



Snap Judgements: How Audiences Who Lack Trust in News Navigate Information on Digital Platforms

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**TRUST IN NEWS
PROJECT**



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1. Introduction and Key Findings

People around the world have access to a variety and volume of information like never before. Navigating this abundance of sources online poses real challenges, especially amid widespread fears of misinformation and outright disinformation. Some have clear, go-to news sources they generally trust to provide them with accurate information. For them, trust serves as an ‘institutional economiser’ of sorts, eliminating the need to independently verify information themselves (Coleman 2012; Rosanvallon 2008). But less is known about how those who lack trust in most news sources – a sizeable and possibly growing percentage of the population in many countries (Toff et al. 2021c) – form assessments around which sources to attend to and which to ignore. Moreover, crowded digital information environments where platforms, especially big platforms such as Facebook and Google, loom large, pose unique challenges for news organisations that seek to stand out and sustain trusting relationships with audiences.

In this report, we qualitatively examine how audiences who lack trust in most news organisations in their countries navigate the digital information environment, especially how they make sense of the news they encounter while using social media, messaging applications, or search engines. Drawing on a sample of 100 individuals in four countries – Brazil, India, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) – we centre on how they use Facebook, WhatsApp, and Google, based on a unique interviewing approach anchored in their concrete everyday experiences. Participants were asked to describe and respond to what they actually saw on their screens as they navigated these platforms in real time while speaking to members of our research team.

This research is focused on individuals with minimal trust in most news sources and below-average interest in politics – a population often neglected in audience research since these individuals tend to be least likely to consume news. However, for that same reason, understanding the way they encounter and engage with information online is of particular importance. Indeed, in line with prior survey-based research (Toff et al. 2021c), we found these individuals tended to be indifferent towards, or even opposed to, the idea of receiving news through platforms, which they said they primarily used for other purposes.

What we found is that when they did encounter news on platforms and sought to assess how credible the information might be, they often relied on cues for making quick, in-the-moment judgements, which were particularly important since many of these users rarely clicked through to the original sources of news. The mental shortcuts people discussed, summarised in Figure 1, involved (1) pre-existing ideas they held about news in general or specific news brands (where the information was coming from), but also several other factors: (2) social cues from family and friends (who shared or engaged with the news), (3) the tone and wording of headlines (whether or not it was perceived as clickbait), (4) the use of visuals (which they often saw as important evidence for what could or could not be trusted), and (5) the presence of advertising (whether or not information appeared to be sponsored). Additional (6) platform-specific cues also played a role in shaping judgements about what to trust. These involved design decisions around how information appears on platforms (e.g. what labels appear, what is given most prominence), which in turn affect many of these other cues.

Figure 1. Six cues for snap judgements about what to trust

These platform-specific cues varied considerably depending on each platform's unique features. For example, given how participants used Facebook and WhatsApp, they often relied on additional kinds of social cues (e.g. number of likes or comments) or labels, which in turn were absent when it came to Google, where the platform's ranking of search results played a more significant orienting role. We also found that many said they depended on Google as a verification tool to validate or investigate information encountered on other platforms in cases when it was deemed interesting or important enough. This practice gave many added confidence in their own abilities to suss out what is true and what is false, despite distrusting most professional sources of news.

Although our focus in this report is on a large minority who lack trust in most news in their country – the least trusting 25% as defined in Toff et al. (2021c) – these findings highlight considerations that we believe are much more widely shared. The snap judgements we observed people making when evaluating information on platforms will likely resonate with many readers, even those who access news much more regularly. What is particularly important about these considerations is that they are quite distinct and even upstream from the trust-building strategies publishers often focus on – strategies that often require a level of attention to news organisations' journalistic practices that can be expected of only the most engaged news consumers. These ways of navigating news and information often presuppose levels of knowledge and skill when navigating platforms that are unevenly distributed among users. While some of the cues that platform users rely on may be beyond the scope of what news organisations have influence over – putting the onus on platforms themselves – other indicators are very much within the scope of publishers' control but require them to be more attuned to the way their content is exhibited in these digital spaces.

1.1 Zooming in on how ‘generally untrusting’ audiences use platforms

This report builds on previous findings from the Reuters Institute’s Trust in News Project to better understand how audiences, particularly those who are largely disengaged from political life and journalism, navigate the news and information they encounter on platforms. As with other aspects of this project (Toff et al. 2020), we focus on audiences in the same mix of countries, allowing us to make comparisons across places with distinct political and media environments.

Prior research on trust in news has focused extensively on the relationship between attitudes towards news and underlying political variables, such as partisanship, particularly in highly polarised countries like the US (Ladd 2012; Suiter and Fletcher 2020). While these factors certainly shape trust for some people, findings based on survey data from one of our recent reports suggest that rather than overt hostility – often fuelled by political disagreement – many of those who lack trust in news do so largely out of indifference or disconnection from political life and from news and journalism specifically (Toff et al. 2021c). This group of people, whom we refer to as the ‘generally untrusting’, not only use news less frequently and trust a below-average number of news brands in their country, but they also tend to be the least knowledgeable about journalism and how it is practised.

At the same time, research has underscored the important role played by digital platforms such as social media, search engines, and messaging applications in how people discover and access news in an increasingly digital, mobile, and platform-dominated media environment (Newman et al. 2021). While platforms have become significant entry points to news in many places worldwide, certain social networks and messaging apps have become especially meaningful for those with lower levels of interest in news, who are less inclined to seek it out on their own, relying instead on what they encounter incidentally while doing other things (Fletcher and Nielsen 2017). As a result, these individuals may be impacted more significantly by how platforms organise and present information or enable it to be distributed, even as some platforms may exacerbate inequalities in who sees news (Thorson 2020).

This emphasis on better understanding untrusting and disengaged audiences on the one hand, and platform use on the other, also speaks to some of the concerns we heard from journalism practitioners during a series of roundtable discussions with newsroom leaders and journalists that we held in October 2021 (Toff et al. 2021a). Many wondered where to concentrate their trust-building efforts – whether to deepen relationships with audiences who may already rely on them or to focus on broadening their appeal to others who may not. At the same time, many wondered about whether certain distrusting audience segments were simply out of reach. Many expressed concerns about the kinds of news stories they believed got rewarded with engagement on platforms, which could undermine audience perceptions of their brands and more generally saw platforms as contributing to a ‘flattening of news’, making it that much harder for individual news brands to stand out at all.

In this report, we focus in greater depth on these concerns by examining how the least trusting segments of the public think about the news they come across on platforms. What aspects do they notice or pay attention to in evaluating the trustworthiness of the information they see on there? How do social connections and interactions on platforms affect perceptions of

what sources of information they can trust? And how do features of specific platforms they use shape these evaluations? In answering these questions, we hope to provide insight into what news consumption for untrusting audiences looks like, what strategies and tools they use in navigating information on platforms, and how this matters for news organisations and platforms alike.

1.2 How this report was constructed

This report is based on a qualitative analysis of 100 in-depth interviews across Brazil, India, the UK, and the US conducted in December 2021 and January 2022, using a videoconferencing service. We focused specifically on ‘generally untrusting’ individuals – those with below-average trust in news and interest in politics – who were also regular users of three distinct platforms: Facebook (a social networking platform), WhatsApp (an encrypted messaging application), and Google (a search engine). According to the 2021 Reuters Institute *Digital News Report* (Newman et al. 2021), Facebook was used by 72% of those surveyed in Brazil (47% used it specifically for news), 66% in India (43% for news), 65% in the UK (23% for news), and 58% in the US (28% for news). WhatsApp is even more prevalent in Brazil and India, where we focused on this platform, used by 80% of respondents in each of the two countries (43% in Brazil and 53% in India use it specifically for news).¹ Meanwhile, 47% of those in Brazil, 59% in India, 24% in the UK, and 36% in the US use ‘search’ for news specifically, which in practice most often means Google.

We worked closely with two independent survey firms – Inteligência em Pesquisa e Consultoria (IPEC) in Brazil and Internet Research Bureau (IRB) in India, the UK, and the US – to screen for participants who fitted the study’s parameters. (More detailed information is provided in the Technical Appendix.) We included participants who regularly used these platforms for any purpose, not necessarily for news, and centred on a single platform in each interview, although many of our respondents were frequent users of more than one. Thus, while we asked participants about general media use early in the interview, when moving to the platform-specific section, where participants described and responded to what they saw on their screens while using these platforms, we concentrated on only one per individual. This approach allowed us to generate 40 interviews focused on Facebook or Google each, with the remaining 20 centred on WhatsApp (in Brazil and India only as the messaging application is less widely used for news in the UK and the US), each averaging 40–60 minutes.

Having participants walk us through what they saw while using a designated platform helped us observe in real time what they paid attention to in judging whether information was relevant and trustworthy to them. This technique allowed us to move beyond abstract responses about platform use to real-life experiences, where we could also probe participants further on specific and concrete examples.² After spending some time understanding what content participants sought out or were presented with when they used the platform as they normally would, we also asked many to do things they may not normally do, such as conduct Google searches for news-

¹ In the UK, 66% of respondents said they used WhatsApp (only 14% used it specifically for news), while in the US only 15% said they did (6% for news).

² Due to privacy concerns, we did not ask participants to share their screens with us and relied entirely on their own descriptions of what they were looking at.

related topics or navigate the Facebook news tab in an effort to focus on their sense-making around news specifically.³

For privacy reasons, illustrative quotations presented in this report are attributed to study participants using pseudonyms.

1.3 Summary of key findings

This report contains a range of findings about how generally untrusting individuals typically think about the news they encounter on platforms, the shortcuts they use in making quick judgements about news they come across, and how specific features of platforms shape these experiences. We summarise several of the key results below:

- **‘Generally untrusting’ audiences were mostly indifferent towards news they encountered on platforms, which only rarely occurred anyway.** Many saw little news at all while using platforms, and when they did the news they saw tended to be focused on soft news topics, such as stories about entertainment and celebrities rather than news about public affairs.
- **Because few tended to click through the links they did see, many made quick, in-the-moment judgements about the credibility of the information being reported.** Most focused on the minimal information conveyed through the platforms themselves, in headlines or visuals, or fell back on what they already knew of brands’ reputations, which, in many cases, could be quite limited and often negative.
- **When encountering sources they were unfamiliar with, many said they took it with a ‘pinch of salt’.** Although they usually did not click on such links, when they did they often described making a separate set of snap judgements rooted in how the website looked, its advertising, and other visible signals. Some also talked about using search engines as a tool for cross-checking information they encountered on other platforms.
- **Topic relevance played a key role in how this group talked about trust.** Many expressed scepticism generally of all news, but they often singled out political subjects and politicised stories as content they tried to avoid altogether. On other kinds of news stories, many did not profess to care much about trustworthiness because they saw such topics largely through the lens of entertainment or a way to pass time online.
- **Interviewees paid attention to different indicators specific to each platform.** On Facebook and WhatsApp, for example, many drew on social cues, such as who was sharing the information, and, on Facebook specifically, elements such as comments and likes, which helped contextualise news they encountered. On Google, the rank order of search results was especially salient. But on all three platforms, many struggled to identify where information was coming from.

