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# Selecting, avoiding, disconnecting: a focus group study of people's strategies for dealing with information abundance in the contexts of news, entertainment, and personal communication

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## ABSTRACT

Information abundance has become a defining characteristic of digital media environments. Today, people have to deal with a vast amount of news, entertainment and personal communication. This study investigates the strategies that people use to do so. Conceptually, we propose to understand information abundance as a macro-level phenomenon, i.e., an external state, which is neither positive nor negative per se. However, it may be experienced differently by individuals depending on what strategies they have to navigate abundance. Information abundance can be observed at the levels of content, sources, and devices as well as across the different media contexts of news, entertainment, or personal communication. Empirically, we conduct focus group discussions with 40 participants from Switzerland and examine what strategies people use to manage or withdraw from information abundance. The findings show that the strategies of selection, avoidance, and disconnection are applied similarly across the three media contexts, both temporarily and habitually, preventively and interventively, and are often used in tandem. Our findings also reveal that all strategies are used at the content, source, and device levels, which is important to consider because avoidance or disconnection from devices can inevitably affect media use more generally. The use of strategies seems to impact how individuals experience abundance, supporting previous research that avoidance and disconnection can mitigate information overload and enhance well-being. The study contributes to a better understanding of the multifaceted application of strategies as individual responses to the increase of information supply and the blurring boundaries between different media contexts.


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## Introduction

Information environments are shifting towards more hybrid, digital, mobile, and social media landscapes (Chadwick, 2017). Tied to these changes is a constant increase in information and content supply provided by an ever-growing number of sources like traditional media, digital media, or social media (Neuman et al., 2012). Arguably, in the digital age, *information abundance* has grown to a degree where it ‘envelops everyday life’ (Boczkowski, 2021, p. 5).

While communication research has primarily focused on information abundance in news and political contexts (Strömbäck et al., 2022), supply is also growing in other media contexts. No type of content has expanded as much as entertainment (e.g., Netflix, Spotify). Additionally, the volume of digital personal communication has increased, as it is easier than ever to share pictures or stories among families and friends anytime and anywhere.

Research in this realm has mostly been occupied with studying information overload – a possible detrimental individual-level consequence of information abundance that surfaces, for example, as overload on mobile devices (e.g., Matthes et al., 2020), platforms (e.g., Dai et al., 2020), or as news overload (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2018). Yet, we know relatively little about the strategies that people use to react or to prevent this overload. Examining such strategies seems relevant because their effective use could help people experience abundance more positively and embrace the possibilities that come with it (Hargittai et al., 2012; Savolainen, 2007). Conversely, the lack of such strategies potentially leads to problematic consequences, from emotional drain or stress to decreased knowledge acquisition, well-being, and democratic behavior (Blekesaune et al., 2012; Prior, 2005).

Although news, entertainment, and personal communication contexts are all arguably characterized by an abundance of content, sources, and devices, existing studies on strategies to *tame the information tide* have predominantly focused on individual media contexts. This study looks at whether and how individuals apply comparable strategies across *different* media contexts in response to information abundance. Following a qualitative approach, we conduct focus group discussions with 40 participants in Switzerland.

## Conceptualizing information abundance

Although information abundance is a central characteristic in many descriptions of the ‘high-choice media environment’ (Strömbäck et al., 2022), the concept is rarely clearly defined. We start by defining the term *information abundance* as a macro-level phenomenon, i.e., an *external state* where a vast amount of information and content supply is readily available to individuals and society. In this sense, the term *abundance* is a synonym for ‘quantity’, ‘profusion,’ or ‘plenty,’ and an antonym to ‘scarcity.’ We adopt a broad approach to the term *information* (Savolainen, 2022) and define it as any type of content more generally. This enables us to investigate information abundance in different media contexts, termed as news abundance, entertainment abundance, or personal communication abundance. Extending previous work (Boczkowski, 2021), we further assume that abundance can be observed at three different *levels* as:

- *content* abundance (i.e., the amount of content, e.g., within news, entertainment, or personal messages),
- *source* abundance (i.e., the amount of sources, e.g., news channels, streaming platforms, or instant messaging applications), and
- *device* abundance (i.e., the amount of devices and screens, e.g., television, radio, or smartphone).

In this theoretical conceptualization, information abundance serves as an *umbrella* term covering both context-specific manifestations (e.g., news abundance) and level-specific manifestations (e.g., content abundance).

Defined as an external state, information abundance is neither positive nor negative per se. However, its subjective experience introduces a certain ambiguity (Boczkowski, 2021). For example, *information overload* is a possible psychological consequence of information abundance that is defined as an *inner state* in which, objectively, information supply exceeds the human information processing capacities or, subjectively, individuals experience stress, pressure, or anxiety (Eppler & Mengis, 2004). Contrary to the neutral term information abundance, information overload has a negative connotation per definition (Bawden & Robinson, 2020).

