

Understanding the Complexity of News Avoidance : Insights from a Delphi Study among Journalism Experts

Journalism Practice

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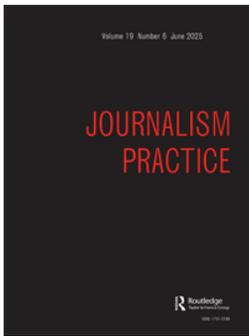
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Understanding the Complexity of News Avoidance: Insights from a Delphi Study among Journalism Experts

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ABSTRACT

In this high-choice media landscape, we witness people avoiding news to substantial degrees. This avoidance behavior raises critical questions about its implications for informed citizenship and the normative role of news media. The research on news avoidance surged in the past five years. However, we know little about the interplay between by whom, why and how the news is avoided, and how that determines the implications. Therefore, we seek a framework that addresses these important nuances. This study, therefore, employs a qualitative Delphi method among audience experts from journalism practice and studies. We propose a holistic framework for understanding news avoidance, via community-based participatory research, by including unique expert perspectives complementary to the existing academic knowledge. This resulted in eight different illustrative types of news avoiders, highlighting the multifaceted nature of news avoidance and its underlying causes and manifestations: The Sensitives, The Low Trusters, The Disinterested, The Niche Dudes and Galls, The Mindful Naturalists, The Low Key Avoiders, The Hedonists, and The Media-Illiterates. This interdisciplinary approach demonstrates that news avoidance is a volatile behavior, that there is no single profile of a news avoider, and that the implications of news avoidance require nuanced audience research.

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The current media landscape is characterized by an abundant presence of information and ample opportunities for the public to select and curate their news consumption. While this allows the public to be more informed than ever, we paradoxically witness people avoiding news to substantial degrees (e.g., 30% of the Dutch public; Newman et al. 2024). People are, for example, able to replace news content with only entertainment or preferred media (Strömbäck 2015), to avoid news deliberately because they exhibit negative attitudes or feelings towards it (Kalogeropoulos, Toff, and Fletcher 2024; Newman et al. 2024; Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2023) or feel overwhelmed by the amount of news (De Bruin et al. 2021; Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil De Zúñiga 2023; Xu et al. 2024).

Although news avoidance is not a new phenomenon (Espeland 2024; Karlsen, Beyer, and Steen-Johnsen 2020), the nature and consequences have evolved in the digital high-choice media environment. This (partial or complete) news avoidance raises questions about its possible implications for an informed citizenry (Blekesaune, Elvestad, and Aalberg 2012). Some argue that news avoidance potentially has a detrimental impact on political engagement and knowledge and yields polarization or deepens knowledge gaps (Aalberg, Blekesaune, and Elvestad 2013; Damstra et al. 2021), while others highlight potential benefits for mental well-being and civic engagement (De Bruin et al. 2021; Ohme et al. 2023; Woodstock 2014). Moreover, the fragmented and averting audience presents new challenges for news organizations in reaching and engaging with the audience to inform them about public matters (Fletcher and Nielsen 2017; Strömbäck, Falasca, and Kruike-meier 2018).

The research on news avoidance therefore has surged since 2019 and gained much attention in academia, journalism practice and the public discourse (Andersen, Toff, and Ytre-Arne 2024). News avoidance is a complex phenomenon in the current high-choice, hybrid media landscape, and is not simply about tuning out from traditional news sources. It is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional concept, that encompasses both habitual, consistent low news consumption, driven by low news-efficacy, low interest and algorithmic content selection, and specific strategic news limiting practices, such as occasional and selective avoidance for emotional or cognitive reasons (Andersen, Toff, and Ytre-Arne 2024; Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2023; Villi et al. 2022). Still, we know little about the underlying mechanisms of news avoidance and how these are related to the manifestations and implications. In this study, we seek to develop a framework that addresses these varieties.

Explanations for news avoidance are found in personal (cognitive and emotional), societal (information overload, technological developments), socio-demographic (age, education, gender), and structural factors. Research suggests younger individuals, those with lower education levels, and women are more likely to avoid news (Edgerly 2015; Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2017; Toff and Palmer 2019). Social class also plays a role, as ability, opportunity, and resources influence news engagement (Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge 2022; Skarsbø Lindtner and Uberg Nærland 2024; Strömbäck 2015). However, strategic news-limiting practices, such as occasional or selective avoidance, transcend demographics, underscoring the importance of personal motivations (De Bruin et al. 2024; Lee 2013). Furthermore, in the digital era, avoiding traditional news does not necessarily equate to being uninformed, as individuals may access public affairs through alternative pathways (Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022; Swart et al. 2022). The boundaries of what constitutes “news” are increasingly blurred (Edgerly and Vraga 2020), and our understanding of novel information pathways remains limited. We so far only have a superficial understanding of the interplay between by whom, why and what news is avoided, and thus when the implications are problematic or beneficial. Therefore, we need a more comprehensive understanding of different types of news avoiders. Only then we can say something about the implications of news avoidance on a personal and societal level. In short: we need to understand who we are investigating inclusively before we can empirically study this further.

