

BREAKING NEWS



News avoidance: Now what?

How do media combat news avoidance?

Tools, insights and a dilemma

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Abstract

Millions of people worldwide avoid the news, either because it leaves them feeling depressed and anxious, overwhelmed and paralyzed, or because they do not trust the content presented by the media. News avoidance is a complex phenomenon that manifests in many ways: some people always avoid all news, others avoid news periodically, and still others avoid TV and radio news but periodically read newspapers or newsletters. News avoidance can also involve avoiding certain topics.

Among news avoiders, there is a predominance of women, young people, and those from lower social classes. This report presents statements from a broad cross-section of news avoiders who explain why they avoid the news. I am also interested in understanding the general human mechanisms at play in relation to news avoidance and have interviewed various experts in social and behavioral psychology who elaborate on the underlying reasons for news avoidance.

In an age where news is available around the clock and the news flow is characterized by its intensity and quantity, I call for reflection within the media industry regarding the extent of the yellow "breaking news" banners, which in many cases are merely unqualified reports or simple repetitions.

What kind of public and audience do the media want to serve? Only those who are already dedicated news consumers, or also those who are selective in their news consumption or completely avoid news? The first group is well catered to in the current media landscape, while the second group calls for a different, more reflective approach to news design. For them, news should not only inform but also inspire.

We end with a thought experiment: What if public service stations collaborate to deliver quality content to a hyper-personalized news app? A sort of "News on Spotify," where it is possible to design one's own news profile. The idea is both provocative and filled with dilemmas. We already live with a fragmented world view, so would an app like the one described merely accelerate a development where we each consume our own selected news and do not have a common, public conversation? If the alternative is that a larger and larger group of people avoid all news and shut off the news flow, then the hyper-personalized news app might be an alternative.

Introduction

It's not me – it's you

Something has happened to me in recent years. I have gone from consuming news on all platforms and shushing others when the radio news began, to consciously avoiding certain news. I have a particular aversion to live updates from murder and sexual assault trials. News about war and violent conflicts can also make me turn off the radio or physically remove myself from the TV until the segment is over. If I, as a journalist, feel compelled to avoid news at times and avoid certain topics, how can I expect others to spend their time and energy keeping up with the news?

It is a paradox to be a journalist and try to avoid news. Conversely, I am quite aware of why I avoid certain news and also what would make me choose news more than now. I long for news with perspective and background, news that includes solutions and possibilities, and news that engages me. Give me nuances on the world and important stories that make a difference. Then I might be on my way back as a dedicated news consumer.

Both personally and professionally, I am deeply interested in news avoidance as a phenomenon. What does it mean for our democracy and our common public conversation that we live with a fragmented worldview, where some follow the news intensely while others completely check out?

My focus in this report has a social-psychological perspective and is based on a desire to understand what (some) news does to us as humans, why we avoid news, and not least, what it takes to change the trend. News avoidance is a complex issue that stems from different causes and calls for different answers. First and foremost, as journalists and media, we must take news avoidance seriously, listen to the people who avoid news, and do our utmost to be relevant to a diverse audience. Without viewers, listeners, and readers, the media have no justification. And without media holding power accountable and ensuring representation of all population groups in the media landscape, we risk increased polarization and a weakening of our democracy.

News? No thanks!

Millions of people worldwide only have a shrug for the news flow. They have made a conscious choice to avoid news, either entirely or periodically. The media try to entice with free newspaper subscriptions, newsletters, compelling storytelling, and high-quality investigative journalism, but it is often like a party where you have hung up the colored lights, been generous with the champagne, and decorated with balloons. Just, no one really shows up to your party.

So what's the point of producing significant, socially relevant news content in print, TV, or radio if the readers/viewers/listeners you want to reach never open a newspaper or turn off the TV when the news begins?

The trend of consciously and actively avoiding news is called "news avoidance" and is an increasing global phenomenon. Nearly four out of ten (39%) people worldwide often or sometimes avoid news. The largest increases are seen in Brazil, Spain, Germany, and Finland¹. But news avoidance is also beginning to make strong contours in Denmark's media landscape. More than one in five adult Danes, 23%, often or sometimes choose to avoid news. This is an increase of 5 percentage points compared to 2023².

Why avoid news?

News avoidance is complex. And therefore, it also calls for different answers. Strong emotions are often associated with the individual's avoidance of news. Powerlessness, anxiety, and a deep sense of hopelessness characterize many of the people who consciously avoid news:

"I have blocked all news content. Both on Facebook and TikTok. I've also blocked Ekstra Bladet, B.T, and TV2 in my feed. I get NO news content at all. About a year ago, I got anxiety, and if I just see a headline, it triggers my fear. I don't want to see all the violence happening in the world. I immediately think, 'When will there be war in Denmark? When will we die?' A few months ago, I

¹ Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2024

² Schrøder, K. C., Ørsten, M., & Eberholst, M. K. (2024). Danskernes brug af nyhedsmedier 2024. Center for Nyhedsforskning, Roskilde Universitet

was on a bus where the driver was listening to the radio. When the news started, I felt so bad. I got hot all over, felt dizzy, nauseous, and just had to get out. I got off at the next stop and waited an hour for the next bus. Over time, I've seen too many news reports about war and conflict, and have often experienced not being able to sleep at night. Now it's a great relief for me to completely avoid all news and reject all the negative."

Woman, 22 years, student, East Jutland

"I never watch the news on TV. The images are too violent. If I hear something on the radio that affects me a lot, I turn it off. Otherwise, I can't sleep at night. I take it all in too much, so it's healthier for me mentally to avoid news. I still remember when I was in high school 20 years ago, and we heard about the ozone hole in class. I felt so bad during the lesson, and it has stuck with me since. After having children, my worry has increased. What kind of future are we offering them? News is necessary, but the way it's presented is never positive. I miss balance in things."

Woman, 45 years, primary school teacher, Zealand

"I don't read newspapers and don't follow the news on the radio or TV either. I turn it off when the news comes on because I simply get too sad. I feel so powerless about everything that happens, for example, in Gaza, and I don't need to hear about another bombing that I can't do anything about. It gives me a stomach ache and makes me angry and down that we live in a world where war and climate crisis are a given. For me, news is only scandals, quarrels, and crises. It's exclusively negative, and why should I fill my life with that?"

Woman, 28 years, project manager, East Jutland

Calm the Nervous System

When ordinary people like the three women in the above quotes are asked why news is a clear and conscious choice for them to avoid, their descriptions closely align with what psychologist Andrea Søgård, from Ballerup Psykologhus, experiences daily in her practice. Her clients are people affected by stress, anxiety, and depression – and one of her first pieces of advice to them is to avoid news:

"It's about avoiding unnecessary stress on the nervous system. The brain cannot distinguish between real and imagined danger. As humans, we co-experience the things we see and hear, and

we form insistent images in our heads. This affects the nervous system and triggers hormones that prepare the body for fight or flight. But the things we see and hear in the news are often things we can't do anything about. This means that the hormones ready to make the body perform do not get out of the body again, resulting in stress. As more and more people are affected by stress, more people would benefit from avoiding news."

What reaction do you get from your clients when you ask them to avoid news?

"They can be afraid of social exclusion because they can't join the conversation at the lunch table at work or at social gatherings. It feels dangerous because we are social animals and survive by being part of the group. They can also be afraid of being laughed at or missing out on something important. My argument is that the major news will still reach the individual. The benefit of avoiding news is very clear, and most of my clients find it very effective and helpful. If one can't completely avoid news, I recommend avoiding news in the morning to avoid alarming the sympathetic nervous system when you wake up, and the same in the evening, where it's important to signal to your body that there is peace and no danger, so you can get a good night's sleep."