Whether people appreciate today's information profusion or feel overwhelmed by it may differ across the levels of content, sources, or devices, as well as across the contexts of news, entertainment, and personal communication (e.g., Aharoni et al., 2022). Research indicates that news abundance is experienced more negatively, whereas entertainment abundance is perceived rather positively (Boczkowski, 2021). Early adopters of new media, for example, felt empowered and enthusiastic in light of the rise in information volume (Hargittai et al., 2012). Today, the convergence of media behaviors, platforms, and devices has blurred the boundaries between media contexts (Bjur et al., 2013; Boczkowski, 2010; Edgerly, 2017). Yet, to attain a deeper understanding of individuals' responses to the prevailing information abundance, our approach involves analytically separating these contexts while studying their interplay.

**News abundance.** Information abundance has been researched explicitly and implicitly in the context of news (de Bruin et al., 2021; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). New technologies enable journalists and non-professional actors to provide information about current affairs anywhere and anytime. Among the positive consequences of this development, people might be more likely to get exposed to news without actively seeking it, which is potentially beneficial for news engagement, political knowledge (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Strauß et al., 2020), and political participation (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Among the negatives, increased news supply might foster news overload or fatigue (Metag & Gurr, 2022; Song et al., 2017).

**Entertainment abundance.** Entertainment options have grown exponentially in the digital age. How the sheer amount of entertainment might impact individuals has been especially explored in research on binge-watching and video games. Binge-watching is not necessarily perceived negatively (Czichon, 2019), but excessive use is linked to increased anxiety (Vaterlaus et al., 2019). Research on video games provides mixed evidence, with studies linking higher hours of video gaming to higher levels of well-being (Johannes et al., 2021) but also to sleep problems (Smyth, 2007). Motivations for

entertainment use are associated with compulsive use patterns (Kim et al., 2009), and studies suggest links between using YouTube and overload (Matthes et al., 2020).

**Personal communication abundance.** Although an abundance of digital personal communication may enhance social connections and connectivity (Taylor & Bazarova, 2021), it also has drawbacks that can affect well-being. Social networking sites often present repetitive and irrelevant information, causing dissatisfaction with habitual use (e.g., Baym et al., 2020). Messaging apps, marked by notifications and pressure for constant availability (Aranda & Baig, 2018), are perceived as disturbing (Nguyen, 2023) and contribute to feelings of anxiety and stress (Clayton et al., 2015). Moreover, the increased use of mobile communication might compromise social relationships (Kushlev et al., 2019). Notably, perceptions of information overload might differ across platforms and may be stronger for certain age groups (Matthes et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021).

### Strategies to deal with abundance

Varied perceptions of news, entertainment, and personal communication abundance may be due to individuals employing different strategies to either embrace or shield themselves from the information flow, as well as differences in the perceived effectiveness of these strategies. On a general level, two types of strategies can be distinguished (e.g., Bawden & Robinson, 2020; Savolainen, 2007; Song et al., 2017):

- (1) *strategies for managing the flow of information*, such as filtering, prioritizing, or selecting information (e.g., Maslen, 2023; Schmitt et al., 2018),
- (2) *strategies for rejecting or withdrawing from the flow of information*, such as avoiding, discontinuing, break-taking, disconnecting, or quitting (e.g., de Bruin et al., 2021; Franks et al., 2023; Nassen et al., 2023).

The use of these types of strategies may differ in terms of motivation, intentionality, or duration, i.e., individuals might use strategies more *preventively* or *interventively* (e.g., Hennecke & Bürgler, 2020), *consciously* or *habitually* (e.g., Reinecke et al., 2022), for a *limited time* or more *permanently* (e.g., Ytre-Arne et al., 2020).

A key determinant of whether individuals experience abundance positively or negatively is the *effective* use of strategies, which may vary across individuals (Nassen et al., 2023). Studies indicate that some individuals perceive temporary news avoidance as a helpful ‘well-being strategy’ in times of crisis (de Bruin et al., 2021; Mannell & Meese, 2022). Conversely, for personal communication, disconnection strategies such as smartphone breaks (e.g., ‘digital detox’) can have both positive but also negative effects (Dekker et al., 2024; Radtke et al., 2022). Various factors can enhance effective strategy application, including digital skills (Hargittai & Micheli, 2019), the ability to self-regulate, or use of technological features (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020).

Whether people use comparable strategies across different contexts and whether strategies for managing and rejecting information intersect has hardly been studied (except for Savolainen, 2007). Studying strategies in interplay and across contexts is crucial and valuable as various fields examine overlapping phenomena under different terms, particularly avoidance and disconnection (e.g., Nassen et al., 2023).

