News in social media and messaging apps

Qualitative research report

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1 Executive summary

The tide is turning on Facebook as a news platform because its phenomenal success as a social network has made it less conducive to discussing and sharing news. People are being pushed to the safety of messaging apps by the combination of privacy fears, exposure risk, content clutter and declining relevance. Facebook is encouraging this development in its algorithm changes, which are intended to prioritise "meaningful social interactions"¹ over connecting users to popular content.

People are also wary of fake news – the gnomic term that has gained traction over the past year in the oxygen of media coverage of its use by politicians – even if they do not feel they have fallen victim personally. While there is resistance to the suggestion of a state legislated response because of the vital role of the media in holding power to account, the spectre of fake news appears to be encouraging greater caution about Facebook and a more emollient attitude towards traditional news media.

However, reducing the amount of news in people's Facebook feeds might not be what users want. This research suggests people still value Facebook for surfacing news, while preferring to socialise it in WhatsApp and other messaging apps. Without news, Facebook might end up feeling quite empty.

Many apps are benefiting from Facebook's well publicised problems. Young people in particular are spending more time on Instagram and Snapchat. As messaging apps such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp grow in popularity, they are increasingly being used to share and discuss news, away from the toxicity of political debate that threatens more open spaces. Messaging apps provide an antidote to the problems that arise when engaging with news in Facebook. They feel personal and intimate – rather like Facebook once felt – and the news that is shared feels more relevant. They also feel more immediate and allow greater freedom of expression because they shield users from the public glare of open platforms. Yet, as news expands across platforms, messaging apps might also, in turn, become vulnerable to the problems of misinformation that have besieged Facebook.

The news industry is beginning to see renewed consumer trust in established news brands over news in distributed platforms. Yet, technology is ever evolving in response to consumer needs and interests. The challenge for news organisations is to determine how to connect with audiences as they continue their shift from open to closed platforms, while developing value propositions that are financially viable. At the same time, established news brands could help stave off the contagion of misinformation spreading to closed platforms such as WhatsApp.

¹See 7.6 – Mark Zuckerberg announcement

2 Introduction

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ), at the University of Oxford, commissioned exploratory research from Kantar Media to provide a topical supplement to the Digital News Report 2018.

2.1 Background

The use of news online is continuing to evolve. Facebook remains a dominant platform for news in most countries, but the RISJ Digital News Report and other studies suggest a peak has been reached.² At the same time, more than half of respondents across countries³ claim to use social media for news, a figure that has doubled in the past five years. Although the figure is an average that masks considerable variation across countries (Brazil's use, for example, is much higher), there is a clear trend towards the use of messaging apps for news, be that actively or passively⁴. Why are consumers turning to new platforms to receive, comment upon and share news? Is there something about these platforms encouraging the change? This is ripe for exploration.

The research study was designed and conducted early in 2018 just as Facebook announced changes to its algorithm. On 11 January 2018, CEO Mark Zuckerberg posted:

"We're making a major change to how we build Facebook... from focusing on helping you find relevant content to helping you have more meaningful social interactions..."⁵

This apposite post reinforced the belief that we had an interesting topic to research and we duly incorporated it into the study.

Subsequent revelations of data harvesting by Cambridge Analytica, and Zuckerberg's appearance before Congress in the US, occurred after the fieldwork was completed.

2.2 Research objectives

The aim of the research was to provide a qualitative exploration of consumer behaviour, attitudes and motivations surrounding news consumption in social networks and messaging apps, and the pivot away from news in Facebook.

More specifically, the main objectives were to:

• Explore attitudes, motivations and barriers towards using Facebook, WhatsApp and other messaging apps, both in general and in relation to news;

² See 7.4 – peak in use of Facebook for news

³ 54% of respondents across the 37 countries surveyed in the RISJ Digital News Report 2018

⁴ See 7.5 – growth of use of messaging apps for news

⁵ See 7.6 – Mark Zuckerberg announcement

- Determine trust cues for news in these platforms, and how social media networks and messaging apps compare;
- Explore perceptions of algorithms, filter bubbles, echo chambers, fake news, and government responses to fake news.

2.3 Research design

The project covered four countries – Brazil (BR), Germany (DE), the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) – with a series of pre-tasked discussion groups, allowing detailed investigation of news consumers' behaviours and attitudes. The markets were selected to cover a range of levels of usage of Facebook and messaging apps for news, potentially differing attitudes towards privacy, and a mix of English- and non-English-speaking countries.

Fieldwork within each country was split between groups of younger (20-29) and older (30-45) news consumers who between them use a variety of brands and platforms to consume news. Everyone had a Facebook account and used Facebook and messaging apps for news at least weekly. The fieldwork was conducted in February 2018. Full details of the sample and methodology are appended.

3 Facebook and news

3.1 In the beginning

Facebook has changed over the past decade and a half. In its early days it was something novel and fun, bringing friends together to share their experiences and reveal something of themselves. It was not originally a platform for news.

"It used to be only pictures and things they were going to do... [but now] I use it in a better way" (male, 20-29, BR)

"You see what your friends are up to and see what's going on in the world at the same time" (female, 20-29, UK)

As Facebook grew and commercialised, the experience changed. News was introduced and became a touchstone for many, solidifying Facebook's place in the infrastructure of daily routines. Many people turn to it first thing in the morning and then again at lunchtime and sometimes when they have downtime throughout the day.

"I think it's a habit now. The first thing when I wake up I'll check and look at the BBC breaking news alerts and look at other apps, go on Facebook" (male, 20-29, UK)

"I use it daily, from early in the morning on my way to work. I like to know what's going on" (male, 20-29, BR)

"In the metro I often look into my Facebook account. It's time killing and often you find some funny things" (female, 20-29, DE)

Some people find Facebook compulsive and describe it in terms of addiction. They might delete the app from their phone for a while to remove the temptation, but eventually can't resist the lure.

