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ARTICLE

Antecedents of News Avoidance: Competing Effects of Political Interest, News Overload, Trust in News Media, and "News Finds Me" Perception

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ABSTRACT

Recent changes in the media environment make it easier than ever for people to actively shape their news repertoires according to their habits, needs, and preferences. As convenient as these practices seem, they may favor the development of misperceptions such as "news finds me" perception (NFM) and make it easier for some people to disconnect from news and political content. Building on the conceptualization of news avoidance as a general disposition and its consequential behaviors, this study jointly examines key individual-level predispositions that may motivate intentional news avoidance. Based on a two-wave survey collected in the United States, our results largely corroborate previous work showing the association of political interest, news overload, and trust in professional news with news avoidance, and stress the importance of including the NFM in the theoretical and empirical modelling of news avoidance. Our analyses also suggest that the linkages between these individual-level antecedents and news avoidance are contingent upon the design and robustness of the empirical tests, with NFM yielding the most consistent association across models.

KEYWORDS

News avoidance; political interest; news overload; trust in news media; "news finds me" perception; new media

Introduction

In the last decade, a growing body of research has drawn attention to the fact that an (apparently) increasing share of the population avoids the news. Although the diverse definitions and operationalizations of the concept make it difficult to reach clear conclusions about the magnitude of the phenomenon (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020), research across countries suggest that news avoidance is a widespread challenge. A recent report by Reuters Institute identified news avoiders in 36 countries in Europe, Asia Pacific, and the Americas and reported figures ranging from 6% of respondents in

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Japan to 57% in Turkey and Greece—although these numbers are underestimates since the study excluded those who used news less than once a month, see Kalogeropoulos 2017. In the United States, this same report estimated the percentage of news avoiders to be around 38%. More recent observations from network analysis of Russian social media Vkontakte found that less than 15% of its users follow at least one page "of the major Russian media sources or blogs," a finding that the author associates with a high rate of news avoiders (Urman 2019, 5171).

From a deliberative democracy perspective (Fishkin 2016), recurrently avoiding the news may be problematic. News media provide citizens with essential information to understand important political issues at the local, national, and international levels (Moy et al. 2004). Without an appropriate knowledge of their political environment, it is unlikely that people engage in reasoned deliberations and reach some form of consensus. A similar argument applies to a competitive model of democracy, in which politically knowledgeable citizens choose between a range of alternatives in the political marketplace, primarily responding to the actions of political elites by voting (Strömbäck 2005, 334; see also Sartori 1987). According to this latter model of democracy as an institutional arrangement (Elliott 1994), elections give *informed* people the opportunity to select the more qualified candidate or party and keep politicians accountable. News avoiders may therefore miss the "most critical link to politically relevant information in the public sphere" (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020, 367).

But why some people avoid news, whether occasionally or regularly? Several recent studies in both communication and political science—mostly based on cross-sectional survey data[1]—have examined potential individual (e.g., personal characteristics, emotions, and thoughts) and contextual factors (e.g., democratic quality of the political and media environment) that may account for the increasing levels of news avoidance (Park 2019; Song, Jung, and Kim 2017; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). The former include motivations such as 1) feelings of *news overload*, against which people would respond with news avoidance as a remedial strategy (Lee, Kim, and Koh 2016; Park 2019; Song, Jung, and Kim 2017; see also Lee, Lindsey, and Kim 2017 for a negative result); 2) cognitions such as *media distrust* or "lack of confidence in the accuracy of the news" (Woodstock 2014, 843; see also Pentina and Tarafdar 2014; Serrano-Puche 2018; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020); and 3) relatively stable personal dispositions such as *political interest* (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata 2013; see also Schiefele 1991).

Drawing on these previous findings, this study develops and tests an overarching model that explores the competing explanatory power of different individual-level factors (i.e., cognitions and dispositions) that may be associated with intentional news avoidance. Further, to account for the time-order of the proposed relationships and provide a time-based benchmark against which to compare previous and subsequent studies, we test our hypotheses with cross-sectional, lagged (4 months), and autoregressive panel models.

Typology and Measure of News Avoidance

Extant literature distinguishes between intentional and unintentional subtypes of news avoidance, a division that focuses on motivational and behavioral aspects. Intentional

avoidance results from an individual's antipathy toward news, which motivates them to actively "opt-out of news exposure" (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020, 465)—e.g., changing the T.V. channel when news comes on, unsubscribing from news content, or unfollowing friends who post too much news (see Bode 2016; see also Skoric, Zhu, and Lin 2018 for the related concept of selective avoidance). Differently, unintentional news avoidance is not connected to dislike for news or to "an active choice to limit […] news consumption" (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020, 460). Unintentional news avoiders *prefer* other media content, for example entertainment, and this preference tends to displace news from their "media diets," especially when it does not require any effort to get entertainment content (Prior 2005; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020).

