



Alliance for Trust in Media

MINNESOTA
JOURNALISM CENTER

HUBBARD SCHOOL
OF JOURNALISM & MASS COMMUNICATION

 UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Research Brief: Initiative to Better Understand Younger Audiences' Expectations about Short-Form Video

About the Initiative

Interest in and engagement with news has been declining for all age groups over the past decade, but young adults in particular follow news less closely than any other age group. Despite these trends, more than three-quarters (76%) of Americans under 30 now say they [get news from social media](#) at least some of the time. Many news organizations have responded by publishing more of their content on the digital platforms most popular with this demographic: TikTok and Instagram. News outlets hope that by meeting these audiences where they are and producing more visual and video content, it will help to cultivate longer term loyalty with these audiences. However, there is much we do not know about whether such efforts will actually resonate with these groups and if not, why not.



Through this initiative, we partnered with the nonprofit Texas Tribune and the public media organization Minnesota Public Radio, two organizations which have begun producing content for these digital spaces. We hoped to better understand how younger audiences are responding to these efforts and assess what they would like to see from news organizations when they develop content designed to reach them on TikTok or Instagram. Although the platforms themselves provide engagement analytics, these data depend on platform algorithms and other factors. We know relatively little about how young adults evaluate news and journalism in these spaces when they see it and what formats and topics they generally prefer.

Research Questions: What Did We Hope to Learn?

We wanted to understand:

- To what extent are younger audiences interested in engaging with news when using TikTok and Instagram?
- What do these audiences expect from news organizations in these digital spaces? What do they like and dislike?

How We Designed Our Study

We conducted a series of qualitative focus groups ($N = 10$) in Texas and Minnesota with adults under 35 years old who regularly use Instagram or TikTok.

- Working with two separate third-party recruitment agencies, study participants ($N = 67$) were screened from four separate communities: three in Texas (Austin, San Antonio, and Houston) and one in Minnesota (the Twin Cities). Participants were balanced between those who used these platforms regularly but rarely got news there and those who said they regularly did see news in these spaces. Demographically, participants varied by race, gender, and educational background.
- In addition to asking about study participants' habits around using digital platforms and attitudes toward news they encountered there, we provided several examples of social media posts provided by the Texas Tribune and MPR News to ground the conversations in concrete approaches each news organization has pursued.

Key Findings

We highlight a range of insights and recommendations we took away from these conversations. While study participants were split about whether they wanted to see news at all in these spaces (some preferred their TikTok and Instagram feeds as a refuge from the world and a place to zone out and disconnect), most generally said they liked being alerted to important stories worth paying attention to especially if they were not getting news elsewhere, which many were not. For these audiences, not every post needed to be highly engaging for it to be valued. Giving readers regular rundowns of the **important news of the day** rather than cheapening news by chasing after viral topics offered these readers a valuable service they appreciated without feeling like they were being treated as dumb or unsophisticated.

Additionally, we found:

- Preferences varied widely and depended often on context or time of day when users were on the platform. Some preferred more text to visuals because it stood out from other posts. Others felt the reverse. The findings illustrate the importance of **flexibility in content styles**: delivering the same story in multiple formats may be the most effective strategy for reaching audiences with differing preferences.
- Most agreed that posts needed to be **concise and to the point** while making the **personal relevance** of any given story immediately explicit. Study participants described making split-second decisions about what to pay attention to, said they lost interest quickly, and enjoyed the option of being able to swipe or scroll or go to captions for more information if and when their interest had been piqued.
- These platforms are designed to keep users from navigating outside of the apps, and most did not like the idea of having to look elsewhere for more comprehensive coverage. Many said they thought even complex reporting should **fit within the constraints of the platforms** and preferred it that way.
- Those who were interested in seeking out more information on stories said they sometimes found it frustrating not to have clearer **pathways for following up** with related coverage. Few said they followed any "link in bio" and tended instead to search

within the platform or Google. At the same time, while younger audiences said they liked the convenience of getting information in the scrollable, visual formats found on TikTok and Instagram, they often had negative views toward the platforms themselves and were not averse to seeking out alternative ways of engaging should formats be similarly appealing (e.g., a podcast) rather than text-heavy websites, which they avoided.

- Given that most posts did not contain the entirety of every story news organizations were reporting, there was sometimes **confusion around whether posts were designed as promotional content** for coverage elsewhere or meant to be the complete story. Many said they appreciated promo-style videos (e.g., a journalist speaking directly into the camera about their reporting and why it matters) and saw it as an effective way of getting attention, but many were frustrated when they felt elements from stories were missing and saw it as potentially misleading, even if the rest of the story appeared elsewhere.
- In general, focus groups underscored the importance of including **consistent signals about brand identity**, including news organizations' commitments to original reporting as well as their ownership status (e.g., nonprofit or public media) to more clearly differentiate such content from other creators. Younger audiences often said they had a more limited understanding of why news organizations differed from other voices they might be encountering in these spaces.

Implications and Next Steps

- Our findings illustrate the potential for content delivered in these digital spaces to resonate with younger audiences, but there is no one format these users are looking for and no silver bullet for how best to engage with them on these platforms.
- News organizations must contend with the constraints afforded by each of these platforms—the lack of links to external websites, the emphasis on the visual, and the competition for attention from more entertaining content that news organization posts appear alongside in people's feeds—but that does not mean that younger audiences do not value the news they do encounter.
- Audiences generally wanted news to stand out and were wary of efforts that seemed like pandering for engagement. Since most creators on these platforms emphasize their own voice and personality as individuals, news organizations as faceless brands might seem to be at a disadvantage. However, many saw room for both kinds of content, valuing journalistic organizations for the steps they take in vetting and confirming information in ways that individual creators may not and preferring that news stand apart. That level of institutional trust, however, depends on pre-existing views toward individual brands in ways that may be difficult to cultivate through exposure on the platforms alone.
- It is important for news organizations to develop stronger pathways for deepening relationships with audiences that might encounter them for the first time in these digital spaces, treating such engagement not as an end in itself but as a starting point for connecting outside of these spaces in deeper, more meaningful ways.