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Trilling, D.; Schoenbach, K.

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Skipping current affairs: The non-users of online and offline news

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Damian Trilling

Amsterdam School of Communication Research, The Netherlands

Klaus Schoenbach

University of Vienna, Austria

Abstract

In an information-rich environment with ample choice, do citizens still get exposed to what is going on around them in society? Or do they become ‘information hermits’, only interested in their personal hobbies? In contrast to widespread fears, the results of a large-scale survey, representative for the population of the Netherlands, suggest that most citizens still get an overview of what is going on in the world, and that television news is still the most popular source for that information. In addition, news on the Internet reaches those who are unlikely to seek news offline and wish to be entertained instead of informed. In detail, the study examines (1) which factors influence total news-overview avoidance, but also (2) what determines the amount of news exposure for those who do not skip the news.

Keywords

Fragmentation, news, news avoidance, news exposure, online, selective exposure

Introduction

In an information-rich environment with ample choice, do citizens still get exposed to what is going on around them in society? This question sounds paradoxical. Is it not true that the new information offers are actually used for more news and public affairs information than ever before? On top of this, the audience gets rid of patronizing journalists,

Corresponding author:

Damian Trilling, Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: d.c.trilling@uva.nl

is finally free of being manipulated by PR people and other gatekeepers – this is what an optimistic vision suggests. Citizens no longer depend on what media organizations pre-select. Both the abundance and accessibility of primary, original sources allow citizens to put together themselves whatever they want to know (e.g. Gillmor, 2004; Negroponte, 1995).

But there are serious fears that people are rather lazy and less responsible than the optimists assume. Once given the chance, they might actually avoid all information that they are not strictly personally interested in. Indeed, this has been made possible by the many more channels on television, and by more outlets in the magazine sector, but above all, by the Internet. It is feared that the Internet audience increasingly consists of ‘information hermits’, focused on their personal hobbies only. The possibility of being surprised by information one was not interested in beforehand – and thus learning about something ‘incidentally’ – could disappear (Zukin and Snyder, 1984). This will inevitably lead to less knowledge of current affairs (Baum and Kernell, 1999; Eveland and Dunwoody, 2002; Prior, 2007; Schoenbach et al., 2005; Tewksbury, 2003; Tewksbury and Althaus, 2000) – indispensable for citizens’ participation in a democratic society (Ferree et al., 2002; Habermas, 1962, 2006; Strömbäck, 2005).

This pessimistic view of the new media environment (e.g. Sunstein, 2001; Tewksbury, 2005) mourns a better past when television, radio, newspapers and magazines were spreading information about a wide range of events and issues to most citizens. In addition, the traditional media prioritized and contextualized their news (e.g. Gans, 2003; Luhmann, 1974; Schudson, 1995). Pessimists claim that the scarcity of outlets made this information rather hard to circumvent. Also, the journalists working for those media typically shared criteria of newsworthiness (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Shoemaker and Reese, 1991). That way, they made sure that the audience inadvertently learned about *a common core* of news and current affairs that then could be deliberated about by all (e.g. Lee, 2007; Sunstein, 2001). But now, with a more diverse offer – so the fear goes – people can at all times select the media content they exactly want. Thus, personal preferences become the main determinant of the content people are exposed to. Formerly, the audience could only be active within the clear limitations set by the mainstream media. But now, people have far more opportunities to select only the media content they want. So, those who do not care about current affairs, politics and news now can simply avoid it – without having to do without any media exposure at all.

And indeed, on the one hand, studies have shown that in US households, with more television channels, people who prefer entertainment seem to skip informative content (Prior, 2007; see also Chaffee and Metzger, 2001). Also, the prime-time share of the three major network channels in the US, with their general-interest content, has declined (Webster, 2005). Instead, viewing time has increasingly been spread across a large number of more specific channels. Websites, too, seem to fragment audiences (Tewksbury, 2005), possibly separating polarized ‘issue publics’, groups of people with similar political attitudes (Morris, 2007; Stroud, 2010).

