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Brita Ytre-Arne & Hallvard Moe

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# Doomscrolling, Monitoring and Avoiding: News Use in COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown

Brita Ytre-Arne and Hallvard Moe

Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

**ABSTRACT**

This paper analyzes news use during the COVID-19 pandemic, asking how people balance between conflicting needs for information and disconnection in an extraordinary situation. We analyze empirical data from a qualitative questionnaire study of Norwegian media users conducted in March–April 2020, a period of early pandemic lockdown. The acute lockdown context accentuated intensified monitoring of constantly updated news streams, and perceptions of news use as immersive and emotionally draining, as captured in the notion of "doomscrolling". To cope with feelings of being scared or overwhelmed, even the most connected citizens deliberately and intermittingly avoided news. Discussing these findings in light of the debate on news avoidance in journalism studies, we argue for the relevance of understanding news avoidance as a situational strategy. We conclude that the concept of news avoidance remains relevant to qualitatively understand a human experience of wanting to avoid news in particular contexts. Our analysis further outlines interconnections between different practices of pandemic news use, including a research-based conceptualization of doomscrolling as a phenomenon.

**KEYWORDS**

News avoidance; pandemic; information overload; qualitative methods; news use; doomscrolling

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a global threat to health and social stability, nearly eclipsing political turmoil or raging wildfires in the headlines of the international news agenda. Over the next year, 24/7 news coverage was dominated by reports from collapsing hospitals and closed down cities, grave government officials announcing drastic counter-pandemic measures, shifting predictions for a vaccination timeline, and statistics of infected, hospitalized and deceased in various countries around the globe. A pandemic is a global societal crisis that people encounter in their everyday lives, and news use is essential to how people relate their own experiences to such a crisis and make sense of what is going on in the world. If news appear increasingly scary and increasingly important, at the same time, the situation calls for analysis of how people navigate conflicting aspects of news use, pertaining to information abundance as well as emotional responses. To paraphrase Graber's (1984) pioneering work in political communication, this article contributes to our understanding of how people "tame the information tide" under precarious conditions.

**CONTACT** Brita Ytre-Arne Brita.Ytre-Arne@uib.no @BritaYtreArne

We ask: How did people balance between needs for information and disconnection in news use during the urgent phase of the COVID-19 pandemic? This research question indicates an interest in the relationship between news monitoring and avoidance, assuming that these practices are connected, and that the same users shift between them. We therefore ask what the pandemic context can teach us about avoidance as part of—rather than the antidote to—news use. Referring to the academic literature, we focus on contributions that discuss news avoidance not as a group characteristic of presumed *avoiders*, but as a strategy, particularly for escaping emotionally unsettling news. Inspired by scholarship on digital disconnection, which argues against a binary understanding, holding that use and non-use are intertwined (Baumer et al. 2013; Baym, Wagman, and Persaud 2020; Kuntsman and Miyake 2019), we investigate how similar dynamics apply to news, and are particularly relevant in the pandemic context.

Pandemic news use could take the form of "doomscrolling", a popular term defined as "the act of consuming an endless procession of negative online news, to the detriment of the scroller's mental wellness" (Wikipedia 2020; see also Jennings, 2020; Watercutter 2020). This term points to smartphones as a central platform for news use, akin to the term "doomsurfing" (Merriam Webster, 2020) for online news. However, the notion of an "endless procession" of negative news could also describe 24/7 television coverage of a global crisis, or experiences of following a news story that is "everywhere", across platforms. Our study takes an open and user-defined approach to news across media, and explicates further how the doomscrolling concept captures aspects of pandemic news use.

We focus on the distinct phase of the early pandemic lockdown, in late March and early April 2020, when the shock of the situation was recent, severe measures a novelty, and trustworthy facts especially sought after. Our empirical material provides insight into people's experiences in this urgent phase drawing on 550 replies to a qualitative questionnaire survey in Norway. Norway is a wealthy nation-state with high levels of societal trust (e.g., Wollebæk, Enjolras, and Ødegård 2013; Aalberg and Curran 2012), and a media system that is integrated in an extensive welfare state (Syvertsen, Enli, and Mjøs 2014) with an active media policy, comparatively egalitarian patterns of news consumption (Newman 2021), and wide-reaching ICT penetration. As in many European countries, the Norwegian pandemic response included an early national lockdown with closed schools, work-from-home instructions and bans on social gatherings, in effect in the period our questionnaire was in the field. With the relatively unusual methodological approach of a qualitative questionnaire, we were able to reach a range of respondents in the first weeks of lockdown, and secure their reflections as written in their own words. Our study offers insight into user experiences in a digitally advanced society, in an early lockdown similar to that of many other counties, also those that later saw different pandemic developments. As such, Norway should constitute a "most likely" or critical case in the sense that the systemic context appears favorable (Flyvbjerg 2006).

