

## 4. Expectations of news and current affairs

The impact of technological and media market developments is especially evident in the ways that Australians now consume news and information, both local and overseas. Given the primacy of the media in informing citizens about matters of public interest and the long-standing regulation of news and current affairs in broadcasting, an objective of the study was to explore changing patterns of news consumption and attitudes to help understand:

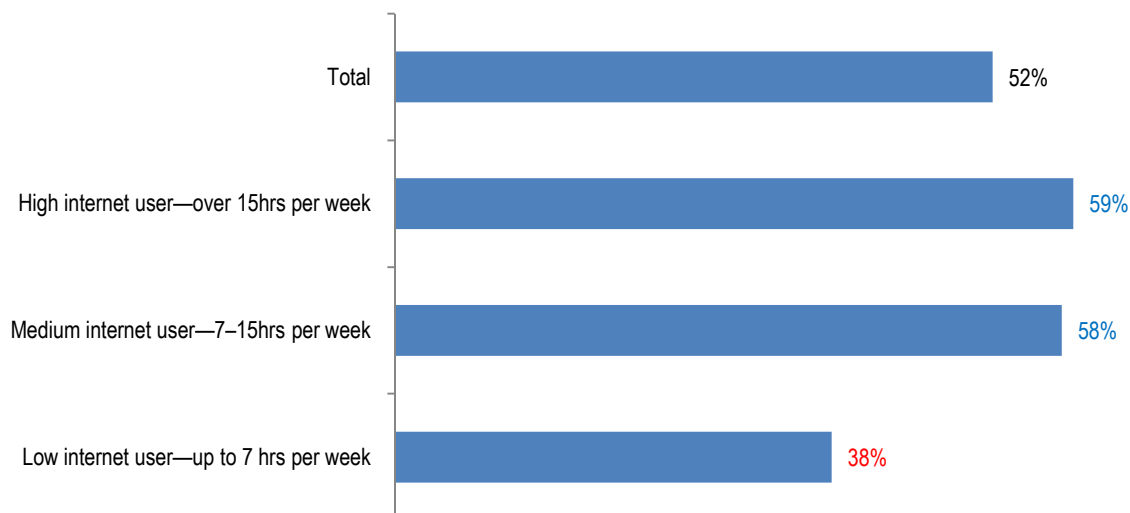
- > To what extent does increased use of online news sources signal a shift in how important digital Australians view traditional sources of news such as newspapers and broadcast networks?
- > What are expectations for the presentation of news and current affairs across different platforms?

### Sources of news

Overall, 68 per cent of online survey respondents indicated that traditional media (television, radio and print) was their main source of news, while 23 per cent cited online news sources (Table 16 below). Older respondents were more likely to report traditional media as the main source of news, and younger respondents to report online sources.

Those who used the internet for more than seven hours a week were more likely to have visited the website of a news organisation, television broadcaster or radio station in the last month than those who use the internet up to seven hours a week.

Figure 14 Visited a website of a news organisation in the last month, by level of internet use



Source: ACMA, Digital Australians online survey, 2011.

