

Changes in News Consumption Bring New Risks to Montanans

By Aurora Flexman and John Baldrige

The 2025-2026 Sources of News Survey, sponsored by the Greater Montana Foundation and conducted by the University of Montana's Bureau of Business and Economic Research, found four major changes over the past 10 years in the way Montanans consume news, including:

- a dramatic increase in using social media to access news,
- a new reliance on algorithms, which deliver news as opposed to intentional choice by Montanans of news sources,
- less attention paid to current events, and
- a sharp decline in sharing news items via the internet to influence others.

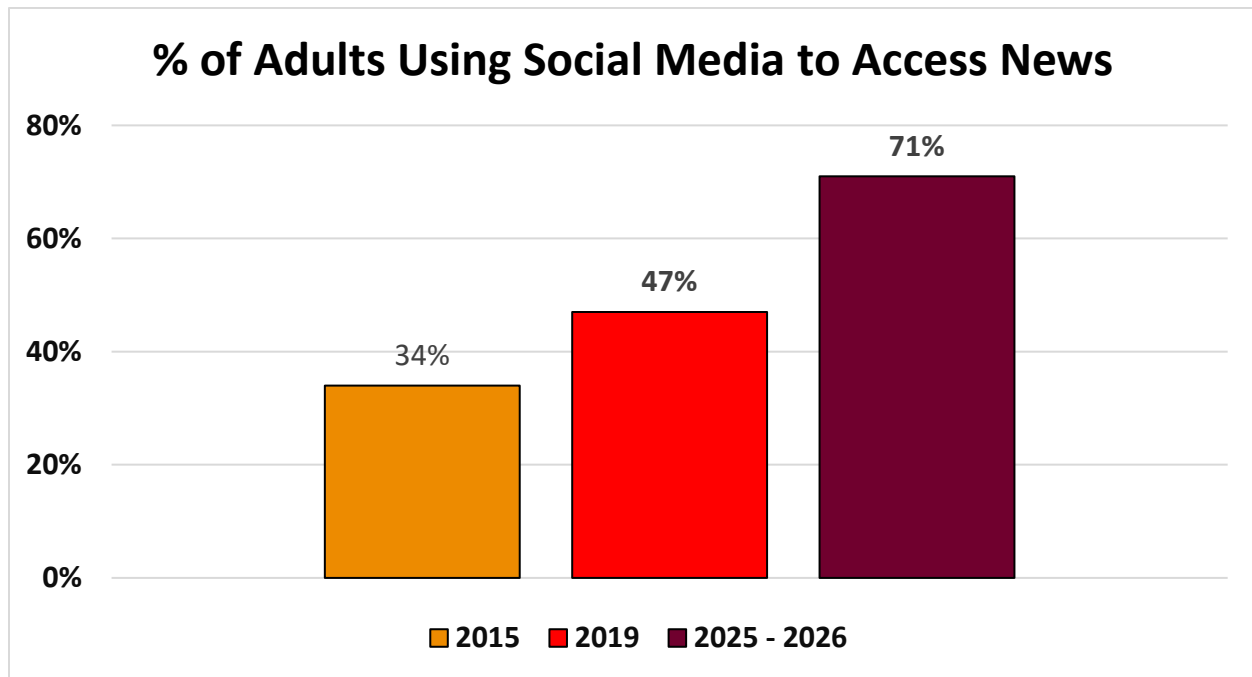
Taken together, these changes bring new risks to Montanans. First, the rise of social media as a news platform, with its reliance on delivering news via algorithm, raises significant concerns about the quality of the news delivered. Second, a decline in interactions between Montanans about news increases the likelihood that algorithm-reported news will be accepted without any critical assessment. Given the ideological points of view that are apparent in some algorithm-delivered news sources (like Fox News or MS Now), this could reinforce the divisions evident in Montana's current political culture.

