

COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS:

# THE NEEDS OF NEWS AUDIENCES

GAME CHANGERS





**Understanding audiences, the context in which people consume news and the interplay of culture, society and technology is integral if brands want to provide meaningful products and services**



Recent events have challenged many of us to analyse our relationship with the news and consider whether we are spending too much time engaging with it, how our mental health is affected, where we should go for it and who is doing a good job at covering the developments.

This dynamic process has created a highly complex, nuanced and even emotional relationship with news content that may impact and shape our news behaviours longer term. It is more imperative than ever for news brands to understand the context in which they operate, and to stay close to their audience in order to meet their rapidly evolving needs.

## Consider the big picture

The internet and resultant business models, along with the ubiquity of social media, has driven an evolution in the way we consume news. News sources are ferociously competing in the attention economy, while many have suffered reputationally from phenomena such as clickbait and fake news, as well as emotive, dramatised coverage aimed at attracting the most sets of ‘eyeballs’ for the longest time. At the same time, an algorithmic approach to digital news has raised concerns around solidifying biases and fuelling societal and political division.

Today, many believe that trust in reported news is at its lowest levels. That said, news sources have always had to work hard to gain trust, as the Ipsos [Global Advisor](#) report demonstrates.

Often, people tend to trust news sources they know; well-established names that have invested in their journalism and have a record of accurate coverage, or correcting inaccuracies.

Many feel closer to sources that align with their own views and values, political or otherwise, and even more so when the publication is transparent about where it stands on the political spectrum. We know [trust](#) is a complex concept with a range of factors at play.

Meanwhile, a 24-hour news cycle across a range of channels where news is always on has forged new relationships with consumers. Coupled with the proliferation of social media, it’s no secret that many of us are constantly encountering news stories whether actively or passively.

Understanding audiences, the context in which people consume news and the interplay of culture, society and technology is integral if brands want to provide meaningful products and services. This becomes even more true in times of uncertainty.



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## Understand news in a crisis

When the COVID-19 emergency shook our everyday lives, it brought about an unprecedented change in news consumption. When the crisis started unfolding, broadcast news and government briefings were a top priority for many, as the public was concerned about their health and livelihood and wanted to hear expert opinion in real time.

TV news became a highly relied upon source of information during lockdown (viewing of TV news content increased by 124% during the first three weeks of lockdown, according to BARB).

Live news broadcasts attracted huge volumes of viewers, including younger audiences who broadcasters had previously struggled to attract. While an ‘always on’, real-time approach was felt to be necessary at the beginning, many started feeling anxious and fatigued as time went on.<sup>1</sup>

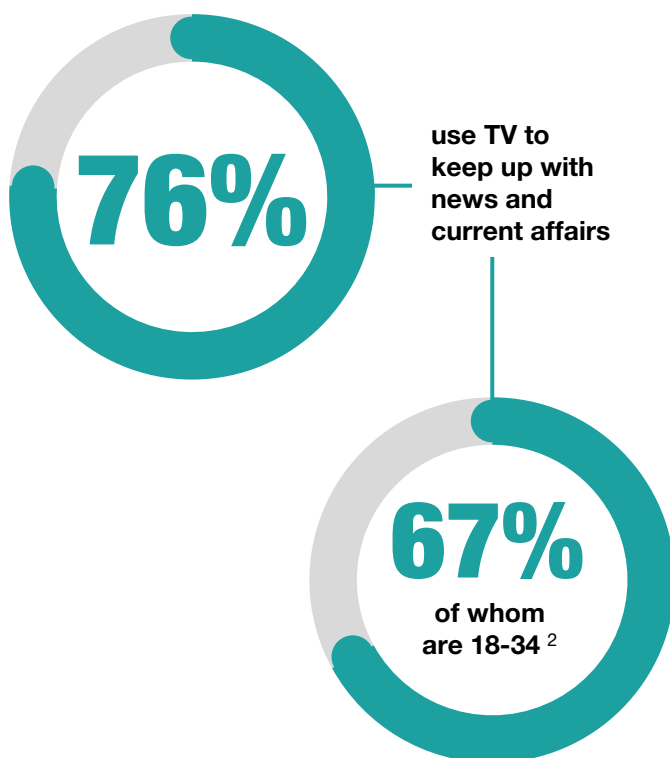
This led individuals to develop coping strategies, such as actively managing time spent consuming news, amount of times they check for updates, or the format of the news they consume. Some brands were seen to adapt and respond to this by offering COVID-19 specific newsletters, or by adopting a ‘slower’, more curated approach to reflect audiences’ behaviour of curating their news repertoire.

