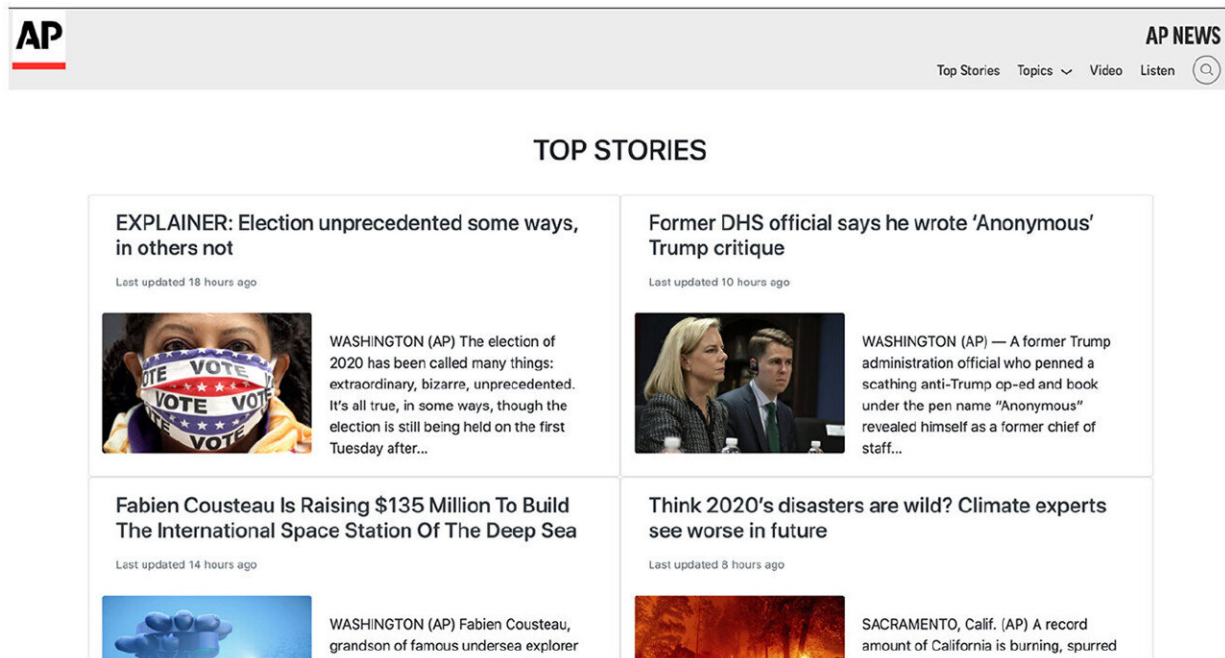


'News finds me' mindset may lead readers away from political, science news

January 18 2024, by Jonathan F. McVerry



Mock news website. Note. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three website versions (like the screenshot shown here), each which presented a different set of 13 news stories (and one faux advertisement). Participants could not click on the website banner. The order in which news stories were presented for each participant was randomized. Credit: *Communication Research* (2023). DOI: 10.1177/00936502231215528

Many adults in the United States do not actively follow traditional TV, print or online news outlets, because they believe the information will

find them via social media or their social networks. [One in three adults](#) in the United States hold this "news finds me" (NFM) mentality, which could lead to less political knowledge, less interest in politics and greater political cynicism, according to Penn State researchers.

Penn State Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications researchers led a study to understand these individuals' behaviors when given the option to select [news](#) stories to read instead of waiting for the news to find them. They learned that when given the choice, people who believe the news will find them opt to read soft news, such as entertainment or sports, more often than hard news, such as politics or science.

The findings were [published](#) in the journal *Communication Research* by Chris Skurka, assistant professor of media studies; Mengqi Liao, doctoral candidate; and Homero Gil De Zúñiga, distinguished professor of media studies.

