Extra, Extra, Read All About It: An Analysis of News Platform Preferences

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EXTRA, EXTRA, READ ALL ABOUT IT:
AN ANALYSIS OF NEWS PLATFORM PREFERENCES

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 Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements
for University Honors

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This thesis analyzes the correlation between age, political leaning, and the way people interact with news media by examining data from a sample survey of 254 news consumers. Results indicate that older and/or more conservative people are more likely to get their news from print newspapers, cable news, broadcast, and radio, while younger and/or more progressive individuals are more likely to get their news from social media. Younger and/or more progressive people are also more likely to trust the news than their older and/or more conservative counterparts. Subjects across the board preferred reading articles to watching the news, with no significant correlation to their age or political leaning. When presented with the option to read an article, watch a video, or do both in the same news package, more than half of subjects preferred to only read the article. A correlation was also found between older and/or more conservative individuals and a preference for reading the article but not watching the accompanying video.
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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the correlation between people’s demographics—including age and political leaning—and what news mediums and platforms they choose to get their news from, as well as how much they trust the news. A quantitative analysis of demographics and news preferences using Pearson bivariate correlation matrices was performed. In this research, quantitative data was gathered using a survey on a sample group of 254 people to determine if the way different groups interact with news media differs (1) between younger and older generations and (2) across the political spectrum. This study also explored the implications of trust in news media as it relates to the different groups’ demographics. The data collected in this study helped form a preliminary understanding of how different groups access and perceive the news, helping to forecast the way news usage trends will continue to change. This data can help news producers, writers, and editors know how to adapt to an evolving audience, and also reveals a need for greater media literacy.
Literature Review

Long gone are the days of newsboys in flat caps and knee pants hawking the days’ paper, yelling, “Extra, extra, read all about it!” Just as the need for newsboys died out a century ago in favor of home delivery—and improved child labor laws—the field of journalism is continually evolving its approach to the format and distribution of news to fit the needs of today’s consumers (“Boys”).

Print newspapers have seen a decrease in circulation, with more readers turning to online news sites and other digital platforms. Just 24.3 million weekday papers hit American doorsteps in 2020, 37.9 million down from the 62.2 million papers distributed in 1980 (“Newspapers”). In contrast, news sites saw an upward trend in usage. The top 50 news sites in America received an average of 13.8 million visitors a month in 2020, up 5.6 million from the 8.2 million visitors to those same sites in 2014 (“Newspapers”). The more instantaneous the gratification, the better—hence the popularity of the immediacy of online news access, available at just the click of a button or the swipe of a screen. In fact, 86% of Americans in 2020 said they got their news from a smartphone or computer “often” or “sometimes,” with 60% of that group saying “often” (Shearer).

While digital devices are increasingly used to access the news, it’s not just traditional news sites or apps that people are turning to. As of 2020, 68% of digital news consumers use news sites at least sometimes, 65% use search engines, 53% use social media, and 22% turn to podcasts (Shearer).

Cable news is also growing in viewership, with the three major news channels, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, gaining the following amounts of prime time news viewers from 2019 to 2020, respectively (“Cable”):
• Fox News: 1.92 to 3.08 million
• CNN: 1.05 to 1.8 million
• MSNBC: 1.3 to 1.6 million

News consumption is changing over the sound waves, too: The percentage of Americans ages 12 and older who listen to AM/FM radio at least once a week fell from 92% in 1990 to 83% in 2020, with the biggest jump being from 89% in 2019 down to 83% in 2020. On the other hand, podcast use is rising. 41% of U.S. citizens ages 12 or older listened to a podcast in 2021, up from just 9% in 2008 ("Audio").

**Political Polarization**

Pew Research Center notes that part of the increase in cable news viewers in 2020 was tied to two major events that year compelling more people to seek information: the global COVID-19 pandemic and a U.S. presidential election.