**Dealing with news abundance.** News researchers have widely studied news avoidance, including as a strategy to deal with news abundance (de Bruin et al., 2021), whereas the term ‘news disconnection’ is less prevalent in the literature (see Newman et al., 2022). News avoidance research assumes that people avoid news *intentionally*, driven by a conscious decision and motivation such as a dislike for specific news, or *unintentionally*, in the sense of very little or no news consumption (Betakova et al., 2024; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). News avoidance can hence be more temporary and selective, or more permanent and general (Villi et al., 2021). Less research focused on how people manage news flows, for example, through curation services or personalized news recommendations (Merten, 2021; Song et al., 2017; Swart, 2021). People may also set clear boundaries regarding when, how, and what news they consume or establish news habits to protect themselves from information overload (Schnauber-Stockmann & Naab, 2019).

**Dealing with entertainment abundance.** Research on how people engage with entertainment abundance in functional ways is scarce. Binge-watching research discusses self-control as a key factor in preventing excessive viewing behavior (Flayelle et al., 2020). Regarding entertainment on social media, individuals were shown to disconnect from platforms when their feeds become saturated with entertainment that misaligns with their interests (Nguyen, 2023). To manage the abundance of entertainment options, habits, algorithms, and personal recommendations might help people to find what they like.

**Dealing with personal communication abundance.** Research on digital communication has generated various studies on disconnection, often implicitly subsuming avoidance (e.g., Nassen et al., 2023). The literature suggests that people *deliberately* disconnect for a certain time, e.g., from their devices, social networks, or instant messaging applications (Aranda & Baig, 2018). People may also indefinitely disconnect by deactivating or deleting accounts or removing apps from their devices (Baumer et al., 2013; Baym et al., 2020; Nassen et al., 2023). Studies also imply that completely limiting all digital means of communication is uncommon, as communication is considered a basic human need (Nguyen, 2021). Instead, people tend to limit incoming information, especially when interacting with others (Nguyen & Hargittai, 2024), while maintaining some forms of connection. Strategies for this can include using content filters, screen time applications, or customizing notifications (Schmuck, 2020).

By collectively examining the contexts of news, entertainment, and personal communication, our goal is to understand whether individuals employ strategies to manage or reject information within specific contexts or fluidly across them. We also aim to illuminate whether individuals recognize a similar impact of increased information abundance across the different levels of content, sources, and devices and whether they respond, for example, by avoiding content in general or rather specific sources or devices.

We pose the following research question: *How do individuals navigate information abundance across the contexts of news, entertainment, and personal communication?*

## Method

This study employs focus group discussions as a suitable and resource-efficient method to capture individuals’ strategies to deal with information abundance. The choice aligns with previous studies (e.g., Hargittai et al., 2012; Mihailidis, 2014) and responds to calls for more

qualitative research in this domain (Boczkowski, 2021). Focus group discussions can elicit both shared and differential experiences of abundance. The interactive and discursive setting is expected to stimulate new aspects of the topic and lead to rich discussions, especially regarding an exchange of the strategies that people use (Schulz et al., 2012).

We conducted the focus groups between April and May 2022 in the German-speaking region of Switzerland. Switzerland has a total population of 8.6 million, of which 65% are German-speaking. Roughly 90% of Swiss citizens have a smartphone, with popular social media and messaging services including WhatsApp (76%), Facebook (54%), YouTube (63%), and Instagram (42%) (Newman et al., 2022). 11% have a news subscription, and 74% have a video streaming account (e.g., Netflix). Although little is known about how Swiss people navigate the abundance of information in different media contexts, in the context of news, 32% of Swiss citizens sometimes or often actively avoid news because it is too much or negatively impacts their mood (Udris et al., 2022).

### **Sampling**

We used convenience sampling and theoretical sampling to construct our sample (Robinson, 2014). We recruited participants of different backgrounds through various means and used a screening survey (N = 108) asking about age, gender, education, media use, digital confidence, and occupation (see supplemental material SM1). While media use and digital confidence were no selection criteria, the survey encouraged participants to reflect on their media habits and introduced them to the interview topic. For the selection of participants, we prioritized diversity in age, gender, and education. After conducting eight focus groups with three to seven participants, the data collection reached the point of saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The final sample consists of 40 individuals (see supplemental material SM2), who are equally distributed in terms of gender and two age groups: Four of our groups were aged 20–40 years (18 participants), and another four groups were aged 48–79 years (22 participants). Participants were rewarded with 30 Swiss francs. Despite forming focus groups based on age, our findings do not point to age-related differences in the adoption of strategies. Therefore, we do not present separate findings for age groups.

