

Constructive Journalism: a response to users' motivations for news avoidance

Periodismo constructivo: una respuesta a las razones de los usuarios para evitar las noticias

Jornalismo construtivo: uma resposta às razões dos usuários para evitar as notícias

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ABSTRACT | Even though the current media landscape allows to choose between very diverse platforms, sources and means to get information, there are users who decide to avoid the news. This article explores the reasons behind this news avoidance, relating it to the proposals of the so-called constructive journalism. Taking Spain as case study and through a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the Digital News Report –based on a pilot study and a survey to 2,006 users–, the results show that 50% of digital users in Spain actively avoid news, a practice more common among women, young users and low-income people. The reasons allude to two major factors. On the one hand, the users' situation, either due to lack of interest concerning current events or to the perception that exposure to the news flow has negative effects on their mood (the main reason to avoid them, 37% of the cases). On the other hand, the media –both at the corporate level and the journalists who produce the information– are accused of failing to comply with some basic principles of the profession. Specifically, 29% of users do not consult the news because they mistrust their veracity. The media could address these motivations by opting for a more constructive approach to journalism, based on a news coverage aimed at generating a positive social impact.

KEYWORDS: constructive journalism; news consumption; news avoidance; emotions; trust in news.

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RESUMEN | Pese a que el panorama mediático actual permite escoger entre muy diversas plataformas, fuentes y medios para informarse, hay usuarios que deciden evitar las noticias. Este artículo explora las razones que motivan esta evasión informativa, poniéndolas en diálogo con las propuestas del periodismo constructivo. Tomando como caso de estudio a España y mediante un análisis cualitativo y cuantitativo del Digital News Report –basado en un estudio piloto y una encuesta a 2006 usuarios digitales–, los resultados muestran que el 50% de los internautas españoles evita las noticias de manera activa. Es una práctica más habitual entre las mujeres, los jóvenes y las personas de bajos ingresos económicos. Las razones señaladas por los usuarios para no consultar las noticias aluden a dos grandes factores. Por un lado, a la situación del usuario, ya sea por falta de interés en la actualidad como por la percepción de que la exposición al flujo noticioso tiene efectos negativos en su persona (siendo esta la principal razón para evitarlas, en el 37% de los casos). Por otro lado, también se acusa a los medios de comunicación –tanto a nivel corporativo como a los periodistas que elaboran la información– de incumplir algunos principios básicos de la profesión. Específicamente, 29% de los usuarios no consulta las noticias porque desconfía de su veracidad. Los medios podrían combatir estas motivaciones optando por un enfoque más constructivo del periodismo, basado en una cobertura orientada a generar un impacto social positivo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: periodismo constructivo; consumo de noticias; evasión informativa; emociones; confianza en las noticias.

RESUMO | Apesar de que o panorama midiático atual permite escolher entre diversas plataformas, fontes e meios para se informar, há usuários que decidem evitar as notícias. Esse artigo analisa as razões que motivam esta evasão de informação, colocando-as em diálogo com as propostas do jornalismo construtivo. Tomando a Espanha como um estudo de caso e através de uma análise qualitativa e quantitativa do Digital News Report – com base num estudo-piloto e num inquérito a 2006 usuários digitais –, os resultados mostram que 50% dos internautas espanhóis da Internet evitam ativamente notícias, uma prática mais comum entre as mulheres, os jovens e as pessoas com baixa renda. As razões apresentadas pelos usuários para não consultarem as notícias referem-se a dois fatores principais. Por um lado, à situação do usuário, seja pela falta de interesse na atualidade seja pela percepção de que a exposição ao fluxo de notícias tem efeitos negativos na pessoa (sendo a principal razão para evitá-las, no 73% dos casos). Por outro lado, também se denunciam aos meios de comunicação – tanto a nível corporativo quanto aos jornalistas que produzem a informação – de não respeitarem alguns princípios básicos da profissão. Especificamente, 29% dos usuários não consultam as notícias porque desconfia da sua veracidade. Os meios poderiam combater essas motivações optando por uma abordagem mais construtiva do jornalismo, baseado em uma cobertura que visa gerar um impacto social positivo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: jornalismo construtivo; consumo de notícias; evasão de notícias; emoções; confiança nas notícias.

