

Understanding college students' trust in news

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I started this project because, as a journalism student, I was curious about people's news engagement and trust levels in the news they receive. Especially with it being an election year, I wanted to know if people were doing what they could to make sure their news was true information.

I decided to focus on the University of Minnesota Duluth and see where students, staff and community members at UMD receive news and whether or not they trust the news they receive.

When you survey people at the University of Minnesota Duluth, they will tell you it is very important that the news they receive comes from a reliable source. The majority who participated in a recent survey said they go to news websites or apps to receive news, yet many go to social media.

According to [Gallup](#), Americans continue to register record-low trust in the mass media. So, why are people continuing to use social media to receive their news when there is a lack of trust in the medium?

Method

First, we have to understand where they receive their news. To gather this information, I created a survey with some of the questions designed for this specific project and the rest taken from another study done in [2022 by the Pew Research Center](#). The survey also included demographic questions, such as age and political leanings. Participants had the option to remain anonymous or provide their contact information in case I wanted to talk to them more based on their responses.

The goal of the survey was to find their social media use, where they receive news and what sources they trust or do not trust.

The survey used a snowball sampling technique and made its way across campus with the help of friends and professors. The survey was also sent to UMD University for Seniors in order to acquire more diversity in age ranges. It is important to note that those who attend University for Seniors are not counted as UMD students, but rather as community members.

Additionally, I interviewed The Bark's (UMD's student news organization) editor-in-chief Seth Roeser and Dr. Kathryn Haglin, an assistant professor of political science here at UMD. Both gave insights on media literacy and bias in news.

Findings/Results

The survey received 130 responses and provided meaningful insights on how those at UMD engage with news.

The first question that was asked was about their first thoughts regarding news sources. Many had similar thoughts. One response said “skeptical about them because of misinformation, also mainly uninterested because it is always so negative,” and another said,

“I am very skeptical about trusting news sources because they can be unreliable and heavily biased. If there is information from a news source that I am interested in, I tend to do further research to ensure accuracy.”

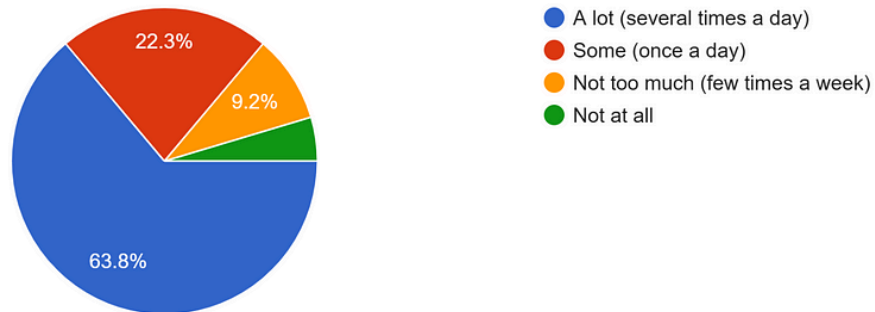
Roeser’s first thoughts were that he definitely has favorites when it comes to news sources. “I think that has more to do with the bias and what I perceive to be more neutrally presented news, obviously everyone has their own ideas of what neutrality is,” he said. “I don’t like to read news from sources I feel are overly advocacy driven. That means I don’t like to see a hyper-left perspective or a hyper-right perspective just because I feel like it’s more likely that they’re presenting only one side of the story.”

The responses clearly show that there is awareness of misinformation and biased information with a common theme of skepticism.

The next few questions were focused on social media use. A total of 63.8% of respondents access social media several times a day, while 22.3% use it about once a day. A total of 9.2% access social media just a few times a week while only 4.6% never use social media.

How often do you use social media?