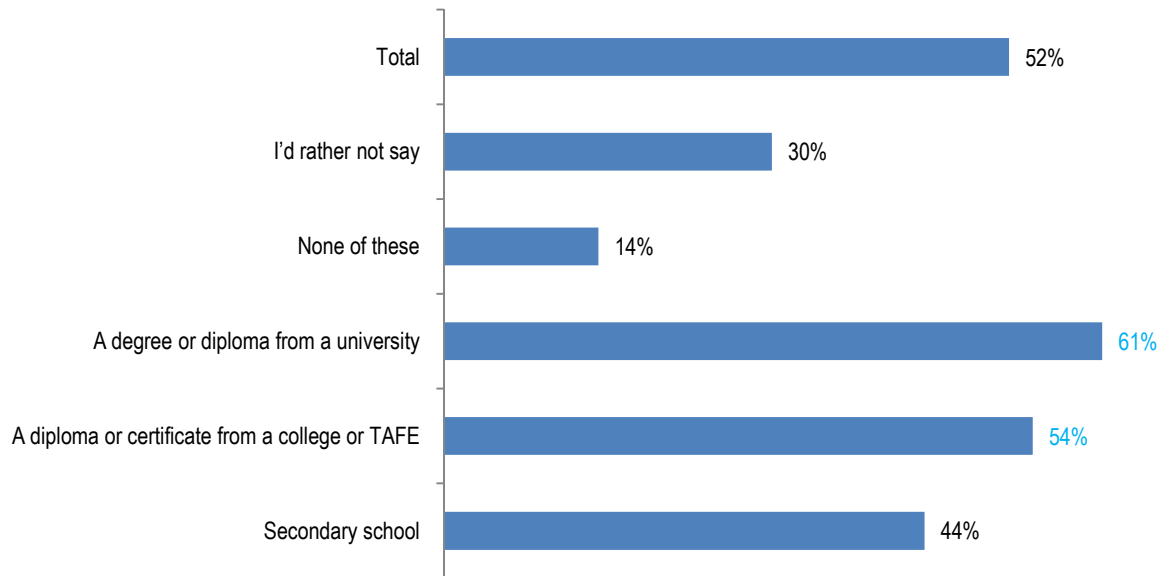
B1 ASK ALL: In the past month, which of the following have you done? M/R RANDOMISE

Note: Blue numbers represent differences that are significantly higher and red numbers significantly lower.

Base samples by level of internet usage: Up to 7 hrs/wk n=368; Between 7 and 15 hrs/wk n=433; Over 15 hrs/wk n=449.

Those with further education (TAFE or university) were more likely than those for whom secondary school was the highest level of education to have visited a website of a news organisation in the last month.

**Figure 15 Visited a website of a news organisation in the last month, by level of education**



Source: ACMA, Digital Australians online survey, 2011.

B1 ASK ALL: In the past month, which of the following have you done? M/R RANDOMISE

Base samples by level of education: I'd rather not say n=33; None of these n=7; A degree or diploma from a university n=388; A diploma or certificate from a college or TAFE n=408; Secondary school n=414.

Commercial television was the main source of news identified by 36 per cent of respondents, followed by Australian news websites (excluding newspaper websites) (10 per cent), local newspaper (not online) (nine per cent), Australian newspaper websites (eight per cent), Australian metro/national newspaper (eight per cent) and ABC or SBS television (eight per cent).

**Table 16 Main source of news**

Main source of news	Total sample (n=1,250)	Male (n=613)	Female (n=637)	18–29 (n=262)	30–44 (n=353)	45–54 (n=233)	55+ (n=402)
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Commercial TV (7, Nine, Ten)	36	33	38	30	36	41	36
Australian news websites (not newspaper websites)	10	8	11	17	9	7	7
Local newspaper (not online)	9	8	9	6	8	9	10
Australian newspaper websites	8	9	8	11	10	9	4
Australian Metro/national newspaper (not online)	8	10	6	5	7	6	13
ABC or SBS television	8	9	7	5	6	9	12
Social media websites	4	3	4	5	5	3	2
Radio	4	4	3	2	4	3	4
Sky News Australia	2	2	1	0	2	2	2
International news websites	2	2	1	3	2	1	0
Fox News, BBC World News, CNBC or CNN	1	2	1	2	2	0	1
International newspaper (not online)	1	1	1	2	1	1	0
None of these	9	9	9	12	8	7	8
NET TV, radio, print	68	69	67	51	66	72	79
NET Online	23	22	24	37	26	21	13

Source: ACMA, Digital Australians online survey, 2011.

C1 ASK ALL: Which of the following would you say is your main source of news? That is to say, which of these do you use the most?  
S/R RANDOMISE

Note: Blue numbers represent differences that are significantly higher and red numbers significantly lower.

The main reason given by 37 per cent of respondents for visiting the website of an Australian television or radio broadcaster in the past month was to get the news (see Figure 9 above). Ten per cent also indicated that they mostly listened to the news and weather on the radio in the past week.