Andrea Søgård herself has avoided news for the past 25 years. Deep frustration and powerlessness are the strongest motivators for the psychologist to turn her back on the news she says.

As a young person, she was very engaged and took social studies at an advanced level in high school, but she early on realized that political engagement required a toughness she couldn't muster. Today, she has no news feeds on her mobile, never watches TV news, and only sporadically listens to news on the radio.

"The media only bring the violent and sensational stories. I think we get too little factual information. I remember how terrified I was before my first childbirth until I spoke with a doctor who told me how many births go well. I almost didn't believe it because I had a distorted view of how dangerous childbirth is. The same goes for the news, where we get a skewed sense that the world is dangerous because they appeal to our emotions and not to facts. There's business in clickbait, and it's often headlines that don't match the content but only serve to catch our attention. For me, following the news is a total waste of time. At the same time, I think it's a big democratic problem that we have a group of people who don't watch the news and a group who do, and therefore may have a distorted view of the world. It's problematic, especially in connection with

elections. Right now, I'm starting to stress about the European Parliament election on June 9th. Where can I find the information that will allow me to make an informed vote? That's the biggest drawback of avoiding the news," says Andrea Søgård.

"Avoiding the News"

Besides feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness, news avoidance can also stem from a lack of trust in the media and its content. Instead, those who are distrustful find their information outside traditional media, often on social media, in closed forums, and/or by following one or more influencers who become their main source(s) of news. In Denmark, we saw this during COVID-19 with influencers like former pop singer Saszeline and Kim Boye ("The Mental Warrior"). In the USA, among others, former news anchor Tucker Carlson has taken his audience from Fox News to his own YouTube channel, where he interprets the news himself. So far, 34 million people have watched Tucker's interview with Russian President Putin on Tucker's YouTube channel in February 2024, while the same interview has generated more than 200 million views on the social media platform X. The fact that so many have seen Tucker's interview with Putin is, of course, also due to Putin rarely giving interviews to Western media, but the trend of influencers and commentators as news disseminators is increasing. Especially on TikTok and YouTube, as shown in the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2024³.

This is bad news for legacy media, which over time are losing an increasingly large portion of their audience or may never succeed in attracting new, younger news consumers. For democracy, it is a problem that the new platforms, in many cases, allow influencers and commentators to reach millions of people worldwide without working with basic journalistic methods such as research, fact-checking, source criticism, etc.

It is important to point out that trust in the news remains high in Denmark. 57% of respondents in the survey "Danes' Use of News Media 2024"⁴ trust Danish news media, and this number is stable. But from a future perspective, it is relevant to monitor the trends associated with social platforms.

³ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024>

⁴ Schrøder, K. C., Ørsten, M., & Eberholst, M. K. (2024). Danskernes brug af nyhedsmedier 2024. Center for Nyhedsforskning, Roskilde Universitet

In connection with this project, I conducted a series of qualitative interviews in the spring of 2024 with people who either completely or partially avoid news. In addition to concrete experiences from news avoiders, I am inspired by the book "Avoiding the News: Reluctant Audiences for Journalism" by Benjamin Toff, Ruth Palmer, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen⁵.

The book provides valuable insights into news avoidance as a phenomenon and the different reasons why news avoiders avoid the news.

"Avoiding the News" points to a crucial factor for why some people are avid news consumers while others completely avoid the news: The social communities we belong to as individuals are even more important than the news habits (or lack thereof) formed during childhood and upbringing.

In other words: Your circle of colleagues and friends is crucial in determining whether you follow the news or not. If you are part of a community where you eagerly discuss what is happening in the world and keep each other updated on the news stream, it becomes a prerequisite to stay informed to be a full-fledged member of your community. Conversely, if you are in a social circle where current events are never discussed, you do not need to follow the news to have access to the community. Your social currency is either based on intense discussions about current societal issues or not.

It is extremely interesting that a given community has such a significant impact on news consumption. This presents new opportunities for the media, especially local media, to create and support communities. Several local and national media have already succeeded with this strategy, among them Zetland, which is membership-based, and Midtjyllands Avis, which engages its readers through constructive journalism.

Never News

In "Avoiding the News," the authors operate with three main elements that are crucial for consistent news avoiders: identity, ideology, and infrastructure.

In short: Who you are as a person, what you believe in, and which platforms you use help shape your (dis)engagement with news. The book's three main elements align very precisely with the

⁵ Columbia University Press

statements made by my interviewees in this report and the background they come from. In "Avoiding the News," the authors conducted qualitative interviews with over 100 people in the USA, UK, and Spain. They all have in common that they are consistent news avoiders. The group of consistent news avoiders constitutes only 3% of respondents in the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2022, but although the percentage may seem low, it involves millions of people worldwide. The book's three pillars of identity, ideology, and infrastructure as determinants for news avoidance lead the authors to conclude that news content plays a minor role in countering news avoidance when it comes to consistent news avoiders.

I believe that content does have significance, also in establishing a connection with consistent news avoiders. Especially if the media succeed with strong, relevant content that matters to the individual.

In this project, I broadly address news avoidance and also include those news avoiders who avoid news in periods and follow it in others. Among news avoiders, there are also those who avoid TV and radio news but instead read newspapers online or in print and/or receive newsletters from, for example, World's Best News or listen to "Genstart" on P1.

I also have a particular interest in people who have been news consumers and now avoid news. In a future project, it will be particularly interesting to delve into this group. Their avoidance is based on news content, making it possible for the media to win them back. More on that when we come to my suggestions on how the media can counter news avoidance.

Who Avoids News?

Among people who avoid news, age, gender, and class all matter. It is predominantly the young, women, and people from lower social classes who say no to news and consciously avoid it. For news avoiders, it is not a societal duty to actively follow the news⁶.

The project "Generation News Avoidance" developed by Jesper Himmelstrup, Constructive Institute, Aarhus University, attempts to reach out to the young and increase their awareness of the role of the media in society.

⁶ Avoiding the News" p.97

With support from the Tuborg Foundation, "Generation News Avoidance" visited 35 educational institutions in 2023-2024 and engaged in dialogue with over 3,000 young people. In the second half of 2024, "Generation News Avoidance" is expected to reach an additional 3,000 young people across Denmark.

I participated as a co-facilitator in "Generation News Avoidance" at Aarhus Cathedral School and experienced enormous interest and curiosity from the young people. But I also got these statements from the audience:

"I would rather be happy and ignorant than informed and unhappy" (male student) and "I often wait until the afternoon to read the news, otherwise I'm in a bad mood all day" (male student).



” Generation News Avoidance” Aarhus Katedralskole. Photo: Martin Dam Kristensen



” Generation News Avoidance” Aarhus Katedralskole. Photo: Martin Dam Kristensen



“Generation News Avoidance” Aarhus Katedralskole. Photo: Martin Dam Kristensen

The young people I interviewed for this report also pointed to other reasons for their avoidance of the news:

"There is so much else important happening in my own life right now. I don't see any reason to stay informed unless it's to join the conversation and gain social acceptance. I don't care about things I can't change or control. There's so much going on when you're young. I think my age is crucial for my avoidance. When I get older, I think it will interest me more."

