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

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**TRUST IN NEWS
PROJECT**

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

How do people view media they come across in everyday life, and what can that tell us about why they do (and do not) trust the news they encounter? In early 2021, the Reuters Institute held a series of focus group discussions and interviews with cross-sections of people on four continents to learn more about the way people think about these matters. They told us about what they liked, what they disliked, and, most importantly, what they found trustworthy and untrustworthy about news, and why.

This report summarises several of the insights we took away from these conversations. What we learnt speaks directly to previous research on trust in news – which we detail in a previous report (Toff et al. 2020) – but in other ways these discussions raise some uncomfortable questions about the nature of trust in contemporary digital media environments. In short, we find that trust often revolves around ill-defined impressions o brand identities and is rarely rooted in details concerning news organisations' reporting practices or editorial standards – qualities that journalists often emphasise about their work.

While some audiences hold clear notions about what certain brands stand for and how to think about the work they produce, we also find consistently that many do not – a pattern which repeats itself across countries, media environments, and even levels of trust in news in general. Instead, audiences draw on shortcuts shaped by past experience in some cases, partisan or social influences in other cases as well as contextual factors involving social media, search engines, and messaging apps, which are increasingly central to how people find and engage with news worldwide (Newman et al. 2020).

1.1 Background

This report is part of a larger Reuters Institute project that aims to study why trust in news is eroding in many places around the world, what it means to different groups in different contexts, what its implications may be, and what organisations that deem themselves deserving might do to restore it.

We focus on media environments in four countries – Brazil, India, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) – each not only differing greatly in their cultures, politics, and media systems but also resembling each other in how centrally important digital platforms have become as critical information brokers. This change in particular has generated growing concerns about what role such companies may play in how people stay informed and engage in civic life. Trust in the sources of information people encounter both on and offline may or may not be affected by these profound changes but existing scholarship has often been limited to single country studies and/or single methodological approaches, and so our up-to-date understanding of trust in news across countries and across platforms remains limited.

Our goal with the larger project is both to broaden and deepen efforts to study trust in news by collecting data in more places and conducting research using a mix of complementary

methods. In this report, we take a largely inductive approach using qualitative data, a 'method of listening' (Cramer 2016), which we describe below.

1.2 How this report was constructed

This report draws on open-ended conversations with 132 individuals in all four countries, a technique that allows for probing how people make sense of complex, polysemic, and sometimes abstract constructs. Although we are unable to make statistical generalisations about how all people in a given country think about news using this approach, we are better able to grasp the context around *how* people form their views and *why*.

Working with the research organisation YouGov, we recruited adults in the four countries, selecting a mix of people who were both more and less trusting of news in general.[1] We also screened study participants to capture a variety of other characteristics including age, partisanship, and forms of media use. Our approach involved a combination of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews (see Table 1), with all interactions occurring over the internet due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of the 90-minute focus group discussions (18 – 21 January 2021) was administered by YouGov using a chat-based platform similar to common messaging services. We used insights from these eight focus groups to inform additional one-on-one interviews with separately recruited individuals using an online video conferencing platform (25 January – 17 February 2021). These interviews were conducted by the Reuters Institute research team.

Table 1. Participants in the study by country and levels of trust in news

	Focus groups	In-depth interviews
Brazil		
More trusting	8	9
Less trusting	8	6
India		
More trusting	9	8
Less trusting	8	9
UK		
More trusting	11	8
Less trusting	9	7
US		
More trusting	11	8
Less trusting	6	7
Overall totals	70	62

Note: Focus group discussions were text-based, using a chat platform administered by YouGov, whereas interviews were conducted using video conferencing tools.

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[1] The screener survey question used was derived from Strömbäck et al. (2020). Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement, 'Generally speaking, I can trust information from the news media in [applicable country]'.

Given technology and other factors involved in recruitment, we specifically focused on people on the higher end of the socio-economic spectrum in each country: those with access to reliable internet service, most typically residing in major metro areas, and with average or above-average education. These are, in effect, people who generally have the most advantaged access to information in their respective countries. In previous studies (e.g. Tsfati and Ariely 2014), socio-economic differences have often been linked to how frequently people consume news and what forms they use, but there are mixed results with respect to any relationship with trust in news. In future studies, we hope to expand our focus to other less advantaged groups using additional research methods and approaches.

Most focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in English, except those in Brazil (Portuguese) and a small portion of the interviews in India (Hindi). All were recorded, transcribed, and translated to English, and analysed by the research team for commonalities and differences in an iterative and inductive manner. In the report, we focus on several of the core themes identified through this process including illustrative examples from the transcripts where possible. In most cases, we focus mainly on similarities observed across the four countries as these were often most striking, but throughout the report we weave in some key differences as well. Where we include quotes, we identify study participants using pseudonyms.

Finally, although we recruited focus group participants and interviewees according to a screener survey question that divided people into more trusting and less trusting groups, it was often difficult to distinguish between those belonging to   ne group or the other except in extreme cases. Most people held a mix of overlapping, nuanced views about the variety of news media they encountered in daily life. We report how study participants responded to the screener question in the appendix, but otherwise we rarely refer back to this classification scheme.

1.3 Key finding

Despite considerable differences in the media environments in each country, our focus group discussions and interviews revealed a great deal of common ground between people in how they thought about and articulated concerns about trust and the news media in their respective countries.

In Figure 1 (overleaf), we summarise the main topics we heard expressed in these exchanges alongside several of the things we heard most frequently from journalists in our previous interviews (Toff et al. 2020). Although there were some areas of overlap between the two groups, news audiences were far more likely to emphasise their sense of familiarity with brands or stylistic qualities pertaining to appearance or how news was presented. Most put far less emphasis on news organisations' journalistic practices since only a few were particularly knowledgeable about how news was made or even interested in knowing more about such matters.

Figure 1. Summary of themes captured in discussions with journalists and news audiences
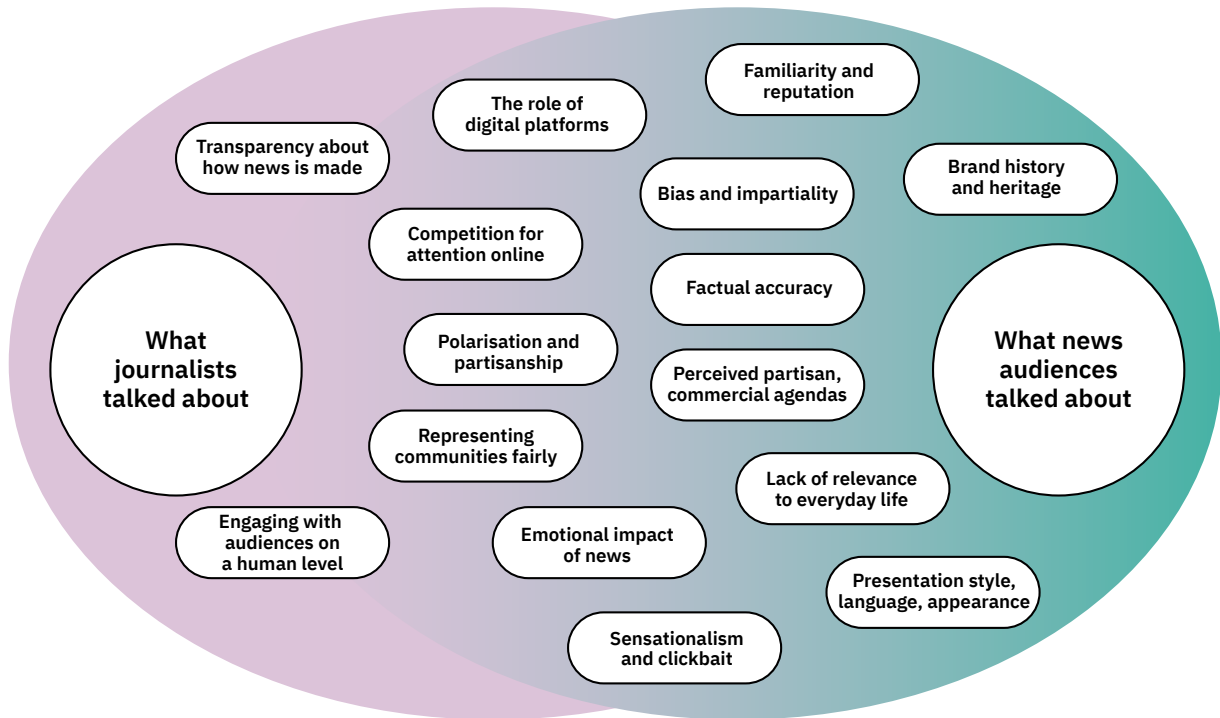
Note: 'What news audiences talked about' refers to themes covered in this report. 'What journalists talked about' refers to themes discussed in our previous report (Toff et al. 2020). While there were many areas of overlap, some themes were primarily discussed by one group or the other. Those themes are depicted furthest apart from each other on the left or the right.

We highlight several of this report's key findings here

- **Familiarity with brands and their reputations offline often shaped how people thought about news content online as well.** Across all four countries, when people described what led them to trust or distrust news organisations, many used the term as a kind of shorthand for news sources they were familiar with and their sense of a given brand's reputation (good or bad). Conversations about trust would often lead to more general impressions about things people either liked or disliked about news media, which suggests the boundaries between a news source that is 'trusted' and a news source that is simply 'likeable' are often blurry. Brands can be cues for trust, but also for distrust. Both more trusting and less trusting individuals tended to articulate trust in this way.

- **Editorial processes and practices of journalism were rarely central to how people thought about trust.** Only a small number in each country expressed confidence in their understanding of how journalism works or the decision-making and newsgathering processes that shape how the news is made. Instead, many focused on more stylistic factors or qualities concerning the presentation of news as more tangible signals of perceived quality or reliability.

- **The work of individual journalists, in contrast to presenters on television, was often far less visible, and many of the prominent media personalities who stood out to people were often polarising figures.** When people spoke of individual journalists, it was often specific to outspoken personalities and opinion w iters, even if they also made a point of saying they preferred impartial news that focused on facts

rather than opinions. Many had an easier time naming presenters and commentators they disagreed with than highlighting the work of individual reporters or editors whose judgement and track record of reporting they respected. A considerable number in Brazil, the UK, and the US could not name any journalists at all.

- **Perceptions of bias and hidden agendas in news coverage were prevalent, but what people meant often reflected differences in their own political or social identities.** Objectivity, impartiality, and balance in news coverage were frequently invoked in all four countries as values associated with trustworthy journalism. While many criticised specific news brands or entire modes of news as being too dri en by commercial or partisan interests or both, others were frustrated by the distorted ways they felt particular groups in society were portrayed – whether ignored entirely, demeaned, or consistently overemphasised. A belief that the news was 'controlled' by various forces led many to adopt a more generalised form of scepticism and resignation about whether any news source could be counted on for accurate information.

- **Few cited the COVID-19 pandemic as a factor in how they evaluated the trustworthiness of news sources.** While many raised concerns about health-related misinformation they had encountered or referred to news about the pandemic as being emotionally taxing, the pandemic itself did not seem to alter many pre-existing views about news media.

- **Most had low trust in information they saw on platforms, but judgement of individual news outlets often depended on how strongly people already felt toward the brands they encountered there.** Many valued the convenience of getting news via social media, search engines, or messaging services, but finding news there was generally a secondary consideration for why they used these platforms – even something they tended to avoid. For audiences without existing preferences (positive or negative) about news organisations in their country, making sense of the abundance of information online could be challenging or overwhelming. Because many perceived digital media as places awash in unreliable, divisive, and even dangerous information, there are clear trade-offs involved for news organisations that seek to appear in such venues in order to attract and engage with new audiences.

2. Trust as a Shorthand for Familiarity, Reputation, and Likeability

In this section, we begin by examining what people said trust in news means to them and detailing several themes that stood out. First, we learned that people held wide-ranging attitudes towards various news organisations in their countries that are difficult to captur in commonly used survey questions. A person who was generally trusting of news often held more critical views about particular news organisations or modes of media. These views were routinely in line with partisanship or other key identities that shaped people's worldviews. Second, while most said information accuracy was among the top factors determining whether an organisation was worthy of trust, how they interpreted factual accuracy was highly subjective and variable. When it came to specific news organisations focus group participants and interviewees across the four countries frequently said they rely on brand-level impressions based on rules of thumb or context clues to determine which sources were reliable and credible.