On the other hand, it is certainly reassuring to know that most people still seem to follow the news, with 38% of Americans relying exclusively on offline sources and 59% using both on- and offline ones (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010b). Also,

the Internet is actually full of news, some say, and thus could *increase* incidental learning about topics one was not interested in before (Lee, 2009; Tewksbury et al., 2001). And, as in the era of the traditional media – newspapers, radio and television – news outlets on the Internet, such as blogs as well as major news sites, are said to not differ much in the societal issues they cover (Lee, 2007).

Fragmentation, selective exposure and factors affecting news use

The concerns raised by the Internet pessimists address a classic issue in communication research: is media exposure determined mostly by personal characteristics of the recipients (for instance, their interests), or by structural factors, such as what the media offer (see e.g. Cooper and Tang, 2009)? As structural constraints seem to vanish, the idiosyncrasies of the audience should indeed gain more and more importance (Wonneberger et al., 2009). This is why a possible fragmentation of the news audience has been explained by the concept of selective exposure. Based on rational-choice theory, it assumes an active audience deciding what to watch, read or listen to according to individual interests and preferences only (e.g. Frey, 1986; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Sears and Freedman, 1967; Zillmann and Byrant, 1985).

Recent studies on selective exposure by Garrett (2009), Stroud (2008) as well as Kobayashi and Ikeda (2009), however, indicate that audiences' individual interests and preferences do indeed lead to exposure to sources closely matching their preferences, but at the same time, people are still curious about the world outside: those who expose themselves to highly partisan and specialist sources *also* consume an above average level of general-interest news (Bimber and Davis, 2003; see also Zaller, 1992). There are increasing signs of this: people on average do not use a lot of different news sites on the Internet, but concentrate on a few, often run by professional news organizations: 57% of Americans get their news from only two to five websites; only 11% routinely use more than that (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010b). Primary or alternative sources and weblogs for news and political information hardly play a part in that diet (e.g. Schmidt et al., 2009). Instead, news consumption still seems to rely heavily on television and newspapers. And even those who use YouTube for their information often find material from traditional media there (May, 2010). Online news sites as well, although having recently begun to substitute traditional outlets, are still mostly professional ones (e.g. De Waal and Schoenbach, 2005, 2010; Gaskins and Jerit, 2012; Lin et al., 2005; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2008). In sum, then, the fragmentation of the audience should be less dramatic than, for example, Sunstein (2001) expected (see also Dahlberg, 2007).

Still, it is not yet clear to what extent people in a high-choice media environment really avoid general-interest news sources of all sorts and, instead, concentrate on information about the one topic – or maybe a few of them – they are personally interested in. Of course, many media provide material for focusing on a certain topic as well, by offering background information and interpretation (Schröder and Steeg Larsen, 2010). Similarly, Tewksbury et al. (2008) distinguish between browsing to get a broad overview and selectively using the media content one is interested in. Also our study will focus on

what may be called the minimal prerequisite to participate in public discourse: at least knowing what topics and events are actually out there (Ferree et al., 2002; Habermas, 1962, 2006). Therefore, this study tries to shed light on the use of media for topical overviews of what is going on in the world, among which, as Sunstein (2001: 35) puts it, inevitably 'topics that you would not have chosen in advance'. We investigate if, in a high-choice media environment, selective exposure is prevalent and exposure to sources providing such an overview really is not common any more, as the pessimists assume:

RQ1: How widespread is news-overview avoidance today?

The pessimist viewpoint suggests that news was hardly avoided in the past only because media choices had been heavily restricted (Prior, 2007). Thus, in a high-choice environment where possibilities for selective exposure to non-news sources are no longer limited, personal factors should gain importance in the selection process. A high influence of these personal factors would reflect a high amount of selectivity – because in a non-selective audience, everyone, regardless of his or her personal preferences, would use similar media content.

Based on this approach, *entertainment preference* is a possible obstacle for news exposure. Prior (2007) showed that if there is no other choice available, even those who prefer entertainment above news watch the news. This personal preference, therefore, had no big influence in low-choice environments, but gained importance as the number of alternatives rose. The same argument can be made for *political interest*: while highly interested people follow the news anyway, those with a low interest also do so if no attractive alternative is offered (Prior, 2007).