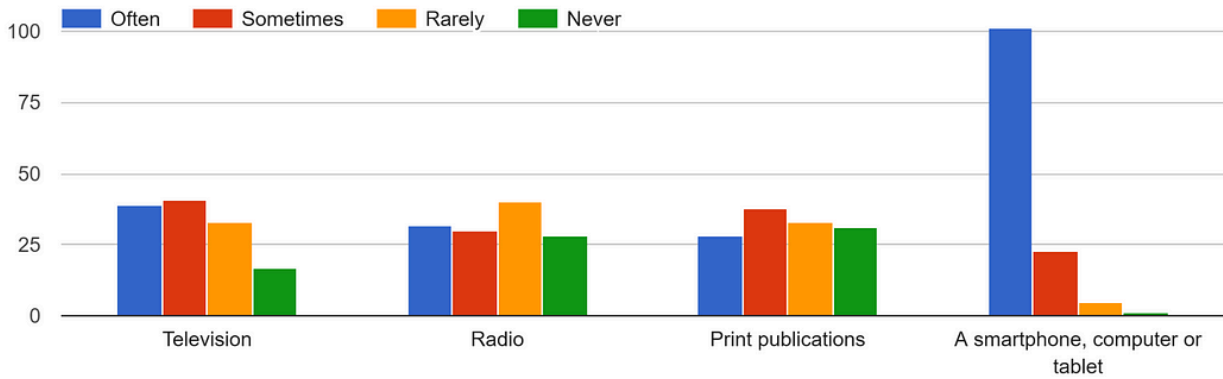
130 responses



The most-used social media platforms are Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat, with TikTok and Facebook following close behind. TikTok is the social media platform used most often to receive news. However, the majority of the respondents receive news through YouTube, only not as often.

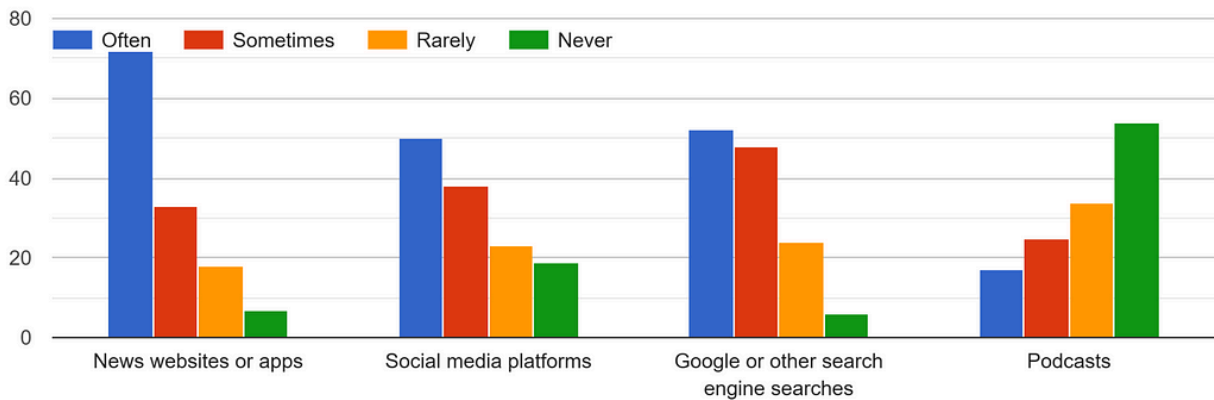
From the options of television, radio, print publications and smartphones/computers/tablets, news is most often received through smartphones/computers/tablets. Radio and print publications have the most disuse for receiving news.

How often do you get news from...



The next question included more digital options of receiving news: news websites or apps, social media platforms, google or other search engine searches, and podcasts. Podcasts show the most disuse whereas news websites or apps are typically used most often for receiving news digitally.

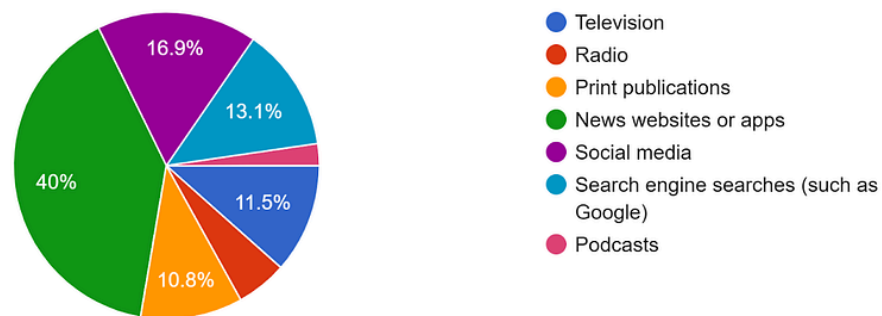
How often, if at all, do you get news digitally from...



