International Journal of Communication 18(2024), 1494–1515 1932–8036/20240005

From Information Poverty to Information Deficit: An Intersectional Analysis of Women of Color's News Information-Seeking Habits in the Digital Age

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Scholars have used information poverty theory for decades to understand when and why marginalized individuals feel disconnected from news and information. However, by focusing on how individuals create information-poor environments, these studies shift attention away from the role of institutions in sustaining informational deficits. This article engages intersectionality as a systemic analysis of power to understand the structural, societal-level dimension of women of color's news information-seeking habits in the digital age. Through eight focus groups with N = 45 women of color, this study elucidates the dynamic role of intersecting forms of systemic marginalization in informing women of color's information-seeking habits. This study contributes to our understanding of the role of media institutions in creating and sustaining informational inequities.

Keywords: information seeking, news, information poverty, intersectionality, focus group methods

Access to news is paramount in helping people, especially individuals from historically marginalized communities, advocate for themselves within society (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, & Trounstine, 2020; Tully & Vraga, 2018). Therefore, news organizations must consider the accessibility, usefulness, and relevance of the information they report to marginalized communities (Britz, 2004; Lievrouw & Farb, 2003; Lloyd, Lipu, & Kennan, 2016). However, U.S. news often reports information that centers on the lived experiences and perspectives of White, middle-class Americans, which can lead to information poverty—this occurs when someone faces barriers to accessing important, useful, or beneficial information because they belong to a marginalized or "outsider" community (Britz, 2004; Brown, Wilner, & Masullet, 2022; Chatman, 1996; Gans, 1979; Heider, 2014; Yu, 2011). Chatman's (1996) small-world theory of information poverty posits that information poverty happens when people who see themselves as lacking in helpful sources of information and at the bottom of a classed hierarchy exhibit self-protective behaviors in information seeking as a

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Date submitted: 2022-09-21

[1] I would like to acknowledge and thank the study participants who provided me with their time and invaluable insights, without which this project would not have been possible. I also wish to thank the reviewers for their thoughtful comments and guidance in helping to develop this article. This work was supported, in part, by The Graduate School at Northwestern University.

response to social norms, to protect themselves against mistrust from sources. In this study, I draw on Chatman's framework to understand if U.S. women of color experience information poverty.

Women of color present a particularly clarifying community through which to explore information poverty. Because of their social, political, and economic marginalization, U.S. women of color's lived experiences often do not align with the perspectives presented in mainstream news (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2021; Steele, 2021). However, women of color have recently played a key role in social and political organizing and influenced the outcome of major national and local elections (Lorenzo, Hopper, & Yang, 2020; Washington & Arnold, 2020). Thus, while based on information poverty theory, women of color could exist within an information-poor environment as a socially-marginalized community, their recent record of active political participation indicates many women of color are informed about social and political issues. Part of this discrepancy may be because of the individual-level analysis of information poverty theory—that it attributes information poverty to individual perceptions of a lack of resources, stigma, and risk, as opposed to the societal and systemic barriers that may lead to these information-poor environments (Gibson & Martin, 2019).

Therefore, this study engages intersectionality, an analytical lens that examines how multiple axes of power and oppression shape people's lives, to uncover the systemic and institutional dimensions of why and how women of color engage in news information seeking (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Here, I follow Gibson and Martin's (2019) concept of information marginalization to understand how, beyond individual information-seeking habits, U.S. news may "hold" women of color "at social 'margins,' where their needs are persistently ignored or overlooked" (p. 476). Through eight focus groups asking $N = 45$ women of color about their news information-seeking habits, this study contributes to the growing scholarship in communications studies on news information equity by asking us to consider, or reconsider, the relationship between news and marginalized communities beyond the individual.

Motivators of News Information Seeking and Avoidance

This study focuses on women of color's information-seeking habits through news, or news information seeking. Information seeking is the active process through which individuals fill information gaps in their knowledge through available sources (Belkin, 1980; Kuhlthau, 1991; Sharot & Sunstein, 2020). Today, most (82%) Americans say they often or sometimes seek news through digital media, such as a smartphone, computer, or tablet, highlighting the important role of digital media in contemporary news information-seeking habits (Forman-Katz & Matsa, 2022).

The information-seeking process is initiated when an individual determines a need for information. However, even when someone identifies an informational need, environmental factors, such as access to information; cognitive factors, such as self-efficacy; or the perceived lack of utility of information can constrain information seeking (Kahlor, 2010; Kuhlthau, 1991; Rice, McCreadie, & Chang, 2001). Individuals may also engage in information avoidance, actively ignoring relevant or potentially useful information because they feel it will cause them increased anxiety or mental discomfort (Brashers, Goldsmith, & Hsieh, 2002; Gudykunst, 1995) or in a highly information-saturated environment, such as our current digital media environment, to avoid information overload (Case, Andrews, Johnson, & Allard, 2005; Dai, Ali, & Wang, 2020). Information avoidance

can impede people from accessing important social and political news information, leading to lower levels of social and political knowledge that can, in turn, decrease social and political participation, something that is particularly important for women of color whose social and political needs are often overlooked by political elites (Bimber, 2001; Ezie, 2021; Fraile, 2013; Park & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021; Zaller, 1992).

