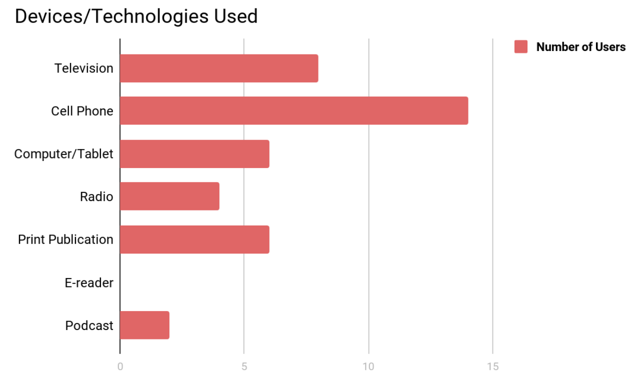
Reshaping the News Analysis

Conducted by the Moody College Senior Fellows Program

By Caroline Purtle

Focus Group Summary



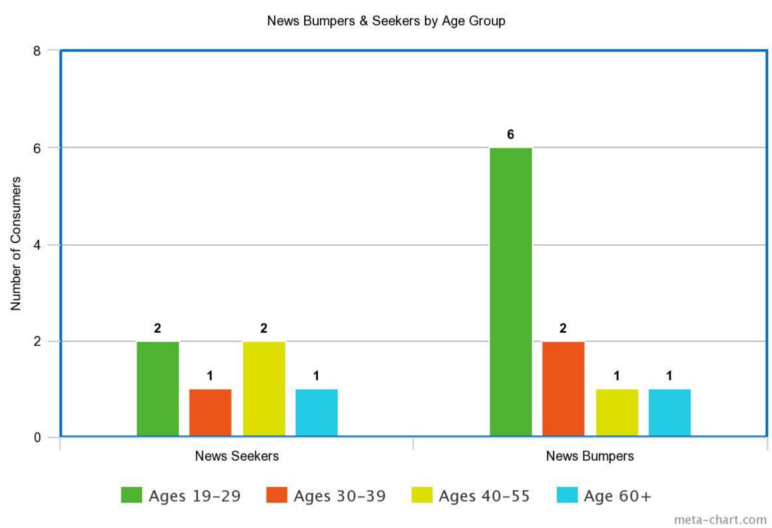
With technology being created, improved and disregarded as “outdated” at seemingly the blink of an eye, news organizations must now evolve to the latest platforms, all while understanding their “new” audience. Technologies like smartphones and social media contributed to the information overload, granting the power to any online user to transform into a freelance writer or blogger. Technology has challenged news publication as well as dilute the integrity of professional journalism. Discussing news consumption is not a natural conversation for the average individual, but it is a necessary one that must take place for the sake of the journalism industry’s future. The Moody College Senior Fellows Program at the University of Texas created a semester-long class to examine just this--Reshaping the News.

Each student was assigned to interview three adults (varying in age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) and write in-depth summaries on their tastes and viewpoints in relation to the modern day journalism industry and its consumption. These summaries were highly unique upon each individual, but highlighted several common trends among their demographic.

Dubbed “Audience Member Visit Reports,” these cumulative essays directed the class toward the creation of our official focus group, and thus became its foundation. One of the most important aspects we adhered to was inviting diversity. This was key to accumulating a vast number of opinions and unbiased, accurate results. The official focus group roster contained 16 participants ranging in the ages of 18-80, students to middle class, male and female, of all ethnicities. The class was divided into small teams in order to efficiently carry-out duties needed for the focus group, such as a planning committee, recruitment team, logistics, etc. An essential team, the facilitators, were in charge of conducting the focus group in action, asking the prepared questions, while maintaining flow in the dialogues. The facilitators will often be mentioned within the results.