INTRODUCTION

There are innumerable publications in the field of audience studies that try to outline the consumption of news by citizens, as well as the various factors that shape it. In this regard, research on the use of the media has so far been approached from two major theoretical perspectives (Taneja, Webster, Malthouse, & Ksiazek, 2012): on the one hand, a *structural* vision, which focuses on how the availability of content or the ability to access technology by users shape media consumption, measured through indicators such as audience ratings. On the other hand, there is an approach that highlights the importance of psychological factors in the media choices, based on the fact that users are active agents, who make reasoned decisions about their media consumption; therefore –through self-reports and users' reflections– it is possible to obtain a portrait of the motivations, needs and gratifications that they obtain with said consumption.

In the last decade, approaches have emerged that try to integrate these two currents, such as media repertoires (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017; Swart, Peters, & Broersma, 2017; Adoni, Peruško, Nossek, & Schrøder, 2017). According to this perspective, citizens evaluate what the various media can offer them on a daily basis, how they complement each other, and what social and emotional consequences their media choices have in different contexts, all of which creates relatively stable patterns of media practices. In other words, media repertoire studies explore how users combine different platforms, media sources, journalistic genres and products to structure their daily lives and fulfill their needs for information, entertainment, opinion formation and socialization (Peters & Schrøder, 2018).

Despite the good *health* of research on media consumption, to date, investigations that explore the motivations that lead some users not to consume the news, but to avoid it, are scarce (Edgerly, 2018). This research aims to offer a contribution to this field, taking digital users in Spain as a case study. I expose the reasons that explain the evasion of information by Internet users, which range from the perception that information negatively affects their mood to mistrust in the media due to their lack of independence or their tendency to sensationalism. Finally, there are some recommendations to the media to mitigate this trend in digital consumption. To do so, I examine the proposals developed by the so-called constructive journalism (Mast, Coesemans, & Temmerman, 2019), a movement with both academic and professional ramifications that seeks to complement traditional journalistic techniques.

AVOIDING THE NEWS: AN APPROACH FROM MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Media consumption includes the use and habits associated with the different media. Currently, and due to the process of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006),

these media are largely integrated into the Internet. The contents linked to media such as television, newspapers, magazines, or radio are accessible through the web, in addition to the digital content itself. That set of information and entertainment acquired by someone is conditioned by factors related to the status and circumstances of each user (gender, age, geographic origin, professional occupation, personal interests, needs and expectations, etc.). In turn, all of this manifests in specific forms of consumption, thus varying the type of medium and content, the frequency, the hours, or the behavior patterns when consuming.

However, and in parallel, from a macro perspective, various factors intervene in the configuration of the media ecosystem, which have a global influence on the news exposure habits of digital users. These elements include the overabundance of information, the multiplicity of devices to access content, and the socialization of information consumption, as it is increasingly no longer carried out directly on the media website, but on social networks and through the recommendation of other Internet users (Serrano-Puche, 2017). Therefore, there is a complementary use of traditional media and new platforms in media consumption, although the predominance of the former gradually loses weight (Martínez-Costa, Sánchez-Blanco, & Serrano-Puche, 2018).

Thus, one of the keys to news consumption is the combination and crossing between different media sources (both digital and traditional) since in the current media landscape there are multiple ways to access news. While this trait is inherent to news exposure, it is also true than in the digital age “emerging patterns of cross-media use are far more seamless and blurred, hybrid and complex, than they used to be” (Bjur et al., 2013, p. 15). Citizens have at their disposal a great diversity of information sources (printed, audiovisual, digital and mobile platforms), giving rise to a *news supermarket*, in which the perceived value and usefulness are a key factor in the daily decisions of users (Costera Meijer, 2013; Schrøder, 2015).

Nevertheless, and adding more complexity to the media consumption panorama, more and more access to information is no longer an autonomous activity, and is part of the uninterrupted connection to the Internet. Thus, on many occasions the news is not sought, but there is rather an incidental consumption (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018). The user comes across information among other social and entertainment content, often without the context and hierarchy provided by professional filters. In other words, the person finds the news without looking for it directly, in a kind of informative serendipity (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010), since there is the conviction that *information is out there* and if the news is really important, it will find them, without having to look after it (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardevol-Abreu, 2017; Toff & Nielsen, 2018).