To address these gaps, we propose a holistic framework for understanding news avoidance beyond the existing literature. Although it is logical to study the object of news

avoidance (e.g., the news avoider), as many studies have done in recent years, this approach often results in fragmented insights that fail to capture the complexity of the phenomenon, with the consequences that some dimensions of news avoidance might be overlooked. A broader approach is needed. Therefore, we adopt a distinctive methodology: a qualitative Delphi study in the Netherlands, engaging journalism professionals and academic experts who provide unique insights into news-avoiding audiences. The Delphi method, rooted in community-based participatory research, fosters interdisciplinary consensus and offers a framework for conceptualizing emerging phenomena (Brady 2015). By incorporating expert perspectives, our study contributes to future empirical research and aids news organizations in reconnecting with disengaged audiences.

Our framework extends beyond socio-demographic descriptions and aims to incorporate both personal and structural drivers of news avoidance and its manifestations. We aim for different illustrative personas of news avoiders, offering a novel perspective on their motivations and behaviors. Our central research question is: How can the different motivations for and manifestations of news avoidance be understood? Specifically, we seek expert consensus on three key aspects: (1) What constitutes news-avoidance behavior? (2) Which types of news are avoided? (3) What are the underlying causes of news avoidance, and how do these factors interact? As a result, we propose eight tentative types of news avoiders: The Sensitives, The Low Trusters, The Disinterested, The Niche Dudes and Galls, The Mindful Naturalists, The Low Key Avoiders, The Hedonists, and The Media-Illiterates. While these personas are not definitive, they provide a framework to understand news avoidance beyond conventional demographic categories. This approach highlights the multifaceted and dynamic nature of news avoidance, emphasizing that “the” news avoider does not exist. By developing this alternative framework, we contribute to a deeper understanding of different facets of news avoidance.

News Avoidance as Conceptualized in the Literature

While research on news avoidance has surged since 2019, the phenomenon remains complex as it is grounded in personal, societal and structural reasons (Andersen, Toff, and Ytre-Arne 2024; Edgerly 2024). The accumulated knowledge demonstrates that news avoidance is a multifaceted phenomenon. First, we explicate the conceptualization and manifestation of news avoidance. Second, we focus on approaches to defining and operationalizing *news* in the digital age. Finally, we look at the different causes, motivations, and predictors of news avoidance.

Conceptualizing News Avoidance

Although news avoidance is not necessarily new, its manifestation and implications have altered as the digital, high-choice media environment has developed. As news avoidance now appears to settle as a subfield within journalism studies, it is conceptualized as a multi-faceted phenomenon that encompasses low levels of news consumption and strategic news limiting practices (Andersen, Toff, and Ytre-Arne 2024). Low news use may be more unintentional, habitual behavior, due to, for example, low efficacy, or low interest, deprioritizing news consumption and stimulating other media use. This may be amplified by algorithmic content selection (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). However, strategic

news limiting practices, such as temporarily occasional or selective (topic) avoidance may be more deliberate behavior, driven by emotional or cognitive overload when handling the highly saturated, mostly negative news landscape, or feelings of mistrust. For example, people might occasionally opt out to protect their mental health (De Bruin et al. 2021) or selectively avoid certain topics due to issue fatigue (Schäfer, Betakova, and Lecheler 2024). While this is a comprehensive conceptualization of news avoidance, we integrate the experts' perspectives on what constitutes news avoidance behavior, to nuance this further.

What News is Avoided?

In the hybrid media environment (Chadwick 2017) it is difficult to define news. Standard notions about what news is and where it can be found are obsolete and the boundaries between genres are blurry (Edgerly and Vraga 2020). This is furthered by social media that spread content from various sources that can be interpreted as news (in tone, appearance, and topics), making it harder to distinguish news sources from other sources on social media (Edgerly and Vraga 2020) and subsequently news exposure from avoidance. On top of that, there also is a rise in media sources that mix elements of news and entertainment, such as talk-show programs and (documentary) series providing current events information, resulting in entertainment sources becoming more news-like, and news sources becoming more entertainment-like (e.g., soft news or infotainment; Edgerly 2017).

Furthermore, changes in the media landscape add to the complexity of news as a social construct. Objectivity and the duty to inform and mobilize the public were previously considered key norms to judge news content by, however, with the news genre harder to define nowadays, it is also becoming less clear when these norms apply (Edgerly 2017). For example, when an entertainment show provides current-events information, and consequently, has the potential to inform and mobilize the public, is this then understood as the social construct "news"?