### **Procedure**

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, we conducted our focus groups online. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality through a fact sheet, and their informed consent was obtained. The interview guide comprised four thematic blocks and ten open-ended questions (see supplemental material SM3). The questions covered participants' (1) descriptions of their media environment, (2) experience of abundance, (3) strategies employed to navigate abundance, and (4) concluding assessments. The interview guide was designed to be open and flexible, allowing new themes to emerge (Schulz et al., 2012). The two first authors pre-tested the guide in two groups with a total of seven participants, resulting in minor changes in wording and cuts. Subsequently, they conducted four focus groups each. During the interviews, participants frequently referred to each other, confirming shared experiences, such as feeling overloaded, or expressing contradictory opinions, such as being indifferent to abundance.

## Data analysis

The focus groups had an average length of 60 minutes, leading to 460 minutes of recorded audio. The audio material was fully transcribed<sup>1</sup>, anonymized<sup>2</sup>, and analyzed in the software MAXQDA. A structured approach to qualitative content analysis was used (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2019) to identify and organize patterns of meaning, combining deductive and inductive categories (see supplemental material SM4). Existing concepts from the literature were used to identify and organize the data into key categories. New themes led to the inductive development of categories, which were organized through the strategy of subsumption. The dataset was analyzed by two lead researchers, who read the material multiple times and double-coded all transcripts. Data interpretation involved iterations between the data and the literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as well as discussions with the larger research team.

## Results

We started the focus group discussions by asking participants about the media they use and their perceptions of changes in today's media environment. Without probing for abundance, the high volume of information was mentioned as one of the most significant changes across all groups: For instance, one participant straightforwardly said: 'Overload! You have endless possibilities to get any information from anywhere.' (Tobias, 40) Participants' descriptions of abundance were most often linked to *content* abundance, illustrated by quotes such as 'the information flood has increased' (Claire, 29) or 'what was a stream has become a raging river, the sheer quantity of information is insane.' (Kai, 51) Other descriptions were related to *source* abundance: 'Ten years ago, you could already find a relatively large amount on the internet, but [...] now there are many new information channels or profiles on Instagram or YouTube.' (Tanja, 25) Referring to non-digital media, an older participant lamented: 'I don't need 250 stations on the TV set, it's nonsensical.' (Sylvia, 62) None of the participants specifically mentioned *device* abundance, but some mentioned an abundance of screens.

Whether abundance becomes a curse or blessing seems to depend on the context and situation in which people face it and, particularly, the strategies they adopt. Participants largely agreed that strategies are important to prevent overload: 'I think it's really important to find a way to deal with the overabundance and manage your time so that you don't drown in this river of possibilities.' (Kuno, 55) Many participants believed they possessed appropriate strategies, often developed over time: 'It's probably also a question of age and experience that you learn to appreciate the quality, and you can also evaluate: What brings me further? What distracts me?' (Valerie, 27) However, some participants acknowledged finding it challenging to cope with the constant flow of offerings despite being aware of certain strategies.

Table 1 provides an overview of the empirically identified strategies: *selection* emerged as a key strategy for (1) managing information, and *avoidance* and *disconnection* as key strategies for (2) rejecting information. Participants used *both* types of strategies to deal with abundance across *all levels* of content, sources, and devices. Notably, they also adopted all strategies in *all contexts* of news, entertainment, and personal communication (see examples in brackets). Many of the strategies are directly linked to the use of *technical features* (see examples in italics).



**Table 1.** Framework of strategies differentiated across abundance levels and contexts.

Strategy type	Strategy	Abundance levels		
		Content	Sources	Devices
(1) <i>Managing information</i>	<b>Select</b>	<b>Select specific content</b> (e.g., war news, reality TV, family chat) <i>select push-notifications</i>	<b>Select specific sources</b> (e.g., NZZ, Instagram, WhatsApp) <i>create personal lists of sources, select favorite source, follow accounts</i>	<b>Select specific devices</b> (e.g., radio, TV, smartphone) <i>select smart TV for streaming, select car radio while driving</i>
(2) <i>Rejecting information</i>	<b>Avoid</b>	<b>Avoid specific content</b> (e.g., war news, reality TV, family chat) <i>deactivate push-notifications</i>	<b>Avoid specific sources</b> (e.g., NZZ, Instagram, WhatsApp) <i>use app timer, mute app or chats, unfollow accounts</i>	<b>Avoid specific devices</b> (e.g., radio, TV, smartphone) <i>mute device, use flight mode, set timeout feature, put device away</i>
	<b>Disconnect</b>	<b>Disconnect from specific content</b> (e.g., war news, reality TV, family chat) <i>block content, delete videos, pictures, messages, or e-mails</i>	<b>Disconnect from specific sources</b> (e.g., NZZ, Instagram, WhatsApp) <i>delete app / account, block account, cancel subscription, exit chat</i>	<b>Disconnect from specific devices</b> (e.g., radio, TV, smartphone) <i>turn device off, leave switched off, throw device away</i>

Note. Examples in brackets serve illustrative purposes for the three contexts of news, entertainment, and personal communication; examples in italics show how strategies can be used technically. NZZ stands for Neue Zürcher Zeitung, a Swiss newspaper.

