



Research Note

How social media users get their news: The informational value of memes, hot takes, call outs, and comment threads during breaking events

An increasing number of people globally say they avoid the news. But are they avoiding the news or the news media? In a longitudinal ethnographic study of Australian social media users, we repeatedly observed self-identified news avoiders encountering information about major news events, in the form of memes, hot takes, call outs, and comment threads. This research note asks: if news avoidance continues to grow, should misinformation researchers take this type of informal content seriously as a key source of public sense-making?

Authors: Agata Stepnik (1), Joanne Gray (1)

Affiliations: (1) Discipline of Media and Communication, University of Sydney, Australia

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Research questions

- What curation practices do young people use to manage their access to news on social media?
- How do these practices impact the news and information they encounter?

Research note summary

- We conducted a longitudinal digital ethnographic study of Australian social media users aged 18–30 to understand how they encounter and engage with information about current events.
- Participants were classified as either news seekers, limited/niche news seekers, news neutral, or news avoiders, and they described a range of strategies they used to encourage or prevent news media content from appearing in their social media feeds.
- During the study, we regularly observed all participants encountering information about current events, including those classified as news avoiders, through non-news sources—what we collectively term *cultural commentary*.
- *Cultural commentary* is content about current events or matters of public interest produced by someone other than a professional journalist or news organization. Like journalism, it discusses, interprets, and reacts to events, but it does so in formats common to social media such as memes,

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hot takes, call outs, and comment threads. It is shared socially, through networks of followers, friends, and contacts rather than through traditional publication channels, and may reach an audience of any size—from one person to millions of users.

- The amount of professional news content observed in participants' feeds broadly reflected their level of interest in news, however, all participants encountered substantially more cultural commentary than professional news content. Notably, several participants reported preferring cultural commentary to professional news media because they found it more accessible and/or credible.
- In this research note, we argue that cultural commentary deserves greater attention as a source of information through which people learn about, interpret, and make sense of public events. For misinformation researchers and media literacy educators, specifically, our findings highlight the importance of considering how people evaluate information encountered through informal social media content alongside their engagement with professional news sources.

Implications

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2026, 52% of 18–24-year-olds globally now name social media, video networks, or AI chatbots as their main way of accessing news (Egan et al., 2026). At the same time, active news avoidance remains at a historic high of 42%, up from 29% when the measure was introduced in 2017 (Egan et al., 2026). News avoidance presents an acute challenge for misinformation researchers and policymakers. News avoiders often cite a desire to avoid being misinformed as a reason for avoiding news media (Hasell & Halversen, 2024; Newman et al., 2025). Yet, studies show an association between news avoidance and less accurate understandings of issues subject to public controversy, such as climate change, vaccination, immigration, and crime (Damstra et al., 2023). Declining trust in mainstream media appears to also be associated with an increase in exposure to misinformation (Ognyanova et al., 2020), and news avoiders are more likely to hold conspiratorial beliefs (Heiss et al., 2023). But news avoidance does not necessarily equate to an absence of information. Our study shows that participants who actively avoided news media still learned about current events, just through a different informational pathway: cultural commentary.

Previous studies have identified cultural commentary as part of online “ambient news” environments (Hermida, 2010). However, this scholarship has tended to treat such content as an extension of professional journalism—for example, when news stories are shared or recirculated with additional commentary from non-news sources—rather than as a distinct source of information and a site where people work out collectively what public events mean. Research on young people's news repertoires has likewise established that they assemble understandings of current events from across a wide range of sources, professional and otherwise (Duvekot et al., 2026; Peters et al., 2022), but has tended to treat non-news content as a residual category. Our observations suggest that cultural commentary may play an important role in how people interpret and understand the world and warrants greater attention as a source of information in its own right, especially in the context of rising news avoidance and a growing preference for social media over traditional news sources.

Of course, like cultural commentary, professional journalism interprets, frames, and evaluates current events. As Carey (1989) argues, news is itself a form of cultural production through which shared meanings about public life are produced and reproduced. What distinguishes cultural commentary from professional news is how it is produced, formatted, and circulated. Cultural commentary looks and feels like ordinary social media content. It uses formats and styles common to social media—such as memes, short videos, stories, personal posts, reactions, and comment threads. It can be produced by anyone, from everyday users to influencers, celebrities, businesses, activists, and public figures. Its intended audience

and reach can vary widely: it may be created for a large public audience or shared within a small network of friends or family. A post seen by one person and a post seen by one million can both be cultural commentary. Information in this form may be more accessible and engaging, particularly for people who do not actively seek out or actively avoid news media. Indeed, several participants in our study described cultural commentary as easier to understand and, in some cases, more credible than professional news. At the same time, creators of cultural commentary are not bound by the professional standards, editorial processes, or regulatory requirements that apply to many journalists and news organizations. Information can therefore circulate without the same expectations of verification, sourcing, accuracy, or correction, potentially increasing the risk that those who rely heavily on cultural commentary encounter and adopt misinformation.

