DÍGITOS

Revista de Comunicación Digital

Exploring News Avoidance in the Spanish Hybrid Media Landscape

Explorando la evasión informativa en el paisaje mediático híbrido español

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ABSTRACT This study investigates the phenomenon of news avoidance in the Spanish context, considering factors such as stress, information overload, media scepticism, and political polarisation that contribute to this behaviour. Utilising a focus group methodology, this study explores the complexities of news avoidance in supportive and non-judgmental settings. The study acknowledges the significant decline in news interest in Spain and the nation's socio-political dynamics as influential factors. These findings have implications for media literacy education, journalism, and understanding the role of the media in shaping public opinion. Furthermore, this study provides insights into countries facing similar challenges in their media landscapes. By uncovering the underlying reasons for news avoidance, this study has implications in various fields, including journalism, communication, and political science, to enhance democratic participation and informed decision-making.

KEYWORDS: News avoidance, News consumption, Media Literacy, Public Opinion, Negative News Saturation.

RESUMEN Este estudio investiga el fenómeno de la evasión informativa en el contexto español, considerando factores como el estrés, la sobrecarga de información, el escepticismo mediático y la polarización política que contribuyen a este comportamiento. Utilizando una metodología de grupos focales, este estudio explora las complejidades de la evasión de noticias en contextos de apoyo y sin prejuicios. El estudio reconoce como factores influyentes el descenso significativo del interés por las noticias en España y la dinámica sociopolítica de la nación. Estos resultados tienen implicaciones para la alfabetización mediática, el periodismo y la comprensión del papel de los medios de comunicación en la formación de la opinión pública. Además, este estudio proporciona información sobre países que afrontan retos similares en su panorama mediático. Al desvelar las razones subyacentes de la evasión de noticias, este estudio tiene implicaciones en diversos campos, como el periodismo, la comunicación y la ciencia política, para mejorar la participación democrática y la toma de decisiones informadas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Evasión de noticias, consumo mediático, alfabetización mediática, opinión pública, Saturación de noticias negativas.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, news avoidance has emerged as an important topic of discussion in academic and social contexts. Moreover, the steady increase in news avoidance has become a growing concern as numerous individuals actively opt to sidestep news content. For instance, the latest Digital News Report by the Reuters Institute reveals that the percentage of people worldwide who intentionally avoided news has risen from 29% in 2017 to an average of 38% (Newman et al., 2022). News avoidance occurs when individuals deliberately choose not to consume news content for various reasons, including a lack of interest or time, the negative impact of news on their mood, or mistrust of the media (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; Edgerly, 2022), which may even lead to populism (Scherr & Leiner, 2021). This behaviour, characterised by the intentional or unintentional (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2019) evasion of news consumption, is driven by multiple factors such as stress, information overload, scepticism towards media, and political polarisation (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Garret, 2009). Furthermore, Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020) found that younger individuals, women, those on the political left, and individuals with low trust in the news or internal efficacy are likelier to avoid news content actively.

As we examine the multifaceted nature of news avoidance, it is essential to consider the interplay between this phenomenon and social class (Majó-Vázquez et al.). A recent study suggests that individuals with lower cultural and economic capital are more likely to avoid online news and exhibit varying patterns of avoidance based on the type of news outlet (Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2022). This finding highlights the importance of understanding social inequality and the symbolic value of news genres and outlets in news avoidance. In addition, gender plays a significant role and deserves attention in studies of news avoidance. Despite advancements in gender equality in affluent post-industrial societies, women are still more likely to avoid the news. Toff and Palmer's (2019) qualitative research, which focused on working and middle-class individuals in the UK, investigated the gender gap in news consumption. The authors stressed the gendered perceptions of news and the structural inequalities influencing media consumption habits, highlighting the importance of addressing these underlying factors to bridge the gender gap.

As part of a broader research project[1], our study focused on several aspects related to news consumption. One of those aspects was news avoidance among individuals in Spain and the underlying reasons for this occurrence. This research design used a focus group methodology to accomplish this objective, a well-established qualitative research technique designed to examine participants' experiences and perceptions (Morgan, 2019). We use this qualitative method aligned with some other similar studies about the differences in news consumption and use, such as Lindell and Sartoretto, 2018, Banjac and Hanusch, 2020, Kalogeropoulos, Simon and Nielsen, 2020, or Ucar et al., 2021,

The study comprised six focus groups with 48 participants and was conducted in October 2021. These focus groups served as a platform for participants to exchange their views and experiences within a collaborative setting, allowing researchers to effectively capture group dynamics and collective perspectives.

