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Uninterested, disenchanted, or overwhelmed? An analysis of motives behind intentional and unintentional news avoidance

<https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2021-0084>

Abstract: In the light of a vast political information ‘buffet’, so-called news-avoiders stay away from the news for indefinite periods of time. Recent research suggests that news avoidance can be intentional or unintentional. However, research has mostly focused on one form of news avoidance or has not differentiated at all. Based on survey data, this study (a) identifies and compares motivations for intentional and unintentional avoidance and (b) investigates drivers of different news avoidance motives. Findings suggest that, overall, avoidance is rooted in the preference for other pastimes, with intentional avoiders also being tired of news and seeing it as too negative, biased, and unreliable. Further, different motives are driven by specific characteristics: Political knowledge and internal efficacy relate to ‘cognitive’ motives, empathy, and being negativity-prone to ‘emotional’ motives, while external efficacy relates to ‘political’ motives.

Keywords: news avoidance, intentionality, motivation, political information

1 Introduction

Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, or climate change; news is abundant and everywhere. In this high-choice media environment, some people turn to news avoidance. Studies show an increase in situational avoidance throughout the Covid-19 pandemic (Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek, 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021), and a growing number of people identified as news-avoiders, that is, people who show “low news consumption over a continuous period of time” (Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020, p. 463, emphasis removed; Elvestad, Blekesaune, and Aalberg, 2014; Gorski and Thomas, 2021). While some studies show

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positive consequences of news avoidance for the individual (Woodstock, 2014), other researchers point to negative consequences of long-term news avoidance on the societal and political level: News avoidance may increase the knowledge gap between viewers and avoiders (Prior, 2007); disengaged citizens are vulnerable to populist claims (Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck, 2016), more likely to stay away from voting booths (Blekesaune, Elvestad, and Aalberg, 2012), or inclined to make uninformed choices, such as choosing a party that does not truly represent their interests (Heath, Andersen, and Sinnott, 2003). In light of this, it is most worrying that prior studies show that different segments of the public have varying chances to avoid the news long-term (e.g., Blekesaune et al., 2012; Edgerly, 2021; Toff and Palmer, 2019).

In their theoretical work on news avoidance, Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) suggest that for a deeper understanding it is necessary to take a closer look at the intentionality behind long-term news avoidance. They suggest that intentional avoidance is based on a dislike for the news, whereas unintentional avoiders miss it because of a relative preference for other content. While researchers have identified structural reasons for why some people do not use the news (Thorson, Cotter, Medeiros, and Pak, 2021; Toff and Kalogeropoulos, 2020) as well as personal motivations (Palmer and Toff, 2020), studies often focus on one type of avoidance or do not consider the suggested difference regarding intent (but see Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2021; Villi et al., 2021). With this study, I address this gap and analyze the motivations of people intentionally and unintentionally avoiding the news over a sustained time period.

Connected to this is the question why motivational differences among avoiders appear; what leads people to specific motivations? The Limited Capacity Model of Message Processing (LCM), for example, indicates that differences in the allocation of cognitive resources and emotional responses toward stimuli may impact message processing (Lang, 2009), and may, through learning, also impact media choice.

With this study, I aim to (a) identify differences in motivation between intentional and unintentional avoiders and (b) analyze the impact of individual characteristics as predictors of certain motivations of avoidance. Hereby, I provide important insights for the conceptual understanding of news avoidance.

Motives behind news avoidance

Prior literature has identified a broad range of motives for news avoidance. First, the cognitive load of news impacts news use behavior. Song, Jung, and Kim (2017) find that the high-choice environment can lead to perceived news overload (“I’m

overwhelmed by news") (see also Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, and Nielsen, 2020; Ji, Ha, and Sypher, 2014), which in turn can result in a lack of understanding ("I don't often understand what is said on the news") or news fatigue ("I'm tired of news"). In a similar line, some people say that their social contacts inform them about important news ("Someone else informs me anyway"), while few people indicate that they do not decide themselves what they consume ("Someone else decides what I end up watching or reading") (Palmer and Toff, 2020; Schröder and Blach-Ørsten, 2016). In both cases, the cognitive load is reduced as responsibility is shifted to someone else. While news overload can also be associated with emotional burden, the main aspect connecting these motives is their relation to a (perceived) cognitive burden of news that can be lifted by avoiding the news.

At the intersection of cognitive and emotional motives lies the disengagement with certain news topics ("I want to avoid certain topics") and a resulting avoidance, or as Metag and Arlt (2016) put it, the "cognitive and emotional resistance of recipients to a topic, so that they 'do not want to see or hear anything more of it'" (p. 542; translated from German). Further studies tap into the emotional aspects of news avoidance, indicating that disengagement with news is a way to feel less emotionally strained. In Schröder and Blach-Ørsten's (2016) study, news-avoiders frequently agreed that they avoided the news because news induces uncomfortable feelings ("News depresses me", "News makes me angry"). In qualitative interviews with intentional avoiders, Woodstock (2014) also identified the emotion-inducing function of news and its negativity as reasons for avoidance ("News is too negative"). Respondents reported that avoidance was a form of "self-preservation". They preferred to avoid anger, anxiousness, or disturbance (Kalogeropoulos, 2017; Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen, 2020; Palmer and Toff, 2020).

