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What Does It Take to Sustain a News Habit? The Role of Civic Duty Norms and a Connection to a "News Community" Among News Avoiders in the UK and Spain

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Why do some people maintain a news habit while others avoid news altogether? To explore that question, we put findings from an interview-based study of news avoiders in the UK and Spain into dialogue with past research on factors found to shape news consumption. We found that news avoiders saw news as having limited informational benefits and high costs in terms of time, emotional energy, and mental effort. They also did not see consuming news as a civic duty to be pursued despite the costs, nor did they have strong ties to communities that highly valued news consumption. This meant they had few social incentives to return to news habitually and that connections between distant-seeming topics in the news and immediate concerns were rarely reinforced. We conclude that group-level social factors play an understudied but important role in shaping news avoidance.

Keywords: journalism, audience research, news avoidance, news consumption, qualitative interviews, comparative research, political efficacy

The 2019 Reuters Digital News Report found that an average of 32% of audiences worldwide said they actively avoided news, numbers that have grown in recent years (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019). News avoidance may be justifiable for many reasons in many contexts—for example, when news media excludes or misrepresents issues or populations, when journalism is not independent of corporate and political influence, or as a coping strategy for overwhelmed audiences in an increasingly saturated media environment (see, for example, Laufer, 2014; Syvertsen, 2017). But to the extent that news consumption is

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linked to citizens' ability to make informed choices, an increase in news avoidance raises concerns about the long-term health of democratic institutions. Those concerns have inspired a growing number of mostly single-country studies focused on news avoidance (Edgerly, 2017; Toff & Nielsen, 2018; Woodstock, 2014). That research usually finds that news avoiders' main complaints about news—that news is too upsetting or untrustworthy, for example—are similar to those of news consumers. So why do some people persist in consuming news despite its perceived downsides, while others end up avoiding it?

No single study can fully answer that question. Just as media repertoires in general result from a variety of factors, including individual preferences, technological affordances, and social dynamics (Peters & Schrøder, 2018), so too is news avoidance likely shaped by a constellation of elements rather than any single cause (Edgerly, 2019). In this study, we aimed to shed light on some of the social contextual factors shaping news avoidance, which have been underexplored in past research (Peters & Schrøder, 2018). To do so, we took a comparative qualitative approach. We conducted in-depth interviews in the UK and Spain with news avoiders—here defined as people who consume little or no news, whether intentionally or unintentionally. We asked them about their habits and concerns in general, and specifically how they think and feel about news and navigate their daily lives without it. Using the constant comparative method central to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), we then reviewed existing research focused mainly on habitual news consumers to identify research questions we could apply to our findings on news avoiders.

Despite their different sociopolitical contexts and media systems, news avoiders in the two countries told surprisingly similar stories about their relationships to news. Elsewhere, we detail differences among news avoiders in the UK and Spain (Palmer & Toff, 2019), but in this article, we focus on those similarities. We found that, although most news avoiders in our study had grown up in homes where news was consumed, as adults, they felt that news consumption was far more costly than beneficial, especially in terms of time and emotional investments. Moreover, they lacked two, likely interrelated, motivations to consume news that have been found in past research to balance out the negative aspects for news consumers. These can be summarized as (1) an internalized norm that consuming news is an important civic duty, and (2) a sense of belonging to social groups that highly value news and expect their members to keep up to date with news, which we call a connection to a "news community." Combined, these factors provide social incentives to follow news, and they reinforce connections between distant-seeming current events and daily life.

Literature Review: Understanding What Shapes People's News Habits

Because our ultimate aim is to shed light on factors that contribute to news avoidance, in this section, we focus on three areas of research that have been found to play an important role in shaping news consumption. We review studies focusing on (a) how individuals view the costs and benefits of consuming news, (b) news use as a social practice, and (c) the relationship between news consumption and political efficacy.

Weighing the Costs and Benefits of News Consumption

How individuals perceive the relative merits of the media options available to them is one of several factors that shape their media diets or "repertoires" (Peters & Schrøder, 2018; Schrøder, 2015). Journalism research has often focused on the benefits that news provides to news consumers, especially through information "transmission," to borrow James W. Carey's (1975) terminology. Normative studies (Nielsen, 2017; Schudson, 2008), manuals for journalists (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007), and studies of journalists' values (Josephi, 2013) all highlight the importance of news as a transmitter of political information in particular. Indeed, for decades, scholars have found that news consumption correlates with higher rates of political knowledge and engagement (e.g., Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010), even when people are exposed to news only incidentally (Prior, 2007).