Despite the multiplicity of information sources, platforms and formats available –or perhaps precisely because of this, as Prior (2007) argues– another trend in media consumption –the focus of this research– should be noted: the option of some users for actively avoiding the news. The practice of information evasion, which is sometimes in fact involuntary (van den Bulck, 2006; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020), can occur for various reasons, as we will see later, and ranges from sporadic and circumstantial behaviors to the vital option, from a critical position, of *resisting the news* (Woodstock, 2014, 2016).

The lack of measurement standards for this practice (i.e., what frequency of access is considered low exposure to the news), makes it difficult to estimate in global terms the extent of this trend in information consumption. However, some research indicates that it is a growing phenomenon. A longitudinal analysis of the little use of news –meaning to expose to them less than twice a week– among the population of Sweden shows that it has gone from 1% in 1986 to 6% in 2014 (Shehata, Wadbring, & Hopmann, 2015). Nevertheless, other studies conducted in the United States indicate that low exposure to the media affects between 18% (Edgerly, 2015) and 34% of adults (Prior, 2007).

On the other hand, in a qualitative research with Norwegian young people, Helgerud (2015) divides citizens who regularly avoid news into three types: the suffering (who avoid it due to the negative impact it has on their spirits), the disconnected (who put entertainment before the traditional civic duty of being informed), and strategic evaders (who prioritize other activities and declare to mistrust the media). These last two types of users would constitute risk groups from the point of view of the link between informational consumption and the understanding of public affairs, because if, according to the canonical definition of Kovach and Rosenstiel, the purpose of journalism “is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (2003, p. 18), the fact that people actively avoid being informed would not lead to negative consequences –at both the individual and community level?

Thus, a concern related to the phenomenon of information evasion is its possible correlation with low levels of civic engagement and political mobilization (Strömbäck, 2017; Palmer & Toff, 2020) and, instead, how these could grow if the exposure to news increases (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010; Edgerly, Vraga, Bode, Thorson, & Thorson, 2018). It is an issue on which more research is needed. However, and according to Schrøder and Ørsten (2016), “even without regular use of news media, it appears that young people may find other ways of maintaining an appropriate level of knowledge for navigating in the terrain of civic participation”(par. 39). Such would be the case of interpersonal communication,

which could be a reliable and more useful filter than the media to monitor some news topics (Price & Zaller, 1993).

In short, the active evasion of news information reveals the variety of expectations, preferences and possible situations in the digital media scenario, where there is room for both the use and *non-use* of news.

CONSTRUCTIVE JOURNALISM: CHARACTERISTICS, ELEMENTS, AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

The tendency of users to avoid news demands, in the first place, an awareness by the media of its roots, in addition to actions that can help alleviate this elusive behavior in the face of news consumption. All this without losing sight of the central role that journalism has in the media construction of reality, through which people largely get to know the world that surrounds them (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

On the other hand, and although it is sometimes questioned (Woodstock, 2014), the narrative that links the health of a democracy with well-informed citizens, who obtain their knowledge of their media consumption by consuming media that act as the fourth power and watchdog over public institutions (Deuze, 2005), continues to predominate in Western societies. This does not prevent a debate growing in the academic field that leads to rethinking the role of journalism in society (Peters & Broesma, 2012, 2016) and questioning classic elements such as objectivity, revaluing the role of emotions in the production and reception of news (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Rosas, 2018).

From this perspective, the rise in the last decade of so-called constructive journalism, i.e., “a form of journalism that is public-oriented, solution-oriented, future-oriented and action-oriented, trying to avoid a bias towards negativity in the news” (Hermans & Drok, 2018, p. 679) is interesting. In other words, it constitutes “an ‘alternative’, more inclusive and accountable practice of journalism that actively looks for positive values and emotions when gathering and telling the news, and that points out possible solutions, in doing so bringing affirmative, inspiring and often untold narratives” (Mast et al., 2019, p. 494). As Bro (2019) points out, since the beginning of the 20th century, this current can be identified in some texts by Walter Williams and Joseph Pulitzer, their historical precedents, which in turn are in tune with other contemporary initiatives with partially similar premises, such as civic journalism (Rosen, 1999), peace journalism (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005), solution-oriented journalism (McIntyre, 2019) or slow journalism (Le Masurier, 2015). Interest in constructive journalism has grown notoriously in recent years, both in the professional field (especially in public corporations) and in academia. As an example,

in 2018 and 2019 it has been the central topic of two special issues of the journals *Journalism Practice* (Ahva & Hautakangas, 2018) and *Journalism* (Mast et al., 2019).