First, the participants were given a private, broad survey covering topics that were then discussed in greater detail actively within the focus group. Not only did their opinions prove to be distinct, through the duration of the focus group their vocalizations catalyzed extended thought and deliberative conversations, as shown in the following results:

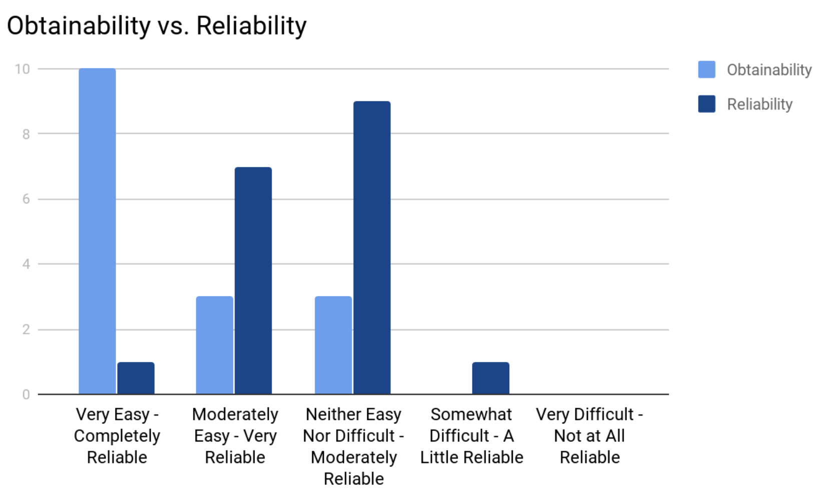
The first question on the survey characterized each person as one of two possible news consumers: a “Seeker” or “Bumper.” A Seeker actively seeks out news that interests them, whereas a Bumper is someone who happens to stumble upon news (i.e. social media, friends).



Results show 10 out of 16 of the participants classify themselves as a Bumper. The Bumpers comprised every age, but 60 percent of this group were between the ages of 19-29. The Seekers group, the minority, polled a pretty consistent result through the ages of 19-60+.

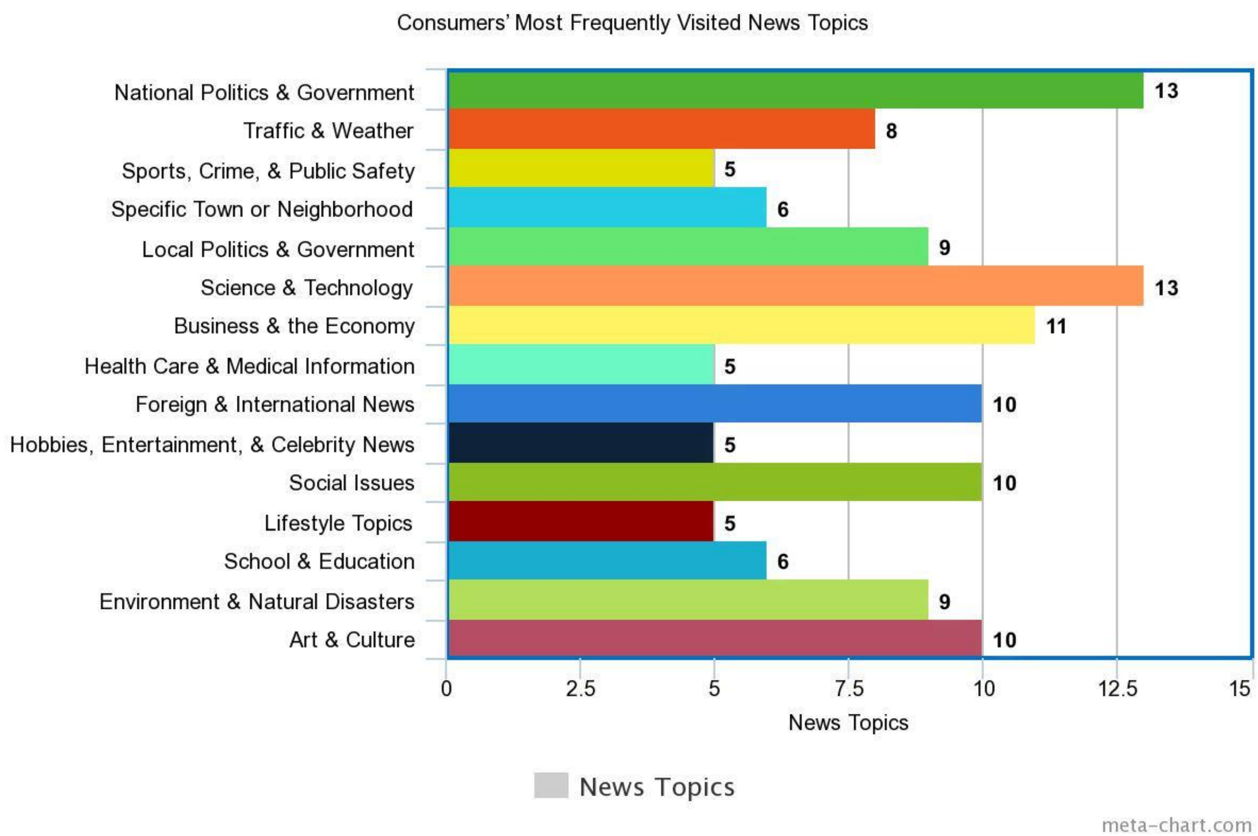
More specific survey questions ranged from news topic interests, to popular news consumption platforms or media. Polling at the highest, 87.5 percent of the focus group said they get their news from their cell phone, with the lowest being Podcasts (12.5 percent) and E-reader (0 users). On a deeper level, a survey question asked in what ways does one interact with a news outlet's content in which 81% answered they visit the website of news organizations. Two answers to this question specifically addressed print interaction and received the lowest scores: 12.5% save print copies and zero participants use its coupons.

