

★ SCROLL STOPPERS ★

Six ways hybrid working is changing attention

1. CURATE EXPECTATIONS	4
2. MULLET MEDIA	7
3. EVERYTHING ALL AT ONCE	10
4. SAY NO FAUX	14
5. UNSCROLLABLE	16
6. SWISS ARMY APPS	19

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As a company obsessed with audiences, keeping up with the latest facts and figures about media engagement is second nature for us at Storythings.

So when we dove into a Radio Joint Audience Research (RAJAR) report earlier this year, we were surprised to discover **a seismic shift in listener behaviour.**

Radio's long-reigning superstar, the breakfast show—historically the most listened to show on any broadcast station—has started losing listeners to its mid-morning counterpart. And thanks to an **increase in hybrid working** and, in turn, a **decrease in commutes and early starts**, it makes sense.

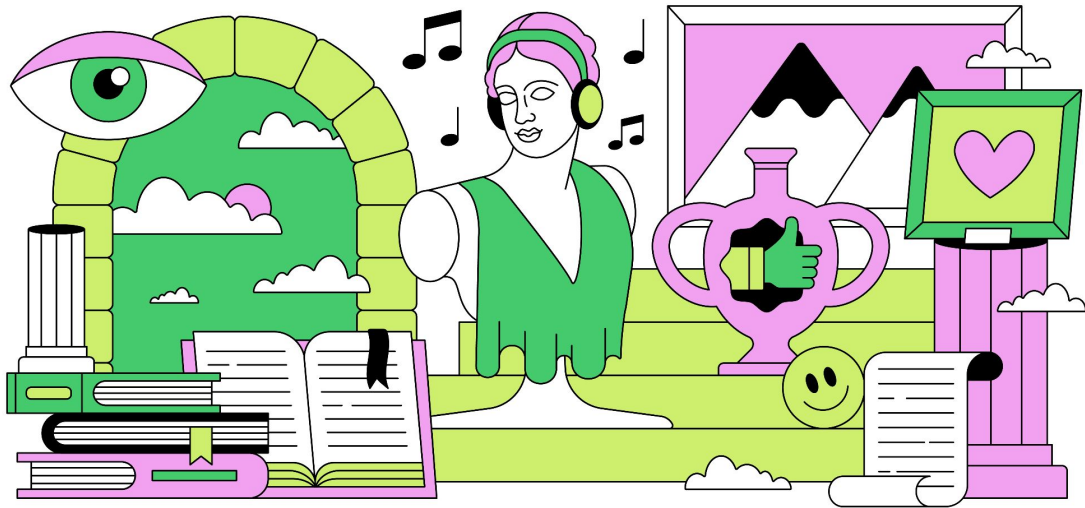
We've been tracking **how attention and behaviours have changed since the early days of the pandemic.** But now, as we reach almost three years(!) since the first lockdown, it's obvious some of these habits have stuck.

The way we engage with media on a day-to-day basis has changed. And with so many of our clients' content strategies based on pre-pandemic habits, we decided it was time to deep dive into new audience behaviours—examining the ways people discover, use, and share content in **a hybrid world.**

During months of surveys, interviews, and roundtable discussions, we spoke to audiences and experts about everything from attention spans to authenticity.

Six ways hybrid working is changing attention

The result? Six fascinating insights to help us (and you) develop up-to-date content strategies for a post-pandemic world.



Part 1 of 6

CURATE EXPECTATIONS

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1. CURATE EXPECTATIONS

The paradox of choice is a funny thing: the idea that having **too much choice** or too many options actually makes us more miserable. And with all the splendour that the content world has to offer—films, tweets, vlogs, newsletters, podcasts, Netflix originals, the list goes on—**feeling overwhelmed and overstimulated** is nothing new for modern-day audiences. A dilemma that only escalated during the pandemic.

As we navigated extended periods of lockdown, many of us not only had the **time and freedom to engage with more content**, but as the whole world moved online, we suddenly had a lot more to choose from.

Now, as our work and social lives get increasingly busier, habits like online learning, infinite scrolling, and late-night Google holes are difficult to maintain.

We've developed a self-awareness in the way we consume content and our research points to a reliance on others to help **cut through the noise**.

Without the time, will, or headspace to trudge through masses of media, audiences are actively seeking out people and platforms to curate content for them.

"We need somebody else to tell us what's interesting. Newsletters are the new water cooler talks."

And there's proof in the proverbial pudding. Our survey respondents explicitly called out newsletters as a go-to for curated content, alongside platforms like Mubi and Axios. Podcasts, articles, Instagram, and newsletters ranked as the four most popular types of content—all of which are frequently used for **rounding up or recommending content**, particularly from a personal point of view.

Ditching the algorithm in favour of more personalised recommendations could also be a symptom of remote or hybrid working.

"When I was working in a studio space five days a week we'd have many of these moments where we shared recommendations, it just kind of happens in the moment. And I feel like that's something that we lost when we moved to working from home."

Whether it's a resistance to information overload or an attempt to offset the loss in face-to-face recommendations, seeking out curated content is a behaviour we're going to see a lot more of.

When asked what content qualities they are most drawn to, responses were:

- 1. Well curated**
- 2. Thought provoking**
- 3. Visually striking**

“We need somebody else to tell us what is interesting. Newsletters are the new water cooler talks.” (Interviewee)

Takeaway:

Think about how you can curate experiences for audiences. **Good curation adds context and lets people know why the thing you want them to see or hear is important.**

The range of content you include, and how you talk about it, defines your voice and personality over time. Becoming a smart filter is a brilliant way for building loyalty.



Part 2 of 6

MULLET MEDIA

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2. MULLET MEDIA

If you've ever had a job, chances are that work-life balance is something you've had to consider—skipping your friend's party to pull an extra shift, taking your lunch break al-desko, or literally *any* advertising gig. But recently **the boundaries between work and play, professional and private, have never been so malleable.**

With many of us working and living in the same space during the pandemic, and the subsequent **rise in remote and hybrid working**, we've gotten used to quickly switching between work-time and break-time. Traditionally work-based platforms have entered our social sphere, and 78% of our respondents say they transition between personal tasks and work activities throughout the day, usually through the same screens, devices, and chat apps.

"You go to your phone thinking oh, I will just see what others are up to, catch up with my friends, check

my messages and then I am sort of sucked into things that are work related, in a time when I do not want to think about work."

But now, in this strange hangover of the digital sphere adapting to mimic real-life proximity, it seems **reconciling our public and personal selves is our biggest challenge.** We want to make sure the right content is finding us in the right context and our research shows the development of two key behaviours when it comes to what we consume and how we interact in online spaces.

The first is to **filter out negative content.** This is particularly relevant in work-from-home settings, when we're perhaps more introspective and vulnerable to negative messaging and are more conscious of our own wellbeing.

"I avoid bleak stories because I feel that at home they just stay with you, and I can't talk it out with somebody."

In-line with this, the second behaviour we see is a **more controlled approach to media engagement**—things like strict screen time limits, timeline cleansing, and blocking various apps.

"I have a lot of friends who deleted certain apps, or changed their password, to have more self control."

And as boundaries change, our habits do too. Not only are we ditching doom scrolling and revenge bedtime procrastination in favour of **more intentional consumption**, but our research shows people are carving out time in their work-from-home days for the things they find important—whether it's getting their 10,000 steps or savouring their lunch breaks to catch up with their favourite podcasts or shows. (Did someone say reruns of Bargain Hunt?)

Our survey asked people to complete the sentence
“When I work from home I...”

The three top answers chosen were:

1. **Spend more time on messaging apps**
2. **Listen to more music**
3. **Read more**

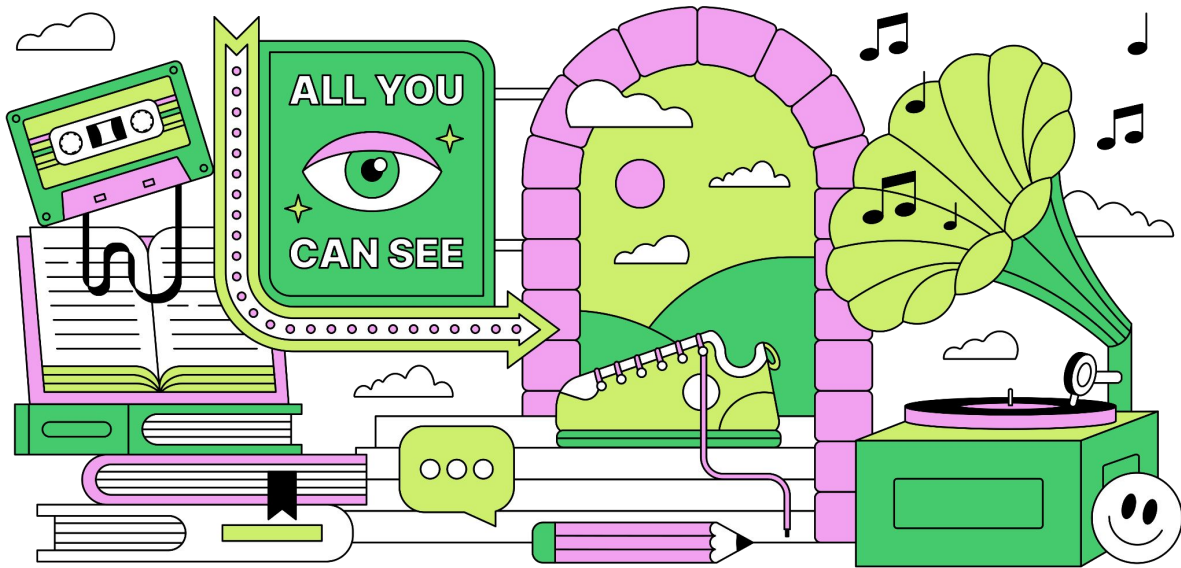
“There is a tendency to be much more empathic. When I work from home I’m very careful with what I consume media wise.”

(Interviewee)

Takeaway:

Audiences constantly make important decisions about how they spend their attention. **Think about how you can help them choose where your content sits in their routine.**

Include read times. Use clear language about what they’ll get from it or how they can use it. Suggest when they might engage with it. Is it a podcast they might enjoy listening to whilst out on a walk or a longread they might want to bookmark and read later?



Part 3 of 6

EVERYTHING ALL AT ONCE

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3. EVERYTHING ALL AT ONCE

Multitasking during downtime is nothing new. Flash back to family evenings around the fireplace, everyone engaging in their own hobby—drawing, reading, sewing—while the wireless plays in the background.

According to Inside Intelligence, these days we're interacting with around **13 hours of content a day**. And given that we're also expected to work, eat, sweat, socialise, moisturise, go to therapy, and God knows what else—it seems our only option is to **engage with multiple media at once**.

We listen to podcasts as we scroll through social media, make online purchases during TV ad breaks, and seek out ambient playlists to help us focus while we work. (Am I listening to Spotify's *Period Drama Soundtracks* while I write this? You'll never know.)

But as opposed to a constant need for stimulation, our research suggests this behaviour is a **coping strategy**.

Thanks to a significant increase in remote and hybrid working, we're getting increasingly good at finding what works for us in a variety of settings. And quite often that means creating the perfect amount of background noise or visual stimulation to **recreate a traditional office environment**.

"Podcasts were really important when I was working from home, because I was alone most of the time and it felt like company."

Perhaps this is also why we see audiences returning to the same comfort programs—*Friends*, *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*—which provide **a sense of safety and nostalgia akin to social connection**.

Alongside new multimedia-tasking habits, our research also highlights changes in the ways we interact with our favourite mediums.

"I live in an open plan kitchen and living space, and subtitles allow people to comfortably be focused on the television while there are other things going on."

The use of subtitles and CC captions while watching TV and films came up a lot in our conversations, and it seems their role is two-fold. Either the programs are muted and purely functioning as a backdrop, or our **distraction-prone brains** are now reliant on subtitles and captions to ensure we stay fully immersed in whatever's on screen.

As of 2022, podcast listeners as a group have grown **29.5%** in the last three years, according to Podcast Statistics and Data, December 2022, from Buzzsprout.

“There is this question of senses. Working from home wreaks havoc with the eyes, so I moved to listening to content more, shifting senses from visual to listening.” (Interviewee)

Takeaway:

Your content is battling for the attention of audiences who are constantly switching between different sources of media. **Think about how your content works for partial or ambient attention.**

- To optimise attention, audiences scan newsletters and articles. **Think about how you format your content to work for scannable reading.**
- Audiences are listening to more audio. Is there a place for audio in your content strategy? **Think about what people might be doing when they are listening.**
- Tell your audiences up front that the content might be something they want to bookmark for later when they can give it more attention.



Part 4 of 6

**SAY NO
FAUX**

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4. SAY NO FAUX

You can't deny social media has had a vast impact on modern day society and the way we present ourselves online. And while platforms like Instagram and Facebook have transformed culture in more ways than we can mention, it seems **their long reign as sources of escapism, aesthetic, and aspiration could be coming to an end.**

There may have been a (burning) desire for escapism during **the pandemic**, but when it came to social media feeds we saw a significant shift toward more **authentic and relatable posts**. Lockdown was a leveller for everyone and the "hashtag goals" lifestyles of the famous and influential no longer spoke to our needs.

"When the pandemic started, I was definitely looking for more content that felt comforting and

kind of replaces the human interactions we'd have every day."

This behaviour is apparent in the rise of apps like BeReal and TikTok, but also in how we've transformed our relationships with the OG social media apps. We're trading fine-tuned (and face-tuned) Instagram lays for **unaesthetic photo dumps**—the tag #photodump has racked up almost 2.5 million Instagram posts and counting.

This change in attitude, alongside the mass exodus of users from social media platforms like Facebook also connects to a **general distrust in big corporations**. Our research shows audiences are becoming increasingly wary of big brands, unethical behaviours, and cheap advertising tactics.

"We've become a lot better at just sniffing out the nonsense really, you know, what's authentic and what isn't. We've got better at that."

Relatability is an important driver of trust, and in the search for authentic, value-driven, and community-focused content, we're seeing audiences transform their relationships with the apps and platforms that held their attention for too long. Making the internet work for them instead.

When asked what their main motivation is for engaging (finding, consuming, sharing) with content, only 2% of our survey respondents mentioned the need for social status or capital. Their top choices were:

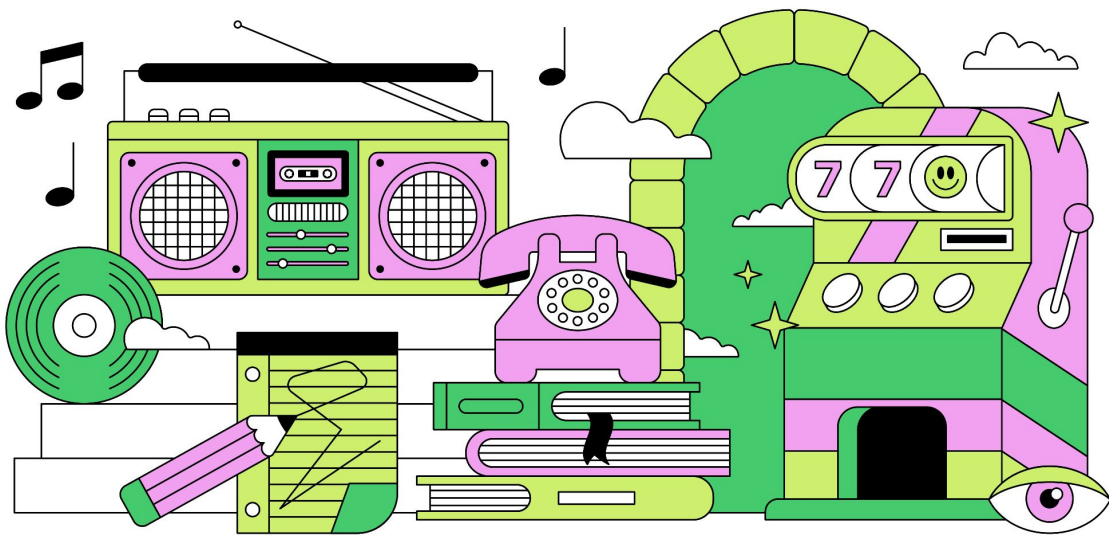
- 1. Researching information**
- 2. Entertainment**
- 3. Information sharing**

"You can follow a creator and it seems like as soon as they become big they're out of your relatable zone." (Interviewee)

Takeaway:

People are tired of the polished versions of everything they see around them. The pandemic brought this into focus, as we spent so much time with our media by ourselves or with our bubbles. **Think about how your content matches these needs:**

- **First-person stories are always better** than rambling pieces reported by a third party.
- **Sometimes visuals don't need to be overly directed** - vox pops and raw footage have an audience.
- **Give people the background behind the stories they see** - they want to know.



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Part 5 of 6

UNSCROLLABLE

5. UNSCROLLABLE

In a time of **fast-paced growth** across technology, culture, media (and, er, everything?), it's interesting to see the value we still give to **formats of the past**—vinyl records, radio, handwritten notes etc. And when it comes to our media habits, we're seeing similar behaviours.

Our research shows **audiences are facing a cognitive dissonance** between being able to choose from literally any kind of content about literally any kind of subject, and feeling like they can't be intentional with their choices. (Netflix homepage, we see you.)

Unlocking our phone screens is like powering up a slot machine—we never know where the imminent sequence of events will lead. And in response we're seeing people move away from infinite scrolling and algorithms designed to take us down the rabbit hole, and instead turn to **less scrollable single-channel platforms**.

It seems there's value to be found in **unskippable media**. When we asked respondents about the types of content they couldn't live without, music, podcasts, and books came out on top.

"I dislike how much control I have over my time. I feel that everything has to be such an active choice that it could get overwhelming. That's what I like about radio—that I do not choose the music."

Not only are we seeking a **reduction in cognitive load**, but perhaps there's a nostalgia in unscrollable formats like radio.

Audiences are craving the serendipity of stumbling upon great content, tuning in midway through a funny segment or Shazam-ing a song as they browse through Urban Outfitters.

Like most of the behaviours our research identified, there's a **desire for personal connection** in the types of media we consume, and curators, tastemakers, and friends' recommendations are continuing to trump the algorithm.

"Face-to-face recommendations bring accountability. Phone communications make me lazy to follow up on recommendations. But if they came in person or via email, I would feel compelled to answer and more likely to follow up on them."

According to our respondents when asked what the one type of content is that they cannot do without, even if they don't have too much time, the top 3 are all unscrollable mediums:

1. Music (e.g. Spotify)
2. Podcasts
3. Books (physical)

"I feel that there is a real pushback against screens, and the slot machine feed. The reliance on personal recommendations has gone through the roof." (Interviewee)

Takeaway:

We can't hide from the fact that the avalanche of choice has made it harder for the makers of good content to find audiences. **But it is not impossible.**

- Before you create your stories, **think about where people might find them** - how you're going to reach your audience's audience, because that's whose recommendations they trust.
- **Think about offering unscrollable media as an option:** can you make a book out of your online magazine, or a Spotify playlist?
- How can you reduce the number of choices you give your audience? If you know them well, **pick a few states of mind they are likely to be in, and only give options to cater to those needs.**



Part 6 of 6

SWISS ARMY APPS

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6. SWISS ARMY APPS

Traditionally, we turn to different channels, media, or apps for different purposes—it's why so many different platforms exist, and why our home screens and desktops are cluttered with so many tiny colourful icons. However, as we become wary of content overload and mindful of getting sucked into our screens, we're seeing new behaviours from audiences.

Instead of switching between multiple apps, channels, and screens to consume content and carry out day-to-day tasks, our research shows we're **repurposing existing platforms** to better serve our needs.

We're taking meetings from our phones, using work-based platforms to socialise, and seeking news and recommendations from social media.

"I think I get most of my information from TikTok, if I'm being honest, book

recommendations, film recommendations, just like any recommendations for home, appliances—anything that I want, I go to TikTok."

These behaviours range from individual repurposing of channels (like searching TikTok for the best coffee machine) to macro trends that directly impact a platform's strategy.

"I literally only would go on LinkedIn when I was looking for a job before. Now, I go on it to find out more about future developments in the

social media / metaverse area. It's been quite a good space to just read different opinion pieces and to find articles whereas I wouldn't know where to start before."

In response to these changing behaviours, **we're seeing platforms offer new ways for people to engage with their content**, largely by taking cues from other formats. Social platforms like YouTube and TikTok are entering the space previously owned by TV and radio—producing content in episodes, segments, or series. Meanwhile traditionally audio-only media like radio and podcasts are producing visual accompaniments to their content, usually for the purpose of social media.

It's **multi-purpose platforms meets multi-channel strategies**. And throw in our newly formed habit of multimedia-tasking, and it seems content is becoming more of a **full sensory experience** for all of us. But what does this mean for the future? Perhaps audiences will soon be able to get all the stimulation and functionality they need from one single space.

In 2023, **more than 50%** of US social network users will shop via social platforms, as per Insider Intelligence Trends, Forecasts & Statistics.

“When I’m at home, I use YouTube videos while I go about my day.” (Interviewee)

Takeaway:

With the avalanche of media choices available for us today and product teams forced to work only on specific features at a time (hello Musk and Twitter), **it’s no wonder people are moulding specific platforms to be most useful for them.**

- **Think of how your content can be left open-ended a bit**, to encourage people to use them as they see fit.
- **Walk with your users:** if a platform is being used by your target audience in a way that is interesting and relevant for your brand, use it the way they are so they can relate to you better.

Credits

We spoke to 135 people for this research.

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For more, subscribe to the [Attention Matters newsletter](#).

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