This study's use of focus groups is particularly appropriate, as it enables the exploration of complex and sensitive topics, such as news avoidance, in a supportive and non-judgmental setting (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Moreover, the Spanish context is a noteworthy determinant in this investigation, considering the recent political and social changes and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the emergence of populist movements and increasing political polarisation has given rise to a complex media environment that influences individuals' media consumption patterns, characterised by an intense polarisation due to the emergence of extremist political entities and the ongoing contentiousness of identity issues, notably, the debate surrounding of Catalonia's independence (Padró-Solanet & Balcells, 2022, p. 76; Díaz-Noci, 2022). Furthermore, Spain presents an especially compelling case for this study because of the steep drop in news engagement over the past decade. In 2015, 85% of Spaniards stated that they were interested in the news. However, by 2023, this number dramatically decreased to 51% (Newman et al., 2023, p. 21). This precipitous drop in news interest and the nation's complex socio-political dynamics necessitates deeper investigation. This decline signals a potential shift in public sentiment towards news consumption and the role of the media in society, which requires careful scrutiny. Therefore, understanding the causative factors and dynamics that drive this significant change is essential. By uncovering these underlying reasons, we can better understand the societal, political, and psychological influences at play.

This study contributes to the existing literature on news avoidance through its qualitative exploration of this phenomenon in the Spanish context. The findings of this research have significant implications for media literacy education, journalism, and the role of the media in shaping public opinion. Furthermore, this study is relevant to countries that face similar media landscape challenges. Finally, by identifying and understanding the

underlying reasons for news avoidance and exploring its potential consequences, this study offers valuable insights into the development of effective strategies to increase public engagement with news media, promote media literacy, and mitigate the potential risks associated with limited exposure to news sources, such as reduced democratic participation and uninformed decision-making. As such, this research has implications in various fields, including journalism, communication, and political science.

2. NEWS AVOIDANCE IN THE HYBRID MEDIA SYSTEM

In the contemporary era, we are experiencing a swift transition from industrial or post-industrial journalism to a hybrid media system in which traditional and new media coexist. This changing landscape demands that journalists adapt and harness the strengths of conventional and emerging media platforms to serve their audiences' evolving needs effectively. Andrew Chadwick (2013) posits that this transformation offers journalists a unique opportunity to explore innovative storytelling techniques and foster greater audience engagement. Irene Costera Meijer et al. (2021) underscore journalists' need to embrace digitalisation to amplify their reach and influence. Anderson, Bell, and Shirky (2014) also advocate for media organisations to re-evaluate their business models and adjust to the dynamic media environment. In summary, progressing toward a hybrid media system presents many challenges and opportunities for journalists and media organisations. Therefore, journalists must engage in strategic planning and deliberate adaptation to thrive in this era of journalism. Finally, it is vital to discern between individual and structural factors influencing this phenomenon to comprehensively understand news avoidance in the contemporary hybrid media system. The individual factors encapsulate personal motivations and unique attributes that directly drive an individual's decision to avoid the news. On the other hand, structural factors reflect the broader media and social environment's influences that might indirectly sway an individual's propensity to avoid the news. By distinguishing between these individual and structural elements, we can examine news avoidance from a more holistic viewpoint, contemplating the interplay between personal motivations and the broader societal and media influences.

3. INDIVIDUAL FACTORS TO NEWS AVOIDANCE

The phenomenon of news avoidance is multifaceted and extends beyond the realm of user experience, encompassing the reasons behind the increasing number of users who choose not to consume news content intentionally or unintentionally. In this sense, the academic literature on news avoidance distinguishes between intentional and unintentional subtypes of news avoidance, depending on whether the focus is on motivational or behavioural

aspects (Goyanes et al., 2023). Intentional news avoidance refers to the avoidance of news content based on the underlying causes that lead individuals to disengage from news consumption (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). In contrast, unintentional news avoidance results from changing characteristics in the broader media environment. As the abundance of media content has increased, individuals with a stronger preference for entertainment have gravitated towards more entertaining content, reducing their exposure to news. This happens without them disliking the news or consciously deciding to curtail their news intake (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; Goyanes et al., 2023).

