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How News Found the Avoiders: The Changing News Routines of Infodemically Vulnerable Young People in England During Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how young people (18–24) in England who experience social inequality consumed news during the first national Covid-19 lockdown. Described as “infodemically vulnerable” due to their reliance on social media for news, I draw on 25 interviews to consider if this underresearched population was exposed to harmful information. Contrary to fears, participants maintained a constant awareness of essential Covid-19 information throughout this period. They used substantively different consumption practices as the lockdown progressed. Initially, interviewees turned to trusted information from broadcast media news, replacing their dependence on social media. This was short-lived, as participants later avoided television news due to its impact on their wellbeing and frustrations that coverage did not relate to their lived experience. The paper demonstrates how structural factors, like age and inequality, can act as catalysts for selective news avoidance. Avoidance, however, did not result in interviewees missing critical updates. They adopted a “News Finds Me” perception, whereby individuals remained informed indirectly through relatable information from trusted contacts received on private messaging applications. Rather than being exposed to an infodemic, this article shows how accidental exposure to news on social media provided information perceived as more useful and representative of their lived experience.

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On 23 March 2020, Boris Johnson, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (UK), announced the first national lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, severely disrupting the everyday life of UK citizens. People were confined to their homes, only allowed to leave for essential purposes. All education settings were closed, with online learning used where possible. A significant proportion of the workforce moved to remote working, while almost nine million British citizens received furlough pay and could not work due to the restrictions (HMRC 2021). It was not until May 13 that people were permitted to leave their homes for outdoor recreation. By 4 July,

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when most lockdown restrictions were lifted, 36,255 deaths in England involved Covid-19.¹

For young people, the first lockdown represented unprecedented disruption at a crucial, formative stage. It had significant consequences for their wellbeing, with a rise in younger citizens reporting mental health issues during the pandemic (Howard, Khan, and Lockyer 2021). This was particularly felt by those experiencing economic inequality, as they were more likely to be digitally excluded from educational and social opportunities.

Furthermore, widespread concerns existed about how this digital divide, and the media habits held by this demographic, could impact knowledge of Covid-19 and compliance with restrictions. The World Health Organisation (WHO *n.d.*) raised fears of an “infodemic”, defined as “too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak”. Exposure to unreliable information was deemed harmful as it could diminish trust in public officials, increase risk-taking behaviours, and threaten public health. These concerns primarily focused on the role of social media due to its availability to actors seeking to cause harm and the potential speed and scale of dangerous communication (Altay, Nielsen, and Fletcher 2022). Those aged under 35 and educated below degree level were most likely to be “infodemically vulnerable”, defined as those who “(a) consume little to no news about COVID-19 from news organisations and (b) have low trust in COVID-19 information from news organisations” (Nielsen et al. 2020, 18).

Against these fears, this study examines how young people (18–24) in England who experience social inequality consumed news during the first national lockdown. Drawing on 25 semi-structured interviews conducted in July as restrictions eased, I explore the conditions of news consumption in everyday life, identifying how behaviours changed over time. I examine the circumstances that led individuals to adapt their cross-media news routines during the first lockdown, identifying the triggers and subsequent impact of changes on their awareness and understanding of Covid-19.

In line with research on the general UK population (Altay, Nielsen, and Fletcher 2022), participants maintained a constant awareness of essential information on Covid-19 throughout this period. However, this was achieved through different practices as the lockdown unfolded. Firstly, during the early stages of the pandemic, interviewees turned to broadcast media news for coverage. Such practices did not reflect their typical news routines and demonstrate how their experience of the crisis triggered substantively different consumption practices.

Secondly, in line with other studies on young people in Belgium (Vandenplas et al. 2021) and the Netherlands (Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek 2022) and the general UK population (Cushion et al. 2022; Nielsen et al. 2020), participants avoided broadcast media news as the lockdown wore on. This was not consistent news avoidance, where citizens avoid news entirely, or topic avoidance, whereby they avoided information on Covid-19, but selective news avoidance of TV coverage triggered by a complex set of personalised factors. Motivations for this practice focused on wellbeing concerns, the evolving context of lockdown, and—unlike other studies—frustrations that TV coverage did not relate to their lived experience. This demonstrates how structural factors, in this case, age and inequality, can act as catalysts for news avoidance.

However, this did not result in interviewees missing critical updates as they adopted a “News Finds Me” perception (NFM), whereby individuals remained informed indirectly

through information received on social media. Participants were accidentally exposed to updates on Instagram and private messaging applications, such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. This significant change in news consumption was brought about by a desire for digitally-enabled social experiences that became more acute as the lockdown wore on. Furthermore, interviewees sought information about the pandemic that resembled a communicative form, tone, and style relatable to them and from contacts with whom they have high levels of interpersonal trust. In doing so, this paper demonstrates how—rather than leading the infodemically vulnerable to misleading information—accidental exposure to Covid-19 news on social media provided information perceived as more useful and representative of their lived experience.

Literature Review

News Consumption by Young People Who Experience Social Inequality: Evidence of a News Finds Me Perception and News Avoidance

There is a lack of research on the news routines of younger audiences who experience social inequality. For young people, generally, there is evidence of radically different expectations of news compared to older citizens (Lindell 2018). Described by Newman and colleagues (2022) as “social natives”, 18–24-year-olds prefer news that is representative of the communicative norms of their favoured social platforms. This content is predominantly visual in form, which focuses on relatable issues and features more informal language and personal reflections from the author. Furthermore, younger audiences value the diversity of sources, stories, and approaches to storytelling that they find on social platforms (Kulkarni et al. 2022; Newman et al. 2022; Swart 2021).

