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Avoiding the news to participate in society? The longitudinal relationship between news avoidance and civic engagement

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Abstract: Lower levels of news use are generally understood to be associated with less political engagement among citizens. But while some people simply have a low preference for news, others avoid the news intentionally. So far little is known about the relationship between active news avoidance and civic engagement in society, a void this study has set out to fill. Based on a four-wave general population panel survey in the Netherlands, conducted between April and July 2020 (N = 1,084) during a crisis situation, this research-in-brief investigates the development of news avoidance and pro-social civic engagement over time. Results suggest that higher news topic avoidance results in higher levels of civic engagement. The study discusses different explanations for why less news can mean more engagement.

Keywords: news avoidance, civic engagement, media effects, panel survey, Covid-19

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1 Avoiding the news to participate in society

In times of crisis, the need for information on how to navigate an uncertain situation is high, which increases citizens' news use (Boyle et al., 2004). The Covid-19 crisis showed, however, that the proportion of people that avoid news increased significantly (Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, and Kleis Nielsen, 2020). Reasons for news avoidance during a crisis may be a fear of negative information, a more focused consumption of certain news content or sources, and the avoidance of misinformation.

Researchers have noted that people with low news use know less about politics and participate less often in civic activities. This can have negative consequences for the social cohesion among citizens (Ohme, 2021; Strömbäck, 2017). However, research suggests that low news use is different from news avoidance (Ohme, Vanden Abeele, Van Gaeveren, Durnez, and De Marez, 2021; Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020). Hence, the question remains about the real-world consequences for a growing share of the population that avoids news. While higher levels of news avoidance can mean that people distance themselves from societal developments, the possibility exists that active avoidance frees up capacities to engage with society in different, more consequential ways (Putnam, 2000). By relying on a four-wave general population panel survey in the Netherlands, conducted between April and July 2020 ($N = 1,084$), this study tests the extent to which avoidance of news, over time, affects civic engagement in four prosocial activities that may help counter a crisis. We use a fixed-effects analysis and focus on intra-personal variation. Hence, we do not seek to provide a full account of civic engagement but rather specifically study the role of news avoidance on over-time changes in engagement, independent from other personal characteristics.

News avoidance and its societal consequences

While there is an abundance of media outlets and online platforms that make news accessible to citizens, in some societies we see sizable numbers of people avoiding (certain types of) news more regularly or avoiding established news altogether. People can either actively avoid the news or have low levels of news use, without actively avoiding it (Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2019). In contrast to other studies that clustered users into groups with distinct media diets (e. g., Edgerly et al., 2018; Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster, 2010), our study understands news avoidance as an active behavior that can differ in its frequency. This means that we do not make a binary distinction between who is a news avoider or not but are instead interested in the outcomes of news avoidance.

The reasons for intentional news avoidance can vary from not trusting the news, the overload of information available, or issue fatigue (Gurr and Metag, 2021). During Covid-19, as a recent study found, the main motivations for avoidance were feelings of information overload and being unable to do anything about the crisis (De Bruin, de Haan, Vliegenthart, Kruikemeier, and Boukes, 2021). News avoidance is thereby closely related to the Uses and Gratifications Approach (Katz et al., 1973), as we understand audiences to have an active role when it comes to the selection of news. Hence, people may have been intentionally avoiding news more often since the outbreak of Covid-19, because news seeking did not present them with the expected gratifications. In times of crisis, people that intentionally avoid news report being more often tired of getting negative news or that they feel increasingly helpless in turning the crisis situation around (Fletcher et al., 2020). Regular news avoidance may lead to disengaged citizens or foster polarization of opinion and knowledge between citizens who do and those who do not avoid news, which can lead to a disbalance in representative democracies (Blekesaune, Elvestad, and Aalberg, 2012). However, so far, little is known about the specific relation between intentional news avoidance and civic engagement. This is especially true for the avoidance of a specific news topic during times of crisis. We will therefore investigate how the active behavior of avoiding the news about a crisis topic relates to civic engagement in activities related to the crisis.