Therefore, it is important to understand why and under what conditions women of color seek or avoid news information. Sharot and Sunstein (2020) posit that when deciding to engage in information seeking, people consider the potential impact on their: (1) actions, the ability of the information to help or hinder their future actions; (2) affect, the ability of the information to have a positive or negative effect on their emotional well-being; and (3) cognition, the ability of the information to help them understand the world around them. Most individuals have a dominant motive, often related to mental health (Kelly & Sharot, 2021). This model underscores the idea that individuals seek information that provides meaning or has utility within the context of their lived experiences (Dervin, 1983; Kuhlthau, 1991). Thus, based on this previous research, when deciding whether to engage in news information seeking, women of color may consider how the information they find will inform their future actions, impact their mental and emotional health, and help them contextualize their specific sociopolitical experiences. However, to this author's knowledge, empirical studies have yet to examine the news information-seeking habits of U.S. women of color.

Information Poverty and Marginalization

In her work on information poverty, Chatman (1996) draws on research that suggests socially marginal individuals or "outsiders" occupy a stratified life, creating barriers to accessing and utilizing mainstream information created from an "insider" knowledge perspective (Lindbeck & Snower, 1988; Merton, 1972). Through a series of studies on the information behaviors of marginalized peoples, Chatman argues that their outsider position leads to feelings of *risk* surrounding information seeking. In turn, Chatman puts forth six propositions that posit information-poor individuals: (1) see themselves as lacking in helpful information sources and (2) at the bottom of a social hierarchy (3) exhibit self-protective behaviors such as (4) acts of *secrecy*, not sharing or searching for certain information, and (5) *deception*, pretending they do not need certain information; however, these people will (6) selectively seek new information if it has enough utility to their lives (Chatman, 1996). Thus, Chatman (1996) highlights the role of community norms, especially perceptions of stigma, in creating information poverty.

Scholars have applied Chatman's framework to analyze various marginalized groups' information-seeking behaviors. These studies consider the role of stigma and social relevance in determining information-seeking habits (Hamer, 2007; Spink & Cole, 2001; Veinot, 2009). Additionally, given the expanse in the types of media through which individuals can seek information since Chatman's initial study, brought about by digital media and Web 2.0, studies suggest the Internet and digital platforms provide more potential sources of helpful information for marginalized communities (Hasler & Ruthven, 2011). Thus, when considering women of color's contemporary news information-seeking habits, it is important to consider the role of social norms alongside the role of digital media.

While these previous studies have elucidated how Chatman's (1996) framework applies to different marginalized communities, they often present two limitations. First, they often focus on how a primary axis

of marginalization, such as race *or* sexuality, shapes information-seeking habits. Second, information poverty theory focuses on how individual-level actions in response to perceived social norms create information barriers, placing the responsibility for information barriers on the individual instead of on how varying structures of oppression coalesce to form these barriers.

One notable exception is Gibson and Martin's (2019) study examining the information-seeking habits of the parents of disabled children. Gibson and Martin (2019) not only consider how participants' actions led to information poverty but also how parents who faced additional forms of marginalization, such as racial and class inequity, experienced additional barriers to information seeking. Thus, the authors argue for the necessary investigation of systemic barriers to information access, or what they term "information marginalization." Building on this concept, I engage intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) in this study as a framework of analysis to understand how experiencing multiple forms of marginalization may introduce systemic barriers to women of color's news information-seeking habits.

Approaching an Intersectional Perspective

Intersectionality is a framework of analysis developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw that considers the dynamic ways intersecting systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism, shape people's lived experiences. Through an evaluation of laws and social policies impacting Black women and women of color, Crenshaw (1989, 1991) argues that Black and women of color's social, political, and economic lives cannot be fully realized through the lens of any single axis of oppression, such as race *or* gender, and subsequently argues for the contemporaneous consideration of how multiple axes of oppression can shape people's lives in dynamic and unforeseen ways. Consequently, intersectionality presents "a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world . . . shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways" (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 22). In this study, intersectionality can reveal the nuanced way that experiencing at least racial and gender oppression concurrently shapes women of color's information-seeking habits outside of individual perceptions of ability and stigma.

In examining how information poverty may impact U.S. women of color in today's digital age, this study considers:

R1: To what extent do women of color's news information-seeking habits fit within an information poverty framework and/or reflect information marginalization?

R2: How do women of color's social positionality inform their news information-seeking habits?

R3: How does the expanding digital media landscape influence women of color's news information-seeking habits based on their varying social positionalities?