Some studies identify motives that are connected to political attitudes. Woodstock (2014) identified criticism of the news as a reason for avoidance; specifically, avoiders pointed to a lack of neutrality in reporting and the misrepresentation of information compared to how they view something ("News doesn't represent my opinions", "News is biased"). Similarly, not feeling like one could rely on the truthfulness of news was one of the most important reasons for intentional avoiders in Kalogeropoulos' (2017) study ("I can't rely on news to be true"). More recently, Kalogeropoulos et al. (2020) and Fletcher et al. (2020) showed that avoiders of Covid-19 news were motivated by their distrust of the news.

Other motives are more closely connected to preferences and the way people arrange their time. Schröder and Blach-Ørsten (2016) found that respondents frequently agreed that "There is usually something more interesting to do". This is in line with some people preferring entertaining content over news (Prior, 2005, 2007). Others indicated that they lacked the time to follow the news ("I'm too

busy”) or did not see it as relevant (“News isn’t relevant to me or my life”) (Palmer and Toff, 2020; Schrøder and Blach-Ørsten, 2016; Toff and Palmer, 2019).

Lastly, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) expected respondents to be able to identify their own media use motivations: “[...] people are sufficiently self-aware to be able to report their interests and motives in particular cases or at least to recognize them when confronted with them in an intelligible and familiar verbal formulation” (p. 511). A similar recognition of motives can be expected for avoidance, as prior studies have shown. Nonetheless, it should be considered that respondents have no clear remembrance of their original motive for this behavior. This makes “I’ve always done it like this” a preferable answer to a “post hoc rationalization for the researcher” (Diddi and LaRose, 2006, p. 195).

Some of these studies focus solely on intentional avoidance, others do not differentiate based on intentionality. These different approaches play their part in exacerbating the comparison of the aforementioned findings (for a discussion of these different definitions, see Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020). To summarize, first, prior research on news avoidance has identified several motives; however, it is necessary to include this range of motives in one single study to determine their relevance for different forms of news avoidance. Second, as indicated throughout the research review, some motives show commonalities: There are motives that are closely connected to cognitive or emotional burden, political criticism, how people spend their time, and habit (see Table 1). This systematization captures main themes between specific motives which are used as guides throughout the paper. However, it does not imply that motives cannot be connected to other aspects as well. To test whether this systematization can be utilized for further analysis, I will apply a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

RQ1: Which motives are indicated by intentional and unintentional news-avoiders?

RQ2: Can the systematization of motives for news avoidance be empirically underpinned?

Predictors for news avoidance motives

After identifying relevant motives for intentional and unintentional news avoidance and exploring commonalities between motives, the question ensues about the roots of such motives or, put differently: Are there specific characteristics that lead individuals to their reasoning of why they avoid the news? The LCM indicates two broad categories: cognitive and emotional responses to media stimuli (Lang, 2009). Furthermore, prior research has identified different political characteristics as relevant for news selection behavior; thus, predictors of news avoidance motivations will be discussed here in terms of these three categories.

Table 1: List of motives, classified by motive focus.

Cognitive	I feel overwhelmed by news. ^{1a} I often don't understand what is said on the news. ¹ I'm tired of news. ¹ Someone else decides what I end up watching or reading. ² Someone else informs me anyway. ² I want to avoid certain topics. ³
Emotional	I want to avoid certain topics. ³ News depresses me. ² News makes me angry. ² News is too negative. ⁴
Political	News is biased. ⁴ News doesn't represent my opinions. ⁴ I can't rely on news to be true. ⁵
Time allocation	There is usually something more interesting to do. ² I'm too busy. ² News isn't relevant to me/my life. ²
Habit	I've always done it like this. ⁶

Note. Variables are either directly taken from the following sources, slightly changed, or derived from the findings. ¹Song et al. (2017), ²Schrøder and Blach-Ørsten (2016), ³Metag and Arlt (2016), ⁴Woodstock (2014), ⁵Kalogeropoulos (2017), ⁶Diddi and LaRose (2006).

^aPlease note that the English translation carries an emotional loading which is not present in the original German wording.

