

MEDIATION

UNDERSTANDING THROUGH INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE



Biannual
publication
of Fondation
Hironnelle



Outside a train station in central Tokyo on November 6, 2024. © Richard A. Brooks / AFP

Meeting our audiences' requirements and needs is our responsibility

Access to information is a fundamental right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But what motivates people to stay informed? Which subjects most interest them? Which takes precedence in today's world: content or format? For almost 30 years, Fondation Hironnelle has been attempting to reconcile these two elements in fragile situations, seeking to provide the widest possible audience with useful, local and independent news in an accessible and attractive format. Most Africans still turn to the radio as the mass media for news they can trust. Despite greater access to digital channels on the continent, rumours continue to travel by word of mouth and from person to person. Responding to information needs must be the cornerstone of journalism, but we must also ensure that technological transformations do not come at the cost of high-quality news. In an increasingly complex world, trust in the news is built through journalism rooted in its audiences' experiences, giving them a voice while providing reliable and independent reporting. This fine-tuned balancing act is more vital than ever. "To know is good; to understand is better", one of our Central African Republic journalists recently said as we began work on Radio Ndeke Luka's updated editorial offer, planned for the station's 25th anniversary in 2025. Incorporating emerging needs into our offer and meeting our audiences' requirements as closely as possible is our responsibility.

Caroline Vuillemin, General Director

ADAPTING TO CHANGING INFORMATION NEEDS

The latest US presidential campaign served to illustrate just how much the media landscape is evolving to meet the changing needs of media consumers. How can journalism adapt to this new set of circumstances and regain resonance for the good of the public?

On the 6th of November, US presidential election results once again caught most of the mainstream news media off guard, and disappointed supporters of fact-based, fact-checked and well-sourced journalism that adheres to the profession's major ethical charters. Following an electoral campaign that relied more on social media, influencer videos and podcasts than on traditional media, an anti-system candidate won the popular vote. He was elected despite opting out of the traditional TV candidate interview on CBS's 60 Minutes, and preferring to communicate through social media messages consisting of 280-character texts and 60-second videos. To an even greater extent than in 2016, Donald Trump succeeded in understanding and adapting to media consumers' changing needs.

Indeed, since the early 2020s, social media platforms have become the main way people

access online news, making them the dominant media in Western and emerging countries. Social media users, however, look to these platforms for information that reflects their opinions rather than for balanced news. They are less attracted by content posted by traditional media outlets than by videos by personalities they like, which they are quick to share with their communities. Journalism, though not always the most entertaining, retains an audience because it provides an opportunity to know and comprehend the world, particularly in its local and international aspects. Nevertheless, it has become a minor need for media consumers who are drawn to the endless stream of more satisfying messages that pop up on their screens every minute of the day.

The situation is similar in zones experiencing crisis and conflict, in which access to reliable news is often more vital than elsewhere. People living in these areas express three main media needs: to be able to communicate with their loved ones; to have local access to reliable news; and to be able to navigate a chaotic sea of information which is further complicated by the discourse of opposing parties in a conflict. By considering these different situations, this issue of Mediation offers an analysis of media users' needs in changing information environments, seeking ways for journalism to better reach them; and, as a result, contributing to safeguarding people in danger, fostering democracy and creating a shared vision of the world in societies where, more than ever, bridges need to be built. ■

Interview

PEOPLE NEED TOOLS TO NAVIGATE THE INFORMATIONAL CHAOS



A Sudanese refugee in the Farchana refugee camp, Chad, on April 8, 2024. © Joris Bolomey / AFP



© DR

Founded in 2009, CDAC Network is a global alliance of organisations working to ensure that people affected by disasters can access trustworthy information and communicate. Helen McElhinney, Executive Director, explains how fast the needs of these communities are changing in the current digital era.

CDAC Network brings together UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, local and international NGOs, media development and communication organisations to provide reliable information and communication means to disaster-affected communities, currently in Occupied Palestinian territories, Sudan or Ukraine. Based on your experience, which type of information is mainly needed for these communities?

Helen McElhinney: Information during crises is truly a lifeline. In moments of extreme vulnerability, people need to know where to find safety and how to access urgent assistance like food, water and medical help. But it doesn't stop there. People need

to be able to connect with each other, to find out where their loved ones are – that kind of connection and communication is a basic human need.

