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All the News that's Fit to Ignore: How the Information Environment Does and Does Not Shape News Avoidance

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Abstract

In a fragmented digital media environment where news is increasingly encountered passively in social media feeds and via automated mobile alerts, active *avoidance* of news, rather than deliberate consumption, takes on outsized importance in shaping what it means to be an informed citizen. This article systematically evaluates the factors that predict news avoidance behaviors, considering both individual- and country-level explanations. Using a large-scale quantitative, comparative approach, we examine more than 67,000 survey respondents across 35 countries worldwide and find consistent evidence for how factors including demographics, political attitudes, and news genre preferences shape avoidance consistently across information environments. But we also show how country-level contextual factors, what we call "cultures of news consumption," influence behaviors above and beyond that which is explained by respondent-level differences. Specifically levels of press freedom and political freedom and stability are shown to negatively predict rates of news avoidance. These findings suggest that many people's news use practices depend not only on personal characteristics and preferences but quite sensibly on the news available to them, which they may have good reason to view as deficient or untrustworthy, as well as culturally-specific norms around its value and utility.

Keywords

News Avoidance, News Audiences, Comparative Media Systems, Political Efficacy, Press Freedom

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News consumption has long been associated with normative models of good citizenship (McCombs and Poindexter 1983; Lupia 2015; Schudson 1998). As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 8) argue, "Political information is to democratic politics what money is to economics: it is the currency of citizenship." Beyond its benefits to individuals in enabling full participation in political life, democratic self-governance also depends on a collectively informed and knowledgeable electorate able to hold their elected officials accountable, and news is often viewed as the most critical link to politically-relevant information in the public sphere (Habermas 1989).

Scholars have grown increasingly concerned about how changing media environments may contribute to gaps between those who do and do not pay attention to news and whether such gaps may threaten processes of representative democracy (Prior 2007; Van Aelst et al. 2017). In media environments where people see news as ambient and ubiquitous (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017; Hermida 2010), deliberate *avoidance* of news may take on outsized importance in shaping what it means to be an informed citizen for news enthusiasts and habitual avoiders alike. The contemporary digital media landscape has made information more widely available and accessible than ever before, yet in some high-income democracies with well-educated populations, considerable numbers report never accessing conventional news altogether (Newman et al. 2017) and/or appear to avoid it with some regularity (Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster 2010).

In this article, we systematically evaluate the factors that predict news avoidance among the general public, considering not only individual-level explanations for why some people avoid news more so than others but also country-level factors pertaining to the information environment often emphasized in scholarship on international media systems. By examining large-scale survey responses across 35 countries, we find evidence that many individual-level variables—including certain demographics, political attitudes, preferences for "soft" versus "hard" news topics, and

social media use—are relatively consistent predictors of news avoidance across countries, but we also find that political information environments, what we call national "cultures of news consumption," play a significant role in shaping audience behaviors beyond what is explained by individual-level factors alone. That is, unlike previous scholarship, which has emphasized characteristics of the news environments such as differences in journalistic practices (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 2017) or the variety of media sources available, we find that levels of freedom and political stability better explain cross-country differences in rates of avoidance. These results suggest that many people may avoid the news not solely because of personal preferences but because of perceived deficiencies in their country's available supply of news and information.

Previous Research on News Avoidance

A small but growing literature on media audiences has recently developed that seeks to investigate the phenomenon of "news avoidance." News avoidance has been operationalized in varying ways in previous studies (for review, see Skovsgaard and Andersen 2019). Researchers often focus on instances of habitual avoidance among people who "resist" news (Woodstock 2014) or otherwise abstain from it almost entirely (Edgerly 2017; Toff and Nielsen 2018; Trilling and Schoenbach 2013). Other studies characterize news avoiders as a category of individuals who differ mainly from the general public in the extremity of their limited use of news (Blekesaune, Elvestad, Aalberg 2012; Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster 2010; Lee and Yang 2014). In this study, we define news avoidance more broadly as a behavior—an intermittent practice that may occur at differing rates among the public separate from overall rates of news exposure. The two behaviors are clearly intertwined, but they are not one in the same as even news enthusiasts may also routinely avoid news. In this study, we refer to "active" avoidance to differentiate such behaviors

from avoidance practices that may occur inadvertently for structural reasons even though we recognize that many instances of news exposure are not entirely intentional or unintentional.[1]

Like many studies of news audiences, previous work examining news avoidance has often focused on (1) individual-level factors, such as predictors pertaining to individuals' access to resources like time and money or personal preferences, or (2) country-level explanations, which tend to involve matters external to individuals involving the supply of news, what is sometimes called the "political information environment" (Aalberg et al. 2010). Here we review findings in both areas and build on previous work that argues for an integrative approach the considers these factors alongside each other.

Individual-level Explanations for News Avoidance

Previous research on news use focusing on single countries has often highlighted individual-level characteristics as the primary factors shaping news consumption. Studies typically emphasize the role of age and socialization (Edgerly et al 2017), political interest (Strömbäck and Shehata 2019), and gender norms (Toff and Palmer 2018) in structuring people's news habits and media routines. Studies have also pointed to education and "preexisting levels of background knowledge" (Price and Zaller 1993, 133), although effects vary depending on how narrowly or specifically news is defined (Lee 2013; Strömbäck and Shehata 2019). Some who use little "hard" news are nonetheless exposed to considerable "soft" news content which can be nonetheless

[1] This term is subject to interpretation by respondents and may mean different things to different individuals depending on what form of news they typically consume (e.g., television, newspaper, online news). Some extreme news avoiders who habitually consume little to no news at all may or may not do so "actively." For a fuller discussion, see Skovsgaard and Andersen (2019).

somewhat informative (Baum and Jamison 2006). Others, such as Norris (2000) and Strömbäck and Shehata (2010, 2019) have pointed to the causal and reciprocal relationship that develops among habitual news users in fostering a "virtuous circle" of interest in political and civic affairs—although as Avery (2009) finds, pre-existing levels of media trust can moderate this relationship. This literature contrasts with a separate body of work on "media malaise" or "video-malaise" (Robinson 1976, Mutz and Reeves 2005), which posits that exposure to certain forms of news media content can cause people to become cynical and disengage with political and civic affairs. In other words, all news is not created equally; some individual-level correlates of news use may differ from place to place as the information environment itself differs.

This view of news audiences aligns with an influential and extensive literature in political communication concerned with the tendency of people to selectively expose themselves to or turn away from certain forms of news in accordance with partisan loyalties (Stroud 2011; Garrett and Stroud 2014) or preferences for soft news (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009) or entertainment (Prior 2007). In an increasingly fragmented environment, it is easier for people uninterested in particular types of niche news (or any news whatsoever) to filter out what they do not like. Strömbäck et al (2013) showed that as the information environment has fragmented over time, political interest has become a stronger predicter of news consumption. Thus, the main concerns about the high choice environment is that large parts of the population will either be isolated from news or consume only like-minded partisan news, as shown in Edgerly's (2015) work on news repertoires.

Similar patterns should in theory apply to avoidance practices; however, this conception of audiences implies significant differences may be apparent across countries as individuals encounter differing media choices available to them. In addition, the way we consume news today complicates these relationships. The increasing use of social media and search engines for news

allows users to be exposed to news stories from outlets that they would not necessarily consume otherwise. As a result, the effect of partisan selective exposure may be reduced (Messing and Westwood 2014) and social media news users may actually consume news from *more* and more ideologically *diverse* news sources (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018a; 2018b). Thus, the way digital technologies are used for news complicates our theories of how people tend to deliberately seek out or avoid news.

Cultures of News Consumption at the Country Level

Assessing to what degree the above explanations apply across political information environments is challenging since many news audience studies are conducted in single countries. Factors that appear to drive individuals to employ different media habits and news repertoires (Edgerly 2015; Schrøder 2015) may omit the variables that structure the information environments in which people interact and engage with media. These include both the penetration of different media technologies in a given country (e.g., Elvestad and Blekesaune 2008; Kim and Webster 2012) as well as more difficult to capture aspects of what political scientists sometimes describe as political or civic cultures (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart 1988). We call these contextual factors "cultures of news consumption," which we define as group-level social, cultural, or political forces that pertain to the supply of available media choices, perceptions about their accuracy and utility, as well as norms about the value of news consumption as a civic duty (McCombs and Poindexter 1983).[2] These cultures of news consumption encompass a greater range of

[2] A single country could contain multiple cultures of news consumption but systematic differences in how such cultures aggregate are likely to result in observable country-level differences in collective patterns of information seeking and avoidance.

characteristics than those typically captured in studies of political information environments, which usually focus on the quality and quantity of information in the news (Aalberg et al 2010) or the dominant modes in which news is distributed (Elvestad and Blekesaune 2008; Shahata and Strömbäck 2011). Technological differences from country to country such as the availability of social media may well co-vary with cultures of news consumption, but these differences are unlikely to deterministically shape behaviors absent changes in the culture.

We are by no means the first to highlight the importance of these contextual factors. For example, previous scholarship has examined how local (Althaus, Cizmar, and Gimpel 2009; Hayes and Lawless 2018) and national (Aalberg, Blekesaune, and Elvestad 2013) contexts play an important role in predicting news consumption and knowledge, with particular importance ascribed to how newspaper-centric a country's media landscape is (Elvestad & Blekesaune 2008; Shahata and Strömbäck 2011). The burgeoning field of comparative media systems research, building on Hallin and Mancini's (2004) influential framework, has often emphasized Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) as a bulwark to creeping commercialization across media systems, contributing to citizens' greater knowledge of civic and political affairs (Aalberg, Van Aelst, and Curran 2010; Esser et al 2012; Strömbäck 2017). When PSBs are a country's dominant delivery mechanism for news, citizens tend to be more informed and engage in politics at higher rates.

But as Brüggemann et al. (2014) note in their re-conceptualization of the Hallin and Mancini typology, PSBs are just one of several factors that pertain to the "role of the state" in a given media system—and by extension its particular culture of news consumption. Country-level political and press freedoms are also likely to interact with and extend beyond the influence of PSBs alone. After all, countries where PSBs are most dominant also tend to be high-income democracies with strong traditions of press freedom and political stability; whereas countries with

high rates of political parallelism, such as Spain or Greece, often also have lower levels of journalistic professionalism and more unstable political systems (Brüggemann et al. 2014).

Although some work has begun to examine audience behaviors such as incidental exposure (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018a; Valeriani and Vaccari 2016) or other patterns of media use (Hasebrink et al 2015; Perusko, Vozab, and Čuvalo 2015) across a small number of mostly European countries, existing research does not provide guidance for how country-level characteristics such as levels of political freedom and stability may impact rates of news use and avoidance. Competing hypotheses offer at least two plausible possibilities. Since most people are unlikely to exert the cognitive effort required to stay informed and make political decisions (Downs 1957; Popkin 1994), in information environments in which news is perceived to be less reliable and/or consequential, where governments exhibit less regard for the democratic preferences of the public, cultures of news consumption may develop in which people are more likely to avoid paying attention to news since it is perceived as less useful. This would manifest in a negative relationship between avoidance and levels of press and political freedom. On the other hand, controlled experiments have also shown how political instability and threats to political freedom contribute to a more anxious and information-seeking public (e.g., Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Best and Krueger 2011; Valentino et al. 2008; 2009), which could prompt the opposite effect, or cultures of news consumption where avoidance is less common.

Further complicating these expectations is the challenge of disentangling the separate, independent effects of press and political freedoms on news audience behaviors. As Hanitzsch and Berganza (2012) find, journalists themselves tend to be more trusting toward public institutions when they work under conditions of relative press freedom. At the same time, scholars have often pointed to the effects a strong press system may have on curtailing corruption (see Brunetti and

Weder 2003) as evidence of the primary role played by press freedom in establishing the conditions for political freedom to flourish. In practice, given how levels of press freedom co-vary with country-level political freedoms, investigating the precise independent effects attributed to each of these factors may not be possible. For purposes of this study, our aim is to demonstrate how cultures of news consumption play a role in explaining cross-national variation in audience practices, not to comprehensively specify its constituent parts. We return to this point in the discussion.

Research Questions

In the present study, we ask four specific research questions designed to assess systematic predictors of news avoidance. In the analysis that follows, we test these factors side-by-side as explanations for why some people avoid news at rates higher than others from one country to the next. The first of these questions seeks to build on the first set of theories about individual-level variables governing news consumption, examining the degree to which such factors predict news avoidance on average across country contexts:

RQ1. What demographic and attitudinal factors at the individual-level are associated with higher rates of news avoidance cross-nationally?

Although we have specific expectations about several demographic variables based on prior research (e.g., we expect age to be associated with less news avoidance while a relative preference for soft news is expected to be associated with more news avoidance), we do not formulate these expectations into hypotheses as our larger purpose in this study is not to derive point estimates for each characteristic but to assess the degree of cross-country variation with respect to each factor.

The second, third, and fourth questions consider the role played by country-level factors in predicting rates of news avoidance. These questions are:

RQ2. To what extent do country-level differences in press freedom contribute to variation in news avoidance?

RQ3. To what extent do levels of political freedom and stability contribute to variation in news avoidance?

RQ4. What is the relationship between rates of news avoidance and other characteristics of a country's supply of news (e.g., PSBs, commercial media, variety of news sources)?

Data and Methods

In order to analyze news use patterns across a range of country contexts, we drew on a combination of several different sources of data spanning multiple continents and political information environments. In this section, we describe the main source of survey data used as well as secondary data sources gathered and the methods used to examine the questions above.

Digital News Report Data and Dependent Variable

We draw primarily on the 2017 Digital News Report (DNR), a large-scale cross-country survey of news audiences conducted annually by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Newman et al. 2017). This online survey, fielded by YouGov, assesses attitudes and behaviors involving news and journalism, with a specific focus on digital media. The survey is conducted on quota-based representative samples of approximately 2000 respondents in each of the countries included in the DNR (N = 67,245; see Figure 1 for a list of the countries).[3]

[3] Singapore was removed from the sample because the variable measuring ideological strength is not comparable. A more detailed description of the sample and how country-level populations vary according to variables used in this study is provided in the supplementary online appendix.

This study's dependent variable is derived from a question in the 2017 DNR, which asked whether respondents found themselves "actively trying to avoid the news these days." Responses were coded on a 0-to-3 scale corresponding to "Never," "Occasionally," "Sometimes," and "Often." Country-level variation in responses to this question were stark: in Greece and Turkey, 57% of respondents said they sometimes or often avoided the news, whereas rates of avoidance were far lower in countries such as Finland (18%), Denmark (14%), and Japan (6%). Although "news" is not defined in the prompt, in an earlier question that asks respondents to report how often they "typically" access news, the questionnaire does define news as "national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online)." The two measures of accessing news and avoiding it are negatively correlated but only weakly so (r = -0.11), which suggests that the active avoidance item captures a phenomenon related to but distinct from news consumption generally.[4] Although we would prefer to operationalize news avoidance behaviors using a more extensive battery of questions, which would add greater depth to our understanding of how respondents interpret the word "actively" here, we sacrifice depth in favor of breadth given the survey's reach across a wider range of news environments than is ordinarily captured in most prior cross-country comparative media research.

[Figure 1 About Here]

Respondent-level Measures

[4] Supplementary online appendices include a model where this variable is included as a separate control (Table B-2) but the inclusion of this variable did not substantively change interpretation of any other variable. We exclude it here for parsimony.

We selected individual-level variables from the DNR survey that previous research on patterns of news use and avoidance indicated were likely to be associated with systematic audience behaviors. These measures are summarized in Table 1 and include both demographics (age, gender, and educational attainment) and political attitudes (including self-placement on a left-right ideological scale, self-reported perceptions of internal political efficacy and trust in news). In light of previous research which has emphasized the importance of media genre preferences (Prior 2007) and self-reported interest in politics (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata 2013; Strömbäck and Shehata 2019), we constructed a variable for relative news genre preferences that serves as a proxy for both variables given that relative preferences for entertainment and interest in politics were not asked about on the DNR survey. This measure of news interest was created by dividing average interest in "soft" news topics such as entertainment and celebrity news by average interest in "hard" news topics such as political or international news.[5] Lastly, we included two measures for whether individuals used social media as a source for news. One captured whether respondents said social media was one of the ways they came across news stories during the previous week; slightly more than half ($m = 0.54$) said they had. The other captured whether individuals said social media was the "main" way they came across news.

[Table 1 About Here]

[5] Soft news topics included: "Entertainment and celebrity news," "Lifestyle news (e.g., food, fashion, travel, cooking, wellness)," "Health and education news", "Arts and culture news," "Sports news," and "Weird news (e.g. funny, bizarre, quirky)." Hard news topics included: "International news," "Political news," "News about my region, city, or town," and "Business and economic news."

Country-level Measures

To evaluate the degree to which country-level factors may influence news avoidance over and beyond variation due to individual-level characteristics, we also pulled together additional data about the political information environments in which respondents were situated. Specifically, we examined three main dimensions: (1) levels of press freedom, (2) levels of political freedom and stability, and (3) characteristics of the information environment and media landscape. While some of these measures could be estimated using country averages in the DNR data, most measures required that we gather secondary data from a range of additional organizations. We summarize these additional sources below in Table 2.

[Table 2 About Here]

As no single measure captures all dimensions of each category, we gathered multiple measures in order to better triangulate on the relevant characteristics. By drawing on a range of different sources, we hope to better approximate the relevant country-level constructs. For levels of press freedom, we used an index of press freedom published by Reporters Sans Frontières ("World Press Freedom Index" 2018), a composite measure of media independence based on two questions from the DNR (Newman et al 2017) (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$), and an index published by the World Bank concerning levels of free expression and other matters pertaining the ability of citizens to voice their concerns in the public sphere (Kaufmann and Kraay 2019). As the three measures are highly correlated with each other, we also averaged across the three measures to produce a composite press freedom variable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$).

For political freedom, we used an index of democratization published by the Economist Intelligence Unit ("Democracy Index" 2018), a World Bank measure of countries' enforcement of laws, property rights, and rates of crime and violence (Kaufmann and Kraay 2019), an index of

country-level corruption levels published by Transparency International ("Corruption Perceptions Index" 2018), and a World Bank measure of political stability (Kaufmann and Kraay 2019). Again we created a composite variable for political freedom and stability by averaging across the four country-level variables (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$).

Lastly, we measured the political information environment using three additional country-level measures: the market share of PSBs ("TV-AUD Public service audience market share" 2015), newspaper reach as measured by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers ("World Press Trends Report" 2014), and a measure of the variety of the media environment by taking the mean number of news brands DNR respondents in each country said they used online or offline during the previous week (Newman et al 2017). For comparability across models, we standardized all country-level variables to a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. Correlations between country-level variables are reported in the supplementary online appendix (Table A-3).

Inferential Limitations

The DNR data is unique in its breadth; however, the survey itself presents some limitations for purposes of this study. As YouGov recruited samples deemed to be broadly representative of the population of internet users in each country, this means that in countries where internet penetration is more limited (e.g., Bulgaria, Mexico, and Brazil) our results may not necessarily apply to the broader populations of each country. Nonetheless, as internet use may well be correlated with country-level variables of interest, excluding respondents from countries with low internet use would significantly reduce variation at the country-level, thereby limiting our ability to assess the importance of some country-level characteristics. Therefore, we include all 35 countries in the 2017 DNR but do so with an important caveat about the nature of the population represented in our data: our results pertain to the *online* population across these countries. We do not have a

strong theoretical view about why the relationship between the factors we study and patterns of news avoidance would differ substantially among offline populations.

Additionally, as the DNR survey seeks to measure news audiences, the Reuters Institute regularly screens out individuals who say they regularly access news less frequently than once a month. These extreme news avoiders, which range from as little as 1-2% in the Nordic countries to 7% in the US and UK, are thus excluded from the analysis in this study. As this constitutes a relatively small percentage of the sample in each country, our results are not likely to differ very much should such individuals have been included. Moreover, by examining active news avoidance *behaviors* among people who otherwise say they occasionally or habitually consume news, our approach here improves upon past studies of news avoidance, which categorize individuals as avoiders or non-avoiders when in fact, as we show, many news users engage in avoidance behaviors some of the time.

Modeling Strategy

To simultaneously assess the factors that predict respondents' frequency of news avoidance, we estimated several multilevel regression models. This approach also allows us to consider the relative importance of various explanations for news avoidance. To examine RQ1, we model individual-level factors separately for each country as well as in a multilevel model allowing for random intercepts by country. We test for both the direction and magnitude of the coefficients of the fixed effects as well as the significance of the variation explained by these individual-level factors. Next, to examine RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4, we estimate additional models which include country-level covariates along with the individual-level fixed effects.

We conduct the analysis below in an iterative fashion, fitting models that include a single country-level factor and then slowly adding additional country-level factors in order to assess the

relative importance of each variable. As many of the country-level variables are closely correlated with each other, we do not fit a single model with all variables.

Results

We find significant relationships between both individual-level and country-level factors in explaining variation in rates of active avoidance of the news. Chief among these factors, we find that trust in the news and media genre preferences are among the strongest predictors of active news avoidance at the individual-level while a lack of press freedom and political freedom and stability are likewise positively correlated with avoidance, accounting for variation related to other characteristics of the political media environment.

RQ1: Role of Individual-level Factors

First, we calculate the Interclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC), a statistic which measures how much of the total variance is explained by group level predictors, in this case country-level differences. In a null multilevel model containing only random intercepts by country (Model 1 in Table B-1 in Appendix B), we find that the ICC is 7.6%, indicating that country-level differences explain a modest amount of variance in avoidance between countries.[6]

Next, to assess RQ1, we estimated an additional multilevel model with random intercepts by country including covariates for individual-level factors related to news avoidance (Model 1A). We find that all but one such variable is statistically significant. As an illustration of how these individual effects vary by country, in Figure 2 we plot the relationship between these variables and predicted levels of avoidance in both this pooled model and separate linear models estimated for each country.

[6] In comparison, Tsfati and Ariely (2014) found country-level intercepts explained 13% of the variance in trust in news across a more diverse set of countries.

[Figure 2 About Here]

At the individual-level, we find that younger people (b = -.003, p < .001) and women (b = .098, p < .001) systematically avoid news more frequently, although education has no consistent relationship with avoidance, which suggests media resistance cuts across socioeconomics. News avoidance is however predicted by ideology (b = -0.032, p < .001) with right-leaning individuals somewhat less likely to avoid news than those on the left. The magnitude of the effect for ideology (d = -0.09) was slightly smaller than that of internal efficacy (d = -0.12), which was also negatively associated with news avoidance.[7] The two variables measuring social media use were significantly related to avoidance but in opposite directions. People who used social media for news were somewhat less likely to actively avoid news (b = -0.095, p < .001) although people who relied on social media as their main source of news were significantly more likely to say they were actively avoiding news (b = 0.150, p < .001).

The most predictive individual-level variables were those pertaining to perceptions about available media choices. Trust in news was inversely related to avoidance (b = -0.127, p < .001) whereas people who reported a preference for soft over hard news topics, which likely captures political interest as well, were significantly more likely to avoid news (b = 0.137, p < .001). The marginal effects of these two variables were -0.26 and 0.25, respectively, larger than any other individual-level factor.

When these individual-level variables were included in the model (Table B-1), the ICC fell slightly to 7.3%. This finding suggests that country-level effects continue to explain almost as much

[7] Marginal effects compare predicted levels of avoidance for one standard deviation above and below a variable's mean, holding all other variables constant.

of the variation in avoidance when we account for individual level factors as when we do not. In other words, although many individual-level factors predict rates of news avoidance across countries, most country-level differences remain unexplained.

RQ2: Role of Press Freedom at Country-Level

In order to assess possible components of the unexplained country-level variance, we estimated additional multilevel models containing both individual-level controls and separate country-level factors. We start with press freedom, which we operationalized using separate indices as well as using a composite variable which averaged across the three measures. Due to concerns about multicollinearity (see Table A-3 in the appendix), we examined each of these variables separately (Models 2A to 2D in the appendix) and in Figure 3 we plot the relevant coefficients alongside each other. Results were generally consistent across measures, deviating minimally from the composite average ($b = -0.131$, $p < 0.001$). Countries with higher levels of press freedom generally exhibited lower rates of news avoidance. Comparing the remaining country-level variance explained in these models to the models in the previous section, we find that the addition of these country-level variables reduces the variance explained by country-level intercepts by approximately a fourth to 5.6%.

[Figure 3 About Here]

RQ3: Role of Political Freedom and Stability at Country-Level

Similar to press freedom, we measured how levels of political freedom and stability are correlated to news avoidance. All of our indicators of political freedom and stability were also consistently negatively associated with news avoidance (Models 3A to 3E). Countries with lower levels of political freedom and/or lower rates of stability exhibited higher levels of news avoidance,

all else equal. Coefficients from these models, plotted in Figure 4, were similar in size to models containing press freedom measures in the previous section.

[Figure 4 About Here]

Averaging across these measures, the composite political freedom/stability measure, which we tested in separate models first by itself (3E) and then in a model combined with the composite measure of press freedom. While the composite freedom/stability measure was significantly and inversely related to news avoidance (b = -0.129, p <0.001), neither variable was significant in a combined model due to a high degree of multicollinearity.[8] Together the two variables were jointly significant ($X^2_{[2]} = 11.5$, $p < 0.01$).

RQ4: Role of Political Information Environment at Country-Level

The last research question looked at the role of the political information environment. We examined the effects of the market share of PSBs, newspapers' reach within countries, and the degree of variety in the media environment (as measured by the average number of news brands named as sources by respondents in each country). Once again, we found that all the country-level variables for the political information environment explained some variation in news avoidance; however, effects dissipated when models included additional country-level covariates for press freedom or political freedom and stability. In standalone models, the higher the market share of PSBs in a country (b = -0.060, p < .05) or the wider the reach of newspapers (b = -0.082, p < .10), the less frequently respondents avoided the news but only at borderline levels of statistical significance. In the other direction, the greater the number of news sources named in each country, the higher the rate of news avoidance (b = 0.101, p < .05), which suggests that variety and choice

[8] The two composite measures are very highly correlated ($r = 0.94$).

may contribute to increased tendencies to avoid political information altogether. However, none of the three information environment variables were significant in models that also included press freedom or political freedom and stability. Coefficients from these multiple specifications are plotted in Figure 5.

[Figure 5 About Here]

Discussion

Our analysis weighs the effects of individual- and country-level factors on rates of news avoidance across a comparative sample of more than 67,000 respondents across 35 countries. We highlight two major contributions from our findings. First, results confirm that news avoidance can be partly explained by respondent-level characteristics that are fairly consistent across a wide range of countries. Younger individuals, women, people on the left, and those with lower levels of internal efficacy or trust in news were significantly more likely to say they were actively avoiding news at higher rates. Education was not significantly related to levels of avoidance, but a preference for soft news over hard news was among the most predictive, likely reflecting the importance of political interest as shown by previous studies (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata 2013; Strömbäck and Shehata 2019).

The two variables measuring social media use also explained some news avoidance, pointing to the importance of factors that transcend both the individual and country context. That said, effects of social media variables were relatively small and effectively canceled each other out. Using social media for news were associated with a modest reduction in avoidance, but relying on it as the main source for news was correlated with more avoidance. It is certainly possible that those who say they use social media as their main source for news do so precisely because they are actively avoiding conventional sources of news.

Second, individual-level variables leave the vast majority of cross-national variation unexplained—compelling evidence of the importance of what we call "cultures of news consumption." The second, third, and fourth parts of our analysis demonstrate how particular aspects of these news cultures—especially those related to levels of press freedom and political freedom and stability—account for roughly a quarter of the country-level variation unexplained by individual-level variables alone. In less free and stable countries, the news may be perceived as less accurate and therefore less valuable, leading many to avoid it. These effects persist even after controlling for differences in media trust, efficacy, and preferences for soft versus hard news topics—variables which relate to the country-level context of the media environments which were among the most powerful individual-level predictors of avoidance. We also show that characteristics of the political information environment emphasized in previous literature such as support for PSBs or the reach of domestic newspapers may be somewhat less important to explaining cross-country differences than a country's specific political conditions.

We do not suggest that the measures included in our study exhaust all dimensions of country-level cultures of news consumption. These cultures are likely shaped by other difficult-to-measure contextual factors such as socialization (Edgerly et al 2017), the impact of political events, or even the degree to which people in particular cultures tend to talk openly about and discuss the news and conceive of themselves as active participants in democratic life (Almond and Verba 1963). Some country-level effects may also be driven by differences in survey response styles internationally (e.g., Harzing 2006). As many country-level factors co-vary closely with one another, it may be impossible to separate out the independent effects of any single component such as levels of press or political freedoms. Our sample also excludes the most extreme cases of unstable and despotic regimes, which means our findings about the relative importance of press and

political freedom may not be generalizable to places where civil liberties and the rule of law have been overwhelmingly curtailed which may cause people to seek out information wherever they can. Lastly, as our analysis involves a single survey and just one aspect of people's media habits, we are unable to identify to what degree *changes* to a country's political or press freedoms over time or changes in media modes used might drive rates of avoidance in ways that may differ from country to country.

However, the robust nature of our findings across model specifications are striking. Limitations notwithstanding, we found evidence across various ways of operationalizing levels of press and political freedom that such factors significantly shape how often people avoid the news above and beyond individual-level differences. These findings should prompt a reconsideration of what is captured by conventional measures of news preferences and reported audience behaviors when citizens situated in different cultures of news consumption may be faced with fundamentally different media choices. Taken together, these results suggest that while demographic characteristics, resources, and political attitudes may shape media habits in similar ways within countries, many people's news habits quite sensibly depend on the news available to them, and in some cases they may have good reason to view such sources as deficient or untrustworthy. While existing work has often emphasized the importance of media systems with strong PSBs, the perceived character of those institutions, rather than their mere existence, may ultimately be most consequential. Rates of news avoidance may grow so long as people view the available supply of news as lacking.

Overall, these findings have distinct implications for public opinion research, given well-established relationships between news consumption and opinion formation. On the one hand, since news avoidance is negatively correlated with rates of news consumption, some active avoidance

could be cause for alarm. In countries with fewer political and press freedoms, lower levels of trust in news or abundant entertainment options, the divide between those who are attentive to current affairs and those who frequently avoid news may grow larger. This gap could have effects on political participation, voting, and political polarization. In the long run, as freedoms have decreased in many countries during the past decade (Freedom House 2018), and as options for entertainment consumption via streaming services are growing around the world, these trends may be accelerated. On the other hand, avoidance is not the pure inverse of attention; some avoidance may be a healthy response to particularly challenging political or media environments. We argue that the normative question of what to make of varying rates of news avoidance depends on the quality of a country's information environment. The degree to which people have access to reliable, independent political information varies, and therefore news audience behaviors must be assessed with consideration of the country-level context in which consumption occurs.

This analysis points the way toward future research concerning not only news avoidance but variation in news interest across time and countries. As our analysis is based on survey self-reports concerning active efforts to avoid news, future studies might examine rates of news use and avoidance using other modes and methods, including experiments and passive tracking data, which may help to identify the degree to which survey responses about avoidance capture expressive attitudes versus actual behaviors. Furthermore, our measure of active news avoidance does not specify what types of news are being avoided. It would be useful to know, for example, the degree to which people who use news frequently and also say they are frequently avoiding it are referring mainly to counter-attitudinal sources. Future studies should consider variation in the motives people offer for avoiding the news and how these motives relate to trust in the media and/or political institutions.

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List of Figures

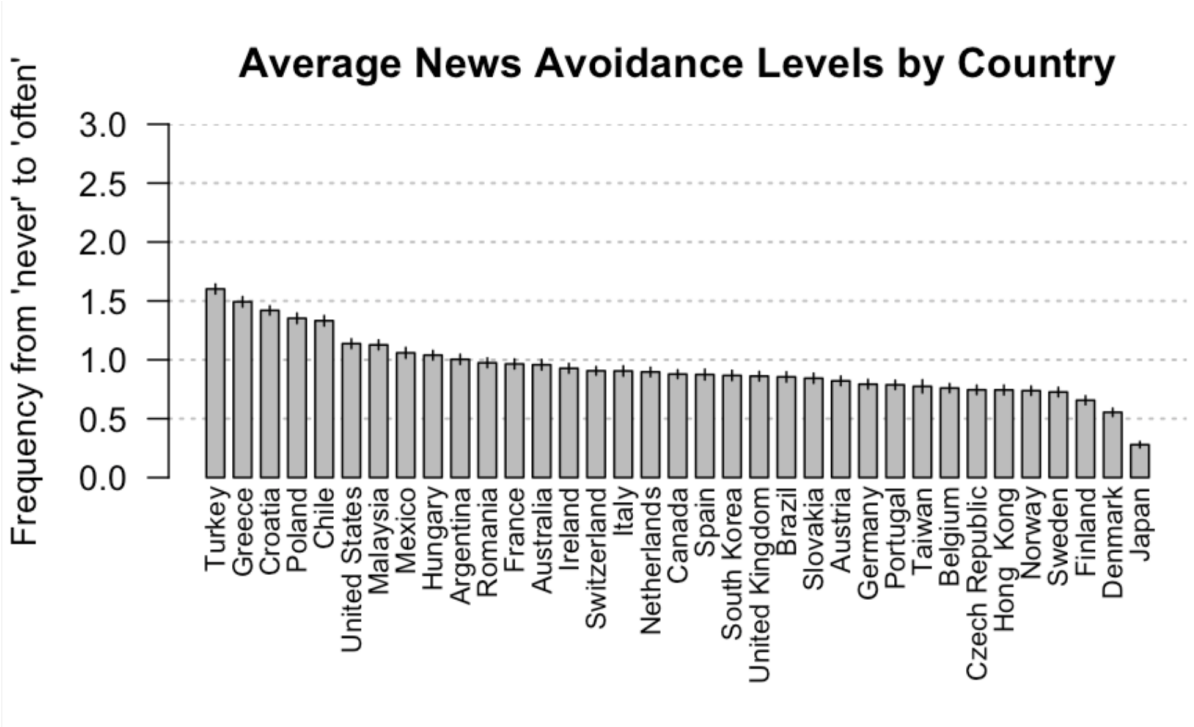


Figure 1. Average levels of news avoidance in each sampled country.

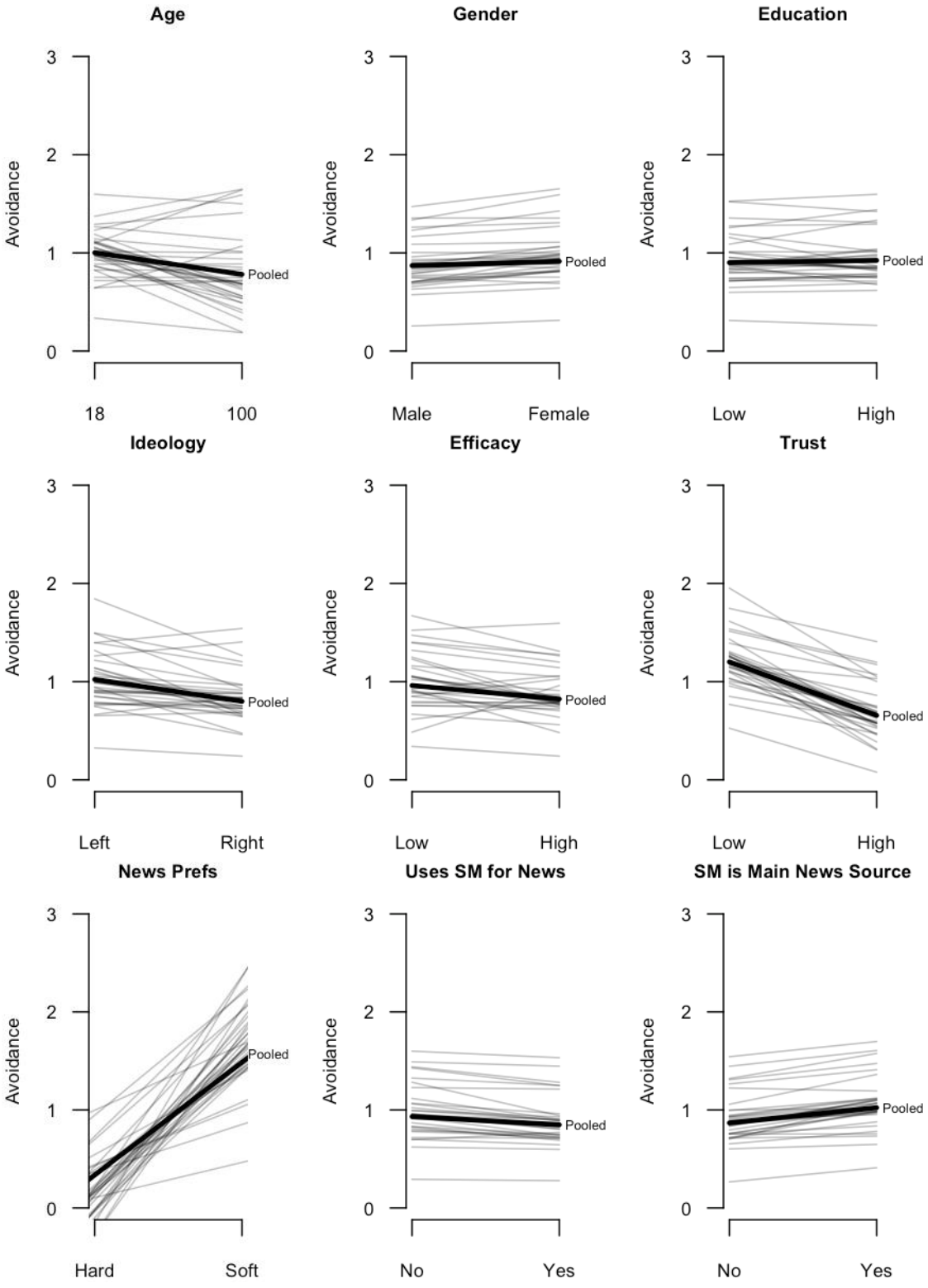

Age
Gender
Education
Avoidance
Pooled
18
100
Male
Female
Low
High
Ideology
Efficacy
Trust
Left
Right
News Prefs
Uses SM for News
SM is Main News Source
Hard
Soft
No
Yes

Figure 2. Effects of individual-level characteristics on news avoidance by country, holding other variables at mean levels. Gray lines depict linear models for each country; dark black lines depict multilevel models. Full output provided in the supplementary online appendices (Table B-1). "High" and "low" levels for each variable refer to one standard deviation above and below the mean value in the sample.

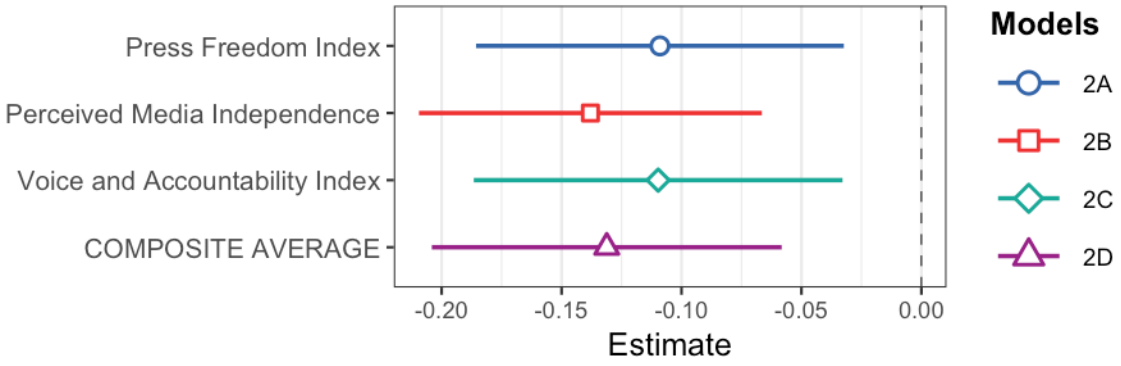


Figure 3. Standardized effects of press freedom on news avoidance from multilevel models. Coefficients from separate models depicted with 95% confidence intervals. All models include individual-level controls. Full output in the supplementary online appendices (Table B-3).

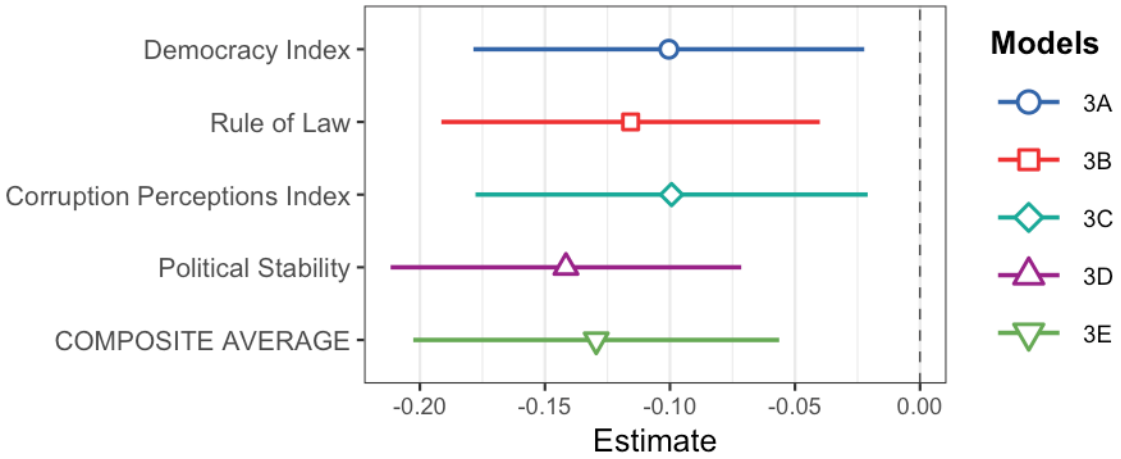
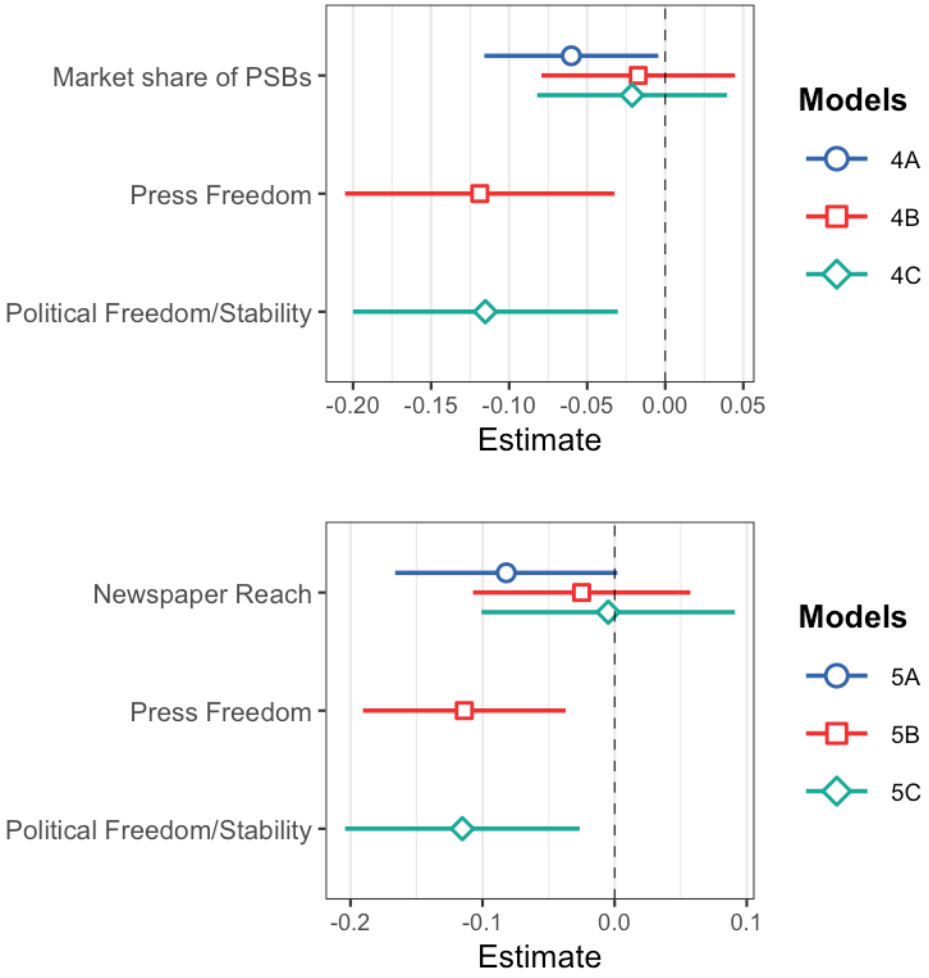


Figure 4. Effects of political freedom and stability on news avoidance. Coefficients from separate multilevel models depicted with 95% confidence intervals. All models include individual control variables. Full output in supplementary online appendices (Table B-4).



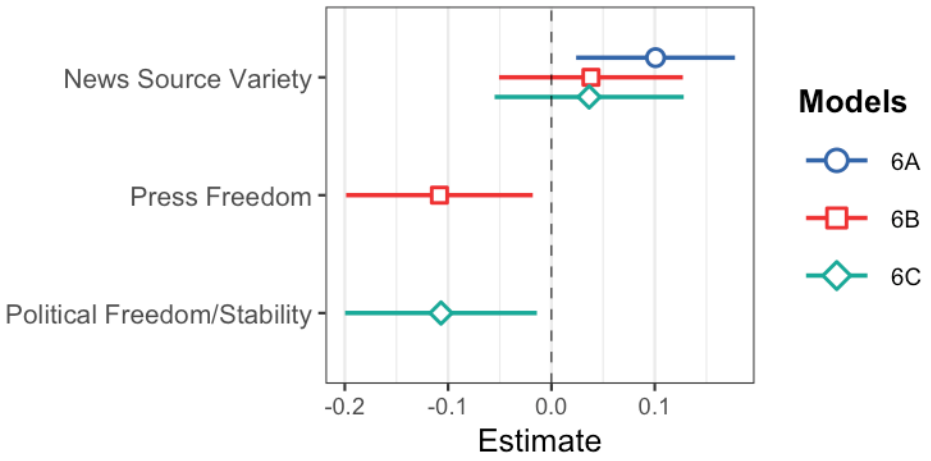


Figure 5. Effects of political information environment variables on news avoidance from multilevel regression models. Coefficients from separate models depicted with 95% confidence intervals. All models include individual-level control variables. Outputs for referenced models provided in the supplementary online appendices (Tables B-5, B-6 and B-7, respectively).

Table 1. Description of Respondent-Level Measures

Category	**Variable**	**Description**
Demographics	Age	Age of survey respondents
	Gender	Indicator (1 = Female, 0 = Male)
	Education	Ordinal scale (from 1 to 5) for highest level of education achieved, corresponding to "did not complete secondary/high school" through "Masters or Doctoral degree"
Political attitudes	Ideology	Self-reported placement on a left-right scale (from -3 to 3) corresponding to slightly, somewhat, or strongly right (left). Respondents reporting "center" or "don't know" are coded as 0.
	Internal political efficacy	Composite scale (from 2 to 10) combining responses to "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country" and "I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics." (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$)
	Trust in news	Ordinal scale (from 1 to 5) of responses to the statement: "I think you can trust most news most of the time"
Genre preferences	Relative preferences for "soft" versus "hard" new categories	Ratio (logged and standardized) of average interest in news about soft news topics (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.68$) divided by average interest in hard news topics (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.73$). Interest in each type of news was measured on a 1-5 scale.
Social Media Use	Uses social media for news	Indicator coded as 1 or 0 for whether respondents said during the previous week they had "used social media and came across news that way (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)."
	Uses social media as main source of news	Indicator coded as 1 or 0 for whether respondents selected "used social media and came across news that way (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)" as the "main" way they "came across news in the last week."

Table 2. Description of Country-Level Variables

Category	**Variable**	**Description**	**Source**	***N***
Press freedom	Press freedom index	Freedom available to journalists as reported in expert surveys.	RSF	35
	Media independence	Country-level mean of respondents' perceptions of how independent the news media is from undue business and governmental influence	DNR	35
	Voice and accountability index	Composite measure of levels of freedom of expression, freedom of association, free press, and how well citizens are able to participate in selecting their government.	WGI	35
Political freedom	Democracy index	Weighted average of experts' assessments on 60 indicators concerning electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture.	EIU	35
	Rule of Law	Composite measure of quality of contract enforcement, property rights, police, and courts, as well as likelihood of crime and violence.	WGI	35
	Corruption Perceptions Index	Measure of perceived levels of public sector corruption according to experts and businesspeople.	TI	35
	Political Stability	Composite measure of perceptions of the likelihood of political instability and/or politically-motivated violence, including terrorism.	WGI	35
Info environment	Market share of PSBs	Daily audience market share of public radio and television.	EAO	35
	Newspaper reach	Combined circulation of newspapers (2014) as a percentage of the country's overall population.	WPT	24
	Variety in media environment	Country-level mean number of news brands respondents said they used online or offline during the previous week	DNR	35

Notes: More details about each measure are provided in the original sources referenced in the text. DNR refers to the Digital News Report. EAO refers to the European Audiovisual Observatory. EIU refers to the Economist Intelligence Unit; RSF refers to Reporters Sans Frontières. TI refers to Transparency International. WGI refers to the Worldwide Governance Indicators published by the World Bank. WPT refers to the World Press Trends published by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers.

Appendix A: Tables of Descriptive Data

Table A-1. Descriptive Data for Respondent-Level Measures

Variable	**Globally**	**Range of Means by Country**
Frequency of actively avoiding news [0, 3] where 0 = "never"	M = 0.94 (SD = 0.96)	Min = 0.28, Max = 1.60
Age (in years)	M = 45.6 (SD = 15.6)	Min = 39.3, Max = 49.6
Gender (% female)	51.1	Min = 44.8, Max = 55.6
Education [1, 5] where 5 = postgraduate degree	M = 3.14 (SD = 1.18)	Min = 2.00, Max = 3.60
Ideology [-3, 3] where 3 = "very rightwing"	M = -0.1 (SD = 1.3)	Min = -0.52, Max = 0.19
Internal political efficacy [2, 10] where 10 = high	M = 6.45 (SD = 1.99)	Min = 5.51, Max = 7.42
Trust in news [1, 5] where 5 = high	M = 3.14 (SD = 1.01)	Min = 2.76, Max = 3.51
Rel. preference for soft over hard news [-6.0, 5.79]	M = 0 (SD = 1)	Min = -0.44, Max = 0.51
Uses social media for news (1 = "yes")	M = 0.54 (SD = 0.50)	Min = 0.29, Max = 0.75
Uses SM as main news source (1 = "yes")	M = 0.14 (SD = 0.34)	Min = 0.05, Max = 0.28
Frequency of news use [-3.4, 1.55]	M = 0 (SD = 1)	Min = -0.36, Max = 0.64

Table A-2. Descriptive Data for Country-Level Measures

Category	**Variable**	**Range of Means by Country**
Press Freedom	Press Freedom Index	Min = -2.53, Max = 1.32
	Media Independence	Min = -2.29, Max = 1.46
	Voice and Accountability Index	Min = -2.66, Max = 1.20
	COMPOSITE AVERAGE	Min = -2.28, Max = 1.47
Political Freedom/Stability	Democracy Index	Min = -3.10, Max = 0.86
	Rule of Law	Min = -2.22, Max = 1.22
	Corruption Perceptions Index	Min = -2.03, Max = 1.64
	Political Stability	Min = -3.97, Max = 1.26
	COMPOSITE AVERAGE	Min = -2.97, Max = 1.19
Political Info Environment	Market share of PSBs	Min = -2.21, Max = 1.51
	Newspaper reach	Min = -2.10, Max = 1.41
	Variety of media environment	Min = -2.05, Max = 2.24

Note: Country-level variables standardized globally (Mean = 0, SD = 1).

Table A-3. Correlations Between Country-level Variables

	Press Fdm Index	Media Indy	Voice & Acct. Index	***PRESS FDM COMP***	Dem Index	Rule of Law	Cptn Pcpt Index	Pol Stab	**POL FDM COMP**	Mkt Share PSBs	Newspaper Reach[1]
Press Freedom Index											
Media Independence	0.63										
Voice and Accountability Index	0.94	0.65									
PRESS FREEDOM COMPOSITE	*0.94*	0.83	0.95								
Democracy Index	0.89	0.49	0.95	0.85							
Rule of Law	0.76	0.74	0.78	0.83	0.62						
Corruption Perceptions Index	0.75	0.83	0.78	0.86	0.61	0.94					
Political Stability	0.80	0.54	0.76	0.77	0.74	0.71	0.66				
POLITICAL FREEDOM COMPOSITE	*0.90*	0.73	0.92	0.94	0.84	0.92	0.91	0.88			
Market share of PSBs	0.74	0.48	0.72	0.71	0.66	0.58	0.58	0.55	0.67		
Newspaper reach[1]	0.47	0.38	0.43	0.46	0.26	0.77	0.70	0.49	0.62	0.36	
Variety of media environment	-0.46	-0.59	-0.58	-0.60	-0.49	-0.65	-0.66	-0.44	-0.63	-0.32	-0.50

Note: [1] Correlations with newspaper reach were limited to a subset of countries for which data was available (N = 24).

