

Survey: Most Americans better informed, often rely on instincts to navigate info environment

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While the vast majority of Americans believe it is easier to find useful information today than it was five years ago, 78 percent report that the sheer quantity of information can sometimes be overwhelming, according to a new survey conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago on decision-making in an information-saturated world. The report, *How Americans Navigate the Modern Information Environment*, also found that Americans across demographic characteristics report a healthy amount of skepticism over the trustworthiness of online information, especially when found through social media.

To commemorate NORC's 75th Anniversary as an independent research institution, NORC conducted a study that provides a detailed understanding of Americans' perspectives on an information environment where most have instant access to virtually unlimited amounts of information via the internet.

"Our survey found that people report being better informed by the amount of information they can access, but they rely on their instincts to navigate the information landscape when making important decisions," said Norman Bradburn, senior fellow at NORC at the University of Chicago. "Even with access to blogs, Facebook, Twitter, newspapers, and TV news, just to name a few, word of mouth still plays a large role in people's information-seeking for both policy and purchasing decisions."

Most Americans agree that the internet has made them better informed on a variety of topics, but legacy media continue to fill important roles. For example, while Americans are most likely to go online for information when making a major product purchase, they are more likely to turn to TV when they need information to decide where they stand on a major national issue.

"We live in a world of information overload. People have access to more data than ever, so we thought it was critical to examine where people went to find the information they use to make decisions," said Dan Gaylin, president and CEO of NORC at the University of Chicago. "When anyone with a mobile device can access, analyze, and even disseminate vast quantities of information, how do you know whom to trust? Given the amount of time people spend on [social media](#), I was surprised people expressed such significant skepticism about it as a source of reliable information to use when making a decision."

The survey reveals new information about many aspects of the ways in which Americans seek information and make decisions in an increasingly digital environment.

Navigating an Abundance of Technology

- Eighty-one percent of Americans believe it is easier to find useful information today than it was five years ago. At the same time, 16 percent report they are often overwhelmed by how much information comes to them, and another 62 percent say the amount of information they get can sometimes be too much.
- Americans who use at least one digital source of information in their daily lives (search engines, social media, or blogs) are more likely than those who don't to say it is easier to find useful information today than it was five years ago.
- Thinking about how the internet connects them to information,

many Americans report being better informed than they were five years ago. More than 6 in 10 report being better informed about lifestyle topics such as hobbies, health, or pop culture, and similar proportions say the same about international and national news.

- The public uses a mix of newer digital sources and more traditional media sources to obtain information for their daily lives. Digital sources are popular, with two-thirds of Americans saying they often use search engines and nearly half using social media.

The Durable Importance of Legacy Media and Word of Mouth

- Legacy media outlets remain frequent sources of information for many people. Six in 10 often use television stations' broadcasts, websites, or apps to find information they use in their daily lives. Likewise, 4 in 10 often listen to radio stations or go to their websites or apps, and a similar proportion read newspapers in print or online to find information they use in their daily lives.
- Legacy media enjoy higher levels of trust than digital sources. At least 8 in 10 Americans who use newspapers, radio, search engines, television, and magazines to get information to use in their daily lives say they can mostly or completely trust the information they get from each of these sources.
- People's information habits differ by decision domain in some respects, but in others they are quite similar. For example, legacy media such as TV and newspapers are more often used when people are deciding where they stand on policy issues compared to product purchase decisions. However, word of mouth plays a large role in people's information seeking for both types of decisions.

Blogs and Social Media—The Trust Gap

- Americans are more reluctant to trust information from blogs and social media. Fifty-five percent say they can mostly or completely trust information from blogs, and 53 percent say the same for social media. That trust gap is similar for all age groups.

The Significance of Age and Education

- Information habits and attitudes vary based on a person's age and education, but there are relatively few differences by race, ethnicity, or gender. And when it comes to party identification, partisans differ more from independents than they do from each other.

Type of Decision Shapes Source of Information—Trusting Your Instincts

- Americans are more likely to gather new information for purchasing decisions than for deciding where they stand on national issues (85 percent do so often or sometimes for products compared to 72 percent for national issues), but in both domains Americans rely on their instincts to help navigate the information environment. Americans are most likely to seek out new information when they have a gut feeling to be skeptical. Furthermore, when they encounter conflicting information about products or policies, they tend to seek additional information and rely on their instincts to determine which [information](#) to trust.

Survey Methodology

The nationally representative survey, funded by NORC, was conducted

from January 14 through January 31, 2016. Data were collected using the AmeriSpeak Panel®, which is NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. Panel members were randomly drawn from the AmeriSpeak Panel, and 1,007 completed the survey. Respondents without internet access and those who prefer to complete surveys by phone were interviewed by trained NORC interviewers. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 3.7 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error is higher for subgroups.—

Provided by University of Chicago

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