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Cyber Law, Policy, and Security

# News Sources and Trust in Information in Southwest Pennsylvania

Survey Report September 2024

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# INTRODUCTION

## A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

In 2023, Pitt Cyber, in collaboration with the University Center for Social and Urban Research (UCSUR) at the University of Pittsburgh, conducted a comprehensive survey targeting residents of Allegheny County and its surrounding regions. This initiative was driven by a need to understand how local communities in and around Pittsburgh perceive their access to information and exercise trust within their information and community ecosystems. Despite the growing academic and public concern over digital misinformation on topics ranging from COVID-19 vaccines to election integrity, there remains a significant gap in localized, empirical data that reflects the perceptions and information habits of community members in Southwestern Pennsylvania making this work especially salient.

This initiative was driven by a need to understand how local communities in and around Pittsburgh perceive their access to information and exercise trust within their information and community ecosystems.

## RESEARCH PURPOSE

We designed our survey to offer a granular, localized glimpse into the information consumption habits and confidence in information of residents in Allegheny County and surrounding areas. By examining how individuals engage with different media—from traditional print to digital platforms—the study was created to identify critical points of vulnerability and strength within the local information ecosystem.

The goal of our study, and ongoing, longitudinal research in this vein, is to pinpoint opportunities to strengthen community ties and enhance the public's capacity to navigate complex information networks. In other words, the underlying hope is to understand the information environments in the region to bolster civic resilience. This research is important in mapping the multiplex network of messages that individuals navigate daily across various platforms, from digital social media to traditional face-to-face interactions.

The study was created to identify critical points of vulnerability and strength within the local information ecosystem; pinpoint opportunities to strengthen community ties and enhance the public's capacity to navigate complex information networks; and understand the information environments in the region to bolster civic resilience.

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# METHODOLOGY

## PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

Our survey was conducted from April 20, 2023 – May 19, 2023, through the Survey Research Program (SRP) within the University Center for Social and Urban Research (UCSUR) at the University of Pittsburgh. The survey was administered using the Qualtrics survey platform. Residents of Allegheny County and surrounding areas were invited to participate via email, which included a direct link to the survey. The recruitment process leveraged UCSUR's respondent registry, which consists of individuals who have previously engaged in community-based research. To maximize response rates, we implemented a mounting incentive strategy, offering escalating amounts in electronic gift cards to underrepresented demographics within our sample to encourage participation.

As this was a non-random, non-probability sample, we calculated weights to adjust the demographics respondents to better match the areas of interest. The weights were provided by SRP. The responses that we present are weighted unless otherwise listed. We weight on gender, age, race, educational attainment, and party affiliation, by county of residence. The analysis that follows is based on the 1,385 respondents from the target geography who completed the survey.

## SURVEY FOCUS

The survey took 10-20 minutes to complete and consisted of questions designed to capture a wide range of information behaviors and attitudes:

- **Media and Social Media Consumption Habits:** Questions assessed the amount of time spent with various media, the specific channels and platforms used, and the intensity of usage.
- **Trust and Perception of Information:** Participants were asked to identify their trusted sources of local and national news and asked whether they believe most of the information they encounter daily is trustworthy, or not.
- **Concerns About Unreliable Information:** Several items focused on participants' concerns regarding the impact of false information on themselves and others, including the influence on people whose politics differ from theirs. They were also asked which information sources they believe are most responsible for the spread of untrustworthy information in our society.
- **Demographic and Background Information:** To contextualize the findings, we collected comprehensive demographic information, including age, education, political affiliation, religion, income, and more.

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# KEY FINDINGS

## 1. GENERATIONAL AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN MEDIA CONSUMPTION RATES

We find that there are large generational differences in media consumption routes, while in contrast differences along other kinds of lines (e.g. gender or household income) are quite muted.

### GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

- Respondents Under 45: spend significantly more time on their phones (a median 2 to 4 hours per day); spend less time on other devices (TV, radio, computers, print).
- Respondents Aged 45-65: spend 1 to 2 hours on their phones per day.
- Respondents over 65: spend less than one hour on their phones per day.

### LIMITED DIFFERENCES BY GENDER

- 50% of men report spending less than an hour a day on their phones, compared with only 20% of women.

### LIMITED DIFFERENCES BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME

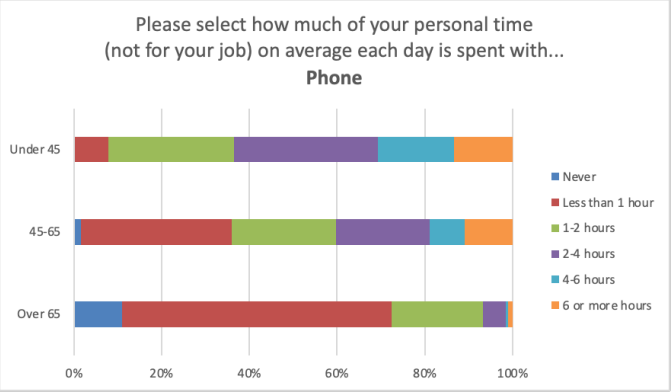
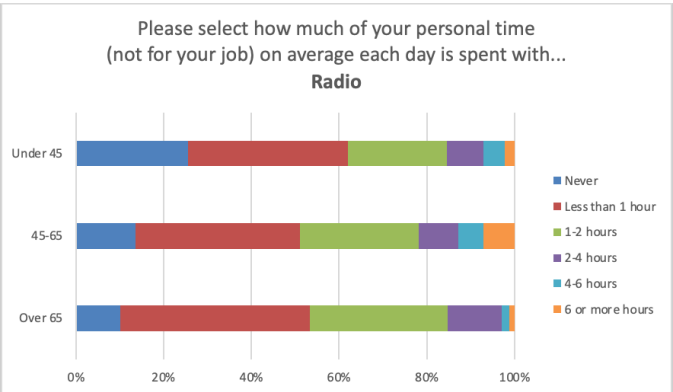
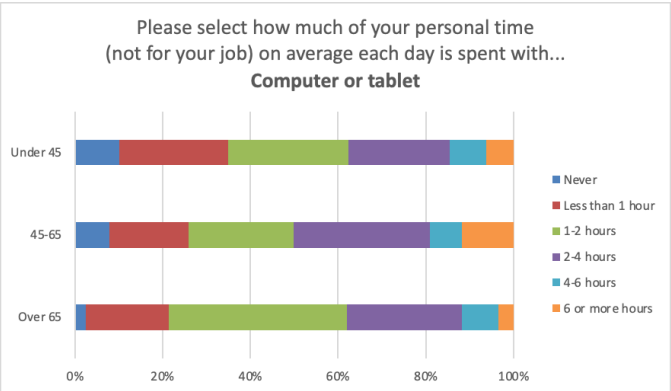
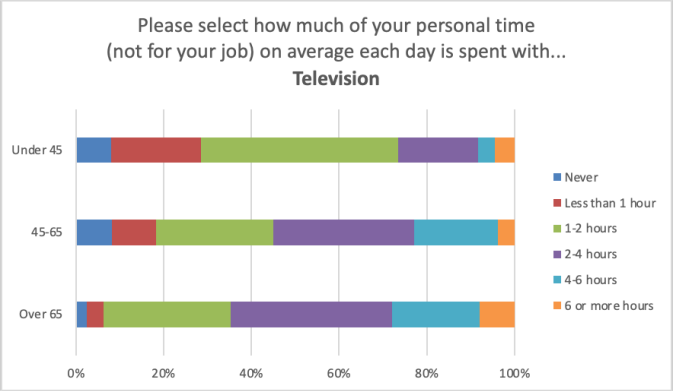
- 60% of respondents from households with an income under \$55,000 report spending 2 or more hours a day with television, compared to roughly 40% of respondents from households with higher incomes.

### PRINT MEDIA CONSUMPTION

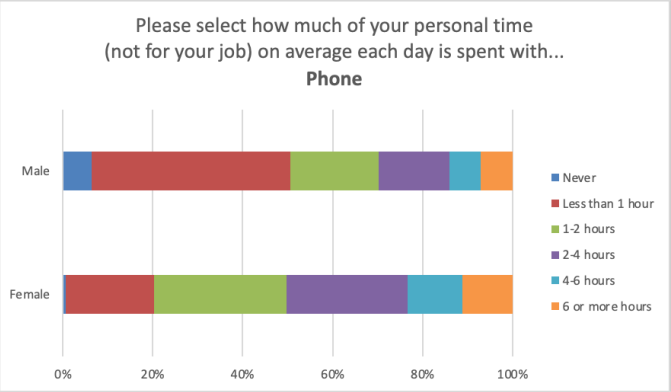
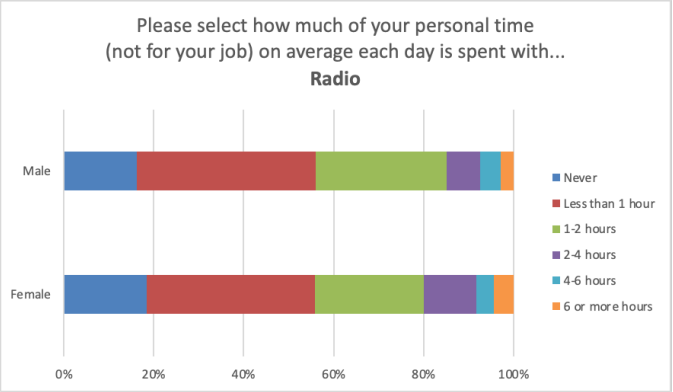
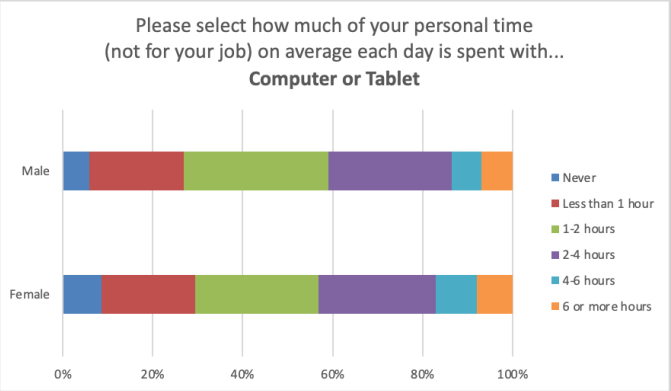
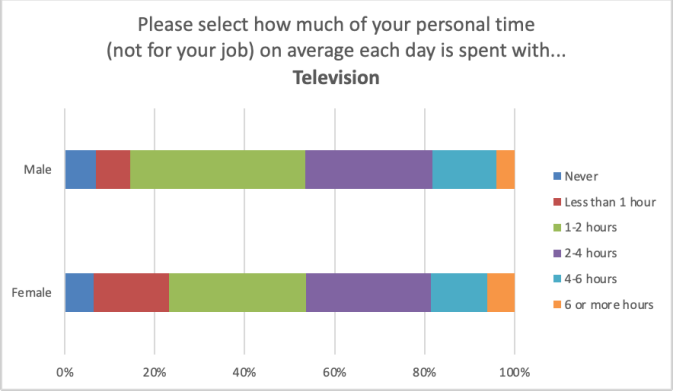
- Few people spend time daily reading material in printed form, with limited variation across age, gender, household income level, or education level.