Our findings show that in uprooted lockdown lives, users depended on news for urgent information needs, but were simultaneously overwhelmed and emotionally drained by the extent and tone of pandemic news. A management strategy was to attempt to break away from continuous doomscrolling and develop new daily routines where intensified news use was intermitted by dedicated breaks. The same people became strongly monitorial citizens who followed the news more closely than usual, and equally strategic news avoiders seeking escape and disconnection.

We first develop a conceptual framework for understanding news use during the pandemic, discussing how the apt buzzword "doomscrolling" relates to more established concepts such as news monitoring and news avoidance. Next, we outline the method of our study and present findings from our qualitative questionnaire, before concluding with a discussion of the future of the concept of news avoidance.

## Understanding Pandemic News Use: Doomscrolling and Beyond

The COVID-19 pandemic is an extraordinary news story in intensity and reach, dominating news around the world over time, in an age of heightened connectivity and availability of information. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report repeated its 2020 survey in selected countries after the pandemic hit, and found that the crisis substantially increased news consumption. There were particular surges in use of television and online sources, as well as news use through social media and messaging services, while print media went further in decline (Newman 2020). However, a multiple wave study of news use in the UK from March to October 2020 found shifts from initial surges in news use to increased news avoidance, as well as decline in trust of news, drastic drops in trust of government, and information inequality coming across as a substantial problem (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018; Nielsen 2020). An interview study found similar patterns and particularly underlines the relationship between negative news and challenges to emotional wellbeing (Nguyen et al. 2021).

Such findings highlights how that the extraordinary pandemic situation interplays with established practices, divides and patterns of news use. To understand pandemic news use we therefore need to consider this interplay of extraordinary and ordinary aspects, not only in terms of how news use transformed empirically, but also regarding how the concepts guiding our understanding can be adapted to the situation.

The term "doomscrolling" is one attempt at capturing a news user experience that did not originate with the pandemic, but nevertheless is particularly relevant to it. With reference to COVID-19, the Merriam Webster dictionary website in 2020 declared doomscrolling a "word to watch" for a future formal entry: "*doomscrolling* or *doomsurfing* are new terms referring to the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening, disheartening, or depressing" (Merriam Webster 2020). Listed points of origin are "doom" to connote darkness, evil, judgement and fate, "surfing" as adapted from television channel swapping to internet use, and "scrolling" to refer to the prominence of smartphones. Cultural commentary attributes the coining of the doomscrolling term to an anonymous Twitter post in 2018, and its recent surge to Canadian finance reporter Karen K. Ho, whose Twitter reminders to stop doomscrolling quickly gained her thousands of followers in early 2020 (Jennings 2020; Watercutter 2020).

From social media through popular articles to dictionaries, psychological dimensions of doomscrolling are emphasized: There is a human impulse to stay in the information flow in the face of an uncertain world situation, and it is difficult to stop even though one ends up feeling worse. In literary studies and philosophy, this is akin to "the paradox of horror" (Carroll 1990): the fact that people are attracted to horror fiction though it generates emotions that seem undesirable. Explanations for this paradox have been sought in different ways (e.g., Bantinaki 2012), but the basic distinction between the fictional universe of a monster movie and the claim of real-world representation in news remains central, and makes the practice of doomscrolling a different phenomenon.

In media and communication studies, the concept of doomscrolling has seemingly not been extensively discussed or defined yet, although references appear in a few recent journal articles: It is mentioned in autoethnography of pandemic experiences (Markham 2020), in a qualitative analysis of young people quitting social media (Pennington 2020), and in a conceptual discussion of social media liveness, where doomscrolling is connected to "a constant state of alertness" (Lupinacci 2020, 9) in which something important could happen at any time, facilitated by the construction of constantly updated newsfeeds.

We suggest a working definition of "doomscrolling" that describes *the combination of (1) the content of dark unsettling news, (2) monitorial news use patterns centered on the smartphone, and (3) attention economy news streams, creating emotional drain through a flow which users find hard to get out of.* To further anchor this practice in the research literature on news use, we will consider and connect three strands of scholarship: news as part of the attention economy, news use as monitoring, and debates on news avoidance.

## Monitoring and Avoiding News in the Attention Economy

The digitalization of news allow for seemingly endless online information streams that potentially transform user experiences (Bengtsson and Johansson 2020; Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2021). Dynamics created between a surplus of information offerings and a scarcity of audience attention has intrigued scholars since long before the onslaught of digital media, but media scholars have argued that digitalization intensifies conditions in the "marketplace of attention" (Webster 2018). Social networking sites can succeed in creating "stickiness"—a term introduced to explain websites' success in retaining users in the attention economy (Davenport and Beck 2001)—through relevance, engagement, community and convenience (Syvertsen 2020).

