Scrolling news: The changing face of online news consumption

A report for Ofcom

Contents

Introduction

In just a few years, news consumption in the UK has changed significantly.

Gone are the days when the majority of people bought a paper in the morning, watched the TV news in the evening, and had little or no exposure to news in between.

Online news consumption is now widespread – even by those who claim to rely primarily on 'offline' news. However, attitudes towards and behaviours in online news consumption are not widely known or understood – which is what prompted this research.

What the research has found is that the pace of change in online news consumption seems to be faster than anticipated. What's more, **people's own perceptions of how they consume news online are often not accurate**.

This research was qualitative – it explored what people say about their attitudes to news; how, when and why they say they access it, and whether they trust it.

It also tracked their **behaviour**, in terms of the time people spend consuming news content, the way they interact with it and how they come across it. This revealed stark differences between what people did and what they *thought* they did.

What this research shows is that, for people who access news online:

- The primary **device** they are getting their news through is their **smartphone.**
- The primary **platform** they are reaching most of their news through is **social media.**
- The primary **mindset** with which they approach news is now **passive.**

These findings – not just how and why people access the news, but also how much this differs from what they think they are doing – have potentially huge implications for how news consumption is understood, and how it is measured in future.

Executive summary

In recent years, there has been a considerable increase in the number of people accessing the news via online platforms, especially among younger audiences[1]. This shift has many implications for news consumers, in particular the increasing role played by non-news organisations and services, such as apps and social media platforms.

The purpose of this research was to gain a more nuanced understanding of the behaviours that sit behind this increase in online news consumption, in order to inform policy.

The study was qualitative, examining the news behaviour, attitudes, and 'online journeys' of 22 individuals. In order to get the fullest picture possible, the things they said were compared with the things they could be seen to do in 'real life', using a variety of data collection techniques.

Respondents filled out a 'media diary', tracking the media they consumed over a week-long period, as well as capturing and uploading snapshots of their news intake and wider media behaviour through 'selfie' videos, screenshots, browser histories, and 'screen record' videos of their phone use. In-home ethnographic interviews were then carried out, exploring the context of news-seeking behaviour alongside attitudes towards the news landscape.

In summary, the research found:

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[1] Ofcom, News consumption in the UK: 2016

When it comes to online news, what people say doesn't always correlate with what they do

Online was the primary media[2] for most people when consuming news, and was the most common means to find news for all but one respondent in the sample[3]. However, nearly all respondents reported using a fairly even balance of online and 'offline' news media – significantly under-reporting their online news intake.

Individuals also under-reported a wide range of factors that researchers observed to be driving their online news intake, such as habit and getting 'drawn into' the news through push notifications on their smartphone.

These unconscious drivers were sometimes 'post-rationalised' with other self-described motivations for consuming the news, such as to keep in touch with the world, or to discuss with friends, family or colleagues.

This widespread under-reporting suggests that the extent of online news consumption remains unknown, with screen record data pointing towards a far greater amount of online news consumption than individuals were able to articulate.

Most online consumption is smartphone-led, driving passive consumption due to smartphone user interfaces

For most respondents, online news was synonymous with news on their smartphone. Around three-quarters of the sample accessed online news primarily through smartphone devices, use of which was driven mostly by habit and convenience.

Accessing the news through computers or tablets was often more purpose-driven (e.g. for school or university studies), or out of necessity (e.g. because phones weren't socially acceptable at work).

The predominance of smartphone and social media-led news meant that, for these individuals, much of their news consumption was happening via platforms such as Google and Facebook, that are as yet largely unregulated.

The design and functionality of content delivered via smartphones seemed to encourage passive news consumption, encouraging scrolling, swiping and watching behaviours rather than proactive searching and exploration.

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[2] Throughout this report, we refer to **media types**, **platforms** and **sources** of news. For clarity, in this report:
- **Media** refers to whether the content is online, on TV, in print, on radio, etc.
- **Platform** refers to specific applications or services such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, various news aggregator apps, etc.
- **Source** refers to the original publisher of the content, for example the Daily Mail, BBC, Sky News, etc.

[3] The sample were not screened specifically to consume news online or on social media. However, they were screened to be consumers of news *across any platform* (92% of the UK population, Ofcom 2016) and *users of social media platforms* (76% of the UK population, Ofcom 2017)

The newsfeed interface is becoming ubiquitous, and keeps people 'in-app'

There were a range of platforms and sources for consuming news on smartphone, including social media, news aggregators, or news-specific apps, but the 'newsfeed' format was present across almost all.

These continuous streams of news offer what felt to respondents like unlimited content to consume, and their design tended towards keeping respondents in-app, for example opening links to articles and videos within the app.

This style of delivery often made judging or evaluating news content difficult, and news was increasingly indistinguishable from purely social media and entertainment. Respondents were often unsure of the sources of news articles, whether a particular article was news at all (rather than an advert or promoted content), or how it had reached them.

Most are aware of the potential problems with online news – but don't act on this knowledge, or rely on superficial cues

All respondents could recognise some or all of the current 'buzzwords' surrounding online news, such as fake news, algorithms and echo chambers.

However, only a few were able to confidently articulate what they thought these terms meant, or might look like in practice. This had a significant impact on their ability to think critically when navigating online news.

The majority of respondents *were* aware of the need to think critically, but did not put this into practice. Reasons included that it took too much effort, or that they believed they had an inherent ability to gauge the trustworthiness of the news they read.

For the few respondents that had attempted to put conscious strategies in place, these were usually too difficult or time-consuming to maintain long-term.

To navigate online news day-to-day, most respondents used heuristics and shortcuts which mostly consisted of superficial cues. Many younger respondents used the rule of thumb that if an article had an embedded image or video, it was probably true.

Constant availability of 'new' news has driven greater changes in behaviour than ever before

Many respondents prioritised quantity over depth in their news intake, and discussed being acutely aware of getting left behind in the 24/7 news cycle. Some respondents employed compulsive strategies to feel as though they were keeping up, such as regular rituals of "clearing" notifications across all apps.

This attempt to take in ever more stories in many cases appeared to lead to shallow processing of the news, with many struggling to recall news stories that their tracking data demonstrated they had seen just a couple of days previously.

Many talked about feeling over-loaded, exhausted and desensitised by the amount of news to process. Some had attempted news "detoxes" to reduce their intake, only to find themselves returning to previous levels of consumption because they feared they were missing out.

These behaviours were seen across all platforms, digital and non-digital. Respondents reported that feelings such as desensitisation and a difficulty 'keeping up' extended beyond online news.

Social media blurs the boundaries between news and other content, impacting people's ability to critically understand what they see

For many respondents, social media was their primary route to news. On social media, news was aggregated alongside other content, providing a convenient 'one-stop shop' for content.

Often, this meant that respondents didn't realise certain stories were news, or did not treat them as such. It led to a focus on sharing and connectivity, with many respondents using popularity of an article to judge its importance.

This style of news intake also created wide divergences between the content that different individuals saw, with algorithm-led processes shaping much of what was presented.

This blurring of what was news or not news also had a detrimental impact on people's ability to judge and report their own news intake.
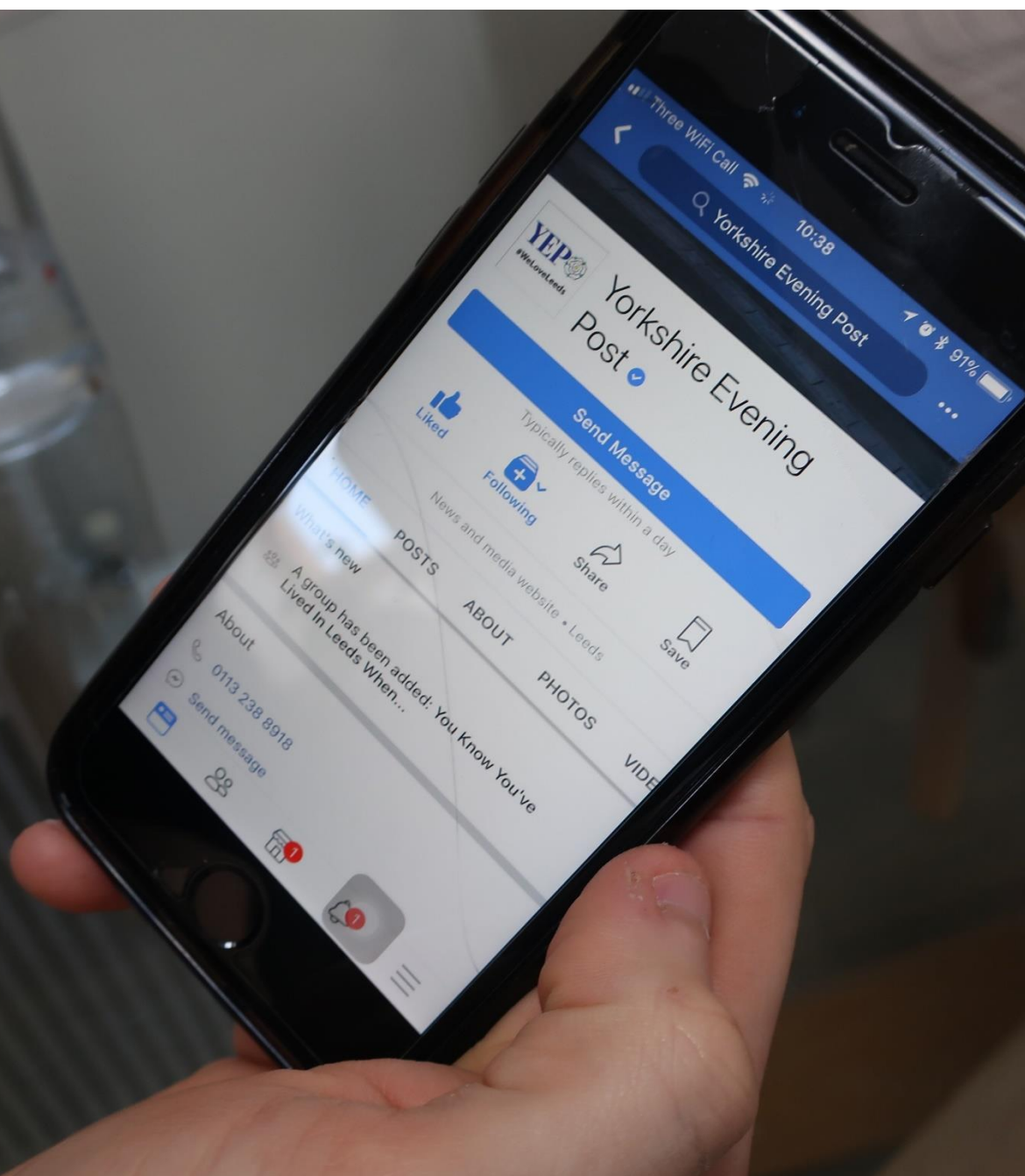
Research approach

The sample of 22 respondents were selected to be representative of a cross-section of the UK, as per the 2016 Ofcom News Consumption Survey[4].