Without a firm grasp on what participants were paying subscribers to specific print or online news organizations, and which get their news solely for free, it is more ambiguous on how to translate the survey results following the two questions regarding how easy it is to obtain news, and how reliable their news sources are. Nonetheless, the conclusion is still telling of the public's relationship with news outlets. The majority 62.5 percent say news is "very easy" to obtain, and 18.75 percent say it is "somewhat easy." The last 18.75 percent said it is "neither easy nor difficult." There were zero responses that said news was "somewhat difficult" or "very difficult" to obtain. When asked about reliability, a little over half of the participants polled that the news and information they receive is "moderately reliable;" a little less than half polled that it was "very reliable." The relationship between journalism and the



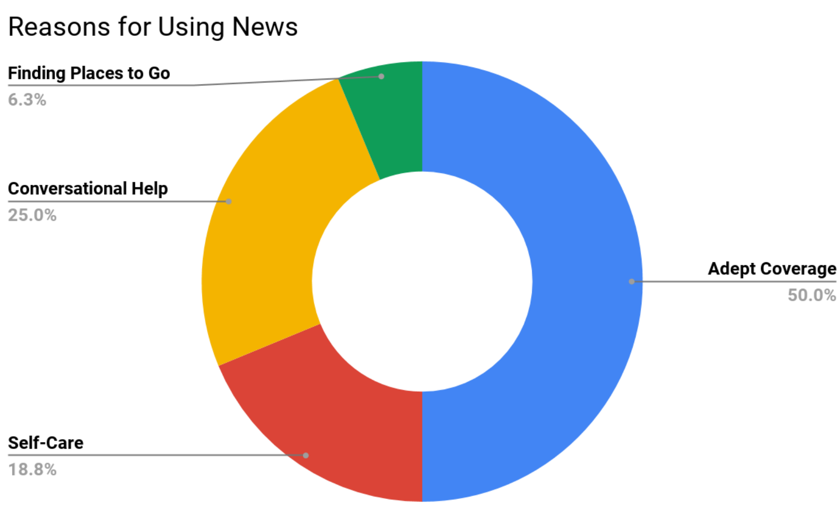
public's perception of its reliability remained an important theme within the discussion. Several qualities associated with news reliability that were mentioned: journalists disclude their subliminal opinions within stories, unbiasedness and credible sources.

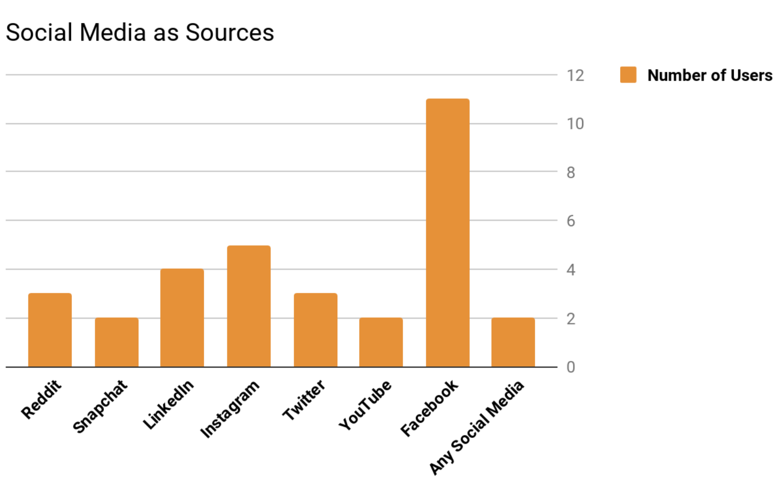
Below is a graph showing common news topics where participants chose (all that applied) what topics they follow most often or closely. A facilitator asked if the group followed local, national or international news particularly. Several responded all agreeing on a national



