

# Being uninformed—News avoidance as a threat to democracy in today’s digital world?

## Executive Summary

Avoiding the news has been claimed to be a potential threat to democracies: Without political and current affairs knowledge from news consumption, citizens cannot participate adequately in the political process. THREATPIE has examined this phenomenon referred to as “news avoidance” and its potential implications.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- The prevalence of those who declare avoiding and actually consume little to no news online is lower than anticipated when asking citizens about their intent to avoid the news. Approximately only 10% to 20% of individuals in the countries examined can be classified as these “intentional consistent news avoidance”.
- Younger generations typically turn to online media and social platforms as their main outlets for accessing news. They seem to be selective in the type of news they seek out. Yet, they do not avoid the news altogether.
- Negative content, lack of trust, and political disengagement are among the reasons for news avoidance.
- One consequence is that news avoiders have lower political knowledge.

## BEING UNINFORMED—THE PROBLEM OF NEWS AVOIDANCE

It seems paradoxical that despite the increased possibilities to inform oneself about societal and political events, a growing trend has developed amongst citizens to outright avoid such information. This phenomenon has been labeled “news avoidance”. The fear associated with the no-use of news is that citizens become and remain uninformed about what is occurring in the societal and political world around them.

In that sense, being uninformed is different from being misinformed defined as citizens possessing incorrect knowledge and being selectively informed referring to citizens being informed only about events and issues that reflect their predispositions. Based on normative understandings of good citizenship, avoiding news not only hampers citizens’ abilities to participate in political life but also undermines democratic collective decision-making, which depends on well-informed citizens.

There are several methods to assess the phenomenon of news avoidance, including survey-

### BACKGROUND: THREATS TO DEMOCRACY IN TODAY’S DIGITAL WORLD

A healthy, functioning society requires citizens to be well-informed about current societal and political events. Recent changes in the “political information environment” (PIE) jeopardize this prerequisite. With the proliferation of media channels and platforms, citizens can now not only choose from an abundance of news and information; it has also become more likely to encounter false or misleading information. Three potential threats to democracy arise from this development:

- Citizens might be *selectively informed* when they only choose news in line with their political views.
- Citizens might be *uninformed* about what is happening in the societal and political world when they decide to avoid news completely.
- Citizens might be *misinformed* when they build their beliefs about the societal and political world on false information.

The consequences of these developments can be significant: citizens who are selectively informed, uninformed, and/or misinformed tend to be less trusting in the news media and political institutions; they also tend to be less civilly engaged. Moreover, social cohesion tends to decrease while polarization between different groups in society increases. THREATPIE investigated the causes, consequences, and remedies to these threats.

ing citizens about their intent to avoid the news and their news consumption behavior, as well as observing directly how often and which news outlets they consume. THREATPIE made use of all these approaches, as this allows to contrast citizens' stated intent to avoid the news with their observed news consumption behavior—two facets of news avoidance that do not automatically coincide.

Consequently, news consumption and avoidance are not necessarily mutually exclusive: Even “news junkies” may now and then not use the news; citizens with certain socio-demographic characteristics, such as lower age, may also use less news while not avoiding it altogether.

To better understand the phenomenon of news avoidance, THREATPIE studies examined the following main questions: 1) How do citizens consume the news—and when do they avoid it? 2) What are the reasons for avoiding the news? 3) What are the consequences of avoiding the news? and 4) How do the answers to these questions differ between countries and generations?

## RESULTS

### How common is news avoidance?

Understanding news consumption patterns is crucial before discussing news avoidance. Comparing several countries, a THREATPIE study revealed five distinct categories of news consumption patterns: 10 % were described as “hyper-consumers” (citizens that show an above-average consumption of news and a broader variety of news outlets and platforms), 19% as “traditionalists” (citizens that use traditional and public service-oriented news), 22% as “social media

news users” (citizens that use primarily use social media), 32% as “online news seekers” (citizens that use the news regularly and seek out online platforms and news outlets), and 17% as “news minimalists” (citizens that use rarely use the news, and if so, only very few outlets and platforms).

The share in percent of “news minimalists”, who also stated to a relatively high degree to actively avoid the news, was the greatest in countries like France, Germany, or the UK.

Results from the THREATPIE studies did not only indicate differences between countries; they also highlighted generational differences. Citizens aged 55 or older continued to depend on television's mainstream news as their primary source of information.