"It's a guilty pleasure and I hate it but I love it!" (male, 20-29, US)

3.2 Facebook's bundle of benefits

Facebook now offers many benefits to its users, providing a sense of belonging as well as a form of escapism. It helps people stay up to date with one another and the world around them. It provides an easy distraction for filling time, as well as idle moments of relaxing pleasure. But it also generates a sense of dependency and fear of missing out, which gives the platform traction.

The diagram below summarises the main user benefits of Facebook.

PLANNING Organising events Diary, calendar 	 PEACOCKING Idealised projection, showing off Shifting to Instagram 	ENTERTAINMENT Humour Memes, funny videos
COMMERCE Business, marketing Selling/buying Personal brand 	 ANNOUNCEMENTS Telling the world Significant life events, BMD (births etc) Proud achievements 	INTERESTS Local info/news, events, clubs, etc Causes, passions Tailored to me
CONNECTING Contacts directory collected over years Keeping in touch Snooping, voyeurism 	MEMORIES Life record of photos, journal Can review, nostalgia 	INFORMATION News, info, what's on Reviewing comments Educational Social currency
functional tools	personal news	external world

Figure 1: Facebook's many benefits

The nine specific benefits listed here span:

- Being a functional tool such as helping to organise events and serving as a directory of contacts collected over the years;
- Providing personal news making announcements, and collecting memories;
- **Connecting with the wider world** for information, entertainment and the pursuit of personal interests. News is an important part of the offer.

Facebook plays a crucial role in many people's lives.

"For me, Facebook is everything. It's my number one source of communication. It's my number one source of getting news. It's my number one source of basically everything" (male, 20-29, US)

"Facebook is the only chance to stay in touch as I do not have phone numbers of the people I studied with" (female, 20-29, DE)

"It's always very handy and, in my case, I have pages I follow and friends I follow, and I scroll up my timeline and come across something I didn't know. So I open it, because we don't always have time to read the newspaper" (female, 20-29, BR)

This cements Facebook as a default platform for many users, although compared with other social networks the breadth also renders Facebook generic.

3.3 News added to the mix

Many participants value news in Facebook. The platform provides a convenient and updated digest of content from a diverse range of sources, which is a great way to stay abreast of what is going on in the world. News might not have been the original driver, but it has become a familiar and important feature for many. It is especially popular in Brazil.

"I'm being fed the news, I'm not pursuing it myself. Sometimes I don't have the time to go in and look for information, so it's convenient that it feeds me news" (female, 30-45, BR)

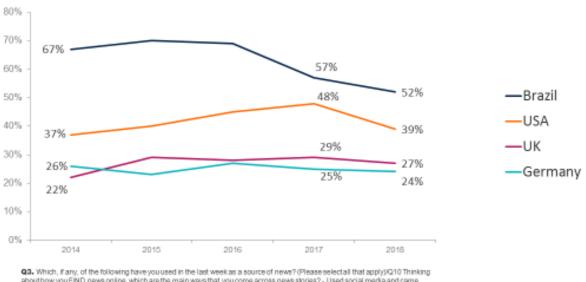
Local news is also a strength. When people have moved away from the area where they grew up, local content allows them to stay connected with their home town.

"It's nice hearing about my home region and even when you know the person they wrote about, it's a moment of coming back home" (female, 30-45, DE)

Some people appreciate this, although some Germans expressed unease about the privacy implications of Facebook being so personally tailored. Privacy is highly cherished in Germany.

3.4 Falling out of love with Facebook

In many markets Facebook has reached a peak as a platform for news, as the RISJ Digital News Report data below show.



% ACCESSING FACEBOOK FOR NEWS (WEEKLY)

Q3. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news? (Please selectal that apply)/Q10 Thinking about how you FIND news online, which are the main ways that you come across news stories? - Used social media and came across news that way. Base: Total sample in each country.

Figure 2: Users of Facebook for news (2014-2018), sourced from the RISJ Digital News Report 2018

Facebook's remarkable growth over the past decade and a half has altered the user experience, and in some respects the platform has become a hostage to its own success. Users' growing collection of more distant acquaintances, and the expanded content mix of brands and advertising, have diluted the experience for many people, requiring them to become more discriminating in the way they use the platform. As news gained traction, and brand marketing grew, the posting of content by ordinary users began to be squeezed out.

"I'm not really posting now at all" (male, 30-45, US)

"I noticed that back when Facebook first came and was all the rage people would post all the time. Today some people seem to be thinking more before they post" (female, 20-29, BR)

"Facebook was very trendy and fashionable when I was younger and now I think that other things have taken over" (female, 20-29, UK)

The drawbacks of Facebook are now becoming more apparent: declining relevance, exposure risks, an unpleasant environment, and privacy concerns.

• **Declining relevance** – Some users find that Facebook is cluttered with time-wasting posts and superficial content that is of little interest. This includes the fakery of people's idealised self-projections, as well as unwanted ads, marketing, click-bait and spam, which some feel is choking the platform and devaluing the Facebook experience.

"I get a lot of irrelevant stuff, things that are not part of my world" (male, 30-45, BR)

"It's very time consuming, which is one of the main negative things... There are things that can pop up that you have no control over" (female, 20-29, US)

"People are very busy and you don't have time to look down your Facebook feed and sift through the rubbish" (male, 20-29, UK)

• **Exposure risks** – There are concerns about revealing too much in a public space; fears of being judged by others and, the corollary, of upsetting others; and the risk of damaging employment prospects.