At CDAC Network, we see communication as aid. Accurate, trustworthy information is essential for helping people make lifesaving decisions, and safe, accessible, two-way communication is critical to enable people to connect with one another, hold aid providers accountable and make the voices of the people heard. Since the early days of our work following the 2010 Haiti earthquake, CDAC has focused on ensuring these "information airways" are open and reliable, so communities aren't left in the dark.

Based on recent experience, what are the major changes in the information needs of those communities? Has the issue shifted from lack of information to navigating information overload and misinformation?

Absolutely, and this shift has been dramatic. When CDAC was founded 15 years ago, communities were often struggling with an information vacuum during crises. Now, thanks to the ubiquity of social media and messaging platforms, it's usually the opposite problem – an overwhelming flood of content, much of it unreliable and sometimes even dangerous.

This is exacerbated in situations where trust in institutions and 'official' information sources is low. For example, our work in Sudan has highlighted that people caught in the conflict are overwhelm-

ingly reliant on their peers for information, usually via Facebook and WhatsApp. These connections are really important for solidarity, support and mutual aid, but can also help spread misinformation – however well-intentioned. For instance, we've seen potentially risky medical misinformation being spread, as well as false reports of attacks on villages creating unnecessary panic and displacement.

There's also the deliberate weaponisation of disinformation, which has always been a part of conflict but is now able to be generated and spread at huge speed, scale and relatively low cost thanks to digital technologies. Harmful disinformation now presents a very real and devastating protection risk. Again in Sudan, we've heard recently how false accusations spread online have led to attacks on mutual aid operations and volunteers and, horrifyingly, even resulted in deaths.

AI-enabled disinformation further fuels these risks. Generative AI tools can now produce vast amounts of synthetic content – seemingly realistic images, videos and fake news narratives that spread at terrifying speed and can make it nearly impossible to discern fact from falsehood. This in turn further erodes trust.

What people need now is not just more information, but support, tools and digital literacy to help them navigate this new information landscape and identify reliable information sources amid the chaos.

Harmful disinformation now presents a very real and devastating protection risk

In your opinion, how should the media and information provider organizations adapt to provide the needed information, at the right time, through the right channel?

Media and other information providers need to be more agile than ever in crisis settings. Crucially, fact-checked information needs to be as compelling and rapidly deployed as the viral misinformation it aims to counter. This presents a challenge – striking the balance between fast information delivery and verifying content in a way that maintains trust – but it’s one we can meet through better collaboration between media, humanitarian actors and communities.

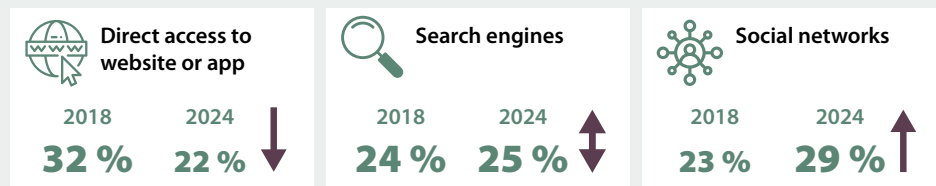
Localised, culturally appropriate communication is also key – and that includes listening as well as transmitting. Often, the best way to counter misinformation isn’t simply putting out ‘the truth’ but making sure people feel heard and acknowledged, as well as aiming to understand why people are turning to alternative information sources. To do this, we must meet people where they are – communicate using the channels and influencers they trust, in the formats and languages they feel most comfortable using.

In the longer term, we need to build resilience against harmful misinformation. This includes upgrading our approach to media literacy so that we’re supporting communities to navigate the new frontiers of the digital landscape, including generative AI. It also means strengthening our independent media ecosystem. CDAC Network brings together media development members with humanitarians, and we regularly see that media are ahead in their approach to building safer information environments. There’s much that the humanitarian sector can learn from them and do to support their work. ■

We must meet people where they are, in the formats and languages they feel most comfortable using