Studies of media choice likewise emphasize the informational value of news, but especially practical rather than political information strictly defined. Uses and gratifications studies find that people name "informational utility" as a key factor when choosing media (Hastall, 2009), and empirical studies using surveys and experiments corroborate that (Eveland, 2001; Knobloch-Westerwick, Carpentier, Blumhoff, & Nickel, 2005). Decades of qualitative audience research have also found that many people turn to news less for political content than for practical information (Coleman, Anthony, & Morrison, 2009), including movie times, recipes, weather reports, and other "tool[s] for daily living" (Berelson, 1949, p. 118).

A separate strand of audience research emphasizes noninformational benefits of news—what Carey (1975) calls "ritual" benefits. These include affective rewards of news, such as the comfort and coherence that many find in reliable routines or narrative forms (Bird & Dardenne, 2008; Costera Meijer, 2013; Silverstone, 1994), or the escapism offered by news as a form of entertainment (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991; Berelson, 1949; Coleman et al., 2009). Often combining elements of transmission and ritual, some scholars highlight the sense of community, connection, and social integration that news provides (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991; Bentley, 2001; Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007), whereas others argue that using and discussing news is a way that people reaffirm and convey their identity, whether as an expression of social standing (Berelson, 1949; Cramer & Toff, 2017), adulthood (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991), or national belonging (Madianou, 2006).

The costs of news consumption have not received as much scholarly attention as the presumed benefits, but here too some important themes recur. For example, scholars periodically debate how diligently we should expect citizens to follow news about civic affairs, given the time and effort required (Schudson, 1999; Zaller, 2003). And, in fact, one common self-reported explanation for why people avoid news is lack of time (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017; Schrøder & Blach-Orsten, 2016). Other studies highlight that selecting news comes with an opportunity cost of other media, especially entertainment (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Prior, 2007). While some of the ritual-oriented research discussed earlier depicts news as a soothing, reliable touchstone, other research finds that news can increase anxiety and worry (Johnston & Davey, 1997), especially when life circumstances feel overwhelming (Ytre-Arne, 2019). Indeed, many survey respondents worldwide who report occasionally avoiding news say they do so because they find it upsetting (Newman et al., 2019).

Fewer studies look specifically at how news consumers weigh the relative costs and benefits of news consumption. Research on "mood management" finds that people may be willing to suffer through

stressful news if they anticipate long-term affective benefits, such as the ability to converse with others about current affairs (Fahr & Böcking, 2009; Zillmann, 2000). The idea of weighing pros and cons of consuming news also arises in some studies of media choice and media repertoires. For example, Schrøder and Larsen (2010) argue that users choose media based on the perceived "worthwhileness" of their various media options, which implies a kind of cost–benefit analysis along several dimensions, including time, price, and normative constraints (Schrøder, 2015).

Meanwhile, studies that explore the ambivalence consumers often feel about news tend to find they are aware of costs, but they consume news anyway—less because of personal benefits, and more because they have internalized it as a civic value (Martin, 2008). For example, in Couldry and colleagues' (2007) study of "public connection," which they define as an "orientation to a space where, in principle, problems about shared resources are or should be resolved" (p. 7), some citizens feel the need to take a break from upsetting news; however, they feel guilty about doing so, presumably because they have internalized norms around the importance of news consumption. Similarly, a recent survey finds that 56% of Americans say news is stressful, and that many "feel conflicted between their desire to stay informed about the news and their view of the media as a source of stress" (American Psychological Association, 2017, para. 6).

Nearly all these studies explore the costs and benefits of news consumption from news consumers' point of view, but we know little of the costs and benefits as they are perceived by news avoiders. Do news avoiders perceive completely different costs and benefits from news consumers, or do they weigh the same costs and benefits differently? Our first research question is therefore:

RQ1: How do news avoiders perceive and weigh the benefits and costs of news consumption?

