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Informed or Overwhelmed?

Understanding the impact of online news on children and young people's wellbeing

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Foreword

Watching, reading and listening to news has always been central to how we all make sense of the world around us. For children and young people, engaging with news plays a vital role in developing critical thinking skills and helps them grow up into informed and engaged citizens.

Today's children and young people are increasingly consuming news online, whether or not they are actively seeking it out. This means news is filtered through algorithmic-driven feeds, delivered by influencers as often as established news outlets, and shaped by systems that can prioritise engagement and monetisation over depth and accuracy. This modern-day news environment gives instant access to unfolding events and global perspectives, in a way that traditional news media did not, widening its reach amongst children and young people.

However, as this research finds, this online information environment can also create new anxieties and cause overwhelm, worry and upset. The murder of Charlie Kirk in September 2025 showed starkly the consequences of an unchecked online information environment, with graphic videos of his murder shown to millions on social media, including children. As well as exposing children to potentially harmful content, the growing presence of AI-generated content and misinformation is making it harder and harder to discern fact from fiction. This can have real world consequences like we saw in the summer of 2024 when the rapid spread of misinformation on social media fuelled riots throughout the UK.

With the digital news landscape having the power to influence opinion and world views, and against the backdrop of the current government proposing to lower the voting age in UK general elections to 16, it is more important than ever that young people

have access to accurate and trustworthy information. Of equal importance is providing them with the opportunity to develop the skills to think critically about the information they encounter. Yet, this research shows that media literacy education in schools is a postcode lottery, with children from higher-income households significantly more likely than those from lower income households to receive lessons on verifying information and understanding AI.

We must support schools, with clear direction set by government, to ensure all children leave school with the media literacy skills and knowledge needed to navigate a digital world. But this cannot be the responsibility of schools alone.

Social media companies also have an important role to play. While the Online Safety Act requires platforms to protect children from harmful content, including graphic news content, more proactive measures are needed. Platforms must be safe and media-literate by design — embedding features that help children evaluate, question and contextualise what they see. This includes labelling AI-generated content, prompting users to verify information before resharing and promoting tools that help users manage what they see online.

If we want children and young people to grow up informed rather than overwhelmed, co-ordinated action from across sectors is needed to support them and their families to navigate online news in all its forms. We look forward to working with industry, government, civil society and the parents and carers facing the everyday impact on their children's wellbeing to make this a reality.

Rachel Huggins

Co-CEO, Internet Matters

Social media has expanded the concept of 'news' far beyond traditional journalism. Editorial judgement can be overridden by algorithms that reward recency and attention-grabbing content, increasingly blurring the line between factual information, opinion and entertainment.

Anyone connected to the Internet is now a potential publisher. This accessibility, however, comes with the unintended consequence that most content out there does not adhere to the standards that trained journalists have followed for generations. These can be summarised as three core principles: **first**, accuracy: is the content checked and factually accurate? **Second**, integrity: is it free from hidden agendas or paid influence? And **third**, transparency: does the creator clearly acknowledge their biases? Instead, children view news unfiltered for bias; unchecked for accuracy and lacking in integrity.

As a result, rather than being offered a classically curated and fact checked editorial view, users are targeted according to what and how they watch, with the associated risk of staying in echo chambers where their views go unchallenged.

In this context, existing news organisations have an important role in helping children engage critically with current affairs. Among those accessing news through social media, two in five turn to established news outlets such as the BBC; while many others rely on content shared by creators or friends. By providing more age appropriate material on social media, news outlets could attract younger audiences to their brands and help children develop the necessary context to understand and evaluate what they consume.

Established news outlets have a crucial role in helping children verify the information they encounter. 58% of 15-17 year olds checked social media content against trusted news outlets – helping to build their understanding and assessing accuracy. Other ways of contributing to media literacy include creating explainers to give background and context and offering materials to help parents discuss major news events with their children

To extend reach and resonance while managing costs, news outlets can partner with creators to combine the governance of a newsroom with the popularity and social media nous of creators. We believe that these collaborations will be helpful to engage children more deeply with trusted information while building future audiences for journalistic content.

Several social media platforms are also taking steps to support content provenance standards and exploring ways to disseminate journalistic standards. Cross industry content authentication protocols are one response to this which is currently gaining some momentum.

We are optimistic about the future of news and encouraged by the interest and critical thinking that children are already applying in verifying content. However, news outlets and social media companies – whose shared purpose is to organise information responsibly- have a vital role in ensuring that the next generation is accurately and effectively informed.

Joanna Levesque

Managing Director, FT Strategies



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Executive Summary

Social media is reshaping how children and young people consume news. It plays a positive role in keeping them informed about current events and exposes them to different perspectives on what is happening in the world around them. However, the social media news environment also presents significant challenges.

Social media delivers a constant stream of both verified and unverified content side by side, making it hard to discern fact from fiction. Furthermore, algorithmically-driven feeds mean that young people are often shown news stories they have not actively sought out, which can result in them feeling distressed and overwhelmed. If this environment goes unchecked, it risks leaving citizens, especially children and young people, less able to make informed decisions and could ultimately undermine the integrity of democratic processes.

This report draws on both qualitative and quantitative research to explore how children and young people navigate the online news landscape, especially the social media news environment, and its effects on their wellbeing. It highlights the importance of media literacy for all children and examines the roles that government, industry, schools and families can play in supporting young people to engage safely and critically with news.

Key findings

Children and young people are regularly consuming news on social media from a range of sources

- 76% of children and young people consume news weekly, with 68% of those who consume news getting their news from social media.
- Established news outletsⁱ accounts play an important role on social media, as they are the most trusted source of news on platforms. However, despite this high trust, children and young people who consume news on social media are just as likely to get news from friends and family (39%) and influencer or content creator (40%) accounts as they are from established news outlet accounts (41%).
- Algorithms play a significant role in who children and young people get their news from. 40% of children and young people who get their news from social media do not follow news-focused accounts, with many reporting they come across news content in their recommender feeds.
- Household income strongly shapes news consumption habits. Children in higher income households are more likely than children in lower income households to consume news more frequently (88% cf. 63%), pay closer attention (28% vs 4%) and access a wider range of sources.ⁱⁱ

i. We use the term established news outlets to refer to long-standing, professionally run media organisations such as newspapers, television channels, and radio broadcasters. Examples in a UK context include BBC News, ITV and the Financial Times. They are typically characterised by editorial oversight, professional journalistic standards, and regulatory frameworks that distinguish them from newer digital-only publishers, influencers, or independent content creators. Other terms used to describe them are legacy, trusted or traditional news outlets.

ii. Throughout the report when we refer to higher income households, we are referring to those in the sample with a household income of £80,000+ and when we are referring to lower income households, we are referring to those in our sample with a household income of £10-30,000.

Distressing news stories, mis- and disinformation and AI-generated content impact children and young people's wellbeing

- Six in ten (61%) children and young people who consume news on social media report that they have seen a story that worried or upset them in the past month, including content relating to war and conflict, violence and death and crisis events.
- The algorithmic design of platforms can exacerbate this, pushing negative and upsetting content to children and young people who are not seeking it out. An example of this was the murder of Charlie Kirk in the USA on 10th September 2025; videos of the shooting quickly flooded users' X, TikTok, and YouTube feeds, even though many later reported that they had not wanted to see them.
- Social media can also create new anxieties and overwhelm children and young people. 47% of children and young people report that seeing news content on social media gives them new problems to think about, and four in ten (41%) report feeling overwhelmed by the news content they see on social media.
- AI-generated content and mis- and disinformation is widespread and harmful: Over a quarter (27%) of children have believed a fake or AI-generated story, and 41% think they may have. This content can leave children feeling embarrassed (10%), confused (30%) and less trusting of the news (31%).
- Vulnerable children are disproportionately negatively affected by the online news environment compared to their peers without these vulnerabilities.ⁱⁱⁱ They report higher rates of worry (76% cf. 57%), greater likelihood of believing fake or AI-generated news (43% cf. 23%), and are more likely to feel upset or embarrassed from seeing this content.

Children and young people see navigating this news environment as central to staying informed and have developed their own support strategies

- 74% of children and young people agree that social media helps them feel informed about current events and 67% agree that social media is usually where they learn about breaking news. It also gives them access to views beyond their offline networks and keeps them informed about global events.
- Trusted adults, including parents, carers and teachers, play an important role in supporting children to navigate the online news environment, including verifying information.
- 52% of children and young people turn to a trusted adult when they see distressing news content on social media and 51% report that they would speak to a trusted adult if they wanted to verify news content.
- Children and young people also turn to social media platforms to verify whether news content is true. This takes many forms including looking at an established news outlet's social media account (34%), checking if the account that posted the content is verified (26%) and checking comments on the post (25%).
- Some children and young people do nothing on platforms when they encounter upsetting or distressing content, or fake or AI-generated news, simply choosing to scroll past it.

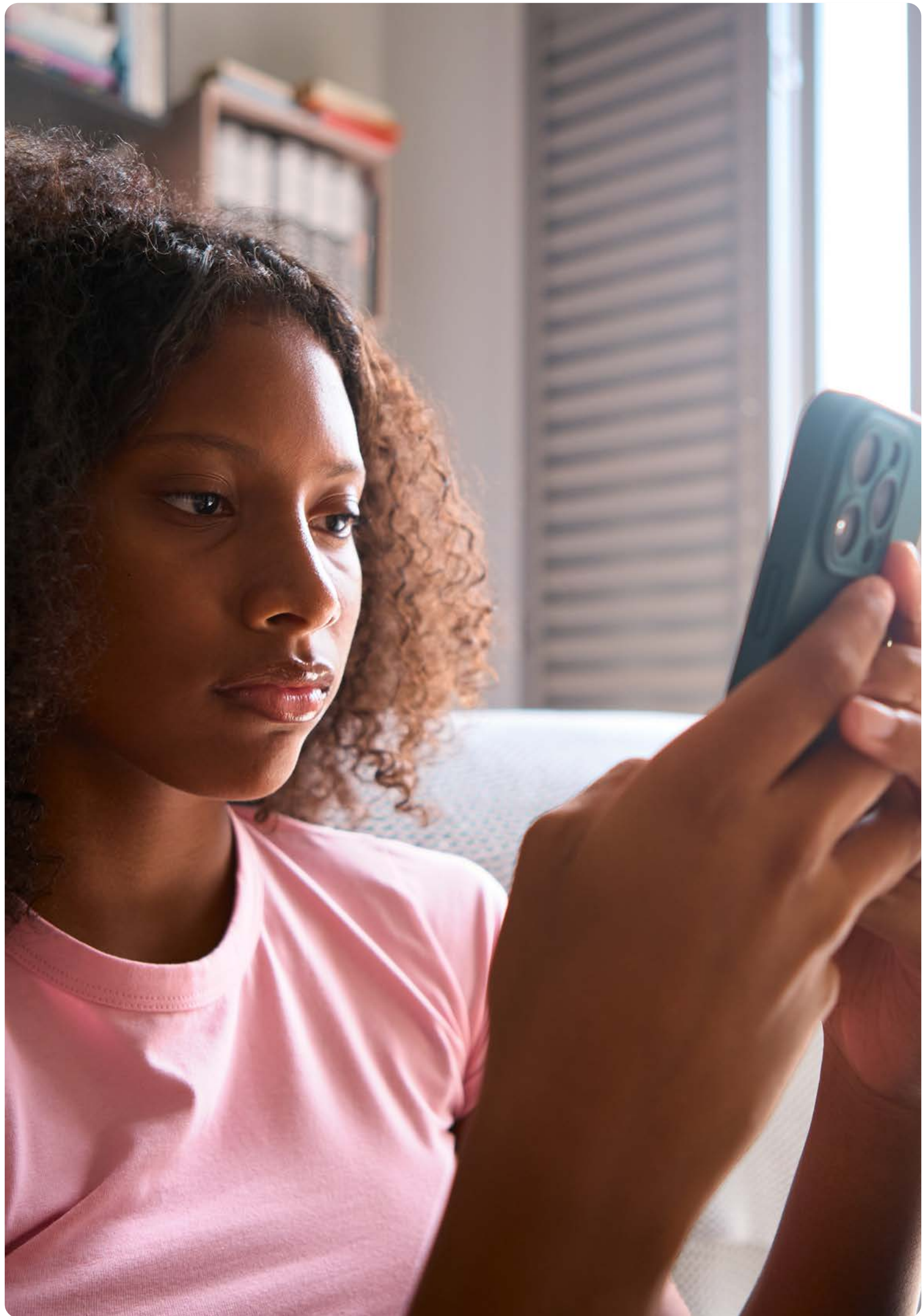
ⁱⁱⁱ. We refer to children who have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), who receive special educational needs (SEN) support, or who have a physical/ mental health condition which requires professional help as 'vulnerable'. We recognise that there are multiple understandings of the term vulnerable, and this definition is for the purposes of this report.

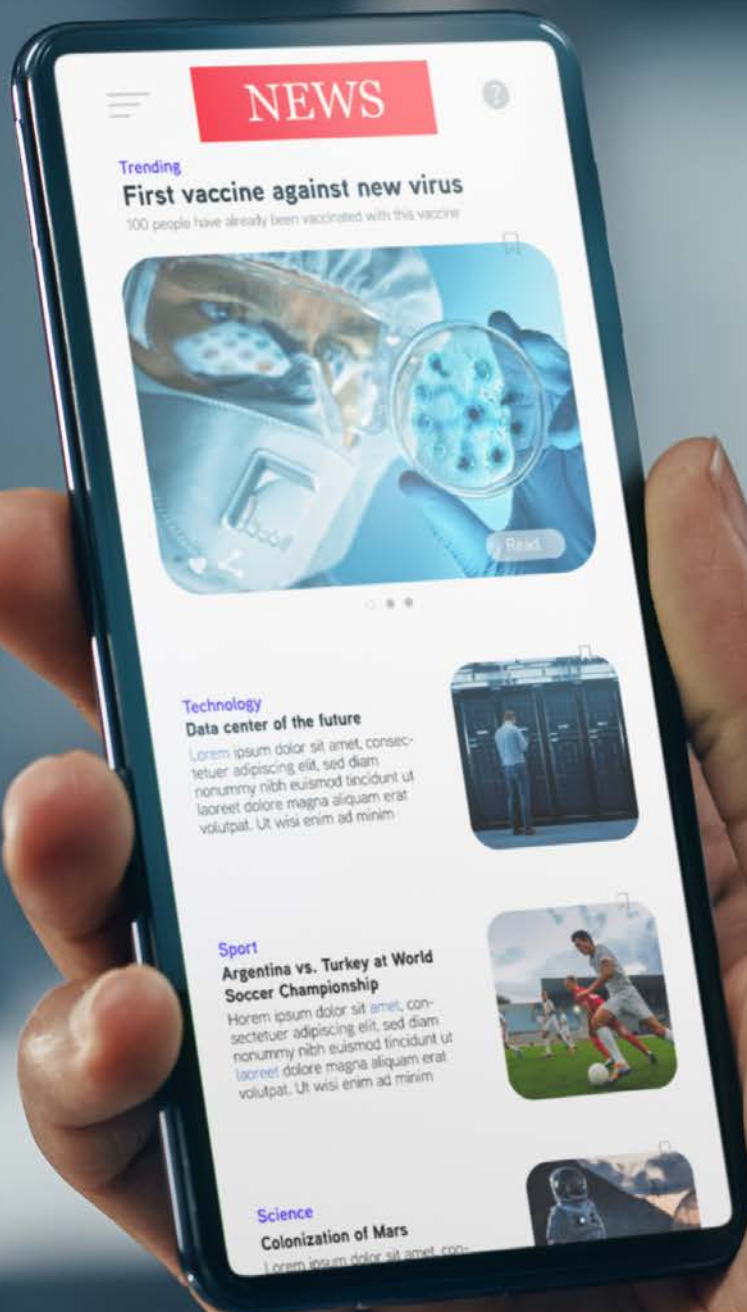
Children and young people agree that families, schools, social media platforms and established news outlets all have a role to play in supporting their media literacy

- Parents play an important role in supporting children to critically engage with the information they see online. 84% of children and young people who consume news have spoken to their parents about how to tell whether online news is true. However, children and young people acknowledge that sometimes parents also need support to navigate this everchanging environment.
- Media literacy education is a postcode lottery: Only 56% of children and young people that consume news report that their school or teacher has spoken to them about how to tell whether online news is true. Children and young people in higher income households are more likely than those in lower income households to report they have had these conversations (66% cf. 49%).
- Children and young people think social media companies should do more to support their wellbeing and their ability to discern fact from fiction online. Nearly half (48%) of children think social media companies should take proactive steps to remove fake news, while 40% say AI-generated content should be clearly flagged or labelled.
- Established news outlets also have a role to play, with children and young people turning to them to help them verify news information and stayed informed. 45% of children and young people believe trusted news outlets should create content specifically for them.