In specific studies on news avoidance, news is mostly defined by the type of news source on various media (e.g., television, online, radio and print) (Edgerly 2015; Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster 2010; Shehata and Strömbäck 2022; Trilling and Schoenbach 2013). Yet, logically, the different studies include different news sources depending on supply-side factors. Considering the blurry boundaries of news as a construct, these sources may not be extensive.

Another problem is that different definitions of news presented to participants (Newman et al. 2024; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020) contain different, ambiguous elements and are open for interpretation, depending on what sources they assess as news and what they view as novel information (Peters and Schröder 2018). However, studies on news avoidance do find an overarching distinction between topic- or content-related avoidance and medium- or technology-related avoidance (e.g., Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2021).

In sum, studying news avoidance in this hybrid media landscape is a challenge because news itself is hard to define. Therefore, we aim to understand which news is avoided and what possible alternatives to news are considered and include a broad range of experts' perspectives in the context of the contemporary journalism landscape.

Explanations for News Avoidance

To understand news avoidance, its implications and eventually its solutions, many studies outline different antecedents of news avoidance. Explanations for news avoidance are often found in the changing media landscape. Foremost, the ever-increasing supply of news means its audience can replace any source it finds unsatisfying with others or solely use entertainment media instead (Strömbäck 2015). For example, consistent news avoidance (or low news consumption over a continuous period), can be driven by a higher preference for other content. Moreover, social media and content-selection algorithms have left people less in control of their news exposure and therefore may not encounter news or diversity of news at all (Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016). The high-choice media landscape also causes people to be more selective in their content, leading to fragmented and averted audiences. For instance, the news is being seen as excessively negative, leading to an emotional overload (Toff and Palmer 2019). Furthermore, the proliferation of sources is causing news to be experienced as untrustworthy (Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil De Zúñiga 2023); a frustration with or distrust of political institutions (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020) or an experienced news-information overload and resulting news fatigue (De Bruin et al. 2021; Villi et al. 2022)

Other explanations for news avoidance can be found in more structural reasons. For example, news avoidance manifests itself when people are too busy to consume news or have no access to news sources, for example, due to economic reasons (i.e., opportunity; Skarsbø Lindtner and Uberg Nærland 2024). Furthermore, studies show that news avoidance can be a result of socialization processes (Edgerly 2017; Shehata 2016), social class (Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge 2022), lack of ties to communities that stimulate news use (Palmer 2020), media-illiteracy or low news-efficacy (i.e., ability; Edgerly 2017). News avoidance can have more structural causes, other studies demonstrate news avoidance is a more dynamic behavior, driven by certain (individual) motivations and preferences at specific points in time.

Finally, previous research also sought explanations of news avoidance in certain predictors, such as stable individual-level characteristics, like (socio)-demographic factors (e.g., educational level, age, gender) or context characteristics, like country-level factors (e.g., media systems, political environment, or cultures of news consumption; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). For example, younger people, women, and people with lower educational levels tend to avoid news more often (Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2017; Toff and Palmer 2019).

This can be related to a lack of representation or recognition in the news. It may be that not only do certain audiences avoid the news, but that media contributes to the marginalization of these audiences (Edgerly and Thorson 2023). Finally, countries with higher levels of press freedom, political freedom, and stability, exhibited lower rates of news avoidance (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). This means that not only there are certain individual predictors or motivations but also the performance and quality of the media landscape influence news avoidance practices.

These approaches to antecedents of news avoidance (structural causes, individual motivations or predictive characteristics) demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of news avoidance. We believe that when it comes to news avoidance, its manifestations, including *how* news is avoided and *which* news is avoided, and the motivations for news

avoidance, are related to each other. More so, we argue that we need to advance our knowledge of the concept of news avoidance to further improve the operationalization of the concept in studies on news avoiders. Therefore, we build on and expand previous conceptualizations with insights from a qualitative Delphi study among experts from the journalism field.

Methodology: The Delphi Method

This study employs a qualitative Delphi method, which focuses on building consensus among experts, to provide us with a comprehensive understanding complementing the academic scope (Brady 2015; Linstone and Turoff 2011; Turoff and Linstone (1975). We deliberately selected experts from the journalistic field, who in one way or another are in contact with news avoiders, as we expect them to provide insights on news avoiders' behavior and motivations based on direct experience, yet at a more overarching level, and outside the academic scope. While this method has been used in different fields where expert knowledge is needed to inform decision-making or to understand a phenomenon in greater depth (e.g., public policy, health care, future studies, or organizational development) (Brady 2015), until now it has rarely been applied in journalism studies (van der Wurff and Schönbach 2011).