There are concerns over the quality of information accessed by people from lower socioeconomic groups. On average, they use significantly fewer online sources and are less likely to visit news organisations directly to verify information (Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2018). This tendency impacts the type of stories accessed, and those from more privileged backgrounds discover “hard news”, such as politics and culture, while those who experience inequality are exposed predominantly to “soft news”, including entertainment news and sports (Lindell 2018). Furthermore, while media literacy programmes have increased in their availability across England, schemes like those run by the National Youth Agency tend to focus on online safety issues. Where news literacy is considered, such efforts have been critiqued by Mihailidis and colleagues (2021) for their lack of consideration of the specific challenges marginalised communities face and the role that unrepresentative coverage can play in exacerbating this marginalisation (Ramasubramanian, Riewestahl, and Ramirez 2023).

Regarding the intersection of these two demographic criteria, both are more likely than the general population to rely on accidental exposure to information on social media as their primary source of news (Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2018; Newman et al. 2022; Swart 2021). This consumption strategy has been described by Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu (2017, 107) as a News Finds Me perception, whereby “individuals believe they can indirectly stay informed about public affairs—despite not actively following news—through Internet use, information received from peers and online social networks”. Those who hold this perception feel that they are well informed about current

affairs and intend to stay this way, but believe that they do not need to deliberately seek out news to do this (Gil de Zúñiga and Cheng 2021). Instead, they believe they will be exposed to such information as a byproduct of their everyday use of digital technologies, especially social media. Many popular platforms, like Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, make recommendations based on personalised algorithms. These draw on many factors, most notably the recency and popularity of content, a user's past interactions, and the composition of their network (Nanz and Matthes 2022). Consequently, the extent to which NFM practices can provide these audiences with regular access to reliable news depends on the networks that they rely on and the degree to which they are interested and willing to engage with such material (Nanz and Matthes 2022).

Given that younger citizens and those with lower levels of formal education and income more commonly hold a NFM perception (Gil de Zúñiga and Cheng 2021), this paper will explore such news consumption habits and their consequences during the first Covid-19 lockdown.

A further similarity between younger audiences and those who experience social inequality is the increased likelihood of avoiding news (Edgerly 2022; Lindell 2018; Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge 2022; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2022). Skovsgaard and Andersen (2022) offer a typology that reflects the complexity of news avoidance practices in everyday life. Firstly, consistent news avoidance, where citizens intentionally or unintentionally avoid news in general. Secondly, occasional news avoidance, where citizens intentionally avoid news in general for a period of time. Thirdly, selective news avoidance, where citizens intentionally avoid specific types of news, such as topics, media, and sources. Depending on the length of time this practice is maintained and its scale, occasional or selective news avoiders—sometimes referred to as situational news avoidance (Vandenplas et al. 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021)—can still consume a significant amount of news in general (Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2023).

Skovsgaard and Andersen (2022) also observe the causes of news avoidance. Firstly, *individual-level factors*, such as interest or trust in news. Young adults are more likely to have low news self-efficacy, meaning that the difficulty of identifying trustworthy sources and verifying the accuracy of information can inhibit interest (Edgerly 2022). Several studies have also found that citizens avoid news to protect their wellbeing when they feel overwhelmed by a topic (Vandenplas et al. 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021). Secondly, *content-level factors*, such as audience preferences for the form, focus, and news style. This includes story selection and storytelling practices, where young people (Edgerly 2022) and those from underprivileged backgrounds (Lindell 2018) do not feel that reporting represents their lived experience. Beyond a lack of relatability, this underrepresentation and misrepresentation can impact how marginalised groups perceive their role in society (Ramasubramanian, Riewestahl, and Ramirez 2023). Thirdly, *contextual-level factors*, such as the availability of news or time (Nelson and Lewis 2022). Structural inequalities are particularly significant, as age (Edgerly 2022), gender (Toff and Palmer 2019), and class (Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge 2022) shape the circumstances under which attitudes towards news are formed (see Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2023).

The impact of news avoidance has been disputed. While initially seen as a threat to democracy, as avoiders are less likely to be politically informed, others have questioned such conclusions. There can be valid reasons to avoid the news, such as protecting

audiences from distressing content (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021) and ignoring untrustworthy news sources (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). Against these debates, this paper reflects on the practice, causes, and impacts of news avoidance by this underexplored section of society.

News Consumption During the First Covid-19 Lockdown

There was a significant increase in news consumption at the start of the pandemic as countries introduced lockdown measures (Altay, Nielsen, and Fletcher 2022; Broersma and Swart 2022; Cushion et al. 2022; de Bruin et al. 2021; Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek 2022; Nelson and Lewis 2022; Nielsen et al. 2020; Nguyen et al. 2021; Vandenplas et al. 2021). There are several reasons to account for this. Firstly, audiences wanted trusted information on an unknown virus. People attempt to reduce their anxiety during crises by becoming more informed (de Bruin et al. 2021). Within the UK, many turned to television news media, with the daily government briefings initially attracting vast audiences (Cushion et al. 2022; Nielsen et al. 2020). This trend of seeking information from legacy news media was also replicated online, as trustworthy news organisations benefited from increased direct visits to their website and more engagements on Facebook (Altay, Nielsen, and Fletcher 2022). Secondly, lockdown restrictions resulted in significant changes to everyday life, most notably citizens spending more time at home. So, alongside the desire to reduce uncertainty, audiences also had the time to watch television news (Nelson and Lewis 2022). These unprecedented changes radically transformed news habits, with TV news being the main benefactor.