Recommendations to support children and young people to navigate the online news environment critically and safely

- **Social media companies** must support children and young people's media literacy by embedding it into platform design, including features to actively help children evaluate, question and contextualise the information they see. They must also make their platforms safe-by-design including through building in features that proactively reduce risks and create a healthier information environment.
- **Established news outlets** should provide accurate and age-appropriate content on the platforms where children and young people access news, as well as providing support to schools and families to develop their media literacy skills.
- **Government** must mandate robust age assurance on all platforms to ensure children are receiving an age-appropriate experience.
- **Government** must support schools to deliver media literacy education to every child at all key stages. This includes supporting teachers with the resources, confidence and knowledge to teach media literacy effectively.
- **Government** should appoint the Technology Secretary of State as responsible for coordinating a cross-government strategy for media literacy. This should include an awareness campaign to support parents and children to critically assess the information they see online, building their knowledge and skills.





Introduction

Social media has become the primary medium of news and information for many people, including children. The shift from established news channels such as TV and print to social media has radically changed how children and young people consume news.

While social media may offer immediate access to news which keeps children and young people informed and connected with the world around them, the volume of information, which is often negative, poses a risk to their wellbeing. The negative effects of this information environment are exacerbated by the rise of mis- and disinformation and AI-generated content, which complicates how to distinguish between true and false content online and impacts young people's trust in the news.

This report explores children and young people's news consumption on social media. We define news as: information about what is happening in the world, including different countries and local areas. It can include stories about events, people, politics, sports, weather or other things affecting people's lives. Our definition of news includes content from any source, including content published online by the public and influencers, as well as outlets or professionals that follow journalistic standards.

The report looks at the difficulties children and young people face in trying to balance wellbeing with staying informed about the news. With the UK government planning to lower the voting age to 16, it is more important than ever that young people are equipped to engage critically with news in an age-appropriate way. Using insights from children and young people, this report offers recommendations for industry and government that will support children to be able to consume news content safely.

Methodology

Desk research

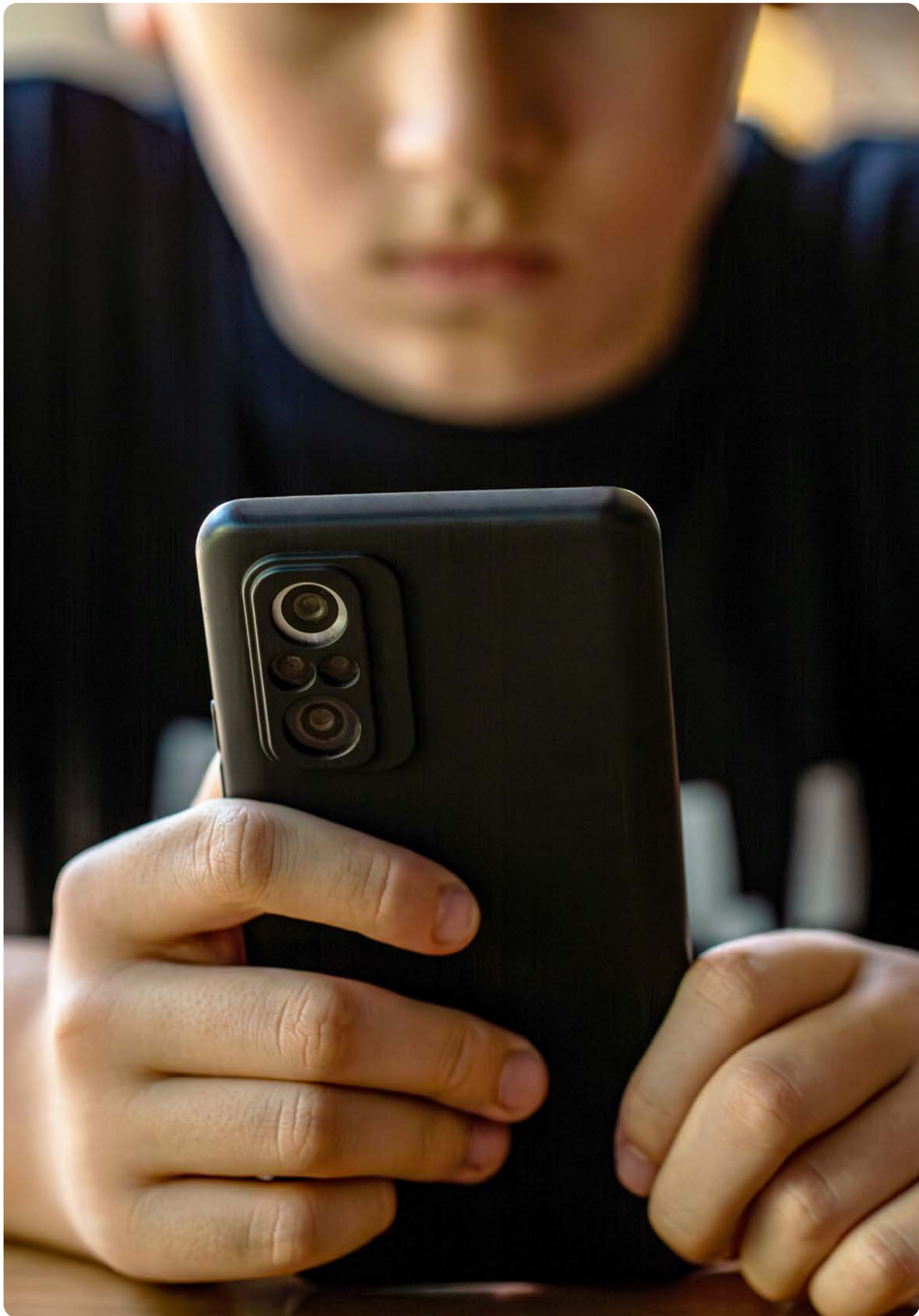
This report is informed by a review of the literature on the changing news eco-system, with a focus on how it pertains to young people. This includes grey literature on the subject.

Quantitative survey

The quantitative findings are based on a survey of 1,000 UK children aged 11-17. Of the 1,000 children we surveyed, 961 said they consumed news, and the rest were screened out. Unless otherwise stated, we are referring to this sample when reporting on children and young people in the survey data. Fieldwork was carried out from the 14-25th July 2025. The survey explored children's news consumption habits, sources they follow and trust, experiences of seeing negative news, mis- and disinformation and AI-generated content, and whether they have been taught to verify news information they see online. We also asked what more could be done to support them. Figures may not always add to 100% due to rounding.

Focus groups

In September 2025, we conducted 3 virtual focus groups with 21 children aged 13-17 who consume news. The focus groups were made up of children of a mix of genders, UK regions and ages. We also hosted one classroom workshop session with 19 children aged 16-17 in a London school. Topics covered included their general news consumption habits, social media news and the role of algorithms, fake news and AI-generated content, and media literacy including the role of parents and schools in teaching children and young people how to verify information.



Section 1: Understanding today's news environment and the role of media literacy

The rise of online news

With the growth of online platforms, the past decade has seen dramatic shifts in news consumption habits. Engagement with traditional news channels such as television and print continue to fall, while social media and online platforms (including videos and podcasts) have exponentially grown as sources of news. In 2018, 79% of UK adults accessed their news through television; by 2025, this has fallen to 63%.¹ Meanwhile, seven in ten UK adults now consume news online and 51% access news through social media: an increase from 45% five years ago.²

Unsurprisingly, these patterns are being driven by younger generations. Ofcom finds that 57% of 12–15-year-olds access the news via social media and this figure rises to three-quarters (75%) amongst 16–24-year-olds.³ The popularity of apps like TikTok as a source of news for children and young people has grown rapidly, with a third (31%) of UK children aged 12–15 using it to access news stories.⁴ This represents a 20-percentage-point increase from 2020 (11%).⁵

The social media news environment

The online and social media news environment is characterised by a constant stream of information, where sensationalist updates are prioritised over depth and context to keep users engaged.⁶

The relentless pace of this environment leaves little time for reflection or understanding and can actually lead to disengagement. An Ofcom study found that it leaves people feeling overloaded and desensitised to the news they consume.⁷

As well as providing a constant stream of information, social media algorithms also shape the news content that people see. As these algorithms are designed to maximise user engagement, they offer users highly personalised experiences by tailoring feeds

and content based on previous engagement. This can result in people being shown viewpoints which mainly reinforce and align with their existing beliefs, rather than challenge them.⁸ It can also lead to users rarely seeing current affairs posts. If a user does not interact with this content, the algorithm will learn this through feedback loops and show less of it. Users are also more likely to see popular content as this is amplified by platforms, making its spread faster by presenting it to more users on their feeds.⁹ If this information is not verified, it can lead to the proliferation of misinformation and polarising content, both of which can have significant offline consequences.

Algorithms also impact how news is presented on social media, especially by news influencers. Like all social media influencers, news influencers are incentivised to create content that is optimised for recommender systems. That is content which is highly shareable, sensational and which prioritises platform engagement over depth or accuracy. A Pew Research Centre survey on American news influencers finds that most (59%) monetise their online personality in some way (e.g. subscriptions, donations, merchandise sales). This means they must cater to the algorithm in order to financially benefit from it.¹⁰

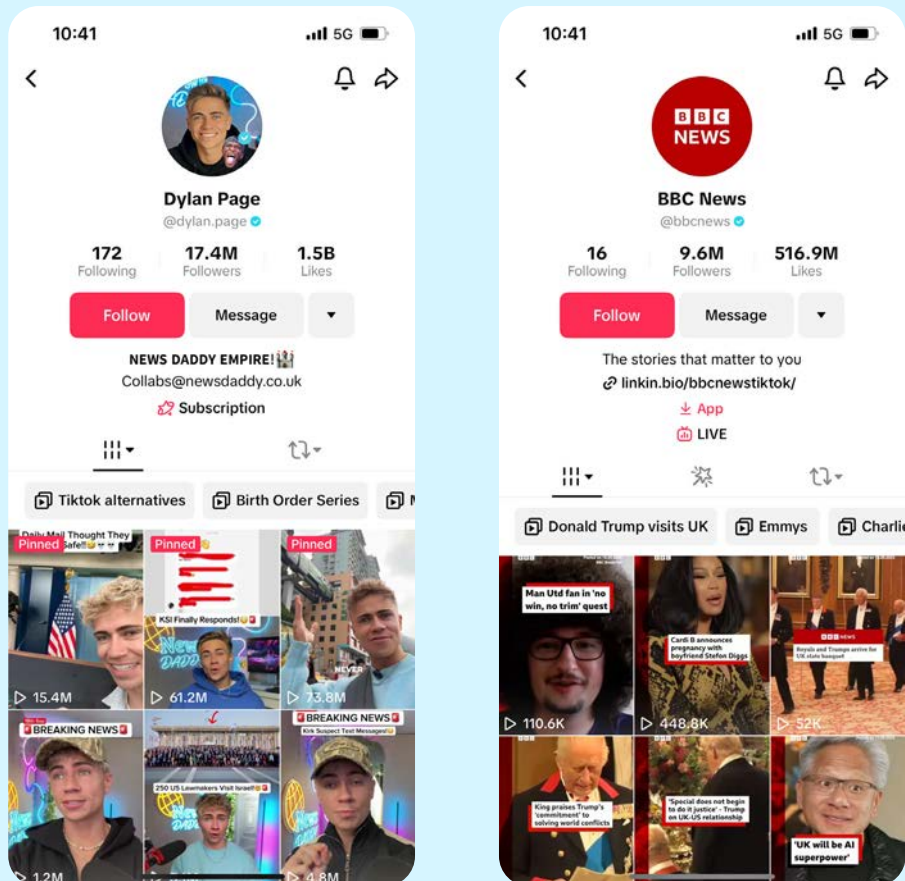
Furthermore, unlike established news outlets and journalists, news influencers and content creators are not bound by journalistic standards, nor do they have editorial oversight. While some platforms may have community guidelines around prohibiting misinformation,^{11,12} such as restricting accounts that repeatedly post false information, the extent to which these are enforced is unclear. As a result, incentivised by monetisation and views, news creators may create simplistic narratives on current affairs which are not rooted in journalistic standards of research, scrutiny and objectivity. A recent UNESCO survey finds that two-thirds of digital content creators do not fact check their information prior to sharing it.¹³ There can be much at stake as a result of this. Reuters Institute finds that the most popular 'alternative media' online influencers – such as Tucker Carlson and Joe Rogan

– have often been criticised for factual inaccuracies, or for spreading conspiracies and misleading narratives.¹⁴ This is ultimately contributing to a highly polarised online news environment, rife with uncertainty and bias.

This shift to online news personalities is not entirely negative. For younger users, it may enable them to engage more with the news due to their digestible,

easy-to-understand formats. Influencers like Dylan Page ('News Daddy') – who has amassed 17.4 million followers on TikTok, surpassing even the official BBC News TikTok account (at the time of writing) – provide expressive, casual and accessible explanations of current events (see Image 1). These influencers may appear more authentic and personal than established news outlets, allowing them to gain more traction on social media among younger audiences.

Image 1: TikTok pages of Dylan Page and the official BBC News account (screenshots taken 18th September 2025).



The consequences of the social media news environment

This online and social media-driven news environment is creating significant challenges, not only for the news ecosystem but society as whole. In recent years, buoyed by social media algorithms, we have seen the proliferation of fake news and mis- and disinformation, as well as the rise and spread of AI-generated content (including deepfakes).

The spread of misinformation can deepen social and political divides and even trigger real-world harm, as demonstrated by the riots which took place in the UK after the horrific 2024 murders in Southport. Following the deaths of three young girls in Southport, many social media accounts - several with followings of over 100,000 people - falsely stated that the killer was a Muslim asylum seeker, alongside unverified information about his politics and ideology.¹⁵ The riots that followed were concluded by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee to be spurred on by the “viral spread of harmful misinformation”, amplified by recommender systems across major platforms.¹⁶ One of the key conclusions that the Committee’s report came to is that the Online Safety Act “is already out of date, failing to adequately address generative AI—a technology evolving faster than governments can legislate—which could make the next misinformation crisis even more dangerous.”¹⁷

The spread of AI-generated content, including deepfakes, on social media is also increasing the risk of mis- and disinformation and making it more difficult for users to verify and trust news. There have already been examples of audio and visual deepfakes of politicians being created, showing them doing or saying things that have not happened. For example, in the UK a deepfake audio clip was created in 2023 of leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer, in which he abused his Party’s staffers,¹⁸ and in January 2025 a deepfake video of Starmer surfaced in which he said that some of the claims brought against paedophile Jimmy Savile were “slightly frivolous”.¹⁹ While neither

gained widespread traction, this type of content has the potential to shape narratives and influence public perception, particularly if such content reaches larger audiences in the future.