While journalism scholars have recently discussed news in the attention economy as an inroad to study new business models (Myllylahti 2020; Nixon 2020), we focus on the consequences for the users. On a basic level, the business of news operates with user attention as a source of value turned into revenue (Nixon 2020). This is all the more apparent with news providers competing for stickiness and user retention. As Syvertsen (2020, 37) argues: News services "use gamification, algorithmic and automated recommendations, and personalized user experiences to increase traffic, customer loyalty and time spent". Coupled with the realization that news lends itself to feelings of liveness and flow, and is easy to break down into small parts, in a no-deadline 24/7 news environment, the news business is well-equipped in the marketplace of attention, creating an engaging stream across platforms, with no end-point. This preparedness comes handy when a pandemic breaks out: an evolving and dramatic story that fits well with an attention economy-driven news business. The quest for user attention and a variety of immersive measures create conditions for increased new use, but also lays the foundation for overload and fatigue.

To understand how users navigate news in the attention economy, the idea of monitoring is central. The idea of monitorial citizens (Schudson 1998) captures notions of people scanning for the most relevant aspects, managing scarce resources of attention, to relieve the burden of living in complex information environments. Contemporary ordinary news use entails that citizens are approximately informed and occasionally monitorial (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2018). Concepts such as checking cycles (Groot Kormelink and Meijer 2018; Ytre-Arne et al. 2020) further describe smartphone-centered practices of monitoring news in

an increasingly datafied media landscape, as users also develop a range of strategies to manage time and technologies. Following the news could take the form of "checking up, digging in, stumbling upon and flowing along" (Ørmen 2016) as users have various degrees of attention and encounter news in daily situations and through different platforms.

A range of studies has demonstrated how needs for information shift with experiences of crisis. For instance, political psychologists argue that anxiety can trigger information gathering (Albertson and Gadarian 2015). The election victory and presidency of Donald Trump has been analyzed as an example of emotionally challenging and personally destabilizing news, also to audiences beyond the USA, resulting in temporarily increasing information-gathering to process shock (Moe, Ytre-Arne, and Nærland 2019) or developing coping mechanisms including disconnection (Wagner and Boczkowski 2019). As such, we should expect a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic to lead to *intensified* monitoring and more direct information-seeking, at least temporarily, but also to increased emotional strain in news use. If news users are both affected by the extra burden of processing the extraordinary aspects of the pandemic, and more dedicated to keeping up with news, it follows that informational needs are perhaps counterweighted by needs to escape. Here, the concept of news avoidance is relevant.

Studies of news avoidance have mapped patterns (Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster 2010; Bergström, Strömbäck, and Arkhede 2019) and given insight into the differentiated motivations of groups of avoiders, such as women (Toff and Palmer 2019; Poindexter, Meraz, and Weiss 2008) or youth (Edgerly 2017; Harris et al. 2010). In journalism studies and political communication, news avoidance has been particularly central in debates on whether less frequent news users are disconnected citizens who tune out from politics (Aalberg, Blekesaune, and Elvestad 2013; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). The connection between low news use and low democratic engagement has also been questioned (Schrøder 2016; Woodstock 2014; Harris et al. 2010), but remains central to discussions in the field. If news avoidance is considered a problem for journalism and for democracy, it becomes important to capture continuity in avoidance, as exemplified in a conceptual review article by Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020). Here, the authors write that anyone could have "brief spells" of avoiding news, but further argue that these should not count (2020, 463), as they will presumably not have the same effects on democratic engagement as habitual news avoidance.

An alternative understanding, also important to the literature, refers to news avoidance as a strategy to limit information overload (Song, Jung, and Kim 2017) or emotional drain (Woodstock 2014). This implies that news avoidance could have positive outcomes. Avoiding hopelessness (Woodstock 2014) or "overwhelming feelings of compassion towards news of human suffering" (Helgerud 2017, 1) are found to be important motivations for news avoidance also in some of the already mentioned studies, which further outline user strategies for prioritizing time and attention for important caretaking responsibilities (e.g., Toff and Palmer 2019). A recent study (Aharoni, Kligler-vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2020) productively differentiates between content-related, medium-specific or user-oriented motivations for news avoidance. This study, as well as a few other contributions (e.g., Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2021) frame avoidance as part of broader practices of navigating news. Edgerly (2021) finds that emotional fatigue does not explain extremely low news use, but is a characteristic across different groups in an abundant digital news landscape, suggesting that some users find emotional relief in short breaks while maintaining engagement with news.