Our cumulative findings explore how individuals of different demographics within our sample interact with information, the influence of digital vs. traditional news sources, the role of social media, and how trust and confidence relate to media consumption habits.

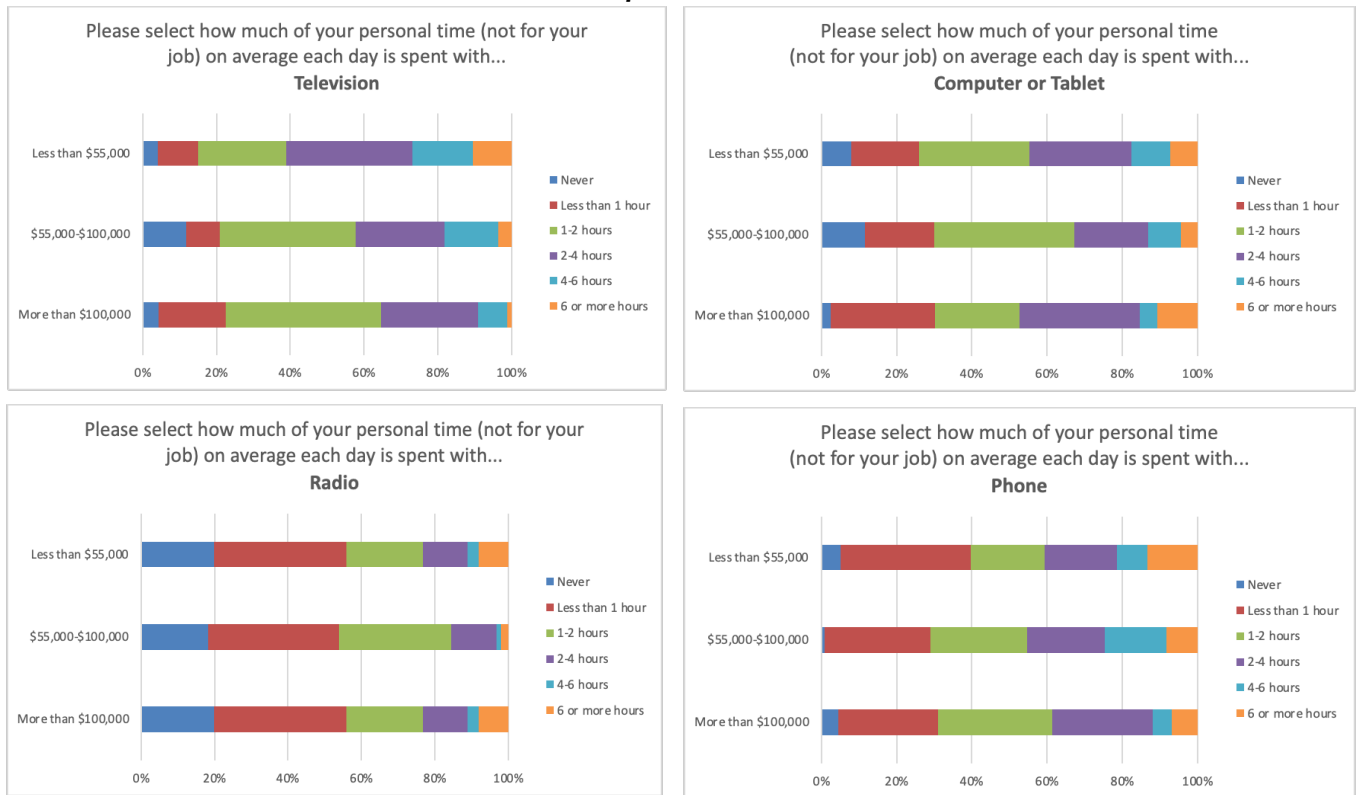
Age Group Breakdown of Media Consumption Routes



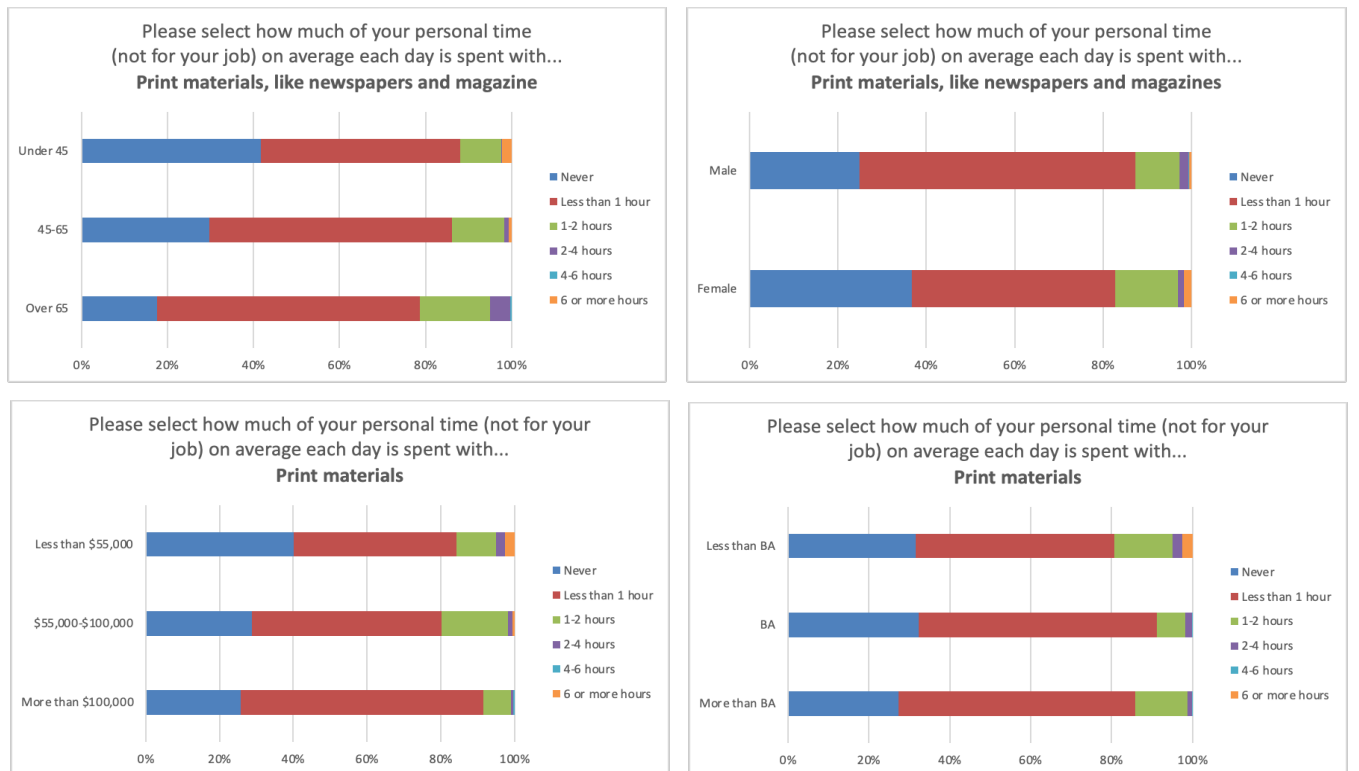
Gender Breakdown of Media Consumption Routes



## Household Income Breakdown of Media Consumption Routes



## Consumption of Print Materials



## 2. BROAD COMMONALITIES IN DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

What people engage with via the internet also varies by generation, albeit less starkly than the routes through which they do so. When asked to mention *all* digital channels and communication platforms they use:

### AMONG RESPONDENTS OVER 65

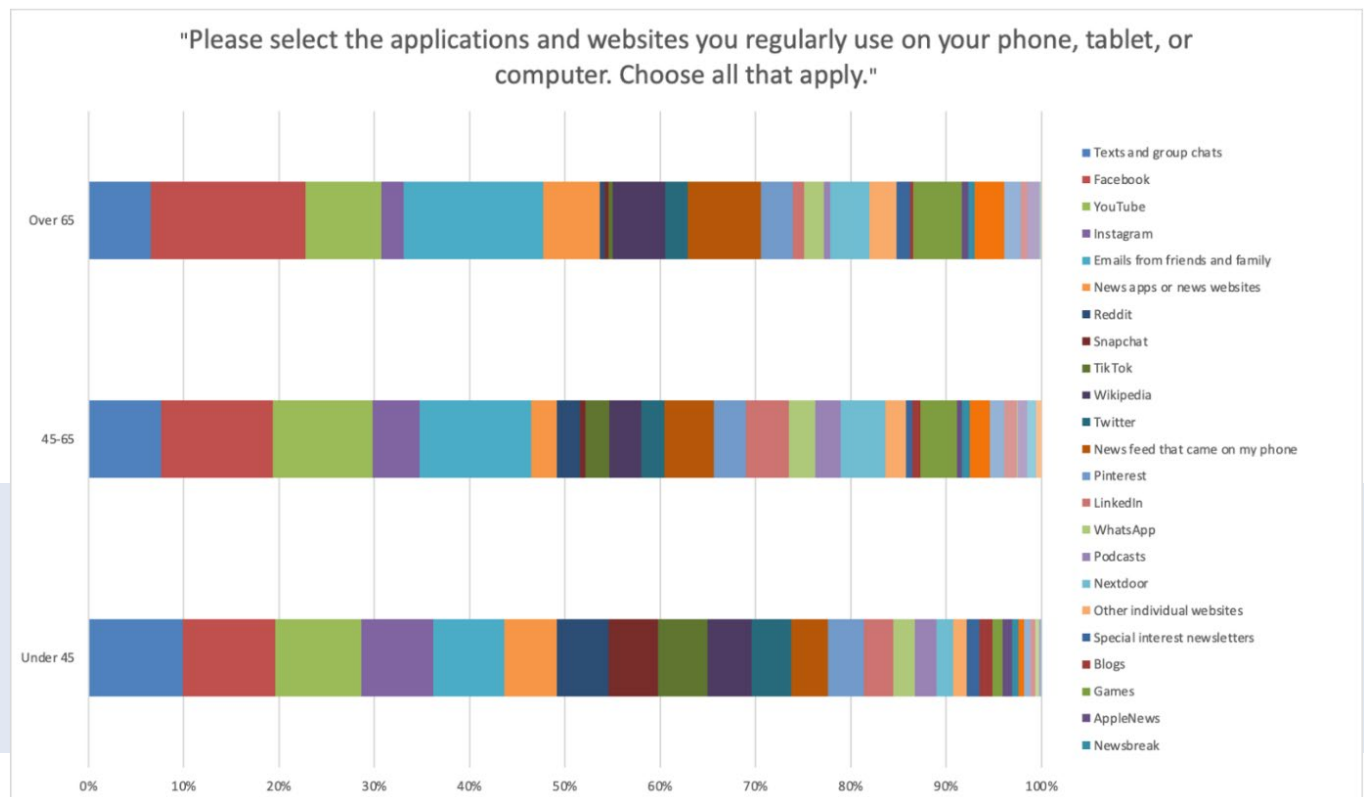
- Facebook and emails to friends and family are most widespread. The next tier in frequency includes YouTube, the news feed that came on my phone, texts and group chats, news apps and news websites, and Wikipedia.

### AMONG RESPONDENTS 45-65 YEARS OLD

- Facebook, emails to friends and family, and Youtube are most widespread. The next tier in frequency includes texts and group chats, followed by the news feed that came on my phone, Instagram, Nextdoor, and LinkedIn.

### AMONG RESPONDENTS UNDER AGE 45

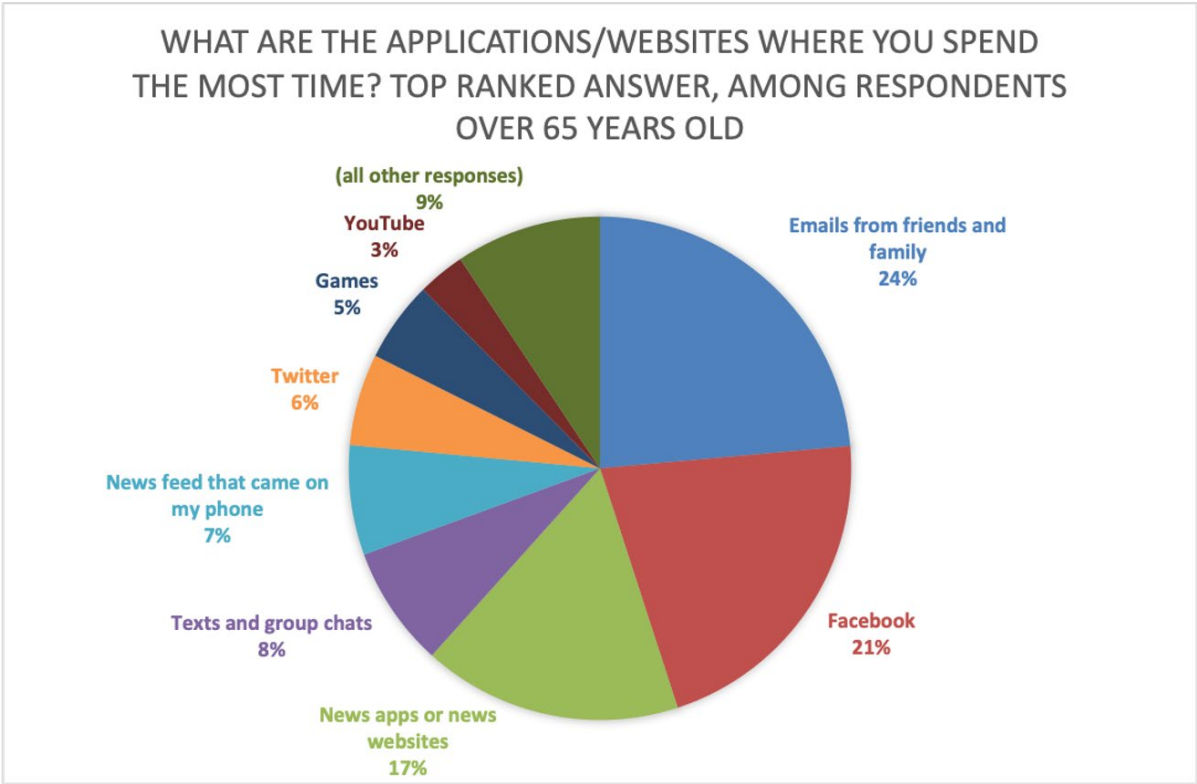
- Texts and group chats, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and emails from friends and family are the most frequently mentioned. News apps or news websites, Reddit, Snapchat, TikTok, Wikipedia, Twitter, the news feed that came on my phone, and Pinterest follow in frequency.



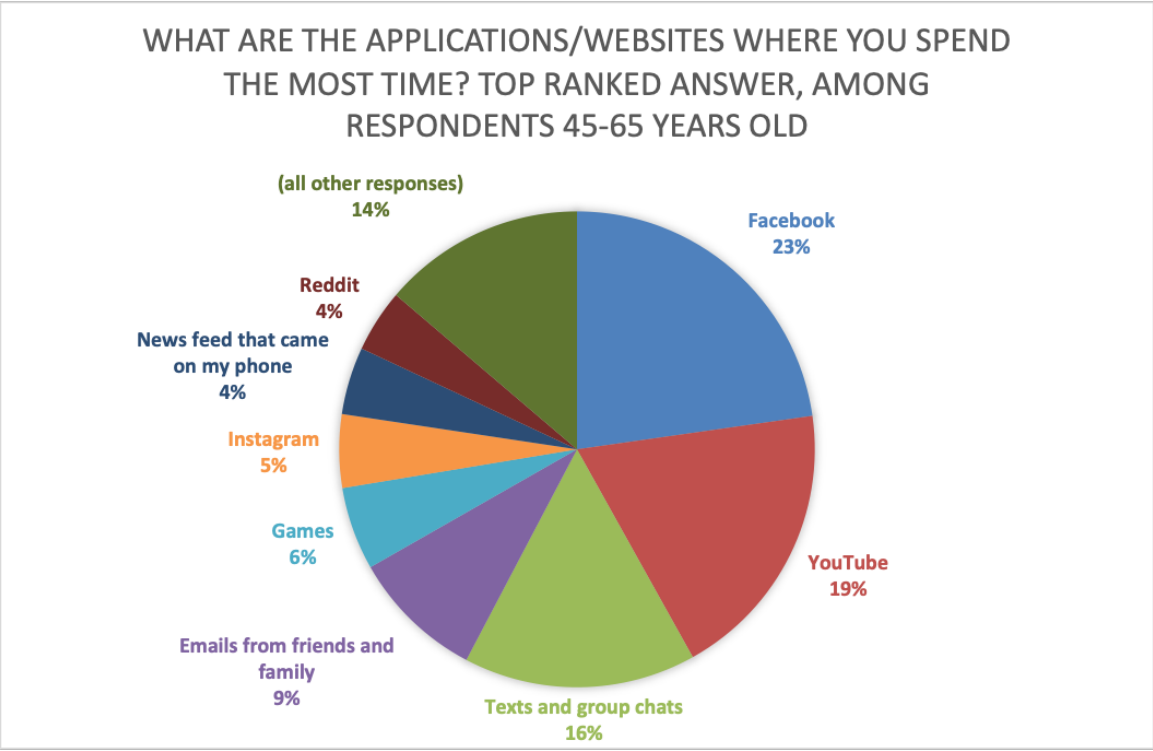
When we narrow this down and ask respondents to rank the websites or digital communications routes on which they spend most time, we see more generational differences. Named as the top destination, we find:

Over 65		45-65 year olds		Under 45	
Emails from friends and family	24%	Facebook	23%	Facebook	18%
Facebook	21%	YouTube	19%	YouTube	16%
News apps or news websites	17%	Texts and group chats	16%	Texts and group chats	11%
Texts and group chats	8%	Emails from friends and family	9%	Reddit	10%
News feed that came on my phone	7%	Games	6%	TikTok	10%