In recent years, news consumption has changed significantly. To illustrate these changes, this article compares the 2025-2026 survey findings with those obtained by two earlier rounds of this survey. The Greater Montana Foundation sponsored all three rounds of the survey. To provide useful context, this article also compares the 2025-2026 Sources of News Survey findings with recent national survey findings obtained by the Pew Research Center. The analysis presented in this article represents the work and opinions of the authors, not the University of Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research or the Greater Montana Foundation.

Social Media and News Consumption

Social media consumption has surged in the U.S. amid an intense political climate, according to a Reuters Institute report published in 2025. Not only has general social media use increased, BBER found that Montanans using social media to access news also increased considerably, from 34% in 2015 and 47% in 2019 to 71% in 2025-2026 (Figure 1). When looking more closely at use of individual social media platforms, BBER and Pew Research Center in 2025 found that Montanans access news from Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) at about the same rates as their peers from around the U.S. This indicates that a large portion of Montanans consume news chosen for them by algorithms used on social media sites.

Figure 1: Use of Social Media to Access News



BBER found additional evidence that news consumption by Montanans today is not always an active and intentional activity. Only 33% of Montanans report searching out news that interests them while 67% just read or listen to news that is delivered to them (Figure 2). The Pew Research Center asked a slightly different question about the intentionality of news consumption and still found about half of U.S. adults get news because they happen to come across it and not by actively choosing a news source. (Figure 3). Together, these survey findings indicate algorithms are at least as likely to choose Montanans' news sources as are Montanans themselves. This is worrying. What is the quality of news delivered by algorithms? What are the goals of the companies that use algorithms to inform Montanans?