Male, 24 years, student, East Jutland

"I have completely avoided the news for the past eight months. Previously, I watched the evening news with my parents every night, but I can't handle it anymore. There's too much war and violence. I plan to study law next year, and then I'll have to stay informed. So I will start again at some point, but I'll scroll past the most terrible things and only follow a trustworthy media source."

Female, 19 years, student, East Jutland

As the various statements indicate, two main elements are at play for young people: the impact of news on their mental well-being and the belief that over time, due to education or work, they will need to stay informed. We are back at the criteria for being a member of a community and the social rules that apply in that given community.

The Copenhagen Criteria

For many years, five news criteria have been the focal point for the selection and production of news stories. The five traditional news criteria are Significance, Identification, Sensation, Timeliness, and Conflict. Sensation and Conflict, in particular, have played a prominent role. But the traditional news criteria need to be reformulated, according to the initiators behind The Copenhagen Criteria. Around 70 young people from The International People's College, in collaboration with news editors and journalists, have redefined the news criteria and created a new set of news values, which were launched at the World News Media Congress 2024 in Copenhagen

under the name The Copenhagen Criteria⁷. The seven new news criteria, which appeal to young people more than the current criteria, are:

1. **Educational** – show us news that helps us learn and understand more about relevant topics
2. **Empowering** – show us news that encourages us and provides tools to take action based on informed decisions
3. **G-local** – show us how global events impact us locally and vice versa
4. **Human** – show us diverse representation through personal experiences that evoke empathy, compassion, and inspiration
5. **Impactful** – show us events that affect numerous people and influence us or those involved
6. **Objective** – show us fact-based news, unbiased and from different perspectives
7. **Timely** – show us current news and prioritize ongoing events

As indicated, The Copenhagen Criteria are devoid of both conflict and sensation, instead emphasizing that news should make us wiser, empower us, and reflect how global events impact national/local contexts and vice versa. The human criterion is also included: case persons with diverse backgrounds should, through their personal stories, evoke empathy, compassion, and inspire others.

From the stage at the World News Media Congress, three young people shared their experiences with news and why new news values are needed. One of them, Miko Nerviol, said, "It feels numbing to read the news. It's depressing," while another, Lilly Anuk Bosse, added, "I only see white, powerful, elder men in the news. I don't feel represented."

⁷ The Copenhagen Criteria is launched in cooperation with Danske Medier, World Association of News Publishers, NewsArcade – Seriously Play the News!, Copenhagen Legacy Lab, Syddansk Universitet og The International People's College



Amalie Kestler, Managing Editor in Chief, Politiken, Denmark, moderating the debate at World News Media Congress 2024 in Copenhagen. Participants: Miko Nervioli, Haruka Kobayashi and Lilly Anuk Bosse, all students at International People's College, Denmark

That young people and their suggestions for new news values are represented at an international media conference with nearly 1,100 editors and journalists from around the world indicates an interest and perhaps also a recognition within the industry of the necessity to listen to Generation Z. The interesting question is whether The Copenhagen Criteria will result in concrete initiatives and changes.

The young articulate some of the issues also highlighted in the book "Avoiding the News" – they don't just want to be informed but want knowledge that gives them an accurate picture of the world and enables them to act.

And just like other large groups, young people want to see themselves represented in the media. If the media is to be relevant to young people, it must reflect them and their lives and be present on the social platforms where young people are active.

One of the regional TV2 stations, TV2 Østjylland, which, like the other TV2 regions, primarily appeals to older generations on traditional TV, is very active on TikTok. This is in recognition that TikTok is the preferred platform for young people, says the director of TV2 Østjylland, Inga Vind.

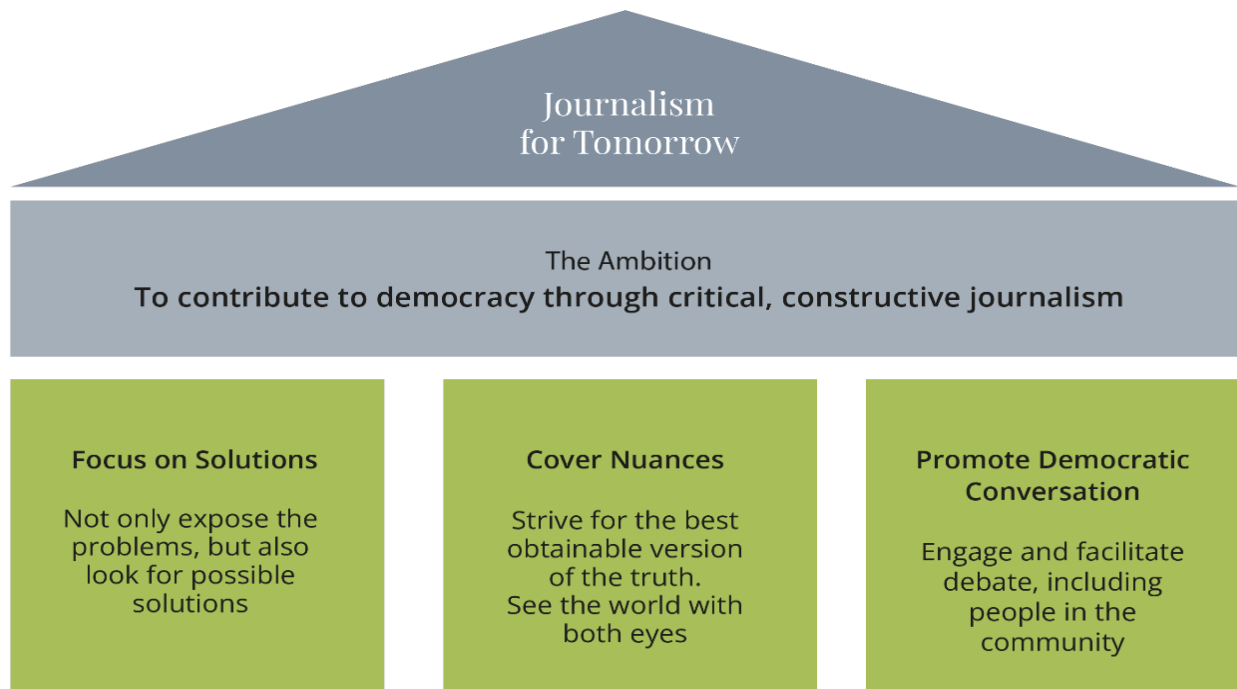
"We follow the users and are where our audience is. For us, TikTok is an opportunity for brand-building among the young, and the platform allows us to deliver credible news to an audience we

cannot reach on traditional TV. We have a very good dialogue with young people on TikTok and experience much less anger in the comments compared to, for example, Facebook. So it is relevant for us in every way to be present on TikTok."

Most of the TV2 regions are on TikTok. Their presence on the young people's preferred social platform aligns with the "Avoiding the News" book, which emphasizes that it is crucial for media to be present on the platforms used by the audience they wish to engage.

Only the young ones?

Is the type of journalism that The Copenhagen Criteria advocate only interesting to young people? Not according to the Constructive Institute at Aarhus University, which has been working for the past seven years to promote constructive journalism. Based on three pillars, the Constructive Institute sets the course for a new path in journalism that moves away from the classical news criteria's focus on conflict and sensation without losing its edge and critical approach. Constructive journalism is based on these three pillars:



Constructive Institute, <https://constructiveinstitute.org/why/>

When comparing the three pillars with The Copenhagen Criteria, the similarities become evident. Constructive journalism focuses on solutions, nuances, and engaging its audience to act on issues rather than leaving its readers, listeners, or viewers overwhelmed with helplessness, just as young people ask for in The Copenhagen Criteria.