2.1 Factors beyond 'accuracy'

SENSE OF FAMILIARITY AND ATTACHMENT WITH BRAND OR SOURCE

Many said they based their judgements about trustworthiness on how familiar they were with a given news organisation. As Pamela (28, woman, US) put it, 'It's always easier to trust someone you're more familiar with'. On the other hand, if study participants hadn't heard of a brand at all, this was often grounds to dismiss its reporting. Mariana (45, woman, Brazil) explained, 'I'm usually not one to look at a website or platform that I've never heard of'. Sometimes this sense of familiarity was less about rational judgements than it was about intuition:

> It's hard to put it into words because it's very instinctual, I don't really think about it. I just have a general feeling, really. I suppose I just trust if it comes from a major publication that I recognise. If it's some random page that I've no idea about, they rarely come up, but it's more questionable.
>
> Andrew (25, man, UK)

Many spoke about familiarity in relation to the formation of news consumption habits, which often dated back to their childhoods. Kayla (34, woman, US) described how she got accustomed to watching *Good Morning America* because 'my mom would wake up and she'd watch it while she drank coffee, so I just got in that habit even when I was younger. And that habit stuck with me when I was out on my own'. Samantha (33, woman, UK) explained she 'would be much more likely to go to the BBC, not because I necessarily think it's better than any equivalent site, but just because it's what I've been used to. My dad would have looked on BBC, do you know what I mean?' Sometimes brands were even talked about as part of family tradition, reminding people of their loved ones. For example, Deborah (50, woman, UK) acknowledged, 'As daft a reason as it sounds, I always remember my Grandad saying he would only trust the BBC, and I guess I grew up conditioned to think that'. Explaining why she trusts NDTV, Farah (40, woman, India) mentioned that she had been watching it for years and 'my family members also used to

like to watch it'. This sense of heritage alludes to a deeper form of attachment to news brands expressed by many of those who trusted specific organisations

> *I grew up watching the BBC. ... I grew up watching George Alagiah. Sometimes, you build that rapport with a presenter, and you think, 'What they're saying is correct'. I can't get that with Piers Morgan and* Good Morning Britain, *anyone on those particular forums or channels. Channel 4, I can. It's really odd. Maybe there's something there, just because somebody's saying it who's in that position, that I've known all my life, I'm more inclined to trust that information.*

<div align="right">Alice (34, woman, UK)</div>

Trust did not, however, necessarily mean interviewees were blindly accepting of all of a news organisation's reporting. As João (25, man, Brazil) said about G1, the brand he used most heavily, 'I wouldn't say that I trust completely, but it is the one I use the most and sometimes it is the only one I use. So, while it is the one I trust the most, it is also the one I most suspect'.

REPUTATION AND PAST EXPERIENCE

Familiarity with a given brand was also closely intertwined with impressions about that media organisation's track record and reputation. Having been around for a long time gave many confidence that an organisation was more deserving of trust 'Well, of course, there's the history, they've got a long history of journalism there', Mary (40, woman, US) said, for example, when asked why she trusted the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.

Similar points were raised elsewhere. When talking about why she trusted *The Hindu*, Pratibha (56, woman, India) underscored that alongside the *Times*, it is 'the oldest' newspaper and was also 'the first on '. Similarly, Maria (37, woman, Brazil) offered, 'I trust Globo group and *Folha* more because I think they've been around for a long time'. As Samantha (33, woman, UK) explained in her case when it came to the BBC, she wasn't sure why she found it more trustworthy. 'I think it's because it's like a big establishment. In England, it's a big thing, it's been around for a lot of years. I guess they have something they have to be accountable to.'

Indeed, some interpreted longevity itself as indicative of whether an organisation had rigorous reporting practices that had withstood scrutiny over time.

> *It's more because if they are a big enough brand, an old enough organisation, they seem to have better practices. I guess there's better regulations, I guess they get in trouble if they misreport facts. So, I think that is the main reason, the main deciphering of trustworthy news sources, and the best way to find it.*

<div align="right">Andrew (25, man, UK)</div>

For others, assessing an organisation's track record involved past encounters and evaluations about the nature of its coverage over time. Carl (64, man, US), for instance, recalled that he had listened to the 'local National Public Radio in just about every place we've lived for the last 40, 45 years. I guess that's the other thing, that sense of consistency over time that gives a level of credibility that maybe other places don't have'.

In the absence of prior knowledge about a news organisation's reputation or previous experience using it themselves, however, many said they would turn to people they knew and

trusted to help decipher which sources were more accurate and reliable.[2] Such practices came up in all countries but most often in India and Brazil. As Andrea (28, woman, India) said, when in doubt, 'I will ask my friends if they've heard anything about it, my parents if they have heard anything about it'. In some instances, these trusted advisors were experts in particular subjects like politics or health. In other cases, people relied on more general perceptions of what they sensed other people thought about the trustworthiness of a given source, what Russell (28, man, US), a regular Reddit user for news, called 'societal consensus'. Sometimes people turned to their acquaintances to stay informed when they distrusted conventional news media.

> *Nowadays, I no longer watch the news on TV. I've stopped doing that during the pandemic. I prefer the truth. We've been watching a lot of fake information going around. For example, I have a friend in Brasília so he tells us what he sees. In this group, each one lives in one part of Brazil so we tell others what we see, not what we watch on TV.*
>
> Rebeca (49, woman, Brazil)

Of course, reputations can cut both ways. For some, greater brand awareness was associated with greater distrust, not just trust. Pratik (32, man, India) made a point of noting, 'I do remember the fake ones', referencing a popular channel that 'had discovered aliens a few years back' and 'were even researching about mermaids'. Others took note of brands whose identities they saw as contrasting with their own partisan or ideological views. As Jordan (23, man, US) said, 'I can just think of specific news anchors on Fox News and hear things that they say that legitimately upset me or I think are very hateful'. In the UK, prominent tabloid newspaper brands were often singled out.

> *The* Daily Mail *has been shown or seen to be very sensationalist. They, I think, repeatedly put out information that's always questioned and then obviously they have to retract certain statements, so that in itself is obviously another cause for me to be, like, 'Hang on a minute, I probably shouldn't take what I see on there for face value'.*
>
> Antoine (29, man, UK)

Generalising about entire modes or platforms

Many made determinations about whether to trust information based on broader categorisations of entire modes of media (e.g. television versus online versus print) or platforms (e.g. news on WhatsApp versus Twitter). The most common versions of this were pronouncements expressing scepticism about online platforms, for example, 'I almost never trust content coming from social media, honestly' (Lia, 43, woman, Brazil) or 'Honestly speaking, I don't trust WhatsApp' (Andrea, 28, woman, India). In rare cases people made the opposite generalisations, such as 'Social media, they keep in mind what is true' (Raghunath, 46, man, India).

We focus specifically on perceptions about platforms in Part 5 o this report, but here we note that many also categorised conventional news sources based on broad assumptions they held about the format. For instance, some interviewees expressed greater trust toward online news because they assumed alternatives were less up-to-date and less relevant. Maria (37, woman, Brazil) explained that she preferred *Folha*'s news website over BandNews TV because 'it's an online company and it can change things throughout the day', which in her view allows for more consistent and well-researched content amended with any necessary changes.

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[2]   The role played by such opinion leaders has long been a focus of communication research (e.g. Druckman et al. 2018).

Some people also said they trusted television news because it provides visual evidence for what is being reported or because they were more inclined to believe 'real people' they could see. For example, Abhay (37, man, India) said, 'I like to see the video, or maybe if I see the video I get to know, "Okay, this is happening around". That makes things easier for me to judge it'. Similarly, Rafael (22, man, Brazil) explained, 'I believe in information that is conveyed visually'. Samantha (33, woman, UK) suggested that 'it's easier to mislead people in print' than on TV because she thought it was 'harder to believe that somebody would outright lie to your face'.

2.2 How likeability relates to trust

In addition to familiarity and reputation, trust and distrust often served as a shorthand for what people liked or disliked about various news sources. Conversations about trust would often veer towards broader critiques and frustrations many felt about particular news sources – a way of explaining why they avoided certain channels or providers and used the ones they did. As Vitor (27, man, Brazil) said, 'I trust in those sources I read'. Or as Mariana (45, woman, Brazil) put it, 'I always try to watch or listen to the ones I am already used to, the ones I trust more'.

A FOCUS ON STYLISTIC DIFFERENCES IN HOW NEWS IS PRESENTED
Among the many critiques people offered about why they gravitated toward particular sources were those pertaining to stylistic differences in how news was presented. These criticisms and observations were common in all countries. Many focused on the style of the writing itself. Describing her dislike of the *Guardian*, Abigail (58, woman, UK) explained that 'it just seems to be quite highfalutin', adding 'I just can't get to grips with it'. The care put into copyediting also mattered for people like Rachel (23, woman, UK), who said, 'When I open an article and I see it's full of errors and spelling mistakes and grammar mistakes, I know that it's not something to be relied upon'. In India, multiple people pointed to 'good language' as a signal of a news organisation's quality or appeal, referring to characteristics of the syntax itself.

> *A lot of it has to do with language as well. When I see something that has been written well grammatically and otherwise, that does lead you to trust it because you can see that the person who's written it obviously has studied a lot, has studied the language, has a good command of the language.*
>
> Pooja (21, woman, India)

The focus on stylistic differences especially stood out in India, where many seemed to differentiate between news sources on the basis of these factors. Geeta (46, woman, India) said she liked that a particular newscaster 'speaks very nicely so I like watching him', adding 'style and the quality of news is also nice; he is very presentable'. Some commentary on the style of television programmes revolved around how aggressive the presenters were, a feature some experienced as abrasive and off-putting. Arshad (32, man, India) criticised the practice adopted by many journalists of 'just shouting on TV'.

> *For Indian news, I would like them to remove those weird siren sounds during breaking news, and would like them to stop yelling and shouting, to put forward their point of view.*
>
> Kartik (25, man, India)

However, the tendency of Indian television news programmes to involve a great deal of shouting

was a polarising stylistic element, as other people found it to be interesting and appealing to watch. For example, Abhay (37, man, India) explained that he appreciates the confrontational style because he enjoys the drama: 'If something has to be portrayed they will shout and portray it, so there is a different weight on that. I love watching them. Even if I don't want to, they'll keep a suspense until the end'. (We pick up on this theme again in Part 3 when we examine how interviewees talked about individual journalists.)

APPEARANCE

In addition to the language and style used in reporting and presenting news, some interviewees highlighted the importance of the appearance or aesthetic characteristics of news, primarily in relation to advertising on news websites and videos. Often, comments about appearance directly touched on the functionality and usability of websites. Farah (40, woman, India) complained about interruptions of 'ads that keep popping up in between, that's very irritating'. Ângelo (28, man, Brazil) said he preferred sites 'with few ads, which leads to less visual pollution in the screen and [content] being more accessible with just a few clicks'. Similarly, Luke (51, man, UK) explained, 'I tend to avoid even watching the videos on the internet news because they're surrounded by adverts that you have to sit through before you can skip them'. Others used the aesthetic characteristics of websites as indicators of the news quality itself.

> *I'm very wary of what the website looks like. If there's a lot of pop-ups and lots of different photos of different things and it's quite a clogged website, I tend to not trust the news as much. It is a weird way of thinking, but if it's not as posh-looking, I tend not to trust it as much.*
>
> Gemma (23, woman, UK)

Several people talked specifically about the appearance of thei local news websites in unflatterin terms. Hannah (28, woman, UK) explained that she avoids '"spammy" websites with loads of pop-ups and adverts', adding that her 'local news provider is a major culprit for this'. Joseph (33, man, UK) was sympathetic to news outlets that financially depend on   dvertising, but nonetheless said he avoids his local newspaper because of the annoyance of excessive ads: 'I just won't go on it because the website takes a long time to buffer and the ads just pop up halfway down the story. It's not very pleasant to navigate, it's not very aesthetically pleasing on the site or anything like that'.

