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How News Feels: Anticipated Anxiety as a Factor in News Avoidance and a Barrier to Political Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study uses an inductive, qualitative approach to examine the perspectives of lower- and middle-class people in the United Kingdom who regularly access little or no professionally-produced news. Findings suggest that people's preexisting perspectives about what news is (anxiety-inducing) and offers for them (little practical value) play an important role in shaping attitudes toward news and subsequent behavior. These perspectives highlight the importance of emotional dimensions of news use beyond its presumed value as a source of information. While political communication scholarship has often treated news consumption as the cornerstone of good citizenship, we find avoiders hold uneven, weakly internalized norms about a perceived duty to stay informed, in part because they anticipate news will make them anxious without being relevant to their lives, resulting in limited engagement with news, and by extension, civic and political affairs. Promoting more informed societies requires grappling with these entrenched perspectives.

KEYWORDS

News audiences; information seeking; political knowledge; anxiety; emotion

The contemporary media environment offers unprecedented access to an abundant supply of news, yet a growing number of people in many countries report consuming little to none of it (Karlsen et al., 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2013). Even larger percentages say they actively avoid news (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020) or feel regularly worn out by it (Gottfried & Barthel, 2018). These trends seem troubling since the practice of following news, long held up in political communication research as fundamental to good citizenship (e.g., Schudson, 1998), has been linked to improved political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Moeller & De Vreese, 2019) and participation (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). While multiple factors are known to affect news use including political interest (Strömbäck et al., 2013), socialization (Edgerly, 2017; Shehata, 2016), and the changing media landscape (Prior, 2007), none of these factors are easily altered, which makes reducing disparities and achieving a more informed society a challenging proposition.

This study examines what news *feels like* from the perspectives of those who largely avoid it and shows that anticipated anxiety plays a key role in shaping how avoiders explain their lack of engagement with news. We argue that existing theories about news and political engagement, which often emphasize the value of the *information* being transmitted, under-

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appreciate perspectives held about the *social* and *emotional* dimensions of news – ideas about what news is and offers citizens. Drawing on in-depth interviews with people who report rarely accessing professionally-produced news in the United Kingdom (UK), we show that avoiding news is a reasonable strategy from their perspective given how it makes them feel – often anxious and disempowered. Our interviewees see news as dominated by stories about crime, terrorism, and partisan bickering, which generates not only fear but also feelings of uncertainty and a lack of control or agency. For those with already minimal political efficacy, the sense that they ought to follow news as a civic duty is much less compelling than the immediate and negative emotional reaction they have to news otherwise viewed as irrelevant for navigating daily life or the wider world. These findings contrast with previous work suggesting a more reciprocal short-term relationship between anxiety and information-seeking (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Valentino et al., 2009). Perspectives that cast news as anxiety-inducing and of little to no practical value represent a significant longer-term barrier to engaging with news, and by extension, civic life, shaping practices to a greater degree than more abstract, unevenly, and weakly internalized norms about a perceived duty to stay informed.

Why Some Follow the News and Others Avoid It

Prior research examining variation in news use has tended to focus either on individual differences in preferences (e.g., Prior, 2007), collective gaps in education or other resources required for engaging with news (e.g., Verba et al., 1995), or other factors pertaining to the quality and supply of news available (Aalberg et al., 2010; Darr et al., 2018). But social, cultural, and political considerations also structure whether news habits are passed down at home, in schools, or via other institutions (Buckingham, 2000; Edgerly, 2017; Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2017; Shehata, 2016). News consumption is a marker of class (Lindell & Sartorello, 2018) and for some provides social cohesion benefits (Berelson, 1949; Carey, 1988). People may follow news because they are part of communities that provide specific cultural resources that make the benefits of news use more tangible (see also, Palmer & Toff, 2020). While previous studies have shown political efficacy to be an antecedent to political engagement (e.g., Couldry et al., 2007; Eliasoph, 1998) and news consumption specifically (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), the relationship between efficacy alone and media use has been somewhat inconclusive (Kenski & Stroud, 2006).

In recent years, news audience research has increasingly focused on the phenomenon of "news avoidance" (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020) as scholars grapple with the implications of a high choice environment in which news is easily accessed but often ignored. While some researchers have defined news avoidance narrowly as purposeful resistance ("intentionally limiting news consumption" as in Woodstock, 2014), such work in practice tends to focus on how individuals who otherwise consume considerable quantities of news curate or curtail their media diets during particular time frames (Villi et al., 2022) or events such as COVID-19 (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Other research, however, has defined news avoidance more habitually, examining "extreme" populations who report rarely or never accessing any conventionally produced news at all for sustained periods (e.g., Palmer & Toff, 2020; Palmer et al., 2020). Such individuals often hail from the least advantaged socioeconomic classes (Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2022). This form of news avoidance is not only poorly understood and understudied, it represents a more normatively concerning disconnection from

news with implications for long-term social inequalities in how people engage in political life.

Anticipated Anxiety as a Driver of Disconnection

As we argue below, engaging with news is not only a matter of resources, the supply of available media content, or internalized norms surrounding its importance; it can also be a particularly fraught *emotional* experience. Our argument is based on an inductive study, but our findings speak to existing work in both communication research and political psychology, part of a growing focus on the "affective" qualities of news, including what Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) has called "the strategic ritual of emotionality" in journalism. Although some research has identified negativity as a frequent complaint about news (Buckingham, 2000) and media psychology research on "mood management" (Zillmann, 2000) places affective responses at the center of news consuming behaviors, these insights have rarely been integrated into political communication theories, which have focused more on short-term effects of exposure to content than how preconceptions informed by broader perspectives shape engagement over time.

We focus especially on the role of anxiety, one of the most studied negative emotions sometimes described interchangeably with "fear," "uneasiness," and "nervousness" (Brader & Marcus, 2013; Wagner & Morisi, 2019). As Cassese and Weber (2011) discuss, such affective responses arisebased on how people interpret encounters with perceived threats and "appraisals" made about the nature of the situation, specifically the degree of certainty, control, and agency that individuals feel they possess. Political psychologists have periodically studied the relationship between news use and anxiety, but this work has generally found a *positive* reciprocal relationship between such emotions and information-seeking (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). Anxious people tend to increase their attention to "any information that may help address the threat" (Brader, 2006, pp. 57–58). This work, often rooted in Affective Intelligence Theory (Marcus et al., 2000), has typically employed controlled experiments designed to examine situational effects which may or may not be relevant to long-term habitual behaviors.

Within this literature, however, some evidence points to how contextual factors may moderate information-seeking. People are only likely to seek out information perceived as "useful for addressing the problem at hand," as Valentino et al. (2009, p. 591) note in their study of selective exposure online. Brader (2006, p. 58), too, posits that anxiety sometimes "leads us to 'avoid' the danger by throwing ourselves into diversionary projects." Valentino et al. (2011) further find that anger, rather than anxiety, is the emotion primarily associated with mobilization (see also, Huddy et al., 2005), and in often overlooked findings in Rudolph, Gangl, and Stevens (2000), internal efficacy is noted as a potential moderator of anxiety's effect on information-seeking. In other words, seeking out news may not assuage anxiety if it serves mainly to remind people of what little agency or control they possess. As Costera Meijer (2013) shows in her ethnographic case study of Dutch news audiences' reactions to sensationalized local coverage, many find news draining rather than empowering, sowing uncertainty and fear rather than mollifying their underlying anxieties. Likewise, Villi et al. (2022) and Ytre-Arne and Moe (2021) spotlight the important role played by emotional factors in driving situational news avoidance as a strategy for compartmentalizing upsetting or discomforting information.

News Avoiders' Perspectives as a Critical Case Study

In the present study, we aim to build upon these past findings, which allude to the importance of anxiety as a possible de-motivating factor in news consumption by focusing on a critical case of individuals whose extreme behaviors enabled us to capture otherwise less visible themes while at the same time heeding Costera Meijer's (2012) call for journalism research that takes seriously the public's views about what makes news worthwhile. Specifically, we examine two questions concerning the experiences of those who avoid news in a habitual, long-term manner: (1) How does the experience of following the news feel to those who typically avoid it? And (2) How do people who rarely use news feel about the importance of staying informed?

This study builds upon a rich tradition of qualitative work in the social sciences that use a bottom-up approach to understanding how people think (e.g., Eliasoph, 1998; J. L. Hochschild, 1981), including work focused on the experiences of people on the margins (Coleman, 2013; A. R. Hochschild, 2016). Our main object of analysis is what Cramer Walsh calls "perspectives," defined as "the lenses through which people view issues" (2004, p. 2). She argues that "the perspectives people use to make sense of public affairs are rooted in social identities developed through social interaction" (2004, p. 26). Like her work, and other qualitative research on political practices, media use, and much more (e.g., Coleman, 2013; Costera Meijer, 2013; J. L. Hochschild, 1981; A. R. Hochschild, 2016; Swidler, 2001; Woodstock, 2014), we examine the preconceptions people draw on to make sense of the practices they engage in.

Specifically, on the basis of our empirical analysis we highlight the importance of what we call "*anticipated* anxiety." By that, we mean ideas people hold about the anxiety they expect to feel should they consume news more regularly. These particular notions about what news *is*, what it *offers*, and what it *feels like* to consume it account for a broad rejection of news among interviewees – as much if not more so than prior *practical experiences* using news. As we show below, following the news is not only a relational behavior, and it is not only based on actual experiences using news. It is a practice in which people draw on differing symbolic resources to make sense of those behaviors. These include preconceived perspectives on how news is likely to affect people emotionally *before* even engaging with any actual news. Economists often define news as an "experience good" that can be accurately evaluated only after having engaged with it (see, Nielsen, 2020), but some hold preconceived perspectives that mean they will be reluctant to engage with it and experience it in the first place. Our findings illustrate a broader theoretical point about the importance of cultural factors in shaping expectations about emotional responses that in turn influence news habits. Similar to Eliasoph (1998), these perspectives are sometimes accompanied by a sense that news ought to be followed, but avoiders weighed such norms against the limited value and anticipated emotional costs they ascribed to news.

Study Design and Methodology

Our findings draw on in-depth interviews with 43 "news avoiders," individuals who reported accessing professionally-produced news "less than once a month" or "never" – approximately 7% of the UK (Newman et al., 2017) where this study was conducted. By focusing on a strategic sample of extraordinary ordinary individuals whose orientations

toward news are unusual by definition (though not much more unusual than, e.g., paying for digital news[1]), we seek to identify factors relevant to this unique group, factors that in turn allow for a wider "logical generalization" (Luker, 2009).

We focused on the UK for several reasons. It is a country with higher rates of news avoidance relative to other Western nations but moderately higher socioeconomic and cultural diversity. As a practical matter, these characteristics improved our ability to identify study recruits. Additionally, the UK's media landscape contains a robust mix of tabloid and broadsheet journalism as well as public and private television – in contrast to countries where public service media has a limited presence (e.g., US), where news is highly fragmented and distrusted (e.g., Spain or Greece) or where news is almost universally used (e.g., Finland or Denmark).

Given that a small share of the public fit the study parameters, to identify participants, we relied primary on Kantar, a research firm with access to specialized online panels of difficult-to-reach populations,[2] who identified recruits using a screener question about news use derived from the Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2017). Like other forms of news and media use, news avoidance is a continuum. Interviews reveal that some study participants did have occasional contact with professionally-produced news, but most clearly had no regular habit of active news use. Recruitment was concentrated in and around Leeds and Manchester, post-industrial cities with diverse socioeconomic populations.[3]

We specifically focused on lower-income, less educated groups who tend to consume less news (e.g., Ksiazek et al., 2010) because they have been neglected in previous qualitative studies of news use, which often examine attitudes among college graduates with crystallized political attitudes. In Woodstock (2014), for example, "media resisters" say they achieve more "meaningful political participation" through withdrawing from news, but interviewees reported using, among other media, National Public Radio (NPR), *The New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and *The Huffington Post*, suggesting a very different disposition and set of practices from what we found among our interviewees who mostly came from lower middle-class backgrounds (see supplementary appendices). Interviewees were also predominately female (N = 36), a gender gap reflected across surveys of self-reported news use and examined in a separate study (Toff & Palmer, 2019). Participants who completed interviews were provided £40 compensation.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted by the first author in study participants' homes (N = 33), public locales (N = 3), or via telephone (N = 7), between Nov. 2016 and March 2017. Interview protocols were semi-structured with questions covering participants' social and family lives; daily habits, routines, and use of media (including but never limited to news); and attitudes toward journalists and journalism. Most questions focused on information study participants deemed relevant to their lives. Where news was specifically asked about, we allowed study participants to define the term themselves since we were interested in what it meant to them. Interviews averaged one hour and were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded for common themes in NVivo software.[4] Pseudonyms have been used to preserve participants' anonymity.[5]

Some may question whether expressions of anxiety in interviews might be post-hoc rationalizations employed by study participants to explain their lack of interest in the news. While we cannot know the emotions experienced by study participants – we take their colloquial expressions of "anxiety" and unease at face value – we do note that many described taking active and extreme steps to modify their behaviors to avoid further contact with news including closing social media accounts or exiting rooms when televisions were tuned to news programs. We also argue that perceptions about the emotional content of news may be meaningful in their own right – regardless of their accuracy and regardless of whether they are strictly aligned with clinical definitions of anxiety – as such expressions, rooted in social or cultural understandings, can shape habits and behaviors over time.

Results

Below we detail these perspectives. We find that (1) many perceive the actual content of news as intensely negative and largely devoid of information relevant to their lives; and (2) many expressed deep ambivalence about the civic importance of staying informed, documenting that more abstract norms encouraging news use were weakly and unevenly internalized. Many conceptions about news and news use are captured in these exchanges, but the way in which preconceived perspectives generate anticipated anxiety and shape encounters with news are particularly notable. News is seen as *emotionally* taxing – a source of uncertainty and lack of control – making it an obstacle to deeper political engagement in a complex and upsetting world.

When News Is "Doom and Gloom"

Interviewees most often described news as overwhelmingly negative, filled with anxiety-inducing stories about crime or terrorism. Where news was discussed as a source of political information, study participants most often deemed it inconsequential – too boring, irrelevant, or confusing to be useful – reinforcing feelings of uncertainty and limited agency.

Negativity In The News

The deeply negative quality of the news was referenced repeatedly across interviews; six separate participants, unprompted, used the same phrase "doom and gloom" as a descriptor. This negativity manifested in assessments that news primarily emphasized gruesome and horrifying tales of crime or distressing stories about terrorist attacks.

Crime stories were especially on the minds of those living in "rough" neighborhoods – as many of the working-class participants in the study often referred to their communities. Caitlin, for instance, a former police officer and single mother who had taken a retail job partly due to fears about safety, recounted incidents in her neighborhood: problems with burglaries, "antisocial behavior," alcoholics, teenagers doing "drug runs" on motorbikes. Her car had been stolen just two weeks prior to our interview. Like several others, Caitlin referenced local stories about stabbings or other neighborhood incidents – crime stories recounted by multiple study participants. These would circulate like "gossip," as Jane put it, even among those who paid little attention to professionally-produced news. For example, Jane recalled "there was a teacher who got killed I think, locally by a student. Everyone was going on about that for ages." Many also saw crime as one of the most important problems

in their communities (Brenna: "Something has to be put in place I think for that for safeguarding kids; it makes me worry to grow up and let me kids go out when they're older."). Many felt, as Chelsea did, feelings of resignation about neighborhood threats, "Wherever you go, you're going to have crime, you're going to have robberies, you're going to have car thefts and, unfortunately, it's just one of those things."

Perceptions that news was dominated by such stories often generated visceral reactions among study participants; "I genuinely got sick," Robert explained, when he read about "sex offenders and stuff like that and how a sex offender would get free and they'd only serve one year and stuff like that." For parents of young children, crime stories hit particularly hard. Chelsea said the last news story she could recall concerned a 16-year-old boy who was stabbed "walking home from school." She said, "It was very close to our house, and it was on the radio, I think my mum had heard it on [the TV news program] 'Calendar,' the kids had heard it all over the computer." Because the victim was a similar age as her son, "it's quite close to the bone." It was not uncommon for such stories to be the *only* examples of news participants could remember seeing – other than celebrity gossip. Megan recalled, for example, "You know when there were publicity cases on kids getting kidnapped and stuff like that. That were always a big subject . . . Make sure that you don't do this, you don't do that. This is what to do in that situation." She said she briefly used a news app on her phone years ago in an effort to stay better informed but found it to be "so depressing so I just got rid of it."

For some, anticipated anxiety toward news was less about crime stories and more about war and terrorism. Many recalled reacting to violent episodes in the news not by seeking out more information but by avoiding opportunities for exposure in the future. They felt subjecting themselves to such emotional trauma served little purpose. Andrea, for example, recounted rising concerns about terrorism as attacks got closer to home:

> We had the London bombings and everything like that and that just brings it home that *it will come to us*. And when the London bombings, the train and the bus, that highlighted the fact that nobody is safe, it doesn't matter where on the planet you are, you're not safe. And I think reading things where people are like, 'Oh we've got a bit of knowledge that something is going to happen,' it upsets you and you worry and then nowt happens, so you're worrying yourself unjustly. (Andrea)

Andrea saw terrorism stories, even those she dismissed as "scaremongering," as deeply affecting, which influenced her decision "not to watch the news because I don't want to, like, upset myself." She explained, "The thought of a van going crazy in the middle of Leeds city centre . . . It's awful. And the thought of my like 15-year-old coming home through town on a day where something is meant to happen, I'd be going out of my mind."

Others had similar reactions. Kate, who works in customer service for a travel agency, described how a terrorist incident in Tunisia had a particular effect on her "even though we're obviously nowhere near Tunisia." She said, "It still was scary, because it was kind of like the . . . It wasn't the first one, but it was very big, wasn't it? And very unexpected. I think that's kind of when I was at the point where I was, 'It can actually happen anywhere.'" She said she could not bring herself to pay attention to the news because "in general, I'm just a nervous person when it comes to crime and death and stuff like that. Anything like that scares me." Emily, likewise, found herself physically impacted by news about terrorism and described a kind of cold-turkey rejection of news. News about "the Islamic State thing"

made Emily "really ill" to the point that her husband insisted (in her words): "Stop watching it. It doesn't affect you, so don't watch it . . . otherwise, you're going to end up a recluse." She continued:

> You know, it was silly things, like, I wouldn't dare go to White Rose [shopping center]. Because, God forbid, what if I got bombed in White Rose. You know, I'm on the bus, going to town, and sending my kids to school, and it's the whole paranoia thing. So, yeah. The news just stays off, and I live in a little picture perfect little bubble. (Emily)

As we talked, Emily traced her fears about terrorism to the World Trade Center attacks, which occurred when she was a teenager. Before that, she said she was unaware that terrorism existed, "Obviously, I'd heard of the IRA, but I didn't know what they were, who they were, and it was over in Ireland, so it didn't bother me." The Sept. 11 attacks occurred just weeks before she and her family were planning to travel to the US on holiday. She recalled being "petrified" that World War III might start at any moment, "I literally sat up all night watching TV, watching what was happening, finding out as much information as I could. I don't know why I did it, but, then, yeah . . . and even now, if I let it, I could really let it affect me again."

Notice how in this example, Emily recounts a situational reaction to terrorism news that fits with previous research on anxiety and information-seeking; negative emotions prompted greater short-term attention to news (e.g., Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). But Emily also described how in order to regulate such responses, she took steps to actively shield herself habitually from exposure to news as a coping strategy – "the news just stays off."

The "Push-Pull" of Emotionality in the News

This oscillation between attraction and repulsion with regards to negative news was a recurring theme among many who anxiously avoided the "doom and gloom" of the news. When asked about news stories she had come across, suburban mother Jodie also referenced terrorism, saying she was "drawn to" such stories because they "pull at your heart strings" but also repelled by them, "Nobody wants to see people suffering; nobody wants to hear of people having died in attacks." In another example, Olivia recalled a conversation with her mother about news involving vivid details about a priest who "got his head beheaded in France and it's like … with a knife … it's not a clean thing, is it?" She recounted telling her mother, "I'm going to have nightmares now, thanks for that. I don't even know. After that I was like no, I don't want to know anything. *Why are you telling me that?*"

In another example of this push-pull dynamic, Grace described occasional stories that caught her attention, "little articles that are quite exciting," but then she corrected herself, "Not exciting, [but] my friend told me about a boy that went missing and his mom's been searching for him and they couldn't find him. And then they found him in a bin or something." She said such stories were "probably quite interesting to know really" because others in her community would frequently converse about them, but she preferred not to, "I just haven't got a clue." Brenna, likewise, said "We're not really a big family on like talking about news . . . and it seems really bad because it's only if something tragic happens and it's been on the news we'll all sit and talk about it." She went on to explain how the "only time I'd really go out of my way to watch" the news concerned stories about "current missing

children and stuff" since "I've got children so I do watch, I would zone into that one." Still, she demurred, "I think if you pay attention to a lot of the news, you could spend your life worried." When asked about whether she viewed it as important for her daughter to be well informed when she got older, she said, "It's not that important. I mean, I'm surviving. I'm not worrying about things." She wanted her daughter not to be "totally clueless" but also wanted to shield her from violent stories she thought would only scare her, such as "the whole Westminster thing." In line with Cramer Walsh's (2004) observation that perspectives are rooted in social identities, in several of these interviews news avoiders we talked to explicitly described how their perspectives on the news were rooted at least in part on identities as parents with children or residents of particular neighborhoods.

Limited Informational Utility

Not everyone was fixated on the "doom and gloom" aspects of news coverage but saw it as basically irrelevant to them and their lives – unlikely to provide them with any increased sense of control or agency and therefore unlikely to reduce their anxieties about threats in the world. Some viewed news as mostly substance free ("mindless, celebrity reporting about rubbish" as Jodie put it) while others perceived news to be synonymous with politics which they saw as "boring" arguments between partisans. Few study participants had a stake in such debates; nearly two-thirds said they did not identify with or even lean toward any established political party. As Emily put it: "I just always think it's the same kind of thing. There's always somebody arguing for, and somebody always arguing against. And then they just do what they want anyway, don't they?" Patrick said he thought others who paid close attention to news, such as his stepfather, did so because of their strong interest in politics: "Any time I go up to his house he loves talking politics. But it just bores me, I don't even get involved." He dismissed all news as "just politics gossip basically."

For many, a lack of investment or engagement with any political side meant that stakes involved in political stories were unclear and relationships between political actors difficult to understand. Recall Jodie above who described being drawn to emotional stories that "pull at the heartstrings." When considering news about the "political and financial," she said "it just doesn't mean anything to me, so I just switch off." Others expressed similar sentiments: "I don't really understand like the different parties and stuff," Brenna said when asked about conversations she recalled involving news. She remembered examples like "the David Cameron stuff" (speaking of the former British Prime Minister), but she said her lack of knowledge about politics meant she would contribute to such conversations "only to a certain extent to what I understood." Engaging with news in the past only added to participants' sense of uncertainty, provoking further anxiety.

Most study participants felt the same way as Brenna. When asked a standard survey question about placement on a left-right ideological scale, several participants asked for clarification, and a majority responded "don't know." Ryan, for example, said he felt he was too uninformed: "I'm like a sheep," he said. "I couldn't tell you one policy, I couldn't tell you one difference between Labour and Conservative." Amelia felt the same, asking, "Do you know like with the political party thing . . . ? I've got my views on like what I think about the government, but I don't understand what both parties have." Again, the role of social identity in shaping these perspectives is clear: for political partisans and for those interested in politics, labels like "left" and "right," "Labour" and "Conservative" are meaningful, but for many others they are not (see, Kalmoe, 2020). Without being equipped with tools to

decode these terms, many felt as Gracie did that "any political thing" in the news was difficult to understand: "It just confuses me. So I sort of gave up because this all made me mad." While Gracie said she thought "knowing about what's going on in the world" could be "really helpful," she also felt other matters in her life were difficult enough – "like earning enough money to survive." News mainly interfered:

> Like personally for me I thought we should stay in the EU because I believe in community and even on a global scale I think it's a good thing. But if I read the newspaper it breaks it all down into these tiny little things. And I think there's so much for me to catch up on. 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. (Gracie)

Interviewees like Gracie clearly recognize the sociological insight that perspectives are shaped over years, not acquired or changed overnight. Given the timing of interviews, many participants referenced coverage of Brexit, and as Gracie does, most expressed confusion on the subject. Often efforts to learn about it added to feelings of frustrating uncertainty – again heightening anxiety. Kate mentioned "an enthusiast" at work who "just says stuff, so I'm like, 'What? I don't understand what you're on about?'" When she asked for clarification, she found it unhelpful. "I think I need to know more about it, but I just don't think the right person's explained it properly."

Uncertainty about political matters was difficult to disentangle from a persistent cynicism about civic affairs, a view that ordinary citizens were unlikely to have any agency or impact on the world's problems. This lack of political efficacy echoed across interviews: "My vote is not going to count, if I did vote . . . it's just another one" (Ryan); "I don't really feel like I've got much control over what's going on in the world; I'm just one person" (Jane); "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." (Gracie); "Nobody is going to listen to me" (Chelsea); "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" (Amelia). (Some of the cynicism documented in conversations like these are reminiscent of the deep stories mapped by A. R. Hochschild, 2016 in her work on Tea Party activists in the American South.)

The sense that news has limited informational utility is in part a preconception, but as interviewees make clear, it too has emotional dimensions intertwined with anxiety. People are not simply assessing news in utilitarian terms, they describe how it makes them feel: at best bored, but at worst confused and uncertain – states associated with anxiety (Wagner & Morisi, 2019). Many people who use a great deal of news may also feel this way, but from the perspective of those with limited political efficacy, avoiding news entirely looks attractive. As Chelsea explained, "Obviously, I could be a little bit more into what's going on and look myself," but given her views about how politics works, she did not see the point. "Knowing more about it doesn't do anything about it, does it?" Between the uncertainty and stasis of politics, and the barrage of "images at night of just wars going on, just gunshots" and other "terrifying" topics, as Lilia summed up her perceptions of news, many viewed tuning out as a survival skill. Lilia called avoiding the news her "self-defense mechanism," a way of focusing on more manageable tasks within her control. "What can I do? I can't change that."

Struggling with the Duty to Stay Informed

As we have shown, many news avoiders held perspectives associating news with anticipated anxiety. Coupled with limited political efficacy and beliefs that news provides almost no practical value, these preconceptions made avoiding it a sensible response to threats in the world. However, one of the key differences between news avoiders and others who may also find news negative and dislike politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Curran et al., 2014) is a skeptical view many held when it came to norms dictating the importance of consuming news as a civic duty (McCombs & Poindexter, 1983). Many rejected the notion that being informed was a requirement for good citizenship (Schudson, 1998).

While a small number could be characterized as having no internalized norms about the importance of following news, most held more mixed views, often agreeing at first that following the news was an important civic duty but in the course of the interview gradually turning more ambivalent. Many described themselves as uninformed about political, civic, or community affairs, but such disclosures were often accompanied by some awareness about how their aversion to news could come across as socially undesirable. Some personally rejected such views; others struggled openly with them. Overall, the norm that citizens *ought* to follow the news comes across as weakly and unevenly internalized and more abstract than interviewees' more immediate sense that news primarily prompts feelings of uncertainty and lack of control.

Persistent Social Expectations

Among the portion of the sample who rejected these normative views, many expressed awareness that their own beliefs about the importance of paying attention to the news were unusual. Emily, for example, who had shielded herself from even incidental exposure online and offline as a strategy for coping with anxiety strongly rejected the view that it was important to stay informed: "Not at all. No. Again, if it doesn't affect [you], then it's pointless." But as she continued, she began to second guess herself. "Maybe that's naïve, maybe it's wrong. Maybe I should pay more attention, but . . . I don't think there's a right or wrong answer." She concluded, "It's not against the law not to watch the news."

Many study participants had views similar to Emily's, vacillating about prevailing norms about the duty to stay informed. Often these attitudes were expressed as an aspiration about responsibilities they admitted they were not currently fulfilling. Rosemary, for example, said, "As I'm getting older, I think I need to know more," or Andrea said she "should watch it more" even though she was "not really interested." Tessa, a young office worker on disability due to chronic fatigue, said she tried to take an interest in "current affairs" and "things on the U.S. elections" mainly because "I felt like I should know a bit about that."

Several referred to admonishments from parents or grandparents for not paying closer attention to the news. Sarah recalled, "My mum says to me all the time . . . 'You must keep updated. The news tells you everything what's going on.'" Megan remembered similar criticism from her mother ("You don't have a clue what's going on in the news!"), which led her to reflect, "I probably should, really. I probably should have more of a passion for finding out what's going on and keeping up with it." Lilia said her father "used to tell me off for not watching the news." She thought perhaps her own lack of interest stemmed from that feeling of obligation: "You know when your parents tell you to do something and you just don't because they've told you to? Maybe it's something to do with that. I was always like, 'No, I'm not interested!'"

These feelings of obligation were sometimes accompanied by expressions of guilt. Jodie, for example, said she thought it was "terrible" that she had "never been interested to sit and . . . read a newspaper." When asked why she felt that way, she explained, "I don't know, because I guess it's that thing that you always feel like you should be a little bit more interested and aware of the news and what's going on." When asked to sum up her reasons for not paying more attention, Jodie offered, "I'm a bad person?"

Study participants often made similar self-deprecating comments about their own lack of interest in the news, as though their failure to take an interest in news reflected poorly on their character – or at least that they *should* feel that way. Jane, for example, reflecting on her limited news exposure, exclaimed, "Bloody hell, I'm like living in some little bubble, aren't I?" Jennifer said talking about her lack of interest made her feel "a bit stupid now." Jodie, a middle-class mother of three, worried it reflected poorly on her as a parent. She recounted her son's English teacher chastising her, explaining, "We don't buy any newspapers at all, which I think is really bad." In another example, Lilia said she wanted to be "one of those people who just bought a *Guardian* every weekend and just sat and read the whole thing." When asked why, she said, "I feel a bit stupid sometimes because people will be talking about, 'Oh, this is happening,' and I'm like, 'I don't know what you're on about,' and just shy away from the conversation."

Such awkward interactions often fueled ambivalence about the importance of following the news, but others expressed some concerns about their own inattention, attempting to reconcile their avoidance with what they thought it implied about the kind of person they were. Tessa, for example, one of the few politically engaged news avoiders interviewed, described her aversion to news as a "Jekyll and Hyde thing in my head," where she struggled to balance her self-concept as an "intellectual person who cares about" weighty matters (e.g., "I did get very upset when I accidentally bought Israeli avocados the other day") with her preference for escapist entertainment (e.g., "I really want to know what Blake Lively's kid is called."). She struggled to give herself permission to "just do what makes you happy at the moment."

"Is that really bad?" Gemma, a young mother in Manchester, asked after revealing that she did not find the news interesting. "I should have more knowledge I think." But as we talked, Gemma explained that she did not think the knowledge she would gain from paying attention to the news would affect her. She mainly felt compelled because she felt "a bit ignorant" to the point of being "a bit oblivious."

Competing Norms About Self-Care

It is important not to overstate how much study participants felt shame about their lack of interest in the news. The majority were unfazed by the questioning and had spent little time thinking about their own media habits. Many felt, as Caitlin put it, "It'd be nice to know what's going on, but I don't feel like I've missed out on anything." Ava echoed this view, "I think it would be nice to know what's happening in the world" but "for me, myself, it doesn't have an impact on what I'm doing at the moment." She continued, "Perhaps when I'm a little bit older with grown up children I'll have more of an interest in it. At the moment, it's just about providing for my family and making sure my son's okay." Following news was seen as an obstacle to being a good parent, not an important civic duty to model.

Echoing Eliasoph (1998), many justified their inattention to news as Ava does by drawing on competing norms about the importance of taking responsibility for things "closer to home" in their day-to-day lives, a perspective that foregrounds anticipated anxiety and the limited perceived value of news over more abstract norms of citizenship. Patrick, for

example, a part-time personal trainer in Manchester, said he felt focusing on self-care was necessary before taking an interest in things happening in the world. "You have to understand what's going on with your own life first I think. So you can take control of your own life and help your friends and family." Haylie, a lawyer and also a self-professed anxious person, offered the same view: "I don't want to pick up newspapers and things like that because of the bad news, the things that I can't do anything about." She attributed her news avoidance in part to advice she read in a self-help guide, "I never really enjoyed the news on TV, so that wasn't any hardship."

Although Haylie, like Tessa, may be an extreme case of anxiety-related news avoidance, others expressed similar views about the need to withdraw as a life strategy. Hollie, for example, offered: "It just depends how your life is, because if you've got a busy life, doing that as well [following the news], it's a bit too much." Olivia described avoiding news as a trade-off between caring about the world and attending to neighbors in need, "I know it's bad, I should probably like look into it. But I'd rather go and help the street than go and worry about something that I'm not gonna do anything about." Many saw avoidance as part of a strategy to achieve a "balance," as Libby put it, between paying attention to "something that you really should know about versus, like, 'Yes! Yes! This is another thing that everyone's very angry about.'" Overdoing it caused her to feel "just kind of burned out." As Gracie said, "I think honestly in life everything's quite difficult anyway. Like earning enough money to survive and keeping your house nice and keeping my van functioning. And all of these things are quite hard anyway."

Discussion

As Coleman (2013, p. 4) has argued, "the sustainability of any social practice depends to a large measure on how it feels to participate in it." Our analysis of how news avoiders – people who say they use little or no professionally-produced news – feel about news underlines the importance of anticipated anxiety in contributing to disengagement with news. Those we interviewed all had access to an abundant supply of news and were capable individuals navigating sometimes challenging and always demanding lives. Some of them also had an abstract sense that they ought to follow the news. Nonetheless, they consumed little of it, associating news with anxiety and believing it offered little to make them feel more in control or certain about how to navigate their lives. Balancing often weakly and unevenly internalized norms of citizenship against the perspective that news is mainly "doom and gloom" and useless "rubbish," which only reinforces already limited efficacy, our interviewees mostly turn their backs on what some scholars have called the "primary sense-making practice of modernity" (Hartley, 1996). Many do this with ambivalence, a sense that perhaps they should engage more, but their sense of civic duty is overshadowed by considerations such as self-care. Through the lens of the specific perspectives we have identified here, news avoidance is cast as a reasonable choice. It feels better than the alternative, and there is no strong sense of missing out.

The role of emotions here, and specifically the way anticipated anxiety shapes perspectives toward news, contributes to growing work on affective dimensions of media use (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Brader, 2006; Villi et al., 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). More specifically, preconceptions about the emotional impact of news appear to play an important role in structuring orientations toward news and, in turn, exacerbating inequalities in who engages and who disconnects. We thus offer a sociological complement to more behaviorist approaches. The perspectives we identify here are part of wider cultural "toolkits"

of symbolic resources, shaped in part by past experiences, but also social identities and relationships, that people use to make sense of the world and develop what the cultural sociologist Ann Swidler (1986) calls "strategies for action." The perspectives we identify among those who have adopted strategies of avoidance are intertwined with resources including communal norms, shared habits, and more abstract folk theories (Costera Meijer, 2012; Nielsen, 2016; Palmer et al., 2020; Woodstock, 2014) that people draw on when interpreting and navigating news. Because they guide action and shape expectations and emotional responses in many cases *before* people engage with things (like news), such preconceptions are of independent importance in understanding how people navigate the world. They are social facts that are important whether or not they are in any verifiable sense accurate or true representations of the news. Indeed, many journalists might challenge the idea that news is all doom and gloom, let alone irrelevant (though criticism of its negativity bias and accusations of superficial sensationalism are certainly widespread among media commentators, too).

As many scholars have pointed out, the meaning of news depends not only on news itself but on the people who engage with it and the perspectives they bring to those interactions like those identified here. Some perspectives we detail, such as the anticipated anxiety that comes with seeing news as "doom and gloom," may be particularly pronounced among extreme news avoiders like our interviewees (Newman et al., 2017; but see, Edgerly, 2021). Others, including a sense of duty, may be more widespread elsewhere. More research is needed to map variation in perspectives, folk theories, and anticipated emotional responses to news among different groups in different countries that gets beyond a narrow utilitarian consideration of the perceived value of the informational content of news alone – along with the question of how such preconceptions take hold and under what circumstances they can be altered.

Much like Coleman's study of "sense-making" in political participation (Coleman, 2013), we show how negative preconceptions about how news feels can be a barrier to engaging in political life. For some, news meant to inform in practice scrambles their sense-making abilities. When coupled with limited political efficacy, a perspective that news offers limited value casts avoidance as a reasonable response. Given well-documented benefits of regular news use for political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Moeller & De Vreese, 2019) and participation (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000), news avoidance may reinforce inequalities between those who do and do not engage in civic life. So long as people fear news will make them feel bad and do little to help them live their lives, those who seek to mobilize more of the public to become more regular news consumers must directly contend with these engrained cultural perspectives.

Notes

1. For comparison, the percentage who said they made an ongoing payment (subscription or membership) for a digital news service in 2021 was 4% in the UK (Newman et al., 2021).
2. Three study participants were recruited in person in targeted neighborhoods in Oxford, UK.
3. As most interviews were conducted in person, it was not feasible to recruit from across the country. Recruitment was also targeted by age (18-to-45), a strong predictor of news use.
4. See the supplementary appendices for additional information about coding procedures.
5. The study was approved by the University of Oxford's Research Ethics Committee (reference #R48688).

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support this study are available from the corresponding author, Benjamin Toff, upon reasonable request in a limited form that preserves the privacy of research participants.

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