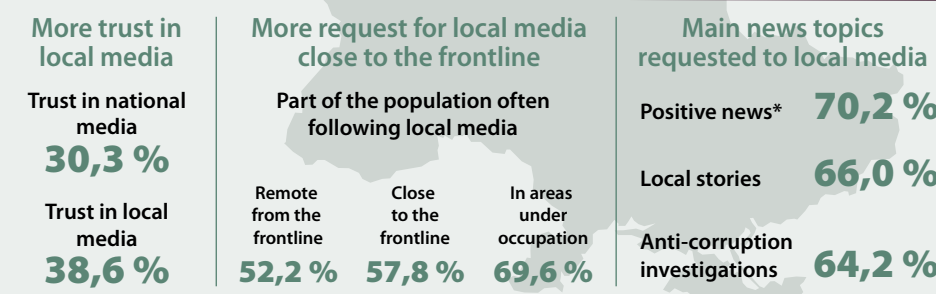
Social networks have become the main gateway to news (47 countries)

Proportion that mainly access online news via each item



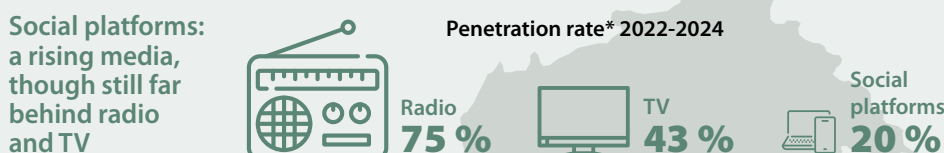
Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024. Data collected in 47 countries over 5 continents, representing half of the world’s population.

Focus Ukraine



Source: Reconnecting audiences: understanding the role of local media in promoting social cohesion, Fondation Hironnelle / IRMI, October 2024. * Any topics about something positive, good, inspiring.

Focus Central African Republic



Source: Etude d’audience pour Radio Ndeke Luka, IMMAR / Fondation Hironnelle, 2024. * Share of the population using such media on a daily basis.

Radio Ndeke Luka in the Central African Republic: radio that gives its audience a voice

Founded in 2000 by Fondation Hironnelle, Radio Ndeke Luka (RNL) is the most listened-to station in the Central African Republic. Broadcasting live 24/7 in French and Sango, RNL has several ways of keeping in touch with the information needs of people in the country:

- a network of 50 local correspondents stationed throughout the country’s 20 prefectures who report to the editorial team on the news and concerns of their regions;
- a phone number for listeners to call with opinions, complaints and programme feedback;
- journalists at the station’s digital desk who track social media comments;
- a WhatsApp number is shared on air by the host of the weekly and popular debate show *Patara*, to receive listeners testimonials via written or voice messages.

"All of these tools put us in direct contact with our fellow citizens", explains Rodrigue Leroi Bengua, RNL’s Digital Manager. "I get hundreds of messages every day, and I read the comments on our Facebook page. This makes me aware of emerging information needs and helps me keep in touch

with our listeners." A 2022-2024 audience survey highlighted the strongest areas of public interest, with the top three subjects being health, music and religion, followed closely by local and national news. This information was invaluable to the radio station, which will incorporate the feedback into its 2025 programming review.

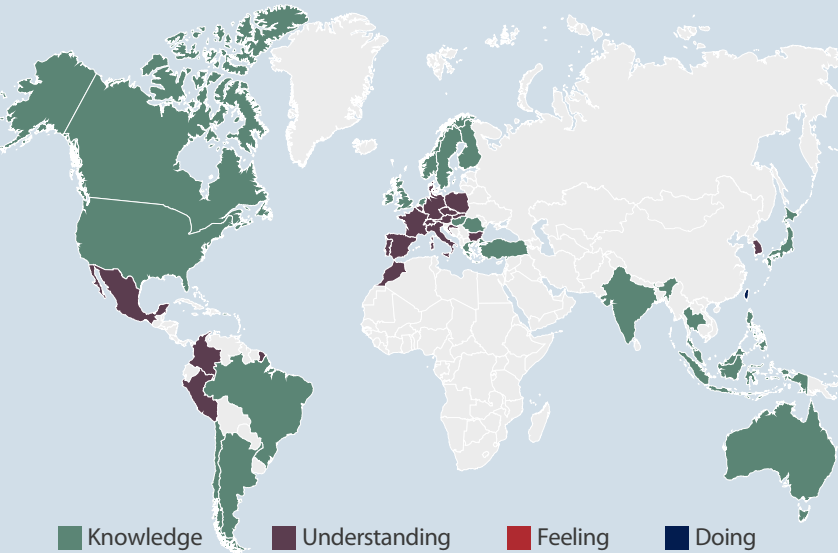
RNL’s close relationship with listeners is also evident in their use of the station as a space for expression. "People come on RNL to share their stories, whether they’ve suffered an injustice or have achieved something." In a country where rumours are rife and media outlets are few and far between, RNL also meets the vital need for reliable news, with more than 95% of listeners stating that "its programmes enable them to verify whether the news they’ve heard is true". The high level of confidence in Radio Ndeke Luka programmes is even more important given that radio is the Central African Republic’s most popular information media: 75 % of people aged 15 and over listen to the radio at least once a day, dwarfing the country’s television audience and far outnumbering the 20% who connect to social media on a daily basis.