³ This feature was not available in India and Brazil.

- **Many in this group saw platforms as, at the very least, helpful, and at best, essential tools for fulfilling important functions in daily life.** This was in stark contrast to the very negative views these ‘generally untrusting’ interviewees held about most news, which they tended to see as irrelevant and depressing.
- **Many were unsure about how platforms determined what information to show them.** Some expressed deep concerns about misinformation, commercial agendas, and privacy intrusions, but often they still placed their trust in platforms to verify, fact-check, or prioritise the most reliable sources. Some said they believed platforms employed experts who manually made such editorial determinations. Despite concerns about platforms, many in this group said they appreciated the way platforms offered access to a range of perspectives, allowing them to make up their own minds.

2. How the Generally Untrusting Think About News They Encounter on Platforms

In this section, we provide a broad understanding of how generally untrusting audiences think about news in the abstract and how they experience their encounters with news on the digital platforms they use most. By design, we focus in this report on individuals who largely lacked trust in most news sources in their countries as well as interest in political affairs; not surprisingly, then, we also found that most had minimal desire to access news, including when they were online. Instead, they said they used digital platforms mainly to stay in touch with friends and family or look for other kinds of information they saw as more relevant to daily life (e.g. shopping, cooking, travelling).

We also found that when participants walked us through their use of digital platforms they rarely encountered very much professionally produced news at all. On the occasions on which they did, they typically expressed little interest in this information. As a result, the trustworthiness of specific news sources rarely came up on its own and was often secondary to other considerations, such as how interesting or relevant the topic of the link might be. Where the question of trust mattered most to study participants was largely around contentious political subjects, which these individuals tended to studiously avoid.

2.1 Minimal encounters with news and limited interest

We begin by focusing on how interviewees described their broader platform use and to what extent – and under what circumstances – news was a part of those experiences. While some study participants said they at least occasionally saw news on platforms, others said they believed this rarely occurred and, in fact, when asked to narrate and respond to what they were seeing on platforms during the interviews, few came across much news on their own. Most said they preferred it this way as news was not something they were particularly keen on, given their already low interest in politics and below-average trust in most news. Moreover, when study participants did come across news on these platforms, most often the content of these posts was limited to soft news or celebrity-focused topics, perhaps feeding perceptions of news as irrelevant and disconnected from their lives.

CONTEXTUALISING NEWS ENCOUNTERS ON PLATFORMS

Just as prior research has shown that news consumption makes up a very small share of the time people spend online (Fletcher et al. 2020), study participants generally said they primarily used digital platforms for purposes other than informing themselves about current events or politics. Platforms were mainly appealing as tools for connecting with other people or finding information individuals were personally interested in.⁴ Many also mentioned using platforms for their studies or work, for example, as they promoted products or communicated with customers. As a result, news consumption on these platforms was largely subsidiary to these

⁴ Past research by Wu et al. (2020) has suggested online attention is anchored not only in individual preferences but also in the way platforms are structured, nudging people to pay attention in particular ways. Google has been found to be intertwined primarily with ‘utilitarian’ goods (i.e. e-commerce and services) whereas social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter were more often linked to ‘symbolic’ goods (i.e. media content websites).

other uses, what communication scholars often refer to as ‘incidental’ news consumption (Boczkowski et al. 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen 2017). Interviewees typically described these incidental encounters as relatively infrequent, especially compared to other kinds of content they were in regular contact with. Although often rare, the context in which encounters with news did occur varied considerably from platform to platform.

During the Facebook-centred interviews, participants mostly typically described scrolling through their feeds to pass the time or to see what close and distant acquaintances were up to, occasionally to find information on hobbies, sports, or entertainment, or to shop for items for sale on the marketplace. Many interviewees encountered no news at all during the portion of the interview where they narrated their platform use, while some encountered a news item sporadically, sometimes from friends and family or a news organisation they had followed. For example, Ricardo (20, Brazil) explained that he rarely came across news on Facebook unless a personal acquaintance shared it, given that ‘the pages I follow are not about news’.⁵ Similarly, in narrating her Facebook visit, Zoe (45, US), described a feed with a variety of different things – birthday wishes, religious messages, advertisements, etc. – none of them news. When asked by the researcher to navigate to the ‘news’ tab on Facebook, she noted that she had never opened it before. Like Zoe, most of the UK and US participants who had access to this feature on Facebook had never clicked on it in the past – many had never noticed it at all.

As might be expected, WhatsApp was usually used to maintain direct communication with family and friends, sometimes via groups, where news was occasionally shared or became the topic of conversation. João (32, Brazil), for instance, described several groups he belonged to with family members or people he worked out with, underscoring that most of these conversations were about passing time, joking around, or planning social activities. His friend groups, he clarified, tended to steer away from topics that could raise tensions, such as politics or sports.⁶ He added, ‘Yes, there are times when I do [get news], you know, in my family group or some other group. ... It’s basically information, you know, routine stuff, jokes, news, one piece of news or the other about politics, about the economy, maybe a sale, but I don’t really spend time on them. When I see it’s about politics, I don’t really pay much attention.’

Meanwhile, those who were regular Google users employed the search engine most often to look up information, not about news, but about topics they were specifically interested in, ranging from health-related websites and recipes to shopping. Camille (43, UK) explained, ‘It depends what you’re searching for. I mean, for me it’s more like – I do more, like, shopping or comparing online when I buy something [rather than looking for news]’. Some interviewees maintained that news rarely came up in their search results as they looked for non-news topics, although those using the Google app on their mobile phones – especially in India, where Android phones make up the majority of mobile operating system market⁷ – sometimes acknowledged the presence of news stories underneath the search bar. This was the case for Preeti (22, India), who explained that she often saw news ‘not by searching, just when I open the page, like as of now I’m opening Google, so below the search bar I can see news headlines which are from *Times of India*.’

⁵ Participants were also asked to navigate to the ‘pages’ and ‘groups’ tabs on Facebook to describe what kinds of organisations they followed. News outlets almost never appeared among these lists.

⁶ Previous studies have noted the degree to which specific group norms affect what individuals are willing to share in WhatsApp groups (e.g. Swart et al. 2019).

⁷ According to data from the 2021 *Digital News Report*, 75% of the India respondents used Android smartphones for any purpose, versus 19% who used Apple (Newman et al. 2021).

When participants did encounter journalistic content on platforms it was often soft or entertainment news. For example, Shashi (46), from India, described the only news item he was able to find in one of his WhatsApp groups, which was a video from a news organisation about a dog stealing cake from a baby. While some expressed curiosity about these kinds of attention-grabbing stories, saying they might even click on them, for many it was also off-putting. In discussing the posts he was encountering on his Facebook feed, Casimiro (40), from Brazil, described a story about a purported romance between ‘the people who got eliminated from *A Fazenda* [reality show]’, followed by another story with ‘a picture of this pregnant celebrity. But I’m not very interested in that’.

For interviewees largely uninterested in receiving news through platforms that they used primarily for other functions, news was, thus, often something to be ignored. For example, Karen (39, US) explained that ‘I generally just scroll past it’ when she sees news on Facebook, in order to avoid ‘debates’. Others experienced these incidental encounters with news as an imposition or annoyance, as Ramesh (45, India) expressed, ‘Obviously, it’s sometimes irritating because of the reason I am using Facebook is only for friends and family.’ Similarly, describing the news she sees on WhatsApp groups, Aarti (26, India) explained her strategy to avoid the disturbance: ‘Yeah, obviously I dislike it, that’s why those groups are archived and on mute.’

The social media platform is not the place to look for information. It’s a place where you socialise, where you smile. ... It’s a place where you play around. You joke with people. You upload a picture. You share an experience. But that’s basically that.

João (32, Brazil)

Not all study participants felt so negatively about encounters with news on platforms. Some did value platforms as places where they could learn quickly and efficiently about important news without requiring the effort involved to seek it out on their own. This was appreciated by participants like Carl (24, UK), who didn’t actively consume news otherwise: ‘I probably like it, really, because I suppose it’s like my gateway into it. Like I was saying, how else would I get it if it wasn’t for Facebook?’ Patricia (70, UK) valued the ability to see news that she believed she couldn’t find elsewhere, which is why she participated in some groups that helped draw her attention to the news items she was interested in: ‘I like it because I like to know what’s going on, not what the mainstream media— all the lies and all the narrow-mindedness.’ Similarly, Lara believed important news often found its way to her while navigating Google:

I like it. There are many times that I’m not even looking for a piece of news, but there is news that are necessary to me. So, you know, I’m not looking for them, but they’re there, and they are necessary, and they help me. So, if it’s news that I know that I can benefit from, I read it. ... I like that this news somehow gets to me.

Lara (28, Brazil)

2.2 The contrast between negative views towards news and more positive associations with platforms

The disengagement from news we found among our interviewees was largely anchored in widespread scepticism – cynicism, even – of the news media as an institution (Fletcher and Nielsen 2019) and perceptions of news as unenjoyable, distressing, and even harmful – echoing

research on ‘news avoidance’ (see, for example, Palmer and Toff 2020; Villi et al. 2022). However, we also identified important differences among this sample, as some did make distinctions between news brands, most typically on the basis of news organisations’ reputations beyond platforms, whereas others saw all news brands as part of the same untrustworthy media system. These perceptions of news organisations stood in stark contrast to the much more favourable opinions they often held of digital platforms, which, even in light of reservations about data privacy issues, ultimately appealed to users given what they saw as clear practical benefits they derived from them in everyday life.

MOST APPROACHED NEWS WITH SUSPICION OR EVEN AVERSION

If generalised scepticism characterises most people’s approach to news on platforms (Fletcher and Nielsen 2019), this was especially the case among the untrusting sample of people we focused on for this report. Their suspicion towards news was often anchored in deep-seated beliefs about the news media as biased, manipulative, and even corrupt. In Glauber’s words (46, Brazil), ‘In the past, TV media did whatever they [politicians] wanted. They’re still doing it. But the media, they’re not credible anymore.’

Each political party runs their own news channels, so, basically you don’t trust that. And you can see the opposition comment on a news channel, the ruling party runs their news channel ... So, like, it’s not the truth, right? They play for politics. Usually, basically, there are news channels run by each party, whether they are ruling or opposite party. I don’t believe them.

Kannan (24, India)

These attitudes were also coloured by largely negative associations many held about the experience of consuming news. Thus, while most held positive ideas of journalism in the abstract, they often referred to news in practice as irrelevant or of limited utility for their everyday lives. Karen (39, US) explained, ‘I don’t think my day would be any different if I didn’t watch it [the news]. ... I think it’s just habit, I like to see what the weather will be [and] what’s happening within our, like, schools.’ On a similar note, Adriana (26, Brazil) explained that, ‘There are pieces of news that ... it’s not that they are useless, but they’re not going to add anything to my life. They’re not going to bring me anything.’ For these participants, the practical utility of consuming news was simply unclear (see also Palmer and Toff 2020). Many more described news as upsetting, depressing, or even harmful for their mental health, motivating them to moderate their news consumption or avoid it entirely.