Figure 2: How Montanans Get News

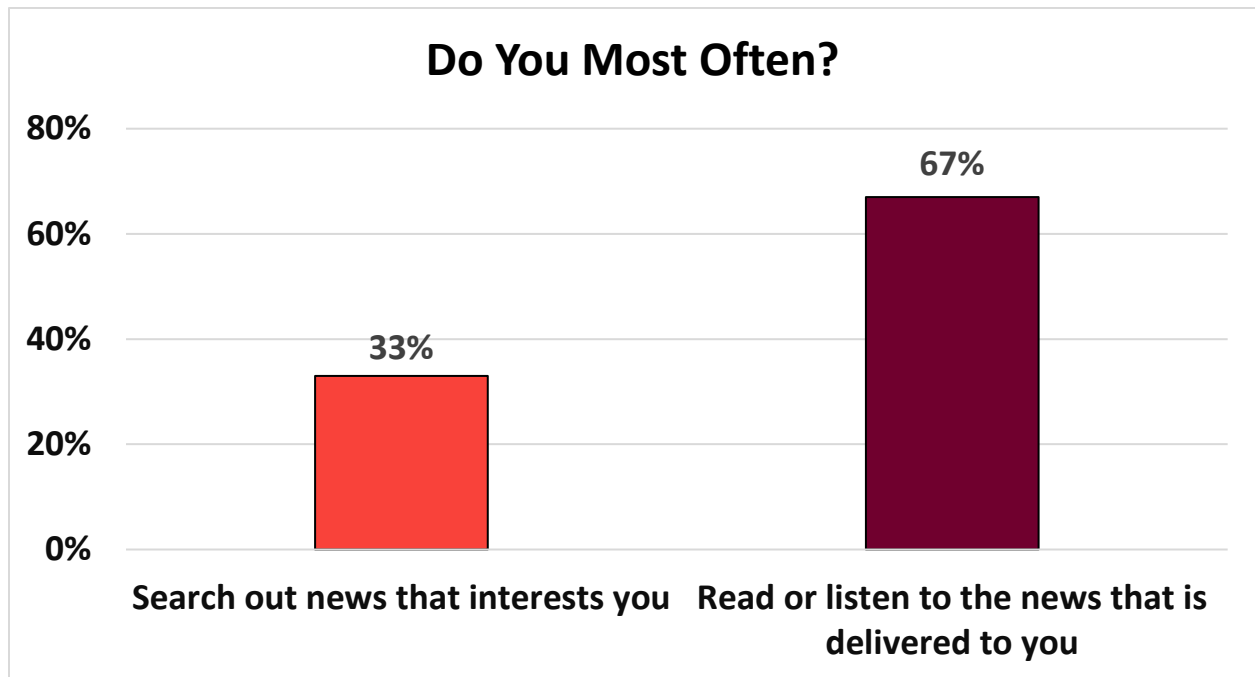