The respondents filled out a media diary over the course of a week, covering TV, smartphone, radio, print and more, documenting what they saw and where they saw it. Over the same period, they uploaded screenshots, 'selfie' videos, 'screen record' videos showing how they had used their phones, and browser histories – over 650 uploads in total – giving extensive detail about the content they engaged with or encountered during this time.

This data capture was followed by depth interviews, each lasting 2-3 hours. Interviews explored respondents' views on their own news intake, and their attitudes towards the news, specifically in relation to online news as well as to the news landscape more generally.

As a result, researchers were able to capture respondents' **self-reported attitudes** and behaviours and compare this with **evidence of their actual behaviour** from screen recordings and browser histories.

For more information on the full methodology, please see Appendix 1.

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[4] Ofcom, News consumption in the UK: 2016

Meet the sample

Alicia, 16
A-level student, London
Alicia sees herself as highly engaged with the news, skimming the headlines of articles on Snapchat throughout the day. She keeps BBC News on the TV in the background for most of the day, but mainly "tunes it out", having to turn on subtitles if she wants to pay attention.

Elizabeth, 18
University student, Edinburgh
Elizabeth is a self-confessed "phone addict" and likes using social media for news so she can get news and social updates in one place. She prefers news through videos rather than reading, as she finds them faster-paced and more engaging. Elizabeth feels news is much less "serious" on social media, and a lot more celebrity-focused.

Billy, 18
Part-time labourer, London
Billy receives a lot of his news through nightly videos posted by a US YouTube personality, whom he says he likes because he balances reporting with openness about his own opinions. Billy is conscious of his potential to fall into an 'echo chamber', but admits he doesn't do a lot to pull himself out of it.

Tara, 19
University student, Leeds
Tara loves social media, spending around an hour a day on Snapchat. She particularly likes the way the Snapchat 'Discovery' page allows her to read bite-size chunks of news stories without delving too much into the detail.

James, 19
Apprentice IT technician, Leeds
James consumes news at work to prevent boredom, and admits that he rarely reads further than the first paragraph in most news articles. He trusts the news implicitly, as he believes "nobody would have reason to lie about it".
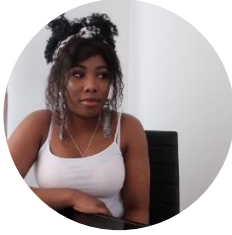
Joanne, 20
Hairdresser, Belfast
Joanne admits she is fairly unaware of the news landscape. She doesn't follow the news actively, so many of the stories she knows are those that she hears of second-hand, through talking to customers in the salon where she works or seeing her friends discussing news on social media.

Linda, 22
Trainee nurse, Birmingham
Linda's favourite platform is Facebook, which she uses many hours a day. She sees it as providing easy accessibility to everything she is interested in. For this reason, when reading stories from The Sun or The Daily Mail, she is more likely to go on their Facebook pages than their website.

Patrick, 24
Events security officer, Bristol
Patrick is deeply cynical about the news. In his attempt to avoid bias, he has reduced his news intake mainly to the BBC and Euronews. He feels they the most trustworthy because he says they stick to the facts and allow him to form his own opinions on a topic.

George, 25
Masters student, Cardiff
George loves tech of all kinds. All of his devices are synced to his Google account, and his main route to news is the Google News function on his phone. He actively "feeds" Google information about his preferences in order to get the most personalised news possible.

Liam, 28
Social worker, Belfast
Liam describes himself as a "heavy" news consumer, using a range of routes to news. He has a special interest in Middle Eastern politics, particularly the war in Syria. He uses Middle Eastern news outlets such as Al Jazeera and Al-Masdar, as well as following local journalists and civilians posting about the war on Twitter.

Peter, 29
PhD student, Edinburgh
Peter feels that since the rise of social media, there is a lot more "trash" news and a general decline in credibility. He is highly cynical and enjoys following American politics because he finds it "humorous". Peter is concerned by the algorithms on social media that "control what you see", finding them highly invasive.

Sandra, 30
Teacher and beautician, Cardiff
Sandra says she is very interested in current affairs and political news. However, she openly rejects "mainstream" news, getting all of her news via Facebook and Instagram through "conspiracy blogs" and other similar pages. Her unwavering trust in these platforms contrasts with her extreme mistrust of more traditional news sources and outlets.

Anthony, 34
Smartphone technical support assistant, Birmingham
Anthony loves technology and has set up his own ecosystem of connected devices that allows him to share information across all his gadgets. He regularly checks his Facebook feed, and reads the news online throughout the day. He still buys a paper copy of The Sun to read on his commute each day.

Joe, 36
Commercial specialist, Glasgow
Joe's primary route to news is Twitter, and describes himself as an "obsessive" fact checker. Joe worries about the type of news that his children are consuming, and tries to encourage them to talk critically about programmes he doesn't approve of but knows they watch.

Carmel, 36
Administrative assistant, County Down
Carmel mainly consumes news incidentally, while listening to the radio on her commute or when skimming the newspaper, which she buys for the TV guide. She perceives there to be negative psychological effects of heavy news intake, and uses these to justify her light news consumption.

Shivani, 40
Part-time administrative assistant, London
Shivani describes seeing a lot of news "without asking for it" when she is browsing Facebook. She believes getting her news in this way means she sees a greater variety of articles. However, Shivani worries she is often "misled" by the headlines of articles she sees on Facebook, which make her jump to conclusions.


Tommy, 43
IT project manager, Leicester
Tommy is a compulsive news consumer, engaging with news across smartphone, print, PC and TV. He often sees the same story multiple times, even reading his local paper in print when he has already read many of the articles online. He describes himself as "addicted" to the news and particularly likes to keep on top of local news.

Johanna, 46
School lunch assistant, Leeds
Johanna loves being the one "in the know" and consumes news mostly to share with her work colleagues and her husband. She prides herself on being the one to share local news first to her Facebook feed, although she takes care to moderate her opinions so that she doesn't get in trouble at work.
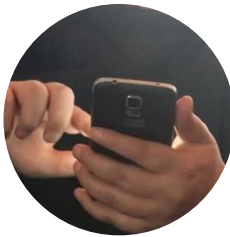
Darren, 52
Management consultant and part-time actor, Essex
Darren spends a lot of time online reading about the topics he is most interested in – movies, charities and sport. He has a separate Facebook account specifically for his actor friends, and is very active on Twitter, where he carefully curates his feed and shares articles related to movies and acting that his audience will find interesting.

Lucia, 55
Part-time cleaner, London
Lucia spends much of her time on her phone finding articles to send to her friends, or discuss with her husband in the evenings. She makes a point of tuning into the BBC World Service on the radio every day at the same time as her brother, who lives in the Republic of Vanuatu, so that they have something to discuss.

Georgina, 59
Retired, Birmingham
Georgina is largely interested in local news, which she refers to as "our news". She gets this through TV, newspapers and specialist local Facebook pages that are for her neighbourhood. She consumes some national news through Facebook and Google, though she is not sure how or why they show her content that is tailored to her interests.

Sophia, 67
Retired, Pembrokeshire
Sophia structures her day around the news, and has specific radio and TV broadcasts that she makes a point of tuning in to throughout the day. She subscribes to multiple print newspapers and often keeps her favourite ones in stacks around the house so that her husband can read them when he gets around to it.

Online news consumption: Perception vs. reality

Under-reporting online news

In their media diaries and in conversation, all respondents reported seeing a balanced mixture of online news and other news platforms such as TV, print and radio (here referred to as 'offline').

Indeed, offline news use was seen across the sample, and just over half of the respondents used offline media for news at least once per day (see figure 1 for a full breakdown of media types used).

In many cases, offline media types were the most readily associated with the term 'news' when the topic was first mentioned in the in-depth interviews. News via the TV and radio was frequently experienced in short bursts, and as part of a routine - for example, listening to the radio in the car on the way to work. News accessed in this way was also delivered at specific times in bulletins throughout the day.

> *"I always have the news on when I get ready for school, and then in the evenings when I get in from school."*
> *Alicia, 16*

Figure 1: The frequency of use of various media types for news consumption across the sample.