Compared to other methods, the qualitative Delphi method takes a more inclusive and participatory approach, because of the (partially) anonymous dialogue it fosters between participants (Brady 2015). This encourages participants to offer honest opinions, without the interference of certain groups or power dynamics (Bolger and Wright 2011). In addition, the anonymity provided might encourage participation by journalism practitioners, since those who represent media organizations can be, especially reluctant to participate in non-anonymous academic research, as they might not want to be held accountable for their answers.

The Delphi method is a pragmatic approach based on the philosophy that social science research should relate to real-world practice and is useful for building practice theory. It emphasizes the importance of perceptions of groups of people, alongside other sources of empirical data, in considering the reality of a phenomenon such as news avoidance. Moreover, the qualitative Delphi method is especially useful in the context of community-engaged research or community-based participatory research. These approaches are characterized by inclusion, collaboration, and participation of various levels of community groups (e.g., journalism practice). It improves the understanding of (social) issues and processes that reflect the concerns in the field being studied and includes participation from experts in lower power positions that are often left out of traditional research (Brady 2015).

Finally, the Delphi contributes to theory-building because the data continuously construct a consensus through subsequent waves of data collection (Landeta, Barrutia, and Lertxundi 2011), rather than measuring the average opinion of respondents at one moment in time, as, for example, surveys do. The Delphi method suits our goal of reaching broad consensus within one group of experts, instead of comparing viewpoints between groups as focus group research would do.

Our qualitative Delphi consisted of three steps: First, we conducted an open online survey (anonymous). Second, we conducted a semi-open online survey (anonymous),

based on an analysis of the first questionnaire, to where the respondents reacted. Third, we held an expert meeting, in which the experts were asked to discuss and reflect upon the analyses of the first two rounds (face-to-face), to reach a consensus on the research problem.

Participants

Since the Delphi method seeks input from a purposive sample of individuals with specific expertise to maximize the range of expert opinion, the selection of experts is arguably the most important (Grisham 2009; Landeta, Barrutia, and Lertxundi 2011). Therefore, the participants were selected to attain a large variety in expertise and affiliations in the panel. We selected two types of experts: Our main focus was to invite journalism professionals in the Netherlands, who, in their function, have expertise on the use and evaluation of news among users. In addition, we invited academics from different European countries who have been researching news consumption and news avoidance to bundle the fundamental knowledge in academic literature. The latter forms the foundation to further develop knowledge from the journalism field. This way, the insights of the journalism professionals were complemented with more conceptual insights.

Twenty-five experts participated in the first anonymous round, and twenty-one of them participated in the second anonymous round of the Delphi study. Twelve of them also participated in the final expert meeting.¹ A total of seven academics and eighteen media professionals participated. While the academics all have in common their research expertise on news consumption and news consumption, the expertise of the journalism professionals came from various functions and organizations. Therefore, in Table 1 only the journalism *professionals* are explicated in terms of function, type of organization and their relation to news avoiders.

Research Design

First Round

All experts were informed how much time the questionnaires would take, what they were required to provide (i.e., their knowledge and opinion on the subject from their perspective), what the purpose of the study was and signed an informed-consent form.

Participants first received an open questionnaire (via online survey creator Microsoft Forms on May 15th, 2020). The first questionnaire consisted of five open questions, to which the respondents needed to respond in a maximum of 150 words. To unveil underlying processes and to ensure concrete answers we formulated the following questions: (1) How would you describe “news avoidance” (your interpretation, not a formal definition)? (2) For what reasons is “news avoidance” receiving increasing attention? (3) What societal factors influence news avoidance? (4) Describe several personae that you think avoid the news (minimum of two personae) in detail (including their characteristics and motivations). (5) Is “news avoidance” a suitable term to cover the phenomenon?

Second Round

The second questionnaire was sent after analyzing data collected in the first round on July 7th, 2020. These questions were more structured and closed and allowed the participants

Table 1. List of journalism professionals. Function, organization, and relation to news avoiders.