To understand these experiences, the research field needs further analysis of news avoidance as a behavior anyone could engage in, at least at times, as part of how we all relate to news. Our interest in news avoidance as a strategy, broadly relevant across user groups and accentuated in particular situations, necessarily implies a different view on the habituality of news avoidance: It becomes less important to develop a measurement for continuity in avoidance, and more important to analyze contexts of news use.

Preliminary reports show how in the extraordinary situation of the pandemic, an initial surge in news use was followed by increased avoidance (Kalogeropoulous et al. 2020), indicating that the temporality of coping with the crisis is essential to balance between information and disconnection needs, and that both intensified and restricted news use were relevant strategies for the same media users. We will examine how such strategies played out in the pandemic context of early lockdown, and discuss such practices in light of the debate on news avoidance. We pay special attention to the shift from routine monitorial practices to always-on alertness—and back.

## Methods: Qualitative Study of Media Users in Early Lockdown

Our research question is: How did media users balance between conflicting needs for information and disconnection in news use in the early phase of the pandemic, and what can these experiences teach us about news avoidance as a phenomenon? To answer this question, we draw on a qualitative study of Norwegian media users in lockdown, exploring their reflections on news in pandemic context. In keeping with the framework outlined above, we do not study a particular group of informants pre-defined as news avoiders, but investigate avoidance as part of broader experiences.

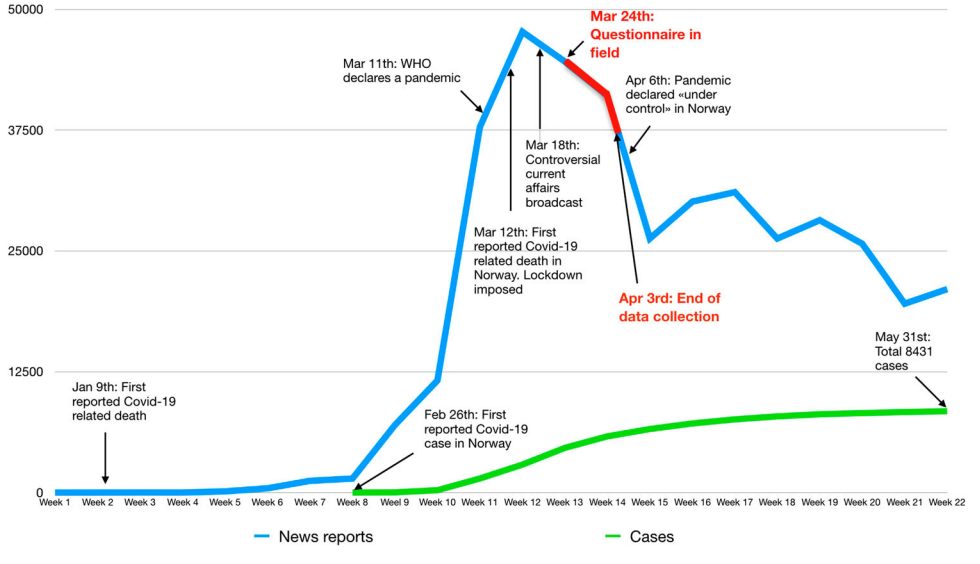


**Figure 1.** Timeline of COVID-19 pandemic in Norway, January 1st 2020–May 31st 2020. News reports (source: Retriever, all Norwegian news outlets, across platforms, search terms COVID* OR korona*), and confirmed COVID-19 cases in Norway (source: Norwegian Institute of Public Health).

Figure 1 depicts a timeline of the amount of pandemic news coverage in the Norwegian media, the confirmed COVID-19 cases in Norway, along with key dates for the data collection period and selected pandemic events.

On March 12th, after warning of "the most severe restrictions ever imposed in peacetime", the Norwegian government instituted a national lockdown that included closure of physical attendance in schools and universities, shut-down of various services ranging from bars to hairdressers, work-from-home recommendations, and a series of other measures for social distancing and travel restrictions. There was no curfew and the government actively encouraged outdoors activities, but a prohibition against visiting holiday homes was intensely debated. The spread of the virus quickly halted, and as soon as early April the Norwegian government declared control of the situation and announced plans for re-opening schools and services. Late summer and early autumn was followed by a series of local outbreaks, a second wave in late autumn 2020, and a third wave in spring 2021. Infection and particularly mortality rates have been comparatively low (Ihle-Hansen 2020; Yarmol-Matusiak, Cipriano, and Stranges 2021).

The early lockdown period in Norway was significantly shorter than in several other countries, and stands out as a particular phase of the pandemic. As Figure 1 depicts, the quantitative spike in news coverage happened to coincide with one of the most controversial singular items of pandemic news, an interview with an alarmed doctor in a widely followed current affairs talk show on the public service broadcaster NRK. Our data collection started immediately after and thereby captures an intense pandemic news period, which slowed when the government declared control of the first wave in early April.

