



News-Avoidance Behavior in High-Intensity Digital Information Environments

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Abstract

The contemporary digital information environment provides continuous access to breaking news, algorithmically selected updates, notifications, social-media commentary, live streams, short-form video, newsletters, podcasts, and user-generated interpretations of public events. Expanded availability, however, does not necessarily produce sustained news engagement. A growing body of research identifies news avoidance as an important audience response to information overload, emotional strain, declining trust, repetitive crisis coverage, low perceived efficacy, and excessive informational choice. The present study examines news-avoidance behavior within high-intensity digital information environments and distinguishes deliberate information regulation from persistent disengagement from public affairs. Because verified participant-level data were not available, the study adopts an explicitly simulation-based research design. A synthetic analytical corpus of 400 hypothetical digital-news users was distributed across four information-intensity conditions: low-intensity exposure, managed high-choice exposure, repetitive high-intensity exposure, and overloaded emotionally fatigued exposure. Five dimensions—perceived news overload, emotional fatigue, trust in news, news-processing efficacy, and avoidance intention—were incorporated into a comparative analytical framework.

The simulated results indicate that the News-Avoidance Index rises from 28 under low-intensity exposure to 81 among highly overloaded and emotionally fatigued users. Managed exposure is associated with considerably lower avoidance than repetitive high-intensity exposure, suggesting that volume alone does not explain withdrawal; perceived control, relevance, emotional burden, and the ability to process information also matter. The paper argues that news avoidance should be conceptualized as a continuum ranging from adaptive boundary management and selective topic avoidance to chronic disengagement. Sustainable audience engagement therefore requires journalism and platform design that reduce unnecessary repetition, improve contextual clarity, strengthen perceived usefulness, protect user agency, and rebuild trust without treating constant exposure as an ideal form of citizenship.

Keywords: news avoidance, information overload, digital journalism, news fatigue, selective exposure, social media, audience engagement, news efficacy, digital information environment

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of journalism has fundamentally altered the conditions under which people encounter news. Earlier media environments were constrained by scheduled broadcasts, printed

publication cycles, and a comparatively limited number of available sources. Contemporary audiences instead navigate an almost continuous flow of breaking alerts, websites, social-network feeds, live blogs, messaging applications, videos, podcasts, automated recommendations, and commentary. This environment has increased accessibility while simultaneously raising the cognitive work required to distinguish relevance, credibility, urgency, duplication, and significance. The latest Reuters Institute Digital News Report illustrates the scale of disengagement emerging within this environment: in 2026, 42% of surveyed respondents across markets reported that they sometimes or often avoid news, compared with 29% in 2017. The same report describes declining interest and growing audience responses characterized by anxiety, disengagement, and cynicism.

News avoidance should not automatically be interpreted as ignorance or political indifference. Audiences may intentionally reduce exposure because news consumption has become emotionally demanding, repetitive, difficult to process, or perceived as insufficiently actionable. Research has repeatedly associated avoidance with negative emotions, overload, distrust, reduced news efficacy, and perceptions that news adversely affects well-being. De Bruin and colleagues found during the COVID-19 crisis that negative emotional responses helped explain increases in avoidance and that avoidance could temporarily support perceived well-being. Park's two-wave panel research further showed that perceived social-media news overload can reduce users' confidence in finding and understanding relevant information, which subsequently contributes to news avoidance.

The intensity of digital information environments magnifies these pressures. Users may encounter the same major event through multiple news applications, reposted social-media content, commentary, notifications, influencers, group messages, and algorithmically recommended videos. The resulting experience is not simply one of having “too much information.” It may involve informational redundancy, emotional repetition, uncertainty about credibility, interruption, perceived urgency, and limited ability to act upon distressing information. Contemporary research on information overload characterizes it as a broader problem affecting decision-making, productivity, and well-being, while news-specific studies identify overload as a relevant antecedent of avoidance.