However, even among those who have followed the news for a lifetime, there is a call for different content:

“If it were up to me, we wouldn’t watch the news on TV at all. But it’s a compromise I’ve made with my husband. I think the TV news is heavily influenced by sensation. It’s very fragmented and lacks depth. If there is something interesting, it’s never elaborated upon; there’s only room for a brief mention. It has become such that news reporters run around in bulletproof vests where things are happening, but they don’t tell us the background. I would rather have context, background, causes, and solutions than all the drama. When the TV news is on, I always sit with my back to it and knit. I don’t want to see all those gruesome images.”

Woman, 72 years, retired, Northern Jutland

The woman behind this quote can be categorized as a selective news avoider in terms of both media and topics. She does not want—similar to many other news avoiders I have interviewed—to see violent live images and tries to avoid more detailed news about war and conflict. The desire to stay updated on current news in a way that does not leave the individual feeling helpless is not a generational issue but rather a general human need across age groups.

Farewell to News Journalism

What about the journalists who work with news? Many are undoubtedly intense news hunters who love their profession and love being where it happens. But there are also other perceptions of news journalism among those who have worked in a news editorial team. Every time I have spoken with former colleagues from my time as a news journalist or encountered old classmates from The Danish School of Journalism and told them about my news avoidance project, the reaction is almost always the same; There are always several who previously intensely followed the news and had a strong professional identity as news journalists but now completely or partially avoid the news.

One of my former colleagues says:

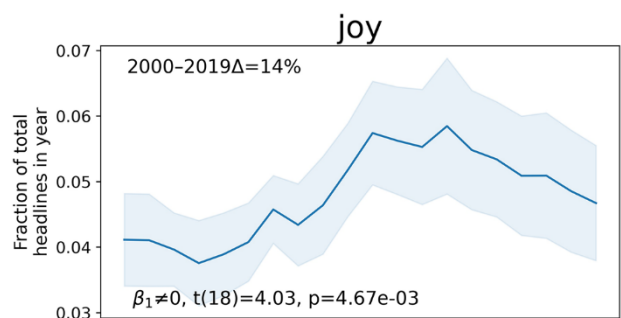
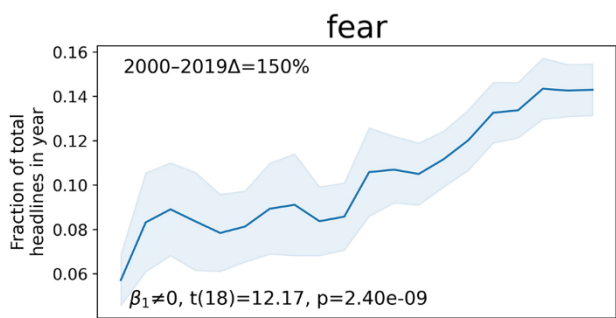
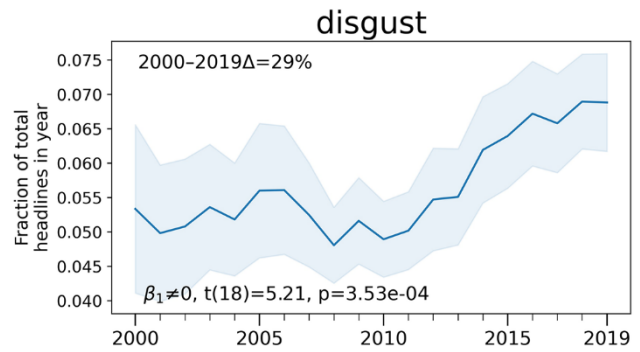
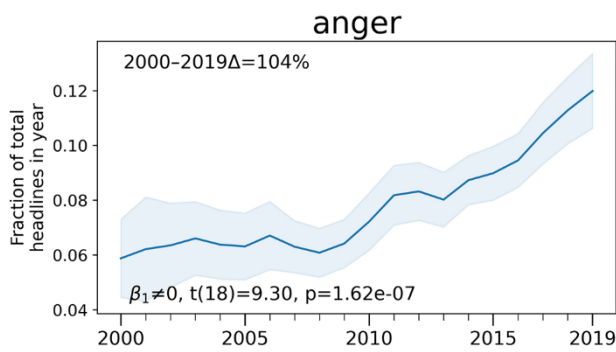
“I am a news journalist by nature, but in recent years I have just skimmed the headlines and avoided most stories. Of course, the media should send journalists where things are happening, but often all they manage to communicate is that something is happening. Nothing else. Everything has to happen so quickly that nuances and perspectives are forgotten. As a person, I feel it is my duty to be well-informed, but I also believe it is the media's duty to create balance and tell some of the positive stories. I make sure to create my nuances by subscribing to international long reads that include everything I miss in news journalism. I want to stay informed, but I don't want to hear all the details from very violent murder and assault cases. Not only the tabloid media but also DR brings more and more crime stories. I am genuinely affected by all the negative and violent news; my mind can't filter it. So I have become very consistent in avoiding most TV news and leave the room if, for example, two colleagues are talking about ongoing murder and rape cases. I feel immense helplessness, and it has really surprised me that I react this way. When I was a news journalist myself, it was part of my job to see strong and violent images—and sort through them—but now I can't handle it at all. I think news for children; DR Ultra and Ultra Nytt, are really good at conveying news in a way that children understand what is happening without being left with fear and helplessness. That approach should be transferred to adult news. You shouldn't be left with a 'downer' feeling, but with hope and empowerment.”

Woman, 45 years, former news journalist, now video editor at an NGO, Eastern Jutland

Both my former colleague and the woman in the previous quote state that their husbands follow the news on TV without being significantly affected. As previously mentioned, women are overrepresented among news avoiders, which we will delve into in the next section.

But there is a reason why many equate news with “doom and gloom”—as this graph illustrates:

Negative, emotionally manipulative news headlines have skyrocketed since 2000 (THE PRESENT, OCTOBER 21, 2022).



Source: D Rozado et al., PLoS ONE, 2022

As the numbers for “anger,” “disgust,” and “fear” have increased, “joy” has decreased. The graphs illustrate exactly what my interviews with news avoiders reveal. It is, of course, the media's duty to report on both war and conflict and to challenge those in power, but the criterion of significance perhaps too often gives way to the unreflective recording of yet another conflict, another bombing, another political skirmish.

More Than Just Breaking News

Journalism is needed more than ever, but specifically the kind of journalism characterized by being thoughtful, nuanced, and significant. Again, I will highlight constructive journalism, which does not stand in opposition to breaking news or investigative journalism, but instead adds an extra layer to journalism that can be applied to traditional genres:

	Breaking News	Investigative Journalism	Constructive Journalism
Time	Now	Yesterday	Tomorrow
Goals	Speed	Uncover	Inspiration
Questions	What? When?	Who? Why?	What now? How?
Style	Dramatic	Critical	Curious
Role	Police	Prosecutor	Facilitator
Focus	Drama	Crooks and Victims	Solutions and Best practice

Constructive Institute, <https://constructiveinstitute.org/why/>

In my view, constructive journalism is crucial for the media and journalism to maintain their relevance and truly fulfill journalism's foremost task: to achieve "the best obtainable version of the truth," as the legendary Watergate journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner Carl Bernstein put it.

Now it is time to take a critical look at the category of "breaking news."

What is the function of breaking news beyond simply being breaking?