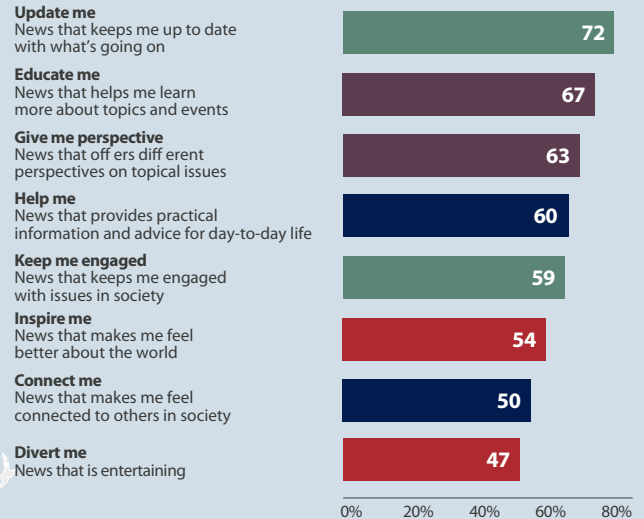
Big Data

Knowledge and understanding remain the two major information needs (43 countries)

Most important information need



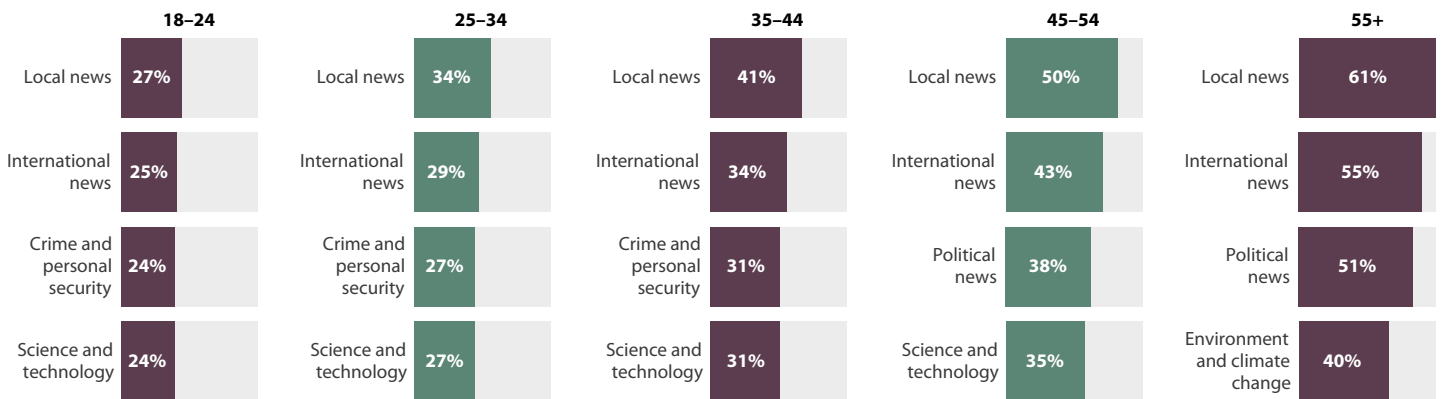
Proportion that said each user need is very or somewhat important to them - all markets



Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024. Question: Thinking about the role that news plays in your life, how important are each of the following? Knowledge = "News that keeps me engaged with issues in society OR keeps me up to date with what's going on". Understanding = "News that helps me learn more about topics or events OR offers different perspectives on topical issues". Feeling = "News that makes me feel better about the world OR inspires me". Doing = "News that provides practical information and advice for day-to-day life OR is entertaining". Data collected in 43 countries in America, Asia, Europe and Oceania.