At the same time, complete withdrawal and selective avoidance should be analytically separated. A person may avoid political conflict while continuing to read local news, temporarily stop following war reporting, disable notifications while retaining a daily news routine, or intentionally limit consumption to one trusted source. Andersen and colleagues' longitudinal research demonstrates that selective news avoidance contains both relatively stable and temporally varying dimensions. Their findings support viewing avoidance as a continuum rather than a fixed category of people who simply “do not consume news.” Schäfer and colleagues likewise found different motivations for avoiding different topics: issue fatigue was particularly relevant to COVID-19 coverage, whereas anger and low trust were important in political-news avoidance.

The present study therefore investigates news avoidance as an adaptive and potentially problematic response to high-intensity digital information environments. It focuses on the interaction between information volume, repetition, emotional fatigue, perceived efficacy, trust, and user control. Rather than claiming original field evidence, the study develops a simulation-based comparative model that can subsequently be validated through real audience research. Its central argument is that news avoidance emerges not simply because audiences are unwilling to be informed but because contemporary information environments may exceed users' cognitive, emotional, and temporal



capacities. Understanding this distinction is essential for journalism organizations, digital platforms, policymakers, and researchers seeking to maintain informed public participation without imposing unsustainable demands on audience attention.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine the Relationship Between Digital Information Intensity and News Avoidance

The study examines how increasing frequency, repetition, notification pressure, informational density, and multi-platform exposure may correspond with stronger intentions to limit or avoid news.

2.2 To Identify Psychological and Communicative Drivers of Avoidance

The research evaluates perceived information overload, emotional fatigue, news trust, processing efficacy, and perceived control as interacting conditions influencing whether audiences continue, reduce, or selectively restructure news use.

2.3 To Distinguish Adaptive News Regulation from Persistent Disengagement

The study differentiates temporary or selective avoidance intended to manage well-being from chronic patterns in which audiences consistently disconnect from professionally produced news and public-affairs information.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 From News Abundance to Information Overload

Digital abundance has fundamentally changed the economics of audience attention. High-choice media environments reduce many traditional barriers to accessing information while substantially increasing the amount of content competing for limited cognitive resources. Van Aelst and colleagues identified the emergence of high-choice political communication environments as an important challenge for democratic communication because greater choice can produce increasingly divergent patterns of media exposure.

News overload represents one important consequence. Song, Jung, and Kim's research conceptualized perceived news overload as a condition with cognitive and attitudinal consequences for news use. Their work demonstrates that the problem is not merely objective information quantity but the user's perception that available information exceeds manageable processing capacity.

Park subsequently extended this argument to social media. Drawing on news-efficacy mechanisms, the study found that overload was associated with reduced confidence in finding and understanding desired news, which in turn predicted stronger avoidance. This mechanism is important because it shifts attention from simple exposure volume toward the perceived manageability of the information environment.

Contemporary social platforms can amplify overload because news appears alongside entertainment, interpersonal communication, advertisements, political advocacy, commentary, and user-generated content. Individuals may encounter information intentionally and incidentally. Schäfer's systematic review of incidental news exposure identified 88 studies dealing with situations in which audiences encounter news while using digital media for other reasons. Consequently, avoiding news in a networked environment may itself require active effort.

Recent evidence further suggests that overload can encourage both avoidance and curation rather than a single uniform response. A 2026 study involving social-media users in the United Arab Emirates found relationships among fear of missing out, news overload, avoidance, and curation, illustrating that overwhelmed users may simultaneously reduce some forms of exposure while actively organizing others.

This distinction has substantial theoretical importance. An overloaded individual may not abandon information completely. Instead, the user may reduce sources, mute topics, disable alerts, rely on summaries, or shift toward selected curators. News avoidance therefore often operates together with news-management strategies.

3.2 Emotional Fatigue, Trust, and News Efficacy

Information quantity alone cannot explain news avoidance. Emotional responses play a central role because contemporary news frequently concerns conflict, disasters, political confrontation, economic insecurity, public-health threats, crime, and climate risks.

Toff and Nielsen conceptualized anticipated anxiety as an important barrier to news engagement, demonstrating that audiences may avoid information partly because they anticipate that consuming it will produce undesirable emotional consequences. De Bruin and colleagues similarly found that avoidance during the COVID-19 crisis was explained partly by negative emotions generated through news exposure.

