

■ OPINION ■

THE PERILS OF OUR NEWS CONSUMPTION HABITS



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

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The transition from intentional news seeking to algorithmic news consumption among younger demographics represents a significant shift in the media landscape. For young people, news has become less about the deliberate act of tuning in to scheduled broadcasts and more about the passive consumption of algorithmically curated fragments and abbreviated headlines on social media platforms. It is far less likely that you will catch your twenty-year-old self leafing through freshly printed newspaper columns as opposed to your parents or grandparents. This shift is clearly visible to us, but how does it matter?

According to the 2025 Digital News Report, published by the Reuters Institute, over half of under-35-year-olds in the United States, 54 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds, and 50 percent of 25 to 34-year-olds now say that social media and video networks serve as their primary sources of news consumption. News distribution now appears to be embedded within entertainment feeds and is shaped by algorithms designed to maximise engagement rather than understanding.

Previously, news consumption was largely intentional. Older generations were more likely to seek out their news, instead of merely coming across it. However, with the rise of the internet and the advent of online platforms, traditional journalism now struggles to compete with an endless stream of short-form content that is easy to consume and goes hand-in-hand with an alarmingly declining rate of attention spans.

In recent years, bite-sized news outlets across social media

platforms have grown immensely popular amongst the youth. Such platforms feature chunks of information, usually presented in the form of eye-grabbing headlines and postcards. They also feature excerpts of the related piece of discussion doled out in the caption or follow-up slides.

To us, while it may appear to be efficient, this style of news delivery prioritises immediacy and shareability over depth and context, reducing complex issues to consumable fragments that often lack nuance. And the reason why it matters is that the way news is delivered shapes how it is understood.

Not too long ago, a headline was making the rounds on the internet that generated public criticism. It had been suggested that the High Court had ruled that women's consent was no longer required for a second marriage. This was framed as a sudden rollback of women's rights, implying that legal safeguards had been removed overnight and that the courts had effectively endorsed unfettered polygamy. In reality, the judgment had actually dismissed a writ petition that had previously aimed to challenge the existing law under Section 6 of the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961.

I had seen many of my friends and classmates express distress over the news, without necessarily having a clear understanding of the legal complications involved. This is precisely what warrants closer scrutiny of the media through which news is being disseminated. It is concerning because of their tendency to flatten news and make it shallow.

I say this because, in contrast to earlier modes of news consumption, which demanded criteria such as reading comprehension and focus, algorithmic delivery removes intentionality from the process. What is read, when it is read, and how frequently it appears are all determined through systems designed to maximise retention. To keep users hooked, they are confined within informational environments that mirror their already existing beliefs, narrowing exposure to different perspectives. This begs the question: Where does it leave us?

The way we learn to interpret our surroundings has implications for democratic participation. Democracy relies upon an informed population capable of understanding laws, policies, and institutional processes. Young adults today follow the news less closely than any other age group. But here's the thing. Even if you don't actively go looking for the news, the news still finds you.

Instead of traditional forms of media such as print or broadcast channels, we access news through for-you pages, influencers, podcasts, tweets, and so on. However, passive exposure does not always equate to informed awareness, if at all.

Encountering mere headlines while scrolling does not provide the context necessary to understand political decisions, legal rulings, or policy debates. What it does is produce a surface-level familiarity with issues that are complex in nature and demand sustainable engagement. When information is consumed in fragments, interpretation is shaped more by emotional framing than by factual substance.

For this reason, the responsibility to remain informed cannot be delegated to digital platforms. The solution for this is simple. Young people must move beyond algorithmic convenience and adopt more intentional habits of interacting with what's happening around the world.

This could include cultivating reading habits and engaging with longer-form content. In the absence of such effort, democracy risks being shaped by impressions rather than by informed judgement.

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