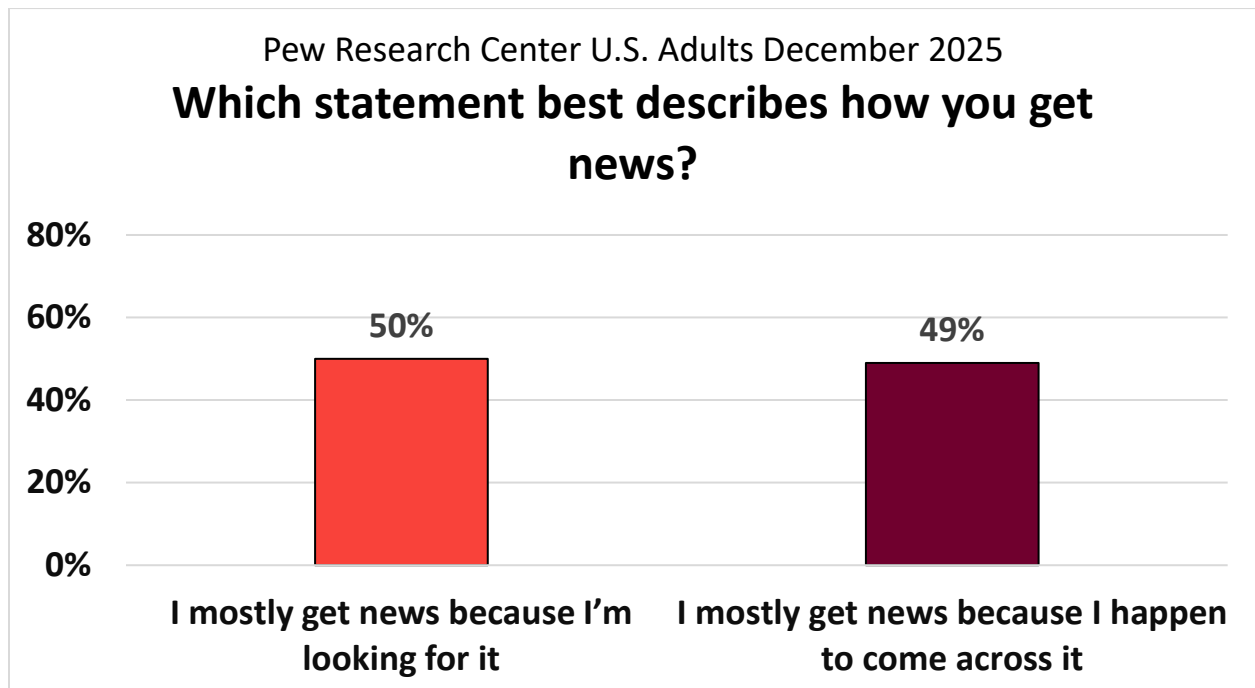
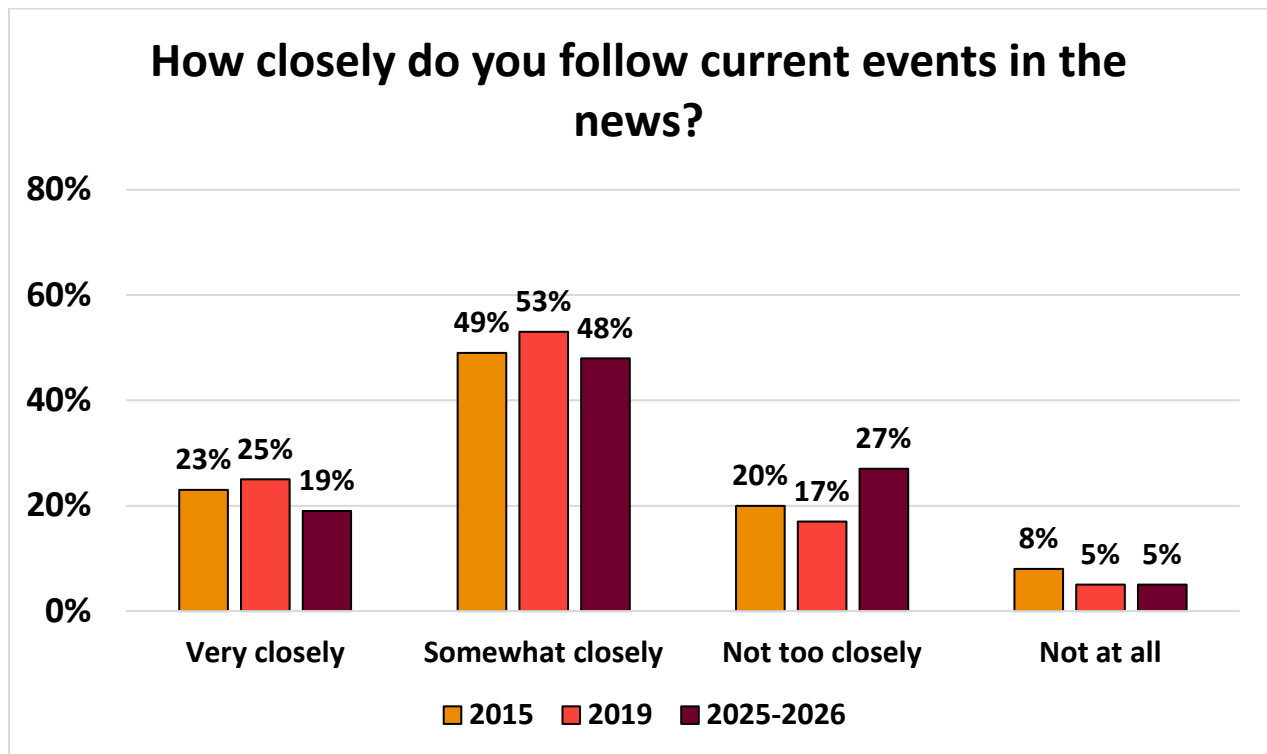