Similarly, the *duty to keep informed*, the feeling that a good citizen has to follow the news (McCombs and Poindexter, 1983; Poindexter and McCombs, 2001), influences media choices. For example, it increases newspaper browsing to get a broad overview (Tewksbury et al., 2008) and increases the likelihood of a preference for national news above local news (Prior, 2003). Here also the same argument as for *entertainment preference* and *political interest* applies: once there are more choices, those who lack a perceived *duty to keep informed* can easily choose non-news media offers if they do not feel the need to watch the news.

Following the news makes most sense for those who actually believe that they can influence political decisions. Accordingly, both *internal political efficacy*, that is the belief that one is capable to participate in politics, and *external political efficacy*, that is the perceived responsiveness of the political system, are related to news use (Aarts and Semetko, 2003; Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Tewksbury et al., 2008). But again, in low-choice environments, some with a low efficacy still might have followed the news because of a lack of alternatives.

The discussion on who avoids the news, however, has not been limited to political attitudes: the young (e.g. Lauf, 2001; Lewis, 2008; Mindich, 2005; Peiser, 2000; Zubayr and Geese, 2009) and poorly educated (e.g. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2008) are feared not to follow the news. Additionally, two psychological traits have been linked to news exposure: extraversion (Finn, 1997; Kraaykamp and Van Eijck, 2005; Shim and Paul, 2007) and need for cognition (Cacioppo and Petty, 1982; Das et al., 2003; Kraaykamp and Van Eijck, 2005). It has been argued that these personal traits influence someone's need for surveillance of the environment, and therefore increase

motivation to follow the news – which, again, should gain influence in a high-choice environment.

All these factors will be used to assess who it is that avoids the news:

RQ2: Which factors affect news-overview avoidance, and how strongly?

To address concerns of increased news-overview avoidance in high-choice media environments with more variety and more possibilities, we investigate if some of these factors are more influential in an online context. In fact, those who fear that the Internet furthers selective avoidance of general-interest news basically assume that the role of individual-level factors is bigger the more choices one has. For example, due to the lack of choices in some offline media, even those who would prefer entertainment still might expose themselves to informative content, as no alternative closer to their preference is available (Prior, 2007). But as the Internet offers the highest possible number of choices, individual factors should play a stronger role for online news exposure than for offline news exposure. Whether this is true will be assessed by comparing the factors affecting online and offline news exposure, respectively. Some factors might even play no role at all online, but be important offline:

RQ3: What different factors influence online news avoidance compared to offline news avoidance?

Method

Our analysis is based on a representative survey in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is not only one of the oldest democracies, but also one of the countries with the highest Internet penetration: 90% of people 16 years and older have access to the Internet and 77% of the population use a broadband connection (Löf and Seybert, 2009). In the US, for example, 74% of adults use the Internet and only 60% have a broadband connection at home (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010a). For a population of about 16 million, the Netherlands offers a wide range of newspapers every day: 12 national ones, among them three free dailies. In addition, every community is served by at least one local newspaper. Three public TV stations and three of the private stations broadcast programmes with news and current affairs content daily. Most of them provide news via their teletext service, too. There are six national public service radio stations and a large number of commercial and regional stations and virtually all of them carry news.

Sample

Our web-based survey draws on a large sample representative for the Dutch population aged 13 years and older. News consumption in the Netherlands is traditionally very high (Tenscher, 2008) – but little is known about who do *not* expose themselves to any news overviews, and what role the online media play in this context.

As the Netherlands have an Internet penetration of 90%, an Internet survey can reach a representative sample of the population. In addition, weights were applied to match gender, age, household size, education, social class, and region of residence with the population. Data collection took place in December 2009. From a panel of

233,467 members in total, a sample of 2900 participants was drawn. Potential participants were approached offline, too. Since a response rate (AAPOR-RR1) of 73% was achieved, a dataset with 2130 cases was collected. Subsequently, 49 cases were removed because of invalid answers, resulting in a final data set of 2081. Completion of the questionnaire lasted 20 minutes on average. Prior to the fieldwork, we had conducted a pre-test with 74 participants filling in an earlier version of the questionnaire. Based on an analysis of these responses and extensive feedback by the participants, we further improved the questionnaire.