Yet, even among the ‘generally untrusting’ population we interviewed, we found considerable variation in how they approached the news. While some participants differentiated between brands on the basis of the perceived rigour or fairness of their reporting – Rogério (23, Brazil), for example, said he trusted G1 because ‘They are well grounded when passing the news to their consumers.’ – many others were substantially more cynical and distrusted all news outlets across the board. Responding to the question about what news brands he considered more trustworthy, Jonathan (54, UK) explained, ‘I’m sorry, I just don’t have one. I don’t think there are any. That’s not a conspiracy theory, that’s just the realisation that everything is a story. There’s no pure narrative, there’s no pure fact.’ Similarly, Paul from the US (41), expressed widespread cynicism: ‘I think they’re all full of shit. I mean they all have an agenda, right? I mean at this point it’s incredibly obvious.’

There were also differences between those who did and did not feel capable of differentiating between sources. While some were confident in their own ability to distinguish reliable sources from unreliable sources, many others, like Ricardo (20, Brazil), were doubtful: ‘I cannot tell that very well. You know, I can’t really set them apart.’ This was especially the case on platforms, as Lucas (32, UK) noted, ‘What makes me trust it less is that there’s just so much unmoderated content on Facebook, or things slip through the net, even if it has been moderated, that you just don’t know where to trust.’ While people may often under- or overestimate their ability to make such kinds of distinctions, these quotes reflect the reality that people have different levels of knowledge and skills in relation to news and broader media use, which may, in fact, lead them to different conclusions – or levels of confusion. Lack of confidence in one’s own capacity to discern may also contribute to driving distrust in news online for some people.

MANY VIEWED PLATFORMS AS CONTRIBUTING TO THEIR LIVES IN TANGIBLE WAYS

In contrast to the negative views many of the ‘generally untrusting’ held about news and their greater tendency to circumvent news altogether, people often expressed more favourable attitudes about the platforms they used on a regular basis, in addition to high levels of attachment to these digital tools. Platforms often invited positive associations because they were seen as enabling social connections or serving practical functions in daily life, often doing so in an easy or efficient manner – the opposite of how many felt about news. For example, when talking about WhatsApp, Antônia (41, Brazil) was reminded of a science fiction movie she had seen many years ago, where people could ‘see and talk to other people’. She added, ‘Oh, I like everything about WhatsApp. Everything. It is so modern.’ Josephine (32, UK) appreciated that on Facebook ‘all your interests are in one place’.

[Google] it’s like a pen or a hammer, it’s a tool. And, you know, if I want to know something, I just click the box, type in what I want to know, and press enter ... and it just happens to be my understanding, and my experience has been, that Google provides quick and accurate information for everything that I’ve ever asked it.

John (72, US)

This doesn’t mean participants were without reservations about platforms. Indeed, some voiced concerns in relation to data collection or privacy violations, especially on Facebook and Google. Veronica, from the US (40), was unsure about how Facebook personalised information but disliked the ‘feeling of being watched’: ‘Are they really listening or how does it really work? ... It makes me feel nervous.’ Abdul (41, India) made a similar point about Google, explaining that although he frequently used multiple Google products in his household, he was ‘honestly very scared because I feel that they are the ones who monitor everything of yours’. Some worried about getting scammed or hacked through platforms, which required a very cautious approach to the content they were presented with and the links they chose to open. Annisa in the UK (54) recalled, ‘My friend said “don’t trust Google” because sometimes they hack your email and then they hack your information.’ Yet these concerns were usually listed as caveats rather than reasons to stop using these platforms entirely.

You know, people are posting images on stories or on your feed, selling things, and it’s a profile from somebody you know ... I come across my sister selling a fridge, and it’s my sister herself. So, you don’t doubt that. And then that person hacked the account, and that person knows how close you are to the person who made that post. And I fell to that scam.

Adriana (26, Brazil)

Of the three platforms we focused on for this report, Google stood out as the one engendering the most positive associations, with some people going so far as describing it as ‘the font of all knowledge’ (Rachel, 37, UK) or ‘our friend, it’s part of our family’ (Camille, 43, UK). The Google search engine was broadly seen as easy to use, reliable, and efficient: clearly helpful for daily life. These favourable perceptions echo recent findings in the US, where levels of trust in Google are considerably higher than trust in Facebook and Twitter (Ognyanova et al. 2022). They are also consistent with our own survey data, where Google ranked highly as the most trusted platform for news and was even trusted more so than any single news brand in Brazil and India (Toff et al. 2021c). For some people, like Rogério (23, Brazil), the Google brand stood out because it fulfilled so many different functions beyond the search engine itself. He explained, ‘Google is not just about research. So, you have email, photos, pictures. That is so interesting. It’s just one platform with different arms.’

Google is like the net teacher. Google is internet school for me, I think for even most of us. It uses everything without money. The only thing we need is [the] internet.

Kannan (24, India)

Even though Facebook and WhatsApp received more mixed evaluations than Google, with some complaining about wasting too much time on them or even becoming ‘addicted’, participants still viewed them as valuable tools making positive contributions to their lives, facilitating communication and connection with others, and collecting meaningful memories and milestones. For example, Rafael from Brazil (32) appreciated Facebook ‘because you can have contact with your people because people take different paths. And then over there we can have a contact, we can see how they’re doing, and we can keep the friendship, the connectivity, so we can have, you know, contact with people’.

I find WhatsApp positive because there are so many people you can have, so many contacts, you can talk to so many people. It’s so convenient you can share things. So, it’s good. It has a positive impact.

Felipe (18, Brazil)

Just use [Facebook] to get people’s updates, like what they are and how they are, and just remembering things, imagining things, like how these people would be, when you look into their family and their kids ... So, it’s been somewhat blissful.

Sushma (45, India)

The stark contrast between perceptions of news versus platforms is especially meaningful in the context of high-choice media environments where users can decide how to spend their time from plentiful options, and active news consumption cannot be taken for granted. To the degree that news is experienced as irrelevant and unpleasant to consume, it is unlikely to make its way into people’s media routines and habits. At the same time, platform-specific associations may colour how people perceive the information they encounter there, something we return to in chapter four of this report.

2.3 Topic as a key driver of impressions of news

TRUSTING NEWS ABOUT WHAT?

In all four countries, when interviewees described their impressions of news they often did so by focusing specifically on the subject matter or topic of the coverage they encountered. This tendency shaped how they felt about specific pieces of news content and news in general in multiple ways. First, trust was not equally meaningful for news consumption across the board. For example, when Ricardo (20, Brazil) evaluated the trustworthiness of a specific post he came across on Facebook, he remarked, ‘The topic is not that relevant, so I’m not that concerned if it’s reliable or not ... When it’s a post like that, I’m not that much concerned about its trustworthiness.’ Josephine from the UK (32) made a similar point when analysing a post from an unknown source about something that was just a curiosity: ‘I don’t think it makes a difference because, to be honest, I’m just reading it, you know?’ Thus, when there was little at stake, trust was deemed much less imperative.

It also depends on what type of news it is. Is it more sensitive? Or is it worth searching for it? Or is it only informative?

Abhijeet (26, India)

I think everybody has a story to tell, and certain stories are more believable than others. I think this one here is benign enough that I would believe it. You know, if they talk more COVID or politics, I probably would be less likely to believe it without understanding more about it first, but this one here is benign enough that I would accept it as being true.

Jim (66, US)

Second, trust (and distrust) towards news often varied in domain-specific ways; that is, most believed news organisations could be trusted for certain kinds of information but not others. Political stories, in particular, by far generated the most concern compared to other subjects, which was one of the main reasons many said they tended to avoid news. Bárbara (39) from Brazil explained that ‘with regards to news, I don’t usually consume it online or on TV. I’m a bit disconnected from this world, especially if it is politics. I don’t trust anything that is about politics’. Priya (21, India) made a similar distinction, explaining that news ‘Related to politics, I will not trust’. Meanwhile, she was more inclined to trust ‘holiday news, sports news, then [news about] films’. Thus, when politics was involved, participants were much more on guard about what they saw as news outlets’ motives in shaping and framing coverage behind the story.

When you say ‘trust’, it depends. Trusting them for what? So, if I’m looking at a story about the floods down south, do I think they’re reporting that right? Probably. If I’m reading something about statistics that matter to politicians, do I believe it? No, because all the media are owned by the politicians.

Sarah (34, UK)

CONFLATING NEWS ORGANISATIONS WITH WHAT THEY COVER

Interviewees’ comments also revealed slippages between their conceptions of the news media and the politicians they covered. Thus, distrust of politicians, which was widespread among this segment of the population, often extended to the news organisations reporting on them. This is consistent with previous evidence showing that trust in the news media is strongly linked to the way the public looks at political institutions – what Hanitzsch et al. (2017) have referred to as

the ‘trust nexus’. For example, as Radhika (21, India) reflected on politics, she slipped back and forth between attitudes towards governmental affairs and attitudes towards the news media: ‘Politics, I literally don’t trust any news ... I don’t like to watch all those’.

Furthermore, the people we interviewed often conflated the news media in general with the issues they were reporting on. Thus, coverage of topics or public policies that were experienced as, for example, confusing or inconsistent – as has frequently occurred with the COVID-19 pandemic (Toney and Ishack 2020) – often extended to journalists reporting on those subjects.

I think just the COVID situation ... what we’re told by mainstream media, I’m sure 99% is correct, but the government have been proven to lie, so why should I trust what they’re saying? It’s kind of twofold. Should I trust them, or shouldn’t I?

Lucas (32, UK)

Others likewise blamed the news media for what they saw as confusing or changing information, as though journalists themselves must have got it wrong if events overtook their reporting. Habib Mohamed (51, India) explained his frustration with how the media had reported on the upcoming opening of a new bus station, which had failed to materialise: ‘That was instructed by the media. But still now, they are not ready to open [...]. So, media, they keep changing their promises, not only media, but the politicians keep changing.’ He went on to add: ‘The media don’t have the courage to ask why they are changing.’ For this interviewee, perceived inconsistencies in news were, thus, also indicative of complacent reporting that failed to hold those in power to account.

TRUST THAT COMES FROM THE ‘GUT’

In practice, since encounters with news on platforms were often limited, as was interest in the news encountered there, our interviewees often made quick, in-the-moment judgements about the trustworthiness of the information they saw. They often drew on the limited information available to them when they encountered posts or search results, using mental shortcuts to make efficient assessments about what was worth their time. Many interviewees referenced the importance of their ‘gut feeling’ or ‘intuition’ when it came to determining trustworthiness. As Sangeeta (38, India) put it, ‘I am not correct every time, but yes, this is my instinct that shows these news [stories] are not relevant and these are not correct.’ Or as Rosemary (31, US) said, ‘I go with my gut. I’m [a] pretty sensible person.’