"I have more than 300 friends but real friends, I have maybe 10 or 20. So there are so many posts from people I'm not interested in" (female, 20-29, DE)

"Facebook is getting more and more unattractive and impersonal for me and so I write or post less... only 10% of my friends on Facebook are really friends for me" (female, 20-29, DE)

• **Unpleasant environment** – Ranting activists make too much noise, while political polarisation in more diffuse networks sparks arguments and bullying, making conversation less civil. Many now avoid fraught topics such as religion and politics.

"I just found [Facebook] became a very aggressive, quite an angry platform, and I'm not an aggressive or angry person" (female, 30-45, UK)

"It gives people the platform to bring negative energy" (female, 30-45, US)

"I've actually pulled back from using Facebook a lot since the whole political landscape changed over the last few years because I just find everyone's got an opinion" (female, 30-45, UK)

"It can destroy a person's life" (female, 20-29, US)

• **Privacy concerns** – As networks grow, many find the platform is becoming less personal and too public, stoking concerns about privacy being compromised and some discomfort about the creepiness of targeted advertising.

"You really have to take care what you 'like' because all your friends get a post when you 'like' something. There's no privacy" (female, 20-29, DE)

"I would be incredibly wary about posting things on Facebook because it's there for everybody to see and it will be for a long time" (male, 20-29, UK)

"It's too much of a public platform now" (female, 20-29, UK)

"They just want more and more to increase their perfect analysis of us. They want to perfectly deliver perfectly personalised offers at all times, whatever... and I don't feel great about it" (female, 20-29, DE)

While some users persevere with Facebook, for fear of missing out, others are disengaging. The collapsing context⁶ is pushing interactions between friends to the privacy of WhatsApp and other messaging apps.

3.5 Major change announced

Facebook has clearly not been oblivious to these currents. On 11 January 2018 the social network made an announcement:⁷

⁶ The term "context collapse", which is often used in relation to social networks becoming unwieldy, was coined by Danah Boyd – see http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2013/12/08/coining-context-collapse.html

⁷ See 7.6 for full announcement

"We're making a major change to how we build Facebook... from focusing on helping you find relevant content to helping you have more meaningful social interactions...

"The first changes you see will be in News Feed, where you can expect to see more from your friends, family and groups. As we roll this out, you'll see less public content like posts from businesses, brands and media. And the public content you see more will be held to the same standard - - it should encourage meaningful interactions between people."

Facebook was apparently responding to some of the problems on its platform by reducing the volume of news. However, according to our research participants, this is not what users are demanding. For many, news is one of the most important reasons for using the platform.

What was the reaction of our research participants? At the time of the fieldwork, just a month after the announcement was posted on Facebook, there was little awareness of the significant change to the Facebook algorithm. Just one person in the US knew about it because of his use of Facebook for marketing, and one attentive Brazilian had read that his daily *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper would no longer be posting on Facebook because of the prioritisation of posts from friends and family.

When Zuckerberg's announcement was presented to the participants in the group discussions, reactions were mixed. Some were initially approving of reducing the clutter on Facebook and reverting to its original spirit, but they were less keen on Facebook withdrawing from its role as a news portal (especially in Brazil).

"I can have social interaction at a bar, at the movies, in bed – not online. I'm not interested in this kind of social interaction. It's mostly a source of news" (male, 30-45, BR)

"I guess Zuckerberg realises that fewer people use Facebook. He's trying to bring them [Facebook] back to their roots" (male, 20-29, DE)

"I think it's kind of cool... if they really care about people interacting. I think that's cool" (male, 20-29, US)

"It's positive, I think – summarising what everyone here is saying, what they don't like about Facebook" (male, 30-45, UK)

There were some positive comments about the intention to improve the user experience. However, if anything, it is the clutter of advertising that users would prefer to be pruned. News is not the problem.

"I think reducing the news sources is not that useful, unlike ads" (male, 30-45, BR)

"If it also means fewer ads I'd appreciate that decision" (male, 30-45, DE)

Many recognise that interaction with friends on Facebook is in decline. *Meaningful social interaction* – the phrase used in the Zuckerberg post – is felt to be shifting from Facebook to other platforms, most notably WhatsApp. News content is catalysing the interaction.

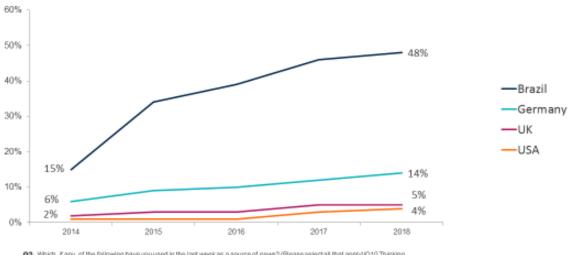
4 Messaging apps and news

Messaging apps have been growing in popularity over the past few years. One of the ways in which they are being used is for sharing, discussing and commenting on news. The news might be the focus of the group, but it might also be used to fuel conversations about shared interests.

In this study we found people typically had groups set up in these apps for family, for friends and for shared interests. The groups ranged between 3 or 4 people up to about 20, although a few examples included larger circles of friends. For example, one woman in the US has a large "chicitas" group in Facebook Messenger that shares fashion tips, health news and gossip with her "sisterhood". Another, more typically, has a "My family" group of nine people in WhatsApp where they discuss news about their home town and politics. There are similar examples across all four countries, with shared interests such as theatre, a wedding group and holiday planning, through to mutual political interests that are more candidly shared in the privacy of a messaging app - a "Boo Trump Boo" WhatsApp group, for example, has four friends discussing the Trump presidency.