SENSATIONALISM AND CLICKBAIT

Across all four countries, another stylistic concern involving both the substance and presentation of news was the reliance on sensationalism or clickbait, which was typically associated with lower quality information. For example, Pedro (35, man, Brazil) maintained that 'if they [news outlets] exaggerate, I'll know it's false'. The distaste for sensationalistic journalism was often anchored in the feeling that such news simply sought to provoke or trick audiences into clicking or watching. Antoine (29, man, UK) explained that he pays close attention to the tone of headlines because you can tell 'if something is being used to just rile people up or … you read a headline and then you read the rest of the article, you're like, "Hang on a minute, that's not even what you're saying in this headline"'.

> *Some of the headlines [on CNN] are ridiculously misleading. Of course they are, they want you to click on it. So, I find that very annoying sometimes where I click on something and then I say, 'Oh, for crying out loud, I totally got suckered on that stupid headline or summary of what I'm going to see'.*
>
> John (39, man, US)

In the UK, study participants were especially likely to single out tabloid newspapers when referring to sensationalism. Gemma (23, woman, UK) explained that she wasn't the 'type' of person who reads such papers, but she could see their appeal to others: 'Tabloids tend to be very right-wing, very clickbait, very much "a version of the truth", just about. I find a lot of their news articles are quite racially aggressive and very distasteful, but to an audience that they're trying to capture, it works.' Another interviewee argued that while approaching tabloids with scepticism, it is unnecessary to entirely exclude them from one's media diet:

> *I wouldn't say I would totally disregard them [tabloids] because to disregard them would be, you know, you're cutting off essentially a whole area of the news. And … I don't think any of those news articles are so far away that they've got no truth in them. They just, I guess, they pad out things a little bit more based on who they think they're tailoring their read to.*
>
> Alexander (35, man, UK)

A small number of interviewees acknowledged enjoying news others might call 'sensationalised'. Many did not assume the information was always accurate, but this didn't prevent them from enjoying it. For example, Gabrielle (22, woman, UK) explained that she read the *Daily Mail* mostly for entertainment and didn't worry about verifying the information because 'It's not something that I really care to know if it's true, if I'm honest. It's not something I take at face value either'. Others pointed out that sensationalism only existed because there was a real demand for it.

> *We don't want calm peaceful news; we want to see something sensational. It's the people. So the channel which is showing something sensational, people watch more.*
>
> Kavita (43, woman, India)

A FOCUS ON HOW NEWS MAKES PEOPLE FEEL

When describing how likeable a particular news channel or source may be, many referred not simply to how credible they believed the information was or the stylistic choices made around presenting it, but how consuming such news made them feel. These affective responses were often important for understanding why people said they trusted certain sources versus others. Gemma (23, woman, UK), quoted above about her preference for 'posh-looking' websites, explained how a site's appearance affected how she felt about it: 'there's a feeling of ease when you read something that's clean, clear and precise, well-written. I feel more relaxed and therefore more likely to trust it, to be honest.' Lawrence (55, man, US), a conservative supporter of Donald Trump, described removing news apps from his phone following the 2020 election and refusing to watch Fox News or any cable news. Although he remained steadfast in his views, he recognised the effect quitting this news medium had on his mood: 'To be honest with you, I think you're less angry.'

> *When I'm watching Channel 4 News, I definitely feel more relaxed than when I'm watching BBC News. It's maybe to do with the sort of setting and the environment. Channel 4 is definitely more relaxed and chilled out in terms of their set and the way they report things, the mannerisms of the presenters and things like that as well.*
>
> Joseph (33, man, UK)

Most often, the kinds of feelings people associated with news were those causing distress, such as anxiety, anger, or fear. Rebeca (49, woman, Brazil) recalled an episode in which something

she saw on TV led her to believe she had COVID-19. 'I had breathing issues. Thankfully, it was only for one night, but it was a horrible experience. That's when I promised myself to stop watching the news on TV.' Danielle (25, woman, UK) also viewed news coverage as potentially harmful, explaining that 'with how much of the media reports negative stuff over positive stuff, people in general have become more anxious and negative themselves'.

The focus on the emotional impact of news also meant people did not always differentiate between events in the news and the editorial choices made about how to represent those events. Henry (48, man, US), for example, said he did not bother paying close attention to the reputations of sources and their biases; he just wanted the basic facts and relied on aggregators like Bing or Yahoo! to simplify his news consumption. 'I'm like a hoverer where I want to know what's going on, but I just don't have the time to be point/counterpoint of each issue.' Others felt similarly:

> *I am not in favour of any [in] particular. The news is important; medium is not important.*
>
> <div align="right">Kavita (43, woman, India)</div>

3. Attention to Journalism Practices, but Limited Knowledge About It

In our previous report (Toff et al. 2020), which focused on journalists' perspectives about trust in news, reporters and editors we interviewed talked about the importance they placed on newsgathering and reporting procedures as markers of quality. Here we turn to what audiences think about journalism practices: what expectations do people have for news? How well do the sources they use meet those expectations? And when people sense that news falls short, what do they do about it?

In this section we highlight how study participants made assessments about journalistic practices in Brazil, India, the UK, and the US. We also focus on views about individual journalists, who were only in rare cases seen as independent and distinct from the organisations they worked for.

3.1 What people say they want from news

Although many focused on factors like familiarity, presentational style, and appearance when describing their own media choices, when it came to expectations about what 'good journalism' means, study participants did sometimes raise matters involving news organisations' editorial practices. To take one example, a select number of interviewees, primarily in the UK and the US, talked about the importance of correction policies as evidence of professionalism, which made them more trusting of news. Jeremy (57, man, US), for example, said seeing corrections made him more likely to trust a news organisation: 'If they just ignore their own errors, well, that's a problem, and the sooner they catch the error, the better, of course.' Likewise, Alexander (35, man, UK) was forgiving of news organisations when they made mistakes and said he respected journalists who sought to correct the factual record, 'At the end of the day there are humans writing these things'.

PROFESSIONALISM

More often, however, the kinds of qualities people said they wanted from journalism were less tangible and concrete. Many emphasised forms of 'professionalism' more generally, underscoring the importance of reporters pursuing stories 'in-depth' and asking 'hard questions'. These notions were not always rooted in any specific practices but in brands' overall reputations for holding themselves to evidentiary standards and being intellectually honest. In some cases, more trusting study participants pointed to professionalism as being a kind of quality that could even overcome partisan disagreements. An American interviewee, for example, mentioned that he liked *New York Times* opinion columnist David Brooks due to what he perceived to be his integrity, even though he disagreed with his political views.

> *I guess he's a journalist that is also quite a thinker, and what I liked about him is just he's a thinker, he thinks deeply, and he really cares about the wellbeing of society. His values, within that spectrum, political values spectrum, he's to the right of me, but it doesn't matter because I can see that he cares, right? He cares and he thinks deeply about the country and the society*

and people, and someone like that, he's got integrity. That's the word, integrity is the word. So, I listen to what he has to say. Even if he says something I do not necessarily agree with, I listen to him and I take it as a lesson. Unfortunately, there aren't that many people like that anymore, but he is one of them.

Jeremy (57, man, US)

In-depth reporting

Closely intertwined with professionalism, participants in all four countries often underscored a preference for in-depth reporting, expressing that they placed importance on reporters asking hard questions and adopting comprehensive research practices. 'I think research is everything', Pooja (21, woman, India) said, for example. She argued that journalism needs to explain what is going on beyond simply presenting a set of facts as if they speak for themselves. 'It's important to interview people who are experts on a topic', she suggested.

For me personally, something's well-written when there are a lot of viewpoints that have been examined. That specific article [where] the Constituent Assembly debates were examined, like what happened? What was the thought process of the members of the Constituent Assembly when they were drafting this particular article? What was the intention behind it? That is something that is very important to know when you want to form an opinion about something. … So, it's not really somebody's opinion, but it's just somebody who's put in a lot of research in their writing, so that to me is well-written – when you can just see the effort that somebody has gone through to write something.

Pooja (21, woman, India)

Similar sentiments were expressed by others who brought up the value of asking 'hard questions'. Lawrence (55, man, US), for example, said he wished news resembled 'the way things were' in the past. 'You weren't getting this constant 24/7 stream of, really, BS, and nobody does their research anymore. Nobody asks questions. It's really, kind of, sad. It's actually tragic, to be honest with you.' Others lamented what they saw as superficial news coverage especially on television, which many used as a cue that the information being reported might be less reliable.

I see this on Good Morning Britain. *It's just over-simplified. It doesn't really give the required depth for people to understand what's going on. Maybe those people are happy not to know what's going on, I don't know. I watched the news today, I watched* Good Morning Britain. *It was very simple. Are you really well-informed if you're watching that?*

Alice (34, woman, UK)

In-depth reporting, however, was not consistently viewed as a trust-inducing quality. To the extent that depth also meant complexity, some viewed it as an annoyance. One interviewee, for example, said that under certain circumstances, he preferred news that was more 'straight to the point'.

I obviously enjoy podcasts, I enjoy drawn out conversations about different implications and things like that, but when it comes to breaking news or something that's happening, it's important to just say, 'X, Y, Z, these are the facts, this is what's happening'. And I think that I'm drawn to journalists who do that more.

Jordan (23, man, US)

3.2 What people say they get from news

While the above examples capture some of the values people say they expect of high calibre journalism, people across all four countries often described a different set of characteristics when it came to news they actually encountered. Here interviewees often brought up the repetitive nature of news and its lack of relevance to their lives. Many even saw news through the lens of entertainment, evaluating it accordingly as a source of information where trustworthiness was not always an important consideration.

REPETITIVENESS

Chief among the critiques participants had about news was that it was often tediously predictable, cyclical, and never changing. This mattered for trust because it also meant that many saw news generally as largely interchangeable from one source to the next.

In all four countries, people expressed some degree of disappointment that news was so often repetitive in this way. In some cases, as in the following, perceptions of repetitiveness were connected to people's own partisan points-of-view, but in other instances, interviewees would mention COVID-19 or other prominent stories as examples of precisely what annoyed them about coverage, as though such frustrations about news applied broadly to all producers of news.

> *Respondent: They are always repeating the same things. Always insisting on the same information, but at a different angle. It's tiring to hear that.*
>
> *Moderator: What is the repetitive information?*
>
> *Respondent: COVID, corruption, lockdown, Bolsonaro doing the wrong things. It's always the same. Just watch the news and you'll see it.*
>
> *Moderator: Do you think the problem is because these things happen and the media keeps talking about them, or do they not happen at all?*
>
> *Respondent: The media explores the content for the audience. Those things don't happen too often, though.*
>
> Ricardo (44, man, Brazil)

For some, the perceived repetitiveness of the news translated into beliefs that there were ultimately few differences between sources, as though news organisations were duplicating each other's work rather than contributing original reporting of their own. This often resulted in participants viewing brands as interchangeable. Henry (48, man, US), for example, described trying to parse through different sources he might encounter online when he searched for stories about an event in the news: 'It might be that if I had gone down to the eighth one on the list I would have gotten the single best explanation, the best statistics, whatever, but that's the problem: we have too many people who do the same job in this world.' In another example, Pratibha (56, woman, India) said she thought 'all the channels' reported misleading information in much the same way. 'No choice, I have to accept it.'

LACK OF RELEVANCE TO EVERYDAY LIFE

One of the concerns many raised about news coverage in their country was that too often it did

not seem relevant to their lives. We say more about this subject in the next part of the report, since often this critique overlaped with concerns about news not representing people's lived experiences, which we heard especially from marginalised groups. But more generally, and especially in India and Brazil, many raised concerns about news failing to address matters that would make a difference in how they lived their lives.