Participants often employed strategies in tandem, and some strategies could expand into others. For example, selecting specific news or entertainment channels also means not selecting or avoiding other channels. However, selection and avoidance differ in that selecting certain news over others simply means filtering and prioritizing to focus on what is relevant, without the motivation to rule out certain options. In contrast, avoidance means *deliberately* staying away if supply becomes too much.

Avoidance and disconnection were both employed to limit negative consequences stemming from information abundance. However, despite conceptual closeness and overlaps in the literature, they differed empirically: avoidance seems to refer to deliberately staying away from information after initial use (e.g., by *muting* chat, app, or the phone). Essentially, behavior falling into this category aims at diminishing the push-character of supply, while maintaining the ability to access it if desired. Disconnection is more radical than avoidance, as it involves more definitively cutting off access to information (e.g., by *deleting* chat, app or turning off the device), either temporarily or entirely. Compared to avoidance, reconnecting after having disconnected often involves more effort. Disconnection inevitably also entails avoidance, and both are driven by the motivation to escape the flow of information. However, they differ in their preventive versus interventive functions: Our interviews suggest that avoidance was more often used preventively to circumvent anticipated overload. Disconnection, on the other hand, was more often adopted in response to overload in an interventive manner. To illustrate the latter, disconnection was described as a last resort that participants in our study used when the strategies of selecting and avoiding did not help in limiting overload, that is, as an ‘exit strategy’ (Kerstin, 32) or ‘absolute radicalism.’ (Adrian, 29)

While acknowledging a potential for overlaps among the strategies, we will discuss them separately for clarity purposes across the contexts of news, entertainment, and personal communication.

### **Selection of news, entertainment, and personal communication**

Participants stressed the importance of selecting specific *content* and *sources* and often used this strategy preemptively to limit overload across all three contexts. For dealing with *device* abundance, selection was rarely mentioned as an active or deliberate strategy, presumably because many participants have fixed habits for selecting a specific device (e.g., radio, TV) at a certain time.

In the **news context**, participants often mentioned conscious and interest-based selection as a strategy at the *source* and *content* level: They prioritized news *content* relevant to them (e.g., political news) while leaving aside personally less relevant content (e.g., sports news). Individuals searched, filtered, and used news content in an informed manner rather than getting distracted by randomly zapping through various TV or radio channels. Many participants relied on routines of using specific *sources*, i.e., their preferred media brands:

I have fixed programs that I listen to. I know tonight at eight o'clock, I'll listen to Radio A. Or half past eight, Radio B. And at seven o'clock, maybe after this conversation, *Echo der Zeit*. I am rather a habitual person. (Oumar, 56)

Others emphasized the importance of selecting trustworthy news sources: 'I get news from stations or websites [...] that I find good and reliable.' (Frank, 60) However, this was also perceived as challenging by some: 'It's a flood of information that you have to filter out. I think it's really difficult to find the exact sources that you can count on.' (Kuno, 55) Only few participants appreciated push notifications to get informed about specific news. One interviewee admitted: 'Your head sometimes spins when news like that comes in. I could turn off the push messages, but it still interests me.' (Karl, 72)

In the **entertainment context**, participants reported similar selection strategies, although these came with other challenges. Many participants mentioned that they were 'very selective' in watching TV shows. Especially older participants studied the TV catalog to search for content and decide what to watch. Personal interests and gratifications were often mentioned as key in the selection of *content*: 'For entertainment, I'm interested in everything in the field of classical music, and nothing else really interests me at all.' (Frank, 60) Younger participants referred to searching for entertainment content on Netflix, acknowledging the difficulty of choosing among the endless possibilities:

Netflix [...] overwhelmed me relatively easily. I just sat there with my siblings for 20 minutes trying to figure out what kind of movie we wanted to watch and what was even available because we didn't have a concrete plan or goal. (Till, 20)

Another participant perceived personalized recommendations as helpful for selecting content on YouTube but pointed out different situational interests: 'You have to select. There is the algorithm behind what might interest you. But you are not interested in the same thing in every situation.' (Nico, 31) Difficulties in self-controlling the content selection were particularly mentioned with respect to Instagram or YouTube, where some participants felt drawn from one content to the other, losing track of time. For dealing with source abundance in entertainment, participants selected specific *sources* they liked, such as their favorite TV, podcast, or radio channel, pointing again to the importance of habits and preferences built up over time.