News Consumption as a Social Practice

Scholars have long emphasized that news consumption cannot be fully understood without taking into account social dynamics. News habits are shaped by socialization processes that include modeling of news use, discussion of news topics, and explicit emphasis on the value of news consumption in the home (Nathanson, 2015), via school curriculum (Maksl, Craft, Ashley, & Miller, 2017), and among peers (Edgerly & Thorson, 2016).

Over the life span, the social groups with whom individuals identify and interact—which scholars variously label social networks (Heikkilä, Kunelius, & Ahva, 2010), "figurations" (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017), and "communities of practice" (Robinson, 2014)—shape individuals' media repertoires in general and the value they ascribe to news in particular. For example, Couldry et al. (2007) find that social expectations play a key role in pressuring individuals to keep up with news. Robinson (2014) describes how, within specific communities of practice where news consumption is highly valued, knowledge about news can become a kind of currency within the group that is socially and professionally gratifying to members, thus reinforcing the habit. That currency may vary from community to community in ways that are inevitably bound up with class (Lindell, 2018; Lindell & Sartoretto, 2018). The importance of such community connections is also emphasized in studies of mass political behavior, although that research often pays more

attention to how information diffuses across networks than to how groups themselves shape behaviors (e.g., Druckman, Levendusky, & McLain, 2018; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995).

Communities off- and online influence not only whether individuals maintain a news habit, but also how they interpret and share news content (Bird, 2011; Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015; Martin, 2008; Morley, 1980; Swart, Peters, & Broersma, 2019); which news sources they consider worthwhile (Schrøder, 2015; Schrøder & Larsen, 2010); and their perceptions of news's relevance (Heikkilä et al., 2010; Martin, 2008). As Swart, Peters, and Broersma (2017) explain, matters that do not affect a person directly can still feel relevant to them if those topics are perceived as important to their social groups. Through shared rituals of news use in everyday life, news consumers also enact, rehearse, and reaffirm a sense of connection to a broader imagined community and, in so doing, reinforce public connection (Heikkilä et al., 2010).

The literature thus indicates that news consumption habits are profoundly shaped by social dynamics. The role that these social dynamics play (or do not play) in news avoiders' relationships to news has not yet been empirically explored. Perhaps news avoiders do not belong, and never have belonged, to communities in which news is highly valued. Perhaps news avoiders respond to social pressures to engage with news differently than news consumers do—or perhaps completely different social dynamics are relevant. Our second research question is therefore:

RQ2: What role do social dynamics, including early socialization and identification with different communities of news users, play in news avoiders' narratives about their relationship to news?

News Consumption and Political Efficacy

Many previous studies have described a link between news use and political efficacy, but that link has not been explored specifically among news avoiders. Internal political efficacy refers to a person's confidence in his or her ability to understand political matters and take political action, whereas external political efficacy concerns his or her belief that the political system will be responsive to those actions (Pingree, 2011). Qualitative studies of news audiences sometimes uncover attitudes about external political efficacy—usually skepticism or even despair about government responsiveness to citizen concerns (Couldry et al., 2007; Schrøder & Phillips, 2007). But internal efficacy is more often the focus of audience research. Many studies show a relationship between news consumption and higher levels of political knowledge, efficacy, and participation (e.g., Hayes & Lawless, 2017; Ksiazek et al., 2010).

However, research exploring whether news consumption itself or news media literacy interventions can increase internal efficacy has produced mixed results, with some scholars warning that such efforts can backfire, leading to cynicism or apathy (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2017; Tully & Vraga, 2018). Some recent studies of news avoidance further complicate assumptions about the relationship between political efficacy and news consumption. For example, regarding external efficacy, evidence suggests that avoiding news may actually help some people stay focused on issues they feel they can change (Woodstock, 2014). Regarding internal efficacy, other studies find that news avoiders may not feel uninformed because they rely on alternative sources, including social networks and other forms of "distributed discovery" online (Edgerly, 2017; Toff & Nielsen, 2018). These findings suggest a third research question:

RQ3: How does political efficacy figure into news avoiders' narratives about their relationship to news?