To investigate changing media use during the lockdown, we developed a qualitative online questionnaire intended to produce reflections in respondents' own words. The questionnaire went into the field on March 24th and was extensively distributed in social media and personal networks, soliciting replies from anyone who wished to participate. In total we received 550 replies before active recruitment ceased on April 3rd. While the sample was self-selected, we monitored replies as they came in and made dedicated advances to secure variety pertaining to gender, occupations and age groups. Women, middle-aged, and middle-class occupations are nevertheless overrepresented in the sample.

While our research interest under different circumstances could have been served by a more traditional interview study, we opted for the online questionnaire to quickly reach a variety of people—within an unclear window of opportunity, in an unsettled phase of the pandemic, when different scenarios of social breakdown were looming. Planning and coordinating interviews was deemed unrealistic. However, the questionnaire format allowed people to answer when and in as much detail as suited them, producing qualitative data on experiences, as needed to understand societal dimensions of the pandemic (Teti, Schatz, and Liebenberg 2020). We observed considerable willingness to contribute, even though respondents were not paid or otherwise compensated. Some respondents contacted the research team with positive feedback, indicating that questionnaire offered a welcome opportunity to reflect upon their experiences.

Our analysis in this paper predominantly focuses on one of five qualitative questions in the questionnaire: A question that was given the headline "News and information" and the wording "How do you follow the corona situation? Do you follow the news closely

or do you need to shelter yourself? How?". In the context of the questionnaire, this came after respondents had given demographic information and responded to questions about changes in their everyday lives and communication with others.

The formulation of this question introduces monitoring and screening strategies, for the latter using the Norwegian word "skjerme" which derives from the same origin as "screen" and could translate as "shelter" or "shield". Replies picking up on these concepts should be considered as directly solicited, and not in themselves a surprising finding. While this could appear as a limitation, the choice was made due to particulars of the method and the moment of the early pandemic. First, in keeping with advice on qualitative data collection through written questions without immediate follow-up (Kjus and Grønstad 2014), we found that cues were needed to encourage reflections and push towards longer replies. The majority of replies turned out to include qualitative comments on impressions and experiences, indicating that this strategy was successful. Second, we decided on a combination of openly asking how people followed the pandemic, and specifically introducing our interest in the relationship between monitoring and avoidance, as is key to our research question in this paper. Here, a binary opposition (following closely vs shielding oneself) would be problematic if respondents had to pick one option, but was instead part of a longer question with multiple cues, to be answered in respondents' own words. We deemed these choices necessary in order to not primarily make respondents list their used news services, but actually outline their practices of news use.

We have analyzed replies to the question on news by thematic analysis. First, we identified two dominant themes in the replies, referring to *the nature of* pandemic news, and personal strategies for *managing* pandemic news. Whereas the latter is then directly solicited by the question formulation, the first was less so: People wrote in greater detail about their interpretations and impressions of the news than we might expect. Digging deeper into the meaning of these themes, we subsequently re-read all replies to identify thematic categories within each of these, with the assistance of a systematic coding of all replies. As we observed some gender differences in our material, and noting that the sample had overrepresentation of women, we re-examined all replies from men to assess how these responded to the overall tendencies in our data. We will comment on diverging experiences, but all examples selected represent broader tendencies found in the material, which overall provided a more unison impression than one might expect.

In what follows, we present the data as translated quotations, filled with insights that we address in our analysis. The format of the data collection—the opportunity to write with little constraints on a relevant and emotionally charged topic, led to entries that could be dense, multi-layered, incomplete, or straying off topic. As argued by Toff and Nielsen (2018, 642–643) in the case of interview transcripts, presenting longer rather than shorter quotations yields greater fidelity, and lets the reader note additional themes not addressed in the present analysis. Information on age, gender (Woman, Man, other) and occupations (open text-field) of the respondents is provided in brackets after quotes.

## Analysis

Overall impressions of our questionnaire material mirror quantitative survey findings of significantly increased news consumption in early pandemic lockdown (Kantar 2020).