Could the media curate the news stream more thoughtfully so that it is not just a roaring river of negativity but rather a well-considered and competent selection of current news?

It is very difficult to justify live updates from, for example, trials concerning murder and severe sexual assaults. These are events that, by their nature, are long over and are now being dealt with in court. There is nothing new to report that justifies live updates focusing on shocking details from the indictment, the defendant's reaction in court, the reactions of the relatives in court, etc. This has nothing to do with journalism but solely feeds a desire for sensation mixed with a quiet shudder of 'thank goodness it's not me or my family affected.'

The same goes for a plethora of other news that is often just unqualified registrations, clickbait without real content, or not significant for anyone other than a very narrow circle. I urge the media industry to consider these three questions before the yellow breaking banner is put up:

1. Is this news really breaking news? (Will it have the same value in 15 minutes?)
2. What makes this news breaking?
3. How many people does it concern?

And when the news has been brought as "breaking" and has again lost its "here-and-now" need, it should be researched more thoroughly to give readers/listeners/viewers all the answers that could not be provided in the acute breaking phase.

Gender and News Avoidance

Gender plays a role when it comes to consciously avoiding news, with women being the majority among news avoiders⁸. It is difficult to provide definitive answers as to what lies behind this gender difference, but social psychology offers some insights. According to Hans Henrik Knoop, Associate Professor in Educational Psychology at Aarhus University and Professor at North-West University, South Africa, it is about both empathy and resilience:

"The most empathetic people can also be among those who most often consciously avoid news. But news avoidance is also about how impressionable and stressable you are. Here, women can be the most vulnerable. Quite literally, resilience is achieved by succeeding in fighting, that is, becoming resilient in the face of resistance, and boys are more likely to fight in ways similar to what you see in brutal news. They call it "wild games", where you fight for fun as if it was a matter of life and death. In this way, they build a resilience that can also benefit them when they encounter death and destruction in the media. Today, parents protect their children in a different way than before and many young people are seen as more fragile than before. This is especially true for girls. Boys are also vulnerable, but on different parameters. We see some skewed consumption patterns - where girls prioritize social media over violent video games, and boys the opposite - which for boys matches very well with a news surface that is filled with war and conflict. Women also often have a lower conflict threshold than men. This may help to explain why the power struggles we see in

⁸ The Digital News Report 2023, Reuters Institute

political and economic news, which make up the majority of news coverage, are particularly disengaging for women"

Christian Gerlach, Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at the Department of Psychology at the University of Southern Denmark, adds:

"Men's brains are about 10-15% larger than women's, but this probably just reflects that men also have a generally larger body volume than women. The difference is certainly not linked to gender differences in cognitive functions or behavior. Although men, for example, produce more of the sex hormone testosterone and are also more aggressive than women, there is actually no correlation between the amount of testosterone and the degree of aggression. There are also studies showing that women have more empathy than men. Conversely, men score higher on helpfulness. These studies are based on self-reporting, so the results should be taken with some caution. The point is that the differences we see are hard to tie to biology. We should probably look more at social-psychological factors, for example, that men and women are raised differently. When there is a predominance of women among those who avoid news, mental load can definitely play a role. Women overwhelmingly have the responsibility for children, lunch boxes, and playdates, so the scarce time that is left is precious. And negative news is not necessarily prioritized."

Can we measure when the stimuli in the brain are exceeded, and the brain cannot take in more?

"If day in and day out you are confronted with horrors, for example, from the war in Gaza, which you cannot act on, you lose more and more empathy over time and suffer from so-called empathy fatigue. If you continue to be exposed to the same stimuli, such as violent images, it elicits less and less reaction over time. Taking a break resets the adaptation, and you can again relate to the things happening in the world. My personal hobby horse in the debate about men and women is that we must remember that there is huge variation within the groups. Not all men like news, just as not all women avoid them. A common trait among those who avoid news could be that they are people who react more strongly than average and have more need to shield themselves," says Christian Gerlach.

Lack of Efficacy

During my fellowship at the Constructive Institute, I attended four courses at Aarhus University, one of them under the title "Gender and Politics: Why are there differences in men's and women's political participation, and what are the consequences?" The course focused on women's lack of participation in politics and what lies behind this gender disparity. One recurring concept when it comes to women's lack of participation in politics is "internal efficacy" – the belief that one can understand politics and therefore feels qualified to participate in a political context. "Internal efficacy" can be translated to a sense of political self-worth. Unfortunately, political self-worth is a widespread scarcity among women, according to an American study with over 3,000 participants of both genders⁹. The study provides example after example of highly educated women with good jobs who decline a life in politics. Even the most professionally qualified women refrain from engaging in politics because they do not feel qualified. It is an inner feeling that trumps facts. The men in the study feel qualified because they have the interest, passion, and desire to make a difference—and besides, they believe they can do better than the current candidate. The opposite is true for women.

Equally crucial for women's lack of participation is that women state they do not have the mental filter and thick skin that politics requires; for them, politics is primarily an arena filled with conflict and fights, and they do not want to be part of it.

According to the book "Avoiding the News," the lack of political self-worth and the conflict-filled political discussions can be linked to news avoidance.

Particularly strong is the theoretical element about the link between women and conflict in relation to news avoidance: Politics constitutes a large part of the news landscape, and most political news consists of process rather than content and often centers on strong political disagreements with conflict as the driving force. Essentially, this is precisely why women opt out of both politics and news.

When was the last time you read a news story about political opponents who together found a good solution to a societal problem? It happens every single day among local council politicians and in

⁹ From the chapter: "I'm Just Not Qualified" Gendered Self-Perceptions of Candidate Viability fra bogen "It still takes a candidate: Why women don't run for office. Lawless, J. L., & Fox, R. L., Cambridge University Press

the Danish Parliament, but we rarely hear about it in the news because there is no conflict element to drive the story forward.

What can inspire women to engage in politics (and potentially news) are role models, and with two female prime ministers in Denmark so far, it would be interesting to investigate whether this has an effect on Danish women's engagement in politics and thus potentially in news.

Norway, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden have also had or currently have a female prime minister.

Given that much of the curriculum in the course "Gender and Politics" is based on American studies and the book "Avoiding the News" examines news avoidance in the USA, UK, and Spain, it would be interesting to have similar Scandinavian studies.

Lack of Representation

Being able to see oneself represented in the media is crucial for feeling included and finding relevance in following the news. This applies to both young people, women, and other large population groups who are perhaps primarily talked about and not with.

One of my co-fellows, Kåre Rysgaard Møller, who works as a journalist at DR, conducted a review of almost 200 articles on dr.dk and tv2.dk over a 10-day period. The following is from his project:

During the ten days in May 2024, only 13 ordinary Danes managed to be quoted and featured in the top stories on DR and TV2, when the news sites were checked at a random time each day. Four students, three parents and children, a farmer, an elderly patient, a horse owner, and a young consultant were included in nearly 200 articles.

In contrast, the US—and particularly Donald Trump's hush-hush trial—dominated the news landscape with 18 articles, overshadowing the presence of ordinary Danes. Sport was also a priority, with one in ten articles focusing on football, handball, tennis, or motor sports.

Overlooking ordinary Danes in the top stories, TV2 and DR instead chose to feature a politician. Almost one in three (68) top news stories featured a politician, with the story either being about politics or a politician being quoted.