Methods and Data

Defining News Avoidance

Researchers have defined news avoidance in various ways, leading to estimates that vary from 18% (Edgerly, 2015) to half the American population (Ksiazek et al., 2010) when avoidance is defined as relatively low news consumption, and between 3% and 7% worldwide when it is defined as accessing news less often than "once a month" or "never" (Newman et al., 2017). In this study, we apply the latter definition. The term *news avoider* suggests an intentionality that does not necessarily apply to all the people we interviewed (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2019), but we use the term as a shorthand because alternatives (e.g., *extremely low news consumers*) are unwieldy. In 2018, the Reuters Institute found that 7.7% of UK survey respondents reported not consuming any news in the previous month, versus 2.9% in Spain (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2018).

Comparing the UK and Spain

The qualitative news avoidance studies cited earlier focus on single countries. A comparative study offers greater leverage for examining how contextual factors shape communication phenomena (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). We chose to compare the UK and Spain because they provide the optimal balance between similarity and difference for fruitful comparison (Barnhurst, 2000; Sartori, 1991). Although the countries have similar political systems, they have different political histories and media systems, factors that might lead to different types of people avoiding news for different reasons. At the time interviews were conducted (November 2016–March 2017 in the UK, and October 2017–February 2018 in Spain), both countries were in the midst of political crises, with the UK reeling from its Brexit vote (June 23, 2016) and Spain from its Catalonian independence referendum (held on October 1, 2017).

In other related work drawing on our interview data (Palmer & Toff, 2019), we explain in detail that the biggest difference we found between English and Spanish news avoiders concerned the dominant images that came to their minds when they talked about news. Those images were tied to features of the countries' respective media systems: In the UK, when asked to reflect on news, many participants referred to tabloids such as the *Sun, Mirror,* or *Daily Mail.* They cited those tabloids' emphasis on celebrity news and crime as a reason they avoided news. On the other hand, blatantly partisan reporting dominated most Spanish participants' default image of news. These different perceptions of the key characteristics of journalism consistently underlay Spanish and UK interviewees' narratives about news and interlaced their commentary. However, as we show next, in other ways, the Spanish and English narratives were strikingly similar, even down to the nearly identical phrasing they often used.

Recruitment and Interviewing

As is important for cross-national comparison, to the extent possible, we applied the same recruitment procedure and research design in both countries (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). We recruited working- and middle-class participants aged 18–49 years using a screener survey derived from the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report.[2] In both countries, recruitment was handled by the same market research firm. In the UK, recruitment was concentrated in Leeds, Manchester, and economically deprived areas near Oxford. In Spain, participants were recruited from the greater Madrid area. The final sample consisted of 43 news avoiders in England and 40 in Spain (online appendix available at https://osf.io/r5sfa/)

We focused on recruiting working- and middle-class news avoiders—measured using participants' occupations in the UK and the occupation of the participants' head of household in Spain—because class is known to influence news consumption rates and repertoires (Ksiazek et al., 2010; Lindell, 2018; Toff & Palmer, 2019). But we also had normative reasons. If people of lower socioeconomic status avoid news at higher rates, it might lead to further political disenfranchisement, exacerbating stratification between the classes.

We followed the same semistructured interview protocol in both countries. We conducted hour-long interviews, primarily in participants' homes, covering daily routines and media habits; views about the most important issues in their lives, communities, and countries; and attitudes toward journalism. We applied a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), recording, transcribing, and coding interviews for common and divergent themes, and allowing study participants' perspectives to inform interviews over time as new theoretical constructs emerged. All interviewees were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. For readability, we quote everyone in English, but provide original Spanish quotes in the online appendix.

Findings

RQ1: How Do News Avoiders Perceive and Weigh the Benefits and Costs of News Consumption?

To the degree that interviewees felt they were missing out on any benefits of news consumption at all, those benefits were primarily ritual rather than informational. When asked if keeping up with news was important, some initially did say yes, but they tended to use vague, scripted-seeming language about the merits of being informed. For example, Gemma in the UK at first explained that "it's just better to have good knowledge about what's around you." But when she and others elaborated on why it was important, the specific reasons that came to mind were almost always social. As Gemma went on to explain, "I'd be embarrassed if I was in a social situation and someone was talking about something and I had no clue." We discuss these perceived social benefits further later on, in response to RQ2. As for the other ritual benefits

[2] The survey question was adopted from previous research (Newman et al., 2017; Schrøder & Blach-Orsten, 2016). In the UK: "Typically, how often do you access news? By news we mean national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online)." In Spain, this question was translated as: "Normalmente, ¿con qué frecuencia consulta las noticias? Por noticias nos referimos a la información nacional, internacional, regional/local y otros acontecimientos de actualidad consultados en cualquier plataforma (radio, televisión, periódicos o Internet)."

identified in the literature, by definition, our participants did not consume news as part of a routine, and they found news neither entertaining nor emotionally satisfying—quite the opposite, as we detail in the next section on the perceived costs of news consumption.