Local and international news, most interesting news topics for any age group (43 countries)

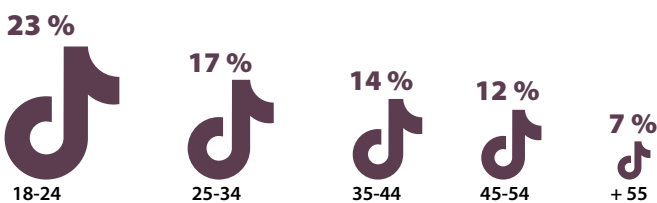
Proportion that say they are interested in each news topic by age group



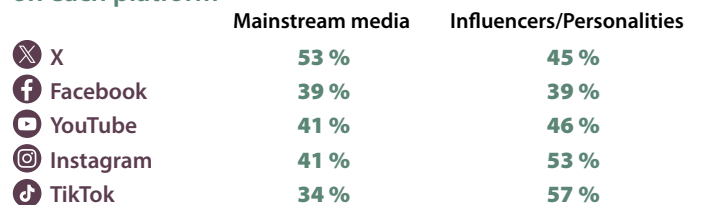
Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024. Question: Which of the following types of news, if any, are you interested in? Please select all that apply. Data collected in 43 countries in America, Asia, Europe and Oceania.

A rising demand for short, non mainstream video news (47 countries)

Proportion that used TikTok for news last week, by age group



Proportion that pay attention to each source of news on each platform



Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024. 47 countries.

Our experience



LOCAL MEDIA ARE MORE TRUSTED

Sofia Bobok, a journalist with Kharkiv Time, films the funeral of a soldier from the Kraken regiment in Kharkiv, in 2023. © Florent Vergnes / Fondation Hirondelle



© DR

Freelance journalist Sabra Ayres has covered Ukraine and Russia for twenty years. She is now editorial mentor in the Fondation Hirondelle program to strengthen local media in Eastern Ukraine and their role in social cohesion.

As a journalist, you have been covering Ukraine and Russia since the Orange Revolution in 2004. What has changed in Ukrainians' relationship with the media since the full-scale invasion of their country in February 2022?

Sabra Ayres: Before Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the Maidan Revolution in 2014 was somewhat of a turning point for Ukrainian media. The revolution forced the ouster of former president Viktor Yanukovich, who was looking at cementing closer ties with Moscow, and ushered in a new wave of investigative journalism in Ukraine. Since then, journalists from media such as Ukrainska Pravda and Slidstvo have exposed some of the biggest corruption scandals in the

country. But the fight against corruption continues and is often referred to as the second frontline of the war. When the war started in 2022, Ukrainian media faced a new challenge: self-censorship. The whole country united in the common goal of victory over Russia, although we still saw several major corruption scandals exposed in the Ukrainian press, leading to a handful of resignations in the government, including in the ministry of defense. Now that the war is approaching its third anniversary, self-censorship has faded. People want the media to denounce again corruption and to examine the choices of the government. For example, the subject of mobilization is frequently covered and remains a very controversial issue because Ukraine needs more soldiers to fight, but not everyone agrees how the process has been rolled out.

As a Fondation Hirondelle editorial mentor for various media in Ukraine, what information needs did you identify?

First, let's clarify what editorial mentor means. It's part of a project called "Strengthening Media Resilience in Ukraine", co-headed by Fondation Hirondelle and Ukrainian NGO International Institute for Regional Media and Information (IRMI). The project started in April 2022, as an emergency response to Russia's full-scale invasion. Then we helped local media close to the frontline to meet the basic information needs of people undergoing a conflict: knowing where to get humanitarian aid, what do to if your family has been displaced, where to plug your mobile phone since there is no more electricity... The project started a second phase in March 2023, in

which we support 23 local independent media. Most of them are hyperlocal print and online media from Eastern Ukraine. We also work with some media from the centre and West of the country, where millions of people have relocated after being displaced by the war, and with at least two TV channels. We work with local media because local Ukrainian communities often feel ignored by national media, above all in conflict areas: they come, they report and they leave, while local media remain. That is why they are more trusted. What we do with them is capacity building and financial support, to help journalists produce better stories that will benefit their readers and meet their new information needs.