The foundations of this constructive notion of journalism are found in two books, written by two Danish journalists who show different approaches to the phenomenon. On the one hand, Ulrik Haagerup is the author of *Constructive News: How to Save the Media and Democracy with Journalism of Tomorrow* (2014) and founder of the Constructive Institute, affiliated with Aarhus University. On the other, Catherine Gyldensted published in 2015 *From Mirrors to Movers: Five Elements of Positive Psychology in Constructive Journalism*, and has launched an academic program on constructive journalism at Windesheim University (Netherlands). The books titles already show nuances in the way of conceptualizing the concept. Thus, Haagerup focuses on refocusing the news selection criteria and presentation, aiming at incorporating the constructive aspect into the newsworthiness criteria (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001) and using it as a framework when it comes to journalistic writing. On the other hand, Gyldensted rather focuses on the level of professional roles (Mellado, Hellmueller, & Donsbach, 2017), from an activist position –not shared by Haagerup– that considers that the constructive effect of journalism is to stimulate the action of the public. In other words, move society, but –using Gyldensted's metaphor– not only with the *stick* of a vision that highlights the negative, but also with the *carrot* that serves as a positive incentive.

Both views are rooted in positive psychology, from the conviction that generating emotions such as hope or optimism tends to increase people's well-being (Fredrickson, 2001). They therefore defend a “form of journalism that involves applying positive psychology techniques to news processes and production in an effort to create productive and engaging coverage, while holding true to journalism's core functions” (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018, p. 23). Proponents of this trend warn of the danger of being left with a spurious vision of the concept, such as associating it with an uncritical, naive, *goodness-oriented* coverage, or the production of simple *happy news*.

They do not propose to eliminate drama or conflict as newsworthy criteria, but to develop constructive elements in journalistic coverage that can serve as a counterpoint to the prevailing negative bias (van der Meer, Kroon, Verhoeven, & Jonkman, 2019). Specifically, Hermans and Gyldensted (2019) point out the following:

- Include possible solutions in the news focus that deals with problems (although without taking sides for a specific solution).
- Orient the news towards the future (adding a W to the traditional journalistic questions, to specify possible developments of the narrated event: What Now?).

- Include more voices and perspectives (overcoming the polarization sometimes caused by the media).
- Explain the news, providing context (using infographics when presenting the information).
- Nurture the engagement and empowerment of readers (facilitating their collaboration for content creation).

These constructive elements have been incorporated into the training programs for journalists developed in the already mentioned academic centers promoted by Haagerup and Gyldensted. More recently, the Constructive Journalism Project (www.constructivejournalism.org/), founded by Seán Dagan Wood and Danielle Batist, started offering training courses in this approach's coverage techniques.

Empirical evidence of the effects of this practice is beginning to emerge in academic literature, both within the newsroom and in the audience reception. Examples of professional experiences that adapt constructive journalism are found in diverse contexts such as Europe (Wiard & Simonson, 2019; Bødker, 2019), Africa (McIntyre & Sobel, 2018) or the Caribbean (Rotmeijer, 2018). Several studies also highlight the impact that a constructive vision of journalistic work has on the public. In a qualitative study with readers of the British magazine *Positive News*, Jackson (2016) concludes that receiving this news promotes optimism, internal effectiveness, an active way of dealing with problems, and social cohesion. Hermans and Gyldensted (2019) have tested the construction elements already listed among 3,000 users in the Netherlands, and highlight that not all are valued equally by the audience (and that depending on factors such as the age or educational level of the reader, some elements are more appreciated than others).

On the other hand, McIntyre and Sobel (2017) developed an experiment to analyze the audience reception concerning news about human trafficking, written from two different approaches (looking to shock the audience or trying to inspire through stories based on solutions). They concluded that constructive news made readers feel better and increased their likelihood of reading more about the issue, but did not increase their empathy towards the news protagonists or the knowledge about the problem to a greater extent than the news that intended to shock them. Likewise, in a research on the cognitive effect of television news on Dutch schoolchildren (9-13 years old), Kleemans and his collaborators (2019) obtained mixed results. They suggest that children remember the constructive parts of the news story better but have less ability to remember the basic facts of the events narrated compared to a news story about the same event presented from a non-constructive approach. Finally, and as other studies point out (Lough

& McIntyre, 2019; McIntyre, Lough, & Manzanares, 2018), the visual elements that accompany constructive news are important, since the reception of solution-oriented stories may be affected depending on whether there is congruence or not between the text and the photos that illustrate it.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

Considering this theoretical framework, the research pursues two objectives. On the one hand, explore an emerging phenomenon in the digital consumption of information, i.e., the act of intentionally avoiding exposure to news. On the other, examine to what extent so-called constructive journalism counteracts the motivations that induce citizens to evade information, and how it can help mitigate this trend.