These kinds of frustrations about news being out-of-touch relate to trust because many see it as a consequence of news organisations ultimately prioritising their own interests. 'The news today isn't focused on helping people', said Ricardo (44, man, Brazil). 'Nobody talks about the price of goods, the cost of utilities in other states. There aren't any details like that. The news is solely based on what is popular, what makes people watch. It's what brings in more audience.'

> They're not reporting the struggles that these farmers are facing. Most importantly, this is not breaking news and people might not be interested in such news. It's the mentality of Indians, that, 'Who cares what is happening to others? Just stick to yourself'. That doesn't mean that this news is put in the back of the newspaper or somewhere in the corners where people are not even able to notice. The sports news gets a lot of highlight because there will be an entire section dealing with which player is supposed to retire or which player is playing or not, which is pretty, I feel, useless.
>
> Pratik (32, man, India)

Line between news and entertainment was often blurry

In many cases, across all four countries, interviewees would often make clear that the way they evaluated news was not always necessarily as a source of information but as entertainment. Sometimes this was offered as a rationale for why a particular news source was not to be trusted. In Brazil, for example, several interviewees mentioned violent television shows they disliked as a reason for distrusting news. Ana (32, woman, Brazil) singled out a programme hosted by José Luiz Datena, 'They manage to distort reality to the point we are scared to go out on the street', adding 'these programmes make this circus out of a news story that is very serious'.

When describing impressions of the news media more generally, people in all four countries would often single out celebrity news in particular as an example of news they dismissed as having little informational value. Many drew a distinction between 'serious' news and this other form of news, which they thought too often bled over into coverage of the former.

> I have a massive problem with reporting of celebrity. That is not news, that is gossip column. Gossip column is not news. What a celebrity thinks about politics isn't important to me. They're not informed in the subject area, stick to your lane, stay in your lane. Talk about acting, if you're an actor.
>
> Alice (34, woman, UK)

> You know, the news about celebrities, like the news about big people. The names that have a big title attached to them. I feel that this news is pretty much hyped up. They are supposed to cover the breaking news first of all. They are supposed to cover the largest sections of the newspaper and the most important news is covered in the smaller sections of the newspaper. Not only this, but apart from them, this celebrity news is made pretty much more attractive by varying fonts and colourful fonts and so many things.
>
> Pratik (32, man, India)

In the US, such critiques were sometimes made through a partisan lens, with interviewees perceiving opinionated content as strictly entertainment. 'Fox News is not a news channel. It is an entertainment network', as Henry (48, man, US) put it. 'They do not present truth; [they add] their twist on what is news and add their opinion to make it the "truth".'

3.3 How people bridge the gap when navigating news

As is evident in the examples above, the gaps identified between peopl 's expectations around news and perceptions about what they get were often focused on critiques about the content of news and less on the editorial practices behind it. One reason why actual practices of journalism were less central to how people seemed to think about trust may be because few expressed confidence in their knowledge about what reportin the news actually entails. Instead, they tended to rely on various heuristics or other cues about what might be decent proxies for professionalism and quality.

OFTEN LIMITED UNDERSTANDING ABOUT HOW NEWS WORKS

Previous research in the US has shown considerable limits to the public's knowledge about basic journalistic practices (Media Insight Project 2018). We found similar gaps in understanding, which were often revealed in subtle ways. Study participants would refer, for example, to pop culture references when describing their sense of how the news works. Sticking with Henry (48, man, US), to take one example, when asked if he had a sense of 'what goes on day-to-day in terms of reporting the news', he responded by recalling the Jim Carrey movie *Bruce Almighty*. 'I'm just picturing how he would show up to a scene and there he'd have his camera crew and everything, and they'd report on something.'

> They're going to be right there on the scene, but if there was some major event in a rural area but really major, they're going to rush to that scene. There are going to be a bunch of camera crews and that kind of stuff. Then I know you have a bunch of writers behind the scenes that write the stories so that the broadcast journalists can read it on the teleprompter, and that's what the public gets. They're clearly biased somewhat, but I'm sure that there are editors who try to not be biased.
>
> Henry (48, man, US)

As in this example, many drew on stereotypes or vague impressions they had about how journalists did their jobs as a substitute for direct knowledge. 'I believe it's like that; they search for the news', Rebeca (49, woman, Brazil) said, referring to journalists' tendencies toward sensationalising, or as Shrikant (57, man, India) put it, 'I have a feeling that the journalists are being led to talk [about] something'.

Of course, there were exceptions here. Some did refer to formal journalism or media literacy training they had received in school, but such responses were atypical. Many instead referred to uncertain ideas they held about the profession, and they were sometimes unsure whether such notions were accurate. 'I've always had the impression, you know, there's that saying "don't let the facts get in the way of a good story"?', Luke (51, man, UK) said while describing what he imagined reporters on 'Fleet Street' might look like: 'grizzled middle-aged men, hard drinking, spending a lot of time in the pub, quite militant'. He added, 'I'm probably being unkind now, but that will probably be my impression – that they're doing this for their own benefit to a certain extent .

Many interviewees described using shortcuts, heuristics, to bridge this gap between ideal news and their actual experiences using news. Most often, participants mentioned tools and techniques that could inform, such as cross-checking and Googling to verify information, which we explore in Part 5 of this report, or turning to other people in their lives whom they trusted to offer guidance on brand reputation, which we described in Part 2. In other cases, interviewees sometimes said they relied on cues embedded in news content itself, such as focusing on numbers or statistics or visual signals perceived as more trustworthy than text.

Many saw these kinds of concrete cues as indications that journalists had carefully studied the underlying situation they were reporting on. Participants in the UK, US, and Brazil especially brought up this tendency to look for references to data and statistics as a heuristic for quality.

> *It is super important that the news are detailed with sources, statistics, and graphs, and seen from several different perspectives. This brings more certainty and credibility to the information.*
>
> Júlia (31, woman, Brazil)

> *I also like that they actually present a lot of facts, numbers, and stuff like that, and they'll show you recordings of stuff that's happened. I don't see as much of that on other networks.*
>
> Raymond (57, man, US)

In other cases, study participants said characteristics of the medium itself could make information seem more or less trustworthy. Many said this was specifically the case for visual information compared to text, because the former allowed people to see what happened for themselves. One respondent (Preeti, 43, woman, India) described how written language was less trustworthy because there was no proof that an event in question actually happened, while another (Sherry, 32, woman, US) described focusing on the timestamp on raw video broadcast on television as a sign that a story was likely to be more credible.

3.4 The visibility and invisibility of individual journalists

The degree to which study participants could speak in depth about their views of individual journalists varied widely, and the specific journalists who were most often singled out ere frequently cited as exemplars of 'bad journalism' rather than as role models for the profession. There was also a high level of convergence in the names that respondents talked about, with study participants often highlighting prominent figures such as William Bonner in Brazil, Arnab Goswami in India, or Piers Morgan in the UK.

WHO REPORTS THE NEWS ATTRACTED LESS ATTENTION THAN WHO PRESENTS IT
When asked to describe specific individuals they associated wit news, a select few said they paid attention to individual journalists as factors when it came to their own trust in news. Antoine (29, man, UK), for example, said he took note of the 'byline itself – who's actually written it – and who they are and what their previous work has been and what their reputation is on the whole'. But more typically, people focused mainly on those who deliver or present news, especially on television, and were unsure about the individuals who wrote and reported news behind-the-scenes. This was true even among those who consumed news frequently.

Most also had difficulty recalling names of journalists when a ked about examples of individuals they either admired or distrusted. As Lara (38, woman, Brazil) said, 'There is a girl at CNN... She even left, but I really liked her. I cannot recall her name. ... She's young, and I really liked her'. These kinds of exchanges were typical, with some saying, as Alexander (35, man, UK) did, 'It's a bit like asking me to give you names of actors, I can tell you the headline names but I couldn't go into individuals that contribute to all the news I read'. In some cases, people followed journalists directly on social media, but even there, they often had difficulty remembering the individuals they followed, or reported primarily being familiar with them from their presence offline

There were, however, some revealing exceptions. Indian interviewees were particularly quick to name television personalities, excited to speak about them, and often had strong opinions about the journalists they named, more so than in the other countries. This extended even to those who otherwise avoided news. This underscores one of the differences between these countries: in India, where TV news seemed especially likely to be viewed as a medium for entertainment, journalists' names were more easily recalled. But in Brazil, the US, and the UK, the content of news itself seemed to overshadow specifics such s reporters' identities.

The brand as a symbol of its journalists

As noted above, many were unsure about what exactly went into original reporting. Often this also meant that people made few distinctions between journalists and the organisations they worked for. Many said they used their perceptions of the brand as a cue for how they thought about the journalists employed there. For example, when Rebeca (49, woman, Brazil) was asked about distinguishing between the two, she said, 'The journalist is bound to the company, so he must obey. That's what happens at Globo. If they don't follow the rules, they are fired .

Others made similar assessments about differentiating at the brand level. Pooja (21, woman, India) said, 'Today I think effectively Arnab Goswami is synonymous to Republic, so I think the lines have blurred between media houses and their journalists'. Similar sentiments were expressed by some Americans as well. As Sherry (32, woman, US) said, 'I think there is a link between the journalists and the organisation they work for. Most times the journalists work to project the image of their organisation. That is the way I feel'.

Polarising exemplars

On the occasion in which individual journalists were discussed, interviewees often held very strong opinions about them, speaking about them as exemplars of good or bad journalism. In the UK, respondents repeatedly talked about the style of television anchors, often pointing out instances of what they deemed as overly 'aggressive' journalism. Deborah (50, woman, UK), for example, said she liked Piers Morgan because 'he is not afraid to ask any question', even though she wished that he would 'give people a chance to answer him, rather than just shout at them!'[3] Others felt strongly otherwise.

> *Oh, no. Good God, no. How the hell he's [Piers Morgan] not been sacked yet, I don't know. He had a boycott from the whole of the UK Government, didn't he, for the way he speaks to people. There's robust interviewing and there's downright being rude, and he's downright rude.*
> Christopher (44, man, UK)

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[3] Interviews and focus groups were conducted prior to Piers Morgan's resignation from *Good Morning Britain* in March 2021.

In India, respondents repeatedly talked about Republic TV's anchor Arnab Goswami but held polarising opinions about him. While some appreciated his bold and loud questioning style, for others the same features were a negative. These polarised views were largely synonymous with respondents' partisan identities, but sometimes gender overshadowed partisanship, with women expressing their dislike for him despite agreeing with him politically.

> *After Sushant Singh's case, [Arnab Goswami] became famous. He is quite aggressive. Previously, he used to talk very calmly and slowly, but after he became the chief editor of Republic India he became so aggressive. I enjoy watching him on TV. He is the only anchor who has the guts to abuse and shout at his guests on a live TV show. He speaks so loudly that I need to keep the volume of the TV at 1.*
>
> Rajendra (31, man, India)

> *Arnab Goswami of Republic TV does not like Congress so he often uses bad language about them, which is not fine. I myself am inclined towards BJP, but still it makes me feel bad. News shouldn't be of such type.*
>
> Geeta (46, woman, India)

In Brazil and the US, opinions around journalists tended to focus not only on style but also on content. While respondents did speak about journalists' personalities, their conversations also revolved around whether the journalists themselves were trustworthy, knowledgeable, or reputable. Mário (55, man, Brazil), for example, said he respected the Brazilian news anchor Ricardo Boechat because 'he had a perspective – no, a way of hosting – that was unmatched', noting the way he could combine criticism 'while also remaining on topic'. Regina (72, woman, US) said Lawrence O'Donnell was her favourite journalist on MSNBC because of his expertise, 'because he used to work on the Hill, he has [the] best knowledge of what is actually going on'.

4. An Elusive Pursuit of Balance and Impartiality

One of the other major aspects of journalistic practice that people often referenced as important to how they thought about trust in news concerned objectivity and impartiality. These kinds of observations about bias and balance, which are the focus of this section of the report, often emerged during critiques of what people perceived to be the failures of the news media and were sometimes held up in contrast to nostalgic ideas about impartial news media of the past.

4.1 Protecting oneself from being misled

DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS OF IMPARTIAL NEWS
People often expressed complex – and even contradictory – understandings about how norms around objectivity should be enacted (if in fact they were possible), what constituted violations of these norms, or how issues like bias do or do not affect news consumers.