Appendix B: Model Output

Table B-1. Multilevel regression model of news avoidance as a function of individual-level factors.

Variable	Model 1	Model 1A	Marginal Effect (M1A)
Age	—	-0.003***	-0.09
		(0.000)	
Female	—	0.098***	0.09
		(0.007)	
Education	—	0.002	0.02
		(0.003)	
Ideology	—	-0.032***	-0.09
		(0.003)	
Internal Efficacy	—	-0.016***	-0.12
		(0.002)	
Trust in News	—	-0.127***	-0.26
		(0.004)	
Relative Genre Preferences	—	0.137***	0.25
		(0.004)	
Uses Social Media for News	—	-0.095***	-0.06
		(0.008)	
Uses SM as Main News Source	—	0.150***	0.06
		(0.011)	
(Intercept)	0.927***	1.533***	
	(0.045)	(0.048)	
Countries (N)	35	35	
Level 2 variance (s.d.)	0.070	0.063	
	(0.26)	(0.25)	
Residual variance (s.d.)	0.851	0.795	
	(0.92)	(0.89)	

Intraclass correlation coefficient	7.6%	7.3%
Obs (N)	67,245	67,245

Note: Regression output for multilevel linear model with standard errors in parentheses. Marginal effects calculated using simulated predicted levels of avoidance while varying each variable from one standard deviation below its mean to one standard deviation above its mean, or from 0 to 1 for indicator variables, holding all other variables at their mean values, including the country-level intercept. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Table B-2. Multilevel regression model of news avoidance as a function of individual-level factors (including frequency of news use).

Variable	**Model 1B**
Age	-0.003***
	(0.000)
Female	0.087***
	(0.007)
Education	-0.005
	(0.003)
Ideology	-0.033***
	(0.003)
Internal Efficacy	-0.011***
	(0.002)
Trust in News	-0.124***
	(0.004)
Relative Genre Preferences	0.132***
	(0.004)
Uses Social Media for News	-0.08***
	(0.008)
Uses SM as Main News Source	0.136***
	(0.011)
Frequency of News Use	-0.065***
	(0.004)
(Intercept)	1.480***
	(0.048)
Countries (N)	35
Level 2 variance (s.d.)	0.063
	(0.25)
Residual variance (s.d.)	0.791
	(0.89)
Intraclass correlation coefficient	7.4%
Obs (N)	66,801

Note: Regression output for multilevel linear model with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Table B-3. Multilevel regression models of news avoidance as a function of press freedom.

	Model 2A	**Model 2B**	**Model 2C**	**Model 2D**
Press Freedom Index	-0.109**	—	—	—
	(0.039)			
Media Independence	—	-0.138***	—	—
		(0.036)		
Voice and Accountability Index	—	—	-0.110**	—
			(0.039)	
Composite Press Freedom Variable	—	—	—	-0.131***
				(0.037)
Countries (N)	35	35	35	35
Level 2 variance (s.d.)	0.053	0.045	0.053	0.047
	(0.230)	(0.213)	(0.229)	(0.217)
Residual variance (s.d.)	0.795	0.795	0.795	0.795
	(0.892)	(0.892)	(0.892)	(0.892)
Intraclass correlation coefficient	6.3%	5.4%	6.3%	5.6%
Level 1 controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Obs (N)	67,245	67,245	67,245	67,245

Notes: Coefficient estimates from separate multilevel models containing country-level factors and individual-level control variables included in Table B-1. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Table B-4. Multilevel regression models of news avoidance as a function of political freedom.

	Model 3A	**Model 3B**	**Model 3C**	**Model 3D**	**Model 3E**	**Model 3F**
Democracy Index	-0.100* (0.040)	—	—	—	—	—
Rule of Law	—	-0.116** (0.039)	—	—	—	—
Control of Corruption	—	—	-0.099* (0.040)	—	—	—
Political Stability	—	—	—	-0.142*** (0.036)	—	—
Composite Freedom/Stability Variable	—	—	—	—	-0.129*** (0.037)	-0.056 (0.106)
Composite Press Freedom Variable	—	—	—	—	—	-0.079 (0.106)
Countries (N)	35	35	35	35	35	35
Level 2 variance (s.d.)	0.054 (0.233)	0.051 (0.226)	0.055 (0.234)	0.044 (0.210)	0.048 (0.218)	0.048 (0.220)
Residual variance (s.d.)	0.795 (0.892)	0.795 (0.892)	0.795 (0.892)	0.795 (0.892)	0.795 (0.892)	0.795 (0.892)
Intraclass correlation coefficient	6.4%	6%	6.5%	5.3%	5.7%	5.7%
Level 1 controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Obs (N)	67,245	67,245	67,245	67,245	67,245	67,245

Notes: Coefficient estimates from separate multilevel models containing country-level factors and individual-level control variables included in Table B-1. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Table B-5. Multilevel regression models of news avoidance as a function of the political information environment (Market share of PSBs).

	Model 4A	**Model 4B**	**Model 4C**
Market share of PSBs	-0.060*	-0.017	-0.021
	(0.028)	(0.032)	(0.031)
Composite Press Freedom	—	-0.118**	—
		(0.044)	
Composite Political Freedom/Stability	—	—	-0.115**
			(0.043)
Countries (N)	35	35	35
Level 2 variance (s.d.)	0.059	0.049	0.049
	(0.243)	(0.220)	(0.222)
Residual variance (s.d.)	0.795	0.795	0.795
	(0.892)	(0.892)	(0.892)
Intraclass correlation coefficient	6.9%	5.8%	5.8%
Level 1 controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Obs (N)	67,245	67,245	67,245

Notes: Coefficient estimates from separate multilevel models containing country-level factors and individual-level control variables included in Table 3. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Table B-6. Multilevel regression models of news avoidance as a function of the political information environment (Reach of newspapers).

	Model 5A	**Model 5B**	**Model 5C**
Newspaper reach	-0.082[#]	-0.025	-0.005
	(0.043)	(0.042)	(0.049)
Composite Press Freedom	—	-0.114[**]	—
		(0.039)	
Composite Political Freedom/Stability	—	—	-0.115[*]
			(0.045)
Countries (N)	24	24	24
Level 2 variance (s.d.)	0.044	0.033	0.035
	(0.210)	(0.181)	(0.188)
Residual variance (s.d.)	0.806	0.806	0.806
	(0.898)	(0.898)	(0.898)
Intraclass correlation coefficient	5.2%	3.9%	4.2%
Level 1 controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Obs (N)	45,791	45,791	45,791

Notes: Coefficient estimates from separate multilevel models containing country-level factors and individual-level control variables included in Table 3. [#] $p < .10$, *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

Table B-7. Multilevel regression models of news avoidance as a function of the political information environment (Variety of news sources used in each country).

	Model 5A	**Model 5B**	**Model 5C**
Variety of sources in media environment	0.101*	0.038	0.036
	(0.039)	(0.045)	(0.047)
Composite Press Freedom	—	-0.108*	—
		(0.046)	
Composite Political Freedom/Stability	—	—	-0.107*
			(0.047)
Countries (N)	35	35	35
Level 2 variance (s.d.)	0.054	0.048	0.048
	(0.233)	(0.218)	(0.220)
Residual variance (s.d.)	0.795	0.795	0.795
	(0.892)	(0.892)	(0.892)
Intraclass correlation coefficient	6.4%	5.7%	5.7%
Level 1 controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Obs (N)	67,245	67,245	67,245

Notes: Coefficient estimates from separate multilevel models containing country-level factors and individual-level control variables included in Table 3. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001