Increasing political polarization is increasingly impacting the way people perceive and interact with the news (Jurkowitz et al.). About \( \frac{1}{5} \) of people on either end of the political spectrum are in a “media bubble,” only seeking news from media outlets with similar political views to their own (Jurkowitz and Mitchell). As of 2019, 20% of Democrats reported only perusing left-leaning news, and 18% of Republicans reported the same (Jurkowitz and Mitchell).

Political views also affect people’s trust in the news: 78% of Democrats say they trust the news at least a little bit, while only 35% of Republicans say the same (Gottfried and Liedke). Interestingly, trust among Republicans has changed far more drastically than it has among Democrats over the years. In 2016, 70% of Republicans had some trust in
national news organizations, dropping by half by 2021, whereas Democrats have only dropped from 86% in 2016 (Gottfried and Liedke).

Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon where non-professionally trained individuals distribute news and information through blogs, tweets, social media posts, and other forms of online communication. With today’s ease of internet access, anyone can become a citizen journalist, thus altering the way we see mass media and mass communication.

The Two Step Flow Communication Theory of Mass Communication, developed by sociologists Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld, posits that news media messages have far less of an influence on individual behavior than do the informal and personal conversations they have with close associates about those same news topics. Under this theory, an “opinion leader” is an individual who serves as a trusted insider who shares the news with other groups (“Two”). Today’s citizen journalists share a similar function to opinion leaders, helping the field of journalism evolve to be even more accessible and changing what platforms people choose to turn to. While their lack of training means readers should be wary of what citizen journalists have to say, these communicators can also contribute to an environment that makes news more accessible.

Trust in the News

Katerina Eva Matsa, associate director at Pew Research Center, said, “When we ask people whether their media represent them, whether the journalists that they talk to
are embedded in the community, that’s where we see big differences in how people evaluate the media” (qtd. in “Do”). News consumers are much more likely to trust the news when it comes from a local or trusted organization, rather than a national corporation. In 2021, 58% of U.S. adults reported having at least some trust in information from national news services, down from 65% in 2019. A greater percentage, 75% of U.S. adults, said they trusted what they learned from local news companies in 2021, down from 79% in 2019 (Gottfried and Liedke).

Additionally, while more people are turning to social media for their news, consumers remain skeptical of its trustworthiness. Just 27% of U.S. adults in 2021 said they had at least a small amount of trust in the news they receive from social media (Gottfried and Liedke).

To the Point

As the way news consumers interact with news media changes—including people changing the way they participate in and even create their own media as citizen journalists—the landscape of the field of journalism evolves. Yet human sentimentality, old habits, and other factors contribute to some parts of journalism remaining, remarkably, in the past. Even if newspapers are being printed less, 24.3 million newspapers were still being circulated in 2020. Radio is trending downward while podcast listeners are increasing, but the latter has not replaced the former, and only a small group of people is getting their news from social media. Even with technological advances, there are still some old habits that die hard—perhaps an older generation, or a
nostalgic few, or someone yearning after the mirage of newsboys shouting, “Extra, extra, read all about it!”

Research Questions

The juxtaposition of increasing ways to access news media, along with varied news platform preferences and levels of trust in the media, prompted this cross-analytical study of the way age and politics interplay with one’s media consumption preferences and trust in news media. As a young reporter entering the field of journalism, this research felt imperative to me to help me understand how to best reach different audiences and interpret the ways they respond to news media. Thus, the research questions of this study were:

Research Question #1: Does age have an association with what platform a person chooses to get their news from?

Research Question #2: Does political leaning have an association with what platform a person chooses to get their news from?

Research Question #3: Are younger generations more likely to trust the news than their older counterparts?

Research Question #4: Does political leaning have an influence on whether an individual trusts the news?

Research Question #5: Do news consumers prefer reading articles or watching videos to get their news?

Please note that this literature review focuses primarily on American news media. There are still many people across the globe with limited or no internet access who still rely on newspapers and other printed materials to receive information (Ang).
Research Question #6: Do the results of question #5 have any correlation with age or political leaning?

Research Question #7: Do news consumers read the article AND watch the video when both options are presented, or do they choose one over the other?

Research Question #8: Do the results of question #7 have any correlation with age or political leaning?
Methods

A survey was taken of 254 randomly selected individuals. The age and political affiliation of the 254 subjects are as follows:

Ages ranged from 15-88, with a mean age of 42.88 and standard deviation of 16.759. Subjects were split into seven groups, by age, for analytical purpose.

Fig. 1: Number of people surveyed from each age group

![Bar chart showing number of people surveyed from each age group]

Age group

Individuals were also asked to identify their political leaning, and they reported themselves as follows:

- Very conservative: 24 individuals, 9.4%
- Conservative: 85 individuals, 33.5%
- Right-leaning moderate: 45 individuals, 17.7%
- Centrist/Moderate: 25 individuals, 9.8%
The survey included questions about individuals’ typical news media consumption, including:

- Their preferences for written versus video news
- Whether they are likely to read an article AND watch the video, or just do one or the other when presented with both options (with the following variables: reading an article = 1, watching the video = 2, both = 3)
- How much they trust the news on a scale of 1-100
For analytical purposes, the label of political leaning was assigned a numerical scale, as follows, with the most conservative subjects scoring 1 and the most progressive scoring 7:

- 1: very conservative
- 2: conservative
- 3: right-leaning moderate
- 4: centrist/moderate
- 5: left-leaning moderate
- 6: progressive
- 7: very progressive

Subjects were also asked to rate the frequency with which they used 7 common news platforms: print newspapers, online news sites, social media posts, cable news, broadcast, podcasts, and radio. The options for frequency were ranked from 1 to 6, with “never” scoring 1 and “daily” scoring 6:

- 1: never
- 2: maybe once a year
- 3: monthly
- 4: weekly
- 5: 2-3 times a week
- 6: daily
I then ran a bivariate correlation matrix to examine the correlation between one’s age, political leaning, and their answers to the other various questions about how they interact with news media.

Results were then analyzed in SPSS.
Results

Age and Platform

The first research question asked whether age has an association with what platform an individual chooses to get their news from. The Pearson correlation matrix showed that the older an individual was, the more likely they were to get their news from print newspapers ($R=.356$, $P=0.000$), cable news ($R=.420$, $P=0.000$), broadcast ($R=.499$, $P=0.000$), and radio ($R=3.60$, $P=0.000$). Younger individuals were more likely to get their news from social media ($R=-0.169$, $P=0.007$). There was no statistically significant correlation found for online news sites or podcasts.

Political Leaning and Platform

The second research question asked whether political leaning has an association with what platform an individual chooses to get their news from. The Pearson correlation matrix showed that the more conservative a subject was, the more likely they were to get their news from print newspapers ($R=-1.74$, $P=0.005$), cable news ($R=-2.03$, $P=0.001$), broadcast ($R=-1.44$, $P=0.021$), and radio ($R=-1.64$, $P=0.009$). More progressive individuals, conversely, were more likely to get their news from social media ($R=1.74$, $P=0.006$). There was no statistically significant correlation found for online news sites or podcasts.

Additionally, subjects who got their news from print newspapers were also more likely to use online news sites ($R=.228$, $P=0.000$), cable news ($R=0.308$, $P=0.000$), broadcast, and radio. Online news site users were more likely to also use print newspapers, social media, and podcasts. People who got their news from social media
were more likely to also turn to online news sites. Cable news viewers were more likely
to also use print newspapers, broadcast, and radio; broadcast users were more likely to
use print newspapers, cable news, and radio. A positive correlation was also found
between podcast listeners and a tendency to get news from online news sites and
broadcasts. Radio listeners were more likely to use online news sites, cable news, and
broadcasts.

Age and Trust in News

The third research question asked whether there was an association between age
and trust in the news. It was found to be statistically significant that a lower age in our
subjects was associated with a higher level of trust in the news (R=-.282, P=0.000).

Political Leaning and Trust in News

The fourth research question asked whether there was an association between
political leaning and trust in the news. A positive statistically significant correlation
showed that the more progressive a subject was, the more likely they were to have a
higher level of trust in the news (R=.446, P=0.000).

Note: It is statistically significant that the younger a subject was, the more likely
they were to be liberal-leaning (R=-.483, P=0.000), hence the association between being
younger, more progressive, and having a higher level of trust in the news.
**Articles vs Videos**

The fifth question asked whether news consumers have a preference between reading articles and watching videos to get their news. Of the 254 subjects in this study, the highest number of individuals, 166 (65.4%), preferred reading their news. The other 88 individuals (34.6%) preferred watching the news.

![Preferred medium for consuming news](image)

**Age, Politics, and Articles vs Videos**

The sixth question asked if the results of the fifth question had any correlation with age or political leaning. No statistically significant correlation was found between one’s preference for written or video news and their age or political leaning.
**Article, Video, or Both**

The seventh question asked whether news consumers have a tendency to just read an article, just watch the video, or consume both types of media when both types are presented. Of the 254 subjects in this study, the largest group was the 136 individuals (53.5%) who preferred to just read the article. Only 25 people (9.8%) chose to just watch the video, and the other 93 (36.6%) chose to both read the article and watch the video.

**Fig. 4: Likelihood of reading an article, watching a video, or both when both options are presented**

![Bar Chart]

**Age and Political Leaning, and Article, Video, or Both**

The eighth question asked whether the results of the seventh question have any correlation with age and political leaning. It was found that the older a subject was, the more likely they were to only read the news article (R=.269, P=0.000). A negative correlation between political leaning and reading vs watching tendency also showed that
the more conservative an individual is, the more likely they are to only read the news article (R=-.221, P=0.000).
**Discussion**

*Platforms*

It is unsurprising that younger subjects were more likely to get their news from social media, as they are also the group that uses social media the most in general. Pew Research Center reports that as of January 1, 2021, 84% of U.S. adults ages 18-29 said they used at least one social media site. This was compared to 81% of ages 30-49; 73% of ages 50-64; and 45% of ages 65+ ("Social"). The correlation between more progressive individuals and higher social media news consumption also makes sense, given that the younger generation is more likely to be liberal-leaning (Maniam and Smith).

The survey results from the older generations tell a similar story. The older a subject was, the more likely they were to get their news from print newspapers, cable news, broadcast, and radio. It is also noteworthy that the more conservative a subject, the more likely they were to use those same four sources. This makes sense, given that older generations tend to be more conservative. As of 2016, 48% of the Silent Generation identified as Republican, compared to 41% who identified as Democrats. That same year, only 33% of Millennials called themselves Republicans, compared to the 54% who said they were Democrats (Maniam and Smith).

Another interesting finding was that there was no correlation between one’s age or politics and their usage of online news sites. This aligns with Pew Research Center’s report that most age groups use news sites at a higher rate than other news platforms, with the exception of Americans 18-29, who get their news more often from social media (Shearer).
Articles vs Videos

The main reason for testing whether subjects preferred reading or watching the news was to see if the shift to multimedia-focused journalism—including the consolidation of many print and broadcast newsrooms—has been well-received by news consumers. It is significant that nearly double the amount of people preferred written (65.4%) to video (34.6%) news, showing that there is still a high preference for that form, despite the technological advances and other available news mediums. It is interesting that there was no statistically significant correlation between age or political leaning and one’s preference for written vs video journalism, showing that across the board, not just generationally, people tend to prefer written news articles. This does conflict, however, with Pew Research Center’s findings from 2018 that Americans prefer watching the news (47%) to reading it (34%) or listening to it (19%), perhaps compelling future research to corroborate (Mitchell).

For our surveyed individuals, if there was an article that also included a video embedded in the article, as more multimedia journalism is now presented, more than half of news consumers (53.3%) said they would just read the article, showing a significant preference for the written medium. This is also significant in conjunction with the popularity of using online news sites across the board, without association to age or politics. Data also showed that more than a third of participants (36.6%) will both read the article and watch the video when presented with both options, showing potential for the multimedia journalism form to gain traction among news consumers in the future.
While there was no significant correlation between age or politics and one’s preference for written vs video, it is interesting that there is a statistically significant connection between being older and being more likely to only read the news article, and being conservative and being more likely to only read the news article, once again confirming the connection between older generations being more conservative (Maniam and Smith).

Trust

A lower age and a more progressive political stance were both associated with higher trust in the news. On the political side, this follows the 2019 Pew Research Center finding that out of 30 sources for political and election news, Democrats trust more than distrust 22 sources, and, conversely, Republicans distrust more than trust 20 sources. Viewed another way, only two of the 30 sources were trusted by at least ⅓ of Republicans, compared to almost half of the included sources being trusted by at least ⅓ of Democrats (Jurkowitz et al).

As for the age factor: It will be imperative to take note of how this trend continues as younger people trust more without fact-checking their sources. A 2022 BBC study found that 47% of people ages 11-16 trust the news they see on social media, and many of them trust social media more than they trust television, news sites and their parents (“Nearly”).

Part of this issue may have to do with a low proficiency in media literacy in the United States. Media literacy involves applying critical thinking to the messages we see,
including analyzing where they came from and the agenda of that source. A 2021 index of 44 countries conducted by Open Society Institute and Media Literacy Now ranked the United States 15th in effective media literacy education. For context, Canada was ranked fourth, and Finland was ranked first (Carr).

Yet complete skepticism is not the answer either. Lee Rainie, director of internet and technology research at Pew Research Center, said, “People have lots of news sources that they trust, but they don’t think that the institution of the news media and the industry of news organizations as a whole is trustworthy” (“Do”). Rainie points out that many Americans don’t just mistrust the news; they mistrust each other. This is corroborated by the Open Society Institute and Media Literacy Now’s index of media literacy showing that while America is strong in its civic engagement via use of technology—we came third in e-participation—we are 12th in our amount of trust for others (Carr). This shows a general lowered trust and greater skepticism between Americans, revealing that maybe part of our mistrust in the news also has to do with our general mistrust of each other (Carr).

The good news, however, as Rainie points out, is that Americans want to find the truth—and they want journalists’ help. “They want to know what’s going on, and they want help doing it, and they are looking to journalists to help solve these problems,” he said (“Do”).

It is important to pay attention to older generations’ distrust of the news because that is a relationship that journalists can work to rebuild. And it is important to teach media literacy to young people who could use a healthier dose of skepticism, including
fact-checking their news. Bill Adair, founder of the fact-checking website PolitiFact, adds his testimony to the importance of strong journalism: “We have to recognize that we live in such a chaotic information age. People need trusted brokers to help them figure out what’s true and what’s not” (Qtd. in Gray).

Study Limitations

One potential limitation of this analysis is only having two options for Research Question #5 on a 1-2 scale. Not only did this method of questioning not include audio or other multimedia options for subjects to choose, but it also lacked variation and room for a nuanced response about a subject’s preferences. Subjects could not mark that they had no preference or that they enjoyed both reading and watching the news. For analytical purposes, only having a small linear response without qualitative commentary left room to be desired in what insights we were able to glean from the study.

Another potential limitation is the subject group. Most subjects who took the survey were recruited by other people or saw the link online, and all of them were on a volunteer basis with minimal randomization. There were also far more young subjects than there were representing the older demographic, leaving room for error based on a smaller older sample representing the whole age group.
Future Research

Recommendations for future studies include a more in-depth and qualitative look at the correlation between older generations and their use of media, with a special focus on why people choose their preferred news platforms over others. A larger focus group with a wider spread across America, with a greater amount of subjects from each age group being included, could also be beneficial. A research experiment involving eye-tracking could also be used to test how news consumers interact with different news platforms, which could lend further insights to how people use the news.
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