In many cases, differences arose around interpretations of specific events in the news, which many saw through fundamentally different lenses. As Robert (43, man, UK) put it, 'Over the last couple of years, everything's become a bit more polarised: Brexit, lockdown or not lockdown – everyone has to have one side or the other'.

Some believed objectivity and impartiality meant keeping opinions out of the news entirely (e.g. 'I just want the facts and I'll make my own opinion' [David, 29, man, UK]). That often meant boiling news down to its essential black-and-white characteristics. John (39, man, US), for example, said he thought an 'impartial journalist' was someone whose only agenda is 'just to give facts and not their opinion of the facts or their opinion of the reports coming out'.

Others emphasised that impartiality meant greater transparency around where opinions played a role in coverage. As Pooja (21, woman, India) said, 'Of course, everybody has opinions, it's a very human thing, but when you're in a profession where there is a need for you to report objective facts, I think you should be able to separate those two'. Joseph (33, man, UK) said he appreciated opinionated takes on the news, so long as 'they make it really clear that it's that analyst's viewpoint and it's the analyst's words that are saying it'.

Still others believed news with a political inclination was fine (and often more interesting), just so long as it didn't go too far. 'Tilt is okay. Okay, he is supporting that, fin ', Shrikant (57, man, India) allowed, while also noting 'there is difference between being supportive and being biased'. Many, although not all, further recognised that their own interpretation of what is factual depended on their own subjective point of view. As Ângelo (28, man, Brazil) said, 'Total impartiality is impossible. We're human'.

GENERALISED SCEPTICISM (TAKING NEWS WITH 'A PINCH OF SALT')
Although interviewees often disagreed about what they meant by impartial news, many were convinced that the best way to respond to pervasive bias in coverage was the same: generalised

scepticism or distrust of *all* news outlets as a form of protection from being misled or manipulated. This attitude has been captured in previous research (Fletcher and Nielsen 2019) and, indeed, many in the US and UK said the same verbatim phrase that they took news with 'a pinch (or grain) of salt'. Luke (51, man, UK), for example, said the phrase while quoting Denzel Washington in the movie *Training Day*: 'He holds up the newspaper and says, "It's 90% bullshit, but it entertains me and that's why I read it". I have that view.'

Although people in Brazil and India did not use the same language, they described similar attitudes.

> *I won't say 100% is true and 100% believable. We need to think proportionally about it, and we need to search and then trust, not trust blindly anything.*
>
> Kavita (43, woman, India)

> *Degree of certainty? Well, I do not have it. Nowadays, what I have the most in my country is uncertainty. It is hard to deal with uncertainty. If I had to put a number, I would say 50%. I read and believe in 50% of it.*
>
> Lia (43, woman, Brazil)

Generalised scepticism was particularly evident among those who did not have loyal and trusting relationships with any specific brands As Russell (28, man, US) said, he tried to use 'as many different sources as I can, as I have the attention span for', because he was certain that 'getting all your news from one source … just seems like a recipe for disaster'.

4.2 Perceived agendas behind coverage

One of the most common complaints we heard about news media was the perception that they were motivated by agendas other than a desire to inform the public. In their most extreme version, these consisted of somewhat vague, unfalsifiable conspiratorial ideas about shado y figures or forces pulling the strings – perceptions held by a handful of people mainly in the US and UK. In their view, some unknown power was responsible for co-ordinating news coverage towards certain topics or covering up others. In these instances, interviewees sometimes referenced ideas about 'investigative journalism' that would ultimately expose the true nature of these influences Abigail (58, woman, UK) illustrated that by saying 'somebody somewhere or some organisation is controlling almost what we get to hear as the news'.

In another example, Lawrence (55, man, US) raised a series of questions similar to those circulated by supporters of the QAnon conspiracy theory, referencing reports about trafficke children: 'They pull over a truck in, say, Michigan, and there were 32 kids in the truck. Basically, that's been happening every month now where they've been rescuing these kids.' Lawrence saw the media's failure to ask questions and connect the dots as evidence of a deliberate cover-up.[4]

> *When has law enforcement ever stopped an investigative journalist from doing their job? Look at the guys that did the Watergate investigation. Come on, there had to be a lot of people*

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[4] Lawrence (55, man, US): 'Who are these people? Who are these kids? Where are they coming from? Are they children that were on the milk carton? Where were they going to? Who hired the truck?'

stepping in their way trying to prevent that kind of information, but they kept digging and they kept dripping out information.

Lawrence (55, man, US)

PARTISAN AND COMMERCIAL AGENDAS

Much more often, concerns raised by study participants about agendas influencin the content of news were typically those regarding commercial or partisan biases, which were understood to be pervasive across all four markets.

The media is not working for the people anymore. It's not working from the perspective of people anymore. It is driven by the agenda of political parties. That kind of journalism will not really succumb to what people have to say.

Arshad (32, man, India)

While some people were more generous in their interpretations, for example, explaining that profit motives were to some extent inevitable ('They must adapt the content based on what kind of audience they are focusing on. You cannot sell the same product to classes A, B, C, and D.' [Mário, 55, man, Brazil]), others were more critical about the intentions underlying these agendas and their perceived consequences.

I think the challenge is the financial interest. You've got people who are motivated by how they're making money for the content they're producing, and they get more content by producing more and more divisive articles and content, and that furthers this divide. So, that is dangerous, I think.

Jay (39, man, US)

Many perceived direct links between news organisations and politicians or political parties, especially following divisive political events. Jay (39, man, US), for example, saw a clear agenda in how networks presented news after the 2016 US elections. 'Nowadays, I read the news anticipating there's an agenda being told for me and it's being presented from one side rather than a non-biased source.' Many said they thought news organisations' partisan agendas could harm trust, even when people agreed with it. Rebeca (49, woman, Brazil) said she thought news had 'got too political'. She questioned motives in particular, 'It's a matter of personal benefit trying to achieve something on someone's behalf – not on the citizen's behalf'.

I am against Bolsonaro. But I know Globo exaggerates. When Globo wants something, they get it. They went against Dilma and they won. When they want something, they invest in news to favour them. They dislike Bolsonaro so they do everything in their power to oppose him.

Rebeca (49, woman, Brazil)

Many also saw commercial and partisan agendas as highly intertwined, such as Ricardo (44, man, Brazil), who said he thought choosing sides politically was often a business decision. 'It's lucrative to have someone backing you up, telling you what to say. The independent sources are small, they don't have much money and they have a small structure. No one assists them.'

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC DIFFERENCES AROUND PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION

The salience of certain issues stood out in some countries more than others. Interviewees in

27

India were more likely to discuss overt corruption and manipulation. From their perspective, news organisations knowingly and selfishly try to trick or dece ve their audiences with the goal of advancing their own interests. In some cases, this was rooted in prominent instances of corrupt media practices – for example, the memory of previous 'paid news' scandals (Press Council of India 2010) – but such practices were often perceived to be prevalent today.

> *Most of the channels are being run by some or another political party or maybe with some close persons with that. … As we have heard this thing that news channels are the pillar of democracy, this is all the dialogue, but the news channels are mostly propagating only for the party's point of view, they are white-washing all their scams.*
>
> Jatin (33, man, India)

In Brazil, many mentioned a perceived patronage relationship between the media and elites. Different from India, however, such perceptions were less anchored in concrete events than in impressions that mirror a notable malaise about institutions in the country more generally (Latinobarómetro 2018; Instituto Sivis 2020).

> *Big [media] companies have a say in the political sphere. Big companies go around Brasília, Capital of Brazil, to lobby. … They seek exemptions, benefits, concessions, and in exchange they offer other spaces. In general, big businessmen go to our capital to lobby more than our politicians.*
>
> Lia (43, woman, Brazil)

These kinds of concerns about corrupt practices echo sentiments we sometimes heard in the US and UK as well.

> *Unfortunately I think our society does believe that anything can be bought and needs to be paid for, so I don't believe it is ever truly independent. It does need to be free of political influence (and should not be tied to the government).*
>
> Pamela (28, woman, US)

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC DIFFERENCES AROUND FOCUSING ON OWNERSHIP

The role of ownership in shaping news coverage came up frequently, but primarily in the US and UK. Laura (54, woman, UK), for example, said it bothers her that news organisations 'might choose not to report things that reflect badly on politic ans in power because they are supporters of that party or donors to that party'.

Concerns about the influence of ownership in some cases led peo le to assert the importance of transparency about such matters. Pooja (21, woman, India), for example, lamented that in India, 'there is very little transparency on the ownership of media houses'. In the US, some saw transparency as an asset for building trust.

> *I guess I equate transparency with truth, and if they're truthful about their affiliations, about the things they might not want to be truthful about, then that would lead me to believe that they're more truthful about their reporting.*
>
> Mary (40, woman, US)

The role of public service media was also celebrated by some interviewees, especially in the UK and to a lesser extent in the US, while it was barely mentioned in Brazil and India. People

often mentioned the BBC in the UK or PBS and NPR in the US as being less constrained by the commercial interests of their for-profit counterparts When referencing the BBC, some also touched on the more stringent regulations imposed on broadcast news, which gave them a sense of greater accountability.

> *I think there's something about the BBC because they're meant to be – well, you don't have adverts, etc., so it's not about making money.*
>
> Robert (43, man, UK)

Some expressed concern about the BBC getting too cosy with the government in recent years, perceiving that 'BBC journalists are not offering enough challenge, for example, to our politicians', as Laura (54, woman, UK) argued. At the same time, those who were more trusting of news believed that being publicly funded likely implied greater editorial independence. Russell (28, man, US), for example, said he thought not being commercially oriented probably allows NPR 'to be a little less biased'.

4.3 Representation matters

We anticipated that ideas about bias and impartiality, for some, might be rooted in their own identities and perceptions about whether the news media in their countries fairly portrayed people like themselves in coverage (Toff et al. 2020). For that reason, we included questions on the subject in our interviews and focus groups designed to better understand what role such views might play in shaping attitudes about trust in news. Here we detail some of the concerns we heard most often.

DIFFERENT VIEWS ABOUT THE ROLE OF IDENTITY

Interviewees understood questions about representation very differently depending on which characteristics of their own identities were most salient to them. For example, some talked about what they felt were misrepresentations of their profession (e.g. teachers, scientists) while others spoke about their gender, age, or the place they lived. Those who were most critical of news, who often believed key perspectives were missing, tended to be racial or religious minorities in their countries. Because such individuals also made up a small part of our sample, these concerns did not come up as frequently. Nonetheless, we highlight them here because such critiques might otherwise be overlooked if researchers and journalists only focus on the most common responses at the aggregate level.

While issues of representation were important to this subset of people, we note that many others interviewed were much less concerned about such matters. Some even challenged the notion that seeing their own identities reflected back in cover ge had anything to do with good journalism.

> *Well, do you want them to [represent you]? … That's the thing at the end of the day, that's not really the point in journalism. Journalism isn't to represent people like you, it's to, maybe, provide a view of the world that you don't necessarily see yourself.*
>
> Alexander (35, man, UK)

> *In some of the channels, they say 'One Muslim killed in road accident', 'One Dalit person killed*

in road accident'. Do we require this particular sort of information? The truth is one person is killed. Why do you bring the caste system here?

<div align="right">

Raghunath (46, man, India)
</div>

While such sentiments were primarily expressed by those who were themselves part of the dominant groups in their country (for example, white men in the UK or people from dominant castes in India), there were exceptions here as well. For example, as Mehdi (47, man, UK) said, 'I want news that is accurate. It doesn't need to be delivered by a middle-aged, Middle Eastern gay man'.

RACE, RELIGION, CASTE, AND CLASS

A perceived failure of the press to represent racial diversity was most commonly discussed in Brazil, the US, and the UK, and was far more likely to be raised by people of colour than white interviewees. The main concerns raised, which were strikingly similar across these three countries, were that racial minorities were covered in stereotypical and damaging ways.

