News Consumption in the UK: 2021

Overview of research findings

News Consumption in the UK: 2021 – Welsh overview

Publication Date: 27 July 2021

Contents

Section

Annex

Key findings from the report

This report provides the findings of Ofcom's 2020/21 research into news consumption across television, radio, print, social media, podcasts, other websites/apps and magazines. It is published as part of our range of market research reports examining the consumption of content, and attitudes towards that content, across different platforms.

The aim of this report is to inform understanding of news consumption across the UK and within each UK Nation. This includes sources and platforms used, the perceived importance of different outlets for news, attitudes towards individual news sources, international and local news use.

This report also provides an understanding of current affairs consumption among adults and news consumption among 12-15 year olds.

Fieldwork for the adults' survey this year took place from 2nd November – 10th December 2020 and 27th February – 29th March 2021. Fieldwork for the children's survey this year took place from 24th November – 7th December 2020 and 27th February – 24th March 2021. These fieldwork periods overlapped with the second and third phases of UK lockdown.

The primary source for this report is Ofcom's News Consumption Survey. The report also contains information from BARB for television viewing. More information can be found in the annex.

What we have found – in brief

TV is the most-used platform for news (79%), followed by the internet (73%), with half of adults using social media (49%) and/or other websites/apps (49%). However, fewer than half now use the radio for news (46%) and less than a third use print newspapers (32%). Use of TV is most prevalent among the 65+ age group (93%), while the internet is the most-used platform for news consumption among 16-24s (89%) and those from minority ethnic groups (85%).

The online trend data shows that usage of radio, print newspapers and the internet for news have all declined since 2020 (-6, -5 and -3 percentage points respectively). Use of TV is unchanged.

BBC One remains the most-used news source across any platform (62%), followed by ITV (46%) and Facebook (36%), then the BBC website/app (31%), the BBC News channel (31%) and Sky News Channel (30%). Usage of BBC One has remained unchanged since 2020, but usage of ITV and Facebook have both decreased. Usage of Channel 4, BBC Radio 2 and BBC Radio 1 have also decreased over the last year.

When rated by their users on measures such as importance, trustworthiness, range of opinions and impartiality, the main news platforms' ratings are largely in line with 2020; TV and magazines performing strongest, and social media performing least well.

TV remains the most common platform for accessing local news and news within the Nations. BBC One is the most used news source in England and Wales for accessing news about the Nation, whereas STV is most used in Scotland and UTV and BBC One are most used in Northern Ireland.

As in previous years, just under six in ten (57%) 12-15 year olds are interested in news. These children primarily engage with news to understand what's going on around them, to learn about new things and to be made to think. Being 'too boring' remains the key reason for lack of interest in news, followed by 'all news sounding the same' and a 'lack of relevance'.

12-15 year olds remain particularly interested in news about music (53%), followed by news about celebrities (45%), the environment (44%) and serious things happening in the UK (43%). However, one in five are '*most*' interested in news about sport/sports personalities.

Talking to family (68%) and watching TV (65%) are the most common ways to find out about news among 12-15 year olds, followed by social media (57%) and talking to friends (53%). BBC One/BBC Two remain the most-used (35%) and most important news sources (14%). However there has been a significant reduction in the use of BBC One/BBC Two and ITV in the last year. In contrast, Sky News, TikTok and WhatsApp are all used more often than in 2020.

Family, radio, then podcasts and TV are considered to be the most truthful news sources among 12-15 year olds. Social media and friends are still considered the least truthful sources.

Overall summary of findings

Overall summary - Adults

TV remains the most-used platform among UK adults (16+) for news (79%), followed by the internet (73%), radio (46%) and print newspapers (32%).

Trend data among the online only sample shows that use of radio, newspapers and the internet for news have all declined since 2020, while usage of TV is unchanged. TV sources represent seven of the top 20 most-used news sources - the most of any platform (the top 20 news sources also include four social media sites, three newspaper titles (print or digital format), three radio stations and three websites/apps). While TV is the most-used platform for news overall, there are some exceptions; for example, 16-24s are still more likely to use the internet for news than TV (89% vs. 61%), while the same is true for those from minority ethnic groups (85% vs. 69%).

BBC One remains the most-used news source across all platforms, with 62% reach among all online UK adults, followed by ITV and Facebook.

