (see figure 9.11).

FIGURE 9.10: MEDIA SHOULD REPORT POTENTIALLY FALSE STATEMENTS MADE BY POLITICIANS BY COUNTRY (%)

FIGURE 9.11: PODCAST USAGE AMONG GEN Z BY COUNTRY (%)
CLIMATE CHANGE DENIAL

Almost 1 in 10 Australian news consumers (8%) think climate change is not serious at all, which is more than twice the global average (3%) and only beaten by the US (12%) and Sweden (9%) (see figure 9.12). Notably, older generations of Australians (Baby Boomers and 74+, 13%) are much more likely to think climate change is not at all serious compared to their counterparts in other countries (global average, 4%).

**FIGURE 9.12: CLIMATE CHANGE DENIERS BY COUNTRY (%)**

*Percentage of those who said climate change was 'not serious at all'. Global average across all 40 countries

Australia ranks 3rd in the world in climate deniers

**SUMMARY**

While online news consumption continues to rise, offline sources still remain the preferred way to access news in Australia. Australians’ use of social media to get news has continued to rise, and is above the global average, but our use of Facebook for news is lower. We are also much less likely to use mobile phones as the main device for news compared to the rest of the world.

Trust in news has decreased globally. Yet in Australia the trend is relatively stable compared to Denmark, Chile, Mexico and the UK, where trust has dropped considerably. Australians are more likely to be concerned about missing out on news behind paywalls than news consumers in other countries.

Overall, the majority of global news consumers think that independent journalism is important for the functioning of society, but less so in Australia. In contrast, Australia is one of the top countries for climate change denial, accompanied by the US and Sweden. It is also worth noting that older generations of Australians deny climate change much more than their counterparts in other countries. Given this survey was in the field during the bushfire season, this result is perhaps surprising.
News is in demand again as people seek out reliable information on the coronavirus, but the business of journalism has rarely seemed more vulnerable. Commercial news organisations, which employ the vast majority of journalists in most countries, are struggling in the face of falling advertising revenues and plummeting print sales – as the crisis pushes economies into deep recession. Some titles have already closed while thousands of jobs have gone. News organisations are having to adapt to a world with both higher demand and lower revenues. The shock is likely to accelerate long-term structural changes towards a more digital, more mobile and more platform dominated news environment.

LOCKDOWN BOOST FOR TV IN THE EARLY STAGE

With many people confined to home, research shows that audiences to television news initially surged. In Europe daily viewing to TV bulletins were up 14% in the early stages (EBU) while our own survey data showed a 5 percentage-point uplift for TV when averaged across 6 countries that we polled in both January and April. By contrast, the lockdowns hit the reach of print newspapers and magazines with a six-point drop in Germany and Spain - and a two percent drop overall- not helped by difficulties in distributing physical copies. Industry data also indicate strong traffic increases for online news with the most trusted brands often benefitting disproportionately. The BBC reported its biggest week ever for UK visitors, with more than 70m unique browsers as the lockdown came into effect – though traffic later returned to more normal levels. Even with extraordinary stories, it is hard to maintain interest and one of our recent polls shows that people in the UK have started to avoid news in greater numbers (22% in May compared to 15% in April). The majority of these say they are trying to avoid news about COVID-19 and the main reason is the negative effect it has on their mood.

UK TRAFFIC DOUBLES TO BBC NEWS WEBSITE JAN-APRIL 2020

Daily unique browsers

But it would be wrong to assume that people have been exclusively using trusted sources and brands. Social media usage was also substantially up as people looked to connect with others and share their own experiences. Across the six countries we surveyed in April around a quarter said they has used WhatsApp to find, discuss, or share news about the COVID-19 – substantially up on our January poll. Around a fifth (18%) joined a support or discussion group with people they didn’t know on either Facebook or WhatsApp specifically to talk about COVID-19 and half (51%) took part in groups with colleagues, friends, or family. One in ten (10%) accessed closed video chats using platforms like Zoom, Houseparty, and Google Hangouts – many for the first time according to our poll.
Social media may be helping to spread false and misleading information, but it has also supported people at a time of anxiety and isolation and provided an effective way to amplify reliable information. A more detailed analysis showed that, in most countries, those who relied on news organisations for information about coronavirus were more knowledgeable about the crisis, whereas there was no consistent, significant pattern for those who relied on various platforms including social media – they were not more informed but, despite some fears to the contrary, they were not misinformed either.1

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT

The lockdowns and social distancing regulations have already pushed most countries into recession with some publishers saying that advertising revenue has fallen by up to 50%. This economic shock will be a catalyst for more cost-cutting, and consolidation. We’ve already seen digital-born BuzzFeed pulling back on news production in Australia while News Corporation suspended print production of around 60 newspapers. With print and digital advertising revenue in short supply for some time, we’re likely to see much more focus on reader payment models online – including subscription, membership, donation, and micropayment – and on the issue of trust which underpins these.