The media doesn't accurately represent Black people. In general, they always show Black people in situations of violence, when Black men are violent and Black women suffer, or they show Black people as poor or fragile. It's always that way in the Brazilian media.

<div align="right">

Maria (37, woman, Brazil)
</div>

Some people linked these failures to the lack of a representative workforce within newsrooms and especially in positions of power, although they also noted some improvements recently. Antoine (29, man, UK) said he thought news media are 'doing more and more now', but 'if it's still going to have the same decision-makers in the boardrooms and behind the scenes, then sometimes there's only so much that those people on the front-line can actually do without actually having power to make changes'.

Among interviewees from India, concerns about inadequate or unfair coverage more frequently focused on particular religious groups or castes. These individuals underscored the tendency among some news outlets to promote divisive narratives about or between religious groups or to encourage caste prejudice. As Arshad (32, man, India) said, referring to growing conflict between Hindus and Muslims, 'I feel like this has all happened because the media is pushing people into that direction', noting how people who were at one time 'the best of friends' are increasingly and suddenly divided. 'I feel that all this boils down to what we read, what we consume in terms of media, whether it's online, or on WhatsApp, or on the mainstream.'

In Brazil, India, and the UK, many also expressed dissatisfaction about the lack of attention to class differences in particular. Farah (40, woman, India) mentioned that the media overemphasise celebrities' stories and asked 'What has the common man got to do with all this stuff if he doesn't have a morsel to eat?' Some interviewees more generally argued that the news media are biased towards elites and those with more fame or power, leaving out regular people and the issues most relevant to them.

What they need to do is to transmit more and more real news and talk more about everybody's daily life about everything, everybody, all social classes, not just focus on politicians, [and the] famous, for example.

<div align="right">

Gilberto (26, man, Brazil)
</div>

GEOGRAPHIC DIVIDES

Another area where representation was seen as lacking by many participants, especially in the UK and the US, concerned coverage of regional or local perspectives. There were some who suggested that the gaze of national news was excessively focused on domestic issues, overlooking important things happening in the rest of the world. Lucy (41, woman, UK), for example, missed a 'more global perspective' and found 'BBC mainstream news, for example, to be very inward-looking, parochial'. But more typically when such issues arose, most maintained that national news eclipsed topics that were relevant on a local level.

> *I also would love community news. I feel like we are overshadowed by national news, but I want to know if my city has new bike initiatives, what's going to be under construction and why.*
>
> Pamela (28, woman, US)

The link between representation of local interests and trust in news, however, was not always clear or direct. A focus on local news was often referenced as a reason for consuming a particular news source, but it didn't always mean people were more trusting of such outlets. Ricardo (44, man, Brazil), for example, said he distrusted Globo, but said he watched its local news station everyday 'because it's the only channel with local news'.

More often, the appeal of local news was related to the information being provided, which could not easily be found elsewhere. Lia (43, woman, Brazil) said she liked her local newspaper specificall because 'they provide information related to my daily life, my region'. Similarly, in another example, Farah (40, woman, India) said she appreciated news sources, including local channels, that provided information 'the common man would need', such as where to go to get medical help or how to get food subsidies. '"You need these documents for a ration card" – *that* is news.'

HOW REPRESENTATION MATTERS FOR EVALUATIONS OF FACTUAL ACCURACY

Even if many did not consistently focus on representation in news coverage, it is still possible to see how identities, whether about race or locality, often played a more subtle role in how people evaluated the factual basis of stories they encountered in the news and made assessments about bias and impartiality. As Regina (72, woman, US) said, she evaluated news sources case by case, over time, assessing whether their coverage matched up with her existing knowledge, whether gleaned from her own life experience or prior news consumption. 'If you take a minute, you have had some type of experience that informs that. You don't know the whole truth of it, so to build trust it's based on, "Yes, I see what he's saying"'.

Although Regina herself was critical of much mainstream news coverage for failing to consistently report on 'unjust treatment of African-Americans by police officers and the lik ', she generally trusted her local paper, the *Washington Post*, because 'nine times out of ten I'm finding stuff in their stories that I know to be factual , emphasising her own prior knowledge as someone who had worked in government as important to how she evaluated those facts.

> *What I'm really saying is that trust is based on facts – the fact that you can rely upon the information that's being presented. And how you get to that is through your experience and the way you've kept yourself informed in the past.*
>
> Regina (72, woman, US)

5. The Role of the Platforms

Platforms were generally viewed as less central to people's news consumption, but when used for this purpose, considerable risks were apparent both for brands and users. In this section, we examine how people viewed the experience of consuming news via platforms and how it affected their sense of trust in the information they encountered there. While many appreciated how social media, messaging apps, and search engines made keeping up with news more accessible and efficient for those without an existing trusting relationship with one or more news providers, navigating the digital information environment was often challenging, costly, and riddled with potential perils. These ranged from concerns about being misled or deceived to threats of violence. Many perceived sources differently because of their engagement with platforms, and their impressions of news generally may suffer due to its association with online media.

5.1 Both a harmless diversion and a useful set of tools

Similar to past research (Miller et al. 2016; van Dijck 2013), study participants often described how the appeal of platforms was mainly tied to their ability to 'bring people together' (Rebeca, 49, woman, Brazil) – less so compared to any role platforms played in facilitating news consumption. These purposes ranged from using platforms to keep in touch with friends and family (especially given pandemic-related social isolation), as a way to promote small businesses, or as 'a quick, easy way to see what's happening' when it came to niche interests or hobbies, as Rachel (20, woman, UK) put it when describing how she used Twitter to keep up with 'different shows, different actors, different people within the musical theatre community'.

In Brazil and India, interviewees were more likely to refer specifically to WhatsAp as one of the primary platforms they used for a variety of purposes, but they also expressed a love–hate relationship with it. This sentiment applied to many platforms across all four countries. While some felt they were indispensable – 'When WhatsApp stops working, I get ill' (Rebeca, 49, woman, Brazil) – others emphasised the unease they felt about both 'becoming its hostage' (Mário, 55, man, Brazil) and the tendency they saw for digital media to fuel division and sow hostility.

PERCEIVED VALUE TO INFORMATION FOUND ON PLATFORMS
Although most focused on the role of platforms for entertainment or socialising with others, platforms like search engines and social media also served a useful role for many in their information diets as tools for gaining access to perspectives, stories, and original reporting on topics perceived as missing from conventional news coverage. Indeed, previous research has shown that people who use digital platforms for accessing news tend to engage with a wider variety of sources (Flaxman et al. 2016; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018), which is one reason publishers seek to engage with users on these platforms (Nielsen and Ganter 2018).

Some of those we interviewed described using platforms specific lly to follow experts and key figures in the news who could offer deepe , more extensive commentary and context on issues

they cared about. This kind of use was not limited to a single platform. Some talked of using Twitter or Google or WhatsApp for these purposes. Pooja (21, woman, India), for example, talked about belonging to a WhatsApp group run by a website called Bar & Bench, which covers legal news, 'Every time they post a new article or there is a new legal development I get updates, so that I can check in on my own time'.

For others, the appeal was not only about getting a more tailored news experience but also about getting 'unfiltered messages from governmental leaders. Jordan (23, man, US), for example, a self-professed 'political news junkie', said he followed officials and members of Congress on Twitter for much the same reason he was a 'big proponent of C-SPAN', the US cable news channel that broadcasts government proceedings. He liked to see events unfolding in real time and get the full context of statements from political leaders.

Political views were often a major factor in shaping this form of information-seeking. Arshad (32, man, India) said he regularly watched clips on YouTube from social media commentator and activist Dhruv Rathee because he liked the way he addressed issues and because he found 'the way that he conducts himself also very funny'. Sérgio (43, man, Brazil) said he watched videos of President Bolsonaro's speeches 'in full', streamed on the internet, because he did not trust Globo's main news programme, *Jornal Nacional*, to capture it accurately. Instead, he expected them to 'show his speech all edited and just the part that he says something that would make him look bad'.

THE IMPORTANCE OF 'DOING THE RESEARCH'
While scholarship on digital media has increasingly focused on the importance played by social and technical 'curation' (Thorson and Wells 2016) as well as 'nudges and online choice architectures' (Wu et al. 2020) in determining what information audiences see and select online, many study participants were either unaware of what role such processes played in shaping their exposure to information online or generally suspicious about them in ways that reinforced tendencies to evaluate all news sources sceptically.

Some were less attentive to such issues, seeing the way platforms condensed, aggregated, and simplified news as a major advantage compared to more linea modes, which were often perceived as slow and inefficient

> It's all quite brief and to-the-point instead of reading reams of a newspaper, if you like. But I like how up-to-date it is. It's in-the-moment, if you like. So, I think its in-the-moment aspect is the main reason I use it.
>
> Christopher (44, man, UK)

For others, a major part of the appeal of getting news online was the sense of control many said they experienced when they used these tools, as though by 'doing the research' they were able to see through the political and commercial agendas that shaped mainstream media coverage. Lawrence (55, man, US), who in the previous section raised concerns about child trafficking made this point explicitly. A retired teacher who also considered himself 'an amateur historian', he pointed to images he had found on Google that he believed proved a connection between the Black Lives Matter movement and the Communist Party of America: 'Everyone was acting like Black Lives Matter is this wonderful group for peace. I know that it's not; I know that it's a Communist/Marxist group, which is dangerous.' He explained how

he had come to this conclusion:[5]

> *I know how to do research. I was trained to do research, and I question everything that I read. That's why you have to look at multiple things because you have to know what the agenda is, what the slant is, read between the lines, what they're leaving out.*
>
> Lawrence (55, man, US)

Most study participants were somewhat more trusting of the information they encountered on platforms, but many saw information on social media and messaging apps as unreliable overall – rife with biased opinions and unconfirmed reports This tendency was consistent regardless of whether people were more or less trusting of news in general. As Abigail (58, woman, UK) said, she felt she so frequently encountered 'conspiracy theories' and 'fake news' on social media, much of which she found 'quite disturbing', that she sometimes questioned her own sense of the truth. 'I may be wrong, maybe that news is real, who knows? Nobody knows anymore, and I think that's actually quite a concern.'

5.2 Navigating information online with and without trust in news

For individuals who felt confident in their trust of specific s   rces, navigating information online was less daunting because they looked to familiar brand names as indicators of news quality. 'Because I am quite black and white about it, it's quite easy for me', Samantha (33, woman, UK) said. In her case, she suggested 'it's probably due to my perception' that brands like the BBC, Sky News, or the *Guardian* were entirely trustworthy. When she saw 'a random website' making a claim online, 'I would straight away just think that's absolute rubbish'.

However, not everyone had clear-cut go-to news outlets they trusted. For these users especially, the sheer volume of information available led many to 'feel overwhelmed', as Henry (48, man, US) put it. Gemma (23, woman, UK) said she felt that while navigating news online 'you're not as in control of seeing the news, and also not as in control of what biases you see', which she thought might lead her to be inadvertently misled. 'That's quite a stressful thing as it's so overwhelming sometimes', she added. Vitor (27, man, Brazil) said he would periodically quit using Twitter because engaging with so many different people's opinions, even those he agreed with, 'it overwhelms me, mentally'.

Such feelings were not uncommon, but they were especially likely to be expressed among those who said they did not have a particularly trusting relationship with any news brand. Henry (48, man, US), for example, who relied mainly on Bing and Yahoo! to keep up with news, said when he would search online, 'you'd just get this gigantic list of sources that would cover the same thing. Which one does the best? I'm not going to look at every single one of them to find out .

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[5] Lawrence believed that search engines themselves tried to obscure the truth. He said he had stopped using Google because he was sure they had tried to bury the evidence that showed the origins of Black Lives Matter: 'I don't know what the reason would be for hiding that, but I do know that they hide things.' The fact-checking organisation PolitiFact examined claims circulated by conservative commentators that the broader movement was 'Marxist', among other assertions, and found 'little evidence' (Kertscher and Sherman 2020).