Function	Type of organization	Relation to news avoiders
Audience researcher	Media Regulator	Included specific research on news avoidance in The Netherlands in the latest news monitor reports.
Ombudsman	Public broadcaster	Often in contact with the unsatisfied or critical audience.
Ombudsman	National newspaper	Often in contact with the unsatisfied or critical audience.
Chairman	Journalism council	Often in contact with the unsatisfied or critical audience.
Market-/ audience researcher	Dutch publishing house	Analyses the audience of different newspaper titles in The Netherlands.
Product innovations manager	Dutch public broadcaster	Focuses on engaging audiences through innovative journalistic products and platforms.
Teaching fellow and innovator	News lab of multinational tech company	Works on innovation in media and with different audiences for news media.
Editor-in-chief	Dutch regional newspaper	Works on strategies to engage and reach the audience. Has knowledge of specific target audience.
Editor-in-chief	Dutch digital news and lifestyle magazine	Works on strategies to engage the audience (digital). Has knowledge of specific target audience.
Editor-in-chief	Dutch news website	Works on strategies to engage and reach the audience. Has knowledge of specific target audience.
Editor-in-chief	Weekly news and opinion magazine	Works on strategies to engage and reach the audience. Has knowledge of specific target audience.
Editor-in-chief	Dutch public radio station	Works on strategies to engage and reach the young audience. Has knowledge of specific target audience.
Regional correspondent	National newspaper	Is often in contact with the community of a specific region, particularly outside the major metropolitan areas of the Netherlands.
Video producer (vlogger)	Self-employed	Creates accessible journalistic informative content for a young target audience to engage them.
Media consultant	Self-employed	Researches the audience and audience needs in the Netherlands and advises news media on how to (re)connect with their audience.
Media strategist and product developer	National Public Broadcaster	Focuses on engaging young audiences through innovative journalistic products and platforms.
Investigative journalist	National newspaper	Works at the newspapers that often include the audience in the choice of stories.
Journalist and advocate for diversity and inclusion in media	Self-employed	Talks to minorities in The Netherlands who often are not represented in the news media and consult media organizations on how to improve this.

to provide feedback on the responses from round one. First, the experts were presented with a definition of news avoidance based on an analysis of the first round of answers and asked whether they agreed or not and why. Second, they were presented with five antecedents of news avoidance and asked what, according to them, was missing. Finally, we presented them with several personae based on their answers in the first round and asked them to rank them from most typical to least typical news avoider according to their judgment.

Third Round

In the third round, the participants were invited to an expert meeting in which they discussed our analysis (in September 2020). To comply with COVID-19 lockdown regulations, the experts were divided into two groups, and, in the end, one meeting had to take place online. Scheduling issues played a role in group selection, but more importantly, we tried to ensure a diversity of functions and affiliations in both groups. We applied a “contemplative dialogue” (Andriessen et al., 2024.). By giving each participant equal participation in the conversation, this method removes power dynamics and avoids a dialogue based

on convincing each other of individual viewpoints. During the meeting, the experts were presented with a text specifying the final personae, antecedents, and manifestations of news avoidance. They were asked to highlight a single paragraph of the text they had questions or remarks about. After contributing their thoughts one by one, they could respond to each other's remarks and discuss raised issues.

Analysis

The data analysis took place during the data collection because the second and third rounds build on the insights from the previous one, which means that the conceptualizations have been established throughout the research process (Bowen 2006; Landeta, Barutia, and Lertxundi 2011). The data analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the study (Brady 2015). We analyzed the data collected in the first round using the constant comparative method and open-coded line- and paragraph segments of the participants' answers. For this, we used the analysis and research software package ATLAS.ti. The codes revealed several recurring topics and were subsequently divided into the following main themes (see also Brady 2015): (1) active news avoidance, (2) passive news avoidance, (3) negative news attitudes, (4) structural causes, (5) topic avoidance, (6) medium avoidance, (7) information replacement, (8) personae of news avoiders. These main themes consisted of sub-codes, for example "low-trust" or "negativity". The experts described a total of 67 personae in the first round. In the analysis, these were clustered into eight types of news avoiders based on a qualitative analysis of similarities and differences. We consistently used the comparative method and open and selectively coded throughout all rounds of participant input. During the last expert gatherings, the experts themselves came to a final consensus on how to understand news avoidance, resulting in our final conceptualization (Linstone and Turoff 2011).

Results

We will discuss our findings in order of our main themes: the act of news avoidance, what news is avoided, and what the causes of and motivations for news avoidance are. Consequently, we will answer our main issue, *how can the different motivations for and manifestations of news avoidance be understood?*, by introducing eight conceptual types of news avoiders: the sensitives, the low-trusters, the disinterested, the niche dudes and galls, the mindful naturalists, the low-key avoiders, the hedonists and the media-illiterates (see Table 2), illustrating the complexity and nuances of news avoidance behavior, serving as a conceptual framework.

The Act of News Avoidance

News avoidance is understood by the expert panel as mostly conscious behavior, as, according to them, everyone is aware news is out there and therefore avoiding it is a conscious choice. Furthermore, news avoidance implies active behavior since *avoidance* and the verb *avoiding* imply agency. However, they agreed that news-avoiding behavior knows varying levels of the agency. For example, some people may have more rigorous strategies to avoid news and change their news consumption routines more drastically,

Table 2. News avoider types. Motivations and manifestations.