focus; one even voted international. When asked about local, a participant chimed in saying, "I don't know, I think I cycle, but local news seems so tedious usually. Especially on the TV, like, watching the local news is just like the people that died that I can't do anything about. Like, what is local really gonna change? 'Oh there's traffic,' oh yeah, there sure is." Much of the group concurred to the participant's point.

Diving deeper into the public's opinion on news subscriptions' fiscal note, or worth, the focus group provided key insight to the decline of subscriptions and its popularity. "I can find plenty of free content so I don't need to pay," polled 75 percent of the participants. During the focus group, someone made the comment, "there's too much access to free news," which connects the disdain to pay for news in part to modern technology watering down the value. The answers "not interested enough to pay," it's "too expensive," the "easy access to paid content in some other way" and some simply "do not trust news and information from the media" all equally polled at 12.5 percent. Although this data highlights the negative truth toward subscriptions, these opinions do not discount the public's basic value of news. Next, the focus group were asked about what was the biggest reason they use their favorite free news source, or why it is most important to them. Exactly half said their source was "good at covering the topic [they] care about." The least popular response was that



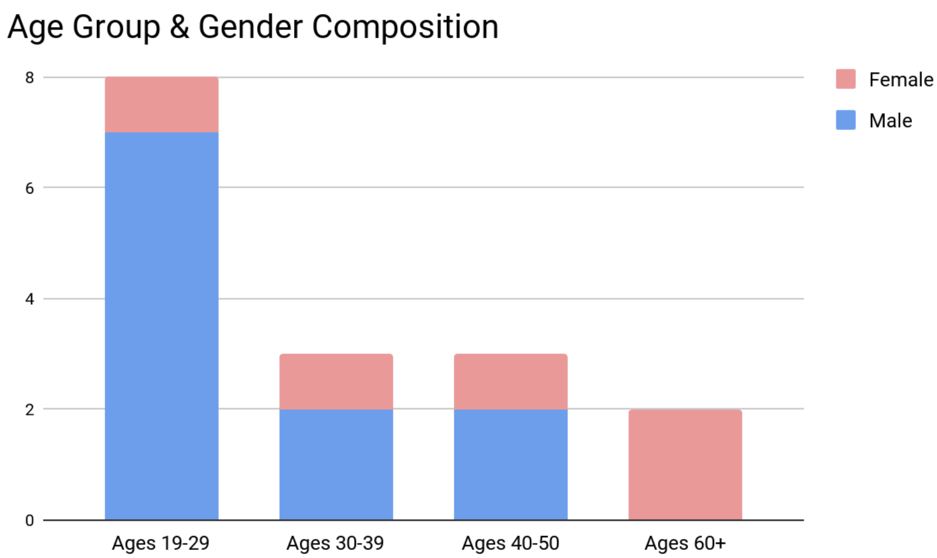


their source “helps [them] find places to go.”

The last multiple choice question on the survey addresses the recent tech-boom and the expansion of journalism platforms on major social media, asking each participant to circle all media that he/she commonly uses to consume news on. The results showed that 69 percent of the individuals use Facebook as a media for news, while YouTube and Snapchat each garnered a low 12.5 percent. A broad answer choice was also included for those who show no preference, who are willing to consume news through “any social media;” this garnered 12.5 percent, as well. Understanding which social medias are most utilized for obtaining news is crucial for organizations because having a strong presence on one or two social media is far greater than devoting too much time to all for an average presence.

Now concentrating solely on the focus group discussion, the class chose four key subjects frevent around understanding the “new” consumer insight: Consumption & Engagement, Qualities of News Outlets, News Credibility and Monetization of News. Dividing an hour between those four subjects, the class carefully formulated and prioritized questions in order to achieve optimum results within the time allotted. These four subjects have been condensed with summaries; included are several participant’s direct answers and opinions that yield value and understanding that I find significantly redeeming to the industry’s goal of reshaping the news.