Civic engagement in times of crisis

Civic engagement is an important way for citizens to influence society by supporting political causes, criticizing them, or suggesting new directions (Strömbäck, 2005). During a crisis, pro-social civic engagement can be especially vital in attenuating negative outcomes, as governments need to rely on an active citizenry to help them steer the country through the crisis and compensate for lacking manpower and resources (Boersma, Kraiukhina, Larruina, Lehota, and Nury, 2019). Hence, active support from citizens can help to mitigate political challenges more successfully (Kornberg and Clarke, 1992).

Civic engagement – defined as goal-oriented, often case-specific, voluntary activity by citizens – can entail a number of different activities (Theocharis and Van Deth, 2016; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Carpini, 2006), such as volunteering, donating, and expressing public opinion. Yet, during a crisis citizens may not be able to engage in all activities, for example, if larger gatherings are prohibited (Pleyers, 2020). We, therefore, focus on the civic engagement in pro-social activities that were possible during the Covid-19 crisis.

The role of news avoidance for civic engagement

Media can play a key role in sparking civic engagement. The positive relationship between political media use and citizen's political activity over time is well established and often explained by higher levels of political interest, knowledge, civic awareness, and efficacy (Andersen et al., 2021). This, in turn, may influence participation, with recent studies showing causal evidence for this relationship (e. g., Andersen et al., 2021; Kruikemeier and Shehata, 2017). Lower levels of news use are generally understood to be associated with less political engagement among citizens.

Research on the Covid-19 crisis has shown that news media are a key source of information that citizens increasingly turn to; however, the longer the crisis lasts, the more people tend to avoid the news (Fletcher et al., 2020; Ohme et al., 2020). Conducting correlation analyses, scholars found low levels of civic engagement and political participation for the group with the lowest levels of media exposure in a survey sample, whom they termed “news avoiders” (Edgerly, 2017; Edgerly et al., 2018). However, the causal relationship between actively avoiding news and civic engagement remains unclear. Also, much uncertainty exists about what actively avoiding news *about* the crisis means for citizens' engagement to attenuate outcomes *of* the crisis. This is important to understand, as active civic engagement helps people to cope with the crisis and increases social cohesion among its citizens, which will contribute to society at large, especially during a crisis period. Research on the causal relationship between news avoidance and civic engagement is sparse (see e. g., Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster, 2010) and, therefore, we propose two scenarios.

Less news, less engagement

In this first scenario, the decision to avoid news leads to lower levels of engagement, mainly for the reasons outlined above and based on the literature on news consumption. Citizens that do turn away from news experience the same situation as citizens that have general low news-seeking routines: Their political interest is lower, they know less about political developments, suffer from lower political efficacy, and, as a consequence, participate less (Shehata and Strömbäck, 2018). In the case of issue-related news avoidance, it is possible that people will have lower interest in the topic, less knowledge, and feel less efficacious to act on this topic. Hence, as it leads to lower levels of news exposure on the topic, the effects of topic avoidance would be similar to those of general news avoidance. As a result, issue-related news avoidance would lead to lower levels of issue-related engagement.

Less news, more engagement

However, in the second scenario, news avoidance could also coincide with higher levels of civic engagement. We believe that different reasons might cause this positive relationship. First, Putnam (2000) argued that media use can prevent citizens from acting together, as the increased time spent, in front of the television in particular, can erode social capital and community goals. However, this argumentation has been criticized, and little empirical evidence has been found for the assumption (Hooghe, 2003; Norris, 2002). Given that avoiding news can be considered a result of a lack of gratifications in the news-seeking process, citizens may seek gratifications in activities beyond news exposure. Woodstock (2014), using qualitative interviews, found evidence that “news resisters”, with their consequential news avoidance, are very much committed to social and cultural issues and do actually practice engaged citizenship.