Legend: ■ Multiple times per day ■ Once per day ■ Once per week

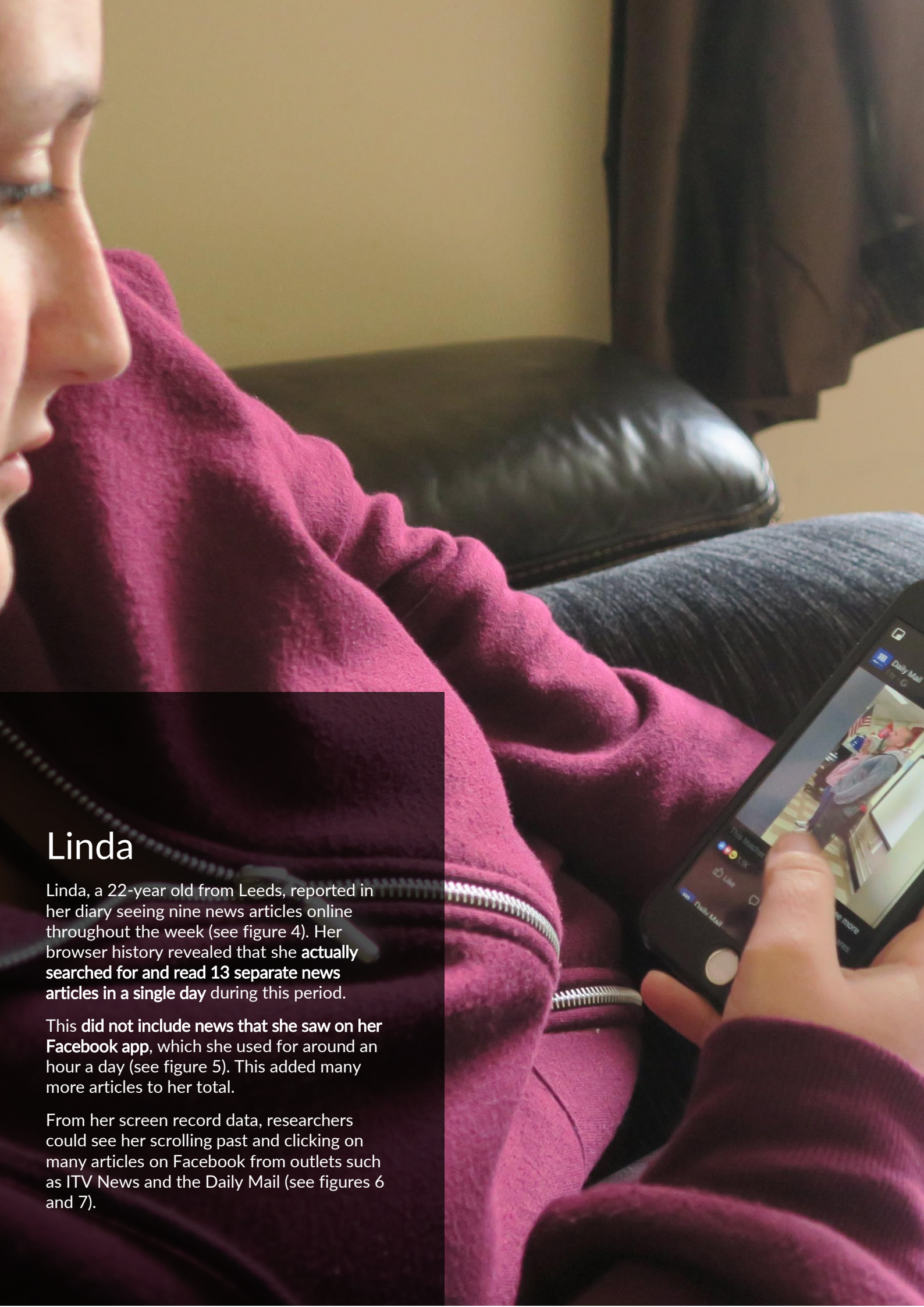| Name	Age	Online	TV	Radio	Print
Sophia	67	Once per week	Once per day	Once per day	Multiple times per day
Georgina	59	Multiple times per day	Once per day	Once per week	
Lucia	55	Multiple times per day	Once per week	Once per day	
Darren	52	Multiple times per day	Once per day	Once per week	Once per week
Johanna	46	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day		
Tommy	43	Multiple times per day	Once per day		Once per week
Shivani	40	Multiple times per day	Once per day		Once per week
Carmel	36	Once per day		Once per week	Once per week
Joe	36	Multiple times per day			
Anthony	34	Multiple times per day			
Peter	29	Multiple times per day			Once per day
Liam	28	Multiple times per day	Once per day		Once per week
George	25	Multiple times per day		Once per week	
Patrick	24	Multiple times per day	Once per week		
Linda	22	Multiple times per day			
Joanne	20	Multiple times per day			
James	19	Multiple times per day	Once per day		
Tara	19	Multiple times per day			
Billy	18	Multiple times per day			
Elizabeth	18	Multiple times per day	Once per day	Once per week	
Alicia	16	Multiple times per day	Once per day		

Unsurprisingly, the sample reported to use a mixture of offline and online media types for consuming news.

However, going beyond the self-reported evidence and examining the data that tracked behaviour more objectively, it was immediately clear that **online was the primary media for most respondents, most of the time**. Online news was used by all, and the most common media type for news for all but one of our sample.

Among all ages, and almost without exception, people greatly under-reported the frequency, duration and extent of their online news use. In most cases, the screen records and browsing history data revealed a huge array of online news consumption that respondents did not report in their media diaries. One typical example can be seen in the case of Linda (figures 4-7 demonstrate the extent of her underreported online news use).
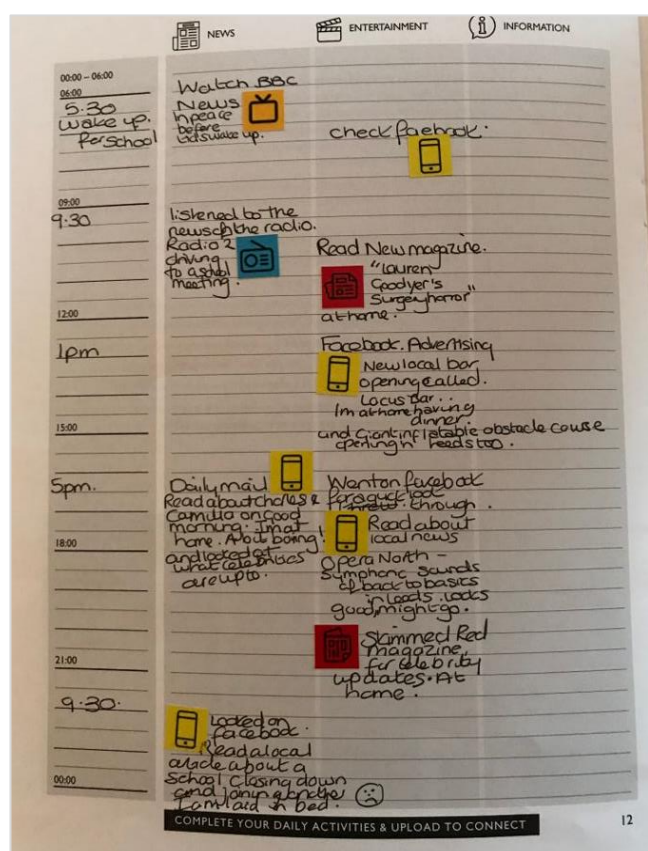
Figures 2 (left) and 3 (right): Example pages of the media diaries filled out by respondents, showing their **self-reported** media consumption. These diary pages were typical in reporting a fairly balanced mix of online and 'offline' news.

Linda

Linda, a 22-year old from Leeds, reported in her diary seeing nine news articles online throughout the week (see figure 4). Her browser history revealed that she **actually searched for and read 13 separate news articles in a single day** during this period.

This **did not include news that she saw on her Facebook app**, which she used for around an hour a day (see figure 5). This added many more articles to her total.

From her screen record data, researchers could see her scrolling past and clicking on many articles on Facebook from outlets such as ITV News and the Daily Mail (see figures 6 and 7).

Figure 4: An example of one of the news articles that Linda reported reading throughout the week. Crimes, trials, and sentencing were of particular interest to her.
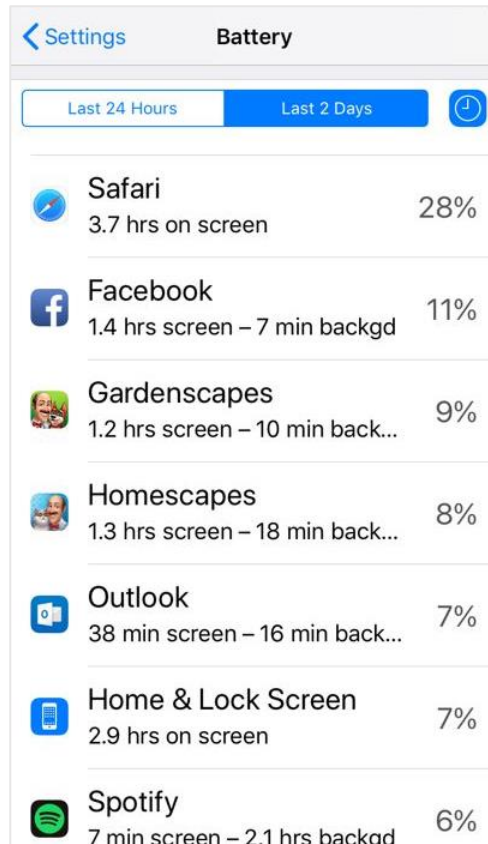
Figure 5: Linda's phone battery usage statistics, showing that she had used Facebook for approximately an hour and a half over a two-day period.

Figure 6: One of the articles that Linda came across while scrolling through Facebook. This article was one of many she scrolled through while visiting the Daily Mail Facebook page.
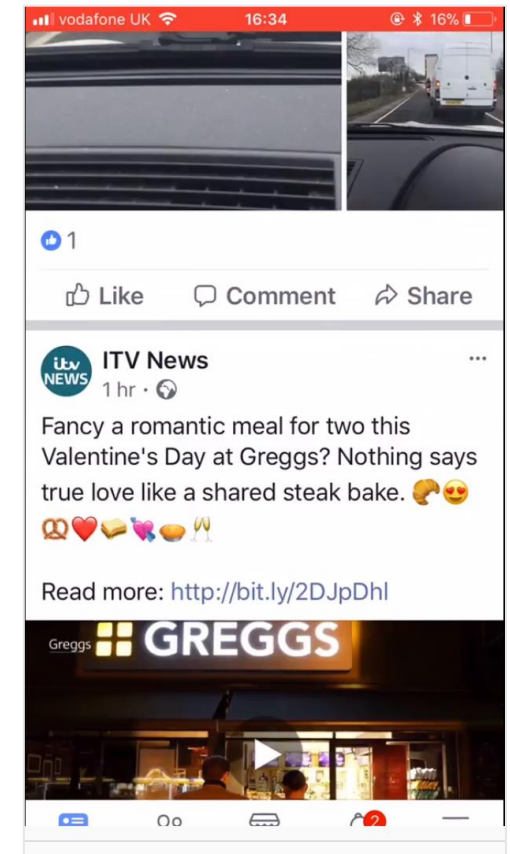
Figure 7: One of the many articles that Linda came across while scrolling through Facebook. This article appeared on her newsfeed; posted from ITV News, a page she had previously 'liked'.