Our respondents mentioned a myriad of examples of how they followed pandemic news content: live 24-h television news (including press conferences), evening TV newscasts, online news sites (including streams with latest headlines), health authorities' and government websites, social media, international news, and more. Most respondents also picked up on the middle part of the question about following the news closely or needing breaks, and expanded on the relevance of these strategies to their situation. Here, many described how and why they wanted to check the news or stay away from news, and a substantial number of replies referring to doing both. We will start by looking at an example that conveys several prevalent themes:

> I have been following the news really closely. At first, I did everything I could to get information about what to do, because I developed symptoms [of COVID-19]. It was unclear at first and then got better. I check [public service broadcaster NRK's news site] nrk.no and [main national tabloid] VG so many times a day, it is the first thing I do in the morning and the last thing I do before bed. The first days in isolation, [checking news] made me really scared. I was worried about infecting others and what would happen to my family […] I realized I spent too much time digging myself down into the news updates and have tried to limit my intake. I still follow the news more than I would in normal everyday life, but I try not to allow it to become all-consuming. (Student, W, 20–29)

This student, who self-isolated after experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, describes how she dug herself down into a scary news stream, potentially "all-consuming", encapsulating her day from morning to night. Her frequent checking of online news increased, and personal worries mixed with pre-established monitorial habits that escalated. But she then describes a reaction, invoking detox vocabulary ("tried to limit my intake") to evade being captured in the stream. Her account exemplifies a combination of two management strategies: intensified monitoring and strategic avoidance, and refers to a temporal shift in the balance between these two after the first days of lockdown.

As reflected in the example above, our initial thematic analysis found two dominant themes: First, *the demanding nature of pandemic news*, and, second, *management strategies* for dealing with such news. We will delve into these themes by asking how pandemic news use was experienced, and which strategies people developed to cope.

## *The Nature of Pandemic News use: Emotions, Overload, and Doomscrolling*

Pertaining to the first main theme, our material suggests that news in the lockdown period were experienced as urgently necessary and important—but also draining in a number of ways. This duality implied that people felt compelled towards intensified news monitoring while struggling with their reactions:

> I follow online news way too much, in a constant state of alarm, checking the news often and waiting for something really bad to happen. And then nothing really happens and all of the media is just corona, so that I read more details than I really need. I have a plan to cut back on news reading because I find that it affects my concentration. (Postgraduate student, W, 30–39)

> Reading lots of news [lists TV channels, online news, smartphone news apps, Facebook, municipality websites] I like to have as much knowledge as possible, preferably a complete overview of the situation – locally, in Norway and globally. Watching every broadcast of [public service broadcaster NRK's current affairs talk show] *Debatten*. I have been taking a few

> breaks, as I felt scared and nervous about the situation, really fearful of my loved ones at risk and do not want to be infected. Everything I read is on the smartphone. (Social worker, W, 40–49)

> At first one tried to keep up with everything, now one can only stomach the highlights. The media makes you look into a black hole. They talk as though we are all going to die from this. (Photographer, M, 40–49)

These replies indicate the perceived importance of monitoring the pandemic situation, but also account for difficult reactions to news: addressing the point where news checking habits tip over into unmanageable constant attention. The young researcher in "a constant state of alarm" braced herself for a collapsing world, being overwhelmed by details instead, while the social worker struggled for security through knowledge while becoming "scared", "nervous" and "fearful". Both of these replies refer to the emotional aspect of news, but also to information overload in which news are detailed and extensive, yet still demand attention and processing, even to the point of boredom. Similarly, the photographer invoked dramatic imagery of "staring into a black hole" imagining "we are all going to die", an alarming situation, still met with the resigned response of trying to "stomach the highlights". The emotions that these replies convey towards pandemic news are fundamentally unsettled. Such findings resonate with previous work (Toff and Palmer 2019; Helgerud 2017), with the nuance that our informants describe not just strain with taking in general societal gloom, or others' suffering, but also the added stress of feeling exposed themselves.

Some respondents went further in describing how news caused physical reactions such as asthma attacks or nausea, while others underlined that they were not scared, just overwhelmed. More detailed coding found that references to overload and being overwhelmed were more prevalent than explicit mentions of fear or anxiety, particularly amongst male respondents. However, both men and women referred to feelings of information overload with expressions and exclamations that signal emotional involvement, particularly with variations over "it's just too much"—to keep up with, to deal with, to take in. We find, then, both distinct examples of emotional drain and information overload as separate phenomena, and a blurring of these categories in which "too much" and "too dark" are experienced as two sides of the same coin.

Whereas a ritual view of news use would underline how we, under ordinary circumstances, check the news stream with limited attention to quickly confirm that the world still stands, these practices are uprooted in crisis (Moe, Ytre-Arne, and Nærland 2019). In the intense lockdown phase, our informants found themselves in a situation where intrusive news was everywhere, experienced as massive and scary, but difficult to relate to as one usually does. We can thus consider if intensified monitoring of pandemic news in the early lockdown can be described as "doomscrolling", which we defined as the combination of (1) the content of dark unsettling news, (2) monitorial news use patterns centered on the smartphone, and (3) attention economy news streams, creating emotional drain through a flow which users find hard to get out of.