Research focusing on fear-inducing topics indicates that emotional intensity interacts with perceived importance, self-efficacy, and overload. Tunney, Thorson, and Chen showed that following or avoiding threatening news cannot be reduced to emotional negativity alone; users also consider whether information feels important and whether they possess sufficient capacity to deal with it.

Trust introduces another important mechanism. Avoidance becomes more likely when users believe journalistic coverage is unreliable, excessively negative, politically biased, repetitive, sensationalized, or unrelated to their everyday lives. Cross-national research by Toff and Kalogeropoulos systematically evaluated individual- and country-level predictors of avoidance and demonstrated that the surrounding information environment matters alongside personal characteristics.

More recent topic-specific evidence further supports this interpretation. Schäfer and colleagues found that political-news avoidance was associated particularly with anger and low trust, whereas avoidance of other news categories showed different motivational patterns. Research from Aotearoa New Zealand similarly reports well-being effects, distrust, and dissatisfaction with reporting quality among prominent motivations for avoidance.

News efficacy connects these factors. Users who believe they can identify important information, understand complicated developments, and distinguish credible reporting are better positioned to manage high-choice environments. Conversely, overload may reduce this confidence and promote avoidance. The relationship suggests that audience disengagement should not be addressed exclusively by producing more news; improving comprehensibility and perceived usefulness may be equally important.



3.3 Selective Avoidance, Persistent Avoidance, and Research Gap

News avoidance is increasingly conceptualized as multidimensional rather than as a simple division between users and non-users. Skovsgaard and Andersen argued for clearer differentiation among forms and causes of avoidance, while more recent work emphasizes variations in intentionality, selectivity, consistency, and temporality.

Andersen, Shehata, Skovsgaard, and Strömbäck used a five-wave panel design to distinguish relatively stable avoidance tendencies from temporary fluctuations in selective avoidance. Their results indicate that individuals may strategically manage exposure to particular issues while continuing to use news more generally.

This distinction is reinforced by research showing that intentional avoidance does not necessarily imply extremely low total news consumption. Some audiences remain generally informed while controlling when, where, and how they encounter particular topics.

The 2020 Reuters Institute findings make this conceptual distinction particularly important. With 42% reporting at least some news avoidance, treating all avoidance as total disengagement would substantially oversimplify audience behavior.

A further research gap concerns the role of information intensity as a combined environmental condition. Much prior scholarship studies overload, trust, emotion, efficacy, or avoidance individually. In actual digital environments, however, users experience these simultaneously. A stream of repetitive negative stories may produce emotional exhaustion; low perceived usefulness may reduce efficacy; conflicting narratives may reduce trust; notifications may remove the sense of control; and the combined experience may encourage selective or persistent withdrawal.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Synthetic Analytical Corpus

The study adopts a simulation-based comparative design because no verified primary dataset was provided. The approach is intended to demonstrate a reproducible analytical structure for future empirical testing without representing hypothetical observations as real participant responses.

A synthetic corpus of 400 hypothetical digital-news users was created and divided equally across four **information-environment conditions**:

- low-intensity exposure;
- managed high-choice exposure;
- repetitive high-intensity exposure; and
- overloaded and emotionally fatigued exposure.

Each hypothetical profile was assigned standardized values ranging from 0 to 100 across five analytical dimensions.

Table 1: Operational Framework for Measuring News-Avoidance Conditions

Construct	Operational Meaning	Analytical Expectation	Scale
Perceived News Overload	Extent to which available news exceeds perceived processing capacity	Higher overload expected to increase avoidance	0–100



Construct	Operational Meaning	Analytical Expectation	Scale
Emotional Fatigue	Exhaustion or negative emotional burden associated with repeated news exposure	Higher fatigue expected to increase avoidance	0–100
Trust in News	Confidence in professional news accuracy, fairness, and usefulness	Higher trust expected to reduce avoidance	0–100
News-Processing Efficacy	Confidence in locating, understanding, and evaluating relevant information	Higher efficacy expected to reduce avoidance	0–100
News-Avoidance Intention	Degree of intentional reduction, postponement, muting, or withdrawal from news	Higher scores indicate greater avoidance	0–100

Source: Author-designed simulation framework informed by established news-avoidance literature. Values are not human-participant observations.