## Reasons given for preferring a news source

Online respondents were asked the main reasons they mostly got the news from the source they had nominated (Table 17):

- > 'I can quickly get the main stories of the day'—48 per cent
- > Habit: 'This is where I have always got my news from'—44 per cent
- > Convenience: 'I can look at it wherever I am'—30 per cent
- > The news source represented a variety of views—25 per cent
- > 'It is reliable (I trust it is accurate)'—24 per cent.

Those respondents who mainly got their news from traditional (offline) sources were more likely to say that the main reason was habit (50 per cent compared with 28 per cent online). Those who got their news from online sources were more likely to give reasons of speed of access (59 per cent compared with 44 per cent), convenience (49 per cent compared with 23 per cent), being more up-to-date (32 per cent

compared with 15 per cent), and being able to find news that interested them specifically (37 per cent compared with 19 per cent).

Those who used the internet more than seven hours a week were more likely to prefer a particular source of news because it was more up to date (22 per cent compared with 11 per cent), or more detailed (23 per cent compared with 16 per cent).

**Table 17 Reason for preferred source of news**

	Total sample (n=1,140)	TV, Radio, Print (n=850)	Online (n=290)
	%	%	%
I can quickly get the main news stories of the day	48	44	59
Habit – this is where I have always got my news from	44	50	28
I can look at it wherever I am (it is convenient)	30	23	49
I am familiar with the 'brand' and am most comfortable with this source	28	29	27
It represents a variety of views	25	24	28
It is reliable (I trust it is accurate)	24	24	22
I can find particular news stories that interest me	24	19	37
It is more relevant to me and my interests	21	21	22
It is more detailed	21	23	14
It is more up-to-date than other sources	19	15	32
It is independent (it doesn't have an agenda)	11	12	9
Other	5	6	2

Source: ACMA, Digital Australians online survey, 2011.

C2 ASK THOSE WHO GET NEWS FROM ANYWHERE (I.E. NOT CODE 90 ON C1)

What are the main reasons you mostly get your news from [RESPONSE TO C1] rather than anywhere else? M/R RANDOMISE

Note: Blue numbers represent differences that are significantly higher and red numbers significantly lower.

Base: Respondents who get news from anywhere, n=1,140.

## Accuracy and fairness of news sources

Participants in the group discussions were generally positive about the greater diversity of news sources online, but also acknowledged a number of negatives; for example, the 24 hours a day, seven days a week news cycle eroding accuracy, and online news not always being fair or credible. Some also mentioned the ease of access by children to online news stories that may be disturbing to them.

Despite the issues with online news mentioned by participants, most indicated that being aware of the potential pitfalls meant that they found ways to overcome them.

The accuracy of all news was seen to have suffered because of the need to report stories, especially breaking news, before all the facts had been established. Speed to break a story was now seen as essential, given the constant news cycle that has developed.

Participants felt that accuracy of news online can also suffer because of the ease with which the public can now contribute to news stories or share breaking news.

The majority of participants were aware of the issues with accuracy and reported that they often looked at multiple online sources to check the veracity of a news story and see what was corroborated by others:

If I see something new that I think is important, I'll make a point of watching for it on the commercial news on TV, and the ABC news.

Often the essence of the story was more important than every detail being correct:

The important thing is that there was a tsunami that caused a lot of damage and death. It doesn't matter exactly how big the earthquake was.

Most focus group participants understood that news organisations—both traditional and online news sources—often had an agenda. This resulted in consumers sometimes being aware of conflicting opinions and views, with some indicating that they take some news stories 'with a grain of salt'. The increasing diversity of news sources also meant that there was often more opinion to 'wade' through.