With **personal communication**, selection strategies played a smaller role than in the other two contexts. Participants stressed the importance of filtering incoming *content* and information and exercising self-discipline on social media: ‘I think the key is to regulate, to control what you actually want and to channel it.’ (Manuel, 57) Many participants explained that selecting specific *sources*, such as messenger apps, for personal communication is mainly driven by what family members or friends are using. Selection was perceived as less difficult compared to news since ‘you can actually still choose well in personal communication where you want to participate and where not.’ (Claire, 29) Some disagreed as they viewed the sheer number of messenger apps critically. And yet, several participants appreciated the many platforms available to stay in touch with kids and friends abroad but deliberately viewed only the content posted by them:

I use Facebook. I have three friends. Those are my family members that I follow because I want to look at the photos and I do that specifically, and everything else I leave out. (Ellen, 64)

### **Avoidance of news, entertainment, and personal communication**

Participants emphasized avoidance as key to dealing with abundance at all three levels of *content*, *sources*, and *devices* and across all contexts. They deliberately used avoidance more as a preventive rather than an interventive measure to protect themselves from overload, often involving break-taking or habitual muting of *sources* or *devices*.

In the **news context**, avoidance took various forms, from intentionally avoiding specific news *sources* or newscasts to specific news *content* (e.g., Covid-19) to avoiding the radio or TV *device*. Many participants deactivated push notifications, either altogether or for specific *content*. This was perceived as helpful for coping with news abundance in a preventive manner: ‘For me, it’s not that much because I don’t have push messages. I have them all turned off so I can really select where I want to get the news and when.’ (Alexandra, 51) Another strategy was avoiding habitually checking news updates repeatedly and reserving specific time windows for news use.

A small proportion said they situationally avoided specific news *content* or *sources* to deal with overload in real time, thus using avoidance as an *interventive* strategy. Examples included the extreme events of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine. Participants described being overwhelmed and emotionally distressed by the amount, speed, and negativity of news, for example, about the war:

In the beginning, I absorbed everything and then realized that it was very bad for me. I also became very sad all the time because it’s really disturbing. And therefore, I started listening to the news only once a day. (...) It’s really a protective attitude. (Edith, 70)

To deal with abundance in the **entertainment context**, participants also actively used avoidance as a strategy to protect themselves from being sucked into ‘the black hole’ (Tanja, 25) or because they feared an ‘addiction.’ Several participants intentionally avoided the amount of ‘trash’ *sources*, citing popular private broadcasters, Netflix, YouTube, or Instagram as examples, when they felt overloaded. One participant avoided specific Instagram accounts by unfollowing them; a few used screen-time applications to control their media use. Only few participants mentioned avoiding specific *devices* in the context of entertainment. Some participants found it relatively easy to ignore entertainment *content* when compared to news:

I find it much easier to switch things off in the entertainment area than with news because maybe it's important for me to hear certain news. In the entertainment area, I know: No, that's not for me. Away with it. (Sarah, 22)

Other participants disagreed as they found it rather difficult to abstain from listening to podcasts or watching videos while doing everyday things like cooking, cleaning, working out, or commuting.

To cope with **personal communication** abundance, participants also mentioned avoidance as a strategy. As in the context of news, many participants mentioned that they intentionally deactivated push notifications from social media and messenger apps to prevent overload with private *content* like messages, photos, stories, videos, trivia, and 'a bunch of nonsense.' (Hans, 79) One participant explained:

I don't get notifications on any single app anymore. I have to actively go somewhere and pull [the information] and I don't get spammed by WhatsApp messages. So, I don't feel like I'm getting stuff all the time. (Sarah, 22)

Several people noted that preventively muting *sources* such as chats or apps helped them feel less stressed, but when they finally opened their chats or apps, they felt inundated by the number of messages they had to read and respond to. Some participants more permanently avoided specific platforms like Facebook or Instagram because they felt overloaded, particularly with irrelevant content from friends and family. In terms of *device* avoidance, it was common among participants to always mute their smartphones to avoid being distracted. In addition, participants deliberately avoided looking at their phones in social situations. However, such temporary avoidance was also perceived as a violation of societal expectations: 'I've often heard from my family that I am never available. But that's also my goal. I don't want to be available around the clock.' (Ellen, 64)

### **Disconnection from news, entertainment, and personal communication**

In our study, several participants reported that they voluntarily disconnected from the abundance of *sources* and *devices* across all three contexts, and occasionally from *content*. Disconnection was more prominent as an *interventive* strategy, taking sub-forms such as temporarily deleting an app, deleting content, or turning a device off in the face of overload. However, it was also used *preventively*, for example, by leaving devices switched off habitually.

For the **news context**, disconnecting from specific *sources* (e.g., news apps) or *devices* (e.g., smartphones) was described as helpful in shielding oneself from negative emotions in the face of overload. Yet, a few participants reported conflicts with their perceived duty to stay informed. Often, participants used temporary forms of *device* disconnection to deal with overload: 'I noticed that when I was at home, the radio was on day and night. For two, three weeks or maybe a month, I no longer turned on the radio.' (Katharina, 49) Others completely disconnected from devices in extreme situations for a certain time, for example, to get away from Covid-19 news. One participant explained: 'For me, only completely switching off, completely putting [the device] away helps. If I try to control myself, I'm not having any success with that at all.'