Measurement

News exposure. Our questionnaire gauged news use separately for 49 sources with a general-news offer – covering public affairs of all kinds. These sources range from newspapers and television broadcasts to news websites. We included all newspapers, all news and current affairs programmes on Dutch television channels, the websites of these offline outlets, radio news and teletext. In addition, we compiled an extensive list of websites which are not linked to any offline source, but offer at least some general-interest news. Based on traffic statistics provided by the web tracking company Alexa, we subsequently excluded those sources which we expected to be used by fewer than 0.5% of our sample. For each source, we measured the number of days it is used in a typical week (for question wording see the Appendix).

For each source a respondent claimed to use at least once a week, he or she was asked to indicate specific purposes the source could serve – from a list of five: ‘because it gives an overview of what is going on in the world’, ‘because it gives background information or opinions’, ‘because it is fast’, ‘because it is pleasant to use’ and for ‘other [unspecified] purposes’. Multiple responses were possible. We used ‘because it gives an overview of what is going on in the world’ as a filter variable to include only the news sources which we were theoretically interested in: those which people claim to use for a broad overview. Doing so, we employed an approach similar to the one chosen by Tewksbury et al., who were only interested in what they call ‘browsing’ and ‘a desire to survey the world’ (2008: 262), and excluded news media that were used for information on specific topics only – and thus not for a broad overview – from their analysis.

Independent and control variables. Unless stated otherwise, the following variables were measured using seven- point scales (for the exact question wordings see the Appendix):

- *Entertainment preference:* the respondents were asked to indicate on three ten-point scales whether they use newspapers, television and the Internet, respectively, for information or for entertainment purposes. The relative entertainment preference of a respondent, then, is the sum of the three *z*-transformed scales (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .62$).
- *Political interest:* answers to the question ‘Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?’ ranging from ‘not interested at all’ to ‘very interested’.
- *Civic duty to keep informed:* agreement with the statement ‘It is important that people in society are informed about news and current affairs’.

- *Political efficacy*: both the internal efficacy scale, consisting of four items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$), and the external efficacy scale (three items, Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$) were inspired by Niemi et al. (1991).
- *Personality traits*: to measure *need for cognition*, we shortened a scale provided by Cacioppo et al. (1984) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$). *Extraversion* was measured based on four items used by Stefanone and Jang (2008) and McCrae and Costa (1996) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$).
- *Sociodemographics*: age and gender were gauged, as was education. For the latter, the highest level of education attained was asked using a seven-point scale, ranging from elementary education or even less, to a university degree.

Results

Avoiding news overviews

Two out of three people (68%) obtain a news overview of what is going on in the world every single day in a typical week. In contrast, only 11% use no information channel at all for finding out what is going on in a typical week. So, total news-overview avoidance seems not to be too widespread (RQ1). In detail, those who use at least one overview source at least once per week, use on average 2.5 different overview sources per day. When we add up all news-overview sources in a typical week, the average citizen views 7.0 television broadcasts, reads 2.6 newspaper copies and visits a website 2.7 times to get an overview. On 1.3 days per week, the average citizen uses teletext for this purpose, and on 1.8 days he or she listens to radio news to get to know what's going on in the world. These numbers show that most people do get – even frequently – an overview of the news; news-overview avoidance seems to be limited to a small part of society.

But which factors affect news-overview avoidance (RQ2)? To answer this question, we ran zero-inflated negative binomial regressions with the aggregated days of use of all news-overview sources as the dependent variable.¹ This type of regression was applied because it fits the data that are skewed to the right (skewness = 1.40 for all media, 1.18 for offline media and 3.24 for online media) and have an excessive number of zeros (Figure 1). Another advantage of this type of analysis is the possibility to distinguish between complete avoidance on the one hand and the amount of exposure on the other hand. In a first step, to find out who it is that completely avoids news overviews, we examine the binary equation of the regression. Second, to predict the frequency of exposure among those who are exposed to news overviews at least once, we take a look at the count equation.