4.2 Classification of Information-Intensity Conditions

Low-intensity exposure represents an environment in which users obtain news through a limited number of sources at relatively predictable times. Notifications and repetitive cross-platform exposure are comparatively limited.

Managed high-choice exposure represents extensive news availability combined with active audience control. Users may follow several sources but customize alerts, choose specific times for consumption, and deliberately prioritize relevant information.

Repetitive high-intensity exposure represents frequent encounters with overlapping stories across social networks, applications, search results, videos, alerts, and interpersonal sharing. Users retain some control but experience substantial informational redundancy.

Overloaded and emotionally fatigued exposure represents the highest simulated pressure. News is frequent, repetitive, emotionally demanding, and difficult to regulate. Users experience comparatively low confidence that further exposure will improve understanding or support effective action.

This classification intentionally distinguishes availability from intensity. A person can have access to hundreds of news sources while maintaining a highly controlled consumption routine. Conversely, relatively few platforms can create high perceived intensity if they generate frequent alerts and repeated emotionally demanding content.

4.3 Analytical Procedure and Research-Ethics Boundaries

Descriptive comparison was used rather than inferential statistical testing. Conducting significance tests on simulated observations could create a misleading appearance of empirical validation.

The analysis therefore focuses on theoretically plausible differences among information-intensity conditions.

A future empirical study should test the framework through a combination of:

- validated news-overload scales;



- digital-news diaries;
- behavioral exposure measures;
- notification-frequency records;
- emotional-fatigue assessments;
- media-trust measures;
- interviews with selective and persistent avoiders;
- longitudinal measures of news use.

Real-world research would also require careful ethical treatment of digital behavioral data. Browser histories, application logs, notification records, search behavior, and social-media activity can reveal sensitive political, health, religious, or personal interests. Researchers should therefore collect only data necessary for the research question and apply informed consent, anonymization, secure storage, and appropriate institutional ethics procedures.

5. Analysis

5.1 Comparative News-Avoidance Conditions

The simulation demonstrates a progressive increase in avoidance as information environments become more repetitive, emotionally demanding, and difficult to control.

Table 2: Simulated Profiles Across Digital Information Environments

Information Environment	News Overload	Emotional Fatigue	Trust in News	Processing Efficacy	News-Avoidance Index
Low-Intensity Exposure	31	28	78	81	28
Managed High-Choice Exposure	49	42	74	76	43
Repetitive High-Intensity Exposure	74	68	59	55	64
Overloaded & Emotionally Fatigued	91	88	43	37	81

Source: Simulated analytical values; these numbers are not derived from respondents or platform users.

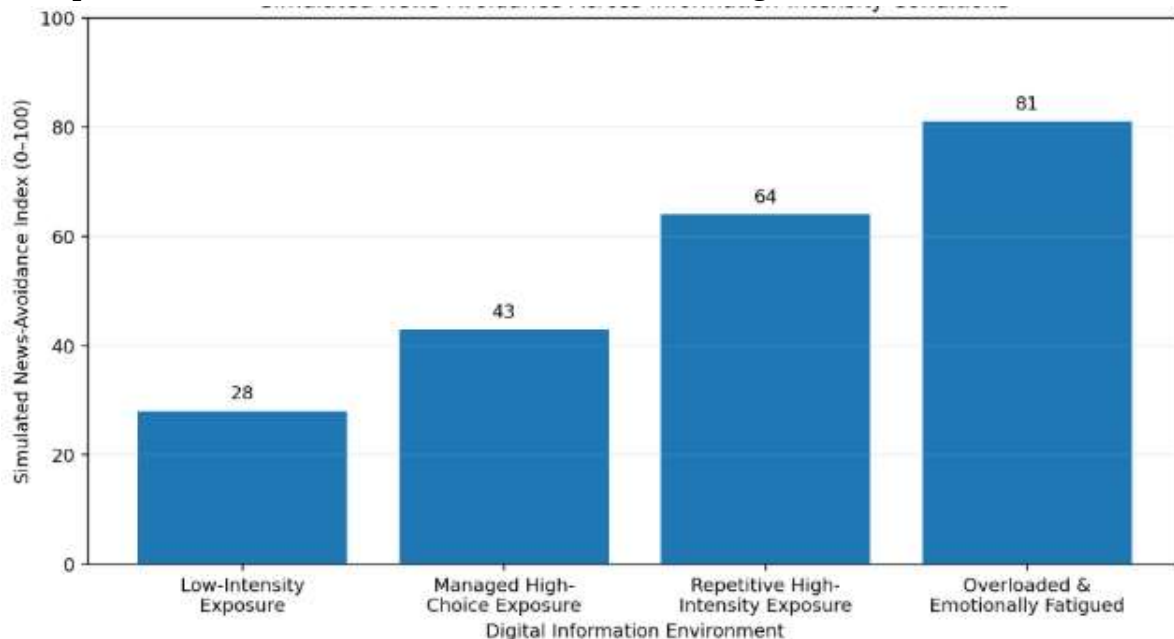
The largest difference appears between managed high-choice exposure and repetitive high-intensity exposure. Although both conditions involve substantial information availability, the avoidance index rises from 43 to 64 when exposure becomes more repetitive and less manageable.