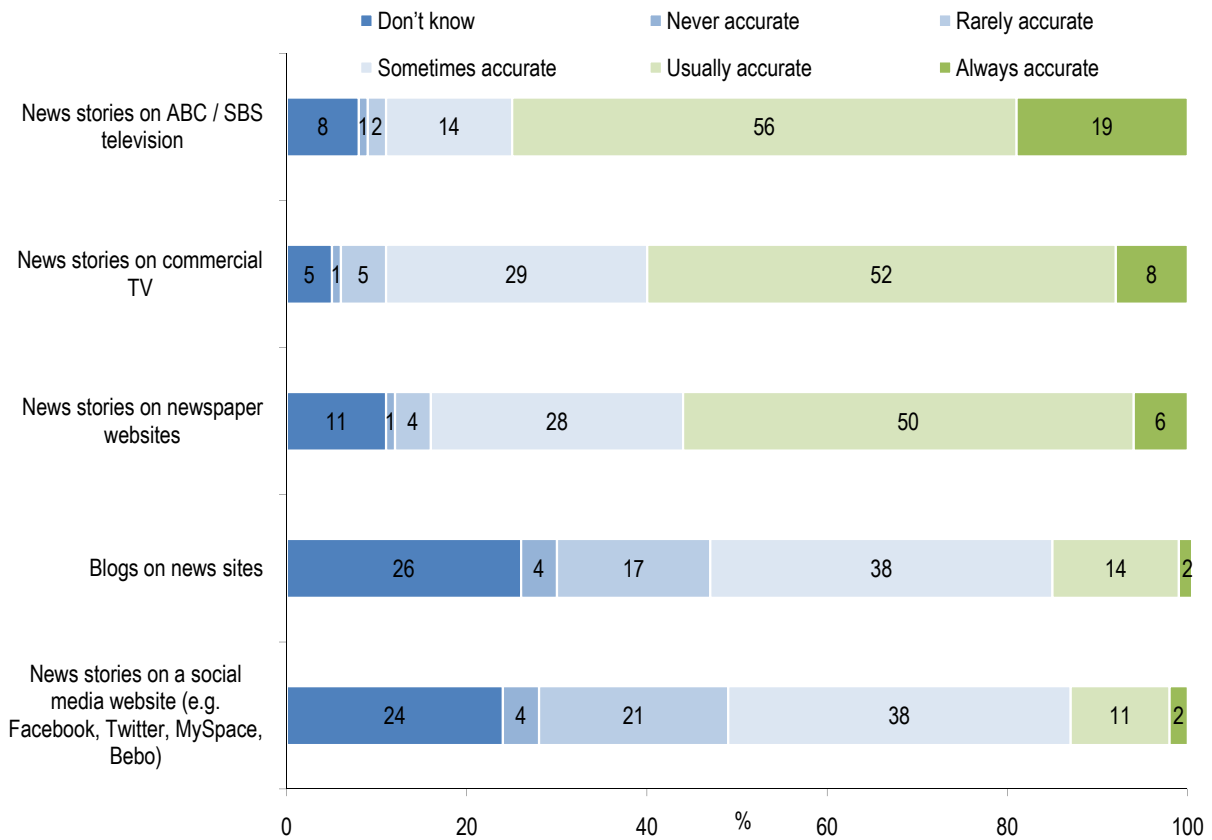
The diversity of news sources was generally seen as a positive, however, with many participants indicating that it was now easier to obtain the full story, and they were no longer limited to a few main media providers.

The focus group findings were supported by the online survey. When asked about their perceptions of the accuracy of news from various sources, 75 per cent of respondents saw the ABC and SBS as usually or always accurate (Figure 16).

The majority of respondents also perceived commercial television news (60 per cent) and newspaper websites (56 per cent) as being usually or always accurate.

Nearly 40 per cent of respondents saw blogs on news sites and news stories on social media as being only sometimes accurate, and a further 21–25 per cent thought these sources were never or rarely accurate.

