

Long-form journalism lives—on mobile

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A Pew Research Center study found consumers spend more time on their phones with long-form news articles than with shorter ones

If you thought long-form journalism would die from the shift to mobile news, think again.

A Pew Research Center study released Thursday found consumers spend

more time on their phones with long-form news articles than with shorter ones, and that the elusive notion of "engagement" increases with word count.

The study contradicts a widely held belief that people's attention spans for news articles decrease when they read articles on their smartphones.

"These findings suggest that on small, phone-sized screens, the public does not automatically turn away from an article at a certain point in time—or reject digging into a longer-length news article," said Amy Mitchell, director of journalism research at Pew.

"Instead, the average user tends to stay engaged past the point of where short-form reading would end, suggesting that readers may be willing to commit more time to a longer piece of work."

The researchers defined long-form articles as those of 1,000 words or more.

The found that the "engaged time"—scrolling, clicking or tapping—was about twice as great with news stories that are 1,000 words or longer compared with shorter pieces.

The total "engaged time" with the long-form articles averaged 123 seconds, compared with 57 seconds for short-form stories, according to the research by Pew in collaboration with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.



Social media sites drive the largest share of traffic for news—around 40 percent

Facebook, Twitter connections

The researchers found that the gap between short- and long-form engagement time is not differentiated by the time of day or the "pathway" taken to get to the news story.

But there were factors within the two categories that made a difference.

For both story lengths, reader spend the longest average in the late night and morning hours, the study concluded.

People spent more time with an article when arriving there from an internal link, compared to an email, external website, search or social media.

Social media sites drive the largest share of traffic for news—around 40 percent—even though readers may not stay with articles as long, the researchers said.

Pew found that while Facebook drives more traffic, Twitter tends to bring in people who spend more time with content, either for short or long articles.

Facebook referrals drive more than 80 percent of visits from [social media](#) sources, while Twitter drives about 15 percent, according to the study.

The researchers found that regardless of the source or the length of a story, [news articles](#) online have a short shelf life: 82 percent of interactions with short-form articles begin within the first two days after publication, and the same is true for 74 percent of long-form articles.

The researchers used data provided by the analytics firm Parse.ly on 117 million anonymized phone interactions with 74,840 articles from 30 news websites in September 2015.

The data "cuts across a mix of general and subject-specific news sites, legacy and digital-only sites and sites with large national audiences, as well as those with smaller, niche user bases," according to Pew.

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