People want to read positive stories, and not only stories of war

How do you identify these new needs?

Early 2024, we commissioned four Ukrainian sociologists to understand the role of local media in promoting social cohesion. They worked during six months with 23 communities with a sample of nearly 2400 respondents. The outcome is a survey that was published in October. Among the results, two elements are striking. First, people want to read positive stories, and not only stories of war. Second, they are more and more concerned with the reconstruction of areas devastated by the Russian invasion, and they want to know where the money goes, how local governments spend their budgets. It seems that the worry for national corruption that followed Maidan Revolution has gone local. For us, these are new guidelines. ■

Eyewitness

DEVELOPING FORMATS THAT SERVE OUR USERS

SWI swissinfo.ch is the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation's online media for an international audience interested in Switzerland. **Veronica DeVore**, Head of Audience, explains how this public service medium analyses and adapts to the new needs of this audience.

How does SWI swissinfo.ch work to understand the information needs of its users? How do you adapt to these information needs?

Veronica DeVore: We serve two primary audience groups: 1) Swiss citizens abroad, of which there are 813,000; and 2) People living outside of Switzerland, in any of our 10 language markets, who have an interest in learning more about the country.

To understand the needs of these users, we first of all enter into dialogue with them through audience surveys, exchanges on social media platforms and on our own platforms. Our most recent audience research has told us that Swiss citizens abroad have a need to stay connected with those living in Switzerland, as well as a need for a quick, regular overview of happenings in the country that are relevant to them. These needs helped us develop products to serve them, such as a daily briefing and a debate platform.

When it comes to the international audience interested in Switzerland, we learned from our research and exchanges that they have a need for perspective on issues that also affect them where they live; a need for inspiration from ideas or debates surrounding Switzerland; and a need for explanations surrounding complex issues having to do with Switzerland and its geopolitical ties. These needs led us to offer them products such as a multilingual debate platform to exchange on global trends and issues such as neutrality.

We also understand our users' needs through data analysis. By analyzing how our content is consumed and by whom, we can see, for example, that 70% of our users are reading us on mobile devices.

Followers of media platforms show the need of belonging to a community and being seen

Furthermore, we can see where our information is being blocked or censored, such as in mainland China and, as of recently, in mainland Russia. When we saw a need for reliable and



Veronica DeVore © obs/SWI swissinfo.ch

accessible information about the Russian diaspora and the effects of sanctions related to the Ukraine war, we created a video format for YouTube that addresses these needs and allows Russian-language users to access the information, since YouTube is not blocked whereas our website is. The format has seen hundreds of thousands of views since its conception.

What new trends do you see emerging? Do you analyse the outcome of the presidential election in the United States also in terms of media environment and audience needs?

We have seen for years, but ever more prominently, a trend of people finding news and information via social platforms or podcast applications. Therefore, we adapt our storytelling to these platforms: we produce vertical short-form video content about our reporting to serve audiences on these platforms, and podcasts from International Geneva and elsewhere for our various language markets.

Media consumption in the United States has long been fractured along platforms and communities as part of this longtime trend. This was made evident this election cycle in the way the candidates engaged with media, choosing for example to appear on independent podcasts rather than on "mainstream" or legacy media outlets and shows. Listeners of such podcasts and followers of media platforms and personalities outside the "mainstream" show the need of belonging to a community of like-minded individuals and feeling "seen" through that community. In these spheres, fact-based reporting often takes a backseat. This altered media landscape certainly had an impact on the presidential election and its outcome. ■

Fondation Hironnelle is a Swiss non-profit organization working to ensure that people facing crises have access to reliable, local, independent information. It has been supporting local media and journalists in fragile contexts for over 30 years (since 1995). With a global remit and local roots, it creates spaces for dialogue, to strengthen social cohesion in fragmented societies.

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