**Figure 16 Perceptions of accuracy of various news sources**



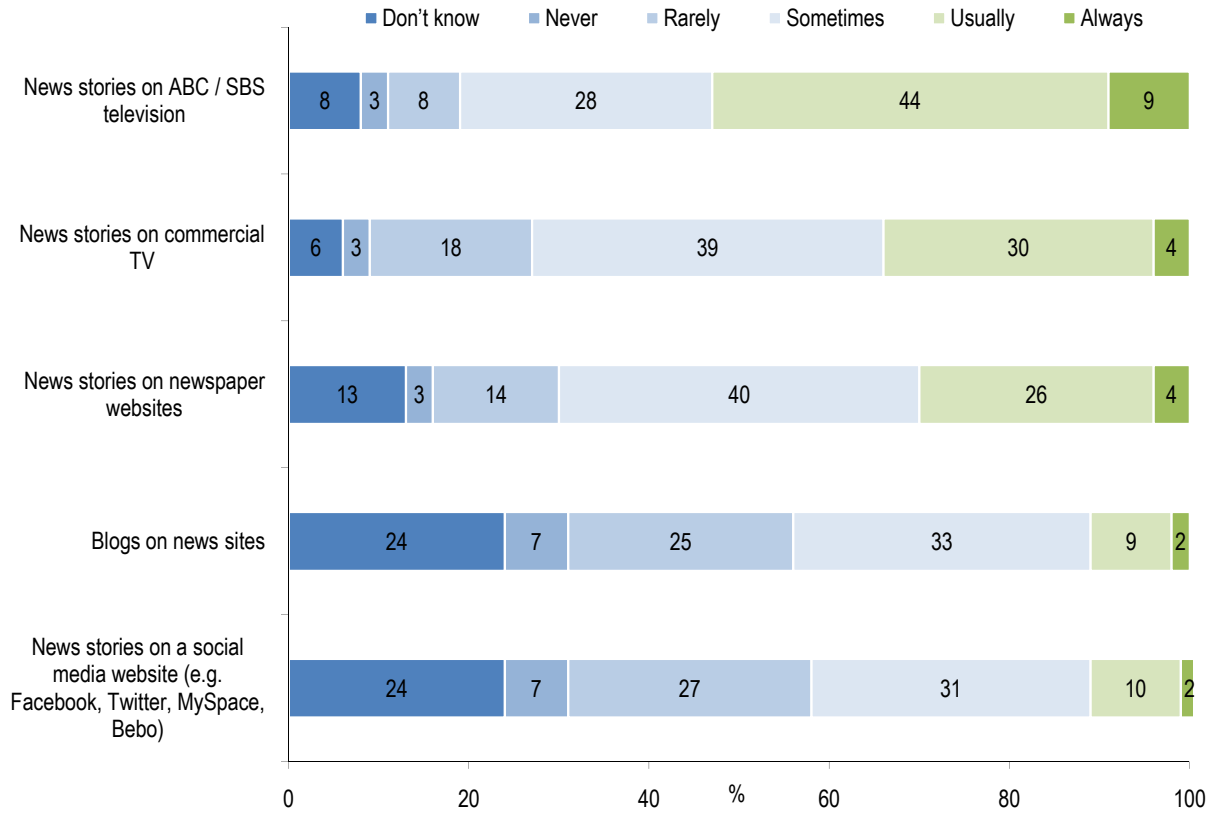
Source: ACMA, Digital Australians online survey, 2011.

D1 ASK ALL: News can be obtained from a number of different sources including TV, internet and newspapers. Please indicate how accurate you think news stories from each of the following sources are in general, S/R PER ITEM, RANDOMISE ITEMS

Base: Total sample, n=1,250.

When respondents were asked about how they perceived the fairness of various news sources, the findings were similar to those for accuracy. For news stories on ABC and SBS television, 53 per cent of respondents believed they usually or always gave both sides of the story. For commercial television news, this figure was 34 per cent (Figure 17).

**Figure 17 Perceptions of fairness of various news sources**



Source: ACMA, Digital Australians online survey, 2011.

D2 ASK ALL: Please indicate to what extent you believe each of the following sources of news give both sides of a story: S/R PER ITEM, RANDOMISE ITEMS

Base: Total sample, n=1,250.