Thus, and taking the Spanish Internet users as a case study, the following research questions (RQ) were formulated as the basis for the analysis:

- RQ1. What weight, in percentage terms, does the phenomenon of information evasion have within the news consumption habits of Spanish digital users?
- RQ2. What are the reasons that encourage citizens to avoid consulting the news?
- RQ3. Which sociodemographic factors influence these motivations and how do they manifest themselves?
- RQ4. Can constructive journalism provide an adequate response to this news consumption trend?

To answer these questions, I developed a research work whose methodological design is explained below.

METHODOLOGY

This research presents a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the *Digital News Report*, an annual study on the consumption of digital information, launched in 2012 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, which currently covers 38 countries in Europe, America, Asia and Africa. For this work, Spain has been taken as a case study. The national panel is made up of a sample of 2,006 digital users (representative of the Spanish population by age, gender, income, education, and geographic region, among others). The fieldwork, carried out by the company YouGov, took place between the end of January and

the beginning of February 2017, period during which an invitation was sent by email to users to complete an online survey.

The universe of the *Digital News Report 2017* survey correlates in Spain to Internet users who consumed news in the last month in this market, which is approximately 29 million people, based on a population of 38,174,687 adults (INE, 2017a), with a penetration of weekly Internet use of 80% (INE, 2017b).

The *Digital News Report* online survey includes a very broad and varied range of questions on news consumption. Of all these, only those related to frequency and motivations to avoid the news are considered for this research. Therefore, although the data was not collected exclusively for this study, I conducted a secondary analysis of a selection of data to answer the research questions established above (and without proof that there are any studies from other researchers who have used the same sources). However, a limitation of this research is that, as in any survey, the memory or perception of the respondents does not always totally coincide with their actual media use.

In any case –and considering the incidence of some sociodemographic variables that proved to be significant (age, gender, income, and ideological orientation)–, for this work, the following questions of the survey were analyzed statistically:

“Do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days?”

- Often
- Sometimes
- Occasionally
- Never
- Don't know

“You said that you find yourself trying to avoid news... Which, if any, of the following are reasons why you actively try to avoid news? Please select all that apply”.

- It can have a negative effect on my mood
- Graphic images upset me
- It disturbs my ability to concentrate on more important things
- It consumes too much of my time
- It leads to arguments I'd rather avoid
- I can't rely on news to be true
- I don't feel there is anything I can do about it
- Other
- Don't know

On the other hand, and as exploratory and complementary material, I also used a pilot study linked to the *Digital News Report 2016* (Schrøder & Ørsten, 2016), conducted with users from the United States, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Spain (n=475) who stated they accessed the news less than once a month, thus being excluded from the full questionnaire. I carried out a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the open responses of Spanish users (n=77), where they explain the reasons for their low frequency of access to news information. This methodological technique of thematic analysis “allows to identify, organize, analyze in detail and report patterns or themes from a careful reading and re-reading of the information collected, to infer results that promote an adequate understanding/interpretation of the phenomenon under study” (Mieles Barrera, Tonon, & Alvarado Salgado, 2012, p. 217).

In short, the combination of this qualitative approach along with the quantitative data from the *Digital News Report 2017* will allow me to better describe the phenomenon of information evasion in the case of Spanish digital users, as stated in the first objective of this research. That will lead to addressing, in the discussion section, the second objective (reflected in RQ4), namely, whether the proposals of constructive journalism can help the media to alleviate the flight of audiences.

RESULTS

In this section I will present the findings obtained in this empirical work. The first part examines, from a qualitative point of view, the reasons of the users who show a greater rejection of news and who self-explained it in the aforementioned pilot study. This first approach to the phenomenon of information evasion, in its most radical version, leads in the second part to a more complete quantitative analysis, outlining the weight of different motivations and frequencies when actively avoiding news, as well as the sociodemographic factors that influence this attitude towards the media information.