4.1 The shift to messaging apps

The Facebook environment is becoming less conducive to open discussion and some conversations are migrating to the privacy of WhatsApp and other messaging apps. As the RISJ Digital News Report data below show, in the past four years WhatsApp has grown remarkably as a tool for news among social media users in Brazil, and it has at least doubled in the other three countries.



% USING WHATSAPP FOR NEWS (WEEKLY)

Q3. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news? (Please selectal that apply)Q10 Thinking about how you FIND news online, which are the main ways that you come across news stories? - Used social media and came across news shat way. Base: Total sample in each country.

Figure 3: Users of WhatsApp for news (2014-2018), sourced from the RISJ Digital News Report 2018

"I use Facebook less... These friends on Facebook are not important for me anymore. With my inner circle of friends I communicate via WhatsApp" (male, 20-29, DE)

"Sometimes on WhatsApp all we share is the screen capture of the headline and we start debating the topic in the group. When the news is too long friends usually say 'send us an audio note and tell us what is going on'" (male, 20-29, BR)

Thus, concurrent with the pivot away from Facebook, there has been growth in the use of messaging apps for news. Comparison between these platforms is interesting.

"The whole thing about social media is [it's] a bit of a mask. So when I'm in my messaging groups with my friends the mask comes off and I feel like I can truly be myself" (female, 30-45, UK)

"We can talk about things on WhatsApp without offending anyone" (female, 20-29, US)

"Even [if] you may disagree with your friends on WhatsApp, friends are able to keep that good level of respect. Everybody shares their opinion and anyone who disagrees can joke about it. It's a lighter mood to debate news with friends on WhatsApp than on Facebook" (male, 20-29, BR)

Messaging app: "Literally does what it says on the tin: sort of small, closed, personal, private" (female, 30-45, UK)

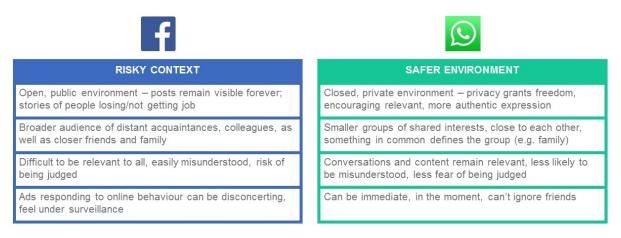


Figure 4: Comparison between Facebook and WhatsApp

Messaging apps provide some important advantages over Facebook:

- Tailored audience users connect one-to-one or with groups set up purposefully around shared interests and values, rather than communicating by default with a diverse group of people;
- Privacy messaging apps provide a private environment, which allows conversations to flow unrestrained by the glare of publicity;

- **Openness** the privacy and targeting benefits encourage messaging apps to be used in a different way to public platforms: they grant users a greater sense of freedom, which encourages more authentic expression;
- Relevance this accrues from the combination of privacy and more targeted sharing, making messaging apps seems clutter-free;
- Safety the more intimate environment reduces the risks of misunderstanding and the unpleasantness of confrontational exchanges that arise in Facebook, as well as freedom from the fear of being judged;
- Immediacy messaging apps feel quicker and more personal and so they tend to be used in a more direct way.

Nevertheless, Facebook continues to have a role. News might be picked up in Facebook and then shared in the privacy and greater intimacy of WhatsApp. Facebook is where news is announced, while WhatsApp is where it is copied across and discussed.

"The source is still Facebook because when we're going to share something on WhatsApp, usually the article we've found is on Facebook. So Facebook is still king in that sense" (male, 20-29, US)

"When it comes to harder news I think about not sharing on Facebook... I don't feel like getting into arguments with people... So I spare myself. I'd share harder news with a friend of mine who I know likes to discuss that sort of stuff. I share directly on WhatsApp" (male, 20-29, BR)

"Somehow WhatsApp seems a lot more private. Like it's kind of a hybrid between texting and social media. Whereas in Facebook, for some reason it just feels like it's public – even if you're in Messenger" (female, 20-29, US)

4.2 Comparing networks

The benefits are inter-related, but not all messaging apps are the same.

WhatsApp is the most popular messaging app for news in Brazil, Germany and the UK, while Facebook Messenger is more popular in the US. However, across countries, many participants described Facebook Messenger as feeling less personal and being more cumbersome to use. The close association of Messenger with the main Facebook platform makes it possible to connect via Messenger without knowing a telephone number, which means there is no filter to receiving messages from unknown people (unlike with WhatsApp). On top of this, some claim to have noticed advertising creeping into Facebook Messenger.

WhatsApp is considered by many to be simpler and quicker to use, although this might be down to familiarity and first mover advantage. Thus, in many respects WhatsApp has the upper hand over Facebook Messenger.

When asked to think about a range of social networks in terms of comparative perceptions and associations, participants provided rich imagery:

- **Facebook** multi-faceted, sociopath, bipolar, adaptive, ego-centric, social butterfly, uncool uncle, mid-life crisis, clean, professional, generic.
- **Twitter** loud, doesn't stop talking, loose, messy, celebrities, niche.
- WhatsApp best friend, sociable, fun, brings people together, straightforward, honest, reliable, faithful, discrete, nimble, agile, dynamic, current.
- **Facebook Messenger** Facebook's little sister/brother, 'wannabe', clingy, needy, irritating, inferior, boring old lady, inconsistent, if not got WhatsApp.
- Instagram glamorous, model, vibrant, showy, vain, show-off, open-minded, stalker.
- Snapchat young, childish, impulsive, pretentious, artificial, distant.

