



After the Fact | [From TV to Twitter: How Americans Get News Now](#)

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TRANSCRIPT

Dan LeDuc: Not so long ago, most Americans got most of their news from television, but to put a spin on Walter Cronkite's old line, "That's the way it was." We're living through a digital revolution that is transforming our lives in so many ways, from how we bank and shop, or even hail a cab. And how we consume news and information is changing, too.

Welcome to "After the Fact," a podcast that tells the stories about the numbers shaping our world. I'm Dan LeDuc from The Pew Charitable Trusts, and joining us today is Amy Mitchell from the Pew Research Center. As director of journalism research, she studies how Americans receive their news—an important thing to know more about since the free flow of news is in many ways the lifeblood our democracy. Her recent report provides this episode's data point: 67 percent. That's how many adults in the United States now say that they get at least some of their news from social media.

So Amy, this new report is showing the real impact social media is playing and how people get news and information in the country. What are some of the highlights?

Amy Mitchell: Well, we saw some modest growth overall—from 62 percent in early 2016, up to 67 percent of U.S. adults that get at least some of their news through social media. That growth, what gets more interesting is when we divide that by different demographic groups.

And so first, if we look at age, the growth is occurring among the older population. We now are at a point where more than half of U.S. adults who are 50 and older are getting at least some of their news through social media. That is a first-time development through these data. We've also seen the increases this current year among the less educated and among nonwhites. So that we now have a majority of nonwhites, more than 70 percent, that are getting some news through social media. And so to see that growth among the older population is really bringing sort of a new crop of folks into this space.

Dan LeDuc: Well, talk about that. I found that interesting too, in reading it. We have a tendency to still view the whole technology thing as for younger people. It's clearly now a more pervasive thing for people.



Amy Mitchell: Absolutely. And this finding is consistent with other areas of growth that we've seen digitally. So for example, when we ask about mobile news consumption, getting news on your mobile device, we're at 85 percent of U.S. adults who do that. But again, the growth that we've seen this past year in 2017 was among the older populations, the older age groups.

The young people—part of that is because the majority of young people are already doing these things. They're already there so there's not as much room to grow. But it's also the case that the older population is beginning to be more comfortable, to use these devices more often.

We do ask people that get news on their mobile and on a desktop what they prefer. And even though we have now over 60 percent that prefer the phone over the desktop, that is the case more for young people than for the older population. So they have yet to prefer the phone over the desktop, but they are using it in that way for news.

Dan LeDuc: But if they're like me, they probably need their glasses. That's a smaller screen, right? And it is so different. I mean, I got on the elevator the other day and there were four people all staring into their phones. And they were receiving news and information on an elevator ride.

So a generation ago, you sat down with your morning newspaper next to your cereal or you tuned in to the newscast at the end of the day, and it was a planned event. Now, if you're on your phone and you're checking Facebook, it might be because you want to see what your friend's vacation picture looks like, but in the meantime, someone might be sharing some news story from somewhere and you just happen upon it.

Amy Mitchell: That's right. It's the happenstance, and then it's also the fact that it's mixed in with a lot of other kinds of activities. So it's a different sort of process, a different kind of intake.

Dan LeDuc: By having this sort of happenstance of happening on news, what does that actually mean to how people are informed?

Amy Mitchell: Well, it certainly has a number of important questions that come underneath it. And one is what are people ultimately learning? What kind of information and news do people get exposed to? It certainly is a part of the conversation around misinformation today. Fake news, misinformation. How aware are people of what they're getting, of what they're receiving? How much do they care? How do they make choices about what to pass along?



Dan LeDuc: I'm fascinated by that point, because it's like you said, in the old days, not so long ago, when you had the newspaper you knew what the source was. You knew it was your local newspaper or somewhere else, but you knew it. And when it comes in social media, as you were saying, sometimes where it's coming from isn't easily remembered or discerned.

Amy Mitchell: Well, certainly in the digital space it puts more onus on the citizen, on the member of the public to parse through and figure out how to make sense of the information that they're getting.

Dan LeDuc: So for the purpose of this report, how did you actually define what news is when you ask this question?

Amy Mitchell: So for the last several years now, particularly when we ask about social media, we do qualify. We ask about news and then we say, "By news, we mean information about events and issues that involve more than just your friends and family." So it is a broad definition of news. That can encompass a lot, but it does take people outside the purview of, you know, what I heard about my high school reunion, or what my friends might be doing this weekend.

Dan LeDuc: But it doesn't necessarily get into the specific source that they may have used. It could be the newsletter from a political party, and they equate that with sort of a more mainstream news organization.

Amy Mitchell: Well, sure. This was not asking about specific sources. We do have certain survey questions where we're asking about specific sources people may be turning to. We know, for example, during the campaign that 3 in 10 U.S. adults said that they got some of their election news and information directly from the campaigns. Either through their social media posts, through emails, or through the websites directly.

