

Defining News Initiative

Focus Group Insights #3: In a Digital World, Getting the News Requires More Work, Not Less

A lot of ink has been spilled over surveys that examine consumers' news habits and the platforms they use to access news. Over the past few decades, research has consistently shown a steady [shift toward digital platforms](#) and [away from print](#). Regularly conducted surveys have charted the rise (and fall) of various [social media platforms](#). Television, particularly at the local level, has remained an important part of many consumers' news diets, but even that has started to [show decline](#) — especially among young audiences — in some of the most [recent](#) such research.

Less attention has been paid to the more nuanced ways people interact with news and the range of content and sources they access across platforms, despite dramatic changes in these areas. In a recent set of focus groups, CNTI set out to better understand how the public defines news, journalism and journalists as well as what role they — and technology — play in keeping individuals informed about important issues and events. Unlike many studies on news habits, we opted for a more [open-ended exploration](#) of how people get informed about issues and events by avoiding explicitly asking people about “news” at the outset of conversations.

Our first two essays explored how people understand [what news and journalism](#) are, who can (and does) create that work, and how they view the [role of generative AI](#) in creating news. In this essay, we look more closely at how participants engage with this news ecosystem, describing the extensive set of habits and practices they have adopted in order to navigate this changing landscape.

We found, across countries and demographic groups, that participants focused much more on describing the **habits and methods that they use to stay informed** than they were on the **sources** themselves. Far from the “passive” news landscape that is often described in news habit research, our focus groups participants revealed active approaches to making sense of the mounting volume of multi-platform content.

While they rely on access to an always-on environment in which information is “pushed” to them, participants see themselves as playing an important role both in curating the information that they regularly consume and in digging deeper into news to verify facts, deepen their understanding, and add perspectives.

Table of Contents

Encountering Information Everywhere	4
Actively Creating a “Passive” News Environment	5
Real-life Social Relationships	5
Curated Feeds	6
Recommendation Algorithms	8
Putting Information in Context	9
Verifying Across Multiple Sources	10
Using Search Tools to Build Depth	12
Adding Perspective	13
Finding the Limits of Personal Research and Personal Verification	14
Conclusion	15
More Information	16
About the Defining News Initiative	16
How We Conducted This Research	17

Encountering Information Everywhere

The explosion of digital technologies has increased participants' access to news and information throughout their days. Participants described getting information about topics of interest from a variety of sources: conversations with friends, family and colleagues; posts on social media feeds; messages in WhatsApp groups; and notifications or suggested content from news aggregator apps and other online portals. Sometimes, they seek out news and information from websites and mobile apps from specific news brands. Many keep radio and television programs playing in the background during their daily activities:

*"It's all at your fingertips. You can have as much or as little as you want."
(Australia)*

"You know, at times, something is happening at that very moment. And then, you're just browsing Instagram, and then a piece of news comes across, you know. It's around you." (Brazil, from Portuguese)

In all, participants describe daily lives awash in news and information. This has created a new set of challenges for individuals as they look to keep up with information and events.

Many participants described a kind of constant scanning of the information around them, sometimes followed by a deeper dive into content that captures their attention:

I prefer to follow a variety of different topics, mostly health, pop culture, current events going on [in] the world, sports, a little bit of politics and such. I don't usually actively seek out this information, unless a headline catches my eye and then I will do research to get more information on the topic. And I honestly don't really have any key sources." (United States)

More intentional news consumption, as described by these participants, usually happens during a moment of calm in their day or week: on a coffee break during the day, when babies are sleeping, after the chores are done, after the work day ends, on a weekend or when someone is looking for substance over distraction:

"I get up in the morning at a ridiculous hour and look through the apps. ABC, BBC and CNN. It's the only quiet time I get, being a single Mum." (Australia)

Older participants sometimes noted that they seek information from more traditional sources because they feel less digitally savvy than some of the younger participants, but even these participants described a fluid relationship to getting informed, in which they check in on the news periodically throughout the day, rather than solely at scheduled times dictated by print or broadcast schedules:

“I would much rather get it like on the go and in like a snippet format, rather than to sit down and actually watch a program for like 30 minutes.” (South Africa)

Actively Creating a “Passive” News Environment

Past research has characterized these behaviors as a shift from more “active” forms of news consumption to “passive” consumption. However, many participants described, in detail, ways in which they are actively taking control of the information they consume, putting a significant level of effort into curating their feeds, seeking out new information within social platforms, and cross-referencing information across multiple sources.