Cognition

As the LCM states, humans' information processing capacity is finite; therefore, the availability of cognitive resources impacts message processing. Whether cognitive resources can be allocated depends on individual differences. These differences are, among others, expertise or familiarity within a field (Lang, 2009). *Education* can equip recipients with the ability to put (news) content into context, making it easier to process and, as news often focuses on political information, expertise can also be understood as *political knowledge*. This indicates that people with low education or little political knowledge could have greater difficulties understanding news content than their more highly educated and more knowledgeable counterparts. In addition to education and political knowledge, perceptions of one's own political ability (*internal efficacy*) can impact news use behavior, as suggested by Palmer and Toff (2020), and could work similarly to education and knowledge. Although these relations seem theoretically plausible, empirical evidence is missing. Hence, I refrain from formulating hypotheses and instead ask whether people with low educational and political knowledge and internal efficacy levels display motives

connected to cognitive ability (see Table 1) for avoidance more strongly than other groups of the sample. The research question builds upon the results of RQ2, that is, the empirical test of common themes in the motives (motive groups).

RQ3: Does the level of (a) education, (b) political knowledge, and (c) internal efficacy impact the probability to name motives related to cognition for news avoidance?

Emotion

The LCM indicates that the cognitive and motivational systems are interrelated (Lang, 2009). The motivational system is activated by either positive (appetitive system) or negative (aversive system) stimuli. Individual characteristics decide whether a person has an inclination for the so-called “positivity offset”, that is, the tendency to show a greater activation of the appetitive system when confronted with media stimuli and/or leaning to a “negativity bias”, such as a tendency to activate the aversive system (Lang, 2009).

News content tends to display negative information, such as natural disasters and their devastating effects on communities, as a means to inform and warn its viewers (for an overview of negativity in news, see Lengauer, Esser, and Berganza, 2011). In line with the proposed positivity offset or negativity bias, on the one hand, some studies suggest a “request” for negativity in news among specific groups (Trussler and Soroka, 2014). On the other hand, some recipients feel upset or angry when watching what is going on in the world, or, as Palmer and Toff (2020) put it, they see news as an “emotionally draining chore” (p. 1642). MacKuen, Marcus, Neumann, and Miller (2010) infer that “personality does condition our individuals’ emotional responses to the news” (p. 7). Here, one’s *negativity proneness*¹ stands out, that is, how strongly one reacts when confronted with negative content (Sharma, 2013). People with a tendency to strongly react to negative content are expected to avoid the news because its negative content might induce strong negative feelings. Similarly, *empathy* describes the propensity to understand and share another person’s feelings (Davis, 1980). This makes highly empathetic individuals more vulnerable to negative news content, especially when the impacts on real people are implicated or displayed. In contrast, the *need for affect* is the “motivation to approach or avoid emotion-inducing situ-

¹ The term negativity proneness refers to the personality trait neuroticism. However, since the term neuroticism is understood in very different ways and is sometimes negatively charged, I use the term negativity proneness instead.

ations" (Maio and Esses, 2001, p. 583), making those with high values of need for affect less likely to avoid news because of its bias for negative content.

To summarize, each of these three variables is connected to negativity and expected to impact the probability to indicate news avoidance motives related to individuals' emotional capability (see Table 1). Again, the research question builds upon the results of RQ2.

RQ4: Do the levels of (a) negativity proneness, (b) empathy, and (c) need for affect impact the probability to name motives related to emotion for news avoidance?

Political motivation

News usage has been linked to several political variables. Research indicates that, among others, ideology, party identification, and efficacy can (de)motivate exposure (Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, and Ardévol-Abreu, 2017; Hollander, 2008; Skovsgaard, Shehata, and Strömbäck, 2016). Different *political orientations* have been found to impact the perception of biased media and media trust. Some studies show strong conservatives and right-wing oriented citizens leaning toward mistrust (Lee, 2005; Livio and Cohen, 2016; Schultz, Jackob, Ziegele, Quiring, and Schemer, 2017; but see Arlt, 2018 for no connection between a right-wing political orientation and media trust), thinking that they cannot rely on the truthfulness of news (Kalogeropoulos, 2017) or seeing news as unfair (Fletcher, 2021). Others find similarities in hostile media perceptions and their effects between conservatives and liberals (Kaye and Johnson, 2016; Perryman, 2019). The question ensues whether political orientation (left or right of the political spectrum) also yields an influence on reasons for news avoidance, especially such related to political aspects. Building upon the results from RQ2, I ask:

RQ5: Does political orientation impact the probability to name political motives for news avoidance?

Also, perceptions of the responsiveness of the political system (*external efficacy*) might impact *why* people avoid the news. In qualitative interviews, Palmer and Toff (2020) reported that the idea of being unable to induce change in the political system was a common theme among news-avoiders (i. e., low external efficacy was frequently conveyed). Thus, it seems plausible that external efficacy, similar to political orientation, impacts the probability of agreeing to motives related to political aspects.

RQ6: Does external efficacy impact the probability to name political motives for news avoidance?

2 Method

Defining news avoidance

As news avoidance has been defined differently throughout the literature, I want to first describe how (intentional) news avoidance was defined and operationalized before providing detailed information on the data. While literature on digital disconnecting points toward occasional news avoidance as part of a regular media diet (e. g., Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021), in this study the focus lies on citizens that indicate to have not, or infrequently, used news in the long term. For the purpose of this study, news-avoiders were identified by an absolute cut-off. Respondents who indicated never using news or once a week were classified as news-avoiders, everyone else was classified as news users. This approach and cut-off point were chosen in line with prior research on habitual news-avoiders (see Shehata, 2016 for a similar approach; see Edgerly, 2021 for a similar cut-off).