Mis- and disinformation, and content that is AI-generated, pose a direct challenge to democratic processes. When false or manipulated information spreads widely, it can distort public understanding of political issues, candidates, and policy debates. This makes it harder for citizens to make informed decisions, undermining the principle of a well-informed electorate — a cornerstone of democratic societies. In extreme cases, false information or deepfakes may be used deliberately to influence election outcomes or discredit political opponents, threatening the integrity of democratic processes.

The growing role of influencers and content creators as news sources amplifies these risks. As noted, much of their content may go unverified, and platform algorithms can reinforce echo chambers that narrow perspectives and entrench biases. Together, these dynamics drive polarisation, weaken trust in institutions, and increase tensions around elections and public debate.

Deepfakes: AI-generated fake images, videos and audio which are convincingly manipulated to misrepresent the appearance, speech or actions of someone or something.

Misinformation: verifiably false information, shared without an intent to mislead.

Disinformation: false information where the intention is to deliberately deceive.

Fake news: deliberately false or misleading information presented as news, intended to deceive or manipulate audiences.

The role of media literacy in combatting the challenges of a changing news environment

Central to combating mis- and disinformation, polarisation, and the societal challenges they bring, is media literacy. Media literacy shapes how all users interact with both platforms and content, as well as how users respond to harmful content – either targeted at themselves or others. Good media literacy can be the difference between harmful content such as misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories spreading like wildfire, or being cut short by users that recognise their falsity or capacity for harm. By learning to critically evaluate sources, identify misinformation, and understand how algorithms shape the content they see, children and young people can become informed citizens capable of engaging responsibly in democratic life.

Media literacy can be defined as: *being able to evaluate information and distinguish between what is true and false online; being able to create and share digital content responsibly and safely; and the awareness and ability to protect yourself from the risks of being online.*

Despite the importance of media literacy, in the UK, media literacy education is a postcode lottery. As a result, by the time children and young people leave secondary school, they do so with significantly different levels of media literacy skills.²⁰ These gaps have significant real-world consequences; not only do they affect a child's ability to distinguish fact from fiction, but they also leave them more vulnerable to online harm. Internet Matters Pulse finds that 77% of children and young people have experienced at least one type of harm online.²¹ Recent research from the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation confirms that a key barrier to taking action when encountering online harm, including mis- and disinformation, is the lack of knowledge or digital skills to combat it.²²

To tackle this, and the broader challenges that the social media news environment brings, it is essential to close these gaps and equip children with the skills and knowledge to navigate online spaces confidently. Doing so will empower them to critically assess information and grow into happy, healthy, and engaged citizens.

The policy response to this news environment to date

In the UK, existing legislation goes some way to protecting people from the challenges posed by this evolving news environment. However, further policy action is needed to protect people from harm and help them navigate and engage with news responsibly.

The importance of such action is highlighted by recent government reports, including the 2024 House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee report on the Future of News, and subsequent 2025 report on Media Literacy. These reviews emphasised that more can be done to strengthen the population's media literacy skills and foster a healthier news ecosystem, including through tackling the spread of mis- and disinformation and AI-generated content.^{23,24}

Online Safety Act (2023)

The UK Online Safety Act (OSA) aims to make the online world safer by holding platforms accountable for the removal of harmful and illegal content, with a particular focus on protecting children online. This includes preventing children from accessing violent content, including news content, on social media.

The OSA also places duties on platforms regarding mis- and disinformation. Specifically, it requires action on the removal of illegal content such as state-sponsored disinformation. It also requires Ofcom, the regulator, to establish the Online Information Advisory Committee which will provide advice to Ofcom about specific areas of work relevant to mis- and disinformation.²⁵

Full Fact, an independent charity dedicated to improving the information environment, argue that platforms and online services should be mandated to treat misinformation as a priority for action under the Act even if it does not fall within the categories of harmful or illegal content.²⁶

The OSA also imposes additional duties on Category 1 services regarding the protection of news publishers and journalistic content, as well as content of democratic importance. Ofcom are still due to consult on how these measures will work.

Media Literacy

Currently the UK's approach to media literacy policy is fragmented and lacks a clear, strategic vision, underpinned by adequate investment. At present, responsibility for media literacy does not sit clearly with one government department but is spread across multiple departments – each with their own definition of media literacy and governing documents. How these departments operate and communicate with each other has hampered progress to date. While the Department for Education (DfE) sets the school curriculum and is an excellent means for reaching children at scale, it lacks specialist expertise in media literacy. Meanwhile, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) holds policy ownership but does not have direct mechanisms for delivering large-scale programmes, especially to children. Ofcom, the communications regulator, shares responsibility for promoting media literacy but has historically focused on small-scale interventions that struggle to reach a wide audience.

Some recent changes have been positive, such as the OSA placing a statutory duty on Ofcom to promote media literacy which they define as “the ability to use, understand and create media and communications across multiple formats and services”.²⁷ Ofcom has since launched a consultation on proposed recommendations of good practice intended to help platforms understand how they can support

media literacy.²⁸ At the same time, the Government's review of the school curriculum and assessment system in England presents an excellent opportunity to embed media literacy more effectively into the existing education frameworks, to enable all children to develop the skills to navigate today's complex information environment. While these initiatives mark a step in the right direction, their impact on the media literacy of the population is yet to be seen.

An upcoming election bill

The importance of improving media literacy is also underscored by the upcoming introduction of a new elections bill. The Government is proposing to lower the voting age to 16, in time for the next UK general election. The published policy paper confirming the Government's intentions states that lowering the voting age will lead to more young people engaging with democracy.

For this ambition to be realised, it will be essential to equip young people with the skills to navigate today's information environment—particularly the ability to verify information and to separate fact from fiction, given their heavy reliance on social media for news.

Future direction

There is growing recognition of the challenges posed by today's rapidly evolving news environment. Yet, despite policy progress, there remain clear gaps, particularly in ensuring that children and young people are equipped with the skills they need to navigate and critically engage with news online.

With the next generation increasingly exposed to information through social media feeds rather than established news sources, and with changes such as lowering the voting age on the horizon, the stakes for getting this right are higher than ever. It is against this backdrop that our research explores how children are engaging with news, including the sources they trust and turn to, and the associated impacts and risks, as well as what more can be done to support them.



Section 2: Where children and young people get their news and who they trust

Children and young people are regularly consuming news on social media. On these platforms, established news outlets remain highly trusted, yet many children and young people do not follow their accounts.

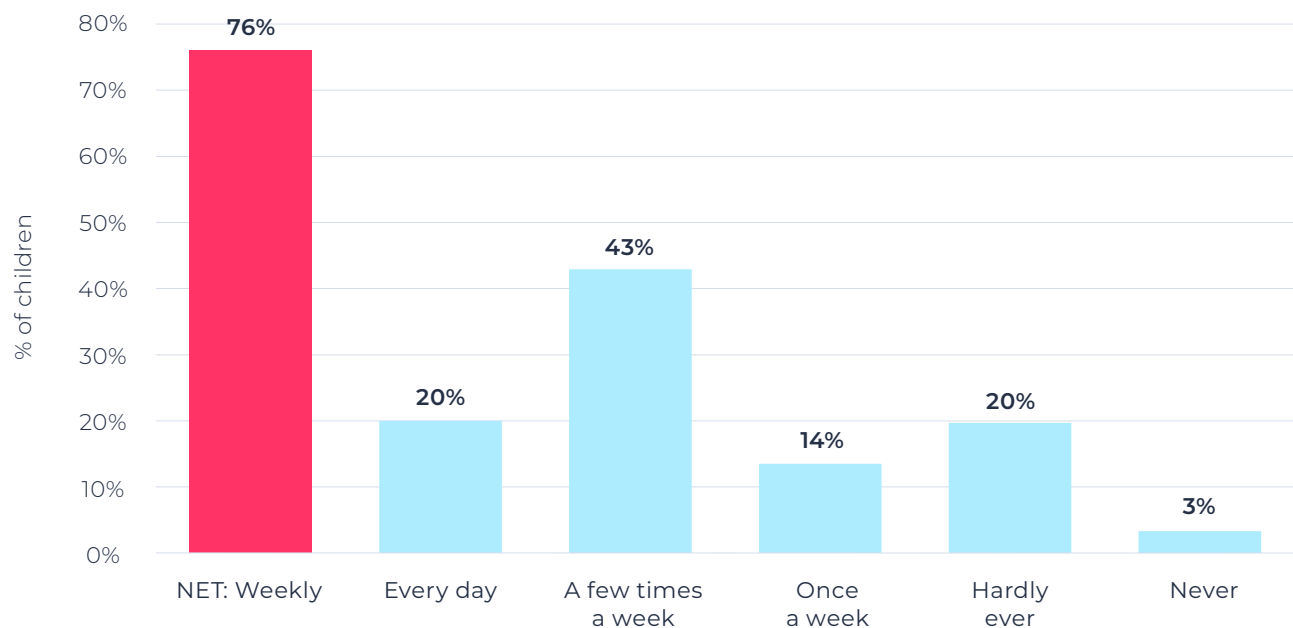
News is a weekly habit for most children and young people

Children and young people are regularly consuming news. 76% of all children in our sample watch, read or listen to news at least once a week, with a fifth (20%) saying they consume news daily. These consumption habits change with age, with older children consuming news more regularly. For example, 15–17-year-olds are twice as likely as 11–12-year-olds to engage with news content daily (23% cf. 12%).

Staying informed and learning new things drives news consumption

Consuming news serves many purposes for children and young people. The main reasons children consume news is to keep up to date with what is happening (63%) and to learn new things (55%). It's also seen as a way to engage in conversations with others (33%) and allows them to hear different points of view (30%).

Figure 1: Frequency of news consumption



Base: Children (1000). Q. How often, if at all, do you read, watch or listen to news stories? By news we mean information about things that are happening in the world, in your country, or in your local area. It can include stories about events, people, politics, sports, weather, or things that affect people's lives. News can be on TV, in newspapers, on websites, or social media.

Social media is children and young people's main source of news

News consumption habits have changed over time, with both adults and children increasingly getting news from social media. In our research, children and young people who consume news reported that their main source of news is social media (68%), followed by TV (60%) and family members (51%).

Girl, 15

"I watch news on TikTok and on the TV sometimes but it's quicker to go onto TikTok and see it."

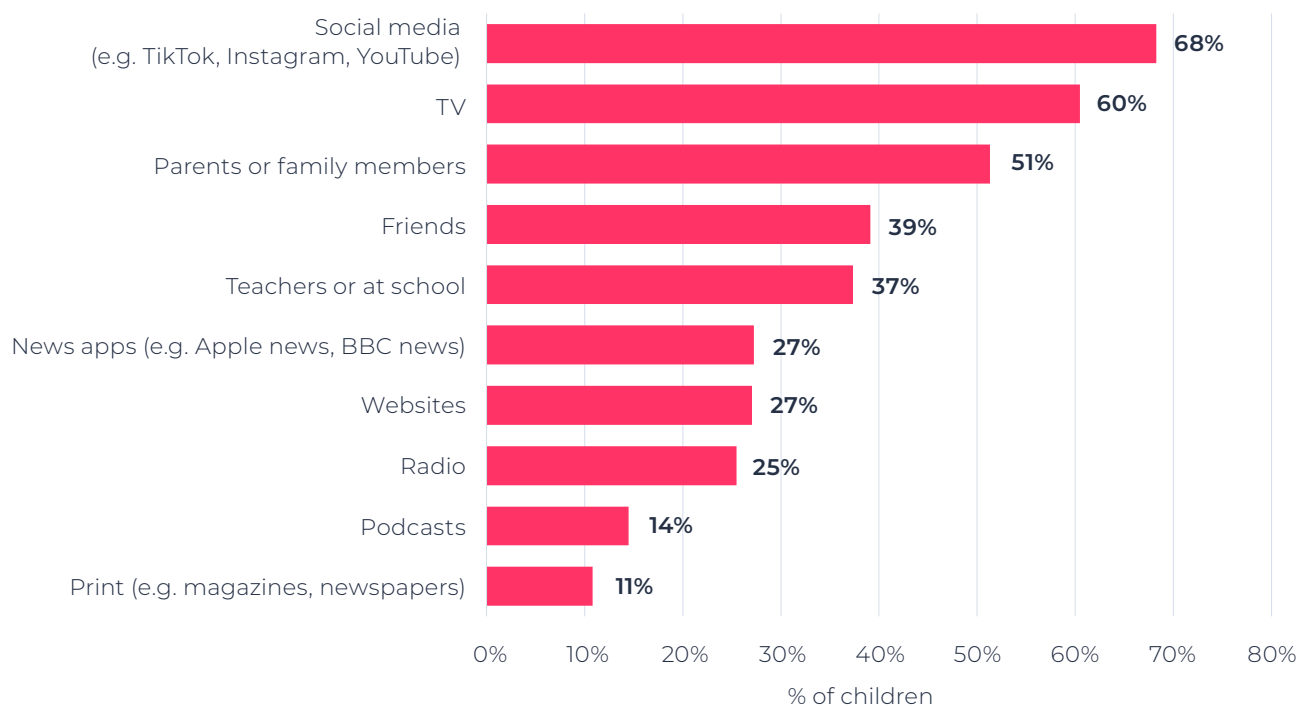
Boy, 17

"I see quite a bit of news and politics on my feed in general and then it branches to asking my parents who read more newspapers about the same events and asking what they think of it... [that] gives me a bit more information about the news which is happening."

Boy, 15

"Before I had TikTok, I didn't really see much news at all."