Interviewees were also quick to dismiss the informational benefits of news, for several reasons. First, they associated news with politics, and their attitudes toward politics—a term they used narrowly to refer to the purview of professional politicians, a realm of infighting and corruption—ranged from apathy to aversion. As such, rather than valuing news as a source of political information, many said that one of the main reasons they avoided news was precisely because the content was too focused on politics. As Ryan, a stay-at-home father in the UK put it, "I hate politics. It's probably one of the reasons I don't read the news, to be honest."

Second, and relatedly, many said they did not trust the information in the news, especially political information. In theory, a dislike of politics could lead a person to value journalism more, as an institution that holds politicians to account. But the belief that news acted as a watchdog, so popular among scholars and journalists, was not expressed by our interviewees at all (see also Palmer & Toff, 2019). Instead, participants in both countries appeared to see journalism and politics as part of a single, untrustworthy system. For example, when asked his opinion of journalists in general, Ryan replied, "I don't really know a journalist. In my head, I'm going: journalist, politician, I don't know." Little wonder, then, that many described news as both manipulated and manipulative, shaped by shadowy political or economic forces for news producers' own gain, and free to print "whatever they want" with no accountability. As Brianna in the UK explained, "I tend not to believe things I see in the news anyway, because that's just what they want you to see."

Third, interviewees dismissed the informational value of news because they saw other sources, whether digital or interpersonal, as more efficient and trustworthy. They were confident that major events or particularly relevant news stories would "find them" via social networks on- or offline (see Edgerly, 2017; Toff & Nielsen, 2018), so it made little sense to dedicate time to regular news consumption. Many relied heavily on Google and had a particular news consumer in their lives whom they trusted to inform them about current events (see also Toff & Palmer, 2019). As Miguel in Madrid explained, "My father seems to me like a perfect source. I trust him. I think that what he thinks is completely reasonable." For further information, Miguel added, "I can look on the Internet for anything."

We also saw little evidence that interviewees felt that consuming news was an important civic duty or value, which some research indicates is a key reason that news consumers persist in consuming news despite the costs (Couldry & Markham, 2008; Martin, 2008). In fact, when we asked if they felt that keeping up with news was important "to be a good citizen," most rejected the idea outright. According to their "citizenship vocabularies" (Thorson, 2012), being a good citizen meant treating other people and shared spaces with respect, not consuming news or participating in more traditional forms of activism. As Miguel explained, "a good citizen is someone who takes care of the streets, takes care of people and is maybe even kind to them. I don't think by finding out what's going on they're better or worse."

In general, we found that interviewees saw news as a time-consuming, emotionally draining chore. Many gave "no time" as the first and main reason they did not consume news. Working parents in particular, especially working mothers, described exhausting routines in which they barely sat down (see also Toff & Palmer, 2019). But even working parents often found some time for entertainment media that they found more enjoyable and emotionally rewarding than news. As Pedro in Spain explained,

> I dedicate so much to my working life that I want my social life to be as relaxed as possible. . . I prefer to be with my kids here watching an animated movie. It's more fulfilling to me than looking for news on the Internet.

Nearly all interviewees said that, unlike many other media options available to them, news was emotionally draining. They saw it as relentlessly negative—"doom and gloom" in the UK, "penas y desgracias" (hardships and misfortunes) in Spain—filled with terrorist attacks, suffering abroad, grisly crimes at home, and frustrating politics. Moreover, many characterized themselves as particularly sensitive or described stressful circumstances that made avoiding news part of an emotion management strategy necessary to just get through the day. For example, Tessa in the UK, whose health had suffered because of stress at work, said it was an "active choice" to avoid news, which, in her words, "could upset me or tax me or depress me or make me feel stupid at this current time, which is not really what I need." Likewise, Cristiano, a father of two young daughters in Spain who had been looking for work for over a year, saw news as the opposite of the emotional boon or escape from daily life that he was looking for in his free time. As he explained, "My emotional state has been really poor, you know? So what I need is happiness, not to find out about stuff, because I have too many of my own hardships to be able to handle any more."