Unlike a morning television newscast, in which producers and hosts curate a selection of “top stories” for a broad audience, most people are engaging with a new kind of morning newscast for which *they* are the producers, curating a deluge of social media posts, app notifications, recommended stories and trending hashtags — often while the broadcast streams play in the background.

The challenge with the new arrangement, as seen in the labors described by most participants, is *which information to pay attention to*. Throughout the focus groups, participants often described three driving factors in making their choices:

- Real-life social relationships: Using friendships and other offline relationships to focus their attention on topics of interest to their communities.
- Curated social feeds: Curating the accounts and creators they follow on digital platforms, including social media, podcasts, and YouTube.
- Recommendation algorithms: Collaborating with algorithms that learn from their behavior and surface relevant information.

Real-life Social Relationships

Participants often described the role that social relationships play in anchoring their interest and attention in particular topics. Across countries and age groups, people mentioned spouses, friends, colleagues and other people in their lives, noting that

these relationships will encourage them to learn more about an issue to build their own knowledge on the topic and/or as a way to invest in the relationship:

“As friends, if it's important in their world, I'm more than willing to sort of lend an ear and an eye if it means something to them.” (Australia)

“I actively seek out certain news from time to time if I hear something from somebody on social media or text messages etc.” (United States)

“I'll [...] wait for my wife to tell me, ‘Did you hear about this or this or that?’” (Australia)

“[A]lso in our township we talk, we get information from our peers.” (South Africa)

As a few people — including one professional psychic — noted clearly, staying on top of the information that is circulating in their social communities means staying on top of both more and less trustworthy information. In other words, some information is valuable to know, even if it isn't accurate — but as discussed below, participants also described efforts to verify relevant information:

“I usually follow a lot of psychic pages, so I usually know, like, like psychic news. Or, like, what's happening in the psychic community, basically. So yeah, I see the good as well as the bad I guess, the scammers.” (Australia)

“With the neighbors sometimes, you don't believe them but you find that they are telling the truth. Sometimes you believe her, yet she has put her spiced version.” (South Africa)

Curated Feeds

Our focus groups often echoed what many studies show: social media plays a big part in how people get exposed to at least headline level news and information. One novel and striking element of the focus group discussions, however, was the way participants described actively curating the information that they receive in their newsfeeds.

On various digital platforms, participants described in detail their engagement with a mix of hand-picked accounts that they follow:

“I have an electronic subscription to the newspaper published in the large city near me. I have intentionally followed a variety of Twitter/X accounts. Both of

those sources might prompt me to seek more specific information about issues and events.” (United States)

Several participants described following professional journalists and news organizations on Facebook, X (Twitter) or Instagram:

[W]hen I’m talking about Twitter, I think of the journalists who have a profile there and post information about their topics of choice. [...] Most of those sites, the news websites, the portals — they also have profiles on media platforms. (Brazil, from Portuguese)

Yes, Instagram can be considered a new source, as I follow many news pages, you know, news outlets pages, they deliver news to me, so I consider Instagram to be a news provider. (United States)

“All the newspapers I get it on my Facebook but physical newspapers no, not really.” (South Africa)

Others described following individuals, creators and organizations who curate news and information from a particular perspective that they share, including religious, political and niche interests:

“I just genuinely follow more people that I feel are more aligned with my way of thinking. And I don't know. I feel like that's what other people do. They kind of subscribe to following certain yeah news, uh studios and stuff like that, that they feel like ohh, you know I can trust them and stuff like that.” (Australia)

“I think anyone can have a platform, and I think of social media when I think of a platform in the smallest sense of the word. I follow this account with 1,000 on Twitter that provide news, and good news at that, for a very niche subject.” (United States)

“I exclusively follow some people and those are the only people that I get news from.” (Australia)

As discussed in [our essay on how people define news and journalism](#), participants sometimes saw these creators as news producers and journalists. Other participants hesitated to call the creators “journalists” even when they saw them as important sources of news:

“There is this guy from Recife Ordinário. He's always telling us facts that are happening in real time. He has this page, he's a local person, and I trust him.