Figure 2: Main sources of news content for children who consume news



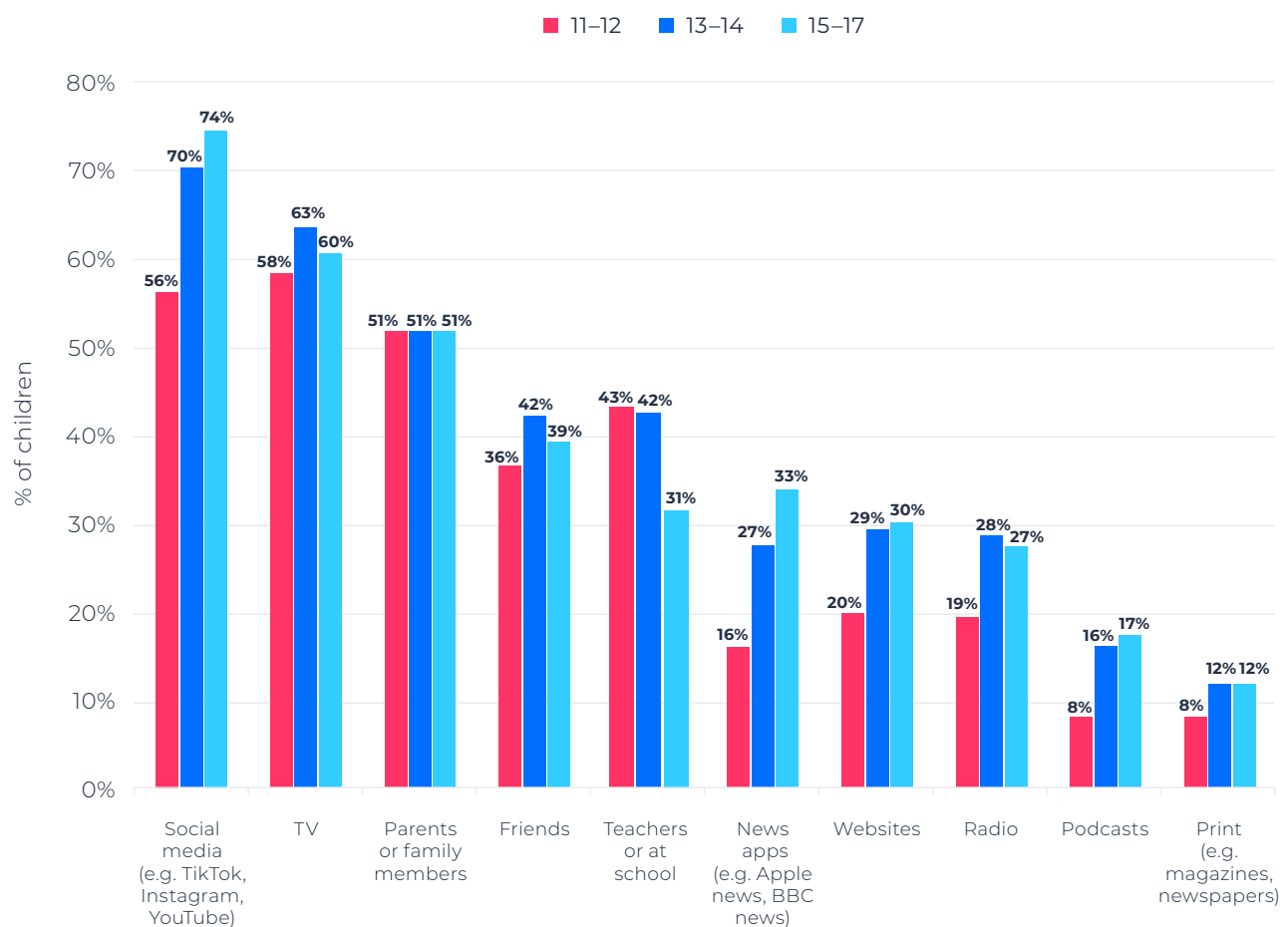
Base: Children who consume news (961). Q. Where do you usually come across or get news from? Please select all that apply.

Age is also a factor in where children and young people get their news from. For younger children schools play a more important role, with 43% of 11–12-year-olds getting news from schools and teachers compared to 31% of 15–17-year-olds.

Although children and young people aged 13–17 are more likely than 11–12-year-olds to get news from social media (72% cf. 56%), it is still a major

source of news for the younger group despite most platforms having a minimum use age of 13+. This is important to note as it means younger children are at risk of seeing content that is not age appropriate. Furthermore, they may not yet have the critical thinking skills needed to separate news from opinion or to identify mis- and disinformation, as discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Figure 3: Main sources of news content by age



Base: Children who consume news by age – 11–12 (250); 13–14 (282); 15–17 (439). Q. Where do you usually come across or get news from? Please select all that apply.

Established news outlets play an important role on social media

Social media is the most popular medium through which children consume news, yet many receive news on social media from the accounts of established news outlets. Two in five (41%) of children and young people get their news content from established news outlets' social media accounts (such as the BBC or ITV). Equally popular sources of news on social media for children and young people are influencers or content creators (40%) and friends and families (39%) accounts. Children often access news from multiple accounts, blending content from established news outlets with peers and influencers.

Children and young people also place high trust in established news outlets on social media. Among those who get their news from social media, established news outlets are the most trusted source of information (55%), followed by friends and family accounts (51%).

Girl, 16

"I see actual news accounts, like BBC News has a TikTok account."

Boy, 15

"I mostly see BBC News but I also follow a guy called Dylan Page."

Girl, 14

"[I get news from the] Daily Mail, it just comes up on my feed."

Platform design shapes the accounts children and young people get their news from

When we compare the social media accounts children and young people are receiving news from with the accounts they trust, an interesting gap emerges. Despite children and young people being equally likely to see, hear or read news from the social media accounts of established news outlets (41%) as influencers or content creators (40%), their trust in these sources varies significantly. When children and young people who consume news on social media were asked which accounts they trust the most, 55% said they trust the news given to them by established news outlets social media accounts, while just 16% say they trust influencers or content creators the most.

One explanation for this gap between who children and young people receive news content from on social media and the sources they trust could be that children and young people are not seeking out news from influencers or content creators – it is simply appearing in their feeds. When speaking to children, many said they do not follow specific news-focused accounts on social media and instead come across news content in their recommender feeds, which are dictated by the algorithm of the platform. Survey data backs this up: two-fifths (40%) of children and young people who get news from social media do

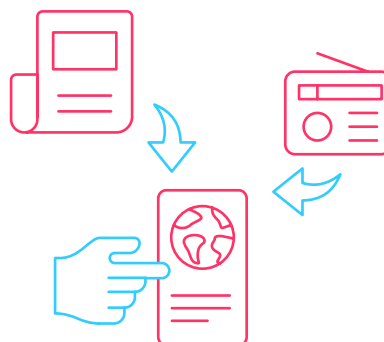
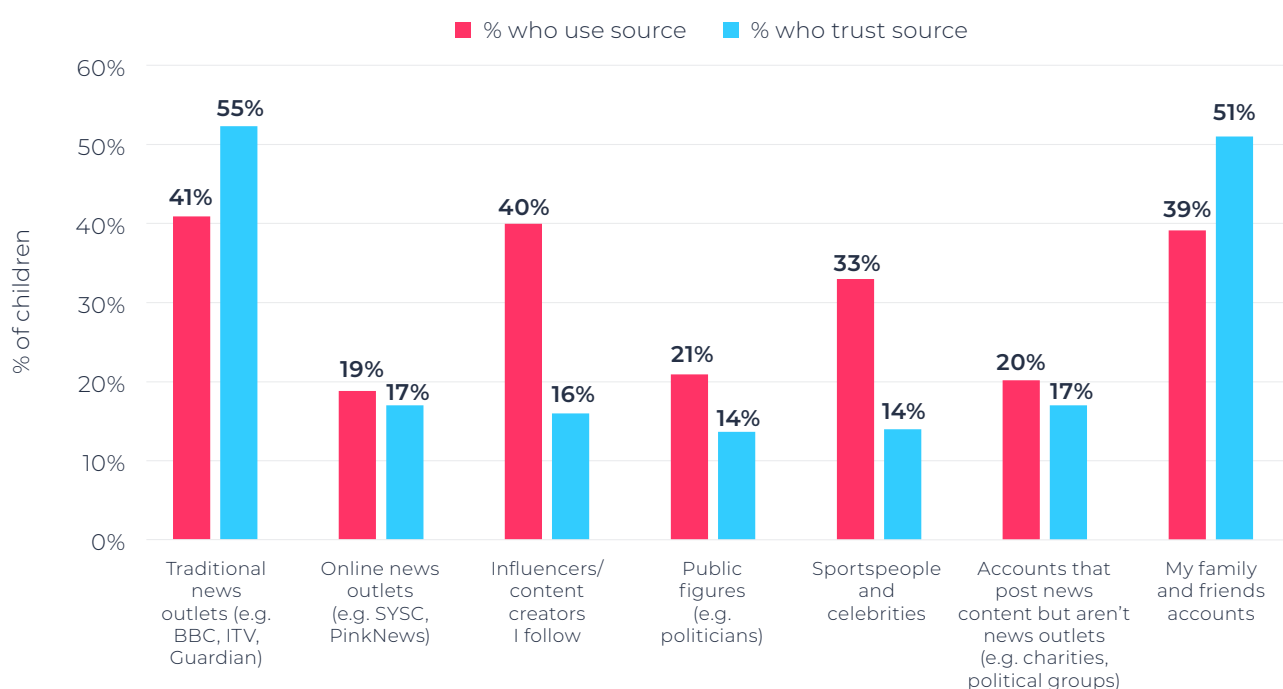


Figure 4: Social media news sources and trust in source

Base: Children who consume news (961); Children who consume news on social media (890). Q. Who do you see or hear news from on social media? Please select all that apply. Q. Who do you trust the most on social media when it comes to sharing news? Pick the top three.

not follow any news-focused accounts. This suggests many are not actively seeking out news from a particular source and that where they get their news is instead shaped by what platforms algorithms choose to show them. The consequences for this on wellbeing are discussed further in the next section.

Girl, 16

"It [news] just comes up on my feed when I am scrolling, I don't like seek it out."

Girl, 14

"I don't, like, follow any [news] accounts. They just come up on my feed."

Boy, 15

"I just get news randomly and I don't really pay attention to the account, just watch it or read it and scroll on."

Boy, 15

"It's not like I am searching for it [news], it just comes up on my feed randomly."

Age shapes news consumption and trust in news outlets accounts

Children aged 15–17 are more likely than children aged 11–12 to get their news content from the social media accounts of established or online-only^{iv} news outlets (54% cf. 37%). In contrast, children aged 11–12 are just as likely to get their news content from the social media accounts of influencers or content creators (35%) as they are from established news outlets (31%).

Younger children are also more trusting than older children of news from influencers or content creators accounts, with 19% of 11–12-year-olds having influencers or content creators in their top three most trustworthy social media news sources compared to 12% of 15–17 years. Conversely, older children place more trust than younger children in established news outlets accounts on social media (47% of 11–12-year-olds cf. 58% of 15–17-year-olds). This suggest that younger children may be less able to verify trusted sources and as result, place more trust in non-news specific accounts, even when these may be less reliable sources of information. This is further supported when we consider that 11–12-year-olds are less likely to check if an account is verified when checking if information on social media is true or false (16% cf. 30% of 15–17-year-olds).

Household income shapes news consumption habits

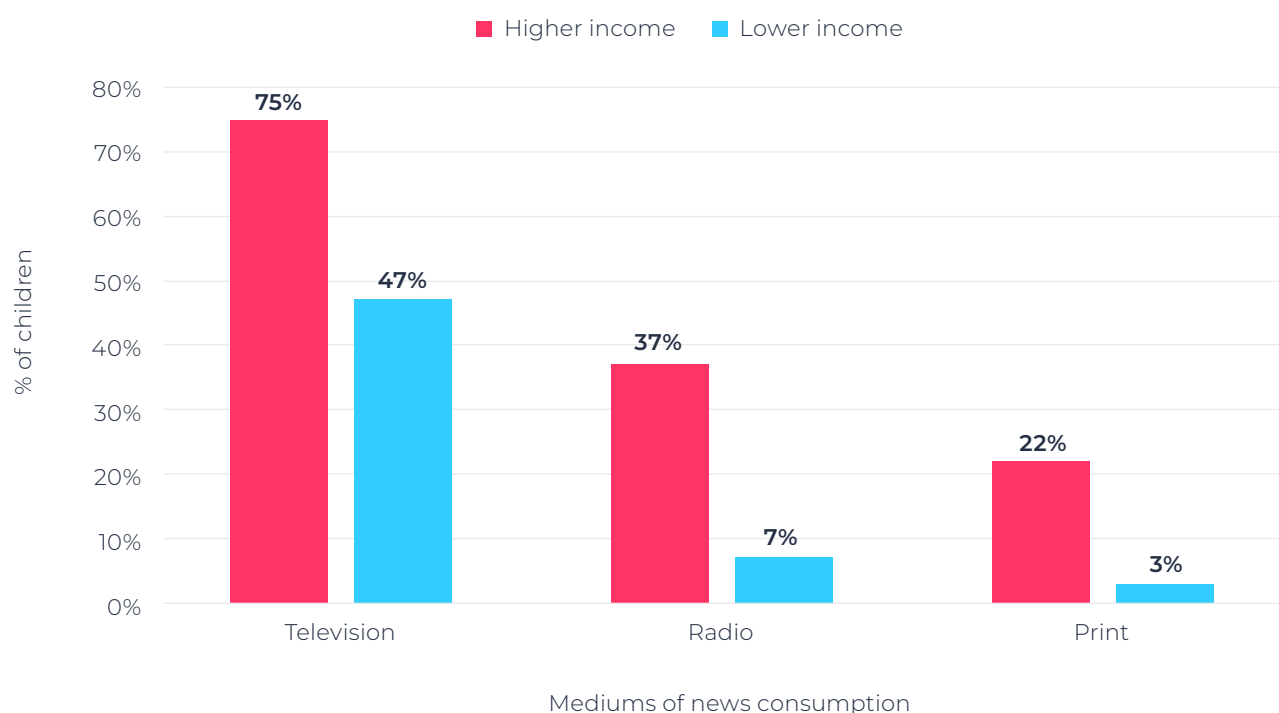
As well as differences across age, we also see that household income has a significant impact on children and young people's news consumption habits. 88% of children and young people consume news weekly in households where earnings are over £80,000 compared to 63% in households where income is between £10–30,000.^v Not only is news consumption more frequent but they are also much more likely to report that they “pay close attention” when consuming news (28% cf. 4% in lower income households).

Children and young people from higher income households are also more likely than those from lower income households to get their news from traditional mediums such as television (75% cf. 47%), radio (37% cf. 7%) and print (22% cf. 3%). This could be as a result of more access to these sources, including paid-for subscription services.

When it comes to accessing information on social media, we find children and young people from higher income households are more likely than those in lower income households to get news from established news outlets (51% cf. 29%), public figures such as politicians (30% cf. 13%) and online-only news outlets such as Pink News (30% cf. 14%). They are also more likely to follow established news organisations such as The Guardian or BBC News: 71% of children from higher income households follow established news organisations' accounts on social media, compared to 37% from lower income households. Children and young people from higher income households also place more trust in traditional news outlets' social media accounts, compared to those from lower income households (64% cf. 45%).

iv. Online only news outlets are those that exclusively publish news on digital platforms, without a print or broadcast presence.

v. Throughout the report when we refer to higher income households, we are referring to those in the sample with a household income of £80,000+ and when we are referring to lower income households, we are referring to those in our sample in a household where income is between £10–30,000.

Figure 5: Comparison of traditional news sources between children from higher and lower income households

Base: Children who consume news – Higher income £80,000+ (300); Lower income £10,000-30,000 (162); Q. Where do you usually come across or get news from? Please select all that apply.

Taken together, these suggest that children and young people in higher income households are likely seeing more verified news, follow the news more closely and access it from a wider variety of sources. These habits can provide important advantages in a crowded and rapidly changing media environment: they help children and young people build a stronger base of accurate knowledge, develop critical thinking skills through comparison of perspective, and foster greater resilience to mis- and disinformation. As we explore in the next section, this can impact wellbeing and potentially their ability to spot fake or AI-generated content.

Social media plays an important role in today's news environment for children and young people. While many encounter news on social media from influencers, content creators and peers, established news outlets' accounts remain one of the most trusted sources of news content and are often who children and young people get their news from.

Where children seek out news from and who they trust is influenced by age and household income. However, one of the most important factors shaping news consumption is platform algorithms, with many children telling us news often appears in their feeds rather than them actively seeking it out.



Section 3: Balancing wellbeing and staying informed in today's news environment

The social media news environment is fast-paced, algorithm-driven and full of both verified and unverified information, as well as AI-generated content. Children and young people often find it upsetting and overwhelming, yet they recognise the importance of navigating it to stay informed about what is happening in the world.

News content on social media causes distress

Many children and young people find the news they see on social media distressing. In fact, 61% of those who consume news on social media reported encountering a news story in the past month that caused them worry or upset, and of those 39% said they were very or extremely worried or upset by it.

