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A Remote Environment's Effect on the News Consumption of College Students

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Introduction[1]

Research Question:
This study investigates how PSU Honors Students have changed how they access[2] and engage[3] with the news in a remote environment.[4]

Background:
      Since the start of the Coronavirus Pandemic, how we approach almost every aspect of our lives has changed. How we work, learn, socialize, and engage with others, have all been modified. No aspect of our lives has been left unaffected, including how we interact with the news.

      Large national news networks, such as NPR, NBC, and CBS, have experienced an upsurge in viewership, while more partisan news networks have not (Koeze and Popper, 2020). This discrepancy suggests that people are gravitating toward sources they perceive as trustworthy rather than more opinionated interpretations of events. Even social media platforms like Facebook have noticed a change. Since the first Covid-19 death in the United States in February, Facebook has reported a 1.1% increase in app use and a 27.0% increase in their website use, suggesting a preference for larger screens to access media when both a phone and laptop are readily available (Koeze and Popper, 2020). So, we know that how Americans access the news has changed.

      We also know that different demographics, particularly along partisan and generational lines, access the news differently. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center study, people under 50 are most likely to use *The New York Times* or NPR for their political news, while people over 50 are most likely to use CBS or MSNBC (Grieco, 2020). A 2015 survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and the American Press Institute found that only 39% of people actively sought out the news every day, and 60% of Americans felt they just "bumped into" news while on social media (Grant, 2019). It also found that

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[1] This article, which was based on a class project rather than a research study, was not reviewed by the PSU IRB.

[2] For the purposes of this investigation the term "access" refers to the platform (such as podcasts, social media, or TV programs) and the network (such as The New York Times, National Public Radio(NPR), or Fox News) used.

[3] For the purposes of this investigation the term "engage" refers to the frequency of access to these sites and why they are accessing them.

[4] For the purposes of this investigation the term "remote environment" refers to the physical and social boundaries enacted to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

the vast majority of college aged students received their news via social media sites. With so much increased screen time, this 2019 trend could suggest that Americans may be reading more news than they did before. However, Facebook's data could suggest that Americans are more likely to seek screen time in general, but is increased screen time in addition to, or in place of, reading the news as we 'bump into it'?

Given how recent the pandemic is, new investigations focusing on how this event has shaped our engagement with the news are necessary to sustain an accurate discourse on our news consumption patterns. Information is the most powerful tool we have; it gives us power and shapes the narrative of our reality. What information we access, how it is presented to us, and what we do with it are all critical things to consider, not just for media and advertising companies, but for everyone that wants to understand human behavior or how humans manipulate, and are manipulated by, their dynamic environment.

Literature Review

While there is not much existing literature on this specific topic, this investigation draws on several similar studies for insight into this subject and the appropriate method design. The study, "Undergraduates' News Consumption and Perceptions of Fake News in Science," focuses on undergraduate students, and, like this study, it investigates students' dynamic interactions with the news (Zakharov et al., 2019). While the variable in this study was a focus on avoiding fake news, rather than adjusting to a remote environment, its findings are still relevant to this work. It is especially relevant as the students involved in the study were all taking the same online course, and the study utilized qualitative student testimonials for its research. The study concluded that undergraduates spent around seven hours a week interacting with the news, and they primarily accessed mainstream news sources such as *The New York Times* and CNN. Students reflected that they gravitated toward these news sites because they perceived these major outlets as trustworthy and did not want to accidentally expose themselves to fake news. The second study this research draws from, "News Consumption Across Multiple Media Platforms: A Repertoire Approach," uses a vastly different research method (a wide-range phone survey) and participant population (the Chinese public) than my study (Yang, 2011). However, it investigated overall news interaction patterns, finding that most participants used multiple media platforms for news consumption, and these trends were influenced by what sources the participants found credible and the participants' interests. Given this, questions investigating what sources students use for their news access and why were included in the interviews conducted for this report, "A Remote Environment's Effect on News Consumption."

Like the first study, "Understanding Student Use of Twitter and Other Online Forums" investigates the relationship between college undergraduates and their technology use (Dommett, 2019). It differs from the current investigation as it uses mostly quantitative data analysis. It also focuses on Twitter and other virtual forums' educational impact on students, rather than the effect a remote environment has on student news engagement. The study found that students were more likely to use other virtual engagement forums to connect with peers or instructors about school work, but when a student was accessing Twitter, they were more likely to engage with people outside of their immediate social group and look at areas of independent interest. That is, students who accessed more virtual resources were more likely to engage with a broader pool of people and spend time reading about topics of personal interest. The correlation between exposure to media platforms and platform use by students is similar to the recent trends suggested by media companies during the Covid-19 pandemic. Given this, my research seeks to further explore the relationship between news access, as the news is almost exclusively delivered through virtual platforms, and the news content students interact with.