However, as the pandemic and lockdown restrictions went on, there was a surge in news avoidance (Broersma and Swart 2022; de Bruin et al. 2021; Nguyen et al. 2021; Nielsen et al. 2020; Vandenplas et al. 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021). News avoidance grew sharply in the UK in April and May, remaining high as restrictions eased (Nielsen et al. 2020). Of those who reported avoiding Covid-19 news, 77% avoided television news, a remarkable turnaround given the initial reliance on this source. Significantly for this study, young people and those who experience social inequality were more likely to avoid Covid-19 news during this period (Nielsen et al. 2020).

Regarding why audiences avoided Covid-19 news, political interest was not a key determinant, unlike research into news avoidance more generally. Even typically avid news consumers engaged in temporary periods of avoidance (Nguyen et al. 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021). Instead, a wide range of triggers or “tipping points” (Vandenplas et al. 2021) have been identified, which cover a range of individual-level and content-level factors. These include feeling overwhelmed by the volume of news, the negativity of coverage, its repetitive and confusing nature, and feeling powerless to do anything about the crisis (Broersma and Swart 2022; de Bruin et al. 2021; Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek 2022; Nguyen et al. 2021; Vandenplas et al. 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021). Therefore, the emotional impact of news exposure during this period has been comprehensively demonstrated. Context, however, was also significant. In the United States, consumption reduced as the lockdown restrictions eased. When reflecting on the increase in news avoidance, Nelson and Lewis (2022) call for “journalistic humility”, arguing the reduction in restrictions shaped news use more than the actions of journalists.

Citizens practised news avoidance in different ways. Some avoided Covid-19 news entirely (Vandenplas et al. 2021, 2197). Others were more selective, strategically managing the conditions of their news exposure (Broersma and Swart 2022) by limiting the time spent consuming news or moving consumption to a different source or medium (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021). This management of consumption enabled citizens to control the tone and style of the information they were exposed to, with some wanting more positive reporting on the pandemic (Nguyen et al. 2021) or to avoid specific coverage, like the government press briefings (Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek 2022). All of these approaches share a similarity in the attempt to regulate the flow of information but vary in the extent to which Covid-19 news is removed from their everyday life.

This study seeks to understand what news routines young people who experience social inequality engaged in as they moved through the different stages of the first lockdown and how this shaped their understanding of Covid-19 and the associated political context.

Methods

The target population for this study is young people aged 18–24 who live in England and experience social inequality. Interviewees were recruited with the assistance of a research agency, Acumen. Drawing from a national database of over 100,000 adults, I used a purposive sampling frame to identify participants who experience social inequality via one (or more) of the following criteria:

- (1) Participants not in education, employment, or training (classified as NEET).
- (2) Participants from a low-income background. The Department of Work and Pensions (2019) defines *relative low income* as any family having an equivalised household income below 60% of the national median pay.
- (3) Participants from households categorised as 6, 7, or 8 on the National Statistics Socio-economic classification, which draws on occupational data to structure socio-economic positions in society (Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2018).

The sampling frame goes beyond economic indicators as the only measure of inequality. Lindell (2018) and Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge (2022) propose that social inequality is multi-dimensional, arguing that access to cultural capital, broadly defined as access to cultural knowledge and education opportunities, is a significant factor in shaping someone's quality of life. Education and employment opportunities are used as criteria alongside income to better represent the lived experience of inequality. However, by going beyond income measures, there is a lack of homogeneity across the sample. I propose that this is not necessarily a limitation to the study given that my intention is not to produce generalisable findings but generate rich, in-depth observations about personal experiences in engaging with news during the lockdown.

All interviews were semi-structured to allow participants to reflect on their news consumption routines on their terms. This was particularly important in identifying news exposure on social media, such as the information accessed on private messaging applications, which are challenging to research due to data access limitations (Chadwick, Vaccari, and Hall 2022).

Interviews were conducted remotely over Google Meet and Skype. Participants were given the option of different video-conferencing tools to account for personal preferences. Webcams were not used during the interview to minimise fatigue from monitoring their self-presentation while also protecting their privacy, as several participated in the interviews from their bedrooms or shared living spaces. Furthermore, pseudonyms and identification numbers are used in the findings section to protect the anonymity of participants (see Appendix). This project received ethical approval from the Faculty of the Creative and Cultural Industries Ethics Committee at the University of Portsmouth.

Figure 1 provides a timeline of the Covid-19 pandemic in England, illustrating how the interviews took place as restrictions eased (between 29 June and 9 July 2020) to allow participants to reflect on any changes that occurred throughout the first lockdown. The timing is also significant as citizens became more “infodemically vulnerable” as the pandemic progressed (Nielsen et al. 2020).