Methods

I conducted eight focus groups with individuals 18 and over who self-identify as women of color, defined as racially non-White, about their news information-seeking habits. Focus groups allowed me to

directly ask participants about their lives to explain how various aspects of their intersecting identities shaped their news information seeking (Bowleg, 2008). Further, because women of color represent a range of racial, gender, sexual, and class experiences, putting multiple women of color in conversation in focus groups allowed me to ascertain the potential scope of how women of color's identities may influence their news information-seeking habits (Casey & Krueger, 2015).

Recruitment

I posted flyers advertising the study in public areas around the Midwestern city where I was located, on local university campuses, online via the social networking sites Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Reddit, and e-mailed flyers to relevant social, professional, and community organizations. Flyers directed those interested in participating to fill out a screening survey housed on the secure online survey platform Qualtrics. The screening survey assessed interested individuals' eligibility to participate in the study by confirming they were at least 18, identified as non-White and a woman, and understood English. Participants were also asked to self-identify their specific race, gender identity, and age range, and had the option to self-identify their socioeconomic class, highest education level, and sexuality—other key dimensions of systemic marginalization that could inform their information-seeking habits. I directly contacted all eligible respondents and invited them to participate in one focus group. I sent everyone who agreed to participate a written consent form, approved by an Institutional Review Board at a mid-sized Midwestern university, to be signed and returned before the focus group session.

Participants

Recruitment resulted in eight focus groups of four to eight participants each, for a total of $N = 45$ participants, attributed P1 . . . P45 throughout the article (see Table 1). Focus groups were conducted from July 2020 to November 2020, via the video conferencing platform Zoom using a password-protected link, were recorded with participants' consent, and lasted an average of 93 minutes. I moderated all focus group sessions in English. In each focus group, I asked participants about their general news information-seeking patterns, what news sources they used to find information, how they defined the helpfulness and trustworthiness of news sources and information, and how they perceived their news information-seeking habits to relate to their identities. After each focus group, I e-mailed each participant a $20 Visa Gift Card as remuneration.

Four groups comprised participants ages 18–35, and four comprised participants ages 36 and older. I determined these age ranges based on existing research on age variation in social media usage, a potential factor in how participants may use different media for news information seeking (Forman-Katz & Matsa, 2022). In the 18–35 range, most participants self-identified as Asian/Pacific Islander; in the 35+ range, most participants identified as Black. No women in the 18–35 range identified as non-White Latinx; however, since Latinx is an ethnicity and not a race, Latinx participants could have racially identified as Black or Indigenous.

Focus groups included a range of economic and educational diversity. All participants who disclosed their education levels said they had at least some college education, with 29% having some advanced education—defined as a master's or professional degree. Of those participants who disclosed their socioeconomic class, most (55%) identified as middle- or upper-middle class. While I did attempt to sample

for class and educational variation, reaching some segments of the population was made harder by the limited in-person recruitment opportunities brought on by the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic. These limitations and their implications will be addressed in the discussion.

Table 1. Participants.

Participant	Racial Identity	Age Range	Sexuality	Class	Highest Education Level
P1	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Undefined	Upper-middle class	SAE
P2	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Queer	Upper-middle class	CG
P3	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper class	ADG
P4	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper-middle class	ADG
P5	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Queer	Upper class	SAE
P6	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Heterosexual	Working class	SAE
P7	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Queer	Lower-middle class	ADG
P8	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Middle class	CG
P9	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	x	x	x
P10	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper-middle class	SAE
P11	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	x	x	x
P12	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper-middle class	GC
P13	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Bisexual	Upper-middle class	SAE
P14	Indigenous	18–35	Pansexual	Middle class	ADG
P15	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Bisexual	Middle class	CG
P16	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Lower-middle class	SAE
P17	Black	18–35	x	x	x
P18	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	CG
P19	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P20	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Upper-class	SAE
P21	Black	35–60			
P22	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper-middle class	ADG
P23	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P24	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P25	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Middle class	CG
P26	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Middle class	ADD
P27	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P28	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	SAE
P29	Indigenous	18–35	Pansexual	Middle class	ADG
P30	Black	18–35	Homosexual	Upper-middle class	CG
P31	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Heterosexual	Middle class	ADG

P32	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Bisexual	Lower-middle class	SCE
P33	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper-middle class	SAE
P34	Indigenous	36–60	x	x	x
P35	Asian/Pacific Islander	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	ADG
P36	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper class	CG
P37	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Working class	CG
P38	Asian/Pacific Islander	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	ADG
P39	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper-middle class	ADG
P40	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper-middle class	ADG
P41	Asian/Pacific Islander	36–60	Heterosexual	Upper-middle class	ADG
P42	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Upper-middle class	SAE
P43	non-White Latinx	36–60	x	x	x
P44	non-White Latinx	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	ADG
P45	Indigenous	Over 60	x	x	x

SCE = Some college education; **CG** = College Graduate; **SAE** = Some Advanced Education; **ADG** = Advanced Degree Graduate

Analysis

I transcribed focus group recordings using secure automated software and manually edited each transcript for accuracy. I coded transcripts using thematic qualitative coding, grouping participants' responses into initial codes based on the central themes expressed in each statement and then combining codes into larger, pervasive themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I derived codes deductively from the literature on *information seeking*, coding for active information seeking, information avoidance, information utility, and emotional well-being; *information poverty*, coding for risk, secrecy, and deception in line with Chatman's (1996) framework; and *information marginalization*, coding for how being a woman of color shaped information-seeking habits. I also derived codes inductively, leaving the coding scheme open to allow new codes to arise based on patterns in the data. Further, following Collins' (2019) proposition that intersectional analysis can be used as a critical social theory to "explain a social phenomenon, not simply describe it" (p. 51), in coding transcripts, I used intersectionality as an analytical lens to code for how participants' descriptions of their information-seeking habits were as shaped by perceptions of racism, classism, sexism, and other relationalities of power in specific information sources. I constantly compared codes across transcripts until I established a final set of codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

Findings

R1: To What Extent Do Women of Color's News Information-Seeking Habits Fit Within an Information Poverty Framework and/or Reflect Information Marginalization?

Across focus groups, n = 35 participants (78%) said they actively engage in news information seeking regularly; this is higher than the 63% of Americans who describe themselves as active news

consumers (Sonderman, 2018). Most of this information seeking occurred from mainstream local and national news sources such as the *New York Times* (e.g., P12, P19, P22, P30, P32, and P45), the *Washington Post* (P3 and P21), and CNN (P4, P18, and P20). Participants also sought news from social media platforms, like Twitter (now X) and Reddit, aggregated newsletters like Feedly, and their friends and family. Thus, overall, participants in this study inhabit information-rich environments.

Also, *n* =10 participants (22%) said they were news avoidant. In line with the propositions of information poverty theory, these participants exhibit self-protective behaviors in the form of *secrecy* and *deception* based on perceptions of risks from engaging in information seeking (Chatman, 1996).

Secrecy

Chatman (1996) defines secrecy as a way "to guard oneself against unwanted exposure . . . of one's personal reality" (p. 199). For participants, secrecy presented itself not as protecting information about themselves but rather as protecting themselves from information that would harm their mental or emotional health. Some participants sought news only from social media platforms so they could curate information to their social and political interests. For instance, P29 noted:

> I really want to be specific on how I consume information . . . Reddit is sort of this easy way to engage in Native American issues because there's a few Native American subreddits that are filled with just news articles . . . I like being able to curate my own consumption of media in a place that feels safer.

P29 selectively relied on Reddit to find news she believed was pertinent to her specific lived experience as a Native American woman and safe for her to consume as a woman of color. Thus, participants used the affordances of digital media to follow sources that more closely reflected their experiences and worldviews as women of color, highlighting the role of digital media in not only facilitating information access but also in allowing information-poor habits. Likewise, P30 commented:

> I tell myself maybe I should go into Fox News and just see what's going on. . . . But realizing that it's in direct tension and contradiction of the society that we live in is a helpful reminder to me. . . . It only makes sense, in my view, to have new sources and be following thought leaders that understand that and take that into consideration when they inform me of the current events and political landscape.

This articulation of secrecy secluded participants from news they deemed irrelevant or mentally harmful to them because of racist and sexist undertones. However, in line with information marginalization, these manifestations of secrecy were not based on individual assessments of stigma or ability but rather agentic reactions to a perception that mainstream news did not reflect their lived experiences as women of color.

Deception

Deception entails creating a false social reality to protect against unwanted exposure in information seeking (Chatman, 1996). For some participants, deception manifested as news avoidance—or denying the

need for news to protect their mental health. Participants who were news avoidant said it was because they were emotionally overwhelmed by current events, especially because of the COVID-19 pandemic and an increasingly hostile political climate during the Trump administration:

> Since 2016, I've not watched TV because Trump has spoiled TV for me because as soon as he comes on any news outlet, I have to turn the TV off. So, it's a lot of work trying to mute him, turning the TV off, so I just leave it off. (P40)

Participants noted that former President Trump's racist and misogynistic rhetoric heightened their anger and anxiety as women of color, causing them to turn away from this information. Thus, the affective dimension of this political information was heightened for participants because of the specific forms of systemic marginalization they faced, causing some to be increasingly news avoidant during this time (Sharot & Sunstein, 2020). Like the secretive practices outlined above, these acts of deception, or news avoidance, reflect information marginalization in that they are a response to how U.S. news media, especially during the Trump presidency, created information barriers for women of color by circulating racist and sexist narratives.

[Worth the] Risk

However, in line with Chatman's (1996) sixth proposition, which posits the information poor will selectively seek new information if it has enough utility to their lives, for most participants, opening themselves up to new information was worth the risk of potential mental or emotional harm. Participants said they would often discuss and share news information with others to help contextualize the social and political information surrounding them. Further, some participants said news related to the Trump administration drove their news information seeking:

> What [Trump's] doing to Native American reservations, he's trying to take away the rights of some of the reservations to govern themselves, just going on with the same governmental things that have been happening for hundreds of years. And I find that just deplorable. . . . So, I follow that closely. At least it is a good year for women, and I follow wherever I can follow the news. (P45)

Both Trump's attacks on Native American rights and news about women, as opposed to one or the other, amplified P45's news information seeking. Similarly, P6 said, "I feel like the Trump administration changes policies literally every day, so it's helpful to know what's going on." Thus, while for some participants, Trump's attacks on women and people of color led to selective news information seeking and avoidance, for others, his rhetoric had a contradictory effect—the anger and anxiety caused by this information motivated participants to seek out more information to arm themselves with the knowledge to defend themselves against potentially harmful policies. Therein, the utility of the information, not only to themselves but also to the larger marginalized communities they belonged to, was worth the risk of news information seeking.

R2: How Do Women of Color's Social Positionality Inform Their News Information-Seeking Habits?

Participants said being a woman of color prompted them to be (1) critical of journalists and news outlets in their information-seeking practices, (2) critical in their news consumption habits, and (3) engage in high levels of information seeking to protect themselves from potential social and political harm.

Engaging in Critical Information Seeking

Several participants said being a woman of color caused them to gravitate toward reporters of color. P4, a Black woman, said she regularly followed Black journalists "like Angela Rye . . . Marc Lamont Hill . . . Trevor Noah." Participants also actively sought news from reporters with multiple-marginalized identities, like MSNBC's Joy Reid and PBS NewsHour's Yamiche Alcindor, both Black women, and CNN's Don Lemon, a Black gay man. In this way, participants used the reporters' identities to signal how they would report on social and political issues.

Participants' news information-seeking habits were also informed by other aspects of their social identities:

> It's not *just* about being a woman of color. . . . Sometimes it's about me being the mom of two Black boys. . . . Sometimes it's about me, just being a woman. The issues that we face . . . it varies about what I see sometimes on any given day. (P37)

This comment illustrates what Collins (2019) terms the "flexible solidarity" through which Black women emphasize different aspects of their identity depending on their current social, political, and economic positionality. Similarly, participants with diasporic connections were intentional in how they sought international news: "There are definitely certain issues where I will not trust any U.S. source . . . especially when it comes to international issues where the U.S. has a very vested interest in pushing a certain narrative" (P2). Participants with diasporic connections would often seek out information from international news sources to make up for "gaps" (P1) and "biases" (P3) in U.S. reporting. Thus, participants' news information-seeking habits were also informed by their nationality, citizenship, and culture.

Participants also checked information across news sources. P10, a Black woman, said that when finding news about the racial uprisings in Portland, she sought information from local news and social media:

> The first thing I did was I went to YouTube, and I wanted to watch the local news. . . . Then I wanted to see noncensored news, independent news sources, or just individuals, so I actually went to Periscope . . . because I feel like on . . . the left and the right, a lot of people are using the Black Lives Matter movement to forward their own political agenda, so I really don't trust either side really in the mainstream media reporting . . . I want to see it for myself.

In this way, participants used multiple sources to offset potential bias in a single news source. Thus, the disconnect between participants' lived experiences and mainstream news did not always lead to information

barriers but produced a critical orientation when engaging in news information seeking that required participants to be selective about the information they chose and seek out additional information to account for perceived biases in reporting. Additionally, these statements reflect how the contemporary digital age has vastly expanded the range of news sources participants can use to check information, increasing the tools women of color can use to engage in critical information seeking (Hasler & Ruthven, 2011).

Engaging in Critical News Consumption

Participants were also critical when engaging in news consumption. P32 noted the importance of the media's attentiveness to systems of power in informing her news consumption habits:

> Trustworthiness has to do a lot with how they report people of color. Especially, my lens is through Native America. . . . If the *New York Times* had an article on the Navajo Nation, and it portrayed us as middle of nowhere, equivalent to a ghetto, I would not trust that because that doesn't align with my humanity.

As a lower-middle-class Native woman, P32 critically used the race and class dimensions of how news outlets reported on her community to determine the trustworthiness of news. Similarly, P27 said:

> I find myself questioning and asking as I am reading something, as I am listening to something. . . . Who's reporting this? What's their background? Who's telling their side of the story? Whose voice is heard right now, and whose voice is actually being left out right now? And it kind of just informs how I'm taking in information.

Participants' experiences as women of color within a society that privileges White heteropatriarchal perspectives led them to read information through a more critical lens, wary of reporting that deviates from their lived experience.

Many participants expressed skepticism about mainstream, White-led news outlets. As P8 said, "Because of the historical placement of power and journalism in general and the way that we are consuming news is so controlled by folks in power, that there is that inherent skepticism because we know what we're experiencing." P12, a Black woman, said this had recently shown up in her engagement with mainstream news on COVID-19:

> They're doing tons of coverage over how Black communities are being . . . hit the worst by COVID . . . and they're doing all this research and all this coverage, trying to figure out why. To me, a woman of color, it's obvious because they tend to work the jobs that you can't work from home. . . . They tend to be the ones that have to ride the public transportation, systemic racism. . . . It's very interesting to see how the other side thinks and views things, and things that seem so obvious to me are so befuddling to the mainstream media. . . . It made me put them in a category mentally . . . the category being like mainstream patriarchy.

Thus, participants were often critical and skeptical of the information they received from mainstream news.

Engaging in High Levels of Information Seeking

Finally, being a woman of color spurred participants' high levels of news information seeking. Summing up a sentiment many participants expressed, P15 commented, "All these events, everything that's happening right now, it's happening to us and especially Black and Indigenous women, it's going to affect us the hardest." Similarly, P23 noted:

> I can't afford to not know what's going on. That could be the difference between me making a decision that's going to positively impact my organization or negatively impact the people who work at my organization. Or even like personal decisions for myself in terms of healthcare . . . I can't afford to not know what's going on.

Participants felt that many social and political events directly impacted their rights, livelihood, and communities as women of color, prompting them to remain informed. Thus, as a socially-marginalized community, the systemic and institutional threats to women of color were key in motivating participants' high news information seeking.

R3: How Does the Expanding Digital Media Landscape Influence Women of Color's News Information-Seeking Habits Based on Their Varying Social Positionalities?

Assessing the Helpfulness of News in Today's Media Landscape

Since Chatman's original studies, the range of mediums individuals can use to find news has vastly expanded, which could also influence women of color's news information-seeking habits. To understand how participants perceive the helpfulness of different media for news information seeking in today's digital media environment, during the focus groups, I asked participants to rank six news media from most to least *helpful* (see Table 2). A total of *n = 37* participants shared their responses to this question. Across focus groups, participants defined *helpful* news as personally relevant, easily accessible, accurate, and fully contextualized to allow for a deeper understanding of the impact of an event on their lives.

Table 2. News Medium Rankings by Helpfulness.

All Participants (n = 37)	#1	*%	#2	%	#3	%	#4	%	#5	%	#6	%
Print	6	16	0	0	3	8	2	5	8	22	13	35
Television	1	3	5	14	8	22	4	11	10	27	3	8
Online	13	35	12	32	5	14	1	3	3	8	0	0
Social Media	12	32	9	24	4	11	4	11	3	8	4	11
Audio (Generally)	0	0	4	11	1	3	2	5	2	5	5	14
Radio	4	11	1	3	1	3	2	5	2	5	2	5
Podcasts	1	3	0	0	5	14	6	16	0	0	0	0
Friends & Family	0	0	6	16	9	24	12	32	1	3	2	5

Participants 18–35 (n = 19)	#1	%	#2	%	#3	%	#4	%	#5	%	#6	%
Print	0	0	0	0	3	16	1	5	4	21	8	42
Television	0	0	1	5	3	16	3	16	6	32	2	11
Online	8	42	6	32	3	16	0	0	0	0	0	0
Social Media	9	47	7	37	2	11	1	5	0	0	0	0
Audio (Generally)	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	11	1	5	3	16
Radio	1	5	0	0	0	0	2	11	2	11	0	0
Podcasts	1	5	0	0	3	16	3	16	0	0	0	0
Friends & Family	0	0	5	26	4	21	6	32	1	5	1	5
Participants 35+ (n = 18)	**#1**	**%**	**#2**	**%**	**#3**	**%**	**#4**	**%**	**#5**	**%**	**#6**	**%**
Print	6	33	0	0	0	0	1	6	4	22	5	28
Television	1	6	4	22	5	28	1	6	4	22	1	6
Online	5	28	6	33	2	11	1	6	3	17	0	0
Social Media	3	17	2	11	2	11	3	17	3	17	4	22
Audio (Generally)	0	0	4	22	1	6	0	0	1	6	2	11
Radio	3	17	1	6	1	6	0	0	0	0	2	11
Podcasts	0	0	0	0	2	11	3	17	0	0	0	0
Friends & Family	0	0	1	6	5	28	6	33	0	0	1	6

Note. Some participants chose only to rank the mediums they actively used.

*All percentages rounded to the nearest tenth

The highest percentage of respondents (35%) ranked online news as most helpful because of the convenience of accessing news online and the variety of sources offered, highlighting the role of the Internet in participants' high levels of news information seeking. However, although most (89%) participants under 35 identified online or social media news as most helpful, most participants over 35 ranked more traditional news media, particularly print (33%), as most helpful (see Table 2). These findings align with the higher usage of social media for news information seeking by younger demographics and reflect the distinct ways age, as another determinant of lived experience, shaped participants' perception of news trust and credibility and, in turn, their news information-seeking habits.

Women of Color Over 35: The Importance of Fact-Checking

Despite an acknowledgment that mainstream news often did not reflect their lived experiences, participants over 35 were skeptical of the veracity and, in turn, helpfulness of social media news:

> It's scary that for some people, social media is their source for news . . . people have sent me this week something that's posted on social media that says that Trump supporters are attacking members of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, so remove your license plates . . .

> I've gotten it from family members and a bunch of people. Of course, I'm searching high and low, I can't find any evidence of this. (P23)

Thus, while the information about Trump supporters attacking women from a historically Black sorority was relevant to P23, the questionable sourcing of the information made it less helpful to her. As P27 said:

> [In mainstream news] there's a whole team of people behind folks, either on the radio or on the newspaper, there's editors . . . I can look up the editors, and I can look up the journalists and see that they went to journalism school . . . that actually gives them some aspect of credibility.

Because of their trust in the credibility of mainstream news and skepticism around the credibility of news on social media, many older participants sought information from mainstream news sources, even if they saw it as biased.

Women of Color Under 35: The Unfiltered Credibility of Social Media

Conversely, participants under 35 often questioned the helpfulness of mainstream news based on its perceived biases against women and people of color. Discussing U.S. mainstream news coverage of the racial uprisings in the summer of 2020, P1 commented:

> I think [mainstream news] doesn't really give a very good perspective of the people actually protesting and asking them why they're protesting and what they're protesting for. Instead, they like to focus on the carnage like, "Oh, look at these Targets that were looted." Did they even bother to ask the people who were looting? "Why are you doing this? What statement are you trying to make?" I'm just really disappointed in that. They also really didn't cover a lot of what the police were doing.

P1's comment illustrates how, for many younger participants, mainstream news failed to capture the role of systems of oppression on news events and tended to filter information through a lens of Whiteness, marginalizing them from this information.

Some participants attributed these issues to a lack of diversity in mainstream newsrooms, noting "journalists are usually White cisgender males or just White people in general . . . women of color, especially Black and Indigenous women, are always shuttered to the sidelines" (P15). Others also believe mainstream news outlets have a vested interest in these White, heteronormative, and capitalist news frames:

> I've just been confronted with how news sources are funded by people that want to maintain a system like Jeff Bezos funds the *Washington Post*, or sometimes news sources will run shady op-eds. . . . So I'll read the news, and I'll be like, "Okay. I guess this is correct." But then I also try to think about how they're putting a spin on things. (P33)

Thus, these characteristics lead to a distrust of mainstream news outlets.

As a result, many younger participants would turn to social media, which they viewed as being more credible because of the unfiltered nature of the news presented:

> Controversial news and as it often relates to racialized topics like occupations or the protests that are happening . . . for that, I need humans to tell me what's happening on the ground that's seeing what's happening. People who are part of the protest, journalists that are doing the work, and not mainstream media sources. (P6)

Younger participants believed social media allowed them to access news that more directly resonated with their social realities. In this way, these younger women of color conceptualized helpfulness and trustworthiness as being not only about the accuracy of facts but also about the accuracy of how those facts are presented.

Thus, the increasingly expansive news and information landscape offered by today's digital media environment provides women of color across generations more opportunities to engage with information that they believe reflects their social realities, and thus had utility and was helpful to them.

Discussion

For decades, scholars have used Chatman's (1996) information poverty theory to examine marginalized individuals' relationship to mainstream sources of information. However, by focusing on the role of the individual in creating an information-poor environment, these studies often shift focus away from the role of systemic oppression in sustaining information poverty. In this study, I explore these structural and systemic dimensions of information seeking by examining the news information-seeking habits of women of color who, marginalized at least along axes of race and gender, have the potential to be information poor in a news media landscape that has historically favored White, middle-class perspectives and yet have observably high social and political engagement. I used information poverty theory to understand if women of color's news information-seeking habits fit into an information poverty framework and intersectionality as an analytical framework to understand the degree to which the information behaviors expressed illustrated information marginalization or, in other words, were a response to larger, systemic marginalization from mainstream news media and society more broadly.

Through focus groups with $N = 45$ women of color, I found that only a handful of participants ($n = 10$) exhibited elements of information poverty. In line with Chatman (1996), for these participants, information poverty manifested through secrecy, in the form of selective news information seeking, and deception, in the form of news avoidance to protect their mental and emotional health, in line with Sharot and Sunstein (2020) proposed motivators of information seeking. These findings also echo previous research on the role of anger, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed in dictating news avoidance (Brashers et al., 2002; Gudykunst, 1995), especially within the context of the Trump administration (Benton, 2019; Kahlor, Yang, & Liang, 2018). However, intersectional analysis of these responses helped illuminate that these habits were not just individual choices but agentic responses to how mainstream news in the United States does not

focus on their lived experiences as women of color and helps perpetuate racist and sexist narratives. In this way, these informational habits actually reflect information marginalization as responses to larger forms of systemic oppression upheld through news media.

Most participants (n = 35) acknowledged that mainstream news did not adequately represent their lived experiences, but still engaged in high levels of information seeking and inhabited information-rich environments. In line with Sharot and Sunstein's (2020) framework, for many participants, the utility of the information, particularly because of their marginalized identity, spurred high levels of news information seeking. The disconnect between news and their lived experiences also led many participants to rearticulate their news information seeking and consumption habits through a critical lens. While some participants were particularly concerned with how the news media covered the racial community they belonged to, almost all participants perceived U.S. mainstream news as prioritizing a White, heteropatriarchal worldview that failed to meet all their informational needs as women of color broadly. Thus, through examining participants' news information seeking through an intersectional lens that explicitly examines how these behaviors are shaped by various intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual oppression, I argue participants' news information-seeking behaviors are less reflective of information poverty, and more reflective of information marginalization, in that they are agentic responses to the lack of available helpful, useful, and trustworthy information from media institutions.

These findings challenge us to examine information poverty not as an individual information deficit but as an institutional deficit, making it harder for marginalized people to access the information they need. In thinking alongside Gibson and Martin (2019), these findings reveal how, despite their high news information-seeking activity, women of color's unique social and political location at the intersection of two (or more) socially-marginalized communities left them in a continual information deficit, requiring them to develop additional news information-seeking skills such as cross-referencing and fact-checking, to make sure the information they received was of use to them. Thus, intersectional analysis reveals how participants' news information-seeking habits were not only about individual preference but dynamically informed by the confluence of various systemic barriers that shaped their lived experiences, including but not limited to racism, sexism, and classism.

Findings also highlight how our contemporary digital media landscape enables women of color's current news information-seeking habits. The expanse of media available today challenges the dichotomous framework of the "insider"/"outsider" perspective on which information poverty theory is rooted. Mainstream or "insider" news is no longer the only information available. Because of the rise in digital media and citizen journalism, more journalists of color and nontraditional citizen journalists, such as activists, are creating news that is easily accessible to marginalized communities. These findings echo previous research that argues the utility of online and social media spaces, such as The Black Press, blogs, and Black Twitter, in providing marginalized communities with alternative news sources that speak more directly to their needs (Hasler & Ruthven, 2011; Steele, 2021). Further, participants were able to use the affordances of digital media to facilitate critical information-seeking habits, such as by checking facts across sources. However, digital media also helped facilitate information poverty by allowing some participants to operate in information silos.

Additionally, age, another dimension that shapes positionality, also influenced how participants conceptualized the utility of social media for news information seeking, with mainly younger participants seeing social media as a credible and trustworthy alternative news source. These findings add to recent calls to reconceptualize how news organizations create news trust as global news trust declines, especially across marginalized communities (Arguedas, Banerjee, Mont'Alverne, Toff, & Nielsen, 2023; Moran & Nechushtai, 2023; Newman & Fletcher, 2017).

Limitations

Although this study presents generative, preliminary insights, these findings have several limitations. First, this study's theoretical and empirical findings center on U.S. news and social identities and, thus, may not map onto other national, cultural, and societal contexts. Second, findings are based on what participants *say* their news information-seeking habits are but cannot make claims about what they do, opening findings up to potential response bias by participants who may have wanted to appear more informed than they are. Third, while the participant sample was diverse, it was not equally representative of all women of color. Since class and education play a significant role in information poverty, with those in lower socioeconomic classes and with lower levels of education often engaging in lower levels of information seeking, the predominance of middle-class, college-educated participants could have influenced the slightly higher levels of information seeking observed (Chatman, 1996). Finally, I conducted this study during the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration, and U.S. racial uprisings, all of which were arguably a source of anxiety for women of color, and as participants' statements elucidated, impacted their news avoidance and information-seeking habits. Future studies should triangulate these findings using complementary methods such as large-scale surveys and ethnography, especially within different sociopolitico and national contexts.

Conclusion

As many news platforms are reckoning with their fraught relationship with marginalized communities (Brown et al., 2022), understanding how and why these communities engage in news information seeking and further how these fraught feelings may be amplified for individuals whose identities intersect with multiple, socially-marginalized communities is paramount. As participants suggested, their race, gender, class, age, and national identity all shape how they perceive the helpfulness and trustworthiness of news outlets. Further, participants' critiques of U.S. mainstream news organizations highlight how they often fail to decenter Whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, and Eurocentrism in their reporting. Thus, as news organizations think about connecting with historically marginalized communities, they must think along multiple axes of power in oppression to understand how their reporting frames these communities' lived experiences.

This study reveals that even when marginalized people seek information, an information deficit will remain if the informational institution fails to decenter hegemony in how they select and package information. Thus, I argue that it is the responsibility of the news institution, not the individual, to shift their relationship to information. News and information sources can do this by hiring and fully supporting the voices of journalists of color, especially non-cisgender, heterosexual, male journalists of color. Only through

inclusive reporting will news and information outlets in this country move closer to fulfilling their stated goal of working toward an informed democracy by providing news that speaks to all—not just a few.

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