Unconscious motivations for news consumption

Another discrepancy between individuals' perceived online news behaviour and their actual behaviour could be found in the motivations and drivers behind their news consumption.

During interviews, the researchers discussed with respondents their motivations for consuming news. A wide range of reasons were given – however, the **researchers found many more unspoken or unconscious drivers in their underlying behaviour**.

One of the most common **self-reported** motivations for consuming the news was the desire to keep in touch with the wider world. For some, this was a personal preference; they simply wanted to know what was going on.

> *"I worry a lot about the world my daughters are growing up in. I feel like I need to keep an eye on it."*
> *Joe, 36*

> *"I like to stay up to date with the news, so I can stay ahead of any bad stuff"*
> *Georgina, 59*

For others, however, this desire was strongly linked to social pressure, and many discussed reading or watching the news in order to keep up in discussions with family members, friends or work colleagues in order to avoid seeming news-ignorant.

Some people stated that their primary motivation for keeping up with the news was to name-drop certain headlines with friends or at work – using news as a sort of accessible, universal conversational currency.

> *"My husband would kill me if he mentioned some news story and I didn't know what he was talking about. I make sure to at least scan the headlines so I can mention them later."*
> *Lucia, 55*

For others, consuming the news served as a way to beat boredom or kill time.

> *"I look at the news most of the day, mostly when I'm bored. I just want to see the stuff that's weird, or makes me laugh a bit."*
> *James, 19*

As previously described in academic literature, when discussing past behaviour, people have a tendency to retrospectively report 'logical' motivations and reasons for behaviour that may have in fact been driven by something completely different.

This 'post-rationalising' is especially common when the behaviour in question was originally driven by less conscious motivations[5].

With this in mind, the researchers probed further into individuals' reasoning behind their news intake. By combining the online tracking submissions with the discussions and observation from in-home visits, researchers could build a more complete picture of the subtler motivations underlying respondents' news behaviour.

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[5] Richard Elliott (2010) A Model of Emotion-Driven Choice

One of the most common of these unconscious drivers was habit. News was frequently embedded in well-established routines, such as making dinner or getting ready in the morning – and often, this meant that individuals weren't always aware they were consuming news during these times.

Some examples of this habitually driven news intake included hearing the news while listening to a particular radio station on the daily commute, or automatically navigating to a news website when sitting down to a computer. In the latter example, one respondent initially claimed to be doing it to keep in touch with what was going on, but during discussion admitted that it was habit – something that she'd "just always done".

> *"As soon as I open up my emails, I go straight to Yahoo. I suppose I don't even really like Yahoo, it's just always been that way."*
> *Sophia, 67*

Researchers also observed respondents getting unconsciously 'drawn into' the news through push notifications, which diverted their attention from other tasks. It was common for respondents to have these notifications set by default on their smartphones, which would deliver news to home screens and therefore to the forefront of their attention.

In multiple instances, people couldn't explain why these notifications appeared, or did not remember setting them up in the first place.

> *"I get loads of these things through to my lock screen – I'm not sure where they come from. I think everyone gets them."*
> *Johanna, 46*

Online news is smartphone-led

The convenience of smartphones

Around three-quarters of the sample accessed online news use primarily through smartphones. Only one individual never accessed the news through a smartphone, preferring to use a tablet.

The most common reason cited was convenience. Smartphones were readily available almost all the time, often within arm's reach in pockets or on desks nearby. Smartphones therefore allowed individuals to consume news with minimal effort compared with laptops, computers or even tablets.

> *"Because I have my phone on me most often, and I check it most often, its probably the place I get most of my news. I'll check it probably once every 5 minutes"*
> *Billy, 18*

Non-smartphone online news was incredibly rare in comparison.

When respondents did choose to use laptops, computers or tablets to access the news, this was usually in specific contexts. For example, they were preferred over smartphones when respondents were actively searching for specific articles with a purpose, for example in the case of school or university work.

> *"Using my laptop helps me to concentrate more on what I'm reading… And it means I can copy stuff into Word for essays, or take notes at the same time."*
> *Alicia, 16*

Another situation in which news consumption via computers was favoured was at work. Multiple respondents spoke about the perception that browsing a "respectable" news site such as BBC News was much more acceptable during work hours than being seen on your

phone, which carried connotations of unproductivity. Indeed, this was one of the few environments in which a smartphone was not always the most convenient device to use.

> *"I prefer Sky News, but it's blocked at work and I can't go on my phone, so I'll go on BBC News there to kill time."*
> *James, 19*

> *"I have my own office, so I can have Facebook, Twitter and news tabs open constantly, checking if anything is going to happen."*
> *Darren, 52*

Smartphone interfaces & passive consumption

From existing research, it is known that when individuals use smartphones as their primary device, i.e. are 'smartphone by default', this has a significant impact on behaviour, in particular, how individuals consume content[6]. This is in part driven by the design of smartphones as devices (see below). Their interfaces have restricted capability for input (e.g. in comparison with other digital devices), limiting their use for exploration, instead favouring consumption.

The design of user interfaces on smartphones favour **feeds of content and video formats**. This was reflected in respondents' tendencies towards behaviours such as scrolling, swiping and watching when consuming online news as opposed to pro-active searching, exploration and comparison of information.

> *"I wouldn't say I search out news that often, I just see what comes to me"*
> *George 25*

> *"Most of the time it's just what I see when I'm scrolling. It's only if I have more time that I'll go on google and actually look for news"*
> *Elizabeth, 18*

Smartphones: Designed for passive consumption

The design of smartphone hardware and software means they are fundamentally unbalanced when it comes to data input and output.

Although screens are small, they can display fast moving, full colour content at high resolutions and their audio capability is improving all the time, making **output** fast and efficient.

In contrast **input** is extremely slow, even compared to other digital devices such as laptops or desktop computers. The relatively small size of a smartphone screen in relation to the human finger means precision is limited. Touchscreen keyboards enable input with two digits (typically thumbs) compared with faster and more dynamic input using computer keyboards and mice.

Digital interface designers therefore create streamlined navigation and content that can operate effectively on a smartphone. Breadth and depth of content is therefore often compromised by the need to reduce the precision and speed of user input to fit the limitations of the device.

Users of these devices will therefore be served with content in a more linear and streamlined format. This results in a tendency towards passive consumption patterns that favour scrolling, swiping and video watching and deter pro-active searching, exploration and comparison.

[6] Ofcom, 'Smartphone by default' internet users, 2016

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Ubiquitous newsfeeds

There were a number of different ways that respondents could access articles on a smartphone - through browsers, or via social media, news aggregators, or news-specific apps (see figures 8-11).

Although these channels differed in format, **the default user interface across all channels was the 'newsfeed'** – a continuous feed of information which offers users a seemingly unlimited amount of content to scroll or click through.

This format, often associated with social media, is now widespread – seen also in news apps such as the Daily Mail (see figure 11), and aggregators such as the Google Newsfeed (see figure 9).

Ambiguous presentation

Within these feeds, news articles could appear in a number of different ways, for instance through recommendations based on previous preferences, articles shared by friends, and sponsored or promoted posts. Often, it wasn't clear to respondents why or how certain articles were appearing in their feeds.

> *"You get some news articles on the side of Facebook. I don't really know how they get there... Maybe the source pays for it"*
> *Joanne, 20*

'Walled gardens'

The design of smartphone apps also encouraged ongoing or repetitive consumption. Most smartphone platform interfaces are designed to encourage users to stay in-app where possible, with articles and videos from external sources such as news outlets opening in-app as opposed to re-directing to the original source's website or app.

While offline news channels such as newspapers or TV had clear end points, and a finite amount of news, newsfeeds were constantly updated, and contained what felt to respondents like a limitless number of stories.
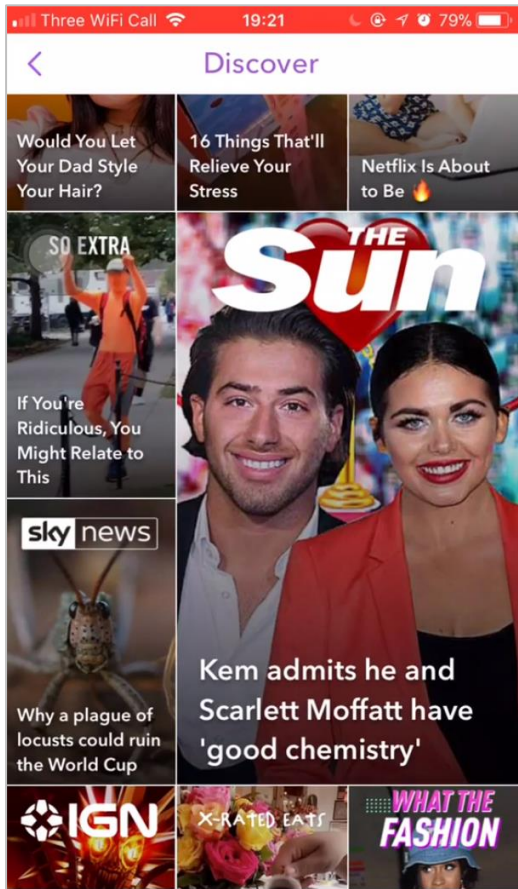
Figure 8: An example of the Snapchat 'stories' screen, which contains stories from other news and entertainment sources.