This simulated pattern illustrates the importance of perceived control. News abundance does not necessarily create avoidance when users can organize sources, select consumption times, and understand the material they encounter.

Trust and efficacy decline as simulated intensity increases. The pattern corresponds conceptually with existing evidence associating news overload with reduced news efficacy and avoidance.

5.2 News Avoidance Across Information-Intensity Conditions

Graph 1: Simulated News-Avoidance Index Across Digital Information Environments



Graph 1 shows an increase in the simulated News-Avoidance Index from 28 under low-intensity exposure to 81 under the overloaded and emotionally fatigued condition.

The managed high-choice condition records an index of 43, substantially below the 64 associated with repetitive high-intensity exposure. This difference supports the conceptual argument that a high-choice environment need not inevitably produce disengagement. Audience agency and information-management capacity can moderate how abundance is experienced. The graph should not be interpreted as evidence of a measured causal relationship. Instead, it represents the expected direction of relationships that a subsequent empirical study could test.

5.3 From Selective Regulation to Persistent Avoidance

The simulated model permits a distinction among several forms of avoidance.

Temporal avoidance occurs when audiences temporarily reduce exposure during periods of unusually intense coverage. Topic-selective avoidance occurs when users exclude particular subjects while continuing to consume other forms of news.

Source-selective avoidance occurs when audiences stop using certain publishers, platforms, or formats while retaining an overall news routine. Intensity-management avoidance involves disabling notifications, reducing frequency, or scheduling news consumption. Persistent avoidance represents sustained disengagement across topics and sources.



These behaviors should not be treated as equivalent. Existing longitudinal research shows that selective avoidance contains both stable and temporary dimensions. The difference is normatively significant. Temporarily reducing exposure to highly distressing news may support emotional regulation. Persistent disconnection from credible public-affairs information, however, can reduce opportunities for civic knowledge and informed participation.

6. Discussion

6.1 News Avoidance as Boundary Management

The simulated findings support a broader interpretation of news avoidance as a form of information-boundary management.

Audiences possess finite attention. When digital systems continuously deliver updates, users must determine not only what to consume but what to exclude. Avoidance therefore becomes an unavoidable part of navigating abundance. This interpretation is compatible with scholarship arguing that avoidance can sometimes help users maintain a workable balance between being informed and protecting emotional well-being. Andersen and colleagues explicitly describe selective avoidance as potentially contributing to such a balance.

- The distinction prevents two analytical errors.
- The first is treating all avoidance as democratic failure.
- The second is treating all avoidance as beneficial self-care.

Both interpretations are incomplete.

A user who disables breaking-news notifications while reading a trusted daily briefing remains meaningfully engaged. A user who permanently withdraws because every news encounter generates distrust, confusion, or helplessness represents a different challenge. News organizations therefore need to understand why people avoid news rather than merely counting how many do so.