Interviews were manually transcribed and analysed in NVivo using a form of qualitative thematic analysis developed in two stages. Firstly, I identified the key themes within the dataset through open coding. Secondly, through axial coding, connections were drawn between different codes to determine how media practices related to existing theory across the sample. When analysing the interview transcripts, I define news as any

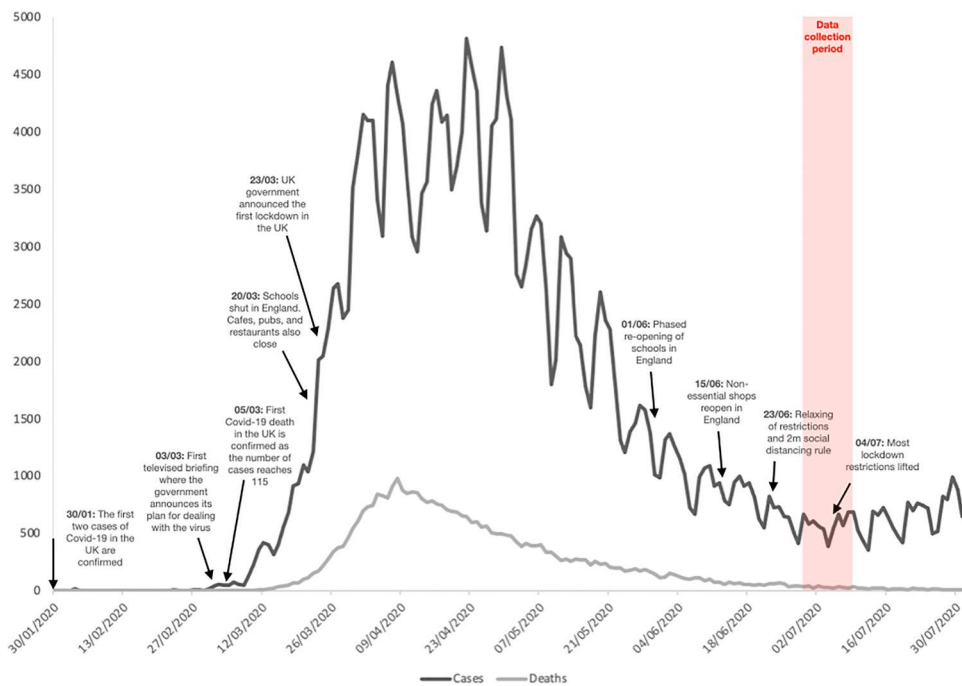


Figure 1. Timeline of Covid-19 pandemic in the England, 30 January–31 July 2020. Cases are likely to be an unreliable measure for the early-period of Covid-19 due to the lack of testing infrastructure. All data for England.

Source: UK Government, <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk>.

content that is informative and meaningful about current affairs and public issues is considered, including that which is created and shared on social media (Swart et al. 2022).

This study faces several limitations. Firstly, self-reports can be unreliable for measuring news consumption (Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge 2022). Secondly, I do not control for levels of political socialisation amongst the sample, the process by which political norms are transmitted to younger citizens. Parental modelling was a factor in shaping news routines in several interviews (17, 19, 25). Furthermore, despite the limited period, the age range for this study (18–24) covers several important life stages, especially concerning educational contexts. Several interviewees noted post-16 education (22) and university (21, 23) as turning points in their engagement with news. Finally, the analysis does not examine other significant factors in the relationship between inequality and news consumption, such as ethnicity and gender (Toff and Palmer 2019). To mitigate against this limitation, a second wave of analysis was conducted whereby gender, ethnicity, and the specific inclusion criteria for social inequality were identified, and the findings from these variables were compared to those from the total sample. There was no significant deviation in results. However, this could result from a small sample size for some characteristics that were not controlled for, especially ethnicity (see Appendix).

Findings

Avoiding Social Media and a Pivot to Television News

Contrary to fears about the impact of Covid-19 misinformation on younger audiences, participants reported an increase in their consumption of legacy news media during the initial phase of the first lockdown. Interviewees reflected on the development of different news routines, moving from a reliance on social media before the pandemic to a dependence on television news when confined to their homes, especially BBC News and Sky News. This change was significant, as 15 of the 25 interviewees described social media as their primary news source. “Keira” (22) went from occasionally seeing news on Facebook and Instagram to watching the breakfast show on Sky News every morning. “Rachel” (20) usually relied on Twitter and was critical of BBC coverage in general, feeling that it did not report on issues that reflected her political priorities. However, when the lockdown started, she structured her day around BBC News coverage, checking in for regular updates. “Darren” (14) underwent a similar transformation, noting that, while he felt uncomfortable with how the BBC reported on issues he was passionate about, the organisation was his most trusted for updates on Covid-19. These examples illustrate several general themes that were evident across the sample.

Firstly, participants reported a significant reduction in their use of social media for news at the start of the lockdown. Predominantly focusing on platforms with algorithmically curated feeds, such as Facebook and Twitter, several interviewees highlighted the prominence of inappropriate content found on these platforms, observing the presence of conspiracy theories, misinformation, and speculation regarding the transmission of the virus (9, 10, 16, 22, 23). “Millie” (9) was concerned about memes that fuelled fears around shortages in the supply of food and essential items, reflecting how they could create anxiety for at-risk communities. Several interviewees mentioned the conspiracy theory that 5G towers were responsible for transmitting the virus (9, 16, 22). For Keira (22), the

persuasive language used in posts like this, and the supportive comments posted in reply, were upsetting and resulted in her avoiding Facebook for several weeks. “Robert” (16) attempted to correct such a claim on Facebook but was subjected to personal abuse.

This points to a second reason why interviewees avoided social media for news in the early stages of the lockdown, as many recognised that the Covid-19 pandemic had unique characteristics as a story. The vernacular of communication on social media, characterised by emotive self-expression and humour, did not help facilitate audience understanding and instead contributed to “panic and confusion” (23). As “Fran” (10) observes, in this specific moment of the pandemic, when young people were seeking reliable information to understand the transmission of the virus and make sense of the unprecedented changes to their everyday life, social media was unhelpful:

At first, there were a lot of memes. It’s not particularly helpful ... It’s obviously changing day to day and so there’s a lot of room for confusion ... I just think a lot of people have become kind of armchair epidemiologists.