Interviewees also found news coverage costly in terms of the mental energy required to understand it. For example, Aria, a Spanish college student, said,

> I look at the news and it seems like they're explaining to an economist or a politician . . . and there are things I don't understand, so I say, "Why am I going to watch the news if they explain it so you don't understand?"

In the UK, many interviewees named Brexit as an example of an issue they found baffling. As Kate put it,

> Like for example, this whole thing with Brexit. I don't have a clue about any of it. . . . You know, if you hear it on the news, in the end, I just don't pay attention, because it—yeah, I don't understand it.

In sum, with regard to RQ1, interviewees emphasized the high costs of news consumption, especially the time, emotional energy, and mental effort they felt news demanded. They perceived few benefits to balance the ledger, preferring alternative sources that they found more trustworthy and emotionally fulfilling. And, unlike what previous research has found about news consumers, we saw almost no evidence that interviewees felt a sense of civic duty to consume news that might help them justify the high costs of engaging with it.

RQ2**: **What Role Do Social Dynamics, Including Early Socialization and Identification With Different Communities of News Users, Play in News Avoiders' Narratives About Their Relationship to News?

Past research on news consumers emphasizes that individuals are more likely to value and consume news when they have been socialized to do so in youth and when news is valued by people around them as they get older. Most of our participants had grown up with at least some news at home, primarily newspapers in the UK and TV news in Spain. Some recalled family news routines with great nostalgia.

However, as they described those routines, two patterns became clear: First, although many recalled discussing major news events when they were growing up (such as terrorist attacks), news consumption did not appear to have been a particularly important activity in their homes, and their families had not discussed news or politics on a regular basis. Second, rather than recalling news as a communal activity in which all or even most members of the family took part, interviewees described an atomized scene, in which their family members took on different roles in relation to news. Often they described grandparents and (especially) fathers reading papers or watching TV news while everyone else showed little interest or busied themselves with other activities. Ava (UK) illustrates this pattern well, including the way these roles often played out along gendered lines (Toff & Palmer, 2019):

> Ava: Yeah, my dad always had a newspaper. I think dads do when we're growing up . . . I don't really remember my mom or the three of us siblings being interested in the news or watching the news if it was on the telly.
>
> Interviewer: Did he ever talk about what was happening on the news?
>
> Ava: No, no, he never. He never talked politically either. He never expressed any views. I didn't up until a couple years ago just because I didn't know that much about it just because it was never discussed growing up.
>
> Interviewer: Your mother didn't pay attention to the news?
>
> Ava: No, no, it was all the soaps. Not news.

In Spain, Iris described a near-identical scenario: The kids stayed quiet so her father could watch news, while, as she recalled, "My mother—I remember the poor thing washing dishes." They, too, never discussed politics at home.

Notably, these same two patterns—that news was present in interviewees' social groups, but not a core communicative practice, and that members of those groups took on different roles related to news—extended to the way news avoiders described their relationship to news as adults. At the time they spoke to us, participants did not have jobs or social lives in which consuming news was really necessary. Brenna

(UK) made that point explicitly, noting that keeping up with current events was not a requirement in any of the communities to which she belonged:

> I don't really do owt really news-based to need to know. Because like I say none of my friends kind of keep up with [news] so it's not like I'd improve my relationships, my friendships with them, knowing more about the news because it isn't something they follow either. And for my work I don't do anything where I need to know. I work with builders and, you know, road diggers and stuff, so I don't really need to know about like current affairs with them either.

When discussions of news did come up at work or in social settings, it was usually, as Lexi (UK) explained, "like the odd comment" rather than "an everyday topic of conversation." Although some said they did occasionally feel foolish for not being able to participate in conversations about current events—as discussed in the previous section, this was the one major benefit of news consumption many said they missed—interviewees mostly felt they could opt out of those discussions without threatening their status or membership in the group. For example, Paloma (Spain) noted,

> I sometimes miss—you get together with a group of friends and they start to talk about a topic and you can't participate at all . . . it happens to me often, very often. But well, you use it to learn something.

Like Paloma, interviewees said they sometimes felt embarrassed in those situations, but they took the opportunity to just listen and learn—or leave.