Those who belong to the group of complete news-overview avoiders typically are younger and less educated, they prefer entertainment, are only weakly interested in politics and have a low sense of a civic duty to keep informed (see the binary equation in Table 1, which predicts the chance of the dependent variable being zero). To illustrate how important these predictors are, respectively, we calculated the change of the odds of belonging to the group of complete avoiders when the predictor variable is varied by one standard deviation. Then, interestingly, all determinants of news avoidance in our model have equally strong effects: an increase of one standard deviation of the independent

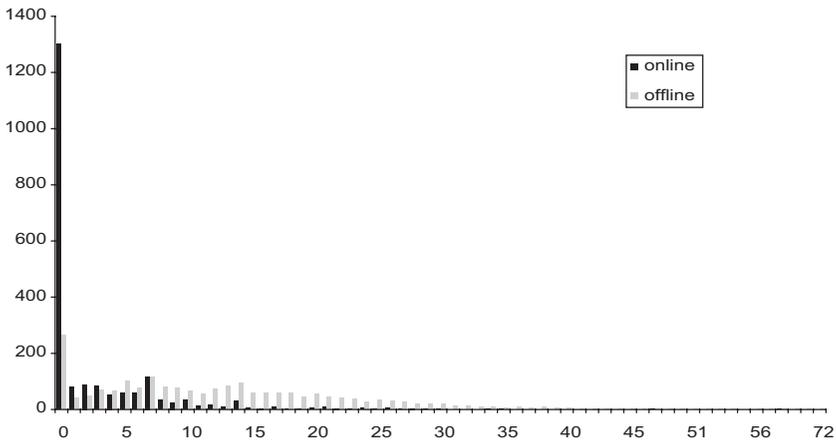


Figure 1. Frequency of exposure to online and offline news overviews.

The bars show the number of respondents sharing the same frequency of media use, calculated as the sum of the frequencies of all outlets they use to get a news overview.

variable reduces the odds of being an absolute news-overview avoider by a factor between 0.64 and 0.76.

But is there a difference between the factors influencing news avoidance offline and online (RQ3)? As virtually all users of online overview information use also some offline media for that purpose (only 31 out of 779 users do not), it is not surprising that entertainment preference and duty to keep informed influence overall exposure and offline exposure to an equally strong degree. Political interest, however, was not significant ($p = .064$). In other words, those who do not claim to use offline media to find out what is going on in the world are again lower educated, young, prefer entertainment and feel a low duty to keep informed (Table 2).

The other way around, a large number of offline news-overview users do not consult online media for the same purpose (1068 out of 1816). And those who avoid online news seem to be structurally different from those who do not use offline news. Skipping online news overviews completely is not related to being younger or preferring entertainment. Like in the offline case, civic duty increases the chance of using news online – but its impact is less than half as strong. Introverts are more likely to be online news-overview avoiders, but not offline. The only factor with the same effect for both media types is education: low educated people are more likely to avoid news overviews completely, both on- and offline.

The frequency of exposure among news-overview users

As one would expect from the results above, being older and politically interested, preferring information and feeling a civic duty to keep informed do not only strengthen the chance of using some news overviews *at all*. Among the users, these factors also increase the *frequency* of exposure. This is revealed by the count equation in Table 1. Exceptions are: a low education, which only predicts complete overview avoidance, but is not related

Table 1. Determinants of news-overview exposure.

Variable	News-overview exposure	
	Binary equation	Count equation
Gender	0.14 (0.17)	-0.00 (0.04)
Age	-0.02** (0.01)	0.01*** (0.00)
Education	-0.24*** (0.06)	-0.01 (0.01)
Internal political efficacy	-0.00 (0.08)	0.03 (0.02)
External political efficacy	-0.05 (0.07)	0.02 (0.01)
Need for cognition	0.03 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.02)
Extraversion	-0.06 (0.08)	0.05* (0.02)
Relative entertainment preference	0.31*** (0.08)	-0.07*** (0.02)
Political interest	-0.15* (0.07)	0.07*** (0.01)
Civic duty	-0.33*** (0.06)	0.04* (0.02)
Constant	0.72 (0.74)	2.02*** (0.17)
ln(alpha)	-0.89*** (0.05)	
Log pseudo-likelihood	-7348.63	
Wald χ^2	251.06***	
Nagelkerke pseudo-R ²	.219	
Zero observations	231	
Non-zero observations	1834	

Note: $N = 2065$. Unstandardized coefficients from a zero-inflated negative binomial regression with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

to the frequency of exposure; and extraversion, which leads to more exposure among news users while having no influence on skipping the news at all. The strongest influence is exerted by age: being one standard deviation older increases exposure to news overviews by 15%, one standard deviation of political interest results in 13% more exposure. One standard deviation less entertainment preference increases exposure by 10%, while one standard deviation of civic duty only adds 6%.