We find evidence of people's discomfort at the dark nature of pandemic news, and of how the severity of the situation pushed for intensified news checking, regardless of the draining effects: "I follow online news way too much". When it comes to how scrolling or digital news navigation play into the pandemic context, we find many mentions of online

news and some of smartphones specifically: "everything I read is on the smartphone". Many also mentioned television, including specific programmes as well as 24/7 coverage. More importantly, our material indicates a prevalent experience of news as one massive stream of COVID-19 information, irrespective of platform: "all of the media is just corona". It appears that the overall flow of pandemic news was most overwhelming. As such, in an operationalized sense, doomscrolling is relevant to grasp key dimensions of pandemic news use across platforms.

Our second main theme concerns how people develop strategies to stay on top of the most important information, breaking free from the flow and the spiraling emotional stress. We will therefore take a closer look at the management strategies people developed.

## *Management Strategies: Intensified Monitoring, Strategic Avoidance*

A key tendency across replies was to describe the start of the lockdown as a distinct period of intensified news monitoring that could not be sustained over time. Less than two weeks after the start of the lockdown, respondents already wrote about what they did "at first" or "in the beginning": "First [I followed the news] closely, then I had to read about other things or watch cat videos", as a teacher in her 40s expressed it. This "first-now" structure was not actively solicited by the question formulation, but still found in numerous replies. Many wrote about how they were *now* taking action to manage the information flow: from checking the news all the time, feeling overwhelmed, bored or scared, to deliberate shifts between disconnection and information-seeking. Our respondents rarely described moves towards complete avoidance, but were coming to terms with the impossibility of following everything, and post-rationalizing initial panicked information-gathering.

Adapted from the typology developed by Aharoni, Kligler-vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2020) of content-based, medium-based or user-oriented avoidance, we find it fruitful to characterize avoidance strategies found in our material as either time/activity-based or medium/content-based.

Time/activity-based avoidance refers to how respondents developed a daily rhythm for news checking at regular intervals, mixed with dedicated breaks in the form of other activities. The strategy has similarities to managing smartphone use by instituting mobile-free timeslots in the day, or planning family time away from screens (Ytre-Arne et al. 2020):

> Followed the news closely at first. Online news and TV. I felt more and more worried and concerned, so I decided to only check a few times a day, not every hour. It was overwhelming with all that information, often it did not feel relevant or important. It was difficult to sort secure information from noise. (Student, W, 20–29)

> First television news was on 24/7, now I turn it on every now and then when taking a break, or right after work. I need to shelter myself more, [taking breaks for news] becomes a way of structuring time and day. But still, way more TV and online news than normal, but less radio. What used to be my most important news update (radio in the morning) is now my free time away from news, also because I spend less time getting ready now that I work from home. (Advisor, W, 30–39)

> Following news closely from hour to hour. Trying to shield myself a few hours each day by computer games and being with my kids. (Academic, M, 30–39)

Some wrote that they decided to deliberately avoid news before bedtime, instead engaging in a pleasurable activity such as reading or watching a movie. People reported on taking walks, cooking or baking bread, spending more time with children, playing boardgames, and talking on the phone as activities focusing their attention away from the scary stream of pandemic news. Some felt the need to try to protect their workday concentration by actively regulating a work-from-home situation to avoid news. Others allowed themselves as set quota of how often during the day they would check the news. They sought to develop a routine in uprooted lockdown life where strategies for news checking and avoidance were carefully mixed to create a sustainable balance.

In addition to activity-based and temporal constraints on news checking, we find a strategy of content/medium-based avoidance. This strategy is closely related to the notion of pandemic news as a scary stream: By navigating platform preferences and affordances, and by considering what sort of information to actively search for, people sought to remain informed while avoiding negativity and constant checking:

> At the start of the crisis, I read a lot, but stuck to research articles and credible sources. I learned a lot from that, and now I don't need much by way of information (not interested in hour-by-hour updates on "deaths" and "infections"). Noticing the consequences of scare-mongering in my mother who lives alone and gets really scared (particularly by [public service broadcaster's current affairs debate show] *Debatten*). (Manager, W, 40–49)

> Following news closely […] Watching some press conferences and debates, but otherwise not much TV, because I find it less intrusive to read + and I feel more influence by actively seeking things out for myself. (Administrative advisor, W, 30–39)

While the last respondent quoted here refers to television as intrusive, several highlighted the televised government press conference were as something they found it important to follow, seemingly with a reassuring effect in spite of the gravity of the tone of communication. In addition to the source credibility of government ministers and health officials, whose crisis management experienced high levels of trust in Norway in the lockdown period (Knudsen et al., in review), a relevant and perhaps underestimated aspect of the government press conference format is that it is not constant. The press conference is a defined event with a limited timeframe. Appearing once a day, eventually once a week, usually at two in the afternoon, people could decide to monitor press conferences to sustain a feeling of staying on top of the most important information, while avoiding incessant news checking. This example indicates that content- and medium-specific aspects could be closely mixed. Many replies refer to various combinations of strategies:

> I have a paper subscription, listen to the radio and watch some television. I switched off news updates on my phone. There was just too much dark news affecting my mood. Less news and debates at night than usual, instead ending up with a series or feel-good film. (Research advisor, M, 40–49)

Here, we find a combination of medium-based avoidance (switching off news updates on the phone) in order to avoid a particular form of content (dark news affecting her mood) and temporal and activity-based avoidance (less news at night, instead a feelgood

film). This is an example of how people tried to manage their use of news and other media, in the structure of the day and across platforms, in order to sustain emotional energy by breaking out of temporary doomscrolling tendencies.

## Conclusion: News Avoidance Beyond the Pandemic

We will conclude by discussing our findings in light of debates of news avoidance, also beyond the pandemic context, highlighting the need to understand news use as a set of different and even seemingly contradictory practices. There are several limitations to our study, a one country case study conducted under difficult circumstances, therefore taking the unusual approach of a qualitative questionnaire rather than interviews that would have offered more opportunities for follow-up. However, we believe that the particular moment captured through respondents' qualitative reflections offer insight into an important shift in pandemic news experiences.

During early lockdown, our respondents describe a situation of immersive news use that could not be sustained over time. Even under what we have described as favorable societal conditions, in a wealthy Nordic welfare state comparatively well-suited to tackle a pandemic, news were scary, boring, emotionally draining—and everywhere. The 24/7 news streams of live television, online news sites and social media updates represent, for users, a constant opportunity to follow news, particularly accessible when the lockdown dissolved ordinary work hours and rhythms for daily activities. At the same time, the urgency of the evolving COVID-19 situation led users into a flow that was difficult to break away from. We find that people needed to counter information overload as well as emotional drain, emphasizing that the amount of pandemic news caused strong emotional responses.

The surge in popular references to "doomscrolling" captures the cultural relevance of this phenomenon, and its interrelated psychological and technological aspects. We have suggested a definition, mobilized in the analysis to substantiate the idea of an interchange between dark content, attention economy-driven news streams, and inadvertent emotional reactions. Whereas the word doom*scrolling* highlights the smartphone, we find that the acute pandemic context made news across platforms, including live television, part of an overall news stream that never seemed to stop. The situation also underlined that news formats with clearly defined endpoints could help users formulate strategies for how to monitor without being caught in the flow. Our study captures a situation in which users were formulating strategies to break away from doomscrolling while staying informed about the pandemic.

Asking what these experiences can teach us not just about news monitoring but also about news avoidance, we find the coping strategy of intermittingly avoiding news to be particularly interesting. For some, news avoidance can clearly be a habitual or permanent situation of feeling unable or unwilling to engage with news, as highlighted in the main body of the literature on news avoidance (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). This can be problematic from a democratic perspective. Yet, for others, news avoidance is a situational response contingent on particular circumstances, either in one's personal life or in a societal situation. Motivations for news avoidance could, as we have highlighted, refer to emotional and attentive drain of following news that are difficult or straining, mitigated by attempts of conserving one's attention and emotional energy for other aspects

of life (Woodstock 2014). We argue that the pandemic accentuates such experiences for a broad range of people, including those who would generally be considered eager news users, showing how dedicated news avoidance could mix with news monitoring.

Our findings also suggest that it is worth exploring how people attempt to filter different aspects of news, to shield or protect themselves from particular types of news while monitoring other kinds of information. One potential path to explore could be the concept of "news saturation", with attention to how different kinds of news content or news use practices contribute to reaching points of saturation at various times, for instance drawing on the typology of content-, medium- and user-oriented avoidance (Aharoni, Kligler-vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2020) in a discussion of saturation. Here, we might also expect that people's various resources and backgrounds push towards different levels of saturation. A range of concepts is needed to grasp the variety of practices and strategies in dealing with news in everyday life, and in extraordinary contexts.

The added value of accentuating these experiences in the research literature on avoidance is to develop a broader framework of how and why news matter, in the context of people's everyday lives and relative to other means of societal engagement. If avoiding news (at times) is part of how we relate to news, we need to understand this form of news avoidance as meaningful and situated, as inherently human rather than inherently problematic. Our case study of news use in pandemic lockdown exemplifies this in an extreme case context. As the debate continues on meanings of the notion of news avoidance (Schrøder 2016; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020), this concept remains relevant to understand the experiences we have highlighted here—in which we are all, at times, news avoiders.

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## ORCID

*Brita Ytre-Arne* http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4452-6007
*Hallvard Moe* http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6924-380X

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