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Explaining the Gender Gap in News Avoidance: "News-Is-for-Men" Perceptions and the Burdens of Caretaking

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ABSTRACT

Even in wealthy post-industrial countries where equity between men and women has improved in recent years, women are still significantly more likely than men to say they avoid the news, a gender gap that has important implications for political participation. This article employs a qualitative, inductive approach to examine the how and why behind the gender gap in news consumption. Using in-depth interviews with 43 working- and middle-class individuals in the United Kingdom who say they rarely or never access conventional news sources, we find that decisions around when and whether to engage with news are (1) often viewed through a gendered lens, which we call "news-is-for-men" perceptions, and (2) subject to structural inequalities that shape people's everyday media consumption habits. These include both gender-based divisions of labor in the consumption of news within households and the physical and emotional burdens of caretaking responsibilities, which fall predominantly on women and can interfere with staying up-to-date with news. We argue that efforts to close the gender gap that fail to address both of these entrenched underlying causes are unlikely to succeed.

KEYWORDS

Gender; news avoidance; news consumption; gender socialization; caretaking; political participation; in-depth interviews; qualitative audience research

Scholars have documented extensively the underrepresentation of women in news production and content, but gender differences in news *consumption* have been studied only intermittently. Surveys show persistent disparities in the amount of news men and women say they use, what topics they prefer, and how they find and consume news (Fortunati, Deuze, and de Luca 2014; Pew 2008; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). Even in wealthy post-industrial countries where gender equity has markedly improved, women are still significantly more likely to say they avoid news, particularly concerning politics. In the United Kingdom, 18.6% of women said they spent no time on average "watching news or programmes about politics and current affairs" compared to 9.5% of men.[1] In the US, when respondents were asked how often they use any form of media "to get political news or information," the gap was smaller but still significant (9.7% compared to 6.9%) and largest among those without college degrees, suggesting that class divides may further magnify differences between the genders.[2] Though relatively small, these

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gaps in attention to news can have significant consequences for the shape and structure of political life, including knowledge about politics (Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006), political participation (Bakker and De Vreese 2011), and self-perceptions about the power to effect change (Moeller et al. 2014). If women, and lower-income women in particular, are less informed about political affairs than other groups, they may be poorly positioned to advocate for themselves politically.

This article builds on previous work in this area by employing a qualitative, inductive approach to examine *how* and *why* gender differences in news avoidance occur in daily life. Using in-depth interviews with 43 working- and middle-class individuals in the UK —mostly women—who say they rarely or never access conventional news, we find that decisions around when and whether to engage with news (1) are often viewed through a gendered lens, which we call "news-is-for-men" perceptions, and (2) are subject to structural inequalities that shape people's everyday media consumption habits. These structural inequalities include divisions of labor in the consumption of news within households, which are often gender-based, and the physical and emotional burdens of caretaking responsibilities, which also fall predominantly on women and can interfere with regular news use. We argue that efforts to close the gender gap that fail to address both of these entrenched underlying causes are unlikely to succeed.

Literature Review

Gender gaps in political participation and news use have most often been studied using surveys, which provide correlational analyses poorly suited to exploring causal claims. Alternatively, this qualitative study employs an inductive, bottom-up approach to understand the role played by gender in decisions around paying attention to news. The findings are informed by research across political communication, journalism studies, media studies, and feminist critical theory. As such, before detailing our methodology, we review these disparate works to link our findings to previous explanations other scholars have posited for why gender gaps in political engagement and news consumption may occur and persist. In synthesizing these works, we necessarily simplify these explanations into two broad categories—role socialization and structural inequalities.

Role Socialization

Scholars using a feminist lens to critique the public sphere (Fraser 1990), citizenship (Lister 2003), and political communication (Jamieson 1988) argue that the structures, concepts, and discourses that define political life are themselves products of a historically, and still deeply entrenched, divide between the public (masculine) and private (feminine) spheres. As such, through both formal and unwritten rules, mainstream politics often excludes not only women themselves, but also the concerns more relevant to them and forms of communication more accessible to them.

Empirical research complements, and sometimes engages directly, with that more explicitly feminist critique. Political scientists frequently conclude that gender disparities in various forms of political engagement, including political knowledge, interest, and participation can be explained at least in part by socialization processes that teach people to consider politics masculine terrain (Kittilson 2016; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997).