The most preferred method for getting news is through news websites and apps, with 40% of respondents. The second preference of encountering news is on social media, with 16.9% of respondents choosing this. The least preferred way of receiving news is through podcasts.

Which do you prefer for getting news?

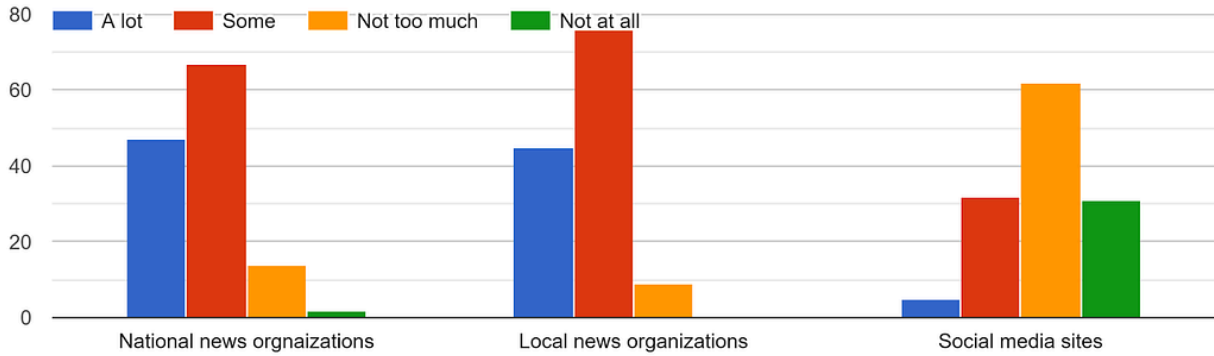
130 responses



The survey found that the majority of respondents, 68.5%, receive news daily. Those that obtain news weekly makeup 20% of respondents, 6.9% hourly, 3.8% monthly, and one respondent encounters news yearly.

The last questions were in regards to trust. When given the options of national news organizations, local news organizations and social media sites, there was much more distrust in social media sites. National and local news organizations roughly had the same amount of trust.

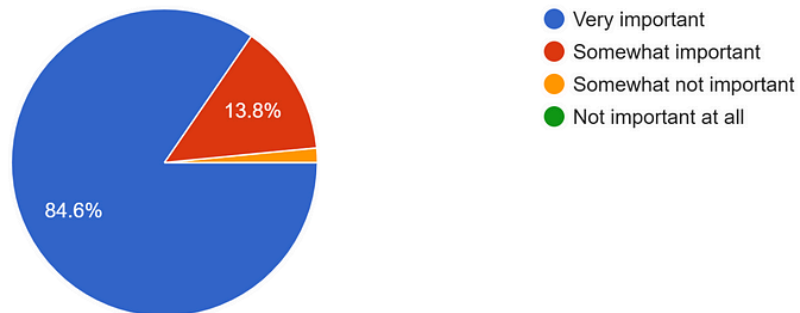
How much, if at all, do you trust the information you get from...



When asked how important it is for the individual to receive news from a reliable source, 84.6% reported that it is very important while 13.8% decided it was somewhat important and 1.5% chose somewhat not important.

How important is it for you that the news you receive is coming from a reliable source?

130 responses

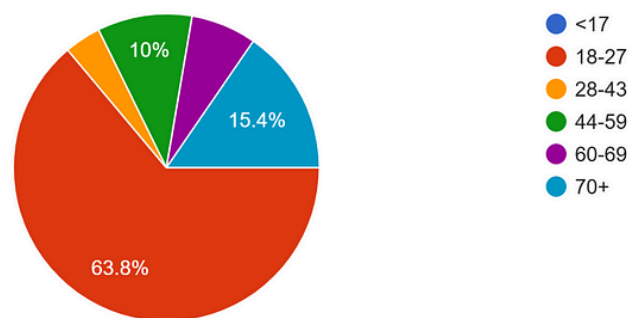


There appeared to be a trend in childhood/home-life influencing responses for specific, trusted news sources. One respondent said, “My parents have always watched NBC, and I am aware that they’re biased, but it’s all I’ve really known,” while another said “I am not really sure. My parents often watch Kare 11, so that is always what I used.” One respondent even simply stated “My dad.”