Similar to general news avoidance, intentional news avoidance can be a strategy in any media diet. In this study, however, the focus lies on people for whom intentional avoidance is more than an occasional behavior and instead is a decisive part of their news-related behavior. The intentionality of avoidance was, for that purpose, measured using two questions. Respondents were asked whether (yes/no) and how frequently (on a scale of 1 to 5) they had actively avoided the news in the last four weeks. Previously identified news-avoiders who answered 3 “sometimes”, 4 “rather frequently”, or 5 “frequently” were then classified as intentional avoiders (see Kalogeropoulos, 2017 for a similar approach).

Data

This study is based on survey data collected in April and May 2019 in Germany. Respondents were both news-avoiders and users. Since previous studies pointed to a low number of news-avoiders in the general population (e. g., Blekesaune et al., 2012; Karlsen, Beyer, and Steen-Johnsen, 2020), recruitment focused on people with low news usage. Respondents were recruited via the market research institute *respondi*. Pre-sampling based on news use was not possible; therefore, education and age were used as proxies to target potential avoiders (see Blekesaune et al., 2012 for the connection between age and education with news avoidance). A subset of *respondi* panelists, especially people of lower age and education, were invited to take part in the study (opt-in). Thus, the sample is not representative of the wider public. The respondents filled in an online ques-

tionnaire. *respondi* incentivizes participation by rewarding points for completed questionnaires, which can either be converted into money or gift cards (*respondi*, 2018).

The complete sample consisted of 416 respondents. This study focuses on the subsample of news-avoiders. There were 175 respondents identified as news-avoiders, among them 64 intentional avoiders. That means that 63.4% (N = 111) of news-avoiders are unintentional avoiders, and 36.6% (N = 64) are intentional news-avoiders (see Table 2). Among the news-avoiders, ages ranged from 19 to 75 ($M = 47.37$; $SD = 13.21$). Additionally, 126 avoiders (72%) were identified as having little or no education, 34 avoiders (19.4 %) indicated a medium education level, and 15 avoiders (8.6 %) had higher education.

Table 2: Distribution of news usage and distribution of intentional vs. unintentional avoidance among news-avoiders.

News usage	News avoidance			
	N	%		
Not at all	122	69.7	Intentional ^a	64
1 day	53	30.3	Unintentional	111
Total	175	100	Total	175
				100

Note. ^aIntentional avoiders: Have avoided the news actively sometimes/rather frequently/frequently in the last four weeks.

3 Measures²

News use and motives for news avoidance

Respondents were asked about their news use frequency in an average week; the scale ranged from never (0) to seven days (7). Participants were provided with a list of possible reasons for news avoidance (see Table 1 for sources) and were asked to indicate how strongly they (dis)agreed. The questionnaire then focused on intentional avoidance, asking respondents to indicate whether they had actively tried to stay away from the news and, if so, how frequent that behavior was (Kalogeropoulos, 2017).

² Question wordings can be found in Appendix A.

Cognitive variables

Respondents indicated their education level (Roßteutscher et al., 2019). Leaning on the distinction in the Hohenheim inventory of political knowledge, half of the political-knowledge questions asked about general political knowledge and the other half about current political knowledge (Trepte, Loy, Schmitt, and Otto, 2017); the six items were retrieved from Rattinger, Roßteutscher, Schmitt-Beck, and Weßels (2009, 2010) and Trepte et al. (2017), where necessary wording was adapted to current political circumstances (e. g., changes in personnel). Two variables measured internal efficacy (Beierlein, Kemper, Kovaleva, and Rammstedt, 2012).

Emotional variables

Being negativity-prone was measured using four items of the big five inventory (short version) tapping into neuroticism (Rammstedt and John, 2005). The five empathy items focused on empathy with people in the media. The questionnaire contained only the sub-dimension “mediatized sympathy with real people” (Happ and Pfetsch, 2015). A 10-item scale measured individuals’ need for affect (Appel, Gnambs, and Maio, 2012).

Political variables

One question assessed placement on a political left-right scale (Rattinger et al., 2010). External efficacy was measured by two items (Beierlein et al., 2012).

Demographics

Respondents were asked to indicate gender (female, male, diverse) and age in years.

4 Analysis and results

Motives for news avoidance

By looking at the mean values, relevant motives for news avoidance are identified (RQ1).³ To test if there is a significant difference between intentional and unintentional avoiders, the Mann-Whitney-U-Test was employed. The data show that intentional avoiders display higher mean values compared to unintentional avoiders on nearly all motives. Intentional avoiders argue that they are, foremost, tired of news. Interestingly, when looking at motives that avoiders do not identify with, we see a strong rejection of all other motives related to cognitive burden by both intentional and unintentional avoiders. Besides being tired of news there was no significant difference between the two groups.