Several sources in the top 20 have seen decreases in use since 2020: ITV/ITV WALES/UTV/STV (46%), Facebook (36%), Channel 4 (24%), BBC Radio 2 (13%) and BBC Radio 1 (11%). BBC sources represent seven of the top 20 most-used news sources. Furthermore, when sources are grouped by organisation, the BBC has the highest audience reach (83%), followed by ITV (50%), Sky (36%) and DMGT (30%).

BBC One also remains the top single most important news source for the largest proportion (19%) of those who use the main platforms for news, although this has decreased from 22% in 2020. The BBC website/app was selected as the most important news source by 11% of news users, an increase from 2020.

This is followed by ITV (7%, a decline from 2020), Facebook (6%) and the Sky News Channel (6%). However, this does vary by age: social media channels are more important among younger age groups, with 36% of 16-24s selecting a social media channel as their most important news source.

Around half (49%) of UK adults claim to use social media for news and 49% also say they use 'other websites and apps' - i.e. any non-social media sources of news, such as websites and apps of news organisations, newspapers or other apps (e.g. LADbible).

Around a fifth (19%) of UK adults say they use news aggregators, and 25% say they use search engines for news, a decline from 2020. The BBC website / app is most used 'other website/app', used by 31% of UK adults, followed by Google (search engine) used by 17% of UK adults. 12% of those using social media for news use TikTok, an increase from 4% in 2020.

In 2021, a third of users of social media for news claimed to mostly get their news from social media posts, a decrease from 2020, while two in five mostly get it directly from news organisation apps/websites.

As in 2020, news consumed on social media is more likely to be from news organisations than 'friends/family' or 'others you follow'. The BBC remains the most commonly followed news organisation across the social media sites, followed by Sky News on Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, ITV on Facebook and The Sun on Snapchat.

At a platform level, attitudes towards news provision (including quality, accuracy, trustworthiness and impartiality) remain consistent with 2020, with TV and magazines performing strongest, and social media performing least well. At the individual source level attitudes also remain largely consistent with 2020.

When asked which sources were good for ‘providing news about Covid-19’ and ‘helping people to understand the restrictions’ users of each platform identified TV as performing strongest and social media as performing comparatively poorly.

TV remains the most popular platform for accessing local news and people are still highly satisfied with the quality of this news.

Half of online UK adults who follow news say they watch regional/local broadcasts on BBC TV and 37% watch ITV/ITV WALES/UTV/STV. Four in five of these viewers are satisfied with the quality of news these channels provide.

TV remains the most common platform for accessing news about respondents’ own nation.

BBC One is the most used news source in England and Wales for accessing news about the nation, whereas STV is most used in Scotland and UTV and BBC One are most used in Northern Ireland. BBC One is the most important news source in England, Wales and Northern Ireland while BBC One and the BBC website/app are equally important in Scotland. Respondents in Northern Ireland and Scotland are most likely to say they are very interested in news about their nation (57% in Northern Ireland and 51% in Scotland vs 41% in Wales and 31% in England).

As in 2020, six in ten adults (63%) think it is important for ‘society overall’ that broadcasters provide current affairs programming, more than those who say it is important to them personally (54%).

Overall summary – 12-15-year olds

As in 2020, just under six in ten 12-15s claim to be either ‘very’ or ‘quite’ interested in news.

These children primarily engage with news to ‘understand what’s going on around them’, to ‘learn about new things’ and to ‘make them think’. Among the four in ten who are not interested in the news, the main reason is it is ‘too boring’ (47%). A further 19% said it ‘all sounds the same’, 16% said it ‘was not relevant for people their age’, and 8% said it was ‘too upsetting’.

The highest level of interest was in music news.

When asked about their interest in different types of news, the highest level of interest was in music news (53%). When asked which types of news content they are ‘most’ interested in, sports/sports personalities (22%) and music news/singers/musicians (15%) were the top choices.

Talking with family and watching the TV continue to be the most common ways to find out about the news.

Talking to family (68%) and watching TV (65%) are the most common ways to find out about news, followed by social media (57%) and talking to friends (53%). However, TV remains the platform used most often for news (27%), followed by social media (22%) and talking to family (19%). As in 2018, 2019 and 2020 social media is used most often for celebrity, music and fashion news, while TV is used most often for all other types of news content.

BBC One/Two (35%) and YouTube (33%) are the most-used news sources for 12-15s across all platforms. However, BBC One/Two declined from 41% in 2020 and 45% in 2018. BBC One/Two remain the most important (14%) news sources.