A review of the top news stories over ten days suggests that TV2 and DR gave little priority to giving ordinary Danes a voice during these days. On the other hand, there was plenty of news about Israel, Ukraine, the USA, sports stars, actors, and politicians. But this news is more distant from the daily lives of Danes. This has consequences when people feel that news is something distant instead of something close¹⁰.

Kåre Rysgaard Møller's study supports many of the statements that recur in "Avoiding the News," where ordinary people say that the news does not reflect them and their reality. They cannot see themselves represented in the media.

This perception is something Danish journalist Lars Olsen recognizes from his work. Lars Olsen is a journalist, social commentator, and author of numerous books about Danish society. In his book "The Disappearing People," published by Gyldendal in 2018, Lars Olsen describes the gap that has emerged between the working class, politicians, and the media.

"Denmark is characterized by deep social divides, where large groups of the population do not see themselves represented in the media. The shorter the education, the more people avoid the news. It is clear that the perception that 'news is for others, not me' has taken root."

Lars Olsen has traveled extensively across Denmark and has given dozens of lectures to union members. According to him, the trend is quite clear:

"Even if you are a member of a union and thus have some of your political interests taken care of, the perception among many of the members I have spoken to is quite unambiguous; 'The politicians, the media, and the experts are all the same. They are posh people who don't care about us.'"

As a journalist at Politiken 30 years ago, Lars Olsen experienced no problems and had a strong network of sources and good contact with people in the labor movement. Today, however, there is a distinct crisis of trust between the media and the working class, he believes:

¹⁰ Review by Kåre Rysgaard Møller of articles on DR.dk and tv2.dk in the period 22-05-2024 to 31-05-2024. Each day, the top ten articles on the news site were reviewed at a random time (the news stream at the top is not included). In total, 197 top articles were categorized. Three articles were discarded as they were repeated over several days

"Even among the well-informed in the labor movement, such as union representatives who are both active and relatively articulate, many do not bother with the media. Some union representatives have simply disengaged. And when there are strikes, the strikers rarely want to speak to a journalist. It is a huge problem that such large groups in society do not see themselves represented in the media, and the media must take its share of the responsibility. There needs to be a lot of outreach work where individual journalists spend time building good relationships and maintaining them. Trust needs to be rebuilt."

But Denmark's largest union magazine is not waiting for that trust-building work. In June 2024, 3F's magazine launched a completely new site as a challenge to what the magazine's editor-in-chief, Thomas Hundsbæk, calls "a skewed media image." The new site aims to give skilled and unskilled workers the voice in the public debate that they currently lack, according to Thomas Hundsbæk.

"We have a unique and large target group that is grossly overlooked in the major media. Their working lives and interests are largely absent in media coverage, and the major societal agendas are almost always described from the perspective of the most privileged Danes. Challenging this skewed media image is our most important mission with the new site," says editor-in-chief Thomas Hundsbæk¹¹.

3F is Denmark's largest trade union with around 262,339 members, and the new launch is, of course, also about being relevant to its members and ensuring its own legitimacy as a trade union. But at the same time, the rationale for the launch should spark a debate in the media about whether there is merit to the criticism. This can be tested with a survey like the one Kåre Rysgaard Møller conducted, but ideally over a longer period and with measurements across multiple media outlets.

If such a study indicates the same trends, it is a democratic problem that the media are obligated to address.

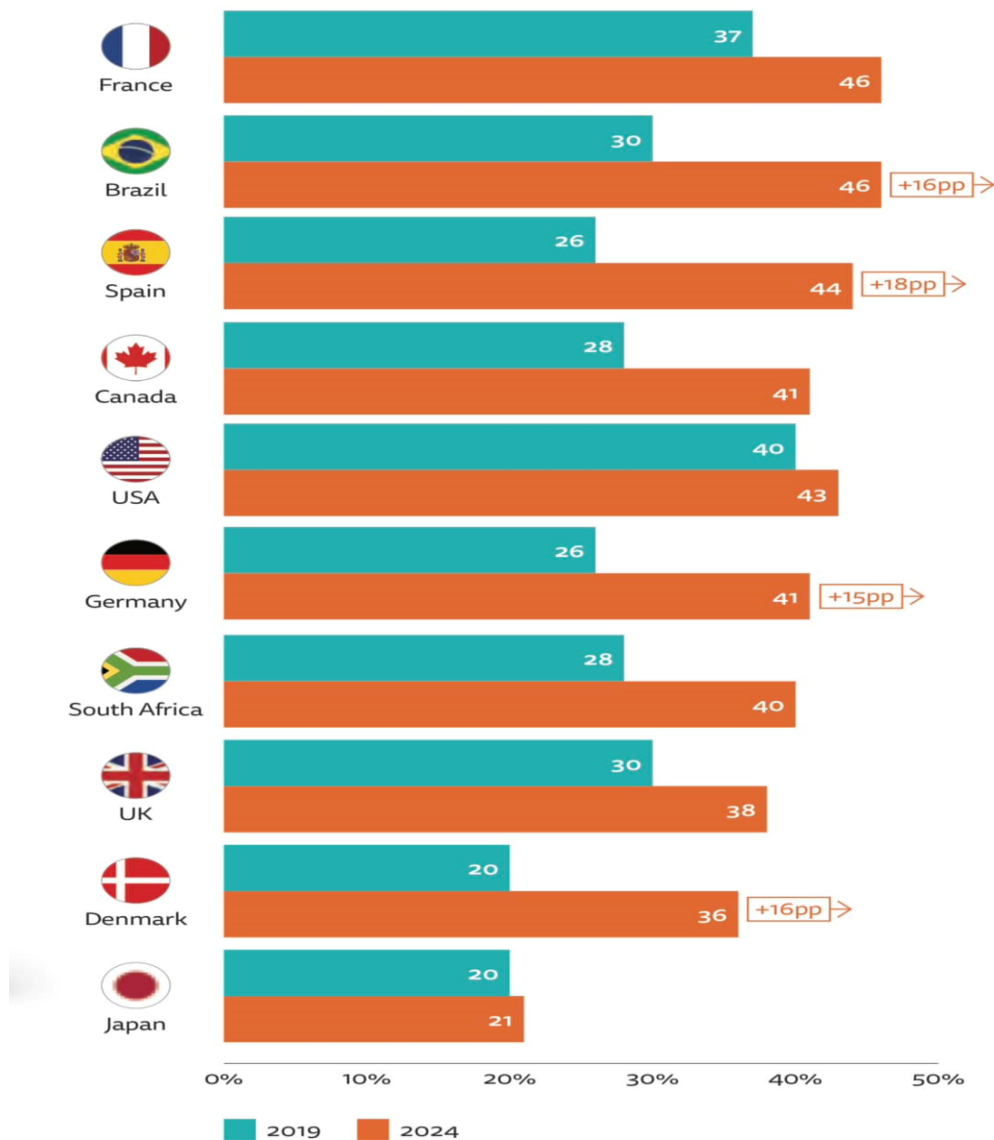
Overwhelmed by the News

The list of topics that really drive news avoidance is topped by the war in Ukraine, the conflict in Gaza, and climate change. Much suggests that it is not just about the topics but also about the

¹¹ <https://via.ritzau.dk/pressemeddelelse/13912749/danmarks-storste-fagblad-gar-i-luften-med-nyt-digitalt-site?publisherId=90363&lang=da>

intensity and amount of information. News is available 24 hours a day on all platforms. And with a smartphone on the bedside table, the news stream is often both what we wake up to and fall asleep to. This leaves traces that can be measured as "worn out"—translated into Danish as being overwhelmed.