Methods

This study explores how college students have changed their relationship with the news in their new remote environment. This demographic was selected because they have experienced changes in their work, learning, and social environment, making them particularly impacted by the shift, and thus more likely to have experienced a change in news access. Four sophomores in the PSU Honors Program were interviewed for this study; pseudonyms represent them to preserve confidentiality. (P 1- 4 is used to represent study participants respectively based on their interview order, and AW is used to represent the interviewer.)

Sophomore students were selected to prevent a 'studying-up' dynamic while still ensuring the interviewees had experienced in-person and remote learning. This ensured that participants could reflect on how their news consumption has changed between these environments. Additionally, the interviewees also lived on campus before the spring term of 2020 but moved back home and have stayed there since the spring. These two characteristics mean interviewees have experienced a high level of change between in-person and remote living. Therefore, they are more likely to have experienced a shift in news engagement, and as I am a member of this population, it was a natural choice for my interview subjects. My position inside of this population is also why all selected subjects were honors students; as an honors student myself this was the most accessible population.

Dunn's pyramid interview structure was selected as the model for this study's interviews so the interview would allow "...the informant to become accustomed to the interview, ... and topics before they are asked questions that require deeper reflection" (Dunn, 2016). This method seemed most fitting as our news engagements' different components are not something people tend to reflect on independently. By building to the conceptual questions, the interviewees were better prepared to reflect on their relationships' with the news before and after switching to a remote environment, and why changes (if any) were made to this relationship. The interview structure was adjusted during the research process as interviews were conducted. This modification is discussed further in this paper's critical reflexivity section when other reflections on the research process are also provided.

Data Analysis and Findings

While informing on how PSU Honors students' news interactions have changed in a remote environment, this study's findings also address several of the existing literatures' trends. For example, all four of the participants mentioned that they used NPR and NYT for some of their news, a trend consistent with the Pew Research Center's data. Almost exclusively, all four participants relied on national networks for their news because they felt it was the most trustworthy. P4 commented, "I'm more likely to trust something from an article where I know the name at the top…," and P3 mentioned that "...things I find very reputable, I definitely really enjoy... I have heard a lot of praise about NPR, *The Economist*…." As such, this report reinforces "How Do College Students Get Their News?" discussion that college-aged students gravitate toward large news networks to try to prevent consuming fake news. The platforms used by participants to access their news the most are also consistent with existing data. All four participants used social media platforms, even if just as a stepping-off point, so they could then look for more information on stories they see on social media, more than any other source.

Additionally, despite recent data, only one of the four participants reported using a local news outlet for news access, and this was only when they started living at home in a remote environment. However, this participant (P4) was not the only one to seek out new news sources once they shifted to a remote environment; all four participants did. This interest in new news resources came from a procession of several changes generated by the remote environment. Participants' cumulative adjustments to their news access and engagement are the central themes that emerged from this study. These preliminary findings are as follows:

Finding 1: **This group is more exposed to the news in a remote environment.**

Given the drastic increase in screen time that students are exposed to in a remote environment, it is not surprising that interviewees were more exposed to the news in a remote setting. All interviewees explicitly emphasize this during their interviews. P4 said, "...when I first started remote learning, I was just on a laptop more. And sometimes I'm in class, and the class is moving at a pace that's like pretty slow for me, so I'd maybe get distracted." P1 also mentioned the effect of remote classes and internet access, noting, "I think I have been accessing it a lot more because I don't have as much to do, and time isn't a constraint anymore. And I'm also on the computer a lot more so it's right there at my fingertips." However, this exposure goes beyond technology access. Other environmental factors also caused an increase in news exposure. For P2, the increase was in part due to the same experiences P4 describes, and in part because, as they explain, "[w]hen I went to college, there wasn't a TV playing 24/7. MSNBC, CNN, something like that. Versus right now, there's TV - I can hear it through the floor; there's TV playing. So, yeah, it's like, constant at our house."