Table 3: Mean values of agreement to reasons for news avoidance.

Motive	Mean (SD)	
	Intentional avoiders	Unintentional avoiders
I feel overwhelmed by news.	-0.39 (1.34)	-0.81 (1.12)
I often don't understand what is said on the news.	-0.81 (1.10)	-0.96 (1.05)
I'm tired of news.	0.94*** ^b (1.08)	0.11*** ^b (1.24)
Someone else decides what I end up watching or reading.	-1.36 (1.23)	-1.30 (1.18)
Someone else informs me anyway.	-0.17 (1.08)	-0.37 (1.20)
I want to avoid certain topics.	0.19** ^a (1.28)	-0.33** ^a (1.29)
News depresses me.	0.16 (1.28)	-0.23 (1.15)
News makes me angry.	0.34** ^a (1.20)	-0.16** ^a (1.21)
News is too negative.	0.63* ^a (1.19)	0.20* ^a (1.17)
News is biased.	0.70** ^a (1.18)	0.14** ^a (1.17)
News doesn't represent my opinions.	0.36* ^a (1.31)	-0.14* ^a (1.20)
I can't rely on news to be true.	0.73*** ^b (1.17)	0.07*** ^b (1.23)
There is usually something more interesting to do.	0.77 (1.23)	0.51 (1.11)
I'm too busy.	-0.27 (1.36)	0.01 (1.29)
News isn't relevant to me/my life.	0.38 (1.12)	0.11 (1.09)
I've always done it like this.	0.09 (1.37)	0.14 (1.20)
N	64	111

Note. Scale -2 to 2. Significant differences between the two groups intentional and unintentional avoiders (Mann-Whitney-U test): * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

^aCohens' $d < 0.5$ (small effect).

^bCohens' $d < 0.8$ (medium effect).

3 Appendix B provides the answers of news users as a comparison.

At the same time, intentional avoiders agree with motives related to emotion, especially because news is too negative and they agree with mainly political motives in that they say news is biased and lacks reliability. For these emotional and political motives, intentional and unintentional avoiders differ significantly. People avoiding the news intentionally and unintentionally agree that there is usually something more interesting to do. At the same time, both do not feel too busy to watch or read the news (see Table 3).

Motive dimensions

With the help of a CFA, I assessed the grouping of the avoidance motives (RQ2). The R package lavaan version 0.6–7 (see Rossel, 2012) was used. Only respondents identified as news-avoiders were included in the analysis. There were no missing data. As data were not normally distributed and, in some cases, not linear, “maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors and a Satorra-Bentler scaled test statistic” (MLM) (Rossel, 2020, p. 31) was calculated and the robust indices interpreted. Nonetheless, conclusions need to be made carefully. Habit was excluded from the CFA, as it includes just one variable and might distort model fit.

Topic disenchantment can have both, a cognitive and an emotional component (Metag and Arlt, 2016); thus, to identify with which group it is connected more closely, I compared two models. In the first model, “I want to avoid certain topics” was grouped with cognitive motives and in the second model, with emotional motives. The model fit indices (Table 4) indicated that the second model fits better, that is, topic disenchantment is closer related to emotional than to cognitive avoidance motives and was therefore classified as emotional motive for further analysis. Yet overall, the model fit was not satisfying, and there were some variables that did not load well (below .4); thus, it was necessary to exclude some items from the model. By considering the exclusion of items, I stepped away from confirmative onto explorative territory. Therefore, I first considered the theoretical reasons why a specific motive did not load as expected and, if it was reasonable, proceeded by deleting the items from the model one after another, starting with the lowest loading item. The variable “I’m tired of news” (standardized factor loading .228) might have been understood as “I’m sick of news” by respondents, thus, taking away the cognitive component. Both variables “someone else informs me anyway” and “someone else decides what I end up watching or reading” were supposed to offer cognitive relief by shifting responsibility away from oneself. However, they might be more related to situational circumstances and out of the power of the respondent, which means that the respondent does not control or reinforce the behavior of the other person but merely accepts it.

“I’m too busy” loaded low on the factor time allocation. The other two variables in this factor (“news isn’t relevant to me/my life” and “there is usually something more interesting to do”) were closer related with choice and interest in news than with opportunity to consume news, while it was the opposite case for the item “being too busy”. After deleting this variable, no low factor loadings remained (Table 4). The final model showed good model fit for each indicator. Based on the items in the final model, a mean score for each factor was created and used for further analysis.

Table 4: Confirmatory factor analysis of news avoidance motives.