	Manifestation Behavior	Avoided news	Motivation
1. Negative Attitude			
1.1 The sensitives	For their own (mental) well-being, they actively avoid the news. However, they are up to date about events in their direct environment (local news) and very engaged with their communities. Their social circle keeps them updated. Active	Medium- and content-related	News affects their mental state or well-being negatively. News is discouraging and leads to a feeling of low efficacy. Personal motivations
1.2 The low-trusters	Because of all the information available (including misinformation), they do not know what to believe anymore, so they actively avoid the news. They seek refuge in alternative, foreign or social media, where their point of view or concerns are shared. Active	Medium-related	News media are untrustworthy and advocate their own political and economic agenda. News is disappointing and does not represent their opinion or point of view and pay attention to other things than those they consider important. Personal motivations
2. Other interests			
2.1 The disinterested	They avoid news more passively and replace it with entertainment or social media (e.g., YouTube). They are, however, up to date about things that interest them (celebrities for example). Content-selection algorithms they rely on might lead them to encounter little news online. Passive	Medium-related	Not interested in politics or current affairs. News is unnecessary and will find them when it is important. Personal preferences and structural reasons
2.2 The niche dudes and galls	They skip and avoid content that does not match their interests. They consume specific niche content, for example, the sports edition of the newspaper, (trade) magazines, or news articles concerning their hobby. Not passive, not active	Content-related	Not interested in news generally but have a specific niche interest or hobby (e.g., sports, gaming or gastronomy). Personal preferences
2.3 The mindful naturalist	They avoid mainstream news. However, they inform themselves on matters they find relevant through magazines, books, podcasts or documentaries. Active	Medium-related	Not interested in "trivial" news, and the 24/7 news cycle. Care about bigger issues (e.g., mindfulness, nature). Personal preferences
3. Not concerned with news			
3.1 The low-key avoiders	They do not avoid news actively. Currently, they just have more important things to do than following the news. They are not completely in the dark about what is happening in the world thanks to, for example, social media or their social circle. And might pick up news consumption later in life. Passive	All news	No time for news. Too busy with jobs, family, or other matters. Do not get around to it. Information and notification overload. Structural reasons
3.2 The hedonists	They do not avoid news actively but do not even consider consumption of the news on offer. It is simply not on their mind. They spend their time having fun and getting the most out of life. Passive	All news	Not concerned with societal issues, but with their own and peers' lives. They do not see the point of voting or political participation because they do not think it will have an impact or an effect. Structural reasons
3.3 The media-illiterates	News consumption is not part of their daily life. They do not know where to look for it or how to make it part of their routine, leading them to avoid it. Passive	All news	Never socialized into consuming news by their parents or school. Also, news might be too difficult to follow for some. Structural reasons

while for others it is more habituated behavior. The results also show that news-avoidance behavior can fluctuate over time. When, for example, someone is occupied with work, children, or other activities, it might be that this person is avoiding news during a certain timespan while in a later phase picks up original news habits, or that news is avoided at specific moments in daily life, such as weekends or mornings. Also, when a topic receives a lot of news attention, for example, the elections or a crisis, people can be temporarily overloaded—leading to active news avoidance during a certain period.

In sum, while the literature on news avoidance does not mention these terms explicitly, the experts in this study articulated news avoidance as behavior that can be manifested in a more active manner, which is more temporal in nature and a consequence of news affecting the person at that moment (e.g., due to individual motivations and personal preferences), or more passive manner, which is more long-term habituated behavior, occurring for more structural and involuntary reasons.

Which News is Avoided?

The question remains what kind of news is avoided. Mostly the experts referred to avoidance of mainstream or established news media, because of growing negative attitudes towards it in The Netherlands. However, as the types of news avoiders will show, it is the motivation that mostly determines what kind of news is avoided. This can be content (topic and form) related avoidance, medium-related (brand or technology/platform) avoidance, or the avoiding of all sorts of news together. For example, someone who finds news untrustworthy will avoid mainstream media and may turn to alternative sources (medium-related), while someone who finds news too negative will avoid hard news and may consume soft news instead (content-related). Moreover, following the literature, there was a consensus that news avoidance does not necessarily leave people uninformed (Edgerly 2017) and that new or other, information sources can gratify the information needs that traditional media cannot (Dimmick, Chen, and Li 2004; Lee 2013).

Causes and Motivations for News Avoidance

In line with the literature, we find both personal motivations or preferences and structural reasons to impact avoidance. Personal motivations can either stem from negative attitudes toward the news or from other (media) preferences than news. Most mentioned regarding negative attitudes toward news, is that news, for example, is considered too much (news overload) or too negative and therefore influences people's mental state negatively or is discouraging and leaves people feeling unable to change things for the better (inefficacy). Furthermore, news can be experienced as untrustworthy, or news does not represent someone's (cultural) background, opinion, or interest (correctly) (e.g., media do not show a representative reflection of society, or reflect mostly polarized opinions, causing the middle group to not feel represented). All these personal motivations would lead toward a more active form of avoidance. When it comes to other preferences than news, experts state that people seem more interested in other media than they are in politics and current affairs, and therefore replace their news-media consumption with entertainment or niche media about specific topics. Over a longer period, this avoidance could lead towards a more passive, structural avoidance. Last, structural