According to theories of socialization, gender roles and news consumption habits tend to originate in the home and are reinforced and modeled in school, among peers, and in the media (Edgerly et al. 2018; Lorber 2010). Even when girls and women resist notions that politics *per se* is oriented toward men, socialization processes may subtly teach them that the behaviors, pursuits, spaces, and interests traditionally associated with political engagement (such as political discussion or running for office), are not appropriate for them or expected of them (Fox and Lawless 2014; Hansen 1997; Morehouse Mendez and Osborn 2010; Polletta and Chen 2013).

Media itself is a powerful socializing agent, and journalism, like politics has long been dominated by men—what Gaye Tuchman (1978) famously dubbed women's "symbolic annihilation" from media. Scholars continue to find women are underrepresented in both news content (e.g. Jia et al. 2016; Shor et al. 2015) and production (e.g. Harp, Bachmann, and Loke 2014; North 2016). When women are represented in news they are still often portrayed as lower-status than men, if not in outright sexist ways (e.g. Ross et al. 2016; Sjøvaag and Pedersen 2018). Recent studies by the European Parliament (Sabbati, Prpic, and Shreeves 2018), the European Journalism Observatory (2018), and the Women's Media Center in the US (2017) have underscored what limited progress has been made to rectify gender imbalances in the media.

Resonant with the feminist critique of the political sphere discussed above, some scholars argue that gender inequalities in news coverage are difficult to address since the practices of journalism, and the very definition of what is newsworthy, were developed in male dominated institutions and are implicitly masculine (Ross and Carter 2011). Moreover, deeply entrenched journalistic norms demand heavy coverage of the most powerful circles in business, politics, and sports, which are still dominated by men in most countries (Shor et al. 2015).

Women's underrepresentation in politics and news thus both reflects and reinforces socialization patterns that may discourage women from political engagement. When women are underrepresented in politics, political journalism covers fewer women and more masculine issues, which in turn may signal to women that politics is not really for or about them (Banducci and Everitt 2012; Yoon and Lee 2013). Meanwhile, if women feel they have little political power and influence, they may feel they get little political benefit from becoming informed about politics by consuming news and are less likely to seek it out (Benesch 2012; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010; Nir 2017).

Both quantitative and qualitative research has found that men and women do approach news media differently, likely both a result of gender role socialization and a contributor to it. Women are more likely to turn to news in search of information (Lee 2013). They prefer reporting that is applicable to daily life, such as weather, health, and safety news, and are less interested than men in political news (Fortunati, Deuze, and de Luca 2014; Pew 2008; Poindexter 2008). Studies also find women more likely to say they want news to be enjoyable and presented in an entertaining way, but they actually enjoy it less, and are more likely to say they find it depressing (Poindexter 2008; Schroeder and Blach-Orsten 2016).

Although qualitative studies of gender and news audiences are rare, influential studies on current affairs programming in the UK (Morley 1980) and supermarket tabloids in the US (Bird 1992) concluded gender is one dimension of social identity that shapes how people make meaning of the media they consume. Early studies of household TV

viewing found women perceived news as part of a "man's world"—valuable to men and society as a whole, but distasteful and alien to women (Hobson 1980; Morley 1986). We call these attitudes toward the consumption of news "news-is-for-men" perceptions, a theme we expand upon below. Given the many changes in gender relations and the news environment since these earlier studies, it is logical to ask to what degree these attitudes persist.

Structural Inequalities

An alternative explanation for the gender gap in news consumption—which may complement "news-is-for-men" perceptions—is that women are structurally disadvantaged in ways that make consuming news more costly. Historically, women have had unequal access to resources that make some forms of political participation possible and appealing, especially formal education and experiences that provide tools that enable civic action (Kittilson 2016; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). If women are less educated generally and specifically about political matters, the "cognitive costs" of deciphering and paying attention to political news may be higher (Benesch 2012). This resource gap may even persist in developed countries where women attend college and work in numbers equaling or surpassing men, but where the education they receive and/or the statuses of their jobs are still qualitatively unequal (Hansen 1997; Wen, Xiaoming, and George 2013).

Time is one resource shown to be particularly important for political engagement, and it may also shape news consumption. In many households, childcare responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately on women, as does unpaid household work in general (Altintas and Sullivan 2016; OECD 2014). Those patterns persist even when both partners work outside the home, saddling women with the dual burden sociologist Arlie Hochschild dubbed the "second shift" (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Much of that unpaid work involves what social scientists refer to as "caretaking," and "emotional labor," meaning work to maintain the physical, emotional, and social well-being of others, both at home and at work (DeVault 1991; Lively 2013). These patterns can lead to gender-based inequalities in terms of both the time and emotional labor required (Hochschild 1983; Hochschild and Machung 1989). Both men and women often take those role-based inequalities for granted, but such a division of labor can leave women feeling physically and emotionally drained (DeVault 1991; Wang 2013).

Indeed, early qualitative research on women's media consumption found it to be heavily shaped by domestic duties: when, how, and what they consumed had to fit in with demanding household schedules and responsibilities to others (Hobson 1980; Morley 1986). Such studies were conducted when gender roles in many households were more sharply delineated than they are today in many places. But the broader takeaway from these and subsequent studies is that the routines of daily life and divisions of labor within the home undoubtedly shaped the consumption of media among their inhabitants (Carter, Branston, and Allen 1998; Hermes 1995). Given the proliferation of flexible ways people can consume news today, we should question whether those structures shape news consumption as they did in the past.

As noted above, these two explanations—"news-is-for-men" perceptions and structural inequalities—are not mutually exclusive, and limited cross-national research has found some support for both theories. In an analysis of international survey data on news

consumption and gender inequality, economist Christine Benesch (2012) demonstrated that, controlling for other factors, countries highest in political and economic gender inequality also exhibited the largest gender gaps in news consumption. In other words, where women are more represented in the political system and therefore stand to gain more perceptible benefits from being politically informed, and where they *also* have access to time and resources that allow them to turn their attention to news, they are more likely to do so at rates similar to men. This lone correlational analysis is highly suggestive but requires further validation using methods better suited to assess the mechanisms underlying these relationships.

Research on News Avoidance

A small but growing body of research on "news avoidance" is also relevant to this analysis. Such work explores why some people rarely or never consume conventional news (see Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster 2010; Poindexter 2008). In the early 2000s, studies of online newsreaders identified a clear gender gap in avoidance (Poindexter and Heider 2001), which more recently has been shown to persist across platforms and across dozens of countries (Kalogeropoulos 2017; Schroeder and Blach-Orsten 2016). However, studies of news avoidance often find small or no difference in the *reasons* given by men and women for avoiding news (Poindexter 2008). Common explanations include preferences for another medium; perceived constraints (such as lack of time); real constraints (health problems, lack of access); and the rejection of the medium or news itself (e.g. preferences concerning its content, format, or structure) (2008, 40). When gender differences have emerged, scholars have usually isolated them to two categories: time and feelings. Poindexter points out that women are more likely to say they avoid news because they are busy, speculating that news avoiders who are women may be more likely to "lack time because they are busy with household chores" (Poindexter 2008, 41). Some studies also find that women news avoiders are more likely than men to say they find news depressing (Poindexter 2008; Schroeder and Blach-Orsten 2016).

Most research on news avoidance has been quantitative, but some recent studies use in-depth interviews to explore the topic in greater depth. In one US study of mostly well-educated "news resisters," Woodstock (2014) finds that time is only a "peripheral problem" and emphasizes instead that news makes people feel hopeless and depressed by focusing on distant, negative topics that offer few routes for effecting change (see also Helgerud 2017). Other scholars have found that some news avoiders feel ambivalence about whether they *should* consume more news (Toff and Nielsen 2017), weighing the emotional cost of paying attention to "doom and gloom" with what they perceive as access to information through other means such as forms of "distributed discovery" online (Toff and Nielsen 2018; Edgerly 2017).

Research Question

The complementary theories about persistent gender gaps in news consumption and political engagement described above are suggestive but require additional empirical validation beyond existing quantitative, correlational observations. Likewise, while qualitative research identifying gendered patterns in domestic media consumption is compelling, several

decades have passed since most of that research was conducted and both gender dynamics and the news environment have changed in important ways. Broadly, this inquiry asks how news today resonates with people's identities, meets their needs, fits into their routines, and at times may fail on all accounts. Specifically, in this article we ask whether and how role socialization and structural inequalities, the two explanations offered above by previous scholarship, impact the gender divide in news consumption.

Research Design

This study is based on in-depth interviews conducted in the UK in 2016–2017 with 43 self-identified news avoiders who said they followed the news less frequently than once a month. Using an inductive, "grounded theory" approach (Charmaz 2014), this inquiry was not designed specifically to examine the gender gap in news consumption patterns, but rather to listen, in an open manner, to how infrequent news users described their perceptions of news, its role in their lives, and their daily habits and routines. The themes summarized below were identified through an iterative process of investigator triangulation, in which members of the project team separately coded and then discussed interview transcripts until they agreed on common themes. This approach led us to focus on gender as one of several important factors in study participants' news consumption choices.

Given relatively low rates of news avoidance in the larger population, recruitment was among the most challenging aspects of the research design. Just 7% of adults online in both the US and UK can be categorized as news avoiders using a measure employed by the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2017). To find study participants, we partnered with Kantar, a multinational market research firm with access to large panels that include difficult-to-reach populations. Using a custom screener survey, we targeted adults 18–45 years old in select communities in the UK who said they rarely or never accessed news.[3] Recruits gave informed consent following a procedure approved by Oxford University for the ethical treatment of human subjects. Semi-structured interview sessions were then held primarily in study participants' homes,[4] each lasting one hour on average and covering participants' media use, relationships, and attitudes about issues facing their communities, as well as their views about news and journalism. Participants who completed interviews were compensated with £40 for their time.

Participants were asked to fill out a demographic survey which included a question about their gender. Although we did not recruit based on gender, most participants self-identified as women ($N = 36$ out of 43), so our analysis focuses more on women's perspectives than on men's. Both are clearly relevant to discussions of gender and news consumption, and future research should further explore the perspectives of men on these matters. We suspect our sample tilted heavily toward women for reasons having to do with both their greater day-time availability and the general tendency for women to report consuming less news, as noted in previous studies. From a normative standpoint, understanding the perspectives and choices of women news avoiders is key for addressing gender gaps in political engagement. It is also important to note that our interest is in gender, a socially constructed category, as opposed to biological sex. We did not inquire, nor do we make claims below, about biological sex. Although treating gender as a strict binary is problematic, that concern was not raised by any of our interviewees, nor a focus of our questions.

Our sample was evenly balanced between working- and middle-class news avoiders, as measured using participants' occupations. We sought specifically to capture the perspectives of people with more limited social and economic resources because we suspected class to be deeply intertwined with patterns of news use and avoidance. Recruitment was concentrated in Leeds and Manchester, post-industrial cities with diverse socioeconomic populations, as well as areas in the outer ring of Oxford the government deems economically "deprived." Study participants reported a household income between £20,000 and £24,999 per year, and only 39% reported having received a bachelor's degree, slightly below the national average. Additional sample details are included in a supplementary online appendix.

By design, our sample differs from the general public, so we do not make claims about generalizability. Instead, we contend that the dynamics apparent among news avoiders are resonant, albeit in a less drastic form, among other news audiences. We return to that point in the conclusion of this paper. To preserve participants' anonymity, pseudonyms have been used below.

Results

In this section we distill the gendered dynamics that emerged in our study into three main themes that illuminate the gender gap in news consumption and expand on the existing literature: (1) "news-is-for-men" perceptions, (2) divisions of labor within households, often along gender lines, and (3) the physical and emotional burdens of caretaking responsibilities, which fall predominantly on women and can be an obstacle to their staying up-to-date with news. The first theme is primarily an example of role socialization shaping individuals' internalized preferences; the latter two involve elements of both role socialization and structural inequalities.

"News-Is-for-Men" Perceptions

Many study participants expressed attitudes toward news that contained clear gendered notions of what news is and who it is for. As discussed above, the literature is unequivocal about women's underrepresentation in the news process and product. Resonant with early studies of household TV viewing, our interviewees also perceived the *habit* of engaging with news, and interest in it, as primarily for men—what we refer to here as "news-is-for-men" perceptions. They rarely cited it as the *reason* they avoided news, but in the way that participants *described* news—what it meant to them and what they thought it meant to others—this gendered lens became a familiar refrain.

These perceptions were sometimes plainly apparent. Take Chelsea, for example, a working-class mother in Leeds who described social situations where "it tends to be all the guys debate, and all the women will just go off for a gossip," a divide she said occurred "naturally."

> the guys have a chat about whatever they chat about, and the women chat about what they're chatting about. It's not just, "Oh right, we're talking about politics, we're going over here." It's just we naturally divide anyway. Maybe, because we live with them, and we're sick of seeing them, so when we get a chance to go out we're, like, "see you."

When asked, Chelsea insisted that she and her companions "don't talk about anything important," downplaying their discussions about relationships and kids as just "gossip."

Other women participants described their opposite gendered partners' interest in news as a waste of time, rather than an important civic duty, but most saw it in terms of personal taste.

These gender differences in *interest* were striking and consistent enough to invite additional scrutiny. When Rosemary refers to her husband as "probably more in-tune with current affairs than I am" or when Kate recalls examples of when her partner "wanted to watch the news, so we watched the news" or when Haylie explains off-hand, "my boyfriend—he keeps abreast of stuff and he knew all about it," they were describing personal experiences where news just happened to be of greater interest to their partners who were men. Taken together, however, these common experiences suggest a more widespread pattern of gendered regard for news.

These "news-is-for-men" perceptions were not always centered around spouses and romantic partners. In some cases, the gendered associations with news were encountered in workplaces. Brianna, for example, said she might occasionally glance at a newspaper from time to time, but only because "I work with a lot of guys and guys tend to have newspapers that they'll take them to the bathrooms, so there tends to be one" laying around. When asked about people she knew who were, unlike herself, highly interested in news, Annabell described two colleagues who were men who "just, sort of, shout over each other because they're both quite interested in politics and stuff, so they will have their, sort of, banter" about the news at work. She went on:

> It's pretty much, like, the two of them. I think the ladies on my section don't really give a shit about that sort of stuff. You might get the occasional couple of little comments but they're just … they don't give a shit, I suppose. Most of the time they're talking about stuff that I've never really heard of, and I'm just too ignorant to go and find out about it.

Annabell here exemplifies several themes often identified in studies of gender gaps in political engagement: she was turned off by her colleagues' aggressive political talk; she denigrated her own ability to keep up; and she thought her colleagues who are women felt the same way.

In some cases this gender gap in news interest was explicitly addressed or reinforced through women participants' interactions with their opposite gendered partners, sometimes triggering conflict. Gemma, for example, described being shamed by her husband after a dinner out with friends where she said she felt "embarrassed" for not being able to engage in conversation about American politics. She said, "They were all talking about it, especially the husbands. I didn't really have an idea." That prompted her husband to criticize her, saying "It's your fault because you don't show an interest." In another example, Haylie described how her ex-husband told her he was "banning" her from reading newspapers after an incident in which reading a story about "this woman who'd been kept in a cellar for 10, 15 years" made her feel intensely anxious. (She added, "to be fair it did help me, because I stopped reading bad news").

Often "news-is-for-men" perceptions were revealed when study participants described childhood experiences where gendered roles were performed by their own families. Gracie, for example, said she avoided talking about the news with her father because she had a "different perspective from him" and it was easier to change the subject than "argue about it." She recalled her mother doing the same: "She has opinions but she doesn't talk about them, she keeps her opinions very much to herself. Very diplomatic."

Ava recalled a similar dynamic with her own father who "always had a newspaper," yet rarely if ever invited others in the family to discuss matters in the news. "He never talked politically either. He never expressed any views." Her mother, she said, kept a strict media diet of entertainment. "It was all the soaps. Not news."

Many participants described similar perceptions of news and political discussion as peripheral to their own experiences, reserved for a sphere inhabited by men who were spouses, partners, or parents. While it is difficult to be certain about the origins of these gender gaps in attitudes toward news and civic affairs, these examples suggest explanations rooted in deeply held, socialized notions about gender roles. Such notions likely play a self-reinforcing role in ensuring gender disparities in news audiences endure.

Divisions of Labor

The engrained notions of gender roles described above only partly explain aversion to news among study participants. Many interviewees had also worked out a clear division of labor in their own households, which helped sustain gender gaps in news use. Often participants said they relied on others—typically a romantic partner, but also, sometimes, a parental figure, a colleague, or a friend—to follow the news in their stead and inform them about important issues. Rather than modeling news use habits, as the paternal figures discussed in the previous section sometimes did, these figures seemed to play a different role, as trustworthy sources of information who could synthesize the news efficiently, freeing up time for news avoiders to focus on other matters.

Many of the news avoiders interviewed in this study juggled a range of responsibilities that sometimes made paying attention to news a low priority. Jennifer, for example, a middle-class manager pregnant with her first child, described how her husband paid more attention to the news "because he has his own business, so he has to," which left her free to concentrate on other aspects of their household maintenance. In another case, Tessa, who was on long-term disability leave due to chronic fatigue syndrome, explained that her condition made "reading stuff exhausting" so she learned to rely on friends to "just text me if something awful has happened" or on her husband who "reads [the news] like all the time" and whose opinions she said she trusts to "reflect my political views as well."

Some participants relied on a close friend who was "very into the news," as Andrea related about her friend Elisia, noting that "she's the person that constantly watches the news every day, she's the one that knows what's happening. You can go to Elisia." For many news avoiders, parents or grandparents, regardless of gender, served as resources they could rely on to stay decently informed and educated about major issues. In a typical case, Carleigh explained

> My granddad is really good with that kind of stuff. Yeah. I mean he was the one that explained Brexit to me. All of it. He basically told me what had happened. If we left. What would happen if we stayed and it helped me come to a decision.

In some cases, this division of labor entailed a reversal of gender roles described above. News avoiders interviewed who were men also often relied on more engaged partners to keep them up to speed with any relevant political affairs. Ryan, for example, a stay-at-home father, said he looked to his wife for such information. Her professional career, he

said, prompted her to take a greater interest in news whereas in his capacity as homemaker ("literally, get up, feed the kids … take them to school, tidy, make dinner"), the news seemed mostly irrelevant.

Not every news avoider had such figures in their lives, but the exceptions were also revealing. Some seemed acutely aware of their lack of a news informant to whom they could turn. Jodie, for example, said she could not think of anyone who would be able to help her find information about political or civic concerns. She said, "Everybody is pretty much as useless as I am," adding "I think my husband is less interested than I am." In another example, Kate contrasted her partner Jack's family dynamic with her own: "They used to talk about [news] with Jack … He understands it, and he thinks I'm thick for not understanding it." Of her own father she said: "I've never seen him read a newspaper anyway. Don't strike me as that kind of person."

As is evident in these examples, both men and women can play the roles of news-consuming-informer and news avoider. However, handing over responsibility for paying attention to news freed many interviewees up to concentrate on domestic duties such as childrearing—work that continues to fall disproportionately on women. Evelyn, for example, made this trade-off explicit. She said her partner "knows everything and he tells me … On his Facebook, it's news, news, news." Meanwhile, she prefers not to pay attention, "because the kids are always here and they have their stuff on," but also because, she said, "I just don't like watching it. I don't like what's going on." By dividing up responsibilities for paying attention in this way, Evelyn felt sufficiently informed about important stories while able to focus on responsibilities more central to what she viewed as her main role in the household.

Caretaking and News Avoidance

For the vast majority of news avoiders interviewed in this study, that role involved caretaking in some capacity. Many described making a conscious decision to screen out the news from their homes in an effort to maintain a positive environment for their kids and/or manage their own emotions, including assuaging anxieties related to parenting. Ryan, for example, the stay-at-home father introduced above, described grappling with this tension, wanting to expose his kids to "a bit of what's going on" in the world, but finding it so negative and scary, he decided it was mostly counterproductive to even try: "I don't want my kids listening to bombs going off, and how many people died, or some gun massacre somewhere. I was, like, no news for the kids either, so we just have no news in the house." In another example, Alaina, a mother of three with a fourth on the way, described her fears about pedophiles in her community, which were exacerbated by stories in the tabloid press. She said she wouldn't stop her kids from watching the news "unless it was something I thought would frighten them." She said her middle child especially tends to "overthink" things. "She'll wake up screaming."

In some cases, the time and energy required to fulfill caretaking responsibilities—which fell predominantly on women, and often in addition to full- or part-time work—meant staying informed was simply an impossible task. Chelsea, in a typical case, described her daily routine, which left little time for any media consumption, let alone news. At 6:30 am, she was up making "pack-ups" and getting "the kids off to school." Then she spent an hour filling in for friend who worked as a nanny. Later, she did two half-day

shifts at work, walked two dogs, picked up two kids in the evening, separately, and got them each "bathed and sorted." She said once they are in bed, "I get all the stuff ready for school, start doing my washing, and I generally probably sit down, most nights, at about 11, 11:30."

In some cases, overburdened parents described earlier moments in their lives when news fit better into their routines. Brianna, a social worker, described how before her daughter was born, she had a daily habit of watching news shows with her morning coffee, back when she would "just have time to get ready." Now, as a single parent, her mornings and evenings were entirely taken over by childcare. Caitlin, also a single parent who worked part-time in retail, said she used to love to watch the news, but now "it's always cartoons on the telly, for the little one." She described routinely falling asleep in bed with her son and then waking up in the middle of the night and doing chores she was too exhausted to do earlier.

Caretaking responsibilities not only limited time available to pay attention to news; they also sapped people of the emotional energy required to engage with current events. Evelyn, for example, said she worried constantly about her kids.

> My daughter goes to Brownies and she's going on a trip at Easter just for the weekend. They're only going Preston. But she's never stayed out so that's like constantly on my mind. I'm worrying. I think the worst of everything. So I'm worrying that all the time. She's dead excited to go but I just panic.

Paying attention to the news only caused her to worry even more. She described the panic she would feel hearing news about terrorist attacks in London, many hours away: "Straight away … my kids are at school. They're not with me!" The panic set in immediately. Even though her daughter had taken an interest in news, she said she would rather keep the home a news-free zone for her own peace of mind.

Similarly, Emily explained that "one of the reasons that I don't get involved with the news and things" is "because it affects me greatly." She admitted she worries that she has been "trying to protect my kids a little bit too much" but "the news in this house is just a big, big no-no. Unless it's to do with Disney World. We like going there, so the Disney World news I say … 'Yes, Yes.' Anything else, I'd rather not know." When asked if she would like for her kids to understand things going on in the world when they get older, she elaborated: "I'd rather they're not naïve, but I don't want them to be like I was growing up. You know, in that sheltered life." She went on, "I need them to know a little bit more about things, especially in today's society, with the drugs and stuff like that. But I'd rather teach them it, than them find out stuff from the media." In her reply, Emily struggles to strike a balance between her multiple responsibilities as caretaker: sheltering her children from troubling stories in the media, managing anxieties she feels when she hears such stories in the news, and wanting her children to grow up to be informed and equipped to navigate the world.

Discussion

As the examples above illustrate, news consumption continues to be intertwined with perceptions of social roles and responsibilities, which are often shaped by ingrained ideas about gender and structural inequalities that fall along gendered lines. Consistent with

theories derived from quantitative studies of gender gaps as well as qualitative research on media consumption, we found further evidence among study participants of perceptions of news and politics as primarily the purview of men. Some interviewees derided discussion of politics and news as aggressive and unappealing; others denigrated their own ability to understand them; and many expressed a lack of interest in them compared to their partners who were most often men. Those attitudes appeared to have often been modeled in childhood and reinforced through interactions with other socializing agents later in life.

Our findings also elaborate on quantitative research that identified correlations between structural inequalities, including unequal labor burdens, and gender gaps in news consumption, by showing what those dynamics feel like on the ground. We found that, especially in homes with children and working parents, caretaking took significant investments of time and emotional energy, leaving parents feeling they had little left for news. When the TV was on, it was often tuned to cartoons or other child-friendly fare, and some participants actively tried to shield the home from the negative content they believed dominated the news or tried to conserve their own emotional energy by avoiding it—energy they needed to fulfill their responsibilities to others.

In many of those cases, however, the news-avoiding parent relied on someone else to keep him or her informed about the most important news. As Edgerly (2017) also found in her study of how young adults inform themselves about current events, this reliance on a trusted news informant aligns well with the classic two-step flow model of communication, in which less informed people turn to more avid media consumers for information and direction on specific topics (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). As our findings illustrate, this division of labor does not always fall along traditional gender lines. But since research consistently indicates that women still do more of the caretaking and other unpaid household work than men (Altintas and Sullivan 2016), it is likely that in many cases it does.

The time period in which we conducted this study—after the Brexit referendum (June 23, 2016) and during the weeks surrounding terrorism incidents in Manchester (May 22, 2017) and London (June 3, 2017)—may raise questions about whether our interviewees were avoiding news in response to specific news events. That was not what we found. Interviewees instead mainly described ideas, feelings, and habits toward news that preceded current events. Moreover there were few differences observed between interviews conducted before or after terrorist attacks. Instead, avoiding the news was often a strategic decision by busy caretakers to narrow their "circle of concern," similar to the way Eliasoph's (1998) otherwise politically uninterested volunteers narrowed their activism to topics "close to home" or "for the children." Eliasoph found such efforts partly practical—people had limited time and resources—but also a matter of emotion management: focusing on where people felt they could make a difference helped them stay hopeful. Similarly, Woodstock's (2014) news resisters limit their news consumption in part to preserve their energy and optimism for other forms of civic engagement. In our sample, a lower socioeconomic group than Woodstock's, news avoidance appeared to be a strategic choice to conserve both emotional energy and time, in order to better fulfill demanding responsibilities, especially caretaking. This finding recalls Janice Radway's (1984) classic study on women who read romance novels: she finds they treasure the medium as an escape from caretaking and emotional labor. Our interviewees saw news as the *opposite* of the escape they needed.