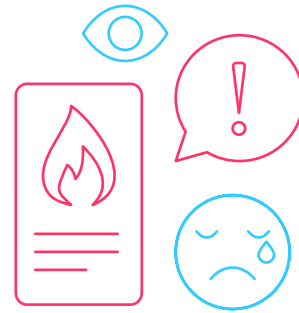
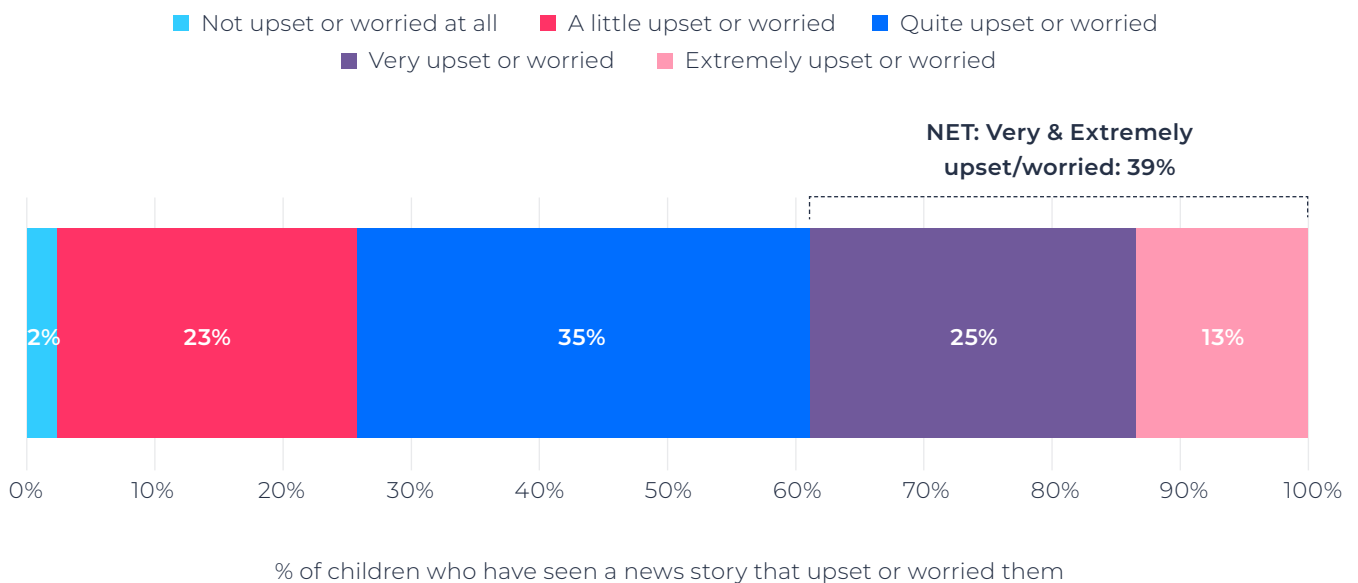


Figure 6: Levels of worry and upset after seeing distressing social media news content

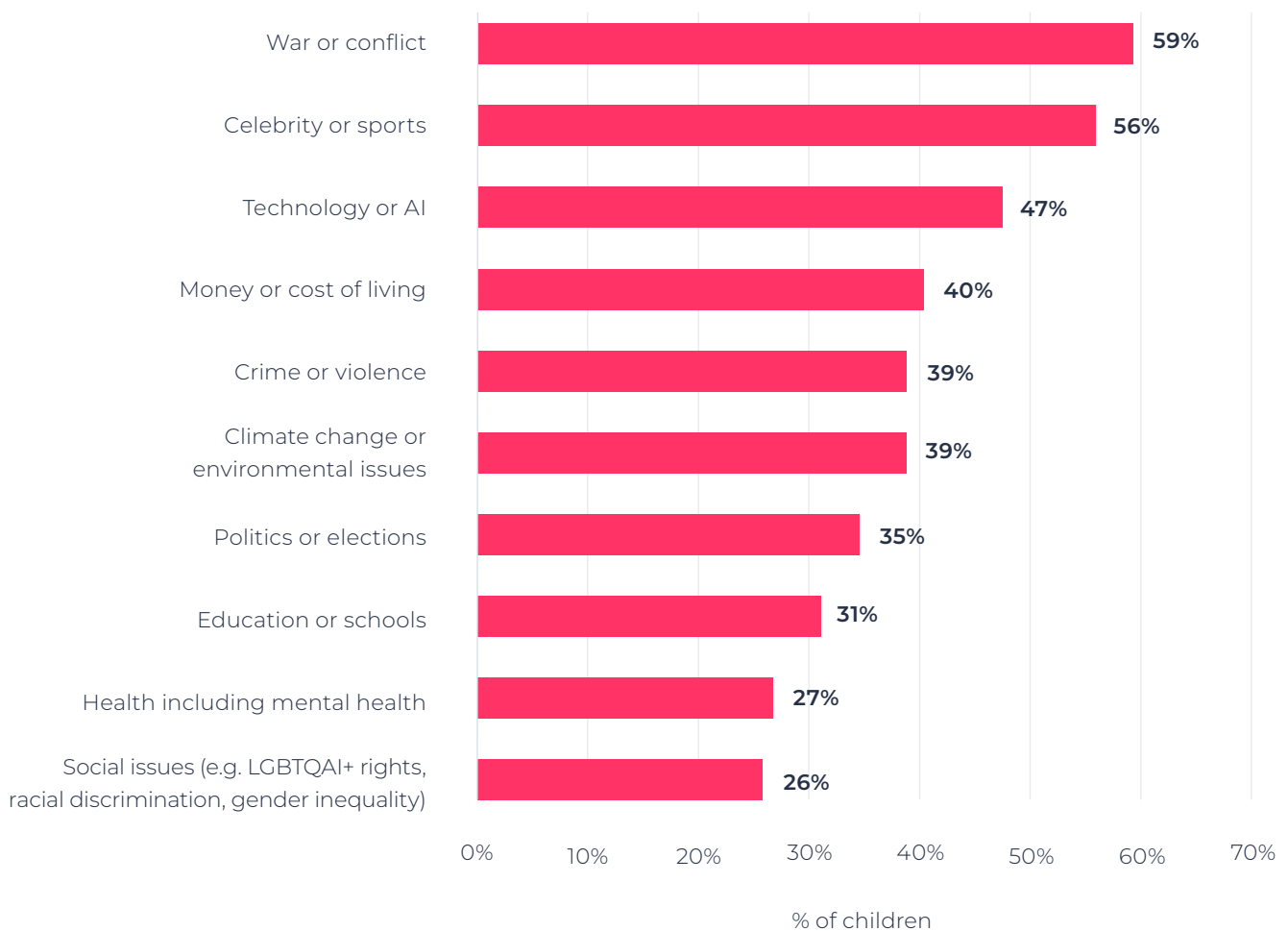


Base: Children who have seen a news story that upset or worried them (545). Q. How upset or worried were you by this news story on social media?

The content that tends to cause the most distress is also the most common. Children and young people are exposed to news spanning a range of topics – from technology and AI, to celebrity and sports – but the most commonly encountered stories relate to war and conflict (59%). When children and young people

were asked what content had upset or worried them, 56% said news stories about war and conflict, followed by news about violence and death (19%) and crisis events (10%). Examples given by children included the conflict in Israel-Gaza, the death of football player Diogo Jota and the 2025 Air India plane crash.

Figure 7: Genres of news content seen by children



Base: Children who consume news (961). Q. Which of the following topics have you seen news stories on in the past month? Please select all that apply.

Although we might expect younger children to be more affected by what they see on social media due to their developmental stage, we find that levels of worry or upset stay the same regardless of age. This may be because of the types of news stories that younger children (11–14-year-olds) are consuming on social media. The research shows they are less likely to see news relating to war and conflict (56% cf. 63% of 15–17-year-olds) and violence and crime (32% cf. 46% of 15–17-year-olds) which is the news children and young people identify as causing the most distress.

It is positive to see that younger children are encountering this type of news content at lower rates. The Protection of Children Codes, introduced as part of the OSA, require platforms to give children age-appropriate access to content deemed priority content, which includes content that depicts or encourages serious violence or injury.²⁹ This could be one explanation for why younger children are encountering war and conflict, and violence and crime, content less. However, it is still concerning that 11–12-year-olds are seeing this content at all given many social media platforms have a minimum age of 13+ outlined in their Terms of Service.

Girl, 14

"On TikTok you can see stabbings and kidnappings which are just not nice to see, especially when you are a bit younger, it makes you feel uncomfortable."

Boy, 15

"[On social media] I've seen the war, Palestine-Israel – a lot of children like upset and crying, begging for the war [to] stop."

Girl, 16

"[On social media I see] stuff about war, I don't mind hearing about, like updates on war, but when it's actual footage of what is happening, I personally don't really want to see that and I don't think a lot of people do... There is a lot of younger people on social media so you can't really put that stuff on there. It says 13+ but there are still going to be people who are younger so that should be taken into consideration."

Girl, 17

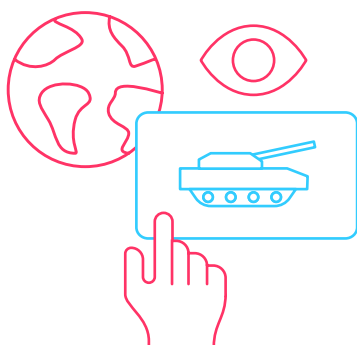
"On Instagram, before videos get taken down, I think there's quite a lot of, like stabbing videos, or gruesome videos like that. When Liam Payne died there was video of him circulating and I thought it wasn't very nice. I would have wanted a trigger warning."



The algorithmic design of social media contributes to this worry and upset

Children and young people also highlighted how the design of social media platforms contributes to them seeing worrying or upsetting content, including news content. They talked about how it could be disturbing to see violent news content in their feed without warning, unlike on TV where you often get a prelude or choose to watch the news. They also explained how because news content just appeared in their feeds, it was not always appropriate for them and noted this could be especially harmful for younger children.

Young people also explained that algorithms can push unwanted content onto users, particularly violent material, by serving more of the same after just one view. One young person also noted that when you first join platforms, while they figure out your viewing preferences, they often push violent content. It is well documented that algorithms favour negative content, which further exacerbates the likelihood of children being served videos that cause worry or upset.³⁰ While children and young people acknowledged there were ways the effects of this environment could be mitigated, such as with content warnings or through censoring images, they said these were not always used or effective.



Girl, 17

"If there are certain things you don't want to see, they will still come up [on your feed] and there is not much you can do to stop it."

Boy, 13

"[Someone] might want to know about it [a death or stabbing] but not constantly know about it."

Boy, 17

"If you encourage the algorithm to show you it, you can see a lot of car crashes, shootings. I find they kind of promote that stuff when you first download the app. You can get away from it if you start interacting with other videos, but it pushes it at the start."

Boy, 15

"The other day I was scrolling, and I saw on a news account someone in a shop was just stabbing people and it was blurred out, but not blurred enough, so you could [still] see what was going on. [I] was like 'it's a bit graphic I didn't need to see that'... I didn't expect to see that [on my feed]."

Girl, 13

"There is always the risk of seeing some graphic stuff [on social media]. Sometimes the videos will have warnings, and you can choose whether to watch... But sometimes they don't."

The role of social media in crisis events: the shooting of Charlie Kirk

When American political activist Charlie Kirk was fatally shot while speaking at a university event on 10 September 2025, the news rapidly reached millions, not through established news sources – but via social media. Eyewitnesses immediately uploaded graphic footage from multiple angles. Within minutes, the video flooded feeds on platforms like X, TikTok and YouTube – “impossible to avoid, impossible to forget” as one report described it.³¹ The rapid spread was in part driven by algorithms that surface popular or timely content, regardless of user choice or whether the account posting the content is verified or not.³²

The videos were graphic: one showed Kirk recoiling as he was shot, with blood visible; another looped the moment of impact in slow motion.³³ On some platforms viewers were required to click through sensitive content warnings before seeing the most explicit clips, but on others the footage remained accessible without any labelling and played automatically.³⁴ While many established news outlets accounts attached content advisory warnings to their posts, many influencers and individual users did not, leaving millions of people, including children, exposed to distressing images without preparation.³⁵

Analysis by the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that posts on X that “glorified, praised, or celebrated” Kirk’s death were viewed 52 million times, while posts calling for retaliatory violence were seen 43 million times.³⁶ Though such posts made up a small proportion of overall content, they still reached millions of users,

highlighting how algorithms amplify extreme or negative material. Academic literature also suggests that people engage more with negative news content, and are also more likely to share shocking news stories, which compounds the spread of this material.^{37,38}

The incident has sparked widespread debate about crisis response from social media platforms. Australia’s eSafety Commissioner called for companies to shield children by removing or restricting violent footage,³⁹ while US lawmakers across party lines urged swift takedowns. Yet the videos continued to circulate for days, sometimes re-uploaded in slightly modified forms to evade detection.⁴⁰ Amateur sleuths also misidentified supposed perpetrators, spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation that added further harm.⁴¹

In the UK, the episode drew parallels to the riots following the Southport murders in 2024, where social media was again scrutinised for fuelling unrest through rapid amplification of graphic content and rumours.⁴² Both events underline the gap between the scale and speed of harmful content spreading online and the adequacy of current safeguards.

On 30 June 2025, Ofcom proposed requirements on certain platforms to develop a crisis response protocol and conduct post-crisis analyses.⁴³ These proposals mark an important step towards ensuring platforms act quickly in moments of acute harm. However, the rapid spread of footage from Kirk’s death illustrates how harmful but legal content can travel faster than systems are designed to respond. Protecting children requires more consistent use of content warnings, stronger checks on algorithmic amplification, and safeguards that are in place before harmful content is uploaded – not after it has already gone viral.

Seeing news content on social media can bring new worries and be overwhelming

As well as showing children distressing content, social media can also create new anxieties. In fact, 47% of children and young people reported that seeing news content on social media gives them new problems to think about, while just 22% disagreed with this statement. Examples given included politics or events in other countries that did not affect them or local news stories that they may not have known about but now caused them concern, particularly where they related to violence. Research by the Youth Endowment Foundation (YEF) supports this. The YEF found that while 1% of children aged 13-17 reported carrying a machete or zombie knife, one in ten had seen violent content involving one on social media - suggesting that social media may amplify fear by making certain behaviours appear more widespread than they are.⁴⁴

Furthermore, four in ten (41%) children and young people report feeling overwhelmed by the news content they see on social media. Children spoke about how if you did not want to see something it could be hard to avoid. This is likely because of the way algorithms work, where often the content you see in your recommender feed is not necessarily accounts you follow or choose to see content from. While it is possible to reset your algorithm feed to display different content, many children and young people are not aware of this function. Internet Matters Pulse finds only 16% of children know how to take this action.⁴⁵ One child also noted that even if you tried to block or filter out content, these features sometimes did not work or only worked for a short period, in their experience.

Boy, 13

"Sometimes your 'For You page' is not in your area at all, like random news from America and you don't really want to care about it."

Boy, 13

"You don't want to see it [a news story] sometimes, and don't want to think about it."

Girl, 16

"Sometimes you don't want to see what's going on... sensitive topics like wars... and sometimes that could be shown to younger people as well which is a problem."

Boy, 13

"There was the Liverpool parade for winning the Premier League and when that car drove through the crowd, I've seen some videos online of it happening and it wasn't the pleasant-est thing to see... Some of my family were there so it was concerning [for me]. I just opened it [social media] and it was a clip of it happening and it was a bit of a shock."

Boy, 15

"I saw it again, so I blocked it [a news account on social media] again."