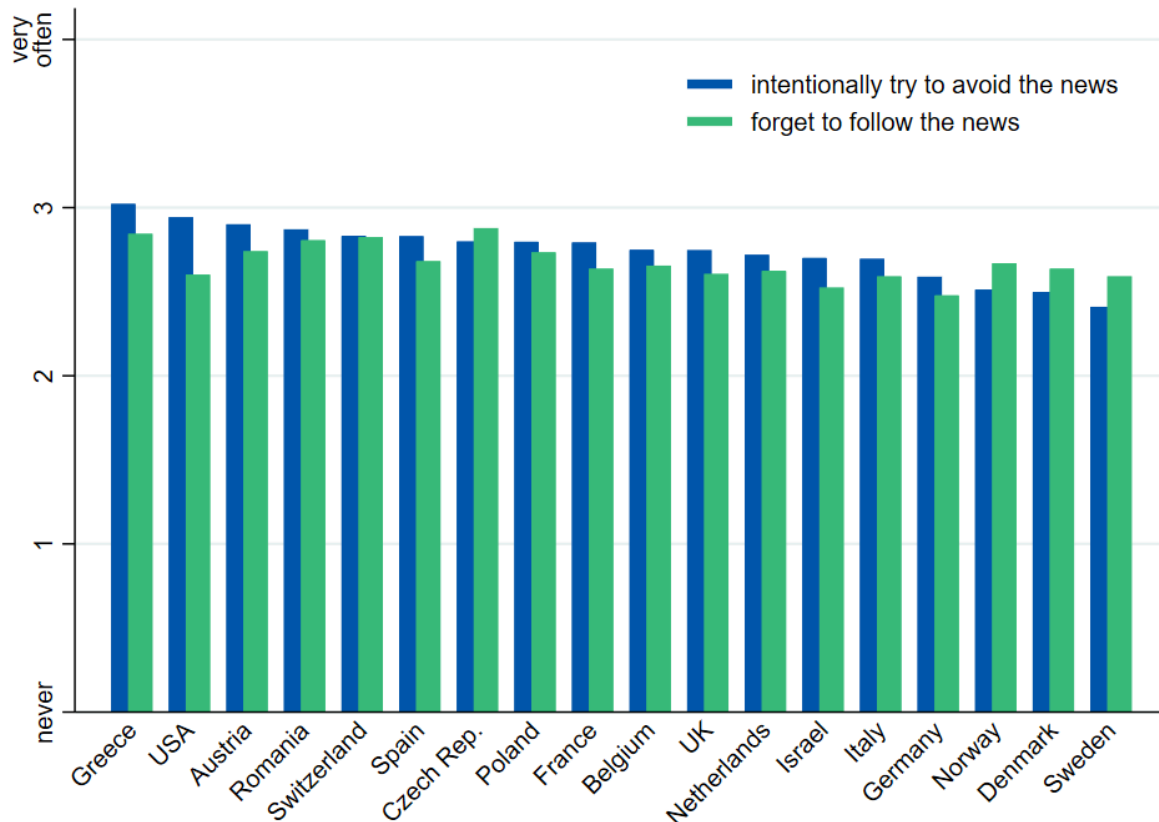
Yet, other sources of information, such as online or social media, have gained importance in the media diets of these citizens—a trend that was also observed by journalists and politicians. In contrast, younger citizens (18 to 25 years old) stated clear preferences for online news and social media.

“ For us, I would say it's a given: news at eight o'clock. And I don't think the younger generation has this rhythm at all. They watch it when they have the time or feel like it. There is definitely a big difference. <sup>1</sup> ”

However, other sources for staying informed about current and political events were referred to by younger citizens. Among these sources

1) Citizen from Germany

Figure 1: Self-reported news avoidance



Note: "Thinking about your news consumption, how often do you 1) intentionally try to avoid political news; 2) forget to follow the news? (0 "never" to 4 "very often").

were traditional media, such as TV or radio, and people in their close circles, such as parents or peers. While older citizens reported to use the news as part of their daily routines, younger people stated to be more selective in their news consumption.

Not only did they opt for shorter and more readily accessible news; they acknowledged to prefer visual formats over textual ones, mirroring social media messages.

Nevertheless, younger citizens stated not to avoid the news altogether but rather to use news according to their interests.