Figure 9: A screenshot of one respondent scrolling through his Google News feed, which collates articles on different topics and from difference providers into one screen

Figure 10: A news source's dedicated Facebook page, as seen in a respondent's Facebook app

Figure 11: The Daily Mail newsfeed as seen on the Daily Mail app, with a continuous stream of available articles
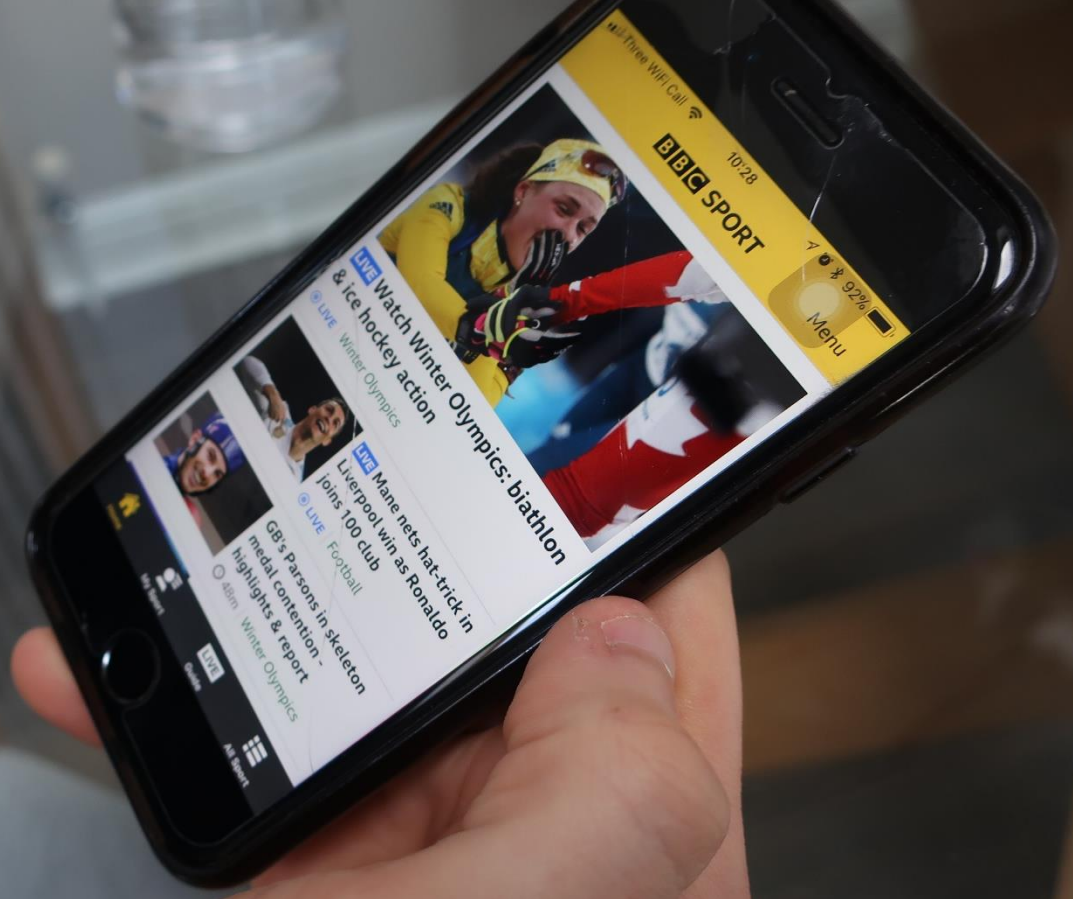
Navigating online news: concerns & strategies

Varying levels of understanding

All of the sample had heard of some or all of the current 'buzzwords' relating to online news, such as fake news, algorithms, echo chambers and filter bubbles.

However, this did not always translate to widespread confidence in discussing the meaning of these ideas. **Many had limited awareness of what these terms might mean, or what they might look like in practice.**

> *"Fake news? Oh - that thing with [Donald] Trump. I can't stand him, though, so I don't pay any attention to that kind of thing."*
> *Johanna, 46*

Varying levels of action

Regardless of their level of understanding of these 'buzzwords', there were few people with any effective strategies for counteracting these types of issues when navigating news online.

For a minority of respondents, a lack of understanding of technology and the internet got in the way of their efforts. Some of the older respondents had adopted misguided strategies in an attempt to take control, such as one respondent who regularly deleted her Facebook posts so that "Facebook doesn't know what I've been seeing online".

A few others simply believed that a critical approach to the news was not necessary, especially in the case of 'lighter' news topics.

> *"I guess most things, like sport or entertainment – why would anyone lie about them? It's just politics you'd have to watch out for."*
> *James, 19*

In contrast, a larger proportion of respondents – around half of the sample - *were* aware of a need to think critically, and yet did not do anything about it when navigating the news day-to-day.

For this group, reflection while browsing online news was more effort than it was worth, and many other factors over-rode the motivation to think critically.

Many said they just "couldn't be bothered" in the moment of scrolling through news, especially when verification or addressing the topic more critically would require leaving the current app or website.

> *"I wouldn't think to fact check something myself, I'd just tend to assume it's fact, assume it's authentic"*
> *Patrick, 24*

Others readily accepted the potential pitfalls of more salacious content because they didn't want to give up their "guilty pleasure".

Some of our younger respondents, who were heavier digital users, claimed they just "inherently know" the value and trustworthiness of news content, without having to think about it.

> *"I've been viewing the news for a few years now and you just start to pick up when it doesn't seem legit."*
> *Billy, 18*

> *"I don't really need to verify it, usually I know what I'm reading."*
> *Alicia, 16*

Two or three individuals such as Patrick (see overleaf) did try to employ strategies to think critically, or to balance and moderate their news intake, but found them too difficult or time-consuming to maintain over the long term.

> *"I can't just take things I see on social media at face value, I am definitely quite obsessive in fact checking and cross referencing"*
> *Joe, 36*

Patrick

Patrick, a 24-year old from Bristol, had **downloaded a browser plug-in to give him more control** over the content that was presented to him on Facebook.

He chose to see more from "serious" news outlets, and fewer posts from his wider group of friends.

He eventually **deleted the plug-in, as maintaining his preferences took up too much of his time** and he resented having to put effort towards something that he believed was Facebook's responsibility.

Despite this, Patrick **still enjoyed having control over his own news consumption.** He enjoyed Reddit for this reason, describing it as the "pub of the internet" for its unregulated and unfiltered nature.

In an attempt to avoid "microbias" in the news, Patrick had **reduced his main news intake to two online platforms,** the BBC and Euronews. He believed that these platforms presented the facts, allowing him to make up his own mind about the news he read.

George

George, a 25-year old Masters student from Wales, was **highly knowledgeable about the pros and cons of online news**, specifically of the dangers of curating his own 'filter bubble' online.

He **articulated many strategies to negate these challenges**, such as 'following' a range of outlets and sources including those he did not necessarily agree with, and analysing the source of articles closely.

However, George did not put any of these ideas into practice day-to-day.

George got most of his news through his Google Chrome app newsfeed and through Twitter. When recalling news that he had seen in the past week, **he struggled to recall the sources of articles**, describing them as "from Google", or "from Twitter", making his source-analysis strategy, in practice, moot.

Despite his knowledge of the potential negative effects of curating an 'echo chamber', George described to researchers how he would **"feed" Google more information about his preferences, in order to receive only the news that he would like** or was interested in.

He described this as being the "most efficient" way to receive news.

Online news heuristics

Most people relied on shortcuts and heuristics for judging the trustworthiness of online news

Across the whole sample, **many individuals had shortcuts in place to quickly assess the trustworthiness and accuracy of the online news they saw**. These heuristics were applied either in the place of more reasoned and conscious strategies, or when these strategies cost too much time and energy to employ consistently.

The majority of cues used were superficial and surface-level. Many younger respondents relied upon the presence of pictures or videos within an article to judge its truth.

In these cases, the actual content of either the article or the accompanying media was usually irrelevant. Individuals described that the mere presence of a picture probably meant that it was true, because these "couldn't really be faked".

> *"If I look at a news article and it's got an image, straight away I'm like, yeah it's trustworthy. That is my shortcut."*
> *Linda, 22*

Another shortcut to assessing the trustworthiness of a news piece was whether it was from an "official" source or not. However, the definitions for what constituted an official source varied widely, and a rule of thumb heard by researchers on multiple occasions was that if the source had a logo of some kind, this counted as being "official", such as a Facebook page or profile with a logo.

> *"It depends on who's posting it… When you go on their page on social media you'll see they have a blue tick. That's how I know the page has been verified"*
> *Joanna, 20*

Many respondents also used popularity of an article to judge its importance, for example how many times it was shared, liked, or retweeted on social media. Others felt that articles were trustworthy if their personal friends, whom they trusted, had posted them on social media.

> *"Look, see, that [article] was posted by my friend, so I'd trust that."*
> *Georgina, 59*
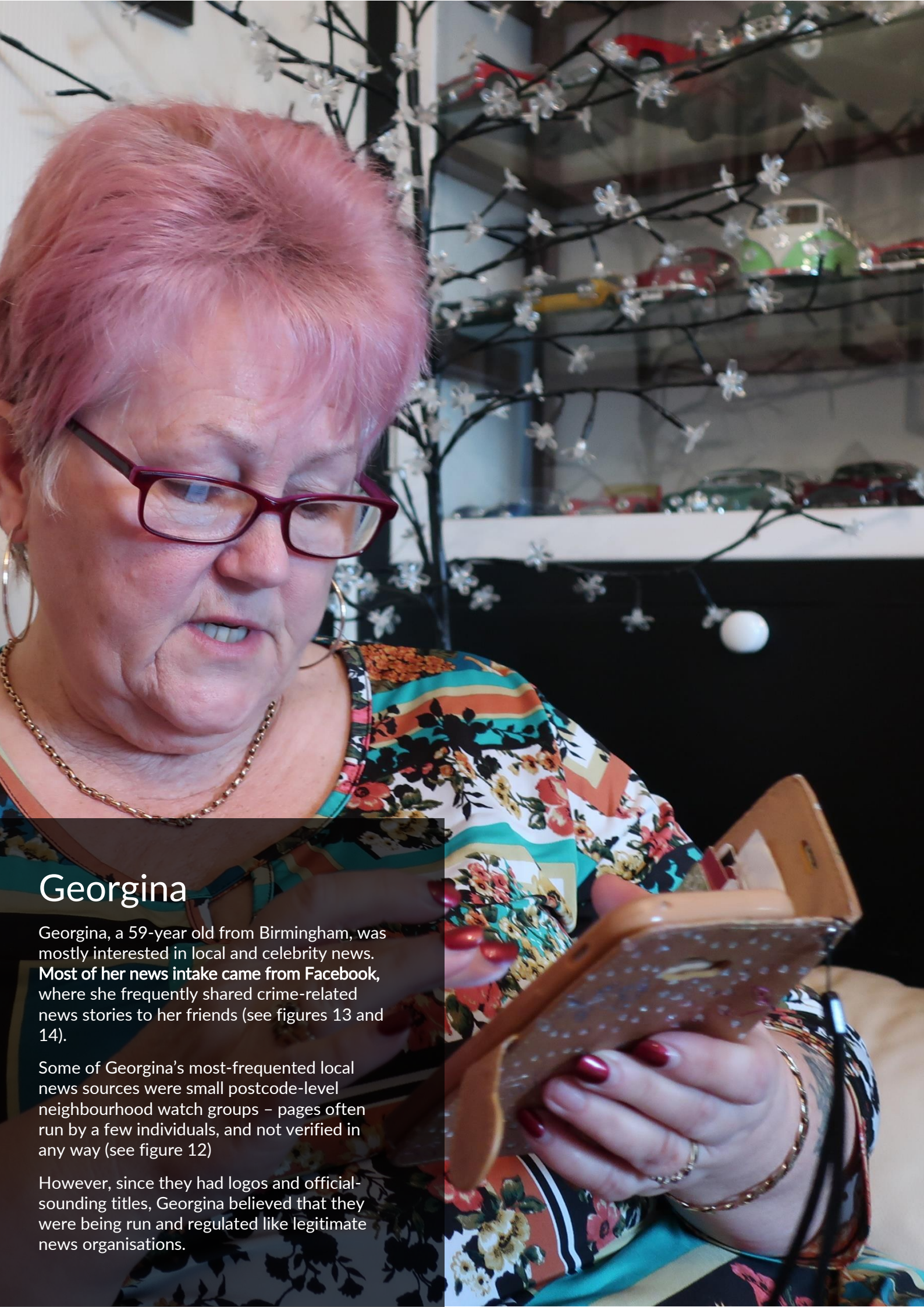
Georgina