The proliferation of fake and AI-generated news negatively impacts wellbeing

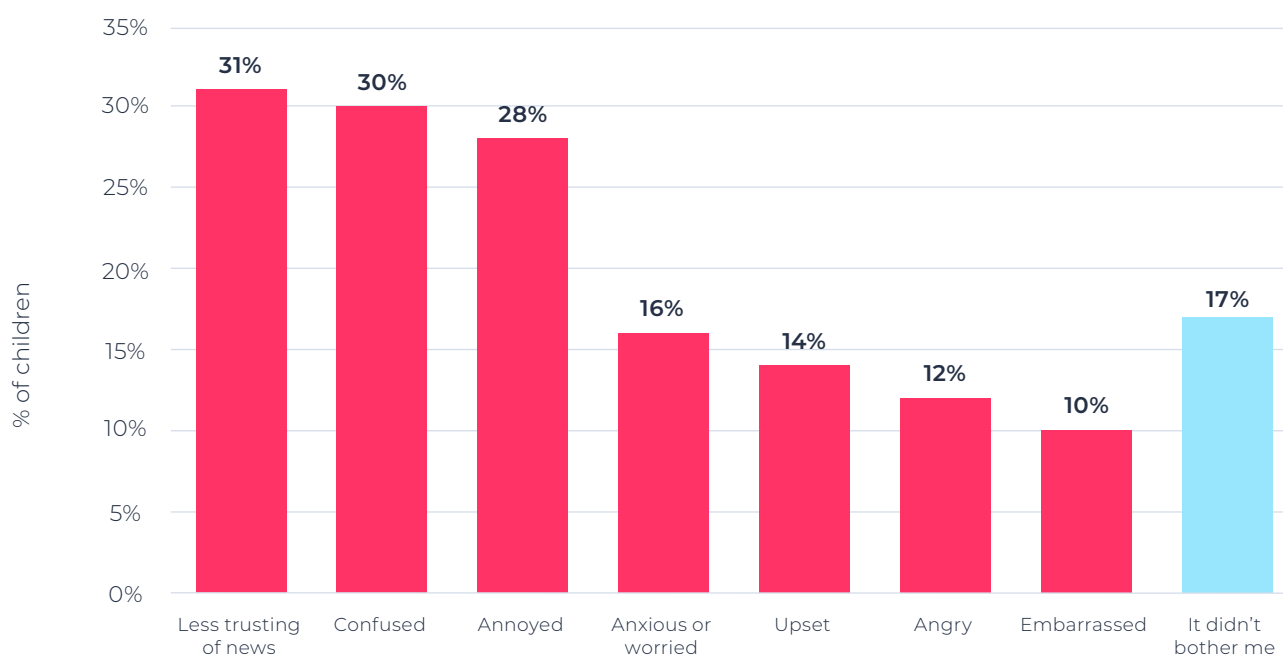
Another challenge of the online news environment is the presence of AI-generated content and mis- and disinformation, especially on social media where content does not need to be verified. Over a quarter (27%) of children and young people report that they have seen a fake or AI-generated news story and believed it was true and a further 41% said they think they have but are not sure. This demonstrates the ubiquitous nature of this type of content. Furthermore, these numbers are likely higher as it

can be difficult to know if you have seen fake or AI-generated news stories – and people's interpretations of truth differ.

Seeing and believing this type of content can also be detrimental for children and young people's wellbeing. When asked how they felt about believing a fake or AI-generated news story, children and young people reported feeling confused (30%), annoyed (28%) and even embarrassed (10%). It can also lead to distrust in other news content (31%).

Only 17% of children and young people reported that seeing and believing fake or AI-generated news content did not bother them at all.

Figure 8: Emotions felt after seeing and believing fake or AI-generated news



Base: Children who have seen a fake or AI-generated news story (658). Q. How did that make you feel?

Given that many children have encountered this type of content, and the negative impact it has on wellbeing, it is unsurprising that 63% of children and young people are worried about the growth of fake news and AI-generated content. In our focus groups, they also expressed concern about its wider societal consequences, such as misleading people into believing false information and trapping individuals in echo chambers: a well-documented challenge of social media.

Girl, 16

"If they are just random creators talking about an issue... it's quite difficult to know what is true and what is not I think."

Girl, 17

"Today I've seen about 3 videos of natural disasters like hurricanes and floods and they've all been fake but I believed every single one of them, the AI fooled me."

Girl, 14

"I think on social media it can be hard to trust it [news content] because it [social media] does have a lot of fake news."

Boy, 15

"It's [AI-generated news] getting more and more realistic."

Girl, 16

"It does concern me [AI-generated and fake news] as there are people who will fall for it, anyone can fall for it."

Boy, 13

"I think people can use AI [news] to influence the views of other people and that can be bad."

Boy, 17

"If you like or comment on certain videos, you can definitely see how TikTok, especially, can start pushing that news story more on your feed and if that viewpoint is biased you can kind of fall into a trap of believing fake news and one side of an argument. So you can definitely see how people can get quite strongly fixated on views and trapped in sort of conspiracy theories or bias."

Exposure to fake and AI-generated content is widespread but recognition is influenced by media literacy levels

Interestingly, children and young people from higher income households are more likely to report having seen AI-generated or fake news content, with 36% reporting this compared to 20% in lower income households. This difference may not reflect greater exposure, but greater ability to recognise content. As discussed previously, children and young people in higher income households are more likely than those in lower income households to pay close attention to the news and to access it from a wider range of established outlets.

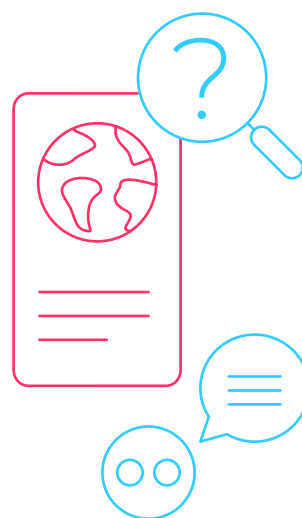
With more opportunities to verify information and a broader knowledge base, these children may be better equipped to identify AI-generated or fake news stories when they encounter them. This is further supported when we consider that children and young people in higher income households are more likely to have received education in school on how to verify news content, as discussed in more detail in Section 5.

Another factor that could influence someone's ability to identify AI-generated or fake news content is age. While previously the report noted that younger children may lack the media literacy skills to distinguish fact from fiction, we find that regardless of age children and young people report relatively similar recollection of coming across fake or AI-generated content. This suggests that exposure to AI-generated and fake content is widespread and not limited by age, with algorithms serving similar material to

younger and older audiences alike. This reinforces the importance of equipping all children with strong media literacy skills so they can critically evaluate what they see online and discern fact from fiction.

Vulnerable children are more negatively impacted by the news they see on social media

Vulnerable children were significantly more likely than non-vulnerable children to report seeing upsetting news content and this also has a greater effect on their wellbeing.^{vi} 76% of vulnerable children and young people who consume news on social media report that they have seen a story that has worried or upset them, compared to 57% of children without these vulnerabilities. Furthermore, 47% of vulnerable children report that it made them extremely worried compared to 36% of non-vulnerable children.



vi. We refer to children who have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), who receive special educational needs (SEN) support, or who have a physical/mental health condition which requires professional help as 'vulnerable'. We recognise that there are multiple understandings of the term vulnerable, and this definition is for the purposes of this report.

We also find that vulnerable children are more likely to say they have believed fake or AI-generated news content (43% cf. 23% children without these vulnerabilities). They are also more likely than those without vulnerabilities to say this has led to upset (23% cf. 12%) and embarrassment (16% cf. 9%). They report feeling more overwhelmed when seeing news content on social media, with 56% of children with vulnerabilities reporting this compared to 37% of children without. This reflects other research by Internet Matters which finds vulnerable children experience more distress than their non-vulnerable peers as a result of their online activities.⁴⁷

Social media plays an important role in keeping children and young people informed about current events

Although news consumption on social media can cause upset, distress and embarrassment for children and young people, most are positive about the role it plays in keeping them informed. 74% of children and young people agree with the statement that social media helps them feel informed about current events and 67% agree that social media is usually where they learn about breaking news. Children and young people in focus groups also noted that social media broadens their perspective, giving them access to views beyond their offline networks and keeping them informed about global events.

Given this role in keeping children and young people informed, and the broader challenges identified by the social media news environment, it is important that they are accessing information from trusted and verified news sources even when on social media. While we know many children and young people are getting their news from these accounts, we also know that news comes from a range of other sources including individual content creators who may not

adhere to journalistic standards. To counter this, there is a need for responsible journalistic standards on platforms. This is also supported by children and young people, with research by FT Strategies finding the ideal news experience for younger news consumers is that their information comes from a source they know and trust.⁴⁸

Girl, 16

"It [news] just like comes up on my feed when I am scrolling, [I am not] like seeking it out, so I still hear about it."

Boy, 14

"The positives of news [on social media] are global connection, you know about things and get perspectives [from] around the world."

Boy, 17

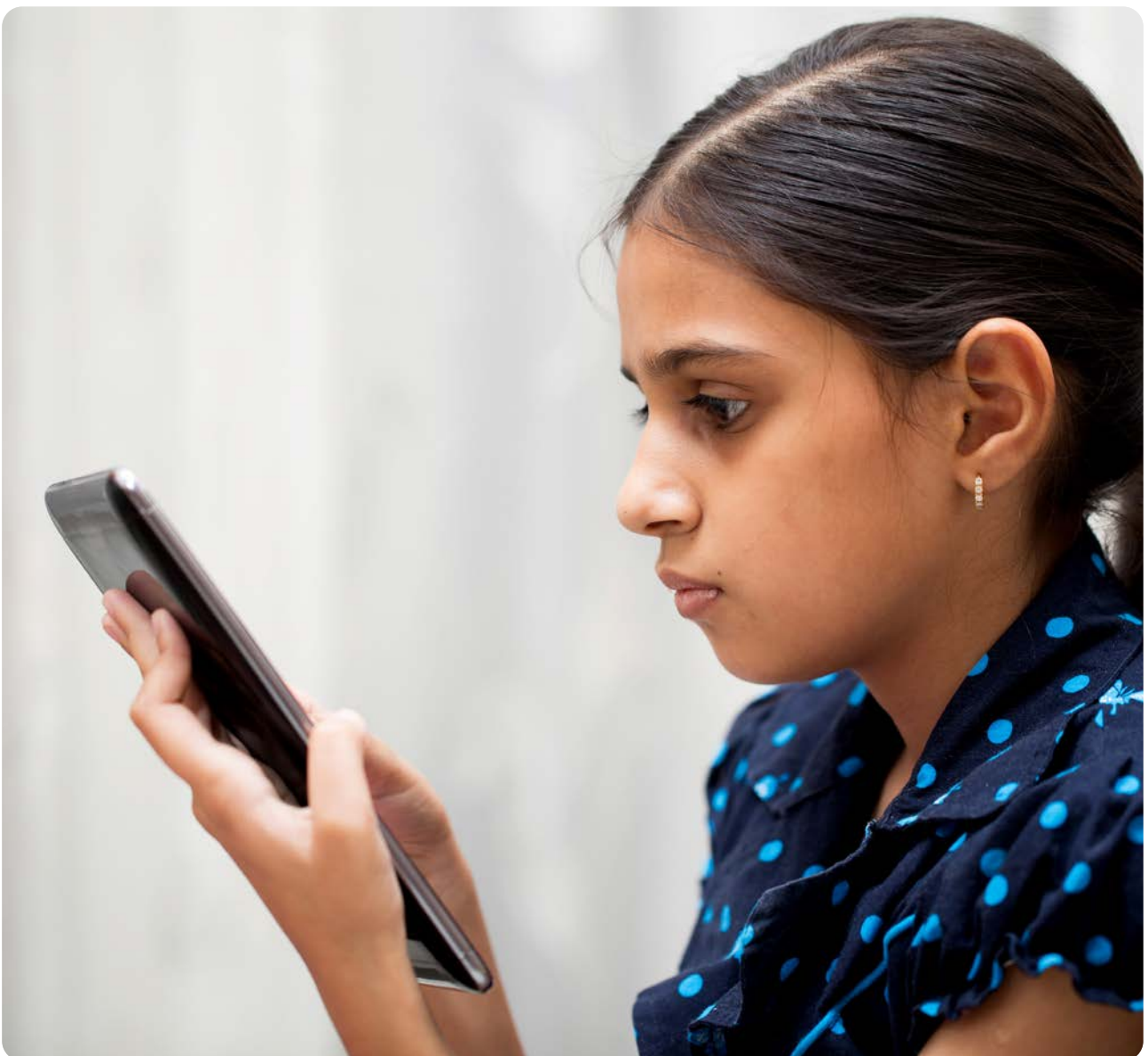
"With the TikTok search function, you can not only come across news more quickly but you can also find news stories from lots of different people."

Boy, 14

"You can get it [news] a lot quicker on social media than some news channels, but it can then be very uncensored, and you might not know what you are going to see."

These findings highlight the double-edged nature of social media as a news source for children and young people. On the one hand, it provides fast, accessible and diverse news content that helps them feel connected and informed about events across the globe. On the other, its design exposes them to distressing, overwhelming and sometimes harmful

content, including fake and AI-generated news. The impact of this is not felt equally, with vulnerable children disproportionately negatively affected. While most young people value social media for keeping them informed, the evidence shows an urgent need to do more to ensure children and young people can experience the benefits without the costs.





Section 4: How children and young people navigate the social media news environment

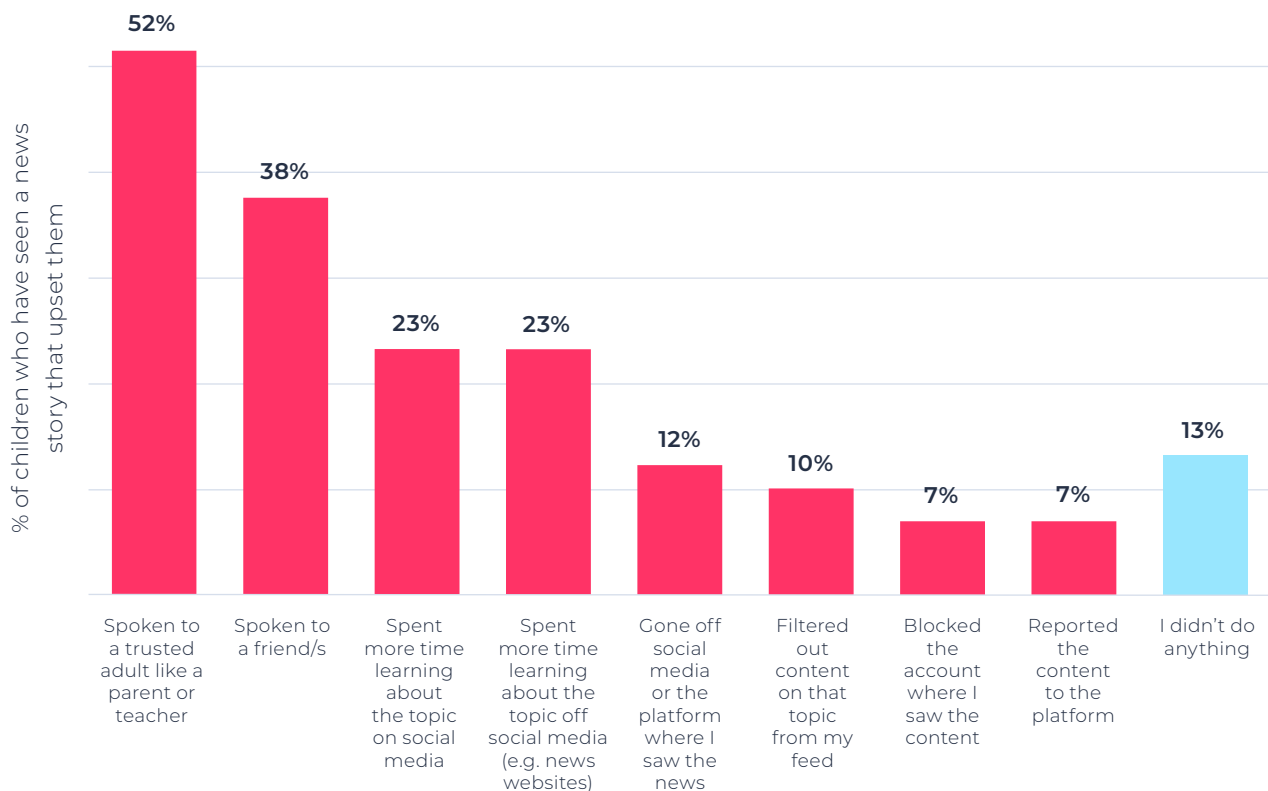
Parents and schools play an important role in helping children and young people navigate the online news environment and judge what is true. They also use trusted news outlets and individual strategies on social media to make sense of what they see and to protect their wellbeing.