reasons, such as lacking time due to a busy life, lacking the ability to consume news (e.g., due to not being socialized in news consumption or (media-)illiteracy or lacking the resources), or contextual factors could trigger news avoidance. Finally, when looking at certain predictors, such as socio-demographics, it became clear that the different types of news avoidance—in any capacity or form—may occur in all demographic or societal groups. Although some types might be overrepresented in specific groups in society and evidence is found certain socio-demographic and contextual characteristics can predict certain forms of news avoidance and non-news use, our study suggests that *the news avoider* does not exist. This means that when we study news avoidance and its consequences, we must distinguish between motivation and manifestation, instead of tarring all news avoidance with the same brush. Furthermore, it should be considered volatile behavior.

Conceptual Types of News Avoidance: Motivations and Manifestations

Based on the experts' insights, we were able to identify eight different types of news avoiders.² In Table 2 the types and their motivations and manifestations are explicated. The eight types are divided into three categories of news avoidance: (1) people who avoid the news because of negative attitudes towards news, (2) people who avoid the news because of other preferences and (3) people who are not concerned with the news.

Types with negative attitudes toward the news include “the sensitives” and “the low trusters”. The sensitives experience negative effects of news on their emotional state and well-being, are overwhelmed and feel unable to change things for the better. The low trusters are disappointed by the news media and find media untrustworthy because, according to them, the media advocate a biased political or economic agenda or do not (correctly) represent their opinion or background.

Types with other interests than news include “the disinterested”, “the niche dudes and galls” and “the mindful naturalist”. The disinterested simply pay no attention to current or political affairs, spend their time on other media and think important news will find them. The niche dudes and galls have very specific interests or hobbies, for example, sports, gaming, or gastronomy, and are not captivated by general news. Mindful naturalists are concerned with the bigger issues in life, e.g., self-development and -care and the balance between nature and people, and do not want to be distracted or bothered by current-affairs information.

The types who are not concerned with news at all are “the low-key avoiders”, “the hedonists” and “the media-illiterates”. The low-key avoiders are too busy (with work, children, or other matters) to follow the news or do not get around to it. The hedonists are mainly concerned with their own lives and peers instead of societal issues, and do not see the point of political engagement. Lastly, the media illiterates never are socialized in consuming news, therefore news consumption is not part of their daily life or news might be too difficult to follow.

These eight types show, first, that the manifestations (avoidance behavior and type of news avoided) are consequences of certain motivations, and second, that these forms of news avoidance are not fixed, but over-time people can change from one type to the other.

Conclusion and Discussion

News avoidance raises new questions regarding the ideal of an informed citizenry, which entails citizens making informed political decisions, and contributing to and participating in a (deliberative or participatory) democratic society (Strömbäck 2015), which might be hampered by avoiding the news. Over the past decade, an upsurge of valuable research has been conducted on news avoidance. However, the complex media environment asks for a more nuanced and holistic framework, suitable to the diversity of contemporary society and media-uses.

To understand a relatively new social phenomenon it is necessary to involve multiple, interdisciplinary perspectives, outside the existing frames. This requires innovative methods, such as the Delphi method. To advance research and empirical studies on news avoidance, this study aims to provide a broad approach to the concept by focusing on expertise from journalism experts on motivations for and manifestations of news avoidance. In other words, what types of news avoidance can be distinguished? This Delphi study advances academic knowledge with journalistic expertise to provide a clearer picture of news-avoiding behavior.

The results show that different causes lead to different manifestations of news avoidance and, adding to the literature, that there is more variation within news avoidance than previously considered. We conclude that news avoidance is changeable, conscious behavior, exhibited in active or passive manners, driven by different individual motivations or structural reasons, independent from the actual amount of news exposure. The distinction between individual motivations and structural factors is important for explaining different types of news-avoiding behavior (Strömbäck 2015).

As in the literature on *information* avoidance, we can make a distinction between active and passive avoidance (Narayan, Case, and Edwards 2011). Passive information avoidance is habituated long-term behavior, which is more structural in nature and involuntary. Active information avoidance is short-term behavior exhibited when a person avoids specific information that affects them. The information activates affective mechanisms in such a manner that the only way they can manage it is by consciously avoiding it (Narayan, Case, and Edwards 2011). Meaning that news-avoiding behavior may manifest itself more actively when members of the public temporarily avoid the news because it affects them. Or news-avoiding behavior may manifest itself as more passive and habituated behavior, occurring for more structural and involuntary reasons, and maybe long-term (Narayan, Case, and Edwards 2011).