Across the sample, all participants identified the temporary need for a change in news consumption habits. Despite a general dislike of the story selection and storytelling devices used by broadcast news organisations, interviewees recognised several benefits during a crisis. The BBC was the most widely mentioned broadcaster. “Lee” (18) praised its impartiality, contrasting this to the confused arguments he found on Twitter. “Jill” (15) saw value in the local focus of regional news bulletins. Perhaps the common factor across these descriptions was the perceived benefit of journalistic sense-making in a time of widespread uncertainty, with interviewees welcoming the social, political, economic, and cultural context provided by journalists. As “Lewis” (4) observes:

It’s quite a sort of intense subject, and there is a lot to understand about it. When you read it yourself, you might take a different interpretation of it. But, if someone is reading it on the news on TV, they’ll broaden your understanding a lot more.

Lewis mentioned the contribution of news anchor Simon McCoy, reflecting on how he reported the crisis in a “human way”, helping him make sense of the profound changes to his life.

Lockdown restrictions also created the conditions for changes in news routines. As “Beth” (8) reflects, “I wouldn’t really pay attention to TV, because I’d be that busy doing other things”. Many interviewees considered this a key factor in explaining their pivot to broadcast media coverage. As “Chloe” (11) notes, “I feel like the lockdown has forced people to actually watch TV and pay attention to what is going on”. For some, this interest became a central part of their everyday life. “Miles” (25) recognised that he became “obsessed” with TV news as he “didn’t really have much else to do”. “Ella” (6) observed how the lockdown had led to her family being at home together, which rarely happened before the pandemic, resulting in a new daily ritual: “Every day, at six o’clock, the whole family sits around the TV together”.

In this way, the uniformity of the lockdown experience was also part of the attraction to TV news. Participants recognised this was different from other political issues discussed in the interviews in how it represented something universal; the nation was experiencing this unprecedented event as a collective. This collective experience evoked values of community and solidarity, drawing people to coverage from the BBC as a public service

broadcaster and the country's most popular news source (Newman et al. 2022). As Millie (9) observed, "we know it's the same thing that the rest of the country is watching". However, this dependence on TV news was short-lived.

The Tipping Points That Led To Selective News Avoidance

Across the majority of the interviews (23 out of 25 participants), I found evidence of selective news avoidance, whereby participants purposefully stopped consuming broadcast media news. This tendency was not due to a general dislike for news or a higher preference for other content, factors often linked to news avoidance, but to protect their mental health. Many adapted their news routines as the lockdown wore on, noting the impact of the coverage on their wellbeing. As "Roy" (1) observes, "during lockdown, I was completely engulfed in it. There was no escape ... I needed a kind of news detox". The feeling of being engulfed, or overwhelmed, was widely shared. Developing Ytre-Arne and Moe's (2021) conceptualisation that news avoidance is not always anti-democratic—a rejection of the idea that news avoidance is, by its very nature, an abdication of civic responsibility—such avoidance can be "a situational response contingent on particular circumstances, either in one's personal life or in a societal situation" (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021, 13). I find evidence that, as the personal impact of being in lockdown intensified over time, and the case rate and death rate increased, TV news became disruptive rather than helpful. Keira (22) reflects on this transition from a spike in news consumption to selective news avoidance:

At the start, like March time, I was watching the news all of the time, but when it hit the peak, and there were over 900 deaths a day, I turned it off ... It was draining to hear because it felt like there was no light at the end of the tunnel. It was the same day after day, people were dying, and there was no sign that we were coming out of lockdown.

Drawing on the interview data, I explore the conditions that resulted in participants reconfiguring their news routines. Two general themes emerged from the data.

Firstly, some interviewees began to avoid TV news when they observed it was impacting their mood or disrupting everyday routines (14, 16, 18). For example, "Kenny's" (19) tipping point was when he noticed that he was constantly thinking about the pandemic. He recognised the impact that this was having on his mental health, and this resulted in a change in his news consumption:

There were times I was getting pretty down about it, and I needed a break from it. So, over this period, I started taking a few news-free days ... These days off became, sort of, every day.

Kenny's description of occasionally avoiding the news relates to a wider tension. Interviewees were keenly aware of the democratic value of being informed, and they were grappling with this civic responsibility alongside the need to protect their wellbeing. As Darren (14) explains:

I began to stay out of it [TV news] from a mental health point of view. It consumed my life ... I think it's very important to be aware of what's going on in the world. But equally, I think too much negative news is a bad thing.

Such self-reflection—an awareness of how these young people felt consumed by the pandemic—partially reflects contextual factors. As the lockdown wore on and the social

implications of it intensified, the emotional labour of maintaining their newfound news rituals became difficult.

Secondly, traumatic events during the pandemic motivated some participants to change their news routines. For some interviewees (7, 22), the rising death toll was the tipping point, with milestones such as reaching 1,000 deaths per day acting as a trigger for Rachel (20), whereas “Michael” (2) noted a more general sense of the death toll “getting out of control”. Others, like “Fran” (10), were impacted by the shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for healthcare professionals and essential workers, which was prominent in the media towards the end of April 2020:

I did reach a point, maybe three weeks into the lockdown, where I stopped looking at the news because it was all a bit too overwhelming ... There was nothing positive said at all ... It was about the time when people were asking, why don't we have any PPE in this country ... I just switched off the news for a little bit.

The PPE shortage was also mentioned by two interviewees (11, 15) who were fearful for family and friends who were essential workers.

The severity of the situation was sometimes juxtaposed with perceived failings in the government response. Several participants referred to a specific event when reflecting on their tipping point: the allegations of rule-breaking by a senior adviser to the Prime Minister, Dominic Cummings (3, 6, 8).² “Mitchell” (3) observed that the scandal, coupled with the personal sacrifice of abiding by lockdown restrictions, was “just too much—the lockdown was hard enough without that story”. Fran (10) was outraged by the government’s response to the scandal—as Cummings remained in post—describing his speech in the Rose Garden at 10 Downing Street as an attempt to “gaslight the nation”. With this specific example, the value of fairness was prominent, with several interviewees (6, 8, 10) contrasting the lack of punishment for Cummings to those received by young people and citizens from disadvantaged communities who broke Covid-19 rules.

Collectively, these tipping points demonstrate how, either through recognising the personal impact of the news on their everyday life or through exposure to upsetting coverage, selective news avoidance was used to protect their wellbeing. In the next section, I examine what specific news sources were avoided and how.

From Binging to Avoiding: Exploring What Interviewees Cut from Their News Consumption

By considering the news consumption practices of interviewees across different media, it became clear that the TV news that participants had initially depended on at the start of the lockdown was now being avoided. Although some recognised that the novel nature of the virus created difficulties for reporters, there was evidence of fatigue with the form, content, and style of broadcast media news. A common factor for this malaise, reported by 17 participants, was the centrality of the Covid-19 briefings delivered by the government to broadcast media news coverage. Ninety-five daily briefings took place before interviews commenced, occurring between March 16 and June 23 and then on an ad hoc basis to coincide with significant announcements.

Interviewees felt that the Covid-19 briefings were “confusing” (22), “complicated” (13), and “wishy-washy” (13). Participants found it challenging to relate to the guidance

offered. This theme was especially prominent in the dataset due to the proximity of the interviews to the gradual easing of the lockdown restrictions. As “Alex” (26) observes:

I didn’t find them useful. I feel like they kept repeating themselves and didn’t make any sense ... I would watch them and feel confused about the rules. Can we go out? Can we not? You know that there was a lot of questions.

Ultimately, participants did not feel that the approach adopted in the briefings—and, by extension, in TV news due to their dominance in bulletins—helped them make informed decisions.

This frustration was exacerbated by the involvement of Boris Johnson, whose contributions were singled out for critique. As “Georgia” (21) reflects, “I feel like when you listen to what Boris Johnson is saying, he’s not really saying anything”. Fran (10) felt that the former Prime Minister “doesn’t like detail”. Interviewees wanted clarity on safe ways to socialise, study, and work but thought the briefings did not provide this. Miles (25) contends that this was due to Johnson’s oratorical style:

I didn’t really get what he [Boris] said. He would be like, ‘Stay inside, but go out. If you do go out, just don’t talk to anyone. But, you can talk to someone if it is at work.’ It was too many ifs and buts ... There were too many different scenarios for me to really pinpoint what he was trying to say ... I just didn’t really find them [Covid-19 briefings] useful.

Reflecting on TV news coverage more generally, interviewees complained about the lack of reporting on how the pandemic impacted the public’s lived experience. Due to the focus on the case rate, the spread of infection, and the death rate, Mitchell (3) felt that the reporting became formulaic: “I know what I’m going to get—lots of numbers”. Fran (10) remarked on the absence of youth perspectives, commenting on how the “separate sets of issues that young people face” were ignored. Michael (2) explicitly referred to how the experiences of disadvantaged communities and ethnic minorities were underrepresented in news discourse, explaining how this negatively shaped his relationship with the BBC:

I think a lot of people lost faith in the BBC ... Part of the issue is when it comes to the experiences of essential workers, those voices aren’t included. They are not brought into the news ... They are only serving a portion of the public ... The only time through Corona I could identify with the news is when they refer to BAME people dying more.

Some participants desired more personal stories within reporting, a theme reflective of broader research on the news preferences of younger audiences (Newman et al. 2022). As I demonstrate in the next section, this representation of lived experience can help audiences make more informed connections between the guidance offered and their day-to-day life.

“I’ll Hear About It One Way or Another”: How News Found the Infodemically Vulnerable on Social Media

To varying degrees, the first set of lockdown restrictions lasted over three months. As a by-product of this intense period of confinement, interviewees pursued socially-enriching forms of digitally-mediated communication. Participants described a substantial increase in their use of social media as the lockdown progressed—most notably private messaging

applications—seeking social connection. For some, that meant being more active in the family group chat on WhatsApp, where they would typically be a lurker (7, 11, 19). For others, Facebook Messenger and direct messaging functionality on Instagram and Snapchat were used extensively with friends (6, 8, 9, 14, 20). Some interviewees sought out new communities in their quest for comparable experiences of companionship online (6, 12). “Georgia” (21) joined a WhatsApp group with local people dedicated to horticultural advice, a new hobby formed during the lockdown. In all of these scenarios, social media use grew as their consumption of TV news dwindled. Therefore, I suggest that the length of the lockdown, and its subsequent impact on wellbeing, was a significant contextual factor for changes in news routines.