Parents and teachers are who children and young people turn to when they see something upsetting or worrying online

When children and young people encounter news content that upsets or worries them, their most

common response is to speak with a trusted adult such as a parent or teacher, with 52% reporting that they do so. This does change with age, with younger children being more likely to talk to a parent or trusted adult (61% of 11–12-year-olds cf. 47% of 15–17-year-olds). Older children are more likely than younger to speak to their friends (39% cf. 31%) or look up more information on the topic themselves off social media (24% cf. 19%).

Figure 9: Children's responses to seeing upsetting or worrying news content



Base: Children who have seen a news story that upset or worried them (545). Q. What have you done in response to seeing news stories/content that worried or upset you on social media? Please select all that apply

Children and young people take limited steps on platforms in response to upsetting content

When they see content that worries or upsets them on social media, children and young people are more likely to talk to someone than take action on platforms. Only 18% of children and young people said they used platforms blocking, filtering or reporting tools to respond to upsetting information. This is supported by children and young people in the focus groups who said they often just scrolled past content even if they thought it was inappropriate for them or could be upsetting for others. Previous research by Internet Matters finds that children face many barriers to reporting and blocking content and users on platforms which reduces their likelihood of using these functions, including belief that the platform is unlikely to take action.⁴⁹

Trusted adults support children and young people to verify if news is truthful

Children and young people also turn to trusted adults to support them to understand if the news they are seeing on social media is truthful. In fact, if children and young people wanted to check whether news shared on social media was true, the most common way they would do this is by speaking to a trusted adult like a parent or teacher – with 51% of children and young people reporting that they would do so.

Boy, 15

"[My parents] tell me if I am not sure about something to check it with them."

Girl, 16

"I ask people around me like friends and family [to verify information]."

Children and young people turn to social media to verify news content they see on social media

Many children and young people will also look to verify if a news story on social media is true by using strategies on social media. This takes many forms, including: turning to established news outlets social media account (34%); checking if the account where they saw the news content is verified (26%); and checking comments on the post (25%). There are challenges with some of these approaches, such as the fact that sometimes people in the comments agree with a post even if the content is not true. As a result, these methods can require a high degree of media literacy or familiarity with the topic.

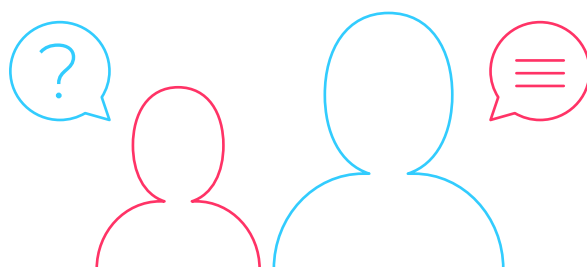
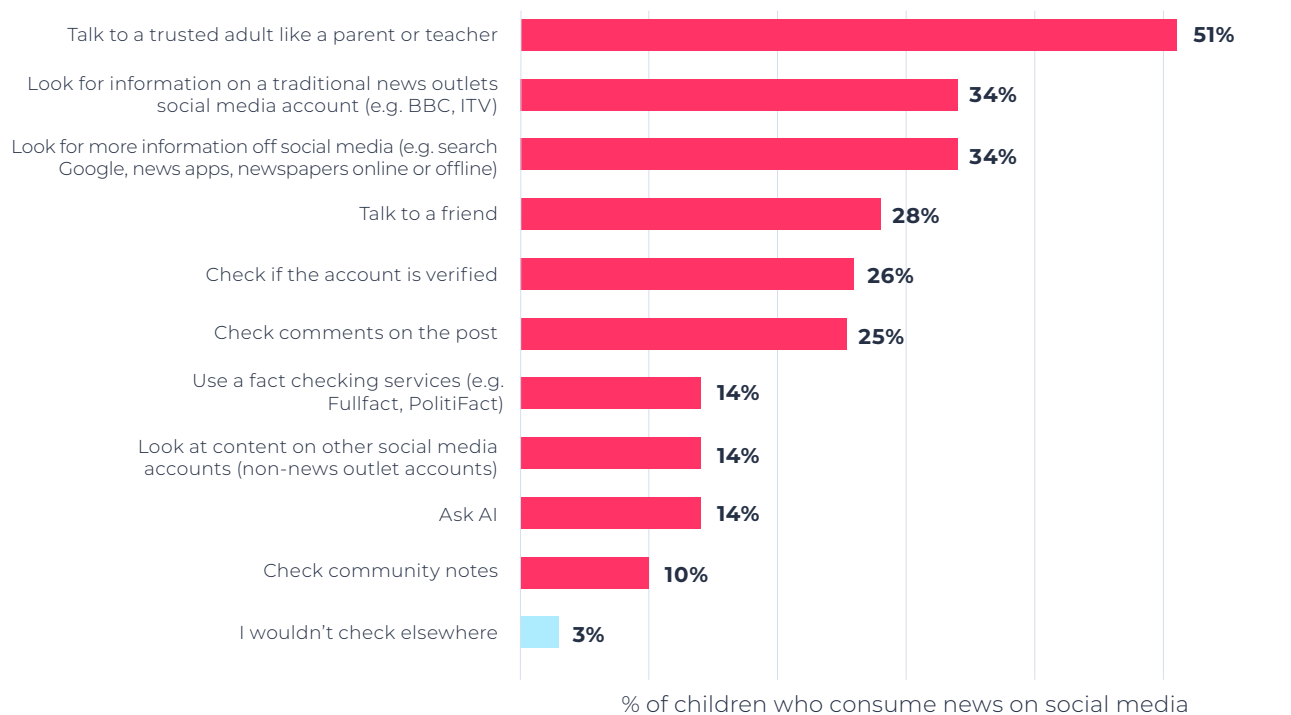


Figure 10: How children verify news information from social media



Base: Children who consume news on social media (890). Q. If you wanted to check if news shared on social media was true, how would you do this? Please select all that apply.

Girl, 17

"I looked in the comments and it was people saying it's not true."

Boy, 15

"I first check what accounts posted it... and then check on BBC or other news sources [to verify information]."

Boy, 15

"If it's from a popular news company it's just as trustworthy on social media as on their app or other sources."

Boy, 16

"I listen to whoever's got the check mark... rather than some random account with 30 followers."

Older children (15–17-year-olds) are more likely than younger children (11–12-year-olds) to verify information themselves, including looking for information on established news outlets social media accounts (40% cf. 25%) and checking if the account is verified (30% cf. 16%). This suggests that they are more confident at verifying news content online.

When it comes to vulnerable children, we find that they are less likely to speak to a trusted adult when they want to verify news content on social media (45% of vulnerable children cf. 52% of those without these vulnerabilities). Instead, they are more likely to verify information themselves such as checking comments on the post (31% cf. 23%) or using a fact checking service (19% cf. 12%). This may be because they feel more embarrassment than other children (16% vulnerable cf. 9% without these vulnerabilities) and upset (23% cf. 12% without these vulnerabilities) when they fall for fake news content and do not want to speak to someone about it.

Children and young people also told us they could often recognise when video content had been AI-generated, drawing on cues such as video quality, the tone of the voice, and subtle inconsistencies. However, it is difficult to measure this reliably, since people cannot recall occasions when they did not realise content was AI-generated. Some children and young people also acknowledged that as AI-generated content becomes more sophisticated, it will likely become harder to verify it.

Boy, 15

"Sometimes I can tell by the quality of it or the audio or something."

Girl, 16

"I am a bit concerned about fake news because I think the more that AI and things are developing, the harder it is to tell and it's harder to get rid of it and identify what is fake and what's not."

Many children and young people do nothing at all when they see something they suspect is fake or AI-generated on social media

For many children and young people, encountering fake or AI-generated news on social media does not always provoke a strong reaction, particularly when the content is about topics they are not interested in. In these cases, rather than pausing to verify the information or engage with it, they tend to scroll past it and continue down their feed. However, when the content does capture their attention, perhaps because it is relevant, worrying, or interesting to them, they may take further steps, such as researching the story or checking trusted sources like established news outlets.

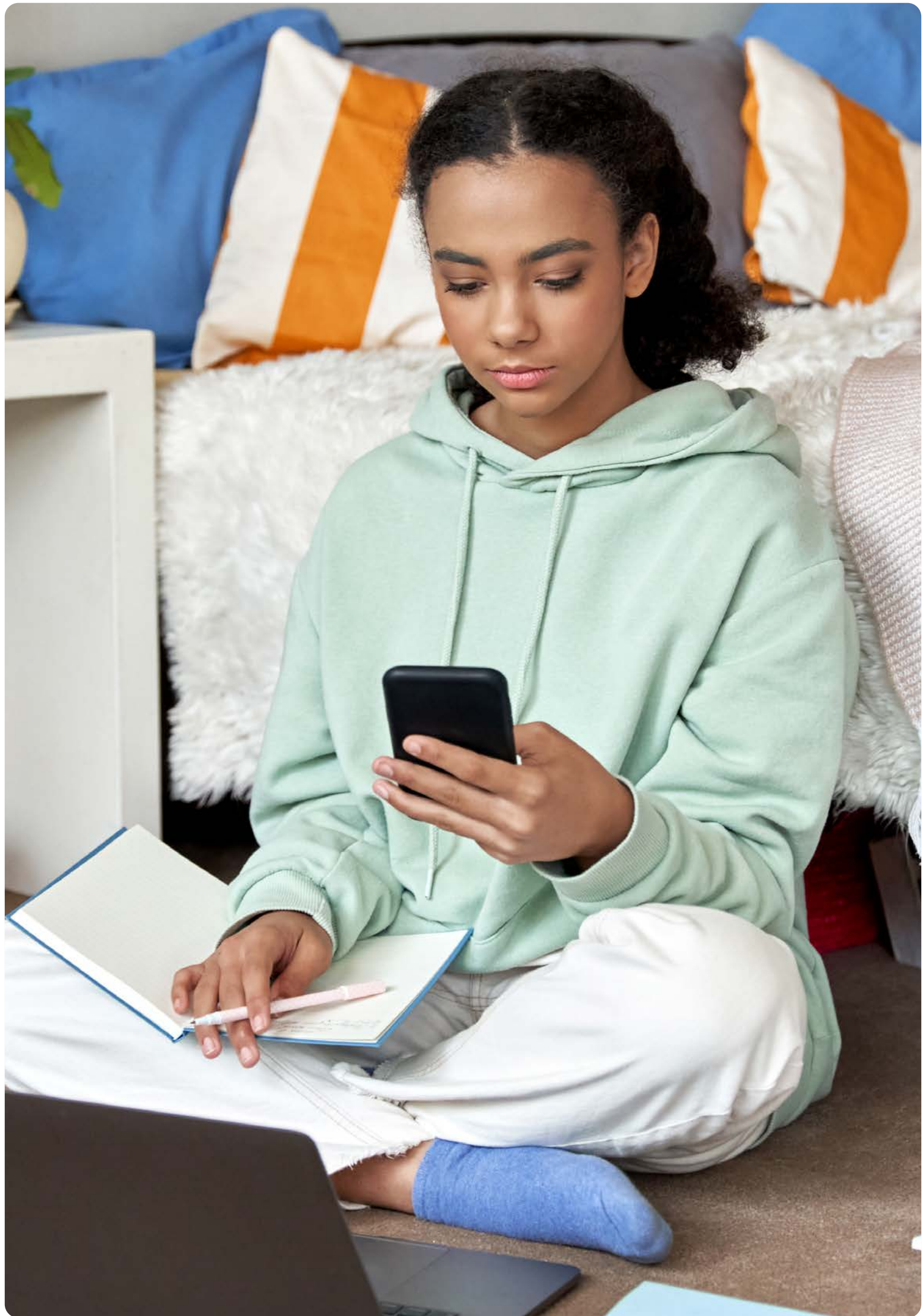
Girl, 15

"I feel like you see them [fake or AI-generated news] quite a lot but most of the time, just because I am not really interested in it, I don't take the time to figure out if it is true or not. I just scroll past it and ignore it."

Boy, 15

"Whenever I see things, I'll just like scroll past it most of the time but if it actually worries me, or interests me I'll do research, find a reliable source."

Children and young people use a mix of support to make sense of the news they encounter on social media. Parents and teachers play a central role in helping them verify information and manage their responses to upsetting content. This is especially true when they are younger, while older children are more likely to use their own media literacy skills to fact check and evaluate sources – including turning to established news outlets social media accounts. Understanding this is central to knowing how to support children and young people to navigate the modern-day news environment.





Section 5: Enhancing children and young people's media literacy

Ensuring children and young people have the media literacy skills to navigate the online news environment is essential to create a happy, healthy and engaged population. Children and young people agree that parents, schools, social media platforms, and established news outlets all have a role to play.

The role of parents

As well as supporting children and young people when they come across upsetting, worrying or false information online, parents also play an important role in developing children's ability to verify information. 84% of children and young people who consume news have spoken to their parents about how to tell if online news is true, with 46% having had multiple conversations.

Vulnerable children and young people have these conversations with their parents even more frequently: 91% of vulnerable children and young people who consume news report they have spoken to a parent about how to verifying information online, compared to 82% of non-vulnerable children. It is important that vulnerable children have these conversations as they are more negatively impacted by seeing and believing AI-generated or fake news content. By having these conversations, they may be less likely to feel upset or embarrassed in the future.

The role of parents and schools in supporting children and young people to navigate the online news environment was also underscored in the focus group by one child who noted that people often find ways around features that are designed to keep children safe online. This emphasises the importance of children building the knowledge to navigate an environment where harmful content, such as violent content, is present - alongside platforms working to protect children.

Girl, 13

"I think that people are always just going to find a way around it [social media companies safety features]."

Girl, 14

"Sometimes my Dad shows me videos that he has seen and we will have a conversation about them."

Girl, 16

"[My parents] tell me to be wary on social media and more trusting of BBC news channel."

Some children and young people did note that their parents were not on social media and felt they had more skills to identify fake or AI-generated content than older generations. This highlights why schools also play a central role in supporting the development of children and young people's media literacy skills.

Girl, 13

"My parents aren't really on social media so they haven't really had conversations with me about it [verifying news]."

Girl, 16

"I've definitely seen AI news videos but for me, I can tell. For like, younger generation I think it's easier to tell what's real and what fake when it comes to AI-generated stuff but maybe older generations wouldn't really know. I've seen like my parents fall for AI and fake news."

