

# Overwhelmed by instant access to news and information? Most Americans like it

August 30 2012, by Erin White

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"Information overload" may be an exaggerated way to describe today's always-on media environment. Actually, very few Americans seem to feel bogged down or overwhelmed by the volume of news and information at their fingertips and on their screens, according to a new Northwestern University study.

The study was published in the journal *The Information Society*.

"Little research has focused on [information overload](#) and [media consumption](#), yet it's a concept used in public discussions to describe today's 24/7 [media](#) environment," said Eszter Hargittai, an associate professor of [communication studies](#) at Northwestern and lead author of the study.

Most of the previous literature on information overload dynamics has involved fighter pilots or battlefield commanders.

To better understand how everyday Americans perceive the amount of information available through traditional and new media, researchers recruited vacationers in Las Vegas to participate in focus groups. Seven focus groups were conducted with 77 total participants from around the country. The, small informal nature of the focus groups helped to reveal participants' strategies for finding news, entertainment and gossip.

"We found that the high volume of information available these days seems to make most people feel empowered and enthusiastic," Hargittai

said. "People are able to get their news and information from a diverse set of sources and they seem to like having these options."

Most of the participants said television was their most used form of media, followed closely by websites. When asked how they felt about the amount of information available to them, few mentioned feeling overwhelmed or that they suffered from "information overload." Here are highlights of the responses:

- Participants had near-unanimous enthusiasm about the new media environment
- Online news was regarded more positively than TV news
- Cable [news](#) was often criticized for its sensationalism and stream of repetitive stories
- Trivial social media posts and opinionated political pundits are top sources of frustration when seeking information

"There's definitely some frustration with the quality of some of the information available," said Hargittai. "But these frustrations were accompanied by enthusiasm and excitement on a more general level about overall media choices."

The few participants who did feel overwhelmed were often those with low Internet skills, who haven't yet mastered social media filters and navigating search engine results, Hargittai noted.

Provided by Northwestern University

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