Reasons to avoid the news, in the words of users

In the introductory questions of the *Digital News Report Spain 2016*, along with other questions that serve to profile the respondent from a sociodemographic point of view, the participants were asked the following: “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)”.

The options ranged, on a scale of 7 possible frequencies, between Several times a day and Less than once a month. Those who selected this last option could not continue completing the questionnaire but were required to indicate possible

Thematic typology of reasons to avoid the news	Examples (responses from users who access the news less than once a month)
Emotional negativity linked to exposure to news	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I do not like to watch the news because they are almost always about misfortunes, wars, accidents and corruption. I already have enough to deal with my problems to be more depressed by the media". - "The news are usually negative and the politicians are not reliable. All of that depresses me".
Feeling of informational saturation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "They repeat them so often, everywhere, that you do not have to keep an eye on them". - "They always address the same issues and I am tired of always hearing and seeing the same thing".
Lack of time and disinterest in current news	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "They are not relevant to me. I already have enough with the things that happen in my life". - "I have little time".
Perception of non-compliance with professional standards by journalists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Most of the time, the news are wrong or worse, misleading". - "Sometimes, journalists are not objective". - "It is an emotional manipulation". - "To listen to lies and see the media manipulation that exists in this country, better not to listen".
Lack of trust in the media (due to the pressures they receive, whether of political and/or commercial origin)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "They tell us what interests those in charge. It is all a lie". - "They do not show reality; only what is convenient or dictated to them". - "Many times, they do not inform us of the truth, the news are manipulated and they explain to us what is of interest to some sectors.".

Table 1. Categorization of reasons (and examples) for information evasion

Source: Own elaboration based on the Digital News Report 2016.

reasons for this *non-use* of the news in a multiple choice question, and were then encouraged to explain it with their own words.

Being such a small sample (n=77), it does not make sense to analyze the reasons pre-established by the questionnaire from a quantitative point of view, but it is interesting to analyze how Spanish Internet users explain the reasons that lead them to avoid the news. Thus, a thematic analysis of these responses allows establishing the typology of reasons for evading information (Table 1).

The list of reasons indicated by users for accessing the news less than once a month points, therefore, to two different focuses. On the one hand, to the situation of the user, either due to lack of interest regarding current affairs or, above all, due to the perception that exposure to the news flow has negative effects on him/her. On the other hand, the media –both at the corporate level and in the figure of

the journalists who prepare the information– are also accused of failing to comply with some basic principles of the profession.

As we will see in the next section, the above justifications are similar to those given to avoid the news by the users surveyed in the *Digital News Report 2017*, which gathers the experience of the previous pilot study to delve into this phenomenon, considering all the panel (n=2006), and thus allowing a more complete portrait of the scope and features of this digital consumption trend.

Avoiding the news: motivations and sociodemographic factors

According to the *Digital News Report 2017*, half of the respondents answered affirmatively to the question “*Do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days?*”. Specifically, one in 10 Spanish Internet users intentionally avoids the news often and 16% does it sometimes (Vara-Miguel, 2017).

From a gender perspective and as shown in Table 2, avoiding news is a more frequent behavior among women than men (55% versus 44% of men). Although the type of information evasion to which the questionnaire points out is intentional, this gender gap coincides with other investigations (Poindexter, 2008), where elements such as socialization of roles or structural inequalities in the distribution of domestic tasks entail –involuntarily– a lesser exposure of women to the news flow (Toff & Palmer, 2018).

If we look at the age range, young users tend to avoid the information to a greater extent than older users, which is consistent with previous studies of information avoidance (Ksiazek et al., 2010). Thus, 56% of Internet users under the age of 45 confess to resorting to information evasion at some point, compared to 38% of those who are 65 years or older. On the other hand, and also along the same lines as previous research in other countries (Edgerly, 2015; Lindell & Sartoretto, 2018), it should be noted that this trend of information evasion is significantly higher among low-income people (59%) and decreases as household income increases.