The factors contributing to news avoidance are complex and diverse. Although many studies have identified the potential causes of news avoidance, most have focused on media consumption patterns, ranging from individual personal habits to media habits (Damstra et al., 2023; Lindell, 2022; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Additionally, research on news avoidance, often described as low news consumption, attributes it to individual and structural factors, including gender, age, low socioeconomic status, and political disinterest (Palmer et al., 2023). Researchers such as Edgerly (2022), Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge (2022), Strömbäck (2017), and Toff and Palmer (2019) have conducted extensive studies on these factors.

4. STRUCTURAL FACTORS TO NEWS AVOIDANCE

Digital media has considerably impacted news consumption habits, leading to many individuals actively avoiding news in recent years (Newman et al., 2022, 2023; Kalegeropoulos, Toff, Fletcher, 2022). This trend raises concerns about the credibility and authenticity of news sources, emphasising the need for journalists and media organisations to establish and maintain trust with their audiences in this increasingly complex media landscape.

In this context, it is essential to consider the Knowledge Gap Hypotheses, a theoretical framework postulating that disparities in knowledge acquisition among individuals are attributable to socioeconomic factors and differential access to media resources (Tichenor et al., 1970). Additionally, the digital divide phenomenon, characterised by inequalities in access to and proficiency in digital technologies, may exacerbate these knowledge gaps (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2019). This, in turn, can lead to selective exposure to and avoidance of news content, as individuals with restricted access or a lack of requisite skills may become disengaged from news consumption.

Furthermore, the role of echo chambers and filter bubbles in the hybrid media system is noteworthy because they contribute to selective exposure and news avoidance (Masip, Suau, Ruiz-Caballero, 2020). Echo chambers refer to individuals being exposed primarily to information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, limiting their exposure to diverse

perspectives (Barberá et al., 2015). Filter bubbles are algorithm-driven phenomena where online platforms and social media networks tailor content based on users' preferences and behaviour, reinforcing their beliefs and interests (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016). Consequently, these phenomena may narrow individuals' news exposure, making them more likely to avoid content that challenges their viewpoints or falls outside their immediate interests.

In the current digital landscape, algorithms have gained increasing significance in determining the extent of media exposure individuals receive. However, this phenomenon may result in the inadvertent prioritisation of certain types of content over others, leading to a lack of exposure to news stories. Moreover, algorithms play a pivotal role in shaping media exposure in the digital age and inadvertently reinforce user preferences, thereby exacerbating unintentional news avoidance (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020, p. 8). Therefore, incidental exposure to the news has become even more critical in hybrid media. Furthermore, with the proliferation of social media platforms and other digital channels, users will likely encounter news content by chance while engaging with other types of content (Boczkowski et al., 2018). For instance, users scrolling through social media feeds may encounter news articles or headlines without actively seeking them.

Consequently, the rise of social media as a primary source of information has led individuals to perceive that they no longer need to seek news to remain informed actively. This phenomenon, referred to as the "News Find Me" perception (Gil de Zúñiga; Cheng, 2021), may lead to disengagement from news. The study by Manuel Goyanes et al. (2021) emphasises the importance of the "News Finds Me" Perception in the context of news avoidance research, highlighting the importance of considering this perception in research on news avoidance.

In hybrid media systems, the abundance of information available in the media landscape is a salient factor worthy of consideration (Boczkowski, 2021). This factor profoundly influences media consumption patterns, including news avoidance. In the current media environment, the proliferation of digital platforms and devices has provided individuals with unparalleled access to immense amounts of information and news content from diverse sources. This abundance of information has profoundly affected how individuals engage with news media and their decisions regarding the news they consume or avoid. Exposure to excessive news content can result in psychological stress, such as news fatigue, characterised by an emotional and subjective sensation of exhaustion from the consumption of news (Song et al., 2017, p. 1179). In this sense, news fatigue prompts news avoidance, which is the intentional choice to abstain from news consumption due to increased exhaustion and dissatisfaction with the news media. Empirical evidence supports this notion, indicating that news fatigue is a significant determinant of news avoidance in both the United States and Europe (Chan et al., 2022). Fitzpatrick (2022) examined the impact of news fatigue on news consumption. This research suggests that

many individuals find it challenging to consume news without feeling overwhelmed, with some opting to decrease their news intake or directly avoid it.