	Robust CFI	Robust TLI	AIC	Robust RMSEA
Model 1 (cognitive)	0.779	0.724	7941.350	0.100
Model 2 (emotional)	0.795	0.744	7929.889	0.096
Model 3 (final)	1.000	1.021	5687.857	0.000
Model 3 (final)				
Factor	Label			Loading
Cognitive	I often don’t understand what is said on the news.			.633
	I feel overwhelmed by news.			.885
	I’m tired of news.			
	Someone else decides what I end up watching or reading.			
	Someone else informs me anyway.			
Emotional	News depresses me.			.682
	News makes me angry.			.680
	News is too negative.			.717
	I want to avoid certain topics.			.705
Political	News is biased.			.721
	I can’t rely on news to be true.			.667
	News doesn’t represent my opinions.			.608
Time allocation	There is usually something more interesting to do.			.602
	I’m too busy.			
	News isn’t relevant to me/my life.			.531
Habit	I’ve always done it like this.			—
	N			175

Note. In Model 1, “I want to avoid certain topics” is classified as a cognitive motive, in Model 2 it is classified as an emotional motive; all other assignments remain the same. CFI (Comparative Fit Index), TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index), AIC (Akaike), RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation), Loading (standardized factor loadings).

Cognition, emotion, and political motivation

To answer RQ3 through RQ6, multiple regression analyses are employed. Only news-avoiders are included in the analyses. First, RQ3 will be addressed, that is, the influence of education (RQ3a), political knowledge (RQ3b), and internal efficacy (RQ3c) on cognitive motives for news avoidance. The regression analyses show that education does not have a significant effect on the agreement to the cognitive relief factor, while political knowledge ($\beta = -.196$; $p = .009$) and internal efficacy ($\beta = -.257$; $p < .001$) both have a significant negative effect (see Table 5). This means that the lower the political knowledge or internal efficacy of a person, the higher the probability that they will avoid the news because they are motivated by cognitive relief.

Table 5: Multiple regression analysis predicting agreement to motive groups.

Cognitive ^a			
	β	SE	p
Political knowledge	-.196	.042	.009
Internal efficacy	-.257	.073	< .001
Adjusted R ²	.123		
Emotional			
	β	SE	p
Negativity proneness	.181	.079	.027
Empathy	.317	.077	< .001
Need for affect	.009	.128	.907
Adjusted R ²	.155		
Political ^b			
	β	SE	p
External efficacy	-.217	.164	.004
Adjusted R ²	.042		

Note. Only news-avoiders (N = 175).

^aExcluded variables: Education (dummies).

^bIndependent variables log transformed; Excluded variables: political orientation.

Next, I focus on the influence that negativity proneness (RQ4a), empathy (RQ4b), and the need for affect (RQ4c) might wield on emotional motives for avoidance. The analysis shows that the need for affect does not yield any influence on the agreement with emotional motives, but proneness to negativity ($\beta = .181$, $p = .027$)

and empathy ($\beta = .317, p < .001$) do. The higher people score on the empathy scale (i. e., the stronger they feel for people in the media) or the stronger they are prone to negativity, the higher is the probability that they will say that they avoid news for emotional reasons.

The data show that political orientation yields no influence on political motives for avoidance (RQ5). External efficacy, however, shows a negative impact on political motives ($\beta = -.217, p = .004$) (RQ6). This means that the stronger someone believes in the responsivity of the political system, the lower their probability of mistrusting and avoiding the news.⁴

5 Discussion

Normative democratic ideals often demand an informed public, to which continuous news avoidance stands in stark contrast. Recent research questions this ideal (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2018) and underlines that instead of expecting citizens to fulfill an unrealistic citizen ideal, research should identify ways to make (democratic) resources more accessible (Moe, 2020). A first step in this direction is understanding what leads people away from the news. Edgerly (2021) notes that “there is no single explanation for news avoidance, nor is there a single answer to curb it” (p. 14). Therefore, I add to the understanding of different reasons for news avoidance by (a) identifying and comparing motives of intentional and unintentional avoidance and (b) analyzing sources of specific avoidance motivations.

My analyses show that motives behind news avoidance vary based on the intentionality of the behavior. Unintentional avoidance is mainly a question of higher interest in other pastimes. Intentional avoidance is connected to a wider variety of motives: interest in other activities, being tired of news, seeing it as too negative, biased, and not reliable. This study, further, identifies a connection between political knowledge and internal efficacy with cognitive motives, a connection between negativity proneness and empathy with emotional motives, and a connection of external efficacy with political motives.

The results substantiate that news avoidance is a concept with different facets: Long-term news avoidance can be a consequence of other interests or an intentional choice based on criticism of the news (Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020). While the results are in line with Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020), it needs to be considered that people intentionally avoiding the news are more

⁴ Political orientation and external efficacy were log transformed because of heteroscedasticity.

aware of their motives. However, unintentional avoiders do not indicate that their behavior is based on what they have always done, which would have been an indication that they are not aware of their actual motives. The results underline the relevance of intent for future research on news avoidance, which is especially important when considering consequences: Marcinkowski and Došenović (2020) imply that the effects from incidental news use vary between unexpected and unwanted political information exposure, whereas reactance plays a greater role for the latter and reinforces the intent to avoid political information.