To start, shown below is a graphic illustrating the participants’ basic demographics:



Consumption & Engagement: Beginning the focus group with the basics of consumption, almost unanimously the participants said they read or watch the news daily. The same goes for a large vocal agreement that their news consumption has changed over the years. The older demographics especially noticed that they consume more now, and partially credit this to the tech-boom. "For me growing up, it seemed for my grandparents and family members, it was 'early morning' or the 10 o'clock news," said a participant. In addition, many said consumption changes because as you grow older, the news starts to affect you more, and then "responsibilities change." Several people from the youngest demographic contradicted those remarks, one stating, "the time hasn't changed, it's just what I'm looking at is getting broader and broader." One participant concisely validated all points: "Not that it wasn't out there before, but there's so much more access to news, I guess, a much greater volume."

Next, out of local, national and international news, national was the overall preferred platform. Every participant agreed that local news is the least likely to follow, or never.

- <u>The main reasons</u>: cyclical, no use for traffic/weather updates and the assumption that they'll find out the news from a local anyway. Only one exception for its use is to keep up with state government and legislative issues.

Lastly, personal engagement with the news showed apprehension. A participant from the youngest age group was the only person to answer that he does sometimes comments on news posts, depending on the topic or anchor. Some expressed a new fear for commenting on stories, noting that there's a risk of being attacked for your views, making it not "worth" the input.

Qualities of News Outlets: This subject began with the facilitator asking the question why do you follow some news outlets over another? Transparency was what a participant said drew him in, or the "story behind a story," how the journalist comes about finding sources and the investigation. <u>Other qualities</u>: avoiding editorialized stories, personality and entertainment were a plus.

Next, when asked about choosing outlets that align or don't align with your views, a general agreement that initially you follow an outlet that aligns with you, but look to another source that doesn't align, like a personal devil's advocate. "You know, you could even operate on the Machiavellian theory that it's always nice to know what your enemy thinks," said a women from the age group 60+. The facilitator asked why is it more common for humans to choose outlets that align with their views. "Well, our brains are built that way," said a participant, and another person added to that saying, "it's also now Facebook that's built like that."

Debate arose when asked to describe the average news consumer, a male in the older age group stating anyone "18 and up." A younger male participant challenged this, explaining his little brothers read every news article on shoes and its industry. The older male rebutted claiming that was just consumerism. The younger male ended with a very insightful point: “it’s news that matters to them personally.”

News Credibility: This subject is the easiest to summarize, for it’s hard to dispute core values such as honesty in the media.

- Values looked for in news outlets: impartiality, avoid sensationalism, relatable reporter/writing.
- What makes a news source credible: sources that are knowledgeable, objective, not trying to persuade with his/her opinion.

There was a sense of confusion when asked about how to know if a source is credible or not. “There’s a certain level of trust in the news, and a lot of it I just think it’s credible because they’ve been around long enough,” a participant responded, justifying the means as to why they’ve never sought to verify a story. This set in motion the occurrences of media using false stories of which may deter audiences and tarnish credibility, depending on the situation. Across the board, the participants agreed that journalists are humans that make mistakes, and on top of that “there’s so much pressure” to just publish things-- “the motive of needing to put food on the table.”

- How would you define fake news: biased, something that never happened, political tool.

Monetization of News: This subject is crucial for effectively restructuring the journalism industry because even if the perfect news organization did exist, nowadays that’s not enough to convince non-payers to subscribe-- the price tag is included in the selling point. The group was scattered on a subscription basis and opinions of why or why not to buy it. Several were vehemently opposed to ever paying for news: “That’s like selling your soul.” “I pay for news through my email.” “If I have to sign up for shit, I mean that’s the closest I’ll get to paying.” One person even quoted the survey, “there’s too much access to free news.” The facilitator then inquired if they thought a print or online subscription was more valuable. A strong case was made with this justification: depends on if a certain person sees more value in tangible objects (newspapers), or convenience (online).

- What is a reasonable subscription fee for online and print newspapers: zero (free), eleven cents a year, $50-$60 a year.

The conversation ended in brainstorming a news outlet worth paying for. Everyone in the group joined in agreeing they would pay more for top quality, credibility and personalization.

