

Self-Preservation in the Digital Age: An Exploration of the Positive Utilization of News Avoidance

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Abstract: In recent years, the rapid development of the Internet has made it more convenient for the public to access all kinds of information. However, the number of people avoiding news is gradually increasing. The phenomenon of news avoidance is becoming increasingly common worldwide and is regarded as another challenge to the development of the news industry, leading to the decline of journalism's public nature. Nonetheless, the positive effects of news avoidance should not be overlooked. In order to explore the possibility of positive utilization of news avoidance, this paper defines the positive utilization of news avoidance by reviewing the existing literature based on the definition, classification, causes and impacts of news avoidance. The research finds that the public's short-term news avoidance behavior helps to reduce exposure to the news with negative content or of low quality, thereby effectively reducing the generation and development of individual negative emotions. That is, the public can achieve self-protection by positively utilizing news avoidance behavior.

Keywords: News avoidance, Positive utilization, Information overload, Self-protection

1. Introduction

As early as in the 1940s, some scholars have been concerned about the problem of audience's information avoidance, that is, the audience tends to receive information according to their own preferences. In 2001, at the annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) in Washington, D.C., the discussion on "Internet News Avoiders: Who Are They and Why Do They Avoid Television News and Newspaper Websites" kicked off the academic community's attention to news avoidance and special research. In the current research on news avoidance, academics mainly focus on the definition of the concept of news avoidance, cause analysis and other aspects, and most scholars believe that news avoidance will lead to a series of negative effects. As a neutral term, news avoidance itself is not directional, but it also has a positive effect, especially in the current digital age of information overload. Based on this, this paper will sort out the existing data and explore the possibility of positive use of news avoidance, so as to provide a new perspective for the study of news avoidance, and at the same time, it has certain exploratory significance for the bilateral benign interaction between news media and information audience.

2. News Avoidance

2.1. Definition and Classification of News Avoidance

For the definition of news avoidance, there is currently no completely unified standard in academic circles. The definition generally accepted is that of Skovsgaard et al.: "low news consumption over a continuous period of time caused either by a dislike for news (intentional) or a higher preference for other content (unintentional)" [1]. After the concept of news avoidance was introduced to China, some scholars, in light of China's news environment, defined it as "the behavior of news audiences or users consciously, actively ignoring, evading, or rejecting certain or all news content over a specific period of time" [2]. Although there is no consensus on the definition of news avoidance, there is a basic agreement on the classification of news avoidance, which is considered to be divided into two major categories: "intentional" and "unintentional". The former refers to the behavior of people who choose to reduce or stop their exposure to news out of subjective disapproval aversion or opposition, while the latter is based on the personal preferences of consumers, passively or involuntarily lacking opportunities to access news, and unintentionally reduce their exposure to news.

As emphasized by Skovsgaard et al., conscious selective avoidance of news is essentially intentional on the part of the consumer and involves a deliberate decision not to engage with particular types of news content [3]. This is a spontaneous and conscious avoidance of news by the audience, which presents a more pronounced subjective tendency and is more useful for exploring its positive effects. Therefore, the news avoidance and its positive utilization discussed in the subsequent parts of this paper mainly refer to intentional news avoidance.

2.2. Causes of News Avoidance

Based on the existing literature, the causes of news avoidance are complex and diverse, mainly including the following aspects:

Firstly, information overload leads to audience avoidance of news. The rapid development of the internet has accelerated the production and dissemination of information, and at the same time, the popularization of smartphones has greatly increased the scope of information dissemination, so that people can access a vast amount of news reports at any time, while human attention is limited and cannot process a large amount of information in a short time. Therefore, when faced with complex content, it is easy to cause news fatigue, and thus the audience can only selectively focus on certain news and avoid another part of the news, thereby reducing the anxiety caused by information overload.

Secondly, news avoidance is due to emotional management. This avoidance behavior stems from news fatigue, which reflects people's emotions and feelings such as fear and disgust, and is mainly aimed at news with negative characteristics. Generally speaking, compared to negative news, people instinctively prefer to choose more positive and pleasant content. Therefore, emotional news avoidance behavior is usually related to consumers' self-protection, reflecting an intention to avoid heavy emotional pressure.

Thirdly, the deconstruction of traditional power relations has challenged media credibility [4]. The rapid development of social media has meant that news production is no longer a privilege of professional media institutions. In the current era of "everyone has a microphone", the relationship between the public and the media has become loose. People are gradually less inclined to trust the media. The perception that the news content is biased in the presentation of the news makes it more likely that people avoid the news, and the credibility of the media is therefore challenged.

2.3. The Impact of News Avoidance

Most of the existing research on news avoidance puts the negative impact of news avoidance in the first place, arguing that the public's avoidance of news brings about what sociologist Richard Sennett calls "the decline of the public man" [4]. One of the major characteristics of news, as a report of newly occurring facts, is its public nature. News exists within the mutual interaction between society and the public, reflecting the operation and changes of society. When the public begins to avoid a certain part of the news, this behavior will gradually evolve into an individual's indifference to the social sphere other than close relationships, which also includes avoidance and neglect of social events in the public sphere. The reduction of individual publicity can lead to a narrowing of the individual's overall perception of society, which will in turn constrain the individual's benign development in society [5]. It reduces people's perception of society and their attention and participation in social affairs, thus weakening their sense of identity and belonging to the country and nation and hindering social development.