Further, my study underlines that there is no single way to make news more relevant to those usually avoiding it, however, there are several points of departure for news producers. First, as news avoidance is rooted in the preference for other pastimes, news producers could test different or new (online) formats. While Park (2017) shows that only some social media foster political knowledge when used as a news source, Galan, Osserman, Parker, and Taylor (2019) note that one problem of today's news environment is that there are too few news formats that are native to social media, whereby younger users want formats that allow for a seamless integration in their online media use and formats that integrate "fun" (p. 4) information without "dumbing down" (p. 43). Formats that can easily be consumed as part of a social media diet could also account for younger audiences relying strongly on their social network for information (Marchi, 2012), which might make keeping up-to-date appear less like a chore and more accessible than traditional news. Such formats could help people feel less tired of news and more willing to engage and learn about current affairs, which is in line with Edgerly (2021) noting that solutions should focus on "reducing the cognitive costs of navigating today's news environment" (p. 14).

Second, news being too negative was a relevant motive for avoidance, which is in line with prior research (Villi et al., 2021). News producers could supplement negative information with positive or constructive news stories. Such stories could make it easier to take part in news, especially for individuals who are negativity-prone and show high empathy levels. As McIntyre (2019) shows, discussing solutions to the problems depicted in news stories can positively affect the perception of said stories and lessen negative feelings. A more positive outlook through constructive news (Meier, 2018) could also prove valuable for news makers when considering that external and internal efficacy were drivers of political or cognitive motives, respectively. However, while too much negativity is a motive for news avoidance, negative news can boost reactions (Soroka and McAdams, 2015). There is also a mismatch between what people say they want from news and how they interact with it (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2014). Therefore, positive news or constructive journalism should be treated as an addition, not a replacement.

Some limitations must be discussed. This study focused on long-term news avoidance instead of occasional avoidance of otherwise (avid) news users. For this purpose, a cut-off point distinguished between news users and avoiders. While such an approach has frequently been employed in research on news avoidance (e.g., Elvestad et al., 2014; Shehata, 2016; Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata, 2013), Gorski and Thomas (2021) show that different operationalizations can impact results. News diets are complex (e.g., less time spent on news can be a sign of both, practiced news use or disinterest, according to Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2019), and it is unclear when infrequent news use may lead to negative consequences for the democratic process. As a result, cut-off points will always be somewhat arbitrary. Nonetheless, applying such a differentiation in this study is valuable as it allows for a better understanding of the reasons for a *continuously* low news consumption. It should also be noted that the categorization of motives approximates commonalities. The differences are not always clear-cut, and there can be overlaps between underlying themes, as indicated when exploring whether topic avoidance is more closely related to cognitive or emotional motives. To account for this, I have chosen a confirmatory and explorative approach towards the systematization. Nonetheless, results should be interpreted with caution.

Further, news-avoiders are hard to reach for studies (Toff and Palmer, 2019), which led to a smaller sample size and a non-representative sampling of participants for this study. Therefore, one must be careful not to over-generalize the findings. This is also advised when applying the results to other media systems. While the findings align with theoretical assumptions about news-avoiders, the study was a one-country study taking place in Germany. As Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020) have shown, country differences, specifically press freedom as well as political freedom and stability, can impact whether people avoid the news or not.

Although not free of limitations, this study has furthered the understanding of habitual news avoidance by considering the role of intentionality and (drivers of) motivations.

Acknowledgements: I thank Michaela Maier for her helpful comments on the manuscript.

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Appendix A: Question wording

The following question wordings are translated from German. The German questionnaire will be provided upon reasonable request to the author.

News use and motives for news avoidance

Frequency of news use: In an average week, on how many days do you follow the news? (0 “never” to 7 “seven days a week”).

Motives for news avoidance: Below you will find a number of reasons why people sometimes don't follow the news. Please indicate how strongly these reasons apply to you personally. Some of the statements sound similar, which is intentional. Nevertheless, please mark all applicable statements.

I feel overwhelmed by news; I often don't understand what is said on the news; I'm tired of news; Someone else decides what I end up watching or reading; Someone else informs me anyway; I want to avoid certain topics; News depresses me; News makes me angry; News is too negative; News is often biased; News doesn't represent my opinions; I can't rely on news to be true or accurate; There is usually something more interesting to do; I'm too busy; News isn't relevant to me and my life; I've always done it like this. (1 “do not agree at all” to 5 “totally agree”)

Intentional avoidance: Have you actively tried to avoid news in the last four weeks, that is, for example, changed the channel or switched off when a news program started? (yes/no)

How often would you say that has happened in the last four weeks? (1 “seldom” to 5 “frequently”).