This raises the question: if participants were increasingly avoiding broadcast media news and instead spending more time on private messaging applications—where journalists and public officials cannot observe and shape discussions on Covid-19—were interviewees infodemically vulnerable?

Despite the selective news avoidance previously outlined, interviewees were still aware of rule changes, prominent narratives in public discourse, and had a general understanding of the case and death rate. This awareness was due to accidental exposure to such information on social media. Participants learnt about crucial developments in the pandemic as a by-product of using these tools for social connection. While some did not consciously identify this as a distinctive change in their news consumption, others clearly articulated a NFM perception. As Georgia (21) reflects:

I just think there is so much information out there on it [Covid-19]. There is not much we can do except try and stay safe. So, I will just not go crazy on the news, and if anything major happens, then I'll hear about it one way or another.

The language here resembles the NFM perception outlined by Gil de Zúñiga and Cheng (2021), specifically, the notion that one does not actively need to seek out news and that news will find them.

“Benny” (13) expands upon this:

To be fair, it feels like the news is getting absolutely pushed down your throat at the moment. I've kind of taken aback a backseat to actually actively watching the news.

This quote speaks to the core principles of the news practices shared by many interviewees in the later stages of the first lockdown. Firstly, if we continue with the metaphor of “taking a backseat”, then one is still in the car as it makes its journey, albeit not in control. Benny is open to exposure to relevant news but is not “actively” seeking it out. Therefore, this is not topic avoidance, where all Covid-19 news is avoided, or consistent avoidance, where citizens intentionally disengage with all news. Secondly, the claim that “the news is getting absolutely pushed down your throat *at the moment*” reflects how this is a temporary, situational practice undertaken to protect their wellbeing. Hence, this quote demonstrates how selective news avoidance and a NFM perception can be related; a NFM perception developed alongside the desire to selectively avoid broadcast media news for some interviewees.

Accidental exposure to Covid-19 news mainly took place within private messaging applications. Many felt comfortable sharing and discussing news in these spaces due to their private setting, with Ella (6) and Miles (25) describing such applications as a “safe

space". There were several benefits observed to support this. Firstly, private messaging applications can adapt to the circumstances of the user. As Millie (9) notes:

I think Facebook Messenger is a good place to gauge how people are feeling about things because you can have like those casual conversations ... You can send a voice note and whatever works for people. You can send photos, attachments, links, or if you want to have a live conversation, you can have a video call ... It's quite versatile in that way.

These observations illustrate the flexibility of such tools, with different functions available to support the communicative preferences of the user and the various forms of interaction they may engage in, from one-to-one to varying-sized groups. As users move between these settings, they draw on different functionality. For example, voice notes in private conversations with close friends (1, 4, 9) compared to predominantly text-based discussions in a group setting.

Such adaptability was central to the second benefit that participants considered; the intimacy and relatability of communication on private messaging applications. Against a backdrop of long-term confinement to one's home, interviewees appreciated discussing how the pandemic was impacting the lives of others in similar circumstances. As Ella (6) describes, she would "speak daily about how each person was coping with their families". She described this as being an effective means of support. It was in these moments that new developments naturally came up.

These exchanges took place within different networks across the sample. Some relied on family: Georgia's (21) Mum would watch the briefings and then summarise them for her daughter on WhatsApp. Keira (22) had a family member who was a paramedic and shared their experiences and advice. Others reflected on the changing circumstances with friends, considering how the rule changes would impact upcoming exams, social functions, and sporting events (9, 11). Some discussed the discourses surrounding how the government handled the pandemic in response to friends sharing their experiences of rule-breaking (16). These conversations would also sometimes include conspiracy theories, which Rachel (20) noted could be corrected in closed groups as she felt comfortable challenging her friends.

Therefore, due to the flexibility of these tools and the relatable forms of private and semi-public discussion that they facilitated, participants were still aware of essential news relating to the pandemic. As Millie (9) observes:

Especially in lockdown, these moments spark discussion. You see a rise in conversations about politics and the news... These things slip into different conversations because what's going on in the world is what's going on in your life.

Accidental exposure to news on applications like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp meant that citizens remained informed despite the situational news avoidance of broadcast media news.

Conclusion

By drawing on interviews to observe the news routines of young people in England who experience social inequality, this paper demonstrates how—rather than being informationally vulnerable—participants maintained a constant awareness of essential updates on Covid-19 throughout the first national lockdown. However, this was

achieved through substantively different news consumption practices as the pandemic progressed.

Firstly, in the early stages of the first national lockdown, interviewees turned to trusted information from broadcast media news. This outcome replicates similar findings on the general UK population (Altay, Nielsen, and Fletcher 2022; Cushion et al. 2022; Nielsen et al. 2020). The crisis represented a significant, albeit temporary, shift in news consumption that deviated from a typical dependence on news from social platforms. This remarkable change in news routine supports existing research that demonstrates how, as countries went into lockdown, news consumption became more uniform across the population (Broersma and Swart 2022; Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek 2022).

Secondly, in line with other studies (Broersma and Swart 2022; de Bruin et al. 2021; Nielsen et al. 2020; Vandenplas et al. 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021), interviewees selectively avoided broadcast media as the pandemic progressed. However, this paper deviates from the existing literature on the triggers that led to news avoidance for young people who experience inequality. In addition to individual-level factors, where audiences avoided Covid-19 news to protect their wellbeing (Nguyen et al. 2021; Vandenplas et al. 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021), and context-level factors, where the gradual removal of restrictions reduced the available time for news (Nelson and Lewis 2022), this paper demonstrates how identity and structural factors, in this case, age and inequality, were significant in explaining the selective news avoidance of broadcast media.