All in all, news avoidance seems to be a phenomenon that covers different dimensions and depends on individual motivations and structural conditions of media markets (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata 2013). In this study, our approach to the construct relates to its intentional type, as opposed to unintentional. Complementarily, our operationalization of news avoidance relies on self-identification, which seems to fit better "with research questions on *why* people *sometimes* choose to turn their backs to the news" (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020, 462).

Political Interest and News Avoidance

Although political interest has been described as "the most powerful predictor of political behaviors that make democracy work," the reasons why it develops (or not) have not been fully explained (Prior 2010, 747). Political interest is a stable personal disposition and an intrinsic motivation that energizes politically related behaviors (Prior 2010) such as following news (Lecheler and de Vreese 2017; Strömbäck and Shehata 2010), engaging in political discussion (Shah et al. 2007), or participating in politics (Blais and St-Vincent 2011).

Some of these positive outcomes of political interest seem to be even more pronounced as media environments provide more choice opportunities (i.e., more media channels, more diverse content, and greater ease for managing one's news repertoires) (see Prior 2005). In media-saturated environments, those who are not interested in politics can reduce their exposure to news in favor of other contents and genres they like or prefer (e.g., entertainment, see Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata 2013). Although increased choice opportunities are crucial for explaining the displacement effects of entertainment on news content (passive avoidance), they also make it easier for the politically uninterested to *intentionally switch* to another channel when TV news starts, customize their social media feed to not include news, or mute instant messaging groups that become too "political." Exactly the opposite is true for those highly interested in politics: Media-rich environments and online/mobile technologies give them the possibility to actively broaden their news intake as much as they want.

Supporting these theoretical claims, a survey-based longitudinal study conducted over 1986 and 2010 in Sweden found that, over time—as media choices increased—, the positive effect of political interest on news media use (including print and online newspapers, TV news, and public service radio; and with the sole exception of tabloid newspapers) increased (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata 2013). Prior (2005), using

nationally representative data from the United States, observed that *only in* a high media choice environment (i.e., access to cable TV and internet) respondents' preferences (for entertainment over news) predicted their levels of political knowledge. Based on the foregoing discussion, we predict that the politically uninterested will be more likely to intentionally avoid news:

H1: Political interest is negatively associated with news avoidance a) in cross-sectional, b) time-lagged, and c) autoregressive models.

News Overload and News Avoidance as a Remedial Strategy

In addition to increases in media choice, modern communication technologies have vastly expanded the *amount* of available news and the *frequency* with which (at least some) people use it. For some scholars, news media and news itself have become *ambient* "like the air we breathe" (Hargreaves and Thomas, cited by Hermida 2010). The widespread adoption of home and mobile broadband allows people to access news "anytime, anywhere" (Schrøder 2015, 15) and, we may add, from any media source and in any desired amount. Furthermore, current patterns of news consumption include not *only intentional* but also *unintentional* exposure: People may encounter news while doing other online activities such as booking an airline ticket or using social media to connect with friends (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018; Goyanes and Demeter 2020). Even though unintentional exposure to news may elicit beneficial effects on political knowledge (Lee and Kim 2017) and participation (Kim et al. 2013), people may stumble upon news at inopportune moments. Thus, they may encounter news in working hours or when they have gone online with different purposes (for example, for social interaction, see Holton and Chyi 2012).

As a specific instance of the broader phenomenon of information overload (Song, Jung, and Kim 2017), feelings of news overload emerge when an individual faces an oversupply of news that interferes with their ability to adequately process it (Lee, Lindsey, and Kim 2017). People may perceive news overload because they feel there are more relevant news out there than they can process or because news "get in their way" when they do not want to encounter it (see Holton and Chyi 2012; Lee, Kim, and Koh 2016). News overload "can create stress and negatively affect both psychological and physiological health" (Lee, Kim, and Koh 2016, 2; see also Misra and Stokols 2012), and people may therefore search for coping strategies. One of them is to actively avoid news, either completely or partially (Pentina and Tarafdar 2014). Extant empirical research, however, provide mixed support for this assumption. In a cross-sectional design using survey data from South Korean internet users, Song, Jung, and Kim (2017) observed that news overload relates to news fatigue, which is in turn positively associated with news avoidance. In the words of the authors, "if the amount of news requiring processing is large enough, people feel fatigued [and] avoid news to get rid of the cognitive burden" (1184). Another study also using survey data from South Korean online panelists found that perceived news overload in social media has direct and indirect (through reduced news efficacy) relationships with news avoidance (Park 2019). In contrast, Lee, Lindsey, and Kim (2017) did not find any significant association between perceived news information overload and news avoidance in their sample of

American citizens (258, Table 1). In line with this, we ask the following research question:

RQ1: What is the relationship between news overload and news avoidance (a) in cross-sectional, (b) time-lagged, and (c) autoregressive models?

(Dis)Trust in Professional News and News Avoidance

A third reason why people may avoid news is that they do not trust the media and the news content they provide, even when it is fact-checked (see Ardèvol-Abreu, Delponti, and Rodríguez-Wangüemert 2020). In a recent survey conducted in four countries (United States, United Kingdom, Denmark, and Spain), Reuters Institute asked 475 news avoiders about "their reasons for not exposing themselves to news on a regular basis" (Schrøder 2016). While most news avoiders alluded to their general lack of political interest, time, or higher preference for entertainment, other respondents suggested they did not trust the media. Thus, one of these news avoiders verbalized: "The BBC are a propaganda machine they do not give the news as it is, they just give their view of the news and can't be trusted" (Schrøder 2016).

Similarly, a secondary analysis of Reuters data focusing on the Spanish subsample of news avoiders found that almost one in three of them (29%) reported that they could not "rely on news to be true" (Serrano-Puche 2018, 314). One Spanish respondent added this way: "We are told just what the rulers want us to know … It's all a lie" (314). The 2017 Digital News Report further explored this issue by including a single question about the frequency with which respondents found themselves "actively trying to avoid the news these days" (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020, 373). A multilevel analysis of this cross-sectional dataset (67,245 respondents across 35 countries) found that trust in the news was one of the strongest individual-level predictors of news avoidance (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020).

Some similar interpretation can be found in Woodstock's (2014) qualitative approach to "news resisters." Woodstock's informants "shared a distrust of corporate influence and a lack of confidence in the accuracy of the news" and criticized news media for over-relying "on official governmental sources" and spreading "incorrect and misinformed reportage" (843, 844). Some participants experienced news avoidance as a conscious strategy to prevent their media distrust from spreading to more general perceptions of the public good (840). Accordingly, we state our second hypothesis:

H2: Trust in professional news is negatively associated with news avoidance a) in cross-sectional, b) time-lagged, and c) autoregressive models.

Avoiding News Because It Will Find Them Anyway

Increased opportunities for unintentional exposure to news in technologically intensive environments can lead some people to develop misperceptions about the ways they can gain political knowledge. An example of this is what has come to be known as the news finds me perception (NFM), defined as the belief that one can be well informed without having to actively seek for and follow news—because one can get

the news indirectly, via "their general Internet use, peers, and connections within online social networks"—(Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017, 112). This mistaken belief seems to have behavioral and cognitive implications that may be problematic for the development of a healthier and more informed democracy. Thus, the NFM has been found to be associated with lower levels of traditional news media use (TV and newspapers) and higher exposure to news through social media (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017). Regretfully, this increased exposure to social media news does not translate into political knowledge. In fact, those with higher NFM tend to be *less* politically knowledgeable, both in a cross-sectional and a longitudinal analysis (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017; Lee 2020).

Another recent account suggests that the NFM is a three-dimensional construct that encompasses epistemic, motivational, and instrumental elements (i.e., a "being informed," a "not seeking," and a "reliance on peers" component, respectively; Song, Gil de Zúñiga, and Boomgaarden 2020, 48). The authors, however, consider the "not seeking" dimension of NFM as a "'passive' motivation of consuming news contents, or lack thereof" (49, 50), a description that seems to overlap with the unintentional type of news avoidance. Conceivably, this is the case because the more intentional news avoidance mechanism emerges *as a consequence* of the NFM (i.e., a long-term effect). The latter is the theoretical approach pursued in this study. In other words, even though those who score high on NFM may not initially make efforts to search for and follow news, their misperception may, over time, drive intentional avoidance behaviors.

From a theoretical perspective, individuals who are high in NFM may have unpleasant experiences with the news that progressively transform its presence into a negative incentive. As such, news could "create in the person an expectation that [...] unattractive consequences are forthcoming" (Reeve 2009, 114) and therefore energize avoidance behaviors. Because individuals who hold the NFM are less exposed to traditional news sources and are less politically knowledgeable, one can assume that it will become increasingly harder for them to fully grasp the news content, even if they try to do so. They are, so to speak, out of practice, and lack domain-specific knowledge that is required for deciphering the news story. They are mostly used to glance over decontextualized headlines and their accompanying pictures on social media and then move on to the next post. Reading the whole news content or watching news programs may therefore become a frustrating or at least unsatisfactory experience that translates to self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with the news environment (i.e., reduced self-efficacy).

Under this framework, it is easy to explain why increased social media use for news among those who believe that news will find them does not predict political knowledge (see indirect pathway in Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017; see also the direct and indirect relationships, through NFM, between social media news use and political knowledge in Lee 2020). Unintentional exposure to news on social media and intentional news avoidance may take place consecutively, one after the other. Even after "stumbling upon" a piece of news, individuals high in NFM may shift their gaze toward a different post on the page or scroll down in search of a non-news related post as a news avoidance behavior. In this case, mere exposure to news would not translate into political knowledge. Hence, we present our final hypothesis:

H3: NFM is positively associated with news avoidance a) in cross-sectional, b) time-lagged, and c) autoregressive models.

Method

Sample

To examine the hypothesized relationships, we used data from a larger project on emerging patterns of media use and their relationship with people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. As part of this project, we administered three waves of online surveys in the United States between June 2019 and February 2020. The questionnaires were designed and distributed using Qualtrics web-based software. To recruit a diverse sample of respondents, we enlisted the services of the international polling organization Ipsos in Austria. Ipsos distributed the survey link to 3,000 of their panel members, seeking to mirror the United States census in terms of demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, and education, see Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2021). For this study, we used data from the first and the second wave[2], delivered four months apart (June and October 2019, respectively). The final sample left 1,338 valid cases in the first wave (W^1). In the second wave (W^2), Ipsos contacted these same respondents and obtained 511 valid responses.

Variables of Interest

"News Finds Me" Perception

Following extant research (Song, Gil de Zúñiga, and Boomgaarden 2020), we used the following six-item measure of NFM: "I rely on my friends to tell me what's important when news happens," "I can be well-informed even when I don't actively follow the news," "I rely on information from my friends based on what they like or follow through social media," "I am up-to-date and informed about public affairs news, even when I do not actively seek news myself," "I do not worry about keeping up with the news because I know news will find me," "I do not have to actively seek news because when important public affairs break, they will get to me via social media" (averaged scale, 1 = *strongly disagree* to 10 = *strongly agree*; W^1 Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$; $M = 4.68$; SD = 1.95).

Trust in Professional News

This two-item construct probes respondent's trust (from 1 = *not at all* to 10 = *completely*) in news "that comes from mainstream news media (e.g., newspapers, TV newscast, online news sites)" and "that is fact-checked" (see Watson, Peng, and Lewis 2019, for a similar measure). W^1 Spearman-Brown $\rho = .68$; $M = 6.24$; SD = 2.26).

News Overload

We drew on and adapted Jensen et al. (2014) cancer information overload scale, replacing the wording "cancer" and "cancer information" with "news," "news sources," etc. Our measurement instrument includes the following three assessments: "There are so many different news channels or sources, it's hard to know which ones to follow," "There is not enough time to do all of the things recommended to stay-up-to-date on

news," and "I feel overloaded by the amount of news/information I am supposed to know" (1–10 scale). W^1 Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$; $M = 5.92$; SD = 2.14).

Political Interest

We asked participants about their degree of interest (1 = *not at all* to 10 = *a great deal*) "in information about what's going on in politics and public affairs" and about their level of attention (1 = *not at all* to 10 = *very closely*) "to information about what's going on in politics and public affairs" (see a similar operationalization in Lee and Kim 2017). Two-item scale; W^1 Spearman-Brown $\rho = .94$; $M = 6.13$; SD = 2.72).

Intentional News Avoidance

Our main dependent variable captures participants' dislike for news, which motivates them to actively "opt-out of news exposure" (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020, 465). We asked respondents to self-identify as news avoiders (see Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020; Van den Bulck 2006) by indicating their level of agreement (1–10 scale) with the following three items: "When I come across news, I move on to read/watch/listen to something else," "Usually the news is not interesting enough to read/watch/listen," and "If the news annoys or bother me, I immediately move on to do something else" (W^1 Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$; $M = 5.06$; SD = 2.21; W^2 Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$; $M = 4.98$; $SD = 2.31$).

Control Variables

Some of our regression models included three or four blocks of control variables that may impact respondents' level of news avoidance (see Lee, Kim, and Koh 2016; Park 2019; Serrano-Puche 2018; Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata 2013; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020): political antecedents, news media uses, demographics and, in autoregressive models, the W^1 measure of the dependent variable. To measure *strength of partisanship*, we asked respondents whether they usually think of themselves as Republicans, Democrats, or Independents (from 0 = *strong Democrat*, through 5 = *Independent* to 10 = *strong Republican*). We then folded the scale so that low values indicate weak- and high values strong-partisanship, irrespective of party (see a similar strategy in Greene 2004). *Internal political efficacy* was measured with the averaged value of the responses to the following items: "I have a good understanding of the important political issues facing our country," and "I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics." The block of news media uses included *newspapers news* (three item-measure inquiring about respondents' frequency of use of "national newspapers," "local newspapers," or "printed"), *radio news* (two items about the frequency with which they get news from "radio news" such as NPR or talk shows, and from "radio" more generally), *TV news* (six-item scale measuring how often respondents get news from "network TV news," "local television news," "MSNBC cable news," "CNN cable news," "FOX cable news," and "television" more generally), *online news* (three items asking respondents how often they get news from "online news sites," "citizen journalism sites," and "local news online sites"), and *social media news* (thirteen items about the use of different social media platforms for news, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.). Finally, we also controlled for a set of demographic variables, measured with single items: *age group* (W^1

median = 3 [36–55 years old]), *gender* (W^1, 53.2% females), *education* (W^1 median = 3 [some college]), *family household income* (W^1 median = 4 [$50,000–99,999]) and *race* or *ethnicity* (W^1, 75.2% White or Caucasian).

Statistical Analyses

We run a series of cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive ordinary least square (OLS) regression models. In the cross-sectional models, both the predictors and the dependent variable are measured in W^1. The lagged models include predictors in W^1 and the dependent variable in W^2. Finally, the autoregressive models are similar to the lagged ones, but they include as another predictor the W^1 measure of the dependent variable. While this latter approach does not establish causality, it adds the time sequence of causes and effect. To test our hypotheses, we first conducted relatively uncontrolled regression models that included all the independent variables of interest. We then incorporated several controls to account for other variables that may affect news avoidance, as explained above. To estimate our multivariate regression models, we used SPSS version 25. Significance tests for regression coefficients are based on the Huber-White robust method and were computed using the HCREG macro for SPSS (HC0, see Hayes and Cai 2007).

Results

To test whether our scales of *news finds me perception, news overload, and news avoidance* assess distinct—but correlated—constructs, we first performed a principal axis factoring with Oblimin rotation. This analysis produced three factors that explained 63% of the total variance and fit our three constructs (Table 1). H1 stated a negative association between political interest and news avoidance. The present analyses provide only partial support for this prediction across regression models. Results in Figure 1 show that political interest is negatively associated with news avoidance in the cross-sectional (H1a, $\beta = -.142$, $p < .001$) and lagged models (H1b, $\beta = -.116$, $p = .010$), but not in the autoregressive test (H1c). When we consider other variables

Table 1. Principal axis factoring of news finds me, news overload, and news avoidance.

Item	News Finds Me	News Overload	News Avoidance
I rely on my friends to tell me what's […]	**.587**	.008	−.090
I can be well informed […]	**.685**	−.016	.021
I rely on information from my friends […]	**.657**	−.084	−.100
I am up − to − date and informed […]	**.651**	.053	.131
I do not worry about keeping up with […]	**.617**	.031	−.094
I do not have to actively seek news […]	**.683**	.036	−.023
There are so many different news channels […]	.049	**.611**	−.072
There is not enough time to do all of the things	−.038	**.870**	.043
I feel overloaded by the amount of news […]	.034	**.751**	−.040
When I come across news, I move on […]	.066	.059	**−.740**
Usually the news is not interesting enough […]	.051	−.086	**−.880**
If the news annoys or bother me […]	−.028	.137	**−.566**

Notes: Values are pattern loadings from the pattern matrix after direct oblimin rotation (W^1 measures, minimum eigenvalue of 1.0). Primary loadings of a variable on a factor are indicated by boldface type. Kaier-Meier-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy = .845; Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi 2\ (66) = 5868.18$, $p < .001$.

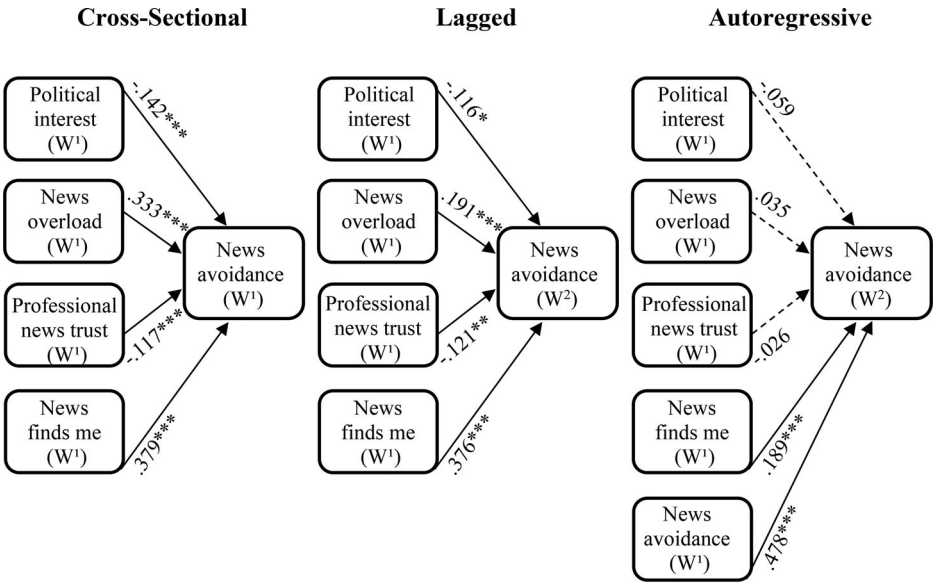

Figure 1 . Regression models of political interest, news overload, trust in professional news, and "news finds me" perception on news avoidance.
Note: Sample sizes: Cross-sectional model $n = 1{,}206$. Lagged $n = 451$. Autoregressive $n = 449$. W^1 = Wave 1, W^2 = Wave 2. Continuous path entries are standardized regression coefficients for OLS regression at $p < .05$ or better. Significance tests are computed using the Huber-White robust method (HC0, see Hayes and Cai 2007).

that may explain news avoidance (Table 2), the beta coefficient of political interest yields statistical significance only in the cross-sectional analysis (H1a, $\beta = -.155$, $p < .001$), but not in the lagged or the autoregressive tests.

The first research question asked about the possible relationship between news overload and news avoidance. As shown in Figure 1, more parsimonious regression models provide only partial empirical support for this association: news overload is associated with news avoidance in the cross-sectional (RQ1a, $\beta = .333$, $p < .001$) and lagged tests (RQ1b, $\beta = .191$, $p < .001$), but not when we include the W^1 measure of news avoidance in the analysis (RQ1c). These findings are mirrored in the more stringent models in Table 2: the beta value for news overload is significant in the cross-sectional (RQ1a, $\beta = .340$, $p < .001$) and lagged studies (RQ1b, $\beta = .202$, $p < .001$), but not in the autoregressive model (RQ1c).

H2 posited that trust in professional news would be negatively associated with news avoidance. Analyses provide support for H2a and H2b, but not for H2c. As shown in Figure 1, this association is negative and significant in the analysis of W^1 cross-sectional data (H2a, $\beta = -.117$, $p < .001$) and in the W^1-W^2 lagged analysis (H2b, $\beta = -.121$, $p = .006$). But, again, once we include the W^1 measure of the dependent variable as a control in the regression, the relationship becomes nonsignificant (H2c). We obtained essentially the same results if we account for all other variables in blocks 1 to 4 (Table 2). Trust in professional news is negatively associated with news avoidance cross-sectionally (H2a, $\beta = -.152$, $p < .001$) and in the lagged model (H2b, $\beta = -.102$, $p = .047$), but the relationship becomes less stark as the beta coefficient does not reach statistical significance in the autoregressive test (H2c).

Table 2. Controlled regression models predicting news avoidance.

Predictors	News avoidance		
	Cross-Sectional (Wave 1)	Lagged (Wave 2)	Autoregressive (Wave 2)
Block 1: Autoregressive W^1			
News avoidance	–	–	.530***
ΔR^2	–	–	39.6%
Block 2: Demographics W^1			
Age group	−.045	−.009	−.024
Gender (1 = female)	−.035	−.058	−.031
Race (1 = White or Caucasian)	−.012	−.094#	−.048
Income	.014	−.007	−.031
Education	.022	.013	.007
ΔR^2	5.3%	6.4%	1.4%
Block 3: Political antecedents W^1			
Strength of partisanship	.045	−.025	−.023
Internal political efficacy	−.017	.001	−.023
ΔR^2	1.3%	2.1%	0.3%
Block 4: News media uses W^1			
Newspapers news	.032	.002	−.034
Radio news	−.039	−.019	.039
TV news	.030	−.109*	−.122*
Online news	−.037	.008	.025
Social media news	.121**	.110	.051
ΔR^2	8.1%	6.1%	1.4%
Block 5: Variables of interest W^1			
Political interest	−.155***	−.105	−.013
News overload	.340***	.202***	.022
Trust in professional news	−.152***	−.102*	.020
News finds me perception	.283***	.287***	.110#
ΔR^2	21.5%	12.6%	0.8%
Total R^2	36.2%	27.2%	43.6%

Note. Sample sizes: Cross − sectional model $n = 1{,}063$. Lagged $n = 408$. Autoregressive $n = 406$. W^1 = Wave 1, W^2 = Wave 2. Standardized regression coefficients reported. Significance tests are computed using the Huber-White robust method (HC0, see Hayes and Cai 2007).
#$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Finally, we also predicted a positive association between NFM and news avoidance (H3). Results in Figure 1 and Table 2 provide support for H3a and H3b. In the more frugal models, NFM is associated with news avoidance cross-sectionally (H3a, $\beta = .379$, $p < .001$) and in the lagged (H3b, $\beta = .376$, $p < .001$) and autoregressive tests (H3c, $\beta = -.189$, $p < .001$). In the more stringent models in Table 2, NFM is also negatively correlated with news avoidance in the cross-sectional ($\beta = .283$, $p < .001$) and lagged tests ($\beta = .287$, $p < .001$), being this association marginally significant in the autoregressive analysis ($\beta = .111$, $p = .071$).

Discussion

The present study explored key individual-level antecedents that may account for people's intentional news avoidance behavior. Our analyses present insightful evidence that moves forward the literature on intentional news avoidance.

At the methodological level, we report several regression-based models that allow for the easy comparability of different study designs: cross-sectional, lagged, or autoregressive, on the one hand; and more parsimonious or more stringent on the other.

These detailed analyses replicate and provide a degree of comparability with previous studies that have mostly employed cross-sectional designs and a variable number of controls. They also establish comparative benchmarks for future longitudinal designs that may use different time frames between waves (e.g., less than for months). Furthermore, our different models illustrate the gradual reduction of the effect size when the autoregressive control (W^1 measure of the dependent variable) and the three blocks of demographics, political antecedents, and news media uses are accounted for. Accordingly, our results provide a comprehensive picture of key individual level-antecedents of news avoidance, suggesting that their role as significant predictors is contingent upon both the study design and the competing power of diverse variables of interest.

We hypothesized that political interest is negatively related to news avoidance. This is in line with Strömbäck and colleagues' (2013) longitudinal study in Sweden, where political interest became a stronger predictor of traditional news media use over time, as the environment offered more media choices. The hypothesis also aligns with the cross-sectional and multi-level study by Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020), which used Reuters' Digital News Report data. Consistent with these previous findings, we found political interest to be a negative predictor of news overload in both cross-sectional models. However, once we consider the time order of the assumed causality ($W^1 \rightarrow W^2$), the association only remains statistically significant in the first lagged regression (the more frugal one), but not in the second lagged model (with the full set of controls) or in the autoregressive tests. Thus, political interest proved to be the weakest predictor among our interest variables. In our view, this does not mean that political interest has nothing to do with news avoidance. However, our results are suggestive that political interest shares an important part of its variance with the other variables of interest (i.e., news overload, trust in professional news, and NFM), and its unique contribution to news avoidance may wane once one considers other important individual-level predictors. Further studies should manipulate "situational" political interest (see Prior and Bougher 2018) in an experimental context and further elucidate its causal role in (and unique contribution to) news avoidance.

News overload showed a statistically significant association with news avoidance in both cross-sectional regressions and in both lagged models. This is in line with Song and colleagues (2017) findings based on cross-sectional data, and with those of Park's (2019) two-wave study in South Korea. News avoidance may therefore be understood as a coping strategy for perceived news overload, an attempt to free cognitive resources in a saturated news media environment—or perceived as such. As effective as news avoidance may be for reducing cognitive load, it may also have undesirable consequences for democracies, whether one understands democracy as a deliberative process or more narrowly as a competition for political power (Fishkin 2016; Strömbäck 2005). The time sequence of the hypothesized influence of news overload on news avoidance could however not be established in our sample, because once we accounted for the baseline level of news avoidance in the autoregressive model, the correlation vanished. Further longitudinal studies could explore whether the strength of this association is sensitive to changes in the time lag between waves, and also try to isolate the unique influence of news overload through an experimental design.

Our findings about the role of trust in professional news in predicting news avoidance parallel those of news overload—although the sign of the association is negative in this case—: The more one trusts professional news, the less one avoids the news. Trust in professional news reduces news avoidance in all our cross-sectional and lagged analyses, which mirrors Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020) findings based on cross-sectional, multilevel data analysis, as well as additional qualitative observations provided by Woodstock (2014). These findings also align with previous empirical assessments about the positive relationship between media trust and media use (although the literature suggest that the strength of this association is rather small and, sometimes, null, see Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga 2017; Tsfati 2010; Tsfati and Cappella 2003). However, once our modeling strategy considers both the time lag and the baseline measure of news avoidance with autoregressive models, we cannot reject the null hypothesis that there is no association between trust in professional news and news avoidance. This does not necessarily mean that trust in professional news does not play a role in explaining news avoidance, but this potential effect should be reevaluated in the light of the competing influences of other individual-level factors, notably the NFM.

According to our longitudinal data, the most promising individual-level antecedent of news avoidance, besides TV news use, is the NFM. In our sample, those who believe that they do not need to actively follow the news to be well-informed since the news will find them, are more likely to become news avoiders in five out of our six models: in both cross-sectional models, in both lagged regressions, and in the first autoregressive test (the more frugal one). The association NFM-news avoidance is only marginally present ($p = .07$) in the most stringent autoregressive analysis. But even in this latter model, NFM has the second largest beta coefficient among the 16 predictors, lagging only behind TV news use. Further studies should try to replicate this finding in other samples, countries, and media environments.

While the NFM has been absent from the literature on news avoidance to date, our findings indicate that this may be a pertinent individual-level construct to consider. As we explained in the literature review section, we are not suggesting that intentional news avoidance is part (i.e., a dimension) of NFM. NFM people may be motivated to be informed, but they perceive the process of information acquisition to be different. Our interpretation is that the "passive" motivation to follow news (or lack thereof) that characterizes those who perceive that news will find them may cultivate[3] an active motivation (and associated behaviors) to avoid news. This double mechanism may speak to the question of why increased exposure to social media news among those who hold the NFM does not facilitate political learning (Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl 2019; Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017, 119; Lee 2020). Thus, even when news actually finds them on social media, they tend to escape it and "move on to read/watch/listen to something else" (i.e., they avoid it, a behavior that does not enhance political learning). Similarly, they may not invest the necessary cognitive efforts to process the news content that finds them.

Complementarily, and different from NFM people, news avoiders are not always unaware that they may be missing public interest information. For example, some of Toff and Palmer's, (2019) news avoiders felt that those who follow the news are "probably more in-tune with current affairs than [they are]," while others referred to

political matters as "stuff that [they]'ve never really heard of" (8). Some news avoiders may therefore hold NFM while others do not, and they may limit their news consumption for a variety of reasons: Because it negatively affects their mood (Kalogeropoulos 2017), or they are not confident about their ability to find and interpret news (Edgerly 2021), etc.

It is important to emphasize that this study is not without limitations, and our findings should be interpreted with caution when making causality assumptions. Observational studies such as the present one "provide significantly limited opportunities for causal inference relative to rigorous experimental studies with random assignment to condition" (Newsom 2012, 171). From our data, we cannot rule out the possibility that the association between our predictors and our dependent variable in the cross-sectional analyses is due to the presence of uncontrolled variables, signaling some degree of spuriousness, or that the direction of the effect is different for some of the independent variables. Complementarily, the fact that our fully controlled longitudinal analyses only found marginal evidence for a positive association between NFM and news avoidance does not mean that all the other predictors do not play a role in explaining avoidance. In the words of Eveland and Morey (2011), "the timing of waves—both the timing of the initial wave, and also the lag between waves—could lead to entirely different conclusions about the operation of the exact same theoretical process" (24). Perhaps a four-months lag is adequate to observe long time influences of NFM, but too much to detect, for example, more immediate effects of news overload. In the latter case, the outcome variable may have decayed over time or been affected by subsequent perceptions or environmental conditions. With these findings in mind, future studies may test alternative time delays, more precisely adjusted to each theoretical process.

A related limitation concerns the non-exhaustiveness of our regression models. Although we tried to incorporate the main individual-level determinants of news avoidance, we concur with one of the anonymous reviewers of this article that our set of predictors do not cover *all* antecedents discussed in the literature. Thus, an interview-based study in the United Kingdom explored "the how and why behind the gender gap in news consumption" and found structural inequalities, beliefs, and perceptions that may explain news avoidance, especially among women (Toff and Palmer 2019, 1563). These include participants' perception that news is for men; their reliance on others to synthetize the news, and thus freeing up their time to manage domestic activities; or their need to keep a positive emotional climate. Closely related to the latter aspect, several qualitative studies suggest that some people avoid news because of its negative tone: "[…] It's very depressing, upsetting, frustrating, and scary" (Schrøder 2016; see also Kalogeropoulos 2017). We believe this limitation is however attenuated by our inclusion of several demographic, perceptual, and belief variables as controls in the models. Thus, gender—which turned out not to be a significant predictor—, internal political efficacy, and strength of partisanship may serve as partial proxies for some of Toff and Palmer's underlying causes of news avoidance.

Finally, a caveat regarding the second item in our measure of trust in the news is that there is not a complete equivalence between professional news and news "that is fact-checked"—because not all professional media outlets fact-check all the

information they publish. However, we see fact-checking as a hallmark of professional news content on social media and as one of the tenets of "good journalism" (see Ardèvol-Abreu, Delponti, and Rodríguez-Wangüemert 2020; Bradshaw et al. 2020, and the code of principles of the International Fact-Checking Network in Poynter Institute, n. d.). Given the increasing proportion of Americans that get their news online and on social media, we think that the item captures important nuances of the construct.

All in all, our findings largely corroborate previous work showing the association of political interest, news overload, and trust in professional news with news avoidance; and stress the importance of including the NFM in the theoretical and empirical modelling of news avoidance. In light of the seemingly widespread proliferation of NFM (Gil de Zúñiga, Strauss, and Huber 2020), these findings are not good news for any conception of democracy. People who do not actively seek news *and* take actions to avoid unintentional exposure will hardly be able to learn about or discuss complex political issues, engage in collective action for social change, or keep political elites accountable.

Notes

1. Park (2019) is an exception to this and uses two waves of survey data from South Korean adults to test a model for direct and indirect effects of news overload on news avoidance. Although not specifically focused on news avoidance but rather on news consumption, it is also relevant to mention the longitudinal study by Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata (2013).
2. Given the large number of independent variables involved in this study and the long time-lag between waves (four months), we expected relatively small relationships. We therefore needed large sample and subsample sizes. These first two waves of the project are larger, more demographically diverse, and less subject to attrition.
3. Although it should be recalled that the relationship was non-significant in the fully controlled autoregressive model (see results).

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