Asking people about how often they intentionally try to avoid the news, as well as how often they forget to follow the news, the THREATPIE survey showed differences between the countries: While self-reported news avoidance is highest in Greece, the US, and Austria, it is the lowest in the Nordic countries. Yet here, citizens

report more often to forget to follow the news (see Figure 1).

Zooming into these patterns by applying different methods of measuring news avoidance, the THREATPIE studies found that declaring actively avoiding the news and actually consuming little to no news online was less common than previously anticipated, ranging between 10 and 20%. Notably, this finding is lower than recent estimations of news avoiders based on self-reported data.

On the other hand, many of those citizens, who reported avoiding the news, regularly con-

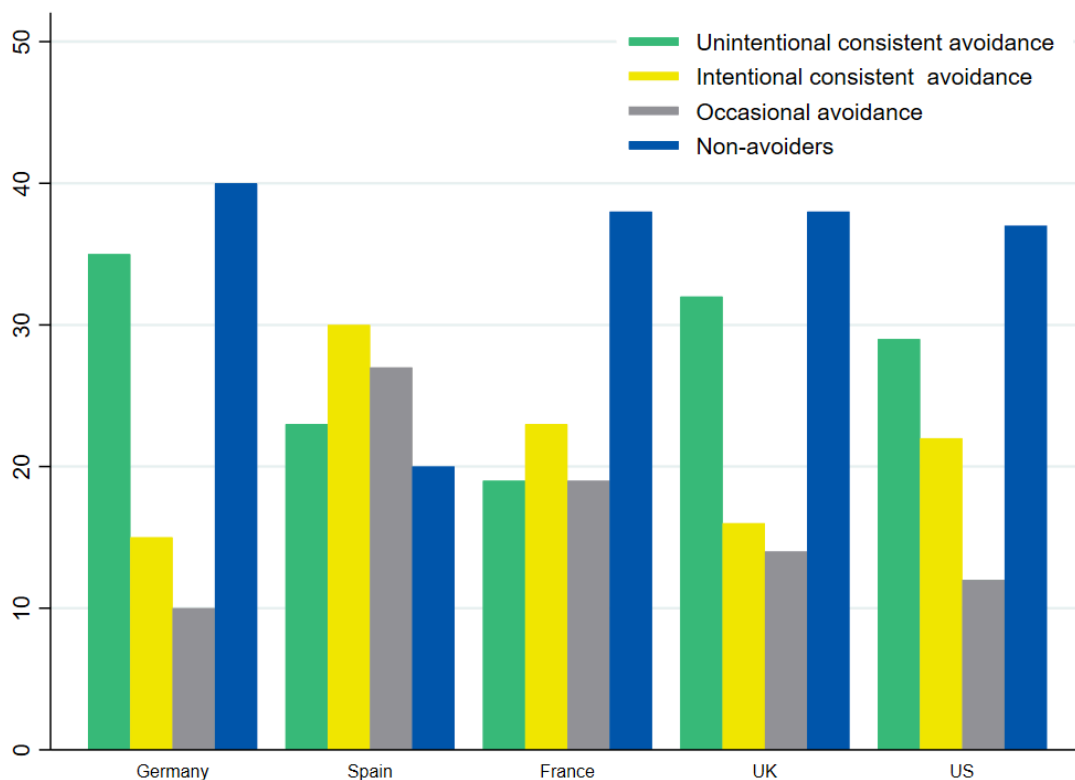
sumed as much news as those who said they did not avoid the news, as shown in Figure 2, which shows the prevalence of different types of news avoidance for five selected countries.

## What are the reasons for avoiding the news?

Interviewing citizens, educators, journalists, and politicians shed light on the reasons why individuals avoid the news. Reasons lay in both individual perceptions and the news characteristics.

Concerning individual causes, news users tuned out from the news when they felt overwhelmed by the amount and negative content of news.

Figure 2: Different types of news avoidance



Note: Types of news avoidance in %. Intentional consistent news avoidance = those who declare avoiding and actually consume little to no news online; occasional news avoidance = those who declare avoiding but consume news online; unintentional consistent news avoidance = those who declare not avoiding and consume little to no news online; non-avoiders = those who declare not avoiding and consume news online.

Similarly, news avoidance was associated with feelings of news use affecting psychological well-being negatively.

This reason was in particular often provided in response to news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another cause for avoiding the news was a lack of trust in institutions, including the news media and politics.