At the same time, news avoidance can also lead to the decline of media credibility. Damstra Alyt et al., based on a large-scale survey of Swedish citizens in 2020, found that individuals intentionally avoiding news have significantly lower accuracy of beliefs on controversial issues compared to other groups [6]. They were more likely to hold incorrect beliefs that were not consistent with scientific evidence. This phenomenon may be related to the intentional avoidance of news by individuals who distrust mainstream media or are averse to mainstream viewpoints, which implies a decrease in trust in the news environment among the audience. This can lead to an increasingly severe public skepticism towards the mainstream news production mechanism.

3. Positive Utilization of News Avoidance

3.1. Definition of Positive Utilization of News Avoidance

Although the current academic community mainly focuses on the negative impacts of news avoidance, this paper argues that the positive effects of news avoidance on the public's news consumption behavior and psychology should also be given attention, encouraging the positive utilization of news avoidance.

This paper posits that the positive utilization of news avoidance primarily refers to managing one's news consumption behavior by consciously avoiding news content that is unfavorable or harmful to oneself and transforming it into a news consumption strategy that promotes the well-being of an individual or society. This strategy can help audiences maintain composure and rationality in the face of the vast and complex information of the digital age, avoiding negative emotions and negative behavioral responses due to overexposure to negative information. At the same time, the positive utilization of news avoidance can also motivate individuals to focus more on positive and uplifting news content, from which they can obtain encouragement and support, and further enhance their quality of life and sense of well-being.

3.2. Case Study

A study of African Americans by Miya Williams Fayne concluded that some conscious avoiders are actively choosing entertainment and news [7]. Black news readers intentionally avoid certain topics, such as crime and violence, but also intentionally read entertainment news about black celebrities. That way, they are able to keep abreast of what's going on in the Black community while also protecting their emotional well-being.

In mainstream media in the United States, consumers gravitate toward entertainment content and journalists gravitate toward hard news, but journalists and readers of black media value both. The

researchers conducted interviews and focus group discussions with 30 black media journalists (including editors and senior editors) and 30 readers, respectively, to deeply explore the function and significance of entertainment news in Black media from the perspectives of producers and consumers.

The research has found that racial trauma in African American news consumption can negatively impact mental health and lead to news avoidance, but some have resisted this by creating joyous spaces for black people online. Entertainment content in Digital Black Press not only provides African-Americans with comprehensive community coverage, but it can also serve as a powerful coping mechanism and form of resistance to help them cope with the psychological trauma and racial stress of hard news, thereby enhancing community cohesion and mental health. This type of entertainment content is not only just an escape, but a positive form of self-care that helps readers maintain their mental health while remaining mindful of and engaged with the black community. Thus, it can be seen that entertainment content in digital Black media is not only an alternative to negative news in mainstream media, but also a positive form of self-care, helping to build a healthier mental state while avoiding certain negative information.

3.3. Evaluation of Positive Utilization

The public's intentional avoidance of some news is essentially the embodiment and practice of self-managed news. In the current digital era, news burnout caused by instantaneous exposure to massive amounts of news will paralyze the personal analysis ability of news consumers and form a negative news consumption experience. Therefore, users begin to avoid news, self-manage the information they want to browse, and minimize the discomfort caused by news browsing as much as possible [8].

This avoidance behavior of the public is actually a strategy of self-preservation, as they try to find a place of peace in the era of news overload. In the face of complex and rapidly updated digital information, people are more inclined to screen out the content that fits their cognitive and emotional preferences, and then news information will go through the process of being selected or avoided [9]. By carefully sifting through and avoiding some news, the public can manage their information intake more effectively and avoid being distracted by irrelevant or unpleasant news. This kind of self-management behavior not only helps to improve personal news consumption experience, but also promotes the healthy flow of information in society to a certain extent.

In addition, the use of social media deepens the connections between users and between users and information, and also constantly deepens information overload. Overloaded news is like noise, which can easily cause negative emotions such as anxiety, boredom, and tiredness [10]. On the surface, news avoidance is a kind of strategic avoidance of negative emotions, but in essence, it manifests the sense of self-activity and resistance, and also expresses the public's hope for a more rational and effective dialogue and interaction, the formation of a healthy news consumption habit, and the realization of the beautiful picture of the construction of self-publicity through an orderly news communication environment. Therefore, the positive avoidance of news is not lacking as a form of using wit. But in the long run, news avoidance behavior is not entirely harmless. Deliberately avoiding news for a long time will make people think that "news will find me", and they do not need to actively seek news, thus limiting the range of information that the audience can access [11].

4. Conclusion

Taking news avoidance as a starting point, this paper systematically sorted out the definition, classification, causes and the impacts of news avoidance, and combines existing research to explore the possibility of positive use of news avoidance. The following findings are drawn: the public can positively use news avoidance behavior for self-protection. The conscious avoidance of news that is detrimental to oneself by the public is actually a behavior of managing news consumption to some

extent, which helps to cope with the negative emotions caused by exposure to negative news in situations of information overload. Although this kind of news consumption behavior may exacerbate the information cocoon effect in the long run, limiting individuals' access to information, it also reflects to some extent the psychological mechanism of self-protection of the public, prompting them to focus more on news content that they are interested in or have positive value, thereby optimizing their personal information reception experience. However, it should be noted that this paper only briefly summarizes some existing research on news avoidance, demonstrating that news avoidance can be positively utilized to a certain extent. There is a lack of empirical research on the positive effects of news avoidance and how it positively affects public news consumption behavior, and there is no in-depth exploration of the sustained impact of long-term avoidance of certain news. Therefore, subsequent research can focus on these aspects and pay attention to related behaviors such as news curation and selective engagement.

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