Meaning & Interpretation

The Senior Fellows focus group provided multitudes of opinions, consumer habits and illumined essential areas within the industry to be approved on. Sifting through the pages of dialogue and information, not every thoughtful answer can be taken and run with; it’s about small steps to big strides. My personal interpretations of the results are simply three takeaways that I believe are the most important to act on or consider during this pivotal climate in our society.

1. Majority of news consumers who are Bumpers believe they will never pay for a news subscription.
2. The importance of local news is on the decline.

3. The public has not become desensitized to thorough reporting, and appear agitated to the commonality of errors in stories and the modern concept of “breaking news.”

Analyze & Compare

The focus group we conducted in Reshaping the News revealed smart opinions that were well represented through all of the participant’s demographics. Although the class organized the group with meticulous planning and fairness, surveying 16 people does not conclude the research that must be done in order to fully represent the american people. In this portion of the essay, I will compare our results to two other official studies: “The Media Insight Project” by API and “Newspapers Fact Sheet” by Pew Research Center.

First looking at “The Media Insight Project,” there are several similarities that align with our research. According to API, the majority 54 percent of news Bumpers answered that the reason they don’t pay is because they can find plenty of free content online, a close reflection of our results at 75 percent. My interpretation is that this is such a vast number, and growing, is because when the tech-boom rushed in, it captured much of the audience that in the past would begin making the investment of a news subscription. And as seen in our data and insight by a participant, the definition of the average news consumer has changed. Years ago, many acclimated to news slowly-- only watching the “10 o’clock news” they could catch on TV at the end of the day. Now, with smartphones and social media, the audience now includes many adolescents. Although these stories might not be about economics or foreign policy, “it’s news that matters to them personally.”

Continuing the focus on Bumpers, API asked Bumpers and Seekers the reason why they choose/subscribe to their preferred choice, the majority of Bumpers, 47 percent, answering "I was looking for a news source that covers a particular topic/issue." Contrastingly, Seekers polled the highest at 45 percent with the answer "my friends or family use it." Our group didn't dive into the logic of the Seekers and subscribers of news as much because our logic was, "if ain't broke don't fix it." We are more concerned with converting the Bumpers to become payers since that's such a large, increasing margin of the "new" news audience. That being said, none of our subscribers ever answered with "my friends or family use it," instead it seemed more of a traditional investment. When our facilitators began asking Bumpers about what it would take to get them to pay for news, the unanimous factors were quality and price. The 47 percent of Bumpers answering they pick sources that align with a particular topic/issue reflects our focus group's answer to a need for quality. This API survey titled "News content and price are key factors leading both print and digital users to pay," did not include the answer choices that dealt with the economics of the non-payers. In all, my interpretation is that a large reason why Bumpers don't pay is because they are critical of quality and content and hardly ever stick to one source, especially when comparing to different news outlets reporting on a story, as seen in our section Qualities of News Outlets.

Next I will analyze Pew Research Center's "Newspapers Fact Sheet." This study doesn't study the news consumer directly, like our focus group and API did; instead, it shows generational statistics for the journalism industry as a whole. I will use this study by attempting to make broad correlations through our focus group's opinions, aiming to show a pattern between the effects of the "new" audience.

The first data I will be reviewing is the “total estimated circulation for U.S. daily newspapers.” Illustrated in their spreadsheet, ever since 1990 the newspaper circulation has been on a sharp decline, reaching lows haven’t seen since the 1940s. It is safe to assume the numbers were so low in the 40’s is due to expensive technology and that newspapers were more of a “good.” I credit this decline to the tech-boom, 1990 being a year of mass integration of modern technology like broadcast news, computers and the internet. The numbers even today continue to drop because of the introduction of smartphones and social media. Again reiterating our focus group’s response, there are now plenty- some even argued too many- free platforms to obtain news from. The decline and rise of bumpers, if haven’t yet noticed, is to no surprise.

Pew Research Center expands to talk about new outlet website circulation and visits, noting, “digital circulation in 2016 was projected to have been roughly steady, with weekday down 1% and Sunday up 1%,” whereas major organizations, like *The New York Times*, have risen 11 percent. As shown in our results, Bumpers and Seekers alike contribute to the 81 percent who regularly visit news websites to consume news. It is telling that Seekers utilize the accessibility of news online, assumingly many pay for print subscription. Expanding on that, Bumpers and Seekers both surveyed using several social media platforms. I interpret this pattern to our section of Qualities of News Outlets again: whether or not the news consumer is a Bumper, Seeker, subscriber or non-payer, all said they commonly practice using two very different news organizations to compare one story. They go on to say this habit is credited toward inevitable biasedness of reporting, and editorialization.