Some interviewees described groups of friends who divided into subgroups—again, sometimes along gendered lines—of those interested in discussing current events and others, like themselves, who preferred other topics. For example, in the UK, Chelsea described parties where "it tends to be all the guys debate, and all the women will just go off for a gossip."

But it was even more common for interviewees to describe one or two news enthusiasts in their social or professional circles whose passion for current events and politics set them apart from others in the group. Interviewees often described those people with ambivalence. On the one hand, they found them overly "preachy" and argumentative. For example, Ignacio in Spain described two news enthusiasts among his close friends who would get into heated arguments about politics to the bemusement of the others, who, he explained, "don't usually get involved because we're a relaxed, calm group, and those two get really mad."

On the other hand, interviewees depended on news enthusiasts to answer their questions about politics and to alert them to major events. In that regard, news enthusiasts functioned like opinion leaders in Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) classic two-step flow model. And even as they were turned off by news enthusiasts' insistence on arguing about politics, news avoiders admired how informed and cultured they were. For example, Ignacio went on to add,

> I'd love to learn a ton about politics and be able to give my opinion, but it's not my thing and it doesn't interest me. But yes, I'd love to, truly, to be able to get into a conversation

> with those two and argue . . . but they have a lot of free time. You have to dedicate a lot of time to be able to learn all that.

Like Ignacio, interviewees always described news enthusiasts in contrast to themselves. Even when they admired them, they did not think they could *be* them, whether for lack of time, ability, or interest. Some interviewees explicitly traced their disinterest in news back to childhood role models. Manuel (Spain), for example, explained that, while he depended on his news enthusiast father for information, he himself was more like his mother, who was "olympically apathetic" ("pasa olímpicamente") about news. Brenna in the UK made a similar comment, noting of her lack of interest in news and politics, "My mum is like me. And I think that's where I get it from."

Past research finds that news stories that do not directly affect individuals can start to feel relevant to them if their communities are invested in those stories (Swart et al., 2017). We saw little evidence that this was taking place for our news avoiders—and a lot of evidence that they found news *ir*relevant if it did not directly affect them. In the UK, Isabella explained,

> It's not that I'm not bothered about the world. It's just . . . it sounds a bit selfish, but if it's something doesn't directly affect me, or if it doesn't interest me, really, then I'm not bothered to look into it.

That view was echoed repeatedly in our sample: People worried it might be "selfish" ("egoísta" in Spanish), but they felt that most news did not affect them directly and was therefore not worth the time and emotional price. As examples of irrelevant news, they most often cited faraway catastrophes, gruesome crimes, and political matters, including the biggest political stories of the day, Brexit and the Catalonia crisis.

In sum, in response to RQ2, most interviewees described some early socialization to news. However, news consumption was not a core communicative practice in any of their social groups, either when they were growing up or in adulthood. News enthusiasts were the exception in their communities. When discussion did turn to news, interviewees accepted the role of the uninformed, uninterested news avoider. And rather than finding news personally salient because it was relevant to their social circles, they dismissed it as too often focused on distant matters with little connection to their daily lives.

RQ3: How Does Political Efficacy Figure Into News Avoiders' Narratives About Their Relationship to News?

Many interviewees indicated that one reason they had given up on news was that they perceived themselves as having minimal efficacy toward news and politics. Regarding internal political efficacy, while some interviewees maintained a high level of confidence in their knowledge of politics despite limited news use, others had concluded that understanding news simply required more effort or skill than they could muster. Comments similar to Brenna's in the UK—"I don't really understand like the different parties and stuff"—were fairly common in our sample. Some interviewees, like Gracie, said they had given up trying to understand current events because they felt they were hopelessly behind. She said, "I spent 30 years not really paying much attention to the news. There's so much to catch up on that it blows my mind, that I don't understand what's going on. So I sort of gave up really."

Comments suggesting low external efficacy played a prominent role in our interviews both because they were extremely common and because interviewees often invoked them at the end of the interview. After laying out all their other reasons for avoiding news, they threw down "and I can't make a difference anyway" as a kind of final trump card, the reason-to-end-all-reasons why consuming news was not worthwhile. As Gracie concluded, "I can't worry about it too much. Because I can't change it. Especially reading the newspaper. That's not gonna get you anywhere." Similar observations were a near constant refrain in both countries. Some, like Amelia in the UK, contrasted powerful people such as politicians, who made decisions that had an impact on the world, with people like themselves, who just dealt with the consequences. She noted, "I really don't think anything makes a difference what anyone says, because it all goes on what the people at the top say. And I think that's all that matters, I really do."