The most distrusted specific news source proved to be Fox News.

Breaking down demographics, 63.8% of respondents are between the ages 18 and 27, making them a part of generation Z. Five respondents are millennials and 10% are part of generation X and 6.9% are in the age range 60–69. In total, 15.4% of respondents are 70 or older.

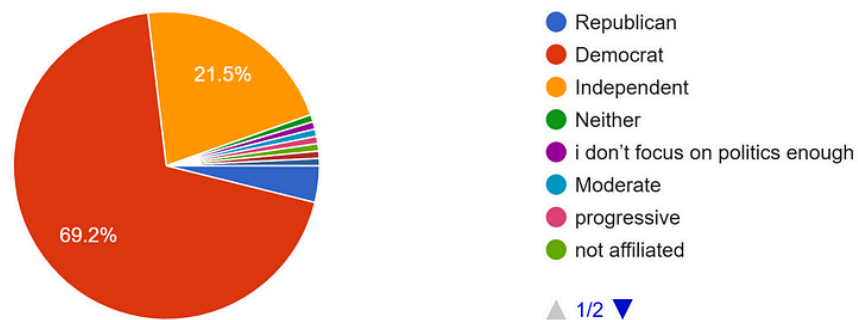
Age
130 responses



A total of 66.9% of the respondents identified themselves as female, 28.5% as male, and 4.6% as non-binary.

In politics today, 69.2% of those surveyed labeled themselves as Democrats. 21.5% identified as Independents and 3.8% as Republicans. Other respondents who didn't fit in those categories said "not affiliated," "neither," "I don't focus on politics enough," "moderate," "progressive," "bleeding heart liberal," and more.

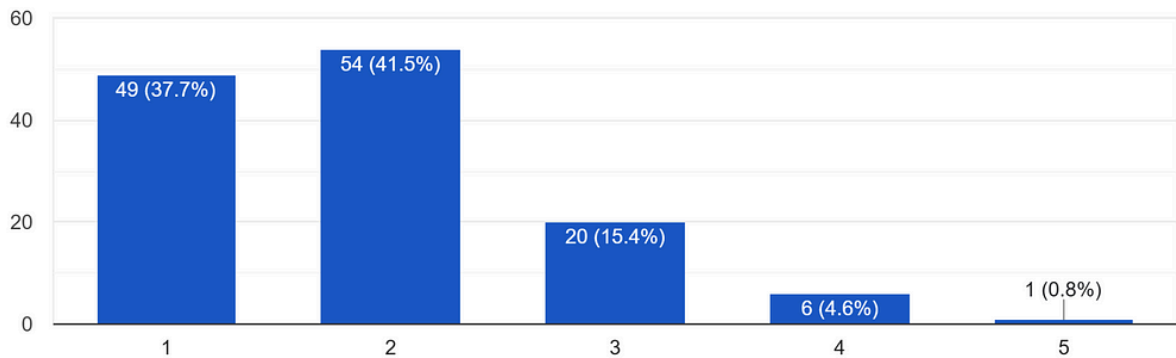
In politics today, do you consider yourself a...
130 responses



On a scale of one to five, where one is "I am more liberal in my thinking" and five is "I am more conservative in my thinking," the majority (41.5%) lay at two. Another 37.7% lay at one, closest to liberal thinking. 15.4% found themselves in the middle.

What are your political leanings?

130 responses



There are some puzzling pieces in these results regarding social media. We see that news websites and apps are used most often to receive news digitally. Then, Google or other search engines are supposedly used more often than social media, yet social media is preferred for getting news more than search engines are.

It was also found that participants distrust the information they receive from social media sites the most and it is clearly very important that their news is coming from a reliable source. So again, we come back to the question: why are people continuing to use social media to receive their news when there is a lack of trust in the medium?