And I don't know who is behind him. I don't know if it's a journalist or a media source." (Brazil, from Portuguese)

Participants' descriptions of their habits suggest that many people prefer to get the morning news roundup, a staple of broadcast TV and radio, through social media, email newsletters and other digital platforms that provide access to an overview of what's happening in their world.

Recommendation Algorithms

Many participants also described platforms' recommendation algorithms as playing an important role in shaping their news consumption, most often describing it as useful for helping them filter through the abundance of information online:

"Well, it's good because that means I don't need to continuously seek out what whatever content that I wanted to see. The algorithm kind of helps me. (Australia)

"X (Twitter) provides short summaries and links to national news stories as well as some 'on the ground' insights. I try to follow a wide variety of accounts to observe how issues might be covered differently." (United States)

In some cases, participants described a habit of exploring trending topics, searching for hashtags and scrolling TikTok's For You Page (FYP) as starting points for exploration. For most people ["news" is seen as something relevant to more than just one's self and family](#) and these tools provide access to information that they perceive as having reached a level of broad cultural interest:

"I check out what's trending on Twitter a lot, usually when there's quite a popular topic like [named participant] said, it shows up for us, the thing at Rio Grande do Sul, the war between Israel and Palestine, and you receive information yourself." (Brazil)

They also saw themselves as having an active role to play in ensuring that the algorithm would surface the right content that would be of interest to them:

"On Tik Tok, for instance, I usually scroll up that bar, and they deliver content related to what we stop to read or watch. Some weeks ago, about the floods in Rio Grande do Sul, I was watching a lot. Now I'm in a different vibe. I'm dieting. So, I'm getting lots of content about diets." (Brazil, from Portuguese)

"[M]y YouTube algorithm is very much curated to the type of videos that I watch, so it's probably more leaning to the right side of things, whereas on Reddit it's a predominantly left-leaning app, the sort of perspective that gets fed to me is the complete opposite. So I like to find them sort of flying down the middle where it's, you don't fall off the deep end or either side." (Australia)

However, even as they called them important sources of information, many also frequently described the limitations of algorithms at presenting them with a full picture of the information around them:

"They're just showing you what you like. And I don't think we always need to see what we like. We need to be challenged and that's how we become educated and compassionate." (Australia)

"I wish that there was a little bit less algorithmic stuff about news cause I definitely agree with [another respondent]. I love hearing other people's point of views." (Australia)

"I think their technologies are built to just show me what they think I will like, or the spin I want to read. I enjoy the technologies I use, but I don't want just the info I might like. I just want the truth and facts, not opinions." (United States)

As social media platforms increase their emphasis on showing users content from accounts they *don't* follow, participants' [ability to control](#) the [contents of their feed](#) and access to specific accounts will change. Additional research into the specific social media behaviors related to information access are needed to better understand the impact of these changes on the news environment.

Putting Information in Context

As seen in several of the quotes above, participants also often noted that once they had built habits and systems for shaping which information they paid attention to, they often felt the need to verify and contextualize information that they received through their own research.

In line with [past research](#) showing an increase in individuals' confidence in their ability to "do their own research" on important decisions in their life (alongside declining trust in institutional authority), participants described relying on their own research skills to make sense of the abundant information they encounter:

"I have a very, very well formed habit of dissecting it and reading between the lines of the information I'm getting." (Australia)

"I'm always checking because this is how you operate online. Whenever you seek a piece of news, you have to check. You know, it's too much online. It's too much information that you get online." (Brazil, from Portuguese)

"...it is really hard if you read something, everyone's saying you got to go do your own research. You can't just take it from that one source." (Australia)

Across countries and individual groups, participants talked about conducting a kind of "comparison shopping" across multiple sources in order to better understand how the same story is presented by different sources. This research seems to take three main forms: verifying information across multiple sources, using search tools to build depth and adding perspectives.