Many interviewees also held general impressions about at least some of the familiar news brands they encountered, and these prior associations about news outlets played a major role in shaping what they trusted and distrusted (as emphasised in Toff et al. 2021b). However, participants were not always able to pinpoint why they felt the way they did about these news outlets. Carl (24) from the UK, for example, struggled to provide a reason why he trusted a particular news source on Facebook: ‘Is, like, what I subconsciously think an answer? I don’t think that really is a good answer. I think more, like, it’s what I, over the years, have told myself that is a trustworthy source.’ So, while our interviewees often tried to come up with reasons for evaluating news sources the way they did when asked, some also acknowledged their inability to identify specific reasons.

In much of the remainder of this report we focus on the specific characteristics of news that interviewees paid closest attention to – the factors that influenced those ‘gut feelings’ or instincts about trustworthiness. As we demonstrate in the next section, many of these indicators were upstream from experiences actually using news organisations’ own websites. They involved aspects of the way they encountered news on digital platforms – in fleeting moments, competing for attention with a wide range of other content.

3. Making Snap Judgements About What is Trustworthy

In this section, we examine some of the most common shortcuts interviewees referenced when making assessments about the trustworthiness of the information they encounter while navigating platforms. These strategies – sometimes referred to as ‘heuristics’ in academic studies of how audiences evaluate information credibility (Metzger and Flanagin 2013; Metzger et al. 2010) – help individuals quickly and efficiently sift through the large volumes of information they come across in daily life. These shortcuts are especially important on platforms where information often feels particularly abundant. After all, few people will be inclined to research every single news item or source of information they encounter online. However, a reliance on shortcuts can also lead people to draw conclusions they might not otherwise reach if they were paying closer attention or thinking more analytically about specific sources or pieces of information (Erlich et al. 2021).

We categorise these mental shortcuts in five broad areas: (1) familiarity and brand reputation; (2) social cues; (3) language and tone; (4) visual and information cues; and (5) advertising. (In the next chapter we focus on the sixth area: platform-specific cues.) While participants did occasionally click through to news websites, more frequently their judgements drew on the limited information available to them in the moment as they navigated platforms, far upstream from any content available on news websites themselves. Some of these aspects are within the realm of what news organisations have influence over, although others are largely shaped by the platforms themselves. In the report’s conclusion we discuss some of the implications arising from this distinction.

3.1 Major shortcuts used when making sense of news on platforms

ASSESSING FAMILIARITY AND BRAND REPUTATION

By far the most common shortcut study participants mentioned, especially in the context of encountering information on platforms, was their pre-existing perceptions of a brand’s reputation and how familiar they were with the organisation (see also Toff et al. 2021b). Simply recognising a brand name or logo often boosted perceptions of trustworthiness, particularly when weighed against brands that seemed entirely unknown. As Veronica (40, US) explained, ‘I’m only going to trust names that I’m familiar with or that I know of.’ On the flipside, a lack of familiarity invited greater uncertainty and caution. When participants encountered news from sources they had never heard of before, which happened often for some, they expressed an inclination to ignore the information entirely or automatically distrust it. As Luiza (25, Brazil) explained, ‘I mistrust sites that I have never seen before because I don’t know if they have credible information.’

The most popular one around here you hear of mostly is the Sun – the Sun newspaper, or Wales Online, maybe? But I do find, like, ones you’ve got that are less known, then you don’t really tend to think – you know, you don’t want to read that because nobody really knows them. So, the more well-known the source is, I think you tend to have a little bit more trust in them, if you know what I mean.

Josephine (32, UK)

I'll choose only those which I have heard before, like, I have not heard about the Sky News, so maybe I'll not click on that. Then the Independent, I've not heard about it, so maybe I'll not click on that.

Preeti (22, India)

Familiarity – and the trust it engendered – was often reinforced over time through repeated interactions with a source, whether online or in an offline context. Long-term habitual use of news brands appeared especially conducive to trust, often invoking feelings of security or comfort. Renata (20, Brazil) recounted how she first became acquainted with a particular news organisation: ‘Well, I started to create this habit when I was in high school because the teachers always told us that we should be updated all the time, and then that became a habit. I started to access it every day to try to understand what was going on. And now I do it twice a week.’ On a similar note, explaining her trust of a particular newspaper, Sonali (45, India) explained, ‘Probably I trust that because I have been doing it from childhood. That is why.’

Familiarity could cut both ways, however. In some cases, interviewees held negative perceptions of a brand’s reputation or status based on prior knowledge or experience using it. For example, Lillian (37, UK) described one TV channel she didn’t hold in high regard, saying they ‘just haven’t got the best reputation ... It’s a channel that has most of the soaps on, you know, it’s just a – and loads of adverts and things like that, so they just don’t have the best reputation.’

Some interviewees specified previous experiences encountering questionable information while using particular sources as an important factor in how they felt about those news organisations. John (72, US), for example, explained, ‘My concern is with the information, the fact ... if I see anything that’s absolutely outrageous on a site – and I have – I will note in my head, “Okay this site is bonkers, I don’t ever even want to talk to these idiots”, and they will get written off.’ John cited ‘72 years of experience listening to people babbling’ on television as a reason why he felt confident in his ability to detect what might be true versus an exaggeration.

Many other interviewees, however, described trustworthiness of individual brands based on associations they held about the ‘kinds’ of people they believed used it, which offered a useful shortcut for assessing the apparent quality of the reporting. Jonathan (54, UK), for example, who said he did not trust any news sources, later revised his statement after remembering *The Economist*, which he considered a very reputable news organisation. Based on the job advertisements he had seen in it, he concluded, ‘it’s aiming for a very high-level readership. The letters page, half of them are by serving government ministers all over the world. So, it’s obviously engaged with by people of power and influence.’ Sarah (34) from the UK also made a similar kind of assessment, explaining, ‘The *Independent* and the *Guardian*, from past experiences, tend to be the ones that the more educated people would read. So, I suppose it goes with if you feel the educated people are reading it, then it must be more trustworthy than the *Sun* or the *Daily Star*’.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY

A second related indicator that many referenced as meaningful in shaping judgements about sources on platforms were social cues, especially from family members and friends. These shortcuts were particularly salient when it came to news on Facebook and WhatsApp, where social interaction is central to the platform experience. Previous scholarship has also noted

the importance of social cues, suggesting that social media users judge information credibility in part based on the credibility of the public figures sharing it (Sterrett et al. 2019) or the endorsements of their friends (Anspach 2017). Here we found that participants frequently paid attention to who from their social network had shared news content or commented on it as an indicator of its trustworthiness. As Ajay (21, India) succinctly put it, when evaluating information on Facebook, ‘First I look up on the source – who shared the post ... Even if it is a personal page, it should be trustable.’

For some, when known friends and family members shared information it tended to make that information intrinsically more believable, perhaps increasingly so the closer they were. The opposite could also be true, as many were also quick to discount information they saw coming from particular friends or family members who they disliked or knew regularly shared questionable content. For instance, Jonathan (54, UK) described with irritation a news story shared by a Facebook acquaintance he wasn’t fond of, noting, ‘I call her a “friend”; I don’t really like her.’ When asked if this affected his perception of the news she was sharing, he responded, ‘Definitely.’

I will believe my family members or my close friends ... I get to know whether the news is genuine or not.

Janaki (45, India)

Many interviewees pointed to the importance of specific friends and family members who held either particular expertise or were perceived as being especially rigorous in how they vetted the information they shared. For example, Vidya (37, India) noted that when her sibling shared news, she was certain it could be trusted: ‘Yes, like my brother, I know if he is posting some news, then I trust that it must be already verified. He would never post anything that is not verified.’ Celeste (45, UK) offered a similar explanation: ‘Because I know the person, and I know that person can be trusted, and the person would do some research, not just send any links. She would look into that deeply. Then I would trust it more, based on the person who is sending it.’

It’s pretty straightforward because most of my friends who I follow whose opinions I trust, I let them be the filter for that stuff for me. I figured that out years ago. So, okay, well, Robert always knows what’s up. He’s a lot more engaged and invested in this. I can trust his opinion. So, I like it in that regard. It’s not necessarily that I like the news articles or the organisations themselves. It’s that I like my friends whose opinions I trust to post stuff that I know isn’t BS.

Jerry (42, US)

Social endorsements could play a role even when the individual in question was not someone the interviewee knew previously. As Celeste reasoned, she trusted her friend ‘because I’ve got similar opinions on things’, and that same logic could apply to strangers online. Carl (24, UK), for example, explained his inclination to trust information he came across in a Facebook group he was a member of that focused on a shared interest in music. He did not personally know the other members, but ‘I think because I kind of, like, identify with the people in that, I guess? They’re my age. And what reason have they got to push an agenda for a group that’s solely based around music?’ This notion of peers ‘not having an agenda’ also stood in stark contrast to widespread beliefs many expressed about news organisations imposing their own biases and hidden motives they might have for spinning information to their advantage.

Being reliant on social shortcuts, however, came with its own risks. As Rachel (37, UK) acknowledged, on social media and messaging apps ‘you trust friends’, but that could also be ‘dangerous’ because it was easy to wrongly assume that others had diligently verified the information they shared or reposted when, in fact, ‘not a lot of people dig below the surface’. She added, ‘There’s a couple of times, more than a couple of times, when I’ve not done that, and I’ve really kicked myself for it.’

PAYING ATTENTION TO HEADLINES AND LANGUAGE

A third kind of information generally untrusting audiences paid attention to when making snap judgements about stories they encountered on platforms had to do with the language and tone employed in posts and search results. Given that users often see such limited text, specific word choices in headlines carried a lot of weight. This shortcut was closely tied to concerns about clickbait and sensationalism as well as political bias, which participants were on guard to detect, especially when encountering specific news organisations about which they held pre-existing attitudes. For example, in explaining her distrust of Globo, Renata (20, Brazil) recalled experiences where ‘headlines were too sensationalistic’, prompting her ‘not to consume this kind of content anymore’. Interviewees were often critical of headlines they saw that seemed designed to grab their attention.

I think sometimes it's really obvious. So, I would say, like, Sky News is another one I've noticed who are very dramatic with their headlines. I think any time there's like capital letters in the headline or, you know, a really kind of doomsday headline, I tend to kind of not trust that really so much.

Natalie (35, UK)

Headlines that were perceived as emotionally provocative could also be a red flag – what Habib Mohamed (51, India) described as ‘hot news’ – making many suspicious not only of the accuracy of the information itself but also of the intentions behind the information, whether driven by a political or commercial agenda or both. In the words of Ruben (48, UK), it was important to be on the lookout for ‘sensational sort of words’, adding that language employed to ‘create emotion of one sort or the other, either [to] scare, anger – the more you have of those, the less trustworthy it is’.

The Sun, the Mail, the Express. They're quite sensationalist. So, you can see that their purpose is to, sort of, get clicks or to excite people or scare people. Just, it's all about sensationalism and not necessarily about informing.

Ruben (48, UK)

Another formula I would use to determine what is a very biased news source, I'd look at how are headlines being framed. Or how are, how is the writing being framed? Like, if they're intentionally intending to be incendiary or if they're intentionally written to be very attention-grabbing.