When we ask about the specific sites, so there are a range—nine in this case—that we ask about when it comes to news. And where we saw growth was actually not at Facebook, even though it's still the biggest, but was among three others: Twitter, YouTube, and Snapchat, who all stood out for substantial growth in the proportion of its user base that's getting news there.

So for Twitter in particular, 15 percentage point increase in the portion of its users, so they're now at 74 percent of its users, which amounts to 11 percent of the public overall that are getting some news there. You carry that through to YouTube and to Snapchat and their increases were 11, 12 percent of their user base. But that puts YouTube now second to Facebook in its overall reach of U.S. adults for news among the social media sites.



Dan LeDuc: So as social media becomes a place people turn to news, the social media sites themselves are starting to take initiatives to act on that and provide that and make that easier for their customers.

Amy Mitchell: We've seen steps that these technology companies have taken over the last several years, both by reaching out to the news organizations themselves to teach them tools that can be used to have their content look better or feel better or distribute more easily in their spaces. And then also reaching out to the public in terms of having things be a good experience for them when they're getting news or more easily shareable or findable. So for example, if we think about Twitter as one of the places that saw a lot of growth, it did of course coincide with an election year where there was a lot of activity on Twitter and also a president that is using Twitter quite frequently to put out direct communications with the public, although we can't tie those things directly together. It was also the case that Twitter had its own initiatives that it took; for example, the live streaming that it developed and began in this past year. So we're now at three-quarters of Twitter users, roughly, that are getting at least some news through that particular site, which outpaces the portion of Facebook users that are getting news there.

YouTube has now a channel on its home page for breaking news as well. And Snapchat has really worked on bolstering its discovery element, which is the news portion of its site, and has brought some quite large names recently, including CNN, NBC, and *The New York Times*.

Dan LeDuc: It's going to be curious the American conversation in the coming years, when people are going to say, yeah I saw that on Snapchat, but it's actually going to maybe be a CBS story. So trying to figure out where stuff is coming from is going to get harder.

Amy Mitchell: Yeah.

Dan LeDuc: And the conversation, right?

Amy Mitchell: Yeah. I mean, it's really interesting. And when we ask people to name main sources for news, Facebook can be named as a main source for news among some of these folks.

Dan LeDuc: But Facebook doesn't have any reporters at the White House.

Amy Mitchell: That's right. Exactly. So it is an interesting dynamic. And one of the other elements that's been fascinating to see is that in all of these social media arenas, none of them were designed initially as a news platform, even to have news as a part of their platform.



Whether it was Twitter, or Facebook, or Snapchat, or Instagram, it was social and news was not a component. But as more people spent time there checking in over the course of the day, part of what they're doing and wanting to learn about is the news; it's what's happening. And so news has found its way, and to different degrees, into each of these different social media platforms.

Dan LeDuc: One of the other things you pointed out in the report is that people still prefer sort of watching their news to reading their news. And that's sort of always been true, right? I mean, obviously the TV networks always had bigger audiences than newspapers did. But how is it playing out now?

Amy Mitchell: Yeah. This was a really interesting finding. So this actually came from research from 2016 that we were doing. And we asked about whether people prefer to read, watch, or listen to their news. And there is a larger portion of U.S. adults who prefer to watch news than prefer to read it or to listen to it.

We then paired that with a separate question about their platform preference. So do you prefer print? Do you prefer online? Do you prefer television, radio, etc.? And what we found in that data is that the vast majority of people who prefer to read, 80 percent of those prefer the web. So text reading has largely transitioned to the web. But for watching, the majority of that still was occurring through the television. So the majority of people who prefer to watch still are preferring the TV.

But what's going to be interesting to see is that in this most recent data when we ask about platform, so in addition to the social media-specific questions, we also asked about television in general, about print, about online, etc.

And what we found was the gap closing very much between online and television, with the TV numbers coming down substantially and the online numbers going up. And so what's going to be interesting to see is if we start to see a similar sort of shift occurring among the watchers. We have not seen that yet, and we don't have newer data on those numbers, but that's the kind of thing we would want to continue to watch. Does watching begin to shift across generations to the web the way reading has?

Dan LeDuc: You know, journalism in America is radically different than it was a decade ago. Taking these numbers, what's the cool stuff to look for down the road?

Amy Mitchell: Well, there's always far more cool stuff to look for than we can possibly take on in any given year, so our wish list is always very, very long. But certainly, there are a lot of



questions that still need answers about how people are parsing through information digitally. There are a lot of questions in those areas.

There are questions about how what we're seeing on the political dynamic and its ties to news habits, how does that play out beyond the U.S.? And what's happening when we think about these sorts of things more globally?

Dan LeDuc: Thanks for joining us, and we hope you've been enjoying this podcast. If you haven't already, please subscribe to listen to more episodes. And we like hearing from you. Contribute a review on Apple Podcasts or the streaming service where you tune in. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."