All participants also made it a point to acknowledge that part of this increased exposure was due to the news events. The political climate, social justice movement, and the global pandemic were factors that participants say contributed to their increased news exposure. This increase in environmental news exposure, paired with near-constant breaking news stories, meant that the news became a constant, almost looming presence in the participants' lives. P3 noted, "I feel like there's so much - there's so many more notifications, there's so many more things that people are talking about that like, you just really can't get away from it. Like it's everywhere." The other participants echoed this sentiment. P4 explained the situation saying, "I think, as of now, like taking school from a laptop, there's a whole lot of.... shrapnel, a whole lot of like bombardment…" from the news.

Finding 2: **This group became more intentional with their news intake after observing its effect on their mental health.**

As exposure to the news increased in a remote environment, the interviewees said they started to become more intentional about when they accessed it. P1 reflected,

> I think, a big thing that I hadn't realized before this was how much more intentional I am being with searching it out and not just like - you know, because the news can have a big impact on your mental health and your day, so not just letting myself spiral down and reading a bunch of news stories randomly…

Recognizing that continually tuning into the news cycle was negatively affecting mental health was touched on in participants explanations' for the shift. P2

explained that "it's not healthy! I have an hour on - I give myself one hour on Twitter a day because ... Twitter riles me up so much that I'm just like, 'nope, can't do that today.' " When P3 was asked about this topic, they said, "I have been making like an active - like I have been actively trying to not go on it as much or like not look at the news as much… I'm just done looking at cases every single day." The following excerpt from P1 encapsulates this relationship well. It reads:

> I'm also trying not to go on my phone and social media as much like absentmindedly and look at the news because the news is really depressing. So if I - I want to make a conscious choice to go search it out, if I feel like that's a good thing for my mind and the course of my day to do, I don't want to be mindlessly reading things that make me feel gross for the rest of the day. So I've been, not doing that as much.

The amount of time available for news engagement also changed in a remote environment. P1 explained that before going remote, "I was busy. I didn't prioritize engagement with the news over getting my school done, and doing all my social things, and going to the gym, you know, it was just a quick part in my morning." In a remote environment "now - all I can think about, there's not much going on except for the crazy stuff in the world. I'm thinking about the news a lot more, but when - back then there's so much going on, it takes up a lot of mental space."

Finding 3: **This group has changed the news content they access.**

As participants became more intentional about their news access, the type of content they prioritized shifted. Three participants reported they now spent less time reading news related to their majors and personal interests and more time on topics related to current events and American politics. P3 explained that they "really pay attention to that industry[entertainment] and that world just because I want to, like, work there eventually," but in a remote environment, they "have been consuming a little bit less of, like, that type of news." The following excerpt shows how P4 responded when asked a similar question:

> AW: Do you think that, now that you're in a remote environment, you're consuming the same amount of environmental news, or do you think the makeup of the type of news you consume has changed?

> P4: It's certainly shifted. Yeah. I mean I'm - I'm still very concerned about the environment. I would say, like - probably like many people, my attention was kind of grabbed by the election and

106

before the election leading up to it. Yeah, Black Lives Matter movement before that. And yeah, I think - I think it's definitely been a shift towards those kinds of things, more so than environment news."

This change in priorities also meant participants looked for new sources of the news. When asked, P4 said now that they are back in their hometown that, "I would say, one local sort of online newspaper that is called *Gazette Times* for Corvallis - and I would say that I do read articles from it on occasion." Other participants mentioned following an additional social media account or looking for new platforms to access news on. P1 said that in a remote environment they were "trying to find new good podcasts, and I've been listening to ... *The Daily* [a *New York Times* podcast] more often than I used to," and P3 mentioned that they " recently started using Twitter ever since Covid."

When asked to describe their experiences with the news before and after the switch to a remote environment in five words each, P3 selected "pop-news, trends, and breaking news" as some of their first descriptors; changing them to words like "election, politics, and health" to represent their news experience in a remote environment. P1 and P4 also chose "political" as one of their remote environment news descriptors' instead of "interesting" (P1's) and "environmental" (P4's) for the in-person environment. However, P3's news access shifted in the opposite direction, moving more toward personal interest and entertainment to distract from the 24-hour news cycle. They relayed:

> Now I try to mostly follow fun things. Like Chrissy Teigen is very entertaining and, yeah. Just like Lin Manuel Miranda and his good morning good night tweets... But yeah, I just like - trying to keep it a little bit more lighthearted and less like, 'this is what's going on constantly, these are the ways your rights are being attacked.'