From a political orientation point of view (Table 3), there are no differences between the three main categories of the ideological spectrum, although users who position themselves on the left avoid news slightly more. On the other hand, there are significant differences between people whose close friends differ from their own political opinion, or who do not know which one is it (these people avoid the news more, between 56% and 60%) and the users whose friends –mostly or at least half– do share their political positions (in these groups, there is less evasion). A trend that seems to be related, as we will see later, to one of the reasons given by users to avoid the news: the discussions caused by exposure to them. From this point of view, therefore, commenting on the news with acquaintances would be easier if it is known that the political position regarding current events is similar and shared.

	Total	Gender		Age						Household income		
		Man	Woman	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Low	Medium	High
No, never	49%	54%	43%	43%	43%	42%	48%	55%	62%	39%	50%	56%
Yes (total)	50%	44%	55%	55%	56%	57%	50%	43%	38%	59%	49%	43%
Yes, often	10%	11%	9%	9%	16%	13%	10%	8%	5%			
Yes, sometimes	16%	11%	20%	16%	17%	19%	17%	14%	12%			
Yes, occasionally	24%	22%	26%	30%	24%	24%	23%	22%	22%			
I do not know	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	2%	1%	-			

Table 2. Distribution by gender, age, and household income, in response to the question “Do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days?”¹

Source: Own elaboration based on the Digital News Report 2017.

	Personal political orientation				Close Friends political orientation			
	Does not know	Left	Center	Right	Does not know	Most agree with his/her opinion	Half agrees, half does not	Most differ from his/her opinion
No, never	35%	50%	51%	51%	40%	52%	53%	39%
Yes (total)	61%	49%	48%	47%	56%	47%	46%	60%

Table 3. Distribution of information evasion by political orientation²

Source: Own elaboration based on the Digital News Report 2017.

1. Income scale: low (less than €15,000/year) / Medium (from € 15,000 to € 34,999/year) / High (€35,000/year or more). Base: n=2006.

2. Distribution by political orientation (of the respondent and his/her close friends, according to his/her perception), in response to the question “Do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days?” Base: n=2006.

	Total	Gender		Age			
		Man	Woman	18-34	35-44	45-54	55+
It can have a negative effect on my mood	37%	29%	43%	37%	41%	37%	34%
Graphic images upset me	15%	13%	16%	19%	13%	12%	14%
It disturbs my ability to concentrate on more important things	13%	14%	12%	16%	13%	12%	12%
It consumes too much of my time	11%	13%	10%	10%	8%	16%	11%
It leads to arguments I'd rather avoid	18%	20%	17%	22%	15%	15%	19%
I can't rely on news to be true	29%	34%	25%	29%	31%	23%	32%
I don't feel there is anything I can do about it	32%	27%	35%	28%	31%	32%	35%
Other	8%	6%	9%	5%	9%	6%	9%
Don't know	4%	5%	4%	4%	3%	6%	5%

Table 4. Reasons to avoid the news (distribution by gender and age)³

Source: Own elaboration based on the Digital News Report 2017.

Finally, the main motivations claimed by Spanish Internet users to avoid being informed are largely consistent with those detected in the pilot study of the *Digital News Report 2016* (and which were considered to establish the list of possible options offered by the questionnaire). These reasons are, in order of importance, that current information can negatively influence their mood (37%), the powerlessness experienced by the user to act in the face of news events (32%), their mistrust of the news veracity (29%), and the fear that the fact of commenting on the news with other people could lead to arguments (18%).

If we break down the reasons from the gender variable (Table 4), there are notable differences. For women, the first reason is the negative influence on their mood (43% vs. 29% in men), while men highlight the lack of confidence in the

3. Reasons to avoid the news, in response to the question: "You said that you find yourself trying to avoid news... Which, if any, of the following are reasons why you actively try to avoid news? Please select all that apply". Base: all those who avoid the news, either occasionally, sometimes, or often (year 2017, n=1000). Age categories 18-24 and 25-34 are grouped, and 55-64 and 65+, because the samples from the lower and upper categories are too small.

veracity of the information (34% vs. 25% of women). There are also some interesting variations regarding the users' age. Thus, younger users are most upset by graphic images (19%, compared to 15% of the average); on the other hand, in the older age group, helplessness in the face of what the news narrates becomes the main reason for not consulting them (35%). Finally, users between 45 and 54 years of age are more concerned by the cost of time derived from consuming information through the media than the rest (16% vs. 11%).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the *Digital News Report Spain* has confirmed that the phenomenon of news evasion is a relevant trend in the digital consumption of information, as it affects 50% of Spanish digital users (RQ1). At the same time, exploring the motivations that can lead a person to avoid news information involves investigating the user's perceptions regarding media companies from which the information comes, as well as the emotional effects of exposure to news flow.

In response to the second research question that guided this work (RQ2), the qualitative and quantitative analysis has shown that one of the reasons for avoiding information is the lack of confidence in the media among Spanish Internet users (Serrano- Puche, 2018). In global terms, the third most pointed reason to avoid news is that the user cannot trust its veracity. Added to this is the discomfort when faced to explicit images or the perception that information consumption steals time from other more relevant activities.

These findings are in the same line than those obtained by other researches. For example, a Pew Research Center survey in late 2019 noted that 66% of Americans said they were exhausted by the amount of news (Gottfried, 2020). In addition, a study based on in-depth interviews with 83 news avoiders from the United Kingdom and Spain concludes that, for them, information has limited benefits and, on the contrary, a high cost in terms of time, emotional energy and mental effort (Palmer & Toff, 2020).

In this regard, regaining prestige in the eyes of the public and overcoming *news fatigue* involves the performance of commonly recognized professional standards. It is the elements of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2003) that shape the credibility of a media outlet (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986); this is based, among other factors, on reliable and unbiased information, accurate, related to the public interest, prepared by journalists who truthfully show the facts and manage to preserve their independence from the power and from those they report on. On the contrary, the use of sensational headlines and emotional images, the use of too many adjectives

in the news, the inaccuracies or the omission of some topics in the news coverage, are aspects that generate mistrust among users (Kantar Media, 2016) and which may ultimately lead to avoiding the news. As stated by one participant in the pilot study of the *Digital News Report 2016* complained, “to listen to lies and see the media manipulation that exists in this country, better not to listen”.

From the point of view of sociodemographic factors (RQ3), and based on the results of the *Digital News Report 2017*, the tendency to avoid news affects women more than men, it is more frequent among young users (between 18 and 44 years old it reaches an average of 56%) and has a significantly greater weight among low-income users. This phenomenon also grows when the Internet user perceives that the political orientation of most of his/her close friends is different from his/hers.

An outstanding finding is that one of the main motivations to avoid the news is the negative emotional implications derived from the act of getting informed. If we add the reasons of “It can have a negative effect on my mood”, and “I don't feel there is anything I can do about it”, they reach 69% of the responses of Spanish Internet users who actively avoid the news.

It is an issue that concerns the newsworthiness criteria and the informative treatment by the media. Countering those motivations requires a redefinition of some professional practices within newsrooms and, even more, a fundamental reconsideration of the impact of journalism on the personal and social life of the communities it serves.

From this perspective, the rise of so-called constructive journalism offers elements of interest for reflecting on this disagreement between journalists and their audience (RQ4). As Meier (2018) explains, its goal is to achieve a positive effect on three levels: at the micro level, the emotional impact on users when receiving information; at the meso level, loyalty to a media company, and at the macro level, the progress of society. Being a conception of the profession that actively pursues positive values and emotions when collecting and reporting the news –and that emphasizes possible solutions to the problems covered by the news– it could help to address the reasons more common that are at the base of intentional information evasion (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). This is not, however, a general solution to the various problems that affect contemporary journalism.

On the other hand, constructive journalism does not intend to eliminate drama or conflict as news values (because to do so would be to blur the news coverage for the sake of naive *goodness*), but to develop, as a counterpoint, constructive elements in journalistic coverage that allow presenting “news comprehensive and proportional” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2003, p. 18). Furthermore, and as its own

promoters acknowledge, it is not a movement aimed at replacing the traditional way of doing journalism, but to complement it. In Haagerup's words, "constructive news criticizes traditional news journalism where you only see the world with one eye. It does not argue that it is better to just see it with the other eye. Instead, good journalism is seeing the world with both eyes" (2014, p. 111).

Considering all of the above, it should be concluded that the phenomenon of information evasion is a relevant trend in information consumption, shaped by the intervention of various factors and which calls for actions, conducted by the media, aimed at recovering the confidence and the emotional well-being of their audiences. Although the latter is not an absolute value –and must be reconciled with the fulfillment of professional standards, beginning with a commitment to the truth– reconquering and retaining audiences is a crucial issue for the future of journalistic institutions, given the complexity of the media environment and the evolution in digital consumption habits.

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