It is paramount to explore the individual and structural factors underlying news avoidance, given its potential to offer insights into the motivations that drive individuals to avoid news media. This study aims to elucidate the factors associated with news avoidance and investigate the relationship between news avoidance and overall news consumption. The research questions guiding this research aim to systematically address the multifaceted aspects of news avoidance, examine its determinants, the potential impact on overall news consumption, and the implications of incidental exposure on individuals' news consumption behaviours. The research questions were as follows.

RQ1: What factors contribute to individuals avoiding news content?

RQ2: How does the prevalence of selective news avoidance affect overall news consumption patterns?

RQ3: Concerning news avoidance, what significance does incidental exposure hold?

5. METHODS

Building on the insights of Morgan (1997), who emphasised that focus groups "provide direct evidence about similarities and differences in participants' opinions and experiences" (p.10), we selected focus groups as the primary method of data collection for our study. As mentioned before, some other related studies have used focus group as the main research technique. This approach allowed us to gather diverse perspectives on news consumption and avoidance, leading to a comprehensive analysis of our research questions. Additionally, it facilitated the exploration of nuanced dynamics of attitudes and experiences among participants regarding their news consumption patterns.

Six focus groups were conducted in October 2021: three in Madrid and three in Barcelona, the two most important and most populated Spanish cities. The focus groups were designed and conducted in collaboration with GESOP, an opinion and market research company. Each focus group had seven to eight participants and lasted approximately two hours. The focus group design incorporated several variables, including gender, age, and education, into the sample selection process. The sample included an equal distribution of male and female participants and individuals in three age categories:20-29 years, 30-49 years and 50-65 years. Regarding education, 50% of the participants had a university education, and the other 50% did not. All participants were residents of Barcelona and Madrid and were chosen based on their usage of instant messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or Signal.

Furthermore, the study aimed to incorporate participants who used various social media

platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and those who engaged in public activities, such as involvement in cultural, political, and trade unions; political parties; and NGOs. The sample also included individuals with varying levels of media engagement, with three focus groups, each comprising participants with high and three focus groups with low media engagement. Overall, the socio-demographic variables used in this study were comprehensive and aimed to ensure a diverse and representative population sample. Table 1 provides an overview of the socio-demographic variables used in this study.

Table 1: Variables used to recruit participants. Source: The authors

Gender	Women 50%, men 50%
Age	20-29 years (2 FG), 30-49 years (2 FG), and 50-65 years (2 FG)
Education	50% with university studies, 50% without university studies
Location	Residents of Barcelona city and metropolitan area (3 FG) and Madrid (3 FG)
Required technology	Have at least one instant messaging program installed (WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, among others.)
Social media usage	Representation of people who use various social networks (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, among others.)
Public engagement	50% without public engagement: no participation in cultural associations, political parties, trade unions, political parties, or NGOs, and 50% with public engagement: participation in cultural associations, political parties, trade unions, political parties, or NGOs.
Media engagement	3 FG with people with high media engagement and 3 FG with people with medium and low media engagement (50%)

We conducted six focus groups with distinct demographic compositions segmented by geographical location and age to capture diverse insights. This study used two levels of media engagement as a factor: high media engagement and moderate to low media engagement. The table below provides a detailed overview of the specific composition of each focus group.

Table 2. Composition of Focus Groups by Age, Location, and Media Engagement
Source: The authors

	20-29 years old		30-49 years old		50-65 years old		Total
	MAD	BCN	MAD	BCN	MAD	BCN	
Media engagement alt		1 FG	1 FG			1 FG	3 FG
Media engagement moderate to low	1 FG			1 FG	1 FG		5 FG
Total	**2 FG**		**2 FG**		**2 FG**		

To ensure methodological rigour and comprehensiveness of the data gathered, focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured guide carefully designed to explore participants' news consumption habits, motivations, attitudes, and behaviours towards the news media. The topics we delved into during these focus group discussions included the emotional impact of news on the participants, their preferred channels for consuming news, their motivations for consuming or avoiding certain news, and the pathways they commonly follow for news consumption. Through this approach, we endeavoured to capture a holistic perspective of the dynamics that shape individuals' news consumption practices.