While this is a very different type of shift in news content, the motivations behind the shift are consistent with the other three interviewees. Given this, the action all participants are taking to respond to news in a remote environment is the same, this action simply has different outcomes depending on the individual.

Conclusion

Implications of Findings:
Based on the preliminary findings explored above, PSU Honors Students have changed how they access and engage with the news in a remote environment by being more intentional about when they access the news instead of 'stumbling upon it' throughout the day. This comes from increased exposure to the news and

increased consciousness of how the news affects them. These changes motivated participants to limit their news exposure as a result. Limiting exposure means prioritizing differently what news is important. Thus, study participants shifted focus to current events or things that will affect them directly instead of more conceptual or specialized stories. Overall, the remote environment is a space that requires a different level of personal and societal awareness that an in-person environment did not demand. This has caused, at least PSU Honors Students, to be more intentional and thoughtful news consumers.

Critical Reflexivity:

It is critical to acknowledge how my identity impacted this project. For one, my research question permitted me to draw my participants from my peer group, two of whom I had an outside relationship with. This was convenient and functional, but by opting for accessible participants, I narrowed my interviewees to individuals who share parts of their identity with me. This is because outside friendships (and peer groups) are formed based on similarities in personality and circumstance. For example, three of my participants were other women, and, like me, all of my participants had similar political ideologies and attended the PSU Honors college directly after graduating from high school. These connections gave me a strong 'in' with my participants, thus preventing me from needing to work to establish rapport and trust. This also prevented "studying up," or a drastically imbalanced power dynamic, as my participants were all comparable to me academically and professionally, and we shared similar backgrounds.

Given this comparatively even status and previous friendship, my interview questions were relatively informal. As two of my participants already knew me, if I performed or altered my identity, such as emphasizing being a researcher and behaving more formally, I would likely have confused them with my unusual behavior. Also, as I was conducting single interviews, there was no ongoing relationship-building period integral to my work to build up a particular persona. If a stranger had conducted my interviews, they would have likely engaged more formally and extracted different answers from my interviewees, as they would not know their sense of humor or how to encourage banter.

In fact, our prior knowledge of each other meant that my interviewees would sometimes reference events or ideas from our past without providing context. As a result, I needed to be highly aware of what information I formally documented and thus had permission to use. Someone without previous connections to my participants would not have received answers contingent on a shared past. They would have also likely received more concise responses, as my interviews' relaxed tone inadvertently simulated a casual, friendly conversation, allowing my participants to feel comfortable rambling.

This is not a comprehensive discussion of how my identity influenced this research. However, I have highlighted many parts of my identity which shaped my work - impacting how I engaged with others and how they engaged with me. Both conceptions of my identity impacted how my research was conducted, and are essential for researchers to account for during, and after, their research process.

Challenges, Limitations, and Further Research:

During the interview process, I discovered I needed to restructure my questions to create a smoother transition to my conceptual queries. I had selected Dunn's Pyramid structure model for my interview to allow "...the informant to become accustomed to the interview, ... and topics before they are asked questions that require deeper reflection" (Dunn, 2016). However, given that people naturally wanted to discuss their different experiences before and after the switch to a remote environment at the same time, rather than as two separate segments, I decided to integrate my AABB structure into an ABAB pattern for my last two interviews. While not necessarily a challenge, an adjustment was made during the interview process in response to observations during the research process.

The most notable limitation to this work is that the shift to a remote environment occurred simultaneously with many other events that impacted news consumption. My interviews were conducted in the week before and the few weeks after the presidential election, a time when news consumption is at its peak. The rising social justice movement that erupted after the killing of George Floyd, and the pandemic that generated the need for a remote environment, also impacted how study participants interacted with the news. For these reasons, it is impossible to discern what findings the remote environment directly caused and might have only occurred in correlation to the remote setting, and what is a combination of many factors. However, given that life is full of messy interconnections, this 'gray area' is not a reason to dismiss this study's findings. The context of this work just must be considered when evaluating or building on this data.

The other major limitation of this study is the small sample size and the participants' homogeneous nature. Four individuals are hardly representative of all college students' experience. Additionally, participants of different ages and educational backgrounds might have different experiences with the news in a remote environment. However, this in-depth exploration of these four individuals' experiences' provides a jumping-off point for future, more quantitative studies. Now that general trends and themes have been identified, the next step would be to conduct a broad survey of this population to see if and how these trends apply to this population as a whole.

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