With these differentiated brand images, it is perhaps unsurprising that some messaging apps are more readily used for news by people in their twenties, thirties and forties (the people whom we researched). Facebook and Twitter work better for news discovery while WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger are more suited to comment, sharing and discussion. However, these are not hard and fast rules and platforms may be used opportunistically.

5 Trust and digital literacy

The relatively benign environment⁸ of messaging apps is one factor at play in the Facebook to WhatsApp news trajectory. There are other issues around the ways that digital platforms work and trustworthiness of the content itself, although generally consumers appear to feel resilient.

5.1 Algorithms, filter bubbles and echo chambers

While the lexicon of digital news concepts is not well known, there is some understanding of the role of algorithms in providing a tailored content feed in Facebook. This is considered beneficial when it works well, but not if it restricts the diversity of content.

Algorithms are associated more with targeted advertising that responds to online behaviour. This can feel creepy, at first, feeling as if the user has been put under surveillance.

"The first time it was spooky. I watched a product on Amazon and when I switched to another website I saw this product in an advertisement at the bottom" (20-29, DE)

While some feel a loss of privacy, others (especially in the US) believe that online safety arises from peer networks and the wisdom of the crowd rather than traditional hierarchies. There is little concern about the mix of news that Facebook provides.

Aside from some pockets of knowledge, however, the terms "filter bubble" and "echo chamber" are not widely known. The former is a little more familiar, due perhaps to the association of filtering with social media.

On consideration, when the terms were explained, most participants recognised the potential risks encapsulated by these concepts, but they do not have much personal apprehension. Their concern tends to be reserved for other people.

5.2 The spectre of fake news

Unlike the terms filter bubble and echo chamber, the term "fake news" is now familiar, if illdefined. The term was mentioned spontaneously in all countries.⁹ It is a broad term that is more or less understood to cover a gamut of problems, as set out in the diagram below. Some of these mainfestations – propagada, poitically biased and agenda-filled content, gossip and rumour, and error-filled, sloppy journalism – have existed for as long as there has been news,

⁸ Although this research did not pick up any concerns about WhatsApp, there has been some more recent publicity about WhatsApp being used to spread misinformation and fake news. In an example, reported by <u>The Guardian</u> in June 2018, it even led to the deaths of two people in India ⁹ The term was much less familiar when researched a year ago by Kantar Media for the Reuters Institute

while parody and satire are recognised as not being news, even if sometimes mistaken as such.

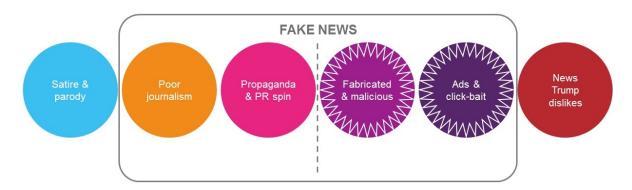


Figure 5: Definitions of fake news

"Didn't our president come up with that?" (male, 30-45, US)

Over the past couple of years the term fake news has taken on additional meaning and resonance among people interested in news, courtesy of Donald Trump and media reporting of his 'weaponised' use of the term. The concept has become a metonym for the information risks of the digital world, spanning click-bait content through to malicious misinformation.

Yet, while aware of the concept and believing in the need to be vigilant, most participants in this research did not feel they had fallen victim to fake news. Instead, those who were apprehensive spoke of their concerns for *other* people being misled, while many considered it a remote risk.

The apprehension was greater in the US and Brazil, although participants struggled to provide specific examples of fake news. In the US some talked of having seen fabricated sources, such as "The Washington Guardian", but this was very much in the past tense. There was general agreement that they had not seen much of this recently.

"During the election the biggest thing I disliked about Facebook was the amount of fake stories that were on there. And I think since then it has gotten so much better" (male, 30-45, US)

"When the elections were going on, I felt that there is a lot of stuff with Russia and then there were lots of videos and stuff, like it was pretty crazy, because it was on both sides, anti-Russian stuff as well, right. It is like, where is the stuff coming from? It is obviously coming for a reason" (male, 30-45, US)

"Before it used to be random websites that you never heard of, or were a bit of something that you do know of. Sort of like New York Times – it will be like New York Teen or whatever. But you know it's fake, because they use something that is really authentic and they're manipulating it" (male, 30-45, US)

"I see fake news every day. I mean, for example, some of the stuff is just mediocre and over exaggerating and it's not always what it seems" (female, 30-45, US)

Do you have an example of that now? "I wish I could give it to you. It was so good last year, I could have given you so much, but it's got so much better" (male, 30-45, US)

In Brazil participants talked in generalities, struggling for examples but worrying that fake news could be everywhere.

"I think there is going to be a lot more fake news, because fake news is growing in every segment: sports, current events, politics" (male, 20-29, BR)

"There is an entire process behind it to select the news that you get to receive. There is a lot more manipulation from traditional media" (male, 20-29, BR)

"O Estado posts a bunch of things that aren't really what they are. Brazilian journalism is the most horrific thing there is. Press agencies around the word say that the Brazilian presses are the worst in the world" (male, 30-45, BR)

"Unfortunately, Brazilian institutions are completely busted. We have no way of trusting the regulator" (male, 30-45, BR)

In the UK, too, few participants had examples of fake news. One recounted a story of a Japanese 'cannibal restaurant' serving human meat. This turned out to be fake, adapted originally from a satirical Spanish website. Clues, such as the poor English and the fact that the owners were called the Edible brothers, gave the game away.

"It's not always difficult to tell whether something is fake or... real... You get an idea from the way that people interact and... the comments" (female, 20-29, UK)

In Germany participants largely felt there was no fake news, although they were disappointed about the partial, low quality of their news.