PLATFORMS OFTEN OBSCURE ORIGINAL SOURCES

One of the most common challenges interviewees mentioned concerned their impression that the information they encountered online often came from sources they knew nothing about, and thus they had no way of gauging its credibility. While past research has noted the extent to which many people fail to recall the brand names associated with links they see online (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019) – with more familiar brands often more easily remembered – in some cases, study participants said it could be difficult to determine the original source of information circulating online or whether people spreading messages were who they said they were. 'On Facebook, I can't really monitor what is going to show up on my feed, what other people are posting', Kayla (34, woman, US) said, adding 'I don't know how reliable it is' when she saw links to sources she had never heard of before.

> *[Using Twitter] probably got harder because information – sometimes it looked like it was coming from good sources or you might have accounts that have similar names to what I would say trustworthy sites are, so if you just give it a glance you'd think that, 'Oh, that's a verified account', and then if you actually look at it again it's, like, it's actually not, or they use the same avatars and pictures as trusted sites.*
>
> Antoine (29, man, UK)

WhatsApp users especially raised this point often, detailing examples of information they were forwarded from unknown origins, frequently concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, where they felt they lacked the context necessary to make sense of it. 'WhatsApp, you don't know who's sending it', Pratibha (56, woman, India) said. 'If it's family, it's okay, they're just forwarding, aren't they? But the source is from some other place.'

> *Websites have liability. You can hold them accountable for the information provided. As for WhatsApp, everything is anonymous. There is no date, author of the publication, so I simply delete those types of posts.*
>
> Mário (55, man, Brazil)

This anonymity could also be dangerous, as Arshad (32, man, India) pointed out.

> *I tell my father, I say that if this is a message that you've received, it looks like it does come from your Muslim fellow who is telling you that 'so and so person has been lynched', or we don't know if he's lynched or not, but 'he's lynched, he's been lynched'. Or, for example, that somebody, this is what the busy bee fellow said, 'we should oppose him and therefore spread this as much as possible'. I tell him, 'Don't forward these messages because the message that you get, I'm not really sure if you have received it from a concerned Muslim citizen'. There could be a possibility that the same party is sending both the messages to different people.*
>
> Arshad (32, man, India)

VERIFICATION AND CROSS-CHECKING

Nearly all interviewees described cross-checking information they encountered online as one strategy employed to reduce uncertainty. Regularly consuming multiple sources of information was often viewed as a basic requirement for staying properly informed. Search engines provided a useful starting point for doing so. As Russell (23, man, US) said, he would often 'go to Google'

when he saw links shared on social media. 'I don't really stick to one website or anything. I Google and try to read a few different articles, whatever I can find '

By verifying information with other news outlets, looking up primary sources of information, or comparing different outlets' coverage of the same story, people often felt satisfied they were receiving a fuller, if still incomplete, picture of what was happening in the world. As Alice (34, woman, UK) said, 'I'll look at several sources, see how they report, try and look for the evidence, and then make my mind up about it'.

> *If you want to confirm things, you have to check news on multiple platforms, and the way things are going on in the country right now, you cannot trust any one channel or any source of news, until you get that confirmed crossed with multiple sources.*
>
> Jatin (33, man, India)

The Google brand seemed to benefit especially from a favourable perception as an honest information broker in Brazil and India. Previous survey data in both countries (Aneez et al. 2019; Newman et al. 2020) has shown search engines generally receive relatively higher levels of trust as a source of news compared to news generally – whereas in most of the world, including the UK and the US, those ratings are reversed. In India, trust in news found on search engines has even exceeded trust in the news respondents use personally.[6]

Some associated cues from Google as a kind of stamp of approval, believing that the company differentiated on the basis of quality when screening and selecting links to display. As Geeta (46, woman, India) said, 'We can say that Google News is trustworthy because [the] Google company takes good care of such things'. Or as Luiz (30, man, Brazil) put it, 'I trust Google News a lot. I believe I have never seen any fake news on it'. In other cases, people seemed to trust the company in part because of the breadth of information it offers: 'If you have Google, you are informed about everything regarding the world' (Pratik, 32, man, India).

POTENTIALLY MISLEADING HEURISTICS

For those who set out to verify information, seeing the same story repeated by multiple sources when they searched online often served as sufficient evidence f r believing a given story was accurate – even if individuals rarely said they clicked through multiple links or necessarily evaluated the specific sources they encountered in depth Aparna (26, woman, India), for example, said she didn't trust news on Facebook, 'but on Instagram, if two or more pages are posting the same things then I trust that news'. Sherry (32, woman, US) said, 'I try to Google them to see if other sites carry similar news. Probably if I get up to three to four sites with similar news, I feel it's trustworthy to some extent'. Artur (23, man, Brazil) described making a point of looking at three sources to verify information.

> *I don't only see the first website it shows, I see the first three. If the information is the same or identical, I trust it. If the first one shows some information and the second one shows another, it generates doubt. The third website I use to confirm my doubt.*
>
> Artur (23, man, Brazil)

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[6] In India, 45% said they could trust news in search engines compared with 37% who said they could trust news in general and 39% who said they could trust the news they personally used (Aneez et al. 2019). In Brazil, the differences were smaller: 53% said they could trust news in search engines compared to 51% for news in general and 54% for news they personally used (Newman et al. 2020). In both countries, trust in news on social media was lower: 34% in India and 38% in Brazil.

Many concluded on the basis of these experiences navigating information online and needing to weigh competing versions of the truth that such assessments came down to personal, subjective judgement. Many described 'averaging' across various claims, assuming the truth must lie somewhere in the middle. As Lawrence (55, man, US) put it, 'Let me look at this source over here and then kind of meld them together to see if I can make some sense of where the truth really lies'.

> *It's really just a case of mixing your news sources so you can see what's conflicting and, you know, at the end of the day if one says black and one says white, it could be a bit of grey in the middle but that's up for your opinion to form that.*
>
> <div align="right">Alexander (35, man, UK)</div>

Individuals like Lawrence and Alexander did not trust journalists to help make such assessments for them. Instead, they insisted on coming to their own conclusions themselves.

5.3 Divisiveness and danger

Many news organisations have turned to digital platforms in an effort to attract or engage with audiences who are difficult to reach elsewhere (Nielsen nd Ganter 2018; Toff et al. 2020), but doing so comes with trade-offs that were often evident in our conversations with study participants. Since many interviewees saw social media and messaging apps as places of divisiveness, polarisation, and even danger, some saw news organisations they encountered there as intertwined with these same problems.

POLARISATION AND DIVISIVENESS

The most commonly raised concern about the corrosive effects of digital platforms on the public sphere involved perceptions that they contributed to political 'echo chambers' and divisiveness more generally. Many expressed concerns about their own news consumption online and wanting to ensure they were encountering multiple perspectives. Others were more focused on *other* people's media habits, which they perceived as a radicalising force. To take one example, Mary (40, woman, US) described watching in dismay as her uncle had 'fallen down the Q hole', referring to his embrace of the QAnon conspiracy.[7]

> *He's older, about 70 I'd say, and he's shut in, and I think that he spends a lot of time on the internet being a computer programmer, he's familiar with the technology even given his age, and you get into this isolated little echo chamber.*
>
> <div align="right">Mary (40, woman, US)</div>

In other cases, study participants raised concerns about the way news and information could be used to inflame and provoke tension between segments of societ . Samantha (33, woman, UK) worried that platforms would enable those with agendas to mislead with 'propaganda' to 'lead people to vote in a certain way' or 'lead people to be against a certain group of people'. Rajendra

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[7] Researchers have long documented this tendency for people to see others as generally more susceptible to media effects than themselves (Davison 1983). Elsewhere in Mary's interview, she bemoaned what she saw as a lack of 'critical thinking' being taught in schools: 'It just reminds me of how vulnerable and susceptible people are to the media that they consume.' This sentiment nearly echoed verbatim what Lawrence (55, man, US) said, 'We always talked about developing critical thinking in students. That was a big thing, critical thinking', while he lamented that 'a lot of people get that "this is what they're telling me I need to know" and they never go past that' and 'develop the habit of asking questions and being curious'.

(31, man, India), in another example, described how 'absurd things like "Muslims are killing a cow in our village"' would circulate on WhatsApp, which led to a local outburst of violence. He blamed both those deliberately spreading lies and those who routinely fall for it.

> *Hindus and Muslims started fighting with each other after that news. Force came to handle the situation. So many rumours are spread by people to just provoke us, and we easily believe in such news and start forwarding it.*
>
> Rajendra (31, man, India)

These kinds of stories led many to view news distributed on social media as particularly negative, even dangerous. John (39, man, US) referenced the 'rise of some of these white nationalist and conspiracy theory groups' as an example of such problems. Even though such groups have 'always been around', he thought their use of social media was 'pretty dangerous', noting 'the way they target and send specific news stories to people I think has allowed those movements to gain traction and empowers some of those movements'. Ankit (25, man, India) cited an example of unfounded rumours circulating that the 'banks are going bankrupt' during India's 2016 demonetisation of high currency banknotes. 'If this news was uploaded to many people, half the people will die of reading this news because they have hard-earned money in their bank.'

Many also raised concerns about the public health consequences of misinformation. Luke (51, man, UK), for example, said he worried about colleagues who were refusing to be vaccinated against COVID-19 because of rumours circulating online: 'I Googled it and within 2 minutes I had analysed that actually that isn't the truth.' Laura (54, woman, UK) related a similar story about a friend who is a nurse who had shared false information about vaccines over WhatsApp, which she felt obligated to debunk.

> *She ran it past me, I checked it out, went back to her, and that was fine, but plenty of people they've seen it, it's gone into their mind, they may never revisit that piece of information. There it is, and to them it's true because it's been said on whatever platform, and that's really frightening.*
>
> Laura (54, woman, UK)

Distrust by association

As we have detailed elsewhere in this report, for many the lines between careful, responsible journalism and entertainment media were often blurred. The same was also often true when it came to differentiating between trustworthy sources of news and their overall experience navigating the larger information environment. Many saw it as one intertwined problem: 'Fake news, poor journalism', as Rebeca (49, woman, Brazil) concluded.

> *It's like they open the news with a bomb. And then let people make out what they will. I ask you – how will children deal with it? Look at the increase in suicides during the pandemic. My uncle killed himself. We are still looking for a reason. 67 years old. We haven't found a reason. 4 successful children, a wife, evangelical … During the 3rd month of the pandemic, he killed himself. And he was always listening to the radio. So the number of suicides have increased. Information should be properly presented, in the best way possible. There is no need to be violent. Spread the news with truth but without malice. There is too much malice these days.*
>
> Rebeca (49, woman, Brazil)

Others saw online spaces as inevitably awash in unreliable information, unconfirmed reports and divisively opinionated content from 'angry-typers', as Helen (30, woman, US) referred to the comments she would sometimes read on her friends' posts on Facebook. As a result, she wasn't sure if she 'could ever really trust' what she saw online, regardless of the source.

> *In school, I couldn't trust Wikipedia. That was like the Google of school. People were able to go on there and edit things. I think it's just a matter of what I want to believe in, or what I see as truth or not. I don't know if there's actually a reliable source.*
>
> Helen (30, woman, US)

Helen, like many others we interviewed, did not see the point in distinguishing between outlets because she thought placing her trust in any of them was less responsible than remaining generally sceptical of all of them.

6. Conclusion

This report examines how people in Brazil, India, the UK, and the US view news media in their countries, the factors they use when determining whether sources are trustworthy, and what 'trust in news' ultimately means to them. In this concluding section, we first summarise our results, then detail what we see as their implications for news organisations. We conclude the report with a brief discussion of how we expect this report will impact future research.

6.1 Summary of our finding

While we note throughout the report areas of difference between the four countries, such as the role played by particular forms of news or individual media figures mainly we focus on the similarities we found, which were often striking. In most cases, study participants tended to fall back on impressions of brand quality that many said were rooted in how familiar they were with a given source and its reputation established over time based on past use, perceived partisanship, or word-of-mouth. Although many spoke about the importance of accuracy and impartiality in their assessments of trust – with individual journalists typically playing a lesser or even negative role – such terms often meant different things to different people. While a minority raised concerns about representation and whether news aligned with their lived experiences, others focused on perceived political or commercial biases or their sense that *all* news sources were irretrievably beholden to elite agendas.