Second, in a crisis, people can actively avoid *some* news about the topic, while they still attend to other news, such as counter-attitudinal or perceived misinformation (e. g., Oyeyemi et al., 2014). Following a smaller number of news sources can be related to higher levels of political engagement (e. g., number of TV programs and participation, see Dilliplane, 2011, or news platforms and turnout, see Diehl, Barnidge, and Gil de Zuñiga, 2019). Hence, it is possible that with a more confined news diet, people are still informed about the crisis, however, just with information they perceive as correct, relevant to them, or easier to digest.

Third, people who do not actively seek news still report significant news encounters – often for the biggest news issues – mostly via their social networks in indirect, often incidental ways (e. g., Kaiser, Keller, and Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018; Toff and Nielsen, 2018). Hence, even with strong avoidance motivations, people come across news most likely via posts and messages shared on social media, private messaging applications, or other forms of interpersonal communication. The increase in relative importance of that information through incidental exposure can mobilize issue-related engagement (see Choi, Lee, and Metzgar, 2017; Johnson, Neo, Heijnen, Smits, and van Veen, 2020).

Taken together, while there is only little evidence that media use has detrimental effects on civic engagement – let alone that avoidance of news produces higher engagement in society –, they can still be valid in a situation in which news about a crisis topic is avoided. So far, however, the causal relation between news avoidance and civic engagement has received little attention. The goal of this study is a first investigation of this relationship for a specific news topic during times of crisis. We therefore ask:

RQ: *What is the effect of actively avoiding news on civic engagement over time during a crisis?*

2 Method

We rely on a four-wave panel study that was conducted in the Netherlands in the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic by one of the largest Dutch research companies, *I&O Research* (anonymized for peer review). The first wave was fielded on April 10, 2020, and sent out to 3,750 potential respondents, stratified by gender, age, region, and educational level. In total, 1,742 respondents completed the survey before April 20 (retention rate = 49.8 %). The second wave took place between April 30 and May 11 and yielded 1,423 responses (retention rate = 81.7 %). The third wave (May 25 until June 3) was completed by 1,241 respondents (retention rate = 87.2 %). The final wave held from June 29 to July 7 had a retention rate of 87.3 %. A total of 1,084 respondents completed all four surveys.

Measures

Civic engagement was captured by the mean score of four items which asked people whether they took any of the following actions in the past three weeks, with answer categories ranging from 0 (not) to 4 (four or more times):

- Item 1: Donated money or goods to people or organizations affected by the coronavirus outbreak ($M_{\text{wave1}}=.42$, $SD_{\text{wave1}}=.88$; $M_{\text{wave2}}=.44$, $SD_{\text{wave2}}=.88$; $M_{\text{wave3}}=.40$, $SD_{\text{wave3}}=.82$; $M_{\text{wave4}}=.32$, $SD_{\text{wave4}}=.76$).
- Item 2: Posted or shared messages on social media with a clear call for action to comply with public-health measures in light of the coronavirus ($M_{\text{wave1}}=.47$, $SD_{\text{wave1}}=1.06$; $M_{\text{wave2}}=.31$, $SD_{\text{wave2}}=.84$; $M_{\text{wave3}}=.21$, $SD_{\text{wave3}}=.68$; $M_{\text{wave4}}=.14$, $SD_{\text{wave4}}=.55$).
- Item 3: Volunteered to help people or organizations that are affected by the coronavirus outbreak ($M_{\text{wave1}}=.69$, $SD_{\text{wave1}}=1.21$; $M_{\text{wave2}}=.59$, $SD_{\text{wave2}}=1.13$; $M_{\text{wave3}}=.41$, $SD_{\text{wave3}}=.95$; $M_{\text{wave4}}=.32$, $SD_{\text{wave4}}=.83$).
- Item 4: Personally convinced people they knew personally to follow official rules and be cautious in their behavior ($M_{\text{wave1}}=1.93$, $SD_{\text{wave1}}=1.54$; $M_{\text{wave2}}=1.58$, $SD_{\text{wave2}}=1.47$; $M_{\text{wave3}}=1.31$, $SD_{\text{wave3}}=1.35$; $M_{\text{wave4}}=1.12$, $SD_{\text{wave4}}=1.30$).

