

Being Informed:

A Study of the Information Needs
and Habits of Philadelphia
Residents.

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Our Team



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About The Study

A central goal of the Lenfest Institute for Journalism is to improve and sustain the Philadelphia information ecosystem. Doing so requires a better understanding of the information needs and consumption habits of those who live in the city. **The Lenfest Institute, in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication**, commissioned **SSRS**, a local survey and market research firm, to conduct a series of focus groups with residents of Philadelphia and its surrounding suburbs.

While not a statistically representative sample, the groups were designed to include people living in various neighborhoods across the area, and to be diverse in regards to of age group, ethnicity, and income, with a bias towards potentially underserved groups.

Research Question:

**How do Philadelphians seek information in their daily lives —
what information they seek and why?**

Methodology

- Eight Focus Groups conducted between February 15th and 22nd, 2018
- Eight participants in each group, 64 study participants in total
- Sessions lasted two hours. Each was structured around a discussion protocol designed to ask participants about their daily routines (mornings, mid-days, evenings, and weekends)
- All focus groups were observed by one or more representatives of the Lenfest Institute, the Annenberg School, and/or SSRS.



Groups Demographic Make-Up

- **Group 1:** Whites; aged 36-65; mixed income
- **Group 2:** Whites; aged 18-35; mixed income
- **Group 3:** Blacks; aged 36-65; middle to high income
- **Group 4:** Blacks; aged 18-35; middle to high income
- **Group 5:** Blacks; aged 36-65; lower income
- **Group 6:** Blacks; aged 18-35; lower income
- **Group 7:** Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians; Aged 36-65; lower to middle income
- **Group 8:** Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians; Aged 18-35; lower to middle income



Main Findings

➤ Information Sources

Information that was of practical or social value to day-to-day lives.

➤ Information Sources

The Mobile Phone

Default Apps

Social Media Apps

Hyperlocal and International Sources

➤ Consumption Habits

News Jungles


Trust and mistrust of sources

Information Needs

- Information and interactions of a highly personal nature that was relevant for planning the day: **food shopping, cooking and meal planning, restaurants, devotional material, entertainment, checking in with friends and family, health and exercise**, etc.
- Relevant “news” fit this same pattern: the day’s **weather, traffic, public transportation** and any very local issues related to **crime, schools, fires** and the like that needed to be taken into account in preparing themselves and their families for the day.
- There was some, albeit little, voluntary mention of **broader local issues** like policy (**police, taxes, social services**, etc.) or **local government** (e.g., **the mayor, city council, city agencies**, etc.)

Information Sources: **The Mobile Phone**

- Most popular source of information across all age groups, races, and household income levels.
- Only two out of 64 participants stating that they used their television sets more when seeking information on a daily basis.
- Local Television was the second information source mentioned, particularly 6ABC. Reuters Institute [research](#) found this is also true for the rest of the United States.
- Newspapers were rarely mentioned unless asked directly.



“I think everyone is on their phone all of the time anyway, so it’s just easier to get your news from that source.”


“I mean, I just look up, Philadelphia news, online, Google, and whatever comes up and has good information.”

“Usually, I check my email on the phone. It’s so much easier than just going to the computer and doing all that.”

“What we do right now is whip out our phones and do everything on there. Even using the computer is becoming glazed over in light of how we use our phones, because the phone is as fast or faster and more convenient.”

Information Sources: **Default Apps**

- The majority of participants across all age groups relied on default apps on a daily basis for traffic, news and weather, the three most common mentioned type of information.
- When participants went to the App store or Google Play with a general idea of the information that they would like to obtain from an app, e.g “Philadelphia News” or “Breaking News,” the majority downloaded the highest rated app on the list except for one participant.
- Default apps were also popular for offering more than one functionality. E.g.
 - * The weather app allows you to find the weather on your lock screen.
 - * The Map app allows you to check for Coffee and Tea places near you



“I don't know how I found out about it (the bible app). I think I went to the Play Store and was just looking at stuff and popped on it and was like, ‘They’ve got everything.’ ”

“Facilitator: When you say your map App, is that your Google map app?