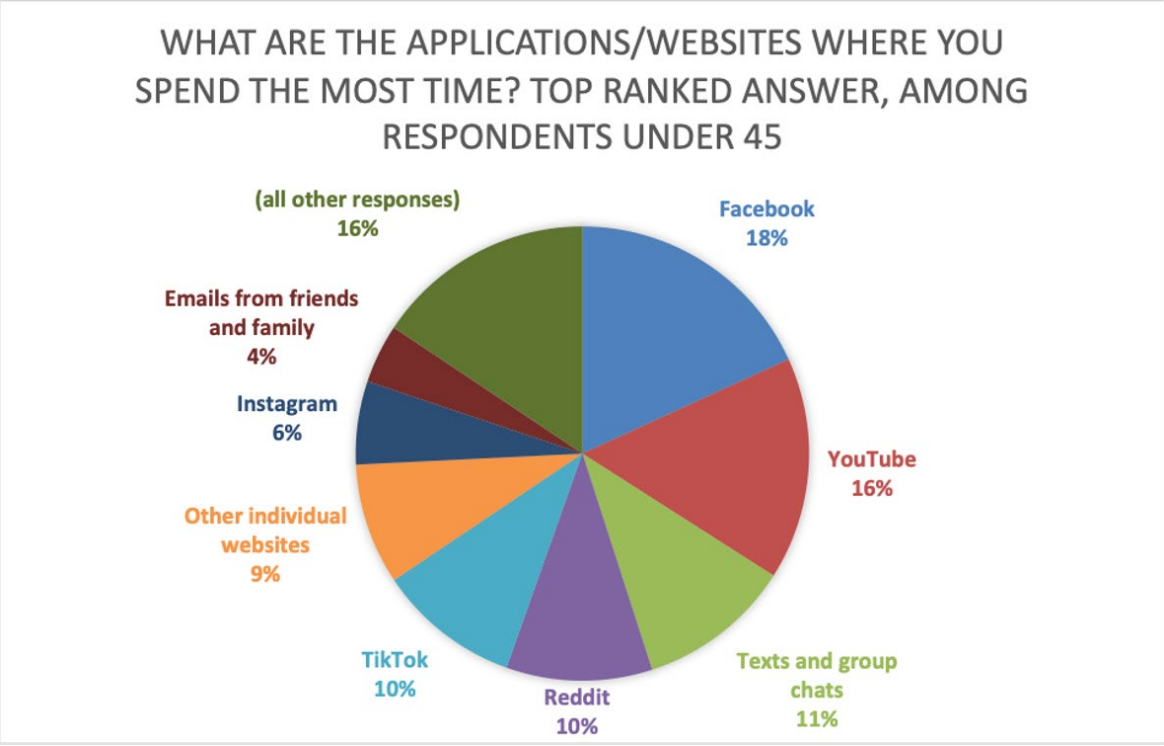
Among Respondents 65 and Older



**Among Respondents 45-65**



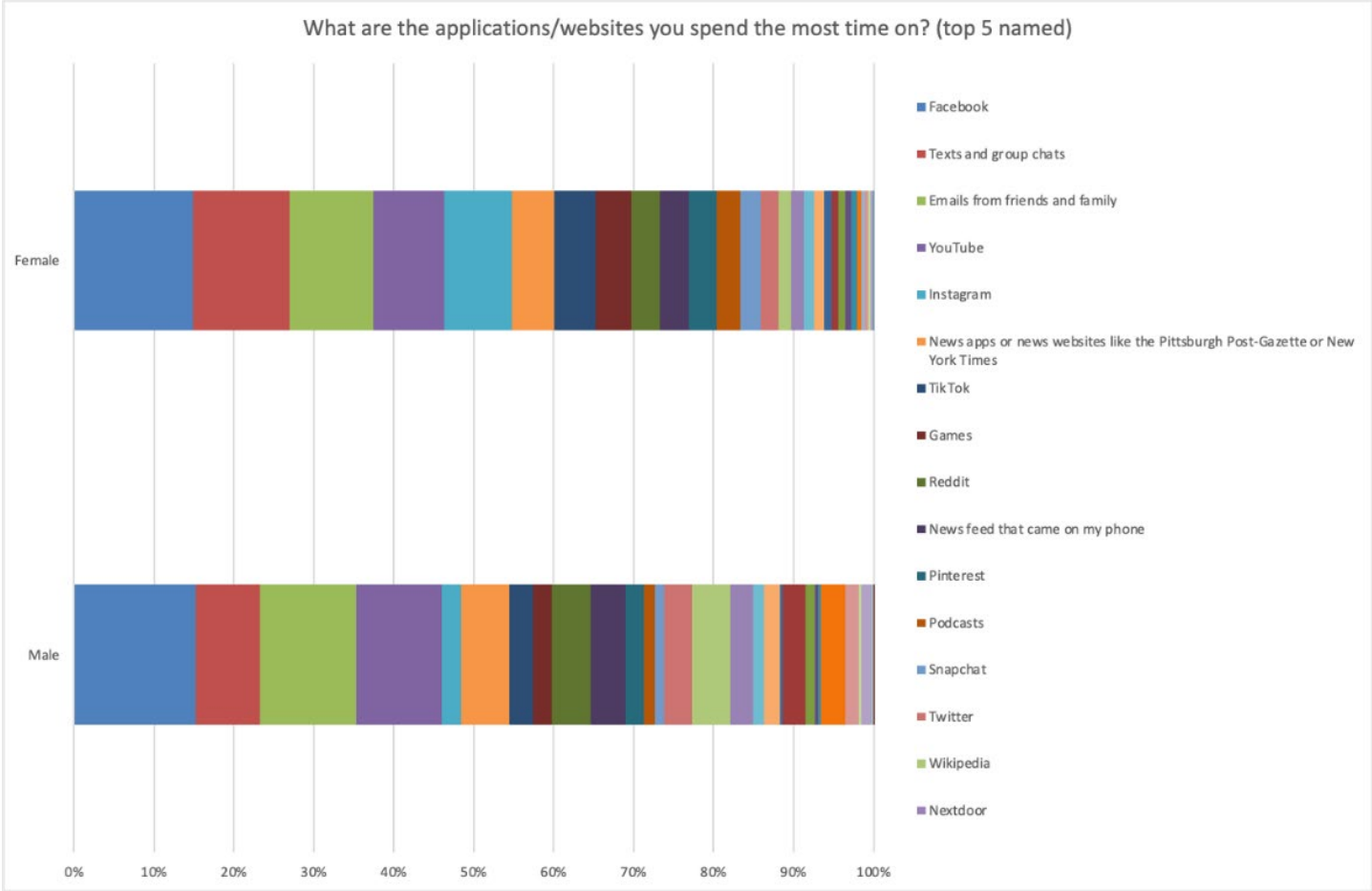
**Among Respondents Under 45**



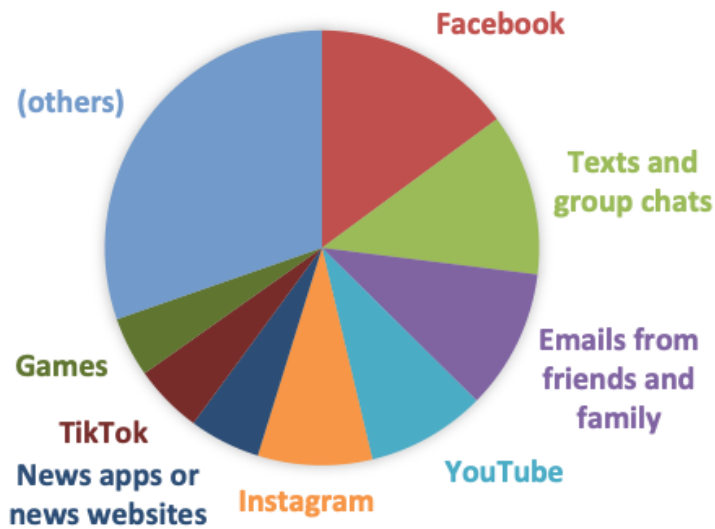
Meanwhile, when asked to name the five applications or platforms they spend the most time on, men and women also give largely similar answers.

For men and women alike, Facebook is named most often. One of the few sharp distinctions: women are nearly as likely to name Instagram as YouTube, whereas men are four times more likely to mention YouTube than Instagram.

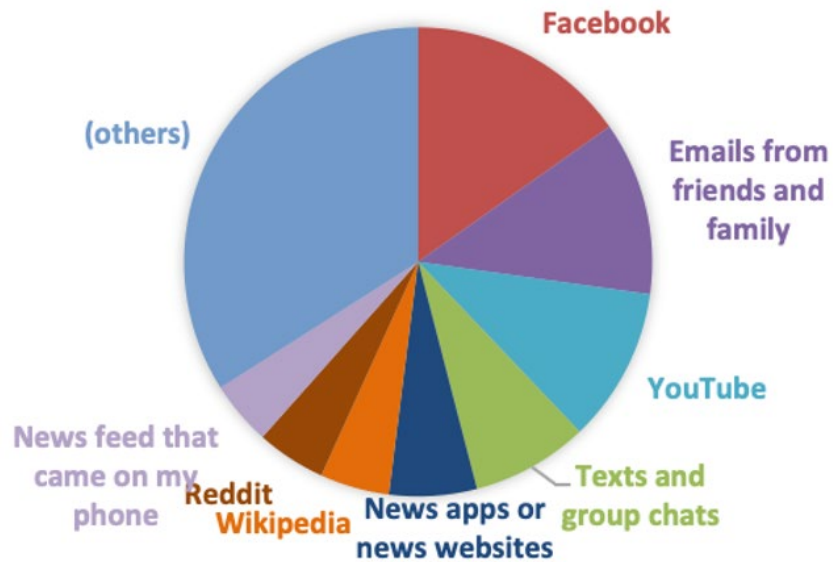
Among Men and Women



WHAT ARE THE APPLICATIONS/WEBSITES YOU SPEND THE MOST TIME ON? TOP 5 (FEMALE RESPONDENTS)



WHAT ARE THE APPLICATIONS/WEBSITES YOU SPEND THE MOST TIME ON? TOP 5 (MALE RESPONDENTS)



### 3. DIGITAL INTERMEDIARIES AND THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL NEWS SOURCES

We note generational differences in media access routes, with younger people favoring digital platforms and older people relying more on traditional media (TV and print). This does not negate the influence of news gathering organizations, however.

Despite the shift from traditional media like TV to digital platforms, professional news organizations still shape the news.

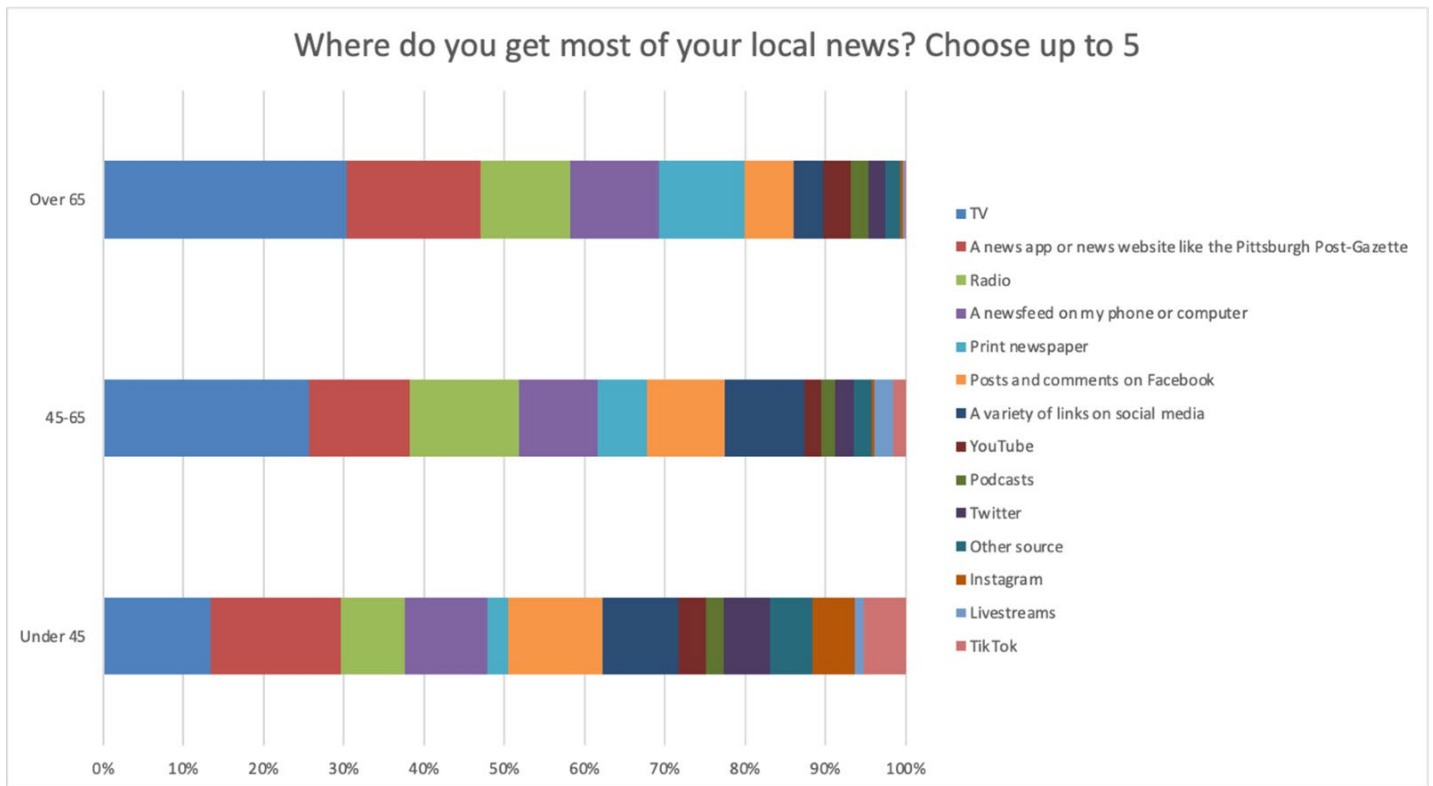
#### ENGAGEMENT BY AGE

- Respondents, particularly younger ones, use various digital intermediaries such as algorithmic feeds, apps, and social media links to access information.
- Younger respondents rely significantly less on television and print newspapers compared to older generations, a trend which is evident across local, national, and international news outlets.

#### ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

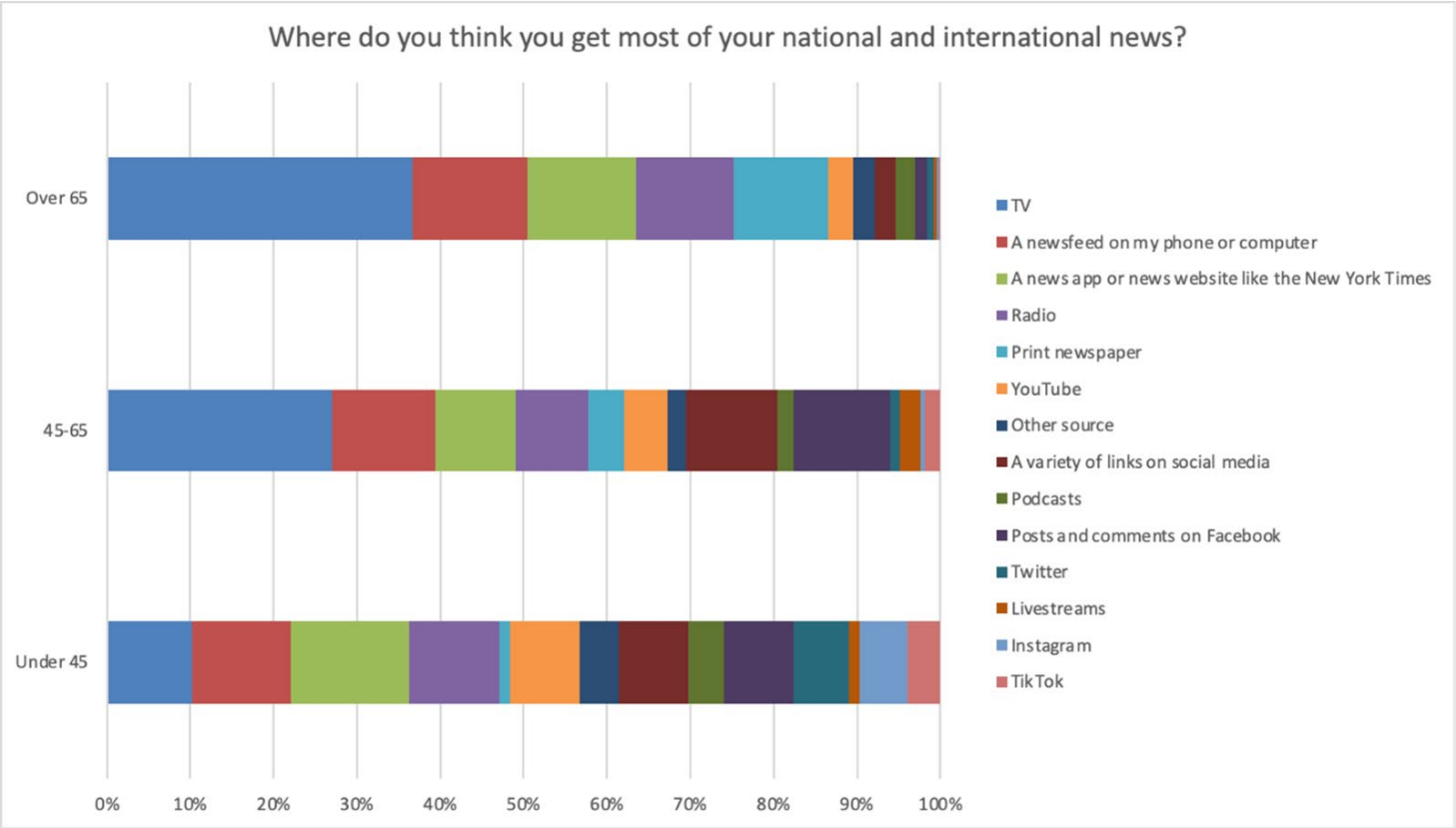
- Despite the decline in traditional media use, professional newsgathering organizations have a major impact, though such impact is mediated by the digital platforms individuals use to access news materials.
- These organizations continue to provide critical information through both their own digital channels (apps and websites) and other routes (news feeds, social media links) --a more fractured model of news consumption than in the past.

## Age Breakdown: Where do you get most of your local news?



Under 45		45–65-year-olds		Over 65	
A news app or news websites like the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	251	TV	344	TV	268
TV	209	Radio	182	A news app or news website like the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	147
Posts and comments on Facebook	182	A news app or news website like the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	167	Radio	99
A newsfeed on my phone or computer	160	A newsfeed on my phone or computer	132	A newsfeed on my phone or computer	99
A variety of links on social media	148	A variety of links on social media	132	Print newspaper	94
Radio	125	Posts and comments on Facebook	130	Posts and comments on Facebook	55
Twitter	89	Print newspaper	82	A variety of links on social media	33
Instagram	83	Livestreams	31	YouTube	30
TikTok	82	Twitter	31	Podcasts	19
Other source	81	Other source	30	Twitter	18
YouTube	54	YouTube	29	Other source	17
Print newspaper	40	Podcasts	22	Instagram	2
Podcasts	35	TikTok	20	Livestreams	3
Livestreams	16	Instagram	5	TikTok	1

**Age Breakdown: where do you get most of your national and international news?**



Under 45		45–65-year-olds		Over 65	
A news app or news websites like the New York Times	211	TV	298	TV	275
A newsfeed on my phone or computer	176	A newsfeed on my phone or computer	137	A newsfeed on my phone or computer	104
Radio	160	Posts and comments on Facebook	129	A news app or news website like the New York Times	98
TV	152	A variety of links on social media	121	Radio	88
A variety of links on social media	124	A news app or news website like the New York Times	107	Print newspaper	85
Posts and comments on Facebook	123	Radio	96	YouTube	23
YouTube	123	YouTube	58	Other source	20
Twitter	100	Print newspaper	47	A variety of links on social media	19
Instagram	86	Livestreams	28	Podcasts	17
Other source	70	Other source	24	Posts and comments on Facebook	11
Podcasts	63	TikTok	21	Twitter	6
TikTok	58	Podcasts	20	Livestreams	3
Print Newspaper	20	Twitter	13	Instagram	2
Livestreams	19	Instagram	5	TikTok	1

## 4. FACEBOOK GROUPS AS KEY HUBS FOR LOCAL NEWS AND INFORMATION

Respondents widely use Facebook groups to access and share local news and information. These groups play a significant role in community information sharing, rivaling traditional newspapers in reach.

### HIGH ENGAGEMENT

Many respondents, particularly women under 45 and some older men, are members of numerous Facebook groups.

With widespread use, Facebook groups have become powerful information points for local news, matching the influence of traditional newspapers.

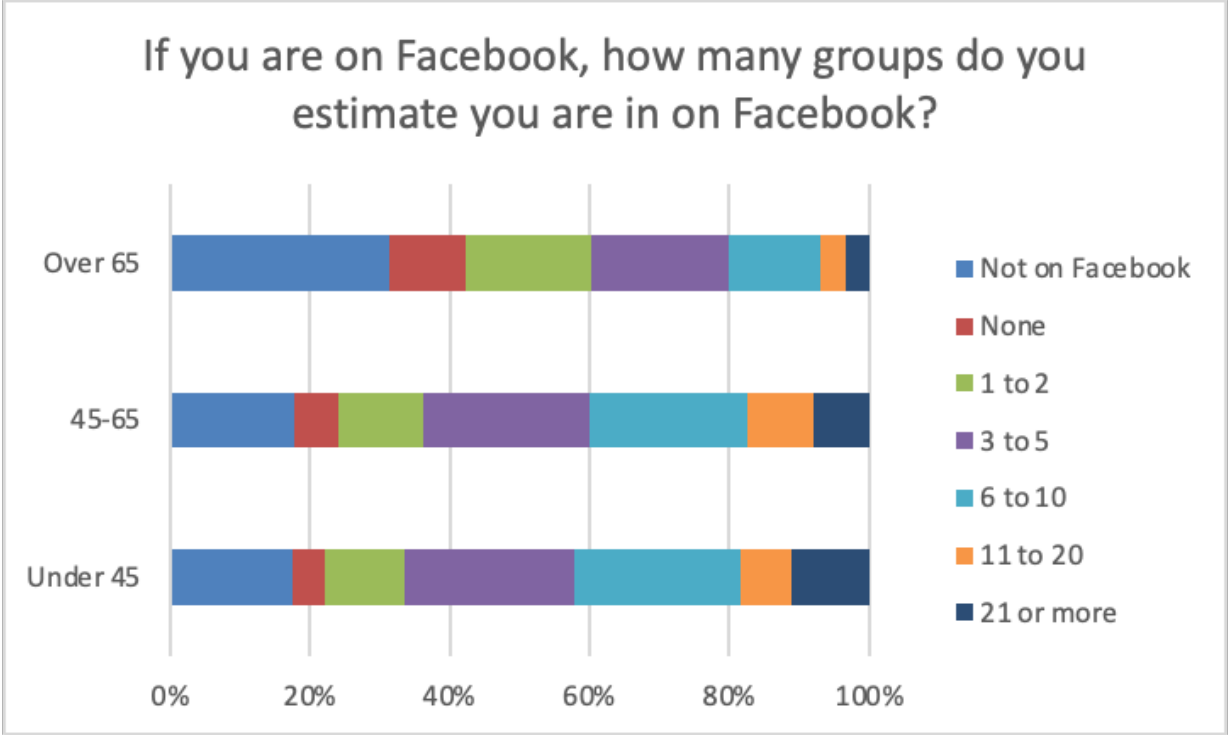
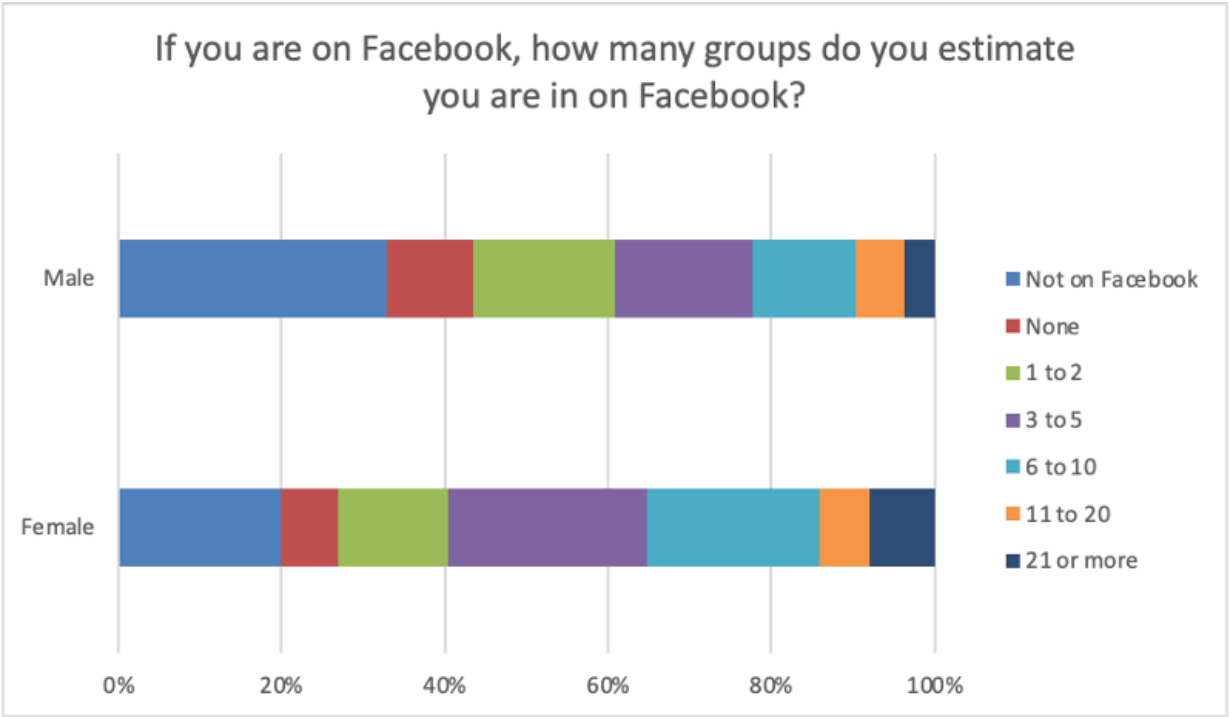
### LOCAL NEWS FOCUS

- About half of women and a third of men on Facebook belong to locally moderated groups for sharing local news and information.

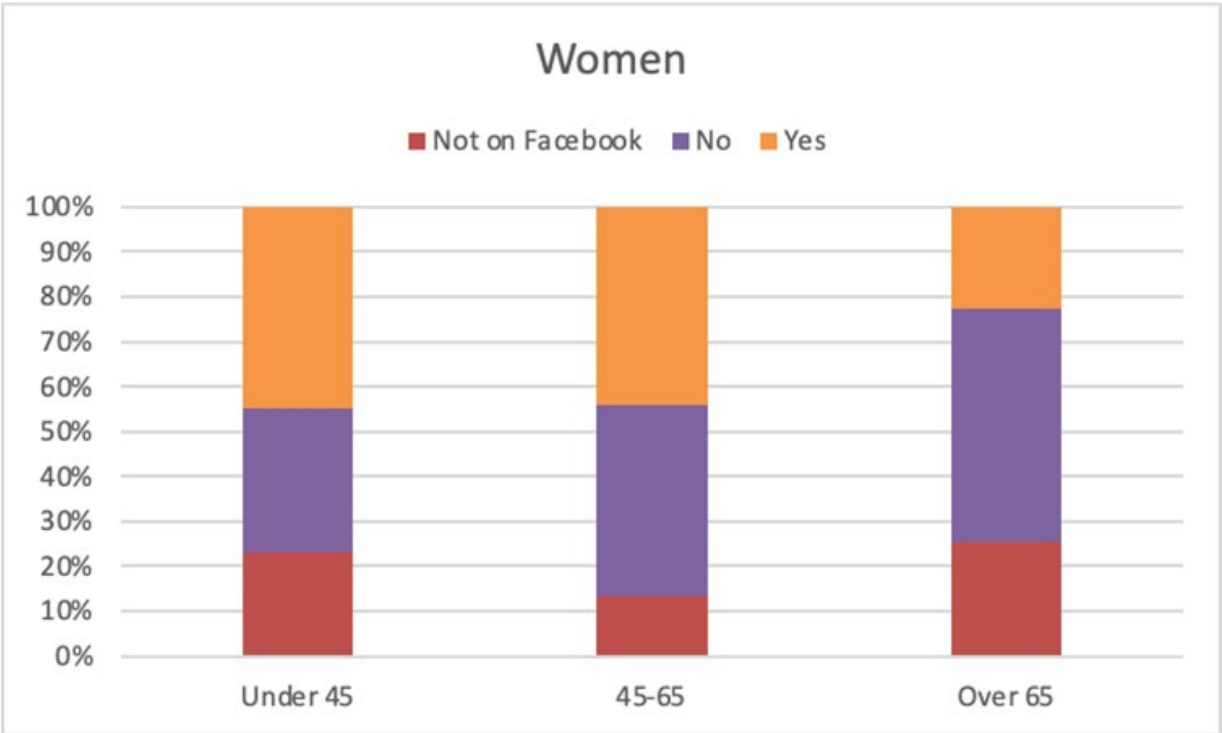
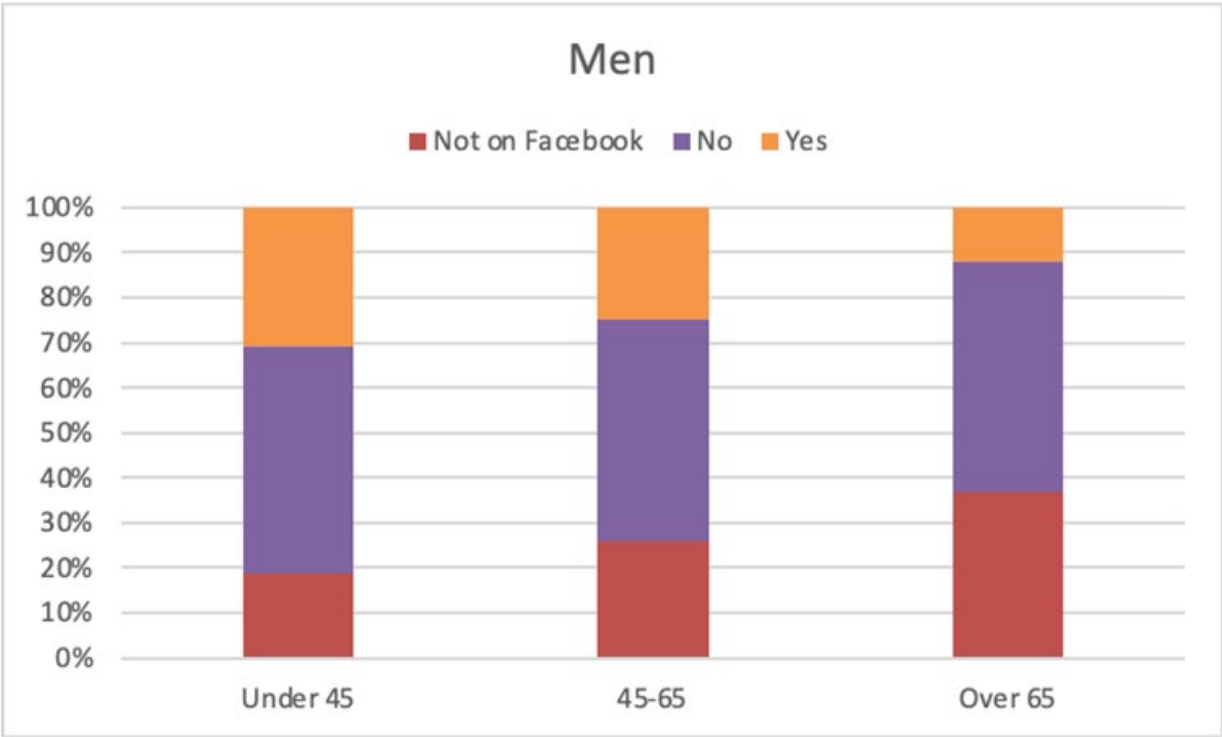
### IMPACT COMPARED TO TRADITIONAL MEDIA

- Local Facebook groups have membership numbers that rival or surpass the circulation of newspapers in their areas.

**Gender and Age Breakdown: how many groups do you estimate you are in on Facebook?**



**Gender and Age Breakdown: are you a part of any Facebook groups that focus on local information and/or news?**



A depiction of open-ended responses to the question “What are the sources of information that you trust the most to usefully inform you about what is going on regarding happenings in your community?” confirms the central role Facebook plays in this regard.



5. TELEVISION AS A SHARED BUT PARTIALLY POLITICALLY DIVIDED INFORMATION SOURCE

Despite the plethora of alternative media available, television remains the primary source of information for many, pointing to the ways television unites as well as divides us.

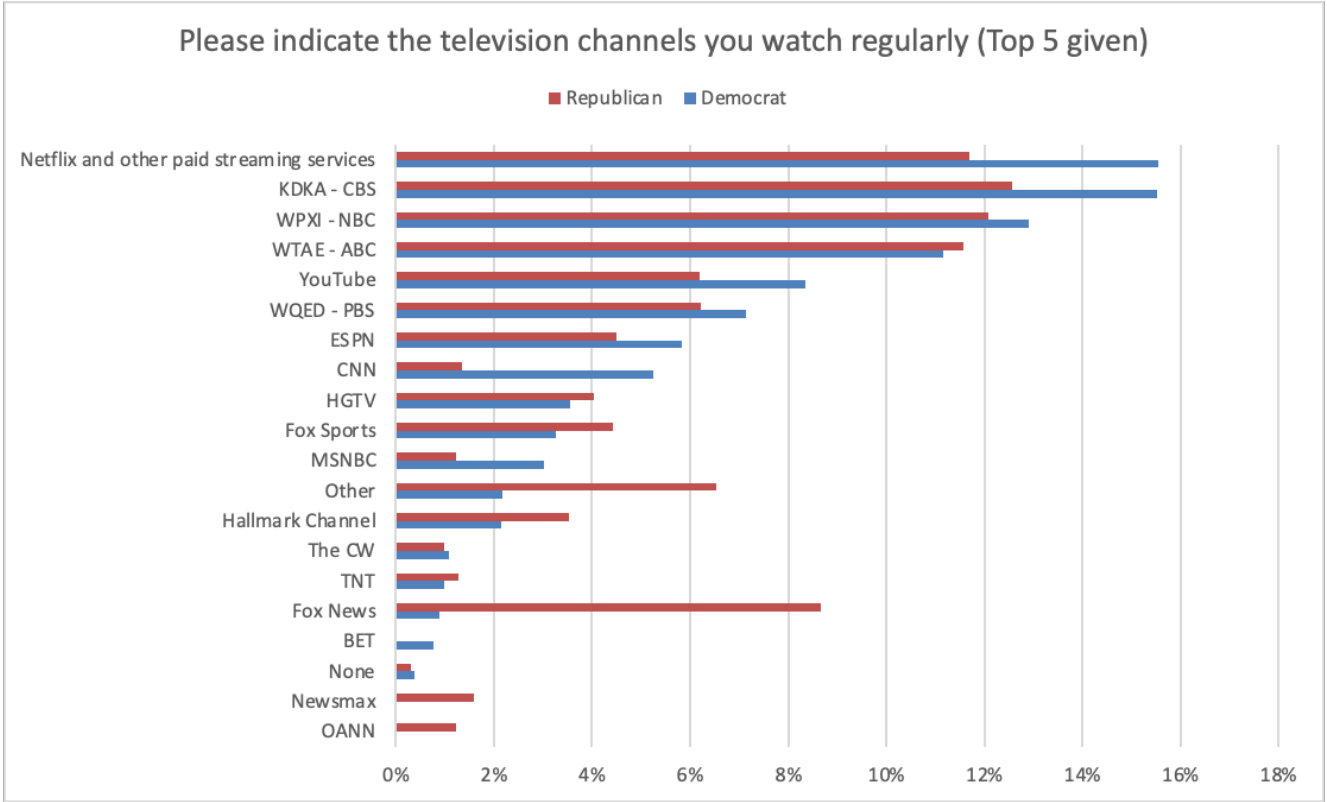
COMMON CHANNELS ACROSS POLITICAL LINES

- Netflix and other streaming services, as well as local affiliates of CBS, NBC, ABC, and PBS are frequently named by both Republican and Democratic respondents.

POLITICAL DIVIDES IN CHANNEL PREFERENCES AMONG SPECIFIC NATIONAL OUTLETS

- National TV channels CNN and MSNBC are more frequently mentioned by Democrats, while Republicans more commonly reference FOX news, “Other channels” not included among the items offered, OANN, and Newsmax.

Television Channels Watched by Political Identification: please indicate the television channels you watch (top 5)



## 6. SHARED CONCERNS ABOUT UNTRUSTWORTHY INFORMATION AND ITS SOURCES

Despite deep political polarization, the degree of shared concern regarding untrustworthy information our respondents express is striking pointing, with both parties expressing the belief that social media is to blame.

### CONCERN ABOUT IMPACT ON FRIENDS AND FAMILY

- About 18% of Democrats and 25% of Republicans are "extremely concerned" about the influence of untrustworthy information on their friends and family.

### HEIGHTENED CONCERN FOR OTHERS WITH DIFFERENT VIEWS

- Approximately one-third of respondents from both parties are "extremely concerned" about the impact of false information on individuals with different political views.

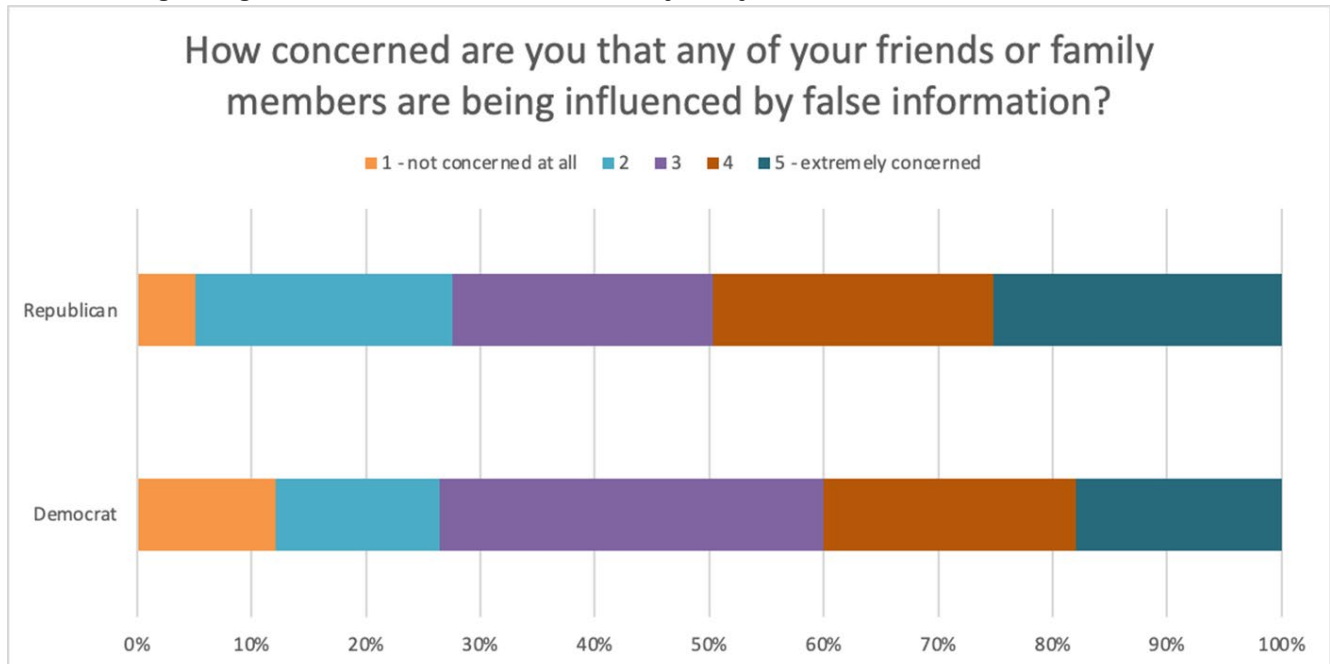
### SOCIAL MEDIA SEEN AS THE PRIMARY SOURCE OF UNTRUSTWORTHY INFORMATION

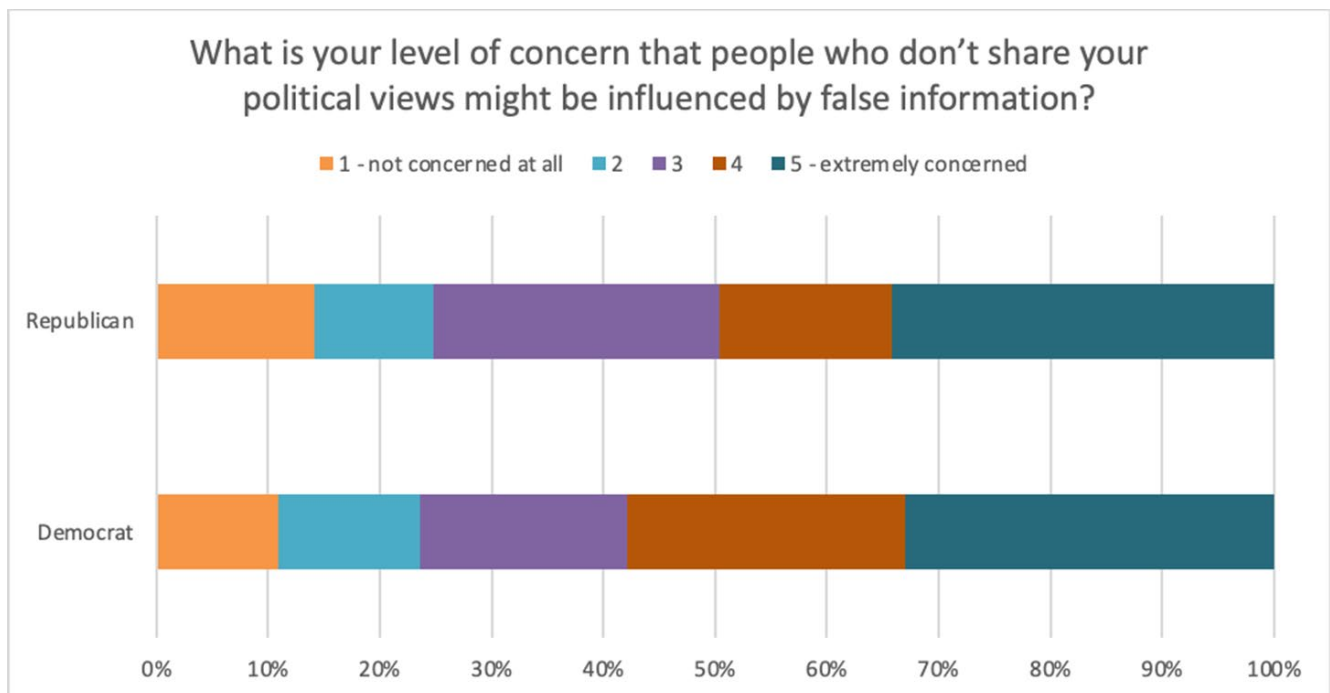
- There is widespread agreement that social media is largely responsible for the spread of untrustworthy information.

### TELEVISION SEEN AS A SECONDARY SOURCE OF UNTRUSTWORTHY INFORMATION

- Television is seen as a secondary but still significant contributor to the dissemination of unreliable information. This perception is particularly strong among Republican respondents, with nearly one-third of Republican respondents judging television to be the source most responsible for the influence of false information in the country as a whole.

### *Concern Regarding Influence of False Information by Party Identification*





***Please rank only the sources of information you think are most responsible for the influence of false information in your community:***

	Democrat	Republican
% ranking Social Media first	73%	66%
% ranking TV first	17%	22%
% ranking friends and coworkers first	3%	5%
% ranking Newspapers first	1%	1%
% ranking Radio first	1%	0%

***Please rank only the sources of information you think are most responsible for the influence of false information in the country as a whole:***

	Democrat	Republican
% ranking Social Media first	74%	61%
% ranking TV first	16%	31%
% ranking friends and coworkers first	1%	2%
% ranking Newspapers first	3%	0%
% ranking Radio first	1%	0%

7. CORRELATION BETWEEN PERCEIVED EXPOSURE TO FALSE INFORMATION AND GENERALIZED TRUST

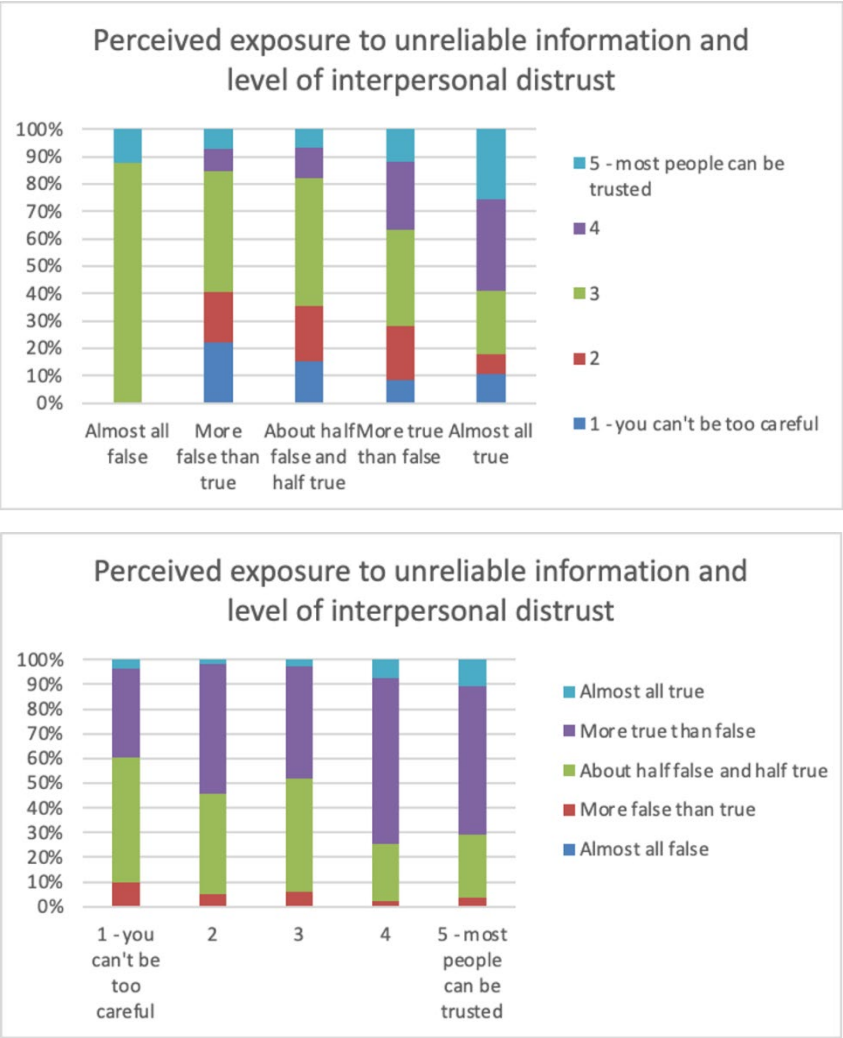
Our survey reveals an important correlation between respondents' perceptions of information reliability and their general trust in people. It is impossible to disentangle the causes driving this correlation based on this survey alone. But given that high levels of generalized trust are important for individual wellbeing and societal thriving alike, this is a worrisome convergence, and more research in this arena is warranted.

Higher levels of generalized trust are important for individual wellbeing and societal thriving alike, warranting more in-depth research into the links between perceptions of information reliability and trust in other people.

CORRELATION BETWEEN BELIEF THAT ONE IS EXPOSED TO FALSE INFORMATION AND INTERPERSONAL DISTRUST

Respondents who believe they are exposed to high levels of false information are more likely to think that people in general cannot be trusted. Conversely, respondents who view people as generally trustworthy are more confident in the reliability of the information they encounter.

Perceived Exposure to Unreliable Information and Interpersonal Distrust



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## IMPLICATIONS

The findings in this study provide a snapshot into the information ecosystem in Southwestern Pennsylvania, particularly regarding how different demographics consume media, and underlying perceptions of trustworthiness in today's fractured media landscape. These insights have implications for various parties including residents, civic and community leaders, journalists, and researchers.

### FOR CIVIC LEADERS

Civic leaders might adapt communication strategies to account for generational differences in media consumption, diversifying strategies to build trust and community. Widespread concerns across party lines about the influence of untrustworthy information presents an opportunity to emphasize, and build, community-level trust through engagement efforts. We further suggest such efforts focus on reversing trends of social isolation by bringing people together in meaningful ways. Having opportunities to gather, serve, and engage with friends, families, and those with different political orientations is paramount to rebuilding trust in one another.

### FOR JOURNALISTS

The findings highlight the role of journalists in maintaining public trust through accurate, transparent, and responsive reporting. Professional newsgathering organizations continue to play important roles, though such organizations are also grappling with the complicated effects of fractured digital information dissemination platforms which often mediate primary news content through algorithms and other access mechanisms over which journalists have little control. Notwithstanding, local news outlets (both print and television) are routinely named by survey respondents as trusted sources for information on issues ranging from health to politics, giving journalists a unique opportunity to counteract false information by reinforcing the credibility of journalistic processes through community-focused reporting.

Building relationships and networks is key, as is considering the media consumption habits of local communities (including Facebook groups and other methods of sharing and consuming information). This context might inform the way local journalists research and share information.

### FOR ACADEMICS

This study offers a framework for further research into the dynamics of information consumption and trust within geographic regions. Academics can continue to explore the complex interplay of social, political, and media influences on public media consumption behaviors and perceptions about information on local, regional, and national levels. Further, academics might develop methodologies that can be developed to other, unique, communities. This work helps researchers understand local information landscapes and informs interventions designed to strengthen the informational resilience of communities.

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## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To build on the insights gained from this survey, we plan to conduct the survey again before the 2024 U.S. presidential election and once more after the inauguration of the new president. This approach will provide us with valuable longitudinal data from the same sample of the population in Western Pennsylvania, a critical swing state in national elections. By comparing pre- and post-election perceptions of information reliability and trust in both local and national government, we aim to capture the dynamic shifts that may occur during this pivotal period with a further comparison of the 2020 data we report on here.


This longitudinal data will enhance our understanding of how political events influence trust and information consumption habits over time and vice versa. Additionally, this comparative analysis will allow us to identify trends and changes in the information and political landscape, offering a more nuanced view of the factors that shape public opinion. By continuing this research, we can better inform policymakers, journalists, and community leaders on the evolving challenges and opportunities in fostering an informed and resilient public.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


The survey was a collaboration between Scott Beach, Mike Colaresi, Sara Goodkind, Bree Bang-Jensen, Rhaven Nelson, Lara Putnam, Beth Schwanke, and Jeff Shook. This survey analysis was conducted by Lara Putnam and Elise Silva.

We thank the Steven Manners Award, The Hillman Foundation, and The Heinz Endowments for support of various aspects of this and related work.

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