PROPORTION THAT SAY THEY FEEL WORN OUT BY THE AMOUNT OF NEWS (2019 AND 2024) - SELECTED COUNTRIES



In a Danish context, 35% of Danes in 2024 said they found the news offerings overwhelming. This is an increase of 15 percentage points over five years¹².

In other words, as humans, we have a natural mental saturation point and a threshold for how much we can relate to.

In a talk at the Constructive Institute in the fall of 2023 Henrik Høgh-Olesen, professor at the Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences at Aarhus University, provided interesting insights into human behavior. Henrik Høgh-Olesen is a specialist in evolutionary and behavioral psychology and says:

"Even though we are modern people in a high-tech age, we have the brain of a prehistoric human. This means, among other things, that we can 'only' care for smaller groups of people that we know and interact with on a regular basis. The original tribal societies were 30 to 120 individuals, and these are the sizes the brain is calibrated to relate to. We are simply not capable of worrying about the whole world but relate to smaller, narrower circles that we can deeply connect with. As humans, we are interested in existential, universal, archetypal narratives—stories about people who go through suffering, struggle, and come out the other side. Such stories resonate. I have no doubt that there is a market for local news because we, as humans, feel we can make a difference locally. We can manage our local environment and act on local challenges. If the media use curiosity instead of fear and create strong local content, there will be an audience for it."

This aligns with data from the report "Danes' Use of News Media 2023"¹³. On the list of topics that Danes with news overload avoid, local news is at the bottom. Only five percent of news avoiders avoid local news.

However, Danish news consumers feel that the media do not provide what they are looking for. Sixty-eight percent want different perspectives in news coverage, but only 45% feel that this need is met¹⁴.

¹² Schrøder, K. C., Ørsten, M., & Eberholst, M. K. (2024). Danskernes brug af nyhedsmedier 2024. Center for Nyhedsforskning, Roskilde Universitet. Note: Reuters Institute puts the figure at 36%, but this is due to a different percentage rounding

¹³ [Schrøder, K. C., Blach-Ørsten, M. & Eberholst, M. K., 14 jun. 2023, Center for Nyhedsforskning, Roskilde Universitet](#)

¹⁴ Schrøder, K. C., Ørsten, M., & Eberholst, M. K. (2024). Danskernes brug af nyhedsmedier 2024. Center for Nyhedsforskning, Roskilde Universitet

While there have always been people who are not interested in news, politics, and societal issues, both the concepts of "news fatigue" and "news avoidance" are relatively recent. In the early 1990s, "news fatigue" began to appear in various media studies, while it took a few more years before news avoidance started to be significantly recorded and described.

Seeing the World with Both Eyes:

During a debate on news avoidance on "Presselogen" on TV2 in March 2024, the then-news director Jacob Kwon of TV2 News said about the media's news coverage: "As news media, we do not present an accurate picture of the world." He has since added several times that TV2 News has introduced a new section under the heading "Hopeful News." This is a step towards depicting the world more nuanced and accurately, but it is also problematic to create a separate section where some news is hopeful and others are not, instead of generally incorporating nuances and solutions into news segments.

For example, it would make a big difference in the coverage of the African continent (and other continents!) if Danish media also dedicated time and space to stories that offer a more nuanced narrative of Africa and not predominantly focus on war, disasters, and hunger.

I had never been to the African continent before, but I only knew Africa through media coverage. In March 2024, I gained a completely different perspective on the continent during the Constructive Institute's study tour to Nairobi, Kenya, where the focus was on innovation and climate solutions.

We visited, among others, the company Octavia Carbon, which is the Global South's first Direct Air Capture (DAC) company that designs, builds, and deploys machines that can directly capture CO₂ from the atmosphere. Octavia Carbon was founded by Kenyan entrepreneurs. A strong, locally rooted initiative that can be an important contribution to combating climate change on a global level.

At the company Green Stem Products, we saw how tons of waste from fruit and vegetable production are transformed into food packaging. Founder and director Anita Anmol Shah runs her company with a socio-economic approach, employing people with physical or mental disabilities, women from shelters, and young people struggling to find their path.



At Green Stem Products, banana leaves are turned into packaging instead of rotting in the fields

It made a huge impression to see how people who are, on paper, underprivileged are actively working to solve the planet's climate problems. Even though I consider myself both informed and well-educated, I have many blind spots, particularly when it comes to the African continent. I'm quite sure I'm not the only Dane or European who needs to have their worldview nuanced, and here, the media plays a crucial role.

As journalists and media, being the bridge between the world and our audience, we have an obligation to depict the world as nuanced and accurately as possible. We are the sent ears and eyes, and we shape and define other people's perceptions of reality. The climate solutions that Kenyan entrepreneurs are working on align with The Copenhagen Criteria's G-local criterion, which calls for global events that impact nationally/locally and vice versa.

In the Slums

Nairobi is home to one of Africa's largest slum areas, Kibera. Here, up to 800,000 people live in tin shacks and deep poverty. In a traditional journalistic narrative, the article or segment would focus on the problems the residents struggle with, how the government doesn't listen to them, that they are starving, and that their future looks hopeless. But that is not the whole story.

Young photojournalist Jeremiah Onyango, who was born and raised in Kibera, has set out to break down prejudices and soften stereotypes with his project "Everyday Kibera," where he depicts life in the slums in a nuanced and respectful way through photos and words. His photos illustrate life as it is lived, both among the elderly in nursing homes, with midwives at work, and in the area's many tiny shops. It is a daily life that most people can relate to. And that is the whole point. Just like you and me, the residents of Kibera have dreams for the future; they fight for a good education for their children, food on the table, and a dignified life.



Kibera resident and photo journalist Jeremiah Onyango telling about his project "Everyday Kibera" at the Danish Ambassadors Residens before taking us to Kibera

Without closing his eyes to the problems that undoubtedly exist in the slums, Jeremiah Onyango depicts the daily life that is also lived there. The residents of Kibera possess a great deal of will to live, down to the smallest details. At the entrance to a craft shop, created and run by HIV-positive women who survive through mutual support, the message was painted directly on the metal sheets:



Craft shop with arts and crafts. Owned and operated by HIV-infected women in Kibera

With the "Everyday Kibera" project, Jeremiah Onyango addresses The Copenhagen Criteria and includes both the empowering and human criteria, which evoke compassion and empathy while also being inspiring. The HIV-positive women are not victims but survivors who have created a life for themselves. They emphasize with their own choice of words on the metal sheets that words create reality, especially when depicting a life situation in a nuanced and not solely negative manner.

In a Danish media context, it is thought-provoking that such stories are rarely depicted, with the focus predominantly on hunger, climate disasters, war, and conflict when describing the African continent.