The role of schools

It is widely agreed that schools and teachers are central to children's media literacy education.⁵⁰ Schools provide an excellent means for achieving media literacy at scale, being a stable and trusted institution in the lives of children. However, only 56% of children and young people that consume news report that their school or teacher has spoken to them about how to tell if online news is true. Furthermore, only a fifth (20%) report that their school has had multiple conversations about online news verification. This echoes other research we have conducted which found that 57% of children report they have had conversations with their teachers about AI.⁵¹

The likelihood of having lessons on verifying information at school also varies depending on household income. Children and young people in higher income households are significantly more likely to have discussed online news verification with a teacher (66%) compared to those in lower income households (46%). Again, this is a pattern we see in other forms of media literacy education, with children in higher income households being more likely to have conversations with their teachers about topics like AI than those from lower income households.⁵² This reinforces that media literacy education in the UK is a postcode lottery.

Children themselves see a role for schools in supporting them to verify information. 49% of children and young people agreed that learning in school how to fact check news online, including on social media, would help them to verify if news content is true. Children also thought this should occur throughout school, not just based on the subjects you take.

Girl, 14

"In ICT, in year 7, they told us what news places to trust and what to do if you see fake news."

Boy, 17

"Our school does like form time lessons about fake news and where to get reliable news from."

Boy, 16

"We've done like internet safety but nothing about the news in it."

Boy, 13

"I don't think I have been taught about verifying information thoroughly."

Girl, 15

"I've never been taught about it [how to verify news] in school before but I think we probably should learn about it so we know the risks."

Girl, 14

"In computing, when we've learnt about social media we've learnt a bit about fake news but they never really go into much detail. I do think they should talk a bit more about how to judge if news is fake and how you can check stuff."

Boy, 17

"I think some GCSE subjects you also are taught about the news a lot more than others, history, politics [for example]."

The role of social media companies

Social media companies can also do more to support children and young people's wellbeing and their ability to discern fact from fiction through the design of their platforms, support for content creators and removal of harmful content.

Nearly half (48%) of children think social media companies should take proactive steps to remove fake news, while 40% say AI-generated content should be clearly flagged or labelled. When asked whether platforms could do more to prevent children and young people from seeing age-inappropriate or upsetting content, some suggested that clearer content warnings, more effective censoring such as blurring images, or removing inappropriate content altogether could help.

Research by FT Strategies and the Google News Initiative identified three core standards that responsible content creators could apply to their posts, with support from platforms, to build a more trusted news environment on social media.⁵³ These standards are: accuracy (i.e. verifying content), integrity (such as noting if a post is paid for) and transparency (highlighting biases and reporting methodology). Responsible creators should apply these standards in content they post, to build and maintain trust, and platforms should support them to do so.

Platforms are beginning to incorporate some of these principles already. Content standards bodies such as the C2PA (the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity), whose members include Google, Meta and OpenAI, allow creators to add a secure cryptographic signature to posts; this enables content to be tracked and makes it easier to identify AI content.⁵⁴ Increasing awareness and usage of standards such as these will help to improve the social media information environment, such as through reducing the impact and spread of deepfakes and misinformation.

Girl, 14

I think [social media companies] should give you the option on whether you want to watch the video or not."

Boy, 17

"Social media companies should label it as AI content."

Boy, 15

"I think they could at least try to take down things [that aren't true] that lots of people are seeing."

Girl, 14

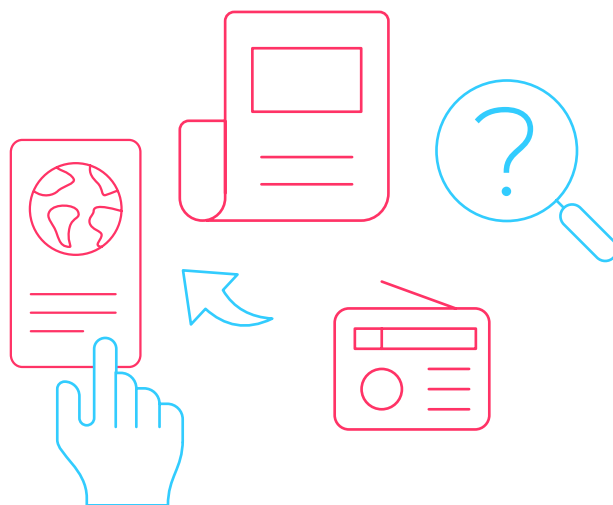
"There is definitely stuff that shouldn't be on there [social media] and apps should be able to notice that it's not appropriate and take it down."

The role of established news outlets

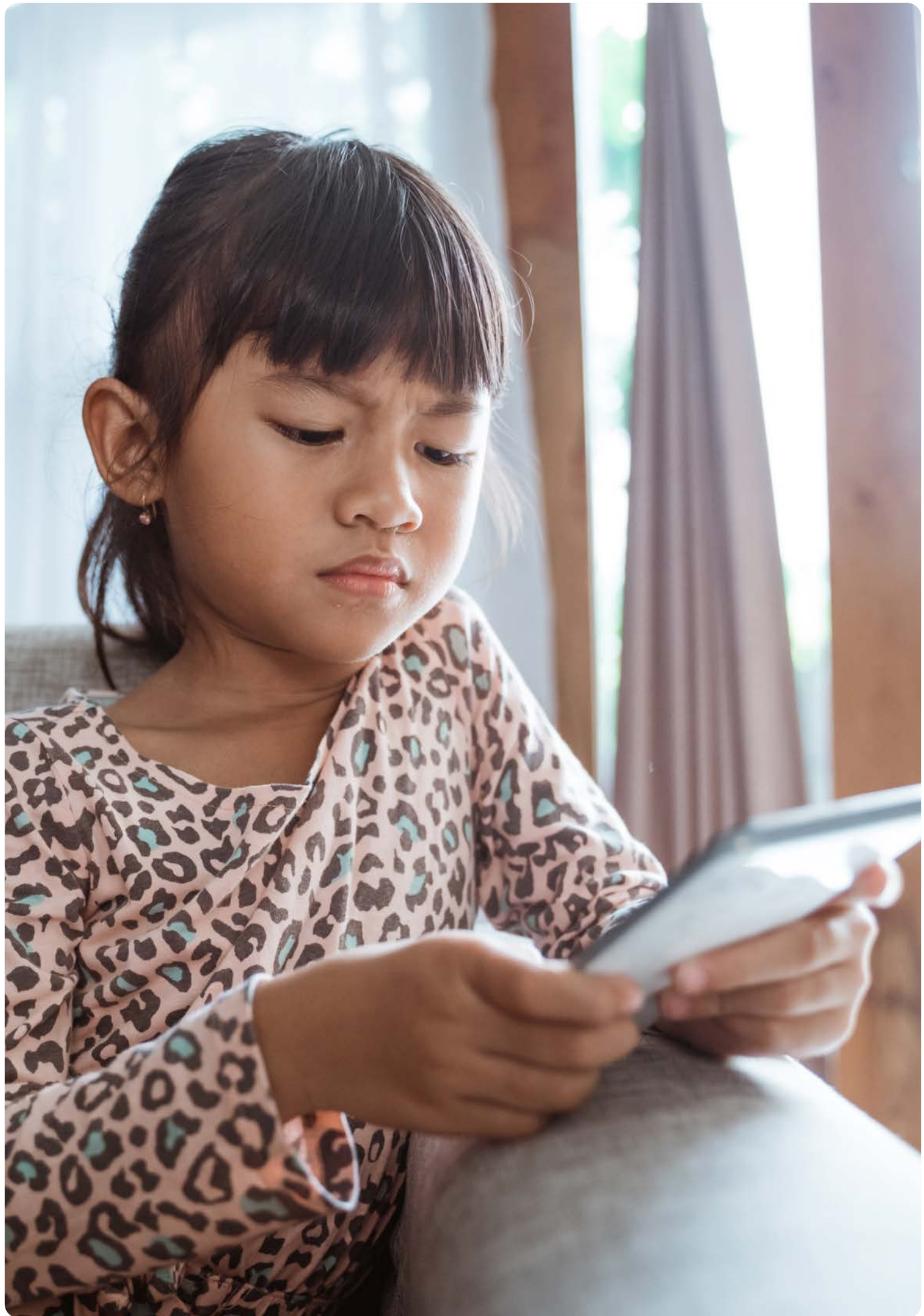
Established news outlets also have a critical role: many children and young people already turn to their accounts on social media platforms to access and verify news content. As children and young people rely on these services, established news outlets have a responsibility to provide accurate, age-appropriate content that helps young audiences stay informed.

They can also help children and young people to develop their media literacy skills. In particular, 45% of children believe trusted news outlets should create content specifically for children and young people. This idea is particularly popular among younger children, with 50% of 11–12-year-olds supporting it, compared to 41% of 15–17-year-olds. Children and young people noted that one of the positives of social media is the short form content that allowed them to get across a topic quickly – this is something which established news outlets could seek to replicate.

Children's media literacy education is a shared responsibility between platforms, established news outlets, government, schools and parents. While parents are already playing an important role in supporting children to verify the information they see online, as the news environment continues to evolve and fragment, we need to ensure they too have the media literacy skills to support themselves and their children. Schools play an important role in this, not just by educating children but also by acting as a conduit to parents. Additionally, more can be done by both platforms and established news outlets to create a healthy news environment that supports children and young people's wellbeing.







Conclusion and recommendations

Social media has profoundly reshaped how news is consumed, providing a constant stream of verified and unverified information, curated by algorithms. While these platforms offer children and young people timely information and diverse perspectives, they also expose them to mis- and disinformation, graphic and distressing content, and AI-generated material. Not only does this negatively impact children's wellbeing but it can also have wider consequences for society as a whole.

To combat this, children and young people are developing their own strategies to verify information and avoid distressing news content, including leaning on trusted adults and established news outlets. This places a heavy burden on children and young people to navigate a complex and changing information landscape, and the responsibility must not sit with them alone. To support children and young people to become informed, happy and engaged citizens, more action is needed from government, social media platforms, the news sector, schools and families.

Industry

Social media platforms

Embed media literacy-by-design on social media platforms

Social media platforms should take responsibility for supporting children and young people's media literacy by embedding it into the design of their platforms. Media literacy-by-design means including features that actively help children to evaluate, question and contextualise the information they see. This could include clear labelling of AI-generated or manipulated content, content warnings, prompts before sharing unverified stories and tools that highlight reliable sources (such as checkmarks) or provide additional context (such as content banners). Platforms should also prompt users with information, such as why they are seeing certain content in their feed and how they can influence what they see.

Ofcom's draft statement, *How to promote Media Literacy: Consultation on recommendations for online platforms, broadcasters and services* provides additional recommendations for platforms to support media literacy-by-design.⁵⁵

Make apps and platforms safe-by-design for all children and young people

Beyond removing illegal and harmful content as set out under the Online Safety Act, industry should embed safety-by-design into platforms. This means building in features that proactively reduce risks and create a healthier information environment. To support children and young people's wellbeing and ability to verify information online, platforms should prioritise:

- **Age-appropriate experiences** including through differentiating content that is shown to younger versus older children. For example, limiting graphic or violent news content for younger users, while still providing opportunities for older children to access information in a contextualised, age-sensitive way.
- **User support** by making it easier for children to manage their feeds through clear options to block, filter or report distressing or misleading content and ensuring these tools work effectively.
- **Trusted sources** through elevating verified news outlets and downranking influencers or content accounts when they share unverified or misleading news content, reducing the prominence of less trustworthy sources.
- **Responsible platform design** by adapting recommender algorithms to reduce the promotion of graphic or misleading content and through removing features (such as autoplay) that may increase children and young people's chance of seeing distressing content.

- **Human content moderation** where needed. Platforms should take a proactive approach to limiting the spread of mis- and disinformation. Content that is rapidly gaining traction, particularly around high-risk events such as riots, protests, or other breaking news, should be prioritised for timely human review, rather than relying solely on user reports or automated systems. This could be part of a broader policy on how to respond to the circulation of information in crisis events.

News outlets

News outlets have a critical role in helping children and young people navigate the social media news environment. Many already turn to them to verify information and stay informed, highlighting the responsibility of outlets to provide accurate, age-appropriate content. To support children and young people further, news outlets should:

- **Create content specifically for children and young people.** This should prioritise short-form, engaging formats that convey news quickly while remaining trustworthy to meet younger audiences' preferences and learning needs. Podcast and other video content should also be prioritised.
- **Support media literacy on platform** by including clear context, explanations and cues to help children evaluate the reliability of information, fostering critical thinking skills alongside news consumption.
- **Collaborate across the ecosystem** working with schools, parents and platforms to develop children and young people's media literacy skills. This should include producing resources that can be used in the classroom or at home.
- **Invest in research** to better understand audience needs and develop solutions to address the challenges of today's information environment.

Government

Government and social media platforms

Mandate platforms to implement robust age assurance to underpin age-appropriate design and the enforcement of minimum age requirements

Although the OSA introduced measures requiring platforms to remove content harmful to children, including violent material, this research indicates that children are still being exposed to distressing content. To effectively prevent access to age-inappropriate material, platforms must reliably understand the age of their users. Age assurance, using verified processes and technologies to determine users' ages, is essential to this.

Government and schools

Embed media literacy across the curriculum at all key stages and support schools to deliver media literacy education effectively

Schools are an important vehicle for teaching all children and young people how to verify information and engage safely and responsibly online. As the Government reviews the school curriculum in England to ensure it is "fit for purpose" and "meeting the needs of children and young people," there is a vital opportunity to embed media literacy, including critical thinking, across the curriculum.⁵⁶

Central to this is ensuring that, regardless of what subjects' children choose, they are taught from primary through secondary school how to critical evaluate information and create and share digital content safely and responsibly. To do this effectively, schools need:

- **Clear guidance** on what to teach, where and at what stage of the curriculum.

- **Support for teachers** including high quality resources that can be used to teach media literacy in the classroom. Teachers should also be provided training on media literacy as part of their Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD).
- **To tailor support for vulnerable children** who we know are at greater risk of harm online and often have less media literacy skills to cope with this.

For more recommendations on how to improve media literacy education in schools see Internet Matters' report *A Vision for Media Literacy: Charting the path for media literacy in schools*.⁵⁷

Government and the regulator

Develop a cross-government approach to media literacy, with ownership from the Technology Secretary

The Government should articulate a strong and clear vision for media literacy, for children as well as adults, recognising the positive role of media literacy in public health, national security and democracy. To support the delivery of this vision, a public campaign should be launched targeted at developing people's

media literacy skills and raising awareness of the challenges of the current news environment, with a focus on mis- and disinformation.

The Secretary of State for Technology should be accountable for media literacy. The media literacy portfolio should include coordinating the efforts of various Departments with responsibility for media literacy – including Education, Culture and Media, Home Office, as well as Ofcom.

Parents and carers

Equip parents with the media literacy skills to support children

Parents already play an important role in supporting children to verify information online but they too can be vulnerable to mis- and disinformation and AI-generated content. Government should recognise this and ensure that parents have access to the information they need to support children and are equipped to navigate the rapidly changing news environment. An excellent way of reaching parents is through schools and websites like internetmatters.org, as well as public campaigns.

At internetmatters.org we offer guides and resources to help families and schools understand how online news impacts children's wellbeing and to support children in verifying information online. These include:

- [A fake news and misinformation advice hub](#) which provides resources and tools to help children think critically about what they see online and avoid spreading misinformation.

- [Find the Fake](#) which is a series of interactive quizzes for children and parents to explore together (or alone), testing knowledge of fake news, mis- and disinformation.
- [Guides for parents and carers](#) to support them to have conversations with children around fake news and misinformation.

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