Candy (25, US)

Ironically for a population mostly uninterested in news, who tended to say they scrolled past news on the limited occasions they encountered it, headlines that did get them to stop and pay attention were often seen as intrinsically less trustworthy. As Pedro (51, Brazil) said, ‘The catchier the headline is, I’m more suspicious of it.’ Similarly, Celeste (45, UK) explained, ‘I think

the more boring the heading is, maybe it's more trust[worthy].' This tension echoes concerns we previously heard expressed in roundtable discussions with journalists (Toff et al. 2021a), who worried that the kinds of stories that get attention on platforms may not be the kinds of stories that best build trusting relationships with audiences over time.

To be sure, the focus on language and word choices did not apply strictly to the headlines interviewees saw on platforms. When interviewees did click through to news sites, many also described paying close attention to the same characteristics, which they felt revealed the biases or hidden agendas behind the coverage. For example, as Robbie (57, US) said, 'What kind of rhetoric are they using, right? Do they seem to be fair in how they're presenting it? Or is it all one sided? ... Those are the things I look at.' Many also considered whether the article itself delivered the information the headline had promised. Often, interviewees pointed to past experiences with clickbait as having soured them on clicking on any news. Lucas (32, UK) described what he called 'the clickbait title', where 'the heading doesn't necessarily match the story'. He went on to explain: 'Sometimes I'll read the heading of the story, and it might be really dramatic, and then you actually read into the story there's nothing that much behind it, and they've kind of twisted the heading for clickbait.' Helen (60, US) described a similar kind of experience on 'AOL, for example. When I go on their news, and I've clicked on news things, it's not even talking about what you thought you were going to see.'

Other times, interviewees alluded more broadly to disappointment they felt with articles that left them feeling tricked. Indeed, previous credibility research (Metzger et al. 2010) has emphasised the importance of meeting audience expectations. Shabana (51, India), expressed her frustration with articles labelled as 'breaking news' but where ultimately 'nothing happened'. Sarah (34, UK) recounted an example of clicking on a news story only to realise later it was actually published two years ago: 'What are you publishing that again for now? Is life that boring that you have to keep churning out rubbish?' Any kind of mismatch between the text itself and expectations raised when audiences first encountered the story on platforms were often experienced as a violation of trust.

RELIANCE ON VISUAL AND INFORMATIONAL CUES

Fourth, people spoke about a variety of visual and information cues they relied on in judging the information and the sources they encountered on platforms. The use and choice of images or video was perhaps the most salient visual factor for catching users' attention in the first place, which was a necessary precondition for whether interviewees would even make a judgement about whether the information might be trustworthy. As Jim (66, US) explained, 'I am a visual person, and so if there's imagery, that will catch my eye, and then I'll read the headline. If there's no imagery, I may just run right past it.'

The images themselves were often an important indicator of whether the information was credible. Many inferred on the basis of the images whether or not news organisations had directly witnessed the things they were reporting on. Perhaps more importantly, images offered audiences a way to see events in the news with their own eyes – a point many said was important before they would consider believing it. This sentiment was expressed particularly often among Indian interviewees. As Arjun (26, India) put it, 'I don't trust at all because I trust with my eyes only. But basically, you can say if something is happening in front of our eyes, then I can trust.' Many also appreciated the ability to watch the news unfold in real time.

Michelle (32, US) emphasised what she liked about the cable news channel CNN was that ‘we actually get to see what’s happening ... they’re live and in action’.

I go to web news channels because there are some variations when we are comparing news channels with Google, and there are some masala [dramas] in Google rather than in channels. Of course, they are also providing us the same thing, but there are variations, actually, and we are believing in our eyes only. So, what we can see, we believe in that. So, we can see through TV channels more clearly than Google.

Sangeeta (38, India)

I think you always have to have videos or photos attached to the story. You know that famous saying, ‘a picture speaks a thousand words’. Especially because I don’t really trust the major news outlets, I really like to have a video that someone’s taken on their phone, and they’re actually there, present, at that moment in time. So, it doesn’t matter what the people are telling you, you can take that at face value. This is with your own eyes, and it’s unedited, and it’s the full video.

Lucas (32, UK)

The types of images selected also mattered. Some interviewees viewed illustrations, cartoons, or stock images with more suspicion than actual pictures or images conveying recency. For instance, comparing across various news sources, Guilherme (22, Brazil) noted, ‘All of the others [sources] have an image of this fossil to show us how big this animal was. This is the only one that has a suspicious illustration. It has nothing to do with the animal. So, I would not click on it at all.’ Similarly, in sifting through the results of a COVID-related Google search, Martin (26, UK) acknowledged that although ‘this sounds very superficial of me’, he paid attention to which sources ‘have the best photo’. He noted that two of the sources he had never heard of simply used ‘stock images’ of Boris Johnson, whereas ‘the *Guardian* and *Washington Post* have pictures of, like, nurses and doctors in PPE in the hospital’, which added to his sense of trustworthiness. In other cases, images that appeared next to headlines were sometimes interpreted as a source of bias. Linda (55, US), for example, said she distrusted a particular news item because of the way her state’s governor appeared in the photo. ‘They’re making him look very angry. So just by the angeriness, I kind of go “hmm”. I probably wouldn’t open it.’

Some participants also paid attention to URLs or the presence or absence of links when evaluating information, especially when encountering news on Google. For example, Isabel (28, Brazil) explained her preference for news stories that link to the original source of information: ‘What I can tell is that, most of the times, the news pages are trustworthy, and when they’re trustworthy, there is a link there that is going to take us to the original website.’ Sarah (34, UK) made a similar point when explaining her trust of a tabloid news story about a restaurant owner that had accumulated a huge debt. She explained that the story ‘even gives you a link to his Companies House [a UK executive agency that registers company information] records, so you can go and actually see the debt and everything like that, so I suppose on this occasion I would trust it because it’s linking to what I would call a reputable source’. For many others, specific URLs were read as more legitimate or official than others, especially those with ‘.gov’ – alluding to government websites – or ‘.org’ URLs, which as Rebeca (23, Brazil) said, made her ‘feel safer; they convey reliability. I trust this information to be true’.

Visual indicators were important signals of trustworthiness, not only on platforms but also when users clicked through to news websites. Interviewees often focused on the appearance and design of sites as an important proxy for quality. Adriana (26, Brazil), for example, contrasted her experience using one website she described as confusing – ‘No, I don’t like the layout, the design of their website. I really can’t tell you about it. It’s too much information that I see when I access it.’ – with one she liked to use – ‘You enter, and the story is already there. So, you have different categories, but let’s say I want politics. I just click there.’ Often, however, appearance and layout went beyond usability and served as a proxy for professionalism and quality, or the lack thereof. Veronica (40, US) suggested that ‘it’s kind of hard to explain it, but, for me, it’s just something about the layout of the article. It just kind of seems a little off’. Melissa (42, UK) likewise explained how she might be inclined to trust an unknown site she had encountered during a Google search based on ‘the way it’s laid out, and there’s lots of writing and paragraphs and headlines, pictures’. Peter also alluded to the design qualities of a website as an indicator of trustworthiness:

There’s just a sense of – it looks quite amateur would probably be what I would say on that point. You can always tell if the site is maybe not the most professional by the image layout and what they use and the title they use.

Peter (24, UK)

The inclusion of specific kinds of information on news websites could also reassure interviewees that a news source was more trustworthy, even if they had never heard of the organisation before. Many said they looked at whether articles presented numbers or figures or data as evidence, even if they were unsure where that information was coming from. Veronica (40, US), for example, described how a site she was evaluating but unsure about ‘looks very scientific with the numbers and all the findings and stuff’, which made her more inclined to think ‘it could be a trustworthy site’. Ruben (48, UK) expressed greater trust in a website belonging to the British Chambers of Commerce because ‘that’s got lots of figures, so that seems reliable’. Other times, people viewed numbers and figures as a defence against bias and opinion, seeing numbers as raw ‘facts’ that would allow them to make up their own minds, rather than interpretations that could be biased and imposed on them. Abdul (41, India) explained that he paid attention to whether information ‘is more related to the facts and figures or the numbers that support that’, adding that ‘if you are giving me something in terms of the conclusion, then I would like to know the reasoning behind it, or how have you reached that’. For him, seeing underlying numbers allowed him to make his own assessment of the information – a preference many interviewees repeatedly expressed.

ADVERTISING AS AN INDICATOR

Lastly, advertising played an important role in the way study participants interpreted the trustworthiness of the information they encountered. Most often, interviewees pointed to whether posts, messages, or search results were sponsored as a highly salient signal for whether or not to pay attention to and trust it. Most frequently, people viewed advertising as something to be skipped over or ignored, like Pranav (28, India), who said he would ‘neglect the first two websites’ in his Google search results ‘because it’s written “Ad”, so it is promoted websites.’

Sponsored posts were often approached as intrinsically suspect given that they were seen as profit-driven, rather than presented for their reliability or relevance. As Rachel (37, UK) said,

‘I hate how they push ads up. I don’t like that because you have to scroll so far to get down to get to any, sort of, trusted sources. I say trusted sources, but anything that’s not been paid for, essentially.’ Other times, general perceptions of platforms as being dominated by advertising made interviewees broadly sceptical of how information was prioritised and presented on them. As Candy (25, US) noted, ‘Google is a private company. Google can be paid to be the first result you see. So, for certain subjects I would have to recall that it is very easy to pay to be in the first Google results.’ When she saw a story from the *Wall Street Journal* among the first results in one of her searches, Candy concluded they had ‘obviously’ paid to be first – ‘I don’t know how much to be the first search result’ – but it made her resistant to relying on it without cross-checking with multiple alternatives. On a similar note, Manish discussed how Google’s revenue model impacted the way content was privileged on the platform:

Say for example, you have a very good article on certain stuff, you know, and your article is a paid article. But you don’t do much of promotion because you believe that your content is very good, and people will get into that. But there is somebody who has the same article but written differently, but he’s using some social media stuff to promote it. And anybody searching for it gets into his article first, then yours, because of the promotion.

Manish (48, India)

On the rare occasion when interviewees did click through to news sites, advertising was also mentioned as a relevant indicator for how reliable a news organisation might be. Multiple people alluded to the presence of advertising or characteristics about the ads (e.g. how distracting they were, whether they were pop-ups) as important clues for determining trustworthiness. Some were particularly concerned with how news organisations were funding themselves, like Robbie (57, US), who noted, ‘I would look at ads, you know, who is – who is supporting them ... who is backing these folks?’ Even when acknowledging that third parties may be driving the selection of advertising, it impacted people’s experiences using websites. Such was the case of Peter (24, UK), who discussed his greater distrust of a local news outlets with particular types of advertising: ‘If there’s like gambling adverts and things like that, I would trust the information less I would say.’ He added:

I mean, it’s not something I’m ever interested in, gambling. At that point they’re just doing it to get clicks, and they’re paying for advertising – sorry they’re earning money from your click-through every time, which I know everyone does, but it becomes less about giving you the news at that point.