Good Examples

There is undoubtedly a need for reflection and changes in the Danish media industry, but having said that, there are also numerous good journalistic initiatives that deliver nuanced and perspective-driven journalism. Here are just a few examples:

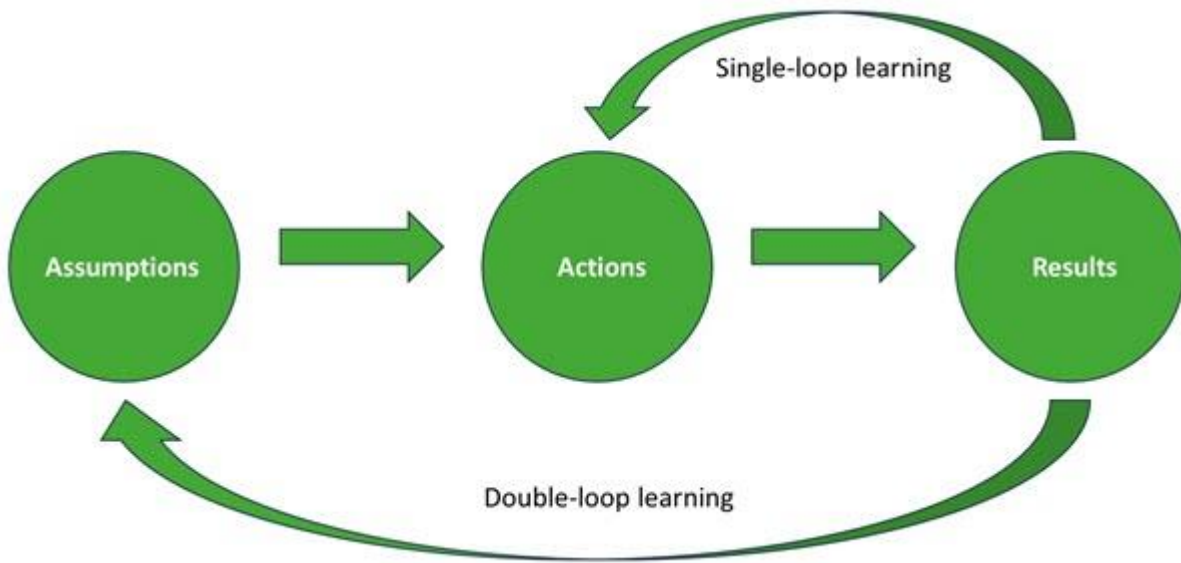
- The online media Zetland has succeeded in creating a close bond with its over 45,000 members, offering a curated daily news overview and two to four longer stories¹⁵.
- Midtjyllands Avis in Silkeborg is the first local media in a Danish context that primarily works with constructive journalism. The newspaper focuses on local role models, engages in dialogue with readers, and describes solutions.
- The hyper-local media "Vores Brabrand" covers a small geographical area in depth and is also based on memberships. Here, 500 members pay monthly for local news about their area.

These media outlets have tapped into something critically important. In relation to countering news avoidance and engaging their users, it is essential that a media outlet has a genuine interest in its audience. Ask what affects the readers/viewers/listeners in their daily lives, listen to their responses, and use the answers actively. At the regional TV2 Kosmopol, users have been successfully involved, leading to stories that might otherwise never have been discovered.

When it comes to news avoidance, it is crucial to understand **why** people avoid the news. Instead of initially focusing on how to act on news avoidance (actions) and focus on the results, the initial focus should be directed towards why people avoid news (assumptions). This approach achieves double-loop learning¹⁶, as illustrated in this model of transformative learning (see model below). Transformative learning goes in-depth and requires a thorough understanding of the audience. As a media outlet, one can then work insightfully with the journalistic content, platforms etc.

¹⁵ Zetland is not a national media, but has its members mainly in Copenhagen and Aarhus

¹⁶ Argyris, Chris. 1999. On Organizational Learning. 2. Ed, p.68



Model by Enablers of Change

Proposals for Solutions

The process of truly understanding news avoidance is still ongoing. I do not have a definitive answer to such a complex issue, but some suggestions include:

- Listen to your audience and get to know them in depth
- Actively use your knowledge about your readers/listeners/viewers
- Create a community for your audience
- Use explainers and Q&As to clarify complicated issues
- Drop clickbaits
- Focus on engagement instead of clicks
- Produce fewer but better news stories
- Consider whether breaking news is truly breaking
- Reduce conflict and increase nuance
- Focus on describing solutions as well

We conclude with a thought experiment:

What if public service stations collaborated to deliver quality content to a hyper-personalized news app? A kind of “News on Spotify,” where it is possible to design your own news profile. This could be an app for instance without breaking news, without war photos, and without details from violent crime cases, but instead with nuance, background, and perspective. Or perhaps a filter that only allows constructive news to reach the user. The idea is both provocative and filled with dilemmas. We already live with a fragmented worldview, so would an app like the one described not just further fuel a development where each of us consumes our own selected news and lacks a common public conversation?

If the alternative is that a larger and larger group of people avoid all news and shut off the news stream, then the hyper-personalized news app might be an alternative worth considering. The Polish media Onet is far along with a user-segmented profile, where the media's users predominantly get the news they want. One could argue that if the media does not offer content that is relevant to the individual, news consumers will go elsewhere, exactly as we already see with people who prefer commentators and influencers as their news providers on social media.

What's next?

I am deeply concerned about the impact of news avoidance on our collective democratic conversation, and I will continue to work on understanding the topic and spreading awareness of news avoidance, both among editors, journalists, journalism students, and anyone interested in democracy and societal issues.

I have two specific projects I will try to realize:

- I will apply for a fellowship at the University of Southern Denmark in the hope of getting the opportunity to work in depth on transforming news avoiders into news consumers. I will have a particular focus on news avoiders who have been news consumers. Here, it is possible to intervene with content. It is my hope that I can collaborate with DR News on this project.

- In the coming year, my goal is to write a book about news avoidance based on Scandinavian conditions.

The book will include the following chapters:

- Chapter 1: Definition: What is news avoidance And what is news?
- Chapter 2: Who are the people avoiding news? – both consistent, selective, and situational news avoiders. Special focus on women, young people, and lower social classes.
- Chapter 3: Why do people choose to avoid news? Eight examples of news avoiders, each with their own background. The eight cases should cover the entire spectrum in terms of gender, age, geography, and education level and consist of:
 - A young woman, middle or higher education
 - A young woman, skilled or unskilled
 - A young man, middle or higher education
 - A young man, skilled or unskilled
 - A middle-aged woman, skilled or unskilled
 - A middle-aged woman, middle or higher education
 - A middle-aged man, skilled or unskilled
 - A middle-aged man, middle or higher education It is particularly important to have geographical diversity, so not only the larger cities are represented, but also the smaller rural communities are included.
- Chapter 4: What do news do to the brain and our nervous system? The chemical and psychological explanation for news avoidance. Including: Why do we avoid news when, as humans, we need to be aware of all dangers to ensure our own survival?
- Chapter 4.a: What triggers news avoidance? Speed of the news stream, amount of information, details in violent crime cases (rape, murder, images) Topics: War, conflict, politics, climate change (with COVID-19 as a trigger)
- Chapter 5: How has news avoidance developed over time? Both in a societal and individual-oriented perspective. From news fatigue to news avoidance.

- Chapter 6: Why is news avoidance a problem? – and what does the future look like if news avoidance continues to grow? What is the role of public service in this context?
- Chapter 7: How can we counter news avoidance? Constructive journalism. Including examples of solutions and nuances. Explainers and Q&A. Personalized news.

THANK YOU

Ulrik Haagerup, Orla Borg, and Peter Damgaard, who all contributed with lots of inspiration and input to my fellowship.

Peter Bro, Morten Skovsgaard, Kim Andersen, and Peter Nicolaisen, all from the University of Southern Denmark, for new insights and enriching discussions.

Mark Ørsten, Kim Schrøder, and Mads Kæmgaard Eberholst, all from Roskilde University, for their quick and thorough responses to my questions.

Kåre Rysgaard Møller for sharing your study with me.

All the participating news avoiders who contributed with valuable insights.

Thank you to the William Demant Foundation for your generous support of this fellowship.