The predominance of cultural commentary may also require us to think differently about how people encounter and come to accept misinformation online. Participants who learned about current events through cultural commentary did not necessarily encounter a single post or source. Instead, information often appeared across posts, memes, videos, replies, and comment threads throughout their social networks, allowing an understanding of an event to develop cumulatively through repetition, discussion, and social endorsement over time. This differs from viral models of misinformation, in which a single post or influential account reaches a large audience directly and spreads outward from that source (Ronzani, 2025; Shao et al., 2018). It is closer to a complex contagion model, which explains how encountering the same claim or idea through multiple social contacts increases the likelihood that it will be adopted (Centola, 2010; Centola & Macy, 2007; Mønsted et al., 2017). Cultural commentary may be the mechanism through which misinformation comes to appear familiar, credible, or widely accepted through their cumulative social circulation.

More research is needed to properly establish whether or to what extent disengagement from professional news, coupled with greater reliance on information from influencers, celebrities, content creators, and other users, increases vulnerability to misleading or inaccurate information. The findings from our study cannot answer this question, but they do suggest it warrants further investigation, particularly if social media remains the primary means by which people access news and news avoidance remains at historically high levels (Egan et al., 2026). This aligns with Ronzani's (2025) call for global misinformation research that goes beyond large-scale platform data to incorporate insights from informal information networks, using methods such as digital ethnography. While their call is primarily directed at geographic and socioeconomic blind spots in the literature, we suggest it applies to populations who identify as news avoidant as well. Taking cultural commentary seriously as a key source of public information is also consistent with critical disinformation scholars who have argued that distrust of legacy media is not a recent phenomenon but a historically grounded orientation, particularly among communities whose experiences have not been accurately or fairly represented by professional journalism (Kuo & Marwick, 2021).

A better understanding of the role of cultural commentary also has important implications for media literacy education. Its influence can be difficult for audiences to recognize. Participants in our study were often unaware that cultural commentary was informing their understanding of social and political issues, although many came to perceive its influence through reflection during the research process. If cultural commentary plays a significant role in how people learn about current events, teaching people how to evaluate professional news sources is only part of the challenge. People also need the skills to identify when informal social media content is shaping their understanding of an issue and to critically evaluate the claims, interpretations, and sources they encounter through memes, videos, posts, and comment threads. This includes recognizing interpretation and framing (Feuerstein, 1999) and understanding how credibility can be socially constructed through repetition, endorsement, and interaction online (Ha et al., 2022). Because cultural commentary is produced and reaches people at a point when meaning is being

negotiated and formed, it could also be leveraged by journalists, educators and public-interest organizations to counter misinformation and reach people who actively avoid news media.

Further research is needed to establish how significant these patterns are beyond our small qualitative sample. Larger-scale studies could examine the prevalence of cultural commentary across different platforms and its role in the information diets of different age groups and people with varying levels of news interest and avoidance. Longitudinal and comparative research could examine how reliance on cultural commentary changes over time and varies across platforms, populations and national contexts. Most importantly, future research should test how effectively cultural commentary informs people about current events, how audiences assess its credibility, and whether greater reliance on it affects knowledge, trust, or susceptibility to inaccurate and misleading information. Such evidence would help determine whether existing approaches to media literacy and misinformation adequately reflect how people encounter and make sense of information on social media.

Evidence

Finding 1: All participants were exposed to substantially more cultural commentary than professional news content.

Across sessions, the professional news content observed in participants' feeds broadly tracked their stated level of interest in news. Regardless of that interest, however, cultural commentary was consistently and markedly more prevalent in every participant's feed than professional news content. While this may be due in part to platforms deprioritizing content from professional news organizations in participants' feeds as operational priorities change (Ang, 2024), we suggest that the ease with which ordinary users and non-news sources can contribute to cultural commentary through their everyday social media practices may be a stronger driver of this trend. The cultural commentary encountered during the study covered a wide range of major news events and public issues, including COVID-19 lockdowns and vaccination programs; the resignation of former New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian; high-profile cases of sexual violence and police violence; the guilty verdict in the trial of Derek Chauvin and the Atlanta spa shootings in the United States; the death of Prince Philip in the United Kingdom; and developments in sport, entertainment, and environmental affairs globally. The ubiquity of cultural commentary in participants' feeds suggests the field would benefit by explicitly including this type of content in future news visibility, news avoidance, and misinformation studies.

Finding 2: Cultural commentary circulated across all participants' feeds in four primary forms—memes, hot takes, call outs, and comment threads.