Cognitive variables

Education: What is your highest educational qualification? (1 “no school degree”, 2 “Hauptschule, elementary school, or POS 8th/9th grade”, 3 “Realschule, Mittlere Reife, qualified secondary school certificate I or POS 10th grade”, 4 “Advanced technical college certificate”, 5 “High school diploma or POS 12th grade”, 6 “Still a student”)

Political knowledge: We would like to ask you some knowledge questions. Therefore, please answer them as well and as accurately as you can. If you do not know the answer, please select “don't know”.

a. In the federal election, the voter has two votes, a first and a second vote. Which is the more important vote that ultimately determines the strength of the parties in the Bundestag? (1 “First vote”, 2 “Second vote”, 3 “Both equally important”, 77 “I do not know”)

b. Who is currently Germany's foreign minister?

(1 “Andrea Nahles”, 2 “Hubertus Heil”, 3 “Heiko Maas”, 4 “Katrin Göring-Eckardt”, 77 “I do not know”)

c. What is meant by the term ‘Länderfinanzausgleich’?

(1 “The redistribution of financial resources between the German states”, 2 “A financial support for the new German states after reunification”, 3 “A measure for financial stability in the European Union”, 4 “A financial reparation for war damages”, 77 “I do not know”)

d. What is the name of the EU Commission President in office since 2014?
(1 “Martin Schulz”, 2 “Donald Tusk”, 3 “Manfred Weber”, 4 “Jean-Claude Juncker”, 77 “I do not know”)

e. To change the constitution requires what majority in the Bundestag and Bundesrat?
(1 “Absolute majority”, 2 “Simple majority”, 3 “Two-thirds majority”, 4 “Three-fourths majority”, 77 “I do not know”)

f. The Gaza conflict is mainly between ...
(1 “... Israel and Palestine”, 2 “... Syria and Egypt”, 3 “... Jordan and Palestine”, 4 “... Israel and Syria”, 77 “I do not know”)

Internal efficacy: You can agree more or less with the following statements. To what extent do you agree with each statement?

I can understand and appreciate important political issues well; I have the confidence to actively participate in a conversation about political issues. (1 “do not agree at all” to 5 “strongly agree”)

Emotional variables

Need for affect: To what extent do the following statements apply to you? Please answer spontaneously. There are no right or wrong answers.

Looking back, I realize that I tend to be afraid of my feelings; I believe that I need strong feelings on a regular basis; Feelings help people cope with their lives; I find strong feelings oppressive and therefore avoid them; I think it is important to get to the bottom of my feelings; I would prefer not to experience either the highs or lows of the emotional world; I don't know how to deal with my feelings, so I avoid them; It is important for me to be in tune with my feelings; It is important for me to know how others feel; Feelings are dangerous – they put me in situations I would rather avoid. (1 “do not agree at all” to 5 “strongly agree”)

Negativity proneness (neuroticism): To what extent do the following statements apply to you?

I get depressed, down easily; I am relaxed, do not get upset by stress; I worry a lot; I get nervous and insecure easily. (1 “do not agree at all” to 5 “strongly agree”)

Empathy: To what extent do these statements apply to you?

In television reports about bullying, I understand how bad the victims' lives must be; When I see a great injustice on TV or in the movies, I get really upset; Media reports about what is happening in the world really get to me; When I read about how unfairly some people are treated on the internet, I feel sorry for them; Documentaries about poor people make me sad. (1 “do not agree at all” to 5 “strongly agree”)

Political variables

Left-right placement: In politics, people often talk about “left” and “right”. Using a scale of 1 to 11, where would you classify yourself if 1 means “left” and 11 means “right”? (1 “left” to 11 “right”)

External efficacy: You can agree more or less with the following statements. To what extent do you agree with each statement?

Politicians care about what ordinary people think; Politicians make an effort to stay in close contact with the people. (1 “do not agree at all” to 5 “strongly agree”)

Demographics

Gender: Please indicate your gender. (male, female, diverse)

Age: How old are you? (years)

Appendix B: Motives of news users

Mean values of agreement to reasons for news avoidance among news users.

Motive	Mean	SD
I feel overwhelmed by news.	-1.09	1.04
I often don't understand what is said on the news.	-1.15	0.95
I'm tired of news.	-0.82	1.19
Someone else decides what I end up watching or reading.	-1.43	0.94
Someone else informs me anyway.	-1.00	1.03
I want to avoid certain topics.	-0.58	1.10
News depresses me.	-0.33	1.08
News makes me angry.	-0.33	1.10
News is too negative.	-0.38	1.06
News is biased.	-0.22	1.10
News doesn't represent my opinions.	-0.44	1.14
I can't rely on news to be true.	-0.25	1.15
There is usually something more interesting to do.	-0.33	1.16
I'm too busy.	-0.66	1.15
News isn't relevant to me/my life.	-0.83	1.12
I've always done it like this.	-0.33	1.21
N	241	

Note. Scale –2 to 2. News users are operationalized as respondents using news twice a week or more often.