One could certainly argue that anyone with a strong interest in news could overcome these obstacles to news consumption, especially given the array of available sources of information available today. In fact, recent surveys show that women around the world equal or exceed men in news consumption via social media and mobile platforms (Fortunati, Deuze, and de Luca 2014; Newman et al. 2017; Shearer and Gottfried 2017). These forms of news use are arguably most adaptable to caretakers' concerns and schedules. But our news avoiders in most cases explicitly expressed a lack of interest or outright dislike of news, so fighting to find the time and energy for it made little sense to them. The time and cognitive cost of engaging with news simply felt too high to be worth it.

Feminists have long advocated a reassessment of how we define and delimit politics, arguing that traditional, rigid ideas about what is legitimately "political" marginalize women and exclude many of women's most pressing concerns from public debate. Our findings suggest a similar reexamination of news conventions and definitions may be overdue. We found that participants often did not see a clear connection between political news stories and their own concerns or problems. Consistent with survey research that finds women more interested in issues and news they find closely connected to their daily lives, when many of our interviewees recalled specific news stories they *had* found important enough to pay attention to and even investigate further, those stories were usually about their children's schools, crimes against individuals in their neighborhoods, or other topics likely to affect their lives and families in a direct way. They were issues immediately relevant to their identities and responsibilities as caretakers. Many interviewees contrasted those topics of urgent interest with more traditional political matters—like Brexit, as many interviewees observed—which seemed distant and unconnected to their daily lives.

Conclusion

News avoiders like those in this study fall at the extreme end of the news consumption spectrum, but their perspectives act as a magnifying lens to help identify gender dynamics that we suspect influence consumption patterns among more typical media audiences. Our findings illustrate that some of the areas where gender inequalities have proven most persistent—perceptions about which behaviors and interests are appropriate for men and women and divisions of labor in the home—continue to exert considerable influence over news consumption habits, perpetuating ongoing gaps between the genders.

As prior research has emphasized, paying attention to news is intertwined with political engagement, and socializing women to avoid either may create a vicious cycle that keeps women disengaged and disadvantaged to advocate for themselves in the political sphere. Likewise, deeply entrenched structural inequalities that make it harder for women than men to engage with news likely contribute to ongoing inequalities in political engagement and, subsequently, to economic and social inequalities that political activism could help to address.

This cycle will be hard to break as long as communities and parents model gendered approaches to news for their daughters and sons. Since media itself is a powerful socializing agent, news content could, in theory, act as a countervailing force, helping to gradually dispel notions that public life, and media portrayals of it, are primarily by and for men. But that seems unlikely to happen while news itself remains overwhelmingly dominated by men and, as our findings suggest, fails to address some women's more pressing concerns

or to communicate how seemingly distant political matters are relevant to their daily lives. Likewise, media literacy efforts could be designed to correct news-is-for-men perceptions, but our findings also suggest that even the best designed interventions would only have a partial effect so long as deeper structural inequalities that depress news consumption among women go unaddressed.

It appears more likely that the solution to the news consumption gender gap is not—or not only—to teach news-avoiding girls and women that they should consume more news, but to correct the structural obstacles and qualities of news itself that make news consumption less appealing or possible for them. Women cannot be expected to address these matters on their own, especially given underrepresentation in both politics and news; men, too, have a responsibility to help bring about these changes and news producers have a responsibility not just to include more women in the product, but to get to know the women in their audiences better, and to take steps to better engage with their concerns. That process may require reexamining entrenched ideas about what is newsworthy and how stories should be told.

The women interviewed in this study, many of them lower-income mothers, are among the more vulnerable members of society, as are their children. They stand to be disproportionately affected by the policies decided at a distance from them, mostly by men. And yet, in a world of ever-increasing media choice, the gender gap in news consumption is unlikely to shrink—and is more likely to grow—if women, more than men, feel news does not reflect, or is outright incompatible with, their concerns, identities, and experiences.

Notes

1. UK data is from the 2014 European Social Survey which asked, "On an average weekday, how much of your time watching television is spent watching news or programmes about politics and current affairs?"
2. US data is from the 2014 General Social Survey which asked, "How often do you use the media, including television, newspapers, radio and the internet, to get political news or information?" The gender gap among those without a college degree is 3.9% points.
3. We employed a screener survey question adopted from the Reuters Institute's previous studies (Newman et al. 2017; Schroeder and Blach-Orsten 2016): "Typically, how often do you access news? By news we mean national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online)." Those who responded "Never" or "Less than once a month" were generally deemed eligible for the study.
4. A small number of interviews were conducted public locales such as coffeeshops ($N = 3$) or via telephone ($N = 7$).

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