

News Avoidance

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Published in [The SAGE Encyclopedia of Journalism](#)¹

The phenomenon of news avoidance has recently gained substantial attention from both scholars and practitioners, as an increasing number of people seem to be turning their backs to the news. This trend is potentially problematic as news consumption has several positive effects. At the individual level it benefits political knowledge and engagement. In addition, news consumption has positive externalities (i.e., benefits for society beyond the individuals who consume the news). For example, people in power are less likely to engage in malpractice if there is a high risk of being exposed in public by journalists. If increasing news avoidance erodes the economic foundation of the news industry, these effects will fade. At the same time, however, news avoidance can have positive effects on people's mood and mental well-being. This complexity illustrates the importance of understanding the character of news avoidance and its underlying causes. This entry provides an overview of different types of news avoidance in terms of their nature (intentional and unintentional) and scope (consistent, occasional, and selective). Second, it provides a systematization of the underlying causes (individual-, content-, and contextual-level factors). And lastly, it outlines some important questions for a deeper and more detailed understanding of news avoidance.

¹ Please use the following reference when citing: Skovsgaard, M., & Andersen, K. (2022). News avoidance. In G. Borchard (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Journalism* (Vol. 1, pp. 1099-1103). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781544391199.n274>

Different Types of News Avoidance

In general, news avoidance can either be intentional or unintentional in nature. *Intentional news avoidance*, on the one hand, is based on a specific distaste for news that drives an individual to deliberately steer clear of news exposure. *Unintentional news avoidance*, on the other hand, is not based on a specific distaste for news, but rather stronger preferences for other types of media content. It occurs in situations where consumption of other types of content, such as entertainment, squeeze out news exposure from an individual's general media repertoire. Thus, unintentional news avoidance is not an active opt-out of news in the same way as intentional news avoidance is.

In addition to the distinction between the intentional or unintentional nature, three types of news avoidance can be identified in terms of their scope: *consistent*, *occasional*, and *selective*. While consistent news avoidance can be both intentional and unintentional and is characterized by very low or no news exposure, occasional and selective news avoidance are entirely intentional and do not necessarily result in low news exposure. As such, consistent news avoidance is primarily concerned with a very low frequency of news consumption while occasional and selective news avoidance is more focused on the deliberate behaviours of restricting news consumption. Each type and how they have been studied in extant research is detailed below. Their main characteristics are summed up in Figure 1.

	Types of news avoidance		
	Consistent	Occasional	Selective
What is avoided?	News in general	News in general	Specific news content
What is the level of general news exposure?	Very low or non-existing	Not necessarily low	Not necessarily low
Is the avoidance intentional or unintentional?	Both	Only intentional	Only intentional

Table 1. Different Types of News Avoidance and Their Main Characteristics

Consistent News Avoidance

A consistently low or non-existing news consumption can be both intentional and unintentional in nature. As such, the consistent avoidance of news is either a consequence of disliking the news in general or having a higher preference for other content.

Most studies focusing on this type of news avoidance rely on survey measures, but their analytical approaches differ. While some studies draw on cluster analysis or latent class analysis to inductively classify news avoiders based on general patterns in news exposure, other studies apply a cut-off point that distinguishes news avoiders from more regular news users. This cut-off point can either be relative to the average news exposure among respondents (e.g., one standard deviation below the average), or it can be defined by an absolute level of news exposure (e.g., the ones who report not to consume any news during an average day).

Although survey measures provide a potential foundation for systematic comparisons across countries and over time, this potential is rarely fulfilled due to the different analytical approaches. Instead, studies based on national representative samples have arrived at substantially different estimates of how large the group of news avoiders is. These differences are of a magnitude that is unlikely to be explained by cross-country differences alone but is at least partly due to the different methodological choices.

Other studies apply a qualitative approach to understand the group of consistent news avoiders. Through interviews with people with low levels of news exposure, these studies try to uncover how this group perceives of the news and why they only to a very limited extent consume news. The aim of these studies is not to estimate the extent of news avoidance, but rather gain a deeper understanding of the complexities behind it.

Occasional News Avoidance

The second type of news avoidance is characterized by an individual's occasional avoidance of news, which does not necessarily result in an overall low level of news exposure. Thus, an individual can intentionally avoid the news some of the time, but at the same time consume considerable amounts of news in general. This understanding is also clear from the operationalization of news avoidance in the empirical studies. For example, in the Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, survey respondents were asked "if they find themselves actively trying to avoid the news these days". Indeed, studies based on this data also show that this type of news avoidance only has a weak negative correlation with general news consumption.

Selective News Avoidance

The third type of news avoidance is characterized by avoidance of specific types of news content rather than news in general. This can be specific issues that dominate the media agenda at a given moment in time, such as a terrorist attack, a pandemic, or specific political issues. Thus, people selectively and intentionally avoid specific content that they have a distaste for. As such, this type of news avoidance is closely related to selective avoidance to political content in opposition to one's own political standpoint.

This type of news avoidance has been analysed through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. While some studies follow developments in avoidance of specific news topics over time using panel surveys, other studies use in-depth interviews to understand why people avoid specific content, such as, for example, news about U.S. President Donald Trump.

Underlying Causes of News Avoidance

Extant research has illuminated different potential causes for news avoidance at different levels of analysis. To provide an overview, they can be divided into three groups of factors: (1) individual-level factors, (2) content-level factors, and (3) contextual-level factors. Differentiating the potential explanations into distinct categories can be helpful in thinking systematically about when and how different causes are most likely to affect news avoidance and how causes at different levels of analysis potentially interact.

Individual-Level Factors

When exploring causes at the individual level, it is important to distinguish between factors that are relatively stable, such as interest in news and politics, media trust, civic norms, and sociodemographic variables, and more malleable factors that fluctuate over time and often have a more emotional character.

One of the most prominent motivations for news consumption is an interest in news and politics. Political interest has been demonstrated to be quite stable after being established through childhood and adolescence and can thus be seen as a dispositional interest. Studies of news avoidance have found a lack of interest in politics and news to be a strong explanation for news avoidance. While media trust is likely to be less stable than political interest, studies have also identified media distrust as a prominent factor related to news avoidance. Thus, if people are not interested in or do not trust mainstream media, they are in general more likely to avoid news. Likewise, if people do not see news consumption as a civic duty, they are more likely to avoid news. In terms of sociodemographic variables, studies have shown contradicting results for how gender and education are related to news avoidance. In contrast, research has repeatedly demonstrated that younger people are more likely to avoid news compared to older people.

These quite stable individual-level factors are prominent explanations to why some people are more likely to have a consistently low level of news exposure than others, but they also have an impact on occasional and selective news avoidance. For instance, people with low interest are more likely to engage with the news in periods when they are in higher need of the information, for example, during election time.

In terms of more malleable factors, research has pointed out that a substantial proportion of news avoiders experience that the news has a negative effect on their mood. A feeling of news overload, fatigue, and paralysis have also been related to news avoidance. Although people in general have a slight preference for negative information, the plethora of available (negative) news can thus be counterproductive as information overload can create stress, confusion, and anxiety and lead to news avoidance.

While there is a risk that these less stable factors can lead to sustained and consistent news avoidance over time, they are also likely to serve as explanations for occasional news avoidance, where people avoid some of the news some of the time when news consumption affects their emotions negatively. Likewise, news overload can trigger selective news avoidance of specific issues, such as Brexit or the coronavirus pandemic. As states of negative mood and mental well-being as well as perceived news overload tend to vary both between individuals but also within individuals over time, they contribute to a more dynamic understanding of news avoidance and how individual level factors interact with content-level factors and context-level factors to explain different types of news avoidance.

Content-Level Factors

News avoidance is also influenced by characteristics of the news content. When news avoiders state that they do not trust the news, this is likely to be at least partly a result of biased news reporting. Likewise, when many people who avoid the news mention a negative impact on their

mood or mental well-being, the precondition is that at least some news with a negative focus is available to them. It is reasonable to assume—all else being equal—that the more negative the focus of news coverage is, the more negative the general impact of news exposure on people's mood will be. Thus, more stable characteristics of the news, such as a negativity bias, can explain consistent news avoidance with a stable and low level of news exposure. However, the valence of current affairs news also fluctuates based on variations in news selection and in events and developments in the society that journalists cover. Thus, even though there are certain general trends in characteristics of news coverage, for example, a negativity bias, some news has a positive tone, and there is substantial variability in valence over time, which is especially likely to affect occasional and selective news avoidance.

In addition, as indicated earlier, these fluctuating content characteristics interact with individual-level factors in explaining dynamics in news avoidance. For example, people with different types of personality traits are likely to respond differently to negativity in the news. Thus, changes in content characteristics do not have a uniform impact across all individuals, and what makes some people avoid the news might motivate other people to expose themselves to more news. This makes it important to consider interactions between content-level factors and individual-level factors when explaining news avoidance.

Contextual-Level Factors

The final category of factors focusses on the context in which individual-level factors and news content are embedded. Contextual factors refer to environmental and situational characteristics, which potentially impact the consumption and content of the news. Variation in such factors can appear across both spatial and temporal contexts. One of the most prominent contextual-level factors is the structure of media and news supply, which creates varying opportunity

structures for news exposure across contexts. These opportunity structures vary both across countries and local information markets.

Opportunity structures also change over time—both long-term and short-term. The most prominent long-term change in opportunity structures is the development from a low-choice media environment with a relatively limited and stable supply of media outlets and content to a high-choice media environment where the proliferation of cable television and the internet has created a plethora of available content. This development is likely to increase the amount of news avoidance, as people can more easily find content that matches their preferences. This means that while people with a high preference for news are more likely to consume even more news, people with a higher preference for other types of content are likely to end up unintentionally avoiding the news, illustrating the interaction between contextual-level and individual-level factors. Focusing on explaining consistent news avoidance some studies confirm that with the rapid expansion of available media content, an increasing number of people have a consistent low level of news exposure. However, other studies point to more modest increases in news avoidance over time.

More short-term changes in the context, such as an election, a pandemic, or a terrorist attack, also impact the opportunity structure and can have a potential impact on particularly occasional and selective news avoidance. For these more short-term fluctuations, the interaction with variables at the other levels are also important. For example, in election time, news coverage will be more intense, which makes it more difficult to avoid the news. While such intense coverage may lead some avoiders to tune in to the news, it may cause others to tune out due to news overload.

Unanswered Questions and New Research Avenues

While the number of studies on news avoidance is steadily increasing, conceptual unclarity and divergent analytical approaches call for rigorous thinking to ensure an accumulation of knowledge. To this end, future research will benefit from clearly specifying the type of news avoidance under consideration and carefully consider the complexity of potential underlying causes. The overview of different types of news avoidance and the underlying causes presented in this entry may serve as a useful point of departure.

Future research on news avoidance is faced with challenging questions. In the new, digitized hybrid media environment it is increasingly complex to establish what news is and through which channels and platforms people are exposed to news. Extant research to a high degree relies on self-reported measures of news exposure and often implicitly rely on people's own definition of what news is. Furthermore, people are known to overreport their news consumption in surveys, which could result in an underestimation of news avoidance. Here, a fruitful avenue for future research is more unobtrusive measurements, such as tracking data. Such approaches are, however, also limited by the difficulties of obtaining cross-media measures that can provide holistic accounts of people's news consumption patterns.

These questions speak to the fact that extant research has primarily focused on the factors that can explain why people avoid the news. However, understanding the implications of the different types of news avoidance is crucial for dealing sensibly with people avoiding the news. For instance, if the result of news avoidance is that an increasing number of people characterized by low levels of knowledge and engagement are alienated from democracy, it is essential to mitigate news avoidance. However, if people are able to gain knowledge and get motivated to broadly engage in politics by substituting news with, for example, political satire or updates in their social networks, the implications of news avoidance might not be as bleak as some suggest. Here, the distinction between consistent and occasional news avoidance is

also important. While it might even be beneficial for the mental well-being of some people to avoid some of the news some of the time without fundamental ramifications for their political engagement and knowledge, individuals consistently avoiding the news are more likely to end up with low levels of political knowledge and engagement.

Another promising research avenue is to explore how news avoidance can be mitigated. This research is already emerging but also deserves more attention. One strand of research focuses on how to create opportunity structures favourable for inadvertent news exposure in high-choice media environments and shows potential for mitigating unintentional news avoidance. Another strand of research explores if changes in news selection and presentation can reduce the extent of news avoidance. One example is the constructive journalism and solution journalism movements, which aim to counter the negativity bias of news by complementing news coverage with stories that focus on inspirational examples and potential solutions to the problems presented. News media around the world have embarked on experiments that implement this type of journalism in the hope that it will lead to fewer people feeling alienated from the news. Similarly, another emerging trend in the news industry is what has been labelled “slow journalism”. As a response to the accelerating news cycle and overwhelming stream of news updates, this type of journalism emphasise in-depth carefully curated news designed for the audience to escape a feeling of news overload and fatigue.

More research on these endeavours to mitigate news avoidance is needed, and together with additional research on the causes and consequences of news avoidance, such research will provide a more complete picture of when and why people avoid the news, what the effects are, and what can be done about it.

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