Looking at demographics can help to understand some of our data. Generation Z covers a significant amount of responses. A majority of responses were also female. Democrats also dominated the survey.

So, it is important to keep in mind that a large portion of respondents are young, Democrat, female students. Because of this, this survey cannot understand any population as a whole. This has also influenced the results of my survey in a way that will make them look different from that of national surveys.

Yet, it is still important to compare these results nationally to assess patterns and discover possible different conclusions.

Comparing nationally

Digging deeper into the data from UMD respondents, it is found that those surveyed who are part of Generation Z were the only ones to prefer using social media to receive news. It is also found that the majority of those surveyed who are boomers (ages 60+) preferred print publications.

We see similar results in a 2022 study done by [The Media Insight Project published by American Press Institute](#). They focused on the news consumption habits of 16 to 40-year-olds and found that older millennials are more likely to rely on traditional news sources than younger millennials and Gen Z.

Another [study in 2022](#) compared American college students and Egyptian college students. They came to the conclusion that American college students trust traditional news media more, but don't use it as much as social media.

These similarities bring up the same question about young people's trust in news.

Why do people continue to use social media to receive their news when there is a clear lack of trust in the medium?

Roeser believes it is just ease of access. "They're going to be on social media anyway, they're doing it for entertainment, if they're also getting the news from it that's a happy bonus to them," he said.

Dr. Haglin noted that there is an overlap. "There's a lot of reputable media sources that are on social media," she said. "You could follow CBS News on Twitter, so it's like you're getting your news from social media; we would probably still say that's a reputable news source."

While this may put some of the pieces together, we still don't really know the news or channels people are encountering on social media.

[According to Evanson and Sponsel](#), students are accessing digital news at high rates, particularly through social media channels. This finding is meaningful because of the complexities that digital news poses for readers.

The main concerns when using social media to receive news is the quick spread of misinformation, disinformation and bias. Both Roeser and Dr. Haglin agree some form of bias will always exist.

“Most people have a general understanding of what sources have what bias, like Fox News has a conservative bias, MSNBC has a liberal bias,” Dr. Haglin said. “So, I think the issue is not necessarily the bias itself, cause some amount of bias is always going to exist, but how much people are accepting without considering the extent of which the bias is affecting their understanding...”

Roeser thinks the entire conversation around bias in news is probably misguided anyway. “It’s like asking do you think there’s ever going to be a perfect news story,” he said. “I don’t think there will be and there’s never going to be a non-biased news story just because every single decision you make is some form of bias whether it’s word choice, the order in which you cover things, who you give the first word to, who you give the last word to— bias is impossible to avoid.”

The concept of fairness is more useful to Roeser. “You are giving both sides a time in the spotlight and also giving equal weight to what they’re saying, as long as it permits equal weight to be given,” he said. “If one side says an easily verifiable fact and the other side says a fact that’s easily verifiably wrong, I don’t think you should give them equal time in the spotlight because one is clearly lying, but I think that’s a lot easier to prove than bias.”

Eliminating bias in news may be unattainable, yet I personally remain optimistic that fewer people will fall for misinformation or disinformation when taking the right steps. Disinformation is created and shared with the intent to deceive whereas misinformation is generally shared due to the lack of fact-checking.

[According to a 2019 study by Evanson and Sponsel](#), the ability to effectively evaluate a claim made by a news source is a critical skill for students to develop.

Some survey respondents at UMD shared the steps they take to ensure their news is accurate and trustworthy. One respondent said “To get anywhere near an accurate representation of events you have to compare news from multiple sources.” Another agreed saying, “The information they provide should be checked with news reports from other sources. There is too much bias in most news sources, but hearing the story from multiple sources helps to cut through to the truth.”

One respondent mentioned that they use a media bias site to check their sources.

A few other responses about fact-checking caught my attention, so I reached out further to those who gave their contact information.