Figure 3: How People in the U.S. Get News



Montanans showed evidence of becoming tired of the volume of news delivered to them, according to BBER's recent survey (see Figure 4). In 2025-2026, 32% of Montanans followed current events in the news either "not too closely" or "not at all." This proportion of Montanans who "tuned out" is up from just 22% in 2019. BBER's observation is consistent with a 2025 Pew Center finding that over half of adults in the U.S. say they are worn out by the volume of news there is today.

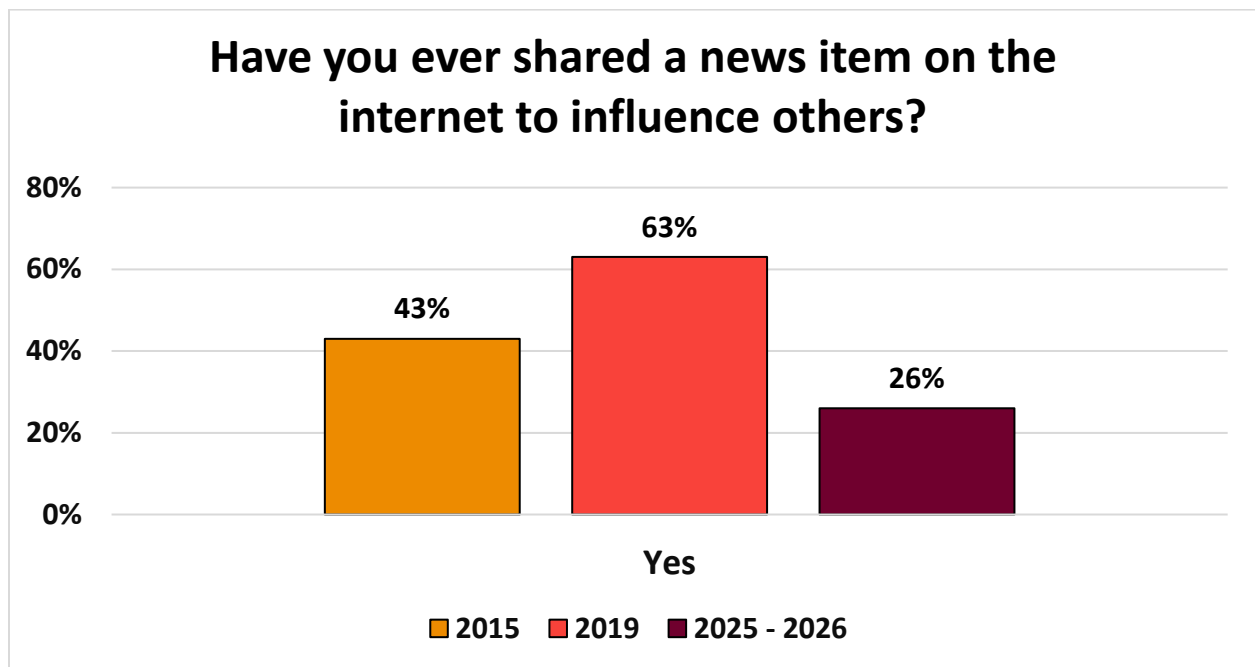
Figure 4: How Closely Montanans Follow Current Events



Sharing News Online

In addition to getting tired of news, BBER found that Montanans are becoming less likely to try to influence other people by sharing a news item via the internet. BBER found that Montanans' sharing of news items on the internet to influence others has decreased considerably, from 43% doing so in 2015 and 63% in 2019, to only 26% in 2025-2026 (Figure 4). Similarly, the Pew Center found in 2025 that over half of U.S. adults have stopped talking to someone about political news. If Montanans only consume news delivered to them by algorithms and get less exposure to alternative perspectives, they may be limited to consuming news that aligns with their own viewpoints. This limited and targeted news exposure may contribute to social or political polarization among Montanans.

Figure 5: News Item Shared to Influence Others



The changes in Montanans' news consumption illuminated by the 2025-2026 Sources of News Survey are cause for concern. The rise of algorithm-delivered news reduces the number of Montanans who intentionally choose news sources because of the quality of those news sources, potentially making Montanans less well-informed. This increase in algorithm-delivered news consumption, in combination with a decrease in the number of interactions Montanans have over the internet about news, may lead to even more polarization in Montana's social and political culture. Montana's leaders, and ordinary Montanans, need to search for ways to reduce these risks.

Methodology: *The 2025-2026 Sources of News Survey was commissioned by the Greater Montana Foundation and conducted and analyzed by the University of Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research with analytical assistance from Public Opinion Strategies, a national public opinion research firm. BBER used leading-edge random, address-based sampling of adult Montana residents, with responses collected by mail and internet. A total of 406 adults completed the survey between November 2025 and February 2026. The results have a sampling error rate of +/- 6 percent. Other sources, like question wording and reporting inaccuracy, may contribute additional error. The survey estimates are weighted by sex, age, education, tenure, and Montana 2024 Presidential election vote using data from U.S. Census Bureau and the Montana Secretary of State. Survey estimates for subgroups should be interpreted with care since they are based on fewer respondents. Full question wording may be obtained from Aurora Flexman of UM BBER: aurora.flexman@mso.umt.edu.*