## Online news standards

Generally, respondents agreed that the same standards that apply to accuracy and fairness of news stories offline should apply to online news on the websites of Australian broadcasters and news organisations. It was also just as important for nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) of respondents to be able to make a clear distinction between advertising and other content on these websites as on radio and television. Older respondents (aged 55 years and over) were significantly more likely to hold these views (Table 18).

**Table 18 Attitudes towards accuracy and fairness of various news sources**

	Total sample (n=1,250)	18–29 (n=262)	30–44 (n=353)	45–54 (n=233)	55+ (n=402)	Male (n=613)	Female (n=637)
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
On the internet, Australian news organisations should take the time to check the facts before publishing a news story	79	74	76	81	84	78	80
Websites of Australian television broadcasters should have the same rules about accuracy and fairness as their news items shown on television	77	70	75	79	83	76	79
It is just as important to be able to make a clear distinction between advertising and other content on the websites of Australian broadcasters as on radio and TV	74	69	69	77	80	73	75
There should be some way for me to make a formal complaint about the accuracy of online news content	65	63	64	69	66	66	65
On the news on television, there should be warnings that prepare me for graphic photos or video material	64	64	63	67	63	57	70
On news organisations' websites on the internet there should be warnings that prepare me for graphic photos or video material	61	60	64	63	58	55	67

Source: ACMA, Digital Australians online survey, 2011.

D4 ASK ALL Below are some statements that other people have made about news programs on TV and the internet. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement: S/R PER ITEM, RANDOMISE ITEMS

Base: Total sample, n=1,250.

## Graphic material

Generally, a similar proportion of respondents agreed that there should be warnings about graphic photos or video material on the news on television (64 per cent) as on news organisations' websites (61 per cent). Women were significantly more likely to have this view (70 and 67 per cent respectively) than men (57 and 55 per cent respectively) (Table 18).

## Special case—the protection of children

Focus group participants indicated that warnings about graphic images and video on the news were important to parents. They were also concerned about other news content that may be upsetting for children. However, there was an acknowledgement that parents were simply not always there to explain or talk about upsetting or inappropriate content children may find online—be it news stories or video content. They recognised that it is ultimately the parents' responsibility to monitor children's online access, but acknowledged the practical difficulty of doing this (see also the discussion on community standards in Chapter 5):

I limit my children's exposure to watching the news due to the horrific images they show ... but you can't do that online ... they come across all sorts of things.

## Trust and brand

For many, the perceived trustworthiness or credibility, and fairness, of online news sites appeared to depend on whether or not the source was an established brand. Where traditional brands also had an online presence, the same credibility was also attached to online content.

Focus group participants frequently explained that they chose online news sources due to their affiliation with an existing and trusted offline or traditional brand. Many said they believed that ABC News online, for example, was as credible as ABC News on television.

## **Complaints mechanisms**

Many focus group participants were aware of mechanisms to complain about online content that may breach personal privacy or be inappropriate, but most were generally sceptical about online content providers acting on such complaints.

When prompted, some expected online news sources, including broadcasters' websites, to have the same standards about accuracy and fairness as their offline counterparts. They expected to be able to complain to the media organisation concerned if there was an issue with online content, but were generally unsure about who to complain to if the site did not resolve the issue.

The online survey found that 65 per cent agreed that there should be some way for them to make a formal complaint about the accuracy of online news content.

Participants generally believed that any complaints about user-generated content would need to be made directly to the site hosting the content, but they felt that the site operators were unlikely to do anything about it, unless the content was seen to be illegal in some regard.

## **Local news**

Research participants welcomed the extraordinary flexibility the internet has brought to keeping up to date with news and current affairs from their community as well as from around the world.

The downside of this was the perception that accuracy could suffer due to the need for exposure, with user-generated news and blogs seen as commentary rather than fact. However, for many, the internet provided a better and more immediate vehicle for local, national and international news than did television or radio.

With many consumers starting to access local news and information online, according to their interests and on demand, the community may no longer need current local news content quotas to the same extent. However, views about this were not sought as part of the online survey. Additionally, those who are not online may depend more on traditional sources, including television news, for their local news.