Meanwhile, there has been a lot of debate on how to serve audiences in a crisis. For example, we have seen powerful first-hand experiences and public reporting playing an important role throughout the pandemic providing authentic, unfiltered content, but it is argued this can also envelope bias and misinformation risks which news brands need to carefully manage.

Moreover, we have witnessed criticism around how some news and tech brands have responded to COVID-19 related news, especially in terms of hosting diverse voices and the reliability of their data. There are audience segments for whom getting a balanced view, or opportunity to hear a range of opinion matters, manifested by the rise of alternative news sources, like independent sites, podcasts and YouTube channels that allow for more context, nuance and conversation.

At the same time, we have recently seen high-profile journalists leaving outlets they see as not encompassing enough diversity of opinion and starting their own news opinion blogs, attracting their readership to new sources and carving new relationships and habits. In a similar vein, it was recently announced that not one but two new 24-hour news channels will enter the race, positioning themselves as impartial alternatives to highly opinionated and one-sided reporting.

Such developments beg the questions of what new dynamics will emerge, what part tech giants can play, and what the role of well-established news brands can be, making keeping abreast of what your audiences want more important than ever.



<sup>1</sup> [Lockdown TV](#); Ipsos and Thinkbox, Fieldwork conducted 12-16 June, 2020.

Base: All Adults aged 16-75 in Great Britain n=1125;  
<sup>2</sup> Ipsos MORI, telephone omnibus 1-10 May 2020, Base: All n=1045

## What will our news habits look like?

With our relationship with news defined and redefined while the pandemic unfolds, it remains to be seen what is likely to go away and what will stick.

But there are some learnings for news brands which will likely set them up for success:

**1**

**Be flexible while being true to your brand. What worked before may not be fit for purpose now**

News teams need to innovate and evolve with the times, without losing sight of what they stand for and who their core audience is or who they aspire to serve.

News brands that are alert to audiences' consumption patterns and perceptions can flex their offer and adapt to provide relevant news content and formats that will render their audience confident in navigating the post-pandemic world.

**2**

**Identify, meet and anticipate your audience's needs with relevant services and products**

In order to build long-lasting relationships, news outlets need to know their audience and their changing needs and expectations – products that anticipate needs and accommodate audiences' lifestyles stand a better chance to cut through.

With needs changing at such a rapid pace, we can help news teams identify audience trends that can inform and future-proof their offer and attract new audiences.

**3**

**Think about ways to uphold and communicate warranties of quality, trustworthy journalism**

Our latest report in collaboration with the Trust Project, Trust Misplaced, examines key factors influencing trust.

Whether a small, independent site or a big player, acknowledge it takes more than a strong brand name to gain and sustain an audience. Balanced coverage, through hosting and representing a range of voices on hot-button issues, providing reassurances on accuracy and transparency (e.g. sources, political alignment disclaimers, opinion vs fact, etc.) where appropriate can all signal and ultimately build trust.

At Ipsos we help news teams consult with audiences in unpredictable times. We have extensive knowledge of the news landscape and experience of understanding news audiences and society.

Through focused qualitative and quantitative research, cultural and semiotic analysis, trends and futures work, as well as social intelligence, we support our clients' decision-making and enable them to produce better news.

## ABOUT IPSOS

In our world of rapid change, the need for reliable information to make confident decisions has never been greater.

At Ipsos we believe our clients need more than a data supplier, they need a partner who can produce accurate and relevant information and turn it into actionable truth.

This is why our passionately curious experts not only provide the most precise measurement, but shape it to provide a true understanding of society, markets and people.

To do this, we use the best of science, technology and know-how and apply the principles of security, simplicity, speed and substance to everything we do. So that our clients can act faster, smarter and bolder. Ultimately, success comes down to a simple truth:

**You act better when you are sure.**

## OUR MEDIA EXPERTS

We are a close knit team of experts who work exclusively to help you understand the media and tech landscape.

Through our work we leverage our deep understanding of people, society, and culture to make sense of audiences and how they use technology and consume entertainment. We work with integrated data sources and curated insights to contextualise your business challenges, so we are in the best position to help shape your strategy and ultimately create greater impact.

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