Perhaps because knowledge about how professional journalism works was often limited – even in our sample, which tilted toward those with the most access to digital media in their countries – many devoted somewhat less attention to differentiating on the basis of actual editorial practices. Instead, stylistic and presentational factors around whether a given news source was more or less enjoyable to use were often more salient. While some said they occasionally enjoyed using news media that they did not trust, the lines between trustworthy journalism and entertaining media were at times indistinguishable.

Similarly complex views were expressed about the digital platforms where audiences increasingly encounter news. While many saw search engines, social media, and messaging apps as efficient timely ways of keeping up with information, for those lacking a strong trusting relationship to particular news organisations, the experience of navigating information online often reinforced tendencies toward generalised scepticism. Many described how platforms not only made it easier to cross-check information between sources but also how those sources seemed interchangeable, making it difficult to discern where stories originated online and even undermining trust in the information environment more generally.

6.2 Where does this leave news organisations?

These findings point both to opportunities and challenges for news organisations that seek to build trust with their audiences. To the extent that many users are looking for greater guidance on how to navigate between sources online, it suggests that news organisations would benefit

from providing clearer cues and signals about who they are, their histories, what they stand for, and how they do their work. In other words, news organisations should not only make it easier to find information about their missions and journalisti practices but also promote their own unique strengths compared to their competitors in more consistent and memorable ways. Brand reputations – good and bad – cannot always be controlled, but news organisations fail to define their own identities at their peril

Of course communicating this information and standing out is not easy in a digital environment in which audiences are inundated with information and in polarised societies where notions of impartiality are inevitably contested; however, in the absence of effective communication strategies around brand identity, audiences appear ready and willing to fall back on baseline assumptions about there being minimal differences between sources beyond stylistic distinctions around how information is presented and conveyed. Search engines, social media platforms, and messaging services could also surely do more, if they wanted, to help users differentiate between the sources they encounter; our findings add further evidence to studies showing how brand cues are often less visible in these contexts (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019). This may not be as much of a concern for already well-known brands with loyal audiences, but it is a major obstacle to lesser-known organisations seeking to establish themselves and build credibility. On platforms like WhatsApp, the proliferation of information untethered from any source cues at all, often in the form of screenshots and of course always encrypted, presents its own challenges.

There are also real dangers lurking here for news organisations that invest in extensive newsgathering operations and expect to establish trust with users merely on the basis of the quality of their journalism or the transparency of their methods. While some users do pay close attention to editorial practices,[8] the tendency to fall back on reputational cues means legacy brands may be able to trade on their past track-records whether warranted or not. And news that is deserving of trust does not always go hand-in-hand with being perceived as trustworthy. There are also guilt-by-association risks to established news organisations that seek to find new audiences online; what generates attention on Facebook and WhatsApp may not be the forms of journalism news organisations would most wish to highlight in building reputations with their audiences, further confusing brand identities in the eyes of users. There are of course risks to *not* appearing in these spaces as well, but publishers must weigh these costs in a clear-eyed manner as they seek to expand their reach in digital spaces.

6.3 Focus of future research

This report is part of a series of research studies focused on news audiences the Reuters Institute's Trust in News project is conducting. As such, we expect to build on these initial findings in the months and years ahead Although most of this report focuses on similarities between the four countries, we have noted several areas where there are nuanced differences between countries as well, often pertaining to the specifics of their media and political systems. We plan to conduct large-scale surveys to better allow us to more systematically explore factors related to differences in trust in news both within each country and between them.

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[8] In the aggregate, the public also tends to rate brands in ways that correlate with expert assessments (Schulz et al. 2020), although such ratings may mask important variation within countries.

Furthermore, although we faithfully summarise themes and patterns we observed across our many interviews and focus groups, there are limits to how much we can generalise on the basis of these data alone. Representative survey data will help to better clarify the extent to which these findings extend broadly across the general public in each country, including among less educated segments of the public who were not the focus of this report. Finally, although our findings indicate the importance of reputation and familiarity in how people form attitudes toward news organisations, they do not reveal what kinds of initiatives might help brands better communicate their identities in ways that build trust, under what circumstances, and among which audiences. We hope to conduct future experiments that will bring empirical evidence to bear on those kinds of interventions.

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Appendix: List of Interviewees and Focus Group Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country	Data collection mode	Level of trust in news generally
Aadil	35	Man	India	Focus group	Less trusting
Abhay	37	Man	India	Interview	Less trusting
Abhijit	22	Man	India	Focus group	More trusting
Abigail	58	Woman	UK	Interview	More trusting
Adriana	28	Woman	Brazil	Focus group	Less trusting
Alan	29	Man	US	Focus group	Less trusting
Alexander	35	Man	UK	Interview	Less trusting
Alice	34	Woman	UK	Interview	Less trusting
Aline	30	Woman	Brazil	Focus group	Less trusting
Alissa	27	Woman	US	Focus group	More trusting
Amy	31	Woman	US	Interview	Less trusting
Ana	32	Woman	Brazil	Interview	More trusting
André	36	Man	Brazil	Focus group	More trusting
Andrea	28	Woman	India	Interview	More trusting
Andrew	25	Man	UK	Interview	More trusting
Ângelo	28	Man	Brazil	Focus group	More trusting
Anjali	25	Woman	India	Focus group	More trusting
Ankit	25	Man	India	Interview	More trusting
Antoine	29	Man	UK	Interview	More trusting
Antônia	35	Woman	Brazil	Focus group	More trusting
Aparna	26	Woman	India	Interview	Less trusting
Arshad	32	Man	India	Interview	Less trusting
Artur	23	Man	Brazil	Interview	More trusting
Beatriz	26	Woman	Brazil	Interview	More trusting
Bharat	30	Man	India	Focus group	Less trusting
Carl	64	Man	US	Interview	More trusting
Catherine	39	Woman	US	Focus group	More trusting
Celia	53	Woman	US	Focus group	More trusting
Chandresh	67	Man	India	Focus group	Less trusting
Charlotte	52	Woman	UK	Focus group	More trusting
Christopher	44	Man	UK	Interview	More trusting
Courtney	51	Woman	UK	Focus group	More trusting
Daniel	31	Man	Brazil	Interview	More trusting
Danielle	25	Woman	UK	Focus group	Less trusting
David	29	Man	UK	Focus group	More trusting
Deborah	50	Woman	UK	Focus group	Less trusting
Deepali	43	Woman	India	Focus group	More trusting
Deepti	22	Woman	India	Focus group	Less trusting

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country	Data collection mode	Level of trust in news generally
Diane	33	Woman	UK	Focus group	Less trusting
Dinesh	40	Man	India	Interview	Less trusting
Ed	63	Man	US	Focus group	Less trusting
Enzo	21	Man	Brazil	Focus group	Less trusting
Farah	40	Woman	India	Interview	Less trusting
Felipe	35	Man	Brazil	Focus group	More trusting
Fred	71	Man	US	Focus group	More trusting
Gabrielle	22	Woman	UK	Interview	Less trusting
Gary	68	Man	UK	Focus group	More trusting
Geeta	46	Woman	India	Interview	More trusting
Gemma	23	Woman	UK	Interview	Less trusting
Gilberto	26	Man	Brazil	Focus group	Less trusting
Hannah	28	Woman	UK	Focus group	Less trusting
Helen	30	Woman	US	Interview	Less trusting
Henrique	37	Man	Brazil	Focus group	More trusting
Henry	48	Man	US	Interview	More trusting
Ian	50	Man	UK	Focus group	More trusting
Isaac	35	Man	US	Focus group	More trusting
Jackie	62	Woman	US	Focus group	More trusting
Jane	42	Woman	UK	Focus group	More trusting
Jatin	33	Man	India	Interview	Less trusting
Jay	39	Man	US	Interview	Less trusting
Jeremy	57	Man	US	Interview	More trusting
Jessica	29	Woman	UK	Focus group	More trusting
João	25	Man	Brazil	Interview	Less trusting
John	39	Man	US	Interview	Less trusting
Jordan	23	Man	US	Interview	More trusting
Joseph	33	Man	UK	Interview	More trusting
Júlia	31	Woman	Brazil	Focus group	Less trusting
Juliette	25	Woman	Brazil	Focus group	Less trusting
Karim	22	Man	India	Focus group	More trusting
Kartik	25	Man	India	Focus group	More trusting
Kaushal	36	Man	India	Focus group	Less trusting
Kavita	43	Woman	India	Interview	More trusting
Kayla	34	Woman	US	Interview	More trusting
Kevin	37	Man	UK	Focus group	Less trusting
Kurt	40	Woman	US	Focus group	More trusting
Lara	38	Woman	Brazil	Interview	More trusting
Laura	54	Woman	UK	Interview	Less trusting
Lawrence	55	Man	US	Interview	Less trusting
Lia	43	Woman	Brazil	Interview	More trusting
Linda	59	Woman	US	Focus group	More trusting

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country	Data collection mode	Level of trust in news generally
Lucy	41	Woman	UK	Focus group	Less trusting
Luiz	30	Man	Brazil	Focus group	Less trusting
Luke	51	Man	UK	Interview	Less trusting
Maria	37	Woman	Brazil	Interview	More trusting
Mariana	45	Woman	Brazil	Focus group	More trusting
Mário	55	Man	Brazil	Interview	Less trusting
Mary	40	Woman	US	Interview	More trusting
Maureen	47	Woman	India	Focus group	More trusting
Maya	32	Woman	India	Focus group	Less trusting
Meenakshi	31	Woman	India	Focus group	More trusting
Mehdi	47	Man	UK	Focus group	More trusting
Michael	40	Man	UK	Focus group	Less trusting
Morris	72	Man	US	Focus group	Less trusting
Neeraj	34	Man	India	Focus group	More trusting
Nelson	64	Man	US	Focus group	Less trusting
Nicholas	34	Man	UK	Focus group	More trusting
Nicole	32	Woman	UK	Focus group	More trusting
Pamela	28	Woman	US	Focus group	More trusting
Paul	66	Man	UK	Interview	More trusting
Pedro	35	Man	Brazil	Interview	Less trusting
Philip	55	Man	US	Focus group	More trusting
Pooja	21	Woman	India	Interview	Less trusting
Pratibha	56	Woman	India	Interview	More trusting
Pratik	32	Man	India	Interview	More trusting
Preeti	43	Woman	India	Interview	More trusting
Rachel	23	Woman	UK	Interview	More trusting
Rafael	22	Man	Brazil	Interview	Less trusting
Raghunath	46	Man	India	Interview	More trusting
Rajendra	31	Man	India	Interview	Less trusting
Raymond	57	Man	US	Interview	Less trusting
Rebeca	49	Woman	Brazil	Interview	Less trusting
Regina	72	Woman	US	Interview	Less trusting
Rekha	33	Woman	India	Focus group	Less trusting
Renata	29	Woman	Brazil	Interview	More trusting
Ricardo	44	Man	Brazil	Interview	Less trusting
Robert	43	Man	UK	Interview	More trusting
Roopa	29	Woman	India	Focus group	More trusting
Russell	28	Man	US	Interview	More trusting
Samantha	33	Woman	UK	Interview	Less trusting
Sara	39	Woman	Brazil	Focus group	Less trusting
Scott	29	Man	UK	Focus group	Less trusting
Sérgio	43	Man	Brazil	Focus group	More trusting

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country	Data collection mode	Level of trust in news generally
Sharon	39	Woman	US	Focus group	Less trusting
Sherry	32	Woman	US	Interview	More trusting
Shrikant	57	Man	India	Interview	Less trusting
Susan	56	Woman	US	Focus group	Less trusting
Tanvi	31	Woman	India	Focus group	Less trusting
Ticiana	32	Woman	Brazil	Focus group	More trusting
Todd	37	Man	UK	Focus group	Less trusting
Vera	39	Woman	US	Focus group	More trusting
Victoria	29	Woman	UK	Focus group	More trusting
Vitor	27	Man	Brazil	Interview	More trusting

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country	Data collection mode	Level of trust in news generally

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