Participant: No, it is the Apple, whatever is just standard on the Phone.”



Information Sources: **Social Media Apps**

- Social Media Apps were the most mentioned third-party apps by our participants.
- Facebook was the most popular one, followed by YouTube and Instagram.
- At least a third of the studied sample stated that Facebook was their main (and sometimes only) source of daily news, and more than two thirds of the sample agreed that they get information from it daily.
- Low income participants relied heavily on Facebook to find rental listings, coupons and deals, and even job opportunities. Generally, the Marketplace feature was popular among all participants.



“A big thing I’ve been doing is yard sale groups. So, (I’m) always on there (Facebook) and find groups.”


“Facebook is more news. It’s a way to share videos and what’s going on and things like that.”

“Yeah, on Facebook, they’re showing you stories that you might already go to see or look at based on what you already looked at. So, when you go on there and you look, you see the story you want to see, you’re not really going to check the whole rest of the paper, because you’re seeing exactly what you want.”

Information Sources: **Hyperlocal Sources**



- Neighborhood newspapers or apps offered news about their communities that no one else could — not even local television.
- Consistently, low income participants in our sample mentioned neighborhood newspapers as a fundamental source of information about community resources and services.
- For our 36-65 participants, it was a way of keeping up to date about neighborhood events, crime, and the community.
- Hyperlocal media, even when not as sophisticated as other sources, offered a direct connection to the place of residence as well, and nourished a sense of belonging.

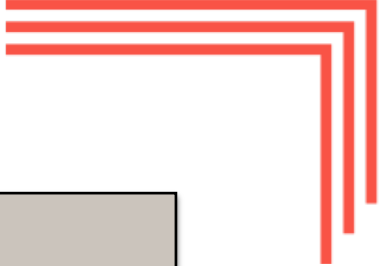


“The Northeast Times. They tell you free activities. They’ve even got places for people if you don’t have your high school diploma. They’ve got places you can go to get your GED or high school diploma. Exercise classes...”

“There are a few local ones that are good like South Philadelphia and South Philly Review, which in a literary sense is kind of not so great, but it’s fun to read. Just to see what’s happening in the neighborhoods. There’s one column about restaurant reviews by this woman who is just the worst and I read it because it’s painful to read and funny. Everybody thinks so.”

Information Sources: **International Sources**

- International sources like BBC and Al Jazeera provided more well-rounded coverage, more frequently, about the rest of the world
- Participants voiced frustration at the fact that it is difficult to find information in mainstream American media about countries that are not major players in relation to America's current foreign policy issues and are not historical allies



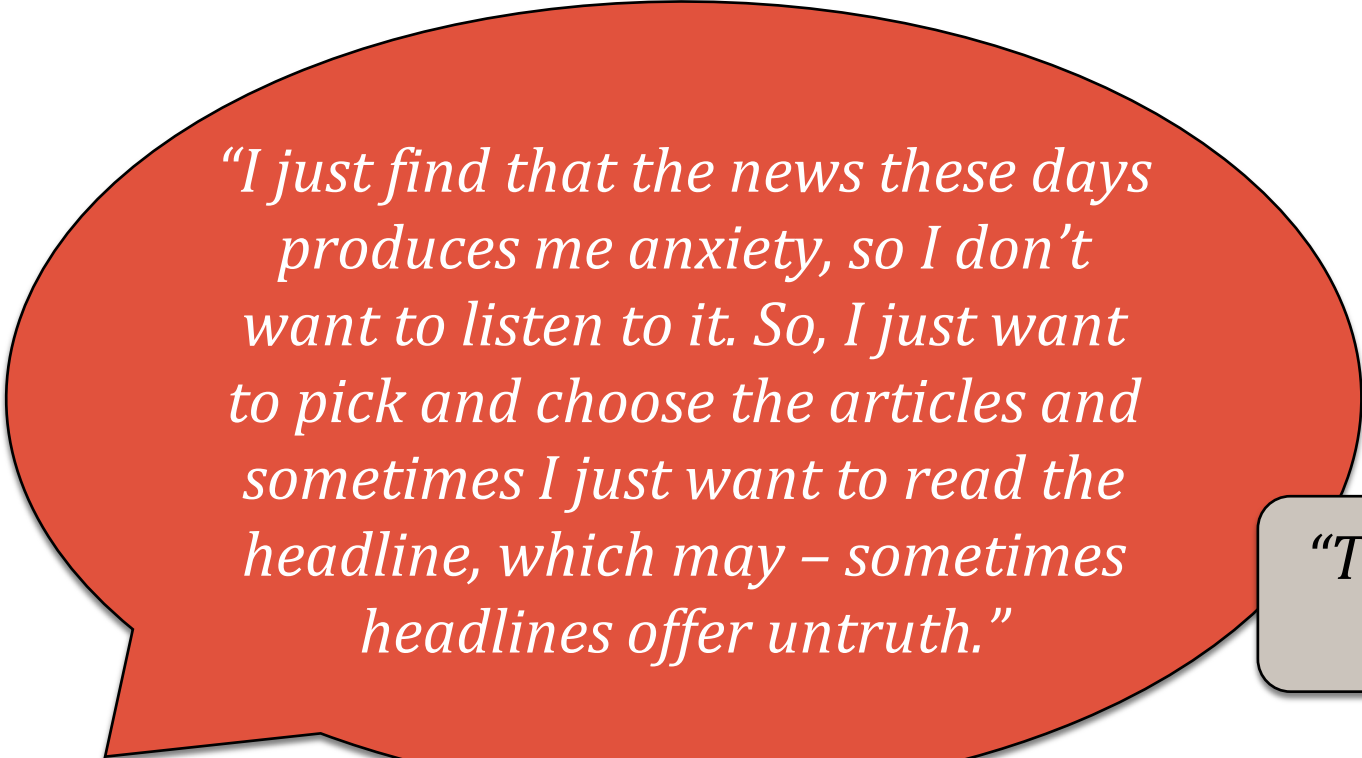
“I feel like just, I don't know—just the older I get, I realize... I think Americans are very—not selfish, but we're very self-centered and we don't really take into consideration that we're not the only people on the planet and we kind of do need to know what's going on around us because that affects us, too. I do definitely keep up with other countries, whether it's their politics. Everything affects us in some type of way seeing how anything we do affects other people.”

“We don't know what's going on in Spain or in Greece if it's not related to the U.S.”


Consumption Habits: **News Jungles**

Instead of news deserts, we found *news jungles*.

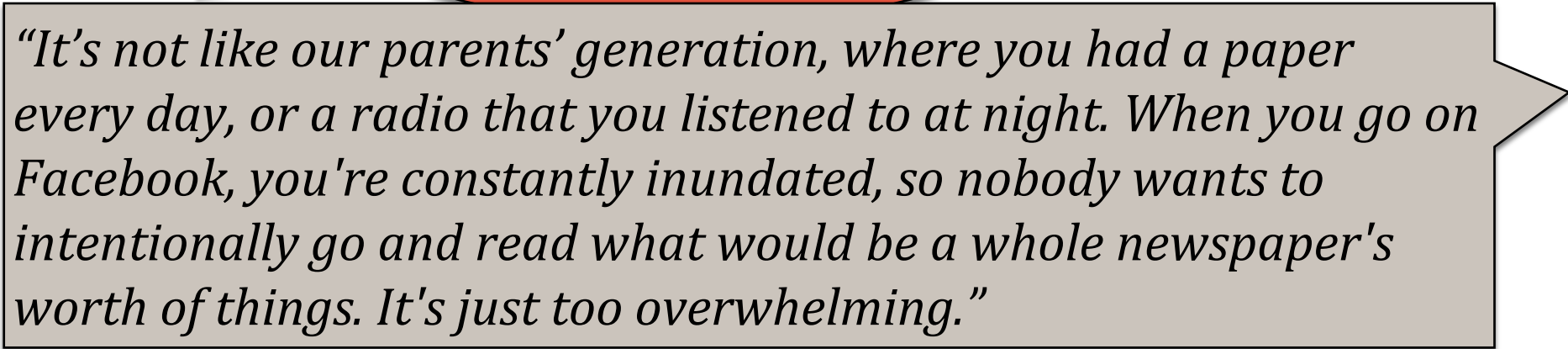
- Instead of sensing that they were not finding essential information and news, participants often felt that they **had too much information and news on their screens and that they often had to opt out, sort through, and hunt for information that they were actually interested in.**
- The only exception was participants of color, who repeatedly mentioned information gaps in the media about specific issues affecting **Latino and black communities like high childbirth deaths, cultural traditions and celebrations, and consequences of gentrification in neighborhoods**, among other things.
- The news jungle effect led to **news fatigue**.



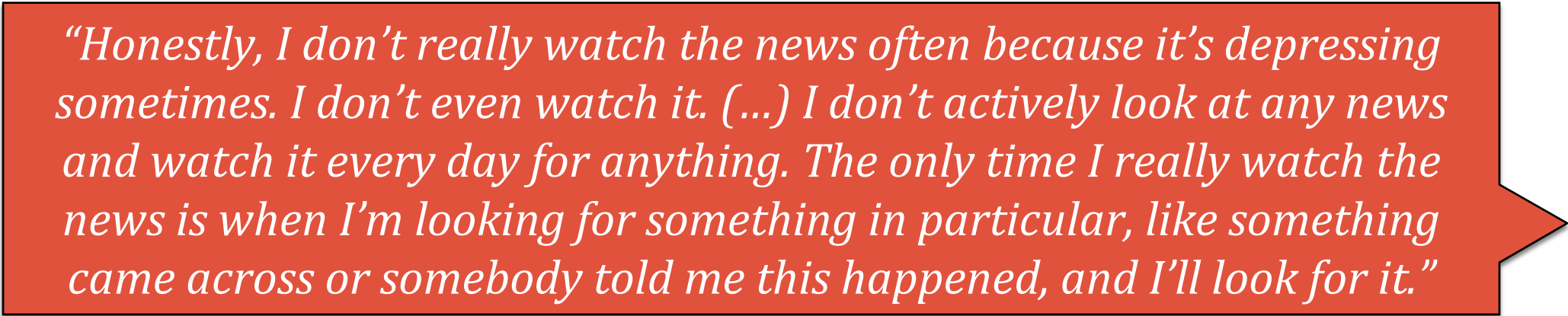
"I just find that the news these days produces me anxiety, so I don't want to listen to it. So, I just want to pick and choose the articles and sometimes I just want to read the headline, which may – sometimes headlines offer untruth."



"There's just less paper time now, so much internet news and stuff."




"It's not like our parents' generation, where you had a paper every day, or a radio that you listened to at night. When you go on Facebook, you're constantly inundated, so nobody wants to intentionally go and read what would be a whole newspaper's worth of things. It's just too overwhelming."



"Honestly, I don't really watch the news often because it's depressing sometimes. I don't even watch it. (...) I don't actively look at any news and watch it every day for anything. The only time I really watch the news is when I'm looking for something in particular, like something came across or somebody told me this happened, and I'll look for it."

Consumption Habits: Trust and Mistrust of Sources

- An acute sense of information abundance motivated participants to **compare, contrast, and fact-check** the news very often.
- No less than **70 percent** of our overall sample admitted to trust news and information from mainstream media **only partially or not at all**. That number was higher among white 18-35 year-old city residents, with almost 90 percent admitting to the same.
- Information or news shared by **a family member or a friend** tended to be trusted, or when it was commented on or shared **by social media activists or influencers**.
- Becoming a person of trust or gaining credibility often relied on factors like **personal empathy, commitment to causes, sources of revenue, or individual background**.



“What I’ve been trying to do, is I try to stay away from slants. What I mean by that is, as far as American headline news, Fox leans to the right. CNN leans to the left. So, you know what I do? I check it all. Go on YouTube. I’ll check out Al Jazeera. I’ll check out the BBC. They don’t seem to have an agenda, you know what I mean?”