Peter (24, UK)

In this section we have summarised five of the main shortcuts people described to us when making evaluations about news and information they encountered on platforms. Most often, these shortcuts involve making use of the limited information they have at their disposal about sources in their Facebook feeds, WhatsApp groups, and Google search results. Some of these shortcuts involve information news organisations have influence over; others depend on aspects of the ways platforms organise and display information. In the next section we focus in more detail on a sixth type of shortcut rooted in platform-specific characteristics, which also played a significant role in how study participants made sense of what they saw.

4. How Different Platforms Affect Judgements About What to Trust

In the previous section, we described some general shortcuts people used across digital platforms in making sense of what information they believed they could trust. In this section, we zoom in on each platform individually to describe how certain platform-specific features shaped people's judgements about what to trust. As Sundar (2008) has argued, the specific characteristics of individual digital media technologies can convey distinct cues about information that become relevant for people's judgements about what is and what is not credible. Different characteristics of platforms, including particular functionalities, the way information gets presented, or metrics about who likes, shares, or comments on stories can each have an influence over how audiences perceive what they see. Here, we focus on some of the cues most frequently mentioned by users of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Google.

As platforms that are intrinsically about social interaction, Facebook and WhatsApp stood out in some distinct ways from Google. On these platforms, users often focused primarily on the specific social information these platforms provide around what other people think about the information presented. Facebook and WhatsApp labels were also significant for some interviewees, although these were sometimes interpreted in disparate ways. Meanwhile, on Google, participants often alluded to the importance of the platform's own ranking of information when it came to evaluating what was trustworthy and worth paying attention to. We also found that participants tended to appreciate the ability to compare across multiple sources of information when using the search engine, which provided a greater sense of control and confidence as they felt able to 'balance' across various sources and make up their own minds. For that reason, many interviewees who used Facebook or WhatsApp also mentioned relying on Google as a supplementary tool, turning to the search engine to verify or cross-check information they encountered elsewhere.

These points shed light on certain aspects that make information consumption on each platform unique in ways that may be meaningful for trust and distrust in the news that users encounter there. In addition, these insights also underscore the extent to which platform design decisions may have tangible consequences – intended or unintended – on how many people navigate the digital information environment.

4.1 How platform-specific features shape judgements

FACEBOOK

As noted previously, many study participants who used Facebook emphasised the importance of their peer networks. What their friends and family, as well as more distant acquaintances, appeared to find relevant and worth sharing offered a useful cue for individuals to assess trustworthiness. Additional kinds of social cues were specific to the Facebook platform – many of them enabled by the social network itself. This is consistent with previous research suggesting peer commentary may shape how people evaluate information on social media more generally (e.g. Ali et al. 2022; Boot et al. 2021).

Perhaps the most common example of these Facebook-specific elements were user comments on individual posts about news, which several interviewees said they paid attention to as cues or indicators about whether the information in the post itself could be trusted. Elis (33, Brazil) noted, ‘There are times when I read the comments’, which she used to determine whether or not something was trustworthy. Similarly, Neha (31, India) explained one strategy she used for identifying fake websites: ‘[The] foremost thing I take a look at [is] the comments. In that, the people used to mention, “I have already gone through this website, and it is fake”.’

Social commentary about the quality of news on social media more generally also had an impact on how some participants thought about even the professionally produced news they encountered there. When asked if he had heard any criticism about Facebook, Casimiro (40, Brazil), for example, alluded to ‘fake news’, which led him to believe the platform was ‘not that trustworthy’ and ‘doesn’t convey that much reliability’, reinforcing the notion that it was important to approach all news content he saw on Facebook with distrust. Indeed, previous research has also found that popular discourse about fake news may, in and of itself, decrease trust in news media (Tandoc et al. 2021).

Others mentioned drawing on the perceived expertise of personal acquaintances who followed a particular news source as a possible clue for its trustworthiness. Since Facebook shows users which friends follow pages, several described making use of this information when examining sources they were less familiar with. Carmen (27, UK) explained, ‘I do think seeing if I have mutual friends that like or follow that group or that news source. That often would indicate if it’s trustworthy or not.’ She added that this was especially the case ‘if it was friends who are very into politics or very into serious matters or whatever or have a serious job or whatever it might be’, who she viewed as especially good judges of reliability. In cases like this, observing that an acquaintance followed a given page was read as an endorsement of the source, which boosted evaluations of it. Curiously, when reviewing the Facebook news tab earlier in the interview, Carmen discovered that she followed a news organisation she had no recollection of having followed and of which she didn’t know enough about to say whether or not it was trustworthy.

Others paid attention to information the platform provides about how popular sources of information tend to be with all users. Several noted using the number of ‘likes’ and other Facebook metrics such as the number of views videos had received as indicators of popularity, which for some engendered a greater sense of trust, a reflection of a perceived ‘wisdom of the crowd’. Indeed, previous research has found evidence of ‘bandwagon effects’ when it comes to evaluations of news, whereby people tend to be influenced by the reactions of others (Xu 2013).

The quantification of these interactions on the platform in effect invites users to treat them as proxies for, if not outright trustworthiness, then at least what is or is not worth their time. Douglas (39, Brazil), for example, explained, ‘I see that there is a high number of views. I think that the more views they get there, the more trustworthy they are.’ Similarly, Sunita (32, India) expressed scepticism about a source she saw ‘because if I open the page then only nineteen people have liked it’, a number that did not inspire trust. Others used platform metrics in more elaborate ways; for instance, considering the proportion of different kinds of reactions (e.g. ‘likes’ versus angry reactions) as gauges of quality. When Lucas (32, UK) was asked about

factors he paid attention to when trying to figure out whether a news outlet was trustworthy, he referenced the complex mix of information about sources the platform provides, including ‘who follows them, the comments’ as well as the ‘number of viewers, number of subscribers, the amount of posts that they’ve got, even how many likes they get as opposed to angry emojis, you know, just simple, easy things like that really’.

In addition to information about how others think about sources and how popular their content might be, labels were another feature mentioned, but only by a handful of interviewees. These included both verification and warning labels. Abhijeet (26, India), expressed his trust in a particular news brand he encountered ‘because this source has a blue tick, which means it’s verified through Facebook’. Carmen (27, UK) also passed judgement on one source she encountered on Facebook, reasoning: ‘It seems trustworthy. It has the verification tick next to it, and quite a lot of people that – I have mutual friends that have liked the page.’ For these participants, the verification label in itself signified that the source was more trustworthy. It is worth noting, however, that Facebook itself describes these labels as conferring only that the page or profile is the authentic presence of the public figure or brand it represents, rather than signifying an evaluation or endorsement of the quality of information posted by the account.

Meanwhile, two other participants explicitly discussed Facebook’s warning labels on content but did so in ways that suggested these labels might not always have their intended effect. These interviewees were suspicious of the labels themselves, which sparked as many questions about Facebook’s intentions as they did about the legitimacy of the information itself. Patricia (70, UK), who was highly cynical of the mainstream media and had had her own content flagged in the past, causing her great frustration, said that, if anything, she trusted news that contained Facebook warnings ‘more than anything’, referencing a man in Germany she had heard about who ‘goes on Facebook and only reads the ones that’ve been censored because obviously that will be ones that are hiding the truth’. Lucas (32, UK) expressed a similar sentiment when recalling a Facebook label on a news source that he had previously found credible:

I know Facebook recently started doing this thing on when you get your news, and it says Russian Controlled State News or something. And I think it’s inthenews.com⁸ that it came up for, and I always used to trust that site. And then when it came up saying ‘Russian sponsored’, I was like, well do I not trust them because they’re Russian, or do I not trust Facebook for saying it’s Russian? And then you get that idea of who to trust, who not to trust.

Lucas (32, UK)

WHATSAPP

As with Facebook, WhatsApp users often acknowledged turning to their social contacts to help make sense of the news they encountered, but often these kinds of interactions were more intimate on the messaging app. Shashi (46, India), for example, who frequently repeated during his interview that he didn’t ‘blindly trust’ any kind of news, nonetheless said he was more inclined to trust direct communication on the messaging platform than information coming from news organisations: ‘So I don’t trust newspapers or news channels on this. If it is going to be true, I’ll get a message through WhatsApp.’

⁸ We believe Lucas was referring to the Facebook page called ‘In the NOW’, which Facebook labels as ‘Russia state-controlled media’. The media company behind ‘In the NOW’ sued Facebook precisely over this label. For more see: <https://mashable.com/article/facebook-maffick-in-the-now-russian-state-controlled-label>.

A uniquely important part of the experience of using WhatsApp for interviewees in India and Brazil involved their participation in different kinds of groups. While some were only active in a handful, many others were part of a great number of groups – even dozens – some of which involved people they did not know personally. Consequently, the information that circulated on WhatsApp groups was evaluated differently depending on what users thought about the other group members (see also Swart et al. 2019). For example, some interviewees saw family members they conversed with on WhatsApp as more trustworthy than more distant acquaintances or strangers. As Padma (45, India) explained, ‘Not all equally, some groups I trust more. I give main importance to my [family] members and friends, not my music group or the sellers selling saris ... I won’t trust anything.’ However, others doubted the abilities of their family members to vet information and used that as a shortcut for rejecting whatever they shared as not credible.

If it is a university group, like one of my subject groups, I have no doubts [to trust it]. But if it is something in my family group, then I have to do some more research because I am not too sure because they will share just anything. There were times when somebody in my family shared a link, and it was a virus. So, my family group, I do not trust everything that is there, but one specific group like my university groups then I do.

Antônia (41, Brazil)

WhatsApp groups could also be a problematic source of news and information because, at least for some interviewees, communication on the platform often resulted in family conflict and infighting. Some study participants also expressed irritation at other people adding them to groups they were not interested in joining or receiving large volumes of content and spam, which rendered those groups virtually impossible to sift through. Vidya (37, India) explained, ‘It’s like my WhatsApp has 999+ messages all the time. WhatsApp is always full of messages. No matter how many I read, it again reaches to this number.’

I find it weird when you become part of a group that you never wanted to be there. You know, I don’t want to be part of that specific group, and to exit that group to get out of that situation, you have to find excuses and things, so I don’t like when that happens.

Joana (50, Brazil)

One defining feature of WhatsApp – both its technical architecture and the way it is taken up by users – reflected in the Brazil and India interviews is the sheer variety of message formats the platform facilitates beyond text exchanges, ranging from images, video, and audio to links and PDF files, among others. This variety means that information on WhatsApp can arrive in many different formats beyond mere links and headlines. Vidya (37, India), for example, described a news story that had been shared with her that consisted of a screenshot of an Instagram post of a newspaper story, which she ultimately deemed trustworthy because of the reputation of the newspaper. She also mentioned that ‘if they are messages which are typed by someone, then I especially don’t trust them’, preferring the content that had been repurposed from elsewhere as more likely to be authentic. Some, like João (32, Brazil), expressed his preference for news delivered in formats other than text. ‘I don’t read much. I would rather listen to audio. I don’t pay attention to written conversations much. I listen to the audio that somebody sends me, so I get a grasp of what’s happening in the conversation,’ he explained.