Verifying Across Multiple Sources

Participants often spoke about encountering untrustworthy information online and expressed doubts about their ability to judge an individual piece of information without further context — even when it comes from traditional sources:

"Many times I can't tell if it's false so I'll go to multiple different news outlets to confirm what I read or [do] a simple Google search." (United States)

"If I see something that I question, I check multiple sources and sites, yahoo, google search and find what I'm looking for, either proving it's legit or if it's false. Yahoo, CNN, Fox, Reddit are some of the places I will look to for verification." (United States)

"We are part of a community and these are people, we verify, like when you get information from a neighbor, you must ask other neighbors about it, that's how you verify. If all of them agree with each other, then you know it's the truth." (South Africa)

This behavior is not limited to the more news-motivated consumers. In Brazil, our focus group took place around the time of a major transport workers strike in Rio. Several participants described first hearing about the impending strike through social media posts and friends and then checking for additional information from other sources:

“I saw that on a friend's status. He posted that buses would go on strike on Friday. So, I actively search that information, but information is somehow just around me. I get that on Instagram, on stories. Or maybe on WhatsApp. So, this is how I consume information.” (Brazil, from Portuguese)

“You know, like, I depend on public transportation. So, I saw that a friend posted about the strike on his Instagram, I had to seek for more information, because I don't know what I'm going to be doing on Friday.” (Brazil, from Portuguese)

“...maybe people who [don't have other choices], who depend on going out [...] you do have to seek — actively — for that information. And also, information is around me. You know, I got that information, and then I actively seeked for more about it.” (Brazil, from Portuguese)

News — the potential of a transit worker strike — was all around participants, but they turned to other sources for deeper information and awareness about the issue.

In some cases, they want to ensure that **the facts are consistent** between sources:

“I would see it and I would go to the next channel or let me rather say, normally I read online. So, I would go to Opera news, read about that, then go to SABC news online and still read about the same thing, then I know it is true.” (South Africa)

“Oh, yes, absolutely [I come across information that is misinformation or fake news]. Because maybe one media outlet reports something one way and the other something completely different.” (Brazil, from Portuguese)

In some cases, participants said they sought out individual, more trusted sources to **validate new information and sources**:

“So, for me when I get information from Facebook especially because in the villages we listen to the radio, I go to the radio to listen and check. If there is no announcement on the radio, then I know it's a lie.” (South Africa)

“Yes, you know, I myself, I always check the source when I come across a piece of news or information from a source that I don't trust, or that I've never seen before. I always check the source.” (Brazil, from Portuguese)

“Sometimes I only know something is false if I hear something different on another news source. To avoid false information, I try to stay with the same,

most reliable news- but some false news is hard to avoid all the time.” (United States)

Using Search Tools to Build Depth

Participants discussed frequently selecting individual pieces of news or information that they encountered on social media or through personal networks and using search tools — including web search tools such as Google or Bing as well as platform-specific search tools on X, TikTok or Instagram — to learn more:

“I keep up to date through a variety of sources like Online news(New York Times, Yahoo, USA Today), Social Networking(Facebook, Twitter), Google Discover Feed. I like to know about all important events happening over the world. Generally If I find any information through the above mentioned sources and I want to learn more about it, I search on Google or Wikipedia.” (United States)

“Whenever I see something, I access X right away, I type the word there, and everything people are saying about the person and the place shows up.” (Brazil, from Portuguese)

“Some topics are suggested for you. And then you read those, and then you dive into a more thorough search.” (Brazil, from Portuguese)

One of the key reasons participants found value in search tools was their ability to cross-reference multiple sources to identify differences in the tone, framing or presentation of information. For several participants, the search engine results page — with a heterogeneous mix of outlets and headlines — gives them exactly what they want: an expansive view of a topic, often providing them with sufficient context to evaluate the original content that started their journey:

“I go to Google to check who else or you know, what other outlets are talking about that topic and what they are saying if it's the same content, if it's the same information that the trustworthy pages and sources are offering. I go on those pages, those outlets that I trust, that I find reliable, trustworthy, and check against the news that I read online.” (Brazil, from Portuguese)

Some participants specifically noted that clicking into individual content is less important than the ability to see differences side by side:

“There's things and and multiple different things I see just from Google Feed News. The same story from three different outlets and it's different on every single one...” (Australia)

Adding Perspective

Aware that they may only be seeing personalized results from the media they follow and the algorithms that curate social media feeds and prioritize search results, several participants described **seeking out different perspectives** on a topic in order to help them assess the bias or perspective of the original information they were researching:

“So if, for example, I follow 2 commentators on YouTube one guy's left-leaning and the other guy's right leaning. They're both going to present the same news in different ways, but at least I'm aware that hey, this guy is going to be left-leaning always and that guy's going to present his views from the point of view of a guy on the right side...” (Australia)

For some participants, seeking out additional perspectives and opinions is a critical part of how they make sense of information — but as opinion-focused content, they don't view it as news:

“It's like once I've got the kind of initial the rest of it, it just kind of builds upon that, but I don't really see it as news.” (Australia)

As [noted previously](#), participants often said that they believed news is only information that is presented without opinion or bias. Adding perspectives helps them add depth to their understanding of an issue or news item, particularly when they feel that individual sources have a particular bias or political slant:

“As somebody here mentioned, you don't trust that piece of information. And everything that is informed, you have to check. When they communicate a piece of news, that is misinformation, or is not real, they correct it, later on. You don't know what to believe, you know about politics, like they mentioned, it was hard to tell apart what was true from what was not. The rightists were attacking everything. So, it raised questions and issues about it. So, when it's too much, you know.” (Brazil, from Portuguese)

“Now, I would say the way that I get a “red flag” and will go do further research is when it's emotionally charged or hyperbolic in nature. There are also news organization[s] I don't use anymore because I just know that they

will have half the truth in a way that is misleading to understanding what is going on to promote their own political slant.” (United States)

A few participants in the U.S. and Australia also referenced Ground News, a site that analyzes coverage of stories across news outlets, identifying the political lean of the outlets that are covering a story and providing links to different outlets.

Finding the Limits of Personal Research and Personal Verification

An important driver of participants' efforts is what they described as growing uncertainty about the accuracy of information that they encounter. Political polarization, commercial bad actors and scammers, and general misinformation were all reasons people gave for why they spend so much time digging into the snippets of information that they encounter on social media.

Still, there was some recognition that because of the significant labor involved in this practice, people don't always dig into information that they see in more passive ways and just accept that it's true, even though they know there is a lot of potential for misinformation to reach them:

“I would say that nowadays, it's so common that we fall prey to them, and we don't even notice. It depends on how interested you are in doing a more thorough search in seeking the source.... if it's a piece of news that has no impact on my life, it doesn't make much of a difference. If it's fake or not, then I don't dive deep into that. If it's something that has a bigger impact, then I say, I'll do a more thorough search.” (Brazil, from Portuguese)

“I can't always tell right away but my gut feeling might say well this doesn't sound right. I don't actively try to avoid false info because I don't have the time or energy to try to weed it out. If it is there, it is there. That's why I try to use credible sources for news, so they do that verification for me!” (United States)

Participants valued individuals, tools and organizations that reduce the labor involved in getting high-quality, accurate information. Much of the value that participants ascribed to journalists is in the skill and ability to identify and verify information and to synthesize it. They also described a range of algorithms, machine learning tools and generative AI tools that are helping them close the gap, with automated fact-checking on platforms, content summaries and content filtering.

AI summarization tools within search tools were frequently seen as performing some of the same synthesis tasks that participants were doing on their own. They were widely seen as helping save time. Participants frequently noted that they liked having access to the underlying links and references within the summary.