Concerning what kind of news is avoided, an issue particularly challenging in the hybrid media landscape, news avoidance can be content- or media-related, or both. However, replacement is often sought in other information sources, such as interpersonal communication, infotainment, social media, or other news-like media. This might suggest that news avoiders are not necessarily uninformed but create their information pathways in the wilderness of our digital information society.

Moreover, this paper suggests a new way of looking at news avoidance, diverging from earlier expressed disdain towards the phenomenon. Often it is seen in the light of being uninformed, and therefore unable to contribute to a democratic society. The news-avoidance types show that news avoidance is not per se normatively negative behavior, since legitimate reasons to avoid the news exist, and it might even be a healthy thing to do (De

Bruin et al. 2021). The consequences, and the solutions for that matter, of news avoidance, will most likely depend on the type of news avoidance (i.e., the motivations and manifestations of the behavior), and so we need to differentiate between these in further research on the impact of news avoidance. This asks for more audience-centric, non-news-centric and individual-centric approaches (see also Swart et al. 2022).

The insights also offer perspectives for news organizations to cope with fragmented and averting audiences. Firstly, it demonstrates that the variety of reasons and diverse manifestations do not call for a one-size-fits-all solution. It also shows that not all news avoidance is problematic. Therefore, this firstly requires news organizations to connect with their audiences themselves to understand who they are and what their information needs are. As the media environment has changed, so has the public. The groups that express negative attitudes or feelings towards the news, due to emotional distress, issue fatigue, feeling overwhelmed by the amount of news to navigate in, or feelings of distrust (The sensitives and low-trusters), for example, may still need news, but not for the current offer of news. They may require less news, but with more context, accountability and hope. It is of utmost importance, in this information society, that news organizations listen to and reconnect with their audience, to investigate what information is valuable and relevant to the lived experiences of the public (Costera Meijer 2020; Swart et al. 2022). More importantly, news organizations must reflect on whether they are accessible and inclusive for all audiences. As the public becomes more fragmented, certain (marginalized) groups may become overlooked. As Edgerly and Thorson (2023) describe, news organizations often have a certain view of their audience—also known as the “imagined audience” to whom journalists believe they are communicating (Nelson 2021)—which does not include the characteristics of certain (marginalized) groups that tend to avoid the news more often. Therefore, while audiences are avoiding news media, news organizations may also (unknowingly) avoid certain audiences. For instance, the lack of relevance and recognition of the journalistic offer may cause people to turn away (Costera Meijer 2010; Edgerly 2024). Stimulated by algorithmic content selection this may cause that groups who feel “news is not for them” will not encounter news at all at some point.

Consequently, not only do news organizations have to innovate to retain attention and legitimacy from the audience but there also lies a challenge for government, organizations and education. While many other online sources are competing for the public’s attention adding to the uncertainty about the credibility of information, it is even more important that (especially younger) citizens become aware, equipped and media literate to be able to navigate through the high-choice digital media landscape.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. While a wide variety of experts from the journalism field provided us with a wide range of perspectives, the results are based on merely these experts’ responses, meaning the conceptualization is based on their judgment instead of the audience’s and maybe to some degree incongruent with their understanding of news avoidance. Moreover, it is worth considering how the involvement of journalism academics may have influenced the outcomes of the Delphi method. Their insights could have served as a lens through which journalism professionals approached the discussion, potentially shaping the direction of their thinking beyond their practical experiences alone. Also, the identified types have not been empirically studied and are not set in stone. However, they do provide a framework for further empirical studies

on news avoidance. In further research, these types can be tested and altered through audience research. In follow-up studies, the understanding of news avoidance could be expanded by looking at, for instance, what behavior looks like in daily life, what alternative sources of news are used, at what moments news is avoided (more often) and when this does (not) has serious consequences, and what the effect of news avoidance is on well-being, (political or societal) knowledge or civic engagement. A final limitation is that this study is conducted in a single country in a Western context. News avoidance in a high-choice media landscape, in a democracy with a relatively independent press and relatively little uncertainty, might mean something quite different than news avoidance in a radically different setting.

With this research, we aimed to provide a relevant framework for further empirical research on news avoidance and stimulate novel perspectives for news organizations on how to reach and engage averting audiences. News media always played a significant role in society in informing and engaging citizens, and they still do. However, research on news avoidance in the digitalized world is important to question normative notions of news consumption, citizens' engagement and knowledge and the changing role of news media. Understanding what drives people to tune out and how they *do* inform themselves might offer a novel look at the use of news and might help understand how journalism could respond to such changes.

Notes

1. Since the third round was not anonymous and required at least two hours of the experts' time, we sent a separate invitation for participating in this round. The experts could reply whether they were interested in participating in this round or not.
2. It should be mentioned these concept types are not empirically tested. However, while the conceptualization is, of course, an oversimplification of the real world, it does provide a deeper and more holistic understanding of news avoiding behavior and serves as input for further empirical studies.

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