Disconnecting from abundance in the **entertainment context** was relatively rarely mentioned. Participants situationally deleted specific *content* (e.g., videos) as an

interventive strategy. More often, participants mentioned disconnecting from *sources* to cope with overload, for example, by terminating their Netflix subscription or deleting personal accounts on social media or apps. One interviewee described this strategy as ‘Cold Turkey, a whole withdrawal’ (Tanja, 25), which helped her to concentrate on her studies. Deliberately leaving the TV turned off was another strategy to disconnect from *devices* and prevent being drawn into the profusion of entertainment:

I’ve had a TV all my life, and it’s always been on, except when I’ve been sleeping or at work. Now, it’s off completely, so I do not even have the temptation to switch it on. So, my tactic is: ‘completely off’ (Katharina, 49)

The most radical form of disconnection in the entertainment context was getting rid of a TV device, although this was very rare and involved replacing the TV with a streaming platform.

Some participants disconnected from **personal communication** to cope with overload, often at the level of *sources* and *devices*. For *source* disconnection, a few had left a group chat and felt better afterward, although one interviewee feared missing out. Several people went a step further to delete social media apps to ‘regain control, but also delimit oneself.’ (Kerstin, 32) However, a few reinstalled the apps on their phones or could still connect via their laptop and thus slipped back into old patterns:

I deleted Instagram. That worked, then there were a few weeks of peace. I also once deleted the Facebook app on the phone. Then, the inhibition or the effort is greater to start Facebook on the laptop. [...] For a few weeks, then you can install it again. (Tobias, 40)

Others deleted messenger apps such as WhatsApp irreversibly and positively assessed that since then, ‘enormous peace has come into my life.’ (Sylvia, 62) However, this did not always mean that participants abstained from all messenger apps but switched to a different app. Few participants used *device* disconnection in a preventive way, for example, by habitually turning off the smartphone before going to sleep or on weekends: ‘I used to be on my phone all the time, and now I turn it off. Then I have my peace, then I can sleep.’ (Fritz, 72)

Notably, disconnection from a specific *source* or *device* did not necessarily mean that participants disconnected from digital media and engaged in non-digital activities such as sports as they had intended. Instead, people sometimes deliberately disconnected from a specific media activity to mitigate overload, but switched to other devices or sources, such as switching from the TV set to the smartphone or from a news app to YouTube for entertainment. While this was helpful for some, others responded that switching to an alternative substitution was not helpful, especially when the initial aim was to disconnect from *all* media use. Several participants were concerned about being ‘constantly engaged in some media consumption’ (Kerstin, 32), and some younger people expressed a wish to disconnect more and be more attentive to ‘offline life.’

## Discussion and conclusion

This study proposes a conceptualization of information abundance that understands it as occurring at the levels of *content*, *sources*, and *devices*. Furthermore, it elaborates on how these three levels of abundance manifest themselves in different contexts, namely in the

form of *news*, *entertainment*, and *personal communication abundance*. Focus group discussions showed that across the three levels and the three contexts, people adopt similar deliberate strategies of *selection*, *avoidance*, and *disconnection* to deal with information abundance to prevent or to mitigate potential negative consequences. Despite minor differences in applications and perceived challenges, people in different media contexts thus react quite similarly to information abundance. Importantly, our study sheds light on the interplay of people's strategies, showing that they complement each other (Savolainen, 2007) and are used both preventively and interventively across all three contexts. All strategies are used rather intentionally and partly also habitually (Dekker et al., 2024), and self-regulation appears key to controlling behavior and making functional choices (Reinecke et al., 2022). Moreover, technical features are perceived as important as they enable individuals to select, avoid, or disconnect, highlighting that adjusting one's information 'architecture' requires constant labor (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). Although applying these strategies alone is not sufficient to successfully deal with abundance, it will likely make it a more positive experience. Participants in our study seemed aware of the need to adopt and improve their strategies and to further develop their literacy levels to deal with abundance. Several participants acknowledged that their strategies were not always helpful, but ineffective or associated with trade-offs, or that they lacked certain strategies. This may have been a result of the interactive discussion and experience sharing, which made participants more aware of strategies they may not have known about or used.

Our study contributes to the field of research and discussion on abundance in theoretical, empirical, and societal terms:

*Theoretically*, we add conceptual clarity to the phenomenon of information abundance by defining it as an external state that can occur and be perceived across three different levels and within different media contexts. Moreover, we respond to calls for 'speaking across communication subfields' (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Lee, 2020) as our *framework of strategies to deal with abundance* unites terminologies and concepts that stem from different communication subfields. Besides introducing a distinction of strategy application at the content, source, and device levels, this allows us to disentangle avoidance and disconnection strategies. Our framework could guide future theorizing and empirical research and contribute to a better understanding of the multifaceted application of strategies as individual responses to the increase of information supply and blurring boundaries between media use contexts.