This year’s Digital News Report shows that more people have been paying for online news in some countries – including a jump of four percentage points in the United States to 20% and eight points in Norway to 42%. In the wake of the pandemic, the New York Times and the Atlantic are among US publications reporting substantial increases in digital subscriptions while the Guardian has seen a boost to the numbers of contributors. Some publishers have emphasised the value of trusted and accurate journalism through a series of coronavirus-themed messaging campaigns designed to increase subscriptions or donations. But the crisis has also raised new dilemmas around paywalls, with many news organisations like the New York Times and El Pais in Spain dropping their paywalls for a time. Many fear growing levels of information inequality, where people with less money become more dependent on social media and other low-quality news while those who can afford it get better information. Others worry about the future of local news, a sector which plays a crucial watchdog role in many democracies, but where providers are most dependent on print and advertising revenue. Many titles are unlikely to survive without support from governments, wealthy individuals, foundations or tech platforms – all of which bring challenges around independence and trust. In our January poll around 40% of newspapers users said they would miss their local paper a lot if it was no longer there, 54% in Germany and 39% in the United States.

LASTING EFFECTS?

Media habits changed significantly during the COVID-19 lockdowns even if levels of interest have proved hard to sustain.2 More people turned to live broadcast television news and to trusted news sources online, but the lockdowns have also accelerated the use of new digital tools, with many people joining online groups or taking part in video conferencing for the first time. Together with the impact on print production and distribution, it is likely that the net effect will be to rapidly speed up rather than slow down the shift to digital.

Despite this, there are some signs of hope. The COVID-19 crisis has clearly demonstrated the value of reliable trusted news to the public but also to policymakers, technology companies, and others who could potentially act to support independent news media. The creativity of journalists has also come to the fore in finding flexible ways to produce the news under extremely difficult circumstances. Fact-checking has become even more central to newsroom operations, boosting digital literacy more widely and helping to counter the many conspiracy theories swirling on social media and elsewhere. Publishers have also found innovative ways to display and interrogate data, just one of many format innovations that have helped audiences understand the background and the implications for each individual.

The next 12 months will be critical in shaping the future of the news industry. Can it use this crisis to demonstrate its value to audiences and rebuild trust or will it put its head in the sand? Many news organisations go into this period clearer than ever about the value of their product even if the immediate outlook looks uncertain.

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1https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/04/the-coronavirus-traumatic-bump-to-news-site-traffic-is-pretty-much-over-already


3https://www.reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/initial-surge-news-use-around-coronavirus-uk-has-been-followed-significant-increase-news-avoidance
BACKGROUND TO THE DIGITAL NEWS REPORT: AUSTRALIA 2020

This is the sixth in a series of annual reports which tracks changes in news consumption in Australia over time – particularly within the digital space – in order to understand how offline and online media are used together. A particular emphasis is on news discovery via social networks and news consumption via mobile devices. The Australian study was conducted with approval from University of Canberra Human Research Ethics Committee 14-224.


DOI: https://doi.org/10.25916/5ec32f8502ef0


The Digital News Report: Australia 2020 can be downloaded from the News & Media Research Centre’s website:


NEWS & MEDIA RESEARCH CENTRE

The N&MRC researches digital news consumption and the impacts of digital technology on public discourse and democratic participation. Our research occurs in three hubs: the Digital News+ Lab; Critical Conversations Lab; and the Media Cultures Lab. The Centre conducts both critical and applied research projects with partners and institutions in Australia and internationally.

More information at: www.canberra.edu.au/nmrc

This report was commissioned by the Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism & Ideas.

Report designed by Ava Wang and Zita Leung
Cover designed by Megan Deas