The guide was composed of open-ended questions to elicit in-depth responses from participants. By utilising a semi-structured approach to encourage a conversation among participants, the focus groups could capture a wide range of insights and perspectives from participants (Ryan et al., 2013, p. 9), resulting in a rich and nuanced understanding of their news consumption patterns. A qualified qualitative research expert from the opinion and market research company GESOP moderated the discussions. To ensure the accuracy of the discussions, participants provided consent for video and audio recordings of the interactions, which were later transcribed verbatim. Following data collection, the analysis involved coding the data and grouping the codes into broader themes. The themes were then systematically reviewed and refined through iterative reading and re-reading of the transcripts to understand the data collected comprehensively. This study employed a rigorous and systematic approach to ensure data quality and thoroughly understand the news consumption patterns of the participants.

Alongside with control questions, such as income, media consumption, access to news, trust in media or subscription to media outlets, the sessions were structured around questions on two main topics: trust in media, according to media consumption, news fatigue after a pandemic situation, or willingness to pay for the news, in a context of increasing implementation of paywalls and, more specifically, subscription models in many European and Spanish media from 2020 onwards. Another block on misinformation was conducted, but it has not been used in this article. We also wonder about the importance of what authors such as Pablo Boczkowski have called the "incidental consumption" of news, i.e. news that is not sought directly in the media but that reaches the user, mostly young people, through recommendations from digital social networks (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein and Matassi, 2018, and Palmer and Toff, 2022). Due to the limited length of the article, this topic is merely mentioned, and needs further development at the light of the barriers imposed by paywalls.

6. FINDINGS

The emotional impact of consuming news content has been observed to affect individuals with varying media engagement levels. It became apparent that the tone and content of news, particularly when damaging, significantly impacted individuals across different media engagement levels. This influence was substantial enough to incite news avoidance among participants. Furthermore, exposure to excessive news content can result in psychological stress, including fatigue, saturation, anxiety, and feelings of lack of control, which seemed particularly intensified by continuous exposure to negative news stories. Notably, this negative effect was more pronounced among specific demographic groups. Women and individuals with lower media engagement reported a higher susceptibility to these feelings of negativity, leading to an increased propensity for news avoidance.

In this regard, the emotional impact of negative news, primarily when related to global catastrophic events such as the coronavirus pandemic, can significantly affect an individual's news consumption habits. Individuals may shift their focus to other topics of interest as coping mechanisms to alleviate the emotional burden of negative news. In this sense, the Coronavirus pandemic has catalysed changes in news consumption patterns. This highlights the potential influence of global crises on media consumption and emphasises the importance of understanding the interplay between emotional responses and news consumption habits, including news avoidance; however, in dire situations, in that sense, for us or the world, it is challenging for me to stay informed because when I see it, it causes me such sorrow and sadness that I would rather not watch it. Moreover, I have changed that approach since the Coronavirus" (woman, 50-65 years-old, no university education, low media engagement).

Furthermore, our analysis revealed another significant factor influencing news consumption — the perception of repetitive news content. Participants felt overwhelmed and emotionally drained by persistent and redundant reporting of specific global events. The repetitive nature of the news content led them to disengage from consuming news, as they perceived a lack of informational or emotional value. This highlights the potential ramifications of prolonged exposure to repetitive news content on news consumption habits and, more broadly, on overall well-being.

Moreover, participants referred to perceived bias in media outlets, often manifesting as excessive repetition of specific news topics. This perceived bias and the repetitiveness tended to induce frustration and disinterest among news consumers. A male participant, aged between 30-49, with a low media engagement, articulated this sentiment, saying, "I think everything is so repetitive... So much information on one topic or whatever that, in the end, you do not get informed because you have it there, but it does not reach you. So, this news is like, yeah, you have heard it, but you have not delved into it; you have not

been interested in it because they have repeated it to you, and in the end, you ignore it." This feedback underscores media practices' role in shaping audience engagement and underlines the need for a more diverse and balanced presentation of news topics.

