News Consumption in the UK: 2020

Overview of research findings

News Consumption in the UK: 2020 – Welsh overview

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1. Key findings from the report

This report provides the findings of Ofcom's 2019/20 research into news consumption across television, radio, print, social media, podcasts, other internet sources and magazines. It is published as part of our range of market research reports examining the consumption of content, and attitudes towards that content, across different platforms.

The aim of this report is to inform understanding of news consumption across the UK and within each UK nation. This includes sources and platforms used, the perceived importance of different outlets for news, attitudes towards individual news sources, international and local news use.

This report also provides an understanding of current affairs consumption among adults and news consumption among 12-15 year olds.

Fieldwork for the adults survey this year took place during 9th November – 8th December 2019 and 24th February – 30th March 2020. Fieldwork for the children's survey this year took place during 15th November – 10th December 2019 and 1st – 20th April 2020. This report does not explore the coronavirus lockdown period as this is explored in other research such as Ofcom's Covid-19 news survey.

The primary source is Ofcom's News Consumption Survey. The report also contains information from a range of industry currencies including:

- BARB for television viewing
- ABC for newspaper circulation

More information about the industry currencies used in the report can be found in the annex.

What we have found – in brief

TV remains the most-used platform for news (75%), followed by the internet (65%). However, compared to 2019, fewer adults claim to use social media (45%) for news and it has now returned to 2018 levels. Use of TV is most prevalent among the 65+ age group (92%), while the internet is the most-used platform for news consumption among 16-24s (79%) and those from minority ethnic groups (74%).

While BBC remains the most-used news source, there is a decrease in UK adults using BBC TV channels for news. BBC One continues to be the most-used news source among all adults (56%), followed by ITV (41%) and Facebook (34%).

There is evidence that UK adults who do use social media for news (45%) are less engaged with the content. Those who use Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are less likely to share/retweet trending news articles, and smaller proportions are clicking on news articles/videos (Facebook/Instagram) or making comments (Twitter/Instagram) compared to 2019**.**

When rated by their users on measures such as quality, accuracy, trustworthiness and impartiality, magazines continue to perform better than other news platforms, followed by TV. Users of social media think it is less trustworthy, impartial and accurate in 2020 than it was in 2019. The opposite is true for other websites and apps which users rate more highly in 2020 than in 2019.

TV remains the most common platform for accessing local news and news within the nations. BBC One remains the most-used source for news in England and Wales. BBC One and STV are joint top in Scotland, and UTV and BBC One are joint top in Northern Ireland.

As in previous years, just under six in ten (57%) 12-15 year olds are interested in news. These children primarily engage with news to understand what's going on around them, to learn and to think about new things. Being 'too boring' remains the key reason for lack of interest in news, followed by a lack of relevance.

Talking to the family (68%) and TV (67%) are the most common ways to find out about news amongst 12-15 year olds, followed by social media (55%) and talking to friends (49%). BBC One/BBC Two are still the most-used (41%) and most important news source (17%), although it is noteworthy that six of the top ten most used sources among 12-15s are social media sites.

As in previous years, Family and Radio, then TV are considered to be the most truthful news sources 12-15 year olds. Social media and friends are still considered the least truthful sources.

2. Overall summary of findings

Overall summary - Adults

TV remains the most-used platform among UK adults for news (75%), followed by the internet (65%), the radio (42%) and print newspapers (35% - a decrease from 38% in 2019).

TV sources represent six of the top 20 most-used news sources- the most of any platform (the top 20 news sources also include four social media sites, five newspaper titles (print or digital format), three radio stations and two websites/apps). While TV is the most-used platform for news overall, there are some exceptions; for example, 16-24s are still more likely to use the internet for news than TV (79% vs. 49%), while the same is true for those from minority ethnic groups (74% vs. 65%). By contrast, those aged 65+ remain more likely to use more traditional platforms for news, including TV, radio and print newspapers, with TV use among this age group almost universal (92%). ABC1s remain more likely than C2DEs to use the internet, radio and print newspapers.

While the BBC remains the most-used news source, there is a decrease in UK adults using BBC TV channels for news. BBC One remains the most-used news source across all platforms, with 56% reach among all UK adults (a decrease since 2018).

The top 3 news sources remain unchanged since 2019, with ITV/ITV WALES/UTV/STV (41%) and Facebook (34%) the second and third most used sources. Following the top three are The Sky News channel, with a reach of 25% of adults, the BBC website/app at 23% and the BBC News Channel at 21% (the latter having seen a decline over the last two years). BBC sources represent seven of the top 20 most-used news sources. Furthermore, when sources are grouped into wholesale categories, the BBC has the highest audience reach (77%), followed by ITN (53%), Sky (29%) and DMGT (27%).

BBC One also maintains its status as the most important news source (23%), although this has decreased from 27% of all adults in 2018.

This is followed by ITV (12%), Facebook (8%), Sky News Channel (7%) and the BBC website/app (6%). However, this does vary by age: social media channels are more important among younger age groups, with Facebook, Twitter (both 13%) and BBC One (10%) rated as most important news sources among 16-24s.

45% of UK adults claim to use social media for news (a decrease from 2019, and a return to levels seen in 2018) and 41% say they use 'other websites and apps'- i.e. any non-social media sources of news, such as websites and apps of news organisations, newspapers or other apps (e.g. LADbible).

13% of UK adults say they use news aggregators. Use of these platforms is higher among younger age groups compared to over 65s.

Users of social media for news are less engaged with news via this source compared to 2019.

Those who use Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for news are less likely to share/retweet trending news articles, and smaller proportions are clicking on news articles/videos (Facebook/Instagram) or commenting on news (Twitter/Instagram). As in 2019, news consumed on social media is more likely to be from news organisations than 'friends/family' or 'others you follow'. BBC remains the most commonly followed news organisation across the social media sites, followed by Sky News on Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, ITV on Facebook and Buzzfeed on Snapchat.

At a platform level, attitudes towards news provision (measures such as quality, accuracy, trustworthiness and impartiality) remain strongest among consumers of news in magazines, followed by TV and weakest for news from social media.

In addition, social media sees significant decreases across attitudes in 2020, while, in contrast, attitudes towards news on other apps and websites have become more positive.

TV remains the most popular platform for accessing local news and people are still highly satisfied with the quality of this news.

42% of UK adults who follow news say they watch regional/local broadcasts on BBC TV and 32% watch ITV/ITV WALES/UTV/STV. Four in five of these viewers are satisfied with the quality of news that these channels provide.

TV remains the most common platform for accessing news about respondents' own nation. Overall, BBC One remains the most-used source for news in England and Wales. BBC One and STV are joint top in Scotland, and UTV and BBC One are joint top in Northern Ireland.

BBC One is the single most important news source in England and Wales, and BBC One and STV are equally important in Scotland, whereas UTV and BBC One are the most important sources in Northern Ireland. Respondents in Wales and Scotland are most likely to say they are very interested in news about their Nation (55% in Wales and 47% in Scotland vs 41% in Northern Ireland and 28% in England).

As in 2018 and 2019, six in ten adults think it is important for 'society overall' that broadcasters provide current affairs programming, more than those who say it is important to them personally (52%).

Overall summary – 12-15-year olds

As in 2019, just under six in ten 12-15s claim to be either ‘very’ or ‘quite’ interested in news.

These children primarily engage with news to ‘understand what’s going on around them’, to ‘learn about new things’ and to ‘make them think’. Among the four in ten (42%) who are not interested in the news, the main reason is it is ‘too boring’ (42%). A further 19% said it ‘was not relevant for people their age’, 14% said it was ‘too upsetting’ and 14% said it ‘all sounds the same’.

When asked how often they read, watch or listen to or follow news, three quarters (77%) of 12-15s said they do so at least once a week.

As in 2019, 7% said they never accessed news. Recognising that news is not always accessed on purpose, we asked children how often they inadvertently came across news (e.g. because others are watching, listening to or talking about it); 84% said this happened at least once a week, and 62% said they actively look for news at least once a week.

The highest level of interest was in music news.

When asked about their interest in different types of news, the highest level of interest was in music news (57%), but when asked which types of news content they are most interested in sports/sports personalities (20%) and music news/singers/musicians (17%) were the top choices.

Talking with family and the TV continue to be the most common ways to find out about the news.

While family and the TV are the most common ways to ever find out about news, TV remains the platform used most often for news (32%), followed by social media (18%) and talking to family (17%). As in 2018 and 2019, social media is used most often for celebrity, music and fashion news, while TV is used most often for all other types of news content.

BBC One/Two remain the most-used (41%) and most important (17%) news source for 12-15s across all platforms.

The next most used news sources are YouTube (30%), Facebook (29%), Instagram (28%) and ITV (28%). There are six social media sites in the top ten most used sources for 12-15s. 12-15s remain most likely to first find out about social media sources from friends and find out about TV and radio sources from parent(s).

Family and radio, then TV continue to be perceived as the most truthful news sources, while social media and friends are perceived to be the least truthful.

80% of 12-15s said the news they heard from family was either ‘always’ or ‘mostly’ accurate, compared to 77% for radio and 69% for TV - all consistent with 2018 and 2019. Only one in three think news stories on social media (33%) or from friends (32%) are accurate.

The vast majority of 12-15s have heard of ‘fake news’ and of these, about half say they have seen a news story online or on social media that they thought was ‘fake news’.

41% of 12-15s who use social media for news claim they always/often think about whether the stories they see there are accurate. However, 55% say it is difficult to tell whether news on social media is accurate or not. 89% of 12-15s say they have heard about ‘fake news’ and 86% say they are aware of its meaning. 55% of 12-15s who are aware of the term claim they have seen a ‘fake news’ story. The most common actions they would take if they saw a fake news story are to tell parents or another family member (33%), followed by telling friends (16%), leaving a comment saying it was fake news (13%) and reporting it to the social media site (12%). 41% said they would probably just ignore it/wouldn’t do anything.

A1. Industry currencies

BARB (Broadcasters' Audience Research Board) is the official industry currency for TV consumption. It uses a continuous panel of approximately 5,300 UK homes and tracks television viewing among all people aged 4+ in these homes using meters attached to every working television set in the home.

ABC (Audit Bureau of Circulation) publishes verified newspaper circulation figures, based on sales information provided by publishers.

A2. Methodology

During 2017/18, Ofcom decided to move the News Consumption tracker from a 100% face-to-face omnibus approach to include online interviews. This methodology was repeated during 2018/19 and 2019/20. Face-to-face respondents were approached to participate by door-to-door interviewers; they then completed the survey using a tablet (CAPI). Online respondents, recruited from an online panel, were invited to complete the same survey separately via email.

In total, 2,066 face-to-face and 2,510 online interviews were carried out during 2019/20. Face-to-face fieldwork was halted during wave 2 of the NCS adults study this year, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. 56 planned face-to-face interviews that had not been achieved were replaced with online interviews. We do not believe this has had a significant impact on the results. Nations were over-represented during fieldwork to produce robust sample sizes for analysis. The interviews were conducted over two waves (9th November – 8th December and 24th February – 30th March) in order to achieve a robust and representative view of UK adults. The combined 2019/2020 data has been reported as ‘2020’ within this report, whilst the 2018/2019 data has been reported as ‘2019’ and 2017/2018 data has been reported as ‘2018’.

The survey data has been weighted to correct for the over-representation of the Nations, with weights applied to age, gender and SEG within Nation to match known population profiles. A final weight step was taken to calibrate between the face-to-face and online methodologies.

It is possible to make direct comparisons between the 2020, 2019 and 2018 data, as the methodology and question wording is consistent. However, due to the changes made to the survey in 2017/18, it is not possible to make direct comparisons to data collected before 2018.

Findings by different demographic groups are shown on the slides, where possible. Statistically significant differences are shown at a 95% confidence level.

The survey has approximately 150 codes for different potential sources for news, as well as the option to allow respondents to nominate their own sources which yields a further 800 or so, including regional sources. This gives us a bottom-up measure of what people consider they use for news (about their Nation, the UK, and internationally) and will not necessarily include every possible outlet. The survey therefore provides a granular range of news sources. These individual news sources are then aggregated into various groups or “nets” relating to their owner or publisher.

This is a recall-based survey. As such, it is likely to provide somewhat different results to other types of measurement. In particular, it may underestimate some online news consumption activity. It is likely to be harder for respondents to recall ad-hoc online news consumption compared to, say, the purchase of a newspaper or the watching of an evening television bulletin. On the other hand, respondents show through such surveys which news sources resonate with them.

The methodology used for the 12-15s study is largely unchanged since the 2019 and 2018 reports. In total, 502 interviews from 15th November – 10th December 2019 have been combined with 505 interviews from 1st – 20th April 2020. Quotas were set on age, gender, SEG and nation to ensure the sample was representative of the UK and the data has also been weighted on age, gender, socioeconomic group (SEG) and nation in 2020. Statistically significant differences year-on-year are shown at a 99% confidence level. Each wave of fieldwork was undertaken in three stages:

- Stage 1: We targeted parents of 12-15 year olds, using an online panel.
- Stage 2: Parents were screened to ensure we recruited a representative sample of participants.
- Stage 3: The parent asked their (qualifying) child to complete the rest of the questionnaire.