Four forms of cultural commentary were observed during the study—memes, hot takes, call outs and comment threads—with each addressing a range of topics that were covered by news media during the period of data collection. Hot takes, call outs, and comment threads were observed across each platform during the study, however, memes were not seen on participants' LinkedIn feeds, while call outs were more commonly encountered on Instagram and TikTok, aligning with contemporary platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015; Hermida & Mellado, 2020). Memes visually convey affect, political views, and key information through humor and shared cultural framing (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Memes featuring breaking or trending news events were encountered by all participants, several of whom actively followed dedicated meme accounts or private groups where they regularly encountered news in these formats.

Hot takes are defined by emotion and reaction rather than objective reports, and are designed to attract attention, using opinionated commentary native to networked media cultures (Fuller, 2018).

News-related hot takes were encountered by all participants during the study, most commonly within Instagram stories.

Call outs are a form of online commentary originating in Black American vernacular traditions as a tool for critiquing systemic inequality (Clark, 2020; Nakamura, 2015). They center on direct criticism of an individual, institution, or public figure, often with the aim of drawing collective attention to perceived wrongdoing. The majority of participants reported seeing call out content across various platforms, and three participants described deliberately following dedicated call out accounts, such as @dietprada and @celeb_spellcheck, specifically to stay informed about social justice issues and to hold power to account. Notably, call outs were the format through which two participants encountered abuse allegations made against an Australian comedian, days before it was reported by Australian news media.

Comment threads are conversational chains of user responses attached to posts, videos, memes, and other forms of online content. They enable everyday users to interpret, debate, elaborate on, and reframe cultural commentary in public conversation spaces. Many participants also described directly engaging with comment sections to gauge public sentiment, encounter alternative perspectives, or make sense of content they did not fully understand—including participants who identified as news avoiders. One third of participants reported adding their own interpretations of events to the comments section, at times linking to content that either debunked other commenters' claims or that provided missing context for those not familiar with the origins of the topic of debate.

Where platform affordances facilitated it, cultural commentary frequently appeared in participants' feeds as a combination of the four forms described here. Memes, hot takes, and call outs were often found within comments, while hot takes and call outs were frequently shared as memes. Particularly prevalent were hot takes presented within popular meme formats such as "distracted boyfriend" (Belam, 2017) or "balloon letter guy" (Hill, 2020).

Finding 3: Participants described cultural commentary as a valued information source.

News-avoidant participants in our study who actively engaged in curation practices designed to reduce the visibility of professional news content in their social media feeds did not report taking similar steps to limit cultural commentary. Instead, they described cultural commentary as an organic feature of social media, produced by the friends, family members, creators, celebrities, and businesses they had chosen to follow. As a result, cultural commentary remained a persistent part of their information environments, even when professional news content was actively avoided.

Participants noted that cultural commentary helped them understand current events. They reported that it reduced complexity, offered community perspectives on events, provided practical guidance, and/or framed breaking news stories within historical and social contexts often unacknowledged by mainstream news media. For example, one participant reported that commentary produced by small businesses explained pandemic-related movement restrictions more clearly than either news coverage or government communications. Another participant reported deliberately seeking out Indigenous creators on TikTok to understand how legislation moving through the Australian parliament was connected to colonial histories and how it might affect Indigenous communities.

Participants also described cultural commentary as useful for communicating about current events with others. They described it as a quick and simple way to share their own feelings on a topic, or alert friends and family to breaking news that was important to them. In these cases, cultural commentary content was frequently forwarded via re-share, direct messaging, or tagging, and had the potential to both reinforce conspiratorial thinking or counter the spread of misinformation. For example, one participant commented that they often saved memes and TikTok commentaries so that they could then send these to friends and family members they thought were misinformed on a topic.

Methods

The study drew on a longitudinal digital ethnography method conducted across 65 sessions with 13 Australian social media users aged 18–30, between February 2021 and March 2022. Data collection commenced on February 6, 2021, a time of significant algorithmic change for professional news content on Meta platforms: on February 10, Meta announced the deprioritization of political content in the news feed, then on February 17, briefly blocked Australian users from accessing news content in response to the then proposed News Media Bargaining Code (Ang, 2024). Digital ethnography is achieved by incorporating and adapting traditional ethnographic techniques to the online environment, which allows the researcher to observe the practices that participants engage in there, as well as the cultures and communities within which they are enacted (Caliandro, 2017; Pink et al., 2016). Participants in the study were categorized as either news seekers ($n = 4$); limited/niche news seekers ($n = 3$); news neutral ($n = 4$); and news avoiders ($n = 2$), based on initial observed and self-reported news engagement. The age range was selected to capture primarily Generation Z users (born after 1997), who have the highest rates of social media use and report a preference for these platforms over traditional media such as print, radio, and television, while also including younger Generation Y users, who demonstrate similar patterns of social media engagement (Wicks et al., 2024). The study encompassed all platforms used by participants that feature an algorithmically mediated content feed, including TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit. This platform-agnostic approach reflects the cross-platform nature of contemporary social media use (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2024) and allowed for the identification of both platform-specific and transferable curation practices.