Building upon our exploration of negativity and redundancy in the context of news consumption, we introduce the concept of "Negative News Saturation" as an integral part of our findings. Negative News Saturation refers to the psychological toll imposed on individuals due to consuming a high volume of negative news content. Negative News Saturation manifests in many ways, including fatigue, information overload, anxiety, and feelings of losing control, as we have explained before. These symptoms are amplified when the negative news content is excessive and repetitive. Essentially, Negative News Saturation represents a state of heightened emotional distress caused by an overabundance of negative news.

An analysis of the focus groups revealed interesting changes in news consumption behaviour. Participants reported a shift from actively seeking news from various sources to adopting a more selective approach. In other words, they prefer to focus on a single news source while paying attention to topics that are personally relevant to them. This is a significant shift from keeping up with broader daily updates, and it is essential to understand why. One possible explanation for this could be the overwhelming volume of available information. With many news sources and constant updates, keeping up with everything can be challenging. Another explanation could be the increasing polarisation of news sources, which may make it difficult for individuals to trust diverse perspectives. In any case, this shift in behaviour has significant implications for the media industry, as it suggests that news outlets need to focus on delivering high-quality, relevant content that resonates with their audience's interests and values. Furthermore, the current moment is one of complete customisation, both actively (choosing media, channels, preferred schedules, available at any time) and passively, through algorithms that make suggestions based on the interests of the users:

> "Actively, I mean putting on TV or looking through newspapers, which before I used to look at more to see what has happened today, to see what the current events are. Nevertheless, instead of investigating that part, I maintain one that I enjoy immensely. However, for everything else, I still inform myself about topics that interest me only, not so much about what happens daily".
>
> Man, 20-29 years old, low media engagement, no university studies yet.

This behavioural change may indicate that individuals are becoming more selective in their news consumption. Such selectivity could stem from a coping mechanism used to manage the overwhelming amount of information and avoid negative emotions from consuming

excessive news content. Interestingly, a study by de Bruin et al. (2021) also suggested that news avoidance is a coping mechanism used by individuals who experience negative emotions and feelings due to media exposure. This could be because specific news stories or topics may be particularly distressing to some individuals. Therefore, consciously avoiding such content can be seen as controlling one's emotional well-being.

When discussing news avoidance, one crucial factor is people's trust in traditional media outlets, such as newspapers, television, and radio. There seems to be a prevailing negative sentiment towards these media sources as they are often perceived as biased and lack objectivity. It is important to note that criticism of the media is more directed towards media outlets than journalists, who are seen as victims of pressure from each media outlet. This perception of media outlets as marked ideologies has resulted in losing confidence in their role as democratic actors, contributing to news avoidance. Furthermore, a lack of trust in the media may lead individuals to avoid consuming news together to mitigate potential exposure to biased or inaccurate information.

> *"I have seen the same news in three different newspapers, with different focuses, and they seemed like completely opposite news. So, of course, this produces much confusion when it comes to trust. Because the news is one (...) and you end up hearing everything you can, you summarise and believe what you want."*
>
> Woman, 50-65 years old, university studies, high level of media engagement.

Finally, participants' responses highlighted the increasing trend of turning to social media platforms as primary sources of news and information. For example, Twitter has become a popular medium by which users can access immediate headlines, follow trending topics, and read unfiltered statements from notable figures. The convenience and efficiency of these platforms enable users to access a wide range of news sources that cater to their interests and preferences.

The data reveals an interesting dichotomy between active news seeking and incidental news exposure, two approaches to news consumption influenced by various factors. Active news seeking, characterised by participants deliberately sourcing news from various outlets, has shifted towards a more selective approach due to information overload, increasing polarisation of news sources, and the desire to avoid negative emotions associated with certain news content. Participants tend to focus on a single source and topics personally relevant to them, thus narrowing their scope of news intake. This shift implies a need for media outlets to adapt their content delivery towards high-quality, relevant information that aligns with the audience's specific interests and values.

Contrastingly, incidental news exposure, often via social media platforms, presents a

different consumption pattern. By now, it appears that the importance of legacy media is still visible in Spain, but very significantly, it is followed by an incidental consumption of news, even more among the young people. According to the data we are explaining here, 23 percent of the participants in the focus group sessions recognized that they reached the news not directly through the media websites, but through recommendation on social networks. Another 20 percent of the respondents indicated that they actively search for the news on Google. Still, a good 38.7 percent of the informants, specially in the segments of more age, preferred to access the news through legacy media, both in printed or in digital formats. This depicts a scenario in which younger people is more prone to consume the news in a different way.