Among *offline* news users, specifically, the frequency of exposure is predicted again the same way as in the overall model. Only need for cognition becomes an additional significant predictor: the higher the need for cognition, the lower the frequency of offline exposure (see the count equation in Table 2). The frequency of *online* exposure, however,

Table 2. Determinants of news-overview exposure, separated by sources.

Variable	News-overview exposure			
	Offline sources		Online sources	
	Binary equation	Count equation	Binary equation	Count equation
Gender	0.06 (0.16)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.11)	0.11 (0.08)
Age	-0.02*** (0.01)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Education	-0.22*** (0.05)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.17*** (0.04)	-0.05* (0.03)
Internal political efficacy	-0.01 (0.07)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.05)	0.05 (0.04)
External political efficacy	-0.09 (0.06)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)
Need for cognition	0.06 (0.07)	-0.03* (0.02)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.03)
Extraversion	-0.09 (0.07)	0.04** (0.02)	-0.13* (0.06)	0.02 (0.04)
Relative entertainment preference	0.32*** (0.07)	-0.07*** (0.02)	0.03 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.04)
Political interest	-0.11 (0.06)	0.06*** (0.01)	-0.08 (0.04)	0.06 (0.03)
Civic duty	-0.32*** (0.06)	0.04*** (0.02)	-0.13*** (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)
Constant	0.89 (0.70)	1.95*** (0.16)	2.59*** (0.51)	1.80*** (0.40)
ln(alpha)	-1.07*** (0.05)		-0.38* (0.10)	
Log pseudo-likelihood	-6905.51		-3486.04	
Wald χ^2	305.35***		32.98***	
Nagelkerke pseudo-R ²	.241		.073	
Zero observations	262		1291	
Non-zero observations	1803		774	

Note: $N = 2065$. Unstandardized coefficients from zero-inflated negative binomial regressions with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

depends on different characteristics of the audience. Most interestingly, the personal factors that should, as we argued, have especially strong effects in high-choice environments (like political interest, entertainment preference and civic duty) do not play any role here. The same holds true for age – the strongest predictor in the offline model. In fact, the only significant predictor is education – which, surprisingly, leads to *less* online news exposure.

Conclusions and discussion

Is there a reason to fear that now, because of the Internet, people systematically avoid overviews of what is going on in the world around them? Actually, only a very small group of people does not use any information channel at all for news overviews – at least once per week. Most people seem to seek some sort of surveillance of their environment and use different news sources to get a broad overview of what is going on in the world.

As earlier research on selective exposure suggested, increased exposure to a specific type of source does not necessarily lead to avoiding other sources for the same purpose. The distribution of our data made it necessary to apply a technique that distinguishes between complete avoidance and the amount of exposure. This yielded very interesting results: the analysis revealed a relatively sharp difference between complete avoidance and little exposure. The few people who do not expose themselves to overviews are typically less educated and younger than the rest. But among those who use a news source at least once in a while, a weak education does not play a role anymore – which is actually quite plausible: people with a better education do not necessarily need *more* sources than anybody else to get to know what is going on in the world. Instead, they may be even more selective and stick to the – few – sources that they may have discovered as particularly useful. This effect is even stronger for Internet sources: among the users of online news, the more highly one is educated the fewer sources one uses for an overview of the world.

For some people, passing the threshold to get news overviews at all seems to be easier *online* – for those who strongly prefer entertainment over information. The Internet reaches them with at least some overview of news and current affairs. A possible reason could be that getting this overview can easily be integrated into surfing sessions. One does not have to miss one's favourite entertainment offer just because one scans some news as well. And news on the Internet is free, as opposed to, for example, most newspapers. Similarly, a low sense of a civic duty to keep informed makes it more likely to avoid news offline, but it does not keep people away from online news that much. These findings clearly contradict the pessimist expectation that those with a weaker motivation to follow the news do not use *online* news media, while they still might be 'trapped' by *offline* media. In fact, it might be the other way round.