6.2 Emotional Intensity, Repetition, and Perceived Control

The simulated increase from managed exposure to overloaded exposure suggests that repetition and emotional intensity may be especially important. Digital news systems frequently reward immediacy. Once a major event occurs, publishers compete to produce alerts, live updates, analysis, commentary, video, reactions, and follow-up content. Social networks then add additional layers of discussion and redistribution.

From the audience perspective, however, greater production does not necessarily produce greater informational value. Repeated exposure can create a perception that the user is consuming substantially more news without acquiring substantially more understanding.

Research during crisis conditions has demonstrated that repetitive negative information can generate fear, despair, anger, and fatigue. The design implication is not that news organizations should minimize serious reporting. Rather, they should distinguish important informational updates from attention-maintaining repetition.

Potential responses include:

- fewer but more meaningful push notifications;
- clear “what has changed” summaries;
- contextual explainers for complex stories;



- user-controlled topic frequency;
- transparent labels distinguishing updates from repetition;
- follow-up journalism explaining outcomes and possible responses.

Reuters Institute's research on notifications similarly recognizes the tension between using alerts to build habits and avoiding excessive audience pressure. These strategies preserve the public-information function of journalism while respecting cognitive limits.

6.3 Trust, News Efficacy, and Re-engagement

Reducing volume alone may not resolve avoidance where the underlying problem is distrust.

The simulation assigns lower trust to the high-avoidance environments because contemporary research consistently identifies trust as relevant to engagement decisions. Audiences who believe news is exaggerated, repetitive, politically motivated, incomprehensible, or disconnected from their concerns may perceive little benefit in continued attention. Re-engagement therefore requires more than promotional campaigns encouraging people to “consume more news.”

Journalistic organizations can instead strengthen news efficacy—the user's confidence that news can be found, understood, evaluated, and used. This can involve concise explanations, transparent sourcing, clearer separation of reporting and opinion, correction visibility, explanatory journalism, locally relevant reporting, and structured summaries. News organizations must therefore compete not only for attention but for perceived informational usefulness.

7. Conclusion

News avoidance has become a central feature of contemporary digital audience behavior. The latest international evidence indicates that occasional or frequent avoidance is no longer a marginal practice, with 42% of respondents in the Reuters Institute's 2026 survey reporting that they sometimes or often avoid news.

The present study examined this behavior through a simulation-based framework centered on high-intensity digital information environments. The model compared low-intensity exposure, managed high-choice exposure, repetitive high-intensity exposure, and overloaded emotionally fatigued exposure. The simulated News-Avoidance Index increased from 28 to 81 across these conditions.

More importantly, the comparison between managed high-choice and repetitive high-intensity exposure demonstrates the conceptual importance of audience control. Information abundance is not necessarily harmful when audiences can regulate timing, frequency, relevance, and source selection. The study identifies five interacting influences on avoidance:

information overload, emotional fatigue, trust, news-processing efficacy, and perceived control.

These variables help explain why two people exposed to similar volumes of information may respond differently.

One may curate.

- Another may temporarily disengage.
- Another may avoid only a specific topic.
- Another may abandon news almost completely.
- This variation means that news avoidance should be studied as a continuum rather than a single behavior.



- Selective avoidance can sometimes operate as adaptive information regulation. It may allow individuals to protect emotional resources while maintaining a broader relationship with credible news.
- Persistent avoidance is more concerning when it results from chronic distrust, helplessness, confusion, or exclusion from accessible forms of journalism.
- For news organizations, the solution is therefore not simply to maximize output or exposure. Sustainable engagement requires relevance, comprehensibility, credibility, proportionality, and user agency.
- Digital platforms likewise have a role. Notification systems, recommendation engines, autoplay features, and repetition-oriented engagement mechanisms influence whether users experience news as manageable information or as an intrusive stream.

Future empirical research should validate the proposed framework using longitudinal panel data, actual consumption records, notification histories, qualitative interviews, and validated measures of news overload, emotional fatigue, trust, and efficacy. Cross-national studies would be especially valuable because media systems, political conditions, platform penetration, and trust vary substantially across societies.

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