Georgina, a 59-year old from Birmingham, was mostly interested in local and celebrity news. **Most of her news intake came from Facebook,** where she frequently shared crime-related news stories to her friends (see figures 13 and 14).

Some of Georgina's most-frequented local news sources were small postcode-level neighbourhood watch groups – pages often run by a few individuals, and not verified in any way (see figure 12)

However, since they had logos and official-sounding titles, Georgina believed that they were being run and regulated like legitimate news organisations.

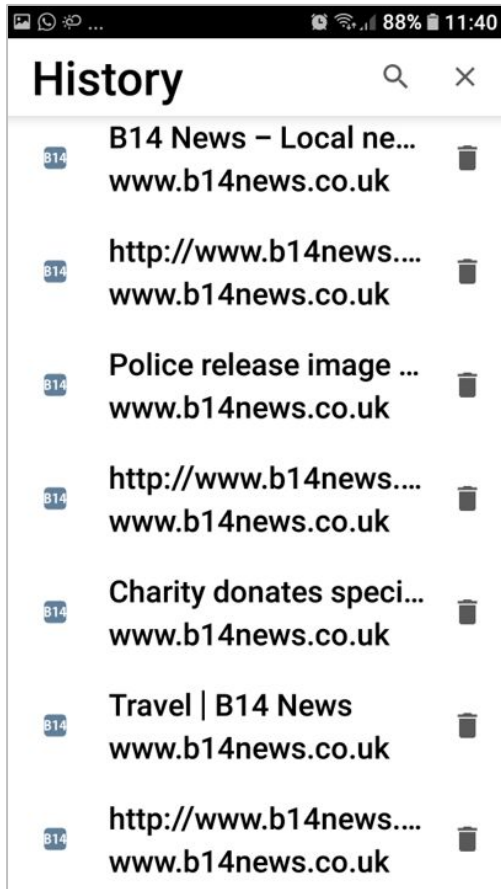*Figure 12:* A screenshot of some of Georgina's browser history, showing her browsing various links on one of her favourite local news websites.

Figure 13: An example of one of the links Georgina would find on local Facebook pages and read. They would open natively in the Facebook app, so she could easily return to her browsing.
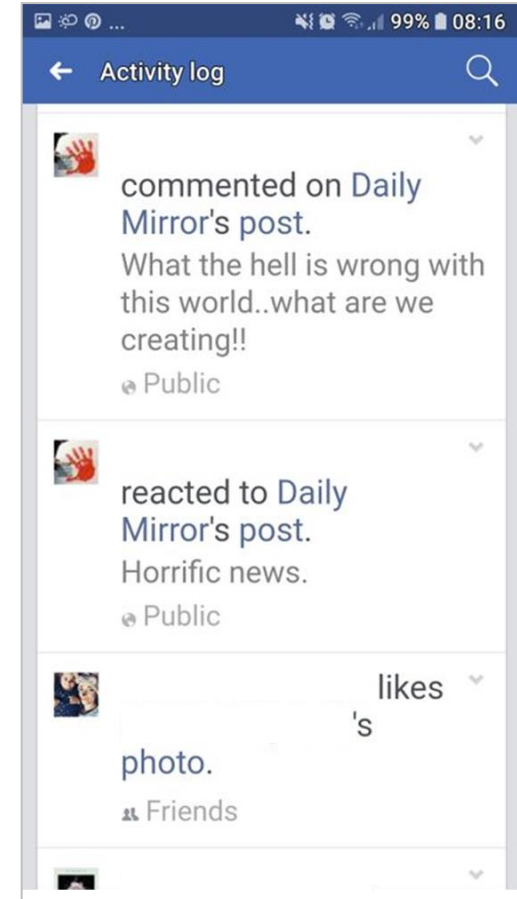

Figure 14: Georgina commenting on national crime stories on Facebook, which made her anxious.

The impact of online news: Managing a constant supply

Quantity over quality

A key feature observed in news behaviour across all platforms was the prioritisation of quantity over depth, as people attempted to avoid missing out on the 24-hour news cycle. Constant availability of news, and newsfeeds that were frequently refreshed with new information, led to an endless stream of news to keep up with.

> *"As soon as you've read something on Twitter, it's become out of date."*
> *Joe, 36*

Respondents reported feeling "bombarded" by information - information that was effectively competing for their attention across all channels. This was especially the case for those multi-tasking or multi-screening, a common occurrence witnessed with media consumption of all kinds. Many watched the TV while simultaneously browsing on their phone and used social media while watching the news on TV. This meant they often had two or more news media types competing for their attention at once.

> *"I prefer videos, because you can get more information in a shorter period of time"*
> *Billy, 18*

The majority of the sample processed the news at a very shallow level, seemingly in order to keep up with the amount of information available to them. This was evidenced by widespread

poor recall of the news – respondents frequently struggled to remember key details or facts, even when discussing news stories that they had come across just a couple of days ago.

> *"I don't remember who was involved... I remember that [Donald] Trump said something. I'd have to go back to read it again and check."*
> *Sandra, 30*
>
> *"I can't really think of any news I've come across in the last few days... I don't have a good memory"*
> *Joanna, 20*

This shallow processing was also illustrated by the fact that when, during the research, respondents viewed their 'normal' newsfeed content in a more reflective mindset, they were often surprised by the content they saw.

During interviews, the researchers asked respondents to browse their apps as they would normally, and voice aloud their thoughts as they did so. This made many of them self-conscious, commenting frequently that their Facebook or Twitter feed was "not usually this boring" or "not usually like this". One said she "would probably have stopped scrolling a while ago" after 10 minutes of Facebook scrolling, despite the tracking data showing she normally spent around an hour every morning doing so.

This prompt to be more active in viewing the content they would usually consume in a passive mindset led some respondents to realise that they were not actually very interested by a lot of what was in their newsfeeds.

Figure 15: One respondent's Twitter feed, which presented them with an endless scrolling feed of content.
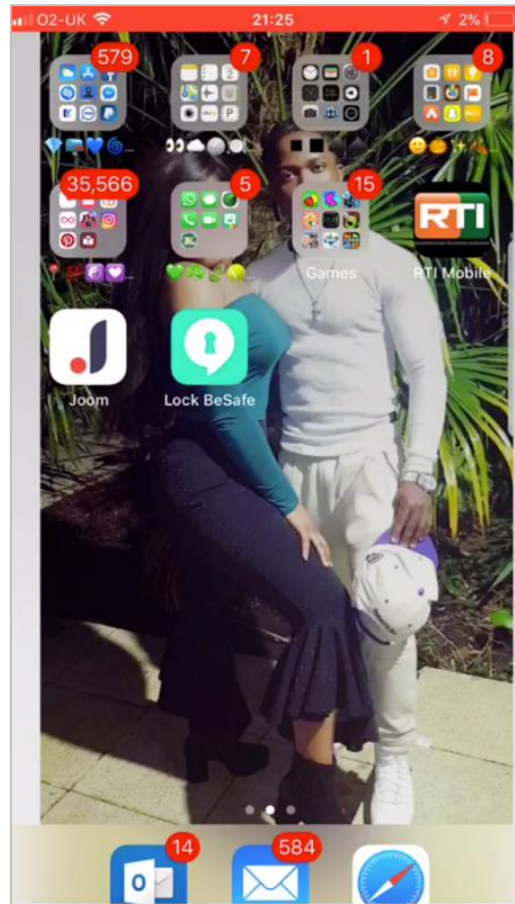

Figure 16: A respondent's phone 'home screen', showing an example of notifications (in red). Many other respondents attempted to "clear" such notifications.

Figure 17: One respondent's Facebook newsfeed, which shows posts shared by a friend (top) alongside sponsored content (shown as a 'suggested app' underneath).

Keeping up and 'FOMO'

Another feature of news behaviour driven by the fast pace of today's news cycle was a keen fear of missing out (FOMO). Many individuals were so concerned at the idea of missing something they perceived as important that they took time-consuming measures to ensure they viewed all news that was presented to them.

Some younger respondents opened their apps specifically to tap quickly through news and scroll through newsfeeds, in order to make 'unread notification' symbols disappear – described by one individual as "clearing" (see figure 16). Those who engaged in this practice felt they were fully up to date with the latest news, although the process of "clearing" was done at such speed that it only allowed for very shallow processing of content (if it was even read at all).