"I don't think we have fake news in Germany. News can rather be puffed up or played down and are interpretable in different ways" (male, 20-29, DE)

Yet, across all countries, the spectre of fake news does appear to have led some people to be more wary: to be more sceptical of Facebook, and therefore more willing to trust traditional news media.

5.3 How should governments respond to fake news?

The role of media in holding power to account makes it difficult for governments to intervene in the problems of misinformation and fake news. There is no international consensus on where the limits of free speech should be set.

In Brazil, fake news is associated with politics and government. Introducing regulation in this area would therefore be challenging because it might be perceived as an attempt to influence the news agenda in a self-serving way.

"It's complicated for our government to be regulating fake news because they are going to toot their own horn sometimes" (female, 30-45, BR)

The general preference in the US is to rely on user responsibility, with government keeping its focus on what some participants referred to as more important issues. There was, though, some concern among older participants at alleged Russian interference in the US elections.

"We have to be intelligent enough to know what's fake and what's real" (male, 20-29, US)

"Well, it's free speech, right?" (female, 20-29, US)

"Yeah, it's what our country is based on, right?" (female, 20-29, US)

"You can't have the government doing that"" (female, 20-29, US)

Similarly, some in the UK warned of loss of freedom if government intervenes with regulation, although some younger participants were aware of the Government's concern about social media posing a threat to democracy.

"But also you'd then get worried about the Government deciding what we consume" (male, 20-29, UK)

Germany is the country that has already legislated in this area, putting a legal responsibility on platforms to remove fake news as well as racist and other discriminatory posts. Some participants approve of this and expect political arguments to evaporate from social media. Others, though, worry about censorship and the curtailing of freedom of opinions and freedom of the press.

"If the trolls stop posting inadequate comments and debates that would be great" (male, 20-29, DE)

"I noticed that disclaimed content is removed within a few hours" (male, 30-45, DE)

5.4 Critical assessment

Is spite of their anxieties about fake news, many participants felt confident to navigate the digital news world (although some Brazilians are more nervous). Many people believe there are tell-tale signs of fake news and strategies for dealing with them.

• **Check the source** – is it a reputable news organisation? Has the story been shared by a trusted friend? This is the most important step.

- Check the comments both the sentiment and the quantity. Is it being called out as fake news?
- **Check for errors** poor spelling and grammar can be signs of fake news. Is the name pretending to be a genuine news brand?
- Check the credibility of the story does it contain far-fetched claims? Does there appear to be an agenda or dishonourable motivation? Is it click-bait?
- **Cross-check the story** look to other news organisations and search the story on Google; refer to personal knowledge and first-hand experiences.
- Consider the importance of the story is it hard or soft news? Is it actually of personal interest?

For the most part, falling foul of fake news – from spin through to misinformation – is considered a problem in theory more than it is in practice. People develop an instinct for consuming news online.

"I have a friend that is very in-the-know about all types of topics, and I tend to trust more when the news comes from him" (male, 20-29, BR)

"My senses are, [if] something's extreme it's probably fake. You know the world's basically moderate. So if something really extreme's going on here it's fake" (male, 20-29, US)

"An avalanche of information you get all the time and you don't know if half of it is true. You have to do your own homework to see if it is" (male, 30-45, BR)

"I Google the same news headlines, and then I see there are news that refute what the original news was saying. There are some things you see and you really cannot believe it" (female, 20-29, BR)

"You should research in at least three different website to see if the news is confirmed" (male, 20-29, BR)

"If it's not on Google it's not real" (female, 20-29, US)

What makes a news story attractive online and what instils a sense of trust? As summarised in the diagram below, the main draws in Facebook are the headline and topic. Where the platform is actively used for news, trust resides in established news brands, with their track record. However, news is also picked up socially, where trust is vested in friends. News decisions are also judged by the popularity of an item, and the comments that are left.

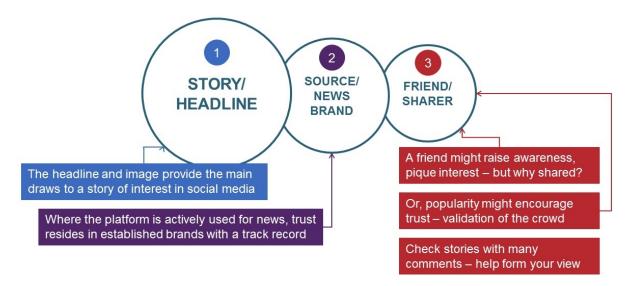


Figure 6: Cues to trust in news in social platforms

This is illustrated in the examples below.

5.5 Trust cues in Facebook

There are several cues that attract attention to news in Facebook and instil trust, as shown below.

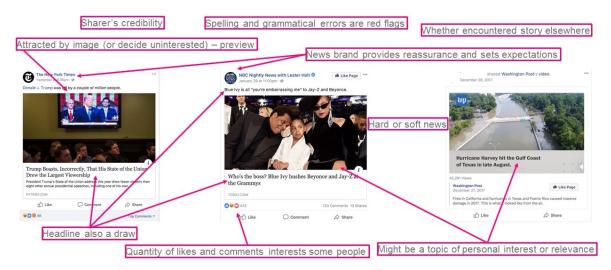


Figure 7: Cues to trust in news in Facebook

In these examples, the images are powerful draws and allow instantaneous decisions about whether the item warrants further attention. The headline contributes to this process. Other important cues are the news brand icon – which can strongly instil trust – and the number of likes and comments. Decisions are also influenced by whether the story has been encountered elsewhere (which might have aroused curiosity or, conversely, sated the interest), by who has shared the piece, and by the personal importance of the news.