Data was collected over 13 months, spanning a period of COVID-19-related movement restrictions in Australia that many participants noted had led them to spend more time on social media platforms and to seek out news on the pandemic. This aligns with findings from studies into digital practices and news engagement during the pandemic (Marzouki et al., 2021; Park et al., 2022). Sessions were conducted in person prior to restrictions and transitioned to Zoom during lockdown periods, with methodological consistency maintained across both formats. Each participant completed five sessions at intervals of two to three weeks, enabling observation of both stable and evolving practices over time with their authentic social media accounts rather than “clean” or puppet accounts. Each session combined semi-structured interviews with platform-based “media go-alongs” (Jørgensen, 2016)—a method designed to elicit situated accounts of media use by embedding discussion within participants’ live interaction with their social media environments. It also allowed for participant-articulated understandings and researcher-observed behaviors, including tacit and habitual forms of engagement that are less accessible through retrospective interviewing alone. Between sessions, participants were asked to document and share screenshots of informational content they encountered, enabling triangulation of self-reported and in-situ interaction data. Participants were empowered to decide for themselves what counted as informational content rather than adhering to pre-set definitions.

Data were analyzed using grounded theory, an approach in which analytical categories are built up from the data itself rather than applied to it from an existing framework. Following Strauss and Corbin (1994), categories were developed inductively through open, axial, and selective coding, and refined iteratively through constant comparison until saturation was reached. In the open coding phase, collected examples of informational content were classified as cultural commentary through a sequential set of decisions. Content was first assessed for whether it concerned a current event or matter of public interest. Content created or shared by journalists or news organizations was excluded. Of the remainder, content that reproduced or linked to material from a news organization or journalist without adding anything of its own was treated as recirculation rather than cultural commentary; where original commentary was added, that original element was classified as cultural commentary. Axial coding then categorized the

remaining content across dimensions including informational topic, platform, format, account owner, and visibility (private, semi-private, or publicly shared). These codes were then categorized into broader themes through thematic analysis that identified patterns across the dataset, resulting in the four categorizations of cultural commentary shared in this research note: memes, hot takes, call outs, and comment threads. Although individual posts could contain characteristics of more than one form, each observed encounter was assigned to one category according to its primary form and purpose, even where, as described below, forms frequently appeared in combination. Content using humor and shared visual or cultural references was classified as a meme; standalone opinion or reaction as a hot take; direct criticism of an identifiable person or organization as a call out; and discussion occurring through exchanges between users beneath a post as a comment thread. This allowed the four categories to be treated as mutually exclusive for analysis. Saturation was reached when no new codes emerged from further data.

The study design prioritized depth over breadth, producing thick descriptions of user practices. Thick description captures not only observed behavior, but also its context and the meanings participants attach to it, which are extended in digital contexts through “thickening” strategies (Latzko-Toth et al., 2022). The media go-alongs, participant screenshot archives, remote observation, and recurring direct observations over time align to the strategies suggested by Latzko-Toth and colleagues (2022) to thicken data. The approach also enabled close analysis of the socio-technical contexts of social media platforms as digital public spaces, that are shaped by both intimate and parasocial relationships, in which those practices are embedded. It also recognizes that algorithmic experiences on these platforms are heterogeneous: shaped by individual motivations and histories of platform use, evolving user–algorithm interactions, and broader contextual conditions such as those created by a global pandemic or breaking topical issues. However, the small sample size, participants’ geographic location and other factors preclude the possibility of statistical generalizability. The platform-agnostic design carries a further limitation: because content was analyzed across participants’ full social media environments rather than platform by platform, the study does not permit systematic comparison of the distinct media logics that shape each platform (Hermida & Mellado, 2020). The platform differences we observed in the circulation of cultural commentary are therefore indicative rather than exhaustive. Consistent with the ethnographic aims of the study, encounters with informational content were recorded observationally rather than meticulously counted. Much of what participants encountered was observed live during media go-alongs and recorded in field notes, including screenshot archives which were shared as data donations at each participant’s discretion, so the record of any individual feed is necessarily partial. Claims about the relative prevalence of cultural commentary in this note are therefore comparative and observational rather than quantitative.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics

This research project was subject to approval by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee under code 2020/625. Participants provided informed consent prior to commencement of data collection.

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Data availability

All materials needed to replicate this study are available on request, subject to ethics approval from the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee.