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Taking a Break from News: A Five-nation Study of News Avoidance in the Digital Era

Mikko Villi[a], Tali Aharoni[b], Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt[b], Pablo J. Boczkowski[c], Kaori Hayashi[d], Eugenia Mitchelstein[e], Akira Tanaka[d] and Neta Kligler-Vilenchik[b]

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ABSTRACT

This article comparatively examines news avoidance in a rapidly changing media environment. We utilize findings from a large dataset of 488 in-depth interviews with media consumers, conducted in Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan, and the US. We aim to make a contribution to the study of news avoidance by providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the drivers, practices, and patterns of news avoidance as they occur in and are shaped by a variety of national contexts. We argue that news avoidance is shaped not only by individual characteristics, but is also manifested and performed as part of specific time frames and socio-cultural factors. We distinguish two drivers of intentional news avoidance: cognitive and emotional. The cognitive drivers are accentuated by distinct country-level contextual factors, whereas the emotional drivers for news avoidance are shared across diverse national contexts.

KEYWORDS

News avoidance; news consumption; audiences; journalism; qualitative research; cross-national research

Introduction

Digital platforms and technologies are expanding the ways in which audiences can consume news (Choi 2016; Edgerly 2017; Hermida 2016). With mobile devices and social media platforms, news consumption is interspersed throughout the day without the predictability that characterized access to media in the times of print newspapers and broadcast news (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018; Hermida 2020). Yet, just as news can nowadays potentially be consumed anytime and everywhere, it can also be avoided anytime and anywhere. People regularly use a variety of media and make decisions about what news to engage with (Ha et al. 2018; Peters and Schrøder 2018). This includes active choices to bypass certain news outlets, or for some, avoid the news media altogether. In the digital media environment users have to make less

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effort than in the print and broadcast counterparts to select and de-select news sources (Trilling and Schoenbach 2015). Digital media include affordances for a selective user activity in a more lean-forward manner than was possible with traditional mass media (P. Villi and Matikainen 2016; Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017; Picone 2016; Prior 2005).

News avoidance, usually defined in the literature as active or intentional resistance or rejection of news (Blekesaune, Elvestad, and Aalberg 2012; Newman et al. 2019; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020; Woodstock 2014a; Woodstock 2014b), is key to describing and evaluating the patterns of contemporary news consumption. In this article we set out to examine news avoidance in a rapidly changing media environment and across a variety of national contexts. While the existing research literature has mostly explained news avoidance behaviour in terms of individual characteristics (Edgerly 2017; Toff and Palmer 2019), we suggest that it is a multifaceted phenomenon that is performed as part of a collective cultural context. In order to examine this, we utilize findings from a large dataset of 488 semi-structured interviews with media consumers undertaken in Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan, and the US between 2016 and 2019. While most previous studies on news avoidance have utilized surveys, interviews enable an understanding of the phenomenon as participants see and understand it. Furthermore, the cross-national qualitative design enables a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the drivers, practices, and patterns of news avoidance as they occur in, and are shaped by, a variety of national contexts. Our findings point to two types of drivers of intentional news avoidance, which cut across the different national contexts, yet do not always conform to the normative Western liberal perspective on news avoidance.

News Consumption and Avoidance in Digital Environments

In the contemporary digital environment, news consumption is integrated into broader patterns of social media sociability, which leads to a constant competition between news and entertainment (Prior 2005) and marks a significant discontinuity with the consumption of media on other, older platforms, such as the printed newspaper (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018). The digital platforms have affordances that can potentially be used by people to increase their levels of news involvement. For those with high interest in the news, digital platforms offer a wealth of opportunities to consume, share and engage with the news. But even for those who do not actively seek news, digital platforms may lead to encounter news incidentally (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2020; Mitchelstein et al. 2020). Even if their primary intention in accessing social media was to connect with friends, they might 'bump' into news when other social media users, social contacts, and algorithms curate news content for them (Villi 2012; Thorson and Wells 2016).

Yet, even incidental exposure to news is still guided by the motivations and actions of individuals, as well as the sociocultural context in which they operate (Mitchelstein et al. 2020). Seeking news offers better possibilities for all kinds of serendipitous and diverse encounters with news (Van Damme et al. 2020). Those individuals who are more interested in the news are also more often found by the news or "attracted" by

them (Thorson 2020). On the other hand, social media algorithms and other forms of personalization can also assist and manage news avoidance. For example, for those who are not interested in news, algorithms can limit access to news on social media by emphasizing other forms of content than news, without necessitating active de-selection of news on the part of the user.

A factor in news avoidance is the sheer amount of news circulating nowadays, mainly online. A study by Pew Research Centre (Gottfried 2020) shows that about two-thirds of people in the US feel worn out by the volume of news updates. Such a news overload might subsequently compromise consumers' political knowledge (Newman et al. 2019). The greater the total amount of media content, the more selective people can or have to be when deciding what media and news to consume (Karlsen, Beyer, and Steen-Johnsen 2020; Strömbäck 2017). News overload induces news avoidance by increasing news fatigue and news paralysis (Song, Jung, and Kim 2017). Important factors behind news overload are the lack of information-seeking skills, self-efficacy, and self-confidence in navigating the digital media environment (Edgerly 2019; Park 2019; Schmitt, Debbelt, and Schneider 2018).

Conceptual Definition

Despite a growing scholarly interest in news avoidance, there is no agreed-upon measure for this notion. This lack of conceptual clarity has been tied to the inconsistent conceptualizations and operationalizations of avoidance which might have led to survey discrepancies (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). While several studies define news avoiders as those who regularly consume little news (Edgerly 2017; Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster 2010), avoiding the news might take the shape of a temporary, sporadic and selective practice, rather than a permanent behaviour (Portwood-Stacer 2013; Ribak and Rosenthal 2015; Woodstock 2014b).

To tackle the inconsistency in the conceptualization of news avoidance, several scholars have examined news avoidance through the lens of users' intentionality. Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) and Van den Bulck (2006) have distinguished between two types of news avoidance: intentional and unintentional. While the former is based on a specific dislike for news that leads people to an active abstention, the latter is conducted unwittingly, based on preference for other media content than news. Intentional news avoidance can be either habitual, driven by durable content preferences, or situational, shaped by individuals' immediate and flexible wishes and needs (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). In our paper we extend the approach of habitual and situational news avoidance in diverse national contexts, shedding light on country-specific influences on this phenomenon.

The incentives and motivations for avoiding the news are another possible avenue to categorize different avoidance types. Previous research indicates various reasons for news avoidance. For one, news coverage is considered relentlessly negative (Newman et al. 2019), thus leading to an emotional overload for media consumers. When people do not trust the news media they tend to avoid them and turn instead to more trustworthy sources such as personal connections (Wagner and Boczkowski 2019). Factors of news avoidance also include structural inequalities (Toff and Palmer 2019),

perceptions of news lacking relevance (Lee and Chyi 2014), disinterest in politics, low news self-efficacy, a lack of knowledge about the news system (Edgerly 2019), and demographic factors (Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster 2010).

These different notions may also incite different normative assumptions. Building on traditional models of citizenship that place news consumption at the heart of democratic processes (Kligler-Vilenchik 2017; Bennett 2008; Woodstock 2014b), intentional news avoidance is generally regarded as negative and harmful to a functioning democratic society (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). Indeed, studies have pointed to a negative effect of news avoidance on people's political knowledge and civic engagement (Blekesaune, Elvestad, and Aalberg 2012) as well as on the media business (Villi and Picard 2019; Lee and Chyi 2014). In addition, news avoidance has been regarded as an essential danger for the formation of an informed and engaged citizenry (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). However, there are some indications that not all news avoiders are necessarily less knowledgeable and less politically active (Woodstock 2014b). These normative assumptions mainly deal with public affairs news – there is scant research on avoidance of other types of news, such as sports, entertainment, or crime news.

Understanding News Avoidance across Different National Contexts

Culture might play a significant role in shaping individuals' motivations to avoid the news, as well as the normative assumptions of such a behaviour. While cross-national data from the Reuters Institute (Newman et al. 2019) shows a global growth in the overall numbers of news avoiders, this trend differs between national contexts. Of the countries included in this study 45% in Argentina say they actively avoid the news, and 41% in the US, while in Finland (17%) and Japan (11%) the proportion of news avoiders is much smaller (Newman et al. 2019). The US has been found in numerous studies as relatively high in news avoidance, with a growing number of citizens reporting on a desire to completely opt out of being informed (Edgerly 2017; Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster 2010).

These discrepancies can be explained by what Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020) call "cultures of news consumption," which are broad contextual factors that shape news use and non-use. These include both the information environments and the collective values, perceptions, and norms shared around them (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). For instance, in a study conducted in Israel, times of crisis were found to motivate both heavy and light consumers to temporarily circumvent the news (Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2021). In a turbulent context of an ongoing violent conflict, some news avoidance motivations seem to go beyond individuals' content preferences and demonstrate a cultural prism for news avoidance.

The five countries in this study have been selected to maximize geographic, linguistic, and cultural variation. Important cross-cultural differences arise in interpretive frames and affective attitudes towards media consumption. Differences in the media systems and cultures of news consumption of the five countries can be summarized as follows: Finland can still be categorized as a variant of the "media welfare state", where communication services are understood as public goods and media pluralism is

supported by cultural policy (Ala-Fossi 2020). Argentina has a well-developed but concentrated media system, in which a few commercial networks and newspapers are the dominant players (Amado and Waisbord 2018), but which also includes a state-run national broadcaster. Relatively high levels of political polarization (Lupu, Oliveros, and Schiumerini 2019) tend to be reflected in news coverage. The Israeli media system is characterized by similar features of concentration and polarization, and can be viewed as a hybrid of the liberal, polarized-pluralist and democratic-corporatist models, due to its commercial nature combined with political parallelism and high levels of news consumption (Thorson, Vraga, and Kligler-Vilenchik 2014). News consumption culture in Israel is marked by a sense of civic obligation to stay informed (Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2021). The contemporary media system in the United States exhibits high levels of technological innovation and of polarization – both in patterns of supply and of demand. In the Japanese society traditional media outlets are still very powerful and newspapers and television are major information sources for many (Hayashi and Tanaka 2020).

Qualitative studies examining news avoidance have mostly considered only one national context, and have often focussed on countries in the Global North (Ross, Lester, and Harwood 2020). However, as the Reuters data suggests, news avoidance patterns may be distinctly expressed in countries that differ in their political structures and media systems, as well as in the amount of citizens' satisfaction with and trust in the news media (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). Understanding the phenomenon of news avoidance therefore requires an integrated investigation of consumers' media practices as part of the specific cultural context in which they operate. In this study we draw on 488 in-depth interviews with media consumers from five national contexts and ask: how are drivers and perceptions of news avoidance manifested across different national contexts?

Method and Data

The data were collected as part of a research project focussing on media consumption practices in five different cultural, linguistic and geographical contexts (Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan and US). The authors together with research assistants carried semi-structured interviews with 488 individuals between March 2016 and February 2019. The interviewees were recruited using a snowball sampling technique (Deacon et al. 1999), while aiming for variance in gender and age groups (age groups: 18–29, 30–44, 45–59, 60 and above; for demographic characteristics of the sample see Table 1).

The selection process did not specifically target heavy news consumers. In all countries the interviewees came from diverse educational backgrounds, political positions

Table 1. Gender and average age by country.

Country	# of interviewees	Average age	Female	Male	Trans
Argentina	158	39.8	89	69	
Finland	100	45.3	50	50	
Israel	82	44.8	44	38	
Japan	77	43.9	39	38	
USA	71	40.6	46	24	1
Total	**488**	**42.9**	**268**	**219**	**1**

and occupations, and exhibited a wide range of news consumption habits (in line with documented news consumption patterns, e.g. Reuters Institute Digital News Media Report, Newman et al. 2020). Overall, the participants tend to represent populations with higher education. In the Israeli sample there is a slight over-representation of interviewees from the (geographical) centre of Israel and of interviewees with high education (for example, of the young adults, aged 18–29, 40% are students). The US sample is more educated (half of the participants have a graduate degree, 30% an undergraduate degree) and more diverse than the general population (41% self-identify as White, 29% as Latinxs, 11% as Black, 11% as Asian, and one as Native American). The Argentinian sample is more educated than the general population there, of which only 21% have a college degree or higher (of the sample 22% are college students, 38% have an associate or bachelor college degree, and 5% had received a graduate degree). The interviewees in Japan are demographically balanced but also slightly leaning to well-educated people. In Finland as well the educational level of the interviewees is rather high, as 45% of them have a university degree.

In all five countries a joint interview protocol was used. It was translated into the local languages and adapted to country-specific contexts where needed. The interviews were transcribed in their original language, and the quotes relating to news avoidance were translated into English for the purposes of this article. The analysis of the data began with open categories using a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2008). In multiple online meetings the authors discussed together the categories in order to find common patterns and themes. This produced detailed coding categories that formed the basis for a common coding scheme, tested by all of the authors on sample interviews using MAXQDA software, and further refined in discussions both online and face-to-face. Finally, the 488 interview transcripts were analysed by using the coding scheme in each country. Pseudonyms are used when reporting responses to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

News avoidance as a theme was not included in the interview guide. The focus in the interviews was on news and media consumption and access on a more broad level, although including some specific themes such as incidental news exposure (Mitchelstein et al. 2020). However, avoidance as a theme was identified as something central in the interview data set during data analysis sessions. In the coding avoidance was a sub-code under "Perceptions/behavior in relation to media use," with addiction and overload as other sub-codes. We also coded the positive/negative/neutral/mixed perceptions towards media use. We inductively derived the diverse forms and aspects of news avoidance from quotes that are coded by various categories, but also such cases where news was avoided in an unintentional manner – we refer to this as non-use of news.

Our study is built around two main axes: (a) the drivers that underlie news avoidance and (b) how these drivers are manifested in different national contexts. In this analytical attention to news avoidance we can benefit from the international set-up, rich qualitative data set, and local understandings of the different national, social and cultural contexts and media environments that influence individual-level factors in news use and news repertoires (cf. Blekesaune, Elvestad, and Aalberg 2012; Peters and Schrøder 2018). We organize our findings along two main drivers of news avoidance, cognitive and emotional.

Findings

The cross-cultural analysis revealed two drivers of deliberate news avoidance. The first is a set of cognitive drivers that mainly refers to a repetition of high-profile news items, which in turn leads to a sense of overload. This trend was illustrated by news on political affairs, and news that concern the then US President, Donald Trump, in particular. The second type of drivers concerns the emotional experience of news consumption. In addition, our findings also attest to an unintentional form of news non-use. The findings demonstrate how country-specific contexts shape the behaviours, yet they do not suggest that news avoidance in any one country occurs in an entirely uniform manner or that news avoidance differs entirely from one country to the next.

Cognitive Drivers of News Avoidance

A first set of drivers for avoiding the news concerns the exposure to extensive coverage of certain topics, and stemmed from a subsequent sense of news inundation, overload, or fatigue. The motivation to avoid recurring journalistic topics was in response, for example, to high profile political topics and figures. Interestingly, our cross-national data show that a sense of overexposure to the US political scene led to news avoidance not only in the US context, as documented in previous research (Wagner and Boczkowski 2019), but in other countries as well.

Particularly among the US interviewees there were individuals who, engaging in active news avoidance in an effort to not consume news on certain topics, appeared to stop consuming news altogether. This abstention is in contrast to selective exposure of news (Ksiazek 2019; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020), and seems to be related to a belief that filtering only specific journalistic topics is difficult, especially when the topics wished to be avoided are at the top of the media agenda. However, in our data such 'total' news avoidance is more situational (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020), as evidenced by the US where Donald Trump has dominated the news agenda, and in wanting to avoid Trump even avid news consumers might end up in "taking a break" from all news: Nicole, a 32-year-old advertising analyst noted that "I think I'm taking like a slight media sabbatical just because it's been like so heavy with what Trump is doing". Likewise:

> Politics is nauseating, especially in the past year and a half or two years [around the 2016 US presidential elections], so for a while I paid a lot of attention and then I got sick of it and I just went under a hole. (Alida, 34, female, digital marketing agency owner)

Our cross-national data highlight how the political situation in one area of the world shapes news consumption practices also in another area, as when the overwhelming news coverage of the political scene in the US can cause news avoidance also in Finland. Several of the Finnish interviews mentioned that they avoid all news discussing the US. For example, Henrik (42, male, coordinator) said:

> Oh my God! Then comes the Supreme Court thing and we are again in the US. (…) I feel so tired with so much reported from the US. I don't think that we used to be so interested in what happens there before. It is very mind-numbing.

Yet, overall Finland has a different kind of political information environment compared to the US, a distinct culture of news consumption, Finland being politically

more stable and less polarized than the US, with less discontent with politics. As a result, at least partly, of more stable levels of trust in political institutions, Finland has not experienced such a dramatic drop in trust in news media as the US has (see Hanitzsch, Dalen, and Steindl 2018). For some of the Finnish interviewees news avoidance was rather the result of events being considered to be so repetitive that they felt irritated. The speed of the news cycle and the ubiquity of news could lead to a sense of news redundancy. Jaakko, a manager (59, male) noted how "Before, we used to read once a day what had happened. Nowadays, we read many times per day what has happened, and there is no time to pause."

According to our interview data in Finland cognitive news avoidance can also be related to the abundance of news content flowing via mobile devices and social media, i.e. people not wanting to be always available for news. When smartphones are always at hand for news use, the boundaries of news consumption can become ambiguous. Mobile news media usage is regulated by the users, and aspired to fit into one's own, personal schedule of news access – in order to limit the obtrusiveness of news. For instance, one young Finnish interviewee (Elle, 24, female, restaurant worker) had a "weekend phone", an old Nokia model without advanced smartphone features. By using this old model, she could be left out of contact with news and other irritating content on weekends when she wanted to relax. This serves as an example of periodic or situational news avoidance (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020), albeit brief in duration.

Emphasizing a different kind of situational news avoidance, in the Israeli context one key motivation for news avoidance at the moment of data collection related to a specific news topic, namely the investigations of the corruption cases that involve the incumbent Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, along with some of his family members. Notably, Israeli interviewees expressed a strong sense of civic obligation to consume the news. In our interviews, they explicitly criticized those who "do not know what's going on in depth" (Stav, 26, female, student) and were ashamed of their own avoidance behaviour, even when conducted situationally. Nevertheless, as the prime minister's investigations have been extensively covered in the Israeli news media since the outset of this political affair in 2016, this topic seems to burden even the most politically interested and involved Israeli citizens. Israeli interviewees, both right- and left-wingers, noted that they intentionally skip or ignore news items that deal with this topic. As Nava, a retired teacher (82, female) describes, a conflict emerges since "it is important to know [what is happening]," but with the ceaseless reports on Netanyahu's investigations "I've had it up to here, enough! I read and was interested and heard [about it] and now I don't care … So I skip it". Likewise:

> It may be that one of the reasons I do not listen [to the radio newscast] as I used to is, it's unpleasant to say, but I'm already tired of hearing all the news about these investigations and those investigations, and these corruptions [affairs]. Heli (65, female, retired construction engineer)

Perceptions of corruption and deceit by politicians are a reason not to follow the news in Argentina, although not focussing on any particular politicians or episodes: accusations of government corruption have been a common feature of the Argentina political context since the 1990s (Waisbord 2000). For instance, Ricardo (male), a 19-

year-old college student, explains "I don't get politics (…) the truth is that … I don't understand much or care either…. I don't get it, I'm not interested in what politicians say. I don't know if it is because I believe they are all liars (…) so I focus on other things that I consider more important." Paula, a 33-year-old administrative worker, concurs "I see a lot of impunity (…) I try to follow [the news] but those things make me angry and I don't want to do it anymore."

By contrast, in Japan, political issues seem to be connected to news avoidance indirectly, relating to a rather habitual (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020) political apathy or cultural desire to avoid disagreement and controversy. Avoiding news has to do with peoples' reluctance to discuss or to be exposed to subjective, personal, and often extreme opinions, as well as low political efficacy and indifference and cynicism towards politics. A 48-year-old office worker Hiroshi (male) says

> When you share it [a news item] on social media, it's only to your friends or people you know. That's why I think it's better not to do that. There are people who do that [share controversial news to their social media audience] and it can put you into a situation like 'He is a little weird even if he looks normal on the surface.'

The attitudes in Japan towards news relate to negative images of political actors and institutions. Interviewees tend to prefer news on non-political issues to political news, for they keep a distance from confrontational and ideological issues (except for older men). Japanese interviewees in our study expressed the wish to consume only impartial information or 'comfortable' contents by avoiding subjective opinions and sensational issues. Japanese people tend also to regard news on ideology and religion as taboo, mentioning that these are "too sensitive topics" (Rikako, 34, female, unemployed) that might "trigger a quarrel" (Yuya, 35, male, slaughterhouse worker).

Emotional Drivers of News Avoidance

In addition to the cognitive drivers described above, our study also points to a set of emotional news avoidance drivers. For instance, in their news avoidance descriptions, respondents condemned the negativity of news, especially in the form of the coverage of car accidents, terror attacks, and natural disasters. The exposure to such tragedies via the news media incites a range of emotional reactions, spanning from fear and despair to anger and disgust. Emotional drivers thus act as a form of self-preservation in an attempt to prevent, or at least curtail, the negative sentiments associated with news items. Emotional reactions to news lead to content selectivity, and in some cases, even motivate respondents to completely opt out of being informed. This set of avoidance drivers was especially prominent in the experiences of young adults (18–34). Notably, for the emotional drivers of news avoidance country-specific context was less apparent, and it had more to do with the negative nature of the news itself. Issues such as press freedom and political and societal stability (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020) did not play a role here.

In Israel, 31-year old Yael (female), working in book publishing, described how

> All the news that is being reported is just negative (…) Over the years the attraction of the public to more graphic and more violent and dark-juicy details has increased, and I just don't feel comfortable with it.

Argentinian Agustina (23, female, university student) explains that she avoids the news because she feels "controlled" because "everything is too politicized" and "the TV will show what they want to show":

> When I watch the news, it's bad for me, it really makes me very sad. It's like I feel that I can't do anything about it and it's all so sad, that it makes me sad and it's also like I'm always very aware of how the media is handling all the news they put in, so it's like giving me a little bit of anger.

Several Finnish interviewees described feeling emotional distress, including sadness and disgust if they consumed negative news, such as news dealing with natural disasters or fatal accidents. Sandra, a 25-year-old sales representative complained

> An airplane crash, terror attack, child abuse, murder. Anybody has a bad start to their day when reading about such things. I quit it consciously. I don't read news anymore because there is so much negative stuff. (…) I would like to read happy news: a kid won gold medal in some competition, or hero dogs or cute panda cubs. Those are so much more fun to read about than terror attacks.

In Japan, particularly female interviewees were found to avoid shocking news – such as those on child abuse – to keep their mental health. Homemakers or mothers may tend to get fed up with horrifying news because they are at home for most of the day and more exposed to sensational incidents via television talk shows. Toshie (45, female, homemaker) explained how distressing crime news can be:

> News about Trump or Kim Jong-un has something to do with the government, but I feel that being a Japanese citizen I won't be affected by it so much. However, the news about the death of the five-year-old boy scared me a bit or I felt fearful of not knowing when and where such a crime is committed.

Also in the US and Finland, news avoidance resulting from both distress and overwhelm was reported almost entirely by women. Possible reasons for this are that women were in fact experiencing greater distress from the news than their male counterparts, they had less tolerance to the distress experienced due to news, or they were simply more inclined to talk about or admit they were avoiding news due to distress.

While the emotional drivers are shown to be global manifestations of news avoidance, our cross-national data demonstrates further cultural-specific variations in addition to those that emerged in the context of the cognitive drivers of news avoidance. The interviews show that individuals do not always intend to *actively avoid* the news, but instead simply bypass it due to their preference to other types of contents, such as entertainment. These unintentional and mundane drivers were common especially in Japan, where news consumption is not perceived a civic duty, and were the least prominent in Israel, where citizens are highly involved in politics and current affairs. The literature of technology non-use (Baumer et al. 2015; Wyatt et al. 2002) can be used to define such a preference as news non-use.

It should be noted that news non-use expressions did not often come up explicitly in our interviews, probably because as a less visible activity, people were not as inclined to address it or even notice it, as can be the case with intentional news avoidance, which requires some direct kind of action and awareness. As a type of practice that people are probably less reflexive about, news non-use is a challenging phenomenon to investigate.

Conclusions

In this article we have aimed to advance the understanding of the different contexts, facets, and motivations for bypassing news contents by adopting a cross-national perspective. We have moved beyond the common scholarly focus on the individual motivations for news avoidance and demonstrated that some aspects of news avoidance, namely, a set of cognitive drivers represent distinct country-level contextual factors, cultures of news consumption (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020), and are more situational (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020), whereas certain emotional drivers for news avoidance are shared across diverse national contexts.

Research on news avoidance is complicated by the lack of a common understanding of the phenomenon, and the concept is in need of systematic conceptualization and empirical study (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). It is still unclear how people negotiate the media landscape to decide which news media to either select or ignore (Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017). Our cross-national data reveal multiple approaches to news avoidance, for instance, that staying informed can be perceived as a national obligation and therefore news avoidance is criticized (Israel, Finland); that skipping news can be understood as avoidance of disconcerting and even distressing political news (Argentina, Israel, US); that news avoidance can be related to avoiding subjective opinions and sensational issues (Japan).

We therefore argue that news avoidance should be considered as something that is manifested and performed as part of specific time frames and cultural and political contexts. For example, in the US data, discussion about burn-out or exhaustion related to news consumption was mostly due to the political atmosphere after the presidential elections in 2016. The interviewees typically referred to actions that involved some level of proactivity or change in their media-use behaviours, thus reflecting a high level of intentionality in their news avoidance. However, for many it was only a temporary or situational practice (Portwood-Stacer 2013; Woodstock 2014b; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020), rather than a permanent one.

Reflecting on such situational news avoidance participants spoke of the specific periods of time in which they paused their news consumption or took a break from news, with an end date in mind. Implicit in talks about temporary news avoidance is the idea that it tends to follow periods of heightened news consumption, such as coverage of the Trump administration in the US or the investigations into the prime minister's actions in Israel. On the one hand this might reflect a cynical attitude towards politicians (Schrøder 2019), on the other it supports the view that feeling a duty to stay informed and considering news as a civic obligation strengthens the chance of consuming news (Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017; Trilling and Schoenbach 2013) once the political situation has shifted – in this case news avoidance is, therefore, not habitual (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020).

Expressing a less reflexive and observant approach, in Japan news avoidance does not seem to be something that is commonly recognized and explicitly on people's minds. In the interviews Japanese people would just give a number of mundane reasons why they do not consume news. This may be connected to the nation's overall low level of political interest, or has to do with people's general attitudes of avoiding conflicts and confrontations. Accordingly, this may explain why, employing a Western

perspective on news avoidance, quantitative studies show Japan as the country which reported the lowest ratio of news avoiders (Newman et al. 2019; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). In fact, with our cross-national data we have discovered that a substantial part of news avoidance discourse reflects a political culture that upholds a liberal Western perspective or a perception developed out of particular polemical political contexts. This underlines our claim that the concept of news avoidance has not been sufficiently investigated qualitatively from a global perspective and so far has been understood in a limited cultural context.

Our study shows that two drivers for news avoidance – cognitive and emotional – can come hand in hand. When people say they are "tired" of news on Trump it seems to be a mix of emotional and cognitive exhaustion. Interviewees expressed the news being "too much," referring to the excess of negative affect the news was producing, feeling like it was more than they could handle – intolerable, even. Media's tendency to focus on negative news seems to be one of the main factors that helps to explain news avoidance. According to Beckett and Deuze (2016, 2) this "brings traditional news values into stark relief: the old idea of 'hard' news' that shocks, frightens, disturbs, and alarms can leave the audience feeling alienated, disempowered, helpless and, worst of all, apathetic, insensitive, and even hostile to learning about our world." In our cross-national data, news avoidance resulting from distress was reported largely by women. This finding is in line with the scholarship on news avoidance and gender that points to the perception of news as male-suitable as a reason to bypass the news media (Toff and Palmer 2019).

The country-specific supply of news can contribute particularly to cognitive news avoidance. For example, in Israel – a news-saturated culture – the burden generated by the intense coverage of an ongoing, polarizing political crisis alongside the sense of obligation to stay informed have mutually shaped people's news avoidance practices and motivations (Aharoni et al., 2021). In the case of the US, a salient trend in news supply affecting news avoidance might be what Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018) examine in terms of asymmetric polarization. In Argentina news on politics tend to be highly polarized, and according to Waisbord (2010), editorial interest in different cases of wrongdoing has fallen along ideological and political divisions. This is in contrast to Finland and Japan, where, comparatively speaking, news media is less polarized.

News avoidance is a value-laden concept with a normatively negative connotation, and news avoidance can even be demonized, in particular when it comes to public affairs news. This is evident in the quest to 'solve' news avoidance. The negative focus of news, depressing and affecting the mood, can be addressed with such efforts as constructive journalism, solutions journalism, conciliatory journalism, or slow journalism (Andersen 2020; Hautakangas and Ahva 2018; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020), although for some news avoiders the benefits include precisely greater calm and purpose and a constructive attitude towards the present and future (Woodstock 2014a). Efforts to convert news avoiders also include reducing the cognitive costs of navigating the news environment (Edgerly 2019). In the online context, personalization and curation services that deliver customized news can be a way for people to avoid news overload (Lee et al. 2019; Song, Jung, and Kim 2017).

Based on our cross-national interview data and building on the distinctions between intentional and unintentional avoidance (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020;

Van den Bulck 2006), as well as on the various found motivations for limiting news consumption (Edgerly 2019; Newman et al. 2019; Toff and Palmer 2019), we argue that the discussion on news avoidance should be supplemented with the concept of news non-use. The concept of news non-use also refers to a lesser amount of news consumption, yet involves a distinctive set of normative assumptions. Drawing on the theoretical concept of technology non-use (Bauer 1995; Baumer et al. 2015; Portwood-Stacer 2013; Wyatt 2003), news non-use implies behaviour that may not simply derive from the consumers' choices in relation to the characteristics of news, but instead could be forced, for example, by a 'technological divide' of class, age, gender, or race (Woodstock 2014b; Wyatt, Thomas, and Terranova 2002).

We acknowledge that news non-use is difficult to study, because people do not usually talk much about what they do unintentionally (cf. Van den Bulck 2006). One way to conceptualize news avoidance and non-use is vis-à-vis degree of motivation and proactivity to not encounter content, with greater motivation, aversion, and action on the avoidance side, and unintentionality and incidentality on the non-use side of the spectrum. News non-use derives from various constraints that inhibit news consumption, from the management of time and money to technological considerations such as user-friendliness of a news platform. Non-users are then akin to 'drop-outs' (Wyatt 2003) of news. This distinction between news avoidance and non-use is always highly contextual, as different individuals, because of their surroundings and context, will have to be more or less proactive in order to avoid news (i.e. are exposed to more news incidentally than others, Thorson 2020). Nevertheless, we suggest that the less normative concept of news non-use could be applied in future research alongside news avoidance in extending our understanding of the different reasons why people do not consume news. Another future avenue we propose for research on news avoidance is to conduct cross-national investigations in a way that further takes into account cultural differences and contexts.

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