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The Evolving News Landscape: Comparing Media Habits and Trust Between Teens and Adults

A new Media Insight Project study explores how teens and adults get news from local media, influencers, and other sources of information, as well as their attitudes and trust in these various outlets.

CHICAGO, April 29, 2026 – Americans’ relationships with news are rapidly evolving, with teenagers and adults navigating a far more complex and fragmented media environment than ever before, according to a new national study from the Media Insight Project, a collaboration of The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, the American Press Institute, Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications and the Local News Network at the University of Maryland’s Philip Merrill College of Journalism.

Influencers and independent creators have emerged as a significant — and growing — source of news and information across all generations, especially among teens and younger adults. More than half of Americans ages 13 and older (57%) say they get news and information from influencers or independent creators at least sometimes. Among teenagers ages 13-17, that share rises to 81%, signaling a shift in how younger Americans engage with the information ecosystem. Despite concerns about misinformation, most say influencers do at least somewhat well at verifying facts, being transparent, and offering different viewpoints.

“This study shows that American teenagers and adults have not abandoned traditional forms of journalism, but they are re-evaluating where authority and trust come from,” said Robyn Tomlin, Executive Director of the American Press Institute. “Traditional national and local outlets continue to stand out as a trusted source, but people — especially younger audiences — are also building relationships with independent creators they believe are transparent and authentic. That reality has enormous implications for the future of news.”

Local news continues to play an essential role in community life and remains the most trusted sector of the news ecosystem, even as its financial future in smaller markets remains uncertain. Americans ages 13 and older view local news largely positively, with 76% getting information from local news sources often or sometimes. Across age groups, local news outlets rank highest for trust, including for verifying facts, covering important issues, and providing useful information. While teens 13-17 are more likely to encounter local information via social media or local independent creators, older adults are more likely to get their local news from traditional outlets like television and radio — pointing to a generational shift in how communities stay informed.

“Even as the media ecosystem becomes more fragmented, these findings reinforce the enduring value of local news and journalism,” said Stephanie Edgerly, Associate Dean of Research at Northwestern University Medill School. “Young people are not blanketly disengaged from news, they are engaging



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differently. Understanding these new patterns is essential for journalism to remain relevant and trustworthy in the years ahead.”

The study also reveals widespread skepticism toward artificial intelligence as a source of news and information. Only about one in ten teens and adults say AI chatbots are more trustworthy than other sources, though two-thirds of Americans say they never use AI for news at all, suggesting low trust may be tied to limited exposure.

Beyond questions of trust and platforms, the findings underscore growing stress and fatigue in Americans’ relationship with news. While most feel confident in their ability to find reliable information, only 10% say news gives them a hopeful view of the world. Many actively avoid specific topics — particularly celebrity and political news. Rather than rejecting news altogether, people are managing their exposure by setting boundaries around their time online.

Politicians and social media companies are seen as the biggest sources of misinformation. Americans point to politicians (66%), social media companies (55%), and social media users (54%) as the primary drivers of misinformation. Clear partisan differences emerge here, with Democrats more likely than Republicans to assign responsibility to these actors (75% vs. 65% for politicians, 64% vs. 53% for social media companies). Local news outlets receive the least blame, which may help explain why trust in local journalism remains comparatively resilient even amid declining confidence in the media more broadly.

“This research underscores the urgency of rethinking how journalism reaches and serves different generations,” said Tom Rosenstiel, Professor of the Practice and Eleanor Merrill Scholar on the Future of Journalism of the University of Maryland. “Local news organizations, educators, and creators all have roles to play in rebuilding trust, meeting people where they are, and ensuring communities have access to accurate, meaningful information.”

Together, these findings suggest that journalism’s influence is no longer defined solely by legacy institutions, but by a comparative, choice-driven environment in which audiences weigh multiple sources against one another. The findings offer a nuanced portrait of the public navigating an increasingly crowded media landscape — one in which attention is fragmented but demand for reliable information remains strong.

Details about the Media Insight Project can be found at: <https://apnorc.org/projects/the-media-insight-project/>.

About the Media Insight Project

The Media Insight Project is a collaboration of The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, the American Press Institute, Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications, and the Local News Network at the University of Maryland’s Philip Merrill College of Journalism with the objective of conducting high-quality, innovative research



meant to inform the news industry and the public about various important issues facing journalism and the news business. The Media Insight Project brings together the expertise of the organizations and their respective partners and involves collaborations among key staff at the American Press Institute, Northwestern University Medill School, the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism, NORC at the University of Chicago, and The Associated Press. <https://apnorc.org/projects/the-media-insight-project/>

About the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research

- The Associated Press (AP) is an independent global news organization dedicated to factual reporting. Founded in 1846, AP today remains the most trusted source of fast, accurate, unbiased news in all formats and the essential provider of the technology and services vital to the news business. More than half the world's population sees AP journalism every day. www.ap.org
- NORC at the University of Chicago is one of the oldest objective and nonpartisan research institutions in the world. www.norc.org

The two organizations have established The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research to conduct, analyze, and distribute social science research in the public interest on newsworthy topics, and to use the power of journalism to tell the stories that research reveals. Learn more at www.apnorc.org

About the American Press Institute

The American Press Institute supports local and community-based media through research, programs and products that foster healthy, responsive and resilient news organizations. API envisions an inclusive democracy and society, where communities have the news and information they need to thrive. API is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization, and its parent organization is the News/Media Alliance. americanpressinstitute.org

About Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing, Communications

The Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications at Northwestern University is a leading journalism school offering undergraduate and graduate programs that combine enduring journalistic values with innovation, data-driven strategies and global perspectives. Founded in 1921, Medill emphasizes real-world reporting, media entrepreneurship, and leadership in media's digital transformation. <https://www.medill.northwestern.edu/>

About Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland

The University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism is one of the world's premier journalism schools. One of only a handful of programs in the country devoted exclusively to journalism, Merrill College emphasizes immersive, hands-on learning to prepare students for success across today's — and



tomorrow's — information ecosystem. Guided by a faculty of accomplished journalists and researchers, students work on data-driven national investigations through the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism, a 2025 Pulitzer Prize finalist. They report from Washington and Annapolis with Capital News Service, cover sports beyond the playing field at The Shirley Povich Center for Sports Journalism, report on issues vital to Maryland communities through the Local News Network, and contribute to building innovative artificial intelligence-based tools that strengthen journalism. They also pursue international reporting opportunities across the globe. <https://merrill.umd.edu>