The civic duty to keep informed *in general* is still one of the strongest predictors for both using news overviews at all and the frequency of exposure. But here also, the Internet might have the potential to reach those who do *not* feel a strong civic duty to keep informed. On the Internet, people with weak civic attitudes actually seem to follow the news: regardless of how strong their civic attitudes, their preference for entertainment and their political interest are, their frequency of exposure does not differ. And using online news overviews at all, albeit only once a week, is much less a matter of civic attitudes online than offline.

So, contrary to popular fears, the Internet may even have an *integrating* function for the public discourse. It also exposes those to news overviews who are likely to avoid it because they are much more interested in media entertainment than in news and political information. Those who prefer entertainment, have a low political interest and a low duty to keep informed are just *more* likely to avoid news overviews in an offline setting than

online. In online contexts rather than offline, the entertainment-orientated can be trapped into following the news.

This is reflected in the impact of personal factors for news media use that we could examine here: they clearly do not have a stronger influence on the consumption of online news than on the use of offline news. We thus could not confirm a basic assumption of the pessimistic position – that vanishing structural constraints in an online environment should make personal factors more important for news exposure. In other words, we do not find support for the notion that people's tendency to selectively expose themselves to content closely matching their preferences will result in avoidance of general-interest news overviews in high-choice environments. The audience in 2010, thus, seems to be active, but not hyper-active in the sense that once the offer is large enough, recipients start pursuing their own interests only and actively avoid all kind of exposure to overviews of public affairs.

So, is democracy in danger? Of course, pessimists could argue that 11% news-overview avoiders are 11% too many. And this specific group again seems to consist of the usual suspects – i.e. those who in the past have been identified as the victims of increasing knowledge gaps or a digital divide: those with a low level of education (for an early acknowledgement of this, see Tichenor et al., 1970; see also Norris, 2001). But for the young, often feared to tune out when it comes to news (e.g. Mindich, 2005), news on the Internet might actually be good: exposure to it does not seem to depend on age – younger people are as likely as older ones to use online news overviews at all; and among the users, the younger ones use online news as often as older people do.

In sum, these results do not support the grim fears that news use is vanishing: the scope of the problem of selectively avoiding general-interest news seems to be rather limited in the Netherlands in 2010. And although absolute figures of exposure might be lower in other countries, we could show that those who have been suspected to tune out as soon as online media make it easy for them, do not in fact do so.

Appendix: Question wording

Media use

How many days in a typical week (Monday to Sunday) do you

- read the paper editions of the newspapers listed below?
- watch the programmes listed below?
- visit these websites? This may also be via newsletters or rss-feeds.
- listen to newscasts on the radio?
- read the news on teletext?

Purposes of use

What are for you personally the most important reasons to use the newspapers, magazines, programmes and websites listed below [*the list contained those sources the respondent had claimed to use*]? You can indicate more than one reason. I use it because . . .

- . . . it gives an overview of what is going on in the world.
- . . . it gives background information or opinion.
- . . . it is fast.
- . . . it is pleasant to use.
- other purposes.

Relative entertainment preference

When you read newspapers, watch television or use the Internet, do you do this mostly to get informed or to entertain yourself?

- Mostly I watch television to . . .
- Mostly I read newspapers to . . .
- Mostly I use the Internet to . . .

Internal political efficacy

- I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics.
- I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.
- I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people.
- I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as current politicians.

External political efficacy

- People like me don't have any say about what government does [reverse coded].
- I don't think public officials care much what people like me think [reverse coded].
- Parties are only interested in people's votes but not in their opinions. [reverse coded].

Need for cognition

- I would prefer complex to simple problems.
- I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.
- I would prefer a task that is intellectual and difficult to one that requires less thought.

Extraversion

- I am someone who actively seeks as much information as I can in a new situation.
- I really enjoy talking to people.

- I like to be where the action is.
- I you usually take the initiative in making new friends.

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Note

1. We also ran all models with the counted number of sources as the dependent variable. By this, we assessed whether our independent variables rather influenced the number of sources or the frequency of exposure per source or both. The models remained almost the same, as both dependent variables are extremely highly correlated ($r = .91$). Thus, the overall frequency of exposure is almost completely explained by the number of sources someone uses.

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