> *"There's so much you feel you need to keep up with... sometimes I have to take a break."*
> *Joe, 36*

> *"I do feel a pressure to keep up with the news. And a pressure to catch up on what I've lost. It's a feeling of being out of the loop"*
> *Patrick, 24*

Overload and desensitisation

Many respondents talked about feeling exhausted or desensitised by the information overload caused by the 24/7 news stream, and researchers heard of several attempted news "detoxes".

> *"Sometimes it can get too much, it's a sensory overload and you can feel overwhelmed by it all"*
> *Liam, 28*

All of the individuals who had attempted to reduce their news intake in this way had at some point returned to similar levels of news intake later on (often driven by the same 'FOMO' that had led to the detox in the first place).

Impacts beyond online news

These news trends, seen across our sample, were driven by the prevalence of smartphone-led online news but not limited to it. They were also seen in the way people read news on laptops, watched it on TV, or read about it in print.

For example, **the fear of missing out was present across all channels, not just social media**. For the only individual in our sample who didn't use social media daily, the mere knowledge of it as a widespread news platform was enough to cause her feelings of unease (see Sophia, overleaf).

> *"It's much quicker, it's much more relevant. You look at a newspaper and its yesterday's news. Why would you look at that when you can get today's news on your phone?"*
> *George 25*

Tommy

Tommy, a 43-year old from Leicester, **enjoyed being "the one in the know"** with news, both at work and with his family. He employed **various strategies to avoid missing out on any news**.

His most regular route to news was Twitter, where he followed many news outlets.

When opening the app, he would make sure to scroll quickly down until he reached the last tweet that he had seen on his previous use of the app – and then scrolled upwards, effectively **consuming content chronologically to ensure he didn't miss anything**.

He would also **read articles from his local newspaper twice** – once in the physical copy delivered to his house, and again when browsing through the paper's website once he got to work.

He openly admitted that this behaviour did not quite make sense, but simply restated that he didn't want to miss anything.

Sophia

Sophia, a 67-year old, had a Facebook account but did not use it frequently.

The idea that everyone else was using such a fast-paced method of communication, including her daughter, was enough to make her **worry that she was missing out**.

In order to compensate, she **increased her news intake through other means,** reading multiple newspapers and keeping the radio on throughout the day to catch the news. She described being "**much more obsessive now... I don't want to lag behind**".

In contrast, Sophia's husband only read the news as a form of entertainment and did not care about keeping up to date with the news.

The family kept stacks of old newspapers around the house, which he would read "when he got round to it", often months later.

The impact of social media: blurred boundaries

Aggregated media

The majority of respondents accessed the news via social media in some way or another, and for many this was the primary route to news.

On social media, services such as Facebook and Twitter served news in an aggregated way – mixed with news articles from different sources, and presented alongside other content. Often, any given news article was shown to the individual amongst news from other sources, entertainment, adverts, and comments from friends, celebrities and other figures.

Social media platforms therefore provided a 'one-stop shop' for content, enabling people to get as much information as possible in one place, often tailored to their preferences. Many respondents viewed this as the most efficient way to consume content.

> *"You can get news wherever you are now. It's all over Twitter, Facebook, Instagram"*
> *James, 19*

Due to this, many preferred getting their news from social media over news-specific apps, such as Sky or BBC, which did not offer such "convenient" content. Researchers heard respondents speak about how their news apps would be the first to be deleted when their phones were running low on storage, because they knew they would able to see news content within their social media apps.

Personalised content

Tailored content meant that individuals could see completely different news on the same platform. The more time people spent in social media apps, the more personalised their content became – whether by individuals curating their own 'following' lists and newsfeeds, or platforms providing personalised content through algorithms.

These apps therefore became gate-keepers of content, with different individuals being served completely divergent content, often from the same news sources, depending on their individual preferences. This was not just the case with social media – some news apps such as the BBC offered similar personalised content.

This personalisation of content was fairly opaque, and many individuals did not realise that they were receiving content tailored to their own preferences. This was in contrast to more traditional 'offline' news, where the type of news was more easily discernible and within individual control, for example by choosing a specific newspaper to purchase.

"I just get what's on the feed – it's trash news. I can't opt out of it."
Shivani, 40

Only a few individuals did notice this 'skewed' content, and felt that it was out of their control and found hard to predict.

Understanding where news comes from

Viewing news in such an aggregated way on social media often had a detrimental effect on people's ability to remember the specific news sources of articles they had read.

While respondents were able to recall the platform they had read an article on, e.g. Facebook or Twitter, they often struggled to remember the specific news source or publisher. For some, this difficulty contradicted their claims that certain news sources were less valid that others, and that they used news source as a way to verify the trustworthiness of content.

"Oh I read about that news story on Facebook... I don't know where it came from"
Georgina, 59

This also meant **that most people widely under-reported the amount of news they got from social media.** Many individuals simply did not realise how much news content they would see on any given day – it was impossible for them to calculate accurately, and therefore impossible to report accurately.

"Maybe a majority [of time spent consuming new] if you added it up, would be on my phone?"
Patrick, 24

Many respondents didn't really understand *how* or *why* they saw particular news content, as they were unaware how social media platforms actually worked. This was particularly the case for those in our sample aged around 35 and up. In multiple instances, individuals had

followed or 'liked' news outlets on Facebook, but either did not do this on purpose or did not remember.

This also worked in reverse - Shivani often saw news articles from 'The Londonist' on her Facebook feed, but was unable to remember 'liking' the page. While screen record revealed these were sponsored posts, Shivani believed she must have 'subscribed' to the posts by liking the page.

This confusion as to what was being presented to them and why was often accompanied by acceptance of this lack of control.

> *"Even if I don't follow it, I always know about it. The Londonist always posts random things on my feed, but I don't follow them."*
> *Shivani, 40*

The social media "mindset"

On social media, people reacted to news content with the same mindset as they would to entertainment or social content, with a focus on sharing and connectivity

The fact that news on social media was presented in such close proximity to entertainment and social content had enormous implications for the *way* that people consumed news.

It meant that those coming across news incidentally on social media treated it in a similar way to the entertainment or social content that made up the majority of that channel – a very different approach to news than if they were sitting down to read the paper or watch the 6 o'clock news.

For those viewing news in this way, the consumption of news was almost entirely a secondary side-effect of entertainment or socially driven behaviour.

> *"Sky is way more informal than the BBC. It's got bigger fonts, it's bolder. It's geared towards a younger generation, isn't it."*
> *James, 19*

This approach to news can be described as the 'social media mindset', as many facets of this approach reflected behaviours that had previously been linked to social media use in general. It was a mindset that changed the way the respondents processed, viewed, talked about, and shared the news that they saw.

When in this mindset, most individuals didn't 'count' the news that they saw on social media, as they didn't see it as 'proper' content.

> *"On social media, the same stories are just churned out when nothing has changed. There's nothing in the way of analysis."*
> *Peter, 29*

One respondent was scornful of social media as a route to news, describing it as "unreliable". However, when browsing "reliable" news sites he would mostly click on and read articles that he had seen his friends talk about on Facebook. In this way, scrolling through Facebook acted as a primer for his news intake, and he did in fact read a lot of news on social media, but mostly regarded his time on news-specific sites as his "real" news intake.

Another aspect of the social media mindset could be seen in the way that the focus on sharing and connectivity, driven by social media, could turn news into a form of social validation and pressure.

> *"It was kind of viral, 'cause lots of people had seen it and were talking about it on Snapchat, so I thought there must be something going on."*
> *Alicia, 16*

For others, the importance of a news story was determined by how many times it was shared, liked, or retweeted on social media. One respondent discussed how he viewed retweets on Twitter as a type of attention filter when scrolling – only pausing to read those which had garnered over 1,000 retweets.

James

James, a 19-year old from Leeds, spent **many hours a day on Twitter in order to "kill time"** at work. He came across most of his news whilst scrolling through his newsfeed.

It was rare that he would actively seek out news. For him, **news was inextricably linked to entertainment**, and so news that he consumed was viewed through this lens.

He was mostly interested in video content, and chose his news providers based on those who used **bigger and bolder fonts, and included more video content.**

James **frequently sent "funny shit news" back and forth in group chats** on social media – however admitted that he never actually read any of the articles his friends sent, preferring to skim the headlines and send back a reaction.
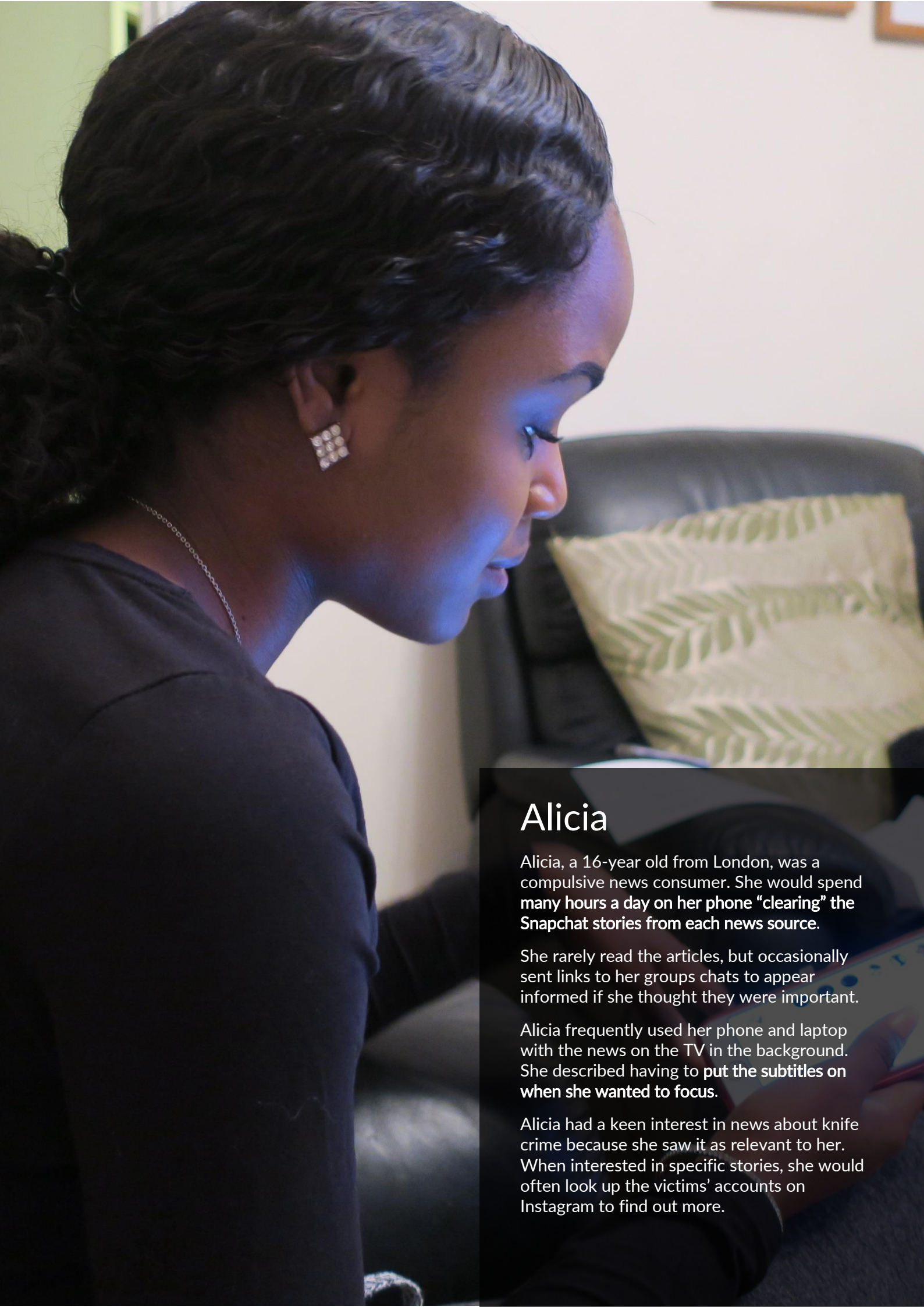
Alicia