Thanks to the algorithmic curation of news and the ability to view shared news stories on [social media](#), it's easier than ever to take a passive stance on accessing the news—and news the user does access is often delivered via a narrow, tailormade view. According to the researchers, that passive use is concerning because informed citizens are vital for a successful democracy, but NFM individuals may believe they are more informed than they actually are.

"We started by talking about the importance of everyday citizens being informed and knowledgeable about current affairs," Skurka said. "I think a lot of political scientists and political communication scholars would agree that to stay informed about current affairs, you need to actively follow the news."

Among [longitudinal studies](#) that addressed the societal consequences of NFM perception, the researchers noticed a dearth of "in the moment"

research that examined the behavior of these NFM individuals when they come across news online. They predicted that given the option between hard news and soft news, individuals with the NFM perception would choose to engage with soft news more often than hard news.

To clarify the mechanisms underlying news use behavior online, the researchers developed a mock news website that resembled the Associated Press's homepage. More than 530 participants were tracked as they perused one of three versions of the site that presented a headline, image and lead for 13 real news articles.

Each participant took a pretest that gathered demographic information and measured the NFM beliefs of the participants. To determine the level of NFM, the researchers asked participants to answer a series of questions using a 10-point scale. The pretest included questions like how strongly they agreed with phrases like "I rely on my friends to tell me what's important when news happens" and "I can be well informed even when I don't actively follow the news." Responses determined the level of NFM perception among participants.

The participants were then shown both hard news and soft news stories in random order. The researchers defined hard news as stories about politics, business, science and COVID-19. The pandemic was a top news story during data collection. Soft news included celebrities, entertainment and sports. Each mock site featured 10 hard news stories and three soft news stories. The researchers monitored what stories were clicked on and the time spent on each article.

"We primarily gave people hard news options to choose from," Skurka said. "This wasn't self-report. We measured what they were clicking on and what they actually spent time on in a tightly controlled environment. We wanted to understand how this 'news will find me' perception relates to actual engagement with news."

The researchers found a [positive relationship](#) between the NFM perception and engagement with soft news. According to their results, almost all the participants clicked on hard news, but NFM participants—approximately 25% of the sample—were more likely to select soft news. Out of the characteristics the researchers considered, which included demographics, political interest and news consumption habits, NFM most consistently predicted level of news exposure.

"For every one-unit increase on the NFM scale, the odds of clicking on a soft news story rose by 13% and the amount of time spent on soft news stories rose by five seconds," Skurka said. "Soft news stories were vastly outweighed in quantity by the presence of hard news stories in the mock AP news environments. You can imagine that if you take this outside of the controlled setting where soft [news stories](#) are even in greater abundance, NFM would play an even bigger role."

The research also offered a view of the NFM mentality based on the news genres featured on the AP sites. Individuals with a perception that science news will find them were less likely to engage with the science news used on the mock news pages.

"These findings suggest that when it comes to science news, NFM means the individual doesn't believe they have to pay attention to climate news or breaking scientific updates, because it'll get to them," Skurka said.

According to Skurka, the results showed a relationship between individuals with strong political NFM perceptions and less engagement with political news—but the connection was not consistent across all of the mock websites. The researchers found that, for one of the mock sites, strong political NFM did not mean those participants engaged less with political news.

"We are not sure why this was the case, but we think that whether NFM

leads to lower engagement with news is contingent on the specific stories in question, as well as the surrounding stories that compete for news users' attention," Skurka said.

Skurka said more research is needed to test the NFM perception using different news content and different news formats, including social media feeds. Other future steps include using this type of research to develop interventions that may help get NFM readers more engaged in hard news.

"We need to be cautious about the conditions under which this link can manifest," he said. "Hopefully, we will be unpacking that in future work."

More information: Chris Skurka et al, Tuning Out (Political and Science) News? A Selective Exposure Study of the News Finds Me Perception, *Communication Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00936502231215528](https://doi.org/10.1177/00936502231215528)

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