Here, users are not necessarily actively seeking news but are exposed to it while engaging in other platform activities. The convenience, immediacy, and perceived democratic nature of these platforms make them attractive to users. However, this shift towards incidental exposure raises essential considerations, such as potential exposure to misinformation, the creation of echo chambers, and the waning influence of traditional news outlets. Thus, the contrast between these consumption patterns underscores the evolving landscape of news consumption. This landscape is increasingly influenced by the emotional toll of news, trust in traditional media, and the growth of social media platforms.

7. CONCLUSION

This research contributes to understanding the Spanish media system's news consumption and avoidance patterns. In this study, three research questions were raised to explore the factors influencing individuals' avoidance of news content (RQ1), the extent to which selective news avoidance impacts overall news consumption patterns (RQ2), and the significance of incidental news exposure in relation to news avoidance (RQ3). Our findings from the focus groups responding to the first research question suggest that the emotional impact of consuming news content has been observed to affect individuals with different media engagement levels.

To conceptualise the negativity and redundancy in the context of news consumption, we introduced the concept of "Negative News Saturation." This phenomenon happens when users are constantly exposed to negative news, and this negative saturation can lead to news avoidance. However, not all demographic groups are equally affected by the saturation of negative news. Our data reveals that women and participants with low media engagement are more susceptible to experiencing this negative saturation and, as a result, avoiding news consumption. Additionally, the diminishing credibility of the media outlet plays a significant role in news avoidance. However, it is noteworthy that this erosion of trust is primarily associated with the media outlets, not the journalists themselves. The

latter are often perceived as victims of the immense pressures imposed by their outlets.

Relating to RQ2 and the impact of news avoidance on news consumption patterns, in this context, the shift from actively seeking news from different sources to selective exposure to specific news sources is relevant. One explanation for this change in the case of the Spanish media system could be the polarisation of news sources. As a previous work published by Padró-Solanet and Balcells (2022) showed, the intense polarisation in Spain's political and media environment enabled this news consumption and avoidance patterns. Additionally, in this context, news avoidance works as a coping mechanism (Bruin et al., 2021) used by individuals to reduce the negative feelings provoked by "Negative News Saturation."

In response to RQ3, incidental exposure has been found to have significant implications for news avoidance. Incidental exposure refers to instances where users encounter news content while engaging in other activities, primarily on social media platforms. This mode of exposure can lead to intensified news avoidance for several reasons. First, the ubiquitous presence of news content on these platforms can result in news saturation or fatigue, leading users to avoid it consciously. Second, immediacy and ease of access to these platforms can expose users to unverified or false information, impacting their trust in news sources and contributing to news avoidance. Third, incidental exposure to social media can contribute to forming "echo chambers," where users are exposed only to viewpoints that reinforce their perspectives, potentially limiting their willingness to seek out or engage with alternative news sources. Consequently, incidental exposure is a significant factor in news avoidance with the potential to cause news saturation, erode trust in news sources, and create echo chambers.

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the limitations of this study, which should be taken into account when interpreting our findings. Although focus groups provided valuable insights into news avoidance, it is essential to recognise the inherent biases, or at least limitations, associated with this method. The sample of participants may need to capture the wider population's diversity fully, and group dynamics could influence their responses. In this sense, future research could employ more diverse research methods and larger samples to address these limitations, provide a more comprehensive understanding of news avoidance in the Spanish media system, and further develop our findings by understanding the dynamics that lead to a progressive decline in news consumption and a diminishing interest in current affairs among users. In particular, our findings underscore the need to investigate the influence of socioeconomic variables, such as gender and social class, on news consumption and avoidance in the Spanish media system, which is in line with previous studies conducted in other contexts (Lindell & Båge, 2022; Toff & Palmer, 2019).

Furthermore, we believe that additional research is beneficial for news avoidance related to specific topics of societal importance. The objectives should include exploring user attitudes towards these topics and identifying the emotions evoked by consuming related news, which could discourage users from seeking more information. By addressing these issues, we believe that further investigation of the mechanisms of news avoidance is pivotal for improving the delivery and reception of information, thereby enhancing the quality of the public debate.

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