While interviewees initially depended on TV news, I argue that this was due to the context of the pandemic. As this population went into lockdown, they had to process unprecedented changes to their routines at an already precarious life stage while also trying to make sense of a relatively unknown virus that was spreading rapidly. As they became more accustomed to the restrictions and their understanding of Covid-19 improved, what they wanted from the news changed.

Interviewees sought relatable coverage that helped them make sense of the challenges they were facing. Such representation is vital for connecting marginalised communities with news coverage (Edgerly 2022; Ramasubramanian, Riewestahl, and Ramirez 2023), but they did not get that from broadcast media news. This is illustrated by their reflections on the coverage of the daily briefings from the government. Whereas young audiences in the Netherlands found their respective briefings to offer a sense of community (Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek 2022) and those in Norway found press conferences reassuring (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021), interviewees in this study found the briefings to be overly negative, confusing, and repetitive, especially when Boris Johnson led them. Although this attitude was also evident in studies on the general population (Cushion et al. 2022; Nguyen et al. 2021; Nielsen et al. 2020), interviewees felt ostracised by the briefings and wider broadcast media news coverage, believing they lacked relevance to their personal circumstances. This disregard was particularly felt when rule changes were communicated, with many interviewees failing to see the impact on their lived experience represented in reporting.

As Ramasubramanian, Riewestahl, and Ramirez (2023) observe, marginalised groups look to media portrayals to make sense of their place and contribution to society, with stereotypical framing negatively impacting self-esteem. In a period where participants were already overwhelmed by the scale and frequency of negative stories (e.g., PPE crisis; rising daily death toll), they also documented their frustrations with

misrepresentation, such as stories of young people who broke Covid-19 rules, and underrepresentation, with an absence of voices from disadvantaged communities. In this particular moment, TV news did not fulfil its civic function of helping audiences make sense of this chaotic situation.

Instead, interviewees found this type of coverage using the very news consumption strategies that made them infodemically vulnerable: participants were accidentally exposed to Covid-19 news on private messaging applications. They learned about rule changes and the evolving societal impact of the virus as a by-product of their desire to experience news that was relatable and inclusive. In this sense, concerns of infodemic vulnerability perhaps reflect a rigid, traditional perspective of what quality news consumption entails, one that overlooks growing evidence of younger audiences reimagining this process (Edgerly 2022; Kulkarni et al. 2022; Lindell 2018; Newman et al. 2022; Swart 2021).

This “News Finds Me” perception emerged alongside the selective avoidance of broadcast media news. In doing so, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how news avoidance is enacted in everyday life. News avoidance is not the opposite of news consumption (Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2023; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021); they are not binary states but behaviours that move fluidly across different media. The paper further argues that news avoidance is, therefore, not a homogenous experience; it can vary depending on identity and structural factors. Interviewees were not completely avoiding Covid-19 news but ignoring professionalised and formal reporting norms, prioritising communication that reflected their lived experience instead. Typically, this occurred on Instagram and private messaging applications with friends or family members. As such, this is not a case of topic avoidance across all media, nor is it a return to pre-pandemic news consumption practices, whereby 15 participants described social media as their primary news source. While most were returning to social platforms with a renewed willingness to engage with news, the intention to avoid broadcast media coverage of Covid-19 reflects a qualitatively different experience. The NFM practices provided a way of sharing relatable collective experiences of the pandemic and, in doing so, countering the depictions—or lack thereof—in broadcast media news (Ramasubramanian, Riewestahl, and Ramirez 2023).

The adoption of NFM perception addresses some concerns surrounding infodemic vulnerability. Despite intentionally avoiding broadcast media news, participants remained informed on guidance issued by the government, were aware of recent trends in both case and death rates and could identify conspiracy theories. However, accidental exposure to news does limit the depth and breadth of coverage that audiences consume (Gil de Zúñiga and Cheng 2021), especially compared to the intensity of news routines at the start of the lockdown. As Cushion and colleagues (2022) demonstrate, the general public lacked knowledge of criticism of the UK government’s approach from international media. Furthermore, they had little understanding of the efficacy of the government’s interventions compared to administrations around the world. This was also evident in my interviews. Yet, it raises the question of how much the public needed to understand the political context in this specific moment of the crisis — the first national lockdown. Should we expect citizens to maintain or even improve their news surveillance of political affairs during a period of deep uncertainty? Given the wellbeing implications of the first experience of national lockdown, and the

pervasive disruption to significant formative years for younger citizens, I argue that the news routines adopted in this study were not necessarily harmful but a means of self-preservation.

Ultimately, this paper adds to the growing body of work in journalism studies exploring the complex nature of everyday news consumption practices for audiences that experience inequality. Given its focus on the first national lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic, this article is somewhat limited in its relevance to essential debates on the impact of structural factors, like age and class, on news habits more generally (Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2018; Lindell and Mikkelsen Båge 2022; Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2023). Further research is necessary on the news consumption of this underresearched group. As young audiences increasingly seek relatable reporting on social platforms that reflects their lived experience, the storytelling practices deemed to resemble quality reporting may need to be updated.

Notes

1. The UK Government Coronavirus Dashboard reports deaths based on the total number of people whose death certificate mentioned Covid-19 (<https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/details/deaths>).
2. A joint investigation was published by the Daily Mirror and the Guardian, alleging that Dominic Cummings had made a trip from London to Durham breaking lockdown rules.

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