The next most used news sources are Instagram (28%) and Facebook (27%). There are seven social media sites in the top ten most used sources for 12-15s. The reach of ITV (24%) has also decreased from 28% in 2020 while Sky News, TikTok and WhatsApp have all seen increases since 2020. 12-15s remain most likely to first find out about social media sources from friends and find out about TV and radio sources from parent(s).

Family, radio, podcasts and TV are perceived as the most truthful news sources, while social media and friends are perceived to be the least truthful.

Four in five (80%) 12-15s said the news they heard from family was either ‘always’ or ‘mostly’ accurate, compared to 75% for radio, 69% for podcasts and 69% for TV. Only one in three think news stories on social media (34%) or from friends (37%) are accurate.

Two fifths (41%) of 12-15s say they have seen a deliberately untrue / misleading news story online in the past 12 months.

42% of 12-15s who use social media for news claim they always/often think about whether the stories they see there are accurate. However, 52% say it is difficult to tell whether news on social media is accurate or not. The most common actions they would take if they saw a deliberately misleading story are to tell parents or another family member (37%), followed by telling friends (21%). A third (33%) said they would probably just ignore it/wouldn’t do anything.

A1. Industry currency

BARB (Broadcasters' Audience Research Board) is the official industry currency for TV consumption. It uses a continuous panel of approximately 5,300 UK homes and tracks television viewing among all people aged 4+ in these homes using meters attached to every working television set in the home.

A2. Methodology

From December 2017 until March 2020, Jigsaw Research conducted a mixed methodology approach, combining online and face to face interviews. However, during the most recent period of research, they were unable to conduct face to face interviews, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Since online methodologies tend to underrepresent low/non internet users, Jigsaw conducted separate Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) to ensure that these groups had the opportunity to express their views.

This additional CATI survey achieved 1,278 interviews, with the nations over-represented during fieldwork. This data has been weighted to correct for this over-representation, with weights being applied by age, gender and socio-economic group (SEG) within Nation, to provide a representative view of all UK adults. In addition to the CATI interviews, a total of 3,327 online panel interviews were undertaken. This online data has been weighted by age, gender, nation/region, working status and ethnicity to ensure they are representative of 'recent' internet users, as found in the ONS Internet Users research (published on 6th April 2020).

Due to differences in the questionnaire and differences in how respondents answered questions about individual news sources between the two survey methods used, the combined adult methodology is only used to show platform level data. All other adults' data is based on the online only sample.

The CATI and online interviews were conducted over two waves of research, from 2nd November – 10th December 2020 and 27th February – 29th March 2021. These interviewing periods have remained consistent over the last four years. Consequently, 2020 data was collected pre- Covid-19 and 2021 data was collected during the second and third UK lockdown periods. 2020/21 online data has been reported as '2021' within this report, whilst the 2019/20 online data has been reported as '2020'.

Findings by different demographic groups are shown where possible. Statistically significant differences are shown at a 95% confidence level.

The survey has approximately 200 codes for different potential sources for news, as well as the option to allow respondents to nominate their own sources which yields a further 800 or so, including regional sources. This gives us a bottom-up measure of what people consider they use for news (about their Nation, the UK, and internationally) and will not necessarily include every possible outlet. The survey therefore provides a granular range of news sources. These individual news sources are then aggregated into various groups or "nets" relating to their owner or publisher.

This is a recall-based survey. As such, it is likely to provide somewhat different results to other types of measurement. In particular, it may underestimate some online news consumption activity. It is likely to be harder for respondents to recall ad-hoc online news consumption compared to, say, the purchase of a newspaper or the watching of an evening television bulletin. On the other hand, respondents show through such surveys which news sources resonate with them.

The methodology used for the 12-15s study is largely unchanged since the 2020, 2019 and 2018 reports. In total, 503 interviews from 24th November – 7th December 2020 have been combined with 507 interviews from 27th Feb – 24th March 2021. Consequently, 2021 data was collected during the second and third UK lockdown periods. Quotas were set on age, gender, socio-economic group (SEG) and nation to ensure the sample was representative of the UK and the data has also been weighted on age, gender, SEG and Nation. Statistically significant differences year-on-year are shown at a 95% confidence level.

Each wave of fieldwork was undertaken in three stages:

- Stage 1: Parents of 12-15 year olds were targeted, using an online panel.
- Stage 2: Parents were screened to ensure a representative sample of participants was recruited.
- Stage 3: The parent asked their (qualifying) child to complete the rest of the questionnaire.