News avoidance was measured by a single item: *Since the start of the Corona crisis I have avoided the news more often*, with answer categories ranging from 1 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree) ($M_{\text{wave1}}=2.59$, $SD_{\text{wave1}}=1.91$; $M_{\text{wave2}}=2.80$, $SD_{\text{wave2}}=1.94$; $M_{\text{wave3}}=2.82$, $SD_{\text{wave3}}=1.93$; $M_{\text{wave4}}=2.73$, $SD_{\text{wave4}}=1.92$). People with higher education, females, and older citizens avoid news less often.

3 Analyses

Our dataset has a nested structure, with waves nested in respondents. For the analysis, we rely on fixed effects models. More specifically, we add fixed effects for each respondent. These types of models account for heterogeneity, that is, variance in the dependent variable that cannot be accounted for by the variables included in the model. In that way, we remove all inter-individual variance and focus on over-time, intra-individual variance. This approach makes it unnecessary (and undesirable) to include control variables that do not or hardly vary over time. In all instances, we lag the independent variable (news avoidance) in order to ensure that the cause precedes the consequence. To account for autocorrelation, we add a lagged dependent variable. As the inclusion of both fixed effects and a lagged dependent variable is sometimes criticized (Arellano and Bond, 1991) in a situation where the number of temporal observations (T) is low, we replicated the model without the lagged dependent variable as a robustness check. We also control for the overall decreasing levels in our dependent variable by including dummy variables for each wave (time fixed effects).

4 Results

To explore the relation between active news avoidance and civic engagement, we first explored the mean scores of both variables across the waves. Figure 1 visualizes the mean scores of civic participation. A clear trend can be observed: The average level of engagement drops as the pandemic progresses (from April till July 2020). A different pattern can be found when we turn to the mean scores of news avoidance across the waves in Figure 1. In the second and third wave, active news avoidance was, on average, relatively high compared to the first and last waves.

Our research questions asked whether active news avoidance can explain fluctuation in the levels of civic participation. Table 1 depicts the findings from the panel models. The results show how news avoidance has a lagged effect on

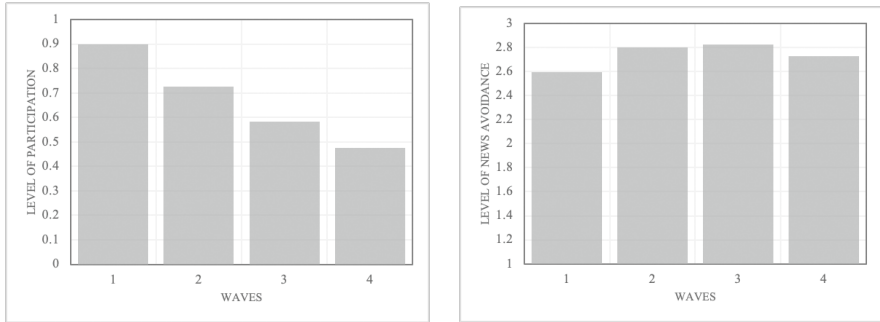


Figure 1: Mean scores of civic engagement (range from 0 to 4) and news avoidance (range from 1 to 7) across the four waves.

civic engagement (Model 1), even when we control for an autoregressive term of the dependent variable. That is the lagged effect of the dependent variable civic engagement (Model 2 in Table 1)¹. The observed lagged effect of news avoidance on engagement indicates that the level of news avoidance in one wave explains the variation in civic engagement in the subsequent wave. In other words, when respondents' active news avoidance is high, their civic engagement in the next wave increases.