In South Africa, several participants noted that the Microsoft Copilot AI was especially useful for this:

"...I want variety and more information, because you find when you get information on WhatsApp, it's not as much as when you actually go and you use Copilot to [find] the information that I'm looking for." (South Africa)

"...with the AI, Copilot, I really like it because it's made life so much easier because what it's done really, it's like taking all the data from everywhere and putting it together for you." (South Africa)

However, there were no clear agreements among participants on how to make it easier to navigate the flood of information or about ways to limit the spread of misinformation, reflecting on the significant differences in awareness, opinions and perspectives. Our larger quantitative study, currently underway, aims to shed more light on these questions.

Conclusion

The focus group conversations demonstrated that far from a “passive” news environment, the modern digital landscape has thrust many people into an active mode of news consumption in which they are responsible for providing the news judgment, sourcing, fact-checking and synthesis [skills that they frequently ascribed to journalists](#).

In a way, this combination of passive and active behavior embodies how people combine news and journalism in their daily lives. In every focus group, participants articulated the value of getting top-level news from their personally curated mix of “push” sources. They also clearly expressed the importance of the points at which they take charge of the process by “pulling” from a range of different sources and mediums. The value of this deeper “pulling” activity is that it provides the rigor and thoroughness that participants also noted makes journalism most valuable.

However, what the focus groups couldn't reveal is the extent to which participants are or are not getting the news and information they need. While they're taking

active steps to manage their information environment and news diet, their sense of self-efficacy doesn't guarantee that they're getting accurate or complete information. Many participants expressed doubts and a sense of unease about this as well.

Other studies have explored different signals of news engagement (e.g., commenting, sharing, or responding to news) as measures of the active role that people play in their news environment. By these measures, news engagement and participation [have declined](#) in much of the world. But few studies have looked in depth at the patterns and paths that news consumers have adopted for navigating this new environment as indicators of news engagement and participation.

Additional research is needed to better understand how well these new habits and methods are equipping people with the information they need to navigate the world and participate in civic life, whether through elections, community involvement or social connection. CNTI looks forward to supporting and collaborating with others in the field to further explore these questions.

More Information

This essay is the third in a series of insights drawn from these focus groups. Even as CNTI uses the full focus group discussions to inform a much larger quantitative survey in the fall, we felt it was worth sharing some insights now.

Additionally, a part of CNTI's mission is to help synthesize research conducted across the community and the globe. To that end, it was a pleasure to see that several of the points discussed above come through in a recent report on AI in News produced by the [Reuters Institute](#). Reinforcing findings in this emerging area of technology are especially meaningful and helpful in designing further studies. CNTI will continue to look across the research community to both synthesize and contribute to this important area of work.

About the Defining News Initiative

The Defining News Initiative is an 18-month effort that seeks to understand how concepts of journalism, news and information access are being defined in countries around the world. In three different realms — in legislation, among the public and among journalists themselves — our research and analyses will provide clarity and insight on the importance these definitions play in safeguarding an independent news media, freedom of expression, and the public's access to a plurality of news in ways that inform policy discussions and decision-making.

How We Conducted This Research

CNTI contracted with [Langer Research Associates](#) to recruit participants for a combination of virtual — synchronous and asynchronous — and in-person focus groups and focus groups moderators, in four target countries: Australia, Brazil, South Africa and the United States.

These countries were selected strategically to capture geographic, cultural, and political contexts, as well as different news environments. Our recruitment efforts involved a screening questionnaire that asked potential participants about their information-seeking interest and behavior, prioritizing, but not exclusively relying on responses from individuals who reported that they keep up with events and issues of the day in some capacity. We recruited a total of 89 participants from these four countries (22 in Australia, divided into 2 groups; 25 in Brazil, divided into 2 groups; 29 in South Africa, divided into 3 groups; 15 in the U.S.), which we conducted between June 3 and June 7, 2024. In our recruitment efforts, we were intentional about maintaining diversity based on gender and age.

Recruitment and focus group discussion materials were designed by CNTI researchers and were reviewed by Langer Research Associates, local vendors and others with research and subject matter expertise. All focus groups in Brazil were conducted virtually in Portuguese and one focus group in South Africa was conducted in-person, with participants conversing both in Zulu and English. For focus groups conducted in languages other than English, such as the ones in Brazil and South Africa, transcripts were translated into English.