Alicia, a 16-year old from London, was a compulsive news consumer. She would spend **many hours a day on her phone "clearing" the Snapchat stories from each news source.**

She rarely read the articles, but occasionally sent links to her groups chats to appear informed if she thought they were important.

Alicia frequently used her phone and laptop with the news on the TV in the background. She described having to **put the subtitles on when she wanted to focus.**

Alicia had a keen interest in news about knife crime because she saw it as relevant to her. When interested in specific stories, she would often look up the victims' accounts on Instagram to find out more.

Conclusions

The majority of these respondents' news consumption is happening in a largely unregulated space

- Social media was one of the most prevalent news channels across the sample, yet these platforms are largely unregulated
- Most people had some idea of issues relating to the rise of online news, such as fake news, algorithms, and echo chambers, but the effort involved in overcoming these issues meant that strategies were rarely used
- Instead, individuals had come up with their own heuristics (such as using images as a measure of trustworthiness) to navigate news in these environments - particularly for verifying news and rationalising why they were seeing the content they did

The extent of online news consumption remains unknown

- Online news consumption was almost always underestimated in self-report
- Screen record data points towards a far greater amount of online news than individuals were able to articulate –suggesting the extent to which individuals are consuming news online is even greater than predicted

News is increasingly indistinguishable from social and entertainment content

- The blurring of content in social media channels meant that many were unable to distinguish between advertising, social content, entertainment and news.
- The entertainment or social aspects of news had become primary, as opposed to secondary, benefits of news consumption

News has never been more different for different people

- Online news created greater differences in what type of news people saw, as algorithm-led preferences and social media 'friends' shaped the content that individuals consumed as opposed to the more transparent differences driven by conventional "newspaper loyalty"

Passivity prevailed

- The changed pathway to news, in which social media played a dominant role, meant that there is far more incidental consumption of news
- Those accessing news via social media platforms demonstrated similar behavioural tendencies to other social media content processing – leading to shallower, faster and less critical news consumption
- This was compounded by the limitations of smartphone devices, which create a more passive experience by default

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology

Respondents were first asked to fill out a media diary over the course of a week. The diary included some introductory activities, such as rating and describing their interest in certain hobbies (including sports, reading, film and news).

The media diary covered one day per page. Respondents were asked to fill out an entry each time they came across a certain piece of media – on TV, radio, print, smartphone, or computer – describing what they encountered, where they found it, and what they thought of it.

Over this same period, respondents were tasked with completing a set of activities to give further detail on their media use. Tasks included uploading a 'screen record' video of their everyday phone use for 4-5 minutes, and of their social media newsfeeds; screenshots of their phone battery usage statistics, showing how long each app was used per day; browser histories, showing the websites they had visited; and 'selfie videos', giving more detail into the news they saw that day and what they thought about it.

This data capture was followed by in-home ethnographic depth interviews, each lasting 2-3 hours. Interviews explored topics such as:

- News preferences and behaviours, including devices, platforms, and sources
- Discussion of specific news articles in recent memory and from the media diary, including more detail on the story, where they had seen it, what platform they had accessed it through, and what they felt about it
- Attitudes towards the news, both online news as well as the more general news landscape
- Critical thinking skills and tendencies, including trust and perceptions of trustworthiness

Appendix 2: Recruitment and sample

22 respondents took part in the study.

They were selected to be representative of a cross-section of the UK, as per the Ofcom News Consumption Survey. As such, they covered a representative range of age, location (see figure 18), and ethnicity.

Respondents were recruited via free-find recruiter. All individuals were sampled to ensure that they engaged with the news in at least one media type (92% of the UK population[7]) and that they used some kind of social media (76% of the UK population[8], although it was not stipulated that they should use this social media platform as a route to news.

The sample covered a range of those who described themselves as accessing their news through online, TV, radio and print media types. It also covered a minimum number of those accessing their news from specific platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter), based on figures from the Ofcom annual News Survey.

Figure 18: a map of the locations of all 22 respondents across the UK

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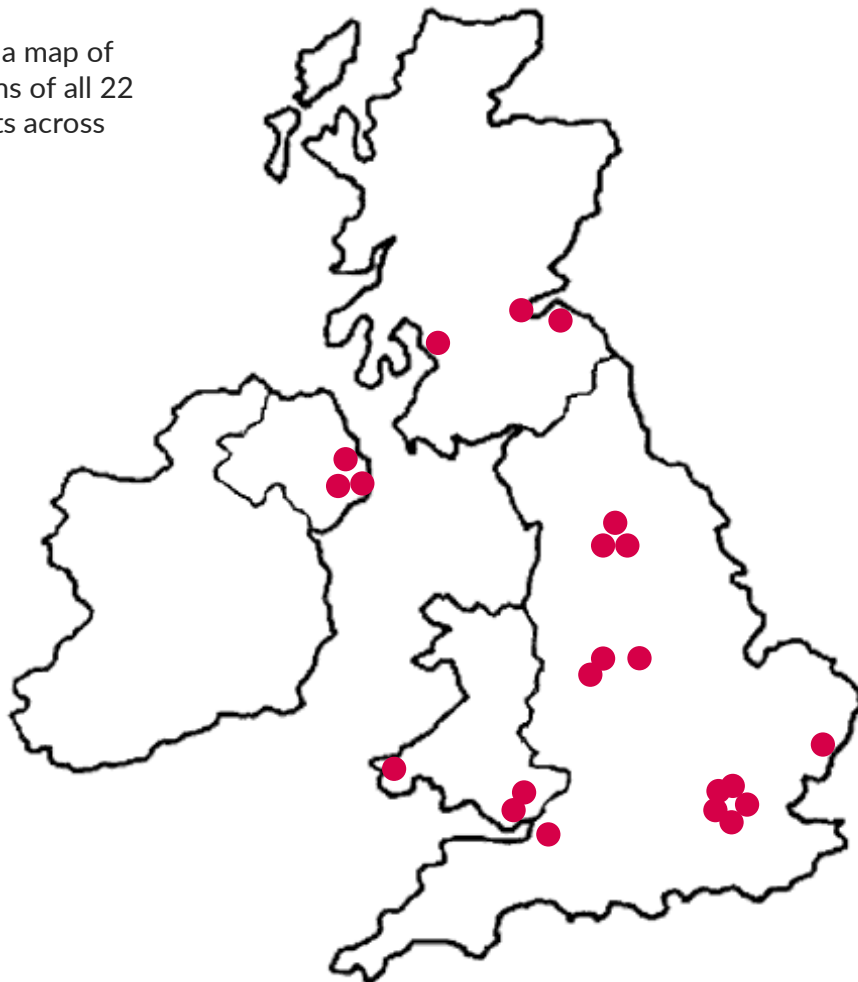
[7] Ofcom, News consumption in the UK: 2016

[8] Ofcom, Adults' media use and attitudes: 2017

Appendix 3: Online news platforms

Figure 19: the apps and social media services used by respondents.

Legend: ■ Multiple times per day ■ Once per day ☐ Once per week

Name	Age	Facebook	Twitter	Snapchat	Instagram	News aggregators	News apps
Sophia	67	Once per week					
Georgina	59	Multiple times per day					
Lucia	55	Multiple times per day			Multiple times per day	Once per week	Multiple times per day
Darren	52	Multiple times per day	Once per day				
Johanna	46	Multiple times per day			Once per day		Multiple times per day
Tommy	43	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Once per week	Multiple times per day
Shivani	40	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day		Multiple times per day	Once per week	
Carmel	36	Once per day					
Joe	36	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Once per day	Once per day		Once per day
Anthony	34	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Once per week	Multiple times per day		
Sandra	30	Multiple times per day			Multiple times per day		
Peter	29	Once per day	Multiple times per day			Once per week	Once per day
Liam	28	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day		
George	25	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Once per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day
Patrick	24	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Once per day	Multiple times per day		Multiple times per day
Linda	22	Multiple times per day		Once per week			
Joanne	20	Multiple times per day	Once per week	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Once per day	
James	19	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Once per week	Multiple times per day
Tara	19	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Once per day		
Billy	18	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day		
Elizabeth	18	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day		
Alicia	16	Multiple times per day	Once per day	Multiple times per day	Multiple times per day	Once per week	Once per day