Overall, the two studies reinforce our results through the mass polling of consumers (API) and statistics of the industry entirely (Pew Research). Some data was off sometimes by percentage, but never by majority. Our in-depth focus group did a lot more than survey though; the conversations and dialogue told experiences so specific they can't be circled on a piece of paper. The data and signature opinions coupled with the two studies emphasize a need for change in the journalism industry, and that it's dire to reconnect with the "new" audience. Concluding this section with data from the same Pew Research Center study, the revenue from newspaper advertisements hit a new low haven't seen since the 80s, around $18 million, and online advertising revenue has only increased by 11 percent since 2011-2016. It cannot be emphasized enough of the need to reshape the news for the news consumer.

Final Insights & Opinion

news | n(y)o͞oz |
noun

> newly received or noteworthy information, especially about recent or important events: *I've got some good news for you.*

Throughout this analysis I reference this “new” audience. The journalism industry was throttled into a new era, seemingly reluctant. Technology has forced organizations into evolution with modern society. Above is the exact definition of the word “news,” but the industry has a different connotation: print, paperboys, magazines, paper, broadcast, nightly news, morning news, etc. These are timeless traditions and the foundation of major news reporting. Now, there is a different consumer- one that defies age boundaries, has smartphones and laptops for consuming, one that prioritizes social medias, goes against the traditions and is even harder to convince.

My definition of “future news” may be seen as depressing by the industry because it’s about setting aside traditions and their connotation.

“Forever is composed of nows,” a poem by Emily Dickinson.

Tradition in an industry that’s job is to tell of everything that’s changing doesn’t make sense. I see a major digitalization, not as drastic as Virtual Reality, maybe not yet, but the new consumer is one whose own self is even completely digitized now. Print and magazines are luxury items, especially when it's found in abundance online for free. The scary part is even when that is taken away, and the industry is still in print, somehow bloggers and Tweeters and regular human beings are able to report things to fill in that gap. As a whole, my definition of future news is a constant awareness of life and society. I can't precisely say what the future is, but as Dickinson said it best-- it's now.

The likelihood of changing shouldn't be called to question, but it is. If there is any change to the future news catering to the "new" audience, it would be a very slow evolution. I hope it changes. It needs to change. The journalism industry is afloat as of today, as of now, but what about the next "now." The change should be swift. The reason why I see this change as a slow dissolving is because journalists are reluctant creatures who hold the print and writing as an art. When people are hired at companies with titles like "social media manager" or specialize in economics, it is off-putting to the Vets. Another reason why I see this as slow is because journalism is an industry of writing and reporting, not about inventing technology. The process is once a major tech change happens, society embraces it rapidly, then journalism acts.

In conclusion: defining future news is similar to gambling. The best thing to do is prepare, let go of some traditions, throw away any ego or reluctance. The "nows" are telling us that there's a new audience. By using results and data from studies like API's or Pew Research Center's, is further proof of this. Our focus group began and ended the conversation of news consumption, giving great advice and pointers on where to start. My final advice and interpretations:

1. Establish a strong presence on only 1-3 social media platforms.

We are gravely aware of the financial situation burdening many news organizations all over the country. In the section “Monetization of the News,” the participants are emphatic on free news and even mock subscriptions. A decline in subscriptions and online advertisements sales are two main revenue losses for news outlets. The growth of technology in the past few years has created a rate race for the industry to seal a presence on all major social media. That being said, when there is minimal of an organization's audience using them, then the money being spent on those developments are frivolous with little return value. Instead, get ahead of the curve and become the best on a platform. When a year goes by and competing outlets are still busy just maintaining those platforms, your news organization was busy improving and investing on new projects. Lastly, I cannot emphasize enough, do not prioritize Snapchat.

2. Make your website and social media a “safe place” for consumer engagement.

Create monitors, discussions, set rules for commenting. The New York Times does this by highlighting great comments that sets a “tone” for the story and organization and has proven to work, as studied in my class at UT called Online Civility.

3. *Get to work.*

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