MSNBC anchor Joy Reid ... “I just love her presence. She looks like me, talks like me, she’s interested in the same things, and she takes those as seriously as I do.”

“I don’t think any of them (news sources) are fully trustworthy because one thing I learned from one of my professors is to always look at where you’re getting the information from. It’s always someone trying to sell a product, so it’s always biased to something. Always cross-check.”

“I’m addicted to watching ‘Dateline,’ ‘60 Minutes,’ ‘48 Mystery Hours,’ etc. because you can actually call them or email them. You can request – ‘Where did you get this source from?’ etc. When they do make a mistake, they actually publicly acknowledge it.”



Participants Recommendations: *Information for different age groups*

Maybe unsurprisingly, a recommendation offered by several members of our focus group was the need for more local information produced with the age of the audience in mind. While younger participants hoped to get local news products that felt more relatable to them and their generation's voice, challenges and cultural backgrounds, older participants also hoped to find information customized around their needs and preferences.

“Make it so the younger person cares about the bottom line, tell me why that’s important. Don’t just talk to me about it; tell me why it’s important. Make it important to me so that I care to listen.”

“The individual newscaster might be in your genre and they’re speaking in terms that you can relate to.”



Participants Recommendations: *Build content and products around communities of interest*

These communities could be differentiated by age, gender, sexual orientation, cultural preferences, ethnic background, pop-culture references and many other categories. Participants who made these suggestions related personal experiences where companies that have created products around specific communities that they feel either part of or compelled to belong to enjoyed the highest rates of engagement and trust:

“I have Dollar Shave Club to get my razors. And what they started doing is genius. I feel like people already are happy with them, but they started a newsletter every month, and I realized that that did something to my brain neurons, where I feel closer to the brand. And I’m very like anti – I think of myself as I’m not loyal to any brand or anything. But I do find myself when the package comes every month, I can’t wait to read (the newsletter).”



Participants Recommendations: *Transparency as a core value and for connecting with audiences*

Participants trusted organizations and individuals that make public information about their funding and revenue, cited sources and generally acted transparently more than others. The more transparent an individual or organization was, the most positive a reaction they received from participants:

“I would definitely promote the reputability of the information that we’re providing. I feel like that’s so important like in an academic circle like you would cite your sources. You don’t always see that, but knowing where your news is coming from is so key to not waste your time or anybody else’s.”

“It’s important to know where the funding comes from for a lot of these things (news sources) because that’s what makes or breaks whether or not something is corrupt.”



Participants Recommendations: *Comic relief*

Another way our participants fought news fatigue and anxiety was by consuming information that offered comic relief. Participants suggested people or organizations looking to connect should make content comical, self-deprecating or speak truth to power through jokes. Comic relief knitted into the narrative of serious and grim information released some of the tension that the information provoked - and also helped them empathize more with the person delivering the information.

“Comical will make it serious.”

“Make sure it’s relatable. I feel like that’s what catches people’s attention.”

“It makes me remember because I want to share it with somebody else because it was so funny.”



Participants Recommendations: *Don't effectively kill printed formats*

While a majority of participants affirmed that most of their daily information was consumed on mobile phones and other digital devices -- followed closely by TV -- many affirmed that print news still played a role in their lives, particularly for older and/or lower-income participants. Several lower-income participants said some people in their neighborhoods relied on printed pamphlets or free local and hyperlocal newspapers like Metro or South Philly Reviews to get information in their daily lives:

“ My problem with information is, as far as the Internet or social media, people who are computer illiterate – the older generation who’s not into the Internet or the phone – getting them information. It has to be more than by word of mouth. Or it has to be more than by the news. Maybe delivering a local paper.”

Final Conclusions and Recommendations



- The future of news and other information is online and mobile.
- People need information curators as much as they need information providers.
- The future of news and other information is social, interactive, and engaged.
- Give people what they need by tying it to what they want.
- Increase representation of all racial and cultural communities in the media.
- Audience-centric information builds support and trust among consumers.
- Research, experiment and test.



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