

SECTION 4: What news do people want?

Most of the research in this area is proprietary – conducted by consulting firms for TV stations and station groups. We wanted to get an overall, national picture of what kind of news and news approach are most important to people.

We attempted to get at that through several questions. First, we broke news down into categories of news approaches and news philosophies and asked people to rank them on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 meaning that they really didn't care about that approach or area and 5 meaning that they really cared a lot.

People are most interested in urgent, breaking news.

This list makes clear, broadly speaking, what kind of news emphasis people are most interested in:

1. Urgent, breaking news ... 4.5
2. Live, going on right now ... 4
3. Regular news about the community ... 3.9
4. Investigative ... 3.6
5. Human interest features ... 3.2

TV news directors were close in their estimations of the general public on this list, and it tends to be reflected in today's TV newscasts and news promotion. The news directors thought there would be more interest in investigative stories and slightly less in human interest features.

How news directors expected the public to rank the approaches to news:

1. Urgent, breaking news ... 4.6
2. Investigative ... 4
3. Live, going on right now ... 4
4. Regular news about the community ... 4
5. Human interest features ... 3

By broad age group, there was one difference. The younger group, 18-34 ranked live in second place, ahead of regular news about the community; the 35+ group reversed those two. In fact, the turning point comes between 35-44 and 45-54. For people ages 18-44, live is second and regular news about the community is third. Starting with 45-54 (and continuing through 65+), news about community comes in second with a larger margin as age increases.

There was no difference in the order, based on gender, and little difference in the number.

There was absolutely no variation on the answers based on income and no meaningful variation based on education, ethnicity, party identification or political orientation.

We also asked about specific content areas. In this case, again, the question wasn't whether something is news but how much people cared about the subject area, on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 meaning they don't really care about the subject and 5 meaning they really care about a lot.

Weather tops the interest scale, but it barely beats out national and international news.

The top of the interest list was clear ... and close. In order:

1. Weather ... 4.2
2. Information on what's happening around the country ... 4.2
3. Information on what's happening around the world ... 4.1
4. Information about politics, education, health care and the environment ... 4.1

The second group was relatively close as well but far behind the first group:

5. Features about people in your community ... 3.5
6. Crime stories and accidents ... 3.4
7. Information about money and how to save it ... 3.3
8. Consumer information ... 3.2

And the third group was well behind that:

9. Sports ... 2.7
10. Information about entertainment ... 2.5
11. Restaurant, movie or entertainment reviews ... 2.4

News directors scored half the list accurately but missed substantially on five of the 11. News directors overestimated the score of weather and consumer information.

Both groups ranked weather in first place; news directors expected weather to score much higher. News directors underestimated the interest in politics, education, health care and the environment and, especially, world and national news.

How news directors thought the public would rank the list:

1. Weather ... 4.8
2. Information about politics, education, health care & the environment ... 3.6
3. Consumer information ... 3.5
4. Information about money and how to save it ... 3.4
5. Features about people in your community ... 3.3
6. Crime stories and accidents ... 3.3
7. Information on what's happening around the country ... 3.2
8. Information on what's happening around the world ... 3
9. Sports ... 2.4
10. Information about entertainment ... 2.3
11. Restaurant, movie or entertainment reviews ... 2

Among the general public, the top four were the top four, regardless of how the data is sliced. Weather, world news and U.S. news came in first, second or third based on gender and age, although the order varied. Weather came in first for men and those 18-34. It came in second to U.S. news for women and third for those 35+ behind national news and world news. Politics, education, health care and the environment came in fourth for all four groups. In only two other areas were there more than one ranking difference among those four groups (men, women, 18-34 and 35+). Sports came in eighth for men and dead last, at number 11, for women. Crime and accidents came in fifth for 18-34 year olds but eighth for those 35+.

By individual age groups, the drop in ranking for crime and accidents starts with the 35-44 year olds and is lowest for those 55+. Consumer information scored a little lower for those 18-44 (3) than those 45+ (3.4).

Weather is number one for those with a high school degree or less, slips to number three with the "some college" group, and drops to number four for college grads and post grads. "Some college" and college grads made national news number one and world news number two. Those with post-graduate degrees selected world news first and national news second. Interest in crime and accidents tended to drop with education.

The results were similar based on income. The two lowest income groups, up to \$60,000, rated weather number one, but the two highest groups, making \$60,000+, rated weather number 3, behind national and world news, in that order. Interest in crime and accidents fell as income rose, and the \$100,000+ group rated consumer stories higher, at number 5, than all the other groups, which rated them at number 8. Sports came in at number 9 for all groups, followed by entertainment and reviews.

There were no meaningful differences based on ethnicity.

The general public distinguishes between news and information.

With the advent of the Internet, questions have been asked about whether Internet users are distinguishing between seeking news and seeking information, so we asked some questions about that. Are people in search of news or information or are those just different words for the same thing? Is one a part of the other? If so, which?

More than 80 percent of the general public drew some distinction between news and information, and while a plurality said they seek out both, there's quite a split. Overall, this is what the general public said it seeks:

- News ... 17.9%
- Information ... 25.2%
- Both ... 37.5%
- No difference ... 19.4%

We then asked whether information is a part of news or the other way around. Nearly half said information is part of news, but, again, there were clearly differences of opinion:

- Information is part of news ... 48.1%
- News is part of information ... 28.9%
- News and information are different ... 4.7%
- News and information are basically the same ... 14.3%
- Not sure ... 3.9%

News directors will be surprised at the distinctions the public sees. This is how the news directors thought the general public would answer the first question:

- News ... 4.4%
- Information ... 7.6%
- Both ... 47%
- No difference ... 41%

The news directors were closer on the second question of whether news is part of information or reverse, 33.9 percent of news directors thought the general public would view news and information as the same versus the 14.3 percent of the general public who actually said that.

There was a significant difference in the answers based on age. Younger adults, ages 18-34 were more likely to be interested in news and almost twice as likely to be interested in information as 35+. Adults 35+ were 50 percent higher in seeking both news and information than 18-34 year olds. Those 18-34 were also more likely to draw a distinction between news and information. By specific age group, interest in just news generally drops by age and is noticeably lower for those 55+ (11.2 percent) versus those 18-54 (21.5 percent). Interest in "both" (news and information) goes up almost steadily with age – as does the view that there's no difference between news and information.

Men were more likely than women to seek out news and information separately; women were more likely to seek out both.