5.6 Trust cues in WhatsApp

The trust threshold is lower in WhatsApp¹⁰ because the platform is generally considered safer and the friend sharing is in effect an endorser.

"It feels like WhatsApp messaging is more personal. So it's almost like I'm asking someone – because they know me so well – it's sort of like I'm asking for the news... they will send me the relevant stuff" (female, 20-29, UK)

"[On WhatsApp] it's a message to you, not a message to everyone" (female, 30-45, US)

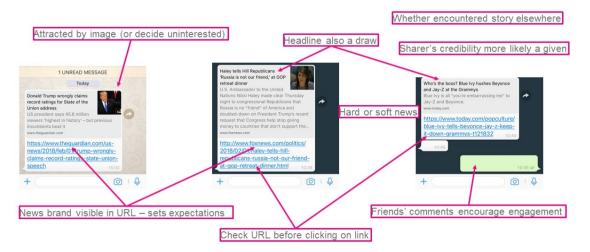


Figure 8: Cues to trust in news in WhatsApp

Images and headlines still serve a role, as do the topic, the sharer and any comments, but the more personal nature of messaging apps – and particularly the nature of the relationship between people sharing the news item – means that there is less caution around news shared in this way. Nevertheless, users are not completely undiscriminating and the URL is an important element to check whether the piece is bona fide and may be trusted. The news brand is important, although less so than in open platforms.

Nevertheless, as WhatsApp and other messaging apps become more important for news, there is every chance that some of the misinformation problems that beset open platforms will shadow news and information into the dark web of messaging apps. Since the fieldwork for this research was conducted there have already been examples reported of fake news being spread via WhatsApp¹¹. Like Facebook before it, trust in news could become an issue for WhatsApp.

¹⁰ Notwithstanding more recent reports of misinformation and safety concerns surrounding WhatsApp, such as a tragic example in India reported by <u>The Guardian</u> in June 2018, no concerns about WhatsApp were raised in this research

¹¹ As well as the example in India, WhatsApp has been reported as a prime channel for spreading falsehoods around the presidential election in Mexico – see <u>Reuters</u> (June 2018)

5.7 Video and audio

The vulnerability of platforms to misinformation might bolster the role of audio-visual content, which tends to be considered more resilient. News provided in video form, in particular, can feel like an unmediated record of unfolding events.

Sharing news film clips through messaging apps can increase the impact of the story, although the length of the clip and the possible disruption of audio tend to be factors in the decision to view. Text subtitles are a clever way of resolving the audio problem.

"If you're in a public place, it would be interesting if it had subtitles, because if you are somewhere you can't hear the audio, you enable the subtitles and you are receiving information right where you are" (female, 30-45, BR)

"Yes, it is more interesting to have subtitles, because sometimes you have your phone in public transportation, or just in public, so the audio can disturb people around you" (male, 29-29, BR)

Nevertheless, audio messages are very popular in Brazil.

"Sometimes, on WhatsApp, all we share is the screen capture of the headline, and we start debating the topic in the group. When the news is too long, friends usually say: 'send us an audio note and tell us what is going on'" (male, 20-29, BR)

6 Conclusions and implications

Facebook is showing signs of a mid-life crisis. Although its many benefits have embedded it in daily routines, the platform's success has bred an unpleasant environment. People are losing faith in the heady mix of privacy fears, exposure risk, content clutter, declining relevance and boredom, coupled with the lure of better and more convenient alternatives.

However, reducing news in Facebook may not be the answer. People are interested in news and they still value Facebook as a discovery mechanism. They are moving to messaging apps in part to avoid the toxicity of political debate in more open spaces. They prefer to share and discuss news with their real friends. Facebook is being augmented, rather than replaced, by messaging apps: news is surfaced on Facebook and socialised on WhatsApp.

At the same time, fake news has gained traction as a concept, although it seems not so much a directly experienced problem – in the misinformation sense – as a cautionary term about the digital news world. People would feel uneasy about the risks of self-serving state intervention as a response to the problem of fake news.

Facebook is likely to address its collapsing context through further innovation. Indeed, as the owner of WhatsApp it already has a response to the evolving market – although messaging apps themselves could in turn suffer some of the same problems as Facebook.

"I've also got a community group in WhatsApp. There are 40 people in that one, too, I think, and I've got only five of their numbers. And then you start to feel a bit uncomfortable" (female, 30-45, DE)

The news industry is developing differentiated business models, tailored to different news organisations and their audience value propositions. Yet, technology is ever evolving in response to consumer needs and interests. The challenge for news organisations is to determine how to connect with audiences as they continue their migration from open to closed platforms, while developing value propositions that are financially viable. At the same time, established news brands could help stave off the contagion of misinformation spreading to closed platforms such as WhatsApp.

7 Appendix

7.1 Methodology and sample

Two group discussions per country with consumers of news, plus two respondents per group interviewed in a filmed mini-depth of about 10-15 minutes in Brazil, the UK and the US (but not in Germany).

GROUP	COUNTRY	CITY	AGE
1	Brazil	São Paulo	20-29
2	Brazil	São Paulo	30-45
3	Germany	Hamburg	20-29
4	Germany	Hamburg	30-45
5	United Kingdom	London	20-29
6	United Kingdom	London	30-45
7	United States	New York	20-29
8	United States	New York	30-45

Additional sample specifications:

- Mix of male & female, spread of ages and social grade, and mix of political attitudes/affiliation
- All have high/mid-level interest in news across a mix of news categories (hard and soft), consume news at least three times a week, and use a range of platforms and news brands
- All use Facebook (mix of using it actively or passively for news)
- All use messaging apps for news at least once per week (mix of massive and active receiving, commenting, sharing)
- Mix of messaging apps with groups, with focus on WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger

Logistics

- Fieldwork was conducted by Kantar Media (in UK and US) and Kantar TNS (in Brazil and Germany) in local language
- All participants were free-find recruited and given a monetary incentive for their participation
- All were pre-tasked: a 3-day consumption diary of news in social media and messaging apps; metaphor objects/images about social media and messaging apps; and questions about the platforms
- The group discussions lasted about 2 hours each and comprised 5-8 participants
- In Brazil, the UK and the US, two participants per group were interviewed on camera after each group discussion, and gave permission for use of the footage
- Client viewing of the groups was provided, with simultaneous translation into English in Brazil and Germany
- Fieldwork was conducted 6-13 February 2018
- The research was led by Jason Vir (Director) and Kathryn Hall (Associate Director) of Kantar Media, UK

7.2 Recruitment questionnaire flow

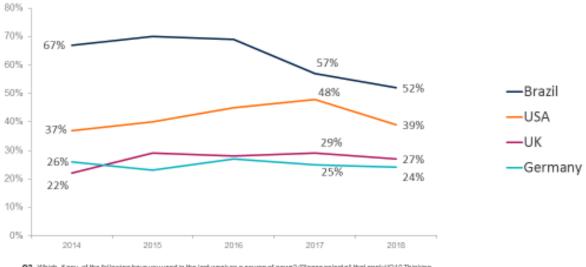
 Screening out industry connections and recent research participation; news interest and consumption frequency; types of news content; news platforms and brands (tailored to market); use in the past week of Facebook and messaging apps for news; political leaning; demographics

7.3 Discussion flow

- Introduction and warm up; defining news
- Exploring Facebook in general and for news; Facebook changes; exploring messenger apps for news, especially WhatsApp; comparing social media and messaging apps
- Awareness and perceptions of algorithms, filter bubbles and echo chambers, and fake news; perceptions of news in the future

7.4 Peak in use of Facebook for news

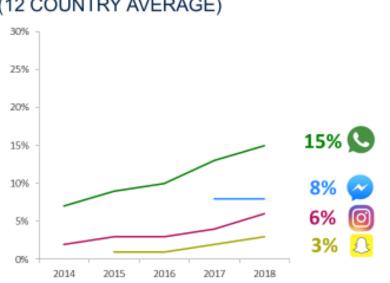
% ACCESSING FACEBOOK FOR NEWS (WEEKLY)



Q3. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news? (Please selectal that apply)/Q10 Thinking about how you FIND news online, which are the main ways that you come across news stories? - Used social media and came across news that way. Base: Total sample in each country.

Figure 9: Users of social media for news (2014-2018), sourced from the RISJ Digital News Report 2018

7.5 Growth in use of messaging apps for news



WEEKLY USE OF NETWORKS FOR NEWS 2014-18 (12 COUNTRY AVERAGE)

Reuters institute Digital News Report 2014-18, Q12a Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week for news? Base: Total sample from 2015 onwards in 12 countries (UK, US, Germany, France, Spain, Raly, Ireland, Denmark, Finland, Australia, Brazil, Japan), and 10 country average for 2014 (excludes Acabalis and Indend)

Figure 10: Weekly use of networks for news (2014-2018), sourced from the RISJ Digital News Report 2018

7.6 Mark Zuckerberg announcement



11 January at 16:28 · Menlo Park, CA, United States · 🕞

One of our big focus areas for 2018 is making sure the time we all spend on Facebook is time well spent.

We built Facebook to help people stay connected and bring us closer together with the people that matter to us. That's why we've always put friends and family at the core of the experience. Research shows that strengthening our relationships improves our well-being and happiness.

But recently we've gotten feedback from our community that public content -posts from businesses, brands and media -- is crowding out the personal moments that lead us to connect more with each other.

It's easy to understand how we got here. Video and other public content have exploded on Facebook in the past couple of years. Since there's more public content than posts from your friends and family, the balance of what's in News Feed has shifted away from the most important thing Facebook can do -- help us connect with each other.

We feel a responsibility to make sure our services aren't just fun to use, but also good for people's well-being. So we've studied this trend carefully by looking at the academic research and doing our own research with leading experts at universities.

The research shows that when we use social media to connect with people we care about, it can be good for our well-being. We can feel more connected and less lonely, and that correlates with long term measures of happiness and health. On the other hand, passively reading articles or watching videos -- even if they're entertaining or informative -- may not be as good.

Based on this, we're making a major change to how we build Facebook. I'm changing the goal I give our product teams from focusing on helping you find relevant content to helping you have more meaningful social interactions.

We started making changes in this direction last year, but it will take months for this new focus to make its way through all our products. The first changes you'll see will be in News Feed, where you can expect to see more from your friends, family and groups. As we roll this out, you'll see less public content like posts from businesses, brands, and media. And the public content you see more will be held to the same standard -- it should encourage meaningful interactions between people.

For example, there are many tight-knit communities around TV shows and sports teams. We've seen people interact way more around live videos than regular ones. Some news helps start conversations on important issues. But too often today, watching video, reading news or getting a page update is just a passive experience.

Now, I want to be clear: by making these changes, I expect the time people spend on Facebook and some measures of engagement will go down. But I also expect the time you do spend on Facebook will be more valuable. And if we do the right thing, I believe that will be good for our community and our business over the long term too.

At its best, Facebook has always been about personal connections. By focusing on bringing people closer together -- whether it's with family and friends, or around important moments in the world -- we can help make sure that Facebook is time well spent.

199k Likes 19k Comments 29k Shares

7.7 Contacts

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