Table 1: Results of panel analysis with fixed effects explaining the variation in civic engagement.

	Model 1	Model 2
Lag engagement		-.17*** (.02)
Lag news avoidance	.02** (.01)	.02** (.01)
Wave 3	-.15*** (.02)	-.17*** (.02)
Wave 4	-.25*** (.02)	-.30*** (.02)
Constant	.68*** (.02)	.82*** (.03)
<i>N</i>	3755	3755

Standard errors in parentheses.

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

¹ This effect remains stable in effect size and significance level when only running the same models with the mean score for civic engagement item 1 and 3.

5 Discussion

The present study was designed to determine whether an active avoidance of news affects the levels of prosocial civic engagement during a crisis, relying on a longitudinal survey conducted during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Netherlands. The contribution of this study is threefold: First, we find that a good share of citizens helped to steer a country through rough times and engage in prosocial, civic activities. Second, we can substantiate findings from previous studies that suggested higher levels of news avoidance as a crisis unfolds (Fletcher, 2020).

Third, and most importantly, our study offers one of the first empirical insights into the question whether news avoidance is detrimental or conducive for civic engagement (but see Woodstock, 2014). We find that over time, news avoidance is positively related to civic engagement in prosocial activities during a crisis. That is, people who said they actively avoided news about the crisis were more likely to become civically active about the crisis. This finding presents an important step for news avoidance literature, and we offer some potential explanations here. First, the need for agency to do something beyond mere news exposure may increase as the crisis unfolds. A mobilizing interplay of news avoidance and political efficacy is possible, as higher levels of efficacy are related to civic engagement and political participation (i. e., Andersen et al., 2020). Second, too much information may be counter-productive for the creation of meaning from information, and a less cluttered-information diet may help to develop behavioral strategies to engage (Diehl et al., 2019; Dilliplane, 2011). Third, the incidental exposure to news through personal networks may work to mobilize, as close-tie network information has been found to be mobilizing (Mutz, 2002).

Limitations

Our study has important limitations to consider. It is a single-country study, and we cannot speak for the generalizability of the findings beyond the Netherlands. The findings emerged during the situation of a global pandemic and a country in crisis mode. Many people during the pandemic strongly relied on news media as a source of information (Ohme et al., 2020; van der Meer, 2018) and felt the strong urge to do something about the crisis situation (Waeterloos et al., 2021). While this may be a suitable moment to zoom into the relationship of news avoidance and civic engagement, future research needs to scrutinize our findings in different contexts. The specific context might make this study a most-likely case, as we focus on the avoidance of a specific news topic and behavioral outcomes that

directly relate to this topic. Our measure of news avoidance is a straight-forward one and asked explicitly about the intentional decision to avoid news. While it serves the purpose of this study, future research should develop more nuanced measurements of news avoidance and re-test the relationship with civic engagement. Future research should also investigate indirect effects of this relationship. Finally, we only focus on a limited number of prosocial civic engagement activities due to the restriction of participation early on in the pandemic (Pleyers, 2020) and cannot speak for the relationship of news avoidance with types of participation that expressed discontent with government measures (such as the increasing number of protests during and after the field time of this study).

Twenty years after *Bowling alone* by Robert D. Putnam (2000) was published, the media environment has dramatically changed. While social media do connect citizens in new ways, this information ecology has led many citizens to follow news on their smartphones, social media platforms, and the still beloved television, to an extent probably higher than Putnam imagined back then. During a crisis, news is almost unavoidable, and we find that more people choose to avoid it but not to the detriment of civic engagement. It is on future scholars to re-focus on the question whether we are now at the point where less news use indeed has the integrating function for society foreseen by Putnam – and whether this finding can be extended beyond a crisis situation like the one we studied. So far, we can conclude that less news consumption is not necessarily bad news for democracy.

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