Alli Colberg said, “I have been very lucky to have had teachers as far back as the 4th grade who taught me the importance of media literacy, supporting my argument, citing my sources, and making sure I am using reputable sources. In academia it is important to fact check your information so that you are spreading accurate information, making sure your argument is truthful, and to try to view an issue from all sides. This protects the integrity of your work, and the integrity of your field, which is especially important in psychology (my area of study).” She goes on to say “If something does not feel right, I fact check it. Usually, that is as simple as a five minute google search to see what other sources are saying about the same topic. If I can find other trusted sources that are saying the same thing, I am good to go. If I find more red flags or

contradictions, I keep digging into specific relevant databases or attempt to find original sources, which can take up to an hour.”

She finishes with, “All of this ‘work’ is worth it though. I can be confident that the information I am reading, and sharing with others, is correct and that I have done my due diligence.”

Beatrice Carter, a UMD student, said, “My parents have always instructed me on the importance of critical thinking and questioning what you hear, especially online. For 17 years of my life, I had no social media besides YouTube. When I first downloaded Instagram in the spring of 2024, I was surprised by the extent of information that I would fact-check on Google that was false or modified.”

“Particularly during times of great social unrest (such as the recent Presidential election), social media is full of short-form informative reels that are designed to reinforce the viewer’s own biases. As a society we should not believe everything we see and hear. We must independently clarify the information that we believe to be true, so we don’t sustain the cycle of fake news,” Carter said.

Carter’s fact-checking process involves a quick Google search. “If the information seems to be true from first glance, I will click on the news report from a reputable site such as CNN, Al Jazeera, or The New York Times and read further on the information if it interests me enough,” she said. “If nothing comes up for the information topic I searched, I typically abandon the topic entirely.”

These responses are what give me hope that more will take the necessary steps to educate themselves on media literacy and trust.

Dr. Haglin said, “Obviously with the creation of the internet and social media and everything, people are always super interested in media literacy and what it means for students to be able to kind of engage with sources. There’s kind of one way of thinking about it, like what does source credibility mean and what does that look like or just how do you find reputable sources.”

Conclusion

From all of these studies, it appears that there is a want, or a desire, to be able to trust news, yet a lack of care in how to build that trust. But, who is responsible for building that trust, the individual receiving the news or the news organization?

I’d say in many cases it starts with the news organizations and then it’s the individual’s turn to pick up on it and work from there.

[The Center for Media Engagement](#) came to the conclusion that newsrooms should start showing their audience how their journalist’s approached a story by adding an “explain your process” box to a news story. Their second suggestion was demonstrating balanced coverage of partisan topics.

Although, we have to remember that there is no one-size fits all solution. What works for some may not work for others.

Some other approaches news organizations can take to build their reader's trust is aligning editorial content to what the public cares most about; focusing on management, ownership, and staffing; or working on a deeper engagement with the public.

No matter what, there is work to be done on both sides. Five ways to help evaluate sources are to do a quick search, conducting a simple search for information about a news source is a key first step in evaluating its credibility.

Look for standards as reputable news organizations aspire to ethical guidelines and standards, including fairness, accuracy and independence. Check for transparency, quality news sources should be transparent, not only about their reporting practices, but also about their ownership and funding.

Examine how errors are handled, credible news sources are accountable for mistakes and correct them. Assess news coverage, an important step in vetting sources is taking time to read and assess several news articles.

Credible sources are not perfect, but information from them is much more likely to be accurate which is why these steps are so necessary.

In [Soliman's study](#), it was shown that trust is not the most crucial factor when it comes to the consumption of news media.

Generation Z seems to continue gathering news through social media when it is a highly distrusted source and they tend to neglect the more trustworthy traditional media that older generations use more often.

Whether trust is a factor or not when it comes to the consumption of news media, it is still crucial to educate oneself and use the necessary precautions when accessing news. A more media-literate public is more likely to trust high-quality journalism when they see it.

“I would like to see a rise in media literacy,” Roeser said. “I don’t know if it’s going to happen.”

Limitations/Future Research

Some limitations of this research include my sample and the demographics within it, as well as having a focus on UMD. Having a larger, more diverse sample size that is not limited to a specific college would more accurately depict a larger population.

Including specific survey questions about evaluating sources and fact-checking could be beneficial for future research as well.

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