*Empirically*, we show that strategies are adopted at the content, source, and device levels, which is important to consider because different consequences may unfold: Avoiding certain types of content or sources is different from *device avoidance* or *disconnection* that can inevitably affect (overall) media use in different contexts. By examining media contexts in combination rather than in isolation, we further demonstrate that strategies cut across contexts, that is, people do not only avoid news but also entertainment, and news can be avoided by switching to entertainment.

On a *societal* level, our findings help to better understand a society enveloped in an abundance of news, entertainment, and personal communication enhanced by digitalization. We illustrate that contrary to an often rather pessimistic discourse, people in our study felt generally well-equipped to deal with abundance and have developed helpful strategies to manage and reject information, underlining that avoiding and disconnecting

can be beneficial for health and well-being (e.g., Mannell & Meese, 2022; Woodstock, 2014). While news avoidance may pose more significant democratic concerns compared to avoiding entertainment, our study does not indicate that news avoidance is a long-term or permanent strategy encompassing *all* news content or news sources. Instead, at least in our sample, avoidance and disconnection practices emerged as a rather temporary and situational response to negative experiences of abundance, often with a clearly expressed intention to return at some point. However, our findings indicate that individuals differ in how effectively they apply certain strategies, with some better able to protect themselves from negative consequences of abundance. This raises questions about interventions to help those less adept at dealing with abundance, and how to hold the supply side accountable for contributing to information abundance and shaping information architectures (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Despite the insights gained from our study, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. First, focus group discussions entail trade-offs, and individual interviews could have provided slightly different results as they allow for more privacy. However, it is our impression that the discussions were not compromised by individual participants, group think, privacy concerns, or social desirability (Baden et al., 2022). Rather, participants interacted and frequently referred to each other, keeping a friendly, often humorous tone. Moreover, as our approach focused on collecting statements about conscious and deliberate strategies, it was challenging to uncover unconsciously used strategies deeply entrenched in people's routines. Nevertheless, participants might have brought some of these to the fore, possibly inspired by the focus group setting. Second, the online format meant that our sample was more tech-savvy and more educated than the population average, despite efforts to reach participants with lower levels of education. Additionally, we are unlikely to have reached permanently disconnected people or unintentional news avoiders (Betakova et al., 2024). Consequently, the results may not allow conclusions about the role of education or other status factors, even though these variables are pertinent for future research (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2018). Third, applying a user perspective and relying on self-reports meant that we disregarded the supply side, preventing an assessment of the information volume actually available to participants. Finally, this study was set in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and is limited in its generalizability to other contexts.

We believe that our study opens exciting avenues for future research. First, it would be interesting to explore quantitatively whether individuals equipped with more strategies also experience abundance in different contexts more positively and feel less overloaded. Research should pay attention to how factors such as age, gender, or socio-economic status but also motivation and personal preferences influence the adoption and successful application of strategies, shedding light on potential digital inequalities in this regard (Nguyen & Hargittai, 2024; Toff & Palmer, 2019). Second, cross-country and longitudinal analyses could examine people's use of strategies during certain events (e.g., elections, sporting events, crises) characterized by a temporary increase of supply in news, entertainment, and/or personal communication and compare strategy application to routine times. Serial in-depth interviews could make it possible to understand how individuals learn new or further develop strategies in different life stages (e.g., parenthood, retirement) or with the advent of new technologies. Future studies could explore how strategies become habitual over time and whether certain life events lead some individuals

to permanently avoid or disconnect from (news) media (Nguyen, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024). Finally, since our study suggests that similar strategies are employed across contexts, future studies could explore additional media contexts such as advertising or the workplace, which were mentioned as examples of abundance in our interviews. Our findings may hence encourage communication researchers to mutually investigate different media contexts, which are often subject to the same macro-level changes, enabling theory-building and empirical research across communication subfields (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Lee, 2020).

## Notes

1. Interviews were transcribed clean verbatim by an automated transcription service and reviewed for accuracy.
2. We provide pseudonyms in the following quotes for illustrative purposes.

## Disclosure statement

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## Note on ethics

The University of Zurich ethics committee did not require ethics approval for this study, but we adhered to APA ethical standards throughout our research. The supplemental material (SM1) states in detail how participants in our focus groups were informed about our study: Prior to the interview, they received a fact sheet per email, including information about the participants' right to interrupt study participation at any time, the voluntariness of the study, confidentiality, and data protection. Before the interview started, participants all signed an informed consent form. During the interview, we asked the participants again if they agreed to be video recorded before the start of the Zoom recording. After the interviews, participants received a debrief via email.

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