Other participants in the THREATPIE studies mentioned a lack of comprehension of the news, as well as of politics, as the cause for avoiding the news and political information. This rationale was strongly connected to feelings of political decision-making processes not

“ After a full day’s work, [...] I sometimes want to disconnect and not know how many people have died in a terrorist attack. <sup>2</sup> ”

being relevant to one’s life and lacking agency in these decisions.

Concerning news characteristics, the focus on negativity, both in terms of topic and presentation style, was listed as one of the reasons why individuals turned away from the news.

In a similar vein, participants in the THREATPIE studies named the highlighting of conflicts in news coverage of societal and political events as another reason for avoiding the news.

Lastly, biases in news coverage of particular topics—such as politics—made people not con-

“ It is our fault too. The easiest way to cover politics is to report conflict. We are looking for a dispute. [...] I think people are tired of it. <sup>3</sup> ”

sume the news. It is worth mentioning that journalists are also aware of that tendency.

## What are the consequences of news avoidance?

While the consequences of avoiding news are believed to be numerous, THREATPIE focused on political knowledge as the main outcome. Intentional consistent news avoiders, i.e., those who stated and actually used news less frequently, possessed less factual knowledge, as evidenced by their lack of knowledge on the latest general election results in their country.

Moreover, this type of news avoiders also knew less about contested societal and political issues, such as climate change or vaccines. In contrast, those citizens, who stated to avoid the news but actually still consumed it, knew only less about these contested issues compared to regular news consumers.

Overall, the THREATPIE studies found that news avoidance was not perceived as a major threat to democracy: While educators and politicians reported to pay little attention to this phenomenon, journalists warned about the potential negative effects of news avoidance on the democratic debate.

News avoidance was considered to be the least threat to democracy when compared to selec-

tive exposure and false information that THREATPIE also focused on.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT NEWS AVOIDANCE?

Even if the THREATPIE studies have shown that news avoidance was not perceived as a major threat to the democratic discourse, several suggestions could be put forward to address the issue before it turns into a challenge for the ideal of a well-informed citizenry:

### Strengthening media literacy:

The foundation for ensuring a well-informed citizenry lies in education. This should include knowledge about the functioning and role of the news media but also equip pupils and students with the skills required to effectively navigate the media landscape.

Schools should incorporate media literacy classes into the curriculum and engage in conversations about new formats and platforms that now are parts of students' political information environment. These efforts should go hand-in-hand with educating the educators.

### Turning to visuals:

Journalists should meet their audience where they are. This means utilizing a variety of media platforms and channels to align political information with the affordances of social media formats. Moreover, acknowledging the appeal of visual content, news outlets should transition to more visual formats.

Visual messages that effectively convey complex political information should be integrated into news reporting to enhance accessibility and understanding.

### Striving for balance in news coverage:

Recognizing the impact of an excessive focus on negative news, a careful curation of news content is needed. Media outlets should strive to balance their coverage, avoiding traditional styles of news coverage that rely on predominantly negativity or conflicts.

### Providing context in news coverage:

In the pursuit of clarity and comprehensibility of news, it is crucial to provide more contextual information in reporting. News consumers prefer to be made aware of why the stories they engage with are important in their personal lives and on a global scale.

## Selected references

- Hopmann, D. N., et al. (forthcoming). A qualitative examination of (political) media diets across age cohorts in five countries. *Communications*.
- Terren, L. & Cardenal, A.S. (Working paper). Disentangling avoidance intent and behavior: The prevalence of news avoidance and its implications for political knowledge.

For other references, further details on data sources, and other output from the project, please visit the project's website [www.threatpie.eu](http://www.threatpie.eu).

THREATPIE stands for "The Threats and Potentials of a Changing Political Information Environment". The project studied how current changes in political information environments influenced the conditions required for healthy democracies. Over 30 researchers addressed this question through a mix of innovatively designed studies. This included in-depth interviews and focus group interviews with citizens, educators, journalists, and politicians, web-tracking of online news use, panel surveys, as well as experiments.

How to cite: Glogger, I., Hopmann, D.N., Cardenal, A.S., Koc-Michalska, K., Schemer, C., Stanyer, J., Stepinska, A., Van Aelst, P., & de Vreese, C. (2024). Being uninformed—News avoidance as a threat to democracy in today's digital world? (THREATPIE Policy Brief).