In sum, in response to RQ3, with few exceptions, news avoiders in both the UK and Spain expressed low levels of both internal and external efficacy with regard to news and politics. Ultimately, one of their most common assessments of news consumption was simply that "it makes no difference."

Discussion

The most consistent narrative we heard in Spain and the UK was that news avoidance was a logical strategy for navigating daily life. Although no media choice can be reduced to a simple cost–benefit analysis, our interviewees did describe their news consumption in those terms. From their perspective, costs clearly outweighed benefits. They saw news consumption as a bad deal, with limited informational benefits and high costs in terms of time, emotional energy, and mental effort, especially compared with readily available alternatives.

Studies show that news consumers report similar complaints about the time and effort required to keep up with news (e.g., Martin, 2008). They also distrust news and find it too negative (Newman et al., 2017), as did our interviewees. This again raises the question of why news consumers persist in consuming news while news avoiders jump ship or fail to develop the habit in the first place. Certainly, socioeconomic factors play a role: For people with fewer resources, the costs of news consumption likely feel more costly. But when we compare our results with past studies on news consumers, two other important factors that have been found to increase the likelihood that people will consume news despite the costs were notably absent in our findings.

The first is the norm that consuming news is an important civic duty—a responsibility that one must undertake to be a good citizen. Our interviewees did not share that view. They defined good citizenship in a more individualistic way, as treating the people and places immediately around them with care. In Thorson's (2012) terms, their "citizenship vocabularies" did not bridge the gap between their immediate concerns and more distant-seeming public matters, and they felt news covered only the latter. Here a connection to political efficacy seems clear: It makes little sense for citizens to feel a responsibility to consume news if they do not believe doing so will make a meaningful impact in the world. Not only did our interviewees express a general lack of political efficacy, but they also felt that news was particularly useless for enabling meaningful political action because it was mostly about distant matters that had little connection with their daily lives, especially faraway catastrophes and politicians arguing.

As we discussed in the literature review, past scholarship suggests that social dynamics play an important role in encouraging news use and in making distant news stories seem relevant. But the second notable absence in our interviews was what we call a strong connection to a "news community." Interviewees did not belong to communities that highly valued news consumption—at least not to such a degree that they felt their inclusion or standing in the group might be threatened if they did not keep up with news themselves.

That was partly because, just as they had seen in their homes growing up, in their adult communities, it was normal for members to take on different roles regarding news. "Uninterested news avoider" was an acceptable role that appeared to be fairly common in their social and professional circles. Meanwhile, interviewees described news enthusiasts as outliers who were sometimes admirable and sometimes annoying, even as they played important roles as opinion leaders and informants for the rest of the group. In fact, those informants enabled news avoiders to opt out of news without worrying they would miss out on anything important. In other words, the norm within our interviewees' social groups was that a minority would keep up to date with news, rather than that everyone should.

There is no single explanation for news avoidance (Edgerly, 2019), and many factors, including individual differences, undoubtedly play a role. But our findings highlight the importance of group-level factors in sustaining news habits. Future research into news avoidance and news consumption should continue to explore the perceived costs of news use, but also the specific ways social groups may counterbalance them. In particular, the way that different roles within groups can shape news habits warrants further study, as does the way norms linking news consumption to civic duty are learned and sustained. And although our study focused on individuals' actual communities, it is likely that perceived belonging to imagined communities of news consumers (or avoiders) and/or parasocial interactions with figures in the news play important roles in shaping news habits as well. These too merit further attention.

If consuming news is, for many, a rather onerous task, and one that is becoming more so as alternatives proliferate amid the stresses of daily life, maintaining a news consumption habit likely requires a strong belief that news matters—that one has a civic responsibility to engage with it and that whether one consumes it or not actually makes a difference. Few people have clear evidence to support such beliefs, so, like articles of faith, they must be rehearsed, maintained, and reinforced over time. While individuals may be able to accomplish that alone, it is more likely to occur through shared values and social practices among communities of dedicated news users.

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