However, this information can be especially difficult to cross-check or verify when it lacks links to external sources. And, as Beatriz (29, Brazil) explained, it can also leave users more susceptible to believing misinformation, especially those lacking the set of skills necessary to evaluate and interrogate it. Assessing her father's WhatsApp use with some concern, she explained, 'I noticed that, like my father, he barely can read and write. He only uses audio messages, so news for him tends to be more trustworthy because he doesn't know where it came from. So, it's much more likely that he will believe in anything he receives from anyone.' Sonali (45, India) described a disappointing experience encountering a news item in the form of a PDF on WhatsApp that 'seemed to be so authentic' but later turned out to be a prank.

Given that many users were concerned about scams via WhatsApp, some were particularly reluctant to click on links taking them to websites outside the WhatsApp platform. Shashi (46, India), for instance, commented, 'If I see a link that leads me to a different application, I'm not going to trust it.' Indeed, virtually all of the WhatsApp users we spoke to said they had received misinformation via WhatsApp in the past. Many also struggled to identify where news being shared with them on WhatsApp was coming from, inviting them to take a more sceptical approach to information in general on or off the platform.

Yes, that has happened a lot of times on WhatsApp, I guess. They share links, and there is news that is not really true. In this scenario, most of the time this has been related to COVID, but at times also they post or they share links that are not really true. So yeah, WhatsApp is, I believe, one of those sources where information shouldn't be trusted, and I don't trust the information that has been shared there at once.

Preeti (22, India)

On WhatsApp, it's not everyone who is concerned about checking information. It's not everyone who's worried about the trustworthiness of what they share. So, at times, you get a lot of information from people who just read the headline of a piece of news, and they didn't check.

Cristiana (33, Brazil)

Labels on WhatsApp played only a minor role as a shortcut for assessing the reliability of information interviewees encountered. Very few said they had even noticed labels on content on the platform, such as the indicator for whether content had been 'forwarded many times' that WhatsApp began using in 2019 in connection with capping how many times messages could be forwarded. Described as an effort to 'slow the spread of rumours, viral messages, and fake news',⁹ those who had seen such labels tended to interpret them in somewhat idiosyncratic ways. Vidya (37, India), for instance, believed the 'forwarded many times' label was less a warning about potential misinformation and instead saw such labels as signifying popularity, reasoning that 'if it is forwarded so many times, then people must have seen something good in those messages, and that's why the message is being forwarded many times'.

Others believed the label implied that the message forwarded was important, such as Beatriz (29, Brazil) who explained that 'if people are getting a piece of information that's been shared by many, it's important because it's telling me that everyone is getting aware of that'. Others, like Aarti (26, India), however, did see the label as a red flag: 'Definitely, when something is

⁹ See <https://faq.whatsapp.com/general/chats/about-forwarding-limits>.

forwarded so many times, it is either for promotional purposes or it is a propaganda ... I will definitely trust it less.' Thus, like labels on Facebook, labels on WhatsApp were interpreted in varying ways from one person to the next.

GOOGLE

Unlike Facebook and WhatsApp, Google contains fewer explicit signals about what other people think about the content they encountered there. Other platform characteristics instead were particularly salient when users described how they navigated information on the platform.

First, participants often alluded to Google's rankings of content as an important indicator of quality, typically preferring the first few results over others, in line with previous research (e.g. Bar-Ilan et al. 2009; Hargittai et al. 2010). For example, Sukumar (66, India) explained that when searching with Google, 'Definitely something on top is a priority. But you tend to go down depending upon your time and interest in that particular subject.' Similarly, Preeti (22, India) noted, 'I'll definitely go with the first thing that is showing up. If we were not discussing what is the source, I would have read the first thing that was coming up, and then ultimately I would have scrolled down.' On a similar note, Rosemary (31, US), believed that Google 'tries to give you the reputable sources first, um, the ones that have peer reviews, by government sources, by experts in the field'.

But for a handful of interviewees, Google's ordering of search results also engendered suspicion. They were sceptical about how the search engine chose which search results to privilege, and especially what commercial interests might have factored into these decisions. Bárbara (39, Brazil) suggested that the selection of search results may be 'somehow manipulative', especially when it favoured large news organisations she was suspicious of. Varun (36, US) also questioned whether 'maybe, like, somebody is paying them [Google]; so based on that they can bring forward the information'.

Second, interviewees often described information on Google as more trustworthy than information encountered in other places, perhaps in large part because they held generally positive views about Google as a platform. Luiza (25, Brazil) reasoned that 'Google is a reliable source. And if Google is showing a piece of news, I believe that I should trust that. It is to be trusted'. In a similar vein, Sonali (45, India) noted that when looking for information: 'I'll just go to the Google search engine. That's one trustworthy – I think I have made up in my mind that this is what I can get correct information from.'

This favourable perception of Google's trustworthiness was often less about beliefs in the platform's vetting of the information it presented – although some expressed such beliefs. Instead, more often, it was linked to the way Google allowed users to compare easily across multiple sources of information at the same time. This feature helped people feel more empowered and in control. Melissa (42) from the UK pointed out, 'There's a broader choice of information on Google which I think is good. Rather if you just go to one website, the BBC or the *Guardian*, then you've just got that source of information. Whereas if you type in a general quote or question then it gives you a broad source of information.' Sergio (18) from Brazil made a similar point, noting, 'I would say that on Google, people can be more reassured. You have more options there, you have more options of places to go, sources.' Seeing a news story confirmed across multiple sources, as users could do on Google, thus added to their confidence in the information they were encountering.

Well, Google's got lots of different news outlets on it so ... in that way I think it's like Apple News, like that's got lots of different news outlets on it, so I think maybe it's good to have, yes, it's good to read a range of things because you might get a more balanced view.

Natalie (35, UK)

Furthermore, interviewees frequently talked about using Google defensively in response to encounters with questionable sources of information on other platforms, investigating information or sources they were unsure about. Pranav (28, India) explained that, on Google, 'If you want to cross-verify anything, you can easily do that – but you can't do that on a news channel or some print media.' As Casimiro (40, Brazil) explained, 'You come across something that you think is a bit too much, you check other sources. You go to Google to check up because nowadays, at first glance, you cannot trust everything.' He later added an example: 'Today, I saw this pill, this Pfizer pill to cure COVID. I went to Google to check, and I saw different sources saying the same. So, I came to the conclusion that that piece of news is reliable.' Similarly, discussing her evaluation of an unknown news site, Veronica (40, US) suggested that after examining the website, 'If I wanted to further go in-depth with it, I would just Google the site, and, you know, see what came up about the site.'

That said, the wide range of options available on Google also led some participants to express a sense of being overwhelmed. Some were uncertain about how to navigate the choices they faced when searching. During interviews themselves, it also became clear that some struggled to identify where information was coming from, particularly with respect to information the search engine highlights and excerpts, apart from its search results. These experiences serve as clear reminders that not all individuals feel equipped to engage in practices like cross-checking or comparing across sources that others so highly value.

Oh, it can get you confused. It's too much information. Too much information. If you don't stop to read piece by piece, you'll be confused.

Bárbara (39, Brazil)

5. Conclusion

In this report, we have examined how individuals who lack trust in most professional news organisations in their countries navigate the information they encounter on digital platforms. We find that in their everyday uses of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Google, (a) participants often do not encounter much news at all, and (b) what news they do encounter, they typically draw on limited information, making in-the-moment ‘snap judgements’ on the basis of a variety of shortcuts about the media landscape. Some of the cues study participants said they paid attention to varied depending on the platform; others were factors that news organisations have some influence over, such as the tone of their headlines and images that accompany them. But, overall, we highlight a set of characteristics that are most typically upstream from the way news outlets present their work on their own websites. While reputations for engaging in high quality, fair, and rigorous reporting certainly matter for the way audiences think about what to trust, interactions with brands online are often deeply shaped by how platforms prioritise and present information – specifically the limited prominence given to individual news organisations’ branding (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2018), how posts get shared and endorsed by other users, and the particular ways news outlets engage with audiences in these spaces. Ultimately, the design decisions made by platforms meaningfully shape which cues people have access to and are most likely to draw on when using their products and services.

This report focuses on a very specific population of platform users who lack trust in most brands in their countries and tend to be less interested in politics – a group that is often neglected from studies of news audiences and rarely the target of most news organisation engagement initiatives. Audiences who are more interested in news may hold much more crystallised views about individual news brands. However, what we have observed among this group holds important implications for building trust in news among audiences more broadly.

As we have pointed out elsewhere in this report, a reliance on cues or shortcuts when navigating information online is sensible given the scale of information more broadly that many routinely sift through. However, these strategies are far from infallible. Indeed, one could imagine a scenario in which a person encounters a low-quality news source frequently enough on a platform that it seems familiar and thus more trustworthy, or where a historically credible news brand develops into something else entirely. Likewise, images and video, so often cited as a cue for authenticity, are easily manipulated. Videos from past events are recycled and presented as new; images are decontextualised or doctored. This is a pertinent reminder of how certain heuristics can also be leveraged by those with less virtuous intentions.

Not all of the shortcuts described in this report are created equal either. Indeed, having a clear sense of the reputation of one or many news organisations likely provides individuals with more specific and elaborate evaluations of the brands they encounter online. Those who lack trust in most news, or who lack knowledge about the different journalistic standards employed by news outlets, may be more likely to rely on evaluations based on the use of photography or the number of likes on a post. As such, effectively navigating information online benefits from – and to a degree, presupposes – certain kinds of knowledge (the familiarity with brands and how they may differ from each other) and skills (when cross-checking information). In other words, those who are unfamiliar with (m)any brands and lack the skills to make expert use of

platforms in combination, may not be as well-equipped to sift through what they find compared to some of their peers, even if they have the same instincts. While platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp make it easier for people to draw on their friends' and families' expertise as a complement to or substitute for their own, skills and knowledge are unequally distributed among the public, often in systematic ways. Those perhaps most in need of assistance navigating information online may be least likely to be connected to others with the know-how to help them effectively.

Publishers and journalists reading this report will surely note that many of the shortcuts described here involve the presentation of information in spaces they may feel they have little influence over. Indeed, the in-the-moment, snap judgements we observed interviewees making tend to be far upstream from experiences interacting with news organisations directly or many of the steps publishers are taking around transparency or other aspects of their editorial practices. That does put an onus on platforms to consider more carefully the role played by their design decisions and technologies in shaping users' evaluations of news. This is a complicated task, given how platform labels often aren't noticed, seem to backfire among certain audience segments, or get interpreted quite differently from one person to the next. Understanding better how these labels or other visual information are interpreted, especially across cultural contexts, is imperative, just as the differential impact of, for example, giving brands greater prominence on platforms calls for more research. Brands that are more divisive or that hold less than stellar reputations – justifiably or not – may not benefit from such changes.

Other aspects, however, are well within the sphere of news organisations' influence, just perhaps not typically at the centre of most efforts to cultivate trust in news. While engagement initiatives like those we previously highlighted (Toff et al. 2021a) may be important strategies for improving trust with certain audience segments, it is unlikely they will even reach untrusting audiences like those interviewed for this report – those who are most indifferent towards news. Reaching these audiences may require more sustained and consistent efforts around branding and tending more carefully to the precise ways in which stories are exhibited in digital spaces, from the images that appear alongside headlines and the mix of topics that get distributed, to the tone and language employed in the short snippets of text that users encounter in fleeting moments.

There are distinct trade-offs here. What is needed is a recognition that, when it comes to trust in news, the interests of platforms, publishers, and the public are not always in alignment. Platforms generally want to offer their users variety, and in an environment that foregrounds their own branding through design and user experience. Individual publishers, in contrast, generally want to stand out from this variety, to attract people to their news specifically, not just any news or information. Finally, members of the public fundamentally aren't interested in platforms' or publishers' interests – they simply seek content or connections that let them get on with their lives. Trust and trustworthiness are not always central considerations for this, and, at least among our respondents, neither is news, whether encountered on platforms or elsewhere.

For publishers who want to reach people, these audience preferences are challenging. Competing for attention on platforms saturated with content more entertaining than news may

not be the place to build a reputation for sober, detached journalism. At the same time, most publishers recognise the need to build relationships with new audiences in the places where they increasingly spend their time. As we previously wrote (Toff et al. 2021a), news outlets must decide with whom they want to prioritise building trust. Do they seek to deepen trust with those who already see the value of their work? Or do they cultivate a broader trust with even those most resistant to the practice of journalism? Except for those organisations with a remit to serve the entire public, there are few incentives around engaging in such a broad manner. But there are also clear risks that arise when news outlets opt out of doing so. Many others are more than willing to fill that void, and some of them have proven adept at using (or even abusing) the commercial and distribution opportunities that platforms – Facebook, WhatsApp, and Google included – provide to do so.

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Technical Appendix: Research Methods

In this technical appendix, we provide additional information about the screening process and the structure and focus of the interviews we conducted.

The screening process

We worked with two independent survey firms – Inteligência em Pesquisa e Consultoria (IPEC) in Brazil and Internet Research Bureau (IRB) in India, the UK, and the US – to recruit adult participants (18 years and older) from online panels and determine who fit the study’s eligibility parameters.

Aside from seeking general balance across geographic areas and demographics (including gender, age, race, and religion [in India]), participants were selected with (a) below-average interest in politics relative to others in their country, (b) below-average trust in news, and (c) regular use of one of the three designated platforms. Both the questions used and the cut-offs for inclusion were based on findings of a prior study (Toff et al. 2021c), where we initially identified the characteristics of ‘generally untrusting’ participants in each of the countries.

Political interest was measured by asking ‘How interested, if at all, would you say you are in politics?’ with responses measured on a five-point scale from ‘extremely interested’ to ‘not at all interested.’¹⁰ Trust in news was measured by asking participants ‘Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from the following’ with 15 different news organisations in their countries separately enumerated. Those who said they ‘somewhat’ or ‘completely’ trusted a below-average number of news brands were included as eligible.¹¹ The screener also asked respondents about their typical use of digital platforms: ‘How often do you use the following for any purpose (i.e. for work/leisure, etc.)? This should include access from any device (desktop, laptop, tablet or mobile) and from any location (home, work, internet café or any other location)’, focusing on Facebook and Google in all four countries and WhatsApp in Brazil and India. Participants who said they used at least one of these platforms ‘2–3 days a week’ or more frequently were deemed eligible to participate. While some participants regularly used more than one platform, each interview primarily focused on only one platform.

We included ten study participants per platform per country for a total of 100 interviews. Due to the inclusion of WhatsApp in only two of the countries, more interviews were conducted in Brazil (N = 30) and India (N = 30) than in the UK (N = 20) and the US (N = 20).

¹⁰ Due to differences in response patterns by country, the cut-off for eligibility varied across the countries. Those who responded that they were ‘somewhat interested’, ‘not very interested’, or ‘not at all interested’ were deemed eligible in the UK and the US, whereas in Brazil and India only those who responded ‘not very interested’ or ‘not at all interested’ were included.

¹¹ Due to differences by country, the cut-off for eligibility on this measure also varied across the countries. In Brazil, eligible respondents trusted three or fewer brands. In India, the cut-off was seven brands. And in the UK and the US, it was four and two, respectively. Trusting a below average number of brands did not necessarily mean respondents explicitly distrusted the remaining brands, as some also stated that they had never heard of several of the brands listed. The specific brands included in the screener are available in our previous report (Toff et al. 2021c).

Individuals who matched our participation criteria received a follow-up invitation to participate and were offered further documentation about the study. Before each interview, the firms we partnered with also ensured that participants were able to connect to the videoconferencing service and use it while navigating digital platforms, given that this was one of the tasks required during the interviews. Participants were also offered monetary compensation for their time and provided informed consent in accordance with procedures reviewed by the University of Oxford's Research Ethics Committee (Approval Reference: R72293).

Details on the interviews and data analysis

This study employed a qualitative methodology, which is not intended to provide generalisable findings but rather to offer an in-depth understanding of how people think about and understand their daily practices and sense-making around media use, especially news. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were employed in this study, which allowed us to explore several consistent topics and themes while providing sufficient flexibility to cater follow-up questions based on participants' responses. This flexible approach was especially important given that a portion of the interviews was dedicated to understanding how study participants used platforms in their everyday lives – contexts that varied considerably across respondents.

Interviews were conducted entirely by members of our research team in Portuguese (in Brazil), in Hindi (in India), or in English (in the UK and the US, as well as in India). Interviews were conducted virtually using videoconferencing software, lasting typically between 40 and 60 minutes. When possible, we used both audio and video to facilitate both verbal and nonverbal communication, although some interviews only used audio given technological limitations or participant preferences. All interviews were transcribed and, where relevant, translated to English for analysis.

All interviews included a core set of themes focusing on general media use and habits (especially news and social media use), importance (or lack thereof) of news in daily life, trust in news (including examples of sources people did and did not trust and why, and strategies or logics for determining what sources are or are not trustworthy), and degree of interest in politics and why. The second part of each interview centred on a single platform of interest (Facebook, Google, or WhatsApp), beginning with general questions about their use of that specific platform and the extent to which they encountered news there, in addition to certain platform-specific questions (e.g. use of groups and interpretations of the 'forwarded many times' label in WhatsApp).

Next, we asked participants to open the platform (on their computer or mobile phone, however they ordinarily would) and walk us through their typical use of it. Participants were asked to describe the things they saw on their screens item by item. When encountering news-related items (if this occurred during interviews, which was not always the case) we asked follow-up questions about the perceived trustworthiness of the information and what things they paid attention to in evaluating it. Given the differences between platforms and how people used them, this portion of the interview required greater flexibility and attentiveness to platform-specific features. After observing how people typically used and made sense of the information they encountered on the platform, when possible, we also tried to include tasks to prompt

encounters with news, for instance, by asking participants to visit the news or pages tab on Facebook or asking participants to search for a news-related topic on Google and describe what they found, what they might click on, and why. These tasks were intended to further our understanding of news-related evaluations, even if such encounters with news rarely ordinarily occurred for many individuals. Before ending the interviews, we also typically concluded with a set of questions to better understand how well participants felt able to distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy information and how they described going about doing so.

Interview transcripts were analysed by the research team using NVivo software. A set of recurring themes were identified based on a preliminary reading of the interviews. This list was then amended and refined in an iterative process as the team discussed their independent observations of the transcripts. This process produced a final set of shared themes (or 'codes'), which the team then used to comb through the interview transcripts and highlight key illustrative excerpts.

RISJ PUBLICATIONS

SELECTED BOOKS

Hearts and Minds: Harnessing Leadership, Culture, and Talent to Really Go Digital
Lucy Kueng

Worlds of Journalism: Journalistic Cultures Around the Globe
Thomas Hanitzsch, Folker Hanusch, Jyotika Ramaprasad, and Arnold S. de Beer (eds)
(published with Columbia University Press)

NGOs as Newsmakers: The Changing Landscape of International News
Matthew Powers (published with Columbia University Press)

Global Teamwork: The Rise of Collaboration in Investigative Journalism
Richard Sambrook (ed)

Journalism and the NSA Revelations: Privacy, Security and the Press
Risto Kunelius, Heikki Heikkilä, Adrienne Russell and Dmitry Yagodin (eds) (published with I.B.Tauris)

Something Old, Something New: Digital Media and the Coverage of Climate Change
James Painter et al.

Journalism in an Age of Terror
John Lloyd (published with I.B.Tauris)

The Right to Be Forgotten: Privacy and the Media in the Digital Age
George Brock (published with I.B.Tauris)

The Kidnapping of Journalists: Reporting from High-Risk Conflict Zones
Robert G. Picard and Hannah Storm (published with I.B.Tauris)

Innovators in Digital News
Lucy Kueng (published with I.B.Tauris)

Local Journalism: The Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media
Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (ed) (published with I.B.Tauris)

Journalism and PR: News Media and Public Relations in the Digital Age
John Lloyd and Laura Toogood (published with I.B.Tauris)

Reporting the EU: News, Media and the European Institutions
John Lloyd and Cristina Marconi (published with I.B.Tauris)

SELECTED REPORTS AND FACTSHEETS

Race and Leadership in the News Media 2022: Evidence from Five Markets
Kirsten Eddy, Meera Selva, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (Factsheet)

Women and Leadership in the News Media 2022: Evidence from Twelve Markets
Kirsten Eddy, Meera Selva, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (Factsheet)

Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2022
Nic Newman

Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarisation: A Literature Review
Amy Ross Arguedas, Craig T. Robertson, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen
Published with the Royal Society

Depth and Breadth: How News Organisations Navigate Trade-Offs Around Building Trust in News
Benjamin Toff, Sumitra Badrinathan, Camila Mont'Alverne, Amy Ross Arguedas, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Changing Newsrooms 2021: Hybrid Working and Improving Diversity Remain Twin Challenges for Publishers
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Overcoming Indifference: What Attitudes Towards News Across the Global North and South Tell Us About Building Trust
Benjamin Toff, Sumitra Badrinathan, Camila Mont'Alverne, Amy Ross Arguedas, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Digital News Report 2021

Nic Newman, Richard Fletcher, Anne Schulz, Simge Andi, Craig T. Robertson, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

An Ongoing Infodemic: How People in Eight Countries Access and Rate News and Information About Coronavirus a Year into the Pandemic

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Anne Schulz, and Richard Fletcher

Listening to What Trust in News Means to Users: Qualitative Evidence from Four Countries

Benjamin Toff, Sumitra Badrinathan, Camila Mont'Alverne, Amy Ross Arguedas, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Women and News: An Overview of Audience Behaviour in 11 Countries

Meera Selva